



## DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Office of the Chancellor

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### **Testimony of Michelle Rhee, Chancellor Meeting of the District of Columbia City Council, November 29, 2007**

Good afternoon, Chairman Gray and honorable members of the DC Council, and thank you for hearing my testimony regarding my accomplishments and first-year plans for the District of Columbia Public Schools.

Many people look at our school system and have lost hope for our ability to change it. Our performance data is heartbreaking, and our long-standing failure to serve children has made the school system of our nation's capital infamous. We have many problems: poverty, a dysfunctional bureaucracy that does not serve students and families, a racial gap that reveals an injustice so large that I am still astounded when I see our numbers. Cynicism, frustration, and a culture of unaccountability have settled so deeply into our system that many are afraid to hope that reversal is possible. Many believe that our problems are too large to solve.

I don't.

In my first weeks as chancellor, I too was taken aback by the current state of disrepair. Our data systems as tools for assessment and communication are so far in the dark ages that it is difficult to understand how the existence of such systems today can be possible. Our abysmal customer service, broken school facilities, and inequalities of curriculum across the District, are mind-boggling. But despite our multi-layered history of poor service, there *is* good news. There are solutions to these problems. Some of them—one being the establishment of a new governance structure in which the mayor and D.C. Council work in collaboration to improve the schools--have already been implemented in urban school districts larger than ours with encouraging

results. There are so many improvements we can enact that will impact student achievement, and we have begun to make them.

Because our problems are so entrenched, much of the work in this first year will put practices and standards into place to restore basic functionality and set us up to meet the basic service levels that should be expected of any school system. We must 'learn to walk before we can run,' we must become functional; because of this, in my first six months I have been working to fix problems that simply do not exist in successful systems. However, my objectives for our students extend far beyond meeting the minimal AYP requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While our challenges are great, they absolutely can be met. In future years, many will not recognize the school system that exists today. With community and political support, future success will snowball to attract the most gifted of professionals to our ranks. Our school system will model reform and justice in education as a nation's capital should.

While it is important to know where we stand in order to progress, it is also time for us to shift our attention from past failures to the actions we are taking to reverse them. This year, we have begun to create a school system that serves our students according to their potential and dignity.

### **First Six Months**

Much of what I have seen has been widely reported and was documented in the hearing before this council on November 2<sup>nd</sup>: the failure of simple textbook deliveries, a room full of unexplained, random personnel records that had been haphazardly ignored, employees who can cross ethical lines with impunity, schools that were unsafe for learning due to extreme temperatures, teachers and paraprofessionals who were missing paychecks and were met with unresponsiveness when they called to get the money owed to them. These are signs of a broken system, and documenting them is a critical first step toward understanding what we have achieved so far and what remains to be addressed.

Due to the sheer number of constituents who were waiting for service, in my first weeks as chancellor I set up a constituent services team. This team inherited a backlog of 200 open cases, and to date, 1,347 out of 1,480 total cases have been resolved.

These cases illustrate the quality of service detailed in the November 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of this council. Former employees who no longer work for DCPS report that they have continued to receive paychecks, benefits and bonuses they could not explain, despite their phone calls pointing out the problem. One teacher left DCPS to pursue a full-time master's program and received a \$1,000 check after her resignation. She has no idea why the check was sent to her. One teacher was given a raise in 2006, and when the raise "took effect" she began receiving paychecks—for an entire summer—for \$3.00 each. My team has corrected this for her, although this did not help her when she found herself suddenly without a paycheck for three months. We have one employee who waited for *three years* to receive pay that was owed to him/her. She has been paid, and all retroactive "2921" pay checks have been sent. To address all of these complaints, we have aligned our customer service reporting to the city's system for tracking constituent complaints and documenting timeliness of response. We have also communicated the mayor's customer service standards to central office employees, who will finally be evaluated in part according to how well they meet these standards. Standards include a 24-hour turnaround time for response to phone calls, friendly service, and other uniform voice mail, email, phone and face-to-face standards.

I have targeted and responded to the following issues: principal and teacher vacancies, gaping holes in our data and tracking systems, the lack of safe and modern facilities, a dysfunctional inventory system at the warehouse, missing textbooks in schools, a budget that underrepresented actual spending, and an overall lack of accountability procedures for school performance.

We hired 20 interim principals to fill all vacancies. I have welcomed each of these principals to apply for this position when we conduct a nationwide search for high-quality principals this winter.

We hired 432 new teachers. In a departure from the past experience of new teachers in DCPS, 99% of them were paid on time.

