



WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE
FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND URBAN AFFAIRS

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For the DCPS Budget Oversight Hearing
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Thank you Chairman Mendelson, Education Committee Chairman Grosso, and all Councilmembers for this opportunity to testify. I am Kent Withycombe, from the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, where I work to advance education justice in DC.

Since the late 1970s, the Committee has been working to expand educational opportunities for students – specifically, those of color and those from historically disinvested neighborhoods -- and for greater equity throughout the DC public school system.¹ All students in DC public schools should have access to innovative, high-quality teaching and engaging educational opportunities. Stark disparities in the treatment of, and outcomes for, students of color and students with disabilities demonstrate that they do not. By DCPS' own measure, the PARCC test, only 22% of Black students, 6% of students with disabilities, and 17% of students in acute poverty are proficient in English and Language Arts, compared with 83% of white students. Proficiency rates in math are similarly abysmal. Students of color, students with disabilities, and at-risk students are also significantly less likely to graduate, according to DCPS' data.

The DCPS budget must support a robust public education system that addresses the inequalities that persist as a result of historic segregation. The Council must allocate sufficient, targeted funding to meet the education needs of low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities.

The proposed DCPS budget falls far short of the ultimate goal of advancing equity in our public schools that we share with the Council and DCPS. Today, we want to focus on three specific ways in which an increased DCPS budget will enable DCPS to serve students who are most at-risk. First, the budget must devote substantial resources to training, staffing, and school-based mental health to prevent unnecessary suspensions, expulsions, and arrests in schools. Second, the budget must provide sufficient funding to schools, especially for schools East of the River, to avoid significant staffing and program cuts that negatively impact students and teachers. Third, the Council should devote more resources to enable DCPS to create and implement a comprehensive technology plan to ensure that all of our students are ready for the college, vocational training and/or work opportunities that increasingly require developed technology skills.

¹ The Washington Lawyers' Committee was founded in 1968 to address civil rights violations, racial injustice and poverty-related issues in our community through litigation and other advocacy. The Committee has a long history of working to address racial and other inequity in the DC public schools, which includes its Parent Empowerment Program and its School Partnerships among law firms, businesses and more than 55 DCPS Title I schools. We work closely with the private bar to bring litigation, pursue policy initiatives and support the academic enrichment and other goals of our DC public school communities.

The DCPS Budget Must Invest in Supports and Services for Vulnerable Students, Schools, & Communities.

The Council should ensure that the DCPS budget creates a system of supports to address trauma, conflict, and behavior without resorting to exclusionary school discipline. We applaud the Council's prior commitment to ending the school to prison pipeline in DC with the passing of the Student Fair Access to Schools Act and urge the Council to fully fund that bill.

Exclusionary discipline like suspension and expulsion has a profound negative impact on student success. Students who receive suspension are more likely to be held back, more likely to drop out of school, and more likely to come into contact with the criminal legal system.² Suspended students are also more likely to miss school or become truant.³ This is especially problematic because exclusionary school discipline is disproportionately meted out to students of color. The recently-released OSSE 2017-2018 State of School Discipline found that Black children in DC are 5 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than their white peers. Students who were at-risk and in special education also had a higher likelihood of being suspended.⁴ Ending the school to prison pipeline is a critical part of closing the racial achievement gap in our schools.

Disproportionate discipline also strains the resources of families of color. When students are suspended from school, their parents and caregivers must then decide whether to jeopardize their job by staying home with their children, or leave their children unsupervised. Disparate suspensions mean disparate economic impact for families. The economic impact for these families is magnified by living in a city with huge employment, wage, and wealth gaps.

To create safe and welcoming schools where every student can be in school and supported every day, the budget for DCPS should prioritize ongoing training and support in trauma-informed and restorative practices, student access to trained mental health professionals within the schools, and high-quality, evidence-based social-emotional learning programs to help students develop the skills they will need to be successful in college, careers, and life. We also support DCPS' Connected Schools Initiative that expands pilot programs to develop robust Community Schools with significant wrap-around services. These investments will empower teachers and administrators to develop and use alternatives to suspension that address the root causes of student behavior and that don't push students out of school and on to a pathway to the criminal legal system.

