

**Testimony before the House Education and Labor Committee  
Hearing on NCLB Reauthorization – Teacher Quality**

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Washington, DC**

Thank you for inviting me to testify today concerning the importance of teacher quality to student achievement, and programs proposed by the Committee to fund career opportunity and teacher performance compensation with the goal of increasing student achievement.

I am a 6<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher at DC Prep, a public charter school in Washington, DC serving a high need student population in the poorest census tract west of the Anacostia River. I joined the faculty at DC Prep as a founding teacher in 2003 when we opened our first school and currently am the Master Teacher, responsible for providing professional development, evaluation, and coaching for teachers at DC Prep in addition to teaching 6<sup>th</sup> grade math classes.

This past year, I was surprised and honored to be selected by the Milken Foundation as a National Educator of the Year, an award given to only one hundred teachers across the country each year who display exceptional educational talent, inspire and motivate students, colleagues, and their communities, and demonstrate long-range potential for leadership. In addition, I teach an elementary math methods graduate school class at American University.

DC Prep currently manages two campuses, DC Prep Edgewood, which opened in the fall of 2003, and serves 275 students in grades four through eight, and our newly opened elementary school which opened this fall and serves 300 students from preschool to third grade. Currently, sixty percent of our students in these schools qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

DC Prep plans to continue expanding to a total of four elementary and four middle schools by the fall of 2012, serving a total of approximately 2500 students. We plan to locate our campuses in the poorest sections of Washington DC where local schools have about 75 percent free and reduced price lunch students. DC Prep will recruit its student population primarily from these neighborhoods and we anticipate at least 50 percent of the student body at each new school will qualify for free and reduced price lunch.

DC Prep was created to bring the lessons learned in high-performing schools nationwide to bear on the tremendous need in Washington DC and to build an effective organization capable of opening and running high-quality schools on a large scale. We strive to prepare our students, many of whom enter DC Prep far behind their peers academically, to attend and be successful at the most competitive college preparatory high schools.

Our first step was to create one excellent school located in an under-served community and use it as a model to expand into a system of high-performing schools – ultimately serving thousands of

children in Washington. DC Prep partnered with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) to bring the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) to these schools in order to address one of our most pressing challenges – developing and supporting a highly effective teacher for every student.

TAP is a comprehensive, research-based reform designed to attract, retain, support, and develop effective teachers and principals. It combines comprehensive teacher support with performance pay incentives to create an instructional environment that is continually focused on advancing student learning. Attracting, developing, and supporting excellent teachers is crucial to our mission because the student achievement goals of DC Prep schools are simply not attainable without a high quality faculty.

Since we began over four years ago, we have struggled to recruit our outstanding faculty from the pool of applicants we received for teacher and principal positions. This is a challenge faced by schools around the country. What's more, we find that among the applications we do receive, only a small percentage of them meet the standards we have set for teaching excellence (high expectations for all students, demonstrated analytical skills, and a minimum of two years urban teaching experience). Thus, there is a critical need both a) to ensure that DC Prep continues to provide an environment that attracts and retains the most qualified and effective teachers, and b) to expand the number of teachers with the requisite skills and knowledge to respond to DC Prep's growing demand. I believe TAP helps us address both of those needs.

### **Introduction of TAP at DC Prep**

After our first two years of operation of DC Prep Edgewood, a middle school serving grades four through eight, DC Prep began discussions with NIET about implementing the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP). During our initial years, we had achieved some early academic gains with students who historically were not achieving at the levels necessary to enter competitive college preparatory high schools. Yet after achieving these gains, our student's achievement scores began to plateau and were not reaching the levels necessary to enable the majority of our students to enter top high schools.

