

**Testimony to the Committee on Education  
For the Budget Oversight Hearing on the District of Columbia Public Schools**

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Hello Councilmember Grosso and other committee members. My name is Aurora Muñoz and I am the Program Manager at the Young Women's Project, a multicultural organization that builds the leadership and power of young people so that they can shape DC policies and institutions to expand rights and opportunities for DC youth. Since 1994, YWP has been implementing after school and classroom based programming on leadership, civic engagement, and health education. We currently work in 15 DC public and public charter high schools.

Today, I am here to share our work engaging students in the public school budget process and to recommend that DC Public Schools (DCPS) develop a more inclusive and transparent process that uses participatory budgeting to engage students, parents, teachers, and other education stakeholders.

At the Young Women's Project (YWP), I work with peer advocates whose job it is to help solve some of their peers' most pressing issues through advocacy, trainings, and outreach. This year, this group has focused on three campaigns: Health Education Standards Revision, Youth Vote, and Educational Equity. Educational Equity is by far the most complicated issue YWP's peer advocates have chosen to tackle. When YWP peer advocates began to explore Educational Equity, they started by looking at DCPS' budget, especially the at-risk funds, which aims to address the educational needs of at-risk students. But they found the budget to be confusing and inaccessible. They could not tell where most of the funding in their schools was being used for. We have found that participatory budgeting is a tool for meaningful student engagement in the budget development process.

### **Budget Access**

We commend DCPS for their work to make their budget more accessible with each passing year and their commitment to engaging the community. DCPS already involves parents, teachers, community stakeholders, and students, through budget hearings, meetings and online platforms, and citywide local school advisory team (LSAT) meetings. DCPS has also created tools, like the Budget Guide and online

budget comparisons, which are steps to making a complicated budget more accessible. This is an important foundation.

For students, DCPS has held hearings, conducted student satisfaction surveys, and most recently have committed to student evaluations of teachers, which will be given weight in annual teacher performance evaluations. DCPS is moving in toward the direction of meaningful student engagement, which values student voice and gives that voice real decision-making power.

Students experience the school on a daily basis and are therefore best qualified to comment on what aspects need more attention and financial support. Integrating student opinion into budget decisions ensures that the needs of the students are being met and supported by the new budget. Additionally, student engagement is crucial for student success. Research has shown that when youth are able to participate in decision-making as participants rather than beneficiaries, they experience optimal development<sup>1</sup>. Although DCPS has taken many important steps, critical accessibility problems continue to get in the way of student engagement:

**Youth still cannot access the budget.** Although DCPS did engage youth through a youth budget hearing on November 19, 2015, these high school students were student government representatives who had been hand-selected by the principals. Even though these students have been elected by the student body at their respected schools, YWP is not aware if these students were encouraged to hold hearings or meetings with the student body to discuss budget issues. These students met with the Chancellor and engaged in various discussions. YWP has not found a record of these conversations either.

**Youth are not engaged in their education.** High truancy and chronic tardiness levels in our high schools demonstrates that students are not engaged. According to the Children's Law Center and DC Lawyers for Youth, "half of high school students — 56 percent — were considered "chronically truant" during the 2013-2014."<sup>2</sup> A significant percentage of our high school aged youth miss school on a regular basis for many reasons— home responsibilities, weather, travel, and (most troubling) because they do not believe that the education they are getting will impact their success in life. The impact of the low student engagement is

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<sup>1</sup> Camino, L.A. (2000). Youth-Adult Partnerships: Entering New Territory in Community Work and Research. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4. Retrieved from <http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership/files/2015/02/Youth-Adult-Partnerships-2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/chronic-truancy-in-dc-high-schools-still-rampant-despite-new-laws/2015/03/08/10b9c9f0-c511-11e4-9271-610273846239\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/chronic-truancy-in-dc-high-schools-still-rampant-despite-new-laws/2015/03/08/10b9c9f0-c511-11e4-9271-610273846239_story.html)

significant across the District and has deep implications for the way in which we select and apply educational interventions. I've included more data on these issues below:

**Academic Performance:** Across the district, 51 percent of students are proficient or advanced in math and 48 percent are proficient or advanced in reading. In 2013, DCPS was composed of 67 percent black/African American students. In 2014, 38.6 percent of black students were proficient in reading as compared to 91.6 percent of white students. In addition, 41 percent of black students were proficient in math compared to 92.3 percent of white students. The Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System (SLED) data reports that 48 percent of ward 6 students are proficient in reading, 31.4 percent of ward 7, and 23.8 percent of ward 8. In Math 49.5 percent in ward 6, 39.9 percent in ward 7, and 26.1 percent in ward 8 tested proficient.

