



**Testimony of  
Darren Woodruff, Board Chair  
DC Public Charter School Board**

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**DC PCSB Oversight Hearing  
Committee on Education  
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairman  
March 3, 2016**

Good afternoon Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee. My name is Darren Woodruff, and I am the Chairman of the DC Public Charter School Board. I'm joined by our Executive Director, Scott Pearson, and our Deputy Director, Naomi Rubin DeVeaux. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss how we and public charter schools offer District families a wide variety of quality educational choices.

Today, DC parents can choose from 114 unique schools to find the program best suited for their child. We have come a long way since the first public charter school opened 20 years ago with just 160 students.

While DC's public charter schools offer parents an extraordinary variety of choices, they also share important common characteristics. They are public, tuition-free and open to all. Each school commits to achieve ambitious and measurable goals for their program, and they have flexibility and operational freedom to achieve those goals. That freedom is essential to their success.

The DC Public Charter School Board holds our diverse schools to high standards of excellence, but we do not manage them. We have a national reputation as a tough authorizer who holds schools to a high standard of quality and has a strong commitment to equity.

Public charter schools are leading the renaissance of public education in DC. While serving a similar, if not more disadvantaged population of public school students, public charter school students consistently outperform city averages, and their results get better every year. This is particularly true for our African American and low-income students.

Public charter schools are popular among families, with more than 8,000 individual students on charter waitlists. Overall, public charter school enrollment continues to grow across the city. Combined with DCPS' resurgence, DC's public schools have recorded seven straight years of citywide enrollment growth, while the charter market share has remained essentially unchanged for the past three years.

Each year we've strengthened our academic and fiscal oversight and our efforts to ensure public charter schools serve all children. To highlight a few of our accomplishments last year:

- First, we opened four new public charter schools, three of which focus on high-risk populations: students with disabilities and students in foster care.
- Secondly, we released the first Adult Education Performance Management Framework, or PMF, with tiers this year. This brings our high standard of accountability we have applied to K-12 public charter schools to our adult public charter schools.
- Third, our ongoing focus on attendance and school discipline continues to produce results. Since we began this focus four years ago expulsions are down by nearly 2/3rds, out of school suspensions are down by 1/3<sup>rd</sup> and in-seat attendance increased by 3 percentage points in the last three years.
- And lastly, regarding school finance, this year we strengthened the standards in our Financial Accountability Report Cards.

We have more work to do. The recent PARCC results showed us how far we still need to travel to ensure all our students are ready for college or a career. And they highlight the stark achievement gaps between different racial and economic groups, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities.

We often talk about the quality of public charter schools using numbers and statistics but I'd like to share with you a sampling of the wide variety of features and instructional approaches that families can choose.

## **Language Immersion**

Our eight language immersion public charter schools are very popular, and the waitlists to get into them are quite long. Families can choose for their children to learn in Spanish, French, Chinese, or Hebrew.

One exciting opportunity some immersion students have is to study abroad. For example, fifth graders in the Spanish immersion program at Elsie Whitlow Stokes Public Charter School attend a week-long intensive cultural and language studies program in Panama. In addition to their language studies, students ride on a boat through the Panama Canal, and travel to Kuna Yala Island, where they visit an indigenous Guna school and play soccer with local students.

## **Personalized Instruction**

Public charter schools are also leading the way in tailoring their teaching methods. Using small teacher ratios that provide rigorous academics, many of these schools have extended day, year or summer learning programs to ensure students stay on track academically.

There are more than 60 schools in the District which personalize instruction for their students. One of them is Roots Public Charter School, a Ward 4 school in its 16<sup>th</sup> year of operation.

Boasting zero suspensions and expulsions, 93% attendance rate, and small class sizes, Roots is located in the only public one-room schoolhouse in the city. The school is based on an African roots theme that engages their students and makes their learning relevant. Roots also offers a free eight-week summer learning program for their students.

This year Roots became one of the top performing public charter schools on the PARCC test.

## **Special Education Students**

Public charter schools are getting better and better at serving students with disabilities. Washington Global Public Charter School, a brand new school in Ward 6, offers a project-based, student-centered curriculum with an international focus. Students who receive special education services make up nearly a quarter of their student population. Through small learning communities that meet twice

per day, students with disabilities receive one to one instruction while all other students work on research-based projects. A partnership with George Washington University offers all students free unlimited academic support four days a week, further enhancing their ability to educate all students.

It is our priority to ensure that all public charter schools serve students equitably, especially those with disabilities. One way we do that is through our Mystery Caller Program which was developed to guarantee that schools follow open enrollment policies. We call schools posing as parents and guardians of students with disabilities to ensure that schools are providing correct information and not pushing families away.

Last week, our staff completed this year's Mystery Caller Program. Of the 114 schools contacted, only one school had pattern of violations. We're proud of these results.

## **Early Childhood**

A great early childhood school helps to bridge the achievement gap. In DC, families can choose from roughly 50 public charter schools that educate more than 6,000 prekindergarten students. An example is Friendship Armstrong Public Charter School in Ward 5.

At Friendship Armstrong's Reggio Emilia Center, three pre-k classes learn in an open-space, which encourages students to move freely and explore with their peers while the teachers provide small group instruction. In keeping with the Reggio philosophy that "the environment is the child's third teacher," the space is filled with natural and found objects that children work with and manipulate through art projects. Teachers are considered collaborators and co-learners with the students, and parents have a particularly prominent role. As one of just two public Reggio programs in the District, this is an exciting offering in the public charter sector.

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As I conclude my testimony, I want to note that we have recently completed the first meeting of the Cross-Sector Task Force which we hope will foster a public education system that works better for Washington DC families. We look forward to collaborating not only through this task force, but every day, with you, the Council and our partners at DCPS, OSSE and DME.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We are proud of public charter schools' diverse offerings. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you.