

# **ON THE PATH TO GREAT RESULTS FOR THE DISTRICT'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS?**

**UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT  
MANAGEMENT, THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE AND THE  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**THE HONORABLE DANIEL K. AKAKA, CHAIRMAN  
THE HONORABLE GEORGE V. VOINOVICH, RANKING MEMBER**



**TESTIMONY OF DEBORAH A. GIST  
STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE OF THE STATE SUPERINTENDENT**

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Good morning Senator Akaka, Senator Voinovich, distinguished members of the committee, committee staff and guests. I am Deborah Gist and I serve as the State Superintendent of Education for the District of Columbia. I am pleased to be here this morning to discuss the progress that the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE) has made since I was last here to brief you in July 2007.

I want to begin by emphasizing that the Office of the State Superintendent of Education fully embraces and takes seriously our role as stewards of federal dollars and we are committed to ensuring that we develop the proper systems and foundations that will allow our local education agencies (LEAs) to be successful in significantly enhancing student achievement. It is clear that we have a long road of reform ahead of us, but the OSSE is deeply committed to ensuring that we move quickly and transparently to put in place the foundational components necessary to spur lasting change. My testimony today will focus on those foundational efforts, from the development of our strategic plan and State-wide Longitudinal Education Data Warehouse, to our efforts around federal grants management reform and ensuring accountability across the state office and across our LEAs in the District of Columbia.

As a result of the *DC Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007* and our Mayoral approved transition plan, a plan that identified the OSSE's timeline for the transfer of the District of Columbia's state education agency functions, the Office of the State Superintendent received state-level authority on October 1, 2007 – a little over five months ago. While extracting these functions out of several existing government agencies was an incredibly complex task, I am pleased to report that the initial transition of these responsibilities occurred successfully—on time and on target with the objectives that were identified in our plan. We are now moving forward with the transfer of the District's early childhood education functions, a transfer that will be complete on April 1, 2008, as well as with the transfer of our non-public tuition and special education transportation responsibilities, both of which are being targeted for transfer at the conclusion of fiscal year 2008.

For far too long the District of Columbia failed to carry out its state-level education responsibilities in a way that provided the proper level of LEA supports and interventions and failed to capture the level of accountability that is necessary in the era of standards based reform. At the same time, the role of the state became even more critical in education governance across the country. As such, we are structuring the OSSE to reflect national best practices with the ultimate goal of becoming a model for state-level education leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To achieve this vision, we are working to set the policy systems and conditions within which our schools can dramatically work to close the achievement gap and improve student performance. We are striving to achieve our core responsibilities of setting state policy by establishing academic standards that are aligned with college and workforce readiness expectations; providing the resources and supports to assist LEAs in achieving these objectives; intervening when necessary to hold LEAs accountable for performance against the state standards; and providing accurate and reliable data to policy makers, our community, our LEAs, the federal government and other stakeholders to drive decision making.

## State-Level Strategic Plan

In seeking to implement these core beliefs, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education has developed a draft strategic plan framework, which will ultimately lead to a five year strategic plan and will serve as a strong foundational guide for our reform efforts. We believe that having this long term strategy in place will be critical to achieving sustainable reform. The OSSE has identified four central long-term goals and several related strategic objectives that will serve as benchmarks for agency progress and performance, including a central focus on the following: 1) All Children are Ready for School; 2) Every Neighborhood has a High Quality Place of Learning; 3) Residents are Successful in Postsecondary Education and the Workforce; and 4) Students Receive the Necessary Supports to Allow Them to be Successful in School. While this work is still in development, I am pleased to share with you some of the work we have done to date around these priorities.

The first of our strategic goals is to ensure that all children are ready for school. Specifically, we need to ensure that we are providing constituents with high-quality early childhood learning settings, early intervention for children who are at-risk, access to quality Pre-Kindergarten for 3- and 4-year-olds and adequate public resources to sustain these quality programs. To achieve this objective, the OSSE has led the effort to develop a school readiness definition<sup>1</sup> as well as an assessment pilot that will be rolled out this spring that will allow for a greater understanding of the skills our children have upon entering the classroom and what skills need to be more closely developed in the pre-K setting prior to entering kindergarten. The OSSE is also working with the State Board of Education to develop a comprehensive teacher quality strategy that will include evaluating our certification requirements for pre-K classrooms with a special emphasis on enhancing our ability to obtain quality instructors. In addition, the OSSE will be developing quality pre-K standards for 3-year-olds to supplement our current early learning standards for 4-year-olds as well as standards for programs that focus on children 0 to 3 years old.

