

Council Hearing on the FY2005 Education Budget

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Mary Filardo, Executive Director, 21st Century School Fund

My colleagues and I want to thank and acknowledge the Council for its support for public education and for increasing the funding for public education over many years. The difficulty is, at the same time funds were increasing, the demands on students--children with special needs, English language learners, children not ready to learn, as well as those ready, able and willing—and on the teachers and staff charged with the responsibility for educating them, have risen dramatically.

As a result, the approach to education funding has changed across the country. It is no longer about increasing funding compared to last year, it is about determining how much money is actually needed to provide educational programs and services so all children can achieve minimally at grade level and optimally at even higher standards.

The change in education funding has been brought about by law suits that have challenged education funding in New York, New Jersey, Ohio, California, Montana, Arizona, Arkansas, to name only a few states. As part of these law suits, a process called “costing out” has been undertaken. This process identifies what it will really cost, not based on past funding levels but on a research-based understanding of what works in education, to educate all children to agreed upon standards.

We can estimate that in the District of Columbia, to educate children who are already ready to learn to achieve at high standards costs about what the tuition is at our finest private schools--\$20,000 for high school at Sidwell and St. Albans; and \$30,000 for special education at the lab school. What might the cost be for students who show up at school unprepared for instruction?

I know this is painful to hear. As a parent, with 3 DCPS graduates in college now, I wish it didn't cost so much to educate them, I sympathize with the council, looking at the bills for all the children in the city. But we need to move our conversations away from issues of blaming and control to focus on the work of educating children, and in the District of Columbia this means primarily children from low income families.

We certainly can do better with what we have, but this does not negate the fact that the need for teachers, training, books, materials, technology, maintenance, and capital improvements outstrips the resources we are committing to them. We urge the Council to work with us to find funds needed to fully fund the local school and build capacity in the central office to support the local school needs. DCPS can do things better, and we are committed to seeing that this happens, but it will take more funds, not less.