

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COUNCIL
COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON THE MASTER FACILITIES PLAN FOR
THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE**

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Summary:

- Focus on classroom renovations at the expense of underlying systems: A significant part of the money to be spent on elementary, PreK-8, and middle schools over the next five years is likely to be wasted when work on classrooms is later undone to renovate the systems “behind the walls.”
- Long term bond funding for short-term improvements: Taxpayers may well be paying off 20-30 year bonds long after the useful life of many of the classroom renovations they have funded is gone.
- No focus apparent on buildings in the worst condition or students most in need: A total lack of correlation between building condition and capital spending, and the order in which buildings are to receive work suggests that selection and sequence is haphazard, not guided by any system based on the condition of buildings or the percentage of disadvantaged students.

The MFP Phase One consists of the modernization/enhancement of classrooms: replacing windows and lighting systems, painting walls, repairing or replacing air conditioning and heating systems in the classroom, wiring classroom computers, installing acoustical materials, sound amplification, and improved interior finishes, and purchasing new fixtures and furnishings (MFP pp. 11-12). Systems components will be replaced only after five years in Phase Two “except where necessary to address immediate concerns and ensure that the building remains stable and supportive of the academic program.” These include heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC), plumbing & fixtures, electrical systems, technology, and the exterior envelope, including the roof and windows (MFP p. 14).

Starting with elementary and middle school classrooms throughout the system has a surface appeal, since students do spend most of their time there, and research does support the importance of lighting, acoustics, and air quality. Moreover, almost everyone enjoys a partially improved environment soon. However, deferring real modernization, such as work on systems behind the walls -- electricity, plumbing, and roofs, for example -- threatens to make the work much more expensive. There is nothing new about this approach: piecemeal systems replacement and the attendant undoing of previous improvements and renovations is just what DCPS did in the 1980s and 1990s. Unfortunately, it only works if money is no object, hardly the case in 2009. A further concern, particularly in view of the 8% enrollment decline recorded last fall, is the risk that many buildings will continue to be under-enrolled, while elementary and middle schools generally lose out on the modernizations previously promised.

Because of pending downturns in tax revenues, the entirety of DCPS capital spending for the next five years is to be financed by general obligation bonds, retired over a 20 to 30-year period. According to the FY 2010 capital budget volume, “[c]apital improvement projects eligible for debt financing must ... Have a combined average useful life at least as long as the average life of the debt with which they are financed”(p. 13). The repairs and renovations typical of Phase 1 seem like 5-10 year improvements, particularly where they will have to be undone and replaced in Phase 2. I hope the Council will investigate the useful life of Phase 1 improvements compared to the life of the debt with which we are funding them.

Finally, I have done a rough analysis of the proposed capital spending on each building, looking at total spending and spending per square foot compared with an index

of building conditions. The last-mentioned comes from the 21st Century School Fund's analysis of DCPS/OPEFM figures on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 as the worst condition and 4 as the best. I found no relationship between capital spending and building condition. Nor did I find any relationship between the building condition index and the year in which a building is to receive work. I also looked at capital spending, capital spending per student, the year of work, and the percentage of low-income students in each building scheduled for repairs and construction. There is no relationship favoring schools with the largest percentages of disadvantaged students. This analysis is rough and could use further refinement, but it suggests strongly that the selection and sequence is haphazard, guided by ad hoc decisions rather than by any system focusing on addressing the worst conditions or the neediest students first and most.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.