



Educator Testimonies
DC City Council Committee on Education
Public Education Roundtable
May 16, 2018

Testimony #1 – Official EmpowerEd Testimony from Executive Director Scott Goldstein

Good Afternoon Chairman Grosso and thank you for holding this roundtable discussion today. My name is Scott Goldstein and I am the founder and Executive Director of EmpowerEd- a teacher empowerment group working to build trust and teacher leadership in DC schools. For the past ten years I have been a teacher and taught both in DC charter and public schools. For many, the past year has represented a shaking of confidence in the public school system we were promised was on an historic rise. But what this revealed to me, and so many of the professionals who have inhabited this space for the past decade, is that we have to do more to have voices in our education system heard and acted upon before the media spotlight forces the issue. It's no longer enough to listen to students, teachers, parents and community members. We have to make sure their voices are integral to school and district decision making.

EmpowerEd is mobilizing teachers- both public and public charter- with a common goal. Create a system that is more collaborative, and less oppositional, than the one we have now. Our goal is to lift the voices of teachers to improve schools. You'll hear from EmpowerEd teachers today about a broad range of issues- from school discipline to curriculum flexibility and charter transparency. EmpowerEd doesn't take a stance on each issue- our goal is to elevate the voices of all teachers to allow their advocacy to take center stage. Our goal is to lift these voices- whatever they may be- because we believe that a system that is informed by its primary practitioners will be a better system for our students.

There is a lot of good happening every day in DC schools. DCPS is providing a wide array of options for students both within and outside the classroom walls. Students are studying abroad, outside partnerships are connecting students to job and internship opportunities like never before, we're increasing dual language programs and others that cater to demand and we've built state of the art facilities that show that we value our students. Many of our charter schools serve unique student populations and experiment in ways we can learn great lessons from- whether that be family literacy programs, serving over-age and under-credited students, language immersion beyond Spanish, and much more. But we have to fight to have a more unified system in which autonomy doesn't only exist in charters and accountability measures don't only address DCPS.

We can and must have a rigorous process for recruiting and hiring new teachers across DC schools- one that prioritizes educators of color, content experts and passionate, inspired educators who can innovate to address the complex needs of our students. As turnover has increased, we've also lost out on experienced teachers who have built long-lasting relations. I've known myself two experienced and dynamic teachers with several decades of experience at the

same school who have retired early due to a climate where messages, both subtle and explicit, have told them they can be replaced by younger teachers at half the cost and the school won't lose out. Teacher-student relationships matter. And that's why we should never accept arguments that somehow teacher churn is a positive. Numbers that cite only the retention of highly effective teachers are isolated from the reality that our evaluation systems have often substituted experienced teachers for new ones, and disproportionately impacted teachers of color. And research that shows that teachers are not at their most effective until at least years 3-5. And perhaps more importantly- these teachers aren't numbers. They are individuals who impact the lives of our students in so many ways other than test scores- by connecting them to opportunities, through personal counseling and advice, and by inspiring them to learn and to lead every day.

This committee has begun an extended dialogue to step back and evaluate whether, after a decade of education reform in DC, we're headed in the right direction or need to make course adjustments. Growing out of this year's controversies has been the increased voice of teachers, students, parents, community members and advocates alike. But we also know that teachers raised their voices about these concerns before the media, and until news reports prompted public outcry, little was done to address them. So now it's time to take the next step. DC schools have long listened to teacher voice, but not heard. Talk alone is not enough. Leadership opportunities can no longer be consigned to teacher cabinets and roundtables. We need to establish real structures to ensure that these important voices- in all schools- are not used to affirm policies already designed or as middlemen to implement someone else's ideas, but as real decision-makers. We also need to ensure the structures we have- LSATs and others, are utilized properly. Throughout the country teacher-led schools demonstrate that when teachers take the lead, we increase innovation and begin to problem solve for the needs of individual students, rather than implement whole district initiatives and solutions that are ill-equipped for high need, high poverty schools where local leaders need the autonomy to problem solve for their unique population. We should work towards this end here in D.C.

Significant research shows a correlation between increased teacher leadership and student achievement. Today you'll hear from several teachers ready to lead and we look forward to bringing their voices front and center every day in our schools to build a school system in this city that is empowering for everyone involved.

