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DC Council Testimony at Round Table on Public Education

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I am Cathy Reilly, Director of S.H.A.P.P.E. Our public high schools are some of the most important public institutions in this city. They bring generations together, they reflect our history. As they are modernized they have become civic centers in their communities. Yet without your intervention DC could lose them as the citizens of New Orleans have. The fragile neighborhood web of walk-able elementary and middle DCPS schools is also threatened.

It has been five years since the Public Education Reform Act of 2007, and the evaluation is due now. While the council legally postponed it to 2014, we can't wait. For the comprehensive high schools in particular the reforms have created enormous personnel turnover, substantial budget cuts to local schools to support the IMPACT evaluation- staff bonus strategy of reform; an increase in class size, and reductions in staff and program. Overall the test scores and other measures do not indicate strong improvement. The threatened closures are another indication that the current reform strategy is *not* succeeding for these schools.

We have had charter schools since 1996. We have never done an evaluation or a coordinated plan on how these two sectors work as public education for the whole city. As citizens of a democracy our role and opportunity for engagement in public education was severely diminished after the passage of each of these laws.

To illustrate: the chancellor has sole authority to close any one of the DCPS schools without a hearing, vote, plan or criterion. Public charter schools are publicly funded but *privately operated and privately owned*, they are accountable and report to the DC Public Charter School Board, whose members are recommended by the U.S. Secretary of Education and then appointed by the mayor.

With current policy, where at least 8 new charters will open in the next 2 years, DCPS officials are calling for school closings; the DME with the IFF study considering charter turnarounds; the charter board proposal to expedite the chartering process for out of state existing chains, we are on track to be majority charter in the coming years.

To responsibly make the policy and budget decisions proposed for this fall/winter we need an evaluation of both the effect of the 1996 Law authorizing charters and the Public Education Reform Act of 2007 giving the mayor full control over DCPS. We then need public discussion, hearings and a vote from the Council on the vision and the blueprint for all of public education in the city. This has to happen prior to any more school closings, turnarounds, or consolidations. The reform of 5 years ago absolutely needs to be evaluated and adjusted if necessary. It is a huge decision for the city to be on the road to a full charter-only public education system. We deserve to make a fully informed decision about what that might mean not only now but five years and twenty years from now; it cannot be pulled back. The plan should be informed by the many studies now underway or promised *and by public input*.

These are the studies:

- Student Rights of Access:

- Boundary Feeder Pattern study and recommendations by DCPS with public engagement – how will this then impact student enrollment at different schools?
- Charter committee studying the right of neighborhood children to access charter schools – how will this effect enrollment at current DCPS schools?
- Wilson, Walls and some of the other modernized schools are now severely over crowded. Other neighborhoods have neither a modernized school nor rich programming – Ward 4
- Facility Master Plan contracted by the Deputy Mayor for Education
- DME initiative to make recommendations on providing quality seats to 10 neighborhoods identified in the IFF study.
 - Community Conversations contracted to Public Agenda but taking place over the summer
 - IFF Study – uses test score as sole measure of quality – but there are serious criticisms with its methodology, conclusions and recommendations which would convert 40 DCPS schools to charter operation or turnaround with no research on that as a guarantee of quality or evaluation of the cost to us in larger terms of tax dollars or democratic ownership.
- Public Education Reform Finance Commission – recommendations on determining what education should cost and ensuring that funding do a much better job of following need.
- 5 Year Evaluation of Mayoral Control to be followed by necessary adjustments to the original bill–
 - Unacceptable delay till 2014 – there should be some evaluation and adjustment this fall to restore civic voice and a transparent process to public education. It is not right that the DME, Charter Board head and DCPS chancellor can sit in a room alone and make binding decisions about which schools stay open, which will be closed and which will be handed over to third parties.