
Public Schools in the District: Data, Reform, and the Future

July 12, 2018

A roundtable discussion





The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman
The Honorable David Grosso, Councilmember
Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Chairman Mendelson and Councilmember Grosso:

I write to share the second in an occasional series of Office of the D.C. Auditor roundtable discussions on topics of importance and interest, titled The District's Public Schools: Data, Reform & the Future. The impetus for this moderated discussion was the resolution adopted by the State Board of Education on January 17, 2018, which asked ODCA to "examine the institutional conditions and culture that have allegedly created an education system that prioritizes appearances and outcomes data over genuine improvement."

As part of our response to the State Board, we invited experts on education research and governance—some of whom have held elected or appointed positions in D.C., and all of whom are familiar with the history of reform efforts here and nationally—to a discussion on May 23, 2018. The 90-minute discussion was held at the new home of the D.C. Bar, and we greatly appreciate the hospitality of D.C. Bar CEO Robert Spagnoletti and his staff. The discussion was taped, transcribed, and edited lightly for length.

The lively discussion covers topics including mayoral control, community participation, how and to what extent data have driven the District's reform efforts, the impact of recent controversies, and prospects for the future for the District of Columbia's public schools. The participants, in addition to State Board of Education President Karen Williams and me, were:

- Robert Bobb, former City Administrator, president of the D.C. Board of Education, and emergency financial manager of the Detroit Public Schools
- Michael Feuer, Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University
- Jeffrey Henig, Professor of Political Science & Education, Teachers College, Columbia University
- Monica Herk, Vice President for Education Research, Committee for Economic Development
- Herb Tillery, Executive Director, College Success Foundation
- Thomas Toch, Director, FutureEd, McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University

The group's discussion of the use of data and metrics to hold individuals accountable and to make judgments about the success of policies and practices is particularly rich. I am grateful to the participants for their comments and their ongoing work in education. And I hope you will find the critiques and recommendations in this report useful as you continue to grapple with the challenge of improving our public schools.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kathleen Patterson".

Kathleen Patterson, District of Columbia Auditor

Public Schools in the District: Data, Reform, and the Future

A Roundtable Discussion from the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor

Panelists

Robert Bobb, *Former President, D.C. State Board of Education*

Michael Feuer, *Dean, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University*

Jeffrey Henig, *Professor of Political Science & Education, Teachers College, Columbia University*

Monica Herk, *Vice President for Education Research, Committee for Economic Development*

Herb Tillery, *Executive Director, College Success Foundation*

Thomas Toch, *Director, FutureEd, McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University*

Karen Williams, *President, D.C. State Board of Education*

Kathleen Patterson, *D.C. Auditor*



Kathy Patterson

AUDITOR PATTERSON: I'm Kathy Patterson. I want to welcome everybody and let you know how much we appreciate the D.C. Bar and Bob Spagnoletti and his team, many of whom are here, for letting us use this building and this amazing facility. We will be audio taping, but we're also being videotaped so everybody has to mind their manners!

Before we have everyone do a brief introduction, I'd like to recognize Karen Williams, the president of the State Board of Education.

MS. WILLIAMS: First of all, thank you, Kathy, for actually reading our resolution and acting upon it! That was one of the most interesting debates that we've had on the State Board, but I think it was very fruitful. Thank you for coming back to us and working together to try to find some solutions to some of the issues that plague our public school system in D.C. I think everyone in this room's main agenda is to improve the educational landscape and if we work together we can do that.

I am the president of the State Board, but I am also a Ward 7 resident, a product of D.C. Public Schools. I actually graduated from George Washington, so I'm really a D.C. girl.

Education has always been something that's foremost on my mind. It was something my parents instilled in me and I want to make the world a better place for those coming up under me. Thank you.



AUDITOR PATTERSON: Thank you, Karen. And all of you are here because you have great expertise in public education and most of you have experience, as well, with D.C. public education. And you are individuals I know and respect, and it feels self-indulgent to have everyone here for what I hope will be a lively conversation.

So why don't we just go around and quickly introduce ourselves. Michael?

MR. FEUER: My name is Michael Feuer. I'm the Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at GW. I've been living in Washington since 1986, and my two kids are graduates of the D.C. public schools. It's wonderful to see a GW alum, Karen Williams, rising to her position of stature and status.

MS. WILLIAMS: Thank you.

MS. HERK: My name's Monica Herk. I'm Vice-President for Education Research at the Committee for Economic Development. CED is a membership organization of CEOs and other business leaders, and we are also a public policy think tank in the public interest, and so education is very important to all our members. I live here in the D.C. area. I'm probably the one least familiar directly with D.C. public schools, but I hope I bring somewhat of an outside perspective to the situation.

MR. TILLERY: I am Herb Tillery. I'm the Executive Director of the College Success Foundation. I am a D.C. resident. I left D.C. upon graduation from high school and college, had a 30-year Army career, came back to D.C. Public Schools as its chief of staff during the time of the takeover from the Control Board --

AUDITOR PATTERSON: The first takeover?

MR. TILLERY: Yes. And General Becton asked me to come back. Since then, I've been at GW as an adjunct professor and deputy mayor for operations under Tony Williams.

MR. TOCH: My name is Tom Toch. I am Director of FutureEd, an independent, solution-oriented think tank at the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University.

MR. HENIG: I'm Jeff Henig. I'm a professor of political science and education at Teacher's College at Columbia. I've been in New York now for 16 years, but before that I was in D.C. at GW for 25 years I've been walking the streets for the last couple of hours, and there are some things that look familiar and some that don't. Some things never change, and that may be a theme.

MR. BOBB: Good afternoon and thanks for inviting me. My name is Robert Bobb. I am a former city administrator here in the district, as well as the former president of the D.C. School Board that later became the D.C. State Board of Education.

I run a consulting firm that's national, and we work with school districts mainly on turning around their finances as well as their operations. And also I was the receiver over the Detroit Public Schools for about two and a half years.