Testimony #2- Zia Hassan- EmpowerEd Board Secretary and Former DCPS Teacher

My name is Zia Hassan and I am a board member for EmpowerEd. When I was a teacher at DCPS, one of my very favorite students came up to me and she was really excited. “Mr. Hassan,” she said, “My teacher just gave me my reading assessment... I got to reading level Y! That means if I increase my reading level by one more letter, I will get to level Z! That’s the last level!” “That’s great!” I told her. “You must have worked really hard and read a lot of books at home.” “Yeah!” she said. “And,” she added gleefully, “once I reach the last level, I won’t ever have to read a book again!”

The problem is that they’ve been given the impression by adults that mastery is a ladder. That all you have to do is keep climbing. That once you’ve reached the top of the ladder, you’ve achieved mastery. The mastery game we play with kids is more about the what and the how than it is about the why. Why do we want to be a proficient reader? It’s not to get to the next reading level - it’s so that we can quickly and efficiently learn new things about the world to solve problems or to express our original ideas. Reading a text about the rock cycle isn’t very meaningful if it doesn’t make us stop and think the next time we pick up a stone on the playground. Comprehending a text about the revolutionary war doesn’t mean anything unless we connect it to the problems of economic inequality that exist in today’s world. Mastery is a not a ladder, it’s a safari! Project based learning - active exploration of real-world challenges and problems. I was once told by an administrator, STOP letting kids play with rocks in your geology reading lessons - you’re a reading teacher, NOT a science teacher.

I tried an experiment a few years ago when I was applying for a teaching job at numerous schools in DC. At the end of my interview, when the administrators asked me if I had any other questions, I asked them what project have you seen a student engage in, that has amazed you, that has challenged your own thinking, or that has provided something useful to the community. I wanted to hear how students were connecting their skills to the world around them, a world that they are desperately trying to understand and heal. The answer I got most of the time was... that their favorite project was ... kids growing their reading levels. And that is a fundamental skill and so important - **but reading won’t change the world, readers change the world. It’s when they look at the skill of reading as first step in understanding a problem, rather than a means to an end, that we will unlock the potential of our students.**

This year we've been very focused as a city on how we are - or aren't moving our numbers along. This concern over the numbers manifests itself in fear and consequently, suppression of teacher voice. Fear that trickles down from the DC government, to the superintendents, to the administrators, to the teachers, and eventually, the students. We can propose policy and ask hard questions to DC public school officials that challenge the notion that mastery is a ladder. We can replace the fear with inquiry, joy, and passion. We just have to change the lens through which we look at education. We have to encourage schools to collaborate with EmpowerEd to build teacher voice.

If we have the courage to allow students to use what they've learned with their reading and math skills to change the world today, even in a small way, then we are preparing them to be leaders. We cannot afford to settle for anything less.

Testimony #3- Elizabeth Koenig, DC Charter Teacher, EmpowerEd Teacher Council

I am Liz Koenig, a DC Public Charter School Teacher and a member of EmpowerEd's teacher council. EmpowerEd is becoming an invaluable resource for teachers seeking to collectively raise their voices on important issues and build trusting relationships in their schools.

I am here tonight to ask that charter schools be held to the same standards of transparency as other public institutions. Currently DC Public Charter Schools are exempt from the DC Open Meetings Act and from complying with lawful FOIA requests, despite an effort to amend the Open Meetings Act a few years ago. Why is this? Public and democratic institutions depend on the active engagement and oversight of informed participants.

I am both a parent of a child in a charter school and a teacher at a charter school here in the city. As a parent and as a teacher, I've learned that the best schools are built on trusting relationships - between students and teachers, between parents and teachers, and between teachers and their schools. A key factor in building trusting relationships is transparency.

Without stakeholders such as teachers and parents being able to seek and receive information and attend board meetings, charter schools are free to keep unpopular and perhaps ill-informed decisions out of the public eye. Parents, teachers, and taxpayers are kept in the dark about important curricular, mission, or budgetary decisions made by the schools that ostensibly serve them. Boards become more secretive, insulated from negative feedback in response to their decisions, and less responsive to public concerns.

