

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

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Good Afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, staff, and members of the public. I am Dr. Lewis Ferebee, Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I am here today to testify on the important topic of academic achievement in the District of Columbia. I am joined by Corie Colgan, our Chief of the Office of Teaching Learning.

It is my great honor to share that more students are choosing DCPS than last year, with 51,376 students enrolled in DCPS according to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education's (OSSE's) preliminary report. As Mayor Bowser said, "When families enroll and re-enroll in our public schools, that is a reflection of their confidence in our teachers, principals, and school communities." And, as Deputy Chancellor Dr. Drewana Bey shared last week, we are thrilled that so many DCPS educators continued to choose DCPS this fall. As she shared, 90% of our teachers from last school year continued in a role within DCPS this year and 79% of our teachers returned to teach at the same school, outpacing the average for large districts comparable to DCPS. Thank you to all the families and educators who are choosing DCPS.

In my 25-year history in education as a teacher, principal, district leader, Superintendent in Indianapolis, and as the Chancellor of DCPS, I have been laser-focused on improving student achievement. DCPS is committed to ensuring that all students reach their full potential. This is a critical and challenging mission. Statewide and national assessment results confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic led to significant declines in academic outcomes for students across the nation, with a disproportionate impact on students low-income and Black and Brown students – the majority of students attending DCPS. And, we know that there are students who needed additional support to meet their potential before the pandemic. It is for all these reasons that we are making substantial investments this school year in strategies that will help our students recover and excel.

Today, I want to leave you with three key messages. First, last spring, we saw student gains in proficiency on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and we should celebrate that progress. Second, this fall we are seeing encouraging signs of further student progress. Third, DCPS is strategic about how we deploy local and federal resources to support student learning.

DCPS is proud to see students performing at improved levels on our state-wide assessment, PARCC. PARCC is the District's annual assessment of mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA), based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Notably, DC is among the few states in the nation that has held firm to these high standards. These assessments measure the knowledge and skills that matter most for students — understanding and analyzing complex texts, evidence-based writing, mathematical problem-solving — all skills that lead to confidence and success in key academic areas. Students in grades three through eight and high school take these state assessments in ELA and mathematics each spring. These assessment results are one of several measures that together create a broader picture of a student's progress.

DCPS was proud to see performance increases from the 21-22 school year, but we recognize that there remains work to do to return to pre-pandemic levels. DCPS saw gains in proficiency rates in both ELA and Math compared to spring 2022.¹ Math, which saw a greater drop in 2022, remains substantially below 2019 levels, while ELA had

¹ DCPS saw gains in proficiency rates in both ELA (2.5 percentage points) and Math (3.1 percentage points) compared to spring 2022. 38% of students scored proficient (Level 4 + Level 5) in ELA and 25% scored proficient in Math.

a less dramatic drop in 2022 and is closer to pre-pandemic performance. We also recognize that there is more work to do to address gaps between subgroups, particularly in math. DCPS's major subgroups all showed growth from 2022 in both ELA and Math proficiency, though at varying rates. We also know that progress has been uneven across Wards and that more must be done to support our students furthest from opportunity. Please see the slide accompanying my testimony which shows PARCC progress over the last seven years.

DCPS is proud to see promising trends after an initial review of our data from the first term of this school year.

We are heartened and proud that we are seeing early literacy achievement levels match pre-pandemic levels and exceed national averages.² On our beginning of the year math assessments, students in elementary and middle school are matching pre-pandemic levels of proficiency.³ And, on our district-wide reading assessment, proficiency levels for our older students have reached a 5-year high.⁴

Let's zoom in on one of these trends – early literacy achievement. Over the last four years, DCPS is proud to have made substantial investments to support early literacy. We believe that our youngest learners are achieving success in reading due to several key strategies:

- Deepening knowledge about the Science of Reading for educators and instructional leaders by, for example, training 450 educators at the DC Reading Clinic, providing Dyslexia Awareness training to over 4000 DCPS educators, and launching two Early Literacy Institutes for school leaders within DCPS for over 200 participants.
- Providing kindergarten, first, and second grade students with DCPS's new Readers Next Door series – a set of 120 original, research aligned, phonics-based, culturally relevant, books designed to strengthen early reading skills. These texts integrate the student experience with characters that reflect DCPS demographics and places within the DCPS community.
- Regularly monitoring student progress and teaching students in small groups based on their needs with support from data analysis by Central Services staff.
- Continuing the work of the DC Reading Clinic to serve students who need intensive intervention and train teachers in effective practices. We are excited that the Clinic will be expanding into middle schools next school year.

In case you are not familiar with the DC Reading Clinic, it is a DCPS program administered by Central Services staff that provides two sites for free literacy tutoring. At each site, we are simultaneously training teachers while they work directly with students who have reading difficulties. For example, this fall, at Turner Elementary, teachers trained at the Clinic worked with a 2nd grader who had special needs and was unable to read three letter words at the beginning of the year. Now, after a few months of interventions, this student is meeting the

² On the district-wide DIBELS assessment, the percentage of students at or above benchmark at the beginning of the year for Kindergarten through second graders was 51% at the beginning of the 2023 – 2024 school year, the same percentage as at the beginning of the 2019 – 2020 school year. Nationally, 47% of students in K-2 were at or above benchmark this fall.

³ On the district-wide i-Ready Math assessment, the percentage of Kindergarten through 8th grade students considered on level at the beginning of the school year was 19%, the same percentage at the beginning of the year in 2019 – 2020. The percentage considered one grade level below shrunk by 4% as compared to 2019 – 2020 levels.