AUDITOR PATTERSON: I'd like to share some of the language from the resolution from the State Board that Karen mentioned. One of the things that the state board asked my office to do was to "review the institutional conditions and culture that have allegedly created an educational system that prioritizes appearances and outcomes data over genuine improvement." So, my first question is, is that what we have here? A system that prioritizes appearances? And let's go to Robert and to Jeff, because I know you were two of the people who testified in 2007 on the mayoral takeover issue.

Have you seen anything in the last several months that is not what you were anticipating looking back at that time?

MR. BOBB: Yes, I've had a chance to think a lot about the reform and the change in the structure of public education here in the district. And looking back, one of the things that still is absent is whether parents have a direct link to a school board, to a state board of education, to an ombudsman type of arrangement.

But I do think that having the mayor having direct responsibility for the school system, I think D.C. has made tremendous progress in that area.

The question at the end of the day is whether some of the challenges that we've read about over the last several months, are directly tied to the structure of the system versus how the system and its leadership are actually performing. We hear a lot about "children are our first asset" and that sort of thing. But at the end of the day, it's really about accountability and whether the system itself has systems that promote accountability and a drive for performance.

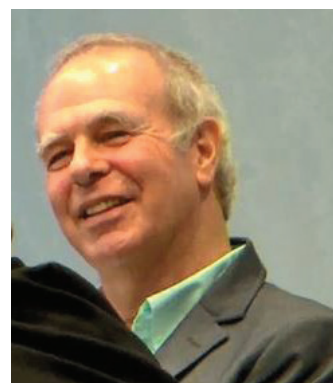
And one of the things I have found in school systems that we've worked in is that the whole concept of data analytics seem to be missing as a way in which to drive performance.

AUDITOR PATTERSON: Do you want to jump in, Jeff?

MR. HENIG: Yes. You know, it's always hard to know what's particular to a city and what's general. I think some of things are general and, ironically, some of the emphasis over the last 18 years or so on accountability may be part of the story, or the problem, in this instance.

There's a frequently cited Campbell's Law named after Donald Campbell, a social psychologist, who argued if you take any measure and invest a lot of importance in it, it will tend to be corrupted.

So, a lot of cities have faced this. There have been high levels of nominal accountability for standardized test scores and then moving into graduation rates. And that creates an incentive to meet measured targets. Ideally that's either by



Jeffrey Henig

doing real hard work reforms, but sometimes the schools and districts don't know exactly how to do that part and so they find the easier route.

There's another way in which cities have been wrestling with this and that is education in the context of aspirations for urban revitalization and attracting business and attracting families and holding families in the schools. Improving the reputation of the city's public schools can be an important part of an urban revitalization strategy.

Again, there's a hard way to create a school system that gives people what they need and then there's an easy way, which is the PR route.

And as long the metrics are coming back and making things look good and people are talking about how the city's doing good, there's an incentive even among people who may be a little bit skeptical to just let it ride.

MR. FEUER: I'll second Jeff's comment that overreliance on a certain set of metrics can create opportunities for distortion and incentives that undermine both the validity of the measures themselves and also lead to erosion of morale and a general sense of disconnect.



Michael Feuer

But I would point out that this is not a new phenomenon in the United States. Go back to the mid-19th century, the first use of uniform written examinations introduced by the common school reformers with good intention also became a tool, as several historians have noted, to "bludgeon" the school principals into changing what was going on.

So, the possibility that metrics create incentives and distortions is—first of all—not new in terms of education. Second, I don't think it's worse in D.C. than in many other places around the country.

Third, it is worth recalling that this problem of metrics that can distort behavior is not limited to education. Campbell's Law is rather more general.

All that said, I believe it is important to ask how bad is the distortion – and to consider whether potential benefits of measurement might outweigh the costs and risks of the distortion -- rather than just say, well, there's been some distortion and therefore let's abandon measurement and try something else.

I think in the case of D.C., we have evidence that comes from metrics that are relatively more shielded from those kinds of distorting influences, such as NAEP results. Those metrics aren't perfect either, but they do offer a more hopeful way of interpreting trends.

MS. HERK: Just to echo some of the things that others are saying, I think it's well established that when you have performance metrics that are high stakes that people get rewarded for, there is a human tendency—there's an incentive to cheat on them. And that's just an aspect of performance metric systems.

And there are a few ways to counteract that part of human nature. And one is to have a balanced set of metrics, so you don't just put everything all on one metric. You have a balanced set so that even if people are cheating on one, it's going to show up in the others.

I think you see that with the attendance versus graduation rates. So, it's good to have a number of metrics, not too many, preferably some simple ones.



And then there's also the system that you have for both collecting those metrics, and auditing them and who evaluates them and comes to decisions about them, and making that independent of the people who are either going to get elected or paid or rewarded on that basis. You need to try to create independent groups to do the collection, auditing and analysis.

MR. TILLERY: I think for the last 11 years, my focus has been on Ward 7 and 8 schools specifically. And I've seen some unintended consequences of the metrics, and that's instability of the leadership.

And we've seen, every time there's a new principal, we have to go back in to prove that we bring value to the school through our college program.

Each principal also looks at why the other principal is not there, and if they put in their own spin on things then the unintended consequence becomes people trying to please the leadership because they want to keep their job, but the kid is the person that suffers.

It's all about relationships. Kids come from broken relationships, and they're looking for stability in their school. By the time they develop a relationship with the teacher or the principal, they leave, and the kids feel abandoned.

Meanwhile, the principal has to show results, because they were brought in to make things better. So, I think you have to look at all the avenues starting with the child and what they bring from their adverse experiences that affect them in the classroom. And I don't think we've taken a systemic look. We try to target either metrics or leadership and we have to look at the total system.

MR. TOCH: I don't think anyone is arguing, that we don't want to know whether the system is doing a good job or not, whether schools are succeeding or not, whether individual teachers are doing a good job or not. Holding high school principals accountable for graduation rates is a logical thing to do.