The second strategic goal that will guide our work is to ensure that every neighborhood has high quality places of learning. Our key objectives around this goal include: 1) setting state academic standards that are rigorous and aligned with college and workforce readiness expectations; 2) developing and implementing a robust system of accountability including comprehensive state assessments that are aligned with state academic standards and a strong system of supports and interventions to assist LEAs in improving student outcomes; 3) ensuring that educators at all levels are of the highest caliber; and 4) identifying and disseminating best practices research.

The OSSE has already engaged in a number of activities in an effort to advance this goal. One such activity has been our collaborative work with the State Board of Education, DCPS and the public charter schools to develop a draft of the state's restructuring rubric, a tool that will be used to assess the restructuring plans that will ultimately be submitted to the state for review. The No Child Left Behind restructuring classification poses a significant challenge as well as a significant opportunity to our work at the state and LEA levels. This year, 31 of our public schools are in the planning year for restructuring with a significantly greater number of schools

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<sup>1</sup> School readiness is the knowledge, skills and dispositions that children demonstrate in (1) Approaches to Learning; (2) Social and Emotional Development; (3) Language and Literacy; (4) Mathematical Thinking; (5) Social Studies; (6) Creative Arts; and (7) Physical Health Development, Health and Safety, as they enter Kindergarten.

expected to reach this status next year. Our success in education reform rests largely on our efforts to improve educational outcomes for our students in our lowest performing schools.

Achieving significant turnaround in our public schools requires the state to also provide comprehensive supports to our LEAs and to provide our LEAs with the tools they need to implement targeted learning opportunities for our students. One area under exploration in this regard is the development of alternatives to the District's formative assessment currently given to DC students to regularly assess academic progress throughout the school year. One of the major tools we plan to provide to our LEAs is a bank of sample items for each education standard. This would allow LEAs to effectively create, administer and use tailor-made formative assessments to help meet individual student needs as well as give LEAs a tool for instructional planning at the school level.

Another area in which we have been significantly engaged is trying to closely align our teacher quality standards to the federal law and to enhance our ability to attract teachers of the highest caliber to the District of Columbia. As such, we have presented an enhanced "highly qualified teacher" definition to the State Board of Education for their consideration. In addition, we are seeking to overhaul our teacher and administrator certification requirements in a number of areas to ensure quality while also allowing classroom access to outstanding individuals who can bring innovation, creativity and results to our students.

The third major goal that will guide our work is to ensure that all DC residents are prepared for and successful in postsecondary education and the workforce and that they have essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. To achieve this goal the OSSE will seek to employ several key strategies, including strengthening pathways and expanding opportunities for residents to gain entry into post-secondary education; ensuring that adult learners have access to high quality adult education providers; and providing resources and counseling to residents attending post-secondary institutions.

One of the most significant commitments that the OSSE has made to external stakeholders is around our efforts to double the number of students graduating from college in five years. This will require significantly strengthening the pathways from our Pre-K system to our K-12 and higher education systems. We are expanding our outreach efforts for our college tuition assistance programs such as the DC Tuition Assistance Grant (DCTAG) program to reach as many students as possible in the District of Columbia and to ensure that they have the resources that they need to stay in school and complete their degrees.

The fourth and final major goal on which the OSSE is focusing is ensuring that students receive the necessary supports they need to be successful in school. Some of the major strategies that the OSSE is seeking to employ to achieve this goal include providing program support to LEAs to ensure that students with disabilities receive appropriate and inclusive services, providing support to LEAs to ensure that English Language Learners receive appropriate services; providing assistance to LEAs in implementing state health standards; and revising DC nutritional guidelines to surpass minimum federal standards for implementing nutrition service programs.

