



## DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Testimony of Michelle Rhee, Chancellor

Meeting of the U.S. Senate Committee  
on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs,  
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,  
the Federal Workforce and the District of Columbia

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman  
The Honorable George V. Voinovich, Ranking Member

March 14, 2008

Foundations

Good afternoon, Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich and members of the Subcommittee. When I last testified before you I said that I would rebuild the public school system in Washington, DC. I described plans to overhaul flawed data and accountability systems, create a culture of individual accountability for student achievement, build strong leadership and high quality teaching in our schools, reform special education and address multiple other areas to increase student achievement. As my evaluation of the system has deepened over the past eight months, I have been shocked by the profound level of dysfunction under which DCPS has been operating. I met high school seniors who want to go to college next year but had just learned about prepositions. I heard from teachers who had not been paid for work done three years ago. I met elementary school students who sent me a 'wish list' for their school. They asked if I could send them a music teacher, a Spanish teacher, a librarian, and other basics for which no young children should have to lobby their chancellor.

These are not just anecdotes. What saddens me most is what the performance data says about what this system is doing to kids. According to DC-CAS data, *fifty* of our schools have proficiency rates below 20% in either reading or math. This means that four out of five kids in those schools do not even meet the most basic level of proficiency. We're talking about almost 14,000 kids.

Residents of the District have rightly demanded radical change, and we are responding swiftly. In this transitional year we have begun to remove the obstacles that block student achievement. We are solving the problems that need to be solved, and I look forward to discussing this work today. However, this system needs more than solving problems one by one. This year we are laying the foundations for my long-term strategy, building our priorities and goals for the next five years. On these foundations we will build the system to give our kids the skills they need and the choices in life that they deserve.

## **Transition Year: Evaluation, Accomplishments**

### ***Creating Accountability in the Central Office***

This year, after receiving multiple reports of problems in our central office, we have swiftly and aggressively moved to solve them. From former employees who were still receiving benefits and paychecks they could not explain, to teachers who had not been paid and parents who could not get an employee to return a phone call, there were so many issues to confront that I set up a constituent services team to help parents and school staff navigate the central office. I learned that many staff members did not have job descriptions and had never received a performance evaluation. We responded. I communicated the mayor's higher customer service standards to all employees, and lobbied for personnel legislation that would allow us to increase the efficiency of the central office as a whole and to create a culture of accountability. We are reorganizing the office so that people's skills and performance are best suited to their positions and office. We created job descriptions for all employees and conducted our first round of performance evaluations. We have previously non-responsive employees who—after one performance evaluation—are now working harder at their jobs. In the past four months our customer satisfaction rate with central office response has jumped from 41% to 59%, and I am confident that it will continue to improve.

### ***Hiring and Retaining Quality School Leaders***

Reforming DCPS requires that we have the best principals leading our schools. Previous DCPS recruiting has been minimal, but through a new principal recruitment campaign we are interviewing and identifying quality school leaders. We have already received close to 500 applications and we expect this number to grow as more prospective candidates begin considering their options for next year.

Recruitment is only half the task. To keep strong employees, leaders must recognize and reward good work. In the nation's capital it is time for us to back our words about respecting successful educators with the investment that will keep them in our schools. We started this year by utilizing federal funds to give TEAM Awards to schools that showed dramatic gains in student achievement, and my long-term plans aim to increase performance awards to teachers and schools.

### ***Teacher Training: Professional Development to improve instruction***

In the past, DCPS has not supported teachers by providing the training they need to drive instruction forward, and in a massive effort this year we are turning around professional development. Before, there was no consistency in the quality of instruction across the District, and parents were rightly frustrated by this disparity. Now, we are teaching our teachers how to use the best practices for reading and math instruction, making instruction consistent across the system.

Also, we are showing our teachers how to use test data to drive instruction, and abolishing the 'drill and kill' style of teaching often associated with standardized testing. For example, the reading portion of the DC-CAS measures students' ability to read for meaning, a skill that this District as a whole has failed to provide. We are training teachers to use 'constructed response' questions to teach children how to show reading comprehension through fully-developed written responses. This is not 'test prep.' It is good teaching that gives students the skills they will need as adults.

