

DC is One Step Closer towards Adopting Requirements for More Transparent School Budgets

By Qubilah Huddleston and Alyssa Noth

To better ensure all public school students have an equitable and fair shot at academic success, DC needs a transparent education budget that gives school stakeholders clear information on where public dollars are allocated. Currently, the District is not providing clear and consistent information on school budgets, making it difficult for stakeholders to track the spending. Improvements may be on the horizon: this week, the DC Council Committee on Education approved legislation — the School Financial Transparency Amendment Act of 2019 — that would strengthen transparency and help deliver better budget outcomes. The Committee of the Whole should approve efforts to boost transparency.

The School Financial Transparency Amendment Act of 2019 would make it possible for the public to easily and accurately compare school budgets in both public schools and public charter schools — including how each school spends its “at-risk” funds. The bill would also require public charter schools to open their board meetings to the public when making high-stakes decisions. Specifically, the bill would do the following:



- **Promote Budget Transparency Between All Public Schools:** The bill would require the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) to establish common financial reporting standards for both DCPS and public charter schools. The Office of the State Superintendent for Education would be required to electronically publish each DCPS and public charter school’s expenditures in five core areas: instructional staff, school administrators, instructional supports, educational materials, and non-educations administrative costs. These reports would promote equity by making it easier for the public to see how schools are funded.
- **Improve Transparency of “At Risk” Funds:** Both sectors would be required to report how they spent their at-risk funds — which are meant to support students who are at-risk of academic failure — according to the reporting standards that the DME develops.

This provision is crucial because [DCPS knowingly diverts half of at-risk funding](#) for other purposes, such as art teachers and librarians — which are positions that schools are already supposed to receive under DCPS’s staffing model. Tracking the use of at-risk funds in public charter schools has been more challenging because public charter schools provide varying levels of details in their at-risk spending plans. This provision has the potential to disrupt the hijacking of resources meant for students facing the most oppression.

- **Expand Transparency in the Public Charter Sector:** The [DC Open Meeting Act](#) broadens access to public decision-making. The bill amends the Open Meetings Act to require board meetings of

public charter schools be made public when discussing budgets and charter school expansion or closure. Currently, charter school boards are not required to open their meetings to the public.

The first step to addressing funding inequity is to improve school budget transparency so the public can hold education policymakers and officials accountable for their budget decisions — and this bill would better position us to achieve that vision.