And therefore, if we have a system of accountability—which surely we should have—then the question becomes what are the right incentives for school leaders to act appropriately; what's the right level of oversight?

And clearly in the last couple of months, there was a failure of oversight in the high school division in the central office in DCPS. But does that suggest that 10 years' worth of reform, largely to the human capital system in this

city, was a failure? No. There's no compelling connection between the two.

Clearly, DCPS is attracting and retaining higher quality teachers. Ask charter school leaders in the city how easy it is for them to poach the best teachers from DCPS, which they used to do with impunity. It's a different ball game now. There's been a lot of back and forth about NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] scores but when I look at the NAEP scores, the evidence is pretty clear.

Student achievement is on the rise. Kids have more educational opportunities in this city than they had before.

So, rather than continue to relitigate the last decade, it seems to me that the focus should be on what's next in reform. The question should be how best to build on the successes of the past decade.

“ And sometimes we make the mistake that, “these children cannot learn.” I’ve been in situations where I’ve seen kids at age 5 that can speak three and four dialects. So, there’s nothing wrong with these children’s minds. ”

– Robert Bobb

AUDITOR PATTERSON: And I would agree with that, but it's hard to parse what does need changing versus what doesn't need changing, how to make mid-course corrections.

You've mentioned the improvements in the human capital system. Can you share more on that?

MR. TOCH: Well, I think DCPS in particular has done a better job of recruiting, hiring, inducting, evaluating teachers. More recently, through LEAP, a school-based professional development model, DCPS is helping to improve all teachers on a continuous basis. Public school teaching has traditionally been a low-status occupation attracting folks who don't have as many opportunities as their peers, notwithstanding the fact that many are deeply committed to children. The District of Columbia has gone further than any school district in America in transforming a low-status, low-standard, low-pay occupation into a performance-based profession, with meaningful compensation, with respect, rewards and opportunities to grow as professionals and stay in teaching. So, to me that's an important step forward.

MS. WILLIAMS: As a former teacher in DCPS, former special education teacher in DCPS, I was very aware of the issues of my students but also of the push to pass them along even though I could not individually meet their needs at that point.

MR. TOCH: When were you in the classroom?

MS. WILLIAMS: I was at Stanton in 1997 and '98. And then I went to Truesdell for a couple of years.

And I'll be honest with you, I was one of those teachers who actually ran out the door screaming one day because I could not in good conscience continue to push students I know had not achieved the goals that I was supposed to help them reach.

When the principal came in and said I had a second-grader who had to read out of the second-grade book but they can't read, so how can I teach them to read using a second-grade book?

But the good part of that is that it took me to early childhood education, where I could see the great things that intervention at an early age could mean, the difference that could make in a child's life

But my point is it's not just a system that we have to fix for those high school students and middle school students. We need to start earlier. We need to start in infancy, because it's not just the children we have to educate, it's the parents.

MR. BOBB: When I was in Detroit, I only wanted two things from parents. I mean, a lot of times we ask parents for a whole lot of things. And I said, let me just see if I can break it down and ask parents to do two things for me.

One is get that child to school every day no matter what, rain, snow, sleet, whatever, please get your child to school every day.

And then the second thing I ask parents to do, have the child get a good night's rest. Because in these urban communities, we provide breakfast, we provide lunch, and we should provide security for these kids.

So, those are my two takes as opposed to asking parents for a whole lot of things. Right? Because they weren't going to get it.

And sometimes we make the mistake that, "these children cannot learn." I've been in situations where I've seen kids at age 5 that can speak three and four dialects. So, there's nothing wrong with these children's minds.

And then, if I can speak consultant-ese for a minute... Whenever there is a crisis like we've had in the District, then there's a lot of conversation around the crisis and then there's a lot of things that people want to do.

I think we need to step back and say, what is the current state of the school district here in the District? Salaries are different, we have better metrics, but when we really drill down to define a current state of our public school system here in D.C., what really is it?

And in defining that current state, we need to define it through the use of data. But it really needs to be defined, not on an emotional level but on an analytical level.

Once that is clearly defined then the next conversation is, what is the future state? And a future state is around all of these conversations that we're having now. And then how do we build the building blocks for improvements going forward?

Each time there is a crisis, whether it's test scores and I've done a lot of research on cheating in school districts around the country—whether it's one of those situations, then all of a sudden the music stops and it does a pause, and the pause is around the crisis. But then somehow the future doesn't progress, it doesn't move. Everything is a crisis. One year we're up, now we're down; now kids aren't graduating.

And that becomes the conversation. So, what is happening with respect to how kids are being educated while we, the adults over here, are having this huge conversation around graduation rates?



Karen Williams



MR. FEUER: I'll pick up on that. I agree with you. One of the sad things that's happened is that there was evidence of progress in a number of very important indicators of the overall performance of the system – but that evidence is not considered trustworthy, for various reasons.

As Tom has noted, if you look at NAEP, average performance has been going up. Of course, that's not sufficient without looking also at the persistence of the variance, or gaps, across our diverse student body. But overall there was progress. And then you have a couple of scandalous events, which undermine the morale of the people who are actually doing this hard work, and you're undermining the trust in the system and in the data that the parents and the community have. That's a sad setback.

But, again, I don't think that the remedy for that is to kick out the word accountability or to kick out the idea of data indicators and metrics. It suggests, rather, that we need to establish some new agreements about what we mean by accountability and how we're going to use measures to hold ourselves accountable. I would recommend attention to some examples from other school systems struggling with problems of poverty and inequality. For example, economists Richard Murnane and Greg Duncan wrote a short book called "Restoring Opportunity," which calls for "sensible accountability" as an important ingredient in programs that have produced positive change.

To reiterate this point: parents in this city want to know if the system is working, and I think they are entitled to the system being held accountable. But to do that in a sensible way means to not let the thermostat go up so high that we are inducing behaviors or reducing trust in the overall system, which then ultimately is counterproductive.

