



September, 2015

Greetings, Councilmembers, and thank you for the opportunity to highlight the challenges and promise of alternative and adult education in the District of Columbia.

My name is Julie Meyer and I am the Executive Director of The Next Step Public Charter School. TNSPCS is a bilingual GED and ESL program in Columbia Heights serving 500 youth, ages 16-24, per year. Our students have had interrupted education and have faced multiple life challenges. Many are immigrants and many work and help support their families; 20% of them have children themselves and many have unstable housing situations.

For these “opportunity youth,” who are typically 5 years or more behind in education level and lacking any credits, a diploma is an unrealistic goal. The GED becomes an excellent second-chance option for these youth. Unlike a graded program, schools like The Next Step can offer flexible placement and pacing, depending on a student’s academic level upon enrollment and ability to progress. We also offer both full-time day (30 hours per week), alternative program and a part-time evening (12 hours per week) options.

In order to understand and support adult education, officials and providers must recognize the realities which our students face:

- Their educational and career paths are not linear; they are interrupted and unconventional. Our challenge is to help them persist and to welcome them each time they are able to return to their education.
- Academic skills are just one piece of the puzzle; older youth and adult learners typically need an array of wraparound services and supports, including mental health services. Many of our students have faced severe trauma, for example.
- Older students also need to develop life skills and soft skills to complement their educational advances; strong programs offer these, as well. As an example, at TNS we use both Advisories and Restorative Practices to cultivate relationships, community, and social and empathy skills.
- The population is diverse and, therefore, the needs are diverse—and the programs which serve older learners need to be responsive and flexible.

- Many adult learners are not native English speakers, so face the double challenge of low academic skills as well as lack of English. Programs must address both needs, as well as the legal and social issues which immigrants typically face.

In short, the commitment to older youth and adult learners needs to be long-term and comprehensive. We cannot expect 6-month programs to put an adult student on the path to a well-paying job. Every study of adult education indicates that results need to be tracked over a period of many years.

Yet, it is also important to recognize the tremendous and ancillary benefits to educating adults, including benefits to their children, improved job prospects, improved self-esteem and dignity, and higher quality of life—not to mention increased participation in voting and civic life, decreased costs for city services, increased tax base, and more DC jobs for DC residents.

We have the tremendous opportunity in the District to create a model system for alternative education, adult education and career pathways due to our charter school funding available, progressive and supportive elected officials, and ecosystem of city agencies, community-based organizations, strong advocates and charter schools.

Growing capacity and strengthening the weak areas will be challenging. Frankly, there are some city agencies, in addition to the community college, which need reform and/or infusions of resources and creativity. Schools can grow capacity but the process needs to be thoughtful and the resulting programs high quality. We charter schools are subject to a strong system of accountability, which is appropriate; we recognize that we must prove our ability to respond to the challenges outlined above with creativity, perseverance—and results.

What can City Council do to facilitate a stronger, larger and more successful alternative and adult education sector?

- Offer a State Diploma for GED recipients;
- Ensure that key city agencies step up to the challenge, including DOES;
- Ensure a vibrant, relevant community college that has a clear role within career pathways and a strong program for ELL students;
- Target resources for expansion of quality programs, including facilities;
- Remove barriers that our adult learners face, including transportation costs, childcare availability (including in the evening) and cost; and
- Regulate and monitor for-profit educational entities which sometimes take advantage of our students.

I urge City Council and the Mayor to articulate a bold goal—ambitious yet achievable--in partnership with all of us providers and advocates. Can we cut the number of disconnected youth in our city in half within five or ten years? Can we cut adult illiteracy in half in that same time? I believe we can—if we work together. And, eventually, we should eliminate the need for many of our programs.