

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**District of Columbia Public Schools**



**Public Roundtable on “The State of Special Education and Disability Services in Public Schools”**

**Testimony of Kerri A. Larkin  
Deputy Chief, Specialized Instruction  
District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)**

**before the**

**Council of the District of Columbia - Committee on Education  
David Grosso, Chairperson**

**November 16, 2016**

**Council Chambers, Room 412  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20004**



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Good afternoon, Councilmember Grosso and members of the Committee on Education. I am Kerri Larkin, Deputy Chief of Specialized Instruction at DC Public Schools (DCPS), and I am pleased to testify today on behalf of Interim Chancellor John Davis on the state of special education services in DC Public Schools. Since we last appeared before Council to discuss this work, DCPS has continued to improve special education instruction, services and supports for our students with disabilities. We are grateful for the support of the Mayor and the Council, as well as our partners at the OSSE, DDS, DMH, DYRS, CFSA, DHCF, DOES and all of our community partners that have assisted us in coming closer to our goal of becoming the district of choice for students with disabilities.

Today, I want to highlight some of our accomplishments and priorities, as well as the next level of work that will allow us to become a rigorous and responsive school system. Before I do that, allow me to clarify the current organizational structure for special education at DCPS. Since August 2015, special education services and supports have transitioned from a discreet Office of Specialized Instruction, shifting the primary components of that former office to the Office of Teaching and Learning (OTL), which is the instructional heart of DCPS. As the deputy chief of the new Division of Specialized Instruction within OTL, I oversee a team which manages monitoring and school support, academic programs, inclusion, transition, related services, non-public schools, and planning and effectiveness. The Language Acquisition Division (which serves our English Language Learners) sits within OTL, and the Early Stages assessment center is now part of the Early Childhood Division in OTL. The Resolution and Policy teams – that write and revise

policy and handle formal complaints – are now part of the Office of the Chief Operating Officer (OCOO). And our school psychologists and social workers work within the Health and Wellness Division, which falls under the Office of the Chief of Schools. While this reorganization of specific components of the former Office of Specialized Instruction may have contributed to some concern or confusion in our community, most of the work falls together under the Office to Teaching and Learning and we believe this will increase the focus on student achievement and support for teachers working with students with disabilities. As part of the Office of Teaching and Learning, we can prioritize and embed the needs of students with disabilities into the district’s core curriculum.

We are happy to report that the state of special education services in DCPS is strong, and we anticipate continued progress. Our four-year special education strategic plan includes four goals and several key objectives or projects illuminate our plan. The special education strategic plan is to (1) increase academic achievement; (2) include more students; (3) involve families in their child’s success; and (4) prepare students with disabilities for college or the workforce. These are ambitious goals that we are confident our students, teachers and leaders will meet.

We currently have 7360 students with IEPs, which represents 15% of the DCPS student population. We have achieved slow, steady progress across most grade levels for the PARCC in ELA and Math. Additionally, our four year graduation rate has improved 10 points to 47% including students earning certificates of IEP completion.

In order to dramatically increase student achievement, DCPS has established three priority projects this year. First, we are collaborating with the Humanities and STEM teams in OTL to embed the DC scope and sequence with accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities. This will ensure that students have access to Common Core-aligned instruction. Second, approximately two-thirds of all special education teachers are participating in LEAP content teams. As you know, LEAP is our new model for teacher professional learning that includes collaborative planning, collaborative analysis and instructional leadership from content experts. The rest of our special education teachers are participating in specialized LEAP experiences with our modified curriculum. We are confident that student achievement will

increase when we strengthen teachers' preparation to teach Common Core standards with rigorous content to students with disabilities. Finally, special education teachers played a key role in revising Cornerstone lessons and activities to incorporate elements of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework that helps teachers develop instruction to meet the needs of all learners. This ensures that students with disabilities across all schools and grade bands have access to flexible and rigorous content with their non-disabled peers.

Next, we are focused on ensuring that students with disabilities receive their services in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The first is to ensure that DCPS can meet the needs of all students. As many of you know, DCPS has reduced the number of students enrolled in non-public settings by 75% since 2011. However, there is a misperception that many former non-public students returned to DCPS. While some did, the majority exited the system through graduation, IEP completion or employment. At the same time, DCPS slowed the outflow of students to non-public schools by designing full-time academic programs to serve students in their neighborhood schools. Slide Four of the attachment to my testimony is a table outlining those programs, their student-to-staff ratios and the number of programs available across the district.

Another critical area of focus has been our development of processes that schools are required to follow when IEP teams are considering a more restrictive environment. For example, DCPS expects schools to submit substantiated requests for dedicated aides or moving students to more restrictive environments. We feel strongly that schools must clearly demonstrate due diligence before increasing students' level of restriction from non-disabled peers. Students who need dedicated aides have them and students who need full-time programs have them. We support schools in making informed decisions, thinking differently about resources and even increasing resources, when possible, to allow students to be successful in the least restrictive environment.

Ultimately, we want individual schools and IEP teams to be so knowledgeable about resources, supports and services that make these processes unnecessary. To that end, our next level of work includes developing school leaders with expertise in specially-designed instruction, as well

as IDEA. Through a program called ASPIRE, we are currently training 21 school managers, directors and assistant principals of special education on three pillars of leadership: (1) instruction; (2) family engagement; and (3) change management. We have created tools such as the IEP matrix and inclusion blueprint to help IEP teams use data to make informed decisions that are made equitably. The inclusion blueprint helps school leaders develop strategic design for staffing, scheduling and implementing inclusive and specialized instruction.

Finally, DCPS is proud to report that our four year graduation rate for students with disabilities continues to increase, and we continue to increase the number of paid work force development opportunities available to students with disabilities. For example in SY15-16, five of seven students in one of our work-based learning programs were competitively employed in integrated settings with salary, benefits and union membership. We have built a state of the art work force development center at the River Terrace Education Campus to ensure that this progress continues.

As we look to the future of our special education delivery system, despite the progress we've made, we know that we still have much work ahead of us. Our next level of work will focus on engineering the instruction and inclusion environments for students with disabilities. And, as I mentioned before, we will strengthen our work around further developing teachers and school leaders with expertise in instruction, engagement and management.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our story today. I hope you are as excited as we are about the progress we've made and the work that is ahead. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.