

**Testimony of Qubilah Huddleston, Education Policy Analyst
at the Fiscal Year 2022 Proposed Budget Hearing on
DC Education Agencies
DC Council Committee of the Whole
June 3, 2021**

Chairperson Mendelson and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. 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.

Mayor Bowser's proposed budget for fiscal year (FY) 2022 makes much needed investments in public education at a time when students are facing substantial academic, social, and mental health loss. DCFPI recommends that the DC Council do the following to further strengthen the public education budget process and the FY 2022 budget proposal:

- **Fix structural issues to stabilize the DC Public Schools (DCPS) budget process;**
- **Require more transparency around the allocation of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) education recovery dollars;**
- **Close the digital divide by requiring an increase in and diversification of outreach efforts to families about low-cost or free internet programs and by passing the DCPS Technology Equity Act and the Internet Equity Amendment Act;**
- **Make long-term, sustainable investments in Out-of-School Time programs;**
- **Provide an additional \$841,000 to fully fund the expansion of the School-Based Mental Health (SBMH) program to all remaining public schools and an additional \$1.5 million to cover increased costs for providers;**
- **Reallocate the \$500,000 proposed for enhanced training for school security officers and school resource officers to non-law enforcement crisis response such as Safe Passage or the SBMH program;**
- **Fund the Representation in Education Pipeline Project (REPP) to strengthen recruitment and retention of educators of color; and**

City Leaders Need to Stabilize the DCPS Budget Process

DCFPI strongly urges the Council, Mayor, and public education officials to establish budgeting principles that make the DCPS budget process and funding for individual schools more stable. The Mayor's budget would increase the per-student base of the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF) by 3.6 percent (not adjusted for inflation), which is commendable. Many DCPS schools—especially those serving high percentages of low-income students—have faced budget cuts year after year, even with UPSFF increases, forcing them to choose between keeping key staff positions such as science teachers or full-time librarians.

Thankfully, the Mayor’s budget proposes \$14 million in federal funds and \$12.3 million in local funds to stabilize school budgets, staving off potential cuts and layoffs at individual schools that may have occurred otherwise.¹ We are still analyzing DCPS submitted budgets to confirm whether the stabilization dollars proposed would fully meet the need.

Policy choices are causing DCPS’s unstable school budgeting process, which harms students of color and those living in low-income households the most. Policymakers have never fully funded public schools at the level recommended in the 2013 Adequacy Study—today, the UPSFF remains \$260 below the recommended per-student base (adjusted for inflation). This issue coupled with the city’s failure to regularly increase the UPSFF enough to keep up with rising costs on an annual basis has led DCPS to pay for basic education services with “at-risk” dollars that are meant to fund additional resources for students who are being left behind in the classroom. Further, the cost of education is now far higher than what the Adequacy study estimated, particularly in light of the pandemic. DC policymakers should re-evaluate how much it would now cost to provide an adequate education to all of DC’s public school children and fully fund it at that level.

While the overall DCPS budget process is unstable for many schools, the schools where low-income and other vulnerable students are concentrated tend to face the most instability in their budgets. Consequently, these schools often struggle to help their students overcome barriers to learning without being able to fund consistent staffing levels or program offerings—let alone hire more staff or offer new programs that could better meet students’ needs. To better stabilize the DCPS budget process and school budgets themselves, DCFPI recommends the following:

- The Chief Financial Officer should prepare a current services funding level (CFSL) for public schools to estimate how much it would cost in future years to fund current levels educational programs and services²;
- The Mayor should base her proposed increases to the UPSFF on the CFSL to ensure that the formula keeps up with real costs of staff and other education goods;
- DCPS should ensure that every school begins their school budgeting process with their current budget and staffing levels, and stop supplanting school budgets with dollars meant for students at-risk of academic failure;
- DCPS should give Local School Advisory Teams at least three to four weeks to review their initial school budgets and provide recommendations to their principal; and,
- DCPS should always ensure that small schools or schools experiencing declining enrollment lose no more than five percent of their previous year’s budget, as required by DC law; stabilization dollars should be appropriated outside of the UPSFF since DCPS is the ‘by-right’ public school system.

DC Must Ensure the Transparency of Federal Investments in Education Recovery and that Community Members Have Meaningful Opportunities to Influence Spending Decisions

The Mayor and DC Council must ensure that data on the city’s use of federal education recovery dollars are accessible and easy to find, and that community members have meaningful opportunities to influence

spending decisions. The Mayor’s budget proposal outlines \$111.8 million in federal investments for education in FY 2022, including \$13 million for “high-impact” tutoring and \$5.6 million for summer programs. Yet, few details are provided about how these investments look on the ground despite federal rules requiring the Office of State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and local education agencies (LEAs) to submit detailed reopening and spending plans for their share of ARPA dollars within the next week. These rules also require that OSSE and the LEAs make spending allocations in consultation with families and community organizations that serve children most harmed by the pandemic.

DCFPI strongly encourages OSSE and LEAs to go above and beyond their usual methods of information sharing and community engagement with the public. DC should look to Baltimore City Public Schools for an example of spending transparency and robust community engagement. The school district launched a “Reconnect, Restore, Reimagine” initiative that aims to collect input and feedback from the community to help guide the school system’s plan to offer “safe, effective in-person learning for students while providing families with a virtual option.”³ All community members, not a select few members of an advisory committee, are valued and have an opportunity to contribute their thoughts via multiple virtual meetings and online surveys.

DC Has Made Progress in Closing the Digital Divide but More Work is Needed

The Mayor’s proposed budget takes meaningful steps toward closing the digital divide, such as providing a \$27 million investment to provide laptops, tablets, or smartphones to seniors, low-income families, foster care youth, and returning citizens. Still, long-term investments are needed to bridge the gap for residents still struggling to connect online.

