



Testimony of Michelle Rhee, Chancellor

Meeting of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,  
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia  
United States Senate

The Honorable Daniel Akaka, Chairman  
The Honorable George Voinovich, Ranking Member

"Education Reform in the District of Columbia"

July 23, 2009

Good afternoon, Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich, and members of the Committee. I am honored to testify today about education reform in the District of Columbia Public Schools and the findings of the GAO report.

In our nation's capital, our education system can and should be a source of national pride. We know from the significant progress students have made in the last two years in DC—and from the results from high performing urban schools—that in good schools children of all backgrounds and circumstances can gain the skills that will allow them positive and fulfilling life choices. Urban schools can send their children to college at rates that can compete with suburban schools.

We also know how much work it will take to get there. Despite the progress of the past two years, the situation remains dire when less than half of our students can read, write and do math at grade level. When Mayor Fenty gave me the privilege of reforming the school system to achieve this goal with him, we quickly discovered a few of the ways that schools were not supported to educate their students competitively.

For example, in 2007 brand new textbooks sat unopened in warehouses while students sat in history classes with books that ended with Nixon's presidency. The school system, owing money to teachers who had worked here years ago, at the same time was accidentally mailing checks to former employees who hadn't worked here for years—even when the employees were regularly calling to correct the problem. While one DCPS school showed 9% of its students were on grade level in math, a successful charter school a few blocks away showed 91% of its students were on grade level.

Parents responded, and between 1996 and 2007 the enrollment of the public school system dropped by 40% as families without viable options in their

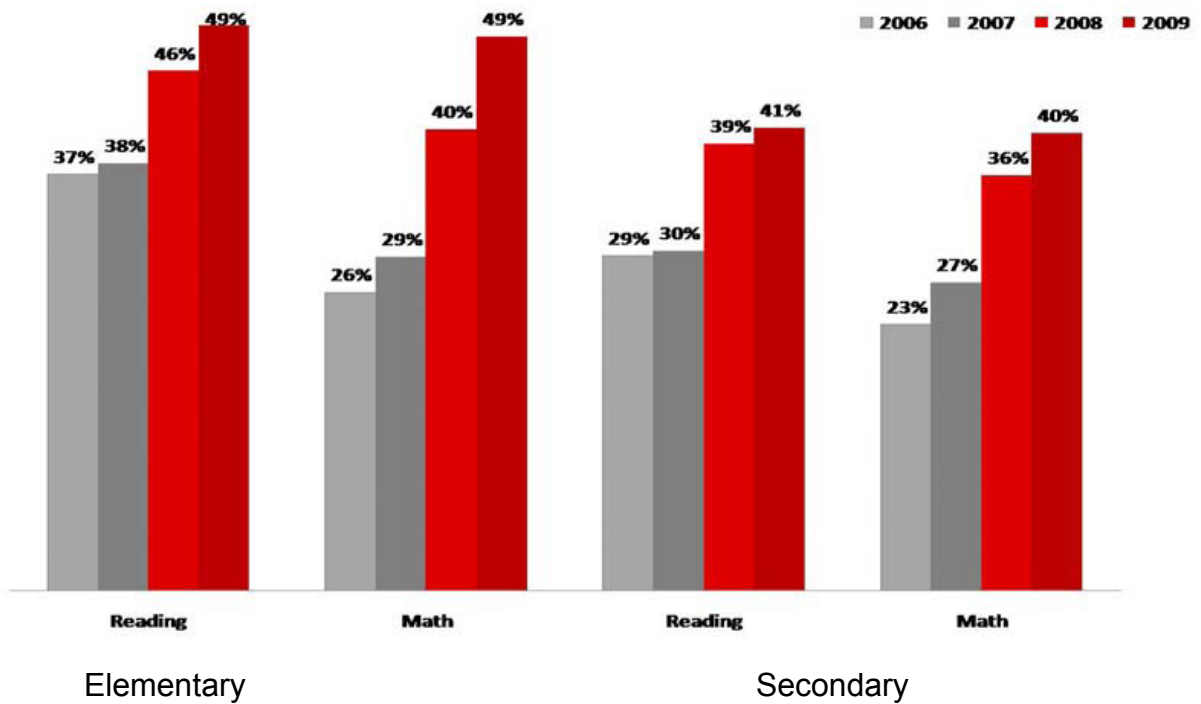
neighborhoods sought schools that would serve their children according to their rights and abilities.

Because of the sheer size of the problem, many thought it would be near impossible to resuscitate DCPS, never mind take student achievement beyond the high expectations we have for children in our country's top schools. However, after decades of poor achievement, under the leadership of Mayor Adrian Fenty we are applying the innovative solutions and commonsense practices that are beginning to turn the tide.

For the second year in a row, DCPS students have posted significant gains on our annual standardized test, the DC CAS. Second year gains are more unusual than a first-year rise in scores, and we are pleased that in 2009 our principals and teachers brought gains across all grade levels and in both reading and math.

Good News: DC CAS Gains in 2009

Our elementary students made significant gains in math and reading this year, moving from 40% proficient in math last year to 49% this year, and from 46% proficient in reading to 49% this year—on top of the encouraging gains achieved in Year One. Our secondary students showed improvement as well this year, advancing from 39 to 41% proficient in reading and 36 to 40% proficient in math.

