

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

“Academic Achievement in the District of Columbia”

Wednesday, December 6, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Mendelson, for convening this hearing on the critical teacher retention issues. My name is Robert Henderson. I am the Ward 5 member of the State Board of Education. These views are my own and do not represent the views of the Board as a whole.

Yesterday, we talked about school improvement efforts; research suggests that stability and continuity among teachers and school leaders are among the most important in-school factors contributing to school improvement. The components of the Educator Retention for Student Success Act of 2023 would go a long way toward supporting improvement in DC schools. Unfortunately, the converse is true — if we continue to lose our teachers, we will struggle. Ultimately, we won't be able to accomplish any of the goals we have for our students if we can't support and retain our teachers. Teachers do incredibly important and incredibly difficult and taxing work.

I support the provision of mental health leave for District educators. I suggest that it apply to public charter school teachers as well. The same is true about the provision of wellness coordinators. When I first learned about the work that MedStar Wise is doing in 30 or so schools across the District, I could think only one thing — why don't we have this for every school? So, I hope we can learn from the experiences and successes in schools that have partnered with WISE, EmpowerEd, and other organizations to broaden the reach of wellness programs as far as possible.

I support the establishment of a Fair Professional Compensation Task Force. Paraprofessionals play an important part in classrooms, supporting lead teachers, making their working conditions more manageable, and often, supporting the students who need the most attention. These paraprofessionals deserve fair compensation; students and other teachers benefit from stability and continuity in these roles. Substitute teachers play similar roles and likewise need to be fairly compensated.

Teachers have indicated that flexible scheduling could be an important factor in increasing retention. We should continue to support experimentation in flexible scheduling and evaluate the results.

We would benefit from charter teachers completing an exit survey as well as DCPS teachers.

We have had years of discussions, surveys, and testimonies in which teachers have told us what would help increase retention, and this bill takes direct, practical steps to address many of those concerns. I hope that the council will move quickly to pass this legislation and work to ensure that it is funded as needed.

I hope that soon, the council can also address the DCPS evaluation system, which teachers have also indicated as a significant driver of turnover.

Thank you again for your attention to the issue of teacher retention; I am happy to answer questions.

Robert Henderson