



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Office of the Chancellor



Testimony of Michelle Rhee, Chancellor

Meeting of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee
on Financial Services and General Government
United States Senate

The Honorable Richard J. Durbin, Chairman

The Honorable Senator Susan Collins, Ranking Member

The Use of Federal Funds in the District of Columbia Public Schools
2009 - 2010

September 16, 2009

Good afternoon, Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Collins, and members of the Committee. I am honored to testify today about the use of federal funds to support education reform in the District of Columbia Public Schools.

Beginning in June, 2007 with less than 15% of students on grade level in math and reading^j and with 70% of our children living in poverty, Mayor Fenty set an ambitious goal for our nation's capital: to address poverty through the education of our city's children.

With a great sense of urgency and as part of the city's larger plans, DCPS aims to create an entire school district in which academic achievement matches or exceeds that of the suburbs. Data indicates that despite facing sobering statistics of low performance, individual schools in urban districts have accomplished proficiency rates of 90% or greater, even in the poorest of neighborhoods and the most challenging of circumstances.

With federal support we are moving quickly but intentionally to accomplish this goal on a district-wide scale. Our ambition is backed by more than a belief in justice in education for all children, regardless of race, socioeconomic circumstance or individual learning needs. It is backed by the researched best practices that have narrowed racial achievement gaps in other cities and have begun to do so for the first time in our nation's capital.

Also understanding that nobody has yet definitively solved the problems of urban education, we are adding targeted innovations to these practices, strategically attacking the most persistent challenges to student achievement from every viable angle.

Positive Signs

Federal funds have been well spent in the past two years. For the second year in a row, DCPS students have achieved significant gains on our annual standardized test, the DC Comprehensive Assessment System, or DC CAS. Such gains are unusual in the

second year of a new administration, especially after significant first-year gains. So we are pleased that in 2009, continuing the trend of district-wide achievement in 2008, our principals and teachers drove growth across all grade levels and in both reading and math.

Gains Among NCLB Subgroups

In just two years, students have narrowed the achievement gap in secondary math *by 20 percentage points*, from 70% to 50%, and the gap has narrowed across all grade levels and subject areas. In fact, virtually every subgroup of students increased proficiency rates this year, including our students with special education needs, English Language Learners (ELLs), and Economically Disadvantaged students. ELL students are outperforming the district as a whole in elementary reading, elementary math, and secondary math, with 20% gains in secondary reading over two years.

When Mayor Fenty took over the schools in 2007, only one-third of our students were on grade level in reading and math. Today, this ratio has moved to one-half. Of course, the fact that only half our students are proficient is not cause for celebration; but given where we once were, this is evidence of progress and a cause for hope.

I would like to highlight just a few priorities that federal funding has supported in 2009 with \$40 million, and that we have requested for 2010 with \$42.2 million. I will also be happy to answer any questions afterward about the more detailed documents previously submitted.

Use of Federal Funds in 2009

In anticipating district needs for 2009 we were cognizant of the significant front-end support that would be necessary to turn a district from under 15% proficiency to over 90% proficiency in future years. Projected in 2007 before a thorough assessment of the school system was complete, we are pleased that the majority of the reforms we anticipated for 2009 progressed as planned, some even ahead of schedule (such as right-sizing the school district by closing under-enrolled schools). Our 2009 initial

request also included additional federal support to jump start the system, and we have actualized these plans in a number of ways:

- *Principal recruitment and training:* After a nationwide aggressive principal recruitment campaign and competitive selection process that included community panels of the top candidates, we replaced 46 principals for the 2008 – 2009 school year and 26 in 2009 – 2010. We revamped our new principal orientations to better reflect adult learning and launched the Principals Academy to provide regular professional development support as well as the sharing of best practices among principals.
- *New school programs in high need areas:* We added a variety of programs backed by researched best-practices in 2008 – 2009 and 2009 – 2010. We expanded access to Early Childhood Education adding Reggio Emilia programs (similar to Montessori), added the Schoolwide Applications Model, or SAM, to improve the delivery of special education services. We also used federal funds to turn around failing schools through partnerships with organizations that have successfully accomplished this in other districts.
- *Improved Data Reporting:* After discovering 27 disconnected data systems holding student information—systems that did not communicate with one another—we found severe problems with DCPS data integrity, one of the most significant and unnecessary challenges we face. With 2009 federal funds, as planned we continued to overhaul our student information system with upgrades that will allow us to engage parents more fully in students’ progress.

We also began the process of creating a School Scorecard—a school report card—which we look forward to releasing in 2010. The Scorecard will contain the school performance data that parents and families prioritized in an extensive

engagement process. This is a large step we have taken to increase transparency, accountability and parent engagement in reforms.

- **Incenting High Achievement:** One of the cornerstones of reform we stated in 2007 is to retain and attract the highest quality educators to every school. In part this means providing competitive salaries, as well as rewards for results in student achievement gains. Our negotiations with the Washington Teachers Union continue in 2009, and we remain hopeful that we will achieve the goals projected in 2007 regarding teacher compensation. As we do, we can reward our hardworking and successful teachers and exit those from the system who, despite significant support, are either unable or unwilling to achieve student growth.

