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**Testimony of Alyssa Noth, Policy Analyst
At the Hearing on the
Fair Access to Selective High Schools Amendment Act of 2019
Committee of the Whole and Committee on Education
February 10, 2020**

Chairperson Mendelson, Grosso, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. My name is Alyssa Noth, and I am a Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute (DCFPI). DCFPI is a non-profit organization that promotes budget choices to address DC's racial and economic inequities through independent research and policy recommendations.

DCFPI supports the Fair Access to Selective High Schools Amendment Act of 2019 because it promotes equity, transparency, and consistency in the DCPS selective high school application process.

Elimination of PARCC from Application Criteria is A Step Towards Racial Equity

Critically, this legislation prohibits citywide selective high schools from including a consideration of standardized test scores in its application criteria and admissions process.

Tying admissions to PARCC scores disproportionately limits access for students with disabilities, students who are considered “at-risk,” and students who are Black, Latinx, or English Learners.

In last year's selective school requirements, students wishing to attend five of the eight selective DCPS high schools must have “met” or “exceeded expectations” in both math and reading on the PARCC exam, equivalent to earning a four or a five.¹ About 20 percent of Black students, English Learners, and students who are at-risk met this criterion, while 30 percent of Latinx and only 8 percent of students with disabilities scored at these top two levels. There is an appalling opportunity gap between each of these subgroups and White students, 80 percent of whom met or exceeded expectations in math and reading on the PARCC.²

In Wards 7 and 8 — where the population is primarily Black, and poverty is concentrated — only 45 students who attended neighborhood middle schools met the PARCC criterion. At one middle school, three students met this standard, while at another, only four did.³

To be clear, I am not suggesting the PARCC exam itself is invalid or inherently biased, but we should be honest that students who have been failed by inequitable and racist public policies and systems do not have an equal shot at attending a selective high school when performance on standardized tests determines if they can even apply.

We should also be honest about why it's so important to expand access to DCPS selective high schools. There is only one DCPS neighborhood high school, Woodrow Wilson, that has a STAR rating of four or above on the federally mandated DC state report card. All other DCPS neighborhood high schools are one- or two-star schools.⁴ In effect, this means that the only students who have guaranteed access to a highly rated high school are those who live in neighborhoods with the highest household incomes in the District.⁵

Legislation is Needed to Ensure Application Criteria is Transparent and Consistent

DCFPI supports the bill's requirement that OSSE provide all 7th graders with each selective school's application criteria. This provision would make the process more transparent.

DCFPI commends Chancellor Lewis Ferebee for responding to this legislation by [updating](#) the application criteria and process for selective DCPS high schools for school year 2020 – 21. Eliminating PARCC score minimums was the right thing to do. However, only legislation makes this change permanent. When DCPS abruptly changed selection criteria prior to the 2019-20 school year,⁶ students did not have equal access to information or time to make their high school plans. Due to this lack of transparency, over 200 families that thought they'd have a shot at getting into School Without Walls were excluded due to the PARCC requirement.

Conclusion

The underlying premise of selective high schools is a scarcity of high-quality seats. An alternative vision of public education affirms that every student is capable of learning and achieving at high levels provided there is adequacy and equity of resources in all public schools. As we work towards a superior socioeconomic model in which there is no need for selective public schools, we should take this important step to expand access to high-quality educational opportunities across the District.

I'm happy to entertain any questions you may have.

¹Benjamin Banneker, Early College Academy at Coolidge, McKinley Technology High School, Phelps Architecture, Construction, and Engineering High School, and School Without Walls required a PARCC score of 4 or 5 in SY2019-20. “DCPS Selective High Schools and Programs – Application Requirements and Admissions Process SY19-20,” District of Columbia Public Schools, http://enrolldcps.dc.gov/sites/dcpsenrollment/files/page_content/attachments/SY19-20%20Selective%20High%20School%20Requirements%20%28FINAL_Eng-Span%29.pdf.

² “2019 DC PARCC Dashboard,” EmpowerK12, <https://empowerk12.org/dc-parcc-dash>.

³ Perry Stein, “Does every D.C. child have a fair shot at attending an elite high school? The city is trying,” The Washington Post, December 1, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/does-every-dc-child-have-a-fair-shot-at-attending-an-elite-high-school-the-city-is-trying/2019/12/01/f0be55e0-f01b-11e9-89eb-ec56cd414732_story.html.

⁴ DC School Report Card: <https://dcschoolreportcard.org/>.

⁵ “Household Income by Race and Ward,” DC’s Economic Strategy, <https://dceconomicstrategy.com/household-income/>.

⁶ Perry Stein, “D.C. had a plan to diversity one of its most selective high schools,” The Washington Post. February 9, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dcs-plan-to-diversify-one-of-its-most-selective-high-schools-is-delayed-by-a-year/2019/02/09/2cceb9a4-2b18-11e9-b2fc-721718903bfc_story.html.