

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DC Public Schools (DCPS)**



**Public Hearing on
The District of Columbia Public Schools' Plans for Shaw Junior High School
Campus and Benjamin Banneker Academic High School**

**Testimony of
Amanda Alexander
Interim Chancellor
District of Columbia Public Schools**

Before the
Committee on Education
Chairman David Grosso

November 15, 2018
Room 500
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004



Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committee, and staff. My name is Amanda Alexander, and I am the Interim Chancellor for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I am grateful for the opportunity to serve a district that is committed to ensuring that every student reaches their full potential and is prepared to thrive in life. As a part of that commitment, I appreciate the opportunity to speak before you today about our process for planning to move Banneker High School to the Shaw campus and next steps.

Last week, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education shared that DCPS' enrollment has grown to over 49,000 students - an increase of approximately two percent from last year. We are proud of this growth, and DCPS will continue to work to increase the number of excellent schools throughout the city by differentiating supports and providing opportunities for innovation. As a district, we strive to provide diverse, rigorous, and joyful programming for all of our students through a cohesive system of neighborhood schools, complemented by extraordinary citywide options.

To meet this goal, DCPS plans for school system enhancements based on four principles:

- **First, Equity of Access:** We believe families should have the ability to access quality and specialized programs outside of designated schools assigned by residence.
- **Vertical Alignment:** We believe it is important to offer families a coherent and predictable Kindergarten through 12th grade school pathway.
- **Quality:** We believe families have the right to a high-quality education independent of economic or geographic circumstances. Additionally, we believe to accelerate growth and improvement, we must develop new programs, replicate or expand successful models, and provide schools with differentiated supports and flexibilities.
- **Finally, Diversity:** We believe having diverse school and program options will help ensure all students have access to a highly-rated school. Additionally, we believe in creating diverse school communities.

At DCPS, we are committed to building and expanding programs that are helping our students succeed. This work goes beyond today's conversation and includes the introduction of DCPS' Excel Academy, our first all-girls school, as well as the new neighborhood Middle School at the Coolidge campus, Coolidge Early College Academy as part of Coolidge High School, and Bard Early College program, both early college programs that will open in August of 2019.

Modernized Banneker Program

Banneker High School is proving what is possible for our young people and is providing students with rigorous and varied academic experiences. Banneker has been an International Baccalaureate World School since 2001, offers over 15 Advanced Placement classes, achieved a 100 percent graduation rate, and has consistently earned high achievement levels on both the PARCC exam and national exemplars. The school modernization process has provided us with an opportunity to not just build a 21st Century

state-of-the-art facility for our current Banneker students, but increase access to an excellent academic program and facilities to more students from across the city. Banneker High School has grown the most of all our selective schools, increasing their enrollment by 12 percent in five years. For a program that annually has over 700 applicants for only 150 open seats, we want to help meet this demand.

Banneker prepares its students for success. As one example, last year, India Skinner, Mikayla Sharrieff, and Bria Snell were the only all black, female team in a NASA competition that called for students to find creative ways to use space technology in their everyday lives. The teens said they considered dozens of ideas but settled on a water purification system. Ultimately, the girls earned second place, crediting their rigorous courses and supportive teachers at Banneker for part of their success. With Mayor Bowser's support, these three Banneker students were awarded \$4000 to continue their research towards creating equal access to clean water. I am proud of these students' accomplishments.

While the Banneker program ensures excellence, the building, which was originally designed as a Junior High School, does not meet its full needs. For example:

- The gymnasium is not large enough for both a high school court and bleachers;
- There are insufficient options for academic support spaces and offices;
- The building's historic designation limits our ability to create a 21st century learning environment; and, finally,
- There is limited capacity, and the current location can only accommodate 560 students.

