

special populations

Chairman Chavous and Members of the Committee:

I am Josephine Baker, chair of the DC Public Charter School Board, and I am accompanied at the witness table by the Board's executive director, Nelson Smith. We appreciate this opportunity to review the status of public charter schools and the work of our Board.

Once again, we can report that DC's charter school movement is thriving. This year, schools chartered by our Board have enrolled 6,412 students, an increase of 38 percent over the prior year. Between these schools and new schools opening this September, we project a total enrollment of nearly 9,400 students in the 2001-2002 school year.

Continuing growth presents challenges in many areas, but I would like to focus especially on facilities and accountability.

Any parent knows that children outgrow their clothes at a remarkable rate. DC's charter schools are doing the same. In the past year alone, six operating schools overseen by our Board moved into new or expanded facilities. Four new schools opened. We have approved three new charters for the coming school year; two will be in temporary quarters for the first year and one will occupy its own building. According to the DeJong and Associates facilities report, at least eight of our existing schools are actively looking for new quarters.

Public charter schools have grown beyond the point where church basements and storefronts can accommodate their needs. They need classroom space, science labs, playing fields, and all the accoutrements enjoyed by other public schools in our area. That means making real their legal preference in acquiring vacant DCPS buildings; help in

getting access to additional city-owned properties; and integration of charter school needs with the District's long-term development plans. We are working with the mayor's office on this process and are expecting his preliminary decisions on vacant DCPS buildings in early March.

Growth poses another challenge to those of us who take seriously the notion of accountability. At a time when the District is spending \$105 million on charter schools, and is getting ready to spend perhaps \$40 million more next year, how can we be sure that this investment is paying off?

As a Board, we respond to this challenge by combining strong support with conscientious oversight.

Although evaluation of school achievement should include multiple indicators -- a point reflected in our charters and accountability plans -- we know that Stanford-9 scores are the only outcomes widely publicized. In our School Performance Reports, which are found on our website and include more than 30 data points for each school, we have tried to get past a simplistic snapshot of SAT-9 scores. Instead, we emphasize growth from year to year, and we also look at how broadly the average gain is shared among the student population.

None of the schools is yet where it hopes to be, but the news is better than some press reports would indicate. Three of the six campuses with sufficient numbers of students to analyze in Spring 2000 reported an average gain of better than one academic year in both reading and math. A fourth campus reported strong gains in reading but a slight falloff in math.

While educational outcomes are the bottom line, we also believe that well-run schools will tend to get good results. That's why the Board conducts reviews of site operations at every school, every year. We are particularly pleased by this year's results:

Of the 19 campuses under the Board's authority, 14 (or 74 percent) received a rating of "exemplary" in 80 percent or more of the 29 categories of review. This shows considerable improvement since the first of these reviews in 1999, when only 3 of 9 campuses operating at that time (or 33 percent) received comparable scores.

To promote continuous improvement, the Board recently conducted a series of workshops on governance and financial controls, attended by more than 120 administrators, business managers, and trustees of our schools. Their response has been enthusiastic, with 96 percent of attendees at the governance sessions rating the workshops "good" or "excellent."

As much as we strive to prevent problems, however, schools sometimes get into trouble. At these times, accountability does not merely mean castigating them and shutting them down. It means working with them to remedy the problems, while also holding the school publicly accountable for improvement.

This is the course we have taken with respect to Meridian Public Charter School, which was placed on probation in a public meeting of the Board last December. We believe Meridian has made significant progress in addressing the probation issues. Their contract with Beacon Schools, which we have just approved, will address a range of outstanding issues including facilities, financing, and professional development. However, the Board decided last evening to continue the probation, in

part because the school's Florida Avenue facility remains unfinished, with some students still located at a temporary site.

Of course, the ultimate accountability for public charter schools is that they can be shut down if they fail. The DC School Reform Act permits revocation of charters at any time for fiscal mismanagement or violation of the law. It also requires each chartering authority to review each school at its fifth year to determine if the charter should be revoked for failure to meet its "goals and academic achievement expectations." Rather than creating a single, high-stakes review, as is done in some other jurisdictions, we plan to incorporate this process into the system of annual performance reviews already in place.

Our general approach is that schools should be allowed to continue past Year Five if they are showing strong progress toward meeting most of their accountability goals. Last evening, the Board released for public comment a draft framework that distills this general guidance into specific, quantitative targets, while allowing some discretion to consider each school's special circumstances. We have provided a copy of the draft framework as an attachment to this testimony. Because we believe that parents and the community ought to have direct input on such a sensitive issue, we will shortly announce a special public hearing on the framework.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, although we will have a separate opportunity to comment on the proposed FY2002 budget, we would like to go on record about one important point. The DC School Reform Act is crystal clear in saying that funding for public education in the District is to be provided through a formula applying equally to DC Public Schools and public charter schools. Neither the School Reform Act nor the Council's Uniform Per-Pupil Funding Formula Act provide for substantial local

appropriations to DCPS outside the formula, with no corresponding payments to charter schools.

We fully support the reform efforts of the Superintendent and Board of Education, and are open to discussion of how the formula can be adjusted so that it addresses areas of greatest need, including low-performing schools and special education. We cannot, however, endorse any scheme that violates the central premise of the formula: that funding should follow the child rather than being delivered to specific agencies.

In closing, we wish to thank you and the members of the Committee for your support of public charter schools and, in particular, your commitment to full funding. Early on, this Committee understood that charter schools were a new yet essential component of public education in the District, and your actions have reflected this belief.

We look forward to your questions.