

Washington, DC mayor calls for reopening of public schools amid pandemic

Nick Barrickman
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On Wednesday, Washington, DC's Democratic mayor Muriel E. Bowser responded to a reporter's question about when it would be possible for the District of Columbia to reopen public schools in person. "I think [Washington, DC Public Schools] can do it, and I think DCPS should do it," she stated.

The mayor added she "would expect" the public school system to begin admitting small groups of students for in-person learning this month. "I don't think we have any health data to suggest that we can't do small groups," she said. The fall school year began on August 31 in DCPS.

The announcement follows news that two of Washington, DC's largest public charter school networks, KIPP DC and Friendship, were admitting groups of students back for in-person courses several days per week. The two charter networks collectively enroll over 11,000 of Washington, DC's 100,000 public school students.

Bowser also announced that she had assigned her deputy mayor for education Paul Kihn "to assess the successes and struggles of charter and private schools that have resumed some in-person instruction to glean lessons for the public school system," according to the *Washington Post*.

The District originally shuttered schools in March as the pandemic spread across the Mid-Atlantic region. Over 7,000 people have succumbed to complications stemming from COVID-19 in the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area.

Bowser's declaration represents a right-wing provocation against teachers in the school system. The mayor is taking direct cues from the business community, in this case, the District's largely unregulated charter school networks, to push for a reckless school reopening which will result in the

spread of the deadly COVID-19 illness.

According to the *Post*: "charter schools offering in-person learning say they are serving small groups of students and have not faced a situation in which a teacher who does not want to teach in person is needed in a classroom. But teachers have told the DC Public Charter School Board that they don't have protections and are fearful of what would happen if they were asked to return to buildings before they are comfortable."

In early July, DCPS provoked outrage among public school teachers when it issued a letter to staff asking them to indicate intent to return for in-person instruction in the new school year. Rather than allowing teachers to virtually teach students, the letter suggested teachers unwilling to appear in person should file for sick leave. If sick leave was denied, teachers would then be forced to do in-person course work or face termination.

At the time, the Washington Teachers Union (WTU), an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, had advised educators not to sign the letter until the school system's position was clarified. The District of Columbia announced in late July, after considerable parent and teacher pushback, that it would switch to an entirely online format until at least November after COVID-19 cases spiked throughout the region.

"We saw some trends in our data that were not ideal for making decisions about the upcoming school year," stated Bowser at the time. Bowser's announcement Wednesday abruptly shifted the school system's policy once again after less than two weeks of classes were completed.

Bowser's announcement follows a general trend in the United States in which Democratic Party administrations at the local and state level have often

set the pace for an abrupt reopening of businesses and schools amid the pandemic. In the Washington, DC metropolitan region, encompassing the District, Maryland and Virginia, this was set by Virginia's Democratic Governor Ralph Northam in late May, when his government announced "phase one" reopening of businesses even as COVID-19 case numbers rapidly rose.

Not to be outdone, Maryland's Republican governor Larry Hogan also began the state's reopening process at the same time. Last month, Hogan contravened his own health department and demanded that the suburban Washington, DC jurisdiction of Montgomery County allow private schools to open in person even as the local health officer warned "data does not suggest that in-person instruction is safe for students or teachers."

On Friday, a report from Montgomery County noted over 13 cases at local schools since classes restarted, including an instance at a Catholic school where a second-grade teacher had accidentally infected one of her students with COVID-19.

For its part, the WTU has acceded to the Bowser administration's about-face, with WTU spokesperson Joe Weedon telling the *Post* that it sought "more conversations with the Bowser administration" because it "hasn't seen satisfactory guidelines for student and teacher safety protocols for in-person learning."

WTU president Elizabeth Davis told the *Post* that "there are teachers who are comfortable returning to classrooms and she is working on identifying them."



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