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## Equity and SEL concerns as APS opens schools

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To: RMacNeal@arlington.k12.ma.us

Cc: aps\_superintendent@arlington.k12.ma.us, Karen Fitzgerald <kfitzgerald@arlington.k12.ma.us>

Dear Dr. MacNeal,

I want to thank you for the perspectives and ideas you have shared at the various school committee and subcommittee meetings over this summer, as well as the APS forum on listening to suppressed voices. I could see that you care about equity, inclusion, and striving for opportunities for all students. I am hoping that you might be able to shed some light on questions and concerns that I have for the coming school year.

I am writing to express my profound disappointment and anger at the tone-deaf response to the COVID pandemic by the district. I am incredibly sympathetic to the fact that planning for public health emergencies landed in your lap—this is not your wheelhouse and it is ridiculous that each individual school district was left to plan independently of any robust state or federal guidance, without adequate funding. That said, children, families, and teachers are not served by the plans and measures undertaken by the district to date. The only stakeholder I can see that would be pleased with this plan are companies like Pearson, Google, and Apple. I appreciate this perspective from Somerville, and share it here:

[https://commonwealthmagazine.org/opinion/curtatone-a-color-coded-map-is-not-a-plan/?fbclid=IwAR16spEI-gp\\_EtLoi8zwcUegzYkZWzlw4MPTb97\\_vX9PjkJBZTfMEjlb8Wk](https://commonwealthmagazine.org/opinion/curtatone-a-color-coded-map-is-not-a-plan/?fbclid=IwAR16spEI-gp_EtLoi8zwcUegzYkZWzlw4MPTb97_vX9PjkJBZTfMEjlb8Wk)

I see a lot of verbage from the district, passed through the teachers, about being positive and reassuring platitudes that we're all in this together. This is not true. Parents with resources will use them to insulate themselves and their children, and those without will end up with whatever is left. In this context, it seems that raising issues of concern--otherwise called complaining--is not welcome. However, I am reminded of this quote from an author I admire, Sarah Kendzior:

"The surest way to keep a problem from being solved is to deny that problem exists. Telling people not to complain is a way of keeping social issues from being addressed. It trivializes the grievances of the vulnerable, making the burdened feel like burdens. Telling people not to complain is an act of power, a way of asserting that one's position is more important than another one's pain. People who say "stop complaining" always have the right to stop listening. But those who complain have often been denied the right to speak."

— Sarah Kendzior, [The View From Flyover Country: Essays by Sarah Kendzior](#)

So, here I go, hopefully not screaming into the void.

The "choice" between remote-only and hybrid was a false one that has divided the community and strained resources. I saw no method for the district to elicit feedback from parents, and none of the comments I shared with my son's teachers seemed to be heard. The surveys that were presented had leading questions, asked parents to state preferences with no context or definitions of those options, and did not seem to be a validated measure. I believe that most parents would have opted for a plan that prioritized the health and safety of staff and students, regardless of format.

Once the district began to communicate with the community in August, we were told that equity, health, and safety were at the forefront of the plans. We were told that social-emotional learning would be the priority. We were told that planning for children on IEPs and English Language Learners would be prioritized for their services to minimize achievement gaps. However, I do not see that reflected in any of the plans or implementation. Instead, the plans as they are rolled out now seem to be poised to exacerbate these inequities and present health risks to the students and staff.

Students in these vulnerable groups seem to be last on the priority list. As a parent of a child on an IEP, I have been asking for weeks how services will be delivered, and was appalled to hear that Supt. Bodie was resigned to remote students not receiving any inclusion services on an IEP. Offering to have students attend for more in-person days on the hybrid plan being made to sit through the content presented twice or being segregated from general education is also a non-viable plan. And finally, re-assigning students in the remote program who have IEPs the weekend before school

begins after connecting with teachers and classmates is abhorrent. In a climate where social ties are already strained, this harms vulnerable students and families, and furthers the divisions in the school communities.

All emails / surveys / communication sent this summer was disseminated by email, only in English. Emails that were sent somehow were sent to promotions or other folders in my email account, and often the only way I would know to look for it would be posts on social media like Facebook. Likewise, families struggling with job insecurity and food insecurity would not have the time to track down all these communications. Who were the people responding to these surveys? Was there any effort to ensure this was a representative sample of families? Was there an effort to reach out to people whose voices are often not heard, to include them in the plan?

