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**January 6, 2019**

***Ruth Wattenberg, Ward 3 Member, DC State Board of Education.***

New Term!; Research; School STAR ratings; "A Better Way to Measure Quality"; DCPS calendar survey...

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## **Sworn In. Ready to Go!**



### **On Wednesday, I was sworn in for my second term representing Ward 3 on DC's State Board of Education. Thanks Ward 3!**

You can see [my remarks here](#). The gist: When I was first elected 4 years ago, I generally believed, as much of the city did, that a strong foundation--I actually called it "awesome"--had been set for continued educational progress. But since then, after visiting dozens of schools and talking with hundreds, probably thousands, of parents, students, teachers, and principals--in W3 and around the city--my views shifted, as my concerns grew. These concerns have deepened with public revelations about inflated grad rates, high teacher turnover, and overall lack of transparency (among other issues), which have led many in the city to become much more concerned.

On the positive side of the ledger, I spoke hopefully of the DC Council's vote (at its last meeting of 2018!) to establish an ongoing research effort on DC education, with the aim of better understanding what is and isn't working in our schools--**and what we can and must change**. (See below for a bit more on the new "Research Practice

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aren't proficient at reading--and 62% of our **at-risk 3rd graders** earn the bottom scores (1's or 2's on PARCC's 5-pt scale, on which a 4 is designated proficient). Earlier in the day, DC Council Chair Phil [Mendelson emphasized](#) the downstream result: Only 1/3 of high school students scored "proficient" in English.

Unlike many questions in education, the scientific evidence is overwhelming that virtually every child can end 3<sup>rd</sup> grade as a grade-level reader if provided sound reading instruction. So what aren't we doing right? How can we do better? Is it the way we teach? Inadequate interventions for students whose learning is impeded by trauma? Inadequate or untimely identification and interventions for students with learning disabilities?

If we don't provide students with a strong elementary education—including grade level reading and math ability and a strong foundation in social studies, science, and arts instruction that provides the background knowledge to comprehend later grades' material--our middle schools and high schools will not be able to adequately provide students with the advanced education we want them to have.

I am chastened, but I am an optimist. I genuinely look forward to making and seeing progress in my next term. We have a new Deputy Mayor of Education. We will have a new DCPS Chancellor. We have 4 new members of the State Board of Education, every one with strong teaching experience. (See their remarks [here](#).) The DC Council has a new urgency, apparent in the strong focus on education at the swearing in of Council members. ([See their remarks here](#). Councilmembers Cheh, McDuffie, and Mendelson each emphasized education in their remarks.) And, we have a new commitment to research, a powerful, until now neglected, tool in helping us.

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## Research Practice Partnership: Half a loaf is better than none...

As noted above, the DC Council, at its last meeting of 2018, voted to establish a Research Practice Partnership. But first a little backstory:

Last spring, Councilmember Mary Cheh (W3) proposed legislation to establish an independent education research collaborative in DC to conduct research on DC education. Like similar entities that exist in many other cities, this one would partner with a research institution (either a think tank or university) and develop its research agenda in coordination with a Steering Committee of stakeholders representing a wide variety of perspectives. (The founder of the original and well-regarded RPP, Anthony Bryk of the Chicago Consortium on School Reform, has said that when the Committee framing the research includes both those who are certain that whatever is being investigated will be a huge success AND those who are certain it will be a disaster, vital research questions don't get neglected--intentionally or unintentionally.)

The idea of the Collaborative was so popular that in July, 12 of 13 members of the DC Council voted to provide forward funding to begin planning for it.

Quickly, it was learned the (previous) Acting Deputy Mayor Of Education (DME) and the city's other mayoral-appointed education leaders (DCPS Chancellor, State Superintendent of Education, Charter School Board) were trying to circumvent the effort

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and other efforts to amend the original Cheh bill, see my [previous newsletter](#) account here.

### ***Endgame, final compromise: The proof will be in the pudding***

Ultimately, the Council approved a bill that was negotiated between Council Chairman Mendelson and the Mayor's appointees. As adopted, there will be an Advisory Committee but mayoral appointees will have an automatic majority. It's also unclear what the authority of the Advisory Council will be; there's at least the suggestion that the ultimate research agenda could be left to a negotiation between the research partner and the mayor's appointees. Further, the law doesn't require that the education agencies make available to researchers the needed data--only that the research partner and the city come to agreement on this via a Memorandum of Understanding. CM Cheh tried to fix this with an amendment that to assure that all needed data would be made available. Unfortunately, that amendment was not adopted.

