

Education 2013:

Planning for a Great Future for Our Schools and Communities

Background

This fall will bring a critical debate about education in our city. There are currently eleven bills relating to education before the City Council. The Deputy Mayor for Education (“DME”) is reviewing the adequacy of the District’s school funding mechanism; the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (“UPSFF”). The DME is also working with the District of Columbia Public Schools (“DCPS”) and the Public Charter School Board (“PCSB”) to establish a unified lottery system and will reportedly soon embark on a review, working with the Chancellor, on DCPS boundary and feeder patterns. This paper goes into depth on the seven bills proposed by Councilmember Catania and in the process touches on many of the other initiatives.

All of these changes come in the wake of the decision last year to close 15 neighborhood schools and assign their populations to other schools and the Office of Planning prediction that our school age population will grow 50% in the next eight years. Decisions made about school policies in 2013 and 2014, will have a critical impact on the shape of our school system and communities for decades.

Who We Are - Our Vision

We are an emerging coalition of parent and community leaders committed to the belief that every family and every community in our city deserves a robust network of neighborhood schools of right that can offer a local, walkable option that meets the needs of their children while building and strengthening their communities. We believe families must be offered solid neighborhood matter-of-right options, and that families should not be at the mercy of a lottery in hopes of getting into a high-quality school.

As parents and leaders deeply engaged in the success of our schools, we share the sense of urgency to improve our schools “yesterday,” but also recognize that creating great school environments is a brick-by-brick process requiring sustained community engagement and investment: it requires both urgency and patience.

Next Steps

In this Paper, we outline a set of principles we believe should guide the coming debate as well as responses to the seven bills put forward by Education Committee Chair Catania as introduced this summer. We recognize that those bills will evolve, as will all of the other initiatives. By responding comprehensively to the proposals as introduced, we hope to articulate and explain a perspective that can be useful as we move forward in the process.

Principles

It is our hope that, as we as a city move forward with reforming our system of public education, the Council and Executive will be informed by the principles outlined below.

- **Responsive programs and curricula** – We must offer a rich array of programs and curricula that reach our children and increasingly engage them at school. The most promising remedy for the tragedy of truancy and failure to graduate high school (and to assure that all our children reach their full potential) is to offer quality programs and curricula that can reach our children from pre-k through high school graduation.
- **Adequate funding** – We must provide adequate funding for our schools recognizing that we must invest more to fully serve children who come to school with the greatest needs. Our city is one of the most expensive places to live and work in the nation. The buying power of our school budgets has been shrinking. We must fully fund our schools to unleash the full potential of our kids.
- **Community engagement** – We need to provide a policy framework that supports parents, teachers and community members to engage in and strengthen the public ownership of our schools across the city. It is important that we assure that the rights and responsibilities of such engagement are institutionalized.
- **Accurate and fair methods to measure the performance of our teachers and schools** – We must ensure that the way we measure the performance of schools and teachers accurately reflects the value they add – through measures of student growth -- as opposed to the proficiency level of the students they receive. Too often we rely on snapshot measures of proficiency rather than measures of growth and value added.
- **Planning** – We must establish a culture of planning guided by a vision for our city informed by robust parent, teacher and community engagement. The master planning for the city should include planning for how neighborhood feeder patterns can succeed and how citywide magnet schools and charters can thrive.
- **Responsible stewardship of public assets** – Our buildings and public lands are treasures for this generation and the next. We should manage them to maximize their use for this generation to efficiently serve the needs of our families and communities, but also ensure that we have a portfolio for future generations.
- **Creating Stability** – The dramatic school-to-school mobility we have encouraged in recent years creates unique challenges both for students moving from school-to-school and schools receiving substantial numbers of students throughout the school year. We must create incentives for schools to serve children throughout their academic careers and mechanisms to enable schools to absorb mid-year additions.
- **The Importance of neighborhood schools, including as centers of communities** – Communities that have strong neighborhood schools reap enormous benefits in terms of community building and walkability. Every neighborhood in our city deserves to enjoy those benefits. They can be built on where appropriate to include partnerships to use school buildings to deliver wraparound services such as health, dental, social, educational and legal services for children and adults.

Summary of Recommendations

Fair Funding Bill:

The introduction of this bill has played an important role in highlighting the need for increased funding to serve our children with the greatest needs.

