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Creating a High Quality Education System for All DC Residents Recommendations to the New Mayor and DC Council

Summary

The next administration faces a number of challenges and opportunities when it comes to the early care and Pre-K-12 public education system in the District of Columbia. For the first time in decades, changes to school boundaries, feeder patterns and admission policies are being implemented following recommendations of a committee of education stakeholders. The DC school funding formula was recently examined and adjusted to better reflect what our students need, including adding a new funding supplement for low-income DC students considered “at-risk,” giving both DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools new resources to help low-income students succeed. The city is also making notable investments in early childhood education through child care quality improvement strategies and increased reimbursement rates for DC’s child care subsidy program.

To continue to build a high quality and accessible early care and education system in the District, we suggest the Mayor-elect take the following steps:

Maintain Key Aspects of the School Boundary Recommendations. As Mayor Bowser and the Council consider possible modifications to the new school boundary and admission policies, three recommendations that improve the educational access of low-income students should be maintained:

- ❖ Ensure economic diversity by ensuring that each school serves at least 25 percent low-income students. For charter schools, this will require a legislative change.
- ❖ In low-income communities, give children access by right to Pre-Kindergarten 3 and 4 slots in their neighborhood school.
- ❖ Provide bus passes to help parents of young students take their children to school.

Raise the Quality and Capacity of the Child Care Subsidy Program. The amount the District pays to support child care for infants and toddlers is well below market rate, making it hard for child care providers to provide the best-quality care and limiting access to child care for working parents.¹

- ❖ Raise DC’s child care subsidy reimbursement rates to better match the market rate.
- ❖ Focus on improving quality of care across city, particularly for infants and toddlers.

Continue to Provide and Monitor New Resources for Schools to Better Support At-Risk Students. There are 35,000 students considered “at-risk” in DC Public Schools and public charter schools. As of the 2014-15 school year, a new element in the school funding formula provides about \$2,000 additional dollars to these students. This partially implements a recommendation of a District-commissioned study on the adequacy of DC’s education funding.

- ❖ Continue to phase in the at-risk student weight to the fully recommended level.
- ❖ Monitor the use of additional resources at the school level in both DCPS and public charter schools to ensure they are being used for effective programs for low-income students.
- ❖ Extend the DCPS budget timeline by at least one month to allow for adequate planning for these important funding decisions at the school level.

Improve Student Supports to Help Close the Achievement Gap. School is an ideal location to deliver services that can alleviate poverty’s impact on student success. DC offers a number of programs that help these students succeed in the classroom, but there are still large gaps. Here are some ways to improve and expand services to help bridge these gaps.

- ❖ Ensure that every public school has adequate access to mental health practitioners, full-time nurse coverage, quality afterschool and summer programming, and services for homeless students.
- ❖ Scale up the Community Schools model to all high-poverty schools to turn schools into community hubs offering a wide array of services.
- ❖ Create a senior liaison role between the Deputy Mayor for Education and Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services to focus on non-instructional supports for low-income children and youth.

¹ UDC Center for Applied Research and Urban Policy. 2012 Market Rate Survey Final Report. See: http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/service_content/attachments/2012%20MRS%20Final%20Report.pdf.

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Issue #1: The District Should Maintain Some of the School Boundary Recommendations

In 2014, the District undertook its first modification to the city's student assignment policies – school boundaries, feeder patterns, and admission processes – in over 40 years. After a year of deliberation and community engagement, a committee issued a set of [recommendations](#), and implementation has begun. The recommendations include a number of changes that appear to have broad support, although some changes in boundaries and feeder patterns have raised questions, as would be expected.

In the event the new administration decides to revisit these changes, several recommendations that would improve educational access for low-income students are worth keeping.

Prioritize placement for at-risk Students. Starting in the 2016-17 school year, DCPS and public charter schools would set aside 25 percent of their out-of-boundary seats in the lottery process for low-income students. Currently, 20 DCPS and 12 public charter [schools](#) would be affected because fewer than 25 percent of their students are low-income. This change would promote socio-economic diversity in schools, which is linked to improving outcomes for low-income students without adversely affecting middle class students, as long as a core of middle class children attend the school.

The Advisory Committee recommended that this preference apply to charter schools, in addition to DCPS, which would require a change in DC law. Because charter schools now account for nearly half of all students in publicly funded schools in DC, the new policy will have the greatest effect if it applies to all schools in the city.

