



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
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WASHINGTON, DC 20004

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COUNCILMEMBER, AT-LARGE
CHAIR, COMMITTEE ON FACILITIES AND PROCUREMENT

February 3, 2020

Dear Colleagues:

Tomorrow, we will vote on an emergency bill to keep open the Washington Metropolitan Opportunity Academy (Washington Met). District of Columbia Public Schools made a decision years ago to give up on Washington Met and now is using its struggling performance to justify closing the school. Sadly, over the past several years, the city has starved Washington Met of resources. The outcomes we see now reflect neither the need for this school nor the potential of its students, but the lack of investment from leadership.

These are students for whom other doors have been closed. They are our most disengaged students who have some of the highest barriers, yet they have not given up on themselves. We cannot give up on them either. Without Washington Met, students who are put out of other schools will fall through the cracks. With the Council's intervention, we can keep open this safety net school and give the city time to identify additional resources. I urge you to vote in favor of this bill.

Important Facts:

The current state of Washington Met reflects deliberate disinvestment despite the high needs of its students. In 2013, Washington Met had 280 high school students. Today, it has dwindled to 150 high school and junior high school students. The decline of nearly half the student population in just a few years raises concerning questions that the Council must ask. Washington Met has no librarian, no art teacher, no sports teams, no extracurricular activities, only three social workers, and one half-time school psychologist for a concentration of students with some of the highest needs in the city. Until January 24, 2020, its "library" consisted of boxes of books thrown into a room (attached). In 2013, it had a librarian, art teacher, sports teams, extracurricular activities, and a clinical team. If the Council fails to pass the emergency bill, it is condoning the disinvestment.

The city does not have a plan for the current students, except to ask the Council to trust that DCPS will place them in other schools and prepare over-age seventh graders for high school in four months. Even if DCPS leadership could fulfil this unrealistic promise, there will be future students who are put out of traditional schools or unable to succeed in other school settings, so the pipeline of students who need a school like Washington Met will not end in the near future. They must have a school to catch them. It would be sad and unacceptable for the Council, which has the authority to intervene and an obligation to be a check and balance on the executive, to allow this school to close.

The rhetoric is that the city is shutting down a failing school. The reality is that the city quit on this school years ago. The Council has an opportunity and an obligation to intervene on behalf of these and future Washington Met students. The emergency bill will keep the school open through the 2020/2021 school year, which will give the Council, and the Mayor and Chancellor, if they choose to engage, time to consider funding, and time to develop a long-term strategy sufficient for the needs of this student population.

Opposing Arguments:

- *This is a decision for the Mayor and Chancellor*

Virtually every decision is a decision for the executive. However, our role in a system of checks and balances requires us to do more than just defer to the executive branch. Here, we have an obligation to question the lack of investment in students with such high needs and intervene to give these students a real chance with the resources they need to succeed. Simply deferring to the Mayor and Chancellor who gave up on this school years ago is abdicating our duty.

- *These students will be placed at other schools*

These students used to be at other schools. They are now at Washington Met because they did not succeed in other school environments. The other DCPS Opportunity Academies do not have capacity to absorb these students, and there is no other Opportunity Academy for junior high school students. The District has other Alternative High Schools that include the STAY schools. These schools offer alternative settings for older students starting at age 16 through adulthood.¹ These schools were created to provide older students a school in a non-traditional setting. They were not designed for students who have been put out of traditional schools or who may need the individualized attention that Washington Met students require.

Even if DCPS could successfully place all of these students at other schools, this is not the end of the pipeline of need. The future students who need the assistance that Washington Met is supposed to provide will not have a place to go. These students who are put out of traditional schools will fall through the cracks.

- *If the Mayor won't support Washington Met, keeping it open will not help these students*

Washington Met has not had the resources to succeed for many years. The Council has the power of the purse and is now keenly aware of the lack of investment in Washington Met. After we pass the emergency bill, we can work with stakeholders to ensure that it has appropriate resources for this specific student population and reporting to monitor the performance of the school.

¹ District of Columbia Public Schools, *Alternative High Schools*, <https://dcps.gov/alternativehs>, (assessed January 31, 2020). *Please note that DCPS removed this page from the website on February 3, 2020.

I am confident in the ability of the mayor and the Chancellor to correct the trajectory of Washington Met if they choose. If the Mayor and Chancellor do not want to support Washington Met, the Council has the proper legislative and budget authority to do so.

- *We need the school for swing space*

The District needs school swing space, but we cannot close a school of last opportunity in order meet that need.

- *The outcome data proves that we need to close this school*

The outcome data reflects what we have put into this school. Any school with needs this high will fail with investments this low. Closing this school will improve the District's overall school performance statistics, but it will do so at the expense of our students who need a second chance, both now and in the future.

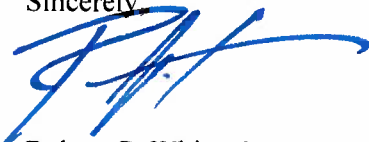
Data has its limits. That is why there must be a human backstop. Here, poor data was created through intentional disinvestment or by deliberate neglect. The students at Washington Met continue to suffer the consequences of poor leadership.

I had the honor of being the 2013 commencement speaker for Washington Met. I will never forget that ceremony. If you have ever been to a graduation for students who were not supposed to graduate, you know that it is a celebration like no other.

There must be a place for students who have not succeeded in other school settings but who are still trying. Washington Met has suffered from poor leadership above the pay grade of those in the school. The consequence of that poor leadership will fall on the students of Washington Met and the students who need Washington Met in the future. Closing this school is a pathway to poverty and prison.

“We come to school for a reason because society basically gave up on us. Our schools that we were in, gave up on us. Here, they are like, “This is your second chance. We’re not going to put you out. We’re going to push you out: We’re going to push you to greatness.” –Ashanti Winstead, student at Washington Metropolitan High School.²

Sincerely



Robert C. White, Jr.
Councilmember, At-Large
Council of the District of Columbia

² District of Columbia Public Schools, *Investments in Opportunity Academies*, <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/investments-opportunity-academies>, (assessed February 3, 2020).