

Joyce S. Wilkerson, Chair of School Reform Commission

Testimony to City Council

School District of Philadelphia

May 10 , 2017

Good morning, Council President Clarke and members of City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. My name is Joyce Wilkerson 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 Farah Jimenez, Bill Green, and Chris McGinley for their service to Philadelphia’s students.

Over the past few months, as Chair of the SRC, I have learned much about the details of our large, complex educational institution. I have met with members of Dr. Hite’s team, education advocates, partners who serve our students, City Council members, and other legislators. Furthermore, I’ve spent time visiting schools across the District, where I’ve had the chance to meet our tenacious school leaders, hard-working teachers, and bright students. These visits have been an informal opportunity to observe learning through the exciting, innovative initiatives happening at schools each and every day. Time and time again, I have been impressed by the interventions and programs I have seen in action during my school visits.

One example of such interventions is the focus on Early Literacy by the School District and City of Philadelphia. I am proud of the District’s significant and strategic investments made to ensure that all eight year-olds are reading on grade-level. These investments include new K-8 math and reading books for all levels, early literacy coaches, and additional investments to support our traditionally lowest performing schools. On our visit to the Clara Barton School, a large K-2 school serving approximately 800 students, we learned specifically about the Balanced Literacy Initiative. Barton is in its second year of implementing the program which centers on strategies such as literacy counseling, guided reading, and modeling. Teachers received paid training over the summer as well as support from the Literacy Coach during the school year. Literacy coaches offer professional development, support in the classroom, and observations and feedback to teachers as they implement the initiative. Through this important work, 78% of students at Barton are currently at their target literacy level. Furthermore, some early research has shown clear progress on instructional practices aimed at improving vocabulary, guided and independent reading, and read alouds.

The District is not alone in this work. The considerable investment in quality Pre-K by the City of Philadelphia, with your support in City Council, provides a fundamental building block to ensure that all children are arriving to Kindergarten more prepared and ready to learn. Additionally, this work is supported by the extensive number of partners involved with the city-wide Read by 4th Campaign. I am proud of Philadelphia for exemplifying true ‘collective impact’ through a coordinated effort and unified vision towards early literacy.

Another initiative I have been particularly impressed with in my school visits is the School Redesign Initiative. The School Redesign Initiative is an opportunity for talented, committed school leaders, educators, parents, and their community to come together and lead the critical work of redesigning their neighborhood school to meet the demands of the 21st century. Since 2014, the District has selected eight (8) schools that have demonstrated innovative ideas to engage all students in 21st century learning by leveraging community partnerships and identifying resources to improve academic performance. At Tilden Middle School, the strategy is focused on blended learning strategies for instruction and data-driven decision making. Over two years of implementation, all staff have received trainings and professional developments to launch the blended learning strategy and assess student learning and growth through online assessment tools. Teachers have common planning time to discuss student-level data and develop strategic plans that are individualized to the needs of each student. The application process for the next round of School Redesign is currently open with final proposals due in September.

I was further impressed by Regina, the Community School Coordinator at Tilden, who has become an integral part of their school community and team. Regina has strengthened the Redesign efforts at Tilden by engaging families and providing critical supports to students, thus allowing educators to focus on instruction and school climate.

Tilden is one of nine (9) Community Schools selected in the first cohort of the City’s Community School Initiative. Over the last year and half, the SRC, District, and Mayor’s Office of Education have worked in strong partnership to plan, develop, and execute community schools. These nine (9) schools have worked with their communities to build plans to improve access to new and existing services for students, families, and community members. Our strong partnership in this work has resulted in aligning efforts between the two organizations and local-level support to school principals and coordinators as they carry out these plans.

The SRC and District’s common goal is to create great schools close to where children live. This goes further for the SRC in ensuring that we are creating options for great schools close to where children live, regardless of the education sector - traditional or charter.

The guiding principles of our charter school work are quality, autonomy and equity. Our hope is that, through the hard work of our Charter Schools Office and the diligence of our charter schools, the charter sector in Philadelphia will become a place recognized for the uniform excellence of our charter schools both in their innovative academic work and their stewardship of public tax dollars. Currently, our sector includes 86 Philadelphia charter schools that serve approximately 65,000 students.

These are just some examples of the inspiring and impressive work I've learned more about in my short time as Commissioner. I am inspired and energized by the hard-work and dedication of Dr. Hite and his team, our educators, families, students and staff.

As a city, we have worked hard to share this positive message of exciting things happening in Philadelphia and highlight the hard-work of our students and staff. Through the leadership of Council President and fellow City Council members, the City has continued to invest in the School District and our young people. The City of Philadelphia has supported our work through the Pre-K and Community Schools initiatives. Today, I ask that each of you join me in continuing to share this positive message of highlighting the achievements of many of our schools and their strong communities. I am not an educator, but my time on the SRC has opened my eyes to the incredible efforts. I hope you will join me in sharing their stories with stakeholders, state legislators, community members, and the general public.

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

Thank you for the opportunity to share these comments with you today and I look forward to our partnership as we highlight the achievements of many of our schools and their strong communities.

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