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Testimony to City Council

School District of Philadelphia

May 10 , 2017

Good morning, President Clarke and City Council Members, and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. Thank you Chair Wilkerson and School Reform Commission Members in attendance.

Over the last year, we have continued our effort to strengthen our partnership with City Council and increase transparency. We have delivered detailed briefings and engaged in meaningful conversations on a number of key issues ranging from building facilities, to special education, to our efforts to recruit and retain a stronger and more diverse teacher workforce. We have delivered detailed quarterly financial reports. I thank all City Council members for their time, and their commitment over this last year to making our schools the best they can be.

Eight months ago, I rang in the 2016-2017 school year at Hill Freedman World Academy. I was proud to be there that day, as Hill Freedman began its year for the first time as one school community. At the time it was the strongest start to the school year since I became Superintendent. Today I am proud to say the school year that followed has been just as strong as its' beginning.

But there remains work to do.

Three years ago, we set aspirational and urgent goals for The School District of Philadelphia. Our four anchor goals represent the core of our work to create great schools close to where all children live. They include an unyielding focus on early literacy; improving academic growth for stronger college and career readiness; supporting principals and teachers who can bring out the best in our students; and working to ensure our finances are stable and fiscally responsible.

After years of difficult choices, we stabilized our budget, brought critical resources back into our schools like nurses and counselors, and invested millions in our lowest-performing schools. We introduced \$35 million worth of new textbooks into

schools, updated science labs with new and improved learning materials, gave teachers new laptops, and filled 99% of our teacher positions.

Our efforts are paying off. We continue to see improvements across the District, and we are encouraged by the progress we see in individual schools and classrooms. 115 District schools increased their SPR (School Progress Report) scores and 43 District schools went up an overall SPR tier. But while we have made progress and laid the foundation for future growth, we must also recognize that improving results in urban education does not come easy. It takes time.

Great schools are not the product of one year's work; they are a multi-year effort that requires changing mind-sets, changing expectations, and improving results. We remain committed to the programs we've put in place, knowing they will create measurable results and impact our students' future success.

As you are well aware, until last year, The School District of Philadelphia had been operating under extremely challenging budgetary conditions, which required many difficult and painful decisions. Decisions no one wants to ever have to repeat again. We appreciate your support when our funding from Harrisburg was dramatically cut, and thank you for standing up and putting the children of Philadelphia first.

I am proud to say we ended last year with a positive fund balance for the second consecutive year, and project we will do so again, this year. However, we find ourselves one year closer to the fiscal cliff we identified last year during this time.

The best funding system for Philadelphia schools is one that gives The School District of Philadelphia predictable, sustainable and equitable revenue sources. Recurring revenues enable continued investments in our schools, and over the last year we saw many important fiscal achievements for The School District of Philadelphia to that end.

We worked with leaders in Harrisburg to extend the Cigarette Tax, guaranteeing the District at least \$58 million annually moving forward, and supported rideshare legislation through Uber and Lyft which are projected to bring in over \$2 million annually.

Through smart fiscal management, we improved our bond rating for the first positive movement in the School District's credit outlook since 2010. That in turn helped us complete a major bond refunding, which will result in more than \$100 million in projected savings over the next 20 years.

These new, recurring revenues from the commercial property reassessment announced by the city will generate an average of \$65 million a year for the School District over the next five years and will allow us to make additional important investments including holding schools harmless at leveling for grades K-3, which will result in 47 additional teaching positions. We will also eliminate all 1st and 2nd grade split classes, impacting over 60 classes.

These new revenue projections have allowed us to significantly increase our contract offer to the PFT. I said at the start of the school year, one of my top priorities as Superintendent was to get a fair contract for our teachers and it remains a top priority.

I want everyone at Council to know that we remain at the table negotiating with the PFT and we continue to make progress. But a lack of a contract for our teachers has gone on long enough. Now is the time to get a fair contract that recognizes the hard work, sacrifices and dedication of our teachers.

