



Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education
John A. Wilson Building | 1350 Pennsylvania Ave, NW, Suite 307 | Washington, DC 20004

March 22, 2024

Dear Public Education Stakeholders,

Our public school system is strong and getting stronger. We have seen important steady progress over the last fifteen years. Our assessment scores have steadily improved across all student population sub-groups; recently, the proficiency rates of at-risk students grew slightly faster than those of non-at-risk students. We've seen remarkable increases in our graduation rates, and our early literacy investments are clearly paying dividends as we consider that our K-3 reading performance withstood the effects of the pandemic and held stable.

At the same time, we all know we still have stubborn and wide opportunity gaps. This underpins our work and the urgency with which we operate. We hold a deep belief that we can become the best District in the nation for public education, and that this work will require that every child has access to a high-quality neighborhood school *and* a set of innovative citywide options. Our system has demonstrated that it can produce results, and we must continue this path – infusing the system again with increased expectations of success and increased pursuit of innovation.

It is in this context that we embarked on our 2023 School Funding Study. We tasked the project team with an ambitious goal to not just evaluate our current funding formula for schools (the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula or “UPSFF”) but also to consider the totality of our school-supporting District dollars and resources because we know that the work our schools do is not just situated inside of our school buildings.

Additionally, this work has been done in concert with our similarly ambitious approach to other seminal bodies of work this year: our Master Facilities Plan (MFP), our Boundary and Study Assignment Study, and our School Safety Enhancement Committee report. All of these contribute directly to our plan to ensure a high level of efficiency and effectiveness across all elements of our system – our by-right neighborhood schools, our citywide DCPS and charter schools, our shared programming options, our District agencies supporting our schools and our students, and our community partners.

This is a necessary foundation as we work to ensure that our system is ready to accelerate our journey – towards continued improvement and innovation.

An approach steeped in engagement

After careful review of adequacy studies nationally from the last few decades and consideration of how recommendations have been adopted, we took a unique and innovative approach to the scope of this funding study. Rather than simply picking one of the several “off-the-shelf” adequacy study methodologies, all of which have innate limitations, we determined that we needed multiple qualitative and quantitative approaches to review current funding, lift the voices of school leaders, educators and families, and consider the totality of District investments in our children and school communities. This study benchmarked our funding against other states’ adequacy studies; reviewed so-called “natural funding experiments” to shed light on the impact of dollars on student outcomes; conducted deep direct

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engagement with administrators, school leaders, educators and families; reviewed the staffing landscape; conducted a mixed Evidence-Based and Professional Judgment panel; and assessed supportive District resources including school nursing, mental health supports, transportation, facility operations, and safety supports to consider the role of District resources outside of the UPSFF.

What we've learned

We have learned much through this work. We learned that dollars do matter, and that *how* we spend them matters even more. We were excited to learn that our existing funding formula is strong and best practice, and that we should consider specific updates in the pursuit of equity and quality. In the aftermath of the pandemic, this study also made clear that our schools are shouldering an enormous burden, often feeling as though they are independently tackling the effects of COVID-19 and the effects of poverty.

If we define “adequate” funding, as we have, to mean the dollars necessary to close opportunity gaps and ensure schools can prepare all students to perform against state standards, then we must recognize that we cannot expect our schools to do this work alone. We have seen that our schools located in neighborhoods experiencing more violence see lower academic proficiency, even after controlling for student demographics and circumstances. Our schools supporting students with the greatest need are spending much of their budget on administrative staff and wrap-around supports, including individuals who are often managing “external affairs,” working with families and District agencies to connect school communities with the appropriate resources. Our schools are spending dollars to address the most immediate needs they see – which they feel they need to tackle *before* the academics. We, in fact, see that while high at-risk schools purchase instructional staff at similar ratios as low at-risk schools, they pour more resources into student wrap-around supports.

This funding study has taught us again that strong schools are absolutely necessary, but wholly insufficient to resolve the impact of intergenerational poverty and it is our collective responsibility to address this tension by simultaneously investing in building opportunity-rich neighborhoods and healthy families alongside thriving schools. This work is essential for our youth.

To this end, we are particularly fortunate that so much work is already underway in Washington, DC. Mayor Bowser’s 2023 Comeback Plan is grounded in recommendations for ways to strengthen neighborhoods and communities emerging from the pandemic; in her first two terms Mayor Bowser has made remarkable investments in affordable housing, in job creation, in food security, in safety, and in out-of-school-time opportunities. We have also seen incredible investments in public schools, topping \$2.7 billion per year, after an 80%+ increase over the past decade. We are therefore tremendously excited about the study’s recommendation to pursue deeper coordination around schools as the success of the District’s children is impacted by both their experience within and outside of the school walls. All District agencies must come together with the community in support of our school improvement efforts. DC’s education governance structure, with Executive administration and Council oversight, provides us with an important foundation from which to pursue this important and ambitious whole-of-government approach.

Next steps

We as a District will now consider these 2023 School Funding Study recommendations alongside those of the MFP and Boundary & Student Assignment Study and School Safety Enhancement Committee study as part of upcoming budget formulation cycles. As with the 2013 Adequacy Study, these 2023



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recommendations come with a significant price tag and several will require significant time to implement. Given the scale and complexity of the recommendations alongside a constrained financial landscape post pandemic, we certainly do not anticipate wholesale adoption. Rather, we offer these study recommendations for careful consideration by District leaders as we look to chart a clear path through our next phase of school and system improvement.

I am pleased that, as part of Mayor Bowser's FY2025 proposed budget and because of recommendations from this study, we are already starting on this journey by increasing the weight for students who meet the at-risk criteria, students who attend alternative schools, and adult learners.

I conclude with tremendous gratitude. I am grateful to all of our school staff, school leaders, charter school and DC Public School administrators, families and students who gave so much time to support this work. I am also grateful to the stellar project teams who did the work and developed the findings and recommendations: Afton Partners; Augenblick, Palaich and Associates; and Metropolitan Strategies and Solutions. The study was led in exemplary fashion by Michelle Yan, Chief of Staff in my office.

Sincerely,

Paul Kihn
Deputy Mayor for Education