

Testimony
District of Columbia Board of Education
Hearing on Co-location
June 29, 2005

There should be substantial benefit to both DCPS schools and public charter schools through co-location and substantial benefit to the District in the long run. But co-location has to be truly beneficial for all the schools involved. To foster this, we need a process that supports both schools in their efforts to work together.

Facilities for Two School “Systems”

It is important to remember that the total number of publicly funded students has remained reasonably steady over the past decade at about 80,000 students - - the District is not losing students, rather they are becoming part of an alternative charter “system”. It is a fact of life that the number of charter schools has grown so substantially in the past five years that they soon will have added nearly 60 schools, totaling about 20% of the total publicly funded student population. DCPS schools proportionately are losing population. This leaves many DCPS schools with excess capacity while charter schools continue to search for adequate and appropriate space. Charters use public funds to lease (often inadequate) private facilities and build new buildings on (often) inadequate sites. This is happening even while most DCPS schools, while generally in poor repair, have excess space - - and they have the kind of space that schools need: abundant classrooms, large assembly rooms, gymnasiums, cafeterias, playing fields, playgrounds, and parking. What DCPS schools lack are enough students to sustain vital programs.

Expand Co-location Criteria

With the current co-location process, the Office of Facilities Management uses specific criteria to designate schools for co-location. These criteria include, for example, the ability to isolate DCPS students and charter students, including separate entrances, 250 student seats or 8 classrooms, sufficient parking, etc. This has produced the current list of ten schools (Bunker Hill, Draper, Emery, Ferebee-Hope, Fletcher-Johnson, Hart, Old Miner, PR Harris, Ron Brown, and Tyler) along with the request for letters of interest, three community meetings and this hearing. Whether any co-locations will be successfully arranged in time for September remains to be seen.

The current process is entirely top-down, which is fine for some situations but it does not provide for the kind of creativity and negotiation that should come into play and might result in some excellent situations with schools sharing space even though the specific criteria might not be precisely met.

Greater Flexibility in Creating Co-locations

We would look for more flexibility in the genesis of co-locations so that principals of schools where there is excess space would be encouraged to look for possible co-location partners and would be supported in doing so by central administration and Board policy. In this way principals could find compatible partners and preserve and sustain their own institutions through co-location as an alternative to closure and consolidation.

Co-location to Preserve Neighborhood Schools

Over the long run, co-location of a public charter school and a regular DCPS school might be much less disruptive to the stability of a neighborhood than closing and consolidating a building

Testimony
District of Columbia Board of Education
Hearing on Co-location
June 29, 2005

(or re-opening it again as a public charter) because it would preserve the boundary school, the school by right for local students. It would also preserve the school facility as an asset to the entire community who could continue to use the meeting rooms, playgrounds, auditoriums, and playing fields.

Co-location Sustains Small Schools

By deliberately fostering the continued existence of several smaller schools in one building as an alternative to consolidating several DCPS schools into a single larger institution, the District can strengthen the many small educational institutions we have created over the past five years. With the proliferation of (mostly) small public charter schools, and the resultant creation of small enrollments in regular DCPS schools, the District has a real opportunity to show its leadership as a center for the establishment of excellent small schools. District schools could work together to devise approaches to teaching and administration that best take advantage of the improved outcomes available with small schools, particular for low-income urban students. Note that this year 33% of all DCPS schools have 300 students or less; 65% of all DC Public Charter schools have 300 students or less and these percentages are likely to increase next year.

Study the Cost of Co-location

A solid study of the costs of co-location would be helpful, including realty office costs for negotiating leases and use agreements, costs to make any required alterations or upgrades to the building, operating costs in terms of additional school-based staff members to handle daily coordination between the two schools, communication costs for meetings and mailings to prepare parents and community members for co-location, security costs, etc.

Study the Mobility of Students

A better knowledge of student mobility at DCPS and at the public charter schools would be very helpful generally for planning, but for co-location in particular. For planning purposes, this means having OFM annually update the plotted GIS addresses for every student at each school so the number and pattern of in-boundary and out-of-boundary attendance can be better understood. Similarly for the public charter schools, plotting student addresses could help determine whether individual charters are drawing from the entire District or if they are functioning more as additional neighborhood schools.

Nancy Huvendick
DC Programs Director
21st Century School Fund
1816 12th St., NW, 4th Floor
Washington, DC 20009
202-745-3745 x 15
nhuvendick@21csf.org