

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
*District of Columbia Public Schools*



Public Oversight Roundtable on  
**Graduation Rate Accountability**

**Testimony of**  
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Before the

Committee on Education  
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairman

Council of the District of Columbia  
Room 412  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20004

### **[Slide 1] Introduction**

Good day, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committee, and staff. My name is Amanda Alexander and I am the Interim Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I appreciate the opportunity to share details of the important work my team and I have engaged in to address graduation accountability at DCPS and ensure the value of the DCPS diploma for the Class of 2018 and future graduates.

### **[Slide 2] Commitments**

At DCPS, we are committed to our vision that every student will feel loved, challenged, and prepared to positively influence society and thrive in life.

As we strive to prepare students for post-secondary success, DCPS will work to:

- Maintain high expectations for all students and ensure all graduates feel confident they have earned their diplomas;
- Empower our students and families on their paths to graduation with the supports they need to be successful; and
- Provide clear and transparent policies with rigorous monitoring systems.

### **[Slide 3] Graduation Task Force**

I want to be clear that graduation and secondary support has been my team's top priority.

Following revelations regarding inconsistent application of DCPS' grading and attendance policy and in response to the Alvarez and Marsal report, we knew it was imperative to move quickly and improve our training and systems. With that in mind, DCPS created a Graduation Task Force—a team dedicated to planning for the 2018 graduation by improving our internal systems and assessing and providing for the needs of students, whether “on track” or “off track.” In addition, this team focused its efforts toward School Year 2018-2019 to ensure that we have effective and appropriate policies in place as we move forward.

Over the last six months, DCPS moved quickly to address these challenges. We communicated broadly to students, families, and staff about our resolve to support every student on their pathway to graduation. We worked to create more opportunity in the second semester and summer school for students to earn original credit and to master content. We developed strong systems around attendance and grading that support families and school staff. Finally, we took steps to build a culture that values authentic mastery over checking a box.

We engaged teachers, guidance counselors, and school leaders in targeted, ongoing trainings that include webinars, in-person conversations, and a comprehensive graduation summit. My senior leadership team participated in weekly touchpoints to monitor progress and offer extensive strategic support to schools and students.

We are moving quickly to meet these goals because they matter and have tangible implications for the future of our students, schools, and our city. Our educators are ready and eager to help, and we are

working to provide them with better tools and training. Our students are planning their futures, and we are partnering with them to ensure they are aware and can take advantage of all of the options available to them. These students cannot afford to wait for our next steps, and DC's families, colleges, and employers expect and deserve more from us.

We appreciate the support of Mayor Bowser as we take on this urgent work and are eager to continue to collaborate with you, the DC Council.

#### **[Slide 4] Graduate Profile**

Despite the urgency of this work, we must not lower the bar—especially since we know that our young people can and will meet it. The DCPS Graduate Profile makes clear what we expect from students who earn our diploma. DCPS holds all graduates accountable to clear standards of excellence. We strive to empower our students to be engaged, prepared, courageous, compassionate, and culturally aware.

#### **[Slide 5] DCPS Goes to College**

Even as we tackle the real and urgent work we still have to do, we must also celebrate the 2,096 students from the 2018 Cohort who have earned a DCPS diploma in recent weeks. The number of DCPS students completing the FAFSA; taking the SAT; applying to, and being accepted to, colleges continues to increase— showing that when students are given opportunity, they take advantage of them!

One incredible example of the excellence produced within DCPS is Munisa Said, who participated in a range of organizations during high school at Cardozo Education Campus, including student government and her school's Local School Advisory Team (or LSAT). Munisa will attend Princeton University this fall.

From Dunbar HS, Sheldon Willett plans to attend Sewanee: The University of the South and has long-term goals to return to the DC community and practice law. Sheldon has already started building the skills he will need to be successful as a member of the Dunbar debate team and student government vice president.

We wish these students, and all our graduates, joy and courage as they begin the next phase of their lives. These students represent the amazing talent of DCPS and challenge us to refocus our efforts to help young people across the district attain these kinds of achievements.

#### **[Slide 6] Graduation Verification**

To meet our goal of supporting individual students on their paths to graduation and beyond, we focused on our three commitments.

First, DCPS is committed to maintaining high expectations for all students and ensuring all graduates feel confident they have earned their diploma.

This spring, DCPS created a robust graduation verification process that includes reviews at both the school and Central Office levels.

This semester, we have redesigned the way course scheduling works in our high schools, confirming that students are on track toward graduation and they have the time they need to master content.

**[Slide 7] Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate**

To discuss our graduation rates, DCPS uses the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (or ACGR), as mandated by the Federal government. ACGR is calculated by following a cohort of rising 9th grade students to determine the percentage that receive a regular diploma within four years. A student who entered high school in the 2014-2015 school year would be included in DCPS' 2018 Cohort.

**[Slide 8] June Graduation**

Earlier today, we shared our final June 2018 graduation numbers. Overall, 59 percent of DCPS' 2018 Cohort graduated by June. An additional 139 students, or four percent, will have the opportunity to earn credit through our enhanced summer school offerings and to graduate in August. The final OSSE verified graduation rate will be available in the fall.

Each of our graduates has overcome obstacles—and used that tenacity to push themselves even further. We know our students are capable of greatness, but we also know that sometimes the path to greatness takes a detour. It is our job to help every student who needs our assistance to get back on that path.

We are committed to providing every support necessary to ensure off-track students have the chance to earn a DCPS diploma.

