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The Columbus Dispatch

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2021 | DISPATCH.COM

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TAKING ON DISPARITIES IN A PANDEMIC

Breaking barriers



Columbus City Schools Superintendent Talisa Dixon, outside Stewart Elementary School, said she has tried to take on the disparities in education that disproportionately affect children of color. DORAL CHENOWETH/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Superintendent addresses inequities during COVID

Alissa Widman Neese Columbus Dispatch USA TODAY NETWORK

With school buildings shuttered and the COVID-19 pandemic taking hold last March, Talisa Dixon was struggling through the lowest point of her career in education. But for the first time, she couldn't talk to the person she always called for help.

Just a week earlier – as Gov. Mike DeWine declared a state of emergency in Ohio – the Columbus City Schools superintendent was more than 600 miles away in her hometown of Oxford, Mississippi, saying her final goodbyes as cancer claimed her father's life.

As she made arrangements after his death with her three siblings, Dixon's team of school district leaders was planning for a state-mandated shutdown. It wasn't until she arrived back in Columbus in mid-March and was sitting alone in her Downtown apartment – with schools already closed – that the

gravity of the situation hit her.

"Everything was shut. Everything was closed. And it was just me," Dixon, 51, said.

"I was sad. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to reach out to, other than my team."

After just a year at the helm of Ohio's largest school district, Dixon never expected she'd be steering it through the uncharted waters of a global pandemic. No district has been unscathed by COVID-19, but nationwide it has especially compounded the struggles of students in large, urban districts which disproportionately serve students who are Black and living in poverty.

Dixon was grieving, but she didn't have time to dwell, she said.

"Our district needed a leader. You had to put on this mask. You had to be seen as this leader who could encourage the organization and say 'We're going to get through this,'" Dixon recalled. "I didn't have another choice."

'Breaking chains'

A few miles away, in the city's Northland neighborhood, district parent Ebony Rice was struggling with similar feelings.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, the 31-year-old single mother of four had a full house – a high schooler, a fifth-grader, a first-grader – all sharing a computer to try and learn online, while her then-4-year-old son weaved between her legs.

Before the pandemic, she was used to juggling her home life with her job, working full-time as a default specialist for Huntington Bank helping borrowers who have defaulted on mortgages. She managed the schedules of kids involved in countless extracurriculars and took classes full-time toward an associate's degree in business management at Columbus State Community College through a program funded by

See DIXON, Page 12

Fraud stalling jobless benefits

Unemployed are getting payments put on hold

Mark Williams Columbus Dispatch USA TODAY NETWORK

An Upper Arlington woman had her unemployment benefits put on hold because someone else filed a fraudulent jobless claim in her name.

It's one of many cases of unemployment fraud, which has become rampant during the pandemic.

Cynthia Sbertoli, 49, had been collecting unemployment benefits since last March, when she was let go from her job, but her benefits were put on hold last month after she received a letter from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services seeking information about an employee who worked for her. The employee's name: Cynthia Sbertoli.

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Report: J&J one-dose vaccine safe, effective

Karen Weintraub USA TODAY

Detailed information on a Johnson & Johnson candidate vaccine for COVID-19 raises no safety concerns, according to a report released Wednesday.

A Food and Drug Administration advisory committee is holding an all-day meeting Friday to review the data and is likely to give the vaccine a thumbs-up, leading to an expected FDA authorization for the vaccine in adults within the next few days. The J&J vaccine differs from the two already authorized because only one shot is recommended, instead of two.

The company also is studying a two-dose regimen, which might prove more effective or more durable, in

See J&J, Page 13A

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