



**Testimony of
Rick Cruz, Board Chair
DC Public Charter School Board**

**DC PCSB Oversight Hearing
Committee on Education
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Good morning Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee. My name is Rick Cruz and I am the Chair of the DC Public Charter School Board. I am joined today by our Executive Director Scott Pearson and Deputy Director Naomi Rubin DeVeaux. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

The DC Public Charter School Board provides oversight to 66 local education agencies, each operated by a DC non-profit led by a volunteer board. More than 600 of our neighbors govern these schools, including over 120 parents and students. Together, they educate more than 43,000 students across 123 campuses.

These schools serve a higher share of low-income and Black students and a similar share of students with disabilities, all while outperforming the city with each of these student groups. Last year there were 11,317 individuals on public charter school waitlist, 1,600 more than the year before. The waitlists grow because our schools keep getting better. For the fourth year in a row, more students attend top-ranking Tier 1 schools— now at 54 campuses. Nine of our schools moved from Tier 2 to Tier 1 last year.

Charter school proficiency rates have grown each year since 2006. Our focus on equity has cut suspension rates by half, and expulsion rates by 90%, all while respecting school autonomy.

DC PCSB is a partner across the city, serving on more than 40 government task forces. We are responsible about charter growth, approving new schools with care while only allowing our very strongest schools to expand. Indeed, we reached a milestone this year when DCPS grew faster than the charter sector for the first time. We celebrate DCPS' successes, which we believe were in small part thanks to healthy competition from charter schools.

In sum, thanks in part to our strong oversight, we have two roughly equal sectors, both improving, both growing, and both working together on behalf of our city.

Essential to this is a healthy and well-regulated charter school sector. Given the considerable debate about the future of education in the city I would like to take a minute to talk about the four principles that allow charter schools to succeed.

First is that public charter schools are public schools, with an obligation to educate all students. It's for this reason that we are so focused on ensuring that charter admissions are open to all. It's why we spearheaded the creation of the common lottery. It's why we've worked so hard to reduce suspensions and expulsions. It's why we pay close attention to the outcomes for our special education and English learner students.

The second is that public charter schools are given great freedom and autonomy, but in exchange for high accountability. This is not an abstract thing. The public charter school board has closed two dozen schools in the past ten years for poor academic performance. By closing low-performing schools and allowing high performers to grow, we have steadily improved the quality of our sector. And when we do close a school, we do everything we can to help the affected students, including encouraging takeovers by higher-performing charters and by DCPS.

But the other side of the bargain is equally important. With charter schools we focus intently on the "what," not on the "how." We are laser focused on outcomes while we do everything possible to ensure schools have maximum flexibility about how to achieve those outcomes. And we fight to remove the distractions that can take a school's focus away from academic success.

Third is innovation. We are very picky about what schools we approve. Last year, we did not approve any. But those that we do approve bring new approaches and whole new school models. This year, for example, three unique schools opened: DC's only all-boys middle school, Statesman Academy, DC's first computer science focused program called Digital Pioneers, and an adult education program serving newly-arrived immigrants, The Family Place PCS. We saw the first Immersion program replicate in the east end, EW Stokes PCS, bringing Spanish and French Immersion to Ward 7. And in September Lee Montessori will bring the first Montessori charter school to the east end.

Finally, charter schools are schools of choice. A neighborhood school of right must serve everyone in its attendance zone and so, to some extent, be all things to all people. A public charter school is open equally to everyone in the District. It can focus its offerings, its culture, and its expectations, knowing that families who aren't interested don't have to attend. As the authorizer we respect and celebrate the diversity of offerings that come from this model.

Of course, none of these principles are absolutes. Every public school must protect the health and safety of its children and follow the law. And they need to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars. If a school leader is making millions, that's fiscal mismanagement. Four years ago, we closed a school because of this, and we wouldn't hesitate to do so again.

Innovative public schools of choice, open to all, held accountable for results but free to pursue those results as they choose and with minimal distractions: that's the formula that has made Washington DC the fastest improving urban school system in the country. As we consider the future of education in DC, we would do well to respect these core principles.

I'd now like to share some of the key areas of focus for our board.

I mentioned the importance of accountability. We are pleased that our proficiency rates climbed again this year, as they have every year since the introduction of the DC CAS in 2006. And behind the averages are some truly extraordinary results from some of our schools.

