DC Council Committee on Education & Committee of the Whole Public Oversight Hearing on Distance Learning in DC Public and Public Charter Schools

Testimony of Lecester Johnson, Chief Executive Officer
October 2, 2020

Thank you, Chairman Mendelson and Councilmember Grosso, for convening this important conversation. My name is Lecester Johnson, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Academy of Hope Adult Public Charter School (AoH).

For over 35 years, AoH has provided District adults high quality education, workforce training and supportive services. Learners at AoH are building their skills, preparing for a high school diploma through the GED or the National External Diploma Program (NEDP), earning industry-recognized certifications and transitioning to post-secondary education.

I’d like to start by thanking District leaders for their leadership over the last six months. Like everyone else, this crisis is unlike any other in my fourteen years as the head of AoH. Even during the crisis, we have had success:

- Since DC declared a public health emergency in March, 13 AoH students earned their high school diploma through the GED or the National External Diploma Program (NEDP), including two graduates since the start of this school year.
- Adult learners who had previously not used email are now using Zoom with ease, and teachers are using innovative platforms to provide dynamic and accessible instruction.
- Healthcare and Office Administration programs are preparing learners for high-demand careers in this current economy.

We have also learned some lessons that inform our recommendations today:

- Adult learners cannot afford to put their education or career training on hold, and distance learning provides the opportunities they need to continue toward their goals.
- Attendance policies must take into consideration the current realities of adult learners’ experiences.
- Technology and internet access are critical and our focus must remain on building digital literacy skills.

**Distance learning provides opportunities for adults during the COVID crisis and beyond**

Economic data clearly show that the COVID-19 crisis is directly impacting adult learners and their families. AoH, in partnership with several other adult charters, recently conducted a survey of nearly 2000 adult learners across the District. In their responses, nearly 70% of learners reported being employed in February 2020. That number plummeted to below 30% after the shutdown. Frighteningly, only 9% of learners reported receiving unemployment benefits. An analysis of the full survey is attached to my testimony, but the overarching message is clear: adult learners simply cannot afford to put their
education or career training on hold. They are relying on AoH and our adult education counterparts to help them earn the educational and career credentials needed now for family-sustaining careers. And with children at home, significant health concerns, and career pressures, distance learning is exactly the way to do that.

AoH learners are achieving their goals in the face of unprecedented circumstances. Thirteen learners earned their high school diploma since the public emergency was declared in March, including two learners so far this year. Now that the GED Testing Center is offering tests online, those numbers will continue to increase—especially since roughly 30 AoH learners had just one more GED test to pass when the testing center was shuttered this spring.

Learners in our workforce program are studying diligently to become Certified Nursing Assistants—a career path in clear demand even prior to the pandemic. They are also studying for industry-recognized computer certifications so they can compete in the new, remote-work-focused economy. And in the spring, we’re launching a Phlebotomy track to offer even more options.

**Attendance policies must take into consideration the current realities of adult learners**

Our classes are offered live and recordings are shared afterward. This programmatic design allows learners to attend classes when it makes the most sense for them—perhaps after their children finish their own classes, in between shifts as frontline workers, or following an important doctor’s appointment for themselves or a family member in their care. Adult learners have an incredible ability to juggle their school work with the other important demands on their time, and we firmly believe it’s important to honor that by offering multiple ways to access and participate in instruction.

Unfortunately, OSSE’s attendance policies do not agree. Like most adult charters, we were surprised to have our Continuous Education Plan recently rejected based on our attendance policy. In our original plan, students who were not able to make the live class at the scheduled time, but were able to view the recording of the instructions by the prescribed time and submit assignments to demonstrate learning were given attendance for that class. This was similar to our plan during the height of the pandemic, which provided flexibility for parents and caregivers who had children at home. We were set to operate in a similar fashion this term until our plan was rejected by OSSE as not being compliant. This of course, caused frustration and confusion for learners who appreciated the flexibly given their current situation with children at home. We encourage OSSE to reconsider this policy decision and instead allow for retroactive attendance that accounts for adult learners’ complex lives.

**Technology, internet access and digital literacy skills training are critical for the full participation and success of adult learners in distance education.**

In the survey of 2,000 adult learners across the District, nearly 30% of learners reported difficulties of learning from home related to technology. When the COVID-19 crisis began in March, nearly 75% of AoH learners reported they did not have the digital tools needed to fully participate in distance education. We immediately began distributing devices, and as we began the new school year, every learner was provided with a laptop and internet access—no small feat given that District-run programs
created to cover learners’ internet costs are not currently open to adult learners. It is important to note that our ability to provide devices to learners was made possible, in part to the adult charter stabilization language the Council included in the FY21 budget and significant, ongoing fundraising efforts by our advancement team.

Access to computers and internet, however, is only the first step in access. Learners also need greater digital literacy skills to fully participate as distance learners. To start the school year, AoH offered tech boot camps to ensure learners had the basic skills they need to participate. We also worked to improve the user experience by launching a new learning management system and single site logon. With one easy login, students unlock a one-stop dashboard that gives them access to the ten applications they use for classes. We are also offering tech clinics on site where learners can receive individualized support if they continue to struggle with the technology. We will continue to refine our offerings using feedback from learners.

