

December 13, 2018

Rick Cruz, Chair
Scott Pearson, Executive Director
District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB)
3333 14th Street, NW
#210
Washington, DC 20010

Dear Mr. Cruz and Mr. Pearson,

For over 20 years, The Next Step Public Charter School has had a tremendous impact on the charter sector, in general, and adult basic education, in particular. As DC PCSB board chair Rick Cruz stated at the PCSB 2018 *Celebrating Best Practices in Public Charter School Education*, we, as top-performing public charter schools, must remain steadfast and focused on growing quality schools and programs. These efforts can serve even more students and promote their academic achievement, especially with an intentionally customized experience. We, then, continue to remain the schools known for high quality, and, at The Next Step Public Charter School, we abide by our relentless pursuit of excellence.

The entire professional community of The Next Step Public Charter School is certain that we can do more to impact the District of Columbia, and the generations represented in our program and in the community. Therefore, the purpose of this correspondence is to articulate our proposed amendment for the charter governing The Next Step Public Charter School. In forthcoming sections, we include the following: articulation of the proposed amendment; discussion of alignment among amendment and our mission; considerations for implementation and impact; as well as review of efforts promoting public awareness, engagement, and feedback. The imperative here is that The Next Step Public Charter School is positioned to remain innovative in order to offer transformative experiences informed by and designed for our current and future learners. As we begin, we offer a discussion of policy and data informing adult basic education programs and outcomes, and highlights of national data focused on GED achievement.

The very definition of Adult Education, as articulated in Section 203 of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, refers to “academic instruction and education services below postsecondary level that increases an individual’s ability to... (B) transition to postsecondary education and training; and (C) obtain employment.” The Next Step Public Charter School serves a significant number of English Language Learners, which WIOA informs academic programmatic design:

“help eligible individuals who are English Language Learners achieve competence in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension of the English Language; and (B) that leads to –(i)(I) attainment of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent; and (II) transition to postsecondary education; or (ii) employment.”

In order to actualize and accelerate transition to postsecondary and workforce opportunities, especially in an increasingly knowledge-based economy, it is with great conviction that we know The Next Step Public Charter School must position itself to do more to serve our students, community, and impact the sector. In particular, The Next Step Public Charter School intends to ensure even more adult learners, including the differentiated needs of English Language Learners, will engage in an environment that includes rigor, supportive and collegial relationship-building, and exposure opportunities necessary to ease the transition to and success in postsecondary educational pursuits—college, career, and otherwise.

As discussed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), from 1990 through 2013, 19 to 24 year old students accounted for the largest percentage of GED test passers throughout this 23 year period. In 2013, the table below captures GED test passers in age-cohort categorizations:

Cohort: Age Range	Percentage of GED Test Passers
16 – 18 year-olds	22%
19 – 24 year-olds	35%
25 – 29 year-olds	15%
30 – 34 year-olds	11%
35 year-olds or older	17%

(Source: Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States, NCES)

What is important to note here, on a national level, the greatest number of potential GED passers is seen under-30, and with our results, we are confident we can continue to grow these measures of achievement within the District. From the American Community Survey (ACS) population estimates (2017), data suggests that the population, age 15-24 is 90,495, and for 25 to 29 year-olds, the estimate is 83,447. From these figures, we then turn to the ACS data for educational attainment (2012-2016), which suggests that for the population of 18-24 year-olds, 8,084 have an attainment level less than high school; the District’s population for 25 years and old, less than 9th grade is 18,612, and those who engaged in 9th to 12th grade, but have no diploma (or its equivalent) is 27,898 [see Table S1501 Educational Attainment, District of Columbia].

As we analyze this data, we note that 10% of the population for the District of Columbia, over the age 25, do not have a high school diploma (or its equivalent). When we assess this finding, nearly 15% of residents who identify as Black, and

nearly 29% of residents who identify as Hispanic or Latino, are not high school graduates. These figures speak to the potential impact of The Next Step Public Charter School as we serve residents of the District of Columbia, 16-30 years-old, with regards to achieving high school equivalency and supporting aspirations for postsecondary educational pursuits.

As we investigate our internal data, we have found that of those who have withdrawn from our program, the percentage of those who have aged-out ranges from 15% to 17%. For the 2016-17 academic year, our data suggests 15% of withdrawn students have aged out, with 17% in the 2017-18 academic year. To date, 12% of our withdrawn students would age out of our program. We no longer wish to say no to those who return to us hoping to re-engage in learning. We do know many leave for work or work-related demands, but their aspirations for degree completion are still present.

Articulation of Proposed Amendment

The Next Step Public Charter School seeks to increase the enrollment age ceiling for its academic program from 16-24 year-olds to 16-30 year-olds.

Alignment to Mission

The Next Step Public Charter School “provides students who face extraordinary challenges and who are not supported in traditional high schools with the opportunity to continue their education,” as declared in our mission statement. Our proposed charter amendment provides our learning community the opportunity to support learners who withdrew or stopped out from their previous academic environments, and/or exceeded our current age ceiling for new enrolled students. We will be able to extend our services to opportunity youth and young adults whom we currently cannot serve (due to our existing age ceiling). This would include those who we must attempt to redirect to other charter providers able to serve older students.

