



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

**DC PCSB Performance Oversight Hearing
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education
March 10, 2021**

Good morning Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee. My name is Rick Cruz and I am the Chair of the DC Public Charter School Board. I am pleased to be joined by our Executive Director Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis for her first appearance in a performance oversight hearing.

As we all know, the last year has uprooted our lives in countless ways and changed education as we know it. From March 2020 to today, the manual for teaching and running a school during a pandemic has been written in real time. When city leaders realized it would be necessary to close school buildings, our principals, teachers, and staff stepped up immediately to meet the moment and support students and their families. Nobody had ever quite trained for this, but within days of the first shutdown, schools adapted their instruction to implement distance learning. As well, school leaders spent the first weeks of the shutdown doing all they could to meet a diversity of community needs, among them technology and food.

We knew that as education responded to the public health crisis, our authorizing would need to adapt as well. At the outset of the pandemic, the DC PCSB set six priorities to guide our work as an authorizer. Those priorities included collaborating with government partners to organize an effective response, facilitating learning and experience sharing, and conducting appropriate oversight of distance learning. From there we solicited feedback on what the most immediate needs were. It was clear that the District needed to dramatically increase access to technology and connectivity. To support schools and students, in March, DC PCSB coordinated the purchase of more than 900 mobile devices from T-Mobile to distribute to students across the sector. We also created a resource page on our website for schools

and the public to access information in one place on many topics related to COVID, distance learning, and navigating a shutdown economy.

We also recognized that as everyone was entering uncharted waters, we would need to increase best practice and idea sharing. DC PCSB staff organized and led dozens of webinars so that LEA leaders and educators could hear from experts or share their experiences on subjects such as the digital divide, providing social emotional support, special education, virtual ELL services, and engaging families online. Partnering with other agencies also created more capacity to address challenges. We quickly got to work with the DME to coordinate regular calls with LEAs to discuss and address ongoing citywide issues.

We also adjusted our authorizing so that schools could focus solely on supporting students through this unprecedented disruption. Last May, our Board passed our initial COVID Impact Policy. We chose not to score or tier our School Quality Report for the 2019-20 school year, and a few months later made the same choice for the 2020-21 school year. 2019-20 data will also not be included in any LEA's review or renewal assessments. These choices allowed schools to put all their time and effort into meeting immediate student and family needs in the spring and take some of the high stakes pressure off of schools this year as they face unprecedented pressures in other areas of their work.

As the pandemic progressed into the fall, public charter schools continued to be flexible and creative to serve students effectively and maintain safety. We collaborated with OSSE to require, review, and approve all our charter LEAs' Continuous Education Plans. We hired health consultants to advise schools on creating safe in-person learning environments and updating facilities in accordance with DC Health's guidance. These consultants have met with dozens of schools who are dedicated to doing all they can to bring students back to school and keep everyone safe.

Schools did all this work while keeping the mental health needs of their communities in mind. We know that the isolation and tragedies created by COVID-19 have hurt all our students and had the greatest toll on DC's Black and Brown families. I want to recognize the work schools and their partners are doing to provide wrap around services to students and their families,

because our students cannot be ready to learn if their social and emotional needs are not being met.

Despite all this hard work and creativity, many students continue to struggle mightily with distance learning and social isolation. Distance learning made many students hard to reach. Specialized services and modifications became much more difficult to administer, and many students lost focus and motivation due to increased screen time. Many schools have been able to provide these students who need it most with a variety of in-person supports or instruction including outdoor and hybrid learning, learning hubs, tutoring, and social emotional supports. Many more public charter schools have spent their months since the fall working to bring more students back in quarter 4.

Our Board has made time and space over the last year to hear from the people most impacted by these educational changes. Many of our LEAs have testified at our meetings to update us on their work and inform us of the challenges they are facing. Families provided public comment on their experiences, their frustrations and their concerns for their children. We will continue to keep the experiences of these groups at the center of our work to reopen and recover.

To close, I want to again recognize the effort and creativity of everyone working in education. It is this constant support of students, their families, and the larger communities that will get us through the pandemic and to a more equitable era in DC public education. While we are not done, and there is much more work to do, we need to acknowledge the incredible way our city – and the public charter school sector -- has handled the problems in comparison to other cities. Thank you, and now I am going to pass it over to Dr. Walker-Davis to discuss our work going forward.

Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis

Thank you, Rick, for outlining all the great work that public charter schools, educators, and communities have done to support students and their families throughout this pandemic. Before I begin, I want to thank you for inviting us here today to discuss the work of the past year. I am honored to be here for my first performance oversight hearing in my role as Executive Director.

I will spend my time today talking about reopening, recovery, and reimagining education. DC PCSB is eager to support public charter schools as they form their plans and rethink education. As an educator, I underscore Mr. Cruz's earlier statement that the manual for teaching and learning during a pandemic is being written in real time; teachers and administrators have been challenged to be more creative, more collaborative, and more responsive than ever before. And, in partnership with our students and their families, educators have risen to the challenge in meaningful ways. With an ongoing emphasis on meeting the needs of all students, schools have begun to reopen their buildings.

