



D.C. POLICY
CENTER

D.C. STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION PUBLIC MEETING
PANEL ON MAYOR BOWSER'S FISCAL YEAR 2025 PROPOSED
BUDGET

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Old Council Chambers

Marion S. Barry, Jr. Building

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Good evening, Chairperson Thompson, and members of the DC State Board of Education. My name is Yesim Sayin, and I am the Executive Director of the D.C. Policy Center, an independent think tank focused on advancing policies for a growing, vibrant, and compelling District of Columbia. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Mayor Bowser’s Fiscal Year 2025 budget proposal includes an increase of 12.4 percent to the foundation level funding formula. However, even with this historic increase, total education spending in fiscal year 2025—approximately \$2.45 billion—will be below fiscal year 2024 levels (at least \$2.7 billion).¹ This is largely the result of the expiration of the ESSER funds, which infused \$540 million to D.C.’s public schools since the beginning of the pandemic. DCPS and charter LEAs also received significant amounts of non-formula dollars throughout the pandemic. These are also mostly eliminated in the Fiscal Year 2025 budget proposal.² In February, the D.C. Policy Center estimated the size of the pending fiscal cliff at 14 percent of instructional dollars for DCPS and 15 percent for charter LEAs so the proposed 12.4 percent increase will not fully make up for the losses.

LEAs will experience the change in their budget differently,³ depending on how they spent their ESSER funds, how much remains to carry over, and how they plan to use any carry-over funds, if

¹ Sayin Y. and Coffin C. (2024) The fiscal future of public education in the District of Columbia. D.C. Policy Center. Available at <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/dc-fiscal-future-in-education/>.

² The D.C. Policy Center estimated that LEAs received approximately \$190 million in local funds outside of the formula. DCPS will continue to receive non-formula dollars for IMPACT bonuses and the Early Stages program in Fiscal Year 2025, for a total of approximately \$30 million.

³ For larger LEAs with multiple schools (and especially DCPS), school budgets will also reflect LEA level decisions on how to allocate funds across different campuses. Mayor Bowser proposes to eliminate the Schools First Budgeting Act, so DCPS schools will no longer have the 100 percent safe harbor provision for their budgets.

they can, in fiscal year 2025.⁴ LEAs with higher shares of at-risk students (which received a disproportionately higher share of ESSER funds),⁵ LEAs with a weaker enrollment growth, and LEAs serving earlier grades (which typically lost students but added staffing early in the pandemic)⁶ are likely to experience bigger fiscal stress, and therefore face tougher decisions.

Data reported to OSSE by LEAs show that schools used ESSER funds most commonly for accelerated learning activities, including targeted supports for vulnerable students such as tutoring. Some of these activities may have to be cut.⁷ Additionally, there was significant increase in staffing throughout the first three years of the pandemic. Between school years 2019-20 and 2022-23, total staffing across LEAs increased by 11 percent while enrollment increased by only 0.4 percent. Teacher retention has returned to pre-pandemic levels in school year 2022-23, but some schools may experience staff reductions because of diminished funding.

While LEAs are facing tough decisions, overall, the public education cluster fared relatively well in Mayor Bowser's fiscal year 2025 budget proposal compared to others. Given the fiscal environment and demands to reverse significant cuts to other social programs, it will likely be difficult for the Council to restore public education funding to fiscal year 2024 levels. Importantly, LEAs should brace for a difficult fiscal future, and not expect any significant budget increases in the coming years. The financial plan shows that spending will not increase between fiscal years 2025 and 2026 and will grow at a tepid 2 percent each in fiscal years 2027 and 2028. In fact, the

⁴ Rules around how LEAs can spend leftover ESSER funds have been relaxed to allow for more uses over a longer period, but LEAs must apply early, with amended plans through OSSE to be able to carry over. They also cannot spend any amounts they carry over on personnel.

⁵ The proposed budget increases the at-risk weight to 0.30 from 0.24 (increase of \$880).

⁶ The median elementary school lost 12 students but added two FTEs including one teacher throughout the pandemic.

⁷ The proposed budget is investing \$4.8 million in tutoring.

public education cluster spending is projected to decline by 1 percent in fiscal year 2026, and the financial plan shows only a 1 percent increase in the out years. Given this picture, the most important task for D.C.'s public schools, education agencies, and researchers is to identify what programs work and generate the highest impact so schools can prioritize these investments in the coming years.

Between school years 2019-20 and 2023-24, enrollment in District's public schools increased by 9 percent, while overall spending increased by 56 percent.⁸ But this spending growth did not translate into full recovery. Learning outcomes still lagged behind pre-pandemic levels at the end of school year 2022-23, especially in math.⁹ There is some funding to build on the early literacy work that already began,¹⁰ but we need to know how efforts will focus on math and we need to figure out what is working to accelerate learning.¹¹

Chronic absenteeism continues to be a significant problem,¹² undermining learning. The Fiscal Year 2025 budget proposal includes both broad system level interventions and targeted efforts

⁸ Sayin & Coffin (2024).

⁹ Learning outcomes on the statewide assessment improved by 3 percentage points (and only for elementary and middle school students) but we still lag behind pre-pandemic levels by 4 percentage points in English Language Arts (ELA) and 7 percentage points in math. For details, see Coffin, C. 2023. "Chart of the week: New PARCC data show overall gain for DC students last year—but high school progress remained flat." D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/parcc-data-gains/>

¹⁰ The proposed budget is dedicating \$2 million for literacy instruction materials.

