



**Testimony of
Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, Executive Director**

**School Reopening Hearing
Committee of the Whole
July 22, 2021**

Good morning/ afternoon, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's school reopening hearing. My name is Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, and I am the executive director of the DC Public Charter School Board.

I want to start off my testimony by recognizing the incredibly hard work of teachers, school leaders, and staff this past year. There were unprecedented challenges, and they always stepped up to the task and put students first. I also want to recognize students and their families for their resilience. This year was particularly difficult for families in communities hardest hit by the pandemic, but students persevered and continued to show up to learn.

As we look to the upcoming school year, our expectation remains that schools open 5 days a week for full-time, in-person instruction. Charter LEAs have been working hard for months to make this a reality. They have upgraded HVAC systems, hosted vaccine clinics, procured additional space, hired more staff, and held community conversations to build trust in both the vaccine and the safety of school buildings. As we speak, many schools are hosting summer school, providing tutoring or other on-site activities to rebuild relationships and make up for lost learning. Families, teachers, and students are looking forward to returning to their buildings soon, and we are committed to seeing this through.

That said, charter LEAs face many challenges as the beginning of the school year approaches, but we have full confidence in our schools and the city to rise to the occasion. Our LEAs have laid out how they plan to overcome these barriers in the Continuous Education Plans they submitted to OSSE a few weeks ago. OSSE is currently reviewing them. We know that most of our LEAs plan to provide high-dosage tutoring to those students who need it. Most also plan to hire more staff to meet the increased need and provide more support to students and families.

Schools have also planned for the aspects of the school year which will be less predictable. All schools have laid out their ideas for providing instruction to students with medical exemptions, but as of now they do not know the total number of students who will qualify for those exemptions. They have contingency plans, but until they know the extent to which it is needed, they need to be nimble and flexible on implementation. In addition, there are still concerns about ensuring that students receive all the necessary immunizations before the first day of school. Many families live in communities with limited health resources, and there will be students who have not had the opportunity to get up to date immunizations. This is a challenge the entire city needs to face and address.

Many items addressed in the budget will go a long way to mitigate these challenges and make education more equitable. In addition to increasing the UPSFF, the mental health investments will make a real difference in the lives of students, families, and educators. Providing teachers access to mental health resources through the Department of Behavior Health will allow more of their needs to be met, and when teachers feel supported, they are in a much better place to support students. Expanding the school-based mental health program will also go a long way to meet the multitude of students' mental health needs which the pandemic exacerbated. Ensuring that schools have at least one mental health clinician is the bare minimum needed to support our students after this unprecedented year. We hope mental health investments continue to be a priority in the coming years.

While addressing the social-emotional needs of students and ensuring they feel welcomed back will be the top priorities on the first day of school, public charter LEAs are also preparing to address learning loss this year and in the coming years. LEAs are partnering with community-based organizations or CBOs to provide tutoring, hire more staff, and extend school days in order to provide students with all the help and enrichment they need. Public charter schools are hubs of innovation and creativity, and our schools plan to use those strengths to help students recover from the pandemic and to create an education system which is more equitable.

In addition, we appreciate the proposed stabilization funds which adult, early childhood, and residential schools have access to in order to make their budgets whole. These schools continue to experience unpredictable

enrollment as the pandemic wanes. Given the importance of these schools to the District and its residents, the investment will ensure that these campuses can continue to offer robust, creative, and unique programming to their communities.

Lastly, this pandemic is teaching us many lessons about how we can use online learning going forward, and it is presenting unique situations that we're working through in real-time. We know that there is a small subset of students who thrived during distance learning, and there are families who have the desire to continue with this model. Permanent online or hybrid learning options could benefit self-motivated students who work at a rapid pace and those who are over-aged and under-credited who need flexibility in order to work and fulfill family responsibilities. To meet these needs and desires, there are four LEAs seeking charter amendments to offer substantive, permanent virtual programming separate and apart from their response to the pandemic. For example, KIPP DC has applied to offer a virtual program for up to 280 students this year which will become a stand-alone campus, similar to Friendship Online, in school year 2022-2023.

Maya Angelou seeks to offer a hybrid learning option for many of their students who have needs and responsibilities above and beyond the average K-12 student. In addition to these plans and others, adult public charter schools will offer a variety of programs in a hybrid format to provide the flexibility so many of those students need. We applaud all our LEAs for learning lessons during the pandemic and applying them going forward. This is especially true for adult LEAs who will meet their learners where they are at and tailor their programs to the circumstances of life for those with jobs and families.

Thank you for allowing me to testify, I am happy to answer any questions.