

**Testimony of Josephine Baker  
Chair  
District of Columbia Public Charter School Board  
Before the  
Subcommittee on the District of Columbia  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
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**DRAFT**

***Chairman Istook and Members of the Subcommittee:***

We meet at a time of great promise for public charter schools in the District. Nearly 7,000 students now attend these independent public schools, about 10 percent of all public school students here. Current projections indicate that these numbers will reach more than 11,000 in the coming academic year.

This extraordinary growth has led to the first substantial increase in three decades in DC's overall public school population. Perhaps most impressive, charter schools have begun bringing back into public education families who had left the system for private or parochial schools, or who had moved out of the District altogether. We are also seeing a significant number of dropouts recovering their academic ambitions in schools like Maya Angelou and Carlos Rosario.

Among the 12 operating schools chartered by our Board are an array of approaches, from using the arts to reach learning-disabled early elementary students, to helping adult immigrants acquire the skills and knowledge needed for productive citizenship. Next year, six new schools will expand these options even further – for example, through a collaboration between Sasha Bruce Youthworks and the Outward Bound Expeditionary Learning program, one of the nationally-tested New American Schools reform models.

I wish we could simply celebrate this good news, but we are finding far too many obstacles placed in the path of those who found and manage these schools.

Although charter schools are funded through the same per-pupil formula as other public schools in the District, the actual process of appropriating and disbursing these funds for Fiscal 2000 has been deeply flawed.

Budget makers overlooked our well-grounded projections of steep enrollment growth, resulting in a drastic shortfall in charter school appropriations. The subsequent fix was a \$30 million set-aside from the DCPS budget. Decisions about how to apportion these funds were delayed by the results of an enrollment audit that was riddled with procedural errors. To this day, several charter schools remain uncertain about how much of their requested FY2000 budget will actually be coming to them.

As we enter the FY2001 budget cycle, there are ominous signs of history repeating itself. The city's budget office has released a budget providing just \$50.6 million for charter schools next year, again providing nothing for growth. The Mayor has asked to make an additional \$35 million available through the reserve fund, and we applaud his willingness to help resolve the problem. However, the reserve fund is for unexpected costs, which these are not. We will continue working with the Mayor and DC Council in hopes that full funding will be provided through the city's regular operating budget before it reaches you later this year.

We are also concerned about the slow and uncertain process by which DCPS oversees disposition of excess school buildings. We have made clear in testimony before the City Council, and in other venues, that this process must improve if the charter preference provisions of the DC School Reform Act are to have meaning. There must be clear rules, applied consistently -- and ideally, the disposition process should be in the hands of a neutral third party, whether the mayor's office or the proposed "state" education office. The District's FY2000 appropriations bill required the Mayor, DCPS *Sept.* Superintendent, and Control Board to devise a new process within 90 days, and we await news of their discussions.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the subject of charter school conversions, specifically the conversion of Paul Jr. High to public charter status.

The Paul community began this process in 1997. It took three tries, but last September, the DC Public Charter School Board finally approved the charter application. We did so because the application proposed an exciting educational vision, and because it was to be led by a distinguished principal who had already achieved a turnaround of this once-dysfunctional school.

We also approved this application because the founders had followed the requirements of the law, obtaining support from two-thirds of the parents and two-thirds of the teachers, and in every other way complying with the dictates of the DC School Reform Act.

Since September, however, the conversion of Paul Jr. High has been subjected to challenge after challenge. The school system sought to deny

the charter school its building. Political activists called a series of public meetings attempting to foment opposition. Finally, yesterday, we were treated to the spectacle of students walking out of school, encouraged by irresponsible adults who apparently used classroom time to feed them misinformation about charter schools.

Mr. Chairman, the Public Charter School Board is not seeking wholesale conversions of DCPS schools. If that were the case, we could have approved two conversions in our first cycle, in 1997, and gone looking for more. Instead, we have waited until one school met the criteria for approval. One out of 146 active DCPS schools has been approved for conversion. One out of the 18 we have approved has been a conversion application. Yet this one case has set off a wave of negative reaction from those who oversee the traditional school system.

The DC Council has passed a temporary moratorium on new conversions which explicitly does not affect Paul. The Council will shortly consider other legislation that would set up new procedures for community notification, and would give the Superintendent a formal role in evaluating the impact of a conversion on the surrounding neighborhood.

We intend to work with the Council to make clear that there is a difference between legitimate community notification and measures that would effectively preclude any further conversions by tying them in procedural knots. We trust that the legislation the Council sends forward will preclude any need for Congress to underscore its intent in this area.

I hope that we can keep one important point in mind. What's at stake here is not some abstract point about who has the legal right to a building, or who has the power to hire teachers. We are talking about the lives of children. For the past six months, we have watched adults put their own turf, and their own interests, ahead of the young people who will be served by Paul Public Charter Jr. High School. September will be here soon. It is time for the adults in our community to act responsibly, follow the law, and let this school have the opportunity it deserves.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.