By the way, it's important to remember that even when we have good data, such as from NAEP, different people interpret the evidence differently. For example, people who never liked the idea of Mayoral reform look at NAEP scores differently from people who hold a more positive view of the major reforms. That's standard operating procedure in a democratic system where there's a robust level of debate and argumentation and opinion, and where prior beliefs creep into the interpretation of data.

What's been missing in much of the contemporary debate in DC is a credible brokering of that data so that people can say, okay, yes, we've had some setbacks, this is what's been going on and then people can actually trust this.

 I think one of the things we wanted to look at was, are there incentives that are in place for teachers and principals to make their scores look better, and are those the right incentives or are the incentives creating this issue? 

– Herb Tillery

And it is sad for me that in this city we still are struggling with the idea of having a reliable source of data and the interpretation of the data that could really contribute to everybody taking a deep breath and not overreacting to this or that scandal, as painful as they've been.

MR. TILLERY: I think one of the things we wanted to look at was, are there incentives that are in place for teachers and principals to make their scores look better, and are those the right incentives or are the incentives creating this issue?

To the data, I always push back on the data because when you're talking about improvements, you're not talking about Wards 7 and 8. You'll see 7 and 8 have flatlined. They're still flatlined. And people are still getting incentives, but it's still flatlined. I've seen it for the last 11 years.

So, you really have to start with looking at the children themselves and what are the adverse childhood experiences that they bring to the classroom.

I've had to testify that sometimes I have to get between the parent and the kid because the parent is holding them back. There we try to go into the homes to find out. We do all the things that people tell us you can't do because you're going to get killed.

And one of them is that we go sit down in the home and say, okay, what's going on here. And sometimes I can be candid and say, I've had my staff at homes when people were in the backroom smoking crack the day that we were trying to mentor a child. That has got to be taken into account when you're looking at how you're going to deal with the system and what the teachers are up against. Are they prepared to deal with the adversity?

The one thing that you see when there is a crisis is crisis intervention counselors. But then they go away after a week or two, the child is still in a traumatic crisis and here she is bringing that forevermore into the classroom. It doesn't go away.

MR. BOBB: My point is that we blame the school system too frequently. Because the things that are happening from the household to the neighborhood to the school campus, those aren't the responsibilities of the school system. Those are the responsibilities of the larger government. I mean, we expect the school system to provide employment, to deal with drug abuse. That's not the school system's responsibility.

The school system is responsible once those children put their foot on a school campus. That's our responsibility.

And until the whole community starts to address some of those other issues then the expectation of performance is not going to be there.

AUDITOR PATTERSON: Did you want to jump in, Monica?

“ There should be pressure on high school principals to increase their graduation rates. The question is, what is the right mix of incentives and how do we audit that? ”

– Thomas Toch

MS. HERK: I think that’s a really good point, but going back to an earlier conversation, has there been any attempt to assess to what extent teachers or principals feel pressured by this?

Has there been any confidential survey, to attempt to get under that? Because I think that’s a real question whether, there is a systemic problem of pressure leading to bad practices or if this is a scandal that came up and it’s not really representative of something deeper.

AUDITOR PATTERSON: One of the steps that we’re taking in response to the State Board of Education’s request is a survey of principals. The survey will ask questions like that but also questions about how principals spend their time versus how they want to spend their time. And we will ask principals if they are willing to do confidential interviews? So, we’re trying to get at some of those issues. One of the challenges is to make sure that you have out on the table all of those things that you do need to address.

MS. HERK: I think that’s a really important step.

MR. TOCH: There should be pressure on high school principals to increase their graduation rates. The question is, what is the right mix of incentives and how do we audit that?

How do we oversee their work to ensure that they’re actually addressing the core problem, which is chronic absenteeism, which I think the district as a whole and all of us should be focusing on, too, rather than spend all of our time suggesting that the malfeasance that took place is the problem.

It is not the problem. It’s a symptom of a deeper problem. Do we have to get the accountability incentives aligned properly? For sure. And heads needed to roll, they did roll in DCPS in the high school division.

But the core problem, as Robert suggests, is really the mix of challenges faced by students in Wards 7 and 8 and other parts of this city who suffer the consequences of severe poverty.

Students don’t have consistent adult interactions. They don’t have a sense of security. They have a variety of responsibilities to younger siblings or to grandparents in their homes that keep them out of school.

So, the question becomes, what is the constellation of supports that we can bring to bear for those children to make them feel more connected to their schools as members of a learning community but also enable them to address the many challenges that they bring in the door with them in a way that allows them to function effectively.

And this becomes an issue of creating an environment in which kids care because they feel cared about.

It has curricular consequences, right? Brian Pick [director of teacher and learning] told me not too long ago that the real challenge in the comprehensive high schools in Wards 7 and 8 is that because kids are absent so often, it’s very hard to create a sustained curricular focus.

You can't build on Tuesday on what you taught on Monday because it's a different group of students in the classroom. We have to address that. How do we create a more effective, sustained curricular focus?

What are the financial incentives that encourage, for example, charter schools to push kids out as they do, not infrequently, after the annual October 5th enrollment count day that determines school funding for the entire school year.

All those kids who are struggling emotionally, behaviorally, academically get funneled back into the comprehensive high schools, Ballou and Anacostia and the like. And then suddenly the schools are dealing with all those challenges, no resources in the kid's backpack, and it becomes much harder. If you talk to the principals over there, that's a huge problem.



Thomas Toch

There is a differential between graduation rates among the kids who start in 9th grade at Anacostia High School and go to 12th grade and kids who come in at 10th, 11th, 12th—very different statistics.

We have to get to that level of granularity to understand the problem and work backwards to address what is a panoply of factors.

MR. HENIG: I want to introduce another dimension to this and it's—I'm a data guy. I believe in data. I think it's really important.

But I disagree with Tom in terms of the notion that this is just a question of tweaking, aligning the system, aligning the metrics. I think that's a false hope, and it doesn't get you out of Campbell's Law.

And the reason is because there are actually tough judgements that have to be made about trade-offs among different kinds of approaches. It's not just a question of getting everything aligned.

