

[What follows is a narrative, starting in mid-October 2022, to get via FOIA from PCSB the source files for the column on exhibit 9 of the FY21 financial analysis report titled “total grants and other contributions,” broken out in terms of state, local, and other grants; philanthropy; and whatever else is contained in that column for each school. This narrative is long, boring, and, not coincidentally, an excellent example why charter governance in DC is abysmal and DC taxpayers have no real way of understanding philanthropic revenue in the charter sector.]

The first FOIA production I received on November 8 was not original source files, but a spread sheet PCSB apparently created just for me that had the following categories:

- private grants
- state grants
- cash contributions
- in kind contributions

Because the spreadsheet didn't specify philanthropic contributions nor explained what is meant by “private grants,” “state grants,” or “cash contributions,” there was no way to determine whether “cash contribution” was the same as, or different from, philanthropic revenue.

So I asked about these terms and requested the source files again. About two weeks later, I got the following message, from PCSB director of finance Michael Bayuk by way of the PCSB FOIA officer:

“Private grants are the same as philanthropic contributions. State grants are funds from the state. Cash contributions most likely are philanthropic funds, but we do not collect that extra level of detail. In-kind contributions may be from federal, state, or private sources – we do not know because we do not collect that extra level of detail.”

I was also told the following by the PCSB FOIA officer:

“The source for this data is an Excel spreadsheet that each school submits to our data portal. . . . I have been experiencing technical difficulties downloading these completed spreadsheets, but I've reached out to our data team, and once they help me download the files, I can send them to you next week.”

Almost 2 weeks after that message, I got another message from the FOIA officer, noting further difficulties with the source files and thanking me for my patience.

A week later after that, I got the following message from the FOIA officer: (boldface mine)

“The source of the data that you’ve requested is spreadsheets that each school completes every year and uploads into our data system. When these spreadsheets are uploaded, each entry is added to our data system as a discrete piece of data. As all the data from those spreadsheets is in our data system, we no longer have a need for the original spreadsheets, and they are transferred to our long-term storage system. We can retrieve files from long-term storage, but it’s a lengthy process where we need to request the files one by one.

“As an alternative, I was able to export the data directly from our data system into a series of spreadsheets, one for each school. These spreadsheets include the same data that was provided in the original spreadsheet, but the formatting is different.”

I was then given a link for these newly created spreadsheets—and then this note (boldface mine):

“As the data contained in these spreadsheets is the same as the data in the original spreadsheets, **these will likely be sufficient for your purposes. If you do need us to retrieve the original spreadsheets, let me know and I can begin the process of requesting the files.**

“Please note that neither the original spreadsheets, nor the versions I’m providing to you include any detail beyond the dollar amount listed in each category. If you are looking for more detail about these entries, you may be able to find it in the schools’ fiscal audits. Audits for all schools are available through 2020 and DC PCSB is currently in the process of adding the 2021 audits as well.”

Because this—again!—was not original source files, as I had requested two months prior, I asked again.

Finally, in the third week of January 2023, I got something!

Except it didn’t (again) exactly respond to my FOIA request.

For one, the files provided were not complete, but for only a subset of charters that appeared to be completely random.

For another, all the files were dated January 17, 2023 on the website on which PCSB had posted them for my retrieval. But as that was not when they were submitted to PCSB, that suggested they were (AGAIN!) not original source files. As it was, the “properties” of each excel file were disabled, obscuring whatever their real creation date was.

Additionally, the files had a line item called “income from philanthropy” not reported in an identical way on either the FY21 financial analysis report or the other spreadsheets PCSB had provided me before.

Suffice it to say that I got no response to my request to have my FOIA request actually fulfilled completely until after I wrote to the general counsel of PCSB at the beginning of February 2023, outlining all of this.

Shortly thereafter, I got two productions in February 2023:

--one production from February 10 contained 24 files, with 9 spreadsheets, each one for one school, and a folder marked “corrections” with 15 folders, each of which was marked with the name of an individual school and contained both a spreadsheet AND a PDF letter from PCSB to that charter school. The FOIA officer explained (boldface mine) that “for fifteen schools, some of **the source data was subsequently corrected** following discussion between DC PCSB and the LEA. For these fifteen schools, we are providing both the spreadsheet submission and the email communication between DC PCSB and the LEA making the revision.”

--another production from February 27 contained 22 folders, each of which was marked with the name of an individual school and contained both a spreadsheet as well as a PDF letter from PCSB to the charter school.

Thankfully, the spreadsheets all had “income from philanthropy” marked on them—even though all the spreadsheets were dated February 2023, thus suggesting that they were not in fact original files.

In both February productions, many of the spreadsheets had markings next to numbers with the term “revised.” But none of that appeared to have anything to do with the letters from PCSB to individual charters contained in the productions. Underscoring the unique designation of that term “revised,” a spreadsheet from the February 27 production did not have anything marked “revised” yet nonetheless had a letter from PCSB adjusting values for its accounting purposes. There was also an unmarked spreadsheet with no PCSB letter associated with it, yet still bearing the designation “revised” next to several columns.

In addition to other, small, oddities (and one LEA’s spreadsheet being omitted entirely), I learned that the “revised” mark was not added after submission, but was included at the time of submission because of the template some of the schools had used.

As if the delays and obfuscations (including apparently messing with original files) weren’t enough, the spreadsheets I got (starting in mid-January and ending in early March) that appeared to be original source files (remember: no original dates!) were completely jumbled.

Here's the order in which these spreadsheets were sent to me, over the course of more than a month:

CC Prep
Academy of Hope
Mary M Behune
Chavez
Goodwill
Children's Guild
Thurgood
Rocketship
DC Prep
Carlos
Friendship
KIPP
LAMB
Basis
DCI
Center City
LAYC
Hope
Whitlow Stokes
Roots
Achievement Prep
Youthbuild
Briya
EL Haynes
LAYC (this was a duplicate)
Unmarked
Sojourner
Creative
Bridges
Appletree
Cedar Tree
DC Bilingual
Digital Pioneers
Harmony (unmarked spreadsheet)
Ingenuity
Kingsman
Maya Angelou
Monument
Social Justice
St. Coletta
Statesmen
Family Place

Next Step
Latin
Breakthrough
Cap City
Cap Village
DC Scholars
Eagle
Early childhood
Girls Global
Howard
IDEA
Inspired
Lee
Meridian
Mundo Verde
Paul
Perry
Richard Wright
SELA
Shining Stars
Two Rivers
Wash Global
WLA
Yu Ying
SEED

If you have read this far and are amazed by the stupidity inherent in all of this, think about all the people who do not have 6 MONTHS to wade through and fight blatant and repeated FOIA violations by a DC public body—and all the people who do not have time to wade through these documents that are (probably, hopefully) original source files just to find out how much philanthropic revenue DC charters got.

If this seems difficult, senseless, and stupid, rest assured: it is.

Ask who this state of affairs benefits.