I work at a charter school where the board is largely invisible to the school community and no teachers are invited to serve on the board. In fact, teachers have, in the past, been actively discouraged from attending board meetings, a blow to trusting relationships between our teachers and our board. Teachers should not have to wonder about the identities and the agendas of their unelected charter school boards. Parents and the public should not have to rely on the Public Charter School Board alone to keep their individual charter school boards honest and transparent.

Given the large amount of public funds that the charter sector receives, it at the very least needs to be transparent to the public it serves. Anything less invites governance based on political, personal, or financial agendas, rather than the needs of the students and the community. Anything less implies charter school boards have something to hide from the teachers they employ and the families they serve. Transparency builds trust.

Testimony #4- David Koenig- Paul PCS and EmpowerEd Teacher Council

Good afternoon Councilmembers. My name is David Koenig. I am here with my fellow teachers from the EmpowerEd Teacher Council.

Last week I attended a celebratory luncheon Class of 2018 at Paul International High School, the charter school where I have taught for the past five years. I sat at a table with some of my fellow teachers, most of whom have also been at the school for four to six years, and I reflected on the quality of the people who I have worked with at Paul—their character, professionalism, and dedication to their students. I reflected on how lucky Paul has been to have assembled such a strong teaching staff, and to keep the core of our team together for the past four years. And then my colleagues and I began to talk about the future—and as I suspected, not one person at the table plans to stay at Paul for their entire career; and no one could speak with certainty about their plans beyond next year.

As I am sure you all know, at this moment approximately half of all public school students in DC attend charter schools. While these schools have produced varying results, as measured by test scores and other types of data, there is one area in which these schools are clearly failing: stability. These schools do not offer stable environments—with consistent expectations and routines, and durable cultures—because there is a lack of stability among the schools' administrations and staffs. Moreover, no one stays at charter schools (or even plans to) for their entire career. In fact, there is a culture of churn in DC charters, which hurts the schools and their students in countless ways. At 20 % of DC charters, turnover is upwards of 40 % year to year and only a third of charters have turnover under 20 %. In this culture, people are constantly wondering who will be the next to leave, and/or making plans for their own exit. No one is truly invested in the long-term success of the school, and often not in the long-term success of students.

The culture of churn is just one contributing factor to the powerlessness of teachers in DC charters. Teachers fear to speak out about problems in their schools because of the real possibility that they could be fired or otherwise retaliated against. They likewise fail to advocate for changes to harmful educational policies (such as an over-emphasis on standardized testing and the monetization of charter school students), again because of fear, but also because many sense that a lonely voice in the wilderness cannot be effective.

In this environment, there is an urgent need for charter school teachers to organize in order to gain the job security and long-term benefits that are essential to building a stable teaching staff. But these organizations should also serve as vehicles for teachers to add their collective voice to the debate over the future of our schools. These organizations might be in the form of traditional unions, or the teacher teams that EmpowerEd is attempting to build to build trust with school leaders and promote teacher leadership, or some other group that engages in concerted activity. But they must be built.

Currently, the American Federation of Teachers is attempting to unionize charter school teachers on a largely secret, school-by-school basis, this is a flawed strategy, as evidenced by the results: our unionizing effort at Paul last year ultimately failed in the face of a withering anti-union

campaign by the school, with the counsel of the law firm Jones Day. The only charter in DC to successfully unionize—one of the campuses in the Cesar Chavez network—is struggling to negotiate a contract in the face of stonewalling by the school's board (in coordination with the Public Charter School Board). The school-by-school strategy plays in to the “divide-and-conquer” approach of anti-union forces.

If we are going to build a stable public school system in Washington, DC, which produces students who are prepared to be productive members of society and engaged citizens, teachers must build organizations to advocate both for themselves and for real, common sense school reform. I believe that to be successful, these organizations cannot be built in secret. The effort must be public, and it must be city-wide. That effort, however, would likely require high-level political support from you, the DC Council. For that reason, I am asking each of you to consider taking a public stance in support of unions and other teachers' organizing efforts at DC charter schools, and to take a hard look at the schools, boards of trustees, and outside groups who are fighting against those organizations. Thank you.

Testimony #5- Erica Mitchell, DC Charter Teacher and EmpowerEd Teacher Council

Good Evening and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Erica Mitchell. I am a DC Charter School teacher and member of EmpowerEd's teacher council.

