



Written Testimony of

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D.C. Auditor

prepared for the

Council of the District of Columbia Committee

on Education

Performance Oversight Roundtable

on the Future of School Reform in the District of Columbia

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I appreciate the opportunity to share the perspective of the Office of the D.C. Auditor as the D.C. Council Committee on Education continues to grapple with the ongoing challenges of improving academic achievement in D.C.'s public schools.

As you know, this office was charged with overseeing the first round of comprehensive research following the enactment of the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (PERAA). We served as fiscal agent, working initially with EdCORE, a project of the George Washington University and other education research entities, and then with the National Research Council of the National Academies in their "summative" report, [An Evaluation of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia: Reform in a Changing Landscape](#), released in 2015. That lengthy report underscored what the District's advocacy community has known for the 25 years I have been engaged in education issues: *improving academic achievement in our public schools requires a sustained, long-term effort*. The report acknowledged some slow gains in test scores, but documented the persistence of an achievement gap between the District's rich and poor students.

The National Academies report recommended as follows:

The District of Columbia should establish institutional arrangements that will support ongoing independent evaluation of its education system. Whatever structure is developed, three conditions should be met:

- The evaluation entity should have sufficient resources to collect and analyze primary data, including at the school level, rather than being entirely dependent on city-generated test and administrative data.
- Evaluations should be conducted by experts with qualifications needed for specific tasks. Ideally, the structure will allow the city to benefit from the expertise of external researchers and practitioners who specialize in teaching and learning, curriculum, testing and measurement, and finance and policy.
- All products produced by the entity should undergo rigorous peer review.

The report usefully recommended next steps to policy-makers, including the development of a comprehensive and publicly available data warehouse and ongoing evaluation of schools and student achievement. I note that the committee now has before it a proposal to build just such a framework for ongoing research and evaluation, Bill 22-0776, the District of Columbia Education Research Advisory Board and Collaborative Establishment Act of 2018. I hope the Committee will research, amend and approve legislation to create a research-practice partnership (RPP) like those in Chicago, New York City, and other communities to work closely with D.C. Public Schools and public charter schools to improve academic achievement. As introduced, the legislation envisions a role for my office similar to the role we played with the earlier PERAA research, and we stand ready to serve in that capacity. It is important, though, to note that the success of RPPs in other communities derive from a collaborative and constructive relationship with school system leaders.

The RPPs elsewhere that have been successful have focused on a feedback loop of reform, measurement, adjustment and improvement. The role of the research partner is to—in good faith, with independence and objectivity—test the results of the reforms put in place by the policymakers and practitioners. In Washington, D.C., as in every other urban center, there are initiatives put in place by public schools that show promise and others that do not. One of the persistent challenges here, for example, has been an over-emphasis on standardized testing without any obvious consensus on what

has been accomplished and how test results could best be utilized. Another challenge has been what is described as a rigorous evaluation process for teachers and principals, but one that has been consistently criticized by teacher and principal organizations.

It has been said that Washington, D.C., is the fastest improving urban school district. But based on what information? Recent assessments of results from the National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP) also known as “America’s report card,” call into question just what has been accomplished as evidenced by standardized tests. Looking at annualized NAEP test score gains by D.C. public school students over a 20-year period finds only modest gains—and more significant gains in the years leading up to the mayoral takeover than in the years since.

Public education advocate Matthew Frumin provided these somewhat surprising metrics, shared with the Committee in greater detail in testimony submitted by budget analyst Mary Levy, showing that growth in student performance overall and on a subgroup bases, in most instances, proceeded on a faster pace before 2007 than in the 10 years after. In just one category—8th grade reading scores—have scores increased more in the years since PERAA than in the years prior. The gains? A 0.60 point annual gain since the governance change, and a 0.56 point annual improvement in the seven years prior. That was for all D.C. public school students (DCPS and charter). For D.C. students who are black and Hispanic, the gain was greater in the years prior to PERAA.

The data suggest for other categories:

- For 4th grade reading scores, there was a 1.98 point annualized gain pre-PERAA, and a 1.63 point annualized gain in the years since. For white and Latino students, there is a slight decrease in scores since 2007, but meaningful annual gains from 1998 to 2007.
- In 4th grade math overall, all students saw annualized gains of 1.76 points since 2007. But they showed annualized gains of 3.16 points between 2000 and 2007. Every subgroup saw larger annualized gains pre-2007 than after.
- In 8th grade math the scores before the governance change and since are very similar, but slightly larger gains in the pre-2007 period than in the years since—1.76 point annualized gains from 2007 through 2017 and 1.94 point gains in the seven years preceding.

Does this mean we are doing something wrong? Not necessarily. But it does mean that there is a good conversation to be had about what was happening in DC schools prior to 2007, and what has been taking place since. Prior to the governance change the District’s Board of Education, working closely with a broad array of parents and other school leaders, researched, debated, and implemented rigorous new education standards, developed curriculum aligned to those standards, and instituted a new standardized test. This work took place over several years with Board adoption of math and reading standards in November 2004, a scant few months after hiring Dr. Clifford B. Janey. A wide range of academic analyses of state education standards uniformly praised the District’s standards—adapted from those of Massachusetts – including a [Fordham Institute study](#) published in 2010 that concluded that the District’s English and language arts standards implemented in 2005 were more rigorous than those subsequently developed through the Common Core State Standards. One of the wisest moves made following the mayoral takeover was to leave that important reform in place—the Fenty-Rhee and Gray-Henderson administrations maintained the new DC standards and the test built on those standards.

In addition to recommending the kind of “ongoing, independent evaluation of its progress” envisioned in the Cheh-White legislation, the National Academies made two other major recommendations to address the continuing challenges of academic achievement documented in the report:

- The District of Columbia should have a comprehensive data warehouse that makes basic information about the school system available in one place. That information should be readily accessible online to parents, the community, and researchers. That information should include data on the school system as a whole and at more detailed levels. Building such a warehouse will take time, but it can begin with the data collection efforts already in place.
- The primary objective of the District of Columbia for its public schools should be to address the serious and persistent disparities in learning opportunities and academic progress across student groups and wards.

A year after the report was published, ODCA provided the Council with an [update](#) on the status of the three major recommendations with information provided by the Deputy Mayor for Education and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

ODCA is currently overseeing a major research project on enrollment in D.C. public schools, requested and funded by the Council in the budget deliberations a year ago. We also have under way or under consideration other projects in public education to respond to a request by the State Board of Education in January that ODCA review both the graduation-related issues, and questions of oversight and governance.

As was the case with the PERAA studies, the Office of the D.C. Auditor is fully prepared to assist the Council in the creation and “incubation” of a new education research consortium, working closely with the Bowser Administration, D.C. Public Schools, public charter schools, the Deputy Mayor for Education, OSSE, the State Board of Education, and the broader community.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide this perspective.