- Increase school funding, particularly to serve low income students. Work to ensure a mechanism that delivers the additional funds to serve the students with the greatest need, for example, by building on the pilot community schools grants just awarded by OSSE.
- Enact the 5% cap on the annual school budget reduction or a similar mechanism to protect against downward spirals at individual schools.
- Move cautiously on creating rigid mechanisms for DCPS to distribute funds to schools, avoiding such mechanisms unless they demonstrably reinforce (to be shown in simulations of the impact of formula changes on school budgets across the city) the goals of stabilizing and increasing funds to serve low income students.
- Build in a mechanism to ensure that additional funds are promptly provided to schools when enrollments in the Fall exceed projections in the Spring. Begin the process of examining the cost of policies that have incentivized students changing schools often. Address the challenges created by this dramatic increase in school-to-school mobility in recent years.
- Create mechanisms to strengthen community engagement in the budget and planning processes including through ensuring a timeline that allows for meaningful input upfront.
- Adequately fund career and technical education (CTE) programs; do not base funding solely on enrollment (use a similar approach for other kinds of programs such as International Baccalaureate or Advanced Placement).
- Instead of an on-off switch for funding struggling high schools, fund effective educational programs for students not on track to graduate. A similar approach should be considered to address reading and math gaps identified by assessments in preschool through 2nd grade.
- Build on the transparency provisions in the bill to strengthen transparency of all school and Local Education Agency (“LEA”) budgets. To the greatest extent possible, open access to the base data so that it can be easily analyzed by stakeholders.
- Reconvene the Technical Working Group under OSSE which was tasked with ongoing revision of the UPSFF taking into account changing costs and best practices.

School Accountability Bill

This bill creates a framework through which schools are subject to punitive actions if they fail to meet certain standards. Communities can lose a matter-of-right school option as a result of leadership failures.

- Treat increased funding and community engagement as opportunities to strengthen schools.
- Utilize “School Improvement Planning” as soon as possible as an opportunity to improve schools with parent, teacher and community input instead of using “Turnaround Plans” punitively after two years of failure as measured by one test metric.
- Ensure school improvement team members are nominated by constituencies and are provided with support to enable them to best understand the range of options for their school.
- Build on the DCPS Autonomous School model being developed, as opposed to the “Innovation School” model in the legislation as introduced. The DCPS Autonomous School model can also replace the Mayor’s proposal to grant DCPS chartering authority.
- Rely on longitudinal measures of student growth to measure the value added by teachers and school as opposed to snapshots of proficiency levels.
- Collect better diagnostic information about student achievement levels and growth through adaptive testing.

Facilities/Comprehensive Planning Bill

This bill sets up a structure that appears designed to move neighborhood schools to charter control while also purporting to provide for comprehensive planning. The bill decidedly does not offer a mechanism for the kind of comprehensive planning that is desperately needed. It creates dynamics that could contribute to the erosion of the local school system.

- Go back to the drawing board on this bill to develop a mechanism for comprehensive planning that can enable both the neighborhood and charter school systems to thrive.
- Address ideas in other bills before the Council on neighborhood preference for charters and community use of public schools, which could be a part of a strategy for how the two systems can fit together and thrive.

Public Education Governance Bill

This bill offers important revisions to our governance structure that could improve overall accountability

- Enact the provisions to grant the Office of the State Superintendent (“OSSE”) increased independence. Increase the mandate of the State Board of Education (the “State Board”). Revise the provision in the bill that allows OSSE to waive municipal regulations; limit the authority and ensure waivers are subject to review.

Parent and Student Empowerment Bill

This bill offers important revisions to strengthen responsiveness to parents.

- Enact provisions strengthening Office of the Ombudsman and creating the Office of the Parent Advocate and Public Education Resource Centers.
- Locate PERCs in comprehensive high schools.
- Ensure that promotional and summary materials accurately reflect the experience in terms of student growth and critical issues of school environment.

Unified Public Education Lottery Bill

This bill calls for a unified lottery by school year 2015-16, while the DME is working with the stakeholders to develop one for school year 2014-15.

- Use the experience in the 2014-15 school year to refine any legislation requiring such a lottery for school years 2015-16 and forward.
- Press for mandatory participation by all Local Education Agencies (“LEAs”).
- Work to assure maximum predictability not only for charter and out-of-boundary, but also in-boundary enrollment.

Social Promotion/Reading

This bill codifies approaches to issues of retention and promotion that have been treated in the relevant regulations in the DC Code which is subject to periodic revision.

- Rather than deal with this issue through legislation with little public input or input from experts in the field, we urge the Council to authorize and encourage OSSE and the State Board to draft a revision to the relevant regulations taking into account key principles raised in the bill.

Promotional and Descriptive Materials on Schools

One of the issues that arises in a number of the bills is the challenge of providing useful comparative information on schools. Too often, snapshot data on percentages of students achieving proficiency are used to assess schools when such data can mask substantial value added (or the absence thereof). It is imperative that we use longitudinal measures of student growth in summary data describing schools. Similarly, graduation rates as currently reported and measured can be misleading. As parents confront a myriad of choices, it is that important that any summary measure used accurately reflect the value added by a school community.