You know, there are trade-offs in terms of how do you do discipline in order to promote the learning and graduation of some kids versus getting other kids out of the schools because they're disruptive? These are tough, tough questions.

And I think that doesn't mean you don't try to get the metrics right. I just think it's not going to solve the problem. I would draw a distinction between metrics for accountability that is hard-wired in with rewards and sanctions attached to specific measures, versus metrics and accountability that are used for judgement.

That's judgement by public officials who have to balance multiple goals and multiple constituencies and judgement and interpretation by citizens who ultimately have to make choices about when there's a course correction, things like that.

I just had one other point. I think one of the reasons that the anxiety level is high around this issue right now is because there's a perception that the reform that has taken place in recent years is fragile, it's vulnerable.

And it's fragile and vulnerable because it doesn't have a local constituency that's bought in. And it doesn't have a local constituency that's bought in partly because so much of the drive for education reform in D.C. has come from the outside.

 I would draw a distinction between metrics for accountability that is hard-wired in with rewards and sanctions attached to specific measures, versus metrics and accountability that are used for judgement. 

– Jeffrey Henig

MR. TOCH: Sorry, Jeff, absolutely not true.

MR. HENIG: Okay. Well, then let's have that argument.

I would say the drive for education reform has come from the outside, and the concern that's elevated right now is on the outside, because D.C. has been promoted as a model.

In some ways, I think DC does provide a model. But that's why people in the national education reform movement are concerned. They don't want to take a hit to this particular vision of how do you drive system change and so they're mobilizing on this issue, to counteract the impression the recent scandals mean that DC's achievement is now questionable.

And I don't think you're going to build a local constituency for reform unless you're thinking about these metrics as also feeding into the community and being in part responsive to the community and what is its vision of what's important to measure.

MR. TOCH: I would only say in response that we don't want to throw out the district's central goal -- more kids achieving at higher levels through high school graduation—in the name of a different, less-demanding mix of accountability measures.

I'm not arguing that DCPS has had the perfectly right mix. There is no right mix, right? But they have been unrelenting in their commitment to what seems to me to be the right goals.

MR. FEUER: Not to adjudicate this exchange here, but it's worth noting that the people who actually know the most about what is inside these test-based measures are frequently the least willing to let them be used for the kind of high stakes accountability of the sort that Jeff is distinguishing from the broader concept of accountability as being "how is the system doing?" and "can I trust it and what kind of judgments ought to be made?"

Most of the people who develop these measures, whether it's test scores or anything else, are the ones who are the most skittish about letting the system over-rely on them as the basis for systemic change.

So, it's just something to keep in mind that we're dealing with metrics that are more fragile and less technologically capable of answering the broad range of questions that we keep throwing at them.

And that's what I mean by rethinking what would be a more sensible approach to accountability that would be taking some of that into account.

All that said, there are other communities around the U.S. that have struggled with many of the same problems that we have here—poverty, racism, discrimination, inequality, political upheaval, and instability—and have somehow not abdicated the role of the public school system in making a difference for the kids, even in that kind of an environment.



And there's evidence of ways in which those things have actually been done. So, I'm with you on the part of not forgetting the broader context of inequality and poverty and degradation that we are suffering from.

But I'm not quite ready to say, therefore, it is inappropriate to hold the schools accountable for whatever their role can be even in that kind of an environment. I think that's really a recipe for giving up on the great goals of public schooling.

MR. BOBB: I think you can't give up. I mean, the school system still must be accountable for educating and achievement however that's defined.

My point is that they're being judged on a lot of things that they really have no control over. Things that happen in the neighborhood. And while there was mention of a collaborative group internally, it's, who leads that group, number one. Number two, what's their authority for getting things done?

And is there someone who's leading this that can go to a district agency and say, over here, Herb is dealing with five homes where crack or whatever is being used, and will social services go there and address that issue or is it up to him? That's my only point.

But if you're going to put collaborative systems in place where the other agencies are playing a significant role, they have to have the juice, in Vegas terms, to really make a difference as opposed to a group of individuals who are coming to a meeting, having a nice conversation, identifying the problem, but then they leave, and who then will drive to make things happen outside of the school campus before those children actually come into the school system?

And Jeff, I can tell you that the reform was all internal. I mean, I was a victim of it, right? I mean, we ran to be on a school board, and we were morphed and became a state board and to this day, I can't quite figure out the State Board.



...let's look at the districts that are doing even better than D.C. with the same poverty levels, and Chicago shines in that regard.

– Monica Herk



MS. HERK: We all want schools that face lots of challenges -- especially in high-poverty districts—to do the best they can. And we want accountability. And we want data to drive improvement. I'm really impressed by a measure developed by Sean Reardon [at the Stanford Graduate School of Education] that looks at looking at actual growth in students' achievement between 3rd grade and 8th grade; that is, how many years do the children improve academically between those grades.

That measure takes into account that different kids start at different places, but how much growth do we get? And if you compare across districts that have equal poverty levels, then, some districts do better than others. And D.C., on that measure, doesn't look that bad. D.C. students achieve 5.1 years of growth between 3rd and 8th grade. I live in Fairfax County, which is considered a prestigious system, and it's only getting 4.9 years.

But then let's look at the districts that are doing even better than D.C. with the same poverty levels, and Chicago shines in that regard.

And what does Chicago have? They're using data in a research-practice alliance to help drive improvement. There are data and metrics for accountability, and then there are data and metrics for technical assistance, improvement, and coaching. And that's actually two different types of data. And you need both.

So, I would say let's look to the districts that are similar to ours and that are having better results. What are they doing and how are they achieving those results? And that begins to get to your question of where do we get DCPS to perform even better.

MR. TOCH: One of the seemingly most valuable things that Chicago is doing, and Baltimore does it too, with data is to identify kids really early on -- in their late junior high school, early high school years -- to see if they are on track to graduate, using three or four different metrics that have been correlated with graduation.

