

Feb. 2007

Chairman Chavous and Members of the Committee:

I am Josephine Baker, Chair of the DC Public Charter School Board, and joining me at the witness table is our executive director, Nelson Smith. We are pleased to have this opportunity to update the Committee on the progress of public charter schools overseen by our Board.

Once again, we have begun the new school year with a healthy increase in enrollment. Reports from our 19 operating campuses show that 6,441 students were in place on the official count date, October 5. This is a gain of more than 30 percent since last spring. Together with increases reported by Board of Education schools, it appears that nearly 10,000 students will be attending the District's 33 public charter schools this year.

The increase demonstrates the growing sense of confidence, especially among parents, that charter schools offer a vibrant new public-sector choice in education. As a chartering authority, our role is to help schools attain the success parents expect, and to hold the schools accountable for performance.

The first step in "chartering success" is our rigorous, multi-stage approval process for new charters. In August, from a field of 12 applicants, the Board granted one conditional approval to the Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter School. This charter grows out of the renowned Street Law program at Georgetown University Law Center, which has taught civil rights and constitutional concepts to the District's public high school students for more than

two decades. We understand that the school has secured a site in Ward 8, and expect that it will open next September.

Three other applicants have received first-stage clearance in this cycle, and the Board will make final decisions in these cases early next year.

Good information is another cornerstone of increased accountability. That is why the Board issued our first School Performance Reports last summer. These reports give parents and the community candid information about how well our schools are doing. They present Stanford 9 data in four different perspectives, showing not just raw scores but -- far more important -- how much students *gain* each year they attend the school. We include other information about academic achievement, special education, discipline, attendance rates, re-enrollment rates, and other aspects of each school's organizational health. These reports can be found on our website, at www.dcpubliccharter.com.

The Board is wary of making sweeping generalizations about overall academic performance, since our most senior schools are just entering their third year, and since we have multi-year data on only 12 schools. We can say that schools generally showed modest gains on the Spring 2000 Stanford-9 tests, with elementary grades showing greater improvement than high schools. There was, however, substantial variation among schools, with several campuses showing exemplary, widely-shared gains and a few falling short of expectations.

What the Board looks for is how well each campus meets the goals and expectations in its own accountability plan. Next month, we will receive annual reports from each second- and third-year school,

containing detailed information on each of the measures in these plans, plus a financial audit. The Board will validate and evaluate this information, and we encourage parents, elected officials, and other members of the community to study these reports.

As you know, we have spoken often about the problems our schools have encountered in finding suitable facilities. This afternoon, we have cause for some cautious optimism on this score. The order signed by Mayor Williams on October 2 provides a clear roadmap through which charter schools can gain access to vacant DCPS school buildings. The new Credit Enhancement Committee, to which this Board made two appointments, will help devise new vehicles for facilities financing. On their own, a number of schools are "pushing the envelope" and creating learning environments in commercial and industrial sites.

The biggest challenge we face is the likelihood of continued growth. Schools that started up in incubators and church basements will soon need large, permanent facilities with labs, playgrounds, and auditoriums. For that reason, we are pleased to be included in the facilities planning process now underway, and we look to the Council and Mayor for continued support and leadership on this matter.

Finally, we should acknowledge the constructive and refreshing attitude of the new superintendent of DC Public Schools, Dr. Paul L. Vance. We met with Dr. Vance several weeks ago and found him willing to cooperate with the charter school community on a range of issues, from orderly transfer of student files to promoting joint opportunities for athletic competition. We share his vision of a community of public schools serving all of the District's children and young people, and we welcome him.

Thank you, and we look forward to your questions.