"We are not moving until there is a single, silent, and straight line." A statement you may frequently hear from educators and administrators as your walking through the halls of public and charter schools throughout the United States in Urban settings. Hundreds of students are being penalized, disciplined, suspended and expelled at alarming rates from schools due to behaviors some view as inappropriate. These inappropriate and unfair behavior expectations have and will continue to have a negative impact on students emotionally, socially, and academically.

These behavioral and discipline expectations that are put in place in mostly urban settings not only has a negative impact on students but educators as well. When receiving weekly emails from the administration, educators at my school are always reminded of student behavioral expectations and the consequences if they are not met. Yes consequences, if students are not in a single, silent, and straight line, it is stated in the email "teachers will receive a written reprimand." After receiving three write-ups, teachers will most likely not be offered employment for the following school year, which causes stress and plays a role in teacher retention at a time when teacher turnover in DC schools is already alarmingly high.

As an observer and educator in an urban setting, this form of pedagogy aligns with the 'pedagogy of poverty' which is most likely to teach students in urban settings. This pedagogy encourages teachers to teach, give directions and make sure there are consequences in place for inappropriate behaviors. The pedagogy of poverty encourages students to listen, follow directions and learn school rules and expectations. This approach to teaching and learning is doing more harm to educators and students than good. Instead of creating positive and healthy learning environments that will help students reach their full potential, be creative, innovative, critical thinkers, that are productive citizens and changemakers; schools are more focused on students being in control. As stated by former educator Dr. Martin Haberman in his article The Pedagogy of Poverty Versus Good Teaching, "Unfortunately, the pedagogy of poverty does not work. Youngsters achieve neither minimum levels of life skills nor what they are capable of learning. The classroom atmosphere created by constant teacher direction and student compliance seethe with passive resentment that sometimes bubbles up into overt resistance." At a time when we say we are prioritizing social emotional learning and restorative practices- this approach betrays both goals.

Resistant and deviant behaviors that lead to thousands of students receiving detention, suspension, school expulsion and some getting arrested. Schools inappropriate behavioral and discipline expectations have also led to racial disparities. According to 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection, Black male students represented 8 percent of enrolled students and accounted for 23 percent of students expelled. Black female students represented 8 percent of the student enrollment and accounted for 10 percent of students who were expelled. Black male students represented 8 percent of enrolled students and accounted for 25 percent of students who received an out-of-school suspension. Black female students represented 8 percent of the student

enrollment and accounted for 14 percent of students who received an out-of-school suspension (2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection).

As we end the 2017-2018 school year, I have witnessed frustrated and upset educators who question their ability to meet discipline and behavioral expectation on a daily basis. The frustration that has led to at least five teachers leaving in the middle of the school year and others mentally drained waiting to see if they will be offered employment for the following school year. If the educational system continues to focus on students perfecting a single, silent, and straight line, many students will lack essential social and emotional skills, and risk dropping out of school. The educational system will also continue to lose highly qualified and passionate educators.

Stories like these matter. That's why it's essential for DCPS and DC charter schools to collaborate with organizations like EmpowerEd to empower and motivate teachers to lead in our schools, advocate for themselves and students, and to have a voice. A voice that will advocate for an immediate change in today's educational system that will help both students and teachers reach their full potential.

Testimony #6- Benjamin Williams- Capital City PCS and EmpowerEd Teacher Council

Assessment Measures: Mix it Up

Hello, My name is Benjamin Williams. I am a teacher in DC and a member of Empower ED's teacher council. I'm glad to be here today and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. Over the past four years, I have been privileged to work at two Tier 1 charter schools here in DC. These schools, my interactions with students and families, and my experience over these past four years teaching in the District have shaped my views on a variety of educational policy issues. Today, I would like to speak with you about the need for schools to use a variety of assessment measures to monitor and evaluate student progress, performance, and overall learning outcomes. I believe that a variety of assessment measures are necessary in the Districts classrooms to ensure students receive equitable learning opportunities and the chance at equitable learning outcomes. Overall, the benefits of teachers using a variety of assessment measures are numerous.