⁴ On the district-wide Reading Inventory assessment, 44% of 6th – 10th graders achieved levels of Proficient or Advanced at the beginning of the 2022 – 2023 school year, as compared to 41% in 2019 – 2020.

goals on their Individualized Education Plan and consistently reading three letter words. The Clinic is ensuring that teachers have the training needed to make a difference in the lives of our students.

DCPS is also strategic about how best to use resources to achieve our mission. Thanks to Mayor Bowser's leadership, DCPS has had robust resources to support our mission. And, like school districts across the country, we have been fortunate to receive robust Federal resources to support our recovery. This school year, we are directing Federal ESSER funding across a range of priorities.

- Recovery and Acceleration – This school year DCPS has budgeted \$7 million in ESSER funds to support school-based efforts geared at acceleration and recovery. For example, Johnson Middle School is using funds to invest in partnerships to support students that need intensive reading support as well as a staff-led High Impact Tutoring program.
- Supporting the Whole Child – \$12 million to implement a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) that includes academic and social emotional learning strategies designed to accelerate student learning during the school year and summer.
- Technology Plan and IT Support – \$20 million to support our Empowered Learners Initiative, a comprehensive multi-year investment to close the digital divide by expanding technology access, enhancing curriculum, providing teacher PD, and offering information and access for families.
- Safety and Operations – \$19 million to fund activities that promote health and safety and maintain school operations in response to the pandemic, including swing transportation, deep cleaning of schools, central staffing, and equipment purchases.
- Differentiated Family and Student Supports – \$1 million to engage families and students in targeted school communities to build confidence in math skills and establish stronger relationships post pandemic via a district-wide two-way engagement and communication platform. This includes our DREAM With Families Math initiative to support high quality and joyful math experiences for students and families in and out of the classroom.

One strategy that has supported accelerated learning is high-impact tutoring (HIT). HIT is an evidence-based approach to improving academic performance for students who are significantly below grade level. In alignment with national research, DCPS defines HIT as at least 90 minutes of tutoring per week, with a tutor-to-student ratio no greater than 1:4, delivered by a consistent tutor. In addition to these basic scheduling structures, three other critical components of HIT are: high quality tutors, evidence-based curricula aligned to grade level content, and data-driven practice. HIT provides students with “just-in-time,” targeted instruction in the specific skills and standards needed to access Tier 1 content.

We have seen strong evidence that we are reaching the right students with HIT, and that when HIT is delivered with fidelity, these students are making strong academic gains. Over 70% of DCPS schools are implementing HIT to some extent. Last year, over 7,000 students participated in tutoring. Nearly all these students started the year below grade level. Black students and students designated as “at risk” are over-represented in students receiving

HIT, in alignment with our student achievement trends. We are pleased to share that across all assessments, students who meet HIT dosage showed more growth than students who did not meet HIT dosage.⁵

I'd like to share one example about High Impact Tutoring. Last year at Ballou, a student was recommended for tutoring by her geometry teacher. She was falling behind in math – she skipped class regularly, didn't complete coursework, and said that she didn't want to work on her math skills. But after a few weeks, she met her tutor from Raising a Village, one of our partners. Gradually, they started working together, built a rapport, and began working on math skills. After a few more weeks, her confidence started to improve, followed by her grades. Her teacher noticed positive changes in class, and, by the end of the year, she had made over two grade levels of progress in math. High impact tutoring works at DCPS, and we are proud to have supported this strategy for our students.

DCPS is committed to ensuring that students have the math skills they need to succeed in college and career. DCPS recognizes that math proficiency levels decreased because of the lost learning time, disruption, and trauma of the pandemic and that we have significant work to do to ensure that all students are recovering. To that end, DCPS is investing in several initiatives to improve math outcomes including:

- A new ECE math curriculum for PK-3 and PK-4 students called Building Blocks will prepare our youngest learners to succeed in math.
- A focus on elementary fluency and number sense. Learners in grades K-5 are developing deep understanding of the operations and number facts by using the Building Fact Fluency supplemental curriculum during the fluency block.
- Enhancing Screening and Intervention Efforts – We are supporting our teachers in using formative assessments to monitor student progress in real time with short tasks that demonstrate what students know and how teachers can adjust their instruction to meet student needs.
- Deepen Teacher Content Knowledge – We are investing in our educators by partnering with Trinity University and Flynn Education to provide a 4-course graduate certificate program for our teachers and math coaches. Courses will focus on math content knowledge, specifically understanding how concepts and standards progress along a learning continuum from K to Algebra.

Federal resources are coming to an end in September 2024. Over time, DCPS has intentionally stepped down ESSER investments to prepare for the absence of ESSER funding in FY 25. While DCPS will not be able to maintain the level of investment to direct services, we are reviewing critical investments to determine which initiatives to continue and which to cease.

While today's testimony has focused primarily on measures of achievement in literacy and numeracy, DCPS is committed to educating the whole child and not focusing exclusively on achievement in literacy and numeracy. That is why we continue to teach subjects like art, music, financial literacy, and computer science. And that is why we continue to invest in dual language programs, career and technical education, study abroad, and programs that teach physical health like our bike safety and learn-to-swim programs.

⁵ For example, last year, 65% of students who started the year below basic on DIBELS and met HIT dosage moved up a proficiency level.

While I hope you find this testimony and the accompanying data valuable, it can also be helpful for you to see the work of our students, teachers, and school communities in action. Therefore, we invite you to visit to one of our schools to do a walk through and see specific academic acceleration strategies; if you are interested, we will work to accommodate a visit in the coming months. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the work of DCPS and the important topic of academic achievement. I am available to answer any questions you have, and I look forward to the discussion.