Over the past three years, applications to Banneker have increased 23 percent. Students from all eight wards attend the high school, with the largest group of students coming from Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8. Based on this increased demand, the Shaw campus provides the best opportunity for the school to grow. At Shaw, we could expand the program to approximately 800 students, while improving accessibility via the DC Metro. We would be able to provide high-quality programming to more students and expand a successful high school model, led by an experienced school leader.

The Banneker High School program has a long and rich history, and we look forward to our continued engagement with the community and School Improvement Team (or SIT) over the next two years to ensure that the modernization design reflects this history and culture. DCPS believes the Shaw building will provide an opportunity to create a more flexible and adaptive learning environment that incorporates 21st century school design elements.

Community Engagement

With our principles in mind, DCPS aims to purposefully improve our system of schools, while fostering collaborative partnerships with our families and the greater DC community. To do this, we know that we must prioritize transparency and provide stakeholders with equitable opportunities to participate in the planning process.

In October 2017, DCPS held the first of many community meetings with Banneker parents and stakeholders, kicking off the Banneker modernization process. In February 2018, DCPS sent out a letter to Banneker community members announcing a feasibility study to examine both the current Banneker



building and the Shaw building to determine the best location for the Banneker High School program. With this, two Shaw neighborhood representatives were invited to join the School Improvement Team (or SIT) in the spring. To date, there have been six meetings with the Banneker community and an ongoing community engagement process around next steps for Banneker HS modernization. Last Spring, DCPS had multiple conversations with school leaders and parent representatives from the elementary schools in the Shaw community, updating them on the feasibility plan and getting initial feedback on middle school planning. Last week, we held two calls to further engage with Shaw community members on the question of a middle school and next steps for their options. We hear the concerns about lack of engagement to-date on the decision to move the Banneker program to the Shaw site. We also understand the desire for a neighborhood middle school in Shaw and increased engagement and transparency around planning decisions. We are committed, along with the Mayor, to engaging with the Shaw and broader DCPS communities on the District's enrollment trends and facility needs moving forward, with the goal of arriving at the best decisions and planning process for our students, families, schools, and community members alike.

Feasibility Planning

As a part of our school modernization work, DCPS develops education specifications and facilitates design review of the modernized building. We rely on our School Improvement Teams to provide feedback during the development of the school-specific education specifications and schematic design and assist with disseminating information about the progress of the school improvement to their larger community. Finally, we partner with the Department of General Services (DGS), which provides technical and project management for our school modernizations or new constructions.

Last year, DCPS and the community began the process of planning the Banneker HS modernization, with the goal of providing the school room to expand its program in an updated 21st century high school space. In Spring 2018, as part of the Banneker modernization process, DCPS and DGS procured an architecture firm to conduct a feasibility study to identify opportunities and constraints on the Banneker and Shaw Junior High properties for the Banneker program. The [feasibility study](#) evaluated two scenarios:

- First, a renovation of the Banneker building and maintaining the program size with little to no growth; and,
- Second, moving the Banneker program to the Shaw site, while expanding the program.

The study confirmed, and DCPS agrees, that the Shaw property is the best site to meet the program needs of the school. The Shaw property is more appropriately sized for a high school than the existing Banneker site, which will enable DCPS to expand the size of the Banneker program and increase access to high-quality high school programming. DCPS strongly believes that this is the best option.

Conclusion

I also want to take the time to highlight the importance of DCPS' school leaders. We value Principal Berger's strong commitment to leading the Banneker and Shaw communities through this expansion.



Her dedication to the Banneker program, where she began as a Physical Education teacher over 25 years ago, will continue to add to the school's success. Her work ensures that DCPS students have the opportunity to rise to new levels of achievement.

As DCPS becomes an exemplar of excellence and equity, we aim to ensure that every student, in every school is provided rigorous and joyful learning experiences in a nurturing environment. Thanks to the strong support from the community, Mayor, and the Council, we are committed to preparing our students for future leadership roles and to succeed in an increasingly interconnected and globally competitive world. Moving Banneker High School to the Shaw campus will allow us to do just that.

Thank you for allowing me to testify before you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

