

**Testimony of Colleen Paletta, Vice President of Workforce Development,
Goodwill of Greater Washington & the Goodwill Excel Center**

DC Committee of the Whole and Committee on Education Public Oversight Hearing on the
State of Adult Education and Adult Literacy Initiatives in the District

September 24, 2015

Good Afternoon. My name is Colleen Paletta and I am the Vice President of Workforce Development at Goodwill of Greater Washington and the Goodwill Excel Center Public Charter School, a high school for adults conditionally approved this past May by the Public Charter School Board to open in August, 2016. Thank you for holding this hearing today and allowing me the opportunity to testify regarding issues currently facing adult learners in the District.

Goodwill of Greater Washington has an 80 year history of serving low-income and low-skilled adults in the District. In my ten year career with Goodwill we have partnered with the business community to offer highly successful job training programs in industries like construction, hospitality, security & protective services and banking to name a few. Through all this work, we have come to realize that job training programs alone aren't the complete answer to helping low-income and skilled adults get ahead. Many of the high performing programs in town that lead to credentials valued by employers and the majority of jobs that pay a living wage aren't accessible to those without a high school diploma and/or low literacy and numeracy skills. For individuals left behind and desiring a second chance, there are a handful of strong education and training options, but these options combined don't meet a fraction of the need in the District.

I have seen thousands of residents come to Goodwill with very low literacy and numeracy skills and/or without high school credentials in search of careers that will pay family sustaining wages. In many programs we have been unable to accept individuals who fall below the 8th grade math and reading level and/or who do not have a high school diploma and have had to refer them to other providers in the District. Last year, Goodwill, in partnership with UDC-CC, Progressive Partners, and a team of community partners implemented the Marriott Marquis Jobs Training Program. We collected a large set of data on the literacy and numeracy skills of applicants. 73%, or close to 1,900, of tested applicants scored 8th grade or below in math and 43%, or just over 1,100, scored 8th grade or below in reading. This prompted our team to dive deeper into the statistics of the District's low-skilled and unemployed workforce. DC has among the lowest

high school graduation rates in the country. There are over 60,000 adult residents who lack a high school credential. Nearly 8,000 are young adults disconnected from work or school. These residents live in wards with the highest unemployment rates. Clearly, a large portion of the DC community is unprepared to effectively compete in the 21st century workforce, one that at a minimum requires a high school credential and demands individuals to demonstrate critical thinking, problem solving, and basic reading and math skills. To tackle this problem, Goodwill discovered an evidenced based solution created in Goodwill of Central Indiana and decided to work to bring it to the District—The Excel Center.

The Excel Center is a nationally proven high school model for adults that has to date produced close to 1,400 graduates with an average 82% of graduates receiving an industry-recognized credential in sectors with above-average growth potential. Seventy-five percent of graduates are either employed or in college immediately after graduation. After a rigorous application process with the DC Public Charter School Board, the Goodwill Excel Center was conditionally approved in May of this year.

The Goodwill Excel Center will be the first charter school of its kind in Washington DC, enabling adults who have previously dropped out to return to school and earn a high school diploma. The school's education plan has three main pillars: (1) an academic philosophy and curriculum that meets the goals and needs of adult students "where they are" with flexible class schedules and individualized learning plans; (2) a concentrated focus on College and Career Readiness with students taking industry specific classes that lead to market valuable credentials, and; (3) a coaching platform designed to address barriers that impede students educational success and facilitate relationships to help student's manage work, life and family concerns as they achieve their educational goals. The school will seek to eliminate as many external barriers as possible by providing needed supports like a child care on-site, transportation assistance, life coaching, and classes in the day and evening.

We look forward to bringing The Excel Center model to DC so that more adult learners in the District may have access to and benefit from higher educational attainment and, as such, improved employment opportunities and economic self-sufficiency. I thank Council Chairman Mendelson and Councilmember Grosso for taking the time to listen and better understand the needs and issues of adult learners in the District.