

**Testimony of Qubilah Huddleston, Education Policy Analyst
at the DC Public Schools Public Budget Hearing for
Fiscal Year 22 (School Year 21-22)
November 23, 2020**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at the DC Public Schools Public Budget Hearing for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022. My name is Qubilah Huddleston and I am a Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute (DCFPI). DCFPI is a nonprofit organization that promotes budget choices to address DC's racial and economic inequities through independent research and policy recommendations.

Today I would like to make the following recommendations to the DCPS finance team:

- **Put equity at the forefront of all budget allocation decisions**—this includes adhering to at-risk funding and stabilization funding laws and targeting federal relief dollars to highest needs schools.
- **Genuinely engage Local School Advisory Teams (LSATs)** to assess needs and develop solutions to student safety and school security.
- **Take more time considering the harm and benefits of a new school funding model** in the current and post-COVID-19 climate.

Equity Must Guide FY 2022 Budget Decisions

All District families are experiencing massive, pandemic-induced disruptions to their daily lives, but low-income DC residents—most of whom are Black, Latinx, or immigrant—are faring worse and will likely be the last to recover. The legacy of racist and classist public policies and practices continues to undermine low-income children and children of color's ability to “catch up” to their wealthier and white peers.

The public health crisis has only exacerbated the already unacceptable racial and income gaps in learning outcomes in the District. Now, more than ever, DCPS must prioritize equity over equality. DCPS needs to make bold and economically just investments in schools to help ensure children from resource-strapped families are not further left behind academically or socially.

To ensure FY 2022 school budgets are equitable, DCPS should do the following:

- **Adhere to *DC Code §38-2907.01(2)*** which states that DCPS shall not reduce a school's budget by 5 or more percent from one year to the next. This should especially be the case for schools with large percentages of low-income and other vulnerable students.
- **Adhere to *DC Code § 38-2905.01*** which requires that DCPS schools receive supplemental funds for students considered “at-risk” of academic failure. To date, DCPS has routinely relied on these dollars to cover basic educational services, instead of allowing schools to use the funds as they were intended—to provide additional resources that mostly low-income, Black and brown students need to overcome barriers in and out of the classroom.
- **Target existing and any future federal pandemic education relief dollars to schools serving students and families most severely harmed by the pandemic.** While wealthier, mostly white families have been able to work from home or pay for tutors and other resources to help their

children catch up and stay on track, low-income, mostly families of color who are essential workers have been economically locked out of these same opportunities.

Engage LSATs to Assess Needs and Develop Solutions to Student Safety and School Security

DCPS says that “our schools are only the best that they can be with the support of the entire school community,” and that LSATs are “a key lever to increasing transparency at DCPS and ensuring decisions affecting school communities are made collaboratively with the help of a diverse group of school stakeholders.” This rings especially true now, yet prior to the pandemic, some schools struggled to form any LSATs at all, let alone teams that were racially and economically diverse. It is imperative that DCPS be vigilant in helping schools get their LSATs off the ground despite the new normal of virtual learning and give schools the tools they need to help recruit and retain diverse members.

Importantly, as the District aims to reimagine student safety and school security, LSATs (and other community-oriented stakeholders) should be meaningfully involved in this process. Black youth and families, who are disproportionately harmed by school policing culture, should especially have a say in the development of solutions and decision-making process. As one example, meaningful engagement at a particular school could look like requesting volunteers or appointing qualified students, educators, and other school community members to oversee the evaluation, adoption, and implementation of the final recommendations in the forthcoming report from the DC Commission on Police reform.

Some solutions that youth, advocates, and other allies are already favoring include:

- **Eliminating security officers in favor of “peace keepers” or “violence interrupters” within schools**—these would be new positions that existing security guards could apply for along with new applicants.
- **Reinvest money from the \$23 million security contract** to create a paid training program administered and overseen by community violence interrupters who can train other community members to become school-based violence interrupters.
- **Creating a pathway to school-based careers not preempted on violence or disproportionate power over youth** but rooted in transformative practices and healing-centered community care. This would be accomplished by creating the community- and care-based staff positions described above.

Consider the Pros and Cons of a New School Budget Model in Light of the Pandemic

DCPS is poised to reveal a new funding model in FY 2022. Much of the planning and discussion around the new model happened pre-pandemic. With all of the unknowns facing the DC children and families in the immediate and distant future, it is critical that DCPS assess the possible pros and cons of shifting the model.

Policymakers’ ongoing failure to adequately fund the overall public education budget ultimately contributes to the ongoing funding inequities of DCPS schools—a new funding model will not address this root cause issue. Policymakers have never fully funded the public education budget at the level recommended by school finance experts in the 2013 DC Adequacy Study. Given all that has changed, the estimated level in the study is likely outdated and warrants the Deputy Mayor for Education commissioning a full updated study that examines the holistic cost of adequately and equitably educating DC children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am happy to answer any questions.