It is important to note that Two Rivers PCS and Capital PCS are both expeditionary learning schools. This means that our curriculum and instruction centralize learning around real-world, authentic contexts. Although these two schools endorsed this model, other teachers across the District are hamstrung from being able to use experiential and project based learning methods. This limits teachers potential to evaluate student learning by suppressing the options they have available as educators. Further, it limits students' range of options in expressing their understanding and in allowing students' interest to drive the curriculum. For instance, at Two Rivers PCS, my students created a student-centered news cast to broaden public awareness of the different economic and social impacts of our different food systems. And, at Capital City PCS, my high school seniors design their own personal learning expedition to explore subjects ranging from how to improve juvenile detention centers to solutions to gun violence and topics stretching as far as how to improve and solve our nation's nursing shortage. These types of projects require students to present their learning in professional style presentations. This format of performance-based assessment, tied to rubrics, gives students practice improving speaking and listening skills which are absent from traditional standardized tests. This gives students practice using skills they will be required to use in professional contexts and makes their learning more real and engaging. According to research by Stanford Professor Linda Darling-Hammond and a recent research study by Google, social emotional skills such as teamwork, collaboration, and moral character are increasingly important. "Businesses are always looking for employees with people skills and the ability to get along well with others" (Darling-Hammond). Therefore, identifying and explicitly modeling these skills, tied to clearly defined criteria through rubrics, helps students understand that the way you work with others is also an important learning outcome. This is another benefit of trusting teachers to help design assignments, projects, and learning experiences that best serve students and their families.

In these schools, I have also used a standards based grading approach. One of the key reasons standards based grading is valuable is because it allows precise feedback to both teachers and students to inform student progress and a teachers' instruction. Using this grading system, I am able to break down standards and target a students' needs based on how well they do on in-class assignments. With all of the controversies of the past year, I think we should duly note that grades don't always accurately reflect what students have accomplished, and that A-F grades, even if they are used "properly" are not an effective tool for measurement, nor

growth. Therefore, we should push both DCPS and Charters to focus on getting students real feedback that can be in service to their learning.

We have to allow teachers the authority to use more authentic measures of student assessment and engagement and shy away from over-prescribing curriculum, rubrics, lesson plans in a way that inhibits personalized learning.

All of these assessment measures briefly discussed today can be used in conjunction with traditional quizzes and tests. However, it's important to underscore the importance of allowing teachers and students to engage with a variety of assessment measures. This allows teachers to better tailor learning to meet students' needs, improves students' engagement and allows students' to deeply learn key skills and concepts. On this issue or other important issues, I want to end by highlighting the importance for DC schools to work with groups like EmpowerEd to promote teacher voice and build trust in both DCPS and the District's charter schools.

I'm happy to answer any follow-up questions. Thank you for your time!

Testimony #7- Kristen Paonessa- DC Charter Teacher and EmpowerEd Teacher Council

My name is Kristen Paonessa and I am in my sixth year of teaching. I formerly taught in DCPS, am currently teaching at a DC charter in the Trinidad community and am a member of the EmpowerEd teacher council. In 2015, I eagerly joined DCPS as a transplant from Houston, TX. My mentor told me that if I wanted to remain in a traditional public-school system and obtain strong professional development, DCPS was my best option. In many ways, he was right. Compared to my experience in Houston, DCPS had content-centered PD led by teachers themselves, my campus had two awesome instructional coaches both years who taught me theory and brain-based practices around literacy as well as introduced me to new and effective writing curriculum. However, despite success in the classroom and my unconditional love for the kids and the community I served, I could not bring myself to remain a DCPS teacher. And I'm not alone.

Poor teacher retention of highly qualified teachers is eroding the progress that DCPS has made in years past and preventing further successes from coming down the pipeline. Our kids cannot get a high-quality education when highly qualified teachers keep leaving the District. Whether it be to charter or private schools in Washington D.C., or to traditional public schools in other counties, when great people leave, kids across Washington D.C. suffer. In a District that has made socio-emotional well-being of our kids a priority, giving great teachers no other option but to leave is breaking bonds of trust between our communities and our neighborhood schools, because on a human level, our kids and their families crave stability, structure and qualified personnel they can trust and rely upon.