We support the Fair Budget Coalition's overall request for \$20 million to support Fairer School Discipline, some of which will be allocated to DCPS directly to implement the Student Fair Access to Schools Act. We join with a broad city-wide coalition of students, parents, and advocates in fighting for

² The Council of State Governments and Public Policy Research Institute, *Breaking Schools' Rules, A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice* (July 2011), available at <http://justicecenter.csg.org/resources/juveniles>.

³ Office of the State Superintendent for Education, *State of School Discipline 2017-18 School Year*, available at https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2017-18%20School%20Year%20Discipline%20Report.pdf

⁴ Office of the State Superintendent for Education, *State of School Discipline 2017-18 School Year*, available at https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2017-18%20School%20Year%20Discipline%20Report.pdf

an overall \$54 million investment in mental health supports and trauma-informed practices for our students.

The DCPS Budget Should Ensure that All Schools Have Sufficient Resources to Support Robust School Staffing and Programming

The proposed DCPS budget does not provide sustainable funding for neighborhood schools on which many students of color from low-income households depend. Excellent by-right, neighborhood school options are critically important to ensuring equity of opportunities for families and communities, as many would prefer to go their neighborhood schools, and many do not have effective access to the lottery. We urge the Council to increase the funding for by-right neighborhood schools. Without this additional funding, schools will have to cut vital staff and programming and students who attend those schools will be deprived of a quality education.

A recent Coalition for DC Public Schools and Communities (C4DC) study revealed that the proposed DCPS budget will result in the loss of “buying power” – the market value of the school budget – at nearly half of our DCPS schools. The schools most affected are DCPS neighborhood schools with very high percentages of students of color living in acute poverty.⁵ Although individual school budgets appear larger in many schools, increased teacher and staff salaries and shifting costs from the central office budget to the individual school budgets means that schools will not have sufficient funding.

The proposed budget risks widening the achievement and opportunity gaps, because buying power losses are greatest for the schools that need funding the most – neighborhood elementary, middle and high schools East of the Anacostia River. Eighteen of the 22 hardest hit schools are in Ward 7 and 8. Anacostia, Ballou and Woodson High Schools lose a combined \$3.5 million in buying power in this proposed budget. Hart, Johnson and Kramer Middle Schools lose a combined \$1.5 million. Hendley Elementary alone loses \$1.3 million, and the proposed budget cuts have demoralized that school community. This loss of buying power means schools will have to cut critical positions, including teachers and counselors, and provide less money for supplies and programming.

Low-income and at-risk students are penalized three times by this DCPS budget: they receive less money for their schools, they are less likely to have robust PTO funds to supplement the school budget, and schools feel forced use their At-Risk funds to fill budget gaps rather than to provide supplemental services.

These budget cuts and resulting decision reductions in staff and programming have long lasting effects: as the quality of education necessarily declines with disinvestment, fewer families (those with the flexibility to exercise choice) choose their neighborhood schools, and schools receive less money in the coming years under the Uniform Per Pupil Spending formula. This challenge is particularly acute for our schools serving predominantly low-income students of color.

As a part of the Coalition for DC Public Schools and Communities, the Committee supports additional funding for DCPS schools serving predominately low-income students of color. One possibility is

⁵ *C4DC Budget Tool 2019*, available at <http://www.c4dcpublicschools.org/c4dc-blog>. The study was prepared by Mary Levy, Matthew Frumin and Cathy Reilly, with contributions by DC Fiscal Policy Institute, SHAPPE, and Code 4 DC.

stimulus funding that would restore the lost buying power of schools, prevent schools from cutting key teachers and other personnel, and help schools avoid using At Risk funding to fill gaps in their regular budget.

To Achieve Greater Digital Equity, DCPS Needs to Develop a Comprehensive Technology Plan and Obtain Sufficient Funding Over Several School Years to Implement It

To meet the needs of those children most likely to fall behind, the Council must fund digital equity in our public schools to help close the digital divide opportunity gap.

