

Public Oversight Roundtable  
on  
The Future of School Reform in the District of Columbia  
Monday, March 19, 2018

Thank you Councilmember Grosso for holding this important public oversight roundtable on the future of school reform in the District of Columbia. My name is Suzanne Wells, and I am the founder of the Capitol Hill Public Schools Parent Organization.

It is critically important for our city to take an honest look at where we are after twenty years of school reform. Yet, Mayor Bowser's words about school reform in her State of the District speech last Thursday make me wonder if the city will be able to take that honest look.

The Mayor said "There have been some bumps in the road...some pretty significant bumps." I'm not sure the Mayor's assessment of the state of our schools aligns with the assessment many of us who are testifying today would make. While she wasn't specific as to what those bumps were, I assume she was referring to the graduation scandal uncovered at Ballou, the enrollment fraud issues at Duke Ellington, and the resignation of both Deputy Mayor for Education Niles and Chancellor Wilson for not following the lottery rules.

While the Mayor sees these things as "bumps," that doesn't seem to show an understanding for some of the serious structural problems that have come about over the last twenty years of school reform in DC.

Before I share my concerns, I want to be clear in saying I think the city has come a long way in improving the public schools. When my son started at DCPS in 1998, the schools were closed for the first three weeks because of a lawsuit brought about by Parents United over fire code violations in the schools. Today the city has made large investments in modernizing the schools, textbooks arrive at the school on time, we have quality PK3 and PK4 programs, and DCPS has developed a curriculum for teachers to follow. We definitely don't want to take any steps back on these and other improvements made to the school system.

But many serious problems persist, and we are not meeting student's needs because of them. We have:

- a continuing achievement gap between white and African American students;
- excessively high turnover rates among both our principals and teachers;
- our city leaders speaking only about the benefits of school choice (which perhaps, more accurately, should be referred to as "school chance"), and not acknowledging the very real downsides that come with school choice;
- not invested equitably in our schools, and have not adequately supported many by-right schools so they are viable choices for families;

- not done enough to create a supportive, collaborative environment for our teachers, but instead demoralize them, and hold them accountable for test score results that are sometimes out of their control;
- an independent authority, the Public Charter School Board, that refuses to plan collaboratively with DCPS on the opening and siting of new schools;
- over 21,000 excess seats across both the DCPS and charter schools while the PCSB continues to approve both new schools and enrollment increases for existing schools; and
- no independent oversight body that should have spotted a problem like the graduation scandal before a reporter spotted the problem.

I would highly recommend our education leaders read the book *Improbable Scholars* by David Kirp. This book studies what happened in Union City, New Jersey over the last twenty years. Union City is a poor, densely-populated community composed mainly of Latino immigrants, that is four miles from Manhattan. When the Union City Public School system was threatened with takeover by the State of New Jersey twenty years ago because of poor performance, the city didn't look to education reform gimmicks to turn things around. They didn't open a single charter school; they didn't fire teachers, and they didn't hire people known in the ed reform movement to lead their school system. Instead, they realized there were no quick fixes to rebuilding their public education system and closing the achievement gap. They relied on obvious, tried and true actions, hard and steady work. They began focusing on quality early childhood education, a strong focus on literacy and project-based learning throughout the school district, and nurturing and supporting their teachers. Their superintendents have all risen up through the Union City Public School system. Today Union City students' scores on state achievement tests approximate their suburban peers. Union City has defied the odds, and is a poster child for strong urban education.

I have testified many times before this committee on cross-sector issues. There is not time in five minutes to thoughtfully discuss ways to improve our public education system in DC. I hope the Committee will set up an inclusive process where input from independent analyses, involved stakeholders and educators will play a role in shaping the future direction of public education in DC. Everything should be on the table including mayoral control, adding more democracy back into our public school system, the independent authority of the Public Charter School Board, a moratorium on the opening of new charter schools and the expansion of existing charter schools, how best to close the achievement gap, and determining how to structure an independent way to analyze data generated by both DCPS and the independent public charter schools.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on this important issue of future school reform.