

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education



Testimony before the Council of the District of
Columbia

Committee on Education
Friday, November 15, 2013

**The Status of plans to revise school
boundaries and feeder patterns for District of
Columbia Public Schools**

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Deputy Mayor for Education

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, my name is Abigail Smith, Deputy Mayor for Education. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide an overview of the student assignment and DCPS school boundaries review process. As I hope my testimony makes clear, we have been very intentional about creating a process that allows for extensive public input so that the school choice and student assignment policies we ultimately adopt will result in greater clarity, predictability, and continuity for families.

As you know, my office launched the student assignment and school boundaries review process last month. Student assignment policies establish the access rights that students have to public schools in the District. They determine who gets to go to which school, where and how parents and students apply to school, what rights students have to remain in a school they have chosen, and what rights students have to transfer between schools. These policies impact students and families in both of our public school sectors.

As we explained when we launched this process, the District has not undertaken a comprehensive review of its student assignment policies,

including school attendance boundaries and feeder patterns, in over three decades. Since these policies were last reviewed, there have been significant changes in public school supply, the city's neighborhoods have changed, and its population has fluctuated. We have also experienced tremendous growth in our charter sector, and greater choice within DCPS schools. Our student assignment policies have not kept up with these changes, resulting in a complicated patchwork of student assignment policies that are difficult for families to navigate.

The goals of the review process are to:

- Clarify what rights and responsibilities families and schools have regarding access to public schools;
- Update feeder relationships between schools to ensure that schools are aligned and to provide a robust pipeline of students into middle and high schools;
- Ensure that DCPS boundaries align to its facility capacity and projected population of students; and

- Explore opportunities to bridge student-assignment and choice policies across DCPS and charter schools.

My office is managing this work with the help of a technical team that is composed of the 21st Century School Fund and the Urban Institute. We have also appointed an Advisory Committee co-chaired by myself and John Hill that includes members with diverse perspectives who are strongly invested in the success of our public education system.

Members include parents from both charter and DCPS schools, as well as individuals from across the city with a deep knowledge of schools, neighborhoods, DC history, and urban planning, or who have legal or policy expertise.

The Advisory Committee will meet monthly to:

- Review current citywide policies on attendance zones, feeder patterns and school choice;
- Formulate guidelines and principles for these policies and associated practices;

- Listen to the community and serve as insightful interpreters of public sentiment, concerns, and questions; and
- Develop recommendations for revised DCPS attendance zone and feeder patterns, and for how to bridge student-assignment and choice policies across DCPS and charter schools.

Although every Ward in the city is represented on the Advisory Committee, members were not selected to represent their wards per se. Rather, they were selected for the overall mix of knowledge and experience they bring to the table. Selecting members for the Committee was a difficult task, and we know that there are many other people in our community who have important perspectives that we should take into account as part of this review process. We also know that there are many community and school groups throughout the city that have been thinking about these issues. It is precisely because we want to hear from these groups and as many other stakeholders as possible that we have designed the process in a way that allows for extensive community engagement.

Accordingly, as we work with the Advisory Committee, we will also be holding focus groups and community outreach meetings throughout the city at which participants can express concerns and provide input into the principles and values that will guide the Committee's work. We have already held two focus groups, one at Tenley library, and the other at Seaton Elementary School, which were well attended. There will be six additional focus group meetings between now and December. I encourage everyone to go to our website, www.dme.dc.gov, or to call (202) 478-5738 to register as space at focus groups is limited.

Next spring, prior to the Advisory Committee submitting its initial set of recommendations, we will establish working groups that will give participants an opportunity to vet policy scenarios being considered by the committee and to examine how they may impact specific geographic areas. Once the initial proposal of the Advisory Committee is released in May of next year, we will begin to hold citywide community meetings to give stakeholders an opportunity to provide feedback on proposed policy, boundary and feeder recommendations.

For community members who want to provide input but who cannot participate in any of the numerous engagement opportunities I just described, we will soon be launching an online forum (EngageDC.org), where the public can complete a survey, comment on materials from committee meetings and share ideas. The website also contains information about future public engagement meetings.

The Advisory Committee will take all of this input into account before releasing their final recommendations at the end of July next year. A final plan will be announced by the Mayor in September 2014, along with an implementation plan for the 2015-16 school year that includes “grandfathering” provisions that will buffer the immediate impact of changes on current students and their families.

Conclusion

Once again, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to provide an overview of the student assignment and school boundaries review process. As I mentioned at the outset of my testimony, we are determined to undertake this review in a manner that is transparent and that solicits significant community input. We are very aware of the

importance of these issues for families across the District, and the need to tread carefully as we develop new student assignment policies. I look forward to working closely with you and members of the Committee as this process unfolds. That concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time. I also want to acknowledge Chancellor Henderson who is here today and available to answer questions.