Yet it's crucial to know, that when amazing staff, teachers, coaches, and leaders leave DCPS every year, it's rarely because of our kids and communities. Here are a few reasons why these personnel are leaving:

- They're leaving because we have a curriculum that doesn't align itself to the testing metrics we use to assess both kids and teachers, causing teachers to become curriculum specialists overnight and feel ill-equipped to tackle the other countless responsibilities they have
- They're leaving because their evaluations are based on how closely they align themselves to their administrators' agendas, instead of being evaluated objectively on their effectiveness with instruction and implementation, thus devaluing some of our most qualified educators just because of they've dissented against their school leader's initiatives or asked too many questions. While DCPS says they retain over 90% of effective teachers, most DCPS educators will tell you this is a drastic misrepresentation told in a vacuum.
- They're leaving because every year there are new promotions of minimally effective classroom teachers to coaching and administrative roles based on cronyism, thus destroying school culture.
- They're leaving because we have unethical school leadership at the campus level, leaders who lack transparency around budgetary spending on grants received for school-based programs and who promote their friends.

I come from a family of traditional public-school educators who, like me, believe very strongly in the idea that kids and their families should be able to go right down the street to their neighborhood public school to receive a top-tier education. We need to keep hearing from our teachers and partnering with groups like EmpowerEd to ensure teacher voice is paramount in promoting better school climates and thus retaining our best and brightest staff. Our kids and families deserve it.

Testimony #8- Carmel Henry- DCPS Teacher and EmpowerEd Board Member

Good evening. My name is Carmel Henry; I am District of Columbia Public School teacher, EmpowerED Board member, and community activist. The mission of DCPS is to help each and every student reach his or her full potential. According to DCPS, it offers three options for students who need additional coursework to get back on track for graduation: Option 1: Enroll in Credit Recovery – Credit recovery allows students to master material which the student did not master in the original course. Option 2: Re-enroll in an Original Credit Course – Re-enrolling in an original credit is the second option for students who need to recover credit. Option 3: Enroll in an Opportunity Academy, which offers a competency based approach to earning credit, which means there is not a seat hour requirement.

Current attendance policies tie advancement to compliance and not to mastery. Measuring student mastery is important; however, mastery should never forgo attendance requirements. I support the current practice of linking attendance policies to compliance.

As a current DC public school teacher, I believe that attendance is correlated to mastery of the content material. In my four years of teaching in D.C. Public Schools, I have never witnessed a student in the District of Columbia truly understand and master history without having a physical presence in the classroom. Students need to learn that being in class is essential for learning and showing up is essential for life. It is my recommendation that DCPS continue to implement its current attendance policy.

Furthermore, it is my recommendation as a DCPS teacher that students who are chronically truant be excluded from teachers' IMPACT evaluations. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers examination assess students' learning over the year. Teachers in Group 1 of the IMPACT program receive 35% of their yearly evaluation from students' PARCC scores. All students, even those who are chronically truant, are mandated to take this examination. It is unfair to link teachers' yearly evaluation to students who have not attended school.

It is also my continued belief that teachers understand what policies and practices best meet the needs of their students. The teacher voice **MUST** be heard and can be heard with organizations like EmpowerED. Although the road to rebuilding the community's trust in the District of Columbia Public Schools will be difficult, it can and will happen if the District allows teachers to lead. Through positive collaboration with City Council, OSSE, DCPS, WTU, school leaders, parents, and community partners, EmpowerED and teachers can aid in restoring the community's trust in District schools.

Thank you.

Testimony #9- Olurotimi Fagbohun- DCPS Teacher and EmpowerEd Teacher Council

The gifted teacher is shaped only by working together with children and other adults, by building together, making mistakes together, correcting, revisiting and reflecting on work that has been done. The culture of our teachers is not only a question of inquiry and knowledge; I believe it is also expressed through a certain style, an approach to intelligence, imagination to children's need for affection and security... This gives teachers endurance and a passion for their work. It reinforces that permanent curiosity....

