

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



Performance Oversight Hearing  
District of Columbia Public Schools

Testimony of  
Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee  
Chancellor  
District of Columbia Public Schools

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

March 1, 2024

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, staff, and members of the public. I am Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee, Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Let me begin by thanking our educators. Whether it is principals greeting students at the door by name to ensure students feel like they belong, teachers working thoughtfully on engaging lessons, or school social workers supporting mental health, DCPS works relentlessly to ensure our students feel loved, challenged, and prepared.

Over the last few years, DCPS' steadfast commitments to equity, excellence in instruction, and educating the whole child have resulted in important progress.

More students are graduating from DCPS than ever before with more students prepared for college and career when they leave high school. In the 22-23 school year, DCPS continued to see an increase in graduation rates with over 75% of students graduating high school within four years. For our youngest learners, we are seeing real impacts from our investments in the Science of Reading, with as many Kindergarten – 2nd grade students reading at or above grade level as before the pandemic. We have more work to do, but we should celebrate these signs of steady progress.

Families continue to choose DCPS. DCPS is the only public school district in the region experiencing enrollment increases; growing from 49,035 students in the 2021-22 school year to 51,294 students now. We are proud that District families continue to put their trust in us, and we will continue to prioritize meeting the needs of our families and students to ensure they continue to choose DCPS.

Teachers continue to return to teach and work at DCPS. I am incredibly proud of the work that DCPS has done to recruit, support and sustain a strong educator workforce that can bring their best to the students of Washington, DC. Nine out of ten teachers returned to DCPS this school year. Ninety five percent of Effective and Highly Effective teachers choose to remain with DCPS, with 85% remaining in the same school. Thank you to all the educators working at DCPS for the incredible work you do each day.<sup>1</sup>

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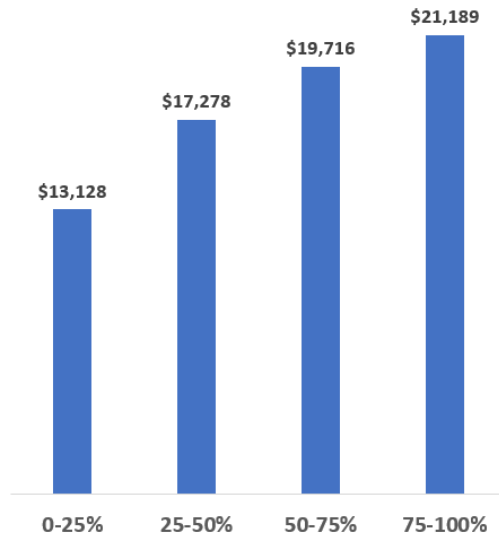
<sup>1</sup> For more information on educator retention, please see DCPS' testimony from the November 29<sup>th</sup> Committee of the Whole hearing on the subject, available here - <https://dcps.dc.gov/release/public-hearing-testimony-%C2%A0teacher-and-principal-retention-district>. Please also see the Office of the State Superintendent of Education's recently release Educator Retention Brief, available here - [https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page\\_content/attachments/2024%20ERB.pdf](https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2024%20ERB.pdf).

DCPS and school systems across the country are at an important juncture as we navigate the conclusion of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Funds. During the pandemic, one-time funding streams like ESSER and the Mayor's Recovery Fund allowed DCPS to expand our workforce by 18% to support COVID-19 related school safety needs, expanded student academic and socio-emotional needs, and the district's recovery. These funds allowed DCPS to prioritize a safe reopening of schools, upgrade facilities, invest in recovery and acceleration strategies, and ensure student wellbeing. During this period, we negotiated historic contracts to recognize the work of our educators and staff across DCPS' four unions. We are proud that our educators and staff are among the highest paid in the nation.

As we look forward, DCPS, like districts across the country, must make difficult decisions as we right-size our budget post-pandemic. While our workforce expanded to meet the challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the same period saw student enrollment increase – but by only 2%. As a result of the negotiated contracts, the loss of federal funding, and inflationary pressures, some schools will see reduced buying power. We recognize the real, felt impacts of these tough decisions that we will have to make this year in a more constrained fiscal environment. Thanks to Mayor Bowser's leadership, DCPS will see a 12.4% increase to the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF) which will help mitigate increased expenses and the loss of one-time local and federal funds.

DCPS will continue to utilize a budget model that centers equity -- allocating resources based on enrollment needs, with more funding going to the students who need it the most. With fewer resources, we feel even more strongly about the need to double down on equity. DCPS recently partnered with Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University, a nationwide leader in school finance analysis, to evaluate our budget model. We hope to release the final evaluation soon, but the initial results are clear – our model provides more resources to schools with higher poverty levels and does this consistently. One finding of the evaluation is that DCPS elementary schools with the highest levels of student poverty (75% - 100%) received \$8,000 more per pupil than elementary schools with the lowest poverty levels (0% - 25%). We know that students furthest from opportunity need more resources and our model is ensuring that students get those resources. Please see the chart included in my testimony for more information about allocations for elementary schools under the DCPS budget model.

2024 average allocation per pupil by elementary school poverty levels.



