



Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
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Public Hearing:
Proposed Fiscal Year 2011 Budget for the District of Columbia Public Schools

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Good afternoon Chairman Gray and members of the Council. My name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Executive Director of Children's Law Center¹ (CLC) and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children's legal services. Every year, we represent 1,200 low-income children and families, focusing on children who have been abused and neglected and children with special health and educational needs. The majority of the children we represent are enrolled in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and a large percentage of them have disabilities that make them eligible for special education.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify regarding DCPS's proposed FY 2011 budget. It is a complicated budget and the change in accounting categories and the significant differences between the FY 2010 approved and reallocated budget makes it difficult on first read to follow the changes from the FY 2010 budget and the FY 2011 proposed budget. I want to thank Dr. Nyankori and his staff for assisting CLC in understanding the changes in funding for special education.

I will focus my comments on funding for special education and at-risk students. I am pleased that the Mayor's proposed budget largely protects these programs and continues investment in special education and early identification. I urge the Council to similarly protect these programs. I know these are tough financial times and spending must be reduced, but these investments are key, not only for children and families but for the District as a whole. The fiscal and non-fiscal costs of failing to improve our local school services are clear. The fiscal costs are reflected in the significant and increasing costs of non-public tuition and special education transportation as well as homelessness services and incarceration when we fail to keep students engaged.

¹ Children's Law Center provides free, comprehensive legal services to thousands of low-income and at-risk children in Washington, DC to ensure they have safe homes, a meaningful education and healthy lives. Applying the knowledge gained from representing children and families, we advocate for changes in the city's laws, policies and programs. Children's Law Center is the largest nonprofit legal services provider in the District and the only to focus on children. For more information, visit www.childrenslawcenter.org.

Special Education

I believe the Mayor and this Council share the goal of providing children with disabilities a meaningful opportunity to learn in the least restrictive environment and when possible in their neighborhood school. To succeed in this effort requires investment – investment in more special education teachers, smaller classrooms, self-contained classrooms and other supports and services.

These important supports and services were increased through reallocation from the FY 2010 approved budget by slightly more than \$3 million.² The Mayor's proposed budget keeps the FY 2011 budget essential flat in comparison to the FY 2010 reallocation budget. Special education instruction increases by approximately \$1.2 million in the FY 2011 budget as compared to the reallocated FY2010 budget.³ Our understanding is that there may be a greater increase than reflected because some of the salary costs for special education teachers have been moved to the general education budget.

There are some reductions. Comparing the proposed FY 2011 budget to last year's reallocated budget reveals a decrease in funding of \$2.4 million for Early Stages, the new DCPS assessment center for children ages three (3) to five (5) suspected of having disabilities.⁴ However, the proposed funding for Early Stages remains \$2.3 million more than the FY 2010 approved budget.⁵ Our understanding is the change in funding will not affect current operations, but slow plans to expand the program.

I urge the Council protect these investments. Investing robustly in DCPS special education programs will have innumerable positive consequences, as taxpayers save on the cost of nonpublic tuition and transportation and children with disabilities receive high-quality education in their neighborhood schools.

² Compare DCPS FY 2010 Budget at D-8 to D-24.

³ DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-23, 3030.

⁴ DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-24, 3380.

⁵ DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-8.

Programs for at-risk students

Funding for programs for students who are at-risk of disengaging from school and entering adulthood without a high school diploma, GED, or even basic academic knowledge is also an important investment. For many of our clients, and for too many students in the District, a traditional high school diploma is a distant dream. In order to attain a diploma, these students will need additional support and they may find that a GED or vocational training is a more realistic option. For students at risk of failing out of school, alternative education programs are key to help them re-engage. Summer school programs allow them to earn credit in order to graduate.

We are pleased to see a proposed modest increase of almost \$3 million in alternative education funding.⁶ The proposed budget does contain some reductions to DCPS programs that particularly serve at-risk students. The FY 2011 budget proposes to cut funding for vocational education by approximately \$1.8 million⁷ and summer school programs by approximately \$4.7 million⁸ as compared to last year's approved budget. However it appears that these reductions were already made in FY 2010 through reallocation.⁹ Youth engagement funding is decreased by \$910,000 compared to last year's reallocated budget, but is still more than the FY 2010 approved budget.¹⁰ According to DCPS's budget summary, there is also a planned reduction in STAY program seats, the alternative diploma program for older students.¹¹

I urge the Council to protect these programs from actual reductions. These programs, like the investment in special education, not only help youth, but help the District by helping young

⁶ The budget for alternative education is increased by \$2.8 million from the reallocation budget. DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-23, 2120. The increase is \$2.9 million from the FY 2010 approved budget. DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-7, 2120.

⁷ DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-7, 2400.

⁸ DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-8, 2600.

⁹ Compared to last year's reallocated budget, the cuts are \$320,000 to vocational education and \$506,000 to summer school. DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-23, 2400, 2600.

¹⁰ DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-26, 5350. The proposed funding is \$1.7 million more than the FY 2010 approved budget.

¹¹ DCPS FY 2011 Budget at D-12.

adults become independent. The alternatives are often unfortunately homelessness and incarceration.

Conclusion

I urge the Council to ensure that DCPS continues to provide sufficient funding for special education and other programs for at-risk students.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.