

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS**



**FY 2016 Performance Oversight Hearing
on
District of Columbia Public Schools**

Testimony of

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**Before the
Committee on Education
Council of the District of Columbia
David Grosso, Chairman**

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**John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Room 412
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Good morning, Chairman Grosso and members of the Council. I am honored to have the opportunity to meet with you today to discuss DC Public Schools' progress and our strategic direction going forward. I want to thank Mayor Bowser for her strong support of DC Public Schools and all of our students.

There is much to be proud of today in DCPS. The past five years of the Capital Commitment have resulted in tremendous gains for our students, and more and more families are choosing our schools. We have the best teacher force in the country. We have strong school leaders. And we are making progress on every metric— on our NAEP scores, on our PARCC scores, and on our graduation rates, which are the fastest-improving graduation rates in the country.

We still have work to do, but DCPS is not the same place it was 10 years ago when we couldn't open buildings on time or pay teachers on time. Today, the city believes in DCPS. I am proud to be in the position to continue this important work.

In my first month as Chancellor, I have visited more than 40 schools across all eight wards - more than one-third of our campuses – and I have seen first-hand what students are doing in classrooms across the city. I plan to visit every school by the end of the academic year. I am also leading family engagement sessions in every ward, and have launched a series of faculty meetings to hear directly from our educators. I've started to build strong relationships with our city and union leaders built on mutual respect. I've met with my central office team to learn about the programs and policies that are working for our students and families, as well as the places that need greater support. And I've spoken with local media to begin introducing myself to the city and sharing my vision for DCPS.

At every step, from playing word games in pre-K classrooms to participating in conversations with college-bound seniors, I have seen incredible things happening in schools. I've met people like Principal Carmen Shepherd, who has built such a strong community at Thomson Elementary that we had a packed house of families ready to share their questions and ideas, even on a cold and snowy night. I have talked to teachers like Jorge Aguilar, whose 9th grade students at Columbia Heights Education Campus were engaged in a rigorous conversation around activism and global issues. I have seen well-maintained buildings that are full of pride and attended meetings with smart leaders relentlessly focused on supporting children.

It's already clear to me that DCPS' greatest asset is its people—the collective talent and passion assembled in this district, from students and parents to custodians and principals, is truly awesome. DCPS retains 92 percent of its highly effective teachers each year and 97 percent of its highly effective principals. I'll work to ensure we continue to support and retain our best educators.

I've spent my entire professional life working in schools, and I can tell you that there is nothing I love more than seeing young people learn and discover their talents. And I want every student in DCPS to love school too. My personal achievements are the result of hard work and public school teachers who challenged and believed in me. I know firsthand what's possible through

educational opportunity, and have a deep passion for making sure that schools are places of both excellence and equity where students, families, and communities feel welcomed and see their values reflected.

Before I talk about our plans going forward, I want to take the opportunity to remind you of a few of the successes we saw as a school district in School Year 2015-2016.

We know that the best way to raise expectations and support for students is to raise the expectations and support for teachers. DCPS has done this by designing a new approach to weekly, content-based professional development called LEAP. Each week, teachers in the same grade and subject come together for 90-minute professional development, led by teacher leaders, instructional coaches, and assistant principals. Professional learning like this doesn't exist anywhere else in the country.

I am clear that our students east of the river deserve the same academic opportunities as our students west of the park. We designed Cornerstones to shift expectations and create a shared understanding across the city about the depth of rigor that all of our young people can handle. For example, through Cornerstones, last year all DCPS 4th graders used math to build a windmill, and all DCPS 10th graders staged scenes from Shakespeare's Hamlet.

At DCPS, we want all students to have rigorous learning experiences, but we also know that we need to differentiate the support we provide. Some students need resources directed to their individual needs to find true success. At DCPS, we are committed to providing that support, whether it's for our students in special education or our students who are learning English as a second language, whether it's for our early learners in our three- and four-year-old classrooms or our high school seniors.

That was the thinking behind our Empowering Males of Color (EMOC) work and the establishment of Ron Brown College Preparatory High School. With lagging graduation rates, low student satisfaction rates, and their performance below the district average, DCPS simply was not doing enough to help our young men of color. Last year, 16 schools across the city received EMOC Innovation Grants to help improve the academic and social outcomes for young males of color. Over the past few months, we've been thrilled to see the unique programs created – from Stanton Elementary School's afterschool Boys Institute to Deal Middle School's summer youth leadership program. Over the past year, we have been assessing the specific needs of our girls of color, and this year we will invest more time and resources to support students of color, especially our girls.

In FY 2016, we also launched an ambitious program that provides international travel opportunities for DCPS students. Through travel, one gains a deeper understanding of global issues, American politics, and the values of one's own community, and these are experiences that I want every single student in DCPS to enjoy. Last summer, we sent 400 students from across the district to 14 countries, all expenses paid. This summer, we will expand this

opportunity to even more students.

DCPS has made strides in providing hands-on, real-world experiences that will set students up for future success. This past summer, we placed more than 500 high school students in internships in IT, engineering, public safety, and more. They interned at places like Microsoft and Accenture, shadowed MPD officers and hotel executives, and visited top organizations like NASA and the Department of Commerce. Additionally, DCPS' Competitive Employment Opportunities Program, or CEO, connects high school students with disabilities to mentors in their fields of interest. Students receive professional development training, career mentoring, and paid internship opportunities as part of our special education continuum of services.

These are only a few of the innovative things driving increased student and family satisfaction, reduced suspensions and truancy, and rising graduation and college-attendance in DCPS. At the end of School Year 2015-2016, suspensions were down by 40 percent from two years ago. Also at the end of last year, 69 percent of seniors graduated from our traditional high schools and alternative schools, up from 53 percent in 2011. As of last month, 100 percent of our graduating seniors at Ballou have applied to at least one college. DCPS is indeed on the rise.

In 2012, DCPS launched an ambitious strategic plan—the five goals known as the Capital Commitment. Five years later, it's time to set a new vision for what our district can accomplish.

This week, I launched a citywide engagement process to seek input on a new strategic plan for DCPS. The DCPS community knows better than anyone else what its children and schools need to meet their full measure of greatness. I will host conversations across the city with families and faculty, lead engagement sessions in every ward, and meet with leaders representing our faith, neighborhood, and business communities. We've also set up a write-in campaign, so that everyone has the opportunity to inform the priorities that will guide our next five years. I want to hear from our families and stakeholders about what they want for DCPS.

We know that there are things we need to improve. We must ensure that every student has access to an excellent education and the support they need to take advantage of it. In real terms, we must close the achievement gap. We also want to continue to improve our communication with families, whether it's about math class, extracurricular opportunities, school modernizations, or school operations protocols. We want to work with our sister District agencies like the Department of General Services and the Department of Health to make sure we effectively and consistently communicate with our families about what is happening in their students' schools.

Councilmembers, we are trying to do something that has never been done before—to build an urban school district where every student graduates ready for what comes next, where every child genuinely likes their school, and where every family feels welcome. With your support, we will provide the young people of the District of Columbia with opportunities that will set them up for success in college, career, and life.

I am grateful for the work that has come before me and proud to be part of this team.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to answering your questions.