

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)



Public Hearing on
Academic Achievement in the District of Columbia

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW

December 4th, 2024
1:00 PM



Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, staff, and members of the public. My name is Corie Colgan, and I am the Chief of the Office of Teaching and Learning. During my 25-year career in education, I have been a classroom teacher, school administrator, and a DCPS Central Services employee since 2009. The Office of Teaching and Learning provides educators with curricular resources, academic programs, and aligned professional development to ensure rigorous and joyful learning experiences for every student. Our office includes five divisions that provide services to schools like the creation of curricular materials, oversight of high-impact tutoring programs, management of the DC Reading Clinic, and support for students receiving special education services. I am joined today by my colleague, Alison Williams, Senior Deputy Chief of Content and Curriculum. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the topic of academic achievement.

At DCPS, we are seeing improved results in elementary grades because of recent investments that prepare students to read proficiently by third grade. These results are encouraging but insufficient. Proficiency rates on state tests in math and English Language Arts for the 2023 – 2024 school year were consistent with or slightly above results from the previous year.¹ We know that the rate of improvement needs to increase dramatically. In recent hearings, we have heard members of this Council ask for more information about DCPS’ plans to improve outcomes. Today, I want to speak about our plans and offer more detail on our Capital Commitment, DCPS’ 2023 – 2028 Strategic Plan.

A Capital Commitment: 2023 – 2028 Strategic Plan

At DCPS, we believe it is imperative that all students have access to the tools, support, and resources they need to succeed. And when we say, “all students,” we mean all – including our students furthest from opportunity. You have DCPS’ strategic plan in front of you today. This plan identifies three

¹ For more information on state test results, please see <https://osse.dc.gov/node/1728216>.



strategic priorities, specific goals for each priority, and the key actions DCPS will take to achieve those goals. DCPS staff developed this strategic plan after deep engagement with key stakeholders including parents, students, educators, and community members.

Today, my testimony will focus on the strategic priority of students succeeding academically.² For this priority DCPS’s plan highlights two goals – that 80% of DCPS students score at level three or higher on state proficiency tests and that the proportion of students enrolling in Algebra in middle school doubles.³ Achieving these two goals will mean that DCPS students have acquired key skills and have a strong academic foundation on which to build. Students who are proficient readers, writers, and mathematicians are better positioned to meet their full potential. Middle school students who develop the mathematical and critical thinking skills taught in Algebra leave 8th grade better prepared to succeed in high school, college, and career.

DCPS measured baseline data for this priority during the 2022 – 2023 school year. During that school year, 45% of DCPS students were achieving at least a level three on the CAPE for math, 57% were reaching this threshold for English Language Arts, and 32% enrolled in Algebra at some point in middle school.

After measuring this baseline data, we checked in at the end of the 2023 – 2024 school year. As I mentioned earlier, DCPS’ results on CAPE were slightly but not substantially higher than the previous year. With respect to enrollment in Algebra in Middle School, I am pleased to share that 37% of students enrolled during the 2023 – 2024 school year, an increase of five percentage points over the previous year. That progress is encouraging and there is so much more work to do.

² DCPS’s strategic plan identifies three strategic priorities centered on students – that they are (1) succeeding academically, (2) connected to schools, and (3) prepared for what’s next.

³ DCPS believes in educating the whole child. This means ensuring a well-rounded education. Please review the plan in detail for more information on actions not directly tied to mathematics and literacy achievement.



To achieve these goals, our plan has three key components. First, DCPS educators provide high-quality instruction to students. Second, they meet regularly to review and respond to student data. Third, they engage in ongoing professional learning with peers and local experts.

I. Providing High-Quality Instruction to Students

Our strategic plan supports the provision of high-quality instruction to students through our approach to literacy instruction, a new early childhood math curriculum, and the targeted use of high-impact tutoring.

Our approach to literacy instruction means that students get lots of opportunities to read during the day while having time to work on specific areas where they need help. If you walk into a DCPS classroom, you will see students reading and writing across subjects, not just during one part of the day. Providing students with multiple opportunities to work on reading and writing skills is one way to help students hone these skills. During time that is specifically focused on developing literacy skills, DCPS educators use needs-based small groups to teach students skills that are relevant to them. For example, educators may teach five students who all need help reading words with the “O-A” vowel pair and work specifically on that goal for 15 minutes.

In the 2023 – 2024 school year, DCPS early childhood students began learning using a new evidence-based curriculum, Building Blocks, that will lead to more academic success in future years and increase readiness for Algebra. This curriculum is aligned with how young children learn and research has consistently shown that students who participate in the curriculum significantly outperform other students on key math skills.⁴ DCPS provided training for teachers last school year and over the summer. DCPS is also

⁴ See <https://www.mheducation.com/unitas/school/explore/sites/building-blocks/2008-evaluation-effects-research-based-pk-math.pdf> for more information.



developing an asynchronous course that educators can access anytime to support the use of this curriculum.

High Impact Tutoring is a strategy that improves attendance and academic achievement for students.⁵ DCPS leverages a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) to identify students who may benefit from tutoring; this can include students who have gaps in their learning or are not responding well to classroom instruction. Through strong citywide collaboration, DCPS has expanded this intervention over the past three years. In the 2023 – 2024 school year, over 7,100 students or about 14% of DCPS students received high-impact tutoring.

