



## EmpowerEd Budget Priorities for the FY 2023 DC Budget

February 17, 2022

Mayor Bowser and Deputy Mayor Kihn,

We are excited to write to you today to share our priorities for the FY 2023 budget. First, we are grateful for the overall increase in the per pupil budget this year and the commitment to trying to ensure stability for our schools. We are still concerned however that even with these per pupil increases, [as many as 77 schools may face staffing cuts](#) due to budgets not accounting for \$3.4 million for librarians the council funded and required last year and \$39.4 million in Covid-recovery funds schools are currently using that would drop off next year.

As an organization focused on improving educator retention and recruiting, supporting and retaining educators of color- we know that we have a steep challenge in front of us to ensure the school-level stability our students, families and educators deserve for the coming year. Our [December survey along with WTU found](#) that 83 % of educators say morale has worsened from previous years, and a staggering number of educators are thinking of leaving their school or the profession. We also know that we are not helpless to stop this. While the pandemic has put a strain on our schools in so many ways, we also have an opportunity to re-imagine the learning experience for students and re-imagine the profession for educators in a way that closes our most persistent gaps in opportunities and achievement. With those things in mind, we want to share our five top priorities for the budget.

**First, we are asking the city to invest in educator retention and student enrichment with a \$6 million investment in a flexible scheduling pilot for 10 to 12 schools. Flexible scheduling can allow educators more time and space to plan, collaborate to improve instruction and balance the demands of work and life in a sustainable way while also providing new and enriching experiences to our students.** We have been engaged in research and outreach on potential models for flexible schedules- such as “Enrichment Wednesdays” where staff would have additional time to plan and collaborate while students engage in experiential learning with partner organizations, project-based learning, focused tutoring and at the upper-grades- vocational programs across schools, internships and more. This win-win approach could transform education and make us a national leader in re-imagining schools post-pandemic, improve staff retention and enrich student experiences. Other models would allow teachers, especially those post-FMLA, to work a reduced schedule while we utilize additional part-time staff and “adjunct” teachers to teach one or two courses to fill the gap (particularly retired/departed educators or field experts) while providing students access to new and interesting perspectives. We propose a \$6 million investment to provide the needed staffing and logistical support to pilot flexible

scheduling models in 10-12 schools next school year, learn from these models and then work to expand these practices in the years to come.

Beyond the budget allocations- if we want to improve both educator retention and student achievement- we must provide more time for learning and less time spent on testing, reform punitive evaluations to focus on educator growth, and tackle teacher pay for paraprofessionals, early childhood educators and in the DC charter sector where half of DC charter schools have starting educator salaries below the DC living wage as determined by the [National Low Income Housing Coalition 2021 “Out of Reach” Report](#). In addition, as members of the Under 3 DC Coalition, we fully support the budget requests of the coalition to ensure Early Educator Compensation Funds are distributed quickly and according to task force recommendations.

**Second, we know that we must invest in the mental health of our students. We join the “Strengthening Families Through Behavioral Health Coalition” in [asking for \\$2.4 million to stabilize CBO grant funding and \\$300,000 to study the actual costs and needs for SBMH](#).** In addition, we are calling on the Mayor to make a deep investment in restorative justice in our schools. Restorative justice is an effective approach to promoting school safety and stability, while also supporting the behavioral needs of students, and enabling positive culture shifts within schools. The 2018 Student Fair Access to Schools Amendment Act set us on a virtuous course to end the use of punitive discipline approaches. Educators want to deepen our commitment to restorative practices but simply have not been given sufficient training and support to do so. We’ve heard a clear message from educators that SchoolTalk/ Restorative DC delivers exceptional professional development in this area and [supports schools in a number of ways](#). While restorative justice can be implemented in response to disciplinary issues and violence prevention, implementing a whole school approach to restorative justice can serve as a proactive tool for promoting positive mental health, building positive relationships, and creating equitable and inclusive school environments. Since 2015 OSSE has funded restorative justice work through a partnership with School Talk. Last year OSSE allocated \$900,000 to this work. **We’re calling for a commitment to continue this School Talk funding with an increase to \$950,000 annually- allowing the program to sustain current work and expand to, at a minimum, ten new partner schools and serving hundreds of new educators throughout the city with professional development.**