**Adult education will play a critical role in supporting DC residents through the COVID-19 crisis**

We know from historical data that participation in adult education and workforce programs rises dramatically during economic recessions. According to the National Reporting System, DC saw a 25% increase in adult students between 2006-2007 and the 2009-2010 school years when the Great Recession occurred. As the job market continues to tighten and industry demands shift, adult charters are preparing residents to compete and excel. AoH is serving DC residents so they can quickly achieve their educational and career goals, secure family-sustaining careers, and keep themselves and their communities safe during this tenuous time. We look forward to a successful school year and appreciate the support and partnership from OSSE, the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Council, and the Public Charter School Board.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.
I study at night or early in the morning because that is when it is quiet in my house and I can think. Also, it is when the laptop is most available.

— ANDREA, MICROSOFT OFFICE SUITE STUDENT
In the United States, public adult-serving charter schools provide a no-cost educational option to thousands of adults who are learning English, completing high school, or obtaining job skills. In fact, there are almost 100 adult charter schools that are alive and thriving across the country. Ten percent of such schools are clustered in Washington, DC. These unique DC public schools have grown out of the major gaps in education and economic stability in the city’s knowledge-based and hospitality economy. While the gap has grown over time, it has been exacerbated by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and its devastating impact on the working poor and populations of color. These schools collectively meet students’ needs inside and outside of the classroom.

"I thought that I could not do distance learning, but I was able to do it, and I’m very thankful to the school... [they] provided me with a laptop... and they helped me to learn how to use it. I think this is very important for adults because we need to have this skill to be prepared for the changes that are coming.

SPANISH GED STUDENT"
While the virus wreaked havoc for all schools and students, adult learners were hit especially hard because over 65% of our students are also parents of public school students and need to oversee their children’s distance learning while also keeping up with their own studies. Adult charter schools rapidly pivoted to serve our learners. For some classes and students, this was a quick response. For example, students in career training programs went from meeting in person to meeting online without losing progress. However, for students with beginning literacy and technology skills, this shift required near herculean efforts on the part of students and teachers.

Our schools are using a range of platforms, including Google classroom, Zoom, and Remind. For students without laptops and digital literacy, we use text messages, WhatsApp, telephone calls, and paper packets. We have collectively distributed 810 devices and hotspots to adult learners, along with written instructions in multiple languages on how to turn on the laptop, connect to the internet, and navigate to the applications needed to engage with their class. We also have staff and teachers who are calling and providing one-to-one virtual tech support and trouble-shooting.

Our schools are trusted community hubs for families that have been the hardest hit by this pandemic. Our student support teams provide both telecounseling and case management, including assistance in applying for unemployment and avoiding eviction. We also support students who have contracted COVID-19 and lack insurance, as well as English-learning parents who need unique support to facilitate their children’s remote learning. We are also providing spaces for adult students to get answers to their questions about public health guidance and available resources in the District.
We prepare essential workers – those at the frontline of DC’s economy – to play a critical and sustained role in the city’s economic recovery. Throughout this crisis, we continue to run proven programs that equip DC residents to succeed in the most competitive economy in decades. In addition to skills-based training, our year-round support services connect students and their families to critical resources so they can stay healthy and safe on the job.

We assist in closing the K-12 achievement gap by ensuring parents are able to be active partners in their children’s school success. Our programs directly prepare parents to support their children’s education – from navigating online learning platforms and building home learning routines to accessing essential resources. Adult public charter schools are committed to continuing to play their leading role in activating parents as their child’s first and most important teacher.

As the District recovers from this crisis, adult education is vital to unlocking an equitable future for all District residents. We stand with Mayor Muriel Bowser and the DC City Council in recognizing this “once in a generation opportunity to build a more equitable, resilient, and vibrant city.” (ReOpen DC Advisory Group, 2020). The communities served by DC’s adult education public charter schools are our city’s COVID-19 hot spots – neighborhoods made up of people of color who are front-line workers in health care and food services, people living in close quarters due to the high cost of housing, and families lacking digital access.

As our students’ responses to the survey clearly indicate, investing in adult education remains a critical priority for our city as DC rebuilds in the coming months and years. We have purposely chosen to focus on “student voices” as the anchors for our data and the themes for a new direction in creating a city that works for all its citizens.
Approximately two months into remote learning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the District’s adult charter schools jointly surveyed their adult learners. 1,853 adult learners responded, representing all eight wards of the District of Columbia.

Surveys were distributed via email and text by Academy of Hope PCS, Briya PCS, Carlos Rosario PCS, Community College Preparatory PCS, LAYC Career Academy, The Family Place PCS, and The Next Step PCS.

We share within this summary report key findings related to:

- Transportation
- Preferred time of day to study
- Learning preferences
- Managing their children’s distance learning
- Greatest challenges encountered while learning at home
- Benefits
- ESL
- Greatest COVID-19 related concerns
- Employment

We have also included quotes from our learners provided during re-opening planning focus groups.

