

Testimony

before

District of Columbia City Council

on

DCPS Human Capital Initiatives

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Good morning Chairman Gray and members of the District of Columbia Council. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the human capital initiatives of the District of Columbia's Public Schools. The views I will be expressing are largely based on research conducted in a national research center that I direct – CALDER (National Center for the Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research) – that is headquartered at The Urban Institute. The work of the CALDER largely focuses on issues associated with teacher quality and teacher labor markets.¹

I want to make three major points.

1. Teachers matter. They are the most important school factor that affects student learning, and the variation in effectiveness across teachers is huge. The most effective teachers get about three times the academic gains for their students than do the least effective teachers. Indeed, according to some calculations the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers can be closed if disadvantaged students had highly effective teachers for five years.

The large variation in teacher effectiveness is good news. Make no doubt about it. It means that teachers can, indeed, make a huge difference for students. It is only within the last few years that we have been able to get reasonably accurate measures of teacher effects. For too long, many observers believed that schools, and what happened in classrooms, were not important – that family background was the overwhelming determinant of student achievement. According to this view, it would be no wonder that poor minority children did not do well in school. What else would you expect given their backgrounds? And you certainly could not hold teachers or any other school personnel responsible for student achievement. They had no control over what was too often believed to be the relevant input – the family. The destructiveness of such views should be obvious. They feed a culture of low expectations, low effort and limited professional responsibility for student outcomes.

It is a new day. We now have some understanding of the magnitude of effects that teachers can have.

¹ Our findings are largely based on research in North Carolina, Florida, Texas and New York City.

2. The variation in teacher effectiveness is greater within schools than the variation between schools; and the variation within schools serving students from the poorest backgrounds is greater than the variation within schools serving more advantaged students.

This, too, is important. While there is some evidence of maldistribution of teachers – teachers with weaker credentials and the less experience are more likely to teach in the most challenging schools than in schools teaching more advantaged students - there is great variation in teacher effectiveness within all types of schools. It means we need to carefully discriminate among individual teachers. No school type has a monopoly on teacher effectiveness. There are strong and weak teachers in all types of schools; and formal credentials (e.g., certification status, graduate degrees) are only weakly correlated with teacher effectiveness.

Just recently we have begun to push these findings further. While there is variation in teacher effectiveness within different schools serving children from different backgrounds, the variation in teacher effectiveness within schools serving the poorest children is greater than the variation in schools more advantaged students. In short, there is a bigger spread in terms of effectiveness in schools serving disadvantaged students. The difference is pronounced at the bottom of the distribution: the weakest teachers in schools serving disadvantaged students are much worse than the weakest teachers in schools serving advantaged students. At the same time, it is important to stress that the top teachers in schools serving disadvantaged and the top teachers in schools serving advantaged students are very similar in terms of their effectiveness. There are true stars in both school settings.

I have spent nearly thirty years doing education research and have visited scores of schools in cities across the country, including the District of Columbia. Almost without fail, when finishing a school visit, I would find myself mumbling “saints and sinners.” There were always classrooms where talented hard working teachers were doing

wondrous things in classrooms and classrooms in the same school where not much of anything was going on. And, for the most part, the system always treated them the same.

3. The variation in teacher effectiveness, both within and between schools, is a management problem that begs for attention. Indeed not explicitly attending to this situation, in my view, would be an abrogation of management responsibility. Moreover, I would argue that at least some of this variation is a civil rights problem that demands policy attention.

Here we come to the central issues of concern in this hearing for DCPS and the proposed human capital management strategies. First, it should be obvious that I think the research is clear enough that school district management in the District of Columbia, as well as elsewhere, should feel compelled to take action to ensure teacher quality for all students, and we should commend Chancellor Rhee and her team for doing so.

The next question is: Are the actions the right ones? The answer is: The proof will be in the pudding. The problems that need to be confronted are clearer than the solutions that might best be applied. The District of Columbia is on the vanguard of districts that are attempting new strategies for more effective human capital management strategies in education. We do not yet have a tremendous amount of evidence about what works, but there is some evidence and I will describe some of what is available here. I might add that the country is looking at the District of Columbia, as well as a few other big cities, to learn more about what might work.

