

# The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

## A Charter School Fiasco

THE PAUL JUNIOR HIGH conversion—approved by the D.C. financial control board over the strong objections of Superintendent Arlene Ackerman, the Emergency Transitional Board of Trustees, the elected school board and several parents of neighborhood children who do not wish to attend the Paul charter school—has prompted a governance crisis in the school system. Four of the five trustees and the panel's two elected school board members have resigned in protest. As a result, the D.C. public school system is now under the supervision of control board Vice Chairman Constance Newman. The control board's decision, which failed to fully consider the impact of conversion on the entire neighborhood where Paul is located, has also undermined public school leadership.

Now there is a plan afoot to bridge the governance gap. It would bring the discredited elected school board back into the picture. Under a scheme being considered, oversight of the school system would be temporarily delegated to the sole remaining emergency trustee, Nathaniel Howard, the school superintendent and the elected school board's five-member executive committee: Robert Childs, Tonya Kinlow, Tom Kelly, Angie Corley and William Lockridge. This stop-gap panel could remain in place until January, when a proposed hybrid school board takes office—provided the voters adopt that dubious governance scheme in a spring referendum. Short of that, it's back to elected school board-lite.

We support the charter school movement, particularly the work of the D.C. Public Char-

ter School Board (in contrast with the elected school board—another chartering authority). The movement has created new schools that offer new options to D.C. parents and children. But the conversion of public schools to charter schools is a more complicated question, and the current process has serious shortcomings. It ignores the superintendent's assessment of conversions on the school system's overall facilities planning. It does not consider the effect of conversion on a neighborhood's public education options. It doesn't allow all potentially affected community residents to participate in the petition gathering process for charter conversion—only those with children attending the targeted school. And the chartering process does not guarantee admission to children who reside within the converting school's attendance boundary.

Fortunately, the D.C. Council has voted to impose a temporary moratorium on the conversion of existing D.C. schools. The council's legislation, if approved by the mayor and control board, will forestall a recurrence of the kind of problems that surfaced in Ward 4, where Paul Junior High is located. Ward 4 council member Charlene Drew Jarvis, who sponsored the moratorium bill, discovered during community meetings that some parents complained about not having access to enough information about how the conversion would affect their non-charter public school options. Unfortunately, despite such red flags, the control board gave Paul a green light. The council's measure wisely seeks to prevent a repeat performance.