

December 8, 2016

**Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Education
Hearing on Nomination of Antwan Wilson as Chancellor of D.C. Public Schools**

Testimony of Gary M. Ratner

Introduction - Good morning. My name is Gary Ratner. I'm the founder and executive director of Citizens for Effective Schools (CES), a national citizens' school reform advocacy organization, www.citizenseffectiveschools.org, and have an education blog in *The Huffington Post* www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/. My written testimony is longer than I could present in 5 minutes, so I will be selective.

In late August, I published an article relevant to this hearing: "How D.C. Could Become National Model for Improving Low-achieving Schools under ESSA," http://www.citizenseffectiveschools.org//How%20DC%20Could%20Become%20National%20Model%20for%20Improving%20Low-achieving%20Schools_8.16.2016.pdf. Last Thursday, I published a shorter, somewhat revised version in *Huffington Post*, "How D.C. Could Become National Model For Turning Around Low-achieving Schools Under ESSA," [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/how-dc-could-become-natio b 12513954.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/how-dc-could-become-natio_b_12513954.html).

Most of my work in the last 12 years has been at the national level, seeking to overhaul the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In 2014-2015, at the invitation of Republican and Democratic staff on the House education committee, I submitted proposed legislative language on accountability and school improvement for what became the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (12/10/15). This legislative language was submitted, with a colleague, on behalf of the Forum on Educational Accountability (FEA). FEA was an alliance of scores of national education, civil rights and other organizations, including the National Education Association, the National School Boards Association, and the American Association of School Administrators.

FEA's overall goal—strongly shared by CES - was to shift the direction of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (then called NCLB) "from applying sanctions for failing to raise test scores to holding states and localities accountable for making the systemic changes that improve student achievement." "Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind Act" (October 21, 2004), www.edaccountability.org. ESSA contains important school improvement and accountability concepts similar to what we had proposed on behalf of FEA.

Achievement Gap: Priority and Statistics—In the process of selecting a new Chancellor, Mayor Muriel Bowser determined that closing the achievement gap is a top parent and community priority and something that she's anxious for a new Chancellor to address. Nominee Antwan Wilson himself has said that his "greatest challenge is eliminating the achievement gap." This is understandable. The achievement gap is huge.

In 2015, the 4th/8th grade average of DCPS black students “Proficient” on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was only 14% in reading, 13% in math, versus 79% for white students in each subject – more than a 5:1 disparity. (NAEP is the nation’s most reliable K-12 academic assessment.) From 2007-2015, the percent of DCPS’s black students who became “Proficient” on NAEP increased less than 0.8%/year in both subjects. At these rates, it would take 80 years to close the achievement gap between black students and where white students already are.

Even worse, the absolute level of learning of a majority of DCPS’s black students was “Below Basic” on NAEP, i.e., they didn’t have even “partial mastery of [the] knowledge and skills” required for their grade level. In 2015, the 4th/8th grade average of black students “Below Basic” was 55% in reading, 53% in math; for white students, only 5% were “Below Basic” in reading, 6% in math. Imagine sending these thousands of youth into the world to get a decent job, function as productive members of society: a prescription for dropping out of school, unemployment, drugs, crime and the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

Turning Around Low-achieving Schools Priority - The community also recognized that to provide effective educations to disadvantaged students and close the achievement gap, it was important for the new Chancellor to have “[a] proven track record of turning around a school or a district.” Similarly, in announcing Antwan Wilson’s nomination, Mayor Bowser said she’d been looking for a candidate who’d had “experience in moving the most difficult schools and kids that were falling behind in their district.”

Shifting priority now to turning around DCPS’s low-achieving schools is essential. As the *Washington Post* reported, “[f]or the past decade, D.C. Public Schools chancellors focused on increasing enrollment, graduation rates and test scores. While the system has seen improvements in those areas, the school system still has vast achievement gaps between white students and students of color.” Alejandra Matos, “Report: Closing achievement gaps should be priority for D.C. schools chancellor,” 11/3/16. There’s no reason to believe that perpetuating the same DCPS strategy of Michelle Rhee and Kaya Henderson would dramatically reduce the gap .