There are three key points of intervention. The first is recruitment/ hiring. Can we improve the pool of applicants applying for teaching positions and can we improve the selection of individuals into positions? While there is considerable evidence about the magnitude of the effect that teachers can have, there is less agreement on the attributes of teachers that make a difference which makes the issue of recruitment and hiring difficult.

However, evidence from a CALDER study in New York City shows that when New York hired new teachers for high poverty schools with different qualifications (higher SAT scores, higher pass rates on certification exam, more selective colleges) than former

teachers and eliminated uncertified teachers, the gap between high and low poverty schools in student performance was reduced substantially (CALDER working paper #10, Boyd et al, 2007). In short as the gap in teacher qualifications between high and low poverty schools narrowed, so did the gap in student performance. Most of these teachers were New York City Teaching Fellows and Teach for America teachers. There is also evidence at the secondary level with data from North Carolina that shows that Teach for America teachers have an effect on student performance that is two to three times the effect of other teachers, even more experienced teachers certified in field (CALDER working paper #17, Xu, Hannaway and Taylor, 2008). DCPS plans to continue and expand partnerships with both the New Teacher Project and Teacher for America for recruitment and the available evidence supports this approach.

DCPS also plans to expand the pool of applicants through compensation reforms including both pay and pension portability. A discussion of the ways in which pensions restrict teacher mobility is in CALDER working paper #3 (Podgursky and Ehlert, 2006). Pay has been shown in a number of studies to affect job selection by applicants, including teachers. Working conditions are also important, especially the quality of the principal. All these factors appear to be part of the effort of DCPS to attract teacher applicants.

A second point of intervention is when teachers are on the job. Here there are two strategies, all based on how well a teacher is performing on the job. One is the point of tenure and the other is evaluation of ongoing performance. Traditionally tenure hurdles for teachers are low; the vast majority of teachers obtain tenure. In addition, a strikingly small number of teachers are weeded out for on-going poor performance after tenure despite the wide variation in performance.

The tenure point should be an easier one to make hard decisions. But in the District of Columbia that decision is made after only two years while teachers are still making their way up the learning curve and only have one year of data on the performance of their students that could be taken into account. Moving tenure later when more information is available to make a well grounded decision seems to make sense if the objective is to

select teachers who make the most difference for student achievement. See CALDER Brief #3 (Goldhaber and Hansen, 2008) for information on the relation between the pre- and post-tenure performance measures of teachers.

On-going performance of teachers is more difficult. Here DCPS is proposing a number of mechanisms including performance incentives and buy outs for low performers. The possibility of performance incentive is relatively new in education. Typically we have been rewarding teachers for years of service, which is not correlated with effectiveness after the first few years, and graduate coursework and degrees which also do not appear to be related to performance.

While there is some evidence on the effect of performance incentives on student performance in other countries, the first study using data in the United States is CALDER paper #10, Figlio and Kenney, 2007). The authors found that teacher performance incentives were associated with greater student performance, but experimental evidence would be needed to make a causal claim. So there is some evidence on the benefits of performance pay for teachers, but it is not strong.

One reason new performance based strategies are emerging is the availability of longitudinal data on student performance and the linking of student data with teacher data that allows a measurement of a teacher's value-added or contribution to student learning gains. These new measures are important and increasingly likely to be used as a tool for management purposes. I should point out that these measures are not perfect and we are engaged in a number of analyses to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of these measures. (See www.caldercenter.org for papers and briefs.) But they provide new information on teacher effectiveness that is not otherwise available. In short, while value-added measures are probably not good enough to use mechanically or alone, they are too good to ignore and should be part of the management toolkit.

In sum, the human capital management issues that DCPS is confronting are ones where there is a compelling reason to confront. The strategies the district is planning to undertake

are reasonable and reasoned and consistent with what we know so far from the research, but they are largely untested on a large scale. DCPS is clearly on the front end of a movement for change and it is imperative that solid on-going evaluation follow the effort so that DCPS and the DC community, as well as the rest of the country, can learn from its efforts.