1 53% response rate.
KEY SURVEY RESULTS
HOW DO ADULT LEARNERS TRAVEL TO SCHOOL?

66% of adult learners take public transportation to school, while only 12% drive to school.

I don’t feel safe riding the bus. Sometimes the bus is too crowded. I’m a sick person too and people aren’t safe. But I do take my chances on coming to school on the bus because I have no other way to get there. - Student
How do adult students prefer to learn?

Learners expressed preferences for in-person learning (44%) and blended learning (22%), but of all of the online options, learners preferred synchronous learning (19%).

Distance learning is not the same as in-person learning. During regular class, it is easy to ask our teacher a question. During distance learning, I need to select questions to ask, because I have to write an email and it takes time and it is difficult to interact. This is difficult for lower-level students. - Level 1 ESL student
30% of responses about difficulties learning at home were related to technology, while 19% expressed that distractions at home make it difficult to learn.

"The thing that is distracting is my kids are at home. She has a school laptop but she had trouble getting into it and using it. The password was not recognized. I have a home laptop but it does not have access to zoom."  - Student
WHEN DO LEARNERS PREFER TO STUDY?

Learners preferred to study in the morning and at night.

—I study at night or early in the morning because that is when it is quiet in my house and I can think. Also, it is when the laptop is most available.

— Andrea, Microsoft Office Suite Student
HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC IMPACTED EMPLOYMENT FOR ADULT LEARNERS?

The majority of responders had a job in February, however 40% of them lost employment after the COVID-19 shutdown.

Are you working now?

- Yes: 28.3%
- No: 71.7%

Were you employed in February 2020 (prior to COVID-19)?

- Yes: 67.3%
- No: 32.7%

ARE YOU CURRENTLY RECEIVING EMPLOYMENT BENEFITS?

- Yes: 9%
- No: 86%
- I prefer not to answer: 5%

Only 9% of learners are currently receiving unemployment benefits.
WHERE DO CHILDREN OF ADULT LEARNERS LEARN?

Where do children attend school?

Nearly 60% of children of adult learners attend a DC Public School or a DC Public Charter School

- DC Public School: 43.2%
- DC Public Charter School: 14.7%
- Adult children not in school: 12.4%
- Daycare: 9.4%
- I am not sure: 6.9%
- College: 5.9%
- Private school: 3.4%
- Homeschooled: 2.1%
- Job training classes: 1.9%

I feel that this experience has helped me to learn technology and forced me to use computers. I am happy that now I can help my son with his homework when he is using his computer.

- Level 5 ESL Student

Which grades do children attend?

A little more than half of parent adult learners had children in elementary grades or lower.

- 1st through 5th grade: 23.6%
- PK3 or PK4: 18.3%
- 6th grade through 8th grade: 12.9%
- 9th grade through 12th grade: 12.8%
- Kindergarten: 12.6%
- College or post-secondary training: 10.6%
- I do not know: 8.9%
- 1st grade: 1.0%
WHAT BENEFITS DO ADULT LEARNERS ACCESS?
One third of learners do not receive any benefits.

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I sought and received mental health services because I was scared and stressed.
- Student

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I do not receive benefits: 30.6%
DC Healthcare Alliance: 21.8%
Medicaid or Medicare: 19.0%
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT), or food stamps: 9.0%
Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): 4.8%
Social Security/Disability: 4.2%
I do not know: 4.1%
 Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): 2.7%
Housing Voucher (Section 8): 2.5%
Childcare Voucher: .9%
WHAT ARE ADULT LEARNERS WORRIED ABOUT?

Most responders (20%) indicated employment was a concern during the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) shutdown.

My work schedule changes frequently, and that is why I stopped distance learning. It is hard for me to have a fixed regular class schedule due to the nature of my job, and I am just giving my job a priority at this time over my studies in order to survive. -Student

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<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment (not having a job, problems at work, etc.)</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Health (Mine or others’)</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing (not having a place to live, paying rent, etc.)</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeschooling my children</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health (fear or anxiety)</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food/Nutrition (not having enough food)</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have no concerns.</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Internet/technology access</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My concerns are not listed above.</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of information</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
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A LOOK AT THE FUTURE, BEYOND COVID-19: WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF ADULT LEARNERS?

Most responders (26%) indicated improving their English language skills is their primary goal for the future. Others indicated their goal is improving their reading and writing skills (18%) or gaining employment/improving their employment situation (18%).

As DC recovers from COVID-19, what are your educational and career goals for the future?

Based on your goals for the future, do you think you need to change what you are studying now?

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<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve my English</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve my reading and writing skills</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass the GED</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Get a high school diploma</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Get a job certification or credential</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Postsecondary school/college</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Keep my job</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Get a job or a better job</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
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Even with the COVID-19 crisis, 60% of respondents said they would not change their program of study.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This survey and report was the result of quick and collaborative work by a cross section of teams from the District’s adult serving schools.

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Deep appreciation to the faculty, student services, communications, and other team members at each of our schools for supporting our adult learners in accessing this survey. Thanks to your efforts, a sizable number of the District’s adult learners shared their voice with our schools and the District via this survey.

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