



Amy Dudas, DC Alliance of Youth Advocates
Testimony to the Committee on Education
Performance Oversight Hearing: Deputy Mayor for Education
February 13, 2017

Good morning Chairman Grosso, fellow Councilmembers and committee staff, and thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the performance of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME). My name is Amy Dudas and I am the Director of Re-engagement and Workforce Initiatives with the DC Alliance of Youth Advocates (DCAYA), a coalition of over 130 youth-serving organizations operating here in the District.

As advocates working to support educationally disengaged youth, meaning those ages 16-24 who are not in school and do not have a high school diploma, we are grateful for the attention and steady investments made by this Committee and the DME in DC's "second-chance system" for educational re-engagement. With over 60,000 adult residents without a high school diploma and many more pushed through graduation annually without clear mastery of academic and essential life skills, programs specifically geared to meet the needs of re-engaging youth and adult learners are more important than ever. Many of these programs offer nontraditional schedules, provide job training, basic skill education, and often leverage the DC Youth Re-engagement Center's (DC REC) work to find best-fit education placements for disconnected youth. All told, the District invests upwards of \$80 million annually in federal and local dollars to support these students.

While critically important, these investments are undermined by the prohibitive cost of transportation for alternative and adult education learners. Unlike younger students who can access transportation affordably through Kids Ride Free, students aged 22 and older pay the full price. In 2016, a DCAYA survey of re-engaging youth ages 22-24 found that 21% reported missing class 3 or more times a month due to insufficient transportation funds. Most programs are less than 40 weeks long, so these students missed 13% of their program's total class time because they could not afford to get there.

As a shared budget priority, DCAYA, the Adult and Family Literacy Coalition (DC AFLC) and members of Raise DC's Disconnected Youth Change Network (DYCN) advocated for \$1.98 million in FY18 to meet this need and realize the recommendations of the DME's "Report on the Needs for Transportation Subsidies and Assistance for Adult Learners". In the 2016 report requested by this Committee, the DME put forward a cost-effective option to extend aspects of the Kids Ride Free program to 7,500 adult learners, including free bus and rail access and a program-wide negotiated daily rate of \$0.65 for student travelers on the Metro system. After many conversations with this Committee, agency leadership, and members of the Council, the money was secured for FY18 and referred to the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) to undertake the implementation of the program.

As it stands, the Adult Learner Transit Subsidy Program began rollout last month as a joint pilot between the DME and DDOT that provides adult and alternative students \$50 per month in full-cost Metro trips through June. We recognize this pilot as an important first step in supporting the transportation needs of adult learners, and are grateful for the DME's leadership, responsiveness and commitment to

ensuring its success. Despite a quick program rollout at the end of last year, some hurried communications, and current administrative challenges, the pilot is now underway and has reached the SmartTrip cards of many adult learners. As DCAYA assess the limitations of this pilot, and thinks forward to developing a more sustainable program model, we offer the following recommendations:

- 1. Provide oversight and budgetary support to ensure the pilot's success.** When asked how they feel about the program, learners are immensely grateful for the pilot and proud of their successful advocacy to secure it. Yet beyond this positive feedback, the program is so new that little more is understood about its impact. We know that to administer this program beyond a six-month pilot, additional resources will be necessary in FY19. We ask that the DME and this Committee will continue to champion the needs of this student population and ensure that the Adult Learner Transportation Pilot is provided the time and investment necessary to make an impact.
- 2. Negotiate a daily rate of ridership for adult and alternative students.** We have seen that administering this pilot through the full-price purchase of SmartBenefits imposes a 6-month, \$50 limit on the reach of the program. As a permanent solution is pursued, DDOT and the DME should engage in negotiations with WMATA to ensure that the District is not leaving any possible taxpayer savings on the table.
- 3. Maintain partner engagement.** We hope the relevant agencies will continue engaging with the varied programs serving adult and alternative learners (i.e. providers serving young alternative students, English Language Learners, learners with low levels of literacy, etc.). As the pilot has rolled out, it is clear that flexible options for administration are ideal to meet these diverse needs and specialties. Given a reasonable time frame to work through challenges, learners and providers will be eager partners in determining a successful, long-term program.

We greatly appreciate the efforts of the DME, the Committee on Education, and DDOT to move this complex, yet immensely valuable program forward. We look forward to the outcomes of this pilot, and a sustainable solution to the transportation barriers faced by adult and alternative students. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

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