



Dear Mayor Bowser,

We are the DC Students Succeed coalition, a partnership of more than 40 education, health, and community organizations, schools, direct service providers, advocates, and allied groups, working to ensure that DC students are successful in school and in life.

We believe that students come first and that their needs must be at the center of our work, especially the needs of Black and Brown students. We believe families must be able to choose the public school that meets each child's unique needs and that education leaders need flexibility to effectively serve our students. We are committed to creating excellent and equitable public schools for all students.

Your support for our priorities in recent budgets has made a meaningful difference to this end. These investments are now positively impacting the lives of students and families across the District but particularly those in communities furthest from opportunity. From a historic 5.9% increase in the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula, to millions more for out-of-school-time programs, school-based behavioral health, and school facilities, the infusion of funds mean schools are better able to support students, their learning, physical wellbeing, and social-emotional development.

Our work remains vital as the combination of long-term inequities and their pandemic-induced acceleration continue to disadvantage too many of our children and communities. As you consider your Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24) budget recommendations, we ask that the experience of DC's students, families, and schools remain at the top of your administration's priorities.

Interrupted learning had an outsized effect on District students. Just 31 percent of students reached proficiency on the 2022 PARCC assessment. Math was even lower at just 19 percent reaching proficiency. Just 11 percent of high schoolers in the District reached that mark, 22 percent in lower grades. These are declines of 10 and 8 points respectively. Fewer than 1 in 10 Black students scored proficient in Math, just 1 in 5 on ELA. NAEP scores similarly showed large declines in proficiency, the challenges are significant by any measure. All student-level data validates the notion that we must double down on investments and resources for students in the years ahead.

Students and their families are also experiencing challenges that extend well beyond the classroom. Increased community violence, deepening poverty from widening economic uncertainty, and lingering social-emotional challenges flowing from the social isolation of the pandemic, the impacts are clear on learning. Truancy is up, in-seat attendance is down, and schools are reporting more behavioral incidents. We need to resource our broader network of support to meet these challenges.

Schools themselves are seeing acute and persistent challenges and are not immune to national financial pressures including increasing inflation and interest rates. Costs continue to rise faster than ever before – operations, staffing, and facilities. Adding to that, hiring challenges, talent

pipeline shortages, and the strain and stress on staff are so widespread, many leaders are asking themselves when these challenges will recede, or if this is just the new normal.

The District government as a whole finds itself at an inflection point in funding the education and wellbeing of our students. The FY24 budget encompasses the tail end of the federal stimulus funds and ushers in the arrival of the anticipated fiscal cliff. Coupled with the aforementioned economic uncertainty, we have a real choice: embrace austerity and begin dismantling the supports that keep families above water and move them to higher ground, or double down on investments in our students, schools and communities and make a long term commitment to live our values of equity, justice, and opportunity for all.

We have experienced a decade of unprecedented economic growth that has disproportionately affected East of the River and Black and Brown communities. Your historic investments in education have helped to counter those impacts through our schools. But, with the acute challenges Black and Brown children have experienced in the pandemic, the gaps between the haves and the have nots – too often drawn along racial lines in our city – will widen to levels we have not seen before. As a coalition, we are concerned that if we do not fund our children and their schools with a focus on closing growing opportunity gaps, we will be neglecting an investment in the future of DC. In support of building a DC where all children, families, and communities can thrive for generations to come, we urge you to take the following actions in the coming year and in your proposed FY24 budget:

### **Boundary and Adequacy Studies:**

#### ***Prioritize the needs and aspirations of those furthest from opportunity***

First, we urge you to plan for and work toward an even more equitable future. The most lasting progress for DC students will come through responsible planning for the future. That means that the upcoming DCPS Boundary study and the new funding adequacy study must both prioritize equity and the voices of marginalized communities.

In both prior iterations, there was effort made to engage the community and incorporate perspectives from across DC. A decade later, we recognize the engagement of over 1,000 community members in the 2014 DCPS boundary process as the minimum standard that we need to meet in this new 2023 iteration. Similarly, we have to not only make bold recommendations centered in equity in the 2023 adequacy study, but we must also raise our funding structures to meet those recommendations, unlike the 2013 study where we never reached the funding goals set forward.

