

Testimony

Written Statement of Alberto M. Carvalho
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Before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary
Education
United States House of Representatives
“Lessons Learned: Charting the Path to Educational Equity Post-COVID-19.”

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to participate in this hearing. My name is Alberto Carvalho and I have served as Superintendent of Schools for Miami-Dade County, Florida since 2008. I am proud to say that Miami-Dade is one of the highest performing urban school systems in the nation. We educate over 340,000 students each year. Our students are over 93 percent minority and over 70 percent poor. Our students also regularly perform as well, or better than their peers in nearly every academic measure and have achieved a graduation rate of over 93 percent.

I am honored to be here today to discuss education, equity, the lessons learned from the COVID-19 experience, and the investments needed to help the children of this nation on the road to academic recovery, acceleration, and success. This unprecedented federal investment in education represents the potential to address long-term issues of academic equity. As our nation moves to reopen schools, and I believe schools should open and can open safely, with proper protocols in place, great care must be taken to address the needs of our most fragile children, children who are in poverty, children of color, children who are English-language learners, and children with disabilities. We must move quickly to address the learning loss that students have experienced because of the disruptions to instruction created by this pandemic and their disproportionate impact on underserved students.

In Miami-Dade, we have been transforming education and improving outcomes for all students for well over a decade, and we did it by measuring what mattered and using the data to shine light into dark places and drive improvement. We began with our youngest students creating high-quality full-day pre-kindergarten programs and we then looked to our secondary schools and found that opportunities were not equal. So, we ensured that rigorous course offerings were available at every high school, including at least ten Advanced Placement courses, dual enrollment, Cambridge, and opportunities for acceleration. We reinvigorated art, music, and world languages, because all children have a right to an education that not only expands the mind, but also feeds the soul. We embarked on a project to re-design the middle school experience listening to the voices of the students who told us what needed to change. And we implemented a tiered approach to providing supports to schools that were most in need, driving resources and wrap-around services to our most fragile and struggling schools, often in our most underserved communities. Finally, in 2012 we began a process we termed digital convergence designed to integrate technology into all classrooms and to unlock the

potential of digital content empowering students as never before with individualized instruction. We paired this with deep and meaningful professional development for teachers and training for families and we put over 100,000 mobile devices in the hands of students. The result was an improvement in graduation rates of over 30 percent and an elimination of “F” rated schools in our District.

All this work helped to prepare Miami-Dade to rapidly respond to the unprecedented impact of COVID-19 on our schools. On March 13, 2020, in-person schooling came to a halt and we quickly pivoted to an online learning model. We deployed 119,000 devices, including more than 9,000 phones with Wi-Fi that were used as hotspots for connectivity and launched 30 professional development offerings for teachers to help support the transition to a 100 percent distance learning modality. Through constant communication, ongoing, often personal outreach to families we achieved an impressive 93 percent average daily attendance rate during the school shutdown. When we returned for the start of the 2020-2021 school year, we did what all other districts across the country did, we opened 100 percent on-line, but with a plan and an eye toward opening the schoolhouse as soon as it could be done safely.

We assembled a task force of public health and medical experts including former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, infectious disease expert Dr. Aileen Marty, and others to seek guidance and recommendations for safely returning to in-person schooling. Under their guidance and direction and leadership provided by our elected school board, all facilities were sanitized, improvements were made to ventilation systems, personal protective equipment (PPE) was purchased and distributed to all employees, schools were reconfigured to provide for single directional hallways, social distancing in classrooms and common areas, a mandatory mask policy was implemented, and provision was made for a nurse or emergency medical personnel to be at each school. On October 5, 2020, Miami-Dade County Public Schools returned to in-person instruction 5-days a week for all students who wanted to return. We currently have about 60 percent of our students physically attending school while the balance has chosen to remain on-line.

We have found that we have been able to navigate reopening safely and that schools have actually been safer than the community at large in terms of COVID-19 transmission. We also believe that schools are a safer place for students that go beyond just the threat of COVID. Schools have always been and remain a safe haven for many who do not have a good home environment, who may be alone, who may be abused or neglected. These children, again often poor, often minority, have never been more in danger, more at-risk than they are right now without the safety of their schools to go to. Many students across the nation are “missing,” right now. They have not been in school, have not attended on-line, and are essentially educationally unaccounted for. If not addressed, this could be our next national crisis.

Our District has employed a number of strategies to locate and re-connect these students in the educational process including daily phone calls to parents, home visits and parent conferences, social worker deployment, even school police-led visits. However, beyond

these traditional strategies, we have also collaborated with several organizations and agencies to help us locate and reach some of our most fragile students, after hours and on weekends. These partnerships include community-based organizations such as the Urban League, other public agencies such as the Miami-Dade Housing Authority, and a host of grass-roots entities that can help us access children living in migrant camps, subsidized housing, or who may be homeless, or part of the foster-care system.

There is work ahead to address the trauma and learning loss experienced by these children caught up in the COVID-19 crisis. The infusion of funding provided by the federal government is critical to meeting those needs but all involved must be diligent and responsible in the deployment of these dollars. We must collectively guard against wasteful and random spending. These taxpayer dollars must be used in a manner that ensures improved academic achievement, operational efficiency, and fiscal responsibility. States and school districts have a moral obligation to make investments which will open schools, protect health and safety, and address academic regression and acceleration. Such non-recurring investments should include considerations toward enhanced summer programming, extended day, week, or year, afterschool tutorials, instructional materials to support remediation, teacher professional development, and HVAC and other sanitization upgrades to maintain safe indoor air quality. Each of these is in direct response to COVID-19 impacts and are non-recurring beyond the period of necessary investment. Each of these investments must also be made with an eye toward equity, ensuring those in most need are the beneficiaries of the most support. Further, we would be sorely mistaken to ignore the fact that there were children in crisis prior to the COVID-19 crisis; it only got deeper and darker. The strategy to accelerate them to full potential cannot fall short by simply restoring their performance to what it was prior to the COVID crisis. We must not allow this to be looked upon as a time for opportunism, but as a time of opportunity. A time when we have an opportunity as a nation to provide solutions to long term resource disparity and strategically invest in academic equity.