

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



Budget Oversight Hearing

Testimony of
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Chancellor
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Before the
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson

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

Good morning, 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 about the Fiscal Year 2025 Budget.

Thanks to Mayor Bowser's leadership, DCPS students and schools have an annual budget \$250 million larger than it was four years ago. Our schools are more robustly staffed than ever before with over 8,700 team members working in schools with students every day compared to just under 7,900 in Fiscal Year 2021. And, during that time, we negotiated a historic contract with our labor partners. Our starting teacher salaries are the highest in the nation.¹ The average pay for a DCPS teacher has increased by 20% compared to four years ago. While we have provided robust resources to schools, particularly over the past four years, we know that this year is a time when we need to right-size. With the ending of federally provided dollars, we need to make hard decisions as a city about what to prioritize and what investments to preserve. While we know that schools are much better resourced than they were four years ago, we also know many school communities are experiencing difficult cuts to staff. We appreciate the work of principals and Local School Advisory Teams to make decisions about what to prioritize at their schools.

At DCPS, our budgeting strategy allocates funds based on enrollment and student need while minimizing staffing changes where possible. This updated approach replaced the previous Comprehensive Staffing Model and acknowledges the impact of per-student spending on educational outcomes. Both DCPS and the Council agree that students identified as at-risk require additional resources. Consequently, our budget model emphasizes these students' needs, directing more funding to schools with larger populations facing significant barriers to opportunity.

Recently, Edunomics Lab, an education finance research center at Georgetown University, conducted an analysis regarding DCPS' budget model. That analysis found that the current DCPS budget model is more successful at directing funds to students with the highest needs than our previous model. For example, their analysis found that for elementary schools that have the highest levels of poverty, our model provides over \$8,000 more per student than to schools with the lowest level of poverty. To better understand their analysis, please see the provided slides.

¹ According to the National Education Association. See <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/educator-pay-and-student-spending-how-does-your-state-rank/starting-teacher>.

Today I want to discuss four specific investments that DCPS is sustaining or expanding in Fiscal Year 2025 to drive progress for our students – (1) Sixth and Ninth Grade Academies, (2) the DC Reading Clinic and DREAM Math Centers, (3) Connected Schools, and (4) School Modernizations. These are evidence-based, equity-focused investments that make DCPS a high-performing school system.

At DCPS, more students are graduating than ever before. 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. One investment that has supported improved graduation rates is our Ninth Grade Academies. The University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research confirms that the ninth-grade year is critical to college and career success and names the freshman year a "make it or break it year for students", perhaps the most important year that will set the stage for whether students will graduate from high school.

Therefore, DCPS continues to invest in Ninth Grade Academies to support the transition of students from eighth to ninth grade. First time ninth graders at nine traditional high schools are scheduled together in teams for all core content courses in such way that they interact with a specific team of teachers and students. Through this teaming or school-within-a-school approach, students make solid connections with adults and peers, which increases their sense of belonging. Academy Assistant Principals lead teaching teams and meet with them weekly to monitor progress, troubleshoot challenges, and design support for specific students. DCPS also employs a Ninth Grade Academy Director at Central Services to support Assistant Principals at each Academy. The Director consults regularly with Assistant Principals to track promotion rates, course pass rates, and other critical data. This strategy has led to more and more students being promoted successfully to the 10th grade from their first year of high school.

Given the success of our model, we are now expanding this approach to middle school and introducing Sixth Grade Academies at 11 Title I middle schools. The Academies are focused on increasing students' attendance, academic performance, and sense of belonging as they begin middle school. Each Academy has a devoted Assistant Principal and a budget for curricular materials, field trips, and compensating staff for additional responsibilities (tutoring, extra-curricular activities, collaborative planning, etc.). We have already seen encouraging data with

students in our Academies attending school at higher rates than students in these schools last year or compared to sixth grade students not enrolled in an Academy.