We realized there was a tremendous need to implement a support structure that enabled teachers to continually improve the effectiveness of their instruction if students were going to continue improving academically. TAP had an established track record of success with similar teachers and students in other high need schools. The method for achieving these results was an intensive focus on increasing teacher quality through a comprehensive program that included 1) school based professional development led by Master and Mentor teachers, 2) career opportunities for teachers to take on additional roles and responsibilities with additional pay without leaving the classroom, 3) a fair, rigorous and objective evaluation system for teachers and principals implemented and overseen by their colleagues, and 4) performance based pay incentives for teachers and principals. DC Prep began implementing TAP in the fall of 2005 with the first year serving as a "practice" year, where all aspects of the program were incorporated, but no performance bonuses were awarded.

## **Student Achievement Results with TAP in the Pilot Year**

TAP has been instrumental in building a professional learning community at DC Prep Edgewood where teachers feel both supported and challenged to refine and deepen their craft. This has been done through TAP by fostering a culture of continuous professional growth and reflection, creating multiple career paths for teachers, and rewarding effective teaching as demonstrated by student achievement. The introduction of weekly TAP cluster groups – small groups of teachers discussing instructional skills and strategies for students – along with bi-monthly interim assessments has ensured periodic monitoring of student progress and given faculty the data and skills to continuously tailor instruction to areas of academic need throughout the school year.

When asked how TAP has impacted her own teaching, one DC Prep language arts teacher responded

*TAP has raised the level of professionalism in our school community and created a culture of reflective practitioners who strive to be the best teachers they can be. Personally, the support and coaching which TAP has provided to me has allowed me to grow tremendously as a professional and has ultimately made me a more effective teacher as evidenced by the growth of my students.*

With the support of TAP, we have been able to demonstrate success and ensure our students — even those who enter the school far below grade level — are prepared for future academic and career success. For example:

- Students who have been at DC Prep for three years have doubled their proficiency rate in Reading and tripled their proficiency rate in Math compared to their peers in neighboring DC public schools, as measured by the DC-CAS, the public standardized test used by the District.
- Roughly 60 percent of three-year veteran students (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders) achieved proficiency or higher on the DC-CAS in the spring of 2006.
- Parents also note positive changes in their children’s attitudes and behaviors as a result of a DC Prep education. When presented with the following statement: “Since coming to DC Prep my child thinks doing well in school is . . . 1 (Not Important), 3 (Somewhat Important), 5 (Very Important),” parent rankings averaged a very positive 4.7.

## **Career Opportunities**

One of the most powerful aspects of this program is the opportunity it creates for teachers to increase their skills and take on additional roles and responsibilities while remaining in the classroom. I became a mentor teacher during the first year of the program in 2005, and in this position was responsible for providing professional development, individualized support, coaching, and conducting evaluations for career teachers. To accomplish these tasks, I was provided with release time from my own classroom for several hours each week.

This year I am serving as the Master Teacher at DC Prep Edgewood, overseeing a team of several Mentor Teachers. Together with the Principal and Assistant Principal, we make up the “leadership team” for the school and set school-wide goals based on data and student needs, as well as provide professional development, coaching and evaluation for our career teachers.

As the master teacher, it is my role to provide ongoing, applied professional development, and observe, evaluate, and coach the faculty at DC Prep. In this role, I identify research-based strategies

for teachers to use in addressing specific needs of students in their class. We identify these needs through standardized testing and classroom based assessments, as well as taking into account each teacher's individual evaluation of classroom skills and knowledge. After field testing the strategies to tailor them to our specific student population, I plan and implement clusters for teachers to learn the strategies for classroom implementation. Finally, I manage the teacher evaluation process, observing teachers in the classroom and providing specific and individual feedback for each teacher afterwards for the purpose of professional growth.

Being involved in TAP has expanded my influence beyond the students in my classroom. It has allowed me to develop my own teaching expertise, which has brought instruction in my classroom to a higher level. As I work closely with other teachers to develop better instructional techniques throughout our school, their students are also positively impacted. Further, I've been able to connect with other outstanding educators throughout the country, which has expanded my scope of understanding about successful teaching techniques and strategies. Because of these opportunities, I continue to be motivated and excited by my profession.

