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Sustaining and Strengthening DC Schools

Challenges and Choices for the New Mayor

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Mayor-elect Bowser assumes control at a delicate juncture in the turbulent history of DC schools. In the 2008–09 school year, public school enrollment—in both traditional and charter schools—increased for the first time since the 1960s. In 2013–14, the District had the largest student body in over 25 years. And, over the past 15 years, public schools in DC have gained ground on national tests.

Contrary to the widespread belief that these gains are the result of a greater number of students from more affluent, higher-educated families, a recent analysis of DC's own achievement tests suggests that only 10 percent of the test score increase can be attributed to changing demographics. In fact, all subgroups, including Hispanic and black students and students from lower-income families (identified by their eligibility for subsidized meals) have experienced some incremental improvements, although their gains are not commensurate with those of students from higher-income families.

Several reforms, including these four, may be contributing to these gains:

- **Universal pre-K**, which offers all 3- and 4-year olds access to early childhood education regardless of family income.

- **School building improvements**, for which spending has skyrocketed since 2007, totaling almost $2 billion.

- **IMPACT**, the evolving performance-rating system for all DC Public Schools (DCPS) school-based personnel, provides incentives and professional development to improve classroom instruction.

- **A robust school choice movement** has increased competition, which may have motivated charter schools and traditional public schools to improve.

The mayor should channel this progress by ensuring stability for all students and equity for DC's poorest students.

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations for how the new mayor can promote meaningful choice for every student, a quality school in every neighborhood, and a long-term leadership structure that is both stable and responsive.

Goal for the First 100 Days: Sustain What's Already Working and Reach Out to the Community for More Input on Tough Decisions

- Encourage stability by retaining and building a cohesive leadership team.

DC schools have gone through a period of enormous turmoil with substantial personnel turnover and building closures. The mayor-elect has already signaled her commitment to stable schools by announcing that she will retain the current DCPS chancellor, Kaya Henderson, who has been integral to many recent reforms and is well respected by students, parents, and other city stakeholders. Mayor-elect Bowser has also announced Jennifer Niles as her pick for deputy mayor for education; Niles has demonstrated her commitment to working with education stakeholders citywide to promote cooperation and shared accountability for results. DC's unique home-rule status blurs the lines of authority between state-level and city-level entities, making cooperation among leaders all the more essential to stable school improvement and performance. The transition to a new student assessment test based on Common Core standards, in particular, will require a highly cooperative leadership team.

- Explore how to exercise targeted central control over the location of new schools.

Every DC child's right to a quality education cannot be fulfilled unless every neighborhood enjoys easy access to strong pre-K, elementary, middle, and high school options. To achieve this equity, the mayor's office may need to play a central decisionmaking role on the location of new schools—particularly charters, but also magnets and special programs—and weigh allocations of city maintenance services and capital investments across all schools.

Because this issue is controversial, the mayor should establish a task force—composed of DCPS and charter school board officials, parents, students, and community leaders—to recommend parameters that will both honor equity and preserve school choice. The current deputy mayor for education plans to form a task force this month that will examine decisionmaking around school openings and capital investment, as well as other issues in need of central planning. The mayor should consider whether to embrace that task force, shape its role, or formulate her own task force.

- Craft a budget that emphasizes priorities and draws on community input.

Stakeholders widely hailed the public engagement component of the DCPS student assignment policy review. The city's new education leaders should bring similar transparency to other policy areas, starting with budget decisions. While these budget priorities should reflect more public input, they should also honor Mayor-elect Bowser's stated priorities, such as improving middle school options, addressing the needs of at-risk students, increasing the number of community schools, and transforming good schools to great schools.

Goal for the First Year: Ensure Meaningful Choice for All Students, Especially At-Risk Students

The mayor should invest equitably, not equally, in schools and students across the city. And she should ensure that students can attend high-performing schools regardless of where they live.

- Improve the targeting of supplemental at-risk funding.

The city recently examined and adjusted the school funding formula to better reflect the needs of middle and high school students, alternative and adult students, English language learners, and a newly defined category of low-income students considered "at risk of academic failure." Roughly $80 million has been allocated for these at-risk students, about $2,000 per student. The administration should ensure that schools target these dollar to students who need supplemental services and learn from each other about how to best reach these students. Some school leaders may need information about evidence-based strategies, curriculum, teacher training, and supports that make a difference for at-risk students.

- Rationalize the budget calendar.

The city must build more time into the budget planning calendar to allow school leaders to identify available resources, priority issues, and strategies to address them. Mayor-elect Bowser will take office too late to do this for the 2015–16 school year, but she can launch a process for major improvements in fall 2015 for the following school year.

- Refine the student assignment policy.

The DC Advisory Committee on Student Assignment recently crafted new policy proposals for overhauling school boundaries. Mayor-elect Bowser has made clear her reservations about some of these decisions. Early in her term, she should announce that parents will have the rights granted them in the new student assignment process but also can exercise the rights they had in the previous year. Because current students already retain their rights, the only students affected are new students and students who wish to transfer from an out-of-bounds, charter, or private school.

