

**Testimony of Ed Lazere, Executive Director  
At the Budget Oversight Hearing on DC Public Schools  
DC Council Committee on Education  
DC Council Committee of the Whole  
March 29, 2019**

Chairman Grosso, Chairman Mendelson, and other members of the Council, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Ed Lazere, and I am the Executive Director of the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI is a non-profit organization that promotes budget choices to address DC's economic and racial inequities and to build shared widespread prosperity in the District of Columbia, through independent research and policy recommendations.

I have several concerns about the proposed DCPS budget, which is a step backward in the fundamental issue of education equity. The proposed budget for schools fails to keep up with expected cost increases in DC Public Schools. That means that overall, schools won't be able to maintain all current staff and services. The proposed budget shortchanges students in low-income communities and students of color by not providing resources needed to address historic inequities in education access. DCPS will continue the unfortunate practice of diverting half of "at-risk" funds for high-poverty schools to other purposes. Falling enrollment in some schools in low-income communities is leading to steep budget cuts.

On the positive side, the proposed budget provides funding to expand DC's Community Schools model.

### **School Funding That Doesn't Keep Up with Rising Costs**

The proposed budget includes a 2.2 percent increase in the per-student funding formula (UPSFF) for DCPS and public charter schools. Yet key cost drivers in DCPS, including the average expenses per teacher, are rising at a faster rate. This means schools are facing a loss in purchasing power that will lead to cuts in staffing or services across the system. The proposed budget disregards key recommendations of a recent OSSE working group, which called for increasing the funds for at-risk students and English-Language Learners (ELL) to bring them to the levels considered adequate. Instead, the budget leaves the ELL weights and at-risk weights at the same level as this year.

The proposed budget is broken up too much into winners and losers, and the distribution is skewed by income and race. Overall, about half the schools will see a cut, when security and rising salary costs are factored. In Ward 7 and Ward 8, three-fourths of the schools are in this situation. The inclusion of security costs in each school's budget for the coming year—which isn't the case in the current year budgets—adds to this problem. For example, imagine school with a \$1 million budget in FY 2019—when security costs were not factored into school budgets—and a \$1 million budget in FY 2020 that includes \$100,000 for security. Funding for that school outside of security would be a 10 percent decline, yet counting security in the FY 2020 budget makes it look like the school's budget isn't falling and that the school doesn't need stabilization funds. By adding security costs for the coming year and then comparing with the current-year budget that doesn't include security, it

inflates the change in budgets from this year to next, and means that fewer schools with declining enrollment qualify for stabilization funds intended to limit how much a school's budget can fall.

### Continued Diversion of “At-Risk” Funds Away from High-Poverty Schools

Since 2014, DC's school funding formula has included a supplement to support students considered at-risk of falling behind academically. At-risk funds are a tool to promote equity by helping low-income students get the same kinds of enriching opportunities and services as their higher-income peers, and to ensure that students who are struggling academically get the targeted supports they need to succeed in the classroom. Yet because of budget constraints, roughly [half](#) of “at-risk” funds in DCPS have been misspent on regular staff positions, rather than on dedicated supports. This will continue under the proposed FY 2020 budget. This is particularly troubling given the [distressing differences](#) in educational outcomes for low-income students and their wealthier peers.

### Inadequate Attention to Student Trauma

The proposed budget includes \$6 million to add mental health staff to 67 schools, as part of the implementation of recommendations from the recent Task Force on School Mental Health. This expansion, while notable, falls short of what's needed to support students who face trauma related to poverty, neighborhood violence, and other factors. The budget fails to include funding to provide trauma-informed training for all schools, and it still leaves schools with too few counselors, psychologists and social workers.

### Expanding community schools

The proposed budget includes \$1.6 million to expand DC's “community schools” model to six more schools. This model recognizes that schools are not just centers of academic instruction but are among our most important and trusted community institutions. Schools can build on that strength to become community hubs by partnering with community-based organizations to connect children and their families with services that strengthen the whole community, like health care, afterschool programs, adult education, and early childhood programming.

### School Budget Allocations That Don't Make Sense

As a former LSAT chair, I have had the experience of trying to understand our school's proposed budget and where we had flexibility to shift resources. This year, I helped staff at one school try to understand next year's proposed budget and to compare it with this year's, only to have more questions than answers. It is incredibly important to make school-level budget information more transparent so that school-level stakeholders can engage in the budget process in a meaningful way.

Given these concerns we make the following recommendations:

- **Stabilize schools, especially in low-income communities:** The DCPS budget should be modified to limit losses in funding at schools with large numbers of at-risk students, even if enrollment is declining. Budget cuts put schools on a downward cycle of further cuts and further enrollment losses.
- **Remove school security from proposed 2019-20 budgets:** This will enable more schools to qualify for stabilization funds.

- **Do more to stop the diversion of at-risk funds:** It is simply unacceptable to continue to rob at-risk students and their schools of resources that have been promised to them and that are intended to address educational inequities.
- **Invest adequately to support student trauma:** Trauma-informed training and additional staff are needed to provide positive behavioral supports for students envisioned in the 2018 Student Fair Access to School Act, which limited punitive and discriminatory discipline practices like suspension.
- **Adopt requirements for more transparent school-level budgets:** Budget formats should be consistent from year to year, they should clearly identify how at-risk funds are being used, and they should give stakeholders clear information on their discretion to modify the budget.
- **Focus on long-term adequacy of school budgets:** The UPSFF is below the level identified in the 2013 Adequacy Study, including the base, the at-risk weight and the ELL weight. The District should move to support adequate funding of schools in as short a timeframe as possible.

Thank you for the chance to testify.