So, let's review where we are. Last year, we began an ambitious 5-year, \$440 million investment plan which has touched every school in the District. With another year added, that investment plan now totals over \$526 million through fiscal year 2022.

Today I'm going to provide an update on those investments and our areas of focus, including our early literacy initiative; the progress we've made in staffing our schools with principals, teachers, nurses and counselors; our efforts to improve school climate and related capital investments; and our work to prepare our students for a career or college.

The first of these is our early literacy initiative, a campaign which is our top priority for the students in our District. Here's why:

Research has shown that students who are not proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school. And, this rate rises from four to six times more likely to drop out of high school when poverty is added into the mix. Reading is critical to a student's academic success because after 3rd grade, students transition from learning to read, to reading to learn, in nearly all subject areas. Not only that, but, by 4th grade, academic success in nearly all subject areas depends on a student's ability to read.

Right now only 30% of our children are reading on grade level by 4th grade. We have the opportunity - and the moral obligation - to make a real difference in the lives of over

200,000 children by ensuring that every child reads, at the appropriate level, by the end of third grade.

Therefore, over the last three years we have focused specifically on high-impact early literacy strategies that ensure all Kindergarten through 3rd grade students consistently receive high-quality literacy instruction. And while we are laying down a strong foundation and seeing progress, we must do more, and we must do it now. Mr. Council President, I would now like to play for you a video that highlights our efforts around early literacy.

Video plays

I would like to thank the teachers, students, and parents at Muñoz Marín Elementary School for their help in creating this inspiring video. Muñoz Marín is one of our 16 Turnaround Schools, and is a terrific example of how the investments in our lowest performing schools are making a difference.

Our early literacy strategy, which will be fully implemented from the beginning of the school year 2017-2018, focuses on three major components:

1. Implementing reliable, research-based reading assessments, and preparing teachers to implement these assessments with fidelity so that we can meet each student where they are and address their specific needs;
2. Equipping all K-3 teachers with early literacy best practices through intensive professional development, access to school-based early literacy coaches and materials such as leveled libraries; and
3. Providing schools with reading specialists for personalized support to students struggling to read in the traditional classroom setting.

So what does this plan actually look like, in schools?

Through the work of the Fund for the School District of Philadelphia through the ongoing Right Books Campaign, a total of 300,000 books have been placed in 1,209 classrooms across 150 elementary schools within the District. In addition, thousands of teachers have been trained in literacy instruction, impacting the lives of 29,400 K-3 students across the District.

In addition to early literacy, we made strides with strategic investments in staffing, in support of our other anchor goals. The District continues to invest in hiring the

principals, teachers and school support positions we need to ensure all of our schools are fully staffed, and we continue to provide the training and coaching they need to allow them to succeed and improve student outcomes.

To that end we have:

- Hired over 1,000 teachers since March of 2016
- Filled 99% of our teacher positions and expanded our teaching corp with more early literacy specialists
- Seen over 2,500 teachers attend summer training
- Redoubled our efforts at hiring a more diverse teacher and principal workforce
- Ended the substitute teacher problem by routinely filling 75% to 80% of our daily teacher absences

Great teachers and great principals are at the heart of improving our schools, but students can't learn unless the environment is conducive to learning. We know better climate is a strong indicator of future academic improvement. Our strategic efforts to support schools by implementing evidenced-based initiatives and coaching schools on best practices to improve school climate are paying off, as 74% of District schools increased their school climate scores in the 2015-2016 school year.

But we are not stopping there. We are also providing the staff that improves the climate in our schools. Last year we restored nurses and counselors in our schools, and we are adding 16 more school counselors for the 2017-2018 school year.

We are investing more resources in school climate and expanding restorative practices in schools. We are working to reduce the number of suspensions and increase the time our students are in school learning.

Alongside improvements in school climate, we are also working to improve our school facilities. Through our GreenFutures initiatives we have installed at least three hydration stations in every single District school to continue providing safe and clean drinking water, and have begun a complete District-wide lead in water testing program. And we are changing school yards with millions of investments in playgrounds and green spaces.

