

**TESTIMONY OF SOUMYA BHAT, EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY ANALYST
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**At the Public Roundtable on the Summative Evaluation of Public Schools in the District of
Columbia as Required by the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (PERAA)
June 22, 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.

The National Research Council's (NRC) evaluation of DC's public schools describes findings that have been echoed by parents, advocates, and researchers in the seven years since the passage of the Public Education Reform Amendment Act (PERAA). DC's education landscape continues to face a sizeable student achievement gap, a lack of data and budget transparency, and a need for clear oversight and coordination.

The NRC evaluation's time period ended a few years ago, and in that time, the city has made notable funding investments in schools and has worked to make school budgets and data more accessible to the public. However, challenges remain and new developments make the recommendations of the report even more salient. Today, I will focus my comments on monitoring investments in student learning, access to data, and budget planning and transparency.

Monitoring Investments in Student Learning

The NRC evaluation examined trends in student performance, such as test scores and graduation rates, since mayoral control began. While there has been some improvement, many students with high levels of need, including those who are low-income, continue to fall behind. Uneven levels of quality remain, pointing to a need for the city to focus efforts on resolving this gap. The report describes DC's need for a system to track indicators used to flag struggling students, the resources made available to these students, as well as the outcomes of applied interventions. It also recommends the city take a more coordinated approach to monitoring "learning conditions" in schools, such as school environment, discipline, and academic support, to better understand what progress is being made for students.

The recent investments in students considered "at-risk" offer a tremendous opportunity for DC schools, but transparency and evaluation of the way we use these resources is critical. These additional resources are intended to help these students receive the extra support they need, but there are still questions about where and how these funds are being spent, and whether or not the

interventions are working. The recent requirement that both DCPS and public charter schools submit an annual report to the DC Council detailing how their at-risk funding is used is a step in the right direction. With better information on how resources are used for struggling students and the impacts of these programs, both DCPS and each public charter school will be able to use their “at-risk” resources to make targeted and proven investments in high-poverty schools.

Data Infrastructure and Access

DCFPI agrees with the report’s recommendation that DC develop a comprehensive data collection system that would be easily accessible to the public and allow for analysis by key indicators, such as school, grade, and poverty status for both DCPS and charter school sectors.

The report states that the “evaluation was limited to a few blunt measures—proficiency rates on standardized tests and high school graduation rates—because of lack of data.” It goes on to recommend the city collect and make data available on several key indicators, including the percentage of students who score at each performance level, college enrollment and progression, and career outcomes, such as employment and earnings.

Although DC gathers data about its public schools through the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), access to this information, particularly for high-need students and the charter school sector, remains a challenge. Information on student demographics, mobility, attendance, and other metrics are available through the OSSE Learn DC website, but more can be done to streamline the process of accessing relevant data and reports from OSSE.

Budget Planning and Transparency

A transparent education budget — one that provides accurate, clear, and timely information — is critical to allowing the DC Council to fulfill its agency oversight functions, and to empowering parents and other residents to hold public officials accountable for the delivery of public services.

Budget transparency for both DCPS and public charter schools is an area that has been worked on since the evaluation concluded, but still needs to improve. The researchers concluded that the budgeting process is not simpler or more transparent since the shift to mayoral control. DCFPI thinks the city should re-establish a DCPS budget allocation task force and extend the timeline that schools get to make budgeting decisions.

Many DC residents continue to feel shut out of the important policy decisions that affect our schools. For example, the short timeline given to DCPS to make budgeting decisions does not allow for much community input into school budget priorities. Prior to mayoral control of schools, a working group would make recommendations and hold hearings to gather input during the school budget development process. While DCPS currently holds workshops and budget meetings with schools, the working group is no longer used. Reinstating this group would provide a strategic process to better plan for school budgets while allowing for more input from the public. The recent Student Reassignment Committee process showed the value of getting the right stakeholders together to tackle complex issues.

DC could also extend the DCPS budget timeline by at least one month to allow for adequate planning for these important funding decisions at the school level. The current budget timeline for schools is far too short for these types of important funding decisions. DCPS is expected to finalize budgets by March to be included with the other agency budgets released by the Mayor in late March or early April.

Instead, the budget timeline could be extended, with the Mayor setting the appropriation for DCPS before the city's February revenue forecast. While this creates some risks, because it will not be clear at that time how much revenue the city will have to meet its various needs, education is usually a top priority each year. Setting a reasonable education funding level in January will give the additional time needed to make better budget allocation decisions.

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