



GREATER MEMPHIS CHAMBER

January 30, 2021

Dr. Joris Ray
and Shelby County School Board Members
Shelby County Schools
160 S. Hollywood St.
Memphis, Tennessee 38112

Dear Dr. Ray and Shelby County School Board Members:

I am writing to express both my gratitude for your tremendous efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic and my concern over the current state of affairs.

I join the entire community in expressing appreciation for the hard, complicated work you and your teams have advanced in sustaining remote learning. This has included securing devices and hotspots to ensure all children have the opportunity to learn. Your efforts have also not ignored major issues like food insecurity with the considerable energy expended to provide students with meals and snacks.

I would, however, not be totally candid if I failed to also give voice to the deep frustration and mounting confusion many community leaders, business executives, and ordinary citizens have continued to quietly express about the reopening of Shelby County Schools. This frustration has escalated in recent weeks with the missed opportunities to share re-opening plans, the verbal clashes with officials in Nashville, and Friday's announcement that schools will be closed *indefinitely* – a word that exacerbates concerns.

My motivation and interests are steeped in generations of personal and professional history with public schools. I am native Memphian (Orange Mound, USA) who attended and graduated from Memphis City Schools. My three children attended and graduated from three different Memphis City Schools, and my granddaughter is currently a middle-schooler with Shelby County Schools. I am a former public school teacher and my daughter currently teaches in the district. Additionally, I cannot name the countless number of district teachers, leaders, and family members of students who are friends, neighbors, and fellow church and organizational members. Few people care more about the health and welfare of teachers and students than I do.

Please know that we all have appreciated your deliberation around the school reopening issue. Early-on in the pandemic, the prevailing thought was that keeping schools open would put educators at risk and accelerate community transmission. So, out of an abundance of caution, schools were closed and school leaders indicated that they would rely on science to inform their decisions on when to reopen.

Nearly one year later, it is important to highlight what the science and recent data are telling us.

- In the Fall of 2020, 11 school districts in North Carolina with more than 90,000 students and staff were open for in-person education for 9 weeks. During this period, school transmissions were rare (32 infections were acquired in school). There were no cases of student to staff transmissions.
- In November 2020, PEW Charitable Trusts published information about a study conducted by Emily Oster PhD, Brown University Economics Professor, who tracked the rate of COVID-19

spread in a small sample of the nation's more than 130,000 public schools, 3 million students and 422,000 teachers. School buildings tend to be substantially safer than most other settings in the community. About the pandemic, Professor Brown notes, **"We've ranked schools far too low in terms of their intrinsic value and far too high in terms of the COVID risk."**

- Newly released CDC guidelines have recommended that students return to in-person instruction with appropriate safety protocols. This decision has been backed by Dr. Anthony Fauci.

We share your worry about health and safety, and we realize that it would be optimal to ensure that all teachers are vaccinated prior to reopening. It is, however, now clear that the vaccination of teachers is not a prerequisite in reopening plans outlined by national health experts and officials. If you would also consider the phenomenon of "vaccine hesitancy" especially among African-Americans, I believe it compels us to view teacher vaccinations as an important, ongoing strategy as opposed to a singular condition that must be met before any teacher or student is allowed the option to physically return to school. With that said, please let me know how we can help advance teacher vaccinations.

Based on meetings and discussions, the following items and questions have also continued to surface:

- What specifically does SCS need in order for teachers and students to return?
- What pilots or beta tests at selected schools have been run to outline the operations for a potential return? The district's Reopening Task Force on which I served definitely highlighted this and other important recommendations.
- What benchmarked strategies are being implemented to get teachers back to work?
- What is the vaccine distribution plan for teachers once they are available and how can we support it?

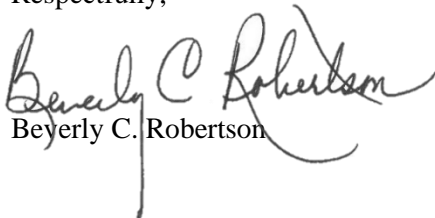
And most of all, the following point is the most urgent and demanding:

- What are the aggressive strategies and the overall plan for addressing learning loss with SCS schools and students?

We want to do all we can to ensure that learning/instructional loss will not result in a low skill, unprepared workforce at a time when there is a drastic shift in requirements for available jobs. Our ability to attract new investment with higher wage jobs will be heavily dependent on SCS graduates.

I want to remind you all that this entire community has a vested interest in the success of Shelby County Schools' students. They belong to us all, and we stand ready to deepen our support of their success.

Respectfully,


Beyerly C. Robertson