



**Testimony of  
Rick Cruz, Board Chair  
DC Public Charter School Board**

**Hearing on the Expanding Equitable Access to Great Schools Act of 2020;  
the Child Enrollment Preference Amendment Act of 2020; and the African  
American and Cultural Studies Inclusion Amendment Act of 2020  
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education  
July 31, 2020**

Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and councilmembers, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on the issue of equitable access to our city's public charter schools. My name is Rick Cruz, and I am Chair of the Public Charter School Board.

The Expanding Equitable Access to Great Schools Act allows an LEA to offer an at-risk preference in the My School DC common lottery, in addition to the allowable preferences, subject to approval from DC PCSB. I am pleased to support the proposed legislation as a means of increasing educational opportunities for our at-risk students—a subgroup of students constituting more than 45 percent of the District's student population.

Previously, available analyses of an at-risk preference being added to the common lottery looked strictly at the sector level. The analysis by My School DC in 2018, found that an at-risk preference would only marginally improve lottery match results for at-risk students, even if the at-risk preference were placed above sibling preference. However, a newer campus-level analysis conducted by the DC Policy Center found that a priority for at-risk students in DC's common lottery has the potential to both improve the chances for at-risk students to match at a school they have ranked and to increase campus socioeconomic diversity. Most significantly, the analysis revealed that an at-risk preference could increase PK3 match rates for at-risk students from four to 42 percent, even if placed below the sibling preference.

It is important to families, and to our schools, that students who meet the at-risk criteria have every opportunity to get into a quality, often high-demand public charter school. We recognize that an at-risk preference will only be as successful as the schools that aim to serve a greater share of these students. This is just a first step to achieving more equitable outcomes for at-risk students. This policy shift will not serve anyone if we do not hold schools to a higher standard at the same time. We are committed to ensuring that

students are well-served by their schools, especially schools that may have less experience serving larger populations of students who have the greatest needs.

Given the current public health and economic crisis, we can expect to see more students meeting the criteria of the at-risk designation, either by the technical definition or in spirit. As a city, we must continue to engage in ongoing conversations as we consider what accountability looks like both in this school year and beyond. As a starting point, I urge this Council to adopt the legislation before you.

Similarly, we are supportive of the technical fix as outlined in the Child Enrollment Preference Amendment Act which seeks to change and clarify an enrollment preference for a child of a student already attending or selected for admission to a public charter school. If passed into law, the proposed legislation would solidify Briya Public Charter School's ability to meet its mission of strengthening families through its two-generation education model.

Before I conclude my testimony, I would like to turn my attention to the African American and Cultural Studies Inclusion Amendment Act which would require OSSE to develop an African American history and cultural studies curriculum for high school students enrolled in the District's public school system. The tragic events surrounding George Floyd and so many others, coupled with our country's belated reckoning with its long history of systemic racial discrimination, illustrate how vital and necessary it is for our schools to reexamine how we teach Black history. There is no question that we must do better as a city to ensure that all students have access to a more complete understanding of our country's history. However, we have concerns about whether legislating curriculum standards is the most effective means of achieving the goal of cultural understanding and inclusion.

Traditionally, the duty of crafting standards and content requirements has fallen to OSSE and the State Board of Education. To our knowledge, OSSE has never performed the set of actions this bill contemplates. We understand the SBOE is in the midst of a months-long effort to revise and update DC's social studies standards through the lens of race and equity, and we ask that SBOE be allowed to continue this work and to follow through with their recommendations, outside of the legislative process. We believe that this process, undertaken with education leaders from across the city, is a preferable alternative to set these standards. This approach also has the added benefit of being more adaptive to changes if education leaders need to tweak or reimagine these standards in the future.

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