They can see when a child is falling behind, missing X number of days in a core course, for example. Then you have an infrastructure in place to support that child and the family because, parents are not always aware or don't always have the resources to respond.

AUDITOR PATTERSON: There was an early warning system included in a piece of legislation that was enacted by the council and has not been implemented.

MS. WILLIAMS: The State Board of Education has the authority over graduation requirements. We just spent a year reviewing our graduation requirements and one of the recommendations from that committee is that every child in the District of Columbia have a Personalized Educational Plan developed by the 3rd grade.

Because I still say when you wait until the ninth grade it's kind of late to try to change that trajectory. The other thing is, the mayor's task force was authorized by the mayor and one of the issues that we're attacking is attendance. We have a tremendous investment in the Every Day Counts program, where every agency in the city is working towards making safe passage getting to school on time one of their priorities.

MR. BOBB: So what does that look like today, this afternoon, safe passage? If we left this room and we went to a neighborhood, what would that look like?

MS. WILLIAMS: That means the police are alert. Like a lot of our children, especially from Wards 7 and 8, leave our wards to catch Metros to other areas and their gang violence...

MR. BOBB: So if we—excuse me—so if we go out there today...

MS. WILLIAMS: ...you should have police officers at the Metro stop...

MR. TILLERY: ...if we go out there today, we'll see a police officer escorting...

MS. WILLIAMS: ...and then you also have the neighborhood, people in the neighborhood involved in this process where they watch to make sure the children get from the Metro to wherever they're going safely. I'm saying this is an initiative that's been worked on for three years. It's just being implemented this year, and I'm sure it's not up to 100 percent speed.

And I'm not saying that we've solved all the problems at all, that is not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that we are addressing these problems.

And fortunately, because the State Board has finally developed relationships with the powers to be, we can be a part of this process instead of standing on the sidelines.

I don't say that we're there yet. I'm saying that we need to do a lot more work.

AUDITOR PATTERSON: And I can share that my office is working with Michael and his team researching approaches to the personalized learning plans.

MR. FEUER: I think Monica made this point but I want to build on it and come back to the example here, which is, if you start the conversation on data, what's a data system we'd want to have for the purpose of answering important questions about what's working and what isn't?

You get a very different data system then you do if you start with accountability. So, it's critical that we start with a clarification of the main goals of the measurement; we can do it now by learning from how other systems do it, including systems that enable us to follow individual students.

You can follow them when they move among the sectors, charter versus non-charter. You can answer questions about what is the result when students are opting for different kinds of schools, making that trade-off for greater transportation versus staying in the more local schools. So individual-level data is one critical part of understanding the impact of mobility on the measures and understanding the effects of the measures on mobility.

We also need to be thinking about how do you then set that system up so that it can be used by different groups for different purposes rather than a single accountability purpose. For example, we may want to make it possible for a

community school/professional partnership that's working in Ward 7 or Ward 8 or in a particular area to be able to answer context-specific questions.

And it ought to be an open system that academics and others can use who have research questions that may not be on the immediate policy agenda but are the kinds of things that are important in the long run.

These are things that it was impossible to do 15 years ago. It is possible now. Some places are further ahead than that. It's not easy, because ideally what you'd want is a data system that allows you to also integrate school versus non-school social services and things like that.

And that brings up a whole bunch of bureaucratic battles that are not easily settled; but it's critical to start the conversation in a way that invites the community in as part of the process so that it can understand how data can be useful.

MS. WILLIAMS: Just to piggyback on that, we just finished doing our yearly update for the state report card that's mandated by the Department of Education.

And part of the information we want on the report card is what kind of services are in the school. Whether they have teachers that are trauma-based trained, what kind of resources they have in the school for after school programs.

We're trying to move forward with having that information transparent to the students and to their parents. Some of this we can't do immediately because we don't have the data, but that's where we're looking forward to having some way to collect that data and report it out accurately.

AUDITOR PATTERSON: Going back to Chicago, another thing that Chicago has is the research consortium doing research on an ongoing basis working with the school system, a research-practice partnership. And there is legislation before the council now to create something along those lines.

MR. BOBB: May I ask a question on that? So, is there a distinction between the auditor role and the research?

AUDITOR PATTERSON: The proposal is to house a new research consortium in my office as an incubator—that's the current proposal. But, again, just like we manage the contract for this research, it's that rather than my staff doing additional audits. It's not an audit function. It's the office serving as a fiscal agent for the research entity.

MR. FEUER: One way to more succinctly summarize this conversation is to note the distinction between getting the right data and getting the data right. What Jeff and others have been arguing here is that depending on what the purpose is, you want to design data systems appropriately.

We have lots of examples of this issue from US education history. If you want to have data to use to make some kind of predictions of how students are going to perform in freshman year of college, you can get a certain amount of information from standardized admissions tests such as the SAT or ACT.

But the idea of using scores from admissions tests that have been validated for very specific (and narrow) outcomes, to evaluate, say, the relative performance of state systems of education, which was tried in this country, is a kind of flagrant disregard of what the data were originally designed and built to be able to support.

Getting the right data means asking the right questions first and then figuring out do we have data that could

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respond to that kind of question that could actually help people make better judgements. If not, what would it take to go about collecting those kinds of data.

And then comes the question of how do you interpret those data in a way that actually produces credible, useful guidance to decision makers. And that’s the part about getting the data right.

And for that I’ve been a fan of trying to figure out a way to reduce some of the heat on this conversation and bring some more light from the data and having some frank and transparent conversations about what we’re actually learning from the data we have and want to collect.

For a while I thought there was a cultural shift taking place vis a vis data: we were starting to see attention to reports such as those from the National Academies. With that, we were also moving away from the belief in what are sometimes called “silver bullet solutions” to our problems.

