

**Testimony for the Public Oversight Roundtable on “Return to In-person Instruction in DC Public Schools”  
Wednesday, December 2, 2020**

**To:** Council of the District of Columbia Committee of the Whole The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson and Committee on Education The Honorable David Grosso, Councilmember

**From:** Ilana Harrus, PAVE Parent and Ward 1 Resident

**Date:** December 15, 2020

My family has not suffered from distance learning and the lockdowns. We are lucky: I work and my employer allows us to telework until July 2021. We have high-speed Internet at home. My kid loves the extra hour of sleep. She loves the learning without worrying about bullies. She is thriving. She and her friends are part of a small “study-pod”. They have daily zoom meetings to check on their homework. They see each other in person as much as possible.

In principle, I should rejoice, enjoy my privilege, and say nothing.

But I am writing this not for my kid, but for all the kids. I am here to ask whoever will listen that the time has come to stop this insane experiment on the mental health of our kids. Re-open the schools. Keep them open. There are ways to do this safely and together we can find them: Give the choice to and support parents who are still afraid. Reassign teachers who are at higher risks for COVID-19. Rotate the days kids are coming in for smaller capacity. Provide schools with money for high quality filters. Do whatever it takes but one thing is certain: Kids need to be at school in person, socializing with their friends.

When the virus came, we complied. No one in my household is in a “vulnerable” category and I was not overly concerned with the disease so we just enjoyed the newly found time together. My kid’s school, DC Public Charter School DCI, has always been strong on technology (every kid is given a Chromebook upon entering the school in 6<sup>th</sup> grade) and the transition was smooth and quick (it took them ONE day!).

My kid and I had time to get breakfast together (a first for us outside weekends), lunch and snack breaks. We watched movies at nights and talked about her classes. I could finally hear what was taught in her classes (the good, the bad and the ugly...) and help her a bit more than usual.

Then we experienced the isolation. The cancelled sleepovers. The swimming classes taken away and the pent-up energy that could go nowhere. The short classes. The classes with silent kids that cannot fully engage on Zoom. And this apathy is not the

worst. My kid's class have students who don't even bother to connect. Some teachers try their best. Some teachers don't. Kids are paying the price.

I understood (even if I didn't share) the panic from most of the population in response of the pandemic: In March 2020, we just didn't know how bad it was and how bad it could be.

Well now we know.

We know that kids don't get as sick from COVID-19 than adults [Ludvigsson, 2020]<sup>1</sup>

We know that they don't catch and transmit the virus like adults [Ladhani et al., 2020] and that they are not superspreaders [Munro & Faust, 2020].

The concern voiced by the teachers about being contaminated by their students while understandable in March is unsustainable in December 2020.

We know that in France for example, schools opened tentatively in May for a couple of weeks. Reopened in September and are now opened despite the new "outbreaks" and there are no link to show that the schools have had any impacts on these outbreaks.

As early as **June, 2020**, there were voices saying that distance learning was not working [Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020]. Parents who could afford it, moved their kids to **private schools** promising in-person instruction [Reilly, 2020]

We know that all kids can have all sorts of adverse effects from school closures [UNESCO, 2020] including:

- Interrupted learning
- Challenges creating, maintaining, and improving distance learning
- Challenges measuring and validating learning
- Rise in dropout rates
- Increased exposure to violence and exploitation
- Social isolation
- Poor nutrition

### **1) Interrupted learning/**

We know that kids at the low-end of the Socio-economical status ladder, the ones you profess to care about, these ones are losing ground compared to kids at the other end

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<sup>1</sup> All references in this text are given in MLA format at the end and the PDF text is appended in the Appendix whenever possible or necessary (we didn't print out the web-only references that can be easily accessed).

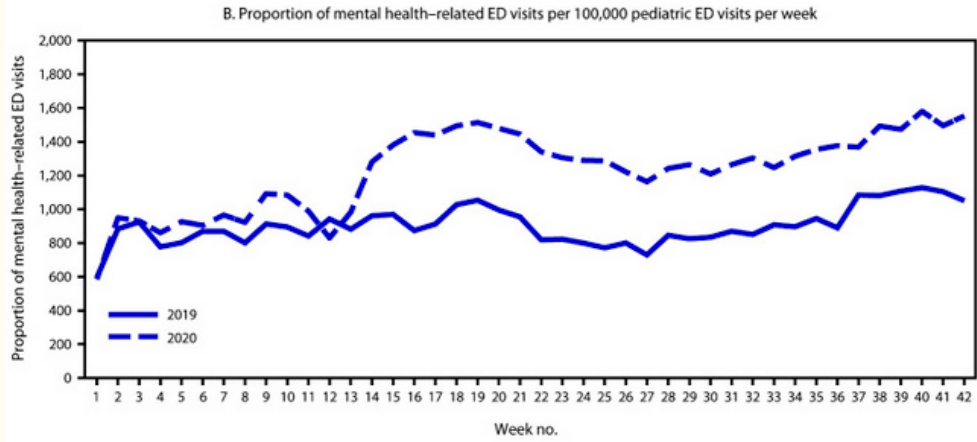
of the spectrum (rich kids in private schools) who are by now mostly in schools **in person**. A recent article in the New York Times [Bellafante, 2020]: “In New York City, only **a quarter** of the system’s 1.1 million public-school children **have returned to the classroom** for any instruction, while **most private-school students are receiving some form of live classroom experience, many of them five days a week**. In San Francisco and other cities marked by grievous inequity, a similar dynamic has played out.” *(Emphasis added)*

