



**Testimony of  
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State Superintendent of Education**

**Public Hearing On  
The Fiscal Year 2013 and 2014 Performance Oversight of the  
Office of the State Superintendent of Education**

**Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee on Education  
The Honorable David Catania, Chairman**

**February 24, 2014  
Room 412  
John A. Wilson Building**

Good afternoon Chairman Catania and members and staff of the Committee on Education. My name is Jesús Aguirre, and I serve as the State Superintendent of Education for the District of Columbia. I am honored to appear before you today to provide testimony on the performance of the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) for Fiscal Years 2013 and 2014 to date.

As you know, OSSE oversees (4) key functions of the Districts education efforts: State Education Agency (SEA) functions, our Non-Public Schools programs, Public Charter School Payments and Support initiatives, and Student Transportation.

OSSE represents the District in all matters before the United States Department of Education as the District's SEA. We are responsible for:

- state education oversight;
- providing resources and support to education providers in the District;
- setting and implementing statewide policies, regulations, and standards under federal and local law; and
- administering both federal and local funding programs for schools while ensuring accountability.

While there is still significant work to do with regards to improving education outcomes for District children, there have been positive and promising trends over the last several years.

- In School Year 2012-2013 the District's growth in NAEP scores outpaced the rest of the nation, and we have seen continued increases in our DC CAS scores and our citywide graduation rate.

- Enrollment continues to grow in both sectors of our public education system. I am happy to report that this year's audited enrollment has been finalized and shows an increase of 2,727 students to push our total enrollment to 82,958 students, an increase of 12,036 from just five years ago. This is one indicator that District families are regaining confidence in the public education system.
- Increased collaboration within the education sectors has yielded greater transparency and choice for students, parents, and stakeholders.
- We continue to lead the nation in access and participation in pre-k. In school year 2012-2013 almost 70% of three year olds and over 90% of four year olds in DC enrolled in a pre-k program, the highest proportion in the nation.

This progress is the result of the hard work of many different entities and thousands of individuals in the District, and while we must acknowledge that our work is far from complete, we should also acknowledge these accomplishments as we continue to move forward with great urgency.

### **Sustaining Our Progress**

Over the last performance period, OSSE has focused on continuing the improvement of the educational options and outcomes for our residents. In my short four and a half month tenure as the head of OSSE, I have been able to witness the strong work of our team, and have begun to understand the accomplishments of our talented and committed staff, while at the same time, identifying several opportunities for improvement. I would like to commend and appreciate our dedicated OSSE employees for their work in maintaining a positive

trajectory and making significant progress during the last year, in spite of several leadership transitions.

In FY 13, the OSSE built upon our recent successes regarding grants management and minimizing lapsed funds through providing significant technical assistance and support to LEAs and CBOs, and through developing monthly burn reports and communicating with all LEAs on at least a monthly basis. This has allowed OSSE to administer approximately \$215 million in federal grants available in FY13 to increase student outcomes across the District, with only .5% of that amount lapsing in FY13. This is a significant improvement over previous years.

For the 8th Year in a row, DC was ranked 1st in the nation in serving meals to the highest percentage (73.5%) of low income children during the summer.

With regards to the Agency's postsecondary education initiatives we have continued to increase District students' college awareness, access, and completion, through programming, campaigns, and financial aid awards. In addition to the approximately 5,000 students annually receiving financial support through the TAG program, we have also been able to leverage the Mayor's Scholars Undergraduate Fund, which was designed in 2012 to support our highest need students who attend our local postsecondary institutions. In Fiscal Year 14 to date, this locally funded program has allowed us to support 279 District students— 94 more students than we served in FY13 – who otherwise may not have been able to attend college. Furthermore, OSSE has and continues to conduct ongoing analyses of District student postsecondary outcomes and will

continue to use this information to highlight the colleges at which District students persist and graduate at the highest rates.

In FY 14, for the first time, we were able to support our high schools and their students through organizing and funding the in class administration of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) free of charge for all juniors and seniors attending a public high school in the District.

In FY 13, OSSE's Division of Specialized Education continued to enhance our monitoring and support of LEAs to ensure an ongoing focus on quality for all students. Our monitoring efforts included: database reviews, on-site compliance monitoring, record reviews, on-site focused monitoring, dispute resolution activities, LEA self-studies, Phase I and Phase II grant applications, and reviews of audit findings. Regarding capacity building, initiatives include: foundational professional development with support in the areas of behavior, instruction, and programming; LEA tiered training and technical assistance based on the level of need of the LEA determined by compliance and outcome data; and placement oversight aimed at ensuring a quality education in the least restrictive environment.

