



**Testimony of
Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, Executive Director
DC Public Charter School Board**

**2021 Performance Oversight Hearing
Committee of the Whole
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Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, and members of the Committee of the Whole. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this year's Performance Oversight Hearing. I am Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board.

The past two years have tested educators and our students in many ways and continue to demonstrate resilience and creativity. The pandemic response has required flexibility and determination among our schools. School staff worked on a long list of priorities to safely reopen buildings, mitigate COVID spread, and accelerate learning. I want to recognize all that work, because it shows just how far staff will go for students. While educating during the pandemic has been so difficult, I can say from my observations visiting schools this fall and as a parent, our students continue to learn and adapt. One of the best parts of my second year in this role has been the opportunities I have to see students learning and creating genuine connections with their peers and observing teachers hard at work. I am reminded of all that it takes to make the magic that is learning happen for our children.

When I first started, I recognized that it had been some time since DC PCSB had revisited its mission, vision, and priorities. After soliciting feedback from families, community members, policy makers, and other partners, we finalized our Strategic Roadmap in June 2021. We have committed to focusing on equity and on the District students we serve. While our work has always put students first, naming that in our new mission and vision marks an important evolution in the role, function, and purpose of our agency. Also, in service of our mission and vision, we have included our race, equity, diversity, and inclusion statement about the way we commit to doing our work. And in this world, where racism and inequity continue to impact our students, we will work to eliminate that impact.

To this end, the Strategic Roadmap will prioritize our work in three areas: Excellent Schools, Enduring Partnerships, and Effective Organization. To achieve excellent schools, we will implement a new accountability framework. The new accountability framework will build on parts of our Performance Management Framework and focus more on equitable outcomes. We hope to pilot the framework this coming school year before implementing it in the fall of 2023.

As we consider the best way to evolve our school oversight work, we also need to reimagine our other authorizing functions, which is why we will revisit our charter application and grade expansion evaluation this year. We want our authorizing to focus more acutely on equity, access, and need for specific programming. And we will ask ourselves and stakeholders important questions. Like what are the grades or program models where we need to see more opportunity? What are the programs families want, but do not currently have access to? Public charter school authorizing is still relatively new as a field and practice, as we move into a new era and new information becomes available, we want to see smarter and more responsible and targeted sector growth.

Schools cannot do it all. Students face challenges every day with housing, transportation, safety, and receiving quality healthcare. Students need us to collectively ensure that the city is serving them and providing the necessary resources. That is why our agency is prioritizing partnerships with agencies across government and organizations throughout the District. This is critical as we rebuild and reimagine life after the pandemic. Our work with a variety of agencies and nonprofits, not just ones that focus on education, will support schools more holistically and enhance the speed of recovery.

We are very proud of how our health consultants partnered with schools, the DME, OSSE, and DC Health this past year to ensure a safe reopening of school buildings. Their work was critical to seeing that goal through.

While our Strategic Roadmap and reopening efforts give us reasons to be hopeful about this school year's efforts, I think many would agree that this year has been more challenging than any of us expected. I hoped that we had seen the worst of the pandemic and its disruptions when I testified at last

year's hearing. At that point, a vaccine had been developed and case levels were decreasing. However, this school year, both COVID-19 variants led to many abandoned or altered plans for schools. Worse yet, the new strains stretched educators thinner than at any other point during the pandemic. Concerns about in-person learning reignited after months of working to build confidence in the safety of classrooms. And it emphasized the need to continue to focus on vaccinating and boosting everyone eligible.

Despite these challenges schools have been dedicated to mitigating COVID and its impacts since the first day of the school year. Many schools participated in the OSSE COVID testing program, and some public charter LEAs went above and beyond to test all staff and students weekly regardless of vaccination status. Dozens of campuses held vaccine clinics. Schools realized they needed to do even more following the winter break to create safe in-person learning environments. And many of them delayed their reopening to test all students and staff and distribute higher-quality masks. On that note, DC PCSB and public charter schools appreciated the support that Mayor Bowser and OSSE provided, especially around ensuring access to rapid tests for all LEAs. All of this, with winter storms hitting the east coast and coming back from winter break.

In our authorizer role, we adjusted and adapted as well. We will not tier schools on our School Quality Report this year given the lack of data. And we are pleased the city will administer PARCC this spring after a two year pause. While I acknowledge that not everyone is a fan of testing, it is so important that we have data on where students are academically, and standardized testing is the best tool we have available to comparably measure progress of students across the city. We need the data to understand the baseline from which recovery begins. With the results, we can better plan to address students' knowledge and skills gaps.

I want to caution that this baseline will likely show less academic progress than pre-pandemic. National studies show that early elementary students are much further behind in reading. Moreover, these same elementary students have little experience taking a statewide assessment. In addition, school staff at all levels have shared stories of the differences in students' maturity and academic skills after distance learning. These are reasons it is critical for us to

take the results and use the data to plan for future learning thoughtfully and intentionally.

A key puzzle piece for recovery for families is funding. We must invest in the whole family, alleviate stressors outside of the school building and allow schools to better target the services and supports students need after the last two years. The mayor's announcement to increase the UPSFF by 5.9%, add an additional \$36 million recovery fund, and further invest in mental health services are big steps to meeting their needs. DC PCSB and public charter schools appreciate this increase, and while we know there are always budgetary trade-offs, we hope to see a similar commitment to youth services across the board.

With the latest COVID wave appearing to be ebbing, PARCC on the horizon, and these investments, it is time for DC to plan for next school year and accelerating learning. Because the next variant could always be around the corner, we need to focus on getting all students fully vaccinated by the fall. This is true of non-COVID vaccines too. The work of educating students cannot happen without healthy students. Next year, DC plans to enforce the COVID vaccine mandate and No Shots No Schools for routine immunizations. Agencies must share this effort with schools, as principals and teachers increase their focus on teaching and learning. It will take trusted voices in the city, such as Councilmembers, the Mayor, ANCs, clergy, and neighbors, to reach 100% compliance. My hope for next year is that schools can focus more on their core functions than they have had the capacity to do this year.

We know that learning is happening in classrooms right now, but school staff are worn out from all the additional responsibilities that have fallen on them. There are so many priorities schools need to balance. We have asked our principals to contact trace, our teachers to substitute teach, our teachers' aides to assist with COVID testing, and our health professionals to serve thousands of students at once. Educators are dedicated to accelerating learning and improving social-emotional health. If the city agencies and nonprofit groups could provide more robust support to schools or share some of the additional responsibilities, it would relieve some of these pressures. After all they have done, the best way to show our appreciation for educators is to let them focus on what they do best. I know DC is up to the

challenge and public charter schools are ready to help our students not just survive but thrive.

Thank you, Chairman Mendelson, and the rest of the Council for your commitment to equity and education. We are happy to address any questions that you may have. Thank you.