We continue to hear—from our current students and alumni—of the supports still needed to successfully navigate a transition into higher education or career pathways. These supports include not only academics, but also the comprehensive student support and engagement resources. In particular, our students desire and would still benefit from college-ready academic supports that combat the need for remedial coursework upon enrollment in postsecondary academic programs. Therefore, we see the proposed amendment as means to enhance our service and re-engagement of formerly disconnected opportunity youth and young adults by providing them with a learning community focused on their academic achievement, early college success, as well as well-defined pathways for career entry and success.

Considerations for Implementation and Impact

The Next Step Public Charter School currently offers three academic tracks—GED in English; GED in Spanish; and English as a Second Language. Students' enrollment within their desired academic track will continue to be informed by assessment placement data (TABE and TABE CLAS-E). In addition, as we respond to growing requests of current students and recent alumni, The Next Step Public Charter School will offer an accelerated preparation experience. This program would be considered a bridge toward the academic rigor best conceptualized as *early college*. Since the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE) has supported access to postsecondary coursework through dual enrollment opportunities, and with Bard College partnering with the District of Columbia Public Schools, the incorporation of *Early College* is a model to enhance adult basic education and offer these same experiences for students.

Research, as highlighted by the National Center for Education Statistics, has found that GED recipients enter postsecondary programs at lower rates than traditional high school diploma recipients. GED recipients also have lower college completion rates, when compared to their counterparts who earn a traditional high school diploma. Our efforts to incorporate the early college model speaks not only to a commitment to student achievement and readiness for postsecondary engagement, this approach speaks to equity. For example, a student who arrives at The Next Step Public Charter School, for what might be their first formal educational experience, has college aspirations. Their journey begins in English as a Second Language and then continues on to the GED track, or vice versa. While these are critical developments in one's academic pathway, college remains an elusive outcome. Therefore, we continue to ask ourselves: *What academic experiences must we provide to ensure that our students are equipped to enroll in college with minimal remediation? How do we ensure access and success for our adult learners?* The increased age ceiling at The Next Step Public Charter School supports our position to further our investment in and the outcomes for adult basic education.

As we extend the age ceiling, and especially through the Early College model, our students will experience a rigorous academic experience that will improve their basic skills and English proficiency with the literacy and numeracy skills needed to advance their postsecondary educational and professional aspirations. This will be accomplished through pre-college academic experiences, as an extension of ELL and advanced-ABE tracks. In particular, the Early College at The Next Step will engage adult learners who have achieved any of the following distinctions: advanced GED/GED-graduates, Level 5 ESL students, advanced ESL/Pre-College students (those approaching ESL Level 6). The focus here is to reduce and/or

eliminate required remediation, while increasing the English proficiency needed for students' successful transition to and through postsecondary educational pursuits.

In practice, the student would experience an individualized and customized on-boarding at the point of outreach and enrollment. As learners engage with The Next Step Public Charter School, their first encounters will include thoughtful and reflective questions regarding their academic and aspirational objectives, and how we, as a learning community, might construct experiences and opportunities to promote such outcomes. From entry-point assessments, to one-on-one conversations with case managers and members of the instructional leadership team, students will inform faculty and staff of their *big dreams* and staff, in turn, will begin to articulate initial benchmarks students can expect to clear. Therefore, our current staffing structure for on-boarding experiences—Registrars, Assessment Coordinators, Instructional Coaches, Coordinators of Curriculum and Instruction, Case Managers, and Coordinators of Student Support Services—are all in place to deliver these services and supports. Our Talent and Outcomes division will maintain data systems and reporting structures such that students can track their progress and the revise their goals as they advance in our programs.

As we “extend the runway” for our students, both in age and academic experience, we are able to truly fulfill our vision and accelerate the aspirations of our students. This extension allows us to forge new and re-imagine existing partnerships, while also fully engaging and retaining the extraordinary talents among faculty and staff. The Early College model has afforded us the opportunity to collaborate with the University of the District of Columbia Community College as we imagine the possibilities of postsecondary readiness. We also intend to collaborate with other community college partners with the hopes that this increases diversity of coursework for students. These opportunities would also allow The Next Step staff to serve as adjunct faculty for credit-bearing college coursework.

We too have another opportunity to re-imagine scheduling and space to maximize student engagement and achievement. In order to enhance our existing staffing and volunteer structures, The Next Step Public Charter School seeks to orchestrate memorandums of understanding with local universities to create off-campus Federal Work Study opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students to serve as near-peer academic mentors. Our university near-peer mentors will engage students with their academic pursuits, as well as career readiness. First and foremost, hosting lectures on campuses and navigating campus resources are all designed to remove the academic barriers. But, secondary barriers—such as collegiate culture and contextual knowledge and skills—are of great import too.

