



**Testimony of
Scott Pearson, Executive Director
&
Rick Cruz, Board Chair
DC Public Charter School Board**

**DCPCSB Performance Oversight Hearing
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education
February 12, 2020**

Good morning Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and members of the Committee. My name is Rick Cruz and I am the Chair of the DC Public Charter School Board. I am joined today by our Executive Director Scott Pearson.

Before I begin, I would like to turn it over to Mr. Pearson who will provide a reflection on his tenure as executive director.

Good morning Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and councilmembers. My name is Scott Pearson and I am the Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board. I am honored to be here for the final time as Executive Director.

Scott Pearson

When I joined DC PCSB eight years ago, I outlined my priorities around four principles: fidelity; autonomy and accountability; and quality. Fidelity to the principle that charter schools are public schools that are open to all students. Autonomy to allow school leaders to choose how they run their schools, accountability because it must accompany greater flexibility. And lastly, quality – a commitment to delivering a quality education for all students who choose to attend a public charter school.

Looking back at my time in this role, I am proud of what we have accomplished and how far we've come to improve public education in this city. When I began my service in 2012, there were 53 public charter schools and a total of 98 campuses. Some were high performing, but many were not. One of the first things I set out to do was expand and strengthen our accountability mechanisms to ensure that schools were living up to the promises they made to families.

The Performance Management Framework, or PMF had just launched when I joined. My job was to use this pathbreaking tool for the benefit of all families. By scoring all schools in a consistent and rigorous way to measure quality, the PMF set a high bar to ensure that students received a quality education. And

by assigning to each school an annual Tier rating, with tier 1 being the best, we made it simple for families to find a quality school.

Our first-ever PMF rated 22 Tier 1 schools, 34 Tier 2 schools, and 25 Tier 3 schools.

Since then we've expanded the PMF to cover early learning, adult, and alternative schools. We've aggressively promoted the PMF results, distributing tens of thousands of parent guides, so that every family can choose quality. Most importantly we've put the PMF into action, aggressively closing low-performing schools and encouraging our highest-performing schools to grow. During my tenure we've overseen the closure of 35 schools, while approving dozens of growth requests for Tier 1 schools.

Closure is never easy, but it's an essential part of being a quality authorizer. I'm proud that we've found ways to make school closures less disruptive, such as through takeovers and wind-downs. Indeed, more than half of our school closures have avoided displacing students.

The results of our focus on quality have been remarkable. The number of Tier 1 schools has nearly doubled, to 63. For the first time ever, more than half of all public charter school students attend a Tier 1 school. And, I'm proud to say, at the end of this school year we will have zero Tier 3 schools.

Proficiency for public charter schools on DC's statewide assessment has climbed every year for the last thirteen years. Importantly, proficiency rates improved across all student populations in both subjects. Public charter schools outperform city averages for African American and at-risk students, and we have narrowed the achievement gap – albeit too slowly – in both English and Math.

47% of our students are classified as “at-risk” and we are proud to see that proficiency rates for these students have increased for the fifth consecutive year.

There is, however, much more work to be done. Proficiency rates overall are still too low; the achievement gap too wide, and results for students with disabilities unacceptable. I'm confident that we will make future progress against these vital remaining challenges.

Of course, the PMF only shows results for public charter schools, making it impossible to compare schools across sectors. That's why we were so pleased to support OSSE in establishing their DC School Report Card, which we are

integrating into our own accountability system. As OSSE's own quality has improved, they have become a real partner of ours.

Indeed, "playing well with others" has been a key theme of my tenure. It may be fine for the public charter sector to stay in its corner if it is serving a small fraction of a city's students. But DC's charters serve nearly half of our public school students, so it's essential we cooperate to make public education work across the city. Our crowning achievement in this regard was the My School DC common lottery, which we created together with DCPS, the DME, and generous philanthropic support. But this kind of partnership has become ingrained in our work every day. We actively participate in more than 40 task forces and working groups including the Every Day Counts! task force, the Coordinating Council on School Mental Health, and the Career Pathways Task Force. We've also created an entirely new department to work as an interface between public charter schools and city agencies such as the Department of Health and MPD. By doing so, we've made our schools safer and improved the ability of our partner agencies to support what may have otherwise looked to them like a bewildering assortment of nonprofit organizations.

And we've totally changed how we work with community groups and parents. We are now an agency that actively seeks public input, and that responds to the input we receive. I would put the quality of our community complaints function up against any here in the city.

Our focus on quality has been matched by a focus on equity. We put in place robust processes to ensure public charter schools collect and report their exclusionary discipline and attendance data with fidelity. Since 2012, it has been our practice to analyze these data monthly, look for campus and sector level trends, and report back to schools to let them know if they are outliers in metrics. The results have been profound. The suspension rate within the public charter sector dropped to just 6.2% in SY 2018-19, less than half the suspension rate during the 2012-13 school year. Expulsions, meanwhile, have dropped by more than 80%, from more than one student out of every hundred in 2011-12 to just 0.17% in SY 2018-19. Meanwhile attendance has climbed from 89% in 2011-12 to 91.7% in 2018-19. And our mid-year data show these positive trends will continue again.

Quite simply, our schools are better. And I couldn't be happier that the quality improvement at public charter schools is also taking place at DCPS. Not surprisingly, the public is taking notice. Every year more families choose public schools, both public charter and DCPS and, by all accounts, they are happier with their school choices. I was floored by the recent Washington Post poll, which found that a record 92 percent of parents with a child

attending a DCPS or public charter school in the District regard their child's school as excellent or good.

