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Testimony for the  
City Council Committee on Education and  
Libraries, July 10, 1995, on  
Proposals for Education Reform

Good morning, Members of the City Council, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Judith Jones, and I am here to advocate introducing public charter schools in the District of Columbia, as one important element of the reforms that are needed to dramatically improve the quality of education offered to our children. As many of you know, I am a longtime resident of the city, and our children attended DC public schools. I have been both a PTA president and Co-Chair of the Six School Council. I even wrote a book about the development of the Six School Complex, subtitled "A Successful Innovation in the DC Public Schools," which led me to consider carefully the reasons for the success and continuing difficulties of these schools. I am an urban sociologist, and I worked part-time as a facilities planner and an education planner for DCPS from 1987 to 1994. These experiences have led me, like so many other parents and citizens of the District, to demand an answer to the questions - what has gone so wrong with public education that, today, only about 20% of our students receive a good quality education? and, what can we do to change this unacceptable situation?

For the past several years I have been researching concepts and practices being tried all over the country to deal with the low student achievement that characterizes most of our children. Several important recommendations have emerged that I believe are essential to long-lasting improvement in education. First, two monopolies must be broken in the field of education - the monopoly that most local boards of education have on who can offer publicly-funded education programs, and the monopoly that neighborhood school zones have over their clients. The first is a monopoly over the supply of public education, and that can be broken by allowing other groups than the government to provide public education; public charter schools are one mechanism for doing this. We must also break the monopoly held by each non-competitive neighborhood school, by allowing parents to choose which public schools they wish their children to attend. This will open up the demand side of education, by empowering parents, students, and teachers with the choice of where they learn and teach. More detail on these concepts is contained in the attachments to my testimony.

Today, I would like to recommend that the City Council adopt two new policies that will provide the financial and organizational support for classroom teachers to undertake the improvements needed at the classroom level. First, parents should be able to choose their children's schools, and second, the public funds committed for education should follow each child to his or her school, through a system of "education allotments." This policy would have far-reaching implications. It would empower all parents to choose, thus setting in motion the

positive aspects of competition among schools, and ensuring that all families receive the benefits of choice among public schools, not just the more savvy or energetic families. Breaking these monopolies will encourage schools to offer better services at reasonable and understandable costs.

Secondly, the entire issue of who controls the education budget, which now consumes the lion's share of adult attention, becomes transformed. Each school's budget would result from the aggregation of the "education allotments" brought by the children choosing to attend that school. At least 95% of the monies dedicated to education would be allocated to local schools on a non-political, non-bureaucratic basis. A small staff of experts would function like a giant escrow account, collecting education funds and disbursing them to eligible schools, as well as auditing the financial reports and expenditures of the schools. While some centralized coordinating functions will remain, these tasks should be able to be handled by a few hundred administrators, and their budget should be limited to a maximum of 3-4% of the total funds going directly to schools and children. Setting the administrative budget as a percentage of total funds for schools would prevent the central administration from becoming another bloated bureaucracy. This proposal also has the advantage of enabling the City Council and Mayor to set the annual value of the education allotments, which could vary in response to changes in city revenues. The total education budget would vary primarily in response to changes in the number of students, not to proposals from self-interested bureaucrats.

Again, more detail on this concept of "education allotments" disbursed through an "education funding authority" is contained in the attachment to my testimony. What I wish to reiterate is my tremendous distress, shared by thousands across the city, that we adults spend so much energy arguing about the effects of varying organizational arrangements on different groups' status and power. By instituting the proposed system of education allotments, we would remove the uncertainty, delay, and competition over the allocation of education resources that now hinders effective classroom teaching. Each school would be responsible for planning and using its funds wisely and effectively. If it did not do so, parents, students, and teachers could choose another school. And, if the quality of education provided really declined, the "state" level office of education could suspend the school for not meeting its minimum academic standards. You, the Council, have the power to institute an entirely new, fair, and efficient way to manage public funds for the benefit of our children if you adopt these policies. Please give it serious consideration. Thank you.