Projected Enrollment [Disaggregated for Internal Purposes]

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
	Projected	Projected	Projected	Projected	Projected	Projected
Day Alternative Adult	209	210	200	200	200	200
Day Adult Rate	--	--	20	20	20	20
Early College Adult Rate	--	--	30	35	40	45
Night: Alternative Adult	209	210	50	60	60	60
Night: Adult Rate	--	--	120	140	140	150
LEA Total	418	420	420	455	460	475

Financial Health and Resource Planning

The proposed age ceiling amendment would be implemented within our current operating structure. As a school that operates programming both day and night, the organizational chart, divisional leadership, support staff are all in place to support the addition of newly enrolled students 16 to 30 years old. If anything, the increased age ceiling will create greater demand for The Next Step Public Charter School and its programming. As such, we will maintain active applicants for wait-list and continue to provide windows of enrollment for fall, spring, and when available, summer session opportunities.

Promoting Public Awareness and Engagement

Over the past eight months, the Executive Director and Management Team has engaged all faculty and staff in visioning activities, which led to the recommendation of extending the age ceiling of The Next Step Public Charter School, as well as even more intentional opportunities to support students’ life plans—postsecondary access and success, as well as career preparation. In the fall of 2018, all members of the professional community of The Next Step PCS (faculty,

staff, and the management team) participated in an anonymous survey which assessed the support for an age ceiling adjustment and the articulation of any uneasiness or hesitation. The majority of the faculty and staff demonstrated strong support for an age ceiling adjustment. The presentation included with this application was shared with all faculty and staff during a weekly staff meeting, then shared with the Board.

The concerns documented on the survey and expressed by faculty and staff were associated with a key program differential—day school versus night school—, and focused on differentiation for student maturity as well as student supports required for older adult students, in comparison to those resources traditionally associated with opportunity youth—ages 16-24. Per the former point, the Board of The Next Step PCS voted to create an internal policy such that the High School program would experience the increased age ceiling, thus the Night School program would enroll new students beyond the age of 24 for the 2019-20 academic year. The Day School program, however, would maintain its current student demographic (ages 16-24).

To address the latter points, the Division Chair and Senior Director of Student Support and Engagement has begun inquiry into the resources and potential community partners needed to best support adult students who would fall outside of the “opportunity youth” distinction. Our approach to holistic student supports will be enhanced to be sure to meet the needs of our diverse learners, while also ensuring equitable access to resources and services that would support student achievement.

The Next Step Public Charter School hosted a community open house event with some of our peer leaders, ANC commissioners, charter advocates, as well as existing partners during which we highlighted some of our success of the 2017-18 academic year, and the 2018 calendar year, while also highlighting the potential of our charter amendment(s). This event, with a focus on “20 years and beyond,” allowed for the display of the attached presentation, student and alumni panel, as well as an open forum regarding the charter. Our guests included representatives from the following entities/organizations: Advisory Neighborhood Commission (1A), OSSE Re-Engagement Center, Capital Guardian Youth Challenge Academy, RaiseDC, New Futures, SOME Career and Technical Education, LAYC Career Academy, Youth Build, Meridan Public Charter School, and a parent/Special Education Advocate.

Our open forum included rich discussion of the charter amendment. Those in attendance shared their enthusiasm and support. Our colleagues at New Futures explicitly stated that they are “beyond thrilled to see the change in the age ceiling... [and there is a] willingness to continue to support The Next Step” as we further students’ postsecondary educational aspirations. Our colleagues from SOME CTE

expressed a desire to establish partnerships that would allow our students to experience career readiness, if college is not their immediate goal.

Our colleagues from the DC Re-Engagement Center asked us to consider the demand the increased ceiling might have on our enrollment and capacity. We assured the audience that we would continue to support students throughout the application process including one-on-one enrollment coaching and assessment sessions, and our timeframe for enrollment windows—as described earlier in this correspondence. We plan to manage a wait-list should demand exceed our building capacity, as a best practice to ensure access and equity.

We were joined by our ANC Commissioner who offered thoughtful questions regarding our community outreach efforts. We shared with Commissioner Christine Miller (1A-05 Treasurer) that The Next Step PCS piloted a summer outreach event in the community—Student, Alumni, and Partners mixer—that we plan to continue. In addition to collaborative outreach efforts, The Next Step PCS will engage in an extensive campaign with ad placements positioned by Outfront Media (including WAMATA). We will host Open House efforts in collaboration with community partners, and also engage apprenticeship pipeline programs to best support students' academic development simultaneous to their career training.

Lastly, we were joined by a parent advocate who also inquired about our commitment to students with disabilities. The Next Step PCS ensured this parent advocate that we would continue our support of students with disabilities, whether it included securing additional internal resources, or collaborating with OSSE and other entities to identify the most appropriate supports and experts to ensure student success. Our school's focus on individualized life plans is deeply rooted in what is normed and expected of our supports for students with IEPs or 504 plans.

We believe that we successfully addressed any uncertainty through the sharing of our strategy, while highlighting opportunities for greater collaboration and our ability to actualize The Next Step's vision and mission in new, intentional, and strategic ways.

Should you have any questions, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Jonathan D. Mathis

Jonathan D. Mathis, PhD
Executive Director