

**TESTIMONY OF SOUMYA BHAT, EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY ANALYST  
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**At the Oversight Hearing On the Proposed Fiscal Year 2015 Budget of the  
Office of State Superintendent of Education, Non-Public Tuition, Special Education  
Transportation, and District of Columbia Public Charter School Payments  
May 1, 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 would like to focus my testimony on the early learning, adult education, and homeless children and youth programs operated at the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). We urge the Council to support both ends of the cradle-to-career spectrum and our most vulnerable students by doing the following:

- **Early Learning:** Approve the proposed budget's \$7 million in increased funding for early learning to improve the quality and capacity of our child care system.
- **Adult Education:** Add \$340,000 to OSSE's adult and family education budget to support a contract to assess 200 adult learners for learning disabilities, and identify resources to maintain a \$4 million partnership between OSSE and the Department of Employment Services.
- **Services for Homeless Students:** Review the adequacy of services to homeless students, and make local investments to expand these services if needed.

**EARLY LEARNING**

DCFPI strongly supports the \$7 million in new funds for early learning in the mayor's proposed budget. The plan for this funding is two-fold — to improve the quality of child care in the city and to expand the capacity of providers that serve low-income families through the city's child care subsidy program. We think this is good news for children and for working parents looking for affordable care that meets their children's developmental needs.

The District has been working to develop a more systematic way of improving the quality of programs serving children birth to five, and \$4 million of the new funds allocated to OSSE's Department of Early Childhood Education will be used to continue to raise the quality of child care. Some of these funds will be used to establish a common approach to assess and evaluate the quality of child care programs as part of the city's early childhood Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Providers who meet certain requirements are given rating levels of quality (bronze, silver,

gold) and corresponding rates for reimbursement. The rating system is meant to incentivize providers to reach higher levels of quality while also helping parents have the information they need to select a high quality provider. Given that the biggest share of providers are at the bronze rating level, investments to boost the quality of care are important.

In addition, some of the new funds will go to developing new quality improvement “hubs” in selected DC neighborhoods. These hubs will 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 will be a source of technical assistance and professional development for other providers. Neighborhoods with high levels of need will be prioritized for these services. Finally, the proposed budget will also provide financial incentives to community-based providers that serve three- and four-year old children. These organizations receive far less funding per child than do pre-kindergarten services funded through the school funding formula. DCFPI supports this but feels it would be helpful to learn more from OSSE about how these funds will be distributed to providers.

The proposed budget also includes \$3 million in funding for the continued expansion of infant and toddler child care slots. This would be helpful to the many DC parents, particularly those with children under age three, who report difficulty finding high-quality child care slots. The funds would build off an \$11 million investment in the current year’s budget, which raised child care provider rates by 15 percent for infant and toddler slots. The increase also was intended to create 200 more child care slots. In addition, this year’s capital budget funded new early learning facilities. The \$3 million proposed for next year’s budget will be used to fund new child care subsidy services in these spaces.

It is not clear how many slots were created as a result of the FY 2014 investments and how many more will be available as a result of these new early learning centers being open next year. It would be helpful to get clarity from OSSE on this issue, to better understand how providers will be selected to offer child care in these centers and how the new funds will expand access to child care.

Beyond these investments, we also hope the Council will find resources for the first item on the contingent revenue priority list — \$8 million for OSSE’s Department of Early Childhood Education — that could scale up and reinforce these quality and capacity-building efforts.

## **ADULT EDUCATION**

DCFPI is part of the DC Adult and Family Literacy Coalition, which is seeking support for adult education services in the FY 2015 budget. Economists project that in just four years, 72 percent of all jobs in DC will require some post-secondary education. Yet more than 60,000 residents lack a high school diploma or its equivalent. This skills disparity contributes to the District’s income inequality, which is one of the fourth highest among major U.S. cities. Investing in adult education also benefits our youngest residents. Research shows a child’s success in school is significantly impacted by their parents’ education level and their family’s economic security.

Adult learners with learning disabilities often need accommodations like extra test time and assistive technology to pass the GED and advance in post-secondary education. Unfortunately, funding is not in place to conduct the assessments needed to properly identify learning disabilities in adult

education programs. OSSE and DOES are partnering this year, through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), to expand adult education services for clients of DOES services. But the screening tool used, the Washington State Learning Disabilities screening, does not provide learners with the documentation of a learning disability required to receive accommodations. Some \$340,000 is needed to conduct the full assessments for 200 adults.

Moreover, funding for adult and family education could decline by \$4 million under the proposed budget, due to the one-time nature of this MOU. Therefore, we urge the Council to maintain the \$4 million being provided this year through the MOU.

Finally, we strongly support the Council funding the additional \$3 million for adult literacy, the sixth item on the mayor's contingency revenue list, and hope the Adult and Family Literacy Coalition will be included in discussions of how best to use these funds.

### **SERVICES FOR HOMELESS STUDENTS**

DCFPI encourages the Committee to explore the adequacy of services to students who are homeless. Over 4,000 students in DC public schools and DC public charter schools are homeless, a number that has grown 60 percent in four years. 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. They are often moving from place to place, which is stressful and makes regular school attendance difficult. Many of the places they stay expose them to unhealthy conditions, leading to frequent illness. 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 federal government requires all school districts, including DC, to meet the many needs of students who are homeless, including a timely enrollment process, access to transportation, and in-school services. The federally funded McKinney Vento program, managed here by DC's Office of the State Superintendent for Education, requires each public school to have a homeless liaison to help students and their families. Often, a school social worker or counselor serves this role.

Families or students have to self-identify as homeless to receive services, although staff are also trained on signs to look for in potentially homeless students. Nevertheless, some homeless students go unidentified because homelessness can be difficult to spot, in part because families may be unwilling to admit they are homeless.

One of the major decisions faced by homeless students is whether to remain in their "school of origin"—the school they attended when they became homeless—or enroll in the school closest to their temporary living situation. If they decide to stay in their initial school, a transportation plan must be created. In addition to transportation, the program assists students with before and after care and financial assistance with costs for uniforms, field trips, and graduation fees.

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. McKinney-Vento funds often are not enough to cover all the costs that schools face in trying to assist students who are homeless. DC's leaders 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. We urge the Council to add local funds if federal funds are not enough to meet those needs.

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