

Testimony of Sandra Moscoso – sandramoscosomills@gmail.com
On Behalf of the Ward 2 Education Council
Committee of the Whole Public Roundtable on DCPS Initial School Level Budgets
April 2, 2021, 9:30am

Chairman and Councilmembers. I am Sandra Moscoso, treasurer of the Ward 2 Education Council and a parent of two students at School Without Walls High School.

I am here to ask that you support funding our schools so they are able to maintain current staffing levels and to also invest more in schools hardest hit by the current crisis. I will share with you what school communities are telling us about how DCPS' inadequate budgets will hurt their ability to serve students.

DC Public Schools is forcing schools to cut staff for the 2021-22 school year, the first year of recovery after more than one year of disrupted learning due to Covid-19. Education councils in Wards 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, and ANC Commissioners and leaders initiated a petition to demand that the city maintain current staffing levels for the upcoming school year. We agreed that DC must also invest more in schools in under-resourced areas to address the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic.

In many cases, the school-level staffing cuts cannot be explained by lower student enrollments. Schools face staff cuts for a number of reasons each year, including increases in costs.

These cuts are happening while DCPS is expecting to receive from the American Rescue Plan around [\\$275 million](#)¹² in stimulus funding for school recovery. These federal funds can be used for [“activities that are necessary to maintain the operation of and continuity of services ... and to employ existing staff.”](#)³ While DCPS could use these federal funds for any purpose through September 2024 – including to fund staff and develop a multi-year staffing plan – DCPS instead chooses not to do so.

The city must do better to meet the needs of all students, given that staffing cuts will be felt most heavily in schools that are already under-resourced. In addition, lack of supplemental investment in education at this critical time will exacerbate the unacceptably large gaps in learning by student race and income. We ask that you fund DCPS schools for recovery:

- **Schools need more staff, not less, to address learning needs. Schools with fewer staff cannot provide the same level of targeted supports when the academic needs of some students have increased due to the pandemic.** Funds promised for

¹ ESSER II Preliminary Allocation

<https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/ESSER%20II%20%20Equivalent%20Allocation%20Table.pdf>

² ESSER III Preliminary Allocation

https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/ARP%20ESSER%20III%20LEA%20Allocations%20-%20Preliminary.pdf

³ H.R.1319 - American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1319/text>

summer and afterschool programs must not be considered replacements for instructional staff during regular school days.

- **Schools will need more staff to adhere to health and safety guidelines, to offer in-person learning to more students, while continuing to provide virtual options.** Fewer school staff puts many schools at risk of not having adequate resources to serve all students and re-open safely.
- **Schools need additional support to address whole-child needs.** Mental health support for students continues to be the most highly demanded request in the city, and the pandemic has exacerbated this need. It is particularly short-sighted and imprudent to cut existing school staff before we have a solid handle on all the mental health, socio-emotional, and academic needs that students will face as in-person learning increases and virtual learning continues to evolve.

In the citywide petition, we asked school communities to share the impact of these cuts to their schools. Here's what we have heard from Ward 2:

- **Duke Ellington School of the Arts**, which for nearly 50 years has served as the sole public arts high school in DCPS, serving a majority African American student body from all 8 wards, reports a serious under-allocation, and seeks pay parity for its teachers. The 2020-21 DCPS budget allocation for Ellington pays for just 31 of the 58 full-time, dual curriculum, faculty positions. Ellington teachers earn an average of \$25,000 less than their DCPS counterparts.⁴ The school seeks an increase, commensurate with what they would rightfully expect to receive today. Doing so gives Ellington teachers the equitable salary and benefits package they are entitled to, and ensures teacher retention.
- **Ross Elementary**, a school with a 20% English Language Learner population with a mile long waitlist, is being forced to cut all their art, music, world languages and library positions to part-time.
- **At School Without Walls High School**, despite DCPS forecasting zero loss in enrollment, DC's highest-performing, nationally-ranked magnet school⁵ serving families in all eight wards must cut a teacher and educational supplies across science, art, and music. This on the heels of a year where the school sacrificed a librarian, and two other staff. For schools like Walls, DCPS should at least do no harm -- maintain the status quo to serve the same number of students as in the prior year.^{6,7}
- **Thomson Elementary**, a Title 1 school with a 50 percent Hispanic population has suffered greatly due to the pandemic (i.e. food insecurity, difficulties with distance learning, and unemployment. Note the at-risk population at Thomson is much higher than reported. Many undocumented families do not register for benefits that form the basis of funding formulas). The school, which counts teacher stability and retention as a strength, is losing an ELL teacher and a first grade teacher. Cutting one of Thomson's

4 DESA fact sheets: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jFvn660GmGv_8BJ1qS9PDJ6iJfz3ARYc2n0P73aDQjk/edit#

5 US News School Rankings:

<https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/district-of-columbia/districts/district-of-columbia-public-schools/school-without-walls-high-school-4648>

6 SWWHS LSAT Letter to Chancellor: <https://www.swwhs.org/news/letter-from-lsat-to-chancellor-ferabee-requesting-restoration-of-staff-in-sy22-budget>

7 SWWHS HSA Letter to Chancellor, Mayor, Council:

<https://www.swwhs.org/news/hsa-letter-to-chancellor-and-mayor-requesting-to-fund-our-school-for-recovery-and-not-cut-staff>

classroom teachers will have ripple effects for years. Thomson would like to see the budget pre-pandemic numbers reinstated for the next school year.

I hope you can see a pattern of annual cuts and defunding of our schools. A pattern that does not change even in the face of a pandemic.

DCPS has not yet released a comprehensive plan for recovery, so we took a look at [what experts outside of DCPS are saying](#).⁸ In one way or another, all of these recommendations focus on investing in schools, in school-day activities, in strengthening relationships between home and school. With federal funds that can be used through September 2024, we have an opportunity to do this. All we need is the political will.

We thank Councilmember Pinto for including [restoring cut teacher positions, critical mental health support and funding healthy buildings](#) in her budget priorities. While I am here speaking on behalf of Ward 2 schools, it's important to note that families across all wards enroll their children here. Of the 876+ individuals⁹ who signed the petition so far, 80% of signatories linked to Ward 2 schools, identified their home ward as other than Ward 2.

We hope to see support for keeping our schools whole across every Councilmember's priorities.

In the Fall, schools should open their doors (or e-classrooms, depending on health and safety) with robust and familiar instructional staff, equitable access to technology, opportunities for students to pursue interests and build relationships, and most importantly - mental health resources to help students cope with current and ongoing stressors.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

⁸ ERS, the company once hired by DCPS to conduct budget model analysis recently published "7 crucial principles for investing ESSER funds for sustainable impact" https://www.erstrategies.org/news/investing_federal_esser_funds_in_recovery_and_redesign (a few below)

1. Understand and quantify students' recovery needs, with an equity lens. - who better to understand student needs, then the very staff who have been responding to student needs during the pandemic (this must be supported by a lot of data...)
2. Invest in proven high-impact strategies. - all of these point to investing in empowering teachers, strengthening relationships, and family and community partnerships.
3. Invest deliberately in equity.

⁹ Signatories as of April 1, 2021, 3pm. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gZC8HdjEkneZ528ei7ynEeggP8QNPkdl/view?usp=sharing>