There are fissures in data fluency across the system, from warehouse tracking to personnel to school accountability measures. When I sent an email letter to teachers soon after school started, 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, because not all teachers could access their email accounts. You have all heard of our discovery of 1.2 million personnel documents that had not been filed; this may explain why it took several queries and cross-references to get an accurate count of how many teachers even work for us. When our verification teams went out to schools to check facilities, they found that there was no reliable tracking system for work orders, and that the number of work orders submitted was far less than the number of actual repairs needed; many principals had eventually stopped reporting problems that they knew were unlikely to be addressed. Providing these basic services to our students and families does not require groundbreaking innovations. It just requires the desire and drive to make the changes, and with citywide support we can make many of these changes in our first year.

Each issue I mentioned has been addressed with immediate, short-term solutions that lead to projected long-term goals and the plans to accomplish them.

I am working to put systems into place so that we are using data as every good organization does: to improve performance. I cannot overstate the importance of these systems and the possibilities they present for our principals, teachers and ultimately our students. My Chief Data and Accountability Officer has been successful in streamlining these systems in other districts, and I am confident that the improvements in systems across the district will result in significant progress in our offices and classrooms. With effective data systems and communication, teachers will finally receive an email when I send one. Educators will have access to the data and technology they need in order to receive important information, track student progress, access current research in education and in their subject areas, and communicate with parents. To make this possible, we are working with the Office of the Chief Technology Officer to bring desktops to every classroom. This initiative was launched on October 19<sup>th</sup> at Anacostia High School.

In response to the 1.2 million personnel documents, we set up scanning stations and trained staff to use them. All 1.2 million documents have been filed, and in total, 4.6 million documents have been scanned so that this data will be available electronically.

I created a task force to improve the textbook request tracking system, and we have created an inventory system that works. 97% of orders for textbooks and

educational materials were filled, and we created a previously non-existent electronic inventory of 161,794 books. Through a combination of improved tracking, the new DC Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization (OPEFM), a 'Summer Blitz' that targeted 37 schools, and a repair program targeting 33 schools, we are well on our way to making our schools safe and modern. This summer, I created verification teams to physically assess necessary school repairs, and their inspections uncovered a flawed system in work order reporting. As a result, we removed 2,500 defunct work orders from our system, and we are currently working to streamline reporting so that work orders receive timely responses that are logged both centrally and locally. We also discovered a number of work orders that simply had not been reported, due to a history of poor response.

We have also identified heating and cooling needs in our classrooms. All schools with central cooling received upgrades, and 670 new units were installed. By the time the next cooling season arrives, all classrooms will have air conditioning. As of October 15<sup>th</sup> all classrooms were heated. Seven schools have been identified as needing new boilers; two have been replaced and five have received temporary heating systems until the boilers are permanently replaced. We have begun athletic field modernization projects, and we have created a 15-year plan for the modernization of all schools; this plan includes all renovations that are in progress.

In addition, I have examined our budget and found a severe underreporting of actual spending. I have submitted a budget that ties to actual spending. DCPS now has fixed costs forecasts for FY07 and FY08. With the restructuring of funds to the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE), the DCPS local fund has been reduced by \$18M. Even within these tight constraints, DCPS is working to implement over \$70 million in savings in FY 2008. In addition, \$34 million in costs associated with such things as personnel and legal counsel services will be transferred to other city agencies.

While it is important to talk about and fix the broken air conditioners, lost personnel files and three-dollar paychecks, it is our performance data that must drive us forward this year and in all future years. Of my four objectives for this year, it is my first priority to put into place what we need in order to increase student achievement in later years.

According to National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data for the 2006-2007 school year, compared to other states the District of Columbia ranks last in reading and math scores of our fourth and eighth graders. The only state to come close to this dismal performance level is Mississippi. We have the largest achievement gap between black and white students in the fourth grade. According to DC-CAS scores for 2006-2007, only 38% of our elementary students are proficient or advanced in reading, and just 29% in math. Our numbers at the secondary levels fall to 30% for reading and 27% for math. We have schools in this District who show a 10% proficiency rate for their students. *To respond to these numbers with anything but radical change to reverse them, is an insult to the dignity, potential and creativity of our children.*

After six months of gathering information from students, parents, principals, teachers, community leaders, experts in the field of education and other stakeholders in the success of our schools, this week I unveiled an exciting new plan for our schools. This plan will renew, revitalize and reorganize schools with innovative school programs. Initiatives will renew our schools through piloting new programs in SPED, increasing our numbers of Gifted and Talented Programs, and increasing our numbers of Science, Technology, Engineering and math (STEM) programs. In the coming years school programs will have art, music, and PE teachers, social workers, psychologists, media center specialists, guidance counselors and various other staff members necessary to run schools that work for students and families. Some schools in the District have debunked the damaging myth that students in urban school systems cannot achieve at high levels. We will build upon their success as we reorganize schools across the District. We will replicate high achieving programs as principals with proven track records are eventually given greater autonomy and promoted to replicate their success by leading new school programs. We will increase collaboration among schools to spread successful practices across the District. I look forward to seeing the results of these actions when in the coming years, our students' aptitude will finally be reflected in their test scores.

