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**Comments of Glenda Partee  
on the Role of Charter Schools in the District**

July 10, 1995

I will begin by comments with a quote from a document by the Center for Education Reform in the District entitled, "Charter Schools: The New Neighborhood Schools." Then I want to share with you something of my belief system. Finally, I want to discuss what I think is the state of the charter school movement in the District of Columbia and offer a few recommendations.

**"Charter Schools: The New Neighborhood Schools"**

*"The Charter School movement is based on the demand for better public schools. As Americans grow increasingly disgruntled with the system that educates their children, the advent of charter schools has given parents and teachers the opportunity to roll back regulations, roll up their sleeves, and create and operate the type of schools where they most want to teach and send their children. People from all walks of life are embracing charter laws as a means of creating schools that are more innovative and responsive to communities and free from the demands of the bureaucratic process." Center for Education Reform, p.1, March 1995.*

**My Belief System**

I see the advent of charters in the District as a way of addressing a number of needs in the school system in ways that will only enrich the range of our offerings and support the development of our students. Among these needs are for greater choice and diversity of programming, equity and access to various programs, and stronger partnerships within our community. I see charters as a way of cutting down long lines of parents anxious to get their children into a few popular and successful programs and a way of promulgating these programs city wide. I see charters as a way of providing state-of-the-art and even controversial programming by the staff and the parents who are ready and willing to move with that type of programming.

For many years we have paid lip service to the notion that schools could not educate our children alone but could succeed through partnerships with families and other entities within the community such as universities, businesses and other public and private agencies. I see charters as a way to create these partnerships in a much more profound and deep way that will bring extensive resources for education and also help us to manage the resources that we have more efficiently and effectively.

For example, the charter school with which I am involved is a pre-K through 5th grade elementary charter with a thematic focus on international and multi-lingual studies. In developing the design for the school, we have worked extensively with a number of think tanks and non-profit organizations in the community with a focus on language and international

studies and teacher education. These organizations will be our partners (and others which we will cultivate) as we implement the charter and use these resources in support of our children's education.

Moreover, all of the design and start-up work to date has been done by volunteers at no cost to the District in research, concept papers, mailings, faxes, travel and numerous meetings, to name a few activities. I know of efforts to set up similar programs in the District that are associated with relatively large federal funds for planning and start-up efforts. We have short circuited this process and will go to implementation in the fall--much ahead of this other heavily funded effort. Moreover, I know of similar programs in the District that rely on twice the staffing that we are proposing for our charter school.

Unlike what some may think, the advent of charters does not take funds away from existing education funds. At most, it uses those funds in different ways for the very same children they were initially designed. From what I can tell of the way the District is focusing its current charter effort, i.e., on teacher-led programs without administrative overhead, charter schools are being designed to run more cheaply than other schools. I would posit that this is not an equitable arrangement, but one that the school system appears to be pursuing.

Another element of charters that I endorse is the accountability built into their creation and implementation. Because they are new and somewhat experimental (although they may only be replicating existing programs), they fall under greater scrutiny and are obligated to consistently meet their goals for student achievement and other stated outcomes or risk loss of their charter status and go out of business. In this manner, a mechanism is created for sun setting unsuccessful programs--something that we rarely do in regular education programming.

I believe:

- (1) The public has a great deal of resources that can be used to support high quality services, among these is education.
- (2) No child should be made to attend a low performing school or be exposed to an unsafe school environment.
- (3) If these conditions cannot be guaranteed, other educational options must be available to children and their parents and they should be free to pursue these options.

I must stress that I did not start out to help create a charter school--I'm a regular person with a regular job that I ought to be at right now. I have waited, however, for over 12 years as a D.C. public school parent to see the system implement a range of high quality educational offerings that are equitable and accessible to students throughout the system. I am tired of wishing that the ocean liner would turn around, but have decided that a bevy of small U-boats can reach the shore just as well!

If we are to move into the 20th century with a curriculum and programs that propel our students forward equipped to compete with the best that other school systems can offer, we need mechanisms for:

- jump starting experimental programs--not just phasing in new ideas slowly;
- replicating already existing programs, thus committing ourselves to making popular and successful programs available to larger numbers of children and parents;
- phasing out unsuccessful efforts or those that cannot account for increases in student achievement and other appropriate measures of success; and
- creating efficiencies where ever we can.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

I want to applaud the School Board and the Superintendent for their efforts to create more autonomy at the local site through the creation of enterprise and charter schools. Whereas the present policy regarding charters offers teachers--and these are often very special teachers, those who are willing to brave the waters to step out of their ranks--the opportunity to create new configurations of schools, the policy provides no place for parents and community members to participate in the design of charter schools. You may say that my being here is a direct contradiction of this policy, and I would agree with you--it is. However, we (the consumers), feel so strongly that we should be at the table to help create these new schools and programs--schools and programs that we want I children to participate in--that we have not let the current wording regarding charters deter us. We thank those of you who have been willing to work with us to this point.

I must stress, however, that the present policy is too restrictive and has a number of inherent problems:

- It restricts charters to existing public school sites without providing the incentives and mechanisms to effect a smooth relationship between a charter and an existing "host" school.

The policy for limiting charters to school-within-school charters assumes that space can be found within existing school buildings and that once found, principles and school restructuring teams will "host" the new charter. These are not necessarily good assumptions since you are dealing with two different paradigms of school governance. Assuming good faith has been made in trying to locate charters in existing school properties, charters should be allowed to contract for space in other government or private properties.

- It provides no incentive for host principals to accept a charter school. Host principals are

given no additional resources for charter school students housed in their building despite that fact that they are responsible for the health and safety of those students. We believe that host principals should be given partial credit for the additional students in their building to offset the additional responsibilities and services these students require.

- The lead teacher is given no incentive or support for assuming the administrative duties of a principal. While DCPS would save half of a principal's salary by setting up a charter school with 160 students, the current programs provides leaders with no release time and no staff support to cover that release time. Nor is the lead teacher given any salary differential. One solution would be to provide charter schools with an additional aide position and to increase the salary of the lead teacher to that of a coordinator.
- Teachers in a charter school are expected to take a personal risk, give up their current positions (and their building seniority which may entail additional risk of being laid off), run a school, and develop new curriculum and creative ways to improve programs with no additional planning time and no salary differential. Teachers should be given assurances that they will have a choice of positions should charter school proposals not be approved or not materialize. In addition, teachers should be provided additional planning time by guaranteeing an additional aide position as described above.
- Administrative support for a charter school is less than that provided to a regular school of a comparable size despite the fact that charter schools will have greater responsibility for managing their own resources. These schools should have access to a business manager position should they deem necessary.
- Parents and community members are given no formal role in designing a charter school proposal despite the fact that Goals 2000 (the federal funding source helping to initiative charter schools) calls for increased community participation. The policy should be changed to give parents and community members an equal voice in designing schools.

As structured, the current charter school effort is heavily tied to the current bureaucracy and the charters are not accorded the freedom to design, staff and site the programs in keeping with the goal of the specific charters. There are a number of models of charter legislation in other states which are more supportive of the development and expansion of charters; also the - legislation proposed by Council persons Mason, Lightfoot and Patterson on May 25, 1995 to establish charter schools provide a more favorable environment for the development of charters than currently exists.