My name is Olurotimi Fagbohun and I am a DCPS teacher and member of EmpowerEd's teacher council. The DCPS 2017 – 2022 Commitment states every student feels loved, challenged, and prepared to positively influence society and thrive in life. That is a commitment that I support and I'm committed to achieve. As a black male educator, I was inspired to give back to society. Teaching was a lifelong goal. I committed myself academically and professionally to become a value added member of the DCPS community and be part of the change that ensures that every student reach their full potential through a nurturing environment. Of course, as a 4th year teacher (3 within DCPS) I have come to a realization and understanding that a nurturing environment in a classroom is only achieved if the school is nurturing to its teachers as well.

At my Elementary School we started the year off strong. We focused on home visits which establishes the nurturing process that is critical for relationship building and success. In addition, home visits create a partnership with the parents that extends beyond drop off and pickup. Continuing that environment should not only start & end within the classroom. (Yes. Today.) I am here to speak to the environment that plagues too many teachers. I am here to speak on behalf of those teachers who are literally afraid to speak because their environment is so toxic that they struggle to achieve the vision and goals that DCPS commits to its community. I am also speaking on behalf of my own experience of literally being reprimanded because I spoke out for what's best for my students.

I grew up all my life believing it takes a village to raise a child, but this village is not supportive in raising our children when administration use fear tactics. Fear tactics such as purposefully dividing grade teams to meet individually in hopes breaking their spirits just because they simply disagree with instructional practice that are not developmentally appropriate. Fear tactics where you schedule to meet with the principal and walk into the meeting with 4 other administrators holding computers pretending to transcribe the meeting. Fear tactics where I have witnessed teachers leaving the district and having to acquire a therapist because of how the administrators treated them. Fear tactics where every email, every conversation, every letter revolves around your IMPACT score being impacted.

Teachers go from inspired teachers to leaving the district or teaching profession. **TEACHERS ALSO GO FROM BEING HONEST TO LYING ON THE PROGRESS OF THEIR CHILDREN DUE TO THE FEAR OF LOSING THEIR JOB.** That's what the controversies this year have demonstrated, and we won't escape those stories without fundamentally changing the culture that underlies them.

Part of DCPS commitment is to empower our people through recruiting, developing and retaining talented, caring and diverse teachers. I wish that would have been most teachers experience, but instead some of us live in fear, not empowered. I hope the district really takes this seriously because the only way to achieve its committed vision, goal and retention is through a nurturing school. That's why it's essential DCPS works with groups like EmpowerEd to build trust in our schools and elevate the voices of teachers.

Testimony #10- Teneisha Holder- Dunbar High School, DCPS Teacher and EmpowerEd Teacher Council

My name is Teneisha Holder and I am a DCPS high school teacher and member of the EmpowerEd teacher council.

Washington, D.C. spends 2.2 billion dollars, or 25 % of our general budget on education annually. We have spent ten years on attempts at education reform yet the achievement gap is widening and deficit thinking is growing. There is still time to fix the issues. What if we tried to address the achievement and opportunity gaps by being truthful about where students are and targeting our instruction? If efforts are made to provide instruction to cater to the needs of different learners in terms of their skills and interests and testing is diagnostic, aimed at providing intervention, and not categorizing students to a subpar performance level, we can make progress.

Imagine a classroom where students learned cooperatively, where differentiating meant teaching one topic differently as opposed to teaching different topics at one time to students at varying levels, where student performance means more than behaving well enough to receive recognition but developing behavioral life skills and deep interest in the content. Where progress doesn't mean you passed a test and moved on, but skill sets improved and equipped students with tools to approach the next set of challenges confidently and uninhibitedly.

I propose the utilization of cohort classes where students are grouped using results from the Lexile readability level, among other things, that would identify exceeding, meeting, and approaching leveled readers. I suggest using the Lexile level because it focuses on texts semantic and syntactic structure eliminating cultural confusion for students of varying backgrounds providing students and teachers with a plethora of options to utilize during instruction. There are websites, such as CommonLit.org, which provide teachers with reading resources to aide with increasing a student's skillset. After identifying a student's current Lexile level, students would then be grouped based on strengths and opportunities where they can cooperatively engage with each other and advance to higher levels. This would happen within any grade level, meaning, cohorts for Pre-K students to 12th grade students, i.e pre-K 1-4 (however many cohorts are necessary to 12.1-4. Keeping students within their current grade but equally performing peers reduces the likelihood that students of any grade would feel inadequate.