To date, more than 60 schools are providing select in-person services or hybrid learning, and even more schools are planning to welcome more students into their buildings for quarter 4. Throughout all these processes, school leaders are collaborating with staff and families to ensure that everyone's voices are heard, everyone feels safe with their plans, and equity is at the center of their decisions.

Currently, teachers are receiving vaccines, and we are thankful to Mayor Bowser and DC Health for making them a priority. There is positive momentum in the public health outlook, but we know that health conditions could also deteriorate quickly as variants become more dominant later this year, and we are already planning for this reality. We do not want the coming months to present as much uncertainty as the summer months presented last year. We and public charter LEAs are thinking about what school looks like when social distancing restricts the number of students in a building, a teacher has a child at home quarantining, and students wait for the vaccine. But ingenuity can only go so far. For schools to enhance the number of students able to access in-person instruction, DC Health will need to update some of the guidance schools receive. We have heard that the major barriers to reopening include cohort size, the ability to mix cohorts in the upper grades, and the amount of space needed to properly adhere to 6 feet of distance. Without greater flexibility, and/or significant reconfiguring in and around facilities, it will be nearly impossible to meaningfully return to in-person instruction. These are some of the many challenges that lay ahead. We believe in our school leaders and educators' ability to meet the moment and bring creative solutions to the table, but they will need our help.

Many schools have announced plans to support their students this summer with fun and engaging programming to boost academic and social skills. Some schools plan to provide what will essentially be a fifth quarter of the school year. That quarter will allow students to access a variety of services depending on what they need. Schools are partnering to provide accelerated and specialized courses for students who are still on track or ahead and have reported that there will be some one-on-one or small group tutoring for students with disabilities and struggling students. Summer will not be purely academic work. Multiple LEAs plan to host both virtual and in-person summer camps in addition to academic offerings so students can reintroduce themselves to their peers, get outside, and have fun in ways that have been restricted up until now.

Summer programming is not the sole responsibility of individual schools though. We need an all hands-on deck effort to address all our students' needs. We look forward to collaborating with other education agencies, Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), and the DC Public Library to provide a variety of opportunities for students in the coming months. We are excited that high school students will have the opportunity to learn while also building valuable work skills and receiving pay through the Marion Barry Summer Youth Employment Program. The work DPR is doing to provide elementary and middle school students with engaging and safe summer opportunities will also help the District begin to recover.

Recovery is a Districtwide goal. So, it is a job which requires help beyond government. We plan to work with community based organizations, out of school time organizations, and anyone in the private sector who has the capacity and innovative solutions to support students. Hopefully, there are opportunities to involve our college and adult students in this work. We are so fortunate to have many universities and a unique set of public adult schools, and we should explore the role they can play in recovery. There are so many assets in our city, and we need to leverage all of them and expect that everyone in DC is dedicated to helping our youngest residents recover.

We need to challenge ourselves to think beyond learning loss. Overall, students, their families, and educators have struggled with their mental health this past year more than in previous years. Our approaches to recovery need to consider the whole child. Agencies, outside organizations, and

schools must coordinate regularly so that the District can provide wrap around services for families and each organization can focus on the pieces they do best.

As the city works together to develop creative strategies, we are supporting recovery efforts and changing our authorizing practices to reflect the current environment to place equity and student outcomes at the forefront of our work beyond the pandemic. We will work with schools in the coming weeks and months to issue guidance for reopening this school year, this summer and fall. We will continue to create opportunities for charter LEAs to share best practices on reopening just as the sector did on distance learning, family engagement and more. Long term, we plan to reevaluate our processes through a racial equity and inclusion lens to guide our decisions, policy, and practices. This includes our School Quality Report, which we are currently in the very early phase of working to refine.

While these plans are a start, we need to have a long-term view of recovery. This pandemic highlighted many gaps, including the vast mental healthcare shortages that exists in our schools. We must address the pipeline of mental healthcare workers and the ratio of counselors to students when the pandemic wanes. The learning loss students experienced this year will not be addressed with one summer of support. We will need to consider extending school calendars and supports provided during the summer for years to come. If DC is to come out of this pandemic more equitable, we need to think big about how we plan to change our approaches to education.

I know we cannot lose sight of the budgetary commitments necessary to recover and make education more equitable. Everything must be on the table. There has been an influx of funds from the federal government to school, and hopefully there will be more. However, that funding will not be enough to address all of the challenges of recovery. We should look into a strategic re-allocation of city resources toward agencies that support the success of students, both inside and outside of school. This will ensure we are working toward a common goal of setting up the District's youngest for a bright future.

Before the pandemic, too many students did not have the foundation of resources and services they needed to get the most out of their time in and

out of the classroom. It is a moral imperative that the entire city step up and plan strategically to provide students with the supports they need and to help schools fully recover.

Creativity and agility are foundational to the charter sector. We continue to lean into these strengths. Our schools are ready to serve students equitably and reimagine education.

Thank you, Chairman Mendelson and the rest of the Council for your commitment to improving student opportunities and achievement – we are excited about what the new decade will bring for public education in the District of Columbia. I look forward to working with each of you to make it a reality.

We are happy to address any questions that you may have. Thank you.