

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF DEPUTY MAYOR FOR EDUCATION**



Public Roundtable
on
“Student Learning Loss: Widening the Achievement
Gap During the COVID-19 Pandemic”

Testimony of
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Before the
Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman

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Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, members, and staff. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today for this public roundtable on accelerating student learning in our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Let me start by acknowledging, and thanking, the heart of our schools: our educators. Schools, and the local education agencies in the District, have demonstrated a relentless commitment to families, students, and the community as a whole. Our teachers have been in the center of all this, showing their fortitude, cooperation, and resilience while adjusting to a whole new way of teaching and learning. Our goals and expectations for the District's public education system have not changed, despite the new challenges before us, and I am humbled by our education professionals who, in a moment of crisis, set a new standard for the tremendous role educators play in the lives of students and families.

And yet despite these incredible efforts we know students are learning less and hurting more. Especially Black children. Especially Brown children. Especially children who live in circumstances of poverty. According to the EmpowerK12 Fall 2020 COVID Slide Study we have seen early literacy proficiency in Kindergarten through 2nd grade fall by 12 percentage points for all students. This could mean 14,000 or more early readers in grades K-2 have fallen behind critical benchmarks. The study also revealed greater learning loss for 3rd-8th grade students designated as at-risk of academic failure with an estimated slide of 5 months in math and 4 months in reading. And this is not a temporary problem. These deficits could result in lasting harm for our city's children. A McKinsey study on COVID-19 and Learning Loss in the United States found that students could lose an average of \$61-82K in lifetime earnings without proper intervention.

At the same time, too many children are also tragically exposed to trauma and violence. In 2020 alone, there were 350 homicides. 26 of those were young people who left behind grieving family and friends. The pandemic has exacerbated mental health issues facing our young people with 77% of students reporting ongoing anxiety related to the pandemic, many stating that they have been unable to participate in the activities that make them happy. 45% of students feel the stress of their family's financial situation. And one in five said they experienced the loss of a family member in their home.¹ The hardships, the loss of connection, and the anxiety all correlate to our children losing confidence in their ability to learn and succeed.

¹ EmpowerK12. (2020). *COVID-19's Impact on Student Well-Being in DC*. <https://www.empowerk12.org/blog/ottg60u6rbid6y1kr2tnbbpqy89i25>.

It is heartening that we are all here today to talk about recovery but we must ask the question: recovery to what? Our collective work must be about more than recovering – this is the first step to broader change. It must be about healing, answering difficult questions about the ways we have fallen short, and the system we want to design. Starting with the question, who do we aspire to be?

Mayor Bowser's administration believes that we aspire to be a city that eradicates the opportunity gaps that exist between white students and their non-white peers, creating communities where all students experience love, joy, and belonging. Doing this requires adjustments to our ways of operating. We must emphasize data-driven design centered on student need. We must foster city-wide collaboration and ensure that opportunities are fairly distributed. We must take the best of what we have learned and bring it into a sharper focus. For example, instead of an extended school year for all, it might mean finding innovative ways to bring in the more than 4,000 high-school students who are overage and under-credited for a 5th quarter of unique academic and workforce development programming or offering accelerator academies over school breaks to the estimated 16,000 students at risk of academic failure in grades 3-8.

We aspire to be a city that is safe for all students. To ensure students are physically safe, it will take additional violence interruption, which is why we have expanded our ONSSE violence interruption programming from Anacostia High School to two additional schools. It will require training for our public safety personnel that enhances skills related to conflict resolution, de-escalation, and cultural competency. To keep students emotionally safe, it will require strong social and emotional skill-building in schools and bolstering mental health supports, working closely with the city's Department of Behavioral Health. Youth safety elements are the foundation for all work that we do to accelerate learning and address academic gaps resulting from the pandemic.

We aspire to be a city where all children receive a well-rounded education that is demanding, enriching, and personalized. While we design our education systems to achieve long term transformation, we must also apply a laser like focus to addressing learning loss and academic acceleration. In addition to working to bring more students back into the classroom, our research has helped us identify six strategies that we will adopt throughout the recovery period - stabilize the early childhood sector, strengthen virtual learning, extend learning opportunities including summer learning programs, broadly implement high-dosage tutoring, accelerate credit attainment, and support families as partners in learning.

We are excited to begin our work to accelerate learning as early as summer 2021 with new Earn and Learn opportunities for a cohort of students in the MBSYEP program, encouraging reading and learning as a family with DC Public Library's Summer Challenge and by offering more academic enrichments as a part of our DPR summer camp experience. DPR's popular summer camps provide a unique opportunity to pair effective practices like high-dosage tutoring with the traditional core curriculum which includes creative and physical activities. And of course, DCPS and charter LEAs are all hard at work developing plans for summer and school-year supports for their students who need acceleration the most.

In closing, we have learned a lot during this unprecedented time. The pandemic has changed us. We will take all of these changes and lessons learned with us into recovery and beyond. Our teachers, families, and students deserve nothing less. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our current thinking around a citywide approach to recovery. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.