**College Enrollment and Graduation:** Fifty-three percent of DC's graduates have gone on to enroll in 4-year postsecondary institutions. Another 9 percent have enrolled in 2-year postsecondary institutions.

**Mental Health:** According the Mental Health Report Card issued last year by the Children's Law Center, more than 5,000 of the District's vulnerable children do not have access to quality mental health care.

**Large numbers of youth are living in poverty.** According to the Kids Count Data Center, in 2013, there were 21,000 youth ages 18 to 24 and 7,000 youth 14-17 living in poverty. DCPS estimates that there are 4,000 homeless youth and children in the public school system (a number that has grown 37 percent in two years). There are about 2,000 each year who turn 18 and leave the school system without graduating. Over 30,000 students in DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools are considered at-risk.

### At-Risk Funding

There are 25,000 at-risk children and youth in the DCPS that are struggling with housing instability, poverty, food shortages, poor living conditions, and educational neglect. The majority of these youth are not succeeding in the education system and their numbers grow every year as more and more families sink into poverty, poor health, and prison. An at-risk funding category, which was established in 2014 after a review carried out by the Deputy Mayor of Education, allocates more funding through the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula for students who are considered at-risk (foster care youth, TANF recipients, SNAP recipients, and overage students). With the assumption that at-risk students require more resources and interventions to succeed, the Mayor's administration expects these funds to follow individual at-risk

students in their schools, so that these schools can then use these additional funds to support these students' needs.

YWP sees at-risk funding as a critical tool to combat educational inequity. Youth in resource-poor environments need additional resources to succeed; however, this funding is not being used as intended.

The first year of At-Risk funding, these funds were not distributed according to their intended purposes. The Chancellor admitted that the funds were not given to DCPS in a timely fashion, and so the expedited distribution of the funding could not guarantee the proper distribution. This school year, that funding has been allocated as it was intended, however, there is no mechanism to confirm that the extra money being spent in technology, art education, or another assistant principal is reaching the goal of creating a more equitable education for at-risk students. Although At-risk funds can be a great benefit to the entire school, this funding is meant for targeted and meaningful interventions that will help the most vulnerable students succeed.

Youth are experiencing challenges that are not easily addressed by the addition of an art-teacher or the inclusion of "related arts, science & custodial supply investments" or "non-personnel supports" in the budget. We are not proposing that these expenditures are unimportant or unfounded but the report makes it unclear how these specific expenditures relate to specific outcomes in the students of interest. We are interested in how these changes translate into supports that move youth who are at-risk of academic failure either out of this designation or at least out of academic failure.

Last year, YWP shared our concerns about the lack of DCPS programming and opportunities for at-risk youth, who account for nearly 50 percent of the student body. Both DCPS and DC Public Charters received additional funding in the FY2016 budget at the rate of \$2,079 per youth. The Committee required a report from DCPS detailing how at-risk funds were spent. From this report, we know that \$45 million was spent and 294 teachers were hired -- but these figures do not make it clear how many at-risk students were actually engaged through the funded activities and what impact was made from these engagements. While this report is helpful, we would like to see how the expenditures identified connect to youth services, support, and opportunities. Youth who are at-risk have identified the need for mental health services, more supports in preparation for life after college, more academic rigor amongst other things in the classroom and we believe that these are legitimate directives that have significant implications for the budget.

In addition, the Fiscal Policy institute found that 4 percent of at-risk funds went to core DCPS school functions, like attendance counselors. We need to make sure that these funds are spent in ways that achieve educational equity, and reduce the achievement gap.

### **Recommendations**

DCPS understands that students are not simply recipients of funding, but also assets in the decisions about where and how to invest it. We encourage DCPS to move further and continue to democratize its budget process, and engage students at every level. YWP recommends that the Committee designates 5 percent of at-risk funds in the DCPS budget to pilot a participatory budgeting process. The intended goals for this process would be:

- Decrease of the achievement gap
- Reduce barriers for participation in budget process
- Create a stronger relationship with students, DCPS, and government representatives
- Achieve DCPS Capital Commitment Goals

### **Participatory Budgeting**

Participatory Budgeting(PB) democratizes the budget development processes. It has been called a best practice by the White House<sup>3</sup> in order to make government more open, and it has been praised as a mode to engage disconnected citizens into one of the core responsibilities of government- creating a budget. Participatory Budgeting has taken place all over the world, and this process has been used throughout Canada and the United States since 2001. In the US, more than \$50 million has been spent through this process<sup>4</sup>. PB can happen at a city level, district level, school district level, or the individual school level. PB has five phases: 1) stakeholders conduct a needs assessment and brainstorm ideas for projects, 2) projects are developed by a working group, 3) projects are reviewed by the community 4) stakeholders vote for projects, and 5) projects are funded, implemented, and evaluated.