I am proud to share the District was just named a 2017 U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon School District Sustainability Awardee. We were one of just nine school Districts granted the honor. The recognition honors our efforts to reduce environmental

impact and utility costs, improve health and wellness, and ensure effective sustainability education.

Through our Facilities Condition Assessment we have completed a thorough review of every school building and building system to better understand our capital needs and how best to use our capital funds as we begin a 5-year, \$1.1 billion capital program.

As we work to improve existing school buildings I am proud to say we are also opening two new high schools in the 2017-2018 school year, Parkway Center City Middle College High School and Big Picture High School. Over 50 schools across the nation have transformed into Middle College High Schools, and Parkway Center City Middle College High School will be the first of its kind in Philadelphia and the only one in the state of Pennsylvania.

Graduates of Parkway Center City Middle College High School will each earn a Certificate in Entrepreneurship, a Certificate in Computer Programming and Software Development and an Associate's Degree in Liberal Arts. Students can also take advantage of specialized programs such as the inquiry-based learning project in Science and Social Studies and the Arts Futures program.

Big Picture High School will be a new four-year high school serving approximately 500 students who have graduated 8th grade on time and are looking for a proven, internship-based, college preparatory experience.

Our efforts to fulfill Anchor Goal 1 - that 100% of our students will graduate ready for college or career - continue to improve as we work to strengthen the safety, climate and culture of our high schools to create environments that foster academic success.

We continue to invest in our Career and Technical Education programs, specifically student apprenticeships. We are working to grow our partnerships and repurpose certain programs to better serve our students and prepare them for the modern job market and the demands of today's industries.

Last week I stood with Councilwoman Blackwell and all Council members to introduce an historic partnership with University of Pennsylvania, various Labor unions and firms to announce the launching of PennAssist to provide high quality jobs for our students after graduation.

Last year over 22,000 9th-12th grade students took the PSAT/SAT for free, allowing us to remove another barrier for those who wish to apply to college. And thousands of 3rd graders were able to visit college campuses for an up-close view of the college experience.

Part of our culture as a School District is being home to one of the most diverse cities in the world. We have more than 14,000 English language learners in our schools who speak 126 languages. Our diversity is our strength and that diversity must be protected.

Over the past year the School District has worked to ensure every member of our school community knows their rights under the laws and that we will not tolerate exclusivity or hate, and that our children's physical and emotional well being is a top priority.

We have convened forums with School District officials, experts and advocates who work with Muslims, immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ individuals, and other vulnerable groups to ensure all students and their families feel welcomed and included. And we have been proud to stand with members of City Council for Community Town Hall meetings to listen to and engage with our immigrant community.

Council President, I am proud of what we have accomplished and the great progress we have made across our School District. But with the backdrop of this progress we still face a fundamental problem when it comes to our budget. Our expenditures continue to outpace our revenues by almost 2% and starting next year we will begin facing fiscal challenges that will force a series of difficult choices. These are the very challenges we projected we'd be facing, when we spoke with you at this time, last year.

This year we have an opportunity to develop a road map to head off these challenges so that the School District can continue to put the children of Philadelphia first. This will allow us to maintain or increase our investment plan, offer fair and fiscally responsible labor contracts, and do so before the School District faces a fiscal crisis again and stalls the progress we have been making. This is why we need to continue the dialogue with our funders, the City and the Commonwealth, to ensure that we will sustain the progress of our schools and our children.

Before I conclude my remarks, I want to thank each and every member of the Philadelphia City Council for their continued support of our schools and students. We believe all students can and will learn, that each child's unique skills and experiences

are a foundation upon which to build, and that we are all uniquely positioned to make a difference in the lives of children in Philadelphia.

We all believe The School District of Philadelphia can be at the heart of Philadelphia's economic progress and training the job workforce of tomorrow. Please join us in our efforts to create great schools close to where all children live.