



**Testimony of  
Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, Executive Director  
Rick Cruz, Board Chair  
DC Public Charter School Board**

**FY2022 Budget Oversight Hearing  
Committee of the Whole  
June 8, 2021**

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's budget hearing. My name is Rick Cruz, and I am the Chair of the DC Public Charter School Board. I am here with Dr. Michelle Walker-Davis, our executive director to discuss the upcoming fiscal year's budget and how we can begin the long process of recovering from the pandemic.

I would like to begin by thanking Mayor Bowser for her support of DC's schools and students throughout the pandemic. Her commitment to increasing education funding despite a difficult budget last year, and a renewal to that commitment this year is welcome, and we are grateful that our city places a high value on supporting children during tough times.

LEAs have made large investments this year to address the concerns and needs of their communities. Many of those investments are ones that are a direct and unexpected result of the pandemic. In March 2020, schools shifted from classroom to home-based learning. During that period, everything needed to be reinvented from teaching to meal delivery. Schools were able to accomplish this largely through best practice sharing, constant communication with families, and the budget flexibility afforded to them in the School Reform Act.

During this school year, we have thankfully turned a corner in our global fight against COVID-19. At the beginning of the school year, a few schools were open for hybrid learning or CARE classrooms with proper safety protocols. Since the District began distributing the vaccine and over the last few months, many more school campuses have opened to serve students. To date, 121 campuses [*as of May 27, 2021*] are providing some form of in-person learning or hybrid learning, and public charter schools are working toward

the goal of in-person learning five days per week in the fall, and many have already announced this decision.

To achieve that goal, the proposed investments in our schools are critical. We thank the Mayor for including a 3.6 percent increase in the per pupil funding base, increasing the at-risk and ELL weights, and the creation of a supplemental at-risk weight for overage high school students will help schools as they work to fully reopen, welcome back students, and address student and family needs. As you know, this announcement came prior to the official release of the budget, allowing schools to more accurately budget for the upcoming school year.

We know the pandemic has taken a large toll on our students' mental health. The \$8 million investment to expand School Based Mental Health is an important step in helping our students deal with long-term trauma. This funding, along with the tranche of federal funds our city is due to receive, will be much appreciated as schools invest in supporting the whole child.

Increased local and federal funding to schools is a great start, but alone will be insufficient to meet the complexities of issues that students and families face. As we know the pandemic has affected everyone across the city, but families with less were hit especially hard. Some of the challenges these families have and will continue to face are ones schools alone cannot combat. We urge this Council to build upon Mayor Bowser's investments in housing, mental health, public safety, and workforce to address all the needs families will have outside of the school building. We need to ensure that every level of government is serving our families' needs, no matter what those needs are. Collective action will not only require much more extensive collaboration with our partners in the education sector but also more and better partnerships with the non-education agencies that support children and families across the District.

These investments, along with those in the other agencies that support families, are an important down payment on the future of the District of Columbia. Now, Dr. Walker-Davis will discuss what our schools are thinking about for the future.

In order to get back to school five days per week, schools are hard at work to upgrade HVAC systems, source PPE, use technology to support the

classroom, and strategizing on how to get more hesitant families back into the building. Many schools have made these investments to reopen their buildings this school year and serve populations who need in-person learning most.

Looking forward to the fall, public charter LEAs are thinking about how to expand their day-to-day academic services and change their models to ensure all students receive what they need. As schools focus on fully reopening, they are investing in support services to accelerate learning, address mental health issues, provide access to healthcare, and reengage students in school communities. Many public charter LEAs adjusted their budgets this year to provide expanded summer learning, employment, and social emotional wellness.

More students than ever will have the opportunity to build academic and professional skills this summer as well as reconnect and rebuild relationships with friends and teachers. Schools are also being creative with facilities use and scheduling in order to ensure both safety and quality programming. The innovation and commitment of school leaders and educators inspires me, and I know they will rise to meet the challenges that next school year will bring.

While all schools want to be able to provide full-time in-person learning next school year, there are some challenges which stand in the way. Some public charter school campuses are constrained by space. Public charter LEAs are thinking about how to address these challenges to secure a seat for every student every day. However, some schools may find they need to alter programming or secure supplementary facilities to bring all students back given the social distancing guidelines and family and caregiver concerns. We appreciate the mayor's second \$10 million grant to public charter schools to help them address these needs.

There are some bright spots. I want to highlight a recent event held at Carlos Rosario Public Charter School in Ward 1. They hosted a walk-up vaccine clinic for multiple days in May which attracted hundreds of people. The school is in a neighborhood hit hard by the pandemic, and they knew that many people both needed easy access to the vaccine and for it to be provided by a group they trusted and could communicate in multiple languages. This is the type

of event we need to see more of in order to have a strong and successful reopening in the fall. Public charter schools have been working with their communities to identify issues and find solutions throughout the whole pandemic, and this is just one example of that. We are pleased at the DME's recent announcement to make schools vaccination sites and hope that this new effort will accelerate the District's vaccination rate toward herd immunity.

Safely reopening schools and getting people vaccinated is step one. There is much more work to do, and a long-term view of recovery is necessary. Investing in services both within the education sector and outside of education on services such as housing, physical and mental health, and community safety will be critical for recovery and setting students up for success in the future. Students need safe and stable housing, plenty of healthy food, neighborhoods and streets free from gun violence, extracurricular activities, and economic opportunities if we expect them to show up ready to learn every day. This is a tall task to be sure, but tackling these issues is necessary for our city to truly flourish.

When it comes to funding the futures of the District's children, everything must be on the table. This year, the District is able to invest in many areas which have been long under-resourced or neglected due to federal funding. We cannot let this be the only year this happens. We must continue to invest in our students and heavily invest in the neighborhoods furthest from opportunity. Every child deserves well-resourced schools and well-resourced communities. This will ensure we are working toward a common goal of setting up the District's youngest for a bright future.

Before the pandemic, too many students did not have the foundation of resources and services they needed to get the most out of the time spent in and out of the classroom. It is a moral imperative that the entire city steps up and plans strategically to provide students with the supports they need and to help schools fully recover.

Before I wrap up my testimony, I do want to put one thing on the Council's radar. Last year's budget established the development of common financial standards for schools by May 2021, with an expectation of at least one year to implement the new standards. Due to the way the dates are set in the code,

the deadlines attached to the submission of expenditures meeting the new standards will be impractical to meet on time. Under the current language, schools will be required to submit expenditures meeting the new standards for the 2021-2022 school year by July 2022. We ask that Council amend the deadlines to better align with the school financial reporting process and make it easier for schools to make sense of the standards and embed them in their reporting practices from the start of their school year. This will help schools release accurate expenditures that families will be able to use to understand how the school spends its funds.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.