

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (DCPS)**



Joint Public Hearing on  
Bill 23-496, the “Fair Access to Selective High Schools Amendment Act of 2019”

Testimony of  
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Before the  
Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee of the Whole  
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman  
and  
Committee on Education  
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairperson

February 10, 2020  
Room 412  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004



Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, members of the Education Committee, Committee of the Whole, and staff. My name is Sito Narcisse, Chief of Secondary Schools for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Thank you for convening today's hearing on Bill 23-0496, the "Fair Access to Selective High Schools Amendment Act of 2019." I am pleased to testify before you and share DCPS' position on this legislation and our recent work to promote access and transparency through the selective high school admissions process.

DCPS believes that all families have the right to a high-quality education regardless of economic or geographic circumstances and that every student deserves to have rigorous and joyful learning experiences in every school, whether in an excellent neighborhood school or in a high-quality citywide option. We celebrate and value the diversity of our students' backgrounds and work to further their dreams for the future.

As a school district, DCPS' vision is to create a cohesive system of excellent neighborhood schools across the city, complemented by also having high-quality city-wide options. We believe that families should have the ability to access quality and specialized programs outside of their designated neighborhood school. Overall, DCPS has eight citywide and selective high schools or programs that deliver on this vision. As a city, we know we must continue to dedicate ourselves to the needs of our families and we cannot shy away from programs that promote our students' learning. We will continue to take steps to ensure all students have access to quality learning environments that give them the support they need to thrive.

### **Strategic School Planning**

As DC's school system of right, our role is to respond to community input and changing city demographics, while promoting quality school options across the district. When making planning decisions, DCPS considers and engages around multiple areas, including data, community feedback, and the District's strategic priorities. I do want to take the opportunity to highlight our approach to planning for a strong, cohesive, system of schools and share some examples from recent years.

At DCPS, we believe the best way to set our students up for success in their later years is to provide them with a strong educational foundation, starting with our earliest learners. Across the country, demand has grown for high-quality child care and early education opportunities, and DCPS is committed to delivering more options across all eight wards. The Thaddeus Stevens Early Learning Center represents both our commitment to families as well as our commitment to equity. By establishing preference for families meeting the District's "at-risk" definition and reserving dedicated self-contained special education classrooms, this citywide program builds



DCPS' capacity to serve young learners with special needs and provides an opportunity to cultivate a socioeconomic-diverse school community.<sup>1</sup>

We also continue to focus on creating and offering families a coherent and predictable K-12 school pathway with high-quality education programs. We want families to be confident that they have excellent schools, which is why we opened Ida B. Wells Middle School, a new neighborhood middle school located on Coolidge High School's campus in Ward 4. Students at Wells started the year in a joyful learning environment which includes new science labs, classrooms, and a historic courtyard that was converted into an atrium for expanded programming.

We are similarly excited about the investments to serve students at the high school level, and ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive in college or career. This school year, Coolidge HS welcomed students into a state-of-the-art building, while Bard DC opened as DCPS' first early college program East of the River. Students at Coolidge have the option to enroll in a Mass Media, Health Sciences, and Early College Academies which provide students with real-world experience in hospitality, IT, engineering, emergency medicine, and more. We are also doubling the number of students enrolled in our NAF academies and are giving students an opportunity to earn college credits and up to an associate's degree before graduation.

DCPS will continue to engage and partner with families, and school-based staff on the best ways to support students' path to graduation. Whether students are interested in pursuing a college degree or entering the workforce, we want every student to feel supported and confident as they enter their next phase of life.

### **DCPS Updated Policies on Selective Schools**

In line with our commitment to equity and transparency, last year, DCPS embarked on a process to revise our admissions policies and processes to ensure that all students in the district have equitable access to selective high schools while maintaining a high standard for excellence. Following a process misstep around admission requirements that occurred last spring, DCPS made a committed effort to review and revise our admissions policies and processes. Our review of our policies as well as stakeholder engagement sessions helped us make thoughtful changes to our process to address the challenges that occurred last spring.

For School Year 2020-2021, DCPS is will be updating the admission process for our selective programming by:

- Eliminating the need for a minimum score on PARCC, and minimum attendance rate for admission;

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<sup>1</sup> As defined in D.C. Code § 38-2901, "at-risk" students include students who are experiencing homelessness, are in the District's foster care system, qualify for Temporary assistance for Needy Family program or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or are a high school student that is one year older, or more than the expected age for the grade in which the student is enrolled.



- Reducing the number of schools with a minimum GPA requirement for admission.
- Decreasing the number of recommendations students are required to provide;
- Requiring schools to develop and post eligibility rubrics that provide clarity for families and the public on how each school evaluates the required criteria, including a narrative on the schools' focus areas and what they are looking for in student applicants; and
- Reducing barriers for admission into School Without Walls HS. For the first time, to ensure that transportation access to the test is not a barrier for students, School Without Walls will offer an additional testing site East of the River.

As we expand access to selective high schools, we want families to be confident that they also have excellent schools focused on ensuring their child is prepared for college and career right in their neighborhood. As an example, Anacostia HS recently saw an eight-percentage point increase in students scoring proficient in ELA on PARCC and is undergoing a school redesign process. The redesign teams at Anacostia HS and Ballou HS engaged with over 1,700 stakeholders to reimagine programmatic goals and design a school that captures the needs and hopes of the students and families in their respective feeder patterns. By creating neighborhood schools that meet the needs of our school communities, we aim to transform the learning experience for both our students and their larger communities. We believe this work will develop their school's programming through a process grounded in student and community input.

In addition to these efforts to move towards progress and equity, we are still exploring additional ways to provide clear and transparent information to families. As more families continue to choose DCPS, we are dedicated to improving and providing clear and transparent policies that are accessible for all families.

**B23-0496, the “Fair Access to Selective High Schools Amendment Act of 2019”**

I would like to now take the opportunity to provide feedback on B23-0496, the “Fair Access to Selective High Schools Amendment Act of 2019.” While DCPS appreciates the Council’s partnership in ensuring fair and equitable schools and supports the intent of the bill, DCPS does not support B23-496 as drafted as we believe school-specific admission requirements should reflect the unique needs of each school community and the District’s strategic priorities. Codifying these requirements would unnecessarily limit our ability to respond to and engage with our students and families on this important topic.

Specifically, there is currently no common ranking system across DCPS and Charter LEAs and we believe that creating such a system would not ultimately be beneficial to DC’s students. Regarding the notification requirement, DCPS works to support our middle school students with information about the application process, which includes neighborhood and citywide schools. We are concerned that the notification requirements would lead to an incomplete picture of high school options for students.



Compared to the drafted bill, DCPS' most recent updates take further steps to promote equitable access to schools. For example, by removing PARCC minimums, DCPS expands access beyond the top 15 ranked students as detailed in this bill. As we have done in the past, DCPS will continue to plan for and adapt to the changing needs of the District of Columbia.

## **Conclusion**

DCPS has set ambitious goals to ensure all our students feel loved, challenged, and prepared in school and to triple the percent of at-risk and students of color who are college and career ready. DCPS has invested significantly in supporting our schools to reach these goals and our selective high schools are a key part of this overall strategy. We work closely with every school community to ensure they have the resources and supports needed to serve their students. DCPS also wants families to be confident that they also have excellent schools focused on ensuring that their child is prepared for college and career right in their neighborhood. DCPS will continue to invest in our schools to offer students the experiences necessary to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We look forward to continuing this conversation with our stakeholders.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you all today. I appreciate the support of students, families, educators, members of the community and the DC Council. I am grateful for the faith and opportunity to refine our processes, and work towards maintaining DC's trust and confidence. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

