

Testimony
21st Century School Fund

My name is Nancy Huvendick, I am DC Program Director for the 21st Century School Fund, a small non-profit dedicated to improving urban public school facilities. I am also the parent of a DCPS high school junior and a DCPS graduate, currently a college junior.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important issue. Most District citizens are concerned about the maintenance of the city's public schools, but those of us with students in the schools have a particular vantage point with daily reminders of the need for cleaner, better maintained school buildings and grounds.

Historically, DCPS schools have been neglected and the current administration is dealing with the very difficult task of clearing up decades of deferred maintenance while re-building both the human capacity and the technological systems required to tackle the problem. We all understand that DCPS is aiming for a system where routine repairs are truly just routine so that minor problems don't fester and escalate into major problems. In its latest Facilities Management Organizational Strategy, the role of maintenance and repair is properly elevated with the maintenance office at the same level as asset management and capital. Strides appear to have been made in the systems handling requests for work orders. However, procurement for maintenance remains problematic and although the re-establishment of regional service delivery is promising there is much yet to do before that re-organization is fully functional.

DCPS administration, the Board of Education and the Council over the past few years have become more aware of and more focused on the need for daily custodial attention, maintenance and repairs for our buildings - - as a city, we seem to want to be much better stewards of our built infrastructure and that bodes well for the future.

However, there are concerns with the current bill 16-948. First, shifting responsibility for engineering, custodial services, energy conservation, utilities management, maintenance, inspection and planning, repairs and non-structural improvements from DCPS control to the Office of Property Management simply moves these functions from one bureaucracy to another. This risks losing time and infrastructure in the transfer itself with no secure expectation that another bureaucracy would perform any better. The loss of human infrastructure is a great as is the risk to continuity of services in a system where schools are in fragile shape to begin with.

More importantly, it would put one of the most important daily operations of the schools at a great remove from the local schools. It would further separate principals from control over what happens in their buildings, making their already difficult jobs even more problematic. The closer the maintenance function is to local school control, the better it will be.

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With the move to provide more autonomy at the local school level that was outlined by the Master Education Plan and sanctioned in the recent contract with the Washington Teachers' Union, this proposal that transfers major functions to OPM is a step in an entirely contrary direction. Very detailed draft plans for local school autonomy will be widely circulating soon. These plans put control of custodial work, maintenance and repairs squarely under the purview of the local principal, where the work can be initiated immediately when needed and scrutinized carefully for quality.

We welcome the increased concern for maintenance that has been demonstrated by the Mayor, the Council, the Board of Education, this committee and DCPS administration over the past few years. Increased funding has helped; increased scrutiny through the oversight functions of the Council Committee on Education, Recreation and Libraries is needed and welcome. More creative thinking, such as that which generated this bill is required. But a shift to the Office of Property Management is not likely to help the situation.

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