



Testimony of Saba Bireda at Confirmation Roundtable

June 27, 2019

Good morning Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee on Education,

My name is Saba Bireda. I'd like to begin my testimony by thanking Mayor Bowser for nominating me to serve a second term on the Public Charter School Board (PCSB). I'd also like to thank Chairman Grosso and the Committee on Education for holding this hearing. I look forward to serving a second term with distinction.

Much has changed within the DC charter sector since I was confirmed in 2016. We have approved ten schools to open and have overseen the closing or voted to close seven schools. Today, more students attend a Tier 1 school than ever before. Our oversight has led to significant reductions in suspensions and expulsions. Graduation rates in public charter schools continue to be higher than the city average. We adopted twenty new or revisions to existing policies including a revision to increase the focus on equity in the policy that guides our evaluation of schools that want to expand. We have increased our community outreach and taken proactive steps to solicit input from the students and families we serve.

While much has changed, my dedication to the students of Washington, DC has not. As you may recall from my previous testimony, my first job here in DC was a teacher at Sousa Middle School in Ward 7. That experience opened my eyes to the amazing possibilities education can open for all children and the tremendous barriers many DC students face in trying to obtain an excellent education. My belief in our students is unwavering and my commitment to expanding educational opportunities is my motivation for continuing to serve on the board.

My focus since joining the Board has been an insistence that the schools that come before us for authorization, review, and expansion are providing high-quality educational opportunities to all students. I have been particularly concerned with achievement gaps for students with disabilities and at-risk students, disparities in suspension rates for students with disabilities and at-risk students, reducing racial isolation and expanding the type of school models offered to students in our most educationally underserved wards, particularly east of the river. In terms of Board processes, I have continually pushed for our board to be clear and consistent in its decision-making and have tried to bring my perspective as a civil rights attorney and litigator to our work to ensure we are always making legally sound and defensible decisions.

Along the way, I have visited more than 30 schools, spoken at numerous graduations (my favorite PCSB activity), consistently attended our public meetings, and met with our Parent and Alumni Leadership Council (PALC), community groups and education stakeholders from across the city. I sometimes joke that PCSB is my “part-time job” but the reality is this position requires an incredible time commitment to do it well and I have been grateful to have the support of my family, particularly my husband and son, who have sacrificed much to allow me the time it takes to be an effective member of the board.

I stepped into the Vice Chair role in 2018 and work closely with our Chair Rick Cruz and our Executive Director on some of our most challenging issues such as school safety and transparency. Perhaps our most difficult has been overseeing the vote and process to close seven schools in the last three years. This is an extremely difficult decision that my fellow board members and I take very seriously. Our only goal during these decisions is determining what is the best course of action for the students and once a decision is made to close a school, our focus switches to supporting the students and families in finding a new school. I am also proud of the work the PCSB has done to facilitate the transfer and takeover of closed schools to existing high performing LEAs. This action allows students to continue their education with minimal disruption and often with the continuation of many of the services the previous school offered.

On a more personal note, while I was a parent in 2016, I am now the proud parent of a PK 4 student at a DC public charter school in Ward 7, where we also live. Being a parent of a public charter school students has provided me with a unique perspective on our work, particularly regarding questions of our role versus the role of individual LEA boards. I’m often asked why PCSB does not do more to step in or overrule individual board decisions which, admittedly from the parent perspective, can be difficult to understand. I hope we can continue to do more to explain our role to the public and be creative and active in the oversight we do have to continue to increase the confidence families have in our board.

I’m extremely excited for the future of the PCSB and for education in our city. Our authorization decisions have brought unique, focused, community-supported educational models to our city in the last few years and I am optimistic that the addition of these schools will undoubtedly increase educational opportunities for our most disadvantaged students. I am particularly proud of the work these schools have done with community members to develop models that are directly responsive to student and family needs. For example, one of these recently approved school models, I Dream Academy, conducted “empathy interviews” with over 40 students to learn about their learning experiences and ask what they would want in a new school environment, those ideas were then tested at a pilot at the Boys and Girls Club FBR Branch in 2018 and incorporated into the final model submitted to PCSB. They also conducted community walks through neighborhoods in their target ward, Ward 8 to

collect feedback on the model and gauge interest from families. This is the kind of intense, respectful, collaborative community engagement that I believe PCSB and all schools should aspire to in Washington.

Going forward, I want to see PCSB double-down on its commitment to ensuring our schools are serving our city's most hard-to-serve students; for example, those who are at-risk, under credited, engaged in the justice and foster care system. I am proud to say that that public charter schools educate a student body that is 42% at-risk, I think we can continue to build on our success with this population and ensure our highest performing schools educate a population of at-risk students that is comparable with schools across the city. I am also looking forward to PCSB being a partner in the city's work to collaborate more across sectors.

In sum, I've enjoyed my service filling out the remainder of an unexpired term on the Charter School Board, and I would be most grateful for your confirmation of my nomination to a second term. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