Vital Questions before the Education Committee - The vital questions now are: 1) what would it take to turn around DCPS’s many low-achieving schools and 2) does the nominee have the vision, experience, knowledge, skills and commitment to do what D.C. needs to have done?

I. What Would It Take To turn Around DCPS’s Low-achieving Schools?

What Works to Turn Around Low-achieving Schools - Fortunately, much is known about what works to turn around a low-achieving school. They’re five common elements that, together, a low-achieving school typically addresses to turn itself around – leadership, instructional improvement, curriculum, school climate, and parent and community involvement and support. Under each element, they’re common practices it typically adopts. These common practices

include, as the catalyst for turnaround, a school leader with vision for improving the school who collaborates with teachers, parents and other stakeholders, gains buy-in and develops leadership teams. The goal is, over time, to holistically change the stakeholders' expectations, beliefs and practices – to dramatically improve the school's culture.

The common elements and practices are described in a paper I, with Monty Neill, was requested to write on behalf of FEA, by the House education committee to prepare the Members for their hearing on "Research and Best Practices on Successful School Turnarounds" (May 19, 2010), <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/congress/house/education/index.html> , "Congressional Hearings," "111th Congress," "Serial No. 111-63". The paper, "Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds: Research and Experience" (May 14, 2010), is at: www.citizenseffectiveschools.org/successfulschoolturnarounds.pdf . A copy is attached to my written testimony.

What DCPS Needs To Do Overall: Implement Common Elements & ESSA Turnaround Programs -
What DCPS needs to do to maximize the chances of successfully turning around its low-achieving schools is to implement, for each such school, the principal-led, stakeholder-collaborative, comprehensive approach of the "Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds." But, because DCPS is subject to ESSA, school turnarounds must also comply with the new Title I.

Impact of Congress's Replacement of Turnaround Strategy: From Piecemeal Mandates to Stakeholder Collaboration in Comprehensive School Change - In ESSA, Congress virtually reversed the rigid, top-down, escalating sanctions school reform strategy of NCLB and the four strict, staff replacement turnaround models of Race to the Top. Instead, it recognized the importance of gaining the support of the teachers, parents and other school stakeholders whose expectations, beliefs and practices must be changed for a school to turn around. Further, Congress recognized that school turnarounds cannot be achieved by piecemeal interventions in staffing or programs, but must start from an assessment of each school's needs and provide a comprehensive approach to change.

Two Federal Turnaround Programs - Title I has two turnaround programs. The "comprehensive support and improvement" program applies chiefly to the lowest-achieving 5% of DCPS's Title I funded schools and all high schools that do not graduate more than two-thirds of their students. Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), sect. 1111(d)((1)(A)(B). "Schoolwide" programs essentially apply to all schools with at least 40% of their students from low income families. ESEA, sect. 1114(a)-(d). "Schoolwide" programs may also be extended to schools with less than 40% low income students, if approved by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

Both programs require, in part, starting the improvement process by collaborating with teachers, parents and other stakeholders to conduct a needs assessment and to develop an improvement plan for each participating school. In the “comprehensive” program, these requirements apply to the school district; in the “schoolwide” program, they apply to the school itself.

Key Actions DCPS Should Take To Implement Turnarounds Successfully – Turning around low-achieving schools requires not only experienced, knowledgeable and talented in-school leaders, but strong support from central office.

Threshold Questions for DCPS and “Local Plan” - Important threshold questions for DCPS would include: how many current DCPS principals have the capacity and interest, if provided coaching, peer collaboration and other support, to become effective turnaround leaders; how many successful turnaround principals could DCPS recruit from other jurisdictions; what staffing and organizational changes would need to be made at central office to provide all the needed kinds of support to schools undergoing turnaround; how much would that cost and how long would it take; in light of the above, how many schools and which schools should be focused on for intensive turnaround; and what improvements can be made in other low-achieving schools in the interim to move them in the turnaround direction? Under Title I, DCPS should focus its “local plan” heavily on how it intends to institute the “comprehensive” and “schoolwide” programs, including addressing the above questions, as appropriate.

