



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Office of the Chancellor

December 16, 2013

Councilmember David A. Catania  
Council of the District of Columbia  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Suite 404  
Washington DC 20004

Councilmember Catania –

At your recent hearing on school boundaries and feeders, you raised four issues for DCPS follow up. While each of these topics deserves substantial planning, including public engagement, we want to provide you with a quick overview of our current thinking and of our plans going forward. We are happy to follow up in the coming months, particularly as we finalize plans and formulate our FY 2015 budget.

**Office of Planning**

Now that DCPS has right-sized the school district by consolidating historically under-enrolled schools, we have an acute need to plan for the reuse of select facilities, to ensure that new school construction supports DCPS' academic plans, and to create programs where demand warrants.

Beginning in 2014, DCPS will establish the Office of School Planning. The Office of School Planning will ensure new schools and programs align the DCPS' strategic approach to improving student opportunities. Specifically, the Office of School Planning will have primary responsibility for:

- Planning and management of the portfolio of schools under DCPS;
- Identifying needs in the portfolio of schools and seeking means of addressing these needs;
- Developing new school programs and partnerships;
- Coordinating with other offices and with the community to ensure that new schools are successful;
- Coordinating the responsibilities (SIT teams, etc.) involved with school modernizations;
- Managing the building reuse process with DME; and
- Short- and long-term strategic portfolio planning related to school programs.

It is critical to note that the Office of School Planning will be lean and will not replace or duplicate the functions in existing offices. In developing new school programs, the Office of School Planning would be responsible for:

- Working with the Office of Family and Public Engagement to gather community input regarding school planning;
- Working with the Chief of Schools and the Office of Teaching and Learning to articulate academic programming for new programs and programs in modernized schools;

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- Working with the Office of Data and Strategy to collect survey information and other relevant data to inform school planning decisions;
  - Working with the Deputy Chancellor for Operations to ensure capital funds and operational needs of schools are met;
  - Working with instructional superintendents to coordinate with outside providers (CMOs, partner organizations) to ensure there are clear roles;
  - Working with district leadership to establish measures of success including enrollment targets and student outcomes for the first year of new programs; and
  - Passing management responsibility on to the Chief of Schools and instructional superintendents once the new program has successfully opened.

We are currently interviewing candidates and plan to launch this new office early in 2014 to address school facility and planning issues going forward.

### **Middle Grades**

DCPS has operated both strategically and with a sense of urgency in addressing the needs of our schools. Our measured approach mirrors our theory of action under which we first worked to ensure that we had high quality educators in our buildings and then created a new district-wide curriculum aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

We began our work at the elementary school level in FY 2014. In planning for the current school year, we worked with principals whose schools had elementary grades to build a schedule and a staff that met critical needs and that ensured equity across the district. Specifically, we funded schools such that every student would receive a 120-minute literacy block and 45 minutes of weekly instruction in art, music, physical education, and foreign language. We chose this approach because it supported our approach to implementing the Common Core State Standards and because it ensured that students received opportunities to explore a variety of courses. Overall, this approach has been very successful for our elementary schools.

As I announced at my public budget hearing in November, we plan to follow this same approach for middle grades in the upcoming school year. We have already begun to seek public input and have reached out to our educators so they can be partners in the work we plan going forward. This engagement will be critical to our success next year. Community and school-based expectations for middle grades vary greatly. Our efforts will be most successful if we can fully understand the varied interests as we make our plans and ensure that our plans are responsive to community input. Releasing a plan for middle grades developed by DCPS' central office without significant input from schools and parents would represent a lost opportunity.

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As a result, we do not have a packaged middle grades plan at this point. We expect that, based on the input we receive and the planning and research we do in the coming months, we will have a thoughtful plan that we will submit as part of our FY 2015 budget.

While we will not articulate a specific plan at this point, we can explain the principles that will guide our work going forward.

First, we will ensure that every middle-grade school student, regardless of the grade span of the school or what ward the school is in, has access to a consistent level of services. This may include multiple options for foreign language, the opportunity to take Algebra, increased access to special courses, or access to technology courses. I am eager to hear from the community as to what our middle grades should offer, but I am committed to ensuring equality of opportunity for our students.

Second, we will ensure that our middle-grade students are prepared for high school. For some of our students who may already be behind or who may need additional assistance to be ready for high school success, this may mean a longer school day or a longer school year – or even both. Part of ensuring that our students receive an equal opportunity is ensuring that students who need extra time receive it.

Third, we will build on the successes we have already seen in our middle schools. Several of our schools, including Kelly Miller Middle School and Hardy Middle School are showing great improvement and are providing high-quality programming to our students. In fact, we have seen the greatest growth in proficiency rates in our middle grades. In 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade math, we have seen nearly 30% gains in proficiency since 2007. In reading, we have seen more than 20% gains in the same grades. Our NAEP data mirrors these results, showing outsized gains in reading and math at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. We are eager to communicate these successes and build on them as we improve our middle schools district-wide.