The mayor should then appoint a team to review concerns and develop revisions by mid-summer 2015. However, the team should maintain new policies that improve opportunities for at-risk students to attend high-performing schools outside their neighborhoods. A random lottery will not ensure

educational equity until the odds of receiving a high-quality seat are weighted in favor of at-risk students.

Goal for the First Term: Develop a More Stable, Responsive, and Collaborative Leadership Structure

Now that the number of charter school seats is nearly equal to the number of traditional public school seats, the city needs to set up a more streamlined system for joint decisionmaking between the two sectors. This streamlining will mean adjusting the current leadership structure, as well as the influence of ongoing public input on that structure.

Under the DC Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (PERAA), the mayor was assigned control of DCPS, the local education agency (LEA) for traditional public schools. The Public Charter School Board was made the sole overseer of charter school operators, which are each LEAs in their own right. The legislation also established the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to issue state-level regulations and monitor performance for all DC schools, as well as to compete for and administer federal education grants. The chancellor of DCPS reports directly to the mayor, while the state superintendent for education (the head of OSSE) reports to the deputy mayor for education. PERAA dismantled the local school board and put the state board of education in its place. The state board is made up of elected representatives from all eight wards and one at-large member. Though the state board was set up to be the primary mechanism for ongoing public input on education matters, the city council's committee on education has played a much more prominent role in this regard.

The three most frequently cited weaknesses in this system are (1) the leadership structure is poorly aligned, (2) the public's voice is muffled by a complex organizational structure, and (3) no clear mechanism exists for central coordination between the charter and the traditional public school sectors.

- Consider establishing clearer lines of authority among top education leaders.

The long-term stability of DC schools depends on a clear, collaborative leadership structure. Though there are no perfect solutions to this problem under home rule, the mayor should explore at least two options:

1. Put the DCPS chancellor and the state superintendent under the direct authority of the deputy mayor for education.
2. Make the state superintendent independent, with a clear mandate to focus on accountability standards and assessments, information sharing, and oversight of federal pass-through programs.

The first option leverages the benefits of mayoral control; the second honors DC's aspiration to statehood.

- Throw weight behind the ombudsman, when necessary.

The state board of education recently resurrected the role of an independent ombudsman, who functions as a mediator between parents and LEAs. Some enforcement weight should be provided to this office in order to clear impasses, particularly given the weakened position of the state board within OSSE. One option is to have the deputy mayor for education enforce the ombudsman's final recommendations.

- Support and build on the best examples of cross-sector cooperation.

While the two recommendations above reflect adjustments to the balance of power, overall, any structural shifts should honor the spirit of mutual cooperation fostered by current leadership. This spirit has sparked the following notable examples of inter-sector coordination that the mayor should assess and build upon:

- **My School DC,** which gives families data about DCPS and charter schools to help them choose a school that fits their needs. Likewise, **LearnDC,** a website managed by OSSE, is a one-stop source for schools and early education information. The mayor should work with the city council to require all pre-K–12 schools to participate in My School DC before the launch of the 2016–17 school lottery. However, the city should continue to assess the suitability of My School DC's primary metrics, especially how the site measures improvements in student performance.

- **The DC Data Summit,** cohosted by various organizations including FOCUS DC and Teach for America, offers public charter school and DCPS leaders and teachers an opportunity to share techniques for data-driven instructional decisionmaking and performance management. Likewise, equity reports—which are created through a partnership of DCPS, OSSE, the public charter school board, the deputy mayor for education, and the NewSchools Venture Fund— provide parents and other stakeholders with transparent and comparable metrics on school experiences.

- **The Request for Offers process.** In the wake of school closures, the deputy mayor for education has been developing a process for identifying available facilities, scheduling public hearings about potential uses, reviewing options, and accepting or rejecting offers. DC law ensures that charter schools have the right of first offer, so school reuse creates an exciting opportunity to coordinate the location and delivery of education programming across the city. This process is an excellent example of targeted central decisionmaking that improves access to opportunity across the city.

- **Raise DC,** the District's version of STRIVE Cincinnati, a nationally recognized model for collective impact across sectors to improve student outcomes. Raise DC conducts much of its work through change networks, including an early childhood network, a K–12 network, a credential and college completion network, a disconnected youth network, and a youth employment network. Each network and the Raise DC leadership council has an impressive roster of members from across the public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors. Although launched by the deputy mayor for education, Raise DC is now under the management

of The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region. However, as the most promising mechanism for citywide, data-driven collaboration among schools and supporting sectors, Raise DC remains worthy of continued and strong mayoral support.

After years of turmoil, DC schools show signs of moving in the right direction. As the third mayor to take control of DC schools since the sweeping 2007 reforms, Mayor Bowser is in an enviable position to shape and accelerate the momentum already under way. By emphasizing stability and equity, the new administration can ensure that more DC youth have access to the high-quality education they deserve and need to be successful.