## **First-Year Plan**

### **Objective I: Establish the practices that will increase student achievement.**

I will hold every school accountable for its progress in achievement and alignment with accountability standards. This is an expectation I have established from Day One. Raising these levels will require strong leadership from principals and excellent teaching from our educators.

We cannot make schools work for students without good principals who have the resources they need and who will be held accountable. In September and October I met with principals to ascertain their needs, set benchmarks for improvement and acquire baseline AYP projections. I continue to follow-up with principals so that they are given every resource they need in order to meet their goals. In December I will launch a nationwide search for principals with a proven track record of success, with the goal of sending three highly qualified candidates for every principal vacancy to the community LSRT panel for selection. In the coming years our principals will be held to high standards for the performance of their teachers and students. This will be accomplished partly through an evaluation of confidential staff surveys, which American Institutes for Research (AIR) is currently conducting. Those principals who show and maintain results across various metrics measuring student achievement (such as AYP data, graduation rates, PSAT and SAT scores, and a school quality review process, to name a few), will eventually be given greater autonomy, and their schools will be used as models for struggling schools.

We cannot raise student achievement without high performing teachers in our classrooms. Teachers are the most direct driving force in our students' school lives. Research supports this and our community agrees. Community members have shared this with me through the successful town halls of the past summer, in personal conversations and through the public testimony of students in your hearings on youth issues over the past months. We need the best teachers we can offer for our kids, we need to respect the work that they do and we need to show that respect by investing in them. My first year initiatives will move us in this direction. Already our successful "Welcome Back" event included the sharing of strong instructional techniques by master

teachers. While I will begin to address issues of teacher performance through streamlining our data and training teachers in analyzing data to drive creative and substantive instruction, the long-term effort to attract and retain quality teachers will include multiple factors. These include initiatives such as performance pay; support for teachers from strong principals so that each teacher is set up to succeed; a stronger professional development program and expansion of supports for new teachers; and increased accountability that will ultimately rid our system of ineffective teachers.

Some of the above mentioned \$81M in surplus city funds will also be necessary to increase student achievement by offering equal and rich curriculums in all of our schools. This year in our high schools, I will begin to create a strong college-going culture in DCPS. We are creating individual graduation plans (IGPs) for each student, and working to increase the number of AP courses available in future years and in all schools. Whether in Tenleytown or Anacostia, a rich curriculum must be available so that preparation for college is not dependent upon race and zip code.

Our special education services in the District also require significant attention this year. Some of our students, especially those with more severe medical needs, historically have not been served well by DCPS. Some were left at bus stops and forgotten, missing a month of school by the time the problem had been resolved. Paperwork for some has been misfiled, and others historically have been so underserved so that their education had to be provided for by outside schools and treatment programs. DCPS has not used its resources well for our students who have IEPs. Based on our expenditures in the last fiscal year, even with transportation costs excluded, for both residential and non-residential students on average our district spends over \$47,000 per child in one year, on our non-public Special Education students. This kind of spending is out of control, and State Superintendent Gist and I are working together to restructure the way these services are provided to our children so that our money is allocated wisely and our children and families are served.

This will include procedures that can increase achievement levels for students at risk of being classified before the proper interventions have occurred. Over 10,000 of our students are classified to receive special education services. This represents 20% of our students, as compared to approximately 13.4% of students in urban districts

nationally. Other districts use academic intervention programs effectively to find the students who may be more successful through academic interventions than through receipt of special education services. This year, we will use their models to raise student achievement for students who in the past may have been erroneously classified. We will do this by implementing Student Support Teams (SSTs) which will help us to find these students and provide the critical academic intervention that will help them to achieve.

**Objective II: Ensure that schools are safe and modern.**

As I documented earlier, we have moved toward achieving my second objective for making schools work this year: ensuring that schools are safe and modern. The conditions of our schools affect student achievement in two ways. First, we communicate our expectations to students through the learning environments we create. In a school where lights stay broken, walls erode, and unsanitary conditions prevail, we tell students that we do not expect great things to happen there. In a school where students are expected to tolerate violence, we tell them that this is what we accept for their lives. Second, physical conditions of schools negatively influence day-to-day performance on assessments, skewing the performance data that we need in order to effectively instruct our students. This year we will begin to reverse the history of communicating low expectations through the physical environment in schools. In addition to the initiatives I have already described regarding facilities and the timely closing of work orders through the new Office of Public Education Facilities Management (OPEFM), in '08 we will implement a new student discipline policy in which current, consistent and sound procedures are enforced. DCPS will also work with the mayor's office and other city agencies in enforcing school safety. Also, in the '08 – '09 school year, schools that do not show reasonable promise for becoming safe and modern facilities that serve students well, will be closed or consolidated with other schools.

