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Testimony of Josh Boots at DC Council Roundtable on Learning Loss
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Councilmembers and staff, thank you for the opportunity to talk about EmpowerK12's "COVID learning slide" study and student well-being survey from this past fall. My name is Josh Boots, Executive Director at EmpowerK12, a DC-based nonprofit that supports schools and education stakeholders with using data to drive continuous improvement. During the Learning Loss Roundtable, I will focus on presenting our research methodology, data sources, and results from our fall studies. This written testimony provides a synopsis of what is covered in the slide deck presentation as well as some additional information about one way in which EmpowerK12 is working with teachers to reverse the learning slide through Educator Continuous Improvement Networks.

A new report from our organization released prior to the holidays finds that the achievement gap is growing in DC and that our students are facing a "COVID learning slide." The study included fall test data of nearly 15,000 DC students across DC Public Schools and DC charter schools who lost, on average, 4 months of learning in math and 1 month loss in English language arts during the COVID-19 pandemic this past spring and summer. Students who are identified as at-risk — defined as students who receive TANF or SNAP benefits, experience homelessness, are in foster care, and (for high school students) are more than two years behind — lost 5 months of learning in math and 4 months of learning in English language arts.

The COVID learning slide also affects DC's youngest learners, with the study finding that reading proficiency is down 12 percent for students in kindergarten through 2nd grade. Students who faced the greatest drop in proficiency are students who live East of the River. Achievement gaps are growing in DC and at-risk students are falling significantly behind.

Our educators, families, and students are working hard to ensure teaching and learning under extreme circumstances, but we must focus on how to close growing gaps now and into the next few years. Now is the time to think boldly. It is time to end racial and socioeconomic outcome gaps for our kids by the end of this decade, once and for all. By outcome gaps, EmpowerK12 does not mean an exclusive reference to math and reading achievement gaps. We also care deeply about social-emotional well-being, science, history, high school graduation, post-secondary educational attainment, and preparedness for adult life and career.

Post-pandemic education will be a challenge for all. The teachers we work with are concerned about their students' well-being and their joy for learning. We are also concerned about teachers' joy for educating and retaining high-quality teachers in our schools. The nature of all

the challenges educators will face when in-person learning becomes reality are difficult to predict. We do know that the future of our schools includes a device for every student that when appropriately complementing high-quality in-person instruction can be tools for fostering academic growth. If educators can quickly learn which strategies hold the most promise, scale them to more places, and continuously improve their implementation, then we can bend student learning curves to new heights and ensure every student can thrive.

Our recovery support began this fall with a continuous improvement strategy we are implementing in partnership with DCPS, Friendship, and Eagle Academy. Allow me to provide you with an example of how 16 elementary school teachers and 5 middle school teachers are working cross-sector to improve outcomes for students with disabilities this year:

In collaboration with Relay Graduation School of Education and the work that they are doing at a school leader level to develop inclusive schools, the teachers in our improvement networks are working together to test out research-based ideas, use data to learn quickly what works and what doesn't, and continue improving to best support their students. The elementary school teachers in our network are focused on closing the literacy gap by targeting foundational decoding and comprehension strategies. Teachers are working on explicitly targeting skill gaps in phonological awareness skills, implementing peer coaching to increase discussion and internalize comprehension strategies, and tracking engagement with students to increase motivation.

Our middle school teachers are targeting GPA and attendance by supporting students with goal-setting, developing a sense of belonging and relevance, and helping students shift from a fixed to a growth mindset. These teachers are collaborating to add in these social-emotional noncognitive factors and understand that supporting our students and recovering from learning loss means focusing on all their needs. Our teachers in both networks are learning quickly, sharing what works, and testing out ideas with meaningful data to help students get back on track.

COVID educational recovery represents an opportunity for bold and creative solutions. We must give educators the space to creatively address the unique challenges that will await them next fall and provide them with the tools and support to gather solid classroom data and quickly improve. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you all today, and I am happy to answer any questions you have.