



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

**Public Hearing on Student Learning Loss: Widening the Achievement Gap  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic  
Committee of the Whole  
February 10, 2021**

Chairman Mendelson and councilmembers, thank you for inviting me to speak today on the topic of student learning loss in the District's public charter schools. I am Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating on many levels. It has touched every facet of life, especially for our most vulnerable families. Given the enormous challenges, I want to acknowledge the hard work of the DC education community who responded rapidly and creatively to provide continuous support to our children and their families during these unprecedented times.

While we have seen our teachers, school leaders, and families step up and embrace change the best they can, we also must acknowledge that it will be challenging to recover from the impacts of this public health crisis. Recovery will require the same level of creativity and commitment that the response to COVID-19 has commanded thus far. We cannot afford to go back to a normal that was not serving all of our children well or equitably.

While DC PCSB does not run the day to day operations of public charter schools, we have positioned our organization to provide support during these unprecedented times. I will share what I believe we need to focus on for an equitable and speedy recovery and I am joined by LEA leaders who can speak more directly to what they are experiencing and planning for on the ground with students and families.

Regardless of when we truly go back to what we deem normal, the pandemic has exposed the deep structural inequities inherent in public education. We need to collectively target students that need the most support to reverse these inequities. We need to ensure that every level of government is serving our students' needs, no matter what those needs are. Collective action will not only require much more extensive collaboration with our partners in the education sector but also more and better partnerships with the agencies that have a tangential connection with children and families across the District.

We have a wealth of expertise and programs in the District and we should view those as assets to our recovery effort. I agree with the Deputy Mayor that we need to consider which citywide programs we can expand and what services different agencies and organizations are set up to provide. As the Deputy Mayor points out, the Summer Youth Employment Program reaches thousands of students every year and teaches them valuable skills. How can we expand on that program to add components which will help make up for learning loss? I also agree that we need to consider building off of the programs which already exist in our libraries. Computer classes, teen homework help, Books from Birth, and other such programs are valuable assets to combatting learning loss. We should think about bolstering the homework help program to provide tutoring and literacy support services to students of all ages and providing ongoing technology classes to help students build 21st century work skills. DC agencies already provide a great deal of services. Now it is time to think about how we can adapt and build upon them to meet the moment.

Responding to this crisis is not the sole responsibility of government. Every day lost during the past year is a day these students do not get back. With this in mind, we must also maximize learning time. Making up for this lost time will require bold ideas and solutions. We must rethink our calendars. This means not only the expansion of extended day or extended year programming, but also supplementing traditional school with in-school and out-of-school high dosage tutoring for the students who are furthest behind. In addition, schools will need to reconsider how they deploy staff across the District. Schools could increase the effectiveness of their recovery strategies by strategically deploying staff to pair the most effective teachers with students who need the most attention.

Combatting learning loss requires more than adding programming and reconfiguring calendars. We need the support of our community partners, and many of them are ready to step up. Community-based and out-of-school-time organizations are eager to collaborate with schools and other agencies to bolster students' education. They can provide some of the wrap around services, outdoor learning opportunities, and summer programs many families want access to. There are also thousands of college and adult students in DC. We need to consider how we can incentivize them to become involved with our PreK-12 schools. They could be tutors and mentors to the District's youth. Strategically and equitably investing in these areas is key to recovery and making up for the gaps widened by the pandemic.

As we work together as a city to develop a comprehensive plan, my commitment to you today is that DC PCSB will look to use our existing levers to support the reopening of schools, as well as the recovery, and to examine what new policies, practices, or partnerships we need to put in place to pursue equity.

We plan to place equity and student outcomes at the forefront of our work, this includes our School Quality Reports, which we will refine when it is appropriate to score and tier schools again.

While these plans are a start, we cannot lose sight of the budgetary commitments necessary to execute these and other strategies. Everything must be on the table. The pandemic has starved both families and the District of income. While we appreciate and must ensure the effective use of the CARES and ESSER funding, we should also look into a strategic re-allocation of city resources and how we can leverage our assets into working towards a common goal of a better "normal."

The old "normal" left too many students without 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 all of us, DC government and our community partners, step up and plan strategically to provide students with the supports they need to be college and career ready and to help schools fully recover from the pandemic.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.