

COW Roundtable on Progress in Modernizing & Improving DC School Facilities

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We appreciate the energy that has gone into our school buildings over the past year. But without a Master Facilities Plan with a regular schedule for whole school modernizations the intense concern with catching up maintenance and repair has ballooned so that it may be taking on the scale of modernizations without encompassing the planning required for educational programs. This planning and the accompanying public discussion and interagency coordination are required to get to a system of really good, like-new school facilities and a regular schedule for on-going modernization and repair.

Most of the substantive work planned for the summer still focuses on stabilizing the buildings (roofs, boilers, pavement, etc.) - - this certainly improves conditions for the students and teachers, and counts enormously for every student in every classroom. But targeted repair, summer blitzes and stabilization, does not address the programs offered at our schools.

A comprehensive facility master plan and comprehensive school specific plans are needed. For this to happen, DCPS - - including local school staff and community and OPEFM -- need to work together. The issues around the PS-8th grade conversions are just a small window into what happens without a responsible and robust DCPS and OPEFM planning operation.

The educational and financial pros and cons of PS-8th grade schools have had little discussion in the District, and with some exceptions, have not been the preferred grade configuration. In the Master Education Plan (February 2006), there were a few demonstration PS-8 schools proposed, but a clear direction for PS through grade 5 was determined.

While others may debate the educational and social benefits of a PS-8th grade model it can be expected that PS-8th grade schools will be more expensive from a capital cost perspective. For example, as part of the PS-8th grade conversion contracts, the middle school level science case work required for 4 separate PS-8 schools will be more expensive than for one middle school.

A properly developed facility master plan would take these and other issues into account - - maintenance and repair needs, educational program requirements, cost, management, phasing, fiscal capacity of the city as well as student and neighborhood demographics. We cannot afford to continue to expend hundreds of millions of dollars on an emergency basis, particularly as we approach an economic downturn and concern about the city's borrowing, without well thought through and completely vetted plans—both for the city's public schools as a whole --DCPS and public charter-- and for individual schools and clusters of schools.

We appreciate the Council's awakening to its critical role and responsibility in the important efforts to improve our public school facilities for the District's children now, but also for generations to come.

I have attached Mary Filardo's testimony to this committee from June 25th (available on our website). It outlines actions that might move the District toward a well-organized planning system for public school facilities.