The importance of support, coaching, and career advancement within the classroom environment cannot be overstated. When I began my teaching career, I felt daunted by the prospect of having the same job responsibilities for the rest of my life. I did not know how to reach all of my students and I felt isolated and unsure how to move forward. Still, I loved being in the classroom and was hungry for a way to grow professionally in a way that would make a significant impact on student achievement. Without the support and knowledge I have gained through TAP, and the opportunity to take on new roles and challenges as a Mentor and now a Master Teacher – opportunities that have advanced my career and skills but kept me connected to teaching students in the classroom – it is likely I would not still be teaching. I certainly would not be as effective a teacher as I am.

### **Performance Pay**

DC Prep did not award performance pay in its first year of TAP since we treated this as a practice year. This past year was the first year teachers received performance pay bonuses. I believe the establishment of performance pay at DC Prep is one factor that has helped to focus teachers on the specific student achievement goals we have for our students. Bonuses for increased student achievement do not by themselves improve teacher skills, but they do provide concrete goals for teachers and they reward and acknowledge outstanding effort. The other aspects of TAP – professional support, coaching, evaluation and career opportunity – are essential to complement performance pay as they provide a mechanism for teachers to improve their practice and to increase student achievement on a consistent basis.

Since implementing TAP at DC Prep, we have been able to recruit outstanding teaching professionals who I believe typically would not have stayed in the teaching profession. On the math team last year, we had a teacher who had been a successful technology consultant as well as another who was an experienced engineer. Both of these teachers were high-achieving in their first careers, but came to teaching for the altruistic reasons typically attributed to many who join the teaching profession. However, my experience is that good intentions are not enough to compel the best and the brightest to stay in a profession that can be isolating and challenging with no clear path to success. Policies promoting performance based pay need to do more than simply offer financial

incentives and bonuses. They need to provide a mechanism for intelligent, highly motivated individuals to become and remain teachers who make a positive impact on student achievement.

### **Teacher Retention and Satisfaction**

Entering our third year with TAP at DC Prep, we have found it has had a positive impact on both teacher satisfaction and retention. While teachers at DC Prep are already highly motivated and professional individuals, TAP provides the structure for us to create a school-wide instructional environment that continuously focuses on the best teaching practices and student achievement. This creates an outlet for teachers to experiment and share ideas, improve instruction within the classroom, and advance student learning together, while providing support and development training. This has been invaluable in our work to keep our students on the upward path to higher achievement as well as our efforts to attract and retain the most qualified, highly-motivated faculty. TAP is the reason many teachers choose our school over others, and it is one of the reasons these outstanding teachers remain at our school. It is a key ingredient to our success.

We recently received the results from the standardized test our children take to show progress for the No Child Left Behind Act. Over the past four years, our average new 4<sup>th</sup> grader comes to DC Prep about 40 percent behind the national average achievement in math and reading. It is our mission to make up that gap in the five years they spend with us. We had our first graduating class this past spring, and so we looked forward to our scores with anticipation. As the head of the math team, I was particularly eager to see our math scores. As has been typical for us, fewer than 40 percent of our 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored proficient or better on the math test. The longer our students had been at the school, the higher their scores: 65 percent of our 6<sup>th</sup> graders and 87 percent of our 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored proficient or better this past year in math. While there are many factors that contribute to student success, much of the credit for this incredible improvement lies with the faculty of our school. TAP has been a successful tool for us to be able to recruit, train, support, and reward our faculty for creating this kind of achievement.

### **Performance Based Pay One Part of Comprehensive Teacher Quality Solution**

Performance based pay systems should be a small part of a comprehensive plan to improve the recruitment, retention, and training of quality teachers. In our experience at DC Prep, TAP is a vehicle for attracting more qualified candidates to our school because they know they will be supported to improve and rewarded with high student achievement. The performance based pay incentives within TAP provide a focus for teachers in their work, afford them opportunities to advance and make a greater impact, and recognize their significant contributions in a tangible way.