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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
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Public Hearing:
FY26 Budget Oversight
Deputy Mayor for Education
District of Columbia Public Charter School Board

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee, and staff. My name is Danielle Robinette, and I am a Senior Policy Attorney at Children's Law Center. Children's Law Center believes every child should grow up with a strong foundation of family, health and education and live in a world free from poverty, trauma, racism and other forms of oppression. Children's Law Center represents DC students who regularly face barriers in accessing their education and my testimony today reflects the experiences of the children and families we work with.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding the Mayor's proposed FY26 budget for the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) and the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (PCSB). To start, we appreciate the Mayor's proposed 2.7% increase to the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula foundation rate.¹ Moreover, we appreciate the Mayor's proposed 3.1% increase to the charter facilities allotments.² Increases to the UPSFF and facilities allotments will support school quality across the District, and we strongly encourage the Council to maintain them.

For at least the next few years, the District's education sector is going to have to do more with less. There is no easy way to do this. However, we urge the Committee to remember that investments in education are investments in DC's future. Proposals to create new jobs for DC residents must be accompanied by education investments that ensure that DC students are prepared to fill those roles. We must ensure that DC students

are thoroughly prepared for the future that the District is trying to build for them. Recognizing the limitations of the current budget climate, we recommend that the Committee and those education agencies with oversight responsibilities – like DME and PCSB – that existing programs are being implemented with fidelity to ensure that DC students are getting the most out of the dollars that the city invests in education.

Ensure Stability and Continuity in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education

Regarding the DME's budget, we are focused on their ability to address chronic absenteeism and to operate the Students in the Care of DC (SCDC) Coordinating Committee. The DME's leadership in each of these areas is crucial to ensuring a comprehensive and well-coordinated response to students' needs. We were glad to see that the Mayor's proposed budget largely maintains DME's operating budget and FTE count.³ We are hopeful that this level funding will allow the office to maintain recent momentum on improving student attendance and supporting Students in the Care of DC.

As we testified during performance oversight, the DME has been charged with the difficult task of gathering, organizing, and facilitating cooperation among disparate agencies to develop a comprehensive response and system of supports for students facing barriers to regular school attendance.⁴ This leadership has reinvigorated the Every Day Counts! Taskforce which has met consistently throughout FY25. We are hopeful that level funding will prevent any regression in absenteeism work and will allow the DME to continue their active leadership of the District's response to chronic absenteeism and

truancy. As such, we urge the Committee to preserve the Agency Management budget line and FTE count within DME's budget.⁵

Regarding the SCDC Coordinating Committee, we are happy to report that the Coordinating Committee has been making steady progress since our oversight testimony. The working groups are meeting regularly and developing proposals to address barriers faced by students in care. The Mayor's budget would maintain funding for SCDC in FY26 which we hope will ensure the continued progress of the Coordinating Committee.⁶ We urge the Council to ensure that the proposed SCDC funding level is preserved and that DME sustains the long-awaited momentum on work supporting students furthest from opportunity.

Support Continued Oversight, Accountability, and Transparency from the Public Charter School Board

In our oversight testimony, we raised concerns about gaps in PCSB's oversight of DC charter schools that lead to the abrupt and highly disruptive closure of Eagle Academy.⁷ However, we are happy to report that PCSB has made noticeable improvements to their processes that we believe strengthen oversight and increase transparency. The Board has begun issuing fiscal notices of concern to schools demonstrating financial red flags. They also issue truancy notices of concern when schools fall below certain attendance targets. These tools allow the Board to heighten their monitoring of schools that are not meeting expectations. We have also noticed improvements in the charter review process. For example, when a charter is continued

with conditions, the Board has included a condition that allows them to conduct out-of-cycle charter reviews if a school does not meet the performance targets set by the Board.⁸ This will allow the Board to intervene sooner if a school is failing to meet the conditions required of them. Additionally, we commend Board Chair Shantelle Wright for her emphasis on schools' responsibility to notify their families when they receive one of these notices or their charter is continued with conditions.⁹ This increased communication will improve families' ability to make the best educational choices for their students.

