

Friday, May 15, 2020

Dear Director Laurvick and Members of the DPS Board of Education:

As DPS educators, we would like to thank you for altering the May DPS Board meeting agenda to remove discussion and voting on policy changes to Innovation Renewal. We appreciate the interest in relaunching conversations with a full set of school community stakeholders prior to moving to Board action. It is our understanding that, in particular, there is an invitation on the table to bring together families, teachers, and leaders to further consider policy changes, with all voices of school communities consulting on this topic. We support this. However, we also learned that there is a request to complete this process by June and another expectation that this would occur ahead of the Board meeting in August. As DPS educators, we would have expected to be asked to focus on students and their families during this pandemic. However, given these timelines that have been requested of us, we'd like to share with you why these timelines are deeply alarming:

1. **The request on us as leaders during this unprecedented time is too great.** We are in a pandemic. With our leadership teams and the district, we stood up an entirely new way of learning and supporting students overnight. Through the end of the school year, we, alongside our teachers, will continue to work tirelessly with our students and families. Our students, their families, and staff are scared, sometimes sick, and in need of tremendous support. The emotional work is huge, alongside the unprecedented day-to-day work of remote learning and leading. Given that we believe we can all agree that the immediate need is to support our communities, asking us to turn our attention before the end of the year to something else is unreasonable.
2. **The work over the summer will continue to need to be focused on students' and families' most basic needs.** This summer, leadership teams and willing teachers will be working to plan for a fall start that is yet unknown. We will be redesigning curriculum, realigning resources, developing further training for teachers and students, and, most importantly, ensuring that students are safe and families are fed. This is daunting work. We would like to ask our staff, including giving ourselves permission, to take a much needed break at some point too. This is the summer where students' needs must continue to come first, so substantive innovation policy work in June, July and August would also be unmanageable.
3. **We cannot effectively engage our communities as we all would expect to during this pandemic.** We appreciate the District is seeking to be more community led. We were heartened to learn your interest in bringing families, CSC members and Zone Board members to the conversation. However, we cannot, in good faith, add innovation voting protocol to our parents' and guardians' plates right now. We know that this unprecedented time is hitting our most vulnerable families the hardest – we could certainly get some of our community members to engage in this work, but it would not be representative of our Denver community because in the current environment, this timeline would highly privilege the already privileged. Indeed, COVID-19 is primarily impacting the school communities we support. Without the voice of everyone in our community, we would not develop the best policy, and we wouldn't be meeting the high standards we have for ourselves in community engagement.
4. **Across the District, there are even greater priorities that require our attention.** We, and our communities, believe there are lots of important conversations like this one to have, but they've all been put on hold or had to change significantly. Indeed, during our webinar last week, you

said that this time will take us naming our priorities. Keeping our students, staff, and their families safe and developing remote learning that reaches all kids, despite limited resources, are our priorities. We understand why we have had to pause or slow down on other important things in order to focus on that. We're not sure why there is interest in making this one of the initiatives to be focused on during COVID, compared to all the other important conversations.

Until we are in a position to have recovered somewhat from the trauma of this time, and ideally hold in-person conversations with our communities to bring our stakeholders together, it does not seem wise to ask individuals to come together for innovation policy changes.

That all said, in this time of uncertainty, we believe innovation is needed more than ever and we want to be the collaborative team members we know we are. In a time when the entire District is operating from a platform of innovative thinking, we are proud to bring "outside the box" thinking to those around us in these unprecedented times. Indeed, we are used to trying new things and, given the need to delay this conversation, we offer to meet the intent of the concerns you have raised, as we understand them. Until we can address this policy change, we can still commit to:

- Working with the Portfolio team to bring data – beyond anecdotes -- to the key questions that are arising about teacher turnover and the accusations of us seeking to minimize teacher voice. We believe a more comprehensive picture will come forward to show inclusive, community-driven processes.
- Identifying even more school community stakeholders who will have a voice in providing our DPS Board feedback on the innovation process.
- Capturing and sharing the experience of school leaders in the last two innovation renewals, which due to outside influencers have sometimes taken on painful, divisive tenors we don't want for our school communities.
- Continuing to be transparent and clear regarding the impact of waivers with our school staff and communities.
- Running the robust, inclusive process that we currently have that involves teachers, families, and administrators in the creation of innovation plans.

