TESTIMONY OF SOUMYA BHAT, EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY ANALYST
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At the Performance Oversight Hearing for the Office of the
State Superintendent of Education
Before the DC Council Committee on Education
March 5, 2015

Chairman Grosso 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 is a non-profit organization that promotes opportunity and widespread prosperity for all residents of the District of Columbia through thoughtful policy solutions.

Today, I'd like to focus my comments on the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) with the following recommendations.

- **Explore the adequacy of services to students who are homeless.**
- **Continue to engage the public and release data on issues facing the District's education system.**
- **Evaluate the Community Schools pilot program to highlight the program's impacts.**
- **Maintain the focus on child care quality, particularly for infants and toddlers.**

Examine Services for Homeless Students

DCFPI encourages the Committee to explore the adequacy of services to students who are homeless and address the gaps in service. The fiscal year (FY) 2015 budget included $200,000 to boost staff capacity to better identify and serve homeless students – we would like to hear how these funds are being used.

Being homeless adds stress and challenges that make it hard for children to succeed in school. Homeless students come to school with challenges that can distract from learning. The spike in family homelessness makes it especially important that publicly funded schools have the tools and resources needed to provide educational continuity to homeless children.

The District needs to conduct a careful review of the adequacy of services to homeless students, and make local investments to expand these services if needed. Given DC's family homelessness crisis, providing educational continuity to homeless students is critical to ensuring that all students can succeed in school. Are children who are homeless being identified? Is the city doing enough to help homeless students get to their school of origin if they want to? Are students getting other services at school to meet their special circumstances? We encourage the Committee to do what it can to ensure OSSE evaluates the adequacy of services for students who are homeless.

Among other things, this assessment could identify whether the city needs to devote more resources. The District gets federal McKinney-Vento for these purposes, but just $35 per homeless

student, not enough to cover all the costs that schools face in trying to assist students who are homeless. Last year, the Council rightly added local funds to OSSE's budget to boost staff capacity, and we hope these funds were put to good use. The city should assess the capacity of homeless liaisons at schools, ensure the state level coordinator at OSSE is able to effectively support liaisons, and that transportation and other direct supports to students are adequate.

Engage Public and Increase Access to Data

The Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System, commonly referred to as SLED, is OSSE's tracking system for standardized data on enrollment and student demographics across the District's education programs. Last year, DCFPI testified on the value of SLED to inform education policy decisions of the mayor and Council, urging OSSE to develop a more systemic, streamlined way to engage with the public and respond to data requests. We are happy to see that progress was made in the past year – OSSE's Division of Data, Assessment, and Research staff held several meetings with community organizations to share their research agenda and also better understand the data and research priorities of the larger community. Data sharing agreements are also being developed with non-profit organizations. We appreciate OSSE's openness and look forward to working with them.

Evaluate Community Schools Program

Community Schools use public schools as central hubs for students and the larger community to access integrated services and supports. They do this by developing partnerships between the school and community-based resources. The partners often connect students and their families with outside supports, including medical, dental and mental health services, before- and after-school programs, or classes focused on financial literacy, GED prep, or computer skills.

There are currently six grantees (at 11 schools) operating Community School partnerships in the District. Ultimately, the District should expand the model to support additional grantees, but right now, we should prioritize data collection and evaluation of the model. Specifically, the city should collect information on key indicators such as school readiness, student attendance, adult education, and families' access to key services to assess the impact of Community Schools. This will be particularly important to attract additional funding from non-public sources, but also to show District leaders the impacts on student learning, health, family engagement, and other outcomes over time. To our knowledge, no evaluation is currently happening.

Maintain the Focus on Improving Quality of Child Care

Finally, DCFPI would like to hear about progress made with OSSE's new quality improvement "hubs" in high-need DC neighborhoods, an initiative funded in the FY 2015 budget that has our support. These hubs were created to provide Early Head Start services, an evidence-based model that emphasizes the family's social and economic needs, access to community supports, and staff development, along with the physical, social-emotional, and language development of each child. The hubs are also a source of technical assistance and professional development for other providers. We would like to learn more about how this work is leading to increased access to quality child care – for example, initial data on the reach of expanded services to low-income families, or examples of successful coaching strategies that are leading to quality improvement of participating providers.

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