

Budget Recommendations for Fiscal Year 2024

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The Honorable Mayor Muriel Bowser
1350 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mayor Bowser and Deputy Mayor for Education Paul Kihn,

As you craft the Fiscal Year 2024 DC Budget, we write to you as a broad coalition of DC educators dedicated to improving education for all of our DC students to share our education related budget priorities for the coming year. This year you have an especially critical task in front of you. As federal dollars from COVID-relief funding disappear, we have to make essential investments locally to ensure the success, wellbeing and retention of our educators and the well-rounded and equitable educational experience for all students.

Nationally we are seeing a dramatic shift in the teaching profession itself. Combining the stress and trauma of the pandemic and the additional demands on educators with DC's already steep challenge with teacher retention and the changing nature of work, we must make investments now in educator wellbeing and retention. Over the past two school years, grants from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (as a result of ESSR funds) have funded five partner organizations to engage twenty-five DC schools in deep partnership to improve educator wellness. This is challenging but critical work. As one of those grantees, we know how powerful this work has been and the enormous difference it has made for educators and students at these schools. The demands for this work (and the incoming requests from schools for partnership) has truly never been greater. These grants are currently \$500,000 annually - \$100,000 to each grantee for five school partnerships. We have learned that we also need a small additional amount of funding to provide stipends to local school-based staff who lead and then sustain the work. **Therefore we urge you to locally fund these grants- and this critical work to prevent educator burnout and promote retention- at the amount of at least \$750,000 annually.**

Second, recognizing the changing nature of work and the great opportunity to make a transformative investment in educator retention while providing additional student enrichment opportunities, **we ask you to create a \$10 million flexible scheduling fund to allow the dozens of DC schools currently designing and piloting flexible scheduling models to fully implement their designs.** We recommend a grant program through OSSE allowing schools to apply for the funding to allow the broadest possible innovation across sectors, requiring at least

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20 distinct schools receive grants between \$100,000 and \$400,000 per school site under the program, going to at least five different schools in each sector. Schools already piloting flexible scheduling have testified to its positive effects on both educator morale as well as student recovery and engagement. With this investment, we can be on the cutting edge of the redesign of schools and attack the need to improve educator wellness and retention as well as student enrichment and differentiated instruction at the same time.

Third, we ask that you invest in strengthening the pipeline of prepared, diverse educators into our schools through three investments. **We ask that you increase the funding for DC's new Grow Your Own investment through OSSE from the current \$1.4 million annually to \$3 million annually.** If the current shortage has taught us anything, it should be instructive about the need to strengthen the pipeline now. Through Grow Your Own programs that give DC high school students and paraprofessionals a debt-free path through DC institutions to become licensed educators, we not only strengthen future recruitment, but help diversify the teacher workforce and strengthen DC career pathways. We also ask that along with the increased investment in these programs that new language be added to prioritize grants to local Education Preparation Providers (EPPs) that serve the highest percentage of DC residents and do so at the lowest costs to ensure the program has the greatest possible impact.

We also ask that you strengthen one of the most critical parts of our educator pipeline by taking a hard look at how to expand the pay for paraprofessionals and teachers aides in the district who, despite a new contract for WTU teachers, continue to make embarrassingly low wages across both DCPS and DC public charter schools. They are being regularly asked to do the work of lead teachers and more despite sub-living wage pay.

Further, to support our immigrant and bilingual educators, we ask that you continue funding for H1B1 visas and to analyze the need for funding J1 visas as well. Providing central funding for these visas is essential to ensuring schools do not face an additional burden in choosing qualified and critical staff, especially with the great need for bilingual educators in the District.

Fourth, we ask you to invest in student mental health, learning and joy by funding equitable outdoor education. We know that outdoor education was not only a response to the pandemic [but improves student mental health and academic performance](#) through safe and joyful hands-on project-based learning. Further, we feel passionately about addressing an underlying inequity laid bare by the pandemic, that children and families across our city do not have equal access to safe outdoor space. **As part of the DC Coalition for Equitable Outdoor Education - a broad coalition of almost 20 DC based organizations- we request \$2 million to pilot outdoor learning partnerships for approximately 45 DC public and public charter schools.** \$1.8mil of the funding would provide a pilot pool of 45 schools with up to \$40k each to engage an outdoor learning partner. These could include partners who engage in gardening and/or nutrition, environmental science & sustainability, the city-as-classroom, Green career training, building infrastructure for outdoor learning or staff professional development related to any of

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the above. Finally \$200,000 would pay the salary and provide a small operating budget for a new full-time Outdoor education/STEM/Environmental science coordinator at OSSE or DOEE who will help with outreach to prioritized schools, facilitate the grant process, and ongoing support for school-partner connections. We ask that funding be housed within a passthrough agency (OSSE or DOEE) for school leaders to either apply for directly or have their chosen partnering organization apply on their behalf.

All DCPS and DC charter schools could apply, but the grant application would prioritize schools with higher “At-Risk” student populations.

Fifth, as we approach the phase out of SROs from our schools, we ask that you consider strategic investments to ensure that student wellbeing and safety is prioritized. **Specifically, we know that a thoughtful approach to the phaseout of SROs must include increased funding and support for: school-based restorative justice coordinators (and training), family engagement and support coordinators, school counselors, social workers and school psychologists and the pipeline to overcome shortages in these positions.**

Sixth, we know the pandemic has increased the need for full wrap-around support for our students and families. There’s no better way to achieve this than through the community schools model where health, employment and a range of other services are connected directly to the school allowing the community to more easily access the range of services. **Accordingly, we are asking for the city to begin an investment in this year’s budget to double the number of DC Community Schools (through the OSSE Community Schools grant program) & Connected Schools (through DCPS Connected Schools) over the next 3 years.**

We also write to express strong support for the requests outlined by the Under 3 DC Coalition to support our early educators, the recommendations of the Strengthening Families Coalition to support our critical needs for School-Based Behavioral Health in the District. We must also support the mental health and wellbeing of our educators. We ask that you also consider ways to provide direct in-school or city-wide counseling services directly to our educators and school staff. Finally, we support the recommendations made by the outgoing Ward 1 State Board of Education Rep. Emily Gasoi to support our dual language schools including more central office support, \$1 million for a full time dual language coordinator in each of the eleven schools, \$200,000 for bilingual specific training opportunities for teachers and leaders and more.

We ask that you consider these critical recommendations as you put together the budget for the coming fiscal year and continue to listen to the voices of DC teachers. We are happy to engage and answer any questions you may have during this process. Thank you.

Sincerely,

The Teacher Leaders of EmpowerEd