



November 29, 2023

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 and these investments are now positively impacting the lives of students and families across the District. From continued increases in the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula to millions more for our educators, out-of-school-time programs, school-based behavioral health, and school facilities, the infusion of funds means schools are better able to support students, their learning, physical well-being, and social-emotional development.

The most recent PARCC data show that, while strides have been made in supporting students' learning recovery, academic gains during the last school year did not outpace the unfinished learning our students experienced during the pandemic. Significant gaps remain in performance across DC's eight wards and between student groups (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, students with disabilities, etc.) in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math and much more work remains to be done to ensure that our students thrive academically, socially, and economically.

This work must begin with reducing chronic absenteeism by supporting students so they are consistently in school and ready to learn. Students who are chronically absent are more likely to have lower grades and weaker performance on standardized tests. Students with chronic absenteeism face hurdles in thriving socially and higher levels of absenteeism correlate with poorer social skills, such as difficulty cooperating or controlling emotion. Students who are chronically absent are more likely to drop out and more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system, and missing days of school has negative impacts on their health and financial well-being. Chronic absenteeism undermines the District's significant investments in education.

While chronic absenteeism declined during the 2022-23 school year, it still stands at the unacceptable level of 40 percent. We believe that the District must set a clear goal of reducing chronic absenteeism to 20 percent within the next three years. To do so, the District must continue to invest in programs and holistic supports that ensure that our students are healthy, both physically and mentally, find school work relatable and valuable, and feel safe when at or traveling to and from school.

It's time to show up for DC students.

DC students succeed when they are prepared, engaged, and feel safe and supported to show up for school. To combat the chronic absenteeism that is undermining their futures, **it's time for DC elected officials to show up for DC students**. As you begin work on the fiscal year 2025 budget for the District of Columbia, the DC Students Succeed coalition intends to show up for our students' futures by advocating that you, our elected leaders, invest in strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism in three ways:

- Fund Schools Equitably

Well-resourced schools are more likely to offer students academically rigorous material, presenting challenging coursework that keeps students interested in school and improves academic outcomes, [especially for those who are furthest away from opportunity](#). Students are safer, happier, and more engaged in healthy and inspiring spaces. We must preserve and grow equitable investments in our public school students through increased per-student and facilities funding that reaches students no matter what public school they attend.

- Drive Academic Achievement

Our children are more likely to be engaged and persistent in their education when their schools prepare them for the future. We must prepare students for academic success through an expansion of DC's science-based literacy initiatives.

- Strengthen Postsecondary Outcomes

Students are more likely to attend school when they can relate to what they learn, feel like they have a voice in what they learn, and can envision their future. It is critical that every student has access to experiences that expose them to and prepare them for college and careers - regardless of their background, ward or sector. We must engage students in their futures through increased access to diversified post-secondary pathways for all students.

We recognize that investments in education will not work in a silo. Good health, access to transportation, housing stability, and community safety also play an important role in ensuring that students are at school and ready to learn and that our educators are able to focus on the critical task of preparing our next generation for college and careers. We must continue DC's track record of equity-driven investments that our policymakers have made in the whole child, whole school, and whole community by supporting and investing in public safety, mental and physical health, health care, access to safe housing, reliable transportation, and healthy food.

In closing, we thank you again for your strong record of supporting students, families, schools, and communities. Your administration's FY25 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 also choose to take decisive and intentional action to ensure children furthest from opportunity can reap the benefits of our city's investments in schools and education by being in school each day.

With respect and in partnership,
The DC Students Succeed Coalition

Enclosure: DCSS Coalition FY25 Priorities

Academic Achievement

Schools are vital centers of our communities. They shape futures by educating our children and making sure they are prepared to lead independent, successful lives. A strong academic foundation is critical not just to our students, but to the health and vibrancy of our city for generations to come. Yet, we are in a state of educational emergency: we must act now to support, invest in, and work together to deliver the strong academic foundation all kids in the District deserve.

In 2023, approximately one-third of all students are proficient in reading, and just over one-fifth are proficient in math. Disaggregated by student subgroup, the data is even more sobering. Lower rates of proficiency for Black and brown students, as well as those from economically disadvantaged households and those with disabilities, reveal the extent to which our schools are failing our most vulnerable learners. Given how much learning our students lost during the pandemic, we are simply not gaining fast enough. If the current rate of growth continues, our students are three years away from recovering to pre-pandemic achievement levels in reading and four to six years away from math recovery.

