



Dear Alderman,

This fall —while thousands of CPS principals, assistant principals, nutrition staff, custodians and even teachers have been safely reporting to schools to carry out their roles — CPS students have been required to learn remotely, and many of our Black and Latinx students have fallen far behind.

At the same time, CPS students have safely attended 16 Learning Hubs throughout the city, and students in Chicago’s private and parochial schools have been attending class in person. Due to the proactive measures being taken by those schools — which are met and exceeded by the [mitigations CPS has implemented](#) — Chicago students who attend in-person instruction have experienced lower rates of COVID-19 infection than their peers who are not in school.

While there was uncertainty about the safety of schools when we knew far less about COVID-19, these positive health outcomes are no longer a surprise. Data from schools throughout Illinois, across the country and around the world confirm what is now the scientific consensus: [schools are safe](#) when proper mitigations are followed.

Now that we know in-person instruction can be conducted safely, we must do everything in our power to make it a reality for the 77,000 students — most of whom are Black and Latinx — who want to return. Families who attend private and parochial schools in your communities have had this option for months, and providing this option is a matter of equity that will have ramifications for years to come. In-person learning is not the right choice for every student, but it must be an option for all.

The unfortunate fact is that despite our best efforts and the heroic work of teachers to make remote instruction effective for CPS students, it is a poor substitute for in-person learning for many of our most vulnerable students. With the [proper mitigation strategies that CPS and the Chicago Department of Public Health have put into place](#), leading public health officials and [medical professionals](#) are confident we can welcome back teachers, staff, and students to school in a safe and responsible manner.

CPS has invested millions of dollars and developed health and safety policies to ensure teachers and staff can work within our school buildings safely. Enclosed here is a [comprehensive list](#) of those investments and policies for your information, including enhanced cleaning protocols, required face coverings, daily health screenings, and clear and transparent information through [Chicago Department of Public Health’s](#) and [CPS’s](#) COVID-19 dashboards. We are also working diligently with leaders at all levels to make sure a vaccine is available to CPS educators and school staff as soon as possible.

Since June, CPS officials have met with CTU leadership more than 40 times to try to reach an agreement that addresses the union’s concerns. Despite what you have heard, we believe there is broad agreement with CTU on all of their in-school safety concerns including — but not limited to — ventilation, PPE,

contact tracing, COVID testing, and school- and district-level safety committees. While an agreement is not legally required to reopen schools, we believe one is within reach and we will continue to work toward one as quickly as possible.

The last nine months have confirmed what we already knew: educators are essential workers who make extraordinary contributions to the healthy functioning of our students, our neighborhoods, and city. We are as essential as police, firefighters, medical personnel, and other frontline workers. The health and development of our students depend on educators making authentic connections with them, which for large parts of our student body is best done in-person. We respect that there is a range of opinion on reopening and that some people are apprehensive about even the safest public activities. Still, the needs of our students are undeniable, and the data are clear that schools like ours can reopen safely, which is why reopening is the right decision for our schools.

In your letter, you identified a number of concerns and below we address them. Thank you for bringing the concerns of not just yourselves but your constituents.

- 1. "Establish and promote clear public health criteria for reopening, and share a detailed testing and contact-tracing plan. The safety-related metrics with which our constituents are most familiar relate to the positivity rate (currently hovering near 9%) and the daily number of new cases (regularly exceeding 1,000). These numbers do not adequately account for the neighborhood-specific hotspots where COVID-19 struggles are most pronounced (the positivity rate in 60632, for example, currently exceeds 16%). Moreover, these numbers may well increase in the coming weeks and continue to exceed the benchmarks of 5% positivity and 400 new cases to which our city's public health leaders pointed earlier this year as warranting concern. In addition, our constituents are less familiar with CPS's new benchmark of infections doubling in fewer than 18 days, nor are they conversant about CPS's testing and contract-tracing plans for educators and students."***

As scientists, researchers, and health officials have continued to study and learn more about COVID-19, the metrics and standards used for public health criteria have updated along with the science. While test positivity rate and daily cases are valuable metrics that are often cited when discussing COVID-19, health officials no longer find them to be as meaningful as once thought with regard to the question of whether schools may safely be open for in-person instruction.

As CDPH and other public health authorities have observed, in-person instruction may safely occur at positivity rates higher than was previously understood as data from around the world on reopening schools has indicated that they, indeed, can safely reopen with the proper health protocols in place.

