

Oral testimony

**Testimony of
Josephine Baker
Chair, District of Columbia Public Charter School Board
Before the
Subcommittee on the District of Columbia
House Committee on Appropriations
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Chairman Istook and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Josephine Baker, Chair of the DC Public Charter School Board, and I appreciate having this opportunity to share our views with the Subcommittee today. Mr. Chairman, I would ask that my written testimony be included in the record. For now, I will summarize its key points.

As we meet today, eight schools chartered by our Board are completing their first year in operation. And what a year it has been -- from the struggle to open schools despite difficulties in obtaining facilities, to the proud moment last Wednesday when 17 young men and women accepted their diplomas as the first graduating class of the Washington Math Science Technology Public Charter High School. This year truly has been a study in achieving against the odds.

*as the first
in a charter school approved by this board*

The charter school movement in the District is off to a strong start. But we see several obstacles that must be overcome.

First, uncertainty created by the appropriations process itself.

The DC School Reform Act requires that all DC students -- in DC Public Schools or public charter schools -- should receive funding based on a common per-pupil formula, according to a headcount taken in September of each school year. But local law requires that DCPS be funded on the basis of prior-year enrollment. Because our enrollment is growing, the disparity between the two laws jeopardized the FY2000 charter school budget.

Fortunately, at the last minute the Control Board and DC Council were able to embrace the idea of a 5 percent set-aside from the DCPS budget that will be made available to charters based on fall enrollment. But this is a one-time "fix," and we should not wait for the problem to recur next year before seeking a more permanent solution. Congress can contribute by clarifying that dollars should follow students, based on enrollment decisions made by their parents.

Mr. Chairman thank you for your statement of support for the funding of charter schools

A second issue is adequacy of resources with respect to special education and facilities.

We have shared with your staff some detailed analyses done by two of our schools, showing that the method of allocating special ed funds under the current per-pupil formula Act actually leaves them with a significant per-student deficit. We plan to work

closely with local officials on revision of the formula, but Congress can help in another way: by being clear that any Federal special education monies appropriated to the District are to be shared by all public school students, not just those attending DCPS schools.

The facilities allowance remains problematic as well. The District's funding formula law requires that charters receive roughly the same per-pupil as is provided to DCPS through the capital budget. But last year, that figure was arbitrarily reduced to an amount that was clearly inadequate.

This year, according to the Council's own legislation, charter schools are entitled to a facilities allotment of \$1198 per pupil. If Congress approves the DC Budget with the 5 percent charter school set-aside contained in Budget Support Act, we know that there will be enough in the bank to fund the charter school facilities at this level. We expect no less.

But money is not the only issue. For some charter schools, the simple task of finding space has turned into a protracted saga that saps resources and distracts attention from the task of preparing to educate children. In recent months, the process has been marked by inconsistent guidance, a lack of accountability, and disregard for established policies.

One particularly troubling issue concerns public schools that seek to convert to charter status. The school system has indicated that schools seeing to convert will immediately have their buildings assessed for use as special education facilities. We believe this contravenes the spirit of the School Reform Act's charter provisions.

Finally, I will touch briefly on two additional items that require your attention.

The first is the matter of sibling preference -- an issue that is easily overlooked, but is a sore point for parents and schools alike. The law permits conversion charters to give admissions preference in their first five years to siblings of current students. But it does not extend this right to new charter schools. We believe that this is an oversight in the law, and that all charter schools should be able to grant admissions preference to siblings of students currently enrolled.

Second, I want to bring to your attention the anomalous situation faced by our Board. The School Reform Act "sunsets" in 2001. If the provision creating the DC Public Charter School Board is not extended or made permanent, we will be in the uncomfortable position of approving 15-year charters, but leaving office before their first critical fifth-year renewal. While I and my fellow Board members are all volunteers and can certainly return full-time to our other pursuits, we owe it to our schools, and to potential