



Chair Dembrow
Vice Chair Thomsen
Members of the Senate Committee on Education

Dear Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Thomsen, Members of the Senate Committee on Education,

For the record, my name is Inger McDowell-Hartye, and I am the BUILD Program Director at Unite Oregon. I am writing to you today to share some concerns about reopening our schools, as well as other insights that parents have shared, through our educational leadership program, BUILD (Building Undergraduates through Leadership Development) coordinated by Unite Oregon and delivered in partnership with Portland Public Schools (PPS). Our program aims to organize and advocate for and with families of color who are disproportionately impacted by educational inequities, those same parents who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID pandemic.

While we've all been navigating a new normal in recent months, many on our staff have been on the frontlines helping our immigrant and refugee, low-income and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) families. We have helped community members access COVID relief funds through grants and donations. We've worked with renters to help stop COVID-related evictions. And we've worked alongside our community to address the high unemployment rates our members are experiencing.

We're hearing firsthand about the struggles facing many of our parents and the mental health challenges impacting our students. We know that there's a plan to reopen schools and we have some concerns raised by parents we want to share for consideration.

We know that COVID has disproportionately impacted [communities of color](#) with devastating results especially the African American community. Many of our parents are wondering what's next for public education in our community and how will the districts across our region reopen schools and keep our most vulnerable students safe?

Ockley Green Middle School students in PPS shared in our recent YIELD (Youth-Led, Involvement through Leadership Development) workshop: "We shouldn't go back to in person learning until kids can get vaccinated too. What if one of us gets sick and then we go home and give it to other people. If one person gets sick then we will

probably all get sick if there's 15 people in one room. What if we go to the grocery store and give it to others or to people in our families?"

One parent shared at our January 16th retreat, "We aren't sending our students back to school until they are vaccinated, another shared "I'm not sure I'll ever send our children back to school or if they'll get them vaccinated."

We've heard from concerned parents and community members and without better communication, immigrant and refugee and BIPOC parents will continue to be left out of critical conversations that will help us get students safely back to school.

Right now, we have more questions than answers but it's imperative that we have a plan and that community-based organizations such as Unite Oregon feel confident communicating to our community members.

We know this pandemic has dealt hardships to many families especially disproportionately communities of color but in the midst of unprecedented times for us all, Oregon must recommit its effort to ensure historically underserved communities are not left behind during the reopening of schools across the state. .

We hope to work together to forge a new path forward.

Inger McDowell-Hartye
BUILD Program Director
Unite Oregon