

**TESTIMONY OF SOUMYA BHAT, EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY ANALYST
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**At the Fiscal Year 2013 Performance Oversight Hearing On the
District of Columbia Public Schools
Before the DC Council Committee on Education
February 26, 2014**

Chairman 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.

I am here today to offer input on the performance of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) system with specific suggestions on what services could be expanded to increase opportunities for our most vulnerable students. DCPS has several ambitious education goals, and recent legislation and a mayoral-commissioned adequacy study create the potential for new resources to be added for at-risk students through the school funding formula as soon as next school year. DCFPI urges the District to take these opportunities to convey a clear and consistent approach to student programming, both inside and outside of the classroom. This means including non-instructional programs and services in a consistent city-wide school strategy. DCFPI makes the following recommendations:

- **Improve access to quality out-of-school time programs and explore strategies to streamline DCPS' Out-of-School Time Program (OSTP) enrollment process**
- **Adopt a comprehensive parent engagement strategy including home visiting services**
- **Ensure all students have access to school-based mental health practitioners**

Improve Access to Quality Out-Of-School Time Programs

There has been a lot of discussion by the Council and the Chancellor on how best to build up DCPS' middle schools, with extending the school day or year mentioned as a possible strategy. However, it's important to note that extending the school day can mean different things to different people. Extended day could just mean more of the same programming offered during school hours, without additional consideration of how best to implement a high-quality program with those additional hours.

DCFPI encourages the District to embrace a range of expanded learning opportunities like those programs currently offered through partnerships with community-based organizations at several DCPS schools. These programs can offer students exposure to activities such as mentoring, college

preparation, arts enrichment, or sports. Close coordination with the school allows service providers to mirror and complement the school-day curriculum and to offer targeted support to students identified as needing extra help.

Research indicates that program quality and implementation are key to attracting participation and ultimately generating positive effects for students. DCFPI recommends that any strategy to extend the school day or year in the District include a blend of hands-on and enrichment learning that goes beyond and builds off of what students learn during the school day.

Explore Strategies to Streamline DCPS' Out-Of-School Time Program (OSTP) Enrollment Process

DCFPI would also like the Council to investigate the new enrollment process put into place for DCPS' Out-of-School Time Program (OSTP) for the 2013-14 school year. Through a combination of organized school-based services and coordination with community partners, the OSTP increases access to afterschool programs for the city's low-income residents. It currently provides afterschool in 57 DCPS schools. The OSTP is primarily funded through federal TANF dollars under purpose two (reducing the dependency of needy parents by promoting job preparation, work and marriage), which includes strict income guidelines and paperwork to verify that a share of parents of students enrolled in OSTP are indeed eligible. Last summer, DCPS changed the enrollment process, requiring parents to come to a single site, make appointments, and bring documentation. Parents who were not able to submit documentation by the deadline were to be denied admission into the afterschool programs by individual schools.

This action was understandably taken to prevent administrative burden on the DCPS OSTP office, who usually spend the bulk of the school year tracking down students' parents to provide documentation for TANF. But, we are concerned that many low-income parents may have opted out of the new process, resulting in declining OSTP enrollment for the families who need it the most.

If the city continues to use TANF dollars for OSTP, we should explore additional strategies to ease the paperwork burden for parents and DCPS while continuing to serve our neediest families. One option is for DCPS to bump its enrollment data with SNAP (food stamps) and TANF rolls and avoid the paperwork burden altogether. Another approach is to count the OSTP programs as part of a pregnancy prevention strategy (purpose three under the federal TANF program), which may also lessen paperwork requirements.

Develop a Comprehensive Parent Engagement Strategy Including Home Visiting Services

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.

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

Parent engagement strategies are considered most effective when interventions are well targeted and maintained over time.² Currently, DC is in partnership with the Flamboyant Foundation to deliver more robust parent engagement, but these programs are only in a handful of schools and, therefore, have minimal reach. The program is currently funded entirely with private resources, but will need to be supported by public funds if it is to be scaled up to additional schools. Flamboyant's model costs an estimated \$58,000 per school, or \$178 per student, on average. This cost includes stipends for teachers to work extra non-contract hours, staff that train and coach principals and teachers, funds for child care, interpretation, snacks, and materials. For all 46,500 students in DCPS, this amounts to about \$8.3 million for a school year.

DCFPI encourages the Council to continue to monitor the results of these quality parent engagement programs and to identify plans and funding to expand these strategies across DC's schools.

Ensure All Students Have Access to School-Based Mental Health Practitioners

Research shows that locating mental health services in schools leads to increased accessibility and use of these services. One study found that 98 percent of students who were referred for assistance in a school with school mental health programs began services, while just 17 percent of students referred to community based clinical treatment began services.³ The District's school-based mental health program provides schools with a part-time or full-time mental health clinician, who provides a range of services — from prevention and screenings to more intensive therapy and counseling. The school-based clinicians also act as a referral source for intensive community mental health services. The program prioritizes the lowest performing schools and those with a lack of social workers, counselors, and/or psychologists.

There is a need to expand the school-based mental health practitioners in our school system and DCFPI encourages the Council to consider investing resources into the Department of Behavioral Health to place clinicians in every school. Recent data shows 40 DCPS schools and 11 public charter schools participate in the program, with more than half located in Wards 6, 7, and 8. There is also a waiting list of schools that would like to participate in the program, including 17 of the lowest performing DCPS schools.

Finally, the chancellor recently said DCPS plans to create a new Office of Planning. We hope this office will play a role in strategic planning and promote consistency for programs and funds aimed at bringing up our lowest performing schools. Instead of one-time funding initiatives, such as the recent Proving What's Possible grant competitions, schools should be able to count on consistent funding to ensure the continuity and scaling up of effective programming from year-to-year. This office can help to ensure key non-instructional supports, such as those discussed in my testimony today, are fully integrated into DCPS' comprehensive educational plan.

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

² MDRC. The Impact of Family Involvement on the Education of Children ages 3 to 8. October 2013. http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/The_Impact_of_Family_Involvement_FR.pdf.

³ Krista Kutash, Albert J. Duchnowski, and Nancy Lynn. School-Based Mental Health: An Empirical Guide for Decision-Makers. University of South Florida, 2006.