



Legislation Text

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Authorizing the Committees on Children and Youth and Education to conduct joint hearings on protocols and decision-making processes in place to protect the health and safety of young people as the School District of Philadelphia navigates a return to in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the City's role in bridging the digital divide for children and families in the 2020-2021 school year.

WHEREAS, Article III of the Pennsylvania Constitution guarantees the right to a "thorough and efficient" education for Pennsylvania's children; and

WHEREAS, In July, the School District of Philadelphia released its Advancing Education Safely plan, which detailed a phased plan to reopen schools where families are given the opportunity to choose to return to in-person school on a staggered, hybrid basis or remain fully remote. The hybrid model, which was originally slated to begin November 30, was delayed indefinitely on November 10; and

WHEREAS, Though the Philadelphia Department of Health and the School District of Philadelphia have developed an abundance of guidance documents and informational materials, details regarding certain critical processes are not fully articulated; and

WHEREAS, It is essential that City Council and District parents, students, and staff have a clear understanding of the specific criteria, thresholds, and process guiding The School District of Philadelphia's determination of when it is safe to reopen for hybrid learning, as well as under what conditions the District would revert back to fully digital and remote instruction in the event of worsening conditions; and

WHEREAS, Furthermore, the process and thresholds guiding similar decisions at the individual classroom and school levels must also be clear, including regarding the role of teachers and principals in making determinations regarding the capability for safe operations and potential closure of classrooms or schools; and

WHEREAS, Building ventilation plays a critical role in improving the indoor air quality of school buildings, which is essential in reducing airborne transmission of deadly pathogens. Additionally, communicating information regarding air quality and ventilation to families and staff is key to ensure they can make informed decisions regarding in-person learning; and

WHEREAS, PreK through 2nd grade families had to make a decision regarding whether to opt-in for hybrid learning by October 30, at which point ventilation reports on many schools remained incomplete or unpublished; and

WHEREAS, It is also critical to ensure there are clear and well-understood health and safety protocols in place, including for when a school member tests positive for COVID-19, with details regarding what constitutes a potential exposure, any necessary subsequent quarantining of students and staff, reporting and notification processes for families and staff, and operational and staffing processes to ensure a continued safe in-person environment for students; and

WHEREAS, Beginning on March 16, 2020, all Philadelphia public schools closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, initiating an entirely virtual learning platform which has remained in place this fall, and may continue throughout the rest of the 2020-2021 school year; and

WHEREAS, Philadelphia's digital divide ranks as the 2nd worst of any big city in the United States, with an internet access rate of only 71.6 percent, according to the 2018 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau. National research indicates that lower-income and racial minority households are disproportionately disconnected from the internet resulting in internet access, and by extension public schooling, subject to "digital redlining"; and

WHEREAS, According to Kagan, a media research group within S&P Global Market Intelligence, 45.7 percent of households in the United States presently subscribe to broadband Internet packages with speeds of at least 100/10 megabits per second (Mbps), which significantly outpaces speeds typically accessed by lower-income households as well as the minimum broadband speed established by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) of 25/3 Mbps, leaving a significant number of historically underserved students in Philadelphia digitally disenfranchised and lagging behind; and

WHEREAS, In response to this emergency, the School District of Philadelphia reached out to all the City's internet service providers, including Comcast, AT&T, and Verizon, requesting their assistance in opening up their networks to be free and accessible to all public school students. In a public hearing on May 20, 2020, Superintendent William Hite explained that the internet providers refused to do so; and

WHEREAS, As a part of its larger digital equity initiative, the City of Philadelphia established the PHLConnectED program with corporate, public, and private funds, intended to connect up to 35,000 households to internet through June 2022; and

WHEREAS, While over 7,400 families have been connected through the PHLConnectED program, as many as 18,000 low-income families lacked reliable high-speed internet at the start of the school year; and

WHEREAS, Transparency regarding the process for making school reopening decisions is an essential prerequisite to building community trust. It also helps ensure stakeholders have meaningful opportunities for engagement as the City and District navigate the COVID-19 pandemic; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Authorizes the Committees on Children and Youth and Education to conduct joint hearings on protocols and decision-making processes in place to protect the health and safety of young people as the School District of Philadelphia navigates a return to in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the City's role in bridging the digital divide for children and families in the 2020-2021 school year.