Shifting from Control to Collaboration & Using SCAI School Climate Survey -For DCPS to succeed with turnarounds, it would need to move from top-down, centralized control to collaborating and partnering with parents, teachers and other stakeholders about each turnaround school’s needs assessment, improvement plan and implementation. To greatly enhance both needs assessment and school improvement, DCPS should administer the School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) survey, California State University, Los Angeles, to all DCPS students, teachers and parents. SCAI would be an invaluable tool for identifying each school’s strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, it would actually begin the improvement process by having stakeholders collectively realize certain specific expectations, beliefs and practices that they themselves need to change at their own school and guide them toward what to do to improve. See Gary M. Ratner, “States’ Crucial Choice Under New Federal Education Law: Selecting the Best Survey to Measure and Improve School Quality,” *Huffington Post* (5/25/16), <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/states-crucial-choice-und b 10127094.html> .

Support for Turnaround Principals - Successful change in a school’s culture – gaining stakeholders’ buy-in to changing their expectations, beliefs and practices - cannot be imposed from outside, but must be led internally. Accordingly, the Chancellor would need to delegate broad authority to all turnaround principals, so they can lead the complex, multi-year changes required and not be micro-managed. Likewise, the Chancellor should extend the contracts for all turnaround principals to at least 5 years. This is necessary to give them stability and security, so they can concentrate on the extremely demanding job of leading turnarounds, which typically takes about 5 years. Further, central office should provide supplemental

staffing, funding, technical assistance and other resources, as necessary, to help turnaround principals and their schools succeed, including mentoring and peer collaboration for the principals.

Federal Grant to Train Turnaround Principals & Contract with Washington Teachers Union -

Having skilled turnaround principals is essential to success, but there are very few available. Thus, DCPS should apply for a federal “school leader residency” grant – on its own or in a consortium with other districts - to train and support experienced principals to lead turnarounds in “comprehensive support schools,” ESEA, sect. 2243(a)(3). Absent such a grant, having such leaders is so important that DCPS should establish such a training program on its own or with a consortium. Finally, to promote teachers’ support that is essential for turnaround success, the Chancellor should complete a new contract with the Washington Teachers Union.

II. Does the Nominee Have the Vision, Experience, Knowledge, Skills and Commitment To Do What D.C. Needs To Have Done?

Nominee’s Strengths - I believe that Antwan Wilson would have many strengths as a potential D.C. Chancellor. Having been a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent, he’s not only an experienced urban educator, but has had experience managing a large and complex school system, including financial management. His compelling life story and commitment to educating disadvantaged children would make him an excellent role model, especially for D.C.’s black, male students. Under his leadership, graduation rates have increased, drop-out, suspension and expulsion rates have been reduced, and minority male students have been helped. He’s had experience implementing a social and emotional learning program and recognizes the key importance of high expectations, teachers establishing personal relationships with students to enable learning, and having all school staff support students. And, as a principal of a middle school in Wichita and a high school in Denver, he apparently led either school turnarounds or, at least, some degree of school improvement.

His experience successfully negotiating a contract with the teachers’ union and other unions in Oakland would be valuable in D.C. where completing the teachers’ contract is long overdue. He’s had experience reaching out to the community to engage volunteer tutors, worked with the community to fund school programs and student activities and has made himself available on a regular basis to meet with stakeholders to hear their concerns. Finally, showing strength of character, in the Oakland “State of the Schools 2016” report he acknowledged, in effect, that: about two-thirds of Oakland’s elementary school students were still below grade level in math and reading; there were severe achievement gaps by race and income; and that “[a]lthough graduation rates have increased, around two-thirds of our students still do not graduate on time.”

Concerns - While Wilson acknowledges that his “greatest challenge is eliminating the achievement gap,” I’m concerned that his apparent strategy for doing that, at least as reported in the media, would be grossly inadequate: introducing new or expanded programs, rather than chiefly concentrating on principal-led, comprehensive, stakeholder collaborative turnarounds of individual low-achieving schools. Although it’s been reported that Wilson “wants to bring a new emphasis on social-emotional

learning, summer programs and in-school tutoring to help lift achievement[,]" Emma Brown and Joe Heim, "Bowser picks Oakland chief to lead D.C. schools," *Washington Post*, A12 (11/23/16), I've not read any suggestion that he intends to focus on turning around the individual schools where the great majority of students suffering from the achievement gap are concentrated.