Neighborhood access to early childhood education programs. Currently, children are admitted to Pre-Kindergarten through a city-wide lottery process, without a guaranteed seat at a child's in-boundary school. The committee recommendation change would give children access *by right* to Pre-Kindergarten 3 and 4 slots in their neighborhood DCPS school, if it is a high-poverty school (receiving [Title I](#) funds). This would help low-income families get access to Pre-K by guaranteeing a spot in a school that is nearby.

Subsidize public transit. Low-income families need access to affordable transportation to truly be able to take advantage of this new opportunity. While students can now ride MetroBus for free, their parents cannot, which is a problem for families with very young children. That is why the Committee's recommendation to offer free bus passes to parents of students in Pre-K3 through 5th grade makes sense.

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Issue #2: The District Should Raise the Quality and Capacity of the Child Care Subsidy Program

The District has placed a great deal of emphasis in recent years to expand access to Pre-Kindergarten education. An important next step is to improve early education programs for city's infants and toddlers. The benefits of early learning start at birth, and programs must be high quality to make sure children are ready for school. There are several steps the District can take to further invest in early childhood programs.

Raise DC's child care subsidy reimbursement rates to better match the market rate for child care providers. A significant barrier for community-based organizations and family home providers seeking to offer high -quality child care for infants and toddlers is the extremely low reimbursement rates available to them. Without adequate reimbursement, providers often struggle to keep up with rising costs and to continue providing quality child care.

DC child care reimbursement rates were increased by 15 percent in FY 2014 for providers serving infants and toddlers, but the rates still do not match the current cost of providing child care in the District. The market rate for center-based infant child care (at the 75th percentile) is \$84.48 per day based on a 2012 survey, and the rate for toddlers is \$78.98.² However, reimbursements in the child care program for the highest-quality providers are just \$58.66 per day for infants and \$56.39 for toddlers. For more information, see the most recent [market rate survey](#).

Continue to focus on improving quality of care across city, particularly for infants and toddlers. The District is developing a more systematic way to improve the quality of programs serving children birth to five, and this work should continue under the new administration.

- ❖ The FY 2015 budget includes provisions to establish a common approach to assess and evaluate the quality of child care programs. These should be coupled with communication plans to help parents understand the quality rating and use it to inform their decisions.
- ❖ The District also is developing new quality improvement “hubs” in selected DC neighborhoods. These hubs will provide Early Head Start services, an evidence-based model, but also will be a source of technical assistance and professional development to other providers. Neighborhoods with high levels of need are being prioritized for these services.
- ❖ The current year's budget provides added financial support to community-based providers that serve three- and four-year old children; these organizations receive far less funding per child than pre-kindergarten services funded through the school funding formula, making it difficult to provide a developmentally appropriate environment.

² UDC Center for Applied Research and Urban Policy. 2012 Market Rate Survey Final Report.

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Issue #3: The District Should Continue to Provide and Monitor New Resources for Schools to Better Support At-Risk Students

DC's school funding formula was adjusted substantially this year to better reflect what DC students need. Increases were provided for special education, English language learners, and an entirely new category for low-income or "at risk" students, following recommendations of a District-commissioned [study](#) on the adequacy of the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF).

Some 35,000 students in DC Public Schools and public charter schools are considered at-risk. As of the 2014-15 school year, the school funding formula provides about \$2,000 additional dollars to these students. We recommend that the Mayor-elect take the following steps to ensure at-risk funds are used to meet the needs of low-income students:

Continue to phase in the at-risk student weight to the fully recommended level. The study recommended that the at-risk weight add 37 percent to the base level of funding – or about \$3,500 additional dollars per student. As noted, the current weight in the FY 2015 funding formula is about \$2,000 over the base amount.

Monitor the use of these additional resources at the school level in both DCPS and public charter schools to ensure they are being used for effective programs for low-income students. Since fiscal year 2015 was the first year of implementation for the new at-risk funding weight, there is room for improvement in the process. For example, according to the Fair Student Funding legislation, at-risk funding is supposed to follow the child to every DCPS school and school leaders are to have flexibility in how they use these resources. But, due to time constraints in the budgeting process, this was not possible in this first year. Instead, the funding went to a number of DCPS initiatives that were already planned – such as middle school supports and grants to reward student satisfaction – that are important, but were not necessarily targeted to improving outcomes specifically for at-risk students.

