

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**



**Fiscal Year 2017  
Performance Oversight Hearing**

**Testimony of  
Amanda Alexander  
Interim Chancellor  
District of Columbia Public Schools**

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

**John A. Wilson Building  
Room 500  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20004  
Thursday, March 1, 2018  
10:00 AM**

Good morning, Chairman Grosso and members of the Council. I am honored to have the opportunity to come before you today to discuss DC Public Schools' (DCPS) progress and our strategic direction going forward. I want to thank Mayor Bowser for her confidence in asking me to serve as Interim Chancellor and for her strong support of DC Public Schools. I will strive to support our students, schools, and families as we work to rebuild the city's trust in DCPS and continue the progress the district has made over the past decade.

I am proud to have built my career as an educator in DCPS. I joined the district in 1998 as a kindergarten teacher at Walker-Jones Elementary School, and later served as principal at Bunker Hill and Ross Elementary Schools. Both Bunker Hill and Ross saw double-digit gains in math and English-language arts during my tenure. Under Chancellor Michelle Rhee, I led the redesign of DCPS' principal supervision structure and was charged with managing a cluster of elementary schools as an instructional superintendent.

In 2013, Chancellor Kaya Henderson asked me to serve as deputy chief of schools, a role in which I led the recruitment, development, and supervision of the Instructional Superintendent team. I have also managed literacy initiatives and a district-wide task force to identify and implement strategies to improve student performance.

Most recently, I served as chief of the Office of Elementary Schools, leading DCPS' elementary school support and early childhood programs. I bring firsthand knowledge of what it takes to transform outcomes for children, from transparent policies and evidence-based practices, to meaningful development for educators and two-way communication with families.

DCPS is a district that puts students first, focuses on equity and excellence, and has the courage to improve. In our strategic plan, *A Capital Commitment: 2017-2022*, we set out six ambitious goals:

- Goal 1: Double the percent of students who are college and career ready, and triple the percent of at-risk and students of color who are college and career ready;
- Goal 2: 100 percent of our K-2 students are reading on or above grade level;
- Goal 3: 85 percent of students graduate within four years; and 90 percent graduate within four or five years;
- Goal 4: 100 percent of students feel loved, challenged, and prepared;
- Goal 5: 100 percent of schools are highly rated or are improving; and, finally
- Goal 6: 90 percent of students re-enroll and DCPS serves 54,000 students.

As chief of the Office of Elementary Schools, I was closely involved in creating this

strategic plan last year. I remain a strong believer in its potential to change the trajectory for children in DCPS, especially those who are currently furthest from opportunity. This important work continues, even as our tactics evolve.

We can all agree that the past few months have been challenging ones for DCPS. At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the gains DCPS has made—gains that were possible because of the passionate effort of district teachers, principals, and staff; honest partnerships with families and communities; and most importantly, our hard-working students.

Here are just a few examples of changes we've seen in DCPS over the past decade:

- Ten years ago, we struggled to find enough teachers to staff our classrooms. Today, we attract the best educators from around the country and pay them more than almost any other school district. We launched IMPACT, a groundbreaking performance management tool; LIFT, a career ladder designed to help teachers grow professionally without leaving the classroom; and LEAP, an innovative professional development system that leverages teacher expertise.
- Ten years ago, we could not show whether students were mastering basic skills or whether our schools were effective, because we did not meaningfully track that data. Today, our teachers have access to a rigorous, Common Core-aligned curriculum, which provides students with engaging and relevant learning experiences. We use sophisticated tools to monitor and share progress on everything from human resource support to student satisfaction.
- Ten years ago, we closed schools because of low enrollment. Today, our enrollment has grown by tens of thousands of students, and we are opening sought-after new schools like Van Ness Elementary School, Brookland Middle School, and Ron Brown College Preparatory High School.

In today's DCPS, students have access to incredible opportunities, from learning to swim and ride a bicycle to building robots and studying abroad. Every one of our schools provides arts programs and world language instruction. DCPS students intern at places like Microsoft and Nationals Park, and can take courses at George Washington and Howard Universities while still in high school. Our Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) and Advanced Placement (AP) course completion rates have reached historic highs, leading to more DCPS students applying to and enrolling in college.

Councilmembers, DCPS is definitely not the same district it used to be. You know this, because we worked together to make it happen.

At the same time, we still have significant work ahead of us. We need to improve and consistently implement our grading and graduation policies. We need to dramatically increase student attendance across the district, especially at the secondary level. And we need to earn back the trust of our students and their families.

Our most urgent priority is that DCPS's grading policy is implemented consistently. DCPS is committed to ensuring that every 2018 graduate can feel confident in the diploma they receive. To that end, we have taken the following steps:

- DCPS is conducting a thorough transcript review for all students and will hold individualized follow-up meetings with families to ensure that students who are on track have a path to graduation, and that students who are not currently on track, receive appropriate supports.
- DCPS is training school leaders, teachers, and counselors on grading, credit recovery, and attendance policies and supports.
- And, finally, DCPS is hosting resource fairs at every comprehensive high school to engage with students and families and ensure they have access to the information and resources they need to be successful in school. Outside of connecting students with critical resources and supports from our partner agencies and community organizations, we are also informing families of additional options, such as summer school and credit recovery.

We are also committed to improving our graduation policies for School Year 2018-2019. Starting this week, we are engaging teachers, principals, students, and families in how we can best do this. We will finalize these policies by May, so that we can train staff and prepare for next year.

We recognize that too many of our young people are not coming to school. Learning cannot happen when students are not present. We have improved our communication to families when their child misses a class or day of school, including text messages and phone calls home. Last month, DCPS also began sharing in-seat attendance, truancy, and chronic absenteeism rates for every campus. Our aim is to be transparent about attendance challenges, so that we can work with partners across the city to ensure every day counts and reduce the barriers that keep students out of the classroom. With help, we can make attendance a priority for every student, in every school, every day.

The last few weeks brought unexpected and disruptive change to DCPS. A leadership transition is never easy, much less so when it stems from a loss of public trust. I acknowledge and respect the anger, confusion, and disappointment I've heard from some DCPS stakeholders. I also acknowledge the support and words of encouragement I've heard from other DCPS stakeholders. My focus in the weeks and months ahead is to show through our actions that we are prepared to uphold our values as a district. DCPS is already aware that we must do more to proactively and transparently share information about our challenges, successes, and plans.

I am committed to providing DCPS with stable leadership during this time. I am eager to hear from you, our city's leaders, as well as from families, educators, and students, about what it will take to restore the public's trust and continue DCPS' path of progress.

I recognize that trust can only be earned. However, I do ask that you continue to believe, as I do, in the awesome potential and power of our students. We are trying to do something in DCPS that has never been done before—to build a school district where every single child feels loved, challenged, and prepared to positively influence society and thrive in life. I am grateful for the Council's partnership toward that goal and look forward to answering your questions at this time.