



Furthering the College and Career Readiness of the District of Columbia's Students

Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia on Education Reform

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Hello, and thank you for having me speak before you regarding Washington, D.C.'s education reform efforts. I have two goals for my testimony today. The first is to encourage Washington to build on the progress it has made in improving student outcomes. The second is to identify ways to align Washington's systems with the rigorous expectations it has set for all students to receive a diploma.

Over the last nine years, Washington has been one of the fastest improving urban school districts in the country on fourth-grade math and reading and was one of the only states or districts to consistently improve on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in these categories since 2013. On the state tests, called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests, scores improved 7 percentage points in English comparing 2017 results to 2015 and 6.5 percentage points in math over this same time period.

But the recent graduation scandals point to the need to develop systems that better support all students to meet the district's admirably rigorous expectations.

When schools do not have supports needed to help students become ready for college, careers, and life after high school, the gap creates fertile ground for the cheating scandals and the uneven progress we have seen in Washington's traditional high schools.

According to last year's outcome data, despite rising graduation rates since 2011 when four-year rates were first calculated, among Washington's eight traditional high schools:

- Six have proficiency rates between 0 percent to 20 percent in both English and math based on 2016-2017 PARCC test scores.
- Seven have chronic absenteeism rates of 50 percent or greater.

- Almost all schools with these low proficiency rates also have high rates of chronic absenteeism.

Despite having relatively rigorous expectations for high school graduation, too few students meet them.

Washington's high school graduation requirements meet all but one marker of college readiness, but students don't possess sufficient basic academic skills to pursue the postsecondary pathway of their choice.

It is evident that Washington does not lack the courage to expect a lot of all students, but these data point to the need for systems and support for these expectations.

Critical Washington, D.C., policies and systems over the last decade

Washington was one of the state educational agencies to set high academic expectations by adopting and implementing the Common Core State Standards and their aligned assessments and, most importantly, sticking with this choice.

This political courage could be one reason why, since implementing these standards, Washington has made some of the largest gains in reading and math scores compared to other states. States that changed either their standards or assessments saw rising and falling results, and in some rare cases, unusable results due to testing glitches rendering the scores invalid when they pulled out of the state testing consortia.

Rising scores on both PARCC and the NAEP tests validate that students are making real academic progress.

Then there are the strides made in aligning educator professional development with academic mastery of the Common Core State Standards to ensure rigorous instruction through Washington's Learning Together to Advance Our Practice (LEAP) program.

I observed LEAP in action and witnessed teachers digging into each standard to discuss how to scaffold instruction so that all students can access and eventually master the content. These are exactly the types of professional development teachers need to make the standards real in the classroom.

Washington has also invested significantly in schools serving low-income students. The district overhauled its educator salary schedule to reward effective teachers in high-need schools and increased pay dramatically for all teachers. Today, excellent teachers teaching in high-need schools can earn more than \$130,000—an amount that often exceeds the salaries offered by nonprofit and government jobs all over

Washington. By implementing generous financial incentives to teach in schools serving students from disadvantaged areas, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) bucked the national trend of paying teachers only 60 percent of what other college-educated professionals earn. This investment also eliminated pay as a reason that teachers leave the district.

While Washington has taken some courageous steps toward college and career readiness for all students, the following recommendations will identify ways that you can put systems and structures into place to better support this outcome.

Recommendations

These recommendations are organized by long- and short-term steps:

- Require that courses needed for high school graduation with the 15-credit college-ready course work required by most public university systems. This course sequence is detailed in our recent report, “Are High School Diplomas Really a Ticket to College and Work?”¹

This course sequence includes four years of English; three years of math, up to Algebra II; three years of social studies, including U.S. and world history; three years of lab science, including biology, chemistry, and physics; and two years of the same foreign language.

Washington only misses this course sequence by the foreign language requirement. Including this requirement would help ensure that students are eligible for the university of their choice.