The absence of significant outbreaks in either the 90+ Chicago archdiocese schools that have served approximately 20,000 students since reopening last fall, or the 3,000 local daycare centers in operation over the past 6 months, tells us that in-person school and daycare may safely occur where key mitigation strategies are in place. And while these schools and providers have taken appropriate

precautions to keep children safe, they have not all undertaken the thorough, independent ventilation assessments conducted in CPS schools or provided HEPA air purifiers for all classrooms.

Data from Chicago align with the emerging national and global patterns that also support students' return to school. An emerging pattern indicates that schools and daycares **are not** the fuel for community surges that occur:

- According to UNICEF, scientific evidence from 191 countries shows, "There is no consistent association between school reopening status and COVID-19 infection rates in communities [where standard mitigation strategies are deployed]." Thus, the net benefits of keeping schools open outweigh the costs to children of closing them. (UNICEF, *Averting a Lost Generation*, Nov 2020).
- Yale Daycare Study (Gilliam, et al; Pediatrics, Oct 2020): Over 57,000 daycare workers were surveyed in May and June 2020. Just under half of the programs stayed open or re-opened after a brief closure. Overall, **427** child care providers in the study tested positive for COVID-19 (< 1%); researchers compared these COVID positive workers to those who did not contract the virus as well as to a group of matched controls. **They found no association between contracting the virus and exposure to child care as a worker. This suggests that transmission within daycares is negligible.**
- NYC, which once publicly endorsed a 3% test positivity threshold in agreement with the teachers' union, discovered the metric to be not valid, and therefore appropriately scrapped it. This allowed NYC students to return safely to in-person instruction, thus protecting and supporting students' educational, social and emotional, nutritional, physical and mental health.

The metric CDPH now endorses for assessment of whether in person school is safe, based on the most current scientific evidence, is "doubling time." This metric answers the most fundamental and relevant question: Is the pandemic under control or not? The longer it takes for case counts to double, the slower the growth of the pandemic and the safer the public health conditions for school reopening.

Right now, **doubling time in Chicago is 96.2 days**, which is safely and quite securely over the 18 day threshold for reopening set by CDPH.

For data on doubling time see:

https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/sites/covid/DoublingTime/Doubling_Time.pdf

In regards to **contact tracing**, when someone self-reports a positive COVID-19 test to the district, they will be interviewed promptly by a member of the Contact Tracing Team (CPS Office of Student Health and Wellness). The Contact Tracing Team quickly notifies all direct contacts of the COVID-19 positive person that they must quarantine, and prepares other health communications. If there is a positive COVID-19 case within a pod, all members of that pod will be notified and guided to quarantine.

Contact tracing is extremely important, so any student, staff, or visitor who tests positive for COVID-19 should promptly report to cps.edu/covidresults. Families can reach out to contacttracing@cps.edu or 773-553-KIDS with questions. To ensure public awareness, the district is tracking confirmed COVID cases at cps.edu/reopening.

In regards to **testing**, we shared our surveillance testing procedures with CPS staff last week and are preparing additional communications to be sent next week to our school communities regarding testing. For additional information, please see our [COVID-19 Surveillance Testing Overview](#). Surveillance testing allows public health officials to measure and monitor COVID-19 prevalence among asymptomatic people in a community over time.

For constituents who are interested in the district's contact tracing protocols and testing plans, we direct you to the infographics included in the Surveillance Testing link above.

- 2. "Improve the technology infrastructure to which students have access—notably, the internet connectivity for all students participating in remote learning. We have heard from many families who have struggled mightily to obtain the requisite internet connectivity and devices, in part because CPS waited until December to announce expanded eligibility for no-cost, high speed internet."***

When Chicago Connected launched in June, the primary focus was to ensure the students most in need received access to the internet. The rollout took into consideration various equity factors to determine eligibility. In addition to the programmatic expansion, the district partnered with 35 community-based organizations and with principals to ensure families have the information and supports needed to gain access to this transformative program.

Since its launch in June 2020, more than 50,000 students have enrolled in the program, which is on track to reach 100,000 students by the end of the 2020-2021 school year. Chicago Connected has also expanded eligibility to more than 235,000 student households, creating the foundation for a permanent publicly supported system for families in the city.

Despite the district's unprecedented efforts to provide families with access to technology, data shows that many of our students are having trouble accessing remote learning on a consistent basis. Our schools have seen that even with the right digital tools, the strongest possible remote learning plan cannot serve all students well enough and in-person instruction is needed.