Capital City Public Charter High School saw a 15% increase in students testing at a level 4 or above on the ELA PARCC exam. At Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter High School an additional 13% of students met or exceeded expectations on the ELA PARCC. Friendship Tech Prep High School went from 13% of students meeting or exceeding expectations on the ELA PARCC exam in 2016-2017 to 35% of students meeting or exceeding expectations this last school year. Many of our middle and elementary public charter schools also showed growth on the ELA and Math PARCC. KIPP DC Lead Academy had an increase of 9% of students testing at level 4 or above on both the ELA and math PARCC exams. Meridian PCS also saw increases in student performance on the ELA and math PARCC of 9% and 7%, respectively.

Students who are categorized as at-risk also saw gains. The at-risk subgroup for public charter schools continues to outperform the state average on both the ELA and math PARCC. An increase of 10% of at-risk students at Center City Public Charter School's Brightwood campus met or exceeded expectations in both the ELA and math PARCC. At DC Prep Benning Elementary, 13% more at-risk students tested level 4 or above on the Math PARCC this last school year. Friendship Woodridge Public Charter Middle School saw an increase of 22% of at-risk students meeting or exceeding expectations on the math PARCC exam. KIPP DC WILL Academy, Center City Capitol Hill, and Center City Petworth, all had double digit increases for at-risk students meeting or exceeding expectations in math.

While we need to celebrate the gains students have made, we also need to take a sober look at where we can improve. Citywide, students with disabilities continue to struggle to meet or exceed expectations on both the ELA and math PARCC. The state average for students with disabilities testing at a level 4 or 5 is 5.7% in ELA and 6.4% in math. However, there are several public charter schools that are successfully supporting these students to reach level 4 or 5 on their PARCC exams. Nearly half of the students with disabilities, 45.5%, at Latin American Montessori Bilingual PCS met or exceeded expectations on the ELA PARCC. Twenty-two percent of students with disabilities at Creative Minds International PCS met or exceeded expectations in math. At Washington Yu Ying PCS, 39% of students with disabilities met or exceeded expectations in math and 30% in ELA. We continue to support public charter schools in improving their programming for students with disabilities. This includes the creation of a professional learning community for special educators in public charter schools.

School safety has been a growing focus of our board. We work with all schools to ensure they have solid emergency plans and safe buildings. We hosted a conference on preventing and addressing sexual abuse. We then held a second workshop to develop school policies and procedures. We appreciate the work you did, Councilmember Grosso, to pass the School Safety Act of 2018, which has helped inform our work.

I want to flag two safety concerns. The first concerns Safe Passages. We are pleased to see the city establish five safe passage zones. In our experience we need many more. And there must be better coordination with WMATA. We have school bus stops overflowing with students, some seeing bus after bus pass by them that are either full or out of service. In the morning, this contributes to truancy. In the afternoon, it risks serious violence.

The second concerns lead filters. Last year we installed 1,692 lead filters in every drinking source at every school. But these filters contain cartridges that must be replaced annually. Inexplicably, this year's budget included funds for DCPS to replace cartridges, but not for public charter schools. The city has been searching for funds to reappropriate without success. Consequently, no cartridges have been replaced this year.

Turning to student health, thanks to this Council, all schools with Department of Health nurses are required to have 40 hours of service. Currently 96 of the 123 public charter school campuses have a nurse, up from 45 in 2012. We hope to have a school nurse at every public charter school.

While nurse coverage is in relatively good shape, that's not the case with mental health. We worked closely with our agency partners to match a CBO

or DBH clinician with 17 of the 18 public charter schools who are part of the top 25 percent identified with the highest need for mental health services.

But we need to do more. We continue to hear that the process is too slow and there is no clarity for when coverage starts. And the remaining 75% of schools still need services and have no idea when it will arrive. There is also a fear that funding is too low for CBOs to afford licensed, full-time clinicians.

Last year there was great focus on high school graduation rates. The scrutiny was, for us, reaffirming. The whole city learned about the rigorous transcript audits we conduct before awarding a diploma. And, we benefitted from OSSE's five recommendations for ways to further improve our processes. I am proud to say we have followed through on all those recommendations and I will update you on each.

