

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DC Public Schools (DCPS)



Public Hearing on
B22-781, "Blind Students Literacy and Education Rights Act of 2018,"
B22-512, "Commission on Literacy Establishment Act of 2017," and
the State of Literacy Efforts

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on Education
Chairman David Grosso

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John A. Wilson Building
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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committee, and staff. I am Corinne Colgan, Interim Chief of Teaching and Learning with the District of Columbia Public Schools (or DCPS). I appreciate the opportunity to share an update on DCPS' role in literacy efforts throughout the District and to discuss B22-781, the "Blind Students Literacy and Education Rights Act of 2018," and B22-512, the "Commission on Literacy Establishment Act of 2017."

Literacy at DCPS

I am proud to serve a District whose city leaders have made a collective effort to transform public education in the District of Columbia. At DCPS, literacy empowers all students to become inquisitive, informed, and engaged citizens in preparation for college, careers, and civic life. Students engage in rigorous and joyful learning experiences to reflect on their own identity, develop empathy for others, and impact their local and global communities.

To guide DCPS' literacy efforts, we believe:

- Achieving literacy is a life-long learning process that requires the purposeful support of an engaged community;
- Literacy requires a combination of content knowledge, discrete skills, and comprehension; and
- We aim to develop both a love of reading and the ability to apply literacy skills in meaningful ways within the context of a given field of study.

We recognize students as whole children and put their needs first in everything we do. A strong foundation in literacy is critical to future success. As a part of our 2022 Capital Commitment, we have set the goal that all Kindergarten through 2nd grade students are reading on grade-level. At DCPS, elementary students develop literacy through a balanced approach that includes phonics instruction, reading, research, writing, and small group instruction to build knowledge, develop fluency, and promote comprehension. We also use our English Language Arts (ELA) block to build their knowledge of the world around them, as background knowledge is a critical component of comprehension. Our Secondary students use rich, compelling literary and informational texts to deepen their understanding of themselves, others, and the world around them through reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Finally, in our Social Studies and Science classes, students use inquiry and literacy to develop content knowledge in these disciplines.

Literacy Programming and Progress

As a part of our efforts to meet our goals, we know that some students will require additional instruction and targeted interventions. DCPS teachers deliver research-based instruction through a rigorous Common Core State Standard (CCSS) aligned curriculum, reading interventions, and a series of assessments used to monitor student progress. At the same time, DCPS believes in tiered supports, which provide a structured way to engage and support our young people.

As needed, students are given additional supports based on formative assessments at multiple points throughout the year. To improve reading comprehension and writing, our teachers identify areas of need using diagnostic assessments, develop instructional plans to provide accelerated instruction, and provide ongoing progress monitoring that is aligned to instruction. We believe it is imperative to intervene early using evidence-based practices.



Our work, both on universal curricular innovations and targeted supports, has led to results. The 2018 PARCC scores showed steady improvement across all grade levels and in every ward. This year marked the third consecutive year of gains in our schools. Schools across all eight wards experienced gains in ELA and Math. In ELA, we've seen an increase in proficiency of 3.2 percentage points in the last year and 10.2 percentage points since 2015. From Simon Elementary School in Ward 8 to Jefferson Middle School in Ward 6 to McKinley Tech in Ward 5, our students are making tremendous progress. Overall, 55 schools made gains of two percentage points or more in ELA.

We also know that there are external data sources, like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (or NAEP), that show we are making progress. In both fourth grade and eighth grade, DCPS has seen gains in reading scores on NAEP since 2009: 10 points in grade 4 reading and six points in grade 8 reading.

With our dedication to literacy in mind, I welcome the opportunity to provide DCPS' feedback on the two bills before the Committee, today.

Blind Students Literacy and Education Rights Act of 2018

DCPS recognizes the importance of individualized education and believes that all students, regardless of background or circumstance, can achieve at the highest levels. As a District focused on providing equitable opportunities, we invest in strategies that ensure student success. Bill 22-781, the "Blind Students Literacy and Education Rights Act of 2018," aligns with some of the current supports that we provide for students with visual impairments through their Individual Education Programs (IEPs). Currently, the decision of whether Braille is appropriate is determined by the IEP team and takes into consideration assessments, eye condition, functional vision, as well as any other disabilities and is determined on an individual basis. DCPS is concerned with the bill's language defaulting to Braille as the best accommodation for visually impaired students. Instead, we support school leaders and knowledgeable staff having the flexibility to make decisions that create a nurturing learning environment for all our students. We believe that the current bill as drafted attempts to standardize a process that requires flexibility and expertise for each individual student.

DCPS teachers of students with visual impairments currently use the Functional Vision Learning Media Assessment to determine a student's primary and secondary learning media. This assessment allows us to accurately assess the needs of our students with visual impairments and design appropriate interventions. We believe that any decisions about the inclusion of Braille in a student's IEP should be based on valid assessment and evaluated by trained professionals.

Similarly, DCPS has a full-time Braille Transcriber to ensure that necessary classroom materials are provided to students in the appropriate Braille format, as requested in Section 3(c). Textbooks that DCPS purchases are either directly obtained in Braille format or the electronic version is provided for transcription into or downloaded in a digital format.

Lastly, DCPS does not require teachers of students with visual impairments to demonstrate competency in Braille reading and writing as described in Section 3(d) of this bill. DCPS believes this requirement should be removed because it would require teachers to check a box that is not based on the full needs of DCPS students and could have larger ramifications on our hiring practices, like limiting the pool of applicants who could teach our visually impaired students. DCPS strives to hire and retain a driven and



motivated workforce that is committed to engaging in lifelong learning and competent in the content, accommodations, modifications, and media needed by our students. For our teachers of students with visual impairments, we provide access to professional development and supports that align with their students' needs. We have teachers who are deeply proficient in braille and use their knowledge to develop strong literacy skills for our students with visual impairment.

Commission on Literacy

Turning to the Commission on Literacy, DCPS welcomes the ideas outlined in Bill 22-512 and would be happy to further discuss this important topic with the Council. At DCPS, we believe increased focus on programming would lead to better outcomes, particularly with pre-literacy for the district's youngest learners, and with a focus on out-of-school time. It is imperative that we provide literacy opportunities for students furthest from that chance. Parents, community members, and other partners are key to improving schools and outcomes for our students.

To that end, DCPS has invested considerable time and effort in developing and supporting research-based literacy practices. To ensure success, we advise that the commission promote current literacy efforts and cross-agency collaboration already happening at DCPS and throughout the District.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to share DCPS' views on these two bills and to provide an update on our literacy efforts. At DCPS, we are committed to preparing our students for success in college, career, and life through enriching classroom and academic experiences, according to their need. We appreciate your continued support and partnership. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

