

Testimony from the Lower Merion School District for the joint Senate Health and Human Services Committee and Aging and Youth Committee public hearing on “Implementation of the State Vaccine Plan”

Thursday, February 4, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on a topic of vital importance and urgency to all Pennsylvania residents and especially the public school community in Lower Merion Township. The Lower Merion School District (LMSD), located in Philadelphia's Main Line suburbs, serves the 62,000 residents of Lower Merion Township and the Borough of Narberth. Established as one of Pennsylvania's first public school districts in 1834, LMSD enjoys a rich tradition of achievement, innovation and community partnership and a longstanding reputation as one of the finest school systems in the United States. The District's six elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools provide a challenging, multi-disciplinary academic program and dynamic, co-curricular experience to more than 8,700 students. We have also been the fastest-growing school district in the state for the last several years.

Like all public school districts, we face unprecedented challenges right now delivering education and other critical services to our students during the pandemic. We have been working very closely with the Montgomery Office of Public Health, the Montgomery County Commissioners, the state Department of Education, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and our local community and school district families to provide as much in-person safe education as possible via a mostly hybrid schedule. We have introduced and continue to manage and expand numerous safety and mitigation measures including social distancing, mask wearing, increased ventilation, contact tracing and a new testing program that enables the District to catch positive Covid cases before they are spread in a school building. Our teachers are working extremely hard to educate and engage with students in both in-person and remote settings and we are amazed and grateful for their dedication and commitment. Despite all these efforts, our children and young adults are suffering from social isolation, and mental, emotional, and physical challenges due to a lack of in-person learning.

We are submitting testimony today based on a resolution our School Board recently passed urging the State of Pennsylvania to prioritize teachers and school employees for vaccine access. The District, alongside the Montgomery County Office of Public Health and Montgomery County Intermediate Unit, have been advocating for the proper amount and appropriate prioritization of COVID-19 vaccines so we can better secure the health and safety of our staff and our students. While receiving the vaccine is voluntary for staff currently, we anticipate high levels of participation, which is a critical component of our plan for opening schools to a greater degree for all our students as soon as possible.

Based upon the recent revisions to Pennsylvania's Vaccine Rollout Plan, the majority of school staff members (including teachers, principals, custodians, bus drivers, and nutritional services staff), who are classified in Phase 1B, are now behind hundreds of thousands of individuals within Montgomery County alone. The allocation of vaccine to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania by the federal government, together with the phased prioritization factors, and the allocation of vaccine to Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, fails to ensure that school staff has timely access to the vaccine in order to ensure a greater level of safety for our staff and students and reopen our schools.

In order to immediately change this situation, it is critical that all school employees **receive Phase 1A prioritization and that the Montgomery County Office of Public Health receive sufficient supply of COVID-19 vaccine to commence vaccinations of all school staff immediately.** The District is also able, ready, and willing to immediately implement a vaccination program onsite, staffed by our employees, that would enable the District to ensure the vaccination of all employees efficiently and effectively.

The Lower Merion School District Board of School Directors calls upon the Governor and General Assembly to change the designation of school staff and to secure the proper amount of COVID-19 vaccines to Vaccinate Our Educators Now.

Finally, thank you to our State Senator Amanda Cappelletti for allowing us to submit written testimony for today's hearing.