

April 19, 2021

Dear Superintendent Cash and Board President Belton-Cottman:

We hope you, all District staff, Board of Education Members, and your families are safe and healthy at this time. We are reaching out as an interracial, intergenerational, multicultural group of mothers and women caregivers, who also serve as parent and community leaders and professionals and provide direct care, service and support to families in the fields of health, education, human services, child care and housing.

We want to express our appreciation for all the good work the Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) has engaged in over the past year to support public education, public health and basic needs of families during the pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism. We acknowledge that we have all been working in unprecedented times and under very difficult and stressful circumstances.

We also know through our personal and professional experience that there are significant gaps to be addressed, and that it is only through robust collaboration between the District, families and the wider community that we will be able to ensure that each and EVERY child and family is healthy, safe and supported in school and in life. We believe in the power of BPS and public education to be transformative and to provide our children with the knowledge and skills they need to create an equitable, just and healthy Buffalo and world. We cannot achieve these aspirations without discussing the historical, systemic and present-day challenges that we and our children are facing.

At the time of this letter, only 7,000 of the 32,000 BPS students are receiving any in-person instruction over a year into the COVID-19 pandemic. There is limited data related to student engagement and outcomes, and whether any measures BPS has put in place have mitigated the educational inequities experienced by the most vulnerable students and families. Child, adolescent and parent mental and physical health have shown troubling trends over the past year as well, confirmed by a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [study](#). There is no current BPS data in this regard publicly available (the most recent Youth-Risk Behavior Survey on the District website is from 2017-2018).

We share the below in the spirit of representing our lived reality, amplifying the voices of mothers, parents and caregivers, and asking for understanding and action by the District on behalf of students and families.

## **Recognize parents/caregivers are under persistent acute and chronic stress**

Parents/caregivers have been asked to take on much of the work of educating and supporting our children this year, often in isolation and without adequate support. Significant gender, racial and socioeconomic disparities are impacting BPS families, the majority of which are run by female heads of household in a District that is over 80% Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). Women have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; leaving the workforce at a rate four times higher than men. Black and Latinx women have unemployment rates double that of their White counterparts. Parents/caregivers who have maintained employment are carrying an enormous workload between their paid jobs and parenting, with women and mothers providing unseen and undervalued physical and emotional labor. Many of us have also experienced sickness, death, violence, and loss in our families and community. The racial, social and political strife over the past year has been acute and traumatizing, particularly for BIPOC families.

First and foremost, we must understand and work to support the extreme challenges that parents/caregivers have been facing for over a year.

## **Develop an integrated approach for equity in all policies, practices and programs**

A comprehensive approach that addresses the academic, social, emotional and health needs of students and families is critical at this time. BPS has historic and present-day challenges related to educational equity based on race, socioeconomics and concerning special populations (students with disabilities, English Language Learners, families experiencing homelessness, violence and abuse, youth in detention, etc.). These have been exacerbated by the pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism. Students in families with adequate social and economic supports have fared substantially better than those who do not. The [Education Trust–New York](#) has extensive research and recommendations related to equity that highlight these issues.

Building on the good work that has begun under the Department for Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Initiatives, it is critical that families representative of the full range of cultural communities in the District are engaged to identify equity challenges and co-create an equity taskforce and plan (e.g. Muslim students and families have consistently advocated for increased understanding and support of Ramadan and Eid for years, with little progress). Appropriate funding and clear, transparent outcome indicators are essential to ensure progress. American Rescue Plan/stimulus funds coming to BPS, the City of Buffalo and Erie County must support educational, health, racial, and social equity for children and families; with those most impacted by disparities (students and parents/caregivers) engaged in this process.

## **Ensure the health, safety and well-being of every student and family**

COVID-19 has increased inequity related to nutrition, safe and affordable housing, health care, child care and internet access. Significant increases in rates of depression and anxiety, abuse, gun violence and pediatric injuries illustrate the impact of these factors on well-being. While BPS has worked to put supports in place to help meet basic needs, many of these programs are underutilized due to accessibility (information only provided in English and/or online, transportation barriers, services provided during hours parents are working/supervising children at home) and through a fragmented system between District departments and lack of coordination with community-based resources.

Now more than ever, we need to align public health and public education and work through the research-based [“Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child”](#) model and the [District Wellness Policy](#). Recognizing the District cannot do this work alone, we must create strong partnerships with community-based coalitions and networks that support the current and emerging needs of Buffalo families related to basic needs and overall health and well-being. Children need consistent care and education support before and after traditional school hours. Financial support and auxiliary education staff should be provided to local child care sites who consistently maintain these students and their families for access to safe, quality, and reliable care, education, and communal relationships. The Department of Social, Emotional and Wellness Supports should be appropriately resourced to have the capacity to implement the District Wellness Policy, and the currently vacant District Wellness Coordinator position should be filled. The [Code of Conduct/addendum](#) should also be reviewed, revised and implemented (inclusive of restorative justice) and in partnership with families and the community.

## **Rebuild relationships through trauma-informed, culturally responsive communication and collaboration:**

We are concerned that decisions that have significant impact on our children and families are being made about us without us, lacking critical context of the lives and experiences of students and families. Informal and formal structures can build positive, mutually beneficial relationships where parents/caregivers feel valued, respected and a part of decision-making. The issue brief [Engaging Parents and Families to Support the Recovery of Districts and Schools](#) has helpful guidance in this regard. BPS specific policies, practices and programs that may facilitate this process include-

- A Districtwide communication plan/department to support consistent, clear, and timely two-way communication.

- Regular meetings between the Superintendent/Board of Education and parents to assess the needs of families and respond to those needs in partnership with families themselves.
- District and school implementation of restorative practices/justice with fidelity to repair harm and promote positive relationships.
- A culture of shared-decision making utilizing the [District Plan for Shared Decision Making](#) (and associated District Committee of Stakeholders and School-Based Management Teams).
- Building capacity of the Office of Parent and Family Engagement, which is siloed and overtaxed in the work of engaging with parents and fixing problems created by the systemic issues outlined above. The [Parent, Family and Community Engagement Policy](#) and [NYSED Commissioners Regulation 100.11](#) provides local and state policy direction to ensure parents/caregivers are meaningfully engaged in schools and the District.

We remain committed to our work as parents/caregivers for our children and to a partnership with Buffalo Public Schools. We believe we can collectively renew the District’s commitment to its mission of “putting children and families first to ensure high academic achievement for all” and the promise of the [Education Bargain With Students and Parents](#). We are hopeful that we can engage in a discussion with school and District leadership to work through these issues in a constructive, solutions-focused manner.

Thank you,

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*cc: All Buffalo Board of Education and Buffalo Public Schools Cabinet Members*