



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Office of the Chancellor

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Testimony of Michelle Rhee, Chancellor

Meeting of the District of Columbia City Council, January 14, 2008

Good afternoon, Chairman Gray and honorable members of the DC Council, and thank you for hearing my testimony regarding the proposed plan, “Renew, Revitalize, and Reorganize” for the District of Columbia Public Schools.

As you know, this is the plan I have brought to the community in order to bring exciting new educational programs and opportunities to students across the District. It is comprehensive and aggressive in scope, and it builds upon recommendations made over the last several years by the Board of Education, this Council, previous administrations and the community as a whole.

I am grateful for the active involvement of the community throughout this process. Their concerns, time and even their frustrations are contributions I respect as signs of deep commitment to our kids. I am listening to every question, concern, and idea from the engaged citizens who have taken the time to communicate with me, and I am considering all ideas and concerns before we make any final decisions that affect our students.

Community engagement has been a critical component of this process. Before drafting the current proposal with the deputy mayor’s office, I listened to students, parents, teachers, principals and multiple stakeholders about what they want for our students. Through living room meetings, town halls and individual conversations, I have appreciated the massive effort, time and support that the DC community has invested in

the process of making our schools work. After drafting the proposal, my staff and I engaged in over 50 hours of dialogue with the community, including three rounds of forums in which we presented the plan and solicited community feedback. In addition we have received feedback from engaged teachers, principals, LSRTs and councilmembers. We will continue this process through a series of individualized community hearings on January 17th, at which community members will have the opportunity to respond to the school-specific issues that would affect them. We are collecting all input received during this process for close consideration in making final decisions.

Renew, Revitalize, Reorganize: Plan Foundations

The inability of our school system to provide high quality educational options for all of our students, regardless of where they live, is nothing short of an educational injustice. Some students have the benefit of art teachers, music teachers, counselors, and nurses while go without. Teachers have students with severe behavioral issues that inhibit the learning and chances of other students; some of these teachers can call on the support of deans and counselors to work with these students, therefore enabling teachers to do the hard work of teaching. Many other teachers simply do not have that option. Some parents have a variety of strong school programs in their wards while many others do not. For years principals, teachers and families have been working within a system that, as a whole, is not set up to serve our students well. This absolutely must change, and this new plan is one step toward changing it.

“Renew, Revitalize, Reorganize” will enable us to provide better programs to our kids, programs that nationally have only been offered to a select few. Through this plan, every ward will have excellent opportunities such as new Montessori and early childhood programs, more high tech campuses and lab schools, fine arts schools, more Gifted and Talented programs, and an increased capacity to serve our historically and grossly underserved students who have special education needs. Over time this plan will enhance the staffing models at our schools, providing schools with psychologists, deans, nurses, and other ‘basics’ that we have no business denying to any school-going child.

In order to provide the strong programs and enhanced staffing models that our kids deserve, we must reorganize and reallocate our resources. This plan relies on significant reorganization of the school system, including closing schools and rightsizing the school system, moving successful programs to buildings better able to support learning, realigning grades and creating logical, coherent feeder patterns. Sharing our successful programs with more students and more schools is not only common sense but it is our responsibility toward our students. When and where something works, we should ensure that as many students as possible have access to that program.

Why do schools have to close?

The data behind the need to close schools is overwhelming, and it is clear that we need to take action now. Through the uniform per-student formula we are allotted a certain amount of money per student. According to this formula, we receive \$25MM to pay for utilities; yet due to the excess space we are maintaining per student, our utility bill is \$50MM. We have significant excess public school space in every ward except Ward 3; by spending money to maintain this space while simultaneously spreading our limited education resources across it, we are throwing money into a fire that is consuming our kids' opportunities. DCPS has one of the largest rates of per-pupil spending in the nation. That would not be cause for alarm if we were using our resources well, if we were not last in the nation in our performance levels. However, when I talk to parents, teachers and students, our spending statistic does not *feel* true to them. They do not see and feel the results of our spending in the classroom. We must act so that the impact of our resources is made on the *classroom* and not dissolved across empty space.

This does not mean our choices will be easy. Schools are more than just buildings, and I do not take lightly the work that has been done within their walls and communities or the relationships that have been built there. In the rightsizing plan, proposing a school for closure does not mean that I condemn the principal, teachers or students in that school. In fact, I look forward to continuing the programs that are successful. However, as painful as it is to face closure of a beloved school, we must take the actions to end the educational injustice that our parents and students know all

too well. With this plan we are following through on our commitment to provide a high quality education for every child at every school, and I am confident that the challenges of change will be worth it when, as a district, we are finally serving students as they ought to be served.

How did we make decisions about which schools to close?

Schools were identified for closure through two levels of analysis. The primary analysis examined objective data related to enrollment decline and overall school enrollment. Applying these criteria, we created an initial list of 40 schools that were candidates for closure. These schools were identified after calculations showed that they have consistently been below median enrollment and above median rates of decline of enrollment over the past five years.

We then completed a secondary analysis that considered other factors, like geographic isolation, walkability, future enrollment patterns and trends, potential neighborhood impact, site amenities, proximity to other schools, and overall current and future impact on the DCPS system as a whole. Each factor was considered from the school, cluster, and neighborhood levels. Through this process, some schools were removed from the proposed list, while other schools were added as alternatives in order to create a rational, comprehensive plan that would maximize the benefit to students and the school system.