### **Objective III: Engage parents and the community as partners.**

My third objective for making schools work this year is to engage parents and the community as partners. When teachers communicate regularly with parents, students achieve at higher levels. When schools and students engage with their community, we build a sense of responsibility for the safety and education of our children. This year we will build and fortify relationships with parents and community partners. I have created a Chancellor-Parent Forum in which I regularly meet with parents to solicit their ideas and concerns on a variety of DCPS issues. I have created a Chancellor-Student Cabinet that encourages students to not only communicate with me but to actively connect their academic and community work as they learn to advocate for themselves as effective change agents. I am in frequent dialogue with them, and I am proud of the work they have already done to improve their schools and communities. We have created an Office of Partnerships to galvanize the many resources of our city and match partnerships with the schools that need them. We will develop an effective and consistent method of communicating with the press and parents, ensuring that the community can be involved in major upcoming decisions and legislation.

In the coming weeks I will also be engaging the community to address federal reorganization requirements for the 27 DCPS schools that are in restructuring status. After years of DCPS failure to meet AYP and after 5 years of non-compliance with U.S. Department of Education regulations, I am working with State Superintendent Deborah Gist to meet our restructuring responsibilities. I have begun to research our choices and will be meeting with Local School Restructuring Teams (LSRTs) to implement innovative programs for schools that must be restructured.

I have been encouraged in my first six months of meeting and communicating with the community. Not only are community members demanding the changes that must be made for our schools, but many have given of their own personal time to make it happen. I am grateful for their support, persistence and their clarity of voice and purpose in raising student achievement.

**Objective IV: Create a central office that effectively serves students and families.**

My fourth objective for making DC public schools work for students and families this year is to create a central office that effectively serves our students and families. Some of my plans for accomplishing this goal were introduced before this council on November 2<sup>nd</sup>. Pending personnel legislation from this council as well as your approval of DCPS using \$81M in city budget surplus, I will be able to enforce these standards in our central office and transform our culture of unaccountability into a reputable and service-oriented culture for students and families.

Recently we began the implementation of performance evaluations for all central office staff. They will be completed by December 14<sup>th</sup>, and face-to-face meetings with employees will be completed by the end of December. Following this baseline performance evaluation, our revised performance management systems will: establish baseline customer satisfaction through surveys to stakeholders; streamline the process of performance evaluations for employees; monitor performance expectations for each department through department scorecards; and ensure that DCPS schools are reaching key objectives through a SchoolStat accountability system. In the central office we are also developing a centralized call center and we have also created a new organizational chart to ensure clear lines of authority.

This year we are increasing the efficiency of data handling in the central office, which will improve financial tracking and reporting. While we have already created a sound budget for '08, in future years the central office must be fiscally responsible and disciplined in order to work for students and their families. Before the '08 – '09 school year, DCPS and Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) will create financial forecasts to predict long-term revenues and expenses. We will build compliance and corrective action plans so that DCPS can track these issues from a single point of contact within DCPS. We will create transparent budgets for grants and private funds so that schools can utilize the external funds available to their students while keeping their spending in line with the budget. We will train central office directors and school staff in fiscal management.

## **Conclusion**

My four primary first-year objectives—increase student achievement, ensure that schools are safe and modern, engage parents and the community as partners, and create a central office that effectively serves our constituents—are clear, attainable, measurable, and comprehensive. They are the keys to making schools work for our children and their families. These objectives lay foundations for necessary reform, foundations that will be critical in raising student achievement levels in the coming years.

Thank you for your investment in our schools and for hearing my plans to create a school system that serves students and families. I hope that I have presented a clear picture for you of DCPS when I arrived, what I have accomplished so far, and what I intend to achieve in the coming year. While my first months have shown me a bleak picture of the many ways DCPS has failed to serve constituents, based on the progress of the past six months it is also clear that the our obstacles are surmountable. With the courage of DCPS, this council and the community to make the hard changes that are necessary, we will drive student achievement forward in the District of Columbia. To those who have lost hope, not only is there new optimism for change but it is well underway. Years of injustice and institutionalized inadequacy are breaking apart as we enable students to actualize their potential in schools that work.