

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



Testimony of  
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Public Hearing on Bill 26-72, Holding School Budgets Harmless During  
Modernizations Amendment Act of 2025  
and Bill 26-327, Schools First Amendment Act of 2025

Before the Committee of the Whole  
Council of the District of Columbia  
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman

October 1, 2025  
9:30 AM

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

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, and members of the public. I am Dr. Patrick Ashley and I serve as the Deputy Chancellor for Finance and Operations at the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I am joined today by Dr. Drewana Bey, our Deputy Chancellor for Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.

Thank you to everyone who testified earlier today. At DCPS, we believe in continuous improvement. So, we appreciate the opportunity to hear from DC residents. In my testimony today, I will (1) share several bright spots at DCPS, (2) discuss our perspective on the legislation under consideration, and (3) recommend changes to the Schools First framework.

### **I. Bright Spots at DC Public Schools**

Thanks to Mayor Bowser's leadership, Washington, DC has continued to invest strongly in public education. In Fiscal Year 2026, Mayor Bowser proposed, and this Council approved, a budget that included over \$1.4 billion for DCPS. This budget funds nearly 10,000 school-based educators and staff at 117 schools with 92 cents of every dollar being spent at the school level. While the District faces economic headwinds, Mayor Bowser continues to prioritize public education.

Since 2015, per student funding in the District has increased by 75%. These investments have led to improved results for DCPS students. I would like to take this opportunity to highlight a few indicators of progress over the last decade.

- **Graduation rates are climbing**, with more students prepared for college and career. In the 2018 – 2019 school year, 65% of DCPS students graduated from high school. In the 2023 – 2024 school year, the percentage increased to 77%.
- **DC CAPE scores** show encouraging gains with a 4.4% improvement in English Language Arts and a 4.2% improvement in math for DCPS students this year.
- **Enrollment has risen 17% over the last decade with over 52,000 students attending DCPS last school year.** More families are choosing DCPS for academic rigor and whole-child supports.
- **Teacher retention continues to improve**, driven by better working conditions, professional development, and compensation. Nine in ten teachers returned to teach at DCPS last school year.

- Along with these highlights, we have leveraged capital investments to upgrade facilities, with dozens of modernizations completed over the last decade.

We agree with this Council’s focus on prioritizing stable and fair school funding. Last year, **DCPS schools saw an average 8% increase in their budgets, and every school with flat or growing enrollment received at least a 3% increase.** Only schools with major enrollment declines of greater than 10% saw budget reductions —and even then, we worked to minimize the impact.

## **II. DCPS’s Perspective on Schools First Amendment Act of 2025 and Holding School Budgets Harmless During Modernizations Amendment Act of 2025**

The Council is considering two bills that would alter how DCPS allocates funds to schools so I would like to take this opportunity to share our perspective. The *Schools First Amendment Act of 2025* would generally require school budgets to increase by at least the change in the average cost of a teaching position each school year. We understand the intent behind this legislation – to ensure that schools with flat enrollment can afford to hire the same staff as in the prior year. We agree with this intent. That is why we created the School Sustainability Fund this year, to ensure that schools had sufficient resources to hire the necessary number of classroom teachers.

However, we cannot responsibly support the legislation as drafted. We are concerned about the long-term sustainability of this approach and believe other changes to Schools First must be made. I will share a few recommendations later in my testimony.

I will now turn to the *Holding School Budgets Harmless During Modernizations Amendment Act of 2025*. We support the goal of ensuring stability for schools but do not support the legislation as drafted. Currently, the Schools First framework allows reductions to school budgets if a school’s enrollment decrease is great enough “to eliminate a classroom or warrant elimination of support personnel.”<sup>1</sup> The proposed legislation would disallow decreases if the school is or will be utilizing a swing space. With the implementation of the School Sustainability

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<sup>1</sup> See DC Code § 38–2851.03(a)(6)(B).

Fund, our current funding formula provides stable budgets and staffing for schools while they swing. Five of the six schools in swing spaces saw budget increases this year, even when enrollment declined. For one school in swing, DCPS did provide a lower allocation than last year. This was necessary because the school's enrollment decrease was large enough to require a reduction in the number of classrooms.<sup>2</sup> We agree that schools with flat enrollment should be able to hire the same staff as the prior year. However, if a school sees large enrollment declines, we believe the fiscally responsible approach is to reduce the number of classroom teachers at that school and provide additional resources to growing schools.

### **III. Recommended Changes to the Schools First Framework**

While this hearing is focused on the two bills before you, I would like to recommend changes to the Schools First framework more broadly. With the creation of the School Sustainability Fund, we believe that we are meeting the spirit of Schools First. We all want to see school budgets set in the spring so that principals can make retention and hiring decisions with a complete picture of their budget. Currently, DCPS cannot calculate the Schools First budget as part of initial allocations to schools. The Schools' First budget calculation requires individual school submitted budgets. As a result, Schools First funds are finalized and allocated in the summer after the budget has passed. Allocating Schools First funds after school budgets have been submitted creates instability and uncertainty about what resources will be available to schools. We recommend three changes that will provide clarity for school budgets.

- **First, Prioritizing Growing Schools for Additional Resources:** When enrollment drops significantly, it is often because students are moving schools. We believe that dollars should follow students. The current framework allows reductions when enrollment declines. We recommend ensuring this flexibility extends beyond classroom teachers to include other roles—such as instructional coaches, related arts teachers, administrative aides, and social workers – as well as non-personnel resources. Each year, some schools see lower enrollment and we expect the upcoming year to be no different. Without the ability to responsibly decrease allocations when

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<sup>2</sup> In SY25-26, Tubman Elementary School is projected to enroll 156 fewer students than in SY24-25. This means that the school will need fewer classroom teachers in second grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade.

enrollment declines, we are creating school budgets that are unsustainable for the long-term.

- **Second, Preserving Principal Autonomy:** Principals make informed decisions about who to hire based on enrollment projections. The Schools First position check strictly compares total grade level projections to the ratio in the Collective Bargaining Agreement. These grade level projections may include students not in the general education setting, like students in self-contained settings, so they may not accurately reflect the ratios that teachers experience in classrooms. We recommend either eliminating the position check entirely or modifying it to allow for more principal autonomy over staffing decisions. For schools that see higher-than-projected enrollment, DCPS maintains an enrollment reserve to provide additional resources in the summer and fall.
- **Third, Reducing Administrative Burden:** When the Council allocates additional funds to schools, it does so to the nearest dollar, sometimes resulting in very small adjustments. For example, a school recently received an additional \$62 for contractual services. These very small adjustments take staff time to implement and, often, to reprogram. It would be more efficient to set a minimum threshold, perhaps \$5,000, at which adjustments would be made.

These recommendations are offered in the spirit of supporting student success, a goal I know this Council shares. DCPS introduced the School Sustainability Fund to ensure that schools can hire the appropriate number of classroom teachers. We agree about the need for stability and school budgets this year are evidence that our approach is working. By implementing the refinements I have shared, we can ensure that school budgets are fiscally responsible and that principals have the clarity they need to make the best decisions for students. We welcome your questions and the opportunity to continue discussing the important issues raised today. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.