As you know, in December 2012, OSSE's Division of Transportation exited court oversight and ended 17 years of federal supervision. Since that time, OSSE has continued to improve performance, evidenced by a 98% rate of drop offs prior to the bell in SY 2012-2013, while reducing costs by more than \$10Million over three years. A portion of these savings can be directly attributed to our ongoing fleet

modernization initiative, which provides a safer and more reliable ride for students, bus drivers and attendants, at a lower cost. In FY14, OSSE-DOT will procure approximately 150 additional new school buses, bringing the age of half of our fleet below 18 months.

### **Improving Stakeholder Engagement and Transparency**

As a primary function of the state education office, one of the areas in which we have and will continue to invest substantial effort, is in enhancing the transparency of our work. More than ever, OSSE has provided public access to important educational data, engaging and empowering District students, parents and stakeholders to make informed choices regarding their education. Our efforts also inform OSSE as we advance statewide policies and programs, based on what the data tells us. The most visible manifestation of this strategy has been the launch of OSSE's new School, LEA, and State report cards as part of the Learn DC website in September of 2013. This initiative was supported by our partners at the State Board of Education, and informed by hundreds of DC residents who were engaged through online surveys, community meetings, and OSSE-organized stakeholder feedback sessions. This tool has, for the first time in the District's history, provided one location for school data across sectors, thus making critical information more transparent and accessible to students, parents, and stakeholders than ever before.

Furthermore, this initiative is an iterative process that will continue to improve and expand to include additional data points that are requested by parents and students. Already since our launch, we have updated the report cards to include

additional data points, as well as sorting and comparison functionality. We see this initiative as an essential component of the District's choice-based system of public education, and one which will help equip our students and parents with information needed to truly be informed consumers of education.

In the coming weeks and months, we also plan to continue to enhance our community engagement by implementing an aggressive grassroots outreach campaign with regards to the role of OSSE, Learn DC and the report cards, the current state accountability plan, our ESEA waiver, the importance and implementation of the common core, our transition to the next generation assessment, and the resources that OSSE can provide to support students and LEAs.

### **Focus on Student Outcomes**

With every aspect of OSSE's work, I have asked my staff to ensure that our guiding principle is always a focus on student outcomes and supporting LEAs to ensure they are equipping ALL students for success. One example of this work has been our collaboration with the State Board of Education in proposing and adopting cutting edge academic standards. We are among some of the first states in the country to update our early learning standards, which were adopted in February of 2013, and adopt next generation science standards which were approved in December of 2013. By developing these new standards that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards, and by working with our LEAs and schools to support their successful implementation, we are making sure that what is being

taught in our classrooms is up-to-date and focused on preparing our students for college and career.

Another overarching strategy regarding student outcomes and LEA support and accountability is the implementation of DC's ESEA Flexibility Waiver.

With the adoption of the Waiver, approved by the US Department of Education in July 2012, we successfully aligned OSSE's strategy in supporting the District's reform efforts with our federal responsibilities. In addition to a revised, differentiated school accountability system, our waiver requires a focus on implementing high-quality college and career-ready standards, teacher and school leader effectiveness and evaluation strategies, a focus on reducing the administrative burden placed on schools, providing increased funding flexibility, and an overall focus on using data to improve all efforts.

With regard to our differentiated accountability system, the waiver allowed the District to create a system of classifications and accountability that recognized schools for high proficiency and high growth as well as other components. This new system facilitates a far better understanding of school quality for our teachers, students, and public. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), almost all of DC schools would have been in corrective action and "in need of improvement" this year based on the rigid 100% proficient threshold required by 2014. Furthermore, the "Safe Harbor" option under NCLB created a misaligned system that often resulted in low performing schools with large annual score fluctuations to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), while some high-performing



schools near the top of the spectrum would fail to meet AYP because their consistent growth would be too small. Our waiver aimed to correct these deficiencies and created classifications that offer families a meaningful way to understand how schools are actually performing.

Additionally, the waiver moved the District away from NCLB's one-size-fits-all model that required rigid and prescriptive uses of federal funds for tutoring and other services, whether or not the schools and LEAs identified these services as needed. The waiver allowed the District to determine its own interventions and supports necessary based on the individual needs of schools and communities. Through this flexibility and through the District's use of School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding, DC has been able to provide strengthened and targeted support and monitoring of interventions to several schools classified as our lowest performing under our waiver (schools designated as Focus and Priority). This, in part, may have been a contributing factor in the recent DC CAS gains that showed larger growth in these lowest performing Priority and SIG schools than the statewide average growth. Coupling the flexibility of the waiver and the SIG funding is a promising strategy that I am excited to say will continue in FY14 because OSSE has recently received an additional \$1.4M School Improvement Grant (SIG) from USED.

Recently, there has been discussion regarding the value of our waiver and whether it is strong enough to result in rapid school improvement. I would agree that we must continue to analyze the impact of the specific tenets of our ESEA

Waiver and its ability to frame our school improvement efforts within the context of DC's unique, and historical challenges.

