

February 11, 2019

The Hon. Phil Mendelson, Chairman
Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington DC 20004

The Hon. David Grosso, Chairman
Committee on Education
Council of the District of Columbia
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Chairmen Mendelson and Grosso and Colleagues:

Based on the extensive number of reports on public education published by the Office of the D.C. Auditor over the last year, I write today to share potential questions you might wish to raise with Mayor Bowser's nominee as chancellor of D.C. Public Schools, Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee at the joint roundtable scheduled February 12, 2019. Our reports included surveys of DCPS principals on their concerns, and public-school parents on school choice; a major study of enrollment projections requested and funded by the D.C. Council during the FY 2018 budget process; and a contract review of individualized student learning plans. This also includes questions based on earlier ODCA reports.

Principals survey

In response to a State Board of Education (SBOE) request that ODCA examine "the institutional conditions and culture that have allegedly created an education system that prioritizes appearances and outcomes data over genuine improvement," ODCA produced [D.C. Public School Principals Share Challenges, Concerns](#), a survey of all the 108 elementary, middle, and high school principals in DCPS to dig deeper into graduation-related issues highlighted in an earlier audit by Alvarez & Marsal. The survey responses -- received from nearly half the principals -- suggest these questions:

- A survey of DCPS principals found serious concern with the current 1-year principal contracts, a policy implemented by the federally-created financial control board in the 1990s. What is your view of 1-year principal contracts and will you retain that policy?
- A majority of the responding D.C. principals also cited stress as an overall concern and also as a motivating factor in saying they are likely to leave their positions in the next five years to seek a similar position elsewhere. What is your view on principal turnover and how will you address this concern?
- A majority of the DCPS principals said they wanted more control over their local school budgets than is now afforded. Our staffing audit further illustrates how little flexibility DCPS principals

have in school budgeting. Your record indicates support for such local school authority. Will you seek to give DCPS school leaders more budget autonomy?

- Principals also said the current graduation and promotion requirements should not be one-size-fits-all and that DCPS should consult with individual principals to determine appropriate local school goals. What is your view of the current promotion requirements and practices?

Parent Survey

To complement our enrollment study, ODCA also contracted for the FY 2018 report, [*Shopping for Public Schools in the District of Columbia*](#), a quantitative survey of 600 parents and guardians of children in PK4 to 11th grade, looking at how families see the existing system and their educational options. The survey responses suggest these questions:

- D.C. parents and guardians in the study perceive charter schools to be doing a better job of educating children than are traditional public schools and identified charter schools when asked where they “are likely to send” their children. What steps will you take to address this perception and make traditional public schools more competitive?
- At the same time parents said they wanted the District to invest more in neighborhood schools rather than increasing options for children to attend out-of-boundary schools. What are your plans for investing in neighborhood schools?
- Many parents do not fully understand how school choice operates, namely that they have a neighborhood school as a matter of right from kindergarten through high school, but must enter the lottery for PK3 and PK4 since not all neighborhood schools have adequate pre-k space. What is your view of this hybrid form of school choice?

Enrollment

To conduct the FY 2018 report, [*A Study of Enrollment Projections for D.C.’s Public Schools: Assuring Accuracy and Transparency*](#), ODCA contracted with a trio of consultants led by Cooperative Strategies, a national firm based in Ohio and supported by the Urban Institute and the 21st Century School Fund. DCPS uses projected enrollment to create school budgets while the actual October enrollment is used to determine charter school funding.

The study found that the District’s public school enrollment is projected to grow between 12,000 and 17,000 students in the next 10 years. The study also concluded that the projection process can be made more accurate, transparent, and efficient, and that current projection methods are least accurate for schools with high mobility rates. The study suggests these questions:

- Are you familiar with the D.C. Auditor’s enrollment study that was mandated by the D.C. Council?
- Do you concur with the recommendation that the enrollment projection process can be made more accurate, transparent and efficient? Do you concur that the Mayor and Council should

formally adopt the report's projection methodology and the 15-step process that was developed? If not, how would you address the need for accuracy, transparency and efficiency?

- Does the research finding of a very high rate of mobility among students in the District concern you and, if yes, what steps would you take to address student mobility and the instability it adds to the school budgeting process?
- How can we improve planning to address the study's growth projections? Would you pursue greater collaboration with the charter sector on opening, closing, and siting of schools? What lessons do you bring from Indianapolis on better utilization and coordination of facilities?
- The enrollment study indicates we are underplanning for our comprehensive high schools. How would you plan to invest in comprehensive high schools in the District?
- What other recommendations would you make to the Deputy Mayor for Education and the State Superintendent based on the findings from the enrollment study?

Student Learning Plans

The FY 2019 ODCA report, [***Student Learning Plans: Options for a Pilot Project in D.C.***](#), by George Washington University's Education Consortium on Research and Evaluation describes how student learning plans could be used in D.C. to ensure that students remain college- and career-ready upon graduation. The study suggests this question:

- What is your view on student learning plans – now being used across the country as a tool for educators to support, personalize, and track student learning as one strategy to improve student outcomes?

Other ODCA Education Reports

School Modernization. In our FY 2016 report, [***The Department of General Services Failed to Provide Information the DC Council Needed to Make Informed Decisions on the Scope and Cost of Modernizing the Duke Ellington School of the Arts***](#), ODCA recommended that the D.C. Council change the basis on which it approved funding for construction contracts to avoid what has been a persistent issue of escalating cost estimates and payouts, but no substantial change in approvals has occurred. ODCA also recommended a far greater degree of transparency in decisions on school modernizations. The report suggests these questions:

- Do you envision any major changes in the processes the school system has followed, in partnership with the Department of General Services, in the system's Capital Improvements Program?
- Do you support the ODCA recommendation, which is also reflected in requirements in the Planning Actively for Comprehensive Education Facilities Amendment Act of 2016 (the PACE Act) that all major decisions on where and how to spend school modernization funds be openly discussed so that the community can be a participant?

Food Service. In our FY 2016 report [Contracting Out School Food Services Failed to Control Costs as Promised](#), ODCA recommended that DCPS consider bringing school food programs back in-house to improve quality and reduce District resources now appropriated for food programs, over and above federal reimbursements. The report suggests this question:

- Are you familiar with the significant expenditures of District funds for school food programs in DCPS, in contrast with some other major school systems that operate solely on federal reimbursements? Do you favor bringing school food services back in-house at DCPS to improve quality and reduce expenditures?

Budgeting and Staffing. In our FY 2017 report, [Budgeting and Staffing at Eight DCPS Elementary Schools](#), we looked at how DCPS has implemented the comprehensive staffing model in a sample of eight elementary schools and we recommended that the school system provide clear guidance on how schools should allocate their “at-risk” funding which is allocated to better serve students who are homeless, in foster care, or otherwise identified as being at risk. We also recommended publication of a multi-year technology plan. The report suggests these questions:

- The ODCA review found that DCPS is using at-risk funds in a manner inconsistent with the D.C. Code, in particular around the “supplement not supplant” requirement. Can you describe what you understand “supplement not supplant” to mean and how you will ensure this requirement is met in the future?
- Can you explain your plan for addressing both the immediate technology needs identified in the review as well as the need for a multi-year technology plan that would both define and provide adequate technology to each school?

I hope this information is useful in the important ongoing work of oversight of the District’s public education system.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kathleen Patterson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kathleen Patterson
District of Columbia Auditor

cc: Councilmembers
Officers of the Council