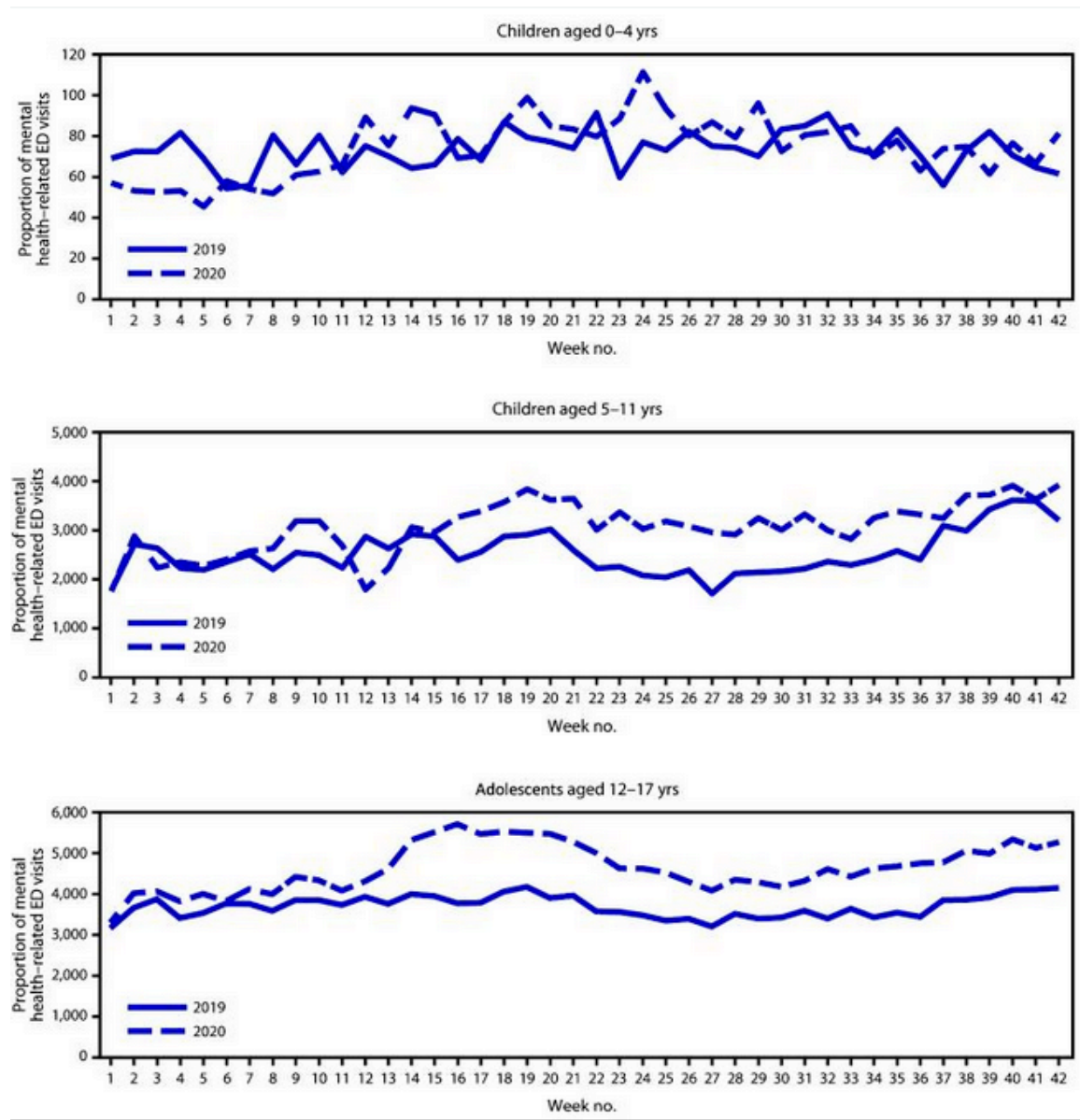
A recent report from the Virginia Fairfax County Public School shows the depressing increase of failing grades in middle school [Office of Research and Strategic Improvement, 2020]. We note that students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged, Hispanics, and English learners all have increased their failing grades by around 400% (!!!).

