

**Testimony to the City Council Committee of the Whole
Master Facilities Plan for DC Public Schools
Thursday, March 26, 2009**

Presented by Margot Berkey, Parents United for the DC Public Schools

Thank you for conducting this hearing on the Master Facilities Plan for the DC Public Schools. My name is Margot Berkey and I am director of Parents United, and the parent of a sophomore at Wilson HS.

One of the most pressing and galvanizing issues in our city is the condition of our public school buildings. We have long known that our children spend their days in substandard, sometimes unsafe and unclean buildings that do not promote the sense that learning is an important endeavor or that we care enough about our children to give them the best our city can offer. It was a major victory when widespread public support brought about a major investment of capital funds to change those conditions for our children. We envisioned a city with sparkling new schools that would inspire children and educators alike, and be a source of pride in our neighborhoods. Unfortunately, from the moment the funding was secured we have failed to develop a plan that realizes our vision. We have instead spent money with great zeal and accomplished rapid results that have certainly improved some egregious conditions in many schools, but the cost of that effort has left us short-changed in our ability to realize our more comprehensive vision. We are now giving a little to everyone and are expected to be satisfied that these superficial improvements make things better for our children. But the long-term investment in modern centers of learning has gone by the wayside.

Parents United has several concerns with the MFP:

1. Lack of community engagement in development of the plan. Two years and no engagement.
2. Lack of strategic vision that clearly defines priorities for the order in which work is done to improve conditions. Factors such as the number of students served and their economic status, current facility conditions, opportunities for public-private partnerships or other shared endeavors, desire to retain students in DCPS with strategic investments, etc. seem not to be drivers of the plan—at least not in a transparent way.
3. Funding for modernization based primarily on square footage of the buildings regardless of current conditions or an academic plan for each school.
4. An overall lack of relationship between the academic vision for each school and the work to be done.
5. The possibility exists that work done in Phase 1 will have to be redone just a few years from now and will not be sustainable. And the sequencing of the phases needs to be clear—does it really make sense not to replace windows and heating systems first—before we paint classrooms and fix lighting? As a public investment are we doing the work in the most fiscally prudent way?

Furthermore, it seems that when projects are undertaken, there is a failure to communicate fully with school personnel and a failure to ensure quality in work performed. Too much depends on which contractor you get for the work and how much they care about choice of materials, attention to detail, effort to preserve historic features of the buildings, etc. I would be happy to provide the Council with photos I took at Browne and Francis at the start of the school year to illustrate what I am talking about.

What we need is a locus of planning in the structure of our facilities modernization efforts. Neither DCPS nor OPEFM, nor the DME seem capable of bringing this together. And we need an accountability function that undertakes real quality control and project evaluation. We are not learning from our mistakes. We're going too fast to assess and that is not acceptable because too much public investment is being made without this being taken seriously.

The MFP should not be approved as is. Local schools and communities do not know what is in the plan. If they did, wouldn't a school like MacFarland wonder why it is slated to get only \$315,000 when most other middle schools get \$3-\$6 million dollars? And wouldn't we have a conversation about whether we'd prioritize work on our untouched middle schools because we are losing the greatest number of students from the school system in part due to conditions in those schools?

The Council should not approve a huge slush fund from which OPEFM spends without a citywide plan—as has been the case. We're in a real bind but one that is of the city's own making.

We look to the Council to safeguard the public trust by ensuring a better plan and better structure for the modernization of one of our greatest public assets.