Will 2014 Bring Stable Leadership to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education?

By Soumya Bhat

Most mayoral appointments happen without much notice, but Mayor Gray’s selection to head the Office of the State Superintendent of Education has been controversial. DCFPI is not taking a position on the nomination, but we are glad that the DC Council is taking the work of this agency, known as OSSE, seriously. OSSE plays several critical roles in supporting high-quality public education in the District, and yet it has suffered from many challenges since its creation almost seven years ago. The next leader of OSSE needs to have a clear vision for its mission, bring stability to key leadership positions within the agency, and open up data to the public.

Created in 2007, OSSE came out of the restructuring of education-related functions along with mayoral control of DC Public Schools. OSSE is responsible for functions typically operated at the state level, such as managing child nutrition services, verifying student enrollment counts, and tracking student level data across all public schools. OSSE has a budget of $127 million in local funds for fiscal year 2014.

Unfortunately, OSSE has seen considerable turnover in its leadership and program staff since it was established. The new leader needs to bring in strong management of key positions. Take, for example, the Division of Early Childhood Education, which oversees the child care subsidy program, child care licensing, Pre-Kindergarten, Head Start collaboration, professional development, and quality improvement. This important department has been without a permanent head for months. The lack of stable leadership in such a key area for the District leads to concerns about the direction and accountability of these early childhood programs.

A new leader also should work hard to make sure OSSE’s work is transparent and that the data it collects is shared with the public in a timely and accessible way. For example, in past budget seasons, there was substantial confusion over basic information, such as the level of child care subsidy funding and the number of slots available for eligible families. The recent launch of OSSE’s Learn DC website is a significant step towards demystifying the numbers behind these and other OSSE programs, but DCFPI would like to see new leadership at OSSE continue to make data more accessible to the public.

As the DC Council and mayor deliberate about who should head OSSE, these key priorities should factor into the decision-making.