



FY2019 Performance Oversight Hearing

Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole and Committee on Education
Phil Mendelson and David Grosso, Chairmen

January 29, 2020

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Markus Batchelor, Vice President, Ward 8
Ashley MacLeay, At-Large
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Jack Jacobson, Ward 2
Dr. Frazier O’Leary, Ward 4
Zachary Parker, Ward 5
Dr. Jessica Sutter, Ward 6
Karen Williams, Ward 7
Dayja Burton, Student Representative
Alex O’Sullivan, Student Representative

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Matthew Repka, Policy Analyst
Alexander Jue, Policy Analyst
Rhoma Battle, Budget & Operations Specialist
Caitlin Peng, Program Associate



Good morning, Chairpersons Mendelson and Grosso and members of the Committee of the Whole Education. My name is Ruth Wattenberg. I am the Ward 3 member of the DC State Board of Education and currently the President of the State Board. I am here with Markus Batchelor, the excellent vice president of our State Board. Both of us were just reelected two weeks ago to our second term as the leadership team—and we are excited to be here to talk about the State Board’s work. Our State Board is made up of nine elected members—one from each ward and one at-large—plus two student representatives, Dayja Burton from McKinley Tech and Alex O’Sullivan from BASIS DC.

I also want to acknowledge Serena Hayes, the Ombudsman for Public Education, and Dan Davis, the Chief Student Advocate. Their independent offices are housed within the State Board and we are deeply grateful to Serena, Dan and their teams for their vital work with student and families.

I want to thank our staff for their dedication, hard work, and passion on behalf of DC residents, without which we could not have achieved our success. Our full-time staff who served in 2019 were: Paul Negron, Rhoma Battle, Matt Repka, Alexander Jue, Caitlin Peng, Lanita Logan, and Milayo Olufemi. And our policy fellows who each served an academic semester with the State Board: Sarah Arrington, Sara Gopalkrishna, Brian Robinson and Jordan Miller; and, of course, our Executive Director, John-Paul Hayworth.

I also want to thank the extremely hard-working staff of the Ombudsman and Student Advocate Offices. You will hear from each of them about the work their offices have undertaken and hope to take on. For myself, I will say they are everywhere. I heard two weeks ago about a case in which a D.C. resident was on the cusp of being deported because he was unable to get his attendance records from DCPS and the PCSB that showed his continuous residency in DC. In 24 hours, Serena was able to resolve the problem. I saw Dan at a DCPS fair, where I was able to connect him with some parents involved in dyslexia work. Within weeks, they were working together on materials that would empower parents to better understand and advocate for their children.

In a system where families are on the sidelines of policymaking and have little role in holding the system accountable, these two offices are vital in providing families not just a way in, but leading them through.

Likewise, in such a system, a vital role of the State Board itself is raising issues that would otherwise be lost or undebated. In our system, it is easy for one narrative, one perspective on what’s important, what’s happening, and what’s working to overwhelm all the others—for some issues to be elevated and others to be neglected. But education is complicated. Nothing in education always works perfectly. There are always tradeoffs and they need to be understood.

The State Board is positioned to raise important issues that could otherwise get lost. We are elected, we visit schools across the city, we are in touch with the families and schools in our communities, we’re at meetings, we talk to teachers. People talk to us. We see and hear what’s going on from





many perspectives and across all wards. Good policy requires good information—and a good feedback loop. We help provide that.

We've been doing so, and thanks to budgetary support from the Council last year, we are poised to do more. Let me say a bit about what we've done and what we're planning.

Teacher and Principal Attrition

A year and a half years ago, the State Board published its first report on teacher attrition. The narrative at the time was: Teacher attrition isn't an issue. The teachers who leave are those who should—those who aren't effective. Or—for charters, schools develop policies that work best for their schools; it's not an issue. Yet, we on the State Board, heard about this issue constantly, from teachers, from students, from families.

But there was no data. Who was right? Absent data, discussion suffers; absent discussion, policy suffers. We were able, with our report, to bring data to the conversation. We were able to show that our average annual school-level retention rates were genuinely, factually much higher than in other urban districts—about 25 percent—in comparison to 19 percent in other large urban districts and 16 percent nationally. We were able to show that the rates were consistently and persistently higher in schools that enrolled higher numbers of at-risk students. 18–20 percent in schools with fewer than 20 percent at-risk students and almost a third in schools with the highest percentage of at-risk students.

Since our first report:

- Both DCPS and OSSE made transparent, for the first time, their own data on teacher attrition in October 2019.
- DCPS appears to have lowered its rate.
- The PCSB has raised the issue as a concern in discussions.
- And, here at the Council, we appreciate that these Committees held a hearing on teacher and principal turnover and retention last month and we look forward to a hearing on our proposed legislation to make attrition data transparent and regularly reported.

The issue is no longer neglected; it's on the table for discussion and hopefully improvement.

We are following up with a survey to be released this spring, of teachers who have recently exited their school (whether resigned, retired, or fired), and, later, with a survey of teachers still teaching—about why they left, might leave, and why they are staying. Each of these surveys will give us a sense of what is driving our high attrition rates and what could be done to help current teachers stay. For each survey, we will—and have—started with a conversation with other agencies and stakeholders to make sure our surveys are informed by their knowledge and questions.





Thanks to budgetary support from the Council, we are expanding our research to other topics: topics that we hear about, that are on the minds of families, teachers, residents and advocates—and of the agencies that ultimately have responsibility for serving our students. Let me describe a few that are moving forward as we speak.

We often hear that with the focus on reading and math achievement, social studies, science, and the arts are squeezed out of the curriculum. We hear it from parents, teachers, advocates. It's also a concern of DCPS, which is working now to bolster instruction in these areas. We also hear concerns about the extent to which students in different schools get comparable exposure to grade-level academic standards. We will be conducting surveys and initial case studies to shed light on these issues. To what extent is the rigor and breadth of education the same or different around the city? What are the obstacles to teaching on grade level? What would help staff better provide a rich, broad curriculum?

We will also be looking at the STAR Framework, which our State Board approved several years ago as the means for rating schools. How's it working? Does it validly capture the actual quality of different schools? Have other states figured out better ways to do this? It is challenging to definitively measure school quality—and federal rules add other complications. Yet we—the public, families, policymakers—need to know how schools are faring and where help is most needed. Our research will help us consider whether and how we might improve what we are doing while meeting federal rules.

In addition to elevating issues, the State Board—along with OSSE—are charged with developing and approving state standards. Neither of us is specifically staffed to address them on a regular basis. In our FY21 budget request, we have proposed to add such a position—and we support such a position for OSSE as well. As of now, the current social studies standards are the oldest in DC, last approved in 2007, before the State Board existed. Only five states have social studies standards more outdated than the District; and at least fifteen states have had multiple revisions of their standards since the District's were adopted. Over the next two years, the State Board will be working with OSSE, the public, teachers, and experts to develop new standards that reflect more up to date thinking about history and social studies and its teaching—including the history of DC. We can all agree that in the current political climate, strengthened, effective social studies education is absolutely key.

The State Board's role is to approve and advise on education policies that best serve our city's students, with significant input and engagement from our constituents: in short, to be an independent voice for District residents, a vital role in our city and one which we are pleased to fill. We are glad to have the Council as an essential partner in these efforts. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I welcome any questions.