**[Slide 9] Term 3 to Term 4 Outcomes**

At the end of Term 3, DCPS shared that 46 percent of the 2018 Cohort was on track for graduation. We used this data to know our students and better understand their paths to graduation. Teachers, guidance counselors, and school leaders have dedicated their efforts to having real conversations with students and families and providing supports that matter. The increase from 46 percent on track at the end of Term 3 to 59 percent of students graduating in June is due to the hard work of DCPS staff, families, and students.

More specifically, the changes between Term 3 estimates and actual Term 4 outcomes are due to two factors: improvements in student grades and student removals or transfers. For example, students who were failing a course at the end of Term 3 could have earned a passing mark in Term 4. Additionally, students earned credit recovery credit at the end of Term 4, which could have allowed them to graduate. Finally, as we've shared in the past, this number also reflects those students verified by OSSE as transfers out of DCPS for removal from the cohort.

**[Slide 10] 9<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> Grade ACGR**

Our focus is not limited to just the graduating class. We have also invested time and resources in supporting our 9<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> grade students as they work toward graduation and career or college. At these grade levels, more than 70 percent of students are on track to promote. DCPS will work tirelessly to support each of the approximately 30 percent of students who are not on track for promotion to get back on their path to graduation.

**[Slide 11] Student Supports**

Our second key commitment is to empower our students and families with clear information and the supports they need to be successful.

This spring, we invested significant time and manpower in one-on-one graduation planning for all of our high school students. DCPS guidance counselors will continue to consistently support students with scheduling and individualized planning, including meeting with all high school students and their families.

These efforts are already making an impact. A guidance counselor at Cardozo Education Campus told me that the new attendance and grading policies have fostered a greater sense of accountability among students and made them aware of the role attendance plays in content mastery. Parents are also receiving more consistent communication—including texts, emails, and robocalls—about their child’s attendance and are tracking progress in Aspen, DCPS’ Student Information System.

Next year, we will launch an online high school planning platform called Naviance. This platform will allow students, parents, and staff to monitor progress toward graduation and implement targeted supports.

### **[Slide 12] Youngest Learners**

We know the path to college and career starts early. As Chief of Elementary Schools, I led the implementation of a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, which required the early identification of students with learning and behavior needs. We know that students who are not meeting benchmarks are those who most urgently need our help.

Like all our elementary schools, H.D. Cooke Elementary School uses the RTI model to support the whole child. Their school-wide RTI block is scheduled each morning from 8:45 A.M. – 9:15 A.M. This approach allows staff to flexibly group students amongst classrooms and grade levels. Based on student data, the team determines tiered academic and behavioral interventions, such as research-based programs like *Leveled Literacy Inventory* or *Do the Math*. Students may also attend some small group sessions with a social worker to address specific behavioral or social skills.

As we expand this framework to include secondary grades, we will better serve all students in DCPS.

### **[Slide 13] Graduation Plan**

Every student should have a clear and realistic path to graduation and post-secondary opportunities and understand the steps they need to take to achieve it.

You can see an example of next year’s student graduation plan on this slide. It contains their grades, transcript, and the credits and requirements they still need to graduate. Students and families will meet regularly with guidance counselors to review their plans and map a student’s trajectory to a diploma. Individual graduation planning meetings empower students and build ownership as they consider their future goals.

### **[Slide 14] Summer School**

This year, DCPS will offer enhanced Summer School programming to provide high school students with additional support on their paths toward graduation. For the first time, students will be able to earn original credit during Summer School, as well as take credit recovery courses.

### **[Slide 15] Graduation Transparency/Implementation Monitoring**

Our third key commitment is to provide clear and transparent policies with rigorous monitoring systems. This includes providing ongoing training, resources, and technical support for school-based staff around policy implementation and expectations.

This fall, we are launching a Graduation Monitoring Framework that will allow DCPS to proactively identify system challenges and respond quickly. This framework aligns with our continuous goals of adhering to requirements; and monitoring and supporting those expectations at all our schools.

### **[Slide 16] Policy Update**

We are updating regulation and policy to ensure clarity for students, families, and school staff around the expectations and requirements related to graduation. We seek to:

- Provide flexibility in the school day schedule, to accommodate families with multiple children and students with caretaker responsibilities;
- Remove automatic grade reductions and failures due to absence and replace them with early warning notifications;
- Remove punitive consequences for highly mobile students by allowing them to make up work and show mastery; and
- Streamline the grade appeals process and align timelines of parent/guardian notifications to reduce administrative burden and support overall compliance.

These changes are informed by extensive feedback from DCPS stakeholders and will, in some cases, resolve discrepancies and confusion in existing DC municipal regulations. We believe that creating clarity around regulation and policies is essential moving forward.

### **[Slide 17] Vision**

What this work amounts to is the creation of a new kind of DCPS high school experience. The DCPS vision is for all students to feel loved, challenged, and prepared to positively influence society and thrive in life. Even as we focus deeply on the “prepared” piece of that work through graduation excellence, we will not lose sight of the love and challenges we seek to provide every student who steps inside a DCPS classroom.

In high school, we will accomplish this through personalized plans for graduation; relevant learning experiences, including internships and study abroad trips; and social-emotional supports that see our students as the whole and richly diverse beings they are. Our graduates are, and will be, independent and self-aware young adults who can take pride in what they have achieved, and in whom our city can be proud. Together, with your support, we will make this vision a reality.

We have work to do—difficult and complex work that won’t be finished in a season, or even in a year. But, speaking on behalf of all of DCPS, it is work that we are fully committed to seeing through.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you about this important topic. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.