

**Testimony of**

**Robert C. Bobb, President  
D.C. State board of Education**

**Before the United States Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs  
Subcommittee on Oversight Management, the Federal Workforce, and the  
District of Columbia**

**On**

**Great Expectations: Assessments, Assurances, and Accountability in the  
Mayor's Proposal to Reform the District of Columbia's Public School System**

**Thursday, July 19, 2007  
2:30 p.m.**

**Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Room 342**



Chairman Akaka, Senator Voinovich, and other members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Robert Bobb and I am the President of the District of Columbia State Board of Education.

The D.C. State Board of Education was established by the District of Columbia Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007. Although the members of the new Board remain the same, the objectives of this board are narrower in focus than the objectives of the previous Board of Education.

The State Board of Education looks forward to discharging our new duties and responsibilities. In our new role approving and advising on citywide education issues, we will approve learning standards and graduation requirements; we will approve the accountability structure that will dictate how lagging and failing schools are supported and held accountable for their performance; and we will establish the criteria for operating all types of education institutions throughout the District of Columbia, including D.C. Public Schools, charter schools, private schools, supplemental education service providers, and the education programs administered at the college and university level.

You have named this hearing Great Expectations and I can think of no better unifying theme for our education reform efforts. The Board of Education recently approved extremely rigorous graduation standards for high school students. We must continue to have extraordinarily high expectations for our students that are supported by standards that are among the most stringent in the nation.

I also believe that we must have extraordinarily high expectations for ourselves. There are many different benchmarks upon which to measure the performance of a state or school District. I think we need to aim to have 10 percent more D.C. students scoring at proficient or higher on our standardized tests. I also believe that the District of Columbia should aim

for greater gains on test scores than the gains at all comparable large, urban school Districts across the country. And finally, I believe that all students in the District of Columbia should be able to read at or above grade level.

To get there, we will make it part of our workplan for this year to advance a concerted citywide focus on two issues most critical to our success: early childhood education and reading skills.

### Early Childhood Education

If you were to construct the Dirksen Senate Office Building where we sit today, would you begin constructing this building on this floor? Of course not, you would start at the foundation. We need to provide our students with world-class education at the foundation as well, starting at birth.

There is a cohort of education experts who have said that the student achievement gap is the most important issue facing urban school District. But I listen to a different set of experts who say that we should be looking instead at the preparation gap. The preparation gap -- which is defined and measured as the social, motor and cognitive skills with which students arrive to begin their formal education -- is especially prevalent in urban areas where children have a predisposition to certain socioeconomic and health risks.

As outlined in the DCPS Master Education Plan, repeated research studies on early childhood education have shown that quality early care and education can have a significant and positive impact on a child's school and life success, and that the results are particularly strong for children with certain health and socioeconomic risks.

I believe we should convene the leading experts in the world to recommend how we can further define the preparation gap and come up with strategies to address the preparation gap. I believe that our efforts

should start with universal pre-kindergarten for all District children. But to fully address this challenge, we need to discuss education in terms of a real urban agenda that addresses the wide ranging pathologies affecting urban communities and impacting children before they enter school.

### Reading

Next, we need a citywide movement to improve reading proficiency in the District. Academic research demonstrates that children who are not reading by the third grade are less likely to succeed academically and professionally for the rest of their lives. And reading levels in the District of Columbia are dishearteningly low.

When we address the reading crisis in the District, we will be addressing many other pressing challenges facing our city. For example, many children are misclassified as special education children not because of a learning disability, but because they cannot read. By improving reading skills, we will begin to reduce the daunting number of District children in special education which will help us reduce costs and focus special education services on those who with the most need.

By focusing on reading, we can also begin to address the extremely high unemployment levels in many of our communities. The unemployment problem in D.C. is not due to the lack of jobs; rather, the problem is that many of our job applicants do not have basic literacy and job readiness skills. By improving reading proficiency, along with an expanded and targeted focus on career and technical education, we will make inroads into the economic and joblessness crisis in many of our communities.

The nature of these challenges calls for a coordinated multi-faceted solution and I endorse the Mayor's plan to unite all education related services from birth to adulthood in one state agency to help us to address these problems comprehensively.

There are many positive examples for the District to follow to foster a citywide reading movement. For example, in Jacksonville, Mayor John Peyton put forward a wide-ranging initiative called Rally Jacksonville. Through this initiative, all newborns are provided with a free literacy kit upon leaving the hospital; all pre-kindergarteners are invited to receive a backpack with Jacksonville-themed children's books; teams of readers volunteer at child care sites across the city; teams of literacy experts advise those child care centers; all centers are rated on a new quality reading scale; and the city is running a book drive to collect and distribute one million books this summer.

I look forward to working with the State Superintendent of Education, Deborah Gist, to institute an initiative across the District of Columbia and to address the reading crisis in the District of Columbia directly.

### Conclusion

Although both early childhood education and reading are issues of critical importance to the District of Columbia, they are also national issues. As the nation's capital, the District should be at the forefront of cities working to address the challenges and pathologies facing our urban communities. I appreciate the partnership of this Committee and this Congress as we jointly face these challenges.

This concludes my written remarks. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.