Families can check eligibility status and access their activation code at cps.edu/GetConnected.

- 3. "Reduce screen time, especially for students in early grades, and increase opportunities for learning that do not rely largely or solely on access to technology. Such opportunities include arts-and-crafts projects that reinforce what students are learning in other subject areas like***

history and reading; building structures using available household items such as legos, blocks, paper, and/or cardboard; and scavenger hunts in- or outside of the home where feasible.”

Our [Remote Learning Guidance](#) includes synchronous and asynchronous learning requirements that take into account the developmental needs of students. Screen time is reduced for our youngest learners, and students in grades K-2 are only required to engage 180 minutes of synchronous instruction per day. The [Illinois State Board of Education](#) (ISBE, p.6) minimum for synchronous learning is 150 minutes per day.

We have continuously provided guidance, direction and professional learning aimed at ensuring educators provide students with meaningful digital and non-digital learning tasks during asynchronous time.

More information can be found at:

<https://www.cps.edu/school-reopening-2020/remote-learning-guide/faq/>

4. “Strengthen the planning around hybrid learning, particularly for classrooms in which CPS anticipates remote and in-person learning to occur simultaneously.”

CPS has released a detailed Instructional Guide for Reopening, specifically focused on supporting teachers who may be assigned to teach both students who are in-person and students who are learning at home. In addition, to support school communities with planning and delivering instruction, CPS will offer multiple professional learning opportunities and pathways for school leaders and teacher participation.

CPS will offer a set of four foundational sessions to support schools with the instructional transition to reopening. School leaders are encouraged to promote attendance at these sessions, or share learning from these sessions during principal-directed preparation time. Each of these four sessions will be available in three different delivery options:

Daytime Sessions for School Leaders and Teacher Leaders: sessions are offered for admins/teacher leaders to access content as a school leadership team during the weeks of 1/11 and 1/18. Sessions will also be offered during the week of K-8 staff return (week of 1/25).

Wednesday Workshops for Teachers: open for any teacher to attend after school.

Asynchronous Modules: Accessible to any teacher or school team for individual or school use.

Other opportunities include, but are not limited to:

- Additional Wednesday Workshops

- The Office of Teaching and Learning and the Office of Early Childhood will continue to offer weekly additional Wednesday Workshops specific to grade and content areas as well as establishing a culture for learning support for reopening. All elementary sessions will be tailored to reopening.
- Tech Tuesdays
 - The Teaching and Learning Instructional Technology team will continue to offer weekly afternoon Tech Tuesdays sessions which include office hours, tech tool specific sessions and technology tips for reopening instruction.
- Supports for New Teachers
 - The Teaching and Learning New Teacher Supports Team has asynchronous modules and weekly synchronous sessions to support first year teachers as they prepare to enter the classroom for in-person instruction.

We will continue to engage school leaders and teachers to inform additional supports that will be offered throughout the remainder of the school year to support this transition. The network teams, including Instructional Support Leaders, Social Emotional Specialists, Special Education Administrators, and Early Childhood Specialists will continue to support teachers during grade level and content area planning sessions. They will share instructional strategies, offer guidance for planning lessons and units of study, review and analyze student work and assessments, and provide coaching and support to individual teachers. Network chiefs will provide support to school administrative teams to implement school reopening plans, and the Office of Network Supports is facilitating principal reopening task forces for elementary and high schools. Over 20 school principals are engaged in providing input for both reopening schools and further strengthening remote learning.

5. *“Engage principals, local school councils, and other school-based leaders to ensure that individual schools are able to adopt guidelines and protocols that reflect their unique needs.”*

Each school has a flexibility within the district’s reopening framework to develop local plans reflective of their unique context and programming. The district held a wide range of meetings, planning sessions, and office hours to support each school administrative team in applying the guidelines within their specific plan. In addition to guidance materials and resources — such as a comprehensive Principal Reopening Handbook and dashboard — principals can set up planning sessions with network teams, have one on one consultations with academic and operational offices, and escalate issues and concerns through the Reopening Command Center managed by the Office of Network Supports. Each geographic network has one principal representative to the elementary schools’ reopening task force, and Network Chiefs provide ongoing support to principals in developing local school plans.

In addition to support for school leaders, we have also prioritized outreach to Local School Councils, which play a vital role in supporting reopening efforts. Our Office of LSC Relations has held biweekly meetings open to all members to discuss relevant topics related to LSC business, including reopening.