Academics impact all other aspects of our students' lives, including their mental health, the safety of our communities, the work environment for our educators, and more. In addition to engaging families with a focus on improving student attendance, maximizing instructional time, delivering rigorous and joyful lessons, embracing data-driven instruction and interventions, and fostering a welcoming and safe learning environment at the school level, we believe the District should focus on the following areas to improve academic achievement:

- **Expand on the current District literacy initiatives to provide universal access to science-based reading instruction.**
Regardless of where a student attends school, they must have access to evidence-based instruction. To achieve this, DC should leverage cost-neutral solutions as well as consider [recommendations from the Literacy Task Force](#).
- **Supporting students by supporting educators.**
Support the training and retention of high-quality teachers and use of robust and standards-aligned curriculum.

Equitable Funding

When schools are well-resourced, they are more likely to offer academically rigorous material, presenting the challenging coursework that keeps students interested in and attending school and improves academic outcomes, [especially for those who are furthest away from opportunity](#).

The District is facing unprecedented fiscal headwinds. Federal supports that have funded schools and school-based programs like high-impact tutoring, mental health supports, and supports for early career development will come to an end in the 2025 fiscal year. Moreover, the city's own revenue picture is also weakening. In this difficult fiscal environment, policymakers will face competing priorities, but we believe the District must continue to fund the programs that support student well-being, improve school environments, and make students feel safe.

To ensure that our students have the resources they need to thrive in their educational endeavors and lead enriching lives, ongoing investments must be made in every school and for every learner, regardless of sector. This is a crucial time for the District to ensure that education is treated as a fully funded, top priority now and in the coming years.

The Mayor and the Council must:

- **Increase per-student funding, while continuing to prioritize resources for students at risk of academic failure.**
Annual increases to the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF) must be mindful of inflation and responsive to recommendations from the UPSFF Working Group and the updated Funding Adequacy Study currently underway. Because student success depends on our ability to retain, recruit, and fairly compensate excellent educators, UPSFF increases for FY25 must fully incorporate the ongoing costs of educator pay increases.
- **Ensure equitable funding reaches all DC students, no matter what public school they attend.**
Every student in every DCPS and public charter school deserves access to equitable resources and opportunities. To ensure all students can thrive in high-quality learning environments, all education funding, including educator compensation funding, must be provided through the UPSFF. Every effort should be made to rectify retroactive disparities and ensure circumstances that led to disparate funding are avoided in the future.
- **Provide for safe, healthy learning environments across the city.**
The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical need to ensure all DC students can learn in safe, comfortable, and well-maintained school facilities. Student wellness and readiness for learning depend on our collective commitment to critical school facilities improvements through ongoing capital investments in DCPS school modernizations and annual increases to the charter facilities allotment.

Postsecondary Outcomes

Students are more likely to attend school when they can relate to what they learn, feel like they have a voice in what they learn, and can envision their future. Because earning a high school diploma is essential, it is critical that during high school, every student has access to experiences that expose them to and prepare them for college and careers - regardless of their background, ward, or sector. The options to prepare students for postsecondary pathways should include career and technical education, early college and dual enrollment, meaningful internship and apprenticeship programs, college and career counseling, as well as adult education.

To better accommodate the skills, needs, and dreams of all students, the coalition urges the Mayor and Council to:

- **Continue its strong multi-year investment in the Education through Employment data system**
This data system will allow DC to understand more about District graduates' experiences in their early careers to inform practices and investments that support current students and future graduates on a path to success. In following years, DC has budgeted \$3.48 million over the financial plan to implement this system and needs to ensure operating funds in the coming year.
- **Provide sufficient funding that will expose high school students to early career opportunities.**
In recent years, DC has provided significant new funding for work-based learning, the Marion Barry Summer Youth Employment Program (MBSYEP), DC Futures tuition assistance, the Advanced Technical Center, support for the transition after high school (tuition assistance, career coaches, and the College Rising program), and so much more. This prioritization should be made in addition to apprenticeships, internships, career technical education, and other programs. This work is critical to creating a bridge between high school and careers for DC's alumni.

- **Adequately fund the expansion of dual enrollment and early college**
All eligible 10th through 12th grade DC students who are interested in participating should have the opportunity to earn at least one semester of credit if they so choose.