



# Washington Teachers' Union

***Amplifying the Voice of DC Teachers***

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## DC City Council Performance Oversight Hearing Committee of the Whole

District of Columbia Public Schools  
Office of the State Superintendent of Education  
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education  
D.C. Public Charter School Board  
State Board of Education  
Office of the Student Advocate  
Ombudsman for Education

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Testimony of

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I am Elizabeth Davis, president of the Washington Teachers' Union. The Washington Teacher's Union represents over 5,000 active and retired teachers. We are dedicated to social and educational justice for the students of the District of Columbia and to improving the quality of support, resources, compensation and working conditions for the public servants and proud teachers who educate our students. Many of our WTU members live and pay taxes in the District and have kids or family members that attend DC schools. I am a DC teacher and DC resident.

At last year's public oversight hearing, my testimony included the following:

In spite of the dedication and best efforts of our members, far too many students in the District of Columbia are stymied in reaching their full potential because of the barriers they face in our schools and in our communities. I want to be clear: our schools and educational systems across the District have improved remarkably over the past decade. However, we must also recognize and acknowledge that the majority of DC public school students are stuck below grade level. **Citywide, 62.9% of those who took the English language portion of the PARCC exam did not achieve proficiency. In math, 69.5% citywide did not reach proficiency.** Large achievement gaps persist between students of color, particularly African Americans, and their white counterparts. The barriers our students face are real and the resulting achievement gaps that are present in the District of Columbia are striking.

Unfortunately not much has changed since I wrote those words a year ago. In fact, due to the pandemic, we can expect to see gaps increase even further. It is time for our city to embark on bold reforms to ensure that every single student in the District receives the education that he or she deserves. Our return to in-person learning cannot simply be a return to what was. We must return to a system that has learned and improved; that is changing its practices and investing so that our city's rhetoric around investing in every student and giving all a "Fair Shot" is more than simply rhetoric. We must re-examine the governance and oversight structures for our city's public schools and embark on a new path that prioritizes equity and opportunity for all DC students regardless of their zip code or their luck in a school lottery.

### **Covid-19 Recovery**

COVID-19 called for a rapid transition from in-school instruction to a virtual setting. Understandably, learning was disrupted during the transition period. This transition highlighted and exacerbated the shortcomings of our educational systems, including, the opportunity gap that puts students of color and ELLs at a disadvantage; disciplinary measures towards minority students, especially students of color; the level of internet access; and unclear directions around attendance and grading policies. Nevertheless, COVID-19 provides a window to address the shortcomings in our city's educational systems and requires us to rethink education in the broadest sense. While WTU appreciates efforts to address disruptions, gaps, or loss that we have experienced this past year, the WTU believes that our time and resources would be better spent planning significant reforms to close the achievement gaps and retooling educators to prepare for what lies ahead

Acknowledging that schooling will likely remain in both virtual and in-person into the next school year as well as an on-going need to adapt to 21<sup>st</sup> Century realities that require increased attention to on-line learning and access, the WTU recommends:

1. **Adequate Funding.** Many of our schools are seeing cuts to instructional staff and increasing student/staff ratios for social-emotional positions. DCPS must be required to justify any budget cuts to a school and explain how those cuts are in the best interest of our students. We invite DCPS to work with educators across the city to begin reimagining education and work to ensure budgets align to District priorities.
2. **Safety.** Safety measures to protect both students and educators must be implemented or maintained. Far too many of our students continue to suffer from violence in the community. The WTU supports the defunding of police in our schools to allow for the adoption of progressive practices to reduce student violence and confront the trauma that many of our students have experienced.

3. **Learning Framework.** The environment in which learning takes place is critical. A well-supported caring environment is paramount to the academic success of all students. Hence, the Community Schools structure is one where all the support systems are in place and now the focus could be on instruction and parent engagement, also paramount to student success. Educators need time to get use to the virtual learning platforms. Educators who are conducting in-person classes, as well as virtual, both need to find ways to retool their teaching to not simply engage students, but to make the learning relevant to their world and community. An approach that has been stifled through standardized testing. Even Webb's Depth of Knowledge recommends that time should be spent on levels 1-3 since level 4 will never appear on a standardized test.
4. **Redistribution of Human Capital.** The research is clear that multi-tasking is a myth and that one can only do one thing at a time. Addressing more than one thing consecutively is not multi-tasking, it is addressing one thing at a time. This suggests that hybrid teaching is counter-intuitive to the research. Hence, educators may approach hybrid teaching with the best of intentions, but resources would be best spent by implementing Collaborative Teaching.
  - a. **Collaborative Teaching.** A process where educators plan together either by subject or in an interdisciplinary way. Both ways have benefits, by subject promotes vertical and horizontal mapping of the curriculum, which ensures continuity in the course of study, while interdisciplinary provides an efficient use of instructional time with extra to apply concepts to the real world. The latter being very necessary for successful teaching and learning.
  - b. **Peer Mentoring.** Highly efficient educators should assist others in the planning of lessons and activities. They could demonstrate how lessons could be effectively taught in both learning environments (in-person and virtual). The assignments of classes would require an educator designated to virtual instruction and one to in-person. This would reduce lapses in learning that occur when the educator switches her attention for either group.

The WTU looks forward to working with the Council over the coming months to ensure that these types of reforms are implemented and that our city confronts the immense opportunity gaps and the resulting achievement gaps that plague our city.

### **Looking Back. Unfinished Work.**

The WTU is proud of the work we've done for our students during this past year. Our educators embraced a shift to distance learning last spring and despite extremely limited training and time to prepare helped our students through the end of a trying year. We have stood firm on our pledge to support the whole student, continuing to provide high-quality instruction remotely until adequate protections were put in place to ensure the health and safety of our students and our communities. Over the past year, WTU has worked with DC Public School officials to:

- Establish a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on virtual learning to create procedures to ensure all students had a high-quality virtual experience;
- Establish MOA for in-Person Learning (IPL) and developed a School Safety Checklist that was adopted by DCPS to ensure our students and school-based staff were protected as we reopened our schools to in-person learning; and
- Ensured that educators were prioritized for Covid-19 vaccinations to prevent the spread of this deadly disease in our schools;

The WTU is also continuing on-going negotiations with DCPS over health and safety protocols to ensure the welfare of members and their students. Just last week, we agreed to a new agreement to establish a Health and Safety Situation Room requiring a virtual check-in between DCPS and WTU officials on Tuesdays and Fridays to discuss issues related to COVID-19. Our conversations, will include information related to cases and trends in each school; actions/steps taken after COVID cases are reported; operating status of buildings such as HVAC systems and other infrastructure issues; vaccination status of all building employees reporting in person; any violations of COVID mitigation policies; and availability of PPE; COVID testing and reporting schedules. We believe this is another needed step to ensure that our

communities are safe as we continue to face a deadly pandemic and we thank DC Public Schools for agreeing to its implementation.

The WTU and DCPS also continue our negotiations on a new contract to replace the WTU's expired labor agreement (which remains in effect until a new agreement is reached). We hope that the contract will be finalized in the coming weeks and that we can have a strong framework to protect educators' rights in place for the foreseeable future.

While I acknowledge that the pandemic forced us all into uncharted territory, myself as well as educators and parents across the city have been frustrated by the lack of clear and direct communication from DC Public Schools throughout the pandemic. This has created mistrust and resulted in multiple failures to reopen schools to in-person learning. While our city should be proud of the work DC Public Schools as well as our city's health agencies have done to ensure our students can begin to safely return to our school buildings, we must also acknowledge that there were many missteps along the path including:

- Delays in the distribution of technology to students in March 2020 and in August 2020 as well as in ordering technology for the 2020-2021 school year;
- Poor communication with students and teachers about expectations and grading practices and policies for virtual learning during the transition;
- Limited Professional Development support as teachers transitioned to virtual environments and limited planning for the return for the 2020-2021 school year; and
- Poor and limited communication with both workforce partners and the community regarding reopening plans and health and safety improvements that DCPS has put in place.

These were missed opportunities by DC Public Schools and other agencies that oversee our educational systems to build trust in our communities and to ensure that disruptions to learning for students was minimized. We believe that student, community and workforce voices are critical in moving our educational system forward and are disappointed in the top-down approach that we've seen over the past year as we confronted the Covid-19 pandemic.

Outside of the day to day operation at DC Public Schools, our city's educational structure also failed to move forward with needed reforms to ensure collaboration across LEAs and ensure that our city has a comprehensive plan to address the needs of all students. These efforts include:

- **A comprehensive plan for education.** It has become clear that the Administration lacks a comprehensive Master Plan for Education in the District. It is long past time that we end competition for limited dollars and work to coordinate across sectors to ensure that every student in the District receives a high-quality education. The DME's Cross Sector Taskforce's failure to agree on substantial reforms highlights this failure.