In 2023, Black, brown, and low-income communities must center the conversation and we have to remove barriers to their participation in the process. That means their experiences must be the primary frame through which decisions are weighed and we have to go past engaging only with known community leaders and bring in new voices. The primary goals of both processes must be to expand access to high-quality educational opportunities for Black, brown and low-income students and strengthen diverse academic pathways for students, full stop. Other considerations must be secondary and the engagement and decision-making process for both studies should clearly reflect that.

## **FY24 Budget Priorities:**

### ***Deliver equitable and adequate funding today as we plan for tomorrow:***

During the FY23 budget process, District leaders demonstrated both their commitment to our students and an understanding of the depth of challenges that they now face through two signature funding moves: a historic increase to the UPSFF base and the creation of two new concentration of poverty weights, the latter of which delivered schools serving the highest need students some \$10 million per year in new funds. Student needs are just as, if not more, acute now, and the District must make a decision to build on these investments increasingly from local funds with the looming expiration of federal stimulus funding streams.

DC must provide schools the resources they need to help DC students succeed. Specifically, we urge you and your team to:

- Increase the UPSFF base by at least the rate of inflation, with greater increases for funding weights that target students who need more support. Ten years after the last adequacy study, the District has yet to meet its targets for funding the At-Risk weight. As we consider the new iteration of the adequacy study, we should ensure we are at a minimum moving toward adequacy for our students in the upcoming budget.
- So that all public school students receive the funding that they are entitled to, regardless of what school they are enrolled in, we urge your administration to ensure that all annual and supplemental schools funding should flow through the per-student formula to both sectors.

### ***Ensure students are in school, supported and able to learn***

Schools across the city are dealing with significant attendance challenges. Students need the resources and support to make it to school and learn effectively once there. As such, we urge you to:

- Continue to invest in safe passage and creating school climates that prioritize the safety and wellbeing of students and staff.
- Ensure students have robust, multimodal transportation options to get to and from school and OST programs including the effective administration of the Kids Ride Free program, as operational challenges with the administration of the program should not prevent any child in DC from getting to or from school or their out of school time activities.
- Support the emotional well-being of our students by faithfully implementing and fully investing in school-based behavioral health.

### ***Create the teaching and learning experiences that students & families need to succeed:***

With adequate and equitable resources, schools will be better able to build learning experiences and environments where students can excel. Literacy and numeracy skills have both declined among our students, underscoring the need to keep laser focused on creating the conditions that support high-quality teaching and learning. To that end, we ask that you propose an FY24 budget that:

- Expands structured literacy training offerings to all PK-5 educators.
- Sustains access to needed high-impact tutoring and literacy interventions for all learners.

- Empowers families by requiring annual reporting of literacy and numeracy student data to caregivers via pre-k through adult data systems in a form that is accessible and comprehensible for all families.

### **Facilities funding and use**

#### ***Increase access to high-quality, safe, and welcoming school buildings for all students.***

Schools are dealing with rapid increases in facilities and operating costs and likely will for some time to come. It is more important than ever that the District develop and implement a coherent and forward-looking plan for the maintenance, modernization, and construction of educational facilities. As such, we urge you to:

- Maintain and build on the 3.1 percent increase in the charter school facilities allotment.
- Move forward with plans to reuse former school sites and co-location in under-utilized school buildings.
- Focus modernization efforts on building functional learning and enrichment spaces to support the full capacity of schools.

In closing, we thank you again for your strong record of supporting students, families, schools and communities. Your administration's FY24 budget, DCPS boundary study, and education funding adequacy study are opportunities to move closer to our collective vision of a more just and equitable system of public education—but we must choose to take decisive and intentional action with our children furthest from opportunity at the center of all of our investments in our schools and education system.

With respect and in partnership,

The DC Students Succeed Coalition