As the plans have been implemented, I have been very concerned that it seems that the solution is to spend money on educational apps and rely on videoconferencing software. This is problematic to me on so many levels.

- Do the families all have uniform internet access to be able to use the google classroom and zoom? Can people afford it, as Internet service is not currently considered a public utility? With many families trying to work from home, that means more than one videoconference streaming simultaneously, for one or more adults, potentially multiple children. Are families without high speed internet meant to stream through their phones as mobile hotspots, and burn through their data plans with the expectation of keeping zoom on all day? We are well-resourced, and with work conferences and 2 children, our data connectivity is suffering, and we will need to invest in additional wifi infrastructure to make it work. How many other families can afford that?
- Are the educational apps vetted and effective? Do they meet the needs of the varying educational needs of the students? What research has been done on their outcomes?
- How is the district safeguarding the data that is being collected by all the educational apps and videoconferencing software? The district has liberally used google forms and surveys this summer to collect personal information about our children and families. How is that data being safeguarded? How are zoom-bombings being prevented? Bad actors are certainly looking to exploit weaknesses and hack into systems at this time. How is APS positioned to defend against this, and how can childrens' personal and educational information be protected?
- Expecting children to be in front of a screen for a 6h school day is developmentally inappropriate, and would be a challenge for an adult. In addition to the overall health concerns with eye strain and ergonomic injuries, there are also privacy concerns regarding an open mic and camera in so many homes.

And finally, the repeated verbage about how we are returning to the normal school day and school requirements is infuriating to me, and generally tone-deaf at best. Asking parents to facilitate and to conform to a schedule of an 8:10a to 2:30p school day while trying to work, care for a family, provide food, care for other family members during a global pandemic and recession is completely out of the bounds of anything any of us have experienced in our lifetimes. This requires an adult to be present and overseeing this, which means either hiring someone to do it if a family has the means, or for a family member to do this for their children, foregoing paid employment. These policies will drive parents, disproportionately women, away from the workforce. <https://gen.medium.com/america-doesnt-care-about-mothers-8dfc1113f7bc>

It is my understanding that classroom teachers were largely shut out of planning of the school year. Classroom teachers are passionate and invested in their students, and would have been a fantastic resource to tap for creative solutions in order to move forward during this time. I found the teachers unions to have valid concerns, and discussion of them was shut out of public view. As teachers will be implementing the plans, I can't understand why they were not included or heard in the planning process. As a result, I am not surprised at all the staff and teacher vacancies right now that make running any in-person school so tenuous.

Public health experts recommend measures such as widespread testing of a population to understand COVID's prevalence, as well as isolation of cases and contact tracing in order to get control of this pandemic in the community. Additionally, wearing of masks and keeping indoor spaces well-ventilated is paramount. I am happy that teachers are offered optional testing, but in order to feel safe about sending my own children in, I would want a requirement that the entire school community tested, as well as utilize outdoor learning spaces. I can understand it is a challenge for the district to implement these common public health measures in the face of the national CDC that does not back them up after political interference. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/18/cdc-guidelines-coronavirus-testing-published-despite-objection-scientists>

What families need now is support, connection, and flexibility. Neighborhood schools could have been a community support for families. Instead, schools starting up again adds to the burden families face even more than it did in the spring when schools closed. I wish the district had planned for a universal, flexible plan to empower staff and students to be able to move between remote and in-person instruction as their individual situation and community situation changes. It is already clear that staff and students will need to quarantine at various points during the school year, and I wish it was possible to do that while being part of a classroom and a school community. A plan that allowed for parents to arrange school hours for the times when they are able to support their children around the family schedule and work hours would greatly reduce the chances that families would send their children in sick.

It is my hope that APS decides to listen, and take seriously, the concerns of the families and teachers in the district, rather than only listening to the loudest and most money-ed voices. The teacher my son has is incredibly kind, resourceful, and is putting forth a lot of effort into making this unworkable situation work for her classroom. I want her to have all the tools and support that she needs, as well as keeping the larger community safe.

Thank you for all you do. I know school districts across the country are in an impossible situation. I hope there is truly a way to move forward with equity, inclusion, and connection in the schools.

Best regards,

Janna Moreau

Bishop Parent / Remote Academy