There were hopes for the IMPACT system [the DCPS evaluation and feedback system for school-based personnel] and other elements of the DC mayoral reform. Some people imagined that these changes would quickly and easily “solve our problems.” It would be better to avoid that kind of “solution” rhetoric, to move from silver bullets to something that I would call “best bets:” the idea being that from good analysis of data we can generate options that are relatively more likely to show the kinds of results, improvements, that we want; and then proceed with caution while we continue to evaluate and refine the interventions. This is different from just turning up the heat on accountability, which leads to disappointment and erosion of trust.

MR. TOCH: I would agree completely with what you’re saying Michael, but I don’t think that that description necessarily reflects what has happened over the past decade in the District of Columbia. They started with a very strong accountability focus. Michelle Rhee, because she had spent 10 years working in the District through her previous work through TNTP [The New Teacher Project] she knew, the district’s strengths and weaknesses and focused on the human capital system.

The emphasis was initially to weed out ineffective teachers, of which there were many. But as I suggested earlier, the system has evolved into a much more comprehensive, sophisticated, and interconnected human capital system.

And layered on that has been a redesign of the curriculum at every level and every subject, a redesign of instructional strategies and now, most recently, a school-based professional development system where you’ve got teachers working with each other as leaders in the case of the teachers who have identified or proven themselves to be top performers, working in schools with colleagues on how to improve their instructional strategies for what they’re going to do next week delivering the common core.

 It would be better to avoid that kind of ‘solution’ rhetoric, to move from silver bullets to something that I would call ‘best bets’...

– Michael Feuer



To me, that’s a sophisticated, multi-layered model that is not just about accountability. And, now, it’s very much about teacher growth. Is this a perfect system? No. There are many teachers who don’t like it. You have to throw the pass and run under it, right? You can’t expect it to be perfect on day one.

But DCPS also has an interim assessment system that we don’t see because it’s inside of schools. But on a six-week rolling basis, every teacher of math and reading understands the progress that their students are making towards success on the PARCC test. That’s a good thing. And that’s an effective non-accountability use of data for instruction. So, there’s a lot of that going on, but we need to do more.

I wouldn’t want everybody to feel like this is an accountability-only system. It’s not a perfect system by any means, but it’s trending towards the right kind of responses to real problems, I would argue.

MS. HERK: I think that’s a really important distinction between data for summative accountability versus data for improvement and interim changes and tweaking and experimentation. So, I think that’s really good.

A question I’ll throw out there for the group: what should be the unit of accountability? Is it the teacher? Is it the school? Where are those levels? And second, what’s the timeframe for accountability?

AUDITOR PATTERSON: When you say accountability in that context, what do you mean?

MS. HERK: How long do you give the unit of accountability to get it right or get it wrong? At what point do you say -- whether it’s a teacher or a school or whatever level of accountability -- at what point do you say, “Hey, something’s not right, and this is a problem, and we need to go with someone else or do something else?”

If you’re holding people accountable for a very short timeframe, that’s not really fair. If you bring a principal in, and they don’t turn things around in a year, what’s the timeframe that’s reasonable to expect improvement in -- and to hold them accountable for results? If you’re just churning through people quickly, that’s not good.

On the other hand, if you leave someone in who’s not performing, that’s not good either. So what’s the correct timeframe to say this is too soon to judge whether this approach or this individual is effective or not? There’s a tension there between judging too quickly versus leaving ineffective approaches or individuals in place.

MR. HENIG: There’s another side to that question, which is you have to ask the parents how much time are they willing to give to the system before another generation of kids is essentially lost. And I worry about going before a group of parents, especially in our poorer neighborhoods and saying, now, we just need to be patient here, folks, because we’re collecting the data and by golly in another 10 or 15 years, we should actually have some answers for you.

So as much as I'm worried about high-pressure, overbearing accountability systems, on the other hand, I put myself in the position of these communities, which do not want to take chances on another new approach and re-starting the time clock for results—so the question is right. It just has to be asked not just from the people who are controlling the data but from the people who are ultimately going to be affected by all of this.

MR. BOBB: You know, some time ago there was something written on school systems where there was this major focus on the student achievement gap. And then there was the preparation gap, which starts way before the child gets to school. You know, for example, if children are living in the household where they're faced with lead-based paint, that's a negative impact on that child's ability to learn.

If they're living in a household where by state standards, the parents are illiterate, then that has a negative impact on that child in terms of enough words, vocabulary, reading materials, etc. So that's part of that achievement gap before the child gets to school. I mean, if they're living in a neighborhood where there is gunfire and crime, then that's a negative impact on that child's ability to learn when he or she comes to the school's campus.



Robert Bobb

So, we focus on this achievement, but we need to get back and look at the preparation gap, which gets back to the collaborative in terms of what is happening in the larger government context prior to the time that a child comes to school.

Public health, mental health, all of those issues in the household are part of the preparation before the child comes to school.

I used to think that being a city manager was the toughest job in the world. No. I've come to the conclusion now, being in a classroom, teaching children, leading the school system, being responsible for parents, children and learning—that is a significantly challenging job.

And my sister tried to tell me that with teachers—I didn't believe her at the time. But until you actually are responsible for the school system, it is a most difficult job and one that oftentimes is not fully appreciated.

So, when we see these issues happening, we blame everyone, and we blame the whole school. We want to blow up the whole system as opposed to addressing the particular problem.

And then we want every child to achieve at a very high level. So, teachers receive these children and then somehow we think that they can just, cut a hole, you know, the top of the child's head off, drop a whole bunch of learning things in it and all of a sudden the test scores are going to rise.

And it doesn't happen. It takes time. And, fortunately or unfortunately, we are very impatient. But it's a very difficult job out there, I mean, Herb, you see it and, Karen, you've been in the classroom.

I've just seen it from the outside looking in and from discussions with a whole lot of educators. It is a very difficult job and parents aren't always nice, right? It's a very difficult job.

MS. WILLIAMS: No question.

MR. BOBB: I would hope that however this is going to unfold downstream that we will all benefit from the work that ultimately comes out of it and that we just stop blaming the system on everything and try to jump in as partners to try and fix it.