There are a wide range of possibilities that we are already considering based on feedback we have received from the community. We know that we must do more to ensure that our 8<sup>th</sup> graders are all prepared for the rigors of high school. We must address the challenges faced by 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders at our education campuses where we do not have economies of scale. We must ensure there is sufficient time in the school day and the school year to provide remediation for students who need additional help, to meet the needs of our advanced students, and to give students a chance to explore new interests.

We will focus on improving our middle grades in FY 2015, and will then move on to improving our high schools in FY 2016 (the 2015-2016 school year). This work is very complicated and requires us to address not just course offerings and scheduling, but also to reflect on what is required to receive course credit and to graduate from high school.

Our experience is that when we apply our full effort and sufficient resources behind any reform, we are successful. When we try to do work too quickly and without sufficient engagement, we are not successful. Our staged approach – first elementary schools, then middle schools, and then high schools with robust opportunities for public engagement – sets us up for long term success rather than chasing quick fixes.

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### **Vertical Alignment**

As we work on improving our middle grades and high schools, we are intensely aware that DCPS does not have a clear, vertically-aligned system of schools. The Deputy Mayor for Education's work to revise boundaries and feeders has also placed a spotlight on this issue. We believe that this is a real and serious concern. We also believe that improving on the current system will require much more than a few staffing changes or an adjustment to our existing management structure.

We have organized our instructional superintendents so that they oversee schools that primarily cover the same grade-spans. We made this decision because we were not happy with the quality and consistency of instruction we were seeing in our schools and because we needed real, grade-specific expertise to increase the quality of instruction. This structure also allowed principals to learn from each other at cluster meetings that include other principals who oversee schools with the same grades. Finally, as we implemented the Common Core State Standards, having horizontally aligned clusters was critical to ensuring consistency in training, implementation and professional development across the district.

Recently, we have begun the process of working with principals more frequently in a vertically aligned structure. This is a useful tool for us and does afford principals a better understanding of the schooling experience that came earlier or that will come later in a student's education.

However, there is much work that we must do if we want to truly align our schools vertically. I firmly believe that the work we are doing to improve first elementary schools, then middle grades, and then high schools is the first critical step to establishing clear feeder patterns for our schools. Until we have consistent, high expectations for all students, high quality instruction for students at all of our schools, clarity regarding what each level of schooling should provide, and additional assistance available to schools where students have significant needs, we cannot truly align our schools vertically. While we are taking some steps toward vertical alignment now, including holding quarterly alignment meetings and considering alignment issues as we plan and develop school programs, the real gain will come when we have a foundation of high standards across our schools.

Our schools have a long history of autonomous decision-making that has led to some great programs, but programs that are often not supported across all school levels. This is particularly evident in language programs at elementary grades that are not supported in middle schools. To have real alignment, we must recognize and address this tension between autonomy and alignment.

While we share the concern that our elementary, middle, and high schools are not well aligned, we do not believe that we will serve our schools or our students well by trying to invent quick-fixes for this problem. Instead, we must address this concern as we increase expectations for our students and improve programming at all grade levels.

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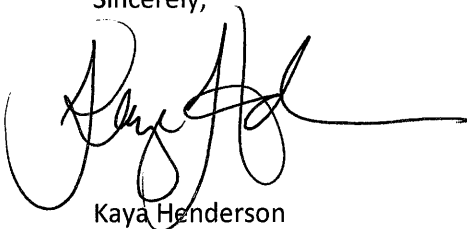
### **Funding Formula Proposals**

DCPS is not proposing any adjustments to the Uniform Per Pupil Funding Formula at this time. Instead, we are looking to the adequacy study to provide adjustments to ensure the formula accurately represents the needs of our students. To date, our experience has been that we have been able to fund all of our priorities within our current funding levels. We expect the same to be true for funding our priorities for FY 2015.

Where we believe additional study, and perhaps additional resources, may be needed is in funding a broad expansion of extended day or extended year for students. While we have been able to provide small-scale extended day programs at specific schools under our current budget, expanding to more schools may require additional resources. We are eager to engage in discussions about how best to address these areas of need going forward.

We are confident, and our data shows, that the strategic yet urgent approach to our work is yielding success. We are eager to hear feedback from the community and from parents as we continue to apply our theory of action going forward. At the same time, we will work hard to ensure we do not lose focus or adopt a reactive approach to improving our schools. Our students deserve great schools and they deserve the focused effort and attention needed to ensure the schools will be great far into the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kaya Henderson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kaya Henderson  
Chancellor