



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD

March 3, 2000

Hon. Eleanor Holmes Norton  
United States House of Representatives  
1424 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Josephine Baker  
Chair

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Nelson Smith  
Executive Director

Dear Eleanor:

Reflecting on our recent conversation, I thought it would be useful to follow up with a letter clarifying some of the points we discussed. There has been an astonishing amount of misinformation put out about the Paul conversion process -- some of it deliberate -- and you really need to hear the accurate story.

Community input. Paul first applied for a charter three years ago. There have been three consecutive petition drives, numerous stories in the Post and other media, three sets of public hearings held by this Board on the application itself, and as recently as two weeks ago, another public meeting to consider a resolution on the Paul matter. We have not conducted this process in secret.

I know that you are concerned about some of the adverse reaction among ANC leaders. I don't know whether you've seen the attached memo that was issued by a member of Mrs. Ackerman's staff in December, but it may account for some of the ill-informed reaction.

Parent support. Since the approval was announced in September, DCPS and some anti-charter activists have been beating the drum about parents who will supposedly be disenfranchised by the conversion. There have been numerous public meetings in the community (convened by Robert Childs, Dwight Singleton, ANC4B, and the area PTAs). Very few parents have spoken against the conversion. Those who have attended have asked good questions about the admissions process and other issues.

By contrast, Paul's petition was signed by 511 parents, or two-thirds of those in the school. Some 400 parents have already sent in pre-registration forms indicating that they wish to enroll their children in the new charter school. These are real parents, and they have already waited too long for a decision about whether the charter school they support will be in place this September.

The "magnet school." DCPS has hastily thrown together a "magnet middle school" program, supposedly designed to serve parents who do not wish to send their children to a charter school. The more we hear about this program, the more transparent it becomes.

- The plan appears to have been created without consulting local parents or schools; indeed, the PTA leaders and principals of "feeder" elementary schools were surprised to find that the proposal includes 6<sup>th</sup> grade (unlike Paul, which starts at grade 7). This would drain students from these local schools and seriously reduce their allocations under the Weighted Student Formula.
- As to the design itself, what is not borrowed directly from the Paul application (i.e., the arts and technology emphasis) is fashioned around the Galef Institute's "Different Ways of Knowing" program. This is an exemplary, research-tested *elementary school* program, which has never been implemented at the middle school level. Galef only recently received federal funds to begin developing middle and secondary programs. I have direct knowledge that they were approached by DCPS to begin working on the new program only *after* we had approved the charter. It appears that little actual planning had been done by last month.
- The original rationale for this new program was to serve neighborhood parents who did not want to participate in the charter school. But it's being advertised as a "magnet" program, and DCPS officials said at a public meeting on February 18 that it will enroll 500 to 700 students. It's obvious that the focus here is not on serving local parents, but on attracting enough students from around the city to outnumber those enrolling in the charter school and lay claim to the building.

The MacFarland Option. In their meeting with Paul's principal, Cecile Middleton, last Friday, Mrs. Ackerman and Mrs. Newman suggested that the Paul charter be located at nearby MacFarland Middle School. They said that the MacFarland student body somehow would be relocated to the Paul site, and added that substantial renovations would be done at the school if the charter would move there.

Mrs. Middleton was given to understand that this was her only option, and that there was no possibility of the charter school remaining in the Paul building. With this kind of pressure being applied, it is not surprising that she volunteered the possibility of moving to the Rabaut building, to try and salvage the school she'd spent three years developing. After consultation with her teaching staff, who did not want

to move, she decided to call Mrs. Newman and tell her of her change of heart.

The MacFarland proposal was ludicrous on its face. What's especially galling is that MacFarland is a troubled school, nearly half empty according to DCPS's own figures, and badly needs a new and innovative program as well as renovations. Mrs. Ackerman could put her new program there, and Ward 4 would have two promising new schools. Instead, she has used the school and its students as pawns.

Home Rule. Since you raised <sup>TO</sup> this issue, I want you to know that we have made extensive efforts deal with the Paul matter on the local level, and to persuade local policymakers that the law must be followed.

- Our staff met with Kevin Chavous shortly after DCPS denied the charter a lease, and he promised to support the right of the charter school to remain in its building.
- I also testified on the Paul matter at the Council's Education Committee oversight hearing on February 10 (see testimony, attached). At this hearing, Councilmember Patterson pointed out that the Council's original charter school legislation, of which she was co-sponsor, intended for conversion charters to remain in their own buildings. (In fact, that legislation provided a *preference* for "charter schools proposed to be established within existing public school facilities." (DC Code 31-2811.4)
- I met with Charlene Drew Jarvis on the same matter in November. She drafted legislation that would have guaranteed Paul its building, and there was significant support for her bill on the Council. After Mrs. Ackerman intervened and asked her not to submit the bill, Mrs. Newman entered the picture and offered to mediate.
- Mrs. Newman promised quick action as soon as the holidays were over, but she has not yet met with me, nor has she spoken to the people whose names were provided (at her request) by the Paul administration and by this Board. I wrote to her in February (letter attached) expressing my disappointment that there had been no movement.
- On Tuesday evening, I testified before the Mayor's budget hearing and raised the Paul matter, because it is also a significant budget issue. More than \$4 million of the charter schools' FY2001 budget

projection remains in doubt because of the uncertainty surrounding Paul.

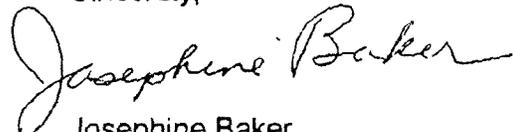
- Beyond these formal contacts, there have been innumerable meetings and phone conversations with local leaders, ANC officials, staff from various Council offices, and the Mayor's office.

As to our own contacts with the Hill, we did not authorize or edit the interrogatories sent to the Control Board by Mr. Istook. But when asked to discuss matters of vital importance to our Board, especially when they deal with interpretation of our authorizing statute, it is appropriate to respond – just as Mrs. Ackerman is within her rights to talk with you and other Members about matters that affect DCPS.

A point of clarification. You had heard that our executive director told Cecile Middleton that we would revoke the charter if she moved to Rabaut. That was incorrect. He told Mrs. Middleton that the Board would not be able to consider the charter a conversion if it moved to another building. We believe that the law supports the right of conversion charters to stay in their buildings, and our approval was for a conversion, not a new school. He added that Mrs. Middleton could submit an amendment to the charter approval for the Board's consideration. There was no threat of revoking the charter approval.

Eleanor, if this letter is more pointed than my usual correspondence, it is truly justified. This Board and the Paul charter applicants have followed the rules scrupulously, only to find the school system and its allies waging an unrelenting campaign against the charter we have approved. It must stop. Please use your influence to persuade those responsible for these attacks to cease and desist.

Sincerely,



Josephine Baker  
Chair

Attachments

- Memo From Leonard Haynes, DCPS, to ANC leaders, 12/21/99
- Baker testimony before DC Council, (dated) 2/9/00
- Baker letter to Constance Newman, 2/2/00