In addition to the improvements I mention above relative to NCLB, it is important to note that we are only in the second year of operating under this waiver. Additionally, our waiver was structured to *initially* place primary responsibility for focused improvement with the LEAs (and PCSB) while OSSE provides guidance and support. For example, DCPS' work with its lowest performing 40 schools has included intensive work on turnaround and improvement through rigorous and regular, on-site monitoring and feedback, discussions with parents and teachers about what's working and adjusting plans accordingly, and the provision of additional resources aligned with best practices and as necessary. This continuous improvement process has yielded higher improvement for these schools, which overlap with the lowest designations through our waiver. However, in the third year of a school's improvement, OSSE is empowered to be more prescriptive in pushing LEAs to implement proven strategies for turnaround. To date we have not reached the timeframe where OSSE is further empowered and therefore it is difficult to speak to our direct impact. Additionally, as we analyze our experience with the waiver to date, we must acknowledge that there have been instances where implementation has been the challenge. As we prepare for year three, it is incumbent upon us to consider our internal structure and resourcing of waiver implementation, and ensure that we have the sufficient capacity and expertise to make it a success. All this being said, we do not claim that the Waiver is perfect as written and we plan to use the next ten months to review the specifics of the waiver with the intent to submit amendments to the Department within the year.

As we take on this process and engage stakeholders in these conversations, we look forward to working with this committee to incorporate their feedback and insights.

### **Moving Forward**

As we move forward in 2014, we have mapped out an aggressive agenda to maintain the progress discussed above, as well as to accomplish several ongoing and new tasks. Some of these include:

- Standing up a new enrollment and residency office to accompany the new residency regulations that will address the findings of the DC Auditors report by, among other things, centralizing residency investigations within OSSE.
- Further improving our data systems by implementing the Automatic Data Transfer tool (ADT) which will drastically increase the efficiency of data collection through daily automatic uploads from LEAs; by moving from design stage to development and implementation stages with regards to the Statewide Student Information System, in a manner that continues to incorporate the needs and feedback of our LEAs and other potential users; and by capitalizing on the opportunities presented by SLED by focusing on enhancing the access, usability, and analysis of the data by LEAs, partners, and policy makers.
- Working with our partners and stakeholders to update or overhaul several statewide policies including the regulations associated with residency verification and investigations; student code of conduct (discipline); special

education; early childcare facility licensing; graduation requirements; GED testing; data policies; and others.

- Developing recommendations related to the methodology and frequency of enrollment audits and the subsequent UPSFF payment schedule and amounts, with a goal of having our local funding follow the student throughout the year.
- Moving beyond the research stage associated with the update of our current early learning Quality Rating Improvement System, and working on actual development and implementation of a new instrument that aligns educational readiness and health outcomes, and focuses on quality.
- Creating a comprehensive secondary transition strategy for students with IEPs, including core training modules available to all LEAs, a public awareness campaign, and a rollout of a student-led IEP development process.
- Enhancing our fiscal oversight system related to special education by implementing systems to flag patterns of SPED level changes across payment cycles; and, explore ways to better implement oversight over local SPED spending and tie it to performance.
- Improving communications with families who use OSSE's transportation services by analyzing and making improvements to our responsiveness to calls and concerns, and rolling out software allowing parents, school staff and other stakeholders to receive automated text, email and/or voice alerts regarding route status, including delays, inclement weather information and other important information regarding specific routes.

- Strengthening and expanding our supports to disconnected youth through the launch of the District’s first-ever re-engagement center in partnership with the Department of Employment Services (DOES) and the office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME). This center will provide an array of services and serve as a one stop center for the over 7,000 youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who have disconnected from our school system without receiving a high school diploma or its equivalent.
- Further reducing the administrative burden on schools by implementing a new Enterprise Grants Management System (EGMS), which is an internal and external technical platform that will improve OSSE’s grants management by allowing sub-grantees and grant managers to monitor their federal and local grants through the entire grants lifecycle. This system will improve our ability to monitor compliance and, perhaps more importantly, assist LEAs and us in making decisions on investments in strategies that are truly positively impacting improved student outcomes. This system will also automate some of our efforts in our continued focus on eliminating lapsed funding.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, I will reiterate that while our reform efforts in the District continue to result in improved outcomes for our students, improved confidence in our educational system, and increased coordination and transparency for our stakeholders, we have much work to do. I am optimistic about the role that OSSE will play in the coming months to build on our successes and move forward with a focus on ensuring that all students are benefitting from these improvements.

While the scope of work that we have set for ourselves is ambitious, I am confident that the importance of the work and the dedication of the OSSE staff will allow us to meet these goals and continue to improve our city's educational landscape.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Council, on behalf of our 2,100 hard working OSSE team members which include our dedicated bus drivers and attendants, I thank you for your continued support.