DCFPI supports the Digital Equity in DC Education Coalition’s call for the Council to pass the DCPS Technology and the Internet Equity Amendment Acts. The first bill would require DCPS to create a comprehensive multi-year technology plan that would define and provide adequate technology to each DCPS school. The second bill would help establish a master internet plan to ensure all residents have access to high-speed, reliable internet.

DCFPI also strongly urges the Council to require the DME, DCPS and public charters to do more robust outreach about the city’s and federal government’s no or low-cost internet programs. While the city’s Internet for All program was designed to reach 25,000 low-income households, the DME reported last fall that only 4,000 households had taken advantage of the program (there is no new publicly available data on program participation).⁴ DC recently expanded eligibility to the program and should do more to reach more families who need the service the most.

DC Needs to Make Long-Term Investments in Out-of-School Time (OST)

DCFPI is a member of the DC OST Coalition and is thankful for the \$7.6 million that DC will receive in ARPA funds designated for summer enrichment and afterschool programming. However, we encourage the

Council to prioritize long-term, recurring investments in OST programs in the DME's Learn24 Office to close the opportunity gap between low-income children and their more well-off peers.

The Mayor's proposal includes \$3.3 million of the ARPA funds for summer 2021 and school year 2021-22 OST programs, with OSSE transferring these funds to the DME. The DME has also shared that the Department of Parks and Recreation will offer 700 OST seats through "DPR Boost Camps" that will operate in various locations such as public libraries, the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, and learning hubs in public housing.⁵ Beyond these data, information on how many more youth will access OST programming with these additional investments has not been made available.

Under the Mayor's proposal, the DME also invests half a million in FY 2022 and 2023 to establish an OST scholarship fund for low-income families. Families can use these funds to cover fees of a program of their choice. However, the Coalition has several unanswered questions about this proposal. They include:

- How many families will this scholarship fund provide resources to?
- How is the DME working with LEAs to promote the availability of these funds?
- What are the eligibility requirements? How is the DME planning to prioritize DC's most economically vulnerable families for these funds?
- How will the DME ensure that families can easily and equitably access funds and programs?
- How will the DME distribute funds to families?
- Will there be limits on the number of children that families can request scholarships for?
- How is the DME planning to leverage additional proposed investments in the Safe Passage program to get children to and from OST programs safely?
- What is the DME's long-term plan for expanding access to more free or affordable OST seats?

DCFPI strongly encourages the Council to ask the DME these questions at the government witness hearing next week.

DC Should Fully Fund the Expansion of the School-Based Mental Health Program

DCFPI is appreciative of the Mayor's proposed \$5.8 million investment in the School-Based Mental Health Expansion Program (SBMH) and the \$2.2 million in ARPA funds that OSSE will leverage to support the SBMH program. DCFPI also appreciates the \$5 million DCPS is proposing to invest in educator well-being. However, the proposal falls short in being able to support student grief and trauma in several ways:

- The Strengthening Families Through Behavioral Health Coalition (SFC) estimates that an additional \$841,000 is needed to cover the real cost to complete the program's expansion to all remaining DCPS and public charter schools.
- SFC also estimates that an additional \$1.5 million in one-time funding is needed to allow the Department of Behavioral Health to help cover pandemic-induced costs that existing SBMH providers are facing.

As a co-chair of the SFC, DCFPI strongly encourages the DC Council to provide additional funding to meet these needs.

DC Students Need Non-Law Enforcement Crisis Response Resources

DCFPI supports Black Swan Academy’s call for the DC Council to reallocate the \$500,000 proposed for enhanced training for school security officers and school resource officers to non-law enforcement crisis response such as Safe Passage or the SBMH program. DC already invests a significant amount in school security and policing—roughly \$33 million in FY 2021 while underinvesting in students’ safety to and from school and students’ mental health needs. DC schools have many more security officers per student than they do social workers or school psychologists. With all students expected to return to in-person learning in the fall, it is crucial for DC to ramp up its supports in care- and community-based resources that help keep students feel cared for and safe.

DC Must Boost Teacher Diversity to Promote Educational Equity Beyond the Pandemic

DCFPI supports EmpowerEd DC’s Representation in Education Pipeline Project (REPP) initiative to boost teacher diversity in DC and urges the Council to allocate \$1.2 million in the FY 2022 budget. DC currently has a wide gap in representation between Latinx students and Latinx educators, particularly in Wards 1 and 4, where Latinx students make up a large percentage of the public school population. Black male educators are also underrepresented in the District. Establishing a “Grow Your Own” teacher diversity program as part of the city’s COVID-19 educational equity strategy could help improve teacher retention, increased student re-engagement, and thereby boosting educational outcomes of low-income, Black students, and English Learners (many of whom are Latinx).

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

¹ Mary Levy, “[Next Year’s DCPS Local School Budgets: Preliminary Findings](#),” Coalition for DC Public Schools and Communities, March 18, 2021.

² Qubilah Huddleston, “[Raising the Bar: Budgeting for a Strong Public Education System](#),” DC Fiscal Policy Institute, December 17, 2019.

³ Baltimore City Public Schools, “[Build the 21-22 Reopening Plan Together: Reconnect, Restore, Reimagine](#),” 2021.

⁴ DC Deputy Mayor for Education, “[Ensuring Devices for Learning at Home During Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#),” Edsight, October 2020.

⁵ Public comments from Paul Kihn, Deputy Mayor for Education, at the DC Council, Committee of the Whole Public Roundtable on School Reopening and Academic Recovery: Government Witness Testimony, May 28, 2021.