

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION,  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COUNCIL  
Budget Oversight on the District of Columbia Public Schools**

**Mary Levy    March 28, 2018**

Since 1980, I have analyzed DCPS budgets, expenditures, and staffing to determine where the money goes. Today's hearing occurs only one week after release of the proposed DCPS budget, a presentation that is so lacking in transparency that I will not even try to say what all they are doing with the money. Problems with the budget appear at the end of this testimony. I can address two aspects now, however:

First, there are enormous inequitable discrepancies in general education funding in next year's local school budgets. When funding for the variable special needs (at-risk, special education, ELL, Title I) is filtered out, there are variations of thousands of dollars per student unrelated to academic or other student needs. Schools of similar size can have wildly different funding. In addition, individual school funding for general education goes up and down from one year to the next, frustrating the continuity in program and staff.

Part of the reason for this is that DCPS is continuing to use a substantial portion of at-risk funds to supplant core program funding, in continuing contravention of the governing law restricting its use to programs targeted at at-risk students. The level at which supplanting occurs varies enormously from school to school, and those whose funds are used this way have less, sometimes almost no extra resources dedicated to at-risk students. Large sums are taken from some schools with large at-risk enrollments, leaving them with much less per pupil funding for general education than schools with almost no at-risk students, and very little at-risk funding to take for core program purposes.

Second, the DCPS central office is enormous. According to the most recent statistics from Census Bureau fiscal reports, DCPS central office spending in 2015 was 11 percent of total current expenditures, compared to 1 percent or less in surrounding districts. DCPS is spending \$2,170 per pupil, which is **ten** times the US average of \$218.<sup>1</sup> For many years I have categorized DCPS employees by whether or not they serve students directly, which is what most members of the public want to know when they ask about central office or "administration".<sup>2</sup> The number of central office full-time equivalent staff performing the same functions that DCPS

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Public Education Finances: 2015, June 2017, Tables 8, 18 and 19.

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/school-finances/newsroom/updates/fy-2015.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The source is lists of DCPS employees, obtained by FOIA or from submissions to the D.C. Board of Education (before FY 2008) or to the DC Council (since FY 2008), based on office of employment, job title, purpose of applicable grant funding, and DCPS website descriptions. Employees performing functions subsequently transferred or contracted out are excluded in the earlier year calculations.

now performs has risen from 516 in 1981, when we had 95,000 students to 626 in 2007, when we had 52,000, to 831 this year for less than 49,000. The chart is attached.

Below are counts of central office staff with common titles. Certainly the system needs some number of these people. Those who are really good are worth a great deal. But do we really need 45 Chiefs and Deputy Chiefs? Plus 103 Directors? Plus 113 Managers?

Title	# of FTEs	Title	# of FTEs
Chief	16	Program Specialist	57
Deputy Chief	29	Project Manager	21
Director	103	Coordinator	129
Manager	113	Analyst	51
Specialist	185	Program Coordinator	21

If central office were reduced to a more reasonable level, DCPS would not have to appropriate at-risk funds for core program services that are funded with regular funds at schools in well-to-do neighborhoods.

Budget format problems: The format in the city’s budget books provides much more detail than once appeared there, but is not useful for the public or independent analysts.

- The three-way categorization of central/schools/ school support is meaningless because “school support” is a mix of central office bureaucracy, non-instructional services, central office instructional support, and direct services to students. The format does not provide an accurate depiction of the resources in schools or in central offices. We would be much better informed with the kinds of categories used in standard educational cost accounting elsewhere, for example, central administration, central instructional support, non-instructional support, and local school budgets.
- The numbers in the local school budgets do not match numbers in the budget books and underlying spreadsheets due to DCPS’ practice of including functions in the former that are “clawed back” into central accounts in the latter. Such functions, which are built into the average teacher cost, include background checks, start-up supplies, and enrollment reserve.
- The local school budgets posted on the web do not match those in the budget books, and DCPS does not even provide totals in them.
- The “program/activity” categories seem to be a mix of organizational units and functions. The lack of organizational units in the published budget materials is a long-standing flaw in the city budget, but it is not helped by labeling some of them as “activities.” We need both organizational units and program/activities, separately and cross-tabulated.
- Most definitions of the “program/activity” categories are too vague to be informative. What are the definitions used by DCPS CFO and human resources officials when categorizing expenditures and positions for reporting purposes? If they do not exist, they should be created; if they do, they should be part of the budget.