Nearly five years ago I co-wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* that argued that the unique system we have in DC – with a rough balance between charters and DCPS supporting a robust system of choice and a strong network of neighborhood schools of right – is the right choice for our city. I can say with pride that we have stayed true to that vision ever since. The result is two thriving education sectors that are growing, improving, and offering more and more families wonderful school options.

So many deserve the credit for this success – starting with our teachers and school staff, but also including this council and a series of mayors committed to our school successes and always willing to fund them generously.

But I would like to close on a cautionary note. The education system we have in DC is unique and special. The direct control of DCPS by a politically accountable Mayor, augmented by a collection of nonprofit public charter schools overseen by a single independent public charter school board. A rough balance between the two sectors. 75% of students attending a school of choice. A state agency, OSSE, providing extensive training and support to all schools. There is literally nothing like it in the country, and it is working.

The crucial essence of this system is that it allows educators to make the most important decisions about their schools. The DCPS chancellor has one boss who gives broad marching orders. And the charter schools are held responsible solely for outcomes – with each school leader deciding how best to achieve those outcomes.

But I have observed over my 8 ½ years that this system is being chipped away at, and that is taking place at the hand of this body. I fully respect your oversight role. But we eliminated the old Board of Education for a reason – because elected officials were making education decisions and, in the process, ruining DCPS. But now we have a Council that seems, more and more, to act like the old Board of Education. And while each piece of legislation has its own compelling rationale, what is lost is the overwhelming rationale for staying out of the decisions made by our professional educators.

And so I close by thanking you for your support for our schools, but also asking you to recognize what a special and precious thing we have created and to do your part to preserve it.

I will now turn it over to Board Chair Rick Cruz.

Rick Cruz

Thank you, Scott, for your tireless efforts on behalf of the students in the DC. Over the course of your tenure, public charter schools in DC have educated more than 10,000 additional students, while improving academically and becoming more equitable. We are grateful for your leadership and look forward to your continued support in the ongoing effort to ensure that every child in DC receives an outstanding education. I have no doubt – and, indeed, I hope - that you will continue to play a part in the public charter sector.

As we look ahead to this next chapter, I'd like to begin with a brief update on the search to find our next executive director – and I'd like to share our key priorities for 2020.

First with respect to the ED search. In November, Scott announced his departure effective May 31st, 2020. To support the identification of a successor, the Board retained an executive search firm to conduct a nationwide search for a new executive director and set out a process lead by me and Vice Chair Saba Bireda. Scott's departure is bittersweet to be sure, but we view this as a natural opportunity to refresh our vision and to shape the public charter sector for years to come. This search is one of the most important roles our seven-member volunteer Board will play. With that in mind, we designed a process to include input from public charter school families, school leaders, elected officials, and residents. Since December, the Board has hosted a series of stakeholder meetings to solicit feedback from key groups, grounding the conversation in the challenges and opportunities they see facing the new executive director as well as the skills and qualifications they want that person to possess. We have used the information solicited during these sessions to inform both the job description and the Board deliberations throughout the selection process.

We have learned a lot about what the city wants, needs, and expects from us and its leadership moving forward. And while we will continue to seek out opportunities to receive feedback across the next several months, in early January we released a job description for the role.

While the job description does a nice job of capturing the contours of the role and some of the priorities, qualifications and attributes, it does not capture everything we have heard over the last two months. Nor does it reflect every nuance of the role. And, we anticipate further inputs moving forward. The Board remains committed to hearing from all stakeholders. During the various roundtables and discussions, we were asked to cast a wider net and to solicit input via a survey to anyone who may have as of yet been unable to participate in person. We partnered with the Ward 7 Education Council to launch a survey last week. That survey was also distributed among other ward

education councils and other community stakeholders. Feedback from the roundtables, public comments, and the survey results will be publicly posted on a dedicated page on our website. You may find it at www.dcpccb.org/ExecutiveDirectorSearch.

Since January the executive search firm has been focused on building the pipeline of prospective candidates. Over the next several weeks the Board will begin engaging with candidates, and I feel confident that we're on track to finding a highly capable person to lead us moving forward. I look forward to providing Council with updated information later in the spring.

Now, I'd like to turn to our priority areas for the coming year. We will be focused on four priorities, none of which will be surprising to you; ensure more access to those quality choices; grow quality schools; collaborate with agencies across the city; and operate and govern with transparency.

With respect to ensuring access to quality choices – We want families to continue having an array of diverse, school programs. That is why we have talked to city residents about what types of programs they would like to see in public charter schools.

With respect to growing quality schools – We want more seats at the top-rated schools so that a higher percentage of public charter school students can attend the best schools.

With respect to collaborating with agencies across the city – As a city we need to work together, across agencies, to meet the needs of students; that means putting schools in good facilities, continuing to provide financial resources and ensuring that students have other supports, including but not limited to, a full-time nurse or mental health professional on staff; accessible transportation; and adequate access to playgrounds and open spaces.

With respect to transparency – It is important that our work is done in an open and transparent way. That is why we invite the public to attend our monthly board meetings (or watch online) and why we meet with families and community stakeholders throughout the city on a regular basis. We will continue to publish and share information for families and the public and we want our schools to do the same.

Thank you, Chairman Mendelson and Chairman Grosso, for your commitment to improving student achievement – we are excited about what the new decade will bring for public education in the District of Columbia.

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