

# Close to Home

*Close to Home welcomes pieces on the local community. Submissions must be exclusive to The Post and should be sent to Close to Home, The Washington Post Editorial Page, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071.*

## A Quarter Turn for the District

Cheers to our neighbors in Maryland who soon will have their own quarter design in circulation [Metro, March 14]. The United States has emulated Canada, which initiated a quarter-design program several years ago. Canada, however, included all national political entities—including its territories—in its program.

Thanks to a bill (H.R. 1029) introduced in the House by D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton and all territorial delegates, the District and U.S. territories may be added to the original 50-state program. Other House sponsors include Michael N. Castle (R-Del.) and Spencer T. Bachus III (R-Ala.), the former and current chairs of the House Banking subcommittee

responsible for coinage, which initiated the 50-state quarter-design program. A companion bill has been introduced in the Senate.

The Association of the Oldest Inhabitants of the District of Columbia, the city's oldest civic organization (est. 1865), was the first of numerous groups to urge Congress to amend the original act to include the District and the territories. One proposed D.C. design, featuring the Frederick Douglass Home, already has appeared.

Del. Norton's bill should be enacted expeditiously, before the 106th Congress adjourns.

—Nelson F. Rimensnyder



## ROUND 2

# Paul School Charter—the Considered Choice of the Community

The conversion of Paul Junior High to a charter school has taken three years of effort by a dedicated principal and staff who acted with the support of two-thirds of the school's parents.

The D.C. financial control board did not approve the conversion, as stated in a March 15 editorial. The D.C. Public Charter School Board granted approval in September. What Alice Rivlin and her financial control board colleagues did was to end six months of uncertainty over whether the conversion charter school would be allowed to remain in its building. By overruling the school system's proposal to "share" the building, the control board recognized the intent of the law and gave the charter school some breathing room to plan for an orderly September opening.

If the school system's governance experienced a "fiasco," as the editorial termed it, it had little to do with the rigorous process by which Paul is becoming an independent neighborhood public school.

For months, charter critics have claimed substantial parental opposition to the conversion. But six public meetings in Ward 4 have turned out only handfuls of parents, most of whom simply were seeking information about their choices. By contrast, Paul's conversion petition was signed by more than 500 parents, with fewer than 2 percent of the school's parents voting against the proposal. More than 400 parents have preregistered their children for the charter school.

D.C. Public Schools has been aware of Paul's plans since 1997. Yet it never published an evaluation of how the conversion would affect its facilities, never presented testimony in three public hearings and never conveyed to this board or to parents its concerns about parents who might not choose the charter route. Only after our approval of the charter in September did the school system mobilize to keep control of the building.

Opponents of the conversion say that it will deprive the community of a public school. But Paul Public

Charter Junior High School will remain a neighborhood-based public school. The law permits schools that convert to charter to give local students an enrollment preference—and Paul's approved application promises to give neighborhood children priority for the life of its charter. D.C. schools' own policy says that a conversion charter can remain in its building providing "the school agrees to give priority to students who reside within the attendance boundaries, if any, in which the school is located."

At a time when charter schools are growing rapidly, often drawing enrollment from underperforming and undersubscribed schools, conversions may help protect neighborhoods by revitalizing existing facilities. Neighborhood leaders may be less concerned about conversions if they understand that such schools can only be leased from the District—not acquired by private entities, as has been claimed by charter critics. The conversion statute can be strengthened so that

communities have more opportunity to evaluate a school's plans. Our most recent application guidelines require proposed conversions to ensure that local neighborhoods have ample notice of their intentions.

In the coming weeks, we will work to help the D.C. Council distinguish between measures that would strengthen legitimate community involvement and those that would preclude any future conversions by tying them in procedural knots.

Charter schools are public schools. With a balance between educational vision and community support, the conversion process can bring the energy and dynamism of this movement where it is most needed.

—Josephine Baker

—Thomas P. Loughlin

are, respectively, chair and vice chair of the D.C. Public Charter School Board.