Increasing Equity in Distribution of Resources in 2009

Of course, once we conducted an accurate data assessment about the state of the system, we adjusted our spending strategy to advance the priorities we had outlined in our projection while also addressing related post-assessment needs. For example, we discovered inequities in resource allocation to students. Some came from data, and some from students themselves. Elementary school students in one of our poorest wards politely inquired whether it would be possible to have a music teacher while school music programs flourished in more affluent wards. Obesity rates are highest in our lowest-income neighborhoods, yet many schools in these neighborhoods did not have PE teachers. Students with mental health challenges were in schools without counselors but with oversized central office staff.

We addressed these inequities immediately by revising the way school budgets were constructed, adopting a Comprehensive Staffing Model (CSM) to ensure that all students had access to art, music, and PE teachers, as well as librarians, counselors and nurses. One grandmother had recently moved her academically struggling grandson from a charter school to Plummer Elementary School, which received the full CSM model as a high-need school. Happy about the help her grandson is receiving, she

shared her experience with us. “The principal got the reading specialist to come to our house. The psychologist came to our house. He got a math tutor. The school makes you feel wanted.”

Federal funds helped to expand equity through the CSM and other ways, including themed schools for more parents when their neighborhood school was failing, and increasing instructional time to address the 70% achievement gap we discovered in some schools and subject areas.

We are grateful for the federal funds that have brought us to this point. Now at the beginning of the 2009 – 2010 school year, we are entering an exciting new phase in which the hard work of the past two years is now hitting schools and classroom instruction, where our focus belongs.

Plans for Requested Federal Funds for 2010

As submitted to this body in June of this year, plans for 2010 federal spending will fuel programs and strategies to continue expanding education equity, tailor the best practices that are effective in other districts to the needs of DCPS, and apply innovative solutions to the most stubborn challenges in urban education.

Teacher quality support represents the greatest funding request in 2010 of the \$42.2 in 2010.

Federal Funds to Improve Teacher Quality

Children have been capable of doing their jobs through decades of systemic failure to educate them according to their rights and capabilities. The data is indisputable: children from every background and circumstance have faced heartbreaking realities in the District of Columbia, and despite them they have learned to read, write, and do arithmetic.

They have not done it, however, without excellent teachers. The most important reforms we can make are those that retain, support and attract the people who move children from potential to achievement. The more teachers we have who are

empowered to achieve these results, the faster DCPS will become a system that exits children with the skills they need to graduate from college, find employment, and move the next generations beyond poverty in the District of Columbia.

Without high quality educators the achievement gap will not close and DCPS children will not be educated according to the rights this nation provides them. We *must* support a cadre of teachers that is singularly focused on student achievement, give them clear direction about what good teaching looks like, and reward them when they accomplish the gains we are asking them to reach with students.

Compensation (\$10M)

The school systems that most desperately need our nation's highest performers often have the most difficulty retaining, attracting and supporting such professionals through compensation that drives results. But with federal support, a public school system could soon be able to compete with the private sector for attracting and retaining the best. In 2010, \$10M of federal dollars can support the first overhaul of human capital strategy with the use of incentive pay.

This is part of a wider strategic reform landing in schools this fall, which includes a new Teaching and Learning Framework aligned to a new performance assessment. Together they set clear expectations about what good teaching looks like and empower teachers to meet those expectations. The Framework and assessment are supported with a federally backed 400% increase in professional development, as well as a new master educator model to implement them both.

Master Educators (\$2.8M)

Assessing high-quality teaching effectively is one of the most challenging pursuits in education, and we sought input from teachers to create their new assessment as well as the master educator position. Through this process teachers expressed their concern about being assessed by only one person, as they felt that principals could use factors unrelated to performance to evaluate them unfairly. They wanted:

- An unbiased third party, separate from school politics and other factors, to assess their work.
- The assurance that the person assessing a teacher's work would have expertise in his or her content area. For example, it would not be appropriate or helpful for a former PE teacher to be evaluating a special education teacher.
- Regular observations of classroom practice, rather than assessments based on a single observation, which has occurred in the past.

We have incorporated these priorities in the master educator role, recruiting content area experts who have faced and overcome teachings toughest obstacles. As a result, teachers are beginning to share their confidence that their work will be assessed through a fair and transparent process.

No public school district has yet accomplished this kind of overhaul in the way it attracts, recognizes and rewards its educators, who are the most powerful hope we have to address poverty through education in this country. With federal support, our nation's capital can be the first.

Other 2010 Initiatives

In addition to federal funding to support teacher quality in 2010, we have prioritized a number of other critical initiatives to:

- turn around failing schools;
- use data to drive decisions and instruction;
- create innovative incentives for students to excel in school;
- provide one-on-one support to students;
- ensure equity so that students in all wards have the resources they need;
- expand and improve early childhood education; and
- attract and reward strong principals.

Vision Moving Forward

The mayor and I both look back at the past two years of reform with gratitude for the hard work from tireless people across the city, work that has resulted in significant growth even before the deepest reforms have hit the system. With the shared effort of students, parents, teachers, principals, counselors, librarians and other school staff, concerned citizens and volunteers, business leaders willing to donate their funds and services, employees of city and federal government and agencies, and the members of this committee, we have begun to move what had not been moved for decades. We will continue to need this investment, whether of funding or of labor, of this dedicated community of people.

In order to continue on this promising but challenging path in 2010 and beyond, we must continue to believe in the potential of all children in DC to achieve at the same levels we expect from students in the suburbs, and we must continue to embrace our shared responsibility as adults to make it happen.

With a renewed respect for our students and what they can achieve, I look forward to continuing on this challenging path with confidence and hope. Thank you for hearing my testimony today. I welcome your questions.

ⁱ National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2007