

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DC Public Schools



Public Oversight Roundtable on
Graduation Rate Accountability

Testimony of
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Before the
Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Education
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairman

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

Good day, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committee, and staff. For the record, my name is Antwan Wilson, and I am the Chancellor of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I appreciate the opportunity to discuss our plans to address the serious issue before us - ensuring the value of the DCPS diploma and improving attendance in our schools.

In DC Public Schools, we believe every student can and should succeed. We strive not just to teach our young people how to read and write, but to build young people of character who will be successful in whatever they choose for themselves. Our vision is to become a district where every student feels loved, challenged, and prepared to positively influence society and thrive in life.

We understand that DCPS graduates make up the future of this city; they will become pillars of the community that we look to in decades to come for wisdom, leadership, and confidence.

I have faith that DCPS graduates are the future of DC, but to ensure their success, we must teach our students that nothing worth doing is easy. Hard work is what will help them persevere through high school, college, and all the challenges that life will bring their way. When our students walk across the stage, I want them to feel their diplomas are well-deserved and confident that their hard work paid off.

In recent years, however, we have let many students down in this respect. We did not uphold the high standards we have for academic excellence for all our students. To learn, to meet the expectations and demands of graduation, and to *earn* a diploma, students must be in school every day and must do the work in each and every course.

We did not hold all our students or ourselves to this commitment. We did not insist that they all attend class regularly in order to be promoted. We did not charge all our students with making up the work they missed. We did not provide all of our students with rigorous opportunities when make-up work was required.

We gave too many students a pass because our policy wasn't clear, because our schools didn't follow policy, and because in some cases, educators felt pressure to pass students who had been out of school far too often. This is unacceptable. It is unacceptable to me as the leader of this school system. It is unacceptable to our students, families, and communities who know education is the path to success.

This investigation has made our city, our families, and our students question our school system. I understand that, both as a leader and as a parent. In the last decade, DC has been held up as a national model for improvement, and now, some are asking – is it real? I can assure you that there has been real progress to acknowledge and celebrate in our school system:

- The learning gains our students have made over the past decade, first on the DC Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS), and then on the much more rigorous PARCC exam, are real.
- The progress our students have made on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which has shown that DCPS is the fastest-improving urban school district in the country, is real.
- Our teachers and our school leaders are even more prepared to teach to today's Common Core standards because of DCPS innovations in evaluation and professional development. IMPACT, our evaluation system for teachers and principals, and LEAP, our professional development system for teachers, are nationally recognized. In fact, Stanford University and the University of Virginia found that IMPACT leads to four months of extra student learning in both math and reading.

- Student enrollment in DCPS has risen since 2012 after decades of decline, proving that families have more faith in our public schools.

We have some significant challenges that we must address if we are to deliver on the promise of a great education for all our children, but we should not lose confidence in our system as a whole. Instead, we must recommit ourselves to doing the hard work required to best serve our students and to achieve quality outcomes for students.

I am committed to doing better, as are our school leaders, central office staff, and our teachers. We will focus not just on improving, but also creating the right systems to hold all of our students and staff to the highest expectations.

It is no secret that urban school districts across the country struggle with truancy and chronic absenteeism. Thousands of students in DC miss a lot of school, and the reasons are complex. High schools are particularly challenging because the coursework becomes harder, which means student attendance can worsen, and if students are behind when they enter the 9th grade, it is twice or three times as hard to catch them up in time for graduation. Additionally, the way we structure high schools and the opportunities they provide must shift if we're going to help every student see the relevance of a high school diploma. The issues we face in DC are no different from what cities across the country are facing.

I commit to you that DCPS will be aggressive in our move towards meaningful solutions.

Immediately, we will reaffirm the value of the DCPS diploma so that every student who graduates in 2018 feels confident that the diploma they receive is a passport to college or career. DCPS has conducted a comprehensive transcript review to verify that every student who walks across the graduation stage will have earned that honor, and will work with families to ensure that students understand where they stand today and have a plan to reach graduation. In addition, DCPS will ensure that schools have the supports and aligned accountability systems to fully adhere to attendance, grading, and credit recovery policies this semester.

We will improve DCPS grading and credit recovery policies before School Year 2018-2019. We will make them clearer, easy to follow, and fair, while setting a high bar for what it means to pass a class, and we will better clarify how attendance fits into both. These policies will be updated through an extensive engagement process, involving teachers, staff, students, parents, and the broader education stakeholder community. We will rebuild the city's trust in DCPS. We will establish a citywide community task force and student focus groups to inform the common vision for what it means to graduate from DCPS ready for college and career. We will engage with DCPS school staff, the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU), and Council of School Officers (CSO) on this work.

After we improve our policies, DCPS will complete comprehensive training for principals, teachers, counselors, students, and parents beginning immediately, and continuing as new staff are on-boarded and as new classes of students and parents come into the DCPS system.

We will communicate our high expectations for students by creating a DCPS Graduate Profile: Defining what it means to be a DCPS graduate, including the college and career milestones for success after graduation, for all students beginning in School Year 2018-2019. By 2022, we will implement district-

wide end-of-course assessments that serve as final exams for core courses such as English, Algebra, Geometry, and US History.

This past Monday, DCPS announced the new Office of Integrity to ensure that policies and procedures are implemented with fidelity and to follow up on complaints regarding laws and DCPS expectations.

Finally, we will do the work we've laid out in our strategic plan, which includes strengthening early childhood literacy, continuing to improve our middle schools, and strengthening our college and career efforts.

DCPS is a school district that puts students first, focuses on equity and excellence, and has the courage to improve. Thousands of families in DC choose to entrust their children to our schools. Councilmembers, I assure you that my priority is to ensure our schools are worthy of that trust. Thank you for your time. I happy to answer any questions you may have.