

!!! The origins of DC's chartering story –  
b. Political environment.

The Public Charter School Board was sworn in on February 27, 1997.

**Public Oversight hearing on Charter Schools Committee on Education, Libraries and Recreation**

**Kevin P. Chavous Chairman was held on Thursday, May 15, 1997.**

**“The purpose of this Public Oversight Hearing is to discuss the status of Charter schools in the District of Columbia. The Committee intends to examine the progress that the DCOS has made in chartering new schools, monitoring existing schools or revoking the charters of problem schools, if circumstances warrant such revocation.”** PCSB was “invited to testify and received a list of questions which were generally directed at DCPS. I used this opportunity to describe, in the public arena, the mission and vision of PCSB and state that “The purpose of the District of Col P C S Board is to help improve education for children and youth in the District of Columbia by chartering public schools that work.” My testimony laid out the role and responsibilities of the PCSB and the process as established by the School Reform Act 1995, amended 1996. My testimony included the following. “In general the DCPCSB intends to charter schools

- where all children are expected to learn;
- where students achieve at international standards;
- where consensus exists on clearly articulated education goals and philosophy;
- where there is strong school leadership and an effective governance structure;
- where the environment fosters support for academic achievement creativity, and enthusiasm for learning among students, teachers and other school staff;
- where children, teachers and school staff are safe,
- where maximum use is made of new technologies in teaching and learning;
- where adults and children take shared responsibility for learning;
- where the school meets a community need, and parent and community involvement is robust and continuing;
- where good business and financial management practices are the norm;’
- where solid beneficial relationships exist with businesses, associations federal government agencies, foundation or other organization in the District of Columbia; and
- Where full advantage is taken of the rich abundance of resources in the Washington metropolitan area.

We want the schools we charter to succeed and we are going to work to see that this happens. Our first step toward that goal in the development of a responsible process for selecting the schools that we charter.”

I presented this testimony less than three months after the PCSB was sworn in.

A Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring, and the District of Columbia held a hearing on “Improvement Opportunities for the Public Schools in the District of Columbia” on April 17, 1997 in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. I attended as an observer and General Julius W. Becton, Jr. CEO of DCPS, and Dr. Bruce MacLaury Chairman of the Emergency Transition Education Board of Trustees (established by the Control Board) testified on Panel 1. Both Senator Lieberman of Connecticut and Senator Brownback, Chairman of the oversight Subcommittee express support for vouchers. Lieberman expressed a concern about the pace of the establishment of charter schools...Becton responded that charter schools “hold great potential –“Where is the accountability with vouchers?”

A Charter School Approving Authority Workshop was held in Seattle Washington on May 6-7, 1997. This was the by-product of The US Department of Education contract with Dean Millot at RAND to produce a Guidebook for Chartering Agencies. Paul Hill and Robin Lake of U of Wash, Steve Wilson of Advantage Schools, Nancy Helm Director of Charter Schools, Arizona Department of Education and Scott Hamilton Assoc. Commissioner for Charter School, Massachusetts Department of Education were among the seasoned participants. Rev. Robert Childs, at large member of the DC Board of Education and I were invited as observers and we were provided with a unique opportunity to listen to dialogue and ask questions – an unusual opportunity for novices. The major components of chartering were discussed and my notes state that “horror stories indicate that “ At the first signs of trouble, act on them immediately, watch for vindictive individuals, establish financial oversight, and know that accountability becomes very important; it can signal emerging problems and enable an authorizer to take action early. Participants who at been involved in chartering for several years commented that an encounter such as this meeting would have made a tremendous difference for them at start-up. It was a wonderful experience for me, an authorizer who was still developing the first application.

Earlier, in February 1999, the SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education hosted a two day meeting in Greensboro, NC. This meeting included individuals Jon Schroeder who was involved in the development of the charter law in MN and Jonathon Schnur, from the US Department of Education. The focus was on developing a application process than included a well constructed application, a strong review process and the importance of making good judgments. I had now been armed with real ammunition to lead my board in doing an expert job as we moved into the next application process.

There were many conferences and workshops throughout my tenure in which I participated as a presenter or observer, sponsored by a variety of organizations including The Institute for Educational Leadership, The Federal City Council, The Committee for Economic Development and the US Department of Education.

In the summer of 1999 Paul Junior High and Phoebe Hearst Elementary School were seeking charter school status and would be the first traditional schools to defect. Both dissatisfaction with central administration's cumbersome process and fear that successful school might be affected negatively by then Supt. Arlene Ackerman's reform plans were factors in the decision to apply for charter status. Parent and teachers at Duke Ellington School for the Arts flirted with the idea of becoming charter school but were able to reach an agreement with DCPS which gave them more independent status. At a later date, I was asked to come to Wilson High School to talk with the School Restructuring about the chartering

The applicants for Hearst Elementary, however, changed the status of their application from conversion to a start-up application, .....

This was the third time that Paul was seeking charter status. In the first application process in 1997, Paul Junior high submitted an application. According to the School Reform Act, an applicant seeking to convert ".....". The application reviewers and staff looked carefully at the parent petitions and discerned that there were not two-thirds of the parents needed for the application to be considered for approval. Paul returned with an application in 1998 and while there two thirds for both parents and faculty were close the Board was not taking any chances. We hired an auditor to inspect the petitions to be sure that the count was indeed accurate. The auditor found some duplications and invalid petitions, and though closer, Paul did not reach the necessary two-thirds. However, on this round, Paul learned a technique for verifying parent and faculty support. In the 1999 application cycle, an auditor verified that Paul did indeed have the required two-thirds positive petitions to be approved. Reviewers recommended to the Board that the application be approved; that it met the standards and requirements for approval.

In the end, the lawsuit was dismissed and the principal of Paul Junior High, Cecile Middleton, fulfilled her dream and that of many parents and staff; Paul became an autonomous charter school, acquiring the autonomy they so \_\_\_ desired to provide a high quality for their students.

And now let the fun begin.

The conversion of a public school to a public charter school was littered with unnecessary roadblocks.

Student walk out – instigated by the teachers union; Court case.

Ackerman

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In addition, a meeting, which included Ackerman and me, was called by Undersecretary of Education, to discuss PSBD's developing cohort of charter schools. The DOE lawyers presented a slide presentation which showed the 1995 School Reform Act (RFA) as well and the RFA amended- 1996. They attempted to present the 1995 law as the (one to be followed) – Ludicrous. The RFA – amended – superceded the 1995. We agreed to return to the following week. When they started with the same approach, I clearly remember saying that if this was the path to be followed, then the meeting should be adjourned. A discussion about the existence of charter schools did take place and Ackerman was adamant about not needing any more schools. I made it clear that the law clearly gave jurisdiction of charter school approved by PCSB to PCSB. The Superintendent of DCPS would have NO authority over these schools. There was an attempt to discuss some of the concerns realistically, but it was clear that Ackerman would not be inclined to provide any cooperation. This surfaced later when central administration attempted to declare that the Paul building would be used for special education and that Paul would have to find another facility!! This was a clear violation of the law and the concept of conversion. It was a threat with no teeth and Paul moved forward with the conversion process.