- Conduct an audit of this course sequence to know which schools offer this entire course suite and which do not.
- To know how well students are progressing towards their diplomas, develop and maintain systems to monitor districts on appropriate methods to collect and analyze graduation requirement completion. These systems should help to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the data, as well as hold school administrators responsible for ensuring that attendance records are accurate.
- Implement an Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System to identify students in ninth grade who are at risk for chronic absenteeism and connect them with a case manager to help connect them with supports—academic or otherwise—that will enable them to succeed.² Include in this system student course-taking and provide notice to students about completing the 15-credit course sequence on time. Monitor these students progress closely and involve their parents, guardians, siblings, and community resources to help get them back on track.
- Along with better data, increase transparency of how well schools are performing by providing the public clear information on school progress and ways to engage in a

conversation about student performance. The Data Quality Campaign offers resources to support better reporting.³

- Offer innovative career and technical education in every high school. Washington can expand offerings for the hospitality, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields by requiring completion of three courses in the same career and technical education field. Research shows that this level of study prepares students for advanced study and certification.⁴
- Invest in systems to provide wraparound supports to students becoming ready for college and careers. To further support students within the context of their school settings, consider whether evidence-based school-wide intervention systems are the right fit for Washington schools. These include:
 - Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR), which shows a statistically significant impact on 19 academic performance outcomes across students, teachers, and schools.⁵ BARR creates a system for educators to discuss detailed student progress indicators and plan for intervening early. The program focuses on building and maintaining relationships with every student and using those relationships as the foundation to provide support.
 - Work with community partners who can provide mental health counselors, health clinics, connections with housing assistance, job training, among other supports. Scavo Alternative School in Iowa is putting some powerful, long-term, holistic strategies to keep kids in school and help them graduate. This might be an example to learn from.⁶

I'll finish by providing some recommendations to address some immediate needs:

- Regarding chronic absenteeism, conduct an analysis of attendance patterns across all grades, including pre-K, and disaggregate the data for all subgroups. Key research questions you may want to ask include:
 - What are chronic absenteeism rates by grade and student demographics?
 - Which grade's attendance rates are strongest predictors of course failure and dropout?
 - What is the pattern of chronic absenteeism across grades, for example, in elementary, middle, and high school?
 - Are attendance patterns due to student-, school-, family-, or community-specific factors?
- To address these absences, you can invest in low-cost interventions, supported by the research as effective in addressing attendance issues:
 - Texts to parents improved attendance by 17 percent.⁷
 - Just one postcard home to parents reduced absences by 10 percent.⁸

In conclusion, there is a path forward for the Washington school system. Meeting the goal of college and career readiness is laudable and worthwhile, and its achievement will demand coordination of the entire education system. To be achieved, Washington can put into place short-term systems to help address immediate needs, such as those that address chronic absenteeism. In addition, Washington can configure its system toward college and career readiness through strengthened high school graduation requirements and then putting into place the supports to help students meet those more rigorous requirements.

The challenge ahead of Washington is balancing the very real tension of demanding more of students and supporting them to get there. My organization and I are here to provide you with the research and practices that are shown to be effective. Please let me know how we can be of further assistance to you.

Thank you.

Endnotes

- 1 Laura Jimenez and Scott Sargrad, "Are High School Diplomas Really a Ticket to College and Work?" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2018), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/04/02/44717/high-school-diplomas/>.
- 2 Ann-Marie Faria and others, "Getting students on track for graduation: Impacts of the Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System after one year" (Washington: American Institutes for Research, 2017), available at https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midwest/pdf/REL_2017272.pdf.
- 3 Jimmy Adams and others, "Administrator Data Literacy Fosters Student Success" (Washington: Data Quality Campaign, 2018), available at <https://dataqualitycampaign.org/resource/administrator-data-literacy-fosters-student-success/>.
- 4 The Education Trust, "Meandering Toward Graduation: Transcript Outcomes of High School Graduates" (Washington: The Education Trust, 2016) available at https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/MeanderingTowardGraduation_EdTrust_April2016.pdf.
- 5 Trisha H. Borman and others, "I3 BARR Validation Study: Impact findings: Cohorts 1 and 2" (Washington: American Institutes for Research, 2018), available at <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/BARR-report-cohorts-1-and-2-January-2017.pdf>.
- 6 Cory Turner, "Guess Which State has the Best High School Graduation Rate?" National Public Radio, June 9, 2015, available at <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/06/09/408521333/guess-which-state-has-the-best-high-school-graduation-rate>.
- 7 Peter Bergman and Eric W. Chan, "Leveraging Parents: The Impact of High-Frequency Information on Student Achievement" (Westport, CT; New York: Smith Richardson Foundation; Institutional Research Board at Teachers College, Columbia University, 2017), available at <http://www.columbia.edu/~psb2101/ParentRCT.pdf>.
- 8 Todd Rogers and Avi Feller, "Intervening through Influential Third Parties: Reducing student absences at scale," available at https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/todd_rogers/files/influential_third_parties.pdf (last accessed September 2018).