We are also providing a monthly professional development calendar full of options across the District. These options are aligned to the specific needs of teachers and students as identified through testing data, surveys and school observations. Not only will this help the District to track professional development for each teacher, it will support our teachers in honing their craft. Overall, our work in professional development this year increases our ability to retain the teachers we need, when too often in this field, isolation and a lack of support lead to preventable burnout.

### ***Data: Systems and Alignment***

Since I have arrived, I have received an education in just how severe our problems with data management and alignment are. An initial assessment revealed 27 disconnected data systems. An update in one location did not automate an update in other areas where similar information was stored. This affected even the most basic of operations. For example, in September when I attempted to send an email to teachers, my inbox filled with returns from defunct email accounts, and I was advised that I should back up the mailing with a paper letter sent through individual schools. Now, with

continued outreach to schools and new connected data systems, this long-standing communication problem is being corrected. Through a collaborative effort with HR, we have updated our teacher email list from 45% accuracy to about 75%. Also this year we worked with the city's Chief Technology Officer to install 5,900 PCs in our schools so that every DCPS classroom teacher has a working computer. They will use these computers to view student data, take attendance, conduct research, take advantage of professional development opportunities, and finally, receive my emails!

Streamlining our data systems is a massive undertaking that will occur over the next few years, and it is one of my highest priorities. In every area of DCPS my long-term objective is to use data as every good organization does: to improve performance. My Chief Data and Accountability Officer has been successful in streamlining these systems in other districts, and I am confident that our plans for the District's data systems will result in significant progress in our offices and classrooms.

### ***School Improvement***

Many schools had significant needs that require immediate attention this year. First, some of our schools are without psychologists, guidance counselors, school nurses, art or music teachers. Teachers are forced to attempt to provide services that they are not equipped to provide, especially when I need them focused on instruction. Our schools with low enrollment numbers are particularly hard to staff. Schools were paying to maintain unused space when we need that money to staff the school and provide strong programs. In November we introduced a plan to rightsize the school system and bring strong new academic initiatives and full staffing models to our schools over time. We are working through the remainder of the year and summer to prepare schools for upcoming transitions due to school closures and new programs.

We also have a number of schools that are not meeting Academic Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA). We are carefully assessing the options available under the law to make the right decisions for each school. We will use these assessments to create plans for each school, not only to correct problems but to align their programs with our longer term plans for success across the District.

### ***Special Education***

Special Education in this district has caused real and deep hardship for many students and families. I have not only been shocked by the mistakes that have led to the loss of millions of dollars that could have served instruction, but more importantly I have been saddened by the damage DCPS has done by over-identifying kids who should not be classified and by failing to support the children who do need services.

We have been aggressive about identifying the root of these problems and correcting them. To start, we will be working with the State Superintendent of Education to pilot mental health programs in middle schools; to introduce the comprehensive staffing model through the rightsizing plan next year (providing the staff to address students' social, emotional, and academic needs); and to reform our process for identifying students for special education services by accurately diagnosing learning needs. Our long-term strategies to raise student achievement levels include 8 new SAM (Schoolwide Applications Model) schools next year, which have shown tremendous success in urban districts to ensure high achievement for both disabled and non-disabled students. This system currently has a reputation for being the least inclusive in the country when it comes to our special education students; our focus now is to become an integrated, inclusive district where we are not segregating these students.

### ***Engagement with Parents***

Historically this system has not done well bringing parents into students' education. Our long-term plans will include the initiatives we need to engage parents in our work in schools. Many parents simply do not know what they can expect, demand or do to support their children through each stage of learning. Now, we are building the foundations to communicate clearly with parents about their children's progress and about important processes such as college applications. We are holding parent information sessions, opening Parent Resource Centers, conducting focus groups with parents, and increasing our commitment to translating and interpreting information for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse (LCD) parents.

## **Moving Forward**

During this first transition year, I have identified the problems that have been blocking student achievement. We are solving the problems. Whether by rightsizing the system, speeding a slow bureaucracy, or improving our data systems, we are building the foundation for a system that works.

After this year we will move into the proactive long-term implementation strategy that will move us beyond correcting problems to creating model programs. I want a portfolio of quality schools in every ward, providing quality choices for all parents. I want a District that fosters a college-going culture in every ward, allowing our students to be as competitive for college as any other students in the nation. Clearly we are far from seeing the results I want today. But as I approach the closing months of this year of transition, I remain determined and confident that we will see them.