

Wolf Testimony on OSSE Independence
October 2021

Good morning, and thank you for the chance to testify. I'm testifying in support of OSSE independence as a former teacher and a current parent and education researcher. I want to throw back to 2007 to the testimony of Jane Hannaway who worked at Urban Institute at the time. Back in 2007, she testified, and I quote, "Governance reform is 'no magic bullet' for boosting student achievement" She continued, "Governance reforms identify who has authority to act in different arenas, but they do not specify what actors or agencies actually do. And it is what individuals and agencies do that affects student outcomes." She also notes that "Student performance gains in recent years have been greatest in large urban school systems. So just showing that particular cities with mayoral control have had gains does not say much." Indeed.

What do we know exactly? Not much, unfortunately. A recent paper from researchers at Mathematica argued that DC showed higher gains than a sample of districts that excluded four states, a few counties, New Orleans, Denver, and Newark. Okay. And what exactly was linked with student gains? Was it the magic of the mayor? Was it charter schools? Was it higher teacher salaries which may have affected the supply and quality of teachers in DC? In correspondence with the authors of the Mathematica paper, they state, "We haven't tried to untangle which reforms mattered in this paper." It is very interesting how many people will testify today that nothing should be changed in DC when they cannot testify as to what actually "worked" in DC. Frankly, this is evidence that there are many people benefitting, either professionally and/or personally, from the status quo.

Let me tell you who is NOT benefitting from the status quo. Parents. Teachers. Students. Those without power. Waiting four years to unseat the Mayor to have any say-so in education whatsoever for the people most impacted by education is wholly insufficient.

But I agree with Hannaway's assessment that it's not the type of governance model per se that matters, it's what you do with it. And in DC, what we've done with it is shut out the voice of the people and defer to those with the purse strings and the political capital.

DC is also unique in that we don't even have an independent state agency. One of the main functions of state agencies is to provide accountability and oversight, but how can OSSE do that when their hands are tied by their boss, the Mayor, who doesn't really want accountability? Bad news out of OSSE means loss of votes for the Mayor. Can't have that.

DC is notorious among researchers for its lack of quality data and the hurdles that researchers have to overcome to conduct research in the District. Most of the requests to conduct research by external researchers are denied by OSSE. Why? Doesn't OSSE want to know what's working? No, not really, especially when it may expose something that the Mayor doesn't like.

I'm also going to be honest that making OSSE independent of the Mayor isn't going to solve OSSE's problems overnight. There's a whole culture that probably needs to change. It's going to take time, probably years, for OSSE to build the muscles it needs to actually do its job. But this legislation is the clear first step.

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Hannaway concluded her testimony in 2007 by asking and answering the question, “What might DC do to improve student performance? Data systems. Without good data systems, the school district is flying blind and susceptible to the ‘best guesses’ of well-intentioned but possibly poor informed advocates. Good information also provides ballast for the system and helps to curb inappropriate political policy maneuvering.” I think it’s fair to say we’ve been flying blind since 2007 or possibly even earlier. At some point, we’re going to have to move on from the carefully curated talking points and ask, how can we serve our students better? To do that, we need better data. We need information. And we can’t have it under our current system because if it were possible, then we would already have it, and we don’t.

So, yes, make OSSE independent of the Mayor. But we also need to consider how to mitigate some of the other downsides of the top-down educational governance system we have. Thank you.