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<sup>3</sup> The Open Government Partnership, Third Open Government National Action Plan for United States of America retrieved from [https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/final\\_us\\_open\\_government\\_national\\_action\\_plan\\_3\\_0.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/final_us_open_government_national_action_plan_3_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/under30network/2016/03/09/what-millennials-are-doing-with-millions-in-government-funds-to-reclaim-their-communities/#4ba6a0866a21>

PB processes have taken place in Boston, Chicago, Vallejo, San Francisco, Long Beach, New York City, St. Louis, and Palo Alto College. Boston's Youth Lead the Change, is the country's first youth-led participatory budgeting project. Youth Lead the Change engages teens and young adults (ages 12-25) throughout the city to collect project ideas, develop projects, and vote on projects that will benefit their communities. It gives them access to 1 million dollars annually of the city's capital budget.

Seattle has also initiated a youth-led PB process, called "Youth Voice, Youth Choice" this year. Last July, Mayor Murray and Councilmember Nick Licata announced the launch of a citywide youth PB process to take place with \$700,000 of city funds. This process is being handled by Seattle Department of Neighborhoods with the goal of empowering youth to make important decisions on how to spend a portion of the budget. The process is guided by a steering committee which has youth and adults from community-based organizations around Seattle.

Youth from the organization Californians for Justice began a campaign to make sure student voice was meaningfully integrated into the implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in East Side High School District (ESHSD). CFJ advocates for a participatory budgeting process, which they felt let students and parents create solutions for problems they witness in their schools. In W. C. Overfelt High School, which is in ESHSD, the principal agreed to set aside \$50,000 of discretionary funding for a student-centered participatory budgeting project. This process resulted in a free driver's education course, college visits, and new sports uniforms.<sup>5</sup>

Around the world, people have used PB in order to make their budgets accessible, open, and participatory. France and Colombia have used PB in their school districts. School districts in France have PB as line items for their school district budgets, and have done so since 2005. The school district of Poitou-Charentes, which has 93 schools, used 10 percent of the regional funds for PB processes in high schools.

Through these processes, communities have voted to pay for capital projects, and programs. PB aims to bring usually disengaged communities into the political processes. In many PB processes, people who are not eligible to vote (undocumented immigrants, youth 12-17 years old, residents, and returning citizens) have been able to make their voices heard. This process brings government representatives and administrators closer to the people they serve, and gives them an insight into people's budget priorities,

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<sup>5</sup> <http://edsource.org/2015/students-get-piece-of-the-action-after-seeking-a-say-in-budget/79194>

which could inform how representatives prioritize other expenditures, projects, and policies. DCPS should commit to a process that has helped communities, especially youth, become engaged with their schools and communities - giving their voices more power.

We also recommend that DCPS work with parents, students, and stakeholders to create budget documents and tools that are clear for all users. It is our belief that all students be given a fair opportunity to weigh in on the school budget through transparent and accessible budget documents, open youth budget hearings, and varied opportunities for youth to contribute to budget decisions.

### **At Risk Funding Allocation**

YWP's Educational Equity campaign, at its core, holds a belief that children and youth who are disproportionately affected by poverty, violence, and trauma should receive a disproportionate amount of support from their city. YWP also believes that youth affected by these problems have to be engaged in solving them directly. The at-risk funds give DCPS the resources to solve inequity, but they need to get input from **and** give decision-making power to at-risk youth and their parents, in order to come up with the appropriate strategies.

Many of our students are unaware that there are at-risk funds, and of those who have heard of the funding, many have no idea how these funds are spent. High school students should at least be given the option to give input into the budget that is both fair and meaningful. So far, 47 percent of DCPS at-risk funding has not been spent to achieve its purpose, so YWP believes that using participatory budgeting, which promotes transparency and equity, is a perfect tool to manage at least part of the at-risk funding.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, YWP is asking the following:

1. That the Committee on Education designate 5 percent of at-risk funds within DCPS' budget for a participatory budgeting process
2. That this participatory budgeting process includes students, parents and guardians, teachers, and school administrators
3. For a relevant government entity to facilitate the process
4. For DCPS to work to create budget tools and documents with parent and student input.

We are happy to share our research on this process, and be a resource for the committee.

Thank you for hearing my testimony.

**PB Resources:**

<http://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>

<http://caljustice.org/our-work/campaigns/>

<https://youth.boston.gov/youth-lead-the-change/>

[http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/grillos/files/pb\\_boston\\_year\\_1\\_eval\\_0.pdf](http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/grillos/files/pb_boston_year_1_eval_0.pdf)