

Marjorie G. Neff, Chair of School Reform Commission

Testimony to City Council

School District of Philadelphia

May 17, 2016

Good morning, Council President Clarke and members of City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. My name is Marjorie Neff and I am the Chair of the School Reform Commission (“SRC”) of the School District of Philadelphia (the “District”). Before I begin I would like to acknowledge and thank my fellow commissioners Feather Houstoun, Sylvia Simms, Bill Green and Farah Jimenez for their service to Philadelphia’s students.

I am excited to be here this morning to share my enthusiasm for the work that is happening in Philadelphia’s public schools. As a member of the SRC, I make weekly visits to schools across Philadelphia, where my fellow Commissioners and I learn about the successes and common challenges facing our schools. On these informal visits, we tour classrooms and hear from students, staff, and family members about their experiences at the school. These visits allow us to experience, firsthand, the diversity of our schools and wide range of programs operating in service of Philadelphia’s roughly 200,000 public school students.

To respond to this vast array of needs, Dr. Hite and his team have built Action Plan 3.0, which arranges the District into five Networks of similar school communities in order to provide targeted educational services to our students.

In the Opportunity Network, schools and programs focus on serving approximately 5,000 of our most vulnerable students - those who are at-risk or already detached from schooling. We have visited a range of program options including Camelot Academy; a transitional program, the Juvenile Justice Center, and One Bright Ray; an accelerated high school. We’ve seen students in these programs find success through individualized supports, strong adult-youth relationships, and access to social, emotional, and behavioral supports.

In the Neighborhood Networks, our traditional District-run schools are grouped into nine (9) networks with the goal of ensuring that every student has a quality opportunity close to where they live. Each of these networks represents the diversity of their community and neighborhood. These schools work with community partners to bring innovative strategies and resources to support their students. In the fall, we attended South Philadelphia High School’s monthly partner meeting. We sat with more than 10 community partner organizations to analyze the school’s achievement data and strategize ways to increase their collective impact. At James G. Blaine Elementary School, we met family members who were engaged in building a School Advisory Council and we observed City Year members providing students tutoring and mentorship support.

Similarly, at Tanner Duckrey Elementary School, we met with many of the school's partners including Temple University, Stepping Stone Scholars, Education Works, and more.

Along with these networks, we have had the opportunity to see schools in the Turnaround Network, where strategic investments are being made to dramatically accelerate improvement in some of our lowest performing schools. The Innovation Network, where we've seen school communities make exciting advances in the implementation of inquiry-based learning models. And, finally, we've visited schools like Motivation High School in the Autonomy Network. A network of high performing, city-wide admission and magnet schools that have been given increased autonomy to manage their curriculum and affairs in a way that suits the distinctive student populations they serve.

Through these networks, and with our 83 charter schools, Dr. Hite has created a framework for fostering and growing an array of school options in Philadelphia, broad enough to meet the diverse needs of our students.

While each network is uniquely built to serve the needs of its students, they all face many similar challenges and successes. Most common among these is the challenge of years of budget cuts. At the school level, our communities have come together to manage those cuts and continue providing students with the best opportunities available. As we witnessed on each of our visits, schools have built strong partnerships that are advancing opportunities for students in Philadelphia despite our challenges. These partnerships, along with the dedicated work of our staff, students and families, have allowed communities to make progress, even in difficult times.

As a city, we have worked together to keep our schools open and support Dr. Hite as he has built a culture of fiscal accountability. Through the leadership of the Council President and fellow City Council members, the City of Philadelphia has increased its recurring, annual investments to the School District by more than \$400M since FY11. These local funds have enabled us to avoid making further cuts to programs and services that impact our students and families.

Thank you to the Council President and all Council members for your continued partnership and support for our schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the achievements of many of our schools and their strong communities. I look forward to sharing future examples of success in our schools as Dr. Hite furthers the work of Action Plan 3.0 with targeted investments this upcoming year.

With that, I'd like to introduce Dr. Hite, Superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia, to make his remarks.