



chairman's update

the NEWSLETTER of
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Graduation Rate Accountability: Scandal in DC Public Schools

We have a duty to educate our children. And that is why the November 28th report by WAMU and NPR about “What Really Happened at Ballou” is deeply troubling. Although the Council’s December 15th hearing in reaction to this was titled “Graduation Rate Accountability,” in my view the real issue is that our education system is failing our kids.

Public education is the great opportunity in our society. It is the equalizer, or it should be. Through the public schools we can help children, and their families, lift themselves up out of poverty. Every child has this opportunity, or should have this chance to learn, to compete for jobs, and to pursue their dream – the American dream. Otherwise, those in poverty are doomed to the cycle of poverty and the despair that comes with it.

These are the facts: of the students enrolled as seniors at Ballou last year, 164 received diplomas. However, half of those graduates were truant more than three months of school, unexcused. Twenty-percent were truant more than half the school year. One student missed over 150 days, but graduated. Numerous teachers as well as students have said that teachers felt pressure to pass chronically absent students. If teachers pushed back, they might be given poor evaluations, putting their jobs at risk. Indeed, the system of evaluations and pay bonuses incentivizes social promotion. Two months before graduation, only 57 students were on track to graduate. But in June, 164 received diplomas.

We are cheating our students. We have cheated the students who were promoted, ultimately graduated, but do not qualify. And we are cheating the students who graduated – properly – because the value of their diploma has been degraded. We have cheated our students out of an honest future, despite the irony that in her commencement address to the Ballou class last June, Mayor Bowser said: *“Be brave, be bold, and be honest about your talents, your passion, your strength. Even your weaknesses.”* That’s not what DCPS has done: be brave, be bold, and be honest.

This scandal is not about Frank W. Ballou Senior High School. Last year, 64% of the entire school was truant 21 or more days (over four weeks). But at H.D. Woodson, 76% was truant 21 or more days. The number was 54% at Anacostia, 40% at Cardozo, 45% at Eastern, 48% at Roosevelt. Are these kids learning? I want to say, “Someone should be fired.” But not the principal at Ballou. Or the principals at these other schools. Or the teachers. It’s the system.

Let’s take new approaches: primary and secondary education is a 12-year process, so we’ll stop the social promotion at the primary level, and whether to graduate these kids from High School will no longer be a Hobson’s choice. We could look at the PARCC scores with regard to educational readiness, which we know show a huge achievement gap for black kids in poverty. We can look at truancy rates as well, because if the kids aren’t showing up, they probably aren’t learning.

We blew up the system in 2007 when we revolutionized the governance. Michelle Rhee and Adrian Fenty said to the Council and the public that things would change. They said it would take time, maybe five years. Well, it’s been a decade. The progress has been too little and too slow.

To me the scandal at Ballou is that the bandaid has been ripped off DCPS. Despite 10 years of reform, millions and billions of dollars spent, we are not educating enough of our kids. I appreciate that our system is seeing the fastest growth in PARCC scores of any large city school system. But we are not educating all of our kids. I want to celebrate the day that the vast majority of our kids are graduating our schools – and that they actually deserve it. Because that is our duty.

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DC Rejects Regional Vote on WMATA Funding

The following is adapted from my statement to the Council of Governments on its resolution to have the District pay more than its share of new dedicated funding for Metro.

The fundamental issue is what is fair and equitable to the different jurisdictions. The District's position is that what is fair and equitable is a uniform regional tax. Anything else requires allocating specific amounts or shares to the different jurisdictions, and that is not fair or equitable.

Our position is hardly unreasonable. It was the recommendation of a blue ribbon commission, jointly sponsored by COG and the Board of Trade, in 2006. Most recently it was the recommendation to this Board by the Chief Administrative Officers Technical Panel, in a March 31, 2017 report. Indeed, virtually every regional transit system in this country is funded by a uniform regional tax. The New York City area has a regional sales tax that includes the City and the seven adjacent counties. San Francisco has a sales tax, as do its two adjacent counties. A regional, uniform tax is reasonable – as recommended by experts and utilized by jurisdictions throughout the country. But its fundamental flaw is that Richmond and Annapolis won't approve it. A regional system deserves a regional tax.

Now COG's resolution might seem fair because it would require equal shares from each state, and the District's quarter-share is "only" \$125 million. But this presumes that the federal government will commit to an equal share which I submit is unreliable and unbondable, given the federal Anti-Deficiency Act.

Allocating shares equally among the three states is not fair, because it favors and disfavors jurisdictions on a per capita basis. You would have the District pay 1/4th — or 1/3rd if the feds don't pay — while the District comprises only 15% of the region's population. You would have the District pay 1/4th (or 1/3rd) even though our tax base is only about 22% of the region (measuring by sales tax or property tax). On a per capita basis, the cost to District residents is at least double the cost to most of our regional neighbors. That is not fair.

Please do not question our commitment to Metro. We blew the whistle on WMATA's fiscal crisis two years ago. Our CFO has been at the forefront in analyzing the financials. Our Mayor led the call for new Metro Board members, and a DC Councilmember has chaired the Metro Board since 2015. We have less than one third of the Metrorail ridership, and 15% of the region's population, but pay over 37% of current costs.

Finally, some will argue that the District should pay more, because the District benefits more from the Metro system, or, many suburban residents don't use Metro. This is not a regional view. Over 40% of the federal workforce uses Metro, and Metro's General Manager has stated that Metro takes over 20% of cars off our roads. Whatever the precise numbers, we know that the Metro system does not just benefit its riders. It makes it easier for non-riders to drive our roads. And it stimulates economic development worth billions of dollars — just look at the Dulles corridor today. The entire region benefits, and this regional transit system should be paid for, equitably, by everyone in the region.

Constituent Services Corner

A constituent approached me complaining of the blight at Fairlawn Park ahead of the Fairlawn Citizens Association's Annual Holiday tree lighting. Our constituent services team jumped into action and worked with the Department of General Services (DGS) to clean up the Park. A few weeks later, with close monitoring by our constituent services director, DGS had the park cleaned of debris, trimmed the shrubbery, and added new mulch under the trees and shrubs. If your neighborhood park is looking a little rough around the hedges, give our team call.

**Contact our
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