



Bridging the Digital Divide During COVID-19:

Improving Educational Outcomes Through Cross-Systems Collaboration

Hearing of Joint Committees on Children & Youth and Education

February 17, 2021

Thank you for this opportunity to speak today. My name is Maura McInerney and I am the Legal Director at the **Education Law Center** (“ELC”), a statewide non-profit legal advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all of Pennsylvania’s students have access to a quality public education. We advocate on behalf of students who are most underserved, including children living in poverty, children of color, children with disabilities, English Learners, those who are in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, LGBTQ youth, and students who are experiencing homelessness. Our advocacy aims to ensure that the decisions made by policymakers serve the needs of all children, particularly those who have been marginalized by racism, poverty, and/or academic needs that often further widen educational inequities.

While the focus of this hearing is on re-opening of schools, **Resolution 200630** also addresses the City’s role in bridging the digital divide for children and families in the 2020-2021 school year. This is and remains a critical issue that demands further attention as a majority of children in the District, particularly youth in middle and high schools may continue to be educated virtually for the remainder of the school year. Many of these students, particularly those

who are living in poverty, children experiencing homelessness, English Learners, and students with disabilities are continuing to struggle to access remote learning, communicate with teachers, and receive the services and supports they need. We also know that students living in Black and Brown communities are bearing the brunt of educational deprivations caused by COVID-19, as well as the most severe impacts from the pandemic itself.

The digital divide is multifaceted and complex. While it certainly includes unequal access to computers for remote learning and unequal access to Internet, it also encompasses information gaps around how to use technology and educational platforms, unequal technical support provided by the District, the absence of caregivers to help support learning due to obligations outside of the home environment, the failure to provide needed differentiated support for limited English proficient parents, English learners, and students with disabilities, differential connections to teachers due to overcrowded classes as well as increased housing instability, social-emotional stress, and health issues experienced by students living in poverty. Nationally, reports by both the Education Week Research Center and RAND reflect that schools serving students in poverty and schools that serve majority Black and Brown students, are more likely to be provided with inferior remote learning opportunities, rather than in-person classes and are less likely to have access to a digital device or the internet, and more likely to fall behind during this time due to these barriers.¹ One study concluded that while the average student could fall seven months behind academically last year, students who are Black and Latinx were likely to experience even greater learning losses due to the inability to access high quality digital learning

¹ *In-Person Learning Expands, Student Absences Up, Teachers Work Longer, Survey Shows*, Oct. 15, 2020, available at <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/in-person-learning-expands-student-absences-up-teachers-work-longer-survey-shows/2020/10>

opportunities, equivalent to 10 months for Black students and 9 months for Latinx children.²

This gap is expected to widen as the pandemic continues.

First, Philadelphia has the “second-lowest” internet access “among the 25 largest cities.”³ This issue has not been fully and meaningfully addressed. Black and Brown children are least likely to have the means to receive internet services. ELC continues to receive calls regarding students who cannot participate in on-line learning due to lack of high-speed internet and hot spots. This is a common problem for students who are experiencing homelessness, particularly those living in shelters and students who are doubled up living with others and may live part of the week in one home and then another. For example, one family shelter in Philadelphia serves over 200 people, including over 100 students. There, children struggle to access remote instruction. In some cases, five children are sharing one hot spot even though the City’s PHLConnectEd program only recommends three devices per hot spot. Children who move around and live in different locations also need additional hot spots or free internet at more than one location. This is an untenable situation and leads many children to be pushed out of learning entirely.

In addition to access barriers, school discipline policies must change in light of our new normal of remote learning to ensure students aren’t punished for being forced to learn outside of the school environment. Children should not be punished for noise in the background that they

² *COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime*, June 2020, available at <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/COVID-19%20and%20student%20learning%20in%20the%20United%20States%20The%20hurt%20could%20last%20a%20lifetime/COVID-19-and-student-learning-in-the-United-States-FINAL.pdf>.

³ *Comcast offers free Wifi, waives data cap and late fees, won’t disconnect service during coronavirus outbreak*, The Inquirer, Mar. 22, 2020, <https://why.org/articles/comcast-offers-free-wifi-waives-data-cap-and-late-fees-wont-disconnect-service-during-coronavirus-outbreak/>

cannot control and families should not face potential referral to family court due to COVID-related absences stemming from barriers to remote learning. ***We urge City Council to ensure that the need for additional internet resources is identified and that all families are provided with sufficient sustained internet access so that all children can access remote learning.***

Second, English learners face unique but common barriers that prevent them from accessing remote learning at all -- from logging on to navigating digital portals, to meaningfully engaging with the curriculum and receiving effective language instruction in a remote environment. Too many of our ELs are still not even getting through the virtual schoolhouse gate, and therefore receive no benefit and make no progress in their education. Moreover, following multiple absences due to technology or access issues, many of these students in multiple schools have been removed from the District rolls entirely. ***The most common barrier for English Learners remains lack of communication with schools.*** Many ELs are unable to overcome technology and language barriers to even log onto remote learning successfully or navigate English-only digital platforms, so they are not accessing instruction in any meaningful way. Multilingual families are left in the dark with no coordinated communication plan from the District. Families receive different levels of information and support depending on which school building their child is enrolled in and whether staff know to use the district's translation and Language Line services or Bilingual Counseling Assistants. ***There must be a common districtwide communication plan that applies to all schools to support ELs across the City.*** ***City Council can also play an essential role in facilitating linkages between community-based organizations and the District to support better communications*** and to ensure that community organizations and the District collaborate to resolve problems that community members are reporting to these organizations. This type of coordination with other community stakeholders is

essential for students and families who do not speak the nine most common languages of greatest diffusion.

Third, along with other advocates we reiterate our prior request that *the City expand eligibility criteria for ACCESS Centers to include English Learners and students experiencing homelessness*. The current requirement that ACCESS Centers are limited to families where there is no caregiver at home ignores the reality that many limited English proficient parents lack the support to navigate digital platforms entirely in English and classes entirely in English. It also ignores the reality that students in shelters and experiencing homelessness commonly lack any quiet place to learn. The requirements further exclude students whose caregivers such as grandparents may need support and access to technology literacy to facilitate virtual learning. Many concerns with the digital divide could be solved by expanded eligibility criteria for ACCESS Centers.

Fourth, we must address the needs of students with disabilities who will continue virtual instruction in some cases due to health and safety concerns stemming from their disabilities. We commend the District for developing individualized digital learning plans for many students. *These individualized plans need to be completed, revisited, and fully implemented for all students with disabilities*. We now have several months of data based on remote learning and these plans need to be modified based on what we have learned and evidence of what children need. *In addition, the District must systemically plan for how it will remediate the failure to provide the virtual instruction and support necessary for students with disabilities to receive a free, appropriate, public education and make meaningful progress during this last year.*

In sum, the District needs additional targeted support to support students who have specific learning needs and those who continue to lack access to the resources needed to engage in distance learning including sustained access to the internet, support for teachers, counselors, and staff to serve students who are most marginalized, and expanded access to school counseling and other social and emotional supports. We urge City Council to provide these needed targeted resources. Thank you for considering these recommendations as part of a city-wide plan to address the ongoing barriers relating to the digital divide which have continued throughout the pandemic and continue to leave many of our most underserved students far behind. These ever-widening gaps have continued over the course of nearly a full year now. All of our students, including those who continue to be educated remotely, desperately need and must receive the services and supports they require to learn and thrive in our City. Thank you.