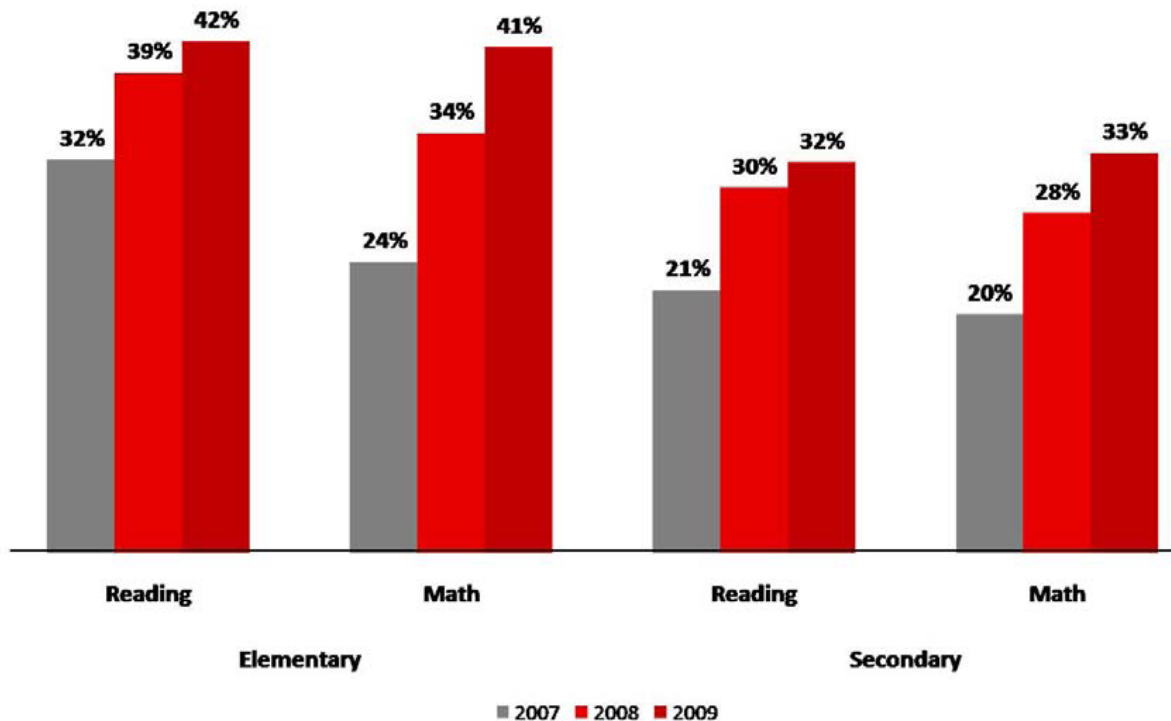


## Gains Among Subgroups

I have heard from many who argue that economically disadvantaged students are not as capable of learning as students from more affluent families are, and that it is only “realistic” to assume that neighborhoods dominated by poor and minority students will remain caught in the cycles of poverty we see now. I am happy to see that our students have an answer for that.

In just two years in secondary math, students have narrowed the achievement gap *by 20 percentage points*, from 70% to 50%. The gap has narrowed across all grade levels and subject areas, and our students have made it clear that they intend to keep going. In fact, virtually every subgroup of students increased proficiency rates this year, including our students with special education needs, our English Language Learners (ELLs), and our Economically Disadvantaged students. ELL students are outperforming the district as a whole in elementary reading, elementary math, and secondary math, with 20% gains in secondary reading over two years.

### **DCPS Economically Disadvantaged Student Proficiency**



Two years ago, when Mayor Fenty took over the schools, only one-third of our students were on grade level in reading and math. Two years later, almost half of our students are on grade level in reading and math. Of course, the fact that only half our students are proficient is not cause for celebration. But given where we once were, this is evidence of progress and a cause for hope.

### The GAO Report

The GAO report released last month represents the conclusion of nearly two years of ongoing evaluation and analysis. Overall, we agreed with many of the major recommendations from the draft report, though we have not seen the final report. As we have shared with the GAO team, the mayor will continue to make constant evaluation and stakeholder input central and integral components of ensuring accountability under the governance structure.

We were perplexed, however, by the tone and specific conclusions of the GAO report. We believe the report fell short of objectively conveying the context for the DCPS initiatives underway and of adequately capturing all of the progress that has been made to date. I would like to use my remaining time to explain some of the innovative reforms occurring at DCPS that have allowed us to make the gains we have seen in student achievement.

### Human Capital Initiatives

The rise in academic achievement over the past two years is in large part the result of months of hard work and dedication from our teachers and principals, and we still have a long way to go. There is no way to get around it—without high quality teachers and principals at every DCPS school, the achievement gap will not close and performance will not rise. We *must* support a teaching corps that is focused on student achievement, and we must recognize and reward them when they accomplish the enormous gains we are asking them to reach with students.

