

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



Fiscal Year 2021-22
Performance Oversight Hearing

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

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Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, members of the Council, and staff. I am Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee, Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today to discuss DCPS' progress, adaptability, and achievements over the past year.

I would like to start by thanking the entire DCPS community and acknowledging their incredible efforts this year. Despite unprecedented circumstances, our students have continued to learn and grow. Our staff have welcomed students back for in-person learning and ensured critical safety protocols are in place. Our teachers have adapted their instruction to address the time our students spent out of the traditional classroom environment. Our school leaders have worked tirelessly to create safe and welcoming school environments filled with rigorous and joyful learning. Our families have trusted us with their children and they have let us know where and when we can do better. There is no greater honor than to lead this school system.

Despite the pandemic, we have focused on our students' experience and positive outcome trajectories; including an increase in our graduation rate to more than 70%. Under the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis, we have been unwavering in our pursuit of rigorous and joyful learning experiences, even when that task was more daunting than ever before. This year, we were proud to welcome back nearly 50,000 students. Every moment I spend in our schools, I am struck by joyful and supportive learning happening. I am inspired by the warmth of our educators and the curiosity of our students.

Rigorous and Joyful Learning for All Students

Reflecting back to last summer, I'd like to recognize the work of our schools that prepared for the full return of in-person learning. All DCPS schools worked with their families and over 50 partner organizations to design unique Summer Acceleration Academies designed to serve more than 5,000 students who benefited from focused support, peer interactions, and academic opportunities. After a year of limited in-person instruction, the summer was a moment to restart through robust, hands-on learning activities such as using math skills to build rollercoasters and applying science by working in school gardens.

As school started in the fall, the entire nation was grappling with concerns about what students may have missed when they were learning remotely. Through research, DCPS' focus on acceleration has been to prioritize important standards to provide teachers the space to deepen student learning. This strategy supports teachers in delivering grade level content, while providing targeted supports if a student's prior skill needs more support. An example of this is in mathematics. If a sixth grader is working on ratios, but needs more support in division, our dedicated educators work thoughtfully and intentionally to teach division alongside ratios to enrich the student's understanding of both concepts concurrently. In addition, we have expanded access to high-impact tutoring, in schools and in partnership with community-based providers, to help students strengthen skills and get on track in their classes.

New this year, every DCPS school team is focusing on consistent acceleration and individualized student support. We are utilizing a system-wide approach that helps teachers and school teams target learning experiences based on each student's unique needs. The DCPS Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a strengths-based approach to organizing supports for students into three tiers. Strong Tier 1 practices are the consistent foundation of success for all students and



include rigorous grade level content, arts, building strong peer and teacher relationships, and providing consistent trauma responsive practices. If a student would benefit from more tailored supports, Tier 2 or Tier 3 success plans are implemented and monitored every 6-8 weeks. For example, 4.3% of DCPS students are receiving Tier 3 supports through High Intensity Tutoring, a research-based strategy for improving student achievement. MTSS is more critical now than ever and is the foundation of our acceleration and support strategy and our work to increase attendance and engagement. It provides systems and structures for understanding strengths and needs within schools and providing aligned supports. The MTSS work is complemented by our increases in social-emotional learning and mental health support to schools both through increases in the number of DCPS social workers and psychological and through the full expansion of the School-Based Mental Health Program.

We have also worked to make school more engaging, relevant, and effective in preparing students for success after graduation. We have continued to invest in our National Academy Foundation (NAF) Academies and career and technical education opportunities as well as early college programs and have expanded career exposure starting at the middle school level. More of our high school students are able to participate in meaningful postsecondary programming, including through the Advanced Internship Program and expanded dual enrollment through OSSE. Our support for students continues after graduation through DCPS Persists, and our data shows that coaching is working to increase college retention rates. We are excited to build on our work to reimagine high school in the years to come.

As we adapt in the ongoing pandemic, technology funding continues to be a priority for ensuring equity and excellence for every student. This school year, we invested \$13 million dollars in new devices. We have achieved our goal of ensuring a one-to-one ratio for students in grades three through twelve, while prioritizing a device for all students. We also prioritized capital investments in technology, including installing outdoor Wi-Fi at every DCPS school.

Finally, we know that our educators are the foundation of our schools. We are working hard to support our teachers in this challenging time. This includes an expansion of mental health supports for teachers, additional staff joining schools this semester to support COVID-19 response and relieve the burden on educators and administrators, and increased incentives and funding for substitute teachers. We've also expanded our investments in career ladders for aspiring teachers, including through free college education for paraprofessionals and high school students pursuing teaching careers through the DC Futures partnership with OSSE.

Safety Supports

We know that students learn best in their classrooms, which is why DCPS made tremendous investments to reopen and operate our facilities safely. With the support of Mayor Bowser, DCPS invested more than \$24M to improve filtration and ventilation in every DCPS building. Mobile units with medical-grade HEPA filters clean the air in classrooms, and we have installed UV lights in key areas to keep germs from replicating. MERV-13 filters in building-wide systems remove small particles, including viruses, from the air. DCPS buildings are also equipped with indoor air quality sensors that are continuously monitoring air quality in our schools.



We know that vaccines are the most effective tool in mitigating the spread of COVID-19. It's been a little over a year since DCPS stood up our first vaccine clinic at Dunbar High School for DCPS staff. Since then, over 35 schools have hosted vaccine clinics where nearly 6,000 members of our DCPS community have been vaccinated.

We have expanded our COVID surveillance testing program to include required testing for all students when returning from extended school breaks. We were proud that more than 40,000 families and staff submitted their student's rapid test results before returning from instructional breaks this year. We've also launched a weekly testing program for our youngest students who are not yet eligible for the vaccine and are proud that more than 4,000 of our youngest learners are testing every week as part of our Test-to-Stay program. Additionally, we've provided a sign-up link for staff to receive a weekly PCR test mailed to their home. We've worked to expedite the process for identifying and notifying close contacts and we are proud to report COVID positivity rates every day at the school level on our website as a level of transparency that helps our community be informed.

We also know students rely on schools for more than just learning. This year, DCPS resumed in-person meals while continuing to provide "grab and go" meals for virtual learners and operating continuous open meal suites for DC youth to receive free, multiple-day meal kits throughout the city.

Innovation and Continuous Improvement

Finally, despite the pandemic, DCPS continued to innovate and improve our practices with a focus on equity. This year, DCPS is proud to launch our equitable access designated seats. As a national leader in early childhood education for our youngest learners, this program is designed to expand access to prekindergarten seats at nine DCPS schools for students furthest from opportunity.

We also launched a Safe and Positive Schools Pilot, which allowed schools to redirect funding from school security for additional social-emotional supports. We look forward to continuing to reimagine school security, and everything we do to promote safety, belonging, relationships, and the supportive environment that we know are drivers of social, emotional, and academic learning.

Looking forward to next year, we were proud to roll out a more equitable and transparent funding model for schools that increases funding to schools with greater needs. At the same time, this evidence-based model, developed over several years with stakeholder and expert input and engagement, coupled with a historic increase in UPSFF citywide announced in February by Mayor Bowser, ensures school stability during this challenging time and puts our schools on a strong road to recovery.

Conclusion

The District was presented with the unique opportunity to reimagine systems to be more equitable, resilient, and vibrant than before. I am so proud of the entire DCPS team for their work to support our talented DCPS students this year.



I am grateful for our community as we work through the dynamic nature of this pandemic. I look forward to continued partnership with the DC Council to achieve our shared goal that every student feels loved, challenged, and prepared to positively influence society and thrive in life.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions at this time.

