



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

**Public Hearing on Distance Learning
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education
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Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and councilmembers, thank you for inviting me to speak today on the topic of distance learning in the District's public charter schools. I am Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board.

As the country faced new and unprecedented challenges during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring, DC's public charter schools stepped up to meet the moment. In a matter of days, schools transitioned to distance learning and worked diligently to set their students and families up for success. Schools did all they could to provide students with necessary technology, to connect families to the internet, and to ensure students continued to have access to free, daily meals. However, despite the best efforts of educators and school staff, the pandemic both highlighted and deepened the disparities already existing in our city.

Like our schools, DC PCSB has adapted to the new educational landscape. Early on, we set six priorities to guide our work as an authorizer. Among them was to collaborate with other agencies, facilitate the sharing of best practices, and to rethink accountability in a virtual environment. To that end, we quickly worked with the DME to coordinate regular calls with LEAs to discuss citywide issues, led dozens of webinars on topics ranging from narrowing the digital divide to health guidance, collected learning plans from each school, and published up to date operating information on our website.

DC PCSB also made the decision to not produce school quality reports for last

year. Further, data from last school year will not be considered as we evaluate schools for reauthorization over the next several years.

Partnership with the DME and OSSE has been critical for me as I stepped into this role in the middle of the pandemic. To advance our priority of collaboration, DC PCSB partnered with OSSE to collect a Continuous Learning Plan for the 2020-2021 school year from each LEA. These plans outline each school's operational and academic approach to this upcoming year, and include details about each LEA's instructional plan, school policies, and family engagement strategies. As we have reviewed these plans, we have been inspired by the creative, thoughtful work occurring across the charter sector, which highlights the agility and strength of our school leaders and staff.

Schools' experiences with distance learning in the spring yielded many insights and lessons learned. As we are all figuring out, virtual learning is not ideal for every student. Schools are making the most out of an imperfect situation and look to provide more robust and differentiated remote learning opportunities for their students this fall. Given the challenges and shortcomings of learning in a virtual setting, some LEAs are prioritizing getting some students back in the classroom.

While almost all public charter school students will engage in virtual learning for the first few months of the year, a small portion of students will receive some in-person instruction to meet their specific needs. Many of these students receive special education services or have caregivers who are essential workers.

Through all the challenges presented by the pandemic, DC PCSB continues to set high standards for our LEAs. We expect schools to direct their resources toward providing students with high-quality remote learning experiences, ensuring that all students have access to an internet connected device, and ensuring the continued distribution of meals.

Suffice it to say, schools have risen to meet our expectations. Throughout the summer, they worked tirelessly to plan for an uncertain and complex school year. Throughout the uncertainty, we have been impressed with the steps taken by educators and school staff at the District's public charter schools to

care for and prioritize students' emotional well-being during the pandemic. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with OSSE, DME, and other agencies on the topic of mental health supports for students and families alike during these challenging times.

I appreciate the Council's commitment to ensuring all students receive a quality education and have the resources they need during distance learning.

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