Wilson's apparent failure to focus on transforming individual, low-achieving schools is not only troubling in its own right, but in light of his personal experience. Since he led school improvement efforts as principal at a Wichita middle school and a Denver high school, and led the Office of School Turnaround as Assistant Superintendent in Denver, he's undoubtedly aware of school turnaround as a strategy, at least in whatever ways he may have sought to do it previously. Further, it's concerning that, although he was overseeing efforts to turn around five schools as Oakland superintendent, Motoko Rich, "Oakland District at Heart of Drive to Transform Urban Schools," *New York Times* (3/4/16), he didn't mention in his resume anything about this highly relevant undertaking or whether it was succeeding. Nor does his resume say anything about his work as leader of the Office of School Turnaround over 5 years in Denver, including whether it was successful in fundamentally changing the schools' culture and eliminating or greatly reducing the achievement gap.

It's possible that the nominee may have experience dramatically turning around low-achieving schools in a comprehensive, stakeholder collaborative way - along the lines of the "Common Elements of Successful School Turnarounds" cited above. I fear, however, that the school improvement or turnaround efforts he led may have been in the problematic top-down, mandated, replacement of staff and programs approach of NCLB and Race to the Top, and not been very successful in improving student learning. That fear draws some support from the above *Times* article: "Mr. Wilson is ... overhauling five of [Oakland's] most troubled campuses, moving principals and introducing new academic and enrichment programs."

In short, the nominee may not have the vision, experience, knowledge, skills and/or commitment to lead turnarounds of D.C.'s low-achieving schools in the kind of principal-led, stakeholder collaborative, comprehensive, "common elements" strategy that, if properly implemented, would predictably succeed. If the nominee lacks any or all of those qualifications, he may be unable to lead the kind of school turnaround strategy that I believe D.C. needs. Without implementing such a strategy, I would not see any significant chance of closing, or even dramatically reducing, the terrible achievement gap that our disadvantaged students and their families are depending on the new Chancellor to rectify.

Questions – I would have the following questions for Wilson:

1. What strategy, policies and practices did he implement to lead turnarounds as principal in Wichita's Pleasant Valley Middle School, as principal in Denver's Montbello High School, as Assistant Superintendent in Denver, and as Superintendent in Oakland?
2. What were the results – positive and negative, if any - of his turnaround initiatives in each of the four places described in #1, including what evidence was there of success in improving student achievement, disaggregated by student subgroup?

3. Does he believe that to close, or even greatly reduce, the achievement gap in DCPS it would be necessary to turn around the schools attended by the great majority of low-achieving students? If not, why not?
4. Does he believe that to turn around individual low-achieving schools, profoundly changing and improving their culture, it's necessary to have principal (or other school leader) and leadership team-led, collaborative, comprehensive change of stakeholders' expectations, beliefs and practices over time or does he believe that this can be done by district mandated replacement of staff and programs? If the latter, what evidence is he relying on that this works?
5. What are the key components of his strategy for closing the achievement gap in DCPS, and what evidence does he rely on that this strategy would work?
6. How would he implement the "comprehensive support and improvement " and "schoolwide" programs under the new Every Student Succeeds Act, Title I, which call for a collaborative, stakeholder-involved, needs assessment and comprehensive planning process for turning around individual low-achieving schools?

Conclusion – In conclusion, I believe that for DCPS to have a meaningful chance of closing or greatly reducing the achievement gap, it needs to concentrate on turning around its low-achieving schools. To do that, it needs to effectively implement ESSA's two turnaround programs' school-based, collaborative, comprehensive strategies, focusing separately on each low-achieving school that it seeks to turn around. Concurrently, DCPS needs to implement - in multiple low-achieving schools - the common elements of successful school turnarounds which research and experience have shown work to turn around low-achieving schools individually.

If DCPS could do that, the District of Columbia would become a national model under ESSA for a school district's turning around multiple low-achieving schools at the same time. If the Council finds that the nominee has the vision, experience, knowledge, skills and commitment to implement that kind of a turnaround strategy, I would be anxious to help the new Chancellor in any way I possibly could.