TO: Bob Thomas, Superintendent; Renee Kelly, Chief of Staff

FROM: Jack Little, Data Analyst

SUBJECT: Reopening Knox County Schools: Discussion Group Summary

DATE: June 23, 2020

Background/Limitations

In response to COVID-19 related closures, Knox County Schools' (KCS) Research, Evaluation, and Assessment department (REA) was asked to support the Office of the Superintendent by collecting data surrounding re-entry scenarios for KCS. REA was asked to coordinate a small number of discussion groups and write anecdotal summaries for consideration.

As requested, REA spoke with four discussion groups. Each group was comprised of a self-contained stakeholder group: school-level administrators, teachers/guidance counselors, parents, and students. The discussion groups provided a venue for stakeholders to have an emergent conversation surrounding their concerns regarding re-entry. Participants were invited to follow up via email if they desired to share any additional or clarifying thoughts.

The selection criteria and recruitment of discussion group participants was coordinated by the Office of the Superintendent. REA coordinated specific meeting times and logistics with participants. Due to limitations in sampling techniques and scope/time constraints, the summary of discussions and themes should not be considered representative of or generalizable to any particular group – nor should they be considered findings of rigorous qualitative research. Readers are invited to consider to what degree themes highlighted below are helpful for framing future conversations and current district challenges.

Discussion Groups

Principals (*6 participants*)

"What may work for me in [my school] may not work for [another principal] in [their] school . . . I really don't know how we are going to do it."

Themes include: Communicating Expectations • Training • Logistical Unknowns

The administration discussion group covered a large number of wide-ranging topics. Participants offered a number of rhetorical questions ranging in scope from systematic concerns (e.g., enforcing IEP requirements, providing services to English language learners, impact to teacher accountability metrics, etc.) to specific logistical unknowns (i.e., reliability of online access, meeting health guidelines in classrooms, etc.) Some participants spoke to the importance of timely and ongoing communication from the district. They wondered aloud about a list of what they called district-wide "non-negotiables." Specifically, participants searched for a distinction between specific policies/practices the district would require them to enforce, and issues for which they would be required to create their own school-level protocols. Further, participants discussed the need for teacher training and recalibrated parental supports in the event of blended or remote learning scenarios. One principal shared, "We're in the midst

of all this training for teachers . . . but I guess I'm even more concerned for the families and how we . . . can help support them."

Teachers/School Counselors (*10 participants*)

". . . right now, safety should be a priority. Sanitation should be a priority."

Themes include: Safety • Time Constraints • Logistical Unknowns

The teacher/school counselor group also discussed communication and teacher training. Participants commented on the nature of school as a "safe zone" and discussed safety in the current public health climate. Notably, one logistical challenge discussed was the lack of nurses/healthcare providers in every school. Participants raised questions about whether infrastructure and school staff would be able to provide appropriate care and quality instruction. One participant contemplated, "So I'm trying—and teachers are trying—to wrap their brain around how . . . we put safety in place, and teach all that we have to teach within the curriculum . . . you need a certain amount of time to teach the curriculum, so do we need to pare down the curriculum? I'm sorry I'm kind of babbling because—it's just—we are in a whole new world."

The group discussed to what degree health guidelines (social distancing, use of masks, etc.) would be enforceable across differing school communities and age groups, particularly among younger cohorts of KCS students. "Talking to the kindergarten teachers, they're like, 'Try to keep kindergartners six feet apart? Really?' . . . And then you look at classroom sizes themselves, I think it's going to be really hard . . ." The group also highlighted concerns about adapting to an online instructional delivery model, especially with an unknown timeline to train and implement. Learning new online applications, supporting parents as educational partners, and keeping students engaged online were some of the many concerns.

Parents (*7 participants*)

". . . there's not going to be one particular answer that's going to be great for everyone."

Themes include: Partnership • Differing School Community Needs • Work-Family Schedules

Parents highlighted the differences between school communities within the district. Specifically, they discussed how different schools could realistically meet health department guidelines. Parents also unpacked the idea of "partnership" between the school and parents and how those relationships may change. Some participants discussed school-level health/community evaluations to inform specific school-level policy. (For context, the group also acknowledged realistic time constraints on the district and that such a localized approach to policymaking may not be immediately feasible.) As one parent commented, "So, each school may not look the same . . . because each school is different in their setup, in their design, some schools may have more ability to social distance than others . . ."

Parents raised concerns and highlighted possible opportunities regarding access to online instruction. On one hand, they anticipated that ensuring internet access across the district may be problematic. However, one parent also speculated that if the district would be able to overcome online access for

students, there may be inherent opportunities for access to more coursework options, Advanced Placement, etc. Parents also expressed concerns about the social-emotional impacts on students from not attending school in person. Finally, parents considered the tension between possible distance learning scenarios and parent work schedules—specifically how this tension may vary in intensity across school communities and socio-economic lines.

Students (*4 participants*)

Student A: ". . . a lot of people at school . . . are showing up just for friends or . . . so they can go to a game or whatever. . . . if [we] are online, all that's taken away, so it's really down to if you actually want to learn or not."

Student B: ". . . if they do want to learn [and] do well in the class and stuff like that it's still hard to find the motivation to do it."

Themes include: Online Delivery • Motivation • Group Compliance to Guidelines

Student participants spent part of the discussion sharing the constraints and challenges of online learning. Several of the discussion participants came from one-to-one schools and were familiar with receiving at least some instruction online. One student called attention to the importance of supporting teachers with the implementation of new technology, citing a number of challenges inherent to online content delivery. Some students acknowledged the temptation to become easily distracted or multitask when completing online assignments. One student suggested that even among typically motivated students, gathering the motivation to self-start can still be a challenge. From a health and safety perspective, students shared concerns about the possibility of becoming sick. However, students also recognized the need for socialization inherent to attending school in person. Additionally, they suggested that some students view school as an escape from other social and familial conflict and trauma. In terms of their comfort level with returning to school, some participants suggested that the degree to which their fellow students would socially comply with new health and hygienic recommendations may be a considerable factor.

Semi-Structured Discussion Outline

Please note, the outline below was used as a starting point for discussion – it does not necessarily represent the specific structure or order of each conversation. Questions were intentionally written to be general and to invite participants to lead as much of the conversation as possible.

1. Regarding reopening Knox County Schools, what primary concerns do you have about returning?

2. What would signal to you that it is time to reopen schools?
   a. What safety measures do you feel are most important to implement when reopening schools?
   b. Given limited resources, how should the district think about prioritizing these measures?

3. What concerns do you have if reopening schools is postponed?
   a. How might we categorize these concerns?

4. How has your school community been specifically impacted by COVID-19 related closures?
   a. What unique challenges might your community experience upon re-opening?
   b. What would you like the district to know about what your community is experiencing?

5. What message would you like relay to the KCS school district?
   a. What do we "not get" that you would like us to get?
   b. What question should we be asking that we are not?
   c. What additional perspectives should we seek out?