

**TESTIMONY OF SOUMYA BHAT, EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY ANALYST
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**At the Public Education Hearing on B20-310, B20-311, B20-328, and B20-41
July 9, 2013**

Chairman Catania and members of the Education Committee, 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.

DCFPI appreciates the efforts that this committee has undertaken to address the issues keeping our school system from achieving its full potential. Legislative oversight is an important function, and each of these bills should be adequately explored with the larger community. We also appreciate your indication, Chairman Catania, that these bills are intended to be the start of a conversation on a number of critical issues.

I will focus my remarks today on Bill 20-310, the Individual School Accountability Act of 2013, and on the following three principles:

- **We support ensuring that DC Public Schools has the ability to intervene when schools are performing poorly.**
- **We support giving flexibility to school leaders who have innovative ideas as one tool to spur improvement.**
- **We hope and believe public schools can be successful without waiving local regulations or collective bargaining agreements.**

The bill's goal is to provide a local framework to hold underperforming schools accountable and provide the Chancellor with two options to turnaround schools. We agree that there is much to be done to lift our lowest performing schools to higher levels of academic proficiency, as we have documented in our research.¹ At the same time, we have some questions and concerns about the specific provisions for creating Innovation Schools.

DCFPI supports the goal of giving school leaders flexibility to align funding with their priorities and needs of their students, as proposed for Innovation Schools. But, we think the District should be encouraging innovation and replication of best practices – such as robust parent engagement or out-

¹ DC Fiscal Policy Institute. “An Uphill Climb for DC Schools: A Look at DC CAS Test Score Trends.” 2013. <http://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/3-13-13-Final-Test-Score-Paper.pdf>.

of-school time programs – rather than imposing it only on poor performing schools that may or may not have the capacity to implement needed change. Innovative leaders of any school should be able to align spending to meet their students’ needs, something that is being considered separately under the Council’s Fair Student Funding and School-Based Budgeting bill, which DCFPI supports.

Second, Innovation Schools have mixed results in other states. Waiving local rules and converting schools did not necessarily translate into better academic outcomes for converted schools in Colorado, where a similar model was implemented in 2008. Reports show Innovation Schools that have been operating for three or more years in Colorado generally saw flat or decreasing proficiency rates.² There was also considerable turnover observed among principals and teachers for these schools – research cited this lack of continuity as a potential contributing factor to the lackluster academic progress.³

Third, individual school turnaround plans should be one piece of efforts to improve performance and not seen as a replacement for other citywide efforts. The fact that school performance is weak in a very large number of schools suggests that there are systemic problems that must be addressed, including tackling the problems that impede progress for low-income students and schools with high poverty rates. The effort to create a new funding weight for low-income students, also in the Fair Student Funding and School-Based Budgeting bill, could allow DCPS to devise new programming across many schools – such as an extended school day – in addition to policies that hold individual schools accountable.

Fourth, we hope that innovative approaches can be adopted without exempting schools from certain city regulations and union rules. If there are regulations or collective bargaining elements that create particular obstacles, they should be addressed head on.

The Council should also consider the following regarding the specific provisions in the bill. The bill’s language suggests that Innovation Schools will automatically become a citywide school, which seems to contribute to the trend of losing neighborhood schools of right. There is also no mention of a cap on the number of Innovation Schools in a given year. DCFPI also suggests that any major reform such as this legislation be applied in a pilot format to be able to adequately evaluate the progress and implementation of the Innovation School option after one year.

Chairman Catania, we look forward to continuing to talk through this legislation with your staff. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

² Colorado Department of Education. 2013 Innovation Report. See: http://www.cde.state.co.us/choice/download/2013InnovationReport_3.1.13.pdf.

³ University of Colorado Denver, The Evaluation Center. “Progress of Innovation Schools in DPS.” 2012. See: <http://www.the-evaluation-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/2012-11-05-Innovation-Schools-Report-FINAL.pdf>.