

## COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

### “Academic Achievement in the District of Columbia”

Friday, November 7, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Mendelson, for convening this hearing on academic achievement. My name is Robert Henderson. I am the Ward 5 member of the State Board of Education. These views are my own and do not represent the views of the Board as a whole.

Over the years, I have tried to make it my regular practice to lead my testimony with my conviction that students learn best when their basic needs are met — food security, income security, healthcare, and housing stability. At last year’s hearing on academic achievement, I asked the Council to take action on measures such as the District Child Tax Credit and to strengthen the distribution of public benefits. I applaud the council for its vote earlier this week in support of a child tax credit, and I am grateful for the leadership and persistence of my Ward 5 Councilmember, Zachary Parker, on this issue. I know that this Committee has an upcoming hearing on “Beating the odds,” recognizing the strong correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. I believe that we should take every opportunity to improve and ultimately even the odds for students. As the federal government reduces its commitment to the social safety net and economic pressures on families increase, it is all the more important for our local government to fight poverty and meet families’ basic needs.

Likewise, to support academic achievement, we need to protect students and their families from fear, uncertainty, and disruption associated with the heightened presence of federal law enforcement and the National Guard. Although we may have passed the most intense phase of the surge, students are still being affected. The State Board sent a series

of recommendations to the Deputy Mayors for Education and Public Safety, as well as the Attorney General, to improve this situation.

I continue to urge the executive branch to increase the weights of several student Categories, including Grades 1-3, at-risk, adult, students with disabilities, and English learners, to achieve more equitable funding as recommended by the DME's 2023 Funding Study. We have 36 schools with more than 80% economically disadvantaged students, most of which are located in Wards 7 and 8. Those schools may need substantially greater resources than schools with much smaller shares of economically disadvantaged students. When we don't adequately support families, when we concentrate students with the highest needs, and when we under-resource the schools where they are concentrated, we increase the burden on the educators serving those students. It is not that students can't learn; they absolutely can, but it is harder when student needs are deep and concentrated.

We need to do better at supporting our students with disabilities. Particularly as the federal government retreats from legitimate civil rights and special education enforcement, it is critical that OSSE takes a more assertive approach to monitoring and enforcement of special education provision, a shift that likely requires OSSE to be an independent state agency.

If we want to see big gains in student achievement, and more importantly, in student learning, we need to make big changes in how we support students, families, and educators. Namely, we need to address poverty in a comprehensive and sustained way. And we need to address the concentration of high-need students.

Thank you again for your attention to the issue of academic achievement; I am  
happy to answer questions.

Robert Henderson