



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, September 10, 2020

Statement from Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Alberto M. Carvalho

We recognize and regret that the 2020-2021 school year did not begin as expected. We know that students, teachers, and parents have been frustrated and disappointed. As Superintendent, I have been frustrated and disappointed as I know our School Board has been. The last nearly six months have been exceptionally challenging for our nation, our state, and our community. The impact of the global pandemic has turned daily life on its head and necessitated a complete transformation of how we engage in teaching and learning.

M-DCPS began the summer with the belief, based on information available at the time, that by Fall our community would be in Stage 2 of reopening with the ability to begin face-to-face instruction in our schools under enhanced safety guidelines specified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But as we know, by mid-July the viral load in our community had substantially increased and, keeping the health and safety of our students and staff at the forefront of our thoughts, a decision was made to open schools exclusively in a remote environment until community conditions would support a safe return to in-person learning.

We had high hopes for the implementation of the K12 distance learning platform, including a package of curriculum, assessment tools, teacher training, and data management. This platform was selected to allow students and teachers to seamlessly pivot between online and schoolhouse learning models without an interruption in the continuity of instruction. We also selected K12, a state-approved virtual instruction provider, over Florida Virtual School because it provided a comprehensive K-12 solution, an easy to use interface, and it had the flexibility to allow teachers to customize the online curriculum in core subjects and electives – a feature not available with Florida Virtual.

In order to provide time to become accustomed to interacting through K12, the first week of learning, beginning August 31st, was designed as an orientation period allowing students, parents, and teachers to familiarize themselves with the K12 platform through a series of Introduction to Online Learning (IOL) course exercises. Unfortunately, that week was marred by a series of technical issues related to the District's network, internet connectivity, as well as disappointing functionality of the K12 platform.

It is to be expected that with the launch of any new enterprise of this scale, there will be glitches and growing pains, and we declared as much; however, what was experienced by our students and teachers was much more than that. Our District, like many others across the nation, was inundated with unexpected attempts to disrupt network services. As we now know, districts across the nation are being attacked as more and more schools move to online instruction. Hartford Public Schools, Houston ISD, Ventura and Conejo Valley Unified School Districts and others are all experiencing similar challenges.

It is clear that M-DCPS must make immediate adjustments to ensure this District is able to deliver what our Board, community, teachers, students, and parents have come to expect from us, an excellent educational experience for all. In response, the following actions have been taken, will be taken immediately, or will be implemented as soon as feasible.

1. I will be engaging the services of a Senior Executive Chief Information Officer on a temporary basis. This contracted individual will be engaged to specifically focus on security procedures and practices, as well as to conduct an overall data center operations review that includes an assessment of existing technology, critical processes, and current infrastructure.
2. Staff will review and revise ITS job descriptions for better alignment with current high-tech industry standards.
3. I will be recommending the appropriation of up to \$5 million of immediate emergency stimulus funds to support ITS infrastructure enhancements.
4. I will be directing the implementation of mandatory cybersecurity responsibility training for selected employees.
5. IT security consultant firms will be retained for immediate support and to provide an independent opinion on system-wide protective measures. These consultants will be funded through our cyber-security insurance coverage.
6. I will be directing that a forensic review of technological impediments be conducted and will continue to seek the assistance of federal (FBI, Secret Service) and state law enforcement entities to assist with investigative procedures.
7. Comcast, our Internet service provider has implemented enhanced mitigation protections with dedicated Comcast staff assigned to provide M-DCPS support.
8. I am immediately implementing a plan of action informed by top technology and cyber security experts from our local community. Miami-Dade's civic and industry leaders have consistently been essential partners and advisors to our team's work. This task force will be made up of industry experts and business leaders including: longtime partners such as Armando Codina and Adolfo Henriques, as well as Mr. Manny Medina - Chairman and CEO of Cyxtera Technologies, and founder and Chairman of eMerge Americas; Mr. Ricardo Panez – Compuquip Cyber Security's Chief Revenue Officer – Oversees Services Operations (Cyber Security and Cloud Services); Georgios Mortakis – Norwegian Cruise Line's Vice President, Enterprise Technology Operations and Chief Information Security Officer with 23 years of experience in the fields of Information Systems Cyber Security, Risk Management and Infrastructure Management; Ms. Martha Poulter - Royal Caribbean's

Chief Information Officer and Senior Vice President; and Mr. Russell Benford – Royal Caribbean’s Vice President Government Relations, Americas at Royal Caribbean Group.

9. Mr. Manny Medina has also committed to deploying a team of experts from his company beginning today to assess needs and support the implementation of immediate solutions. His team will be working directly with my cabinet and ITS senior management.

It is our goal to ensure that the District’s technology infrastructure is sufficient to support our distance learning demands and result in a good user experience. We know that Cyber security is a concern. This Board has brought forth a number of items, and we have also brought this concern to the legislature’s attention.

I want to be clear that the intent of this administration has been and continues to be to provide the best educational experience possible for all students, even under these unprecedented conditions. I continue to be heartened daily by the outstanding, creative, and committed education professionals who make up Miami-Dade County Public Schools. I know that these educators go above and beyond each day for their students and have done their best to implement the My School Online program as powered by K12.

Earlier this month, it was announced that K12 would be funding a recognition for teachers valued at up to \$100. K12 has in fact deposited \$1.57 million with the Foundation for New Education Initiatives as they committed they would.

Last week, it was announced that we would be suspending the use K12 for grades 6-12 while we evaluated its viability. Teachers were encouraged to use Microsoft Teams and Zoom through Microsoft Teams. At its meeting of September 9, 2020, the School Board took action to provide for the “termination of any and all contractual considerations of K12 as the Learning Management System for the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year and which is a part of the District’s online/distance learning system.” Now, consistent with School Board direction, the K12 platform will no longer be utilized as a single access platform for PreK-5 or 6-12 users. Therefore, effective Thursday, September 10, 2020, teachers across the District should now use Microsoft Teams and Zoom through Microsoft Teams moving forward.

It should be noted that K12 had acknowledged the shortcomings of the product that was made available for use in M-DCPS. K12 recognized its inability to bring to fruition in a timely manner an effective implementation of M-DCPS’ vision to deliver online learning to our students. Therefore, due to the significant impact to teachers, students, and this District resulting from its actions, K12 had agreed to make the necessary investments and accrue all prior and current financial risks while continuing to provide support to those teachers who voluntarily chose to personally opt to stay on the platform because they felt it was a good fit for their students. However, shortly after the Board’s vote and consistent with their action, K12 advised the District that it would respect the declared will of the Board and begin migrating M-DCPS students off of its platform Thursday, September 10, 2020.

Teachers will be receiving assistance and direction to aid with this transition. Teachers are free to utilize any District-adopted curricular resources with their classes and I have great faith in their resilience and capacity to adjust to this situation.

As it relates to the reopening of schools for in-person learning, we have been very clear that the health and safety of employees and students is of the utmost importance. When we began this work, we did so by stating that we would listen to the experts and let science drive our decision making. Any discussions or decisions related to a return to in-person schooling will continue to follow the guidance of our public health and medical experts, CDC guidelines, and will be informed by the gating criteria previously identified as critical to a safe return to school.

We are doing all we can to protect this District, our data security, and give teachers and students a good experience. We must also recognize that distance learning will always have some limited connectivity issues, regardless of platform. This is true in our own daily lives and experiences in our homes, and we must recognize that personal Internet connectivity, individual device functionality, and other unknown variables may affect a certain percentage of users on any given day. But the overall experience must be much better than what has been experienced, and we will deliver that. Our community deserves no less.

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