



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

**FY23 Budget Hearing  
Committee of the Whole  
March 30, 2022**

Good [morning/afternoon], Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this year's budget hearing. I am Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board.

**Introduction**

I am excited that we are starting to see some of the signs of life as we knew it prior to March 2020. I am also excited that we find ourselves in a position to make transformational investments in our schools. Over the past two years, schools have stepped up to meet our students' needs. Teachers have been working hard to accelerate learning. Parents and caretakers have helped their children log onto virtual classes while balancing their day jobs. And this year students have returned to school buildings with joy on their faces, ready to learn.

This budget is an important down payment on our children's future. I want to start by thanking Mayor Bowser for her investments in our students, educators, and schools. The 5.87 percent increase in the funding formula, \$36 million in recovery funds, 2.2 percent increase to the facilities allowance, and investments in mental health, school nursing, and crossing guards demonstrate her commitment to helping young people grow into a brighter and more equitable future.

It is our belief that an excellent school is equitable. As I said earlier this month, DC PCSB took time over the last year to create a new Strategic Roadmap focused on equity. We have an opportunity before us to accelerate recovery and equitably fund our schools to ensure every child in DC has the resources they need to thrive. That equity means targeting funding and resources where they are most needed.

Despite our city's best efforts, the pandemic has only exacerbated the preexisting inequity between our city's richest and poorest residents. Years ago, we decided that some students needed more help than others which is why we developed a weighted funding formula. The formula was intended to equitably target funds to students based on grade-level, socioeconomic and other special needs. Though there have been periodic studies over the past decade, there has not been a comprehensive look at our education funding, including the weights for adult and special education, since 2013. While raising the base funding level is critical, necessary, and appreciated, putting more money into every school based on overall enrollment results in a stretching of finite resources. With that in mind, we believe it is time for a fresh and comprehensive look at the adequacy of education funding. Given what we all just experienced, a review and update is a chance to level set and assess what communities furthest from opportunity need right now. We cannot expect schools to be excellent if we do not properly equip them.

### **Investing in Excellent and Equitable Schools**

One area that needs to be addressed is the funding for schools that serve our adult learners. These schools play a critical role in our education ecosystem. They educate parents, recent immigrants, and young adults looking to jumpstart their careers. Unfortunately, many of these students were most impacted by the pandemic from both an economic and health perspective. Many adult students are parents that needed to navigate childcare during virtual learning, which made it difficult for them to prioritize their own education. Others were excluded workers who did not qualify for stimulus checks or unemployment payments and had to work several jobs and risk their own health just to make ends meet.

Given these challenges, we need to ensure adult students receive equitable funding in this budget. Many of the programs that adult schools offer set students up to enter high-demand fields or become proficient in English. At a time when many adults are reevaluating their careers or rejoining the workforce, these services are crucial. But to sustainably provide programming and services at a high level, the schools need more investment.

Adult schools face many of the same spending pressures that K-12 schools do, and underinvestment over the years has put them in the difficult position of having to pick and choose which spending pressures to address. Along with

alternative schools, adult schools are not funded at the base level recommended in the adequacy study. In fact, they are funded at .11 below the recommended weight of the 2013 study. Adult schools were not eligible to receive the same amount of federal COVID recovery funds as our K-12 schools. They are also not eligible to receive the at-risk funding we support other schools with despite educating students with similar needs. We ask that this Council take a hard look at assisting these schools so that they can continue and improve the level of education and service they provide to our community.

Increasing the at-risk weight serves as another way to promote equity in the budget. In many ways, we expect our schools to confront the effects of poverty every day. As you know, the 2013 adequacy study called for the at-risk weight to be at .37. We have now gone almost a decade without fulfilling this need, all while the costs of living, goods, and services has increased. Worse yet, students who meet the definition of at-risk (and their families) have disproportionately felt the impacts of the pandemic and remote learning. Research shows that many young, at-risk students are significantly further behind in reading than their pre-pandemic peers. Now is the time to equitably invest in these students. By fully funding the at-risk weight to the need identified in 2013 and then setting a modern-day benchmark for 2022, schools can provide more of the academic and social-emotional supports students need. If our city chooses not to conduct a new adequacy study, we should at least review the adult and at-risk weights. We cannot afford to shortchange these students at this critical juncture.

### **Investing in Enduring Partnerships and School Communities**

Helping students recover from the pandemic is going to take more than directly investing in schools. We need bold investments across the board in youth-centered services. Students need supports and resources while they are in the classroom during school hours, and they need be supported outside of those hours. That means continuing to invest in safe passage, housing, and healthcare access. Teachers can plan engaging lessons but if a student regularly shows up hungry or traumatized, they are not going to learn and thrive.

Schools, education agencies, and other stakeholders are dedicated to making the most of initiatives such as the school-based mental health program. But

we know that a staffing shortage makes it difficult to ensure all schools have the staff they need to maximize the impact of these initiatives. Right now, there are shortages of teachers, therapists, nurses, and others who support students daily. We need to consider how we can leverage the budget to address these challenges. The mayor has already invested in diversifying worker pipelines, now we need to work to accelerate and broaden paths to school support positions too.

We need to increase the number of people attending college to become teachers, nurses, and therapists. We need to recruit them to DC's public and non-profit sectors. And they need affordable places to live so we can retain workers in these fields. As a city, we need to consider incentives and policy changes to retain our great educators here in the District.

### **Conclusion**

As we all know, the pandemic has challenged our city's most vulnerable residents and widened disparities in our city. All the leaders of our city have made commitments to pursue equity as we come out of the public health emergency. We must do right by those commitments and invest all we can in families with an emphasis on investment in communities furthest from opportunity.

Thank you, Chairman Mendelson and the rest of the Council for your commitment to improving student opportunities and pursuing equity. I look forward to working with each of you as we work toward our goals.

I am happy to address any questions.