¹¹ A preliminary evaluation of the District's High Impact Tutoring program finds that the program has helped reduce absenteeism, but no findings have been released on how or whether High Impact Tutoring has improved learning outcomes. For details, see National Student Support Accelerator. 2024. "Early Findings Show Evidence that High-Impact Tutoring Increases Student Attendance in D.C. Schools." National Student Support Accelerator. Retrieved from <https://studentsupportaccelerator.org/news/early-findings-show-evidence-high-impact-tutoring-increases-student-attendance-dc-schools>

¹² Last school year 44 percent of the students (and estimated 34,000 students) were chronically absent, with majority of these absences being "unexcused." According to the OSSE attendance report for school year 2022-23, the average student was absent for 22 days (up from 16 pre-pandemic), with 14 of these absences being unexcused. New data for this school year through November shows a 6 percentage point

to address truancy,¹³ but we need to know more about what works best to reduce absenteeism through research and sharing of best practices.

Outcomes for high school students, who were mostly in middle school when the pandemic began, are particularly worrisome. There is now a greater disconnect between high school graduation and promotion,¹⁴ and other indicators of secondary success like attendance,¹⁵ SAT scores,¹⁶ academic achievement, and postsecondary success.¹⁷ We need to know what works best to improve high school student success in academic outcomes.

decrease in chronic absenteeism. For more information, please see OSSE's 2023-24 Mid-year Attendance Brief:

https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/Mid_Year%20Attendance_1_Pager%203_29_2024.pdf

¹³ Investments include \$375,000 in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME)'s budget for "nudges" to improve attendance, DC School Connect Program provides school transportation for 350 students at \$7.2M, and the PASS and ACE truancy interventions programs at an additional \$7M to serve an estimated 680 youth. The Show Up, Stand Out or SUSO program is eliminated at \$2M. This program had 1,895 referrals in SY21-22.

¹⁴ More high school students are being promoted: 9th grade repetition rates have decreased by 3 percentage points and graduation rates have increased by 8 percentage points since pre-pandemic. Coffin, C. and Mason, H. 2024. *State of D.C. Schools, 2022-23: Challenges to pandemic recovery in a new normal*. D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/state-of-dc-schools-2022-23/>

¹⁵ A larger share of high school students are chronically absent, at 60 percent in school year 2022-23. High school rates compare to 37 percent and 38 percent of elementary and middle school students, respectively, and higher than 51 percent of high schoolers before the pandemic. For more information, please see Mason, H. 2023. "Chronic absenteeism is still higher than pre-pandemic, especially in high school grades." D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/chronic-absenteeism-dc-public-schools/>

¹⁶ The share of high schoolers meeting the SAT college and career benchmark is steady at 20 percent and has decreased for Black and economically disadvantaged students. For details, see Dodds, N. 2024. "Rising graduation rates and falling SAT scores for DC students." D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/dc-graduation-rates-and-sat-scores/>

¹⁷ Postsecondary enrollment has declined since the pandemic by 3 percentage points, and 18 out of every 100 9th graders complete postsecondary, with large disparities between subgroups.. Coffin, C. and Mason, H. 2024. *State of D.C. Schools, 2022-23: Challenges to pandemic recovery in a new normal*. D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/state-of-dc-schools-2022-23/>

The proposed Fiscal Year 2025 budget also includes investments to better connect the high school experience to college and career outcomes.¹⁸ In this area, the Office of Education through Employment Pathways is a step in the right direction for the data-driven evaluations we desperately need.¹⁹

Schools report investing 7 percent of their ESSER funds in mental health and have added more full-time mental health professionals,²⁰ but student mental health indicators have not improved.²¹ One disturbing indicator is out-of-school suspension rates, which returned to pre-pandemic levels notwithstanding the significant limitations brought on this practice by the Student Fair Access to School Act in 2019. Again, we need more evidence to better understand what interventions work the best to improve student wellbeing.

Under Mayor Bowser's proposed budget, D.C.'s public schools have avoided a deep fiscal cliff that is impacting many of the other urban school districts elsewhere in the country. But schools should prepare for a fiscally tight future. In the coming years, it will be imperative to direct investments to what works best and communicate budget plans early and transparently. Having clear and consistent metrics for success, using existing data to examine the root causes of systems-level problems, collecting new, program-level data for rigorous evaluations, and building

¹⁸ These include investments in work-based learning, with career and technical education, advanced internship opportunities, and career ready internships at an expanded version of the existing Advanced Technical Center in Ward 5 as well as a new Advanced Technical Center in Ward 8. There is also funding for continued dual enrollment opportunities so that high school students can earn college credit and a scholarship program at UDC for a behavioral health pathway.

¹⁹ Coffin, C. and Rubin, J. 2021. *Measuring early career outcomes in D.C.* D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/measuring-outcomes/>

²⁰ These include investments in trauma-informed practices, meals, and mental health services and supports, among other interventions. Schools have also shifted away from part-time mental health professional staff and toward full-time mental health professional staff.

²¹ Perceptions about being loved, challenged, and prepared slightly declined since the fall of 2020 as captured by the Panorama surveys and the share of D.C.'s high school students who reported feeling sad or hopeless increased to 36 percent from the pre-pandemic share of 33 percent.

strong partnerships across LEAs, government agencies, partner organizations and researchers will be tremendously important.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to take your questions.