



**Testimony of Rick Cruz
DC Public Charter School Board
FY 19 Budget Oversight Hearing
Committee on Education
April 11, 2018**

Good morning Chairman Grosso and education committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's budget hearing. My name is Rick Cruz and I am the Chairman of the DC Public Charter School Board. With me today are Executive Director Scott Pearson and Chief Operating Officer Lenora Robinson Mills.

I would like to begin by thanking Mayor Bowser for my recent reappointment to the board and, more importantly, for what we consider a fantastic budget for students in DC. In the proposed FY 19 budget, we see critical and much needed investments in mental health, school nurses, out-of-school time, special education, school facilities, and in the per pupil base. I would also like to thank you, Chairman Grosso, for holding such a timely and supportive confirmation hearing.

Even with these increases, some schools are without necessary tools to support their students efficiently. Over the past few months, we took part in a task force on school mental health. While we support the recommendations of the task force, we believe that more money than the \$3 million allocation is needed to adequately deliver services to our students

most in need. We know from researchers, parents, and school leaders that there is more work to be done to best support our vulnerable students. We also know that additional funding is necessary for these supports, the mental health task force participants talked about needing closer to \$5 million to properly implement the recommendations. While the extra \$2 million is by any stretch a significant sum, we simply cannot afford to get this wrong.

We support the \$4.4 million the mayor has put toward having nurses in schools for 40 hours a week. This should go a long way in ensuring students are healthy and that medical emergencies are handled adequately. However, many schools are still without a full-time nurse due to space or hiring constraints. While there has been some progress, our city needs to have a larger conversation about school facilities and whether it is appropriate for our public charter schools to have to rely on the commercial real estate market. Without a more holistic solution for these facility issues, many of our students will continue to attend school in substandard facilities.

Wrap around services are central to a students' success and we thank the mayor for her contribution of \$19.2 million dollars to out of school time programs. Studies continually show the importance of providing students opportunities to extend their school time, whether that's through before and after school programs, summer school, or extended day and year opportunities. It is important that students are provided with opportunities to learn in different environments and have a safe place to interact with their

peers outside the classroom. Without these investments from the city, so many of our LEAs could not continue the important work that they do for their students who need the most support.

Special education has been another area where schools need assistance. Now that LEAs have transitioned to become their own special education providers, it the time for schools to really focus on ensuring that the students in their programs receive the same quality education as the students who don't need more support. Fully funding the Special Education Enhancement Fund should go a long way in helping students with disabilities get that assistance. With this new funding, schools will be better able to evaluate the needs of their students and address those needs more quickly.

We are extremely thankful of the mayor's commitment to education through her generous 3.9% increase to the UPSFF. The District is not only an expensive city for families, it is also expensive for schools. We also applaud the mayor for continuing to fund the annual 2.2% increase in the facilities allowance. The increase in the base funding levels will help schools provide services for students, living wages for teachers to live in the city, and keep up with the rising costs associated with real estate and running a quality school.

Increasingly school leaders and teachers are taking on the responsibility of providing more for their students. Schools are asked to have

smaller student to teacher ratios, act as a student's medical provider, facilitate safe passage, diagnose mental issues, and simultaneously ensure each student is able to read, write, and do math. The increases I have cited today represent great progress, however we need to think about what we expect of schools and teachers going forward. We need to invest more in schools if we want to see gains in the areas we all care about, including closing the achievement gap.

As far as DC PCSB's budget, we continue to rely largely on the oversight fee paid by public charter schools. As has been the case for the past three years, our budget requires no appropriation by this Council and no grant support from OSSE. Even as we have steadily expanded our oversight, we have managed our expenses carefully to the point where we have been able to reduce the oversight fee charged to schools from the legislatively permitted one percent to 0.9%. We have also accumulated an appropriate fund balance that permits us to respond to unexpected costs relating to things such as school closures.

When it comes to providing more support and resources, we are implementing a few changes in FY19. Through doubling our school support team, we will expand our school health and safety support next year as outlined in our pre-hearing responses. Regarding implementation of OSSE's high school graduation recommendations, we will add an additional layer of oversight to our already extensive audits of high school students'

coursework and transcripts. It is our hope that taking these additional actions will bolster the public's trust and confidence in our schools.

As described in our written responses to this committee's questions, we continue to expand access to data for public charter schools. Our data systems now permit both DC PCSB and school staff to access data in real-time. This means that schools will have a better sense of where they stand on equity metrics and can course correct if needed.

Finally, we are excited to roll out a new digital campaign this month called #TransparenSEE, which will educate the public about all of the available data on our website on everything from school quality metrics to school financial audits. We hope that through this new campaign, DC residents have a better understanding of all that is available at their fingertips.

Thank you, Chairman Grosso for your commitment to the students of this city and your leadership of this committee. Your continued support of innovation in education, school choice, and fairness across sectors has increased educational opportunities for DC students. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and we are happy to answer any questions you may have.