



**Testimony of:** Scott Goldstein, Executive Director, EmpowerEd

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**Topic:** Educator Retention in Washington, DC

Good Morning Council Members and Staff.

My name is Scott Goldstein and I am the Executive Director of the DC teacher organization, EmpowerEd. I want to start by re-telling a story from workplace guru and author Simon Sinek. He was in Las Vegas staying at the Four Seasons and went to get a coffee in the lobby. The barista's name was Noah. Noah was very charming so they had a long conversation and he asked him "do you like your job?" and without skipping a beat Noah said "I LOVE my job". He found his exuberance unusual. He studies work and so he asks people that all the time and people will say they like their jobs, but it's rare that they say they love their job with so much emotion. So he asked him "tell me specifically what the Four Seasons is doing that you would say to me "I love my job"- and he immediately said "throughout the day managers will walk past me and ask me how I'm doing and if there's anything I need to be able to do my job better. Not just *my* manager, *any* manager. And then he said "I also work at Cesar's Palace, and there the managers walk past us and are just trying to catch us when we do something wrong. There the managers are always trying to drive performance and make sure we hit our numbers. There I like to keep my head below the radar, get through the day and collect my paycheck. Only at the Four Seasons do I feel I can be myself." Sinek notes- this is the exact same human being, working at two different companies and yet our experience of him is profoundly different not because of him, but because of the leadership environment in which he works. The art of leadership is to create the environment where people work at their natural best. If you want to know why DC has higher teacher turnover than other cities- the number one reason is that our management approach (one education reform leaders for the last 20 years have been trained explicitly to take) is more like Cesar's Palace than the Four Seasons. Instead of gearing ourselves towards support and growth we are focused on accountability and performance metrics, and this destroys culture. You might hear about a bunch of strategies we take to retain teachers today, but as the saying goes- "culture eats strategy for breakfast."

Now let's step back.

Educator retention is at the heart of EmpowerEds mission, and for the past six years EmpowerEd has focused our full attention on studying and solving this critical problem that undermines student success. **EmpowerEd is in a unique place to talk about this challenge.** Over the past six years we've been trusted by 18 DC public and public charter schools to assist them in improving educator wellness, with five new school partners coming on board now. This testimony combines what we have learned from our deep research, our regular deep conversations with educators about their needs and concerns and what we have proven works in our school by school work to improve retention.

**First we must clarify some facts.** DC teacher turnover is in fact the highest in the country. The national urban average is between 12 and 16 %. The last reported year SY 21-22 to 22-23 OSSE reported 30 % overall annual school level turnover. It's worth noting that charter sector turnover was almost twice as high as DCPS. We lose about 70 % of our educators over 5 years. This is beyond unacceptable. We also know that DC's turnover is not because DC is more transient. More transient cities like NYC and LA have much stronger retention. We also know that our turnover is not "good turnover". While 10-15% turnover might be considered a normal range, 30 % is unacceptable. While it's true millennials do change jobs more frequently- we've had nearly the same troubling turnover rate for the past 15 years and the majority of those who have left over that time period are not, in fact, millennials. Some even cynically accept turnover believing it is cheaper to have younger teachers in circulation than costly veteran educators. But it's both worse for students and *also* comes at a price. In fact, if we had reduced our turnover just to the national urban average, we would have saved \$40 million over the past five years. It has also been argued that we simply don't know enough to act. This is far from true. We have very substantial data from the State Board of Education research and surveys, EmpowerEd and WTU deep surveying over the years, years of council testimony and much more.

**What is different about what is happening in DC?** The two most marked differences we believe contributing to our substantially higher than normal turnover rate are 1) the substantially lower degree of professional trust we put in teachers (as shared in my intro story)- including through the DCPS IMPACT evaluation system and a higher reliance on never-ending standardized tests that teachers have little design control over and 2) that DC has an education ecosystem that encourages both student and educator instability given our nearly 70 LEAs. Many educators go back and forth from DCPS to charter schools. From DCPS to charter for more autonomy and flexibility and from charter to DCPS for better pay and union protections. That's precisely why we need the mayor and council's help in leveling the playing field to provide strong retention incentives across sectors and push our system away from the approach of the last fifteen years that has been built on a distrust for educators and their professionalism.

We know why teachers are leaving.

*We also know this issue is solvable.*

Many teachers leave because their school does not respect their mental health needs, but EmpowerEd has worked with schools that deeply prioritize this by ensuring mental health staff for educators and working with district leaders to provide explicit mental health days.

Many teachers leave because their schools failed to effectively respond to trauma in moments of crisis. But EmpowerEd has worked with schools that have deeply consulted staff to come up with a process that respects the well-being of students and educators and communicates effectively in times of crisis.

Many teachers leave because they do not have enough flexibility in their work and life, but EmpowerEd has worked with schools to design flexible scheduling models and through our advocacy and the council's action, there is now some funding available for them to pursue this.

Many teachers leave because of the design of our punitive evaluation system, but EmpowerEd is currently studying a group of charter schools with strong retention that have successfully implemented more collaborative, teacher evaluation and growth systems.

