



January 18, 2020

Lewis D. Ferebee
Chancellor
D.C. Public Schools
1200 First Street NE
Washington, DC 20002

Chancellor Ferebee:

The D.C. State Board of Education urges you to **rescind your proposal to close** Washington Metropolitan Opportunity Academy (Washington Met) until the school community is properly engaged and a mutually agreed-upon plan is in place for the continuation of education of these vulnerable students, and for the future of the dedicated staff and teachers. Since the abrupt announcement of the school’s proposed closure on November 26, 2019, the school community and residents across the District of Columbia have spoken forcefully against shuttering an alternative school that serves as a lifeline for some of the District’s most vulnerable middle and high school students. We believe that this stakeholder input should be respected.

The State Board received public testimony from Washington Met students and staff at its January 15, 2020, public meeting that was deeply concerning. This included reports that, on the day before Thanksgiving, D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) presented a proposal to close the school without offering other options for discussion.¹ Students testified that they believe they have been disrespected and unheard. It appears that DCPS intends to move forward with its original proposal, despite nearly unanimous agreement among stakeholders that closing the school without amendment will be harmful to students and school personnel. This leads the community to believe that the decision to close the school had already been made, even as DCPS held two public input sessions.

Further, it would appear that the reasons DCPS has given for the school’s proposed closure—underutilization of space, low levels of student achievement, low attendance rates, and under-enrollment—are directly attributable to DCPS’ inattention and withholding of needed resources. It is disturbing that DCPS would move to close a school serving one of the highest concentrations of at-risk students in the city before attempting to work with the community to bring resources and make needed improvements.

¹ Prior to the January 15, 2020 public meeting of the State Board, many representatives publicly voiced concerns over the closure of Washington Met. Ward 1 Representative Emily Gasoi wrote an op-ed in *The DC Line* on Dec 31, 2019 and co-hosted a meeting with Ward 1 Councilwoman Brianne Nadeau on the school’s closure. Ward 8 Representative Markus Batchelor and Ward 4 Representative Frazier O’Leary have both expressed their views and urged the public to support the communities affected by the potential closure.





Finally, decades of research from closures across the country have shown that the short-term impacts on students of closed schools are negative, that low-income students and students of color face greater adverse effects from closures, and the impacts can be long-lasting for the communities in which they serve.^{2 3 4 5} For the population of students at Washington Met, this is even more significant because they have already left other schools where they did not feel they belonged or that did not provide the environment necessary for both their unique academic and non-academic needs. The research is clear about the damage done to students when a school like Washington Met is closed without a substantive plan for what comes next, designed in partnership with the community.

For the reasons outlined in this letter, the State Board strongly opposes the closure of the Washington Metropolitan Opportunity Academy.

It has become clear to us, based on stakeholder testimony, review of public input, and constituent feedback, that going forward with the plan to close Washington Met in June will invariably harm many members of that community and further erode already damaged trust between the District and the residents it serves. We therefore strongly urge you to rescind your proposal and to engage the Washington Met community in authentic discussion around how best to improve their school.

Sincerely,

The D.C. State Board of Education

Ashley C. MacLeay, At-Large Representative
Emily Gasoi, Ward 1 Representative
Jack Jacobson, Ward 2 Representative
Ruth Wattenberg, Ward 3 Representative
Frazier O’Leary, Ward 4 Representative
Zachary Parker, Ward 5 Representative
Jessica Sutter, Ward 6 Representative
Karen Williams, Ward 7 Representative
Markus Batchelor, Ward 8 Representative

² “Subtracting Schools from Communities”, <https://www.urban.org/features/subtracting-schools-communities>

³ “School Closure as a Strategy to Remedy Low Performance”, <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/closures>

⁴ “Tracing Transitions: The Effect of High School Closure on Displaced Students”, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40963085>

⁵ “The Effects of Performance Based School Closure and Charter Takeover on Student Performance”.

<https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/Bross-Harris-Liu-The-Effects-of-Performance-Based-School-Closure-and-Charter-Takeover-on-Student-Performance.pdf>