More broadly, however, this goal is also focused on engaging parents so that they are better able to support their child's educational achievement. The OSSE has established a parental engagement effort to ensure that our students and families receive high-quality services and supports at the state level. As such, the OSSE will provide information, resources, training and technical assistance to parents, volunteers, and schools to support the range of high-quality educational programs and services that contribute to student success. The OSSE is also working with the State Board of Education to develop state-wide regulations for home schooling. The proposed regulations focus on several key areas and are designed to ensure that the District has the tools necessary to perform our responsibilities to our residents.

### **Federal Grants Management Reform**

In addition to developing our strategic plan, we have also been focusing on several critical areas of reform, including reforming our federal grants management process. As you know, the District of Columbia was designated as a "high risk grantee" by the US Department of Education in 2006 for federal grants management. As a result of the "high risk grantee" designation, the District has been placed under a US Department of Education corrective action plan to address the concerns that had been repeatedly identified over the course of several years. Since receiving authority for the SEA functions in October, we have taken several critical steps to elevate the federal grant reform effort and have begun the process of implementing sufficient financial controls on our federal dollars. We have also begun implementing a number of programmatic reforms including: 1) providing technical assistance to LEAs such as workshops and trainings on program implementation; 2) ensuring adequate oversight over the use of federal funds through LEA monitoring; 3) developing and refining our financial monitoring systems to ensure fiscal compliance; 4) increasing grants management accountability through the development of state evaluation protocols; 5) ensuring extensive collaboration with the LEAs around our reform efforts in order to provide maximum leveraging of our federal dollars, and 6) ensuring efficient fund allocation and distribution systems to ensure that federal funds are allocated and distributed in a more expedited manner – a recurring failure of our system.

### **Statewide Longitudinal Education Data Warehouse**

In addition to federal grants reform, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, in partnership with our key education stakeholders, is developing the Statewide Longitudinal Education Data Warehouse (SLED) – a key foundational component of our reform efforts. The data warehouse will be the main repository of current and historical public education student data in the District of Columbia and will be used for education analysis, research and reporting purposes. The data warehouse will be populated with information extracted from disparate enterprise educational systems into a single comprehensive relational database. It will standardize student academic information currently stored in various local education agencies and track student information statewide over multiple years and in multiple education institutions.

Thus far, we have succeeded in producing a unique student identifier and creating a monthly student tracking system for public education students in the District of Columbia. We have enhanced this interim student tracking system to include richer and more advanced data. This

data includes information on each student's grade level, where students are enrolled, student exit dates and – where applicable – a student's special education status, or a student's English Language Learner status. In addition, we have mapped all of this information to scores on the District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System so that we can not only obtain a picture of mobility, but also of student achievement and how the two factors are related.

### **Internal Accountability**

The most critical element that the OSSE is seeking to implement in order to achieve our strategic objectives and critical action reforms is a culture of accountability. As such, we have moved quickly to establish clear expectations for all staff within the agency. As a result, each OSSE employee now has a manager approved performance management plan in place for which results will be regularly measured. I intend on holding all employees accountable to their specified performance objectives and goals and believe it is critical that we manage based on these established expectations. Perhaps our emphasis on accountability is most apparent, however, in our EdStat process. EdStat is a data-driven tool that the OSSE uses to monitor and improve performance across the agency. This tool results in a management technique that fosters ownership for results through sustained and relentless follow-up and action. It is important to note that while similar tools have been employed elsewhere in the country, the OSSE is the first state education agency in the country to utilize this results-oriented and cutting-edge management technique.

It is clear that we have a long road ahead of us as we drive toward reform in our education system. There is no greater civil rights challenge than ensuring that our children receive the quality education they deserve. I take the responsibility that has been entrusted to me very seriously, and the team members at the OSSE do as well. We are going to need hard work, relentless drive, fresh ideas and a collective city-wide effort that includes parents, teachers, community members and public servants. I am confident that providing the proper foundations of reform through our federal grants management reform efforts and data warehouse development efforts will lead to visible progress in our education system. We will ultimately be judged, however, by student success and achievement outcomes. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education is fully committed to that result.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on our progress and the direction of our agency this morning and I look forward to answering your questions.