The gap in access to technology starts at home and continues into our schools. Many of our low-income students in DC public schools have very limited or no broadband access at home, and no computer or tablet at home to access it if they do have broadband. School may be the only place where they can become familiar with the technology devices, applications and skills that they will need to succeed in college, vocational schools and in so many work environments. But many of our schools are not providing adequate access to technology. One Ward 8 school reported to us that there is inadequate bandwidth for teachers to do their jobs effectively and for students to engage with internet-based learning; there is little to no budget support for tech training or for IT; and equipment is old, in disrepair, and not replaced. Students are often frustrated when they have to use computers with missing keys and unreliable broadband during lessons, projects and standardized testing.

We are grateful for how DCPS has been responsive to the Digital Equity parent group that has members from all Wards. DCPS has submitted for your approval a budget proposal that would phase in a 1:1 student-device ratio over several years, and dedicates \$4.6 million towards technology development, which we applaud. The DCPS proposal, however, does not fully address the need for a comprehensive technology plan that ensures long-term equitable technology training and opportunities for students. The budget fails to provide the following necessary components:

- **Dedicated information technology (IT) services.** The designated \$4.6 million only includes small stipends for staff to do some basic IT support at the school level. Without IT services, students and teachers will be left with lots of broken laptops, outdated applications and inadequate broadband access. Delays in service and repairs means many lost days of learning and frustrating testing conditions. DCPS indicated that they are discussing IT support with OCTO, but they have not provided details.
- **Sufficient funding for new devices.** DCPS has not finalized the procurement model for the devices (whether to purchase or lease), so it still has to determine how many devices it can afford for next year.
- **Sufficient funding for training & repairs.** DCPS' preliminary plans do not address teacher professional development and Smartboard maintenance, repairs or replacements.

As the DC Auditor recommended in 2017, DCPS should develop and make public a comprehensive, multi-year technology plan, including expected costs and planned funding sources. Many other U.S.

urban school districts, like Atlanta, Georgia⁶, Arlington, Virginia⁷, and Detroit, Michigan⁸ have comprehensive technology plans and are already several years into implementing them. The 2020 DCPS budget should allocate sufficient dedicated funding to meet school technology needs equitably across all our city's schools.

In summary, the Council should prioritize a DCPS budget focused on equity and support for the most vulnerable students. The DCPS budget must include robust support for ending unnecessary suspensions and expulsions by providing trauma-informed practices to address with behavioral manifestations of unaddressed mental health and other learning-related needs in schools. The budget should provide sufficient funding to ensure that by-right neighborhood schools can continue to provide a quality education for students. The Council must also invest in closing the Digital Divide by passing a budget that will give DCPS the resources to develop and implement a comprehensive, multi-year technology plan that will provide all students, and particularly the chronically underserved children of color from low-income households the technology training and opportunities that they deserve.

I thank all of the Councilmembers again for the opportunity to testify, and I am happy to answer any additional questions.

⁶ Atlanta started developing its technology comprehensive plan in 2014. See *Atlanta Public Schools: Three Year Plan*, available at <https://www.atlantapublicschools.us/cms/lib/GA01000924/Centricity/Domain/10194/APS%20Technology%20Plan%202015-2018.pdf>

⁷ Arlington's strategic technology planning started as early as 2011 and has documented the plan's evolution. See *Arlington Public Schools FY2012-2016 Strategic Technology Plan*, available at https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/legacy_assets/www/30d52c1b4e-Technology_Plan_for_FY2012-16v2.pdf and *2016-18 Addendum to the Arlington Public Schools Technology Plan for FY2012-16*, available at https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/legacy_assets/www/7a1ce69827-Addendum_to_the_APS_Tech_Plan.pdf.

⁸ Jennifer Chambers, *Detroit Schools Expand Tech Efforts in Classroom*, Detroit News, February 6, 2018, available at <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/education/2018/02/06/detroit-schools-expand-technology-classrooms/110163424/>