DCPS continues to lead as a District that is making real progress for students through investments in the Science of Reading. We are seeing encouraging improvements for our youngest learners with as many Kindergarten – 2nd grade students reading at or above grade level as before the pandemic. In fact, at mid-year our Kindergarten through 2nd grade students are outperforming the national average.² We celebrate these signs of rebounding and steady progress and understand we have more work to do. One reason for this success is our investment in ensuring our teachers understand the Science of Reading, use aligned materials, and through consistent monitoring of student progress. A driver of this work is the DC Reading Clinic. This \$1.3 million annual investment has now trained over 450 teachers and served over 500 students with intensive intervention. Thousands of students have benefitted from increased teacher expertise when teachers apply what they are learning in their classrooms. In Fiscal Year 2025, we are pleased to expand the Reading Clinic to middle schools and the model to mathematics instruction. DCPS will open a DREAM Math Center to grow teacher expertise while serving students in need of math instruction. The Center, which will serve students across the District, will allow families to learn together with students.

While we work to support students' academic achievement, we are also investing comprehensively in the whole child through our Connected Schools Model. Connected Schools are full-service community schools. These schools partner with the community to provide an integrated approach to academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement. This approach works to ensure all students, regardless of background or neighborhood, are able to thrive in school and in life. Initial analyses by Johns Hopkins University showed that learning loss between 2019 and 2023 was smaller at Connected Schools compared to non-Connected Schools. Additionally, students receiving at least one ongoing service from a community partner at Connected Schools had attendance rates that were 7% higher than their peers for SY22-23. Connected Schools partner with programs providing high-impact tutoring, student mental health support, aftercare, and other services – all ways that DCPS is working to support the whole child.

² 64% of DCPS Kindergarten through 2nd graders are performing at or above benchmark on the mid-year DIBELS assessment, as compared to 52% of Kindergarten through 2nd graders nationally.

This investment is funded through a variety of sources including local funding, Federal grants, Medicaid funding, as well as private philanthropy.³ At each school, an approximately \$200,000 investment supports a Connected Schools Manager as well as funding for basic supplies. At Central Services, four team members support this work by providing one-on-one coaching, connecting schools to community partners, and by applying for and securing additional funding sources. Altogether, this program represents a \$4.7 million annual investment by DCPS. In Fiscal Year 2025, we are excited to expand this program from 18 schools to 20 within DCPS. Please see the provided slides for more information.

Finally, over the last twenty years, in collaboration with the Department of General Services (DGS), DCPS has renovated and modernized dozens of school buildings, investing billions of dollars to ensure that students are learning in state-of-the-art facilities. Thanks to Mayor Bowser's leadership and the continued support of the Council of DC, DCPS is moving forward with 33 school modernization or expansion projects. Over the next six years, we propose to invest \$2.6 billion in our schools. In Fiscal Year 2025, opening in time for School Year 2024-25, we plan to complete construction for Whitlock, Dorothy Height, Garfield, School Without Walls at Francis-Stevens, Deal, and the Old Miner Early Childhood Education Center. Despite the challenging fiscal environment, we continue to prioritize modernizations and small capital projects to improve the physical spaces in which students learn. In Fiscal Year 2025, DCPS and DGS will begin the construction phase of modernizations at four elementary schools – Thomas Elementary School, JO Wilson Elementary School, Tubman Elementary School, and Malcolm X @ Green Elementary School. DCPS prioritizes modernizations in accordance with the PACE Act, which emphasizes the need to prioritize schools with significant percentages of students designated at-risk.

These are just some of the thoughtful, evidence-based, equity-focused investments we are making at DCPS with public resources. At DCPS, like other school districts around the country, we have had to make tough decisions about what to prioritize in a challenging fiscal environment. Above all, we have chosen to prioritize supporting our students and the investments that help them succeed. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering your questions.

³ While DCPS Connected Schools receive a small amount of funding through OSSE's Community Schools Initiative, the DCPS efforts will not be impacted because of changes to funding to that program.