Until the District has adopted a comprehensive education plan, the WTU again calls for a moratorium on the opening of any new school.

- **Master Facilities Planning.** The executive has failed to provide the Council a Master Facilities plan to provide agencies, school leaders, stakeholders, and the community with the information needed to support current and future school facilities planning in Washington, D.C. This failure continues to hamper our efforts to ensure that we have state of the art facilities and high-quality seats for every student in the District.

Across the District, we have more than 20,000 empty seats. Each of these seats carries a cost in dollars that prevents funds from flowing to our students and our classrooms where they are most needed. We hope that the DME will work with all local stakeholders to develop a Master Facility Plan that works for District students.

- **Improved Accountability.** While we appreciate the Council’s action last year to improve the transparency and accountability in the education sector, we believe it is time for the District to establish an independent state education agency. In our current structure, the head of the District’s state education agency, OSSE, reports to the same executive who oversees our public school systems and the LEAs authorized to serve students in the District.
- **Teacher Turnover.** In the nearly two years since the DC State Board of Education released a report highlighting the District’s high rate of teacher turnover, we’ve seen no concrete action by the LEAs to address this concern. In Fall 2019, DCPS Chancellor Lewis Ferebee announced a partnership with American University’s School of Education to provide an evidence-based, independent and objective analysis of IMPACT, DCPS’ longstanding performance evaluation system for teachers. However, this report has not yet been made available and no substantive reforms have been proposed.

The WTU calls for an immediate suspension of IMPACT for the duration of the pandemic and, again, asks the Council to move legislation that would allow the Union to negotiate a fair evaluation system that emphasizes teacher growth and development.

- **Special Education.** In 2019, the US Department of Education found the District was in the “need assistance” category of Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). While the District scores well in the Department’s “2019 Part B Results-Driven Accountability Matrix” for “compliance,” the District fails to meet the academic needs of DC Special Education Students, earning just 11 of 24 possible points.

The gap in our city’s ability to effectively education students with special needs is reflected in our city’s PARCC scores. Fewer than 10% of Special Education Students achieve at a 4+ threshold.

	State % 4+			DCPS % 4+		
	2018	2019	% Point Change	2018	2019	% Point Change
Math	6.4%	7.2%	0.8%	6.9%	8.5%	1.6%
ELA	5.7%	7.9%	2.2%	6.1%	9.3%	3.2%

The issue of improving achievement for students with special education needs should be a priority for our city and for DC Public Schools. In our contract negotiations, we have recommended to DCPS that we ensure that categories of special education mirror national guidelines and that we bring our class sizes into compliance with the Union contract. Additionally, we recommend increasing the number of planning periods for special education teachers, to ensure they have adequate time to plan lessons for their students. We’ve also heard from our special education teachers and aides that they are often pulled from their regular duty to “cover” when other teachers are out. We need to end this practice and prioritize the needs of our special education students.

- **School Accountability and Standardized Testing.** While we are grateful that OSSE has decided to pursue a waiver for federally mandated student testing for the 2020-2021 school year, the WTU continues to express our concerns that our current school accountability system is heavily weighted towards measures that are proxies for poverty – tests and attendance. We, again, encourage OSSE to bring forward reforms to the District’s School Accountability system to ensure that our schools are weighted fairly on the teaching and learning as well as the positive school culture that exists in District schools.
- **School Budgeting Reform.** Our local school budgeting process is broken. Each year, as costs increase at the local school level, our DCPS schools face cuts that prevent them from meeting the academic and socio-emotional needs of our students. It is time that DCPS works with

educators and communities to reform the budget process in a manner that provides stability to schools, builds pathways for student success from early education through graduation, and fully supports all student needs.

The WTU will again reiterate its support for the creation of a Special Committee to review educational governance and make recommendations to this body to improve the support our students receive as well as their educational outcomes.

**Concluding Thoughts.**

The true measure of our city is how we treat our most vulnerable; it is morally wrong to fail to invest in the students of the District of Columbia. It is time that our city moves beyond a framework of public education that emphasizes “choice” and embrace one that recognizes our citizen’s right to education. It is time that we embrace a bold policy agenda that prioritizes students and ending the achievement gaps that plague our city.

The WTU recognizes that challenges that COVID-19 has created. We view this as an opportunity to not simply reopen our schools, but to reopen better and we look forward to working with city leaders, including the Council, to overcome the challenges that we are facing. I know that we share a passion for our city’s student and ensuring that every student has access to a high-quality education in their community.

Thank you very much.