



June 9, 2020

The Hon. Shebra Evans, President
and Members of the Montgomery County Board of Education
Carver Educational Services Center, Room 123
850 Hungerford Drive
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear President Evans and fellow Board of Education members:

We write on behalf of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington, (JCRC), which represents over 100 Jewish synagogues, schools, social service agencies and other institutions throughout the greater Washington, D.C. region. Since its inception in 1938, the JCRC has been a leader in advocating for rights and protections for Jewish Americans and for all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or other identity. We champion the cause of the most vulnerable members of our society, through advocacy for our network of non-sectarian Jewish social service agencies, interfaith and intergroup outreach, and other legislative and grass-roots initiatives.

Education outreach is a significant priority for the JCRC. An overwhelming majority of Jewish children in our region attend public schools; we work independently and in coalition to ensure that those schools are safe and welcoming for all students, and that all children have an equal opportunity to realize their full potential. As part of that goal, the JCRC is proud to be a member of the Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity and Excellence.

We speak out today as Montgomery County begins the slow, complex process of recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. With its disproportionate devastation of communities of color, the pandemic has further exposed injustices that continue to challenge American society. Data is beginning to demonstrate what had already been observed at the grass-roots level: while the move to online learning in March 2020 has been difficult for all children, it has had an especially harmful impact on our most vulnerable students: Black, Brown and low-income. We also note the myriad challenges confronted by students with learning differences in need of specialized supports, many of whom have found online learning practically inaccessible.

As Dr. Jack Smith, Superintendent of the Montgomery County Public Schools, noted in his April 30, 2020 letter to the County Council, a copy of which was shared with members of the Board of Education, there is a critical need to implement a learning recovery system as soon as possible. We understand that the economic downturn has only further strained municipal and school system budgets, but we respectfully request that within the process of authorizing a final operating budget for MCPS, the unprecedented circumstances wrought by a pandemic that has taken a devastating, and for some students potentially life-changing, toll, be considered.

We support the Black and Brown Coalition's recommendations for recovery, which include:

- triaging service provision to prioritize reaching those children who have suffered the most acute learning losses during this crisis;
- implementing expanded 2020 summer learning for greater numbers of students than in a typical summer, whether it be in-person or online;
- employing an equity lens in implementing system-wide changes and adaptations in response to the crisis;
- improving the quality and consistency of online learning and communications platforms with the understanding that it could very well be necessary to maintain at least some level of online learning in the fall;
- expanding and intensifying social and emotional supports and interventions for students who have experienced significant trauma during the pandemic, including witnessing illness and death of loved ones, income loss, food insecurity, and isolation; and,
- ensuring that teachers have adequate supports to meet the new demands being placed on them during this very challenging time.

We also respectfully request that steps be taken to allow organized, vetted volunteers to begin working again with MCPS students. Many members of the Jewish community, from retired teachers to high school students whose summer plans have been cancelled, stand ready to assist vulnerable children in whatever way possible during these long summer months.

The road to equity in learning opportunity is a complicated one; resources are limited and the need is great. But Jewish tradition teaches us that “[i]t is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it.” (*Pirkei Avot/Sayings of our Fathers 2:16*). We urge the Board of Education to courageously and pragmatically address the critical moment that we find ourselves in, by ensuring the children most in peril of being lost academically and otherwise be supported by our leaders and our community.

Sincerely,

Ron Halber
Executive Director

Sam Kaplan
President

June Trone
Co-chair, Education
Commission

Tal Widdes
Co-chair, Intergroup
Relations Commission

cc: Dr. Jack Smith, Superintendent, MCPS
Dr. Monifa McKnight, Deputy Superintendent, MCPS
Montgomery County Council, Education and Culture Committee
Councilmember Craig Rice, Chair
Council President Nancy Navarro
Councilmember Will Jawando