

Testimony on Emergency & Proposed Rulemaking on Public-Private Partnerships
at Stated Meeting of the Board of Education on July 17, 2002

My name is Jordan Spooner, and I am the Director for District of Columbia Programs at the 21st Century School Fund. I am here tonight to provide both favorable and unfavorable comments on the new emergency and proposed rulemaking for public-private partnerships, and to urge the Board to hold a public roundtable on this policy before it becomes final.

I would first like to state that the 21st Century School Fund appreciates that the new rulemaking allows for the developing partnership between School Without Walls and George Washington University to continue forward. A lot of work has already gone into expanding this potential partnership, which provides the possibility for significant and extremely helpful private financing to modernize and expand this historic 120-year-old school, and to enhance its successful academic program.

On the other hand, the 21st Century School Fund believes that the new policy comes up well short of where it needs to be in two areas: (1) early notification and involvement of the local community; and (2) flexibility for other parties or agencies who would have programmatic as well as realty relationships to directly negotiate an MOU with DCPS prior to solicitation of competitive offers.

In the area of early community notification and involvement, we believe that the local school restructuring team and the local advisory neighborhood commission should be included, because public schools are public assets, and any partnership agreement will directly affect them. At the very least, an appropriately-scheduled public hearing should be incorporated in the process, but there is currently no provision for one.

Concerning the flexibility issue, we believe there will be other instances where a mutually-beneficial partnership to utilize a DCPS-controlled real estate asset can be created by working with a partner that could not be designated otherwise.

As you already know, the 21st Century School Fund spearheaded the highly successful public-private partnership for the Oyster school. That partnership originated in the community. There was an October 1995 Board of Education resolution designating the Oyster LSRT as the official local school representative in the partnership development process, and subsequently, the LSRT and DCPS administration agreed on an MOU for how they would work together. We believe that early and direct inclusion of local Oyster community organizations was critical to the success of that partnership.

In summary, public-private development partnerships are possible in many communities in the District of Columbia. We believe that these communities should not have to fight for notice and participation in the partnership development process. They should be entitled to it as part of democratic government.