So we know educator retention is critical to student achievement and success, we know that DC's turnover rate is unacceptably high, and we know that it is solvable. So the big question is- what role do principals need to play, what role does OSSE need to play, what role does DCPS need to play and what role do the mayor and the council have to play to change the status quo. So that is what I will walk through next.

**First, OSSE.** I would argue OSSE has made the strongest investments and made the most substantial contribution to turning this problem around over the past few years. OSSE has substantially improved their reporting on educator retention, they provide very valuable communities of practice to support educator professional growth, they have made some improvements in licensure access, they have implemented the Educator Wellness Technical Assistance Grants and are implementing the Grow Your Own grants and now the flexible scheduling pilot as a result of this council's action.

### **What more could OSSE do?**

1. OSSE can and should extend the Educator Wellness Technical Assistant Grants over the four year financial plan. This work is incredibly effective and works best through community organization partnerships and will not be effective with asynchronous materials alone.
2. OSSE should work to publish its deep dive workforce report annually instead of every two years.
3. OSSE can and should also work to establish a common exit survey of educators across sectors (with room for LEAs to add their own items but with a common set of foundational questions) so we can have a cohesive data set on why educators leave.

4. OSSE should conduct a thorough review of educator certification requirements and potential barriers for Latino/a educators and the transfer process for educator credentials and experience from abroad and make needed changes.
5. OSSE must work to reduce the influence of standardized testing and consult educators on the new statewide CAPE assessment.

### **DCPS has made progress with the recruitment of Latinx educators in the past few years.**

Following our 2019 comprehensive report on the Recruitment, Support and Retention of Latinx Educators, DCPS did begin to pay for immigrant educator visas and expand partnerships to bring in new educators from Latin America. We encourage them to double down on this work. DCPS has also committed to flexible scheduling pilots through XQ redesigns and begun to offer technical assistance to schools to implement models- particularly at high schools.

### **What more could DCPS do?**

1. DCPS can and should overhaul the IMPACT evaluation system and replace it with a system of Peer Evaluation and Review, similar to Montgomery County's model. Our system should be focused on educator growth, not educator exit.
2. DCPS should go much further with a commitment to flexible scheduling for educators. I am concerned that the commitment so far is limited to allowing educators more time to analyze data or plan- which both matter- but if DCPS does not recognize the need to give educators unstructured and unsupervised time back to do all of the impossibly long list of tasks they've already asked of them and to take a moment for themselves when they need it- educators will not feel respected by this approach.
3. DCPS should better support dual language program educators with curriculum support, a focus on equity and inclusiveness in our dual language schools and a smart expansion of the program across the city- combined with its strategic focus on recruiting bilingual educators.
4. DCPS should also greatly reduce its emphasis on scripted standardized assessments. Our students and educators constantly feel under the gun and stressed by the frequency of testing (even formative assessments developed by DCPS) and educators do not feel trusted as professionals to assess their students and adjust accordingly.
5. DCPS should implement much more comprehensive induction and mentoring programs that set a standard for high expertise teaching across the system.
6. DCPS should invest in principal professional development to support positive working conditions for staff, the building of professional trust and invest in school-based educator wellness partnerships.
7. DCPS should implement more authentic teacher leadership opportunities by expanding TLI implementation beyond LEAP coaches to part teaching/ part leadership roles designed by school staff and principals rather than central office (as was done previously).

**Finally, the Mayor and Council.** In the past few years we have finally seen some real action, if small, to begin to tackle this challenge. We are grateful for the investments in Grow Your Own

programs, in providing requirements for stable school budgets, in educator wellness and for the recent flexible scheduling pilot investments. But we need to do much more. But these are still small efforts in the scheme of things and must be expanded while we also take on the larger and more controversial rocks.

### **What more should DC's elected leaders do?**

1. Require a universal exit survey of all teachers, across LEAs, that asks a minimum set of established questions and is publicly reported on by the following fall each year.
2. Provide long-term funding for the OSSE Educator Wellness Technical Assistance Grants at \$500,000 a year in the financial plan.
3. Pass the Educator Retention for Student Success Act and fund mental health days for educator, wellness coordinators for high need schools and study needed increases in paraprofessional pay.
4. Assess demand this year and provide additional funding to expand flexible scheduling pilots.
5. Allow WTU to negotiate the teacher evaluation system and provide DCPS a date certain to come to consensus with WTU over changes or legislation will be introduced to force critical changes.
6. Provide dedicated funding to all schools to have at least 1 full-time permanent substitute teacher per 250 students enrolled. This person should be an ET-15 WTU member. This will take the strain off teachers constantly losing their planning periods and pave the way for better instruction and improve educator morale.
7. Greatly expand funding and support for Community Schools/Connected Schools models to ensure students have the wrap around supports they need to focus on learning in the classroom.
8. Fund student loan relief for educators and explore housing cost policy options.

*While all of these policies will help, we must also move away from the mindset brought in with education reform in 2007 that systematically distrusts and disempowers teachers. Instead focus on hiring the best and then trusting and empowering them to succeed.*

Everyone, from our LEAs to our education agencies to the Mayor and this council, has a responsibility for turning this around and providing stability for our students and families in our schools. It is, without question, the fundamental building block of school improvement. Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions.