

Angélica Infante-Green
 Commissioner

January 6, 2021

School Committee

City of Pawtucket

Dear School Committee Members,

I am writing to follow-up on our last communication from December 1st, and to provide some clear next steps to reopening all classrooms in the City of Pawtucket for Pawtucket School District (PSD) students and families.

I want to start by thanking so many of you for your work these past few months to support student learning, working to bring Pre-K, Kindergarten and our highest risk students back into the classroom where we know they learn best. Over the last four months, we have proven the efficacy of our COVID mitigation guidance and controls and as a result, we have observed negligible rates of transmission among close contacts in school, far below other settings in the state, and rates of incidence of COVID-19 lower among our in-person students than among our students that are learning virtually. Nationally, we have seen worrisome trends of significant learning loss among students that were not afforded the opportunity to receive in person instruction.

We know that COVID-19 has exacerbated education inequities and has disproportionately impacted communities of color here in Rhode Island. This is of particular concern for communities, like yours, that based on the state’s new accountability system are tracking towards a 1-star rating. At this time, Pawtucket is the only school district in the state that has not offered the opportunity for students to return to in person instruction. Superintendent McWilliams shared previously that 70% of students opted for in–person instruction, if it were to become available in Pawtucket. It is our shared responsibility to ensure that these students are afforded the same opportunity as others in Rhode Island so that they can realize the academic, health, and social/emotional benefits that in-person instruction provides.

When the RIDE team last met with the Pawtucket city and school leadership teams on November 6th, there were **three** primary concerns that we had aligned upon a path forward to remedy. Our top concern was that based on the results of the school walkthroughs in early September, steps had not been taken to procure the necessary items or put the proper controls in place in all Pawtucket schools to allow for the in-person return of students. PSD’s concerns were: 1) ensuring adequate ventilation in buildings that did not have modern HVAC systems and 2) the ability of the school electrical systems to handle operating HEPA air purifiers in each classroom simultaneously. As of early December, both of PSD’s concerns have been remedied and the State has added new COVID-19 testing opportunities that can be implemented directly in schools by the district. However, we have still not received Pawtucket’s plan to return students to in-person instruction or observed the implementation of the reopening guidance in the unoccupied buildings. We understood that PSD was going to reconvene a task force to develop a reopening plan. Both Deputy Commissioners Ana Riley and Dr. Kelvin Roldan offered to be part of the task force. If the task force has been empaneled and plans developed, please let us know. Our team stands ready to assist. This implementation is also critical to delivering equitable and accessible COVID-19 testing options for your school communities, as you have indicated that uncertainty around reopening will prohibit Pawtucket from committing to any of the testing options supported by the State. Below is a detailed accounting of the steps that have been taken since our meeting in November and what remains to be done in order to safely return Pawtucket’s students to in person instruction.

**Concern: Adequate ventilation in accordance with the Facilities and Physical Plant Guidance to Reopen RI’s Schools**

**Status: COMPLETE**

* PSD did not respond to the statewide survey or multiple outreach attempts in October for how many HEPA air purifiers would be necessary in order to place one in each classroom. Based on the known classrooms in the District, the state ordered 500 HEPA filters which arrived on 11/17. PSD arranged for pickup of their 500 units on 12/3.
* Superintendent McWilliams notified the EdOC on 12/16 that the HEPA air purifiers had been placed in all of the classrooms that required them and were operational.
* Prior to delivery, pickup and placement, the State provided the services of Arden Engineering to walk through all PSD schools 11/9-11/11. The team identified that no barriers existed to implement the current ventilation guidance. The engineering team also assessed that the Medify AIR HEPA air purifiers that the state procured would provide the required 4-6 air changes per hour of filtered air for classrooms in Pawtucket.

**Concern: PSD School’s electrical system capacity to support HEPA air purifiers**

**Status: COMPLETE**

* The State provided an electrician to survey all PSD school buildings on 11/16 and determine if the electrical system was adequate to meet normal load and accommodate all of the HEPA air purifiers operating simultaneously. The electrician reported that all schools and annexes had more than sufficient capacity to operate all of the HEPA air purifiers simultaneously.
* On 11/16, Superintendent McWilliams also shared with the Education Operations Center (EdOC) team that the PSD facilities team had tested the HEPA air purifiers in classrooms without any electrical issues.

**Concern: Implement the state health and operating guidance and Pawtucket’s school reopening plan**

**Status: PENDING**

* The State walked through all RI schools in the first week of September and noted that only the schools that were planning to open for Pre-K, Kindergarten, and special populations had put proper COVID mitigation controls in place in accordance with the Pawtucket school reopening plan and the state health and operating guidance.
* The state conducted another round of walk throughs of all of the Pawtucket schools two months later from 11/9-11/11 and noted that minimal progress had been made in preparing the unoccupied schools to receive students.
* During the month of December, the EdOC has been working with Superintendent McWilliams to arrange another round of walkthroughs once the buildings are ready to validate that the controls outlined in the Pawtucket reopening plan and current guidance are in place so that buildings are ready for students, faculty, and staff. On 12/29, Assistant Superintendent Lee Rabbit informed the EdOC that PSD schools will be ready for walk throughs on 1/20/2021 and they have been scheduled for that day.
* The State is offering multiple COVID-19 surveillance testing options for schools to further improve our ability to quickly detect positive cases. Pawtucket is one of only three school LEAs statewide, that has not opted into this program as of yet. The State has allocated staff and resources to provide testing in schools on 1/21 and 1/22 and is awaiting final coordination from PSD to provide this important public health resource to the Pawtucket school community.

As always, our EdOC is an excellent resource and should be considered a partner for assisting PSD with the planning and implementation of these controls and a robust COVID-19 surveillance testing program in PSD’s schools. It is critical that the PSD team takes the necessary steps to ensure that they’re schools meet the standards of the reopening guidance in order to safely open schools in January, per the statewide calendar. Our students and families deserve access to in-person learning opportunities and supports and are relying on PSD to provide safe in-person learning environments, which I’m sure are well underway.

Our state team is standing by to support in any way that we can to ensure that students have the best education opportunities possible this year. Please reach out to our team with any additional questions you may have.

Sincerely,



Angélica Infante-Green Commissioner