

Testimony of Karen Williams o Bill 22-0776
July 11, 2018

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committees of the Whole and Education. My name is Karen L. Williams and I am a Ward 7 resident and I am proud to represent my ward on the DC State Board of Education. My testimony today is my own and is not a statement by or on behalf of the State Board.

Bill 22-0776, the District of Columbia Education Research Advisory Board and Collaborative Establishment Amendment Act of 2018 is a wonderful idea that will likely make our current problems getting good data even worse. Currently, four of the five District education agencies (DCPS, PCSB¹, OSSE and DME) are required by law or regulation to report on innumerable items. Many times, this reporting is repeated exactly or nearly exactly in slightly different wording, but frankly, Mr. Chairman, nobody reads the reports, or they are submitted so quietly that no one knows they are even being written.

I want to be clear, Mr. Chairman. I am not opposed to independent data and research. In fact, I think independent research could be very helpful in eliminating barriers to educational opportunities for our students. We are lucky to have so many fantastic researchers and universities calling this city their home. If we are to properly utilize their skills, however, they must have access to open and reliable information without having to rely on Freedom of Information Act requests. It does not make sense to me to set up a new entity that will be consistently underfunded and under resourced just by the nature of its existence. The Office of the Auditor, rightly, does not have an unlimited budget nor unlimited resources to delve into every aspect of government simultaneously. That isn't practical, and it isn't efficient.

District residents, the Council, the State Board, the press, even other mayoral agencies cannot get answers to their legitimate questions. This bill does nothing to solve the underlying problem that data is being withheld. The District of Columbia Data Policy that was issued by Mayor Bowser last year is a great first step in providing District residents and researchers with information. All District agencies, offices, boards, commissions and divisions under the mayor's authority must comply with this policy.

The Council should take the next step and enshrine the policy in law, applicable to all District agencies, even those that are not under the authority of the mayor. Without a legal requirement, a timeline requirement and consequences for failure, agencies will continue to ignore requests to provide the data necessary to make decisions on behalf of our students. Supporters of this bill claim that it will lead to better data and better research. That might be true, but not without fixing the data problem first.

Any organization that receives funds from the District government has an obligation to taxpayers to provide relevant requested information. Our failure as a city to require compliance is the reason

¹ It should be noted that PCSB and the public charter schools generally object to any authority requiring them to submit data. This has led to many regulations and state policies that are written in favor of the positions of the charter sector in an attempt to get some comparable data rather than what we actually need.

the trust gap between our schools and our residents continues to grow with very news cycle that brings more accusations, more fraud and more bad actors to the forefront. I have heard every member of the Council and the State Board echo the same refrain, "I requested the information, but we haven't gotten it." That is unacceptable. Any new policy, regulation or legislation related to data that does not contain penalties, either individual or agency, for non-compliance is a waste of time. Good data exists, Mr. Chairman, but we can't get to it.

This obligation "Good data" requires seven things:

- Accuracy and Precision.
- Legitimacy and Validity.
- Reliability and Consistency.
- Timeliness and Relevance.
- Completeness and Comprehensiveness.
- Availability and Accessibility.
- Granularity and Uniqueness.

I am struggling to understand how the proposed consortium will do a better job on any of these items. The same agencies will still be responsible for providing the data. The consortium will still be dependent on the same infrastructure. In my opinion, the bill provides all of the problems with getting data with none of the advantages.

Finally, I would like to suggest instead of creating another layer of bureaucracy when attempting to get input from the citizens, parents and students of the District of Columbia. If you need an independent actor to serve as an incubator or advisory authority, why not use an existing and established entity like the State Board? Our members were elected directly by the people of the city to be their voice in education policy. Why not use these resources?