

Testimony on the District of Columbia
Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007
Council of the District of Columbia, Committee of the Whole
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee: I wish this hearing were about how to make education more effective for the young people of the District, rather than about who is in charge of doing so. It is good news that the city's political and educational leaders all realize the need for radical change in the schools. We have an energetic new mayor who is making education his highest priority, a vigorous Board of Education president eager to accelerate educational change, a superintendent who has put together a master plan ready to be executed, and a new Council Chair with a track record of effectiveness in the city. Moreover, we are fortunate to live in a rapidly developing city with growing tax revenues and an excellent bond rating and to have a vibrant charter school movement in the city which is providing some models of student achievement in inner city schools.

Our political and educational leaders are not arguing about what the schools actually need. Everyone wants higher academic standards and dedicated, qualified teachers who believe that all children can learn. They want energetic principals with strong administrative skills who will support their best teachers and weed out those who are not performing. They want modern equipment and buildings that enhance rather than impede learning. They recognize that traditional and chartered public schools all spend taxpayers' money to serve District children and ought to cooperate in spending it well.

Collectively, the mayor, Council, and Board of Education have the power and the resources to get the job done. What is absent is the willingness and determination to work together to improve outcomes for the kids. The question is: Will changing the governance

structure of the schools facilitate that willingness and determination and be worth the disruption it will inevitably cause?

The Need for Action is Clear

These hearings have dramatized what we all knew: many DC schools are failing. Over the years learned reports detailing the poor performance of DC schools have piled up in a high stack. These reports all say the same thing. Despite many excellent principals and teachers, substantial investment and some successes, too many students are not learning basic reading and mathematics skills, and few are excelling. Too many students are dropping out; too few are going on to post-secondary education and succeeding when they get there. Many school facilities are in bad shape, out of date, and poorly maintained. Some principals, teachers, and staff are not up to the job. Special education (including transportation) is often ineffective and absorbs too large a share of the budget. Charter schools, whose enrollment has been growing rapidly while DCPS enrollment declines, have often been left to find facilities in the private market, while many DCPS buildings are vacant or underutilized. DCPS and chartered public schools often act as though they were separate rival school systems, rather than partners in providing quality education for District students.

While there have been many high-sounding goals and well-intentioned plans—including the current Master Education Plan and Master Facilities Plan – progress has been far too slow, and there is too much evidence of failure to simply wait and hope for the best. Positive change must be accelerated. There is no easy way to create high performing schools in a central city with large concentrations of poverty and blight. However, the success of many urban schools (including some in Washington), and measurable improvement in other cities show that higher performance is possible. Washington can do much better than is doing!

Strengths of the Mayor's Proposal

Mayor Fenty deserves a lot of credit for putting a bold proposal on the table. Many parts of it seem to me excellent and likely to lead to more effective management and improved educational outcomes:

- **Creating a Department of Education under a deputy mayor for education**
This will elevate education to the same level as all other major city functions. The new Department of Education will play a critical role in consolidating responsibility for the planning and coordination of all education-related activities of city agencies, from facilities management to special education, early-childhood development to higher education.
- **Centralizing the state functions in the State Education Office (SEO)**
The District has jumbled up its state and city functions in confusing ways, vesting some in DCPS, some in the SEO and some in UDC. It would be more efficient to pull together the state level functions, such as administering federal grants and setting state standards under the No Child Left Behind Act, into a strong SEO.
- **Treating the school budget as a regular part of the city budget**
The schools do not have a dedicated source of revenue or independent borrowing authority. School spending should receive the same scrutiny as other city functions. The mayor should submit a budget that balances education against the needs of other city services and the Council should act on it. Similarly, the capital budget should include educational and other facilities and should take advantage of opportunities for co-location to get the best use of capital funding.
- **Creating a new authority to manage the modernization of DC Schools.**
The slow pace and ineffective management of school modernization, as well as basic maintenance and repair, is one of the school system's most glaring failures. Creating the Public Education Facilities Management & Construction Authority under strong leadership should result in schools being built and renovated faster and at less cost.

The new authority should create a facilities planning system that considers the needs of DCPS and chartered public schools as part of one public education system. Since it will take time to establish this new authority, managing and tracking of projects currently underway or about to start should be outsourced in the interest of not losing momentum. Exempting the Authority from the city's procurement rules should be temporary. If the procurement rules are dysfunctional they should be fixed for all government functions, not abandoned.

