



ROBERT W. RUNCIE
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Broward County, Florida**

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Superintendent Robert Runcie Remarks for Congressional Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis

Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise, and distinguished Members of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the challenges facing Broward County Public Schools as we prepare for the upcoming school year, and what is still needed in order for us to safely reopen our schools for in-person instruction.

In less than two weeks, Broward County Public Schools will start the new school year. The first day of school has always been a day of great anticipation and excitement as teachers and educational support professionals, principals and administrators, bus drivers and food service workers ... every one of our 30,000 employees welcome back almost 270,000 of our precious children into our classrooms. Providing valuable learning opportunities for our kids; offering engaging experiences through sports, the arts, and peer mentoring; showcasing their talents in musicals, speech and debate competitions, and watching our students excel in the classroom and on the athletic field. That is what we live for.

The coronavirus pandemic has changed all of that.

On March 13th, we announced the closing of our school campuses due to the coronavirus pandemic, and within just a few short days our schools became the lifeline for many in our community. We felt an immediate moral obligation and responsibility to respond to these new challenges, and we implemented several key steps to ensure we met the needs of our students and the community:

1. We continued to distribute food from our local school sites and have served over 2.5 million meals to students and families since mid-March. This is important for us to do as 65 percent of

the children attending Broward County Public Schools qualify for free or reduced meals. For many children, our public schools are the only reliable place for them to receive two nutritious meals – breakfast and lunch – each day.

2. We addressed digital inequities by distributing more than 100,000 laptop computers to any student who needed one, while also offering discounted internet services for families and free mobile hotspots to students with housing instability.
3. District Mental Health Staff continue to provide services to our students:
 - Since March 30th, our Family Counseling Program therapists have provided more than **4,300** hours of therapy via telehealth.
 - School Social Workers received more than **34,000** referrals and provided close to **160,000** interventions.
4. Through our Home Library Initiative, we distributed 48,000 book packs – each with 5 books, a family guide, and a student journal. That’s 240,000 books delivered to the homes of our Title I Pre-K through 2nd grade students and families in May and June.

Looking forward, a big consideration about how and when we open schools is the state of the pandemic. Unfortunately, South Florida continues to be a hot spot for coronavirus spread in this country.

As of this week, Florida had reported more than 480,000 known cases of the coronavirus, with the highest concentrations in Broward and Miami-Dade counties where the positivity rate has at times been as high as 20%. Florida has more than 7,000 deaths and has been breaking records for new coronavirus cases on an almost daily basis. Within our own school district, even with schools being closed and only skeletal crews on campuses, we have recorded more than 200 positive cases among employees.

Public health experts and infectious disease physicians almost universally recommend that children not go to schools until the positive test rate is 3 to 5% over a rolling two-week average. Our local positive test rate is still averaging above 10%, which is significantly higher than the recommended range to consider reopening schools.

As we continue to consult with our local public health officials and medical experts for guidance, I have been clear about reopening schools that, “We will not compromise the health and safety of our students, teachers, and staff. That’s our highest priority. Period.”

Faced with an ongoing pandemic that continues to spread through our community, our only option when the school year starts in just a few short weeks will be to begin with an eLearning model. That is the one way we can educate our students while still keeping them, their teachers and all employees healthy and safe. We simply will not risk exposing our students and staff until the coronavirus is under control.

When conditions improve, additional options will be introduced including: (1) face-to-face learning five days per week; (2) a hybrid or blended model with staggered school days with part-time on campus and part-time eLearning; and (3) continued eLearning connected to each student’s school.

Our commitment is to deliver high-quality instruction to our students regardless of which learning model we provide. We understand that distance learning or eLearning will never be a substitute for face-to-face teaching and learning in our classrooms, but during this time, our students will continue to learn, and we will work to make the learning environment personal, engaging, interesting, challenging and fulfilling.

I will continue to ask our community for help. The only way our District will be able to open our school buildings is when we have lowered the number of COVID-19 cases in our community. It will require each and every one of us to contain community spread of COVID-19 by wearing masks, by physical distancing and by washing hands. It will also require a widely available, timely and effective testing and contact tracing infrastructure.

I ask our leaders to put in place national and state plans that include effective testing, contact tracing, and ensuring that school districts have access to PPE. At the beginning of this pandemic, because there was not a national plan in place to assist schools, our procurement officer was forced to purchase PPE out of someone’s car trunk. School districts shouldn’t have to fend for themselves.

I am urging, *begging* our federal government to pass an additional coronavirus relief package that responds to the impact of COVID-19 and assists with the ongoing recovery by providing at least \$200 billion to public schools across this country that serve over 50 million students. This funding is critically needed to help cover the impending substantial shortfalls in state and local revenue collections; to continue to feed students and families; to close gaps in remote learning; to expand mental health services;

to provide reliable high speed internet access for all students; and to purchase the necessary PPE, materials and equipment for enhanced cleaning and sanitation protocols so we can make our schools safe for students, teachers and staff when schools open.

Our children have so many abilities and talents to develop and countless dreams that are being stifled by COVID-19. We owe it to them and future generations to meet this pandemic head on by developing and implementing national and local strategies to get this pandemic under control, and to provide the necessary funding and support so we can fully open schools and safely provide them with the opportunities to thrive.

They deserve nothing less.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.