There were also some questions about whether or not the at-risk funding was enough for some charter schools to cover the costs of summer school, as the new weight is intended to subsume the previously separate budget for summer school programming. We hope that both DCPS and each public charter school will be able to use at-risk resources in more strategic ways next school year – especially if the size of the at-risk weight is increased – to make targeted and proven investments in high-poverty schools.

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 before April. Two major pieces of information are needed to set the school budgets. One is the revenue forecast that is delivered in February from the CFO to the Mayor. After this figure is determined, the Mayor's budget staff can determine how much should go into the per pupil formula for the next year. The

second piece of information is the school enrollment number for each individual charter school LEA and the DCPS school system. Once these two figures are out and finalized, usually by late February, the school system – DCPS and each public charter school with their board of trustees – can come up with their individual school budgets.

DCFPI recommends the Mayor-elect extend the budget timeline, by 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 certainly will be 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.

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Issue #4: The District Should Expand and Improve Non-Instructional Services Delivered Through Schools as Part of a Comprehensive Strategy to Close the Achievement Gap

Across DC, over one in four children, or 28,600 children under 18, lived in poverty in 2012. That means living on less than \$18,500 per year for a family of three. In some neighborhoods, particularly in Wards 7 and 8, the child poverty rate is greater than 50 percent. Poverty impacts children in a number of ways that make it harder for them to succeed at school.

School is an ideal location to deliver services that can alleviate poverty's impact and contribute to improved academic outcomes. DC offers a number of programs that help these students succeed in the classroom, but there are still large gaps. Here are some ways to improve and expand services to help bridge these gaps.

- ❖ ***Improve school-based mental health services.*** An estimated 5,000 children are in need of mental health services, yet only one-third of DCPS and public charter schools has a school-based mental health program. In addition, a number of schools do not have adequate staffing of social workers and psychologists to assist students. The District can better meet the mental health needs of students by expanding these services. Beyond that, all schools can adopt systems to reinforce positive behavior and to make school staff sensitive to the needs of traumatized children, at little added cost.
- ❖ ***Improve and expand health and nutrition services for students.*** Only a handful of DC schools has a School-Based Health Center, including no middle schools. In addition, many schools lack a full-time school nurse. Expanding these services can help students access primary care services that can help reduce barriers to learning. In addition, DC should work to expand use of innovative options for serving school breakfast –such as grab-and-go carts – to increase the number of students who start the day off fed and well-nourished.
- ❖ ***Promote access to quality afterschool and summer learning programs.*** The District's financial support of afterschool programs is modest and declining. The District should enhance the capacity of quality expanded learning programs to ensure that all low-income students have access to meaningful activities after school and in the summer, when low-income students lose ground to higher-income peers. The District should improve data collection and evaluation of programs to ensure that funding supports high-quality services, and the city should work to streamline funding and reporting requirements across multiple government agencies to make it easier for providers to access funding.
- ❖ ***Improve services for students who are homeless.*** Despite a sharp increase in homelessness, DC gets just \$35 in federal funds per homeless student to provide educational support services. The District should provide additional support for school-based staff who help homeless students and should expand outreach to make sure students and families who

become homeless know of assistance that is available to them. A system-wide assessment is needed to identify gaps in services so that DC can develop comprehensive tools to remove educational barriers for homeless children. Lastly, the District can focus its homelessness prevention programs on families with school-age children avoid the trauma and disruption of homelessness.

- ❖ ***Scale up the Community Schools model in DC.*** Community Schools turn public schools into hubs for students and the larger community by developing partnerships with community organizations and bringing services into the school, such as health care or adult literacy. There are currently six grantees (at 11 schools) operating Community School partnerships in the District, but the model should be expanded to all high-poverty schools. The District should increase funding for additional grantees, explore hiring an organization to coordinate services, and prioritize data collection and evaluation of the model as it grows.

- ❖ ***Create a new senior liaison role between the Deputy Mayor for Education and Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services to focus on non-instructional supports for low-income children and youth.*** Many of the services for low-income children and youth that are provided in the school are run by agencies outside of the education cluster. For example, the School Mental Health program operates in both DC Public Schools and DC public charter schools and is run and managed by the Department of Behavioral Health. Communication, coordination and planning of the education and human services agencies are therefore critical. The senior liaison would be responsible for identifying common needs of low-income children and youth across schools, what services are available, and how to plan for and address gaps in services.

Note: These recommendations are based on DCFPI's *Unlocking Opportunities* issue brief series, which can be accessed [here](#).