- Creating an Ombudsman's office to deal with and track complaints

This designated office could dramatically improve parents' sense of access to a receptive public school system that can handle and manage their concerns and complaints. By creating a single venue for these concerns, the city and school system will be able to determine patterns of complaints that seem to warrant policy changes.

Risks of the Mayor's proposal

The Mayor's central proposal is to abolish the local functions of the Board of Education, make it a purely advisory board on state functions, and have the superintendent report directly to him. This proposal would require a charter change, is sure to be divisive, and carries some serious risks that the Council should weigh carefully.

Mayor Fenty's diagnosis is that public schools in DC are not producing satisfactory results because no one is clearly in charge. Authority is diffused among too many players: the School Board, the Superintendent, the Council, the Public Charter School Board, and various agencies reporting to the Mayor. He proposes centralizing the decision-making authority for public schools in the Mayor's office, so that the Council and the public will know whom to hold accountable if school performance does not improve. He believes this structure would speed up needed change.

The proposed legislation would vest control of DCPS in the mayor. The superintendent, who would be called the chancellor, would report to the Mayor and serve at his pleasure. The mayor could delegate the operation of the schools to the chancellor, along with procurement and personnel authority. The mayor, working with the chancellor, would be able to put his imprint on school system policies and priorities in the DCPS budget.

Will such a structure produce better results than the current one? If the mayor and chancellor have a good working relationship and have compatible strategies for improving education, the new arrangement could speed up reform. As long as the mayor approved, the chancellor could try to implement his ideas about curriculum, teaching methods, partnerships with other organizations, and so forth without seeking approval

from the Board of Education. The chancellor would have a strong incentive to implement needed reforms quickly because the mayor would demand results, and changes could not be derailed by objections from the Board of Education. If the changes did not produce measurable improvement in educational results, the mayor could fire the chancellor and look for another one.

By itself, however, the new relationship would do nothing to increase the competence of the DCPS management or change its proverbial slowness in implementing change. The presumption is that past superintendents have had insufficient incentives to succeed or have been thwarted by the Board of Education, that the mayor would push DCPS harder to produce results, and that it would be easier to recruit talented leaders at the top echelons of DCPS if they reported to the mayor rather than the Board.

The Board of Education has not always functioned well, but it is not my perception that the Board deserves much of the blame for the slowness of reform in recent years. With vigorous new leadership I believe that the Board's functioning could be improved without taking divisive and disruptive action to strip its powers and transform it into an advisory state board. While the mayor should be held accountable for education as well as other government services, it is not realistic to think that he can spend a lot of time on the details of school administration. He needs a strong professional in the job of Superintendent (or Chancellor), and both the superintendent and the mayor need a board to debate and decide on policy matters and to keep them in touch (through hearings and other means) with the general public.

If the Board of Education loses its local role, the Council will become the de facto Board of Education, and the Council has a full plate already. Does the Council really want to become the arbiter of school graduation requirements, discipline regimes, and the yearly school calendar? There are risks to having such decisions made by administrators with no structured way for the public to interact and express its views. The Ombudsman's office is a good place to handle individual complaints and advise on whether a pattern of complaints warrants a policy change; it is not an appropriate forum for parent groups,

student groups and educational activists to present their views in public. Without the Board of Education, the Council would quickly become that forum. I do not think this would be a wise use of the Council's time.

Moreover, it is difficult to recruit effective superintendents, and the cost of turn-over is high. The Council should carefully consider whether having the Chancellor serve at the pleasure of the mayor would make it easier or harder in the long run to recruit and retain talented superintendents and other top school management who would be willing to invest significant portions of their careers improving education in Washington.

One school system

A salient aspect of the DC school situation is the rapid growth of chartered public schools in recent years, which has been accompanied by a decline in DCPS enrollment.

Chartered schools serve a disproportionately low-income and minority population. The strongest charter schools have been showing impressive gains in student achievement while some of the weaker ones have not. DCPS has been in deep denial about the momentum of the charter movement, which will likely soon include a third of DC students. The proposals by the Mayor and the Board of Education also do not appear to recognize that chartered schools should be seen as part of a single system in improving public education for all DC students. However the Mayor and Council resolve the school governance question, they should focus on improving schools for all DC children. This means making school facilities available to charters that want to rent them, co-locating schools where this would use space effectively, and encouraging cooperation and mutual learning in the interest of helping all children to get a high quality education.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will be happy to answer questions.