



**TESTIMONY OF SOUMYA BHAT, EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY ANALYST
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**At the Performance Oversight Hearing for District of Columbia Public Schools
Before the DC Council Committee on Education
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Councilmember Catania and members of the Committee on Education, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Soumya Bhat, and I am the Education Finance and Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI engages in research and public education on the fiscal and economic health of the District of Columbia, with a particular emphasis on policies that affect low- and moderate-income residents.

The DC Public Schools five-year "Capital Commitment" plan includes several ambitious goals to accomplish by 2017, from dramatically improving proficiency and graduation rates to raising enrollment and student satisfaction. One of these goals is to increase proficiency rates by 40 percentage points at the 40 lowest-performing schools.

DCFPI agrees that there is a real need to support these schools, most likely with additional programming and resources, and we believe DCPS needs to be transparent about the steps that will be taken to achieve this goal. I am here today to highlight a few programs already being offered that could be expanded to extend the reach of the limited resources of the DCPS system while increasing opportunities for our most vulnerable students.

Strategically invest in effective out-of-school time programming

One of the ways to stretch the limited resources of DCPS is to continue to use best practices in the Office of Out-of-School Time Programming (OSTP). Through a combination of organized school-based services and intentional coordination with community partners, the OSTP has made an impact by promoting high-quality programs and increasing access to out-of-school time services for the city's neediest residents.

This year, however, the OSTP was cut by \$3 million and many schools had to share an afterschool coordinator. In addition, DCPS administered a "Proving What's Possible" (PWP) grant competition last summer which awarded 59 schools with grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$490,000 to implement "innovative programming" to improve academic achievement. Yet the impact and sustainability of Proving What's Possible are still unknown.

It is not clear, for example, if the PWP grants are part of an ongoing sustainable strategy to improve schools or whether it was a one-time funding opportunity. To date, DCPS officials have not announced if there will be a similar "Proving What's Possible" grant program this coming summer. If the grants continue, it is not clear if there will be any evaluation of the various efforts to determine which were most effective.

Last year, the funding source for the PWP grants was not clearly identified and school leaders had little time to submit proposals and set up their programs for the school year. Rather than funding critical programs in this manner, DCFPI recommends that funding be strategically invested into the OSTP to ensure the continuity and scaling up of effective programming. The school-based coordinator model should also be reinstated to the extent possible to improve the alignment between school leaders and community-based organization partners. Close coordination allows service providers to mirror and complement the school-day curriculum and to offer targeted support to students identified by the school as needing extra help. DCFPI welcomes additional conversations to discuss these strategies.

Expand quality parent engagement efforts

Parent engagement strategies should also be a key component of improving academic outcomes in the District. Research shows us that students do better in school when their families are engaged.¹ Positive outcomes of family engagement include academic achievement, such as increases in math and reading proficiency and reduced truancy rates, an issue of concern for the Council. Robust family engagement interventions are also associated with improved socio-emotional skills and fewer behavioral issues for students who participate.

Currently, DC has a number of programs in partnership with the Flamboyant Foundation that are aimed at robust parent engagement, but these programs are only in a handful of schools and have minimal reach. For example, the Parent Teacher Home Visit program trains staff to build a relationship between parents and teachers through visits to students' homes. Academic Parent Teacher Teams are another support that offers parents information on what concrete skills their child needs to learn for their grade, specific learning activities they can do with their child at home, and guidance with identifying short term academic goals for their child.

So far, at least 1,800 children have received home visits and positive results are already being seen through Flamboyant Foundation's interim data evaluation. The program is presently funded with private resources, but will need to be supported by DCPS resources if it is to be scaled up system-wide. DCFPI encourages the Council to pay attention to the results of these quality parent engagement programs and to identify plans and funding to scale up these strategies across DC's schools.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer input. I am happy to answer any questions.

¹For more information, see: http://flamboyantfoundation.org/resources_and_publications/family-engagement-matter/.