



Testimony of Margie Yeager

Managing Partner

Education Forward DC

Before the Committee of the Whole

FY2025 Budget Oversight Hearing on the Deputy Mayor for Education, DC Public Schools, and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education

April 4, 2024

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Council of the District of Columbia. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is Margie Yeager, and, in addition to being a resident of Ward 3 and the parent of three public school students in the District, I am the Managing Partner at Education Forward DC.

Education Forward DC envisions a DC where students starting furthest from opportunity can chart their own path and thrive. We accelerate the work of visionary education leaders to foster a city of high-quality, equitable public schools for every DC student and family. We provide grants across the city, offer advisory support to our grantees, and coordinate work across sectors, schools, and organizations to deliver excellent educational experiences for students. We believe DC can continue its progress and become a national model as the first city to guarantee every student access to great education by focusing on pandemic recovery, growing high-quality public-school options, addressing racial inequities, recruiting and retaining excellent leaders, and fostering equity-centered change. By 2026, we aim to double the proportion of schools providing students with the learning experiences they need to thrive.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share Education Forward DC's thoughts on the Fiscal Year 2025 budget proposal before, and its investments in the District's public education system and the students and families it serves.

Since 2022, in partnership with Education Forward DC, EmpowerK12 has maintained the [DC Education Recovery Dashboard](#) to track our education system's health as the District recovers from the pandemic. Through it, anyone can explore how we are serving our students and how our system is doing on a number of metrics – citywide, by student group, and by ward.

At first glance, one thing stands out: Our students are not attending school consistently. The District has experienced a significant spike in chronic absenteeism that is alarming, imperiling the academic recovery, and reversing progress made in the years prior to the pandemic.

According to DC's Office of the State Superintendent of Education, before 2020, just under one-third of students missed significant amounts of learning. That jumped to nearly half of students missing 10 or more days of school during the pandemic and has remained above 40%. Nearly 60% of students considered "at risk" of academic failure are missing 10 or more days.

The figure for Black students and students with disabilities is almost identical: 53% have missed 10 or more days. When students aren't in school, making academic progress isn't possible. It's that simple.

It should be noted that DC is not alone. It's a trend across the country, which prompted the White House Council of Economic Advisers to recommend an "all hands on deck" approach to reducing student absenteeism as key to improving student success and the nation's economy.

Student engagement needs to be the No. 1 focus of everyone who cares about our students' futures as well as the future of the District of Columbia.

Ed Forward DC, as part of the DC Students Succeed Coalition, strongly supports many of the education investments Mayor Bowser has made in her FY25 budget proposal. We believe these will go a long way in helping ensure students feel prepared, engaged, and supported to show up for school.

The proposal before you preserves and grows equitable investments in our public school students; prepares students for academic success through proven strategies like high-impact tutoring; and engages students in their futures through increased access to diverse post-secondary pathways.

We urge Council to protect these investments in our students' and the District's future as it considers the tough budget decisions ahead of it in the coming weeks.

- **Fund Schools Equitably** - Well-resourced schools are more likely to offer students academically rigorous material, present challenging coursework that keeps students interested in school, and improve academic outcomes, especially for those who are furthest away from opportunity. Students are safer, happier, and more engaged in healthy and inspiring spaces. We support the:
 - 12.4 percent increase schools funding through the uniform per-student funding formula, which ensures funding reaches our students and educators no matter which public school they attend or teach in.
 - Increased investments in healthy and safe school environments through this year's facilities allotment for public charter schools. We urge you to maintain the multiyear commitment to this investment and the requirements to keep up with increasing costs annually.
- **Drive Academic Achievement** - Our children are more likely to be engaged and to persist in their education when their schools prepare them for the future. We support the:
 - \$2 million for high-quality literacy instructional materials to implement the [Literacy Task Force's recommendations](#); and
 - \$5 million for high-impact tutoring which has been [shown to boost attendance](#) and support students' academic recovery
- **Strengthen Postsecondary Outcomes** - Students are more likely to attend school when they can relate to what they learn, feel like they have a voice in what they learn, and can envision their future. It is critical that every student has access to experiences that

expose them to and prepare them for college and careers – regardless of their background, ward, or sector. We must engage all students in their futures through increased access to diverse post-secondary pathways. We support:

- Millions to support and expand Advanced Technical Center programs, dual enrollment, and career readiness programs.
- The creation of the Office of Education Through Employment Pathways to support the implementation of a data system that will measure and utilize information on student college and career readiness and outcomes. This information will provide valuable insight into how best to support students and help them succeed.

Investments in education will not work in a silo. Access to good healthcare, reliable transportation, housing stability, and community safety also play an important role in ensuring that students are at school and ready to learn and that our educators can focus on the critical task of preparing our next generation for college and careers. We must continue the equity-driven investments that our local policymakers have made in the whole child, whole school, and whole community by supporting and investing in public safety, mental and physical health, healthcare, access to safe housing, reliable transportation, and healthy food.

We appreciate the mayor's investment in providing out-of-school time opportunities, addressing absenteeism, and supporting safe passage to and from school. However, we know many of these investments are not enough and share particular concerns regarding cuts to school-based mental health supports and the elimination of early childhood education funding.

The coalition and its members look forward to working with councilmembers in the coming weeks to better understand this budget, work to protect the investments proposed today, and examine how we can further support a public education system that ensures DC students succeed.

Over the last year, Education Forward DC held a series of public events focused on how we can build a school system that serves our students even better than before the pandemic. We heard directly from students who shared hopes for more engaging academic offerings and experiences, more individualized supports, reliable transportation, and safer communities.

We all have our own part to play. School leaders and educators are certainly already doing a great deal. Education Forward DC continues to focus on student engagement and well-being through investments in survey instruments, school-based mental health supports, and other approaches that value whole child development.

Without commenting on the specific proposals, I also would like to share how encouraged we are to see a renewed focus on student attendance and engagement from elected leaders in recent weeks and months. Showing up for DC students will require a citywide effort and I urge you all to

continue to work closely with school leaders, families, and students themselves as you develop further solutions to support them in addressing their unique attendance situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented experience. But what isn't unprecedented is forging success in the face of overwhelming challenges when it comes to helping students reach their own visions of success. DC has done it before, and we can do it again. By looking at the data and centering the needs of our students, there is no doubt that we can recapture DC's pre-pandemic progress in providing better outcomes for students and get back on track as the fastest-improving district in the nation.

Thank you for your time and I'm happy to take any questions you may have.