As DPS educators, first and foremost, we care deeply about the success of our students. In this uncertain time, we are even more aware of the incredible obstacles our students and families face everyday. As school leaders, we also care deeply about how Innovation allows us to serve our students and families in these unprecedented times. Any narrative that is not focused on meeting the needs of our school communities is hurtful and counterproductive and distracting from the important work of teaching and learning. Now more than ever, our focus should be on students.

As leaders, we commit to coming back together in the fall and working through a robust process to improve innovation renewal where all voices can be heard. Thus, we implore you to put a hold on any Board voting which would change the Innovation process for the 47 Innovation schools in DPS. We are a "Students First" District – and our students need us now more than ever. Let us not ask our communities and our teachers and ourselves to try to create new innovation policy in the midst of a pandemic.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Innovation Council and Principals Undersigned:

Blake Hammond, Green Valley Elementary, Innovation Council Representative

Moira Coogan, Denver Center for International Studies (DCIS) Montbello, Innovation Council Representative

Sheldon Reynolds, Center for Talent Development, Innovation Council Representative

Julio Contreras, Denver Center for International Studies (DCIS) Montbello, Innovation Council Representative

Katy Myers, Denver Montessori Junior/Senior HS, Innovation Council Representative

Bailey Holyfield, Luminary Learning Network, Innovation Council Representative

Tomi Amos, Northeast Denver Innovation Zone, Innovation Council Representative

Alex Magaña, Beacon Network Schools

Daniel Walsh, Beacon Network Schools 

Lindsay Meier, Bear Valley International School

Frank Coyne, Jose Piza, Prudence Daniels, Denver Green School

Suzanne Morris-Sherer, McAuliffe Manual Middle School

Julia M. Shepherd, Brent Applebaum, Creativity Challenge Community

Ginger Conroy, DCIS at Ford

Ryan Kockler, Montclair School of Academics and Enrichment 

Dr. Angelina M. Walker, John H. Amesse Elementary

Kimberly Grayson, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Early College

Stacy D. Parrish, Northeast Early College

Dr. Evelyn Cruz, Denver School of Innovation and Sustainable Design

Christine Fleming, Joe Shoemaker School

Renard A. Simmons, Denver Center for 21st. Century Learning - DC21

Shelby Dennis, Swigert International School

Kartal Jaquette, Erin Miller, Denver Green School Northfield

Sara Gips Goodall, McGlone Academy

Jessica Buckley, Valdez Elementary
Dr. Amy Gile, Willow Elementary
Laura Munro, Centennial, A School for Expeditionary Learning
Karin Johnson, International Academy of Denver
Mandy Martinez, Trevista at Horace Mann
Kia Abdool, Cole Arts & Science Academy
Kurt Dennis, McAuliffe International School
Leah Schultz-Bartlett, Beach Court Elementary
Anthony L. Smith, Jr., Vista Academy
Jessica Ridgway, Goldrick
Christina Sylvester, Merrill Middle School
Joe Glover, Manual High School
Amy Bringedahl, Northfield High School
Jesse Y. Tang, Schmitt Elementary
Davon Renfrow, Godsman Elementary
Hillary Niebauer, Morey Middle School
Edwin Salem, Legacy Options HS
Mia Martinez Lopez, West Early College
Teresa Klava, West Leadership Academy
Elizabeth TenCate, Ashley Elementary
Juan Osorio, Summit Academy
Kimberly Ortiz, Compassion Road Academy