One consequence of this stronger oversight is that two charter schools – I Dream PCS and Hope Community PCS – have decided to relinquish their charters and will close at the end of the current school year.¹⁰ Unfortunately, these decisions were made after the My School DC lottery was closed. As a result, students at I Dream and Hope Community are significantly limited in their school choices for next year. As PCSB continues to review and strengthen their processes, we encourage them to alter their charter review timelines to ensure that reviews are completed during the first semester of the school year so that charter school boards can make difficult decisions about whether to relinquish their charter prior to lottery application deadlines in February and March.

PCSB's budget has historically consisted solely of the Special Purpose Revenue Funds collected through an administration fee charged to each school granted a charter.¹¹ The Mayor's proposed budget is consistent with this history. However, last year the Council added "a one-time increase of \$1,200,000 to support operating costs for St. Coletta

Special Education Public Charter School and a one-time increase of \$950,000 to cover the costs of lead testing and remediation services in public charter schools.”¹² We urge the Committee to use this hearing to determine if these addition needs were fully met in FY25 or if any comparable additions to the PCSB budget will be necessary for FY26.

Adjust for Recent Changes Affecting Charter Schools

In addition to the charter facilities allotment increase, we want to identify recent charter ecosystem changes that will impact the budget for DC Public Charter Schools (DCPCS). First, as noted above, I Dream PCS and Hope Community PCS have decided to close at the end of the current school year. However, these schools are still reflected in the DCPCS budget.¹³ We urge the Committee to make the relevant updates to reflect these announced closures. Second, we want to highlight the effects of federal cuts on charter school budgets. We know that the federal government has decided to terminate grants for School-Based Behavioral Health.¹⁴ However, it is less clear how these grant terminations might impact DC schools. We urge the Committee, alongside the Committee on Health, to work with charter LEAs to identify potential cuts to staffing and services resulting from the termination of federal grants and explore ways to minimize the impact felt by DC students.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. I welcome any questions.

¹ See Mayor’s Proposed FY 2026 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 3 Agency Budget Chapters – Part II. Public Education System, District of Columbia Public Charter Schools (GC0), p. D-30.

² See *id.*

³ See Mayor’s Proposed FY 2026 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 3 Agency Budget Chapters – Part II. Public Education System, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, Table GW0-1, p. D-67.

⁴ See Danielle Robinette, Testimony before the DC Council Committee of the Whole, Performance Oversight Hearing (March 5, 2025), p. 2-3, *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/2024-2025-performance-oversight-testimony-deputy-mayor-for-education-and-the-district-of-columbia-public-charter-school-board/>.

⁵ See Mayor’s Proposed FY 2026 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 3 Agency Budget Chapters – Part II. Public Education System, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, Table GW0-4, p. D-69.

⁶ See *id.*

⁷ See Danielle Robinette, Testimony before the DC Council Committee of the Whole, *supra* note 4, p. 5-8.

⁸ See *e.g.*, District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, “2024-25 Preliminary 25-Year Charter Review Report: IDEA Public Charter School,” (March 17, 2025), p. 8, Condition 6(a)(iii), *available at*: <https://dcpcsb.egnyte.com/dl/qCPaqOhq2F>.

⁹ See *e.g.*, Statement Chair Shantelle Wright during the April 2025 Board Meeting (April 7, 2025), 2:20:58-2:23:15, recording *available at*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPpuFkwIFTw>.

¹⁰ See DC Public Charter School Board, “I Dream PCS Relinquishes Charter, School Will Close at the end of the School Year” (April 7, 2025) *available at*: <https://dcpcsb.org/i-dream-pcs-relinquishes-charter-school-will-close-end-school-year> and “Hope Community PCS to Close at the End of the 2024–25 School Year,” (April 28, 2025), *available at*: <https://dcpcsb.org/hope-community-pcs-close-end-2024-25-school-year>.

¹¹ See DC Code 38-1802.11.

¹² See FY 2025 Approved Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 3 Agency Budget Chapters – Part II. Public Education System, District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (GB0), p. D-27.

¹³ See Mayor’s Proposed FY 2026 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 6 Operating Appendices, District of Columbia Public Charter Schools, Schedule 30-CC, p. D-46 – D-47.

¹⁴ See *e.g.*, Cory Turner, “Education Department stops \$1 billion in funding for school mental health,” NPR (May 1, 2025), *available at*: <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/01/nx-s1-5382582/trump-school-mental-health>.