With such a wide-range of student reading levels especially in the upper grades, we must break down the focus on the traditional grade and age- based cohorts. It is imperative for the benefit of our city to center education around the different learning styles of our students and appreciate the perspectives they offer to produce not only better performing students but also students who are confident in their acquisition of knowledge. Envision such a plan being implemented through offering teachers a small stipend for summer testing of returning and newly registered students using the Lexile scoring system coupled with a learning style inventory.

The benefit of such a program is that actual differentiation wouldn't just be a dream or a buzzword, but would actually take place- not just by level but by method of delivery, learning

style, and more. Teachers would be able to rotate assignments between achievement levels of students, the extra time would afford teachers the chance to make a good lesson better and a better lesson the best. Student productivity would increase because instead of hiding progress from students, they would be driven by the desire to continue making progress to achieve the next level assignment or take part in activities granted to students of other cohorts. Testing would take place on a rolling basis and teachers who opt to utilize a planning period to assist would receive administrative pay for the time period. This would reduce taking huge chunks out of the school year to focus exclusively on testing, and should replace, not be added on to, current testing. The focus is not on identifying weaknesses but making those areas of opportunities strengths. This would address the needs of students who have fallen behind the curve. Cohorting has unfortunately received a negative connotation. Very few studies have effectively followed and produced data on schools who use a cohort model. Cohorting has become synonymous with “restricted opportunity” so we don’t even bother pursuing it. Yet these views are based on a rigid design system. Learning should never be a rigid process. Albert Einstein said, “Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

Why are we perpetuating this method of thinking? Students only become engulfed in this pattern of low performance because we have created an environment that limits them and subconsciously shows them that they don’t deserve a better opportunity. Thank you.

Testimony #11- Cosme Lantigua- DCPS Teacher and EmpowerEd Teacher Council

For those who are awakening from the “I” and thinking more collectively

My name is Cosme Lantigua, Dominican raised in Puerto Rico and granted with the opportunity to serve in education in three different social environment within my 13 years of teaching, Puerto Rico, Miami Dade County and the District of Columbia. I am currently teaching in DCPS as a Physical Education/Health Teacher and swimming instructor and I am a member of EmpowerEd’s teacher council. For the past 7 years I have been witnessing a decrease in student’s willingness to be an active participant and protagonist in their learning process. When asked why, the common answer is the lack of meaningful content connected to their real life situations.

I remember taking my health class students to two well-known grocery stores very frequented by our school community, with the task of utilizing an specific budget out of a series of activities to identify their real economic situation at home, while comparing how accessible healthy choices really are. The store is just around the corner, but our school requires a tedious “walking field trips” policy to take high school students out, even in the neighborhood. While I didn’t know about that policy, enforcing that policy seemed much more important to my supervisor than the teaching process happening when you do your best in bringing meaningful experiences in and outside of the classroom. The conversation wasn’t about the experiential learning I was trying to provide my students, but about compliance, period.

The business of education doesn’t understand what learning means when education takes place. This system only reads numbers instead of a consciousness looking to develop its individual potential in connection with others to find solutions that in the long term will benefit communities, societies, countries and inevitable the Planet. Education without its business counterpart should be the pathway to nurture’s true relationships and not to sustain a failing, unequal and unjust existing economic system.

I invite you all with positions of power to make a change to implement student-driven curriculums having our children as the real priority and to reduce the class ratio for an effective learning experience among many other issues. Please continue to ask those in charge of our school system what they’re doing to trust the voices of students and teachers and building a more flexible curriculum that is more relevant to our students’ lives.

It is totally understandable that neither of us will have a magic bullet to solve education, but I do believe in us and our values as a result of all those experiences that brought us to understand that we are all connected by the same needs. Education is the pillar to shift from this present imbalance towards the enjoyment of sharing all the wonderful outcomes in a society where everyone take care of each other.

I might not have a more technical collegiate vocabulary to add strategic solutions but I do have a humble advice. We have to listen to the voices of educators to improve outcomes. That’s why

it's essential to support the work of EmpowerEd. If you are in a leadership position and find these ideas that are emerging in dialogues around the country as a utopic case, then please allow other souls with more light, optimism and collectiveness to at least try to plant seeds of hope in those who are ready and eager to assume this role. Thank you.