MR. FEUER: Can I pick up on the impatience thing? It reminds me of when, at the federal level, we established for the first time in our history a set of national education goals. I forget what year this was.

MR. TOCH: 1989.

MR. FEUER: One of the goals was that we would be number one in math and science in the world by the year 2000. And I remember one of the rather more satirical commentators said, maybe there was a typographical error and what they meant was we would be number one in the world in 2000 years.

But the lesson from that, for me at least, is that one has to set some rather ambitious goals that reflect a legitimate degree of impatience with a system that we don't want to believe is sustainable, morally or financially, or otherwise, and not go to the extreme of setting the kind of goals that are so unrealistic that inevitably we won't make them and we will be disappointed and we will lose our spirit for keeping it going. So that's your mission, Kathy.

AUDITOR PATTERSON: You bring me to my last question. So, if we're writing an action plan for the district's policymakers, what would you put in it?

Robert made the point earlier that we need to know the state of affairs of our schools and then figure out the future. And we've talked a lot about not throwing out the progress that has been made.

So, if you were drafting that action plan for the mayor, for the Council, what would you want them to know?

MS. WILLIAMS: One bright light that I see since I've been on the State Board of Education is that the D.C. government agencies are working together and trying to come up with solutions across the board not in isolation. So, policy should not be written by one office, one agency. You should have the input of the people who are actually in the trenches doing the job, the people who are facing the problems.

One of the things that we've done as a state board is make sure that we have the parents of our students at the table so that they can express their needs and their desire. If we continue down this path, then we'll come out better in the end.

MR. TILLERY: You know, in terms of action, I think we have to be realistic about the type of actions. One of my jobs when I was the deputy mayor was to run the health department. And we had to use community engagement people. So, I brought them all together one day and I said, what time do you all work? They work from 8:00 to 4:00 like everybody else. Well, that didn't make sense to me. So, we had to change our hours, like 3:00 to 11:00 be in the community. Be in the community. Where in the community? Liquor stores, beauty shops, barber shops, and grocery stores. So that's one. That's an action thing if we really want to bring services to the community.

And one of the things we just started experimenting with in the foundation is that we have what we call, parent university. So, we now have our parents come in to not only hear from us about the status of their kids. We now have people from the Department of Health. We have the guy that does the college savings plan.

We bring them all in on a Saturday or a Sunday in a community location normally around 3:00 to 5:00 in the afternoon. So, parents are beginning to show up, because now we brought the service to them.

MS. HERK: So I would say, first of all setting the right goals. They should be ambitious, yet realistic, by which I mean they should be attainable and sustainable.

Once you have the goals, you need metrics to measure those. The metrics you use to measure progress toward those goals should be accurate measures of the outcomes you're trying to reach and a balanced set of metrics. And it would be desirable if they are simple enough for the average person to understand them and not too expensive to collect. I know you'll take care of all that, Kathy.

MR. TILLERY: And not punitive.

MS. HERK: And not punitive. So, that's a delicate balance between accountability and coaching. And finally my earlier point about the independence of the groups that collect, audit and analyze the data. Having a data warehouse is really important. And I like the idea of making it available to lots of different groups to use it for their purposes

MR. BOBB: I was a city manager of a city and the superintendent and I were complaining about educating children, and she and I would have these very heated conversations. And in one conversation, she took me aside and started to educate me on the importance of children reading at the 3rd-grade level. As a city manager, I didn't even think those things.

And she was convincing enough until a few months later I redesigned the performance evaluations for every employee such that every employee in his or her performance evaluation had a specific plan as to how they were going to help a child learn to read by 3rd grade, be it a grandparent, a grandchild or a niece or a nephew, these adults had their plan.

And then there was the group of employees in our public works department, who convinced my office that they should expand the program and help children on their lunch hours learn to read, and they wanted time off. And it became the Lunch Buddies program. And we gave them time off so that they can go to a school and tutor and help children learn to read.

So, just forget the big government, but you might want to consider having in each employee's performance evaluation some standard in terms of how they're going to participate in the education reform that's required in the district.

MR. FEUER: So I just urge you to keep in the forefront that we now have a system of schools in D.C. -- not just a school system in the conventional definition -- given that charters are educating nearly half the kids. That provides an opportunity to learn: the charter school board's school accountability model is indeed a model, and there's a lot to be learned from it. It's both formative and evaluative. At the same time, maybe there are ways we can look to rethink the school funding formula in ways that incentivize the charter sector to keep challenging kids all year long beyond the count day on October 5.

Another opportunity to learn from the charter sector is to examine how they audit diplomas and to think of ways we might introduce similar techniques in in the DCPS high schools. That would be a conversation worth having, it seems.



Monica Herk



MR. HENIG: This was one of the promises of mayoral control in theory, that you would get cross-sectoral coordination across agencies, but that has not generally come to fruition. It is encouraging if it's the case that the Council is involved and invested now and if the potential of mayoral control to do this is real. If so, I just add in to that we should think about this in relation to data as well.

You know, we're all saying data and, you know, that's fine, but I think data collection and dissemination is useful because it helps the other things and it informs us, but think about it not just in terms of the school system. Think about it in terms of an integrated system.

I've already said that I know that this is really hard to do, but it's not technically hard to do. There are legal issues of privacy and there are bureaucratic issues. But that's what's needed in order to stimulate useful thinking about trade-offs given that funding is finite.

Are there trade-offs in terms of early interventions versus later interventions? Can we learn about what works in terms of community health strategies and their long-term payoffs and things like that.

And the Council and the Mayor are the ones who are in a position to think across those sectors.

AUDITOR PATTERSON: Thank you all. This has been very stimulating. We will transcribe, edit, send to you to be able to review your own remarks as recorded in our transcription. And then we will issue a report and take full credit for all the smart things you've said!

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Office of the District of Columbia Auditor

717 14th Street N.W.

Suite 900

Washington, DC 20005

Call us: 202-727-3600

Email us: odca.mail@dc.gov

Tweet us: https://twitter.com/ODCA_DC

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