I'm bothered that the mayor's appointees care so much about being in control. Such control has not been an issue in Chicago, where the initial Steering Committee included just 2 mid-level researchers from the school district and no other mayoral appointees. I'm not aware of it being an issue elsewhere either. Why do they regard it as such a big deal?

Nonetheless, as I said when sworn in, I remain an optimist. I understand that Chairman Mendelson and our Acting Deputy Mayor of Education worked closely on this. I trust that he believes the negotiated protections are sufficient to assure that the research agenda and its execution will be conducted free from undue mayoral pressure. I hope so. The proof will be in the pudding. [Sorry for all the cliches. I normally avoid them like the plague :)]

### **School STAR Ratings: Less than meets the eye?**

Last month, DC issued its STAR ratings, awarding 1-5 stars to each school in the city. One purpose of the ratings is to help parents choose the best school for their kids—and presumably many will put a lot of weight on the star rating. But is that assumption right? Are schools with many stars better than others? Are their kids learning more and progressing faster than other kids? Do their kids get a better curriculum? Experience better teaching?

The evidence tells us it's not so simple. The largest factor in the STAR rating (50%) is the portion of a school's students who have reached a particular score threshold on the PARCC test--either a 4 or 5 (and to lesser extent 3) on the PARCC (which counts for 30% of the total rating); or a school-specific threshold based on the school's current distance from the PARCC proficient threshold (which counts for for 20% of the total).

But the proportion of students who have reached these thresholds says virtually nothing about the quality of the school. **Most of a student's spring score is determined by his/her fall score.** A [research brief](#) from the Northwest Education Association argues that a full "80% of spring achievement is accounted for by fall achievement." All things being equal, students who know more in the fall, will know more in the spring. And kids who knew more in the fall by and large new more the prior spring and so on. In short: **Last spring's scores** (and therefore the number that meet the various thresholds) **reflect what students have learned in school and out-of-school over their whole**

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spring growth."

### ***School Quality not fairly/accurately captured in STAR rating***

Other research argues that snapshot test scores reflect the effect of non-school factors and correlate very highly with student poverty. Whichever way you think about it, it does not make sense to rate school quality based on factors that more accurately reflect students' family income than school quality.

One better way to identify schools that contribute more than most to students' learning is through the MGP, short for median growth percentile, which accounts for 20% of the STAR score for elementary and middle schools. By comparing how much each student in a school learns compared to students not in the school with similar scores, it provides an imperfect measure of how much students progressed in different schools. Not surprisingly, if we graded schools according to MGP, the star ratings would change, in some cases very substantially!

I am hopeful that the State Board of Education and the State Superintendent will all be able to work together to revise the basis for these ratings. Even better, we could, as some other states do, avoid the star rating all together and publish, transparently, the school's proficiency levels AND its growth levels, as well as any other measures we think are important to make public. Stay Tuned!

## **Short Takes:**

**Calendar: "A Better Way to Measure School Quality,"** with Jack Schneider, author of "A Better Way to Measure School Quality" and Director of Research for the Massachusetts Consortium of Innovative Education Assessment. Sponsored by SHAPPE, the Senior High Association of Parents, Principals, and Educators

Sat. January 26, 10:30AM-12PM

Columbia Hghts Education Campus, 3101 16th St NW

*Childcare and translation available if requested (Contact: [dc.shappe@gmail.com](mailto:dc.shappe@gmail.com))*

[Register here:](#)

### **Participate: DCPS Calendar Survey**

DCPS is soliciting feedback as it develops the final calendar for next year. (The first day is already settled: August 26 for traditional schools and August 12 for extended year schools.)

Click here for [info](#) on the proposals.

Click here to [participate](#). The survey is open until January.

### **Call the Ombudsman**

If you believe that your schools is not providing adequate services to your child, and you have been unable to resolve the issue on your own with school faculty or administration, consider reaching out to the State Board of Education's Ombudsman at [ombudsman@dc.gov](mailto:ombudsman@dc.gov) Also: [@DC\\_Ombuds](#).

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***Happy New Year!!!***

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