

STATEMENT OF RICHARD J. WENNING  
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BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, LIBRARIES, AND  
RECREATION OF THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF  
COLUMBIA

REGARDING CHARTER SCHOOLS

May 15, 1997

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

My name is Richard Wenning, Senior Policy Advisor in the Office of the CEO and the coordinator of charter schools activities for the DC Public Schools. I welcome the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss this important education reform.

As you know, on April 26, 1996, Congress passed the District of Columbia School Reform Act Of 1995. This Act established a charter school law for the District of Columbia that offers an opportunity to greatly expand the quality and quantity of choices available to children and their parents among public schools.

The DC charter school law established two eligible chartering authorities, the School Board and the Public Charter School Board. These two chartering authorities may approve a total of 20 charter

schools in a given year. Therefore, at this time next year, 24 charter schools may have been approved in the District of Columbia.

As part of an effort to promote school autonomy and accountability through decentralization and parental choice, DCPS intends to support the development of high quality charter schools that will serve as laboratories of change for the entire school system. We will seek to develop partnerships with institutions such as the Smithsonian, and provide assistance, when appropriate, to existing public schools that wish to convert to charter status. Our efforts with charter schools will occur in concert with our efforts to foster a variety of school restructuring efforts, including expansion of school-based management and budgeting.

To ensure the development of high quality charter schools, we will work closely with the two existing chartering authorities. In addition, we seek to develop an appropriate state-level role in the approval and oversight process.

At the time of the School Reform Act's passage, the School Board served as state educational agency (SEA) for the District of Columbia. As a result of the Control Board's order in November, the Emergency Board of Trustees now serves as state educational agency. This change is the impetus for developing a state-level role for the Emergency Board of Trustees in the area of charter schools.

## DEVELOPING AN APPROPRIATE STATE-LEVEL ROLE

In an effort to begin crafting an appropriate state-level role in the area of charter schools, the CEO has developed a draft proposal that has generated considerable discussion in the charter school community. Specifically, the proposal:

- Directs the CEO, as the Chief State School Officer, to ensure development of procedures and criteria, in consultation with the eligible chartering authorities, for the approval and oversight of charter schools.
- Seeks to establish that the Board of Trustees, in its capacity as state educational agency, shall review decisions to grant charters by eligible chartering authorities.
- Seeks to enable the Board of Trustees, in its capacity as state educational agency, to take appeals from eligible applicants whose petitions were rejected by the eligible chartering authorities and grant the charters if appropriate.

In no way is this proposal intended to diminish the authority of the School Board or Public Charter School Board as eligible chartering authorities. Rather, the proposal is intended to create an appropriate state-level role that compliments the extensive responsibilities of the eligible chartering authorities. Primary responsibility for approving

and monitoring charter schools rests with the eligible chartering authorities.

MONITORING CHARTER SCHOOL  
OPERATIONS AND PERFORMANCE

The DC charter school law specifies that eligible chartering authorities are responsible for monitoring the operations of each charter school to which the authority has granted a charter. Chartering authorities must ensure that each charter school complies with applicable laws and the provisions of the charter granted to the school. At least once every 5 years, a chartering authority must review a charter to determine whether it should be revoked for the following reasons:

- The school committed a violation of applicable laws or a material violation of the conditions, terms, standards, or procedures set forth in the charter, including violations relating to the education of children with disabilities; or
- The school failed to meet the goals and student achievement expectations set forth in the charter on the date that is 5 years after the date on which the charter is granted or renewed.

## CONCLUSION

Charter schools with high quality educational programs and sound business management hold great potential to improve the choices and quality of public education available in the District. However, charter schools without such attributes both threaten the District's financial viability and undermine our ability to improve quality and choice in the District's public schools. The importance of a rigorous application review and approval process, as well as thorough oversight of charter school performance, cannot be overstated. Autonomy and accountability must go hand-in-hand. This a fundamental premise of charter schools and a necessary condition for us to ensure a quality education for the children of the District of Columbia.

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This concludes my prepared statement. I will be glad to answer any questions that you and the other Council members may have.