

Testimony for PERAA Roundtable

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David Tansey, Math Teacher at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School

Chairman Grosso and Members of the DC Council:

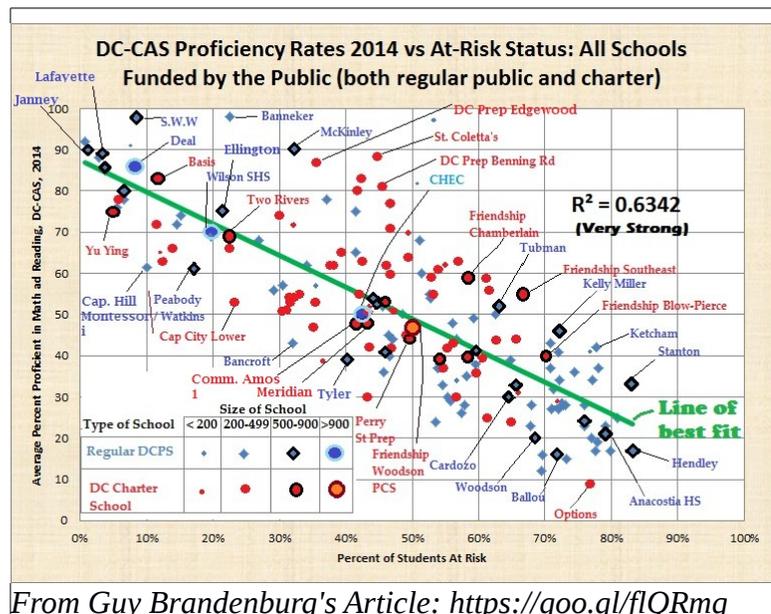
My name is David Tansey and I am a math teacher at Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School. I have come today to make two comments on PERAA's review. First is that the data warehouse that the review recommends needs to be student-centric and longitudinal in order to best serve our students and identify effective programs. Second is that we need to address the current incentive structure that leads schools away from serving the highest need populations. I believe this is a primary reason the achievement gap, as highlighted by the review, has remained largely unchanged.

D.C. has a highly mobile population. In the context of school enrollment, this is compounded by our widely-used school choice policy. As such, it is imperative that we do not limit ourselves to using schools as the primary unit of measure when creating the recommended data warehouse. Instead, the database should be based on longitudinal student data. This would allow us to better identify effective programs, investigate suspicious statistics such as high rates of mid-year and between-year transfers, and diagnose patterns of poor performance or unusual groupings of students.

The risk of having such a database be school-centric is that it would further establish that schools should be ranked by who they teach rather than by how well they serve the needs of the city's population. As indicated in the graph below, there is a strong correlation between a school's proficiency rate and its concentration of students considered to be "at-risk." It is also clear that our DCPS neighborhood schools have a disproportionate number of highly-concentrated at-risk populations. With school choice thoroughly utilized, this is not a natural population distribution. With a student-centric database, we would be able to perform a more granular analysis of the causes of such trends.

The current incentive structure for schools in D.C. is to teach to proficiency, a euphemism for being on grade level. This leads schools to aspire to one of two goals: being a school that is for high-achievers who are already on grade level or being a school that enables students to cross the threshold into proficiency. Unfortunately, aspiring to either of these two goals leads us away from focusing on the highest-need students.

With teacher evaluation tools like IMPACT, we extend this incentive structure into the decision making of teachers. As noted in Michael Allison Chandler's February 6th article, *District embarks on plan to bring more quality teachers to poor schools*, teachers rated Highly Effective are concentrated in Ward 3. Some of this may be that it is easier to be rated Highly Effective at a school with a lower at-risk population. Some of this may be that Highly Effective teachers will not risk their



jobs to teach highly-concentrated high-need populations. Neither is a reasonable result for a teacher evaluation program that is meant to ensure all of our students receive the high quality education they deserve.

This incentive could be modified if we instead focused on student growth and coupled this with a demand that our schools serve all students. Some students fit more readily into existing school structures and routines. A student who is years behind may require interventions beyond those provided in a traditional classroom setting. This would undoubtedly be true for students who have suffered through trauma. The concern is that these interventions come with costs – both in terms of staffing and in terms of potential disruption to the learning environment of others. The city's at-risk funds are an attempt to address this reality. We must also ensure that our policies do not unintentionally concentrate our students with atypical needs.

Student growth is important. But unless our schools and LEAs commit to serving whichever students they receive, unacceptable concentrations of need will ensue. Given that expulsion rates vary dramatically between schools and LEAs, as documented in Emma Brown's article *D.C. charter schools expel students at far higher rates than traditional public schools*, this commitment can not be taken as a given. To ensure it is, we must monitor student churn in general, whether it is a result of expulsions or other causes, and implement policies to reduce it.

It is imperative that we ask ourselves what governance structure will help ensure that all students are benefiting from school. Mayoral control was supposed to allow more effective targeted interventions. The PERAA review seems to indicate this has not happened. We must now ask ourselves, what about our laws must be changed to ensure the same is not true in another five or eight years?