Additionally, weekly programs have been offered to all parents, LSC members, and community members. The sessions, titled, “Ask the Expert” take place weekly on Thursdays from 4pm - 5pm and leverage various subject matter experts to provide information and take questions directly submitted by families. The next session will take place on Thursday, January 7th, and will feature Bryan Stokes, Chief of Early Childhood Education. These sessions are recorded and uploaded to the [Office of Family and Community Engagement YouTube channel](#). Videos are shared with LSCs and LSC members are encouraged to register and submit questions in advance. To sign up for an upcoming session, visit the district’s [upcoming events page](#).

- 6. “Provide social workers, speech therapists, and other clinicians with adequate advanced notice regarding which of their students will be available to them remotely, in-person, or both, and prioritize scheduling that allows these clinicians to maintain their existing caseload of students and to sanitize equipment and rooms as needed. In addition, CPS should ensure that these clinicians are subject to the guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, at least in part to protect against the use of basements, hallways, and other poorly ventilated areas for providing services.”**

The district prioritized scheduling that allowed related services providers to keep their caseload, however, due to teachers’ ADA requests and other requested accommodations that have been granted, some modifications were necessary.

We are currently focused on scheduling our K-8 Related Service Providers, and we are ensuring that all ADA and workplace accommodation requests are prioritized and addressed.

- 7. “Provide decisions regarding educators’ applications for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or non-ADA accommodations timely and transparently, as well as provide clearer guidelines regarding when and under what circumstances CPS will seek to roll back those accommodations.”**

ADA and non-ADA requests are made on a rolling basis, and CPS has set soft deadlines for requests to ensure we are able to respond in a timely manner. All requests that were fully completed on time by staff returning to in-person work on January 4 have either been approved or denied, and those decisions have been communicated directly to the employee. Employees who are scheduled to return on January 25 will receive their approval or denial during the week of January 4 or January 11.

- 8. “Provide clearer guidelines for decision-making regarding paid leave rights under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and other relevant laws and regulations so that educators who are also parents can make their own childcare arrangements promptly.”**

The paid leave rights for childcare and other reasons granted under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act expired on December 31. CPS will continue its emergency paid sick leave for employees who are unable to work because they are self-quarantined per public health order, or by order of a

medical provider. And to support teachers who have children in CPS, we are providing their children access to in-person instruction or Learning Hubs every day.

9. “Provide regular, public updates on the pace of hiring the 2,000 new employees who are to assume various pandemic-related responsibilities.”

To support the larger in-person learning expansion that will begin on February 1 for grades K-8, the district recently opened 2,000 additional positions to support schools. Principals are actively working to hire for these roles, and the district will provide a staffing update at its next public Board of Education meeting on January 27.

Our students and families are depending on us, and welcoming them back safely is our highest priority. This year has undoubtedly been challenging, but we remain confident that our team of talented educators will do everything possible to ensure our students have what they need to succeed. We thank you for your continued partnership and look forward to beginning the new year with tens of thousands of our students back in the classroom.

We are grateful for your commitment to our students. Please do not hesitate in contacting our IGA team with any further questions, Lauro Roman at lroman37@cps.edu, Jamel Chambers at jdchambers3@cps.edu, and Frank Bilecki at fwbilecki@cps.edu.

Sincerely,



Janice K. Jackson, EdD
Chief Executive Officer
Chicago Public Schools

Additional Information/Support for Staff

[COVID-19 Guidance for Educators](#) - Overview of health and safety protocols including cloth face covering requirement, symptom screening, and COVID-19 surveillance testing.

[Mandatory COVID-19 Training](#) - Important training related to COVID-19 safety protocols. For staff returning on January 4, training must be completed by January 8 (unfortunately, Safe Schools will still show a deadline of January 29). For staff returning on January 25, training must be completed by January 29.

[Reopening Instructional Guidance](#) - In preparing for 2021, we've taken the lessons learned from our

transition to remote learning and refined them to face the persisting challenges of COVID-19. This guidance outlines instructional models to support students across learning environments as well as examples of synchronous and asynchronous delivery methods.

To help make sure families and communities are prepared for this transition, we have compiled the below list of [frequently asked questions](#) and answers.

Video Links:

[Return to School](#) (Hamline ES)

[What will a school day look like for a pre-k student](#) (Drake ES)

[What will a school day look like for a K-8 student](#) (Bronzeville Classical)

[What considerations will be taken for students in moderate and intensive cluster programs](#) (Christopher ES)