

**COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE**  
**“Academic Achievement in the District of Columbia”**  
**Wednesday, December 6, 2023**

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.

Much of the discussion today will center on test scores. Just as a matter of framing, I would like to say that our students achieve academically in all sorts of ways, many of which do not get captured in test scores. Still, the test scores that we have indicate that we have a long way to go in reaching the achievement levels that we would like to see and in eradicating the gaps that we know should not exist.

It is tempting to zero in on the most proximate factors related to academic achievement, perhaps the least costly, and maybe the politically easiest factors, but those might not be the most powerful levers for boosting academic achievement and closing gaps. I think that it is vital that the Council view its influence on academic achievement on at least three levels: structural, systemic, and school.

First, structural. We know that academic achievement correlates strongly with socioeconomic status, and it is not hard to imagine why. Students learn best when their basic needs are met — food security, income security, healthcare, and housing stability. Socioeconomic comfort affords all sorts of benefits and freedom from stressors that negatively impact the academic achievement of those living in poverty and economic insecurity. There’s so much before the Council right now, from the District Child Tax Credit to social housing to work to shore up the distribution of public benefits that are all important in their own right, but are also important for moving the needle on academic achievement. Many people will mention chronic absenteeism today — these structural issues, not just school-level issues, drive absenteeism.

Second, at the system level, we need to fund our schools adequately and equitably. I greatly appreciate the Council’s efforts to stabilize school funding. I know that expectations are for a tightening budget, but I do not see us making significant progress without increasing funding and devoting much more funding to the schools with the hardest to serve student populations. Even as the DME works on a new adequacy study, it is disheartening to note that none of our “historic” budget increases over the years have met the level set by our last adequacy study. Another systemic factor linked to increased academic achievement is socioeconomic integration, which is hard to imagine without a significant increase in the proportion of school funding towards higher need schools.

Finally, at the school level, stability and continuity among school leaders, teachers, students, and programing are important as are engaging teaching and learning and strong relationships between teachers and students. All of this underscores how important it is to support our educators. The Council has recently had two hearings on educator retention. The issues raised and solutions proposed from the need for a WTU contract, a new DCPS evaluation system, support for

educator wellness, student loan relief, and more are not just about teachers but are about academic achievement.

Maybe we can continue making incremental gains, maybe not, but to make the dramatic progress the city needs and our students deserve, I think we need to prioritize significant investments at each of these levels. And, I'm only scratching the surface, there's more, of course, at each of these levels that can move us forward, but we need all of them to get us to where we want to be.

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

Robert Henderson