In this challenging fiscal environment, DCPS will continue to focus on what has made our district great – our people and our values. I’m excited to share that we officially launched our 2023-2028 Capital Commitment earlier this winter.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on the past fifteen years, we know that DCPS overcame many challenges to chart a path of progress. For this Strategic Plan, we have identified three Strategic Priorities. We want students to be: Succeeding Academically, Connected to Schools, and Prepared for What’s Next.

Our first Strategic Priority area is Succeeding Academically. DCPS is proud to have experienced gains in both ELA and Math proficiency rates between SY21-22 and SY22-23 in the state-wide assessment.<sup>3</sup> DCPS is also heartened by a review of our mid-year SY23-24 data. This data demonstrates that early literacy achievement levels match pre-pandemic levels and exceed national averages.<sup>4</sup> Data from mid-year math assessments show students in elementary and

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<sup>2</sup> DCPS engaged hundreds of stakeholders in listening sessions and dozens of interviews. I’m proud that our listening sessions specifically targeted getting feedback from our students, our educators, and of course the community and staff. I was so inspired to hear from students at School Without Walls High School, Anacostia High School, Cardozo Education Campus, Kramer Middle School, and our virtual engagement listening sessions where scholars offered feedback and their vision for DCPS. Through nearly fifty individual interviews we heard from members of the DC Council as well as other community leaders. We also heard from over 1,300 through our survey.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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. At the mid-year point, 64% of K-2 students are at or above benchmark. At the mid-year point of the 2023 – 2024 school year, 64% of K-2 students were meeting or exceeding benchmarks, the same percentage as MOY 2019 – 2020. This year, more students are exceeding benchmarks than pre-pandemic (35% this year vs. 33% 2019-2020).

middle school improving from last year.<sup>5</sup> And, on our district-wide reading assessment, proficiency levels are improving significantly from the beginning of the year.<sup>6</sup> Even with these bright spots, we know there is a tremendous amount of work to be done to ensure we return to and exceed pre-pandemic levels in our math and ELA performance for all students. And, we know that the opportunity gap between our Black and Hispanic students, and their white counterparts, remains high.

In the five-year Strategic Plan, DCPS places an emphasis on math to ensure students have the math skills they need to succeed in college and career. DCPS is investing in several initiatives to improve math outcomes including:

- A new Early Childhood Education math curriculum for PK-3 and PK-4 students to prepare our youngest learners to succeed in math.
- A focus on elementary fluency and number sense.
- 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.

Our second Strategic Priority is ensuring that students feel Connected to Schools. We know when students feel connected to their school community, they're more likely to succeed. This has never been more relevant than over the past four years, as our students were challenged by a global pandemic and its effects. Research shows that students learn best when they have trusting, caring relationships with adults and peers. That's why DCPS regularly surveys students about whether they feel loved, challenged, and prepared. More than eighty percent of students report they feel safe at school.

In partnership with Transcend, we recently launched our DCPS Becoming Pilot with forty-one schools. Pilot schools like Ballou High School trained their staff in Restorative Practices to reduce serious infractions and use alternatives to suspension when serious incidents occur. One way they do this is the way that they prepare students for restorative conversations after an incident. Students and teachers write notes praising each other and leave them on a teacher's door or a

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<sup>5</sup> 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. At mid-year, 35% of students are considered on grade level.

<sup>6</sup> On the district-wide Reading Inventory assessment, 49% of K-5<sup>th</sup> graders are reading on grade level, an improvement of 20 percentage points since the beginning of the year.

student's locker. This year, the school is seeing results – serious infractions are down 47% and Out of School Suspensions are down 69%.

DCPS will continue to build on existing strategies in the coming five years that support our students, which includes our Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), doubling our after-school enrichment opportunities available to our middle school students, and building on our Cornerstone experiences.

Our third Strategic Priority is for students to be Prepared for What's Next. To us, that means students are supported at every key transition throughout their time at DCPS and beyond. Our students graduate on time and are prepared for postsecondary success. Two critical transitions for our students are the move from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to high school. To support students with these critical changes, DCPS rolled out Sixth Grade Academies this year, as a complement to our successful 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy model.

Sixth Grade Academies at eleven Title I middle schools each have a devoted assistant principal and a budget for curricular materials, field trips, and compensating staff for additional responsibilities. The Academies are focused on increasing students' attendance, academic performance, and sense of belonging as they begin middle school. We have already seen encouraging data this school year as in-seat attendance among students in Sixth Grade Academies is more than two points higher than in-seat attendance at these schools at this point last year.

One way that we ensure students are prepared for what's next is by partnering with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) on the District's Advanced Technical Center (ATC). At this center, DCPS 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> grade students, along with students from public charter schools can participate in career and technical education programs while remaining enrolled in their high school. Specifically, the center offers two-year, four-course dual credit pathways in cybersecurity, health information technology, and nursing. Students can earn credits, industry credentials, and access paid internship opportunities. We're pleased to be collaborating with OSSE on this important program to remove barriers and help students prepare for the future.

DCPS remains relentlessly focused on our students. We continue to invest in their academic, social, and emotional success, and we appreciate the opportunity to discuss our work with you today. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.