1. Last February, we posted HS graduation requirements for all high schools on each school's profile page on our website. We will update the information annually. Additionally, we added a page on our website where users can find graduation requirements for each school as well as our transcript audit policy.
2. We revised our High School Course Catalog Requirement to include a "Memorandum of Understanding" between families and schools. Schools will be required to include an explanation of their MOU process to families. Our hope is that this level of interaction will give families renewed confidence and understanding of what it takes to earn a diploma from each LEA.
3. We also modified our High School Course Catalog requirement to include credit recovery policies. Schools' credit recovery policy must include eligibility for participation, how students are referred or assigned to credit recovery, where and when credit recovery courses take place, and how credit recovery credits are earned. This requirement took effect last summer.
4. As a part of our transcript review audit, we review all students' attendance for those schools that include attendance as part of their course promotion policy. This was formally revised in our transcript audit process policy during our April 2018 board meeting.
5. DC PCSB continues to use the transcript audit excel spreadsheet but this year we included on the spreadsheet the names of specific courses needed for graduation in DC. For example, auditors not only check for four years of science, but they also ensure Lab Science has been

completed. This was already done during our audits but by adding the specific course names to the spreadsheet we are codifying our practice.

Finally, the board voted on a series of policy changes in April to strengthen our existing practices and codify some new procedures. For example, our graduation policy clarifies that any waiver from a school's graduation policy must be approved by the school's board and be consistent with that school's waiver policy. Further, our transcript audit policy now makes it clear that we will be auditing attendance.

Another focus has been further expanding transparency. This has long been a priority of our board and we are proud of what we have achieved. We were the first to publish discipline data in 2012. We brought Equity Reports to the city in 2013. We developed the Financial Analysis Review back in 2011, allowing the public to better understand schools' financial statements and health.

In the year since becoming the Chair of the board, I worked to increase this transparency for DC families. Ensuring that public charter schools are more understandable and accessible to families has been no small task. Our website contains 96,000 pages of information, which can be hard to navigate. To improve accessibility, we created a transparency hub that centralizes the important performance and financial documents we collect annually. Included in the hub is information on school budgets, audits, at-risk funding usage, school calendars, charter goals, and more. While much of this information was already available on our website, we realized that it has not been as easy to find as it could be. By adding this hub, we are hoping to make this information easier than ever to access.

We are also in the process of establishing a transparency policy that would further expand the information we make publicly available. The policy has made it through one round of public comment, and we incorporated into a second draft many of the suggestions we received from our parent advisory group (PALC) and at a well-attended public hearing in January. We will hold another hearing in two weeks.

Our goal, as always, is that the public has good insight into the operations, expenditures, and outcomes of our schools, all while minimizing the burden on these schools that would distract them from their core mission of education.

I opened this testimony with the statement that we can be proud of the progress our schools have made. Progress has been steady, but incremental. When it comes to something as critical as the achievement gap, that progress feels too slow. Many experts say that steady incremental progress is

the best we can expect. Perhaps they are right. But I believe we should aspire to more.

To achieve breakthrough results, the steady work of DCPS and the Public Charter School Board cannot take place in a vacuum. We need the support of the entire city in two admittedly large areas.

The first concerns teachers. Finding and keeping great teachers is a challenge everywhere. We've made progress with teacher salaries, but as DC becomes costlier, it's not enough. A teacher with a family should be able to live in DC. That is why we propose helping to ease the housing burden on teachers, such as through extending first responder benefits to teachers. We also support SBOE's work on reducing teacher attrition.

The second is poverty, and the related issue of housing instability. An education researcher recently published a troubling graph that showed that the black-white achievement gap across US cities is highly correlated with the black-white income gap. With poverty comes stress, trauma, and instability. Rising rents and the disappearance of affordable housing adds to this. These are complex issues, but the challenges our students face are often more than any one teacher, dean of students or school community can overcome alone. I hope that the city can take a more holistic approach that includes housing solutions and an expansion of mental health services so that students can thrive, and school leaders can focus on academic achievement.

Finally, as you heard at the truancy hearing a few weeks ago, students cannot learn if they are not in the school building. We all know that our approaches so far have not worked. As we stated previously, we hope to work collaboratively to improve attendance, ideally first through a bus pilot. If we can get this idea set up for our most vulnerable and chronically absent students, we might be able to see improved outcomes.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. we are happy to answer any questions.