We also support the Under 3 DC recommendations for \$700,000 for behavioral health support in child care development settings, \$300,000 for the HealthySteps program, increased funding for home visits and prioritizing rental relief to prevent home evictions- all of which contribute to student and family mental health, wellness and provide the foundation students need to thrive in school.

**Third, we are asking the mayor to allocate \$6.5 million for outdoor learning and equity of access to outdoor space in DC.** We know that outdoor education is 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. We believe funding must be prioritized to schools where students currently have the least access to safe outdoor space. So we ask the city to fund and complete an audit – likely through OSSE in coordination with DCPS and PCSB- to measure each school’s access to safe outdoor space for students and the current

opportunity students have to engage in outdoor programming at each school. Last year, DCPS invested \$9 million in outdoor learning and other innovations, but the funds were strictly limited to purchasing infrastructure. [Members of the DC Coalition for Equitable Outdoor Education](#) have made clear that infrastructure without programming is ineffective. Instead, we must invest in our terrific array of partner organizations that do amazing work in our schools. Once schools are able to hire partners, organizations can work with schools to build the infrastructure that matches the programming that works best for their school. **We are requesting the full continuation of DCPS funding for FoodPrints DC at \$1.5 million as well as an additional \$5 million- \$2.5 M to be allocated directly to DCPS schools and \$2.5 M for public charter schools (either through a city-run fund or a OSSE grant program).** We believe this funding would allow for 20-25 schools in each sector to be served by DC's phenomenal outdoor and experiential learning partner organizations over the next two years.

**Fourth, we must begin to invest more systematically in literacy support across our schools and provide additional staff to deliver one on one support for students during the school day.** We support the recommendation of SBOE Ward 2 Representative Allister Chang's literacy working group in [expanding "LETRS" training](#) in our schools and hope education leaders will work to expand this training to literacy coaches, reading teachers and principals in every school. We have heard consistently from teachers that many in-school staff charged with literacy initiatives have no formal training in "the science of reading" or particular literacy expertise. Often teachers who have received the proper training are being held back from implementing research-based pedagogy because those above them- instructional coaches and school leaders- do not have this instructional expertise. Too many of our students are reading below or far below grade level due to years of well-intentioned yet misguided approaches about how kids learn to read. We believe that every principal, every literacy coach and every reading teacher in the elementary grades should be trained in the science of reading, with the long-term goal of implementing evidence-based reading practices across grade-levels. It is important that schools have the capacity to implement these practices in a unified, systematic, and sequential manner to ensure all students get the skills that support proficient reading and to identify reading problems before they fall behind. We also call for at least one dedicated literacy tutor *per grade* at all elementary schools who can push into classes to provide one on one support. **We encourage the Mayor and Council to work with DCPS and the PCSB to identify the cost of LETRS training for all elementary school literacy educators and instructional leaders and to ensure that every school has at least one certified educator serving as a literacy support per grade level for all elementary schools.**

**Fifth, 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/ DCPS "Connected Schools" model where health, employment and a range of other student and family services are connected directly to the school allowing the community to more easily access the range of services needed. **Accordingly, we are asking for the city to work with the OSSE Community Schools Incentive Initiative Office and the DCPS Connected Schools Office to begin an investment in this year's budget to double the number of DC Community Schools over the next 3 years.**

Thank you for your time and consideration as we work to ensure that our students, families and educators emerge from the pandemic with all of the supports they need to thrive.

We must ensure that our budget priorities reflect our commitment to provide a first-rate, well-rounded education and childhood experience to every single DC student.

Thank you,

The Educators of EmpowerEd