



**Testimony of
Scott Pearson, Executive Director
DC Public Charter School Board**

**DC PCSB Budget Oversight Hearing
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education
June 4, 2020**

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. My name is Scott Pearson and I am the Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board.

I want to begin by expressing my sympathies to our students, families, and school communities across the District who have been affected by COVID-19. This time has been challenging for many and we cannot lose sight of the fact that none of this is normal. All of our learners have lost precious classroom time, critical to developmental milestones. And our students have had to mourn the loss of proms, graduations, and other lifelong memories. Although there is much to grieve, we should be proud of how both public and public charter schools have adapted to our new reality.

In March, DC Public Charter Schools shifted student learning from the classroom to home-based learning. To support distance learning, DC PCSB hosted more than 100 webinars, open to everyone, on a wide range of topics. Each webinar has been well received and well attended. This would not have been possible without the education sector working together.

Our schools moved swiftly to ensure the uninterrupted delivery of education, meal distribution, mental health support, laptops, and internet ready devices. To date, public charter schools distributed more than 13,300 laptops and Chromebooks and more than 550 mobile hotspots for the purposes of distance learning, with plans to distribute thousands more. The effort to ensure a 1:1 student-to-device ratio has been both challenging, amid a high-demand market, and costly as device repair, replacement, and a need for IT support are inevitable.

While our schools have done their best to adapt, we know that this is not sustainable and will lead to learning loss. I applaud Mayor Bowser's

commitment to education in this year's budget. We all know that to disinvest in education now would be to worsen the prevailing inequities in our city. The 3% per pupil foundation increase will help slow the learning loss we expect from long-term distance learning.

Despite our best efforts, the public health crisis has intensified an unacceptable digital divide. Effective distance learning for all but the youngest children requires that every student have a dedicated device with fast and reliable internet connectivity. While our schools procured devices and hotspots, and Mayor Bowser launched the DC Education Equity Fund, one thing is clear: our efforts citywide are not sustainable without a larger solution.

In 2020, we do everything on the internet. We learn, work, bank, access government services, and do much more online. Internet connectivity is essential to fully participate in our society. At the beginning of the crisis we saw many families lose critical access to the internet. These families have, in a way, been cut off from our society and have shouldered the worst of the crisis. It is past time to recognize broadband internet as a modern day necessity.

The District has an opportunity to act boldly and establish an entitlement that any low-income family with a child in a public or public charter school can access free or low-cost broadband in their home. During the Great Depression, the federal government enacted laws establishing electricity and telephony as universal services to which all Americans had affordable access. Today, federal level dysfunction makes national progress unlikely, but the District can lead the way. In doing so, we can make our schools more resilient and help families with non-educational issues in the process.

We can do this at a modest cost. Presently, companies charge low-income households \$10 per month or \$120 per year with no provisioning fee. If 70% of the approximately 50,000 households with a student at a public school availed themselves of this type of service, the total cost to the city would be just \$4.2 million per year. In mid-April, Prince George's County enacted a similar plan for more than 5,000 homes.

We know that we have lived through not just a public health crisis but also an unparalleled economic calamity. With that, we can sadly expect to see more students falling in to the "at-risk" category either by the technical definition or functionally. Schools will need to be there to help alleviate some of these issues. They will be there to serve meals, they will do their best to address housing instability, they will be there to deliver mental health services. But they will need your help to fully reach these students. Given the expected wave of new or undercounted students at-risk, I urge this Council to find a

way to increase the weight for at-risk students to 0.37 as recommended by the DC Education Adequacy Study. As this crisis drags on, we know that more and more families will be impacted. It may be a good idea to explore ways that schools can access funding when a shift in at-risk students occurs after count day. This will allow schools to be more flexible, especially when a sudden or chronic situation arises in a student's life.

Thank you for your commitment to the students of this city. I am confident that an investment in universal broadband and our at-risk students will bring us steps closer to ensuring equitable outcomes for all students in the District. I look forward to continuing the conversation and am happy to answer any questions you may have.