Community Feedback on the Plan

Community response to our plan, while usually specific to ward, school, and neighborhood, to date has fallen into the four primary areas of concern addressed below:

1) Walkability:

Ensuring that young children are able to walk to school safely is a high priority. Walkability is an issue of distance, physical boundaries such as impassable roads, and safe passage. We believe that the plan proposed has a minimal impact on walkability for the vast majority of students. In addition and in response to some of the feedback from our community dialogues, we are working directly with the DC Department of Transportation (DDOT) and the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) to help students to cross streets and walk through neighborhoods safely.

2) The expressed fear that quality programs will not be continued:

At some schools, the community has strong feelings about the quality of certain programs. They have told me that their teachers are doing good work and the classes offer the right instructional environment for their children. As chancellor I absolutely want and need to maintain what serves our students well. Where we have quality programs that work in schools proposed for closure, we would move the elements of that program to a receiving school so that the success can be continued to the benefit of even more students. In our second round of community meetings, once parents began to see the new programs we want to *add* to the successful District programs, their questions began to change. Parents wanted to know about new models of learning. In many of our smaller group discussions in which we could more directly listen to and answer more constituents' questions, teachers became excited and animated as they peppered us with questions about the new programs in which they could be

involved. New programs are significant enhancements to our system of education and I can assure the community that they will not take the place of existing programs that are already working.

3) *A desire for fairness to all wards:*

I have heard from some community members a concern about the fairness of this plan, as it does not propose closure in all wards. In fact, this new plan was created *because of* the need for District-wide fairness. While issues of space and facilities were examined without regard to ward, the unequal distribution of academic rigor in the District is *not fair*. We owe it to our students to make sure that our schools are consistently strong in every ward, and to insist on this bucks a system of inequality that has existed in our country's urban districts for years. This plan is one of the first steps to finally righting the imbalance in quality educational programs across the District as a whole, reconstituting the exclusivity of a solid education into a basic right that exists in all wards.

4) *Concerns regarding student body dynamics:*

Many parents have rightly asked us if we have considered the impact of both students' relationships and differences in academic needs on the social environment in a school. The community has been especially important in contributing to our understanding of and sensitivity to these issues. Social dynamics impact student achievement and safety, and we are considering these dynamics as we make decisions about swing space and the student body as a whole in every school. Varying academic needs of our students will be closely considered through individualized plans for each school, and we will work directly with the receiving school communities to ensure that effective and positive integration of staff, students and parents takes place in the new school year.

Looking Forward

So that students and families have time for transition and we may best support them through this transition, we must be able to make this decision sooner rather than later. Once we do so, we will immediately begin the task of preparing schools and communities for upcoming changes. Academic teams will begin meeting with instructional leaders at the local school level to develop implementation plans, including timelines, resource needs and professional development plans. We will begin the logistics planning that must occur to close schools at the end of the school year and re-open schools at the end of the summer with minimal disruption for students. We will work closely with the Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization (OPEFM) to make the necessary improvements to receiving school facilities. We will continue the planning process for determining how to best utilize excess school facilities and space. During this process we will solicit community participation, and we will work with two central priorities:

- 1) Schools will not be left vacant to become eyesores to the neighborhood, as they have been in the past.
- 2) Potential uses for school buildings will first focus on the issues that benefit our education system and our communities.

“RRR” Rightsizing vs. NCLB Restructuring vs. Pre-K to 8 Reconfiguration

To clarify for the DC Council and for the public, our community engagement regarding this plan is ongoing with other engagement initiatives to improve DCPS, such as the upcoming school restructuring required by No Child Left Behind. There are 27 schools in the District that due to consistent failure to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), have been federally mandated to create and implement a restructuring plan. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provides five options for this change. We have conducted several parent, LSRT and structured community meetings to discuss the five options. Currently we are undergoing a Quality School Review in each school to examine teaching and learning. We will develop and implement school-specific comprehensive school improvement plans based on the identified needs of each school, working with

the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE) to create preliminary plans by February, making any modifications as necessary in the following months.

Our Pre-K to 8 restructuring of grade levels is included in “Renew, Revitalize, and Reorganize.” I have proposed creating a Pre-K to 8 model to initiate in some of our schools. Research suggests that these new grade configurations foster higher achievement levels than their 6-8 counterparts, especially in urban environments. In addition, this new configuration has been shown to reduce discipline problems and increase stability and continuity within one school environment over the years. Routines, teachers, principals, and other important influences on achievement remain more consistent for students during the transitional years of pre-adolescence and adolescence. Students in 7th grade are in the same building with the familiar and stable environment of their earlier grades, and in an urban school system this stability and continuity are critical.

In Conclusion

A few months ago a group of students at Leckie Elementary School sent me a list of questions that included the following request: “Here is our wish list. Please let us know what you can do.” Included on the list were: a music teacher, a Spanish teacher, a counselor, a librarian, and other basics for which no young children should have to lobby their chancellor. This plan is part of my promise to Leckie’s students. It is ‘what I can do.’ It will require change. It will take time. It will mean we have to give new programs a chance to take root and transform a failing school district. As the community and the DC Council stand with me to make these critical decisions, we will achieve what has seemed out-of-reach for too many years. We will have collaborated on a plan that means expanded educational opportunities for our students, greater justice in the delivery of a sound education in all wards, more support for principals, teachers, and students, and higher overall levels of achievement in the District of Columbia. I understand that it will not be easy to get there, but I look forward to the results.