For many years, new teachers have struggled to “reinvent the wheel” of classroom management and planning without significant or sustained support from DCPS. But just as teachers are asked to meet every individual child’s academic needs, professional development must support teachers at all ends of the spectrum on their way toward mastery. DCPS has established a higher commitment to professional development with a 400% increase in budgeted PD resources. This has allowed us to hire teacher coaches to support reading and math instruction. The coaches work at the school level, getting to know teachers and their styles and practice to help new and struggling teachers advance their students’ academic growth.

Building teacher capacity for excellence is the most important work of the past two years and the years to come. Nothing is more telling of this importance than the way students flock to our best teachers. In one of our high schools last year, a teacher was surprised to find students attending her class who were not on her roster. When she asked them why they were there, they said that they were learning from her, and they wanted to attend her class whether they were getting credit for it or not.

Schools also need strong principals to succeed. In a district facing a challenge of this size, we need the best school leaders we can find, and we must support those we have to achieve according to their highest potential. As part of our aggressive human capital strategy, DCPS recruited over 49 proven instructional leaders for the 2008-2009 school year to replace principals who were unable to increase student performance. Our new principals went on to outperform the district-wide averages on the DC-CAS this year. One of these new principals, Dwan Jordon, assumed leadership last year of Sousa Middle School in Ward 7, one of the city’s highest poverty wards. In just one year he galvanized his staff to move students up 17% points in reading and 25% in math, meeting AYP for the first time in Sousa’s history.

When we hire, or develop staff to achieve such results, our children cannot afford to lose them. To attract and retain highly effective staff we must dramatically change the way in which teachers and principals are compensated. Already, DCPS has provided incentives to teachers who helped their students realize school-wide gains of 20 points or greater in both math and reading. After the 2007-2008 school year, DCPS awarded cash bonuses to the staff at 7 schools. Teachers at these schools each received an \$8,000 cash award, sending a clear message that if they perform at the highest level, they will be rewarded.

### Engaging Families and Community Stakeholders

We are proud of what we have accomplished in the past two years, but we have not created these results on our own. In addition to significant support from multiple city agencies under the mayor, a proactive community including students, parents, families, community advocates and countless stakeholders has engaged in reform with us.

Here at DCPS, we have modeled ourselves on Mayor Fenty's commitment to community responsiveness, adopting the city's customer service standards under his directive. This year alone our Critical Response Team received, responded to, and resolved more than 16,000 issues, complaints, and inquiries from parents, teachers and community members. We have also taken great efforts to be present in the schools and communities we serve. This past school year, I met informally with hundreds of DCPS teachers to hear their needs and concerns.

We also sponsored community engagement opportunities continuously throughout the past year. These events included everything from intimate living room sessions to city-wide meetings where policy proposals were discussed.



In fact, any time one of our DCPS departments presents a major project or policy change, the department works with our Office of Family and Public Engagement to ensure that institutional and community stakeholders have a chance to weigh in on the proposed changes. One example that shows how this process works is the community engagement that occurred over one year to revise our student discipline policy.

With much input from students, families and school staff, in our first year we learned of many ways that the policy was detrimental to student achievement. We then created a task force to revamp the policy with the help and significant efforts of the DC community. This task force went out to schools to speak with students, created focus groups of teachers, principals, parents, and community advocates, and listened. With the input from the focus groups, we created a draft of a new policy to bring to the larger DC community. Then, through a series of three community meetings held in different wards this past winter, we presented the draft to the community and hosted multiple discussions to garner as much input and experience possible, which we used to revise the draft before submitting to the D.C. Council in the spring.

In the pursuit of full transparency, throughout this process we took notes on the input received, posted them online, and we created a document listing the recorded ideas to be included, with the rationale for why we did or did not include the various ideas received in the final policy. We then held a series of trainings and engagement with principals, who are training their staff on the new and better policy we will implement this fall. In addition, students were trained as peer educators to communicate the policy and support other students to implement it in their schools.

This process is just one example of the process to engage school communities in any such change in policy, such as the new School Scorecards we are building to better share school performance information with parents and

to raise accountability for our work. These “report cards for schools” will increase transparency, make school performance data easier to track and read, and they are being created with the significant engagement from the community that is so invested in the success of DCPS.

Through our Office of Public Engagement, created before the 2008-2009 school year, our stakeholders have access to key information and ample opportunities to be heard. Equally important, this office makes sure that DCPS engages families and the public in a manner that allows us to listen and learn from the valuable feedback and experience of our stakeholders. We will continue to work closely with the families and the communities we serve as we pursue our shared goal of increasing student achievement.

### Moving Forward

We have no illusions about the work that lies ahead. Right now in this city, a student’s race remains a determining factor in the number and quality of choices that student will have upon exiting the public schools. This is inexcusable, and it becomes more painfully acute to anyone who visits our schools, speaks with our students and sees directly how capable and curious they are. We are working furiously to correct this injustice, and we have made significant progress over the past two years. The accomplishments we have shared with you, the most important of which belong to our students, we believe merit recognition in any measure or oversight of this rewarding work.

As we all continue this forward movement with our school staff and students, I remain grateful for your support, and I am happy to answer your questions.