This school year, DCPS is targeting the intervention to students who need it the most and spreading best practices learned from previous tutoring interventions. Over the next two months, DCPS educators and trusted partner organizations will start tutoring nearly 3,000 students at 45 schools. This tutoring is made possible through a \$1.4 million grant made to DCPS from OSSE and smaller grants to tutoring providers. At the same time, we are codifying what works at schools that have used tutoring in the past and spreading those practices to other schools. For example, high-impact tutoring for all K-5 students at Moten Elementary School led to big gains on the Math CAPE and other schools can benefit from what Moten learned by intervening in this way.

II. Meeting Regularly to Review and Respond to Student Data

In our plan, you will see a focus on regularly reviewing and responding to student data. DCPS educators look for trends within their classroom and plan how to best approach teaching for the coming week so that gaps in student understanding are filled. At DCPS schools, each week, educators meet to plan

⁵ For more information on HIT, please see <https://osse.dc.gov/release/high-impact-tutoring-increases-attendance-dc-students> and <https://studentsupportaccelerator.org/about/high-impact-tutoring>.



lessons or review student assessment data. This data can be from a 60-second progress monitoring assessment, a longer test, or a Required Curricular Task.⁶ These planning and data meetings are facilitated by experienced DCPS educators from each school's staff.

DCPS recently made improvements to Required Curricular Tasks, or RCTs. These tasks inform the teaching that an educator will subsequently do – and they provide opportunities for students to engage with rigorous grade level material. Before this year started, DCPS revised RCTs to include questions that indicate a student's understanding of pre-Algebraic concepts. While we are not teaching Algebra to elementary students, there are certain concepts (i.e. strong knowledge of math operations and fractions) that students can begin to grasp early in school that will help them learn Algebra later.

One way that DCPS is responding to student data is by developing trainings for teachers. As Suzanne Donovan mentioned in her testimony earlier, this school year, DCPS and the Strategic Education Research Partnership (SERP) Institute are leveraging a federal grant to provide additional training to new-to-DCPS educators.⁷ District leaders proposed a partnership with SERP to answer the question of why schools with similar characteristics have different literacy outcomes. The goal of the project is to identify strategies DCPS can pursue to better support schools to achieve reading success for their students. Through this partnership, DCPS and SERP developed a training to help new-to-DCPS teachers establish strong academic discussions in classrooms and set up students for success during independent work times. We know that new-to-DCPS teachers leave DCPS at higher rates than teachers with longer tenure and we believe this approach will have an impact on retention of these teachers as well.

⁶ See <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1179831.pdf> for more information on the positive impacts of formative assessments.

⁷ Please see <https://ies.ed.gov/funding/grantsearch/details.asp?ID=3282> for more information.



III. Engaging Ongoing Professional Learning with Peers and Local Experts

The partnership with SERP is one example of how DCPS is improving and planning to improve teacher training as part of our strategic plan. DCPS is training teachers by leveraging in-house expertise and in partnership with local universities.

As Helen Behr mentioned in her testimony earlier, for the past five years, the DC Reading Clinic trained over 600 teachers in instructional methods aligned with the science of reading while providing rigorous tutoring opportunities to students who struggle to learn to read. DCPS educators who enroll in the Clinic are mentored by experienced reading specialists, many of whom teach at DCPS. We are pleased to expand the Clinic to middle school with a pilot decoding-focused intervention class and teacher training in four schools.

This year, DCPS began supporting a cohort of middle school instructional leaders who are focusing on student success in accelerated mathematics in middle school.⁸ Every DCPS school has an instructional leader focused on math. This could be an assistant principal, instructional coach, or another educator. By supporting this group of instructional leaders, more students will be prepared for Algebra by the end of middle school.

DCPS has also engaged with local experts through American University's Early Literacy Intervention Leaders Program. This grant-funded program from the US Department of Education provided funding for DCPS educators to pursue their doctoral degree in education policy and leadership with a focus on early reading.⁹ The grant also allowed for coaching of approximately 180 teachers.

⁸ This cohort includes leaders from eight middle schools – Capitol Hill Montessori School @ Logan, Columbia Heights Education Campus, Ida B. Well MS, John Francis Education Campus, Kramer MS, Leckie Education Campus, MacFarland MS, and Stuart-Hobson MS (Capitol Hill Cluster).

⁹ See <https://www.american.edu/soe/iie/> for more information.



Finally, DCPS is partnering with Trinity University to offer a graduate certificate in Mathematics for Educators. This 12-credit program is designed around the series from the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics or NCTM. This series explores how math concepts build and develop from Kindergarten through 8th grade. Educators who take part in this program will not only strengthen their own math content knowledge but also deeply understand how concepts are related and dependent across grade levels.

Whether it is improving the quality of instruction offered to students, supporting educators to respond to data, or continuing to innovate on professional learning opportunities, DCPS is taking strategic steps to improve.

Mathematics Proficiency and DREAM Learning Center

While we are confident in our strategic plan, we also know that proficiency scores are still below where they were pre-pandemic, especially in math, and we have so much more work to do. One way we intend to improve math instruction is to launch a DREAM Learning Center focused on three aspects of math excellence – tutoring, professional development, and family engagement. Building on the success of the DC Reading Clinic, educators will tutor students and receive mentoring from more experienced mathematics teachers. We have seen this model work at the Reading Clinic with improved early literacy results and more effective teachers and believe that a similar model can help our students in math. Additionally, families will be able to make use of resources at the center so they can support student learning at home. We look forward to sharing more about this proposal in the future.

Although no single intervention or action can magically transform student outcomes, the steps we are taking, grounded in research and best practice, are driving measurable progress. We are confident that by steadfastly adhering to our strategic plan, DCPS will achieve the ambitious goals we have set. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the important topic of academic achievement. I look forward to answering your questions.