

Offered by City Councilor Julia Mejia, Bok, Coletta, Breadon, Fernandes Anderson, Lara, Louijeune, Worrell, Flynn and Arroyo



## CITY OF BOSTON IN CITY COUNCIL

### ORDER FOR A HEARING ON GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY TOWARDS COVID SAFETY IN BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**WHEREAS,** One of the fundamental responsibilities of the Boston City Council is to ensure that there is accountability and transparency in the operation of Boston Public Schools, as well as equitable and safe accessibility in all city buildings, including the Boston Public Schools; *and*

**WHEREAS,** COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on many Boston Public School (BPS) students, staff, and their families. More than one-third of BPS staff and about 10,000 students were infected during the 2021-2022 school year. Students lost days of education; parents and teachers lost days of work they could not afford to miss; infections have led to hospitalizations of students and family members; and educators and school nurses have been overworked, heightening burn-out and quit rates; *and*

**WHEREAS,** As of winter 2022-2023, new, highly transmissible COVID-19 variants are now dominant, making infection and re-infection more likely. In addition, health care providers have determined that we face a tripledemic of COVID, flu and RSV, just as Massachusetts has a severe shortage of pediatric hospital beds. Exposure at school also means these viruses can be spread to family members who are at high risk, as many students live in multi-generational homes; *and*

**WHEREAS,** In 2022 Boston Public Schools (BPS) enrolls more than 46,000 students, of whom 84% are students of color and more than 70% are low-income, more than 30% are English Language Learners, and 22% are students with disabilities. BPS students are primarily Black and brown, the very communities that have been the most disproportionately harmed by the health and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic; *and*

**WHEREAS,** The Boston Public Schools (BPS) is one of the oldest school districts in the country, with an average building age of 80 years and three-quarters of school buildings do not have mechanical ventilation (also known as HVAC). Without ventilation and filtration, COVID is more likely to be transmitted and infect

students and staff. Good ventilation also reduces the spread of other respiratory conditions - such as colds and flu - and creates conditions where students and staff are able to concentrate better and perform at their best. Ventilation and filtration are the most crucial institutional COVID prevention steps, whereas other interventions, important as they are, rely on individuals to take certain steps. Ventilation and filtration are also a racial justice issue. Black and brown children are disproportionately affected by asthma and COVID, which also adds to the racial gap in school readiness, participation and outcomes. Ventilation and filtration can reduce asthma triggers;; *and*

***WHEREAS,***

At year three of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have proven public health tools that can help prevent illness, save lives, and preserve in-person learning days. Universal masking has been proven to protect against virus spread. PCR pool testing enables us to identify infections and prevent spread in classrooms, schools, and by extension, families and communities. However, at both the state and the city level, COVID protections for students and staff have been rolled back for the 2022-23 school year, despite ongoing pandemic harm. Ending universal masking and eliminating pooled PCR testing increases the risk of COVID transmission and harm; *and*

***WHEREAS,***

Public health studies show that universal masking is more effective than one-way masking and that a masking requirement can be flexible enough to support students and classrooms with special educational needs. Individual masking only offers protection to the masked individual and has little effect on population-level transmission. Even when a universal masking requirement is in place, BPS can still allow flexibility for students who may not be able to wear masks or may need their teacher to be unmasked for periods of time. There are also special masks that allow mouths and lips to be seen, which can be useful especially with special needs students and English Language Learners. When the majority of students, teachers, and staff are masked, that offers greater protection for students who cannot mask; *and*

***WHEREAS,***

BPS and the Mayor's Office did not require universal masking after the Thanksgiving break. The result is a predictable increase in COVID infections. There were 525 COVID cases in BPS in the four weeks before the Thanksgiving break, an average of 28.4 reported per school day. In the seven school days after the Thanksgiving break there have been 463 reported COVID cases, an average of 66 per school day, or 230% higher. We know this is an undercount, but the trend is important and demonstrates what happens when policymakers choose not to use the tools we have at hand, such as universal masking. The more virus that circulates in our schools, the more transmission will happen and more students and staff can become infected; *and*

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***WHEREAS,***

Equity leadership should include centering the perspectives of populations most affected by COVID in policy decisions. This includes having families from Boston Public Schools and other communities participate in policy decisions and greater transparency in the decision-making processes of policymakers; ***NOW THEREFORE BE IT***

***ORDERED:*** That the appropriate committee of the Boston City Council holds a hearing regarding government transparency and accessibility of COVID safety in the Boston Public Schools. Representatives from the Boston Public Schools, the Boston School Committee, the Mayor's Office, and the Boston Public Health Commission, in addition to advocates, individuals with lived experiences, and members of the public, are encouraged to attend..

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