**Table 3. Percentages of FCPS Middle School Students with Marks of F in 2 or More Classes Overall and By Student Group, SY 2019-20 Q1 Compared to SY 2020-21 Q1**

	Q1 2019-20 Percent and Count	Q1 2020-21 Percent and Count	Change
Middle School Students	2% n=539	8% n=2488	300% increase
Male Students	3% n=378	10% n=1591	233% increase
Female Students	1% n=161	6% n=897	600% increase
Asian Students	1% n=35	3% n=145	300% increase
Black Students	3% n=92	9% n=283	200% increase
Hispanic Students	4% n=318	20% n=1698	400% increase
White Students	1% n=82	3% n=271	200% increase
Students with Disabilities	3% n=122	15% n=674	400% increase
English learner students	6% n=212	29% n=1163	383% increase
Economically disadvantaged students	4% n=391	19% n=1660	375% increase
7 <sup>th</sup> grade Students	2% n=222	8% n=1085	300% increase
8 <sup>th</sup> grade Students	2% n=284	9% n=1208	350% increase

We know that we are now facing a huge increase in mental health issues: A recent report [Leeb et al. 2020] measures that “beginning in April 2020, the proportion of children’s mental health–related ED visits among all pediatric ED visits increased and remained elevated through October. Compared with 2019, the proportion of mental health–related visits for children aged 5–11 and 12–17 years increased approximately 24%. and 31%, respectively.” This effect can be seen clearly in the graphs shown below:





It is clear that the mental health crisis is mounting (Lee, 2020; Farber, 2020) and that kids are paying the heaviest price because of the lack of leadership from the adults in charge.

DC has not escaped the issue: Dr. Dooley, a medical director at Children's National Hospital, quoted in an NPR story noted: "As a pediatrician, I am really seeing the negative impacts of these school closures on children. Going to school is really vital for

children. They get their meals in school, their physical activity, their health care, their education, of course.” [Kamenetz, 2020].

This mental health crisis **does not just affect children**. According to Patrick et al. [2020] “Since March 2020, 27% of parents reported worsening mental health for themselves, and 14% reported worsening behavioral health for their children. The proportion of families with moderate or severe food insecurity increased from 6% before March 2020 to 8% after, employer-sponsored insurance coverage of children decreased from 63% to 60%, and 24% of parents reported a loss of regular child care. Worsening mental health for parents occurred alongside worsening behavioral health for children in nearly 1 in 10 families, among whom 48% reported loss of regular child care, 16% reported change in insurance status, and 11% reported worsening food security.”

We know that there is now a vaccine that is more than 95% efficient. Concerned parents and teachers could get it if they chose to. **Please DO NOT make the vaccine mandatory and/or a condition to kids getting back to school!**

It is pure hypocrisy to hide behind “science” to advocate for school closure: no science supports it. In fact, the exact opposite is true, as the research presented above makes abundantly clear.

Will there be people infected with COVID-19 at school? Probably yes but let’s put things in perspective.

NPR has created in collaboration with several education systems across the country, a dashboard to track COVID-19 cases in school<sup>2</sup>. (Note that this is the number of **CASES not the number of people who end up in hospital** or are really affected by it!). This is how much students and staff have been affected by it in the schools currently opened (image from end of September). Please note that these also include the **suspected** cases (COVID-like symptoms which may or may not be actual COVID infections).

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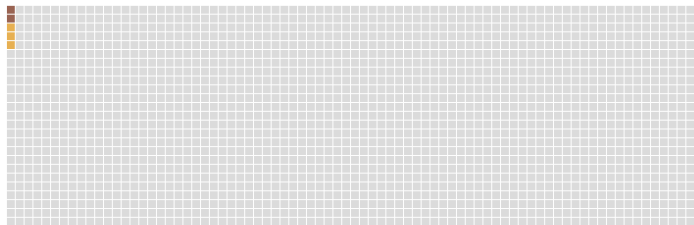
<sup>2</sup> The website is at: <http://qualtrics.com/covid-school-dashboard>

### Coronavirus Cases Among Surveyed Schools

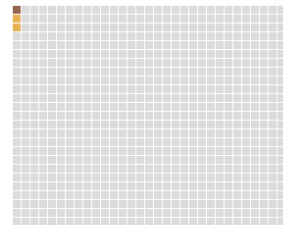
In surveyed schools, there were about 230 confirmed or suspected cases among more than 98,000 students who came to school. There were about 130 confirmed or suspected cases among about 38,000 staff members at these schools.

■ Confirmed cases   
 ■ Suspected cases   
 ■ All other students or staff members  
 One  = 50 people

STUDENTS



STAFF



So enough is enough. We did what you asked. We said nothing and went on lockdown for what was supposed to be a couple of weeks to “flatten” the curve.

I don’t really care to know why the school closures are still going on despite the evidences presented that they are hurting kids, especially kids already at risk. I don’t need to know why some people are still advocating for school closures. I am sure that they can convince themselves that they have children’s interest at heart. But they don’t.

They say they care about kids. They all profess to love them.  
 So prove it. My mother always told me in her native ladino “Las obras son amores” (Love is shown by actions, not just words).

Time to move pass the nice speech on how you care and show us that you actually do.

Open the schools!

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