



D.C. POLICY
CENTER

PUBLIC OVERSIGHT HEARING ON

DC Public Schools Budget

Before the Committee of the Whole
Chairman Phil Mendelson

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Testimony of Dr. Yesim Sayin
Executive Director
D.C. Policy Center

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Yesim Sayin, and I am the Executive Director of the D.C. Policy Center—an independent non-partisan think tank advancing policies for a strong, competitive, and compelling District of Columbia. In my testimony, I will focus on the need for prudent, efficient, and equitable budgeting at DCPS and the need for oversight from the Council.

Public education policies in D.C. make us stand out.

The District of Columbia has a lot to be proud of when it comes to public education policy. There is a great deal of choice for parents and caregivers to find the schools that best fit the needs of their students. We have the Equitable Access option, adopted by this Council, that has not only increased lottery matches for economically disadvantaged students at schools where they'd like to attend, but also increased overall timely participation from this group in the Common Lottery.¹ We also have a funding formula that is one of the most thoughtful and equitable in the entire country.

How D.C.'s funding formula compares to other states

D.C.'s funding approach stands out in various ways compared to other states:

- **Student-Centered Funding:** D.C. is among 35 states where funding follows the student. Among these:
- **Pre-K Inclusion:** D.C. is one of only 8 states that include pre-K in its funding formula. Among these:
- **Needs-Based Weights:** It is one of 7 states that apply needs-based weights to a base formula. Among these:
- **Enrollment-Based Funding:** D.C. is among 6 states where funding is based on enrollment, not attendance. Among these:
- **Support for Special Populations:** D.C. stands with just 3 states that use weights for special education and English learners. Among these:
- **Enhanced Support for Disadvantaged Students:** It is one of only two states with multiple weights for economically disadvantaged students.

Source: 50-State Comparison: K-12 Funding, compiled by the Education Commission of the States. Retrieved from <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-k-12-funding-2024/>

Challenges remain.

Despite these achievements, significant challenges persist. Academic outcomes have not rebounded as expected since the pandemic, and while chronic absenteeism has

¹ Coffin, C. (2024). Research briefing: The first years of Equitable Access in DC's common lottery. D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/research-briefing-first-years-of-equitable-access-common-lottery/>

decreased, it remains a serious issue that undermines investments in our schools.² Many public high school graduates struggle after leaving the school system. For instance, D.C.-born residents aged 25 to 34 are less likely to be employed compared to similarly aged residents who were not born in D.C. (an unemployment rate of 23 percent vs. 3 percent), and those who are employed earn significantly less (\$34,130 vs. \$78,700).³

Balancing school-level needs with systemic interventions

The Schools First Budgeting approach, though well-intended, restricts the ability to implement broader systemic changes to address these challenges. Parents understandably want to see stability in their children's schools,⁴ and Schools First Budgeting ensures that schools do not lose funding year to year unless enrollment shifts dramatically. However, this approach comes at the cost of broader system improvements:

- **Resource Allocation Challenges:** Prioritizing individual schools restricts DCPS's ability to invest in system-wide initiatives, such as programs to improve attendance, academic outcomes, and school environments, including high impact tutoring and programs focused on college and career education.
- **Inequities in Budgeting:** This budgeting model locks in historical funding patterns, preventing adjustments to address historically unmet needs. It also prevents DCPS to respond effectively when needs change.
- **Inefficiencies in budgeting.** School budgets cannot be adjusted if students change schools within DCPS or move from DCPS to a public charter school or to a school outside of D.C.'s public schools.

Shifting focus to critical needs.

When money follows staff, there is very little incentive to examine what works at the school level and at the DCPS systems level to identify other types of investments that may be impactful in addressing the greatest needs. The greatest need for the District is

² Coffin, C. (2024). Chronic absenteeism is still improving as of March 2024, with uptick from fall. Retrieved from <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/chart-of-the-week-chronic-absenteeism-still-improving-as-of-march-2024/>

³ Coffin, C. & Mason, H. Forthcoming. Building career assets for lifelong success: A landscape of opportunities that connect D.C.'s high school-age youth to college and work-based learning.

⁴ It is important to note that Schools First Budgeting was enacted at a time when resources were growing. Between FY 2019 and 2024, public school spending in D.C. increased by 56 percent, fueled by ESSER funds and funding outside of the formula. During this period, the city's own-source revenue increased by only 17 percent. When this funding ended in FY 2024, DCPS was facing a fiscal cliff that is the equivalent of 15 percent of its formula resources. In FY 2025, UPSFF base was increased by 14.2 percent to cover this cliff. Moving forward, these types of increases are unlikely given the tightening fiscal space.

not to preserve class sizes, which have marginal impact on learning given the minimum class size requirements that already exist in D.C.⁵ The more important needs are:

- **Reducing absenteeism.** Although some progress has been made, chronic absenteeism remains around 40 percent. Effective interventions—such as text reminders or home visits—are most impactful early in the school year. Additionally, system-level incentives, like linking attendance to graduation requirements, could encourage better attendance. Feedback from D.C. Policy Center listening sessions suggests that parents and students value attendance less than before the pandemic. Efforts to educate parents on tracking absenteeism and the benefits of in-person learning, as well as investments in engaging programs like tutoring and extracurricular activities, could make a significant difference.
- **Investing in teacher development.** Providing teachers with the best pedagogical tools, especially in early reading instruction and math education, can significantly improve student outcomes. Such investments are essential, but under Schools First Budgeting, they often become a lower priority.

The role of Council oversight:

The Council plays a crucial role in improving education outcomes through rigorous oversight. This means focusing on the return on investment for various programs and shifting the conversation from merely “What is funded?” to “What is achieved?” The Council has the power to hold DCPS accountable for results, and this accountability is essential for continued progress.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

⁵ Research also finds that small class sizes matter the most in earlier grades, with effects disappearing after Grade 5, and they are more important for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, boys, and students of color. For details, see Chingos, M. & Whitehurst, R. (2011). Class Size: What Research Says and What it Means for State Policy. Brookings Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/class-size-what-research-says-and-what-it-means-for-state-policy/>