

**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
Monday, January 27, 2014**

**The Status of Plans to Revise School Boundaries and Feeder
Patterns for District of Columbia
Public Schools**

**Abigail Smith
Deputy Mayor for Education**

Good morning, Chairman Catania and members of the Education Committee, and thank you for giving me an opportunity to provide an update on our work to revise student assignment and choice policies in our public schools. I am joined today by Chancellor Henderson who will be available to answer questions.

As I shared at the last roundtable the Committee held on this topic, our goal is to revise these policies to create more predictability, stability, and access to high quality school options for families in a way that is transparent and that affords community members with multiple opportunities to engage in this work. I am happy to report that, since that last roundtable, we have made significant progress. We have held focus groups in every ward, have attended numerous community meetings, and have held individual meetings with stakeholders and community groups. We have posted on our website all materials from our Advisory Committee meetings, including meeting minutes, along with all of the policy and data analysis that our consultants have conducted. Also included on the website are preliminary summaries of feedback we received in our focus groups. All of these documents have also been compiled into binders, which we have provided to the Committee today.

As we enter the next phase of this work, we will continue to engage community members in various ways, and make all information that we are analyzing available to the public. As I stated at the last hearing, we want to make this process as inclusive and transparent as possible. We will also meet regularly with Chancellor Henderson and her team to ensure that this process supports and is informed by DCPS' on-going efforts to improve program quality and alignment.

Since we last appeared before you on this subject, there have been several key developments that I would like to highlight for you today.

First, in response to concerns raised by witnesses who testified at the last roundtable, as well as this Committee, we added 3 Advisory Group members: Martin Welles from Ward 6, Eboni-Rose Thompson from Ward 7, and Sharona Robinson from Ward 8. Each of these new members is extremely active in their communities and citywide, has important perspectives that will add significant value to the work of the Advisory Committee, and have support from other community members who recommended them for this post. DME selected these members by considering these and other factors, and by soliciting feedback from community members, including parents, activists and principals, in each ward.

Second, we have held focus groups in each ward where we solicited community views on the principles and values that should drive the work of the Advisory Committee. We had 169 people participate and heard over 31 hours of input. Again, the preliminary results of these focus groups are summarized in a document that is included in your binders, but to give you a sense of the feedback we received, equitable access to quality schools across the city, predictability, and strengthening neighborhood schools were the highest priorities that community members identified. A complete focus group analysis and summary report will be completed by the end of February and will be posted on our website.

The focus groups are the first in a series of planned community engagement sessions leading up to the Mayor's announcement of the final plan for student assignment policies and boundaries in September. Between now and the end of March, when we will convene community working groups to vet policy scenarios that are under consideration by the Advisory Committee, several Advisory Committee members will hold open community meetings in their Wards to hear residents' concerns and ideas, and to share their perspectives on what they have learned thus far about policies in other cities and data on current patterns in D.C. We will also conduct additional outreach and individual interviews of stakeholders to address gaps in participation in the focus groups held last fall. In addition to the community engagement work I have just described, my staff and I continue to attend community meetings and hold individual meetings with stakeholders. We have also reached out to the State Board of Education and are in the process of establishing a schedule for briefings to the Board.

At the end of March, once the Advisory Committee has a working set of policy scenarios, we will begin to vet these scenarios with community members at working groups that will be held

throughout the city. We have already started to solicit participation in these working groups, and have over 190 people signed up to participate, to date. I encourage anyone who is interested in participating to go to our website to sign up, or to call my office.

Once these working groups are complete, the Advisory Committee will take their feedback and will use it to inform their initial proposal for student assignment policies and boundaries, which will be released in May. At that point, we will hold additional community meetings across the city to vet the proposal. This feedback will then inform the final proposal that will be submitted to my office and to the Mayor in August. Once again, no changes will go into effect until the 2015-16 school year, and we expect to include grandfathering provisions that will support a smooth transition to the new policies.

Turning now to the work of the Advisory Committee, the Committee has held 3 meetings since the start of this process. A fourth meeting was scheduled for last Tuesday evening but had to be postponed due to the inclement weather. At the first two meetings, Community members discussed the principles and values that will be driving their work, as well as information provided to them on the challenges of the current student assignment policies and boundaries in the District. At the last meeting in December, Committee members reviewed case studies of student assignment policies in other districts, and began the process of considering how this range of student assignment policies might support our goals in the District. The committee also reviewed preliminary feedback from focus groups.

At the next meeting, Committee members will discuss current data on student assignment and choice patterns in the District and will begin to grapple with developing various student assignment and choice scenarios that the District should consider in light of this data, as well as stakeholder feedback gathered to date. The work of developing policy scenarios will continue into the next two Advisory Committee meetings, with the goal of having a set of preliminary scenarios ready for the community working groups at the end of March.

Ultimately, our goal is to go through a careful process that includes:

- **Extensive parent and community engagement**
- **Understanding the current landscape** of what rights and opportunities families have to access public schools;
- **Understanding how current policy and practice play out**, in terms of where students are living and attending schools and who has access to what;
- **Assessing our current programmatic landscape** in order to ensure that our work around student assignment, and DCPS' on-going programmatic planning are aligned;
- **Looking outside our city**---to what other cities are doing;

- **Looking forward at the projected growth of our city;** and
- Using this knowledge and exploration to develop creative recommendations that **support the principles and values established by community members.**

I am pleased that we are on-track to deliver these recommendations on the timeframe we have set forth, and that we continue to conduct this work in a way that is transparent and that is heavily informed by stakeholder feedback.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to update you on the student assignment and feeder pattern work to date, I would be happy to answer any questions that you have at this time.