

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



PR23-67, "Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools Dr. Lewis Ferebee Confirmation Resolution of 2019"

Testimony of
Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee

Before the

Committee of the Whole
Chairman Phil Mendelson
&
Committee on Education
Chairman David Grosso

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Introduction

Good day, Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, members of the Education Committee and Committee of the Whole, staff, and the DC Community. It is with great pleasure and pride that I speak before you today as Mayor Bowser's nominee to be the next chancellor of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I would first like to thank you for convening today's hearing and the opportunity to speak with all of you in recent weeks. I am honored by Mayor Bowser's endorsement and grateful to be considered for this opportunity. I would also like to thank the DC Community and the Our Schools Leadership Committee for providing their input, both during the Chancellor search process and at the DC Council's recent community roundtables.

Over the past three weeks, I have seen clear evidence of educators' dedication to transforming schools and to accelerating student progress in Washington, DC. If confirmed, I am excited to collaborate with a team committed to always putting students first and to usher in DCPS' next phase of excellence. During my meetings with students, parents, teachers and community members, I heard very clearly that DCPS needs a champion. DCPS has seen challenges, but I truly believe this is a transformational moment for our students, schools, and for the District. I am ready to be that champion.

Schools are the anchor of building opportunity pathways, and the greatest driver to student success is the relationship between schools, families, and communities. Often times, schools and the communities they serve have a symbiotic relationship. Since my selection, I have appreciated learning more about the history and culture of DC's neighborhoods and engaging with residents to hear solutions and recommendations for how to best serve our young people. In my experiences as an education professional, including my work in Virginia and North Carolina, and more recently, in Indianapolis, I have always placed an emphasis on keeping student success at the heart of all I do. As Chancellor, I would welcome all opportunities to find and implement strategies that prioritize student growth and the removal of barriers to success.

Background / Educational Leadership

I am a proud member of a family of educators. My parents, both educators themselves, instilled a set of values that I carry with me. Like most adults, I learned a lot about work and life from my parents. I chose a career as a public servant, not out of obligation, or to fulfill parental expectations, but because I believe in the promise education provides as an equalizer and as a means of increasing social mobility—and, that, I experienced firsthand as a student and through my parents' eyes as educators. For the urban education setting where I have served the most, this is ensuring that the tall buildings downtown is not just the city's revered skyline for the students furthest away from opportunity. It's a vision of a career in a city where our students grew up. It is access and opportunity to earn a better quality of life. It is a promise to our students of graduating high school prepared for post-secondary success yielding the income to take care of themselves and their family.

At North Carolina Central University, I had the opportunity to volunteer at C. C. Spaulding Elementary school across the street from campus with a group of students who were not reading on grade level. Through this experience, I realized the joy of teaching a young person to read. I began my career as an



elementary school teacher and taught third, fourth, and fifth grades. At the age of 25, I became the youngest principal in the state of North Carolina at the lowest performing school in the state. Under my leadership, Fairview Elementary School moved from less than half of the students proficient on state tests to exceeding the district average and meeting high growth. Governor Mike Easley recognized our efforts as a state turnaround model. From my 16 years as an educator and leader in Virginia and North Carolina, to my five years in Indianapolis, I have had the chance to lead transformation efforts in the classroom, and to build an understanding of the complexities that come with leading a large urban school district in an evolving city. I have had to make difficult decisions but have always put students first.

In Indianapolis I was tasked with redesigning the high school experience, fighting for teacher raises, and turning around low-performing schools. In many instances, these changes were challenging and have taught me invaluable lessons that have impacted my leadership. Change may be hard, but I believe that it is our responsibility to empower students to be prepared for college, career, and lifelong success by having strong systems in place that reflect the needs and hopes of the community.

As some examples of my work as a 20-year education veteran, I have:

- Designed processes for Student-Based Budgeting, which enable schools to create innovative school designs that meet the unique needs of their students, while also creating new levels of transparency and improving equity in how resources are distributed across the system.
- Bargained one of the most innovative teacher contracts in the nation, which led to \$20 million dollars in compensation and teacher leadership investments—, over three years.
- Founded the Indianapolis Public Schools Business Alliance, whose members included Fortune 100 and Fortune 500 companies to advance the school district's strategic priorities, workforce development and corporate partnerships.
- Employed transformation efforts to drive turnaround for low-performing schools and raise the district's graduation rate by 15 percentage points with Black students also surpassing the state average for graduation.
- Increased the College Career Readiness Achievement Rate by 13 percentage points, a state accountability measure assessing the percentage of graduates completing activities that are connected to being more prepared for college and/or careers such as advanced courses, dual enrollment and industry certifications.

Why DCPS?

I am excited about the opportunity to support students in a system with such strong support from the executive and legislative branches of government . It is clear to me that DC's leaders have made tremendous investments in education and recognize its importance. For example, the investments made in social emotional learning, modernizing facilities and summer youth employment are admirable and attractive.



I am thrilled about the opportunity to partner with city agencies and work with the Deputy Mayor of Education to make every day count for every student. Similarly, I hope to be able to partner with the DC Council on various efforts. Direct access to the city's behavioral health services enables the school district to efficiently and effectively address mental health needs. Employment services are linked with DCPS providing a runway to think about labor and talent in ways that give all our students a fair shot at the middle class or higher. The possibility to better support students and families with a closer coordination with child family services is another area that peaked my interest in DCPS.

I am most excited to be a part of a District and administration that are appropriately aggressive in finding innovative ways to meet the needs of our young people. I have enjoyed and thrived in environments where the status quo is challenged, and innovation is encouraged. I have a proven track record of introducing creative and new ways of better serving students and families and building a strong coalition of support around innovative ideas.

Finally, I am thrilled about serving a community closer to family. I can remember vividly the summers in the Hillcrest neighborhood, here in the District with my aunt who retired from Scott Montgomery Elementary School taking me to the Fredrick Douglass House and thinking how one day DC could be home. I am proud to call DC home for me and my family.

Priorities

For DCPS' next phase of excellence, every student from Pre-K to 12th grade should have a high-quality education that prepares them to take advantage of the growth and opportunity in every ward across this thriving city. If I am confirmed in this role, I have four priorities for the future of DCPS:

1. **First, we must ensure there is a high-quality school in every neighborhood providing rigorous instruction at every grade level.** We must guarantee that our students who are furthest from opportunity have access to the strongest educators, school leaders, and programming. We can only achieve our goals of equity and excellence if all schools have access to the resources and opportunities that support every student in reaching their full potential. This includes ramping up school autonomy and talent pipelines ensuring the best educators and school leaders for all of our campuses.
2. **Second is meaningful public engagement. I want to partner with parents, families, community members, and educators to set every student up for success.** DCPS families and the community will have voice in strategy and how we define success for our students and high performing schools. Our next phase of excellence will be cemented with elevating family advocacy and agency. Greater transparency for how schools are funded and how resources are allocated to schools will become a signature feature of public engagement. We will only succeed in this work when all stakeholders are valued, heard, and rooted in our bold solutions.
3. **Third is the continued expansion of early education opportunities.** As documented in studies of other communities that have made similar investments in early education, students have greater success when they have mastered more early literacy skills by the time they enter kindergarten. To close the achievement gap, a persistent challenge that no urban school district



has achieved, the opportunity gap entering kindergarten must be closed first. Our early education options will be accessible, non-traditional and rigorous. DCPS will be the nation's bellwether for early childhood education.

4. **Finally, introducing career pathways and new school models will shape innovative and relevant curricular options bolstering student achievement and engagement.** An analysis of the labor market and high-performing and interesting programming will frame new choices for families tightly aligned to post-secondary opportunities. School design fellowships for planning and engagement will strengthen our offerings as well. As new school models and career pathways are launched, students will be more engaged and heightened confidence in middle grades and high school will emerge.

Moving Forward

As an exemplar for Districts across the Nation, I would like to see all schools as pillars of excellence, and for our parents to take pride in the number of five-star schools and high-quality options available to their students. I believe that DCPS is already a system where educators are committed to the progress of their students and to eliminating the opportunity gap for all. I hope to continue providing incentives to retain the best instructors and to grow the number of students that choose DCPS. I would also like to instate a pledge of transparency between myself and this council and the community, including all DCPS students, teachers, leaders, and parents.

Conclusion

I recognize that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to building a strong school system focused on putting students first and accelerating student growth. What may have worked in the school systems I have previously worked in, may not be the best solution here. But I am prepared to learn the landscape, hear from the community, and determine what is next and best for the students and families of the District of Columbia—and my prior experience shows that I am an educator and leader who is not afraid to make choices, and that the choices I make create positive changes.

I am looking forward to continuing to visit schools, and engaging teachers and families in hopes of increasing transparency and rebuilding faith in our commitments. I am excited about the opportunity to bring stable leadership to DCPS as chancellor and catapult the success of our students by focusing on equity and excellence.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you all today. I am grateful to have had the chance to hear from students, families, educators, and community members who participated in the search process and who have spoken today and the two community based roundtables, and hope to continue these conversations as chancellor. If confirmed, I hope to collaborate with all education stakeholders to build partnerships that ensure all students have a path toward success, from the earliest learners through high school students focused on college and career. I also ask for your support and patience as we work to make this a smooth transition.



I also want to take a moment to thank the people who every single day enter school campuses and central office to do the hard work that supports the DCPS mission “to ensure that every school guarantees students reach their full potential through rigorous and joyful learning experiences provided in a nurturing environment” – our teachers, faculty and administrators. Thank you for your efforts to make sure every day counts and every student feels loved, challenged and prepared to positively influence their community and thrive in life.

Chairman Grosso and Mendolson, I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

