

Testimony to the Council of the District of Columbia Committee of the Whole

On the District of Columbia Public Schools Master Facility Plan 2008

March 26, 2009

Submitted by SHADE, the School Home Association of Duke Ellington

Good afternoon, Chairman Gray and other members of the Council.

The members of the SHADE Executive Committee, one of the parent groups for the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, thank you for asking for our comments on the Master Facility Plan.

We're sorry that we're not able to appear in person to share our concerns with you: many of our members are visiting colleges and other arts events with our families during this spring break.

And we say "one of the parent groups," because it actually takes 9 parent groups to sustain support what our children and the faculty are doing to develop artistic talents – one each for Dance, Instrumental Music, Literary Media, Museum Studies, Theater, Technical Design and Production, Visual Arts, and Vocal Music, in addition to SHADE.

These parent groups -- and the communities that they've been able to draw upon -- have contributed much to their areas.

- The driving force behind the recording studio that now allows our students to compete with their peers for college slots that require professional audition recordings – and to master studio technical skills;
- A huge catalyst in getting our dance studios (and some showers) repaired after 8 months of ballet classes in the hallway; and
- A major voice and resource in the recent repairs and renovations Ellington has undergone.

All of our children have gained from the facilities improvements made over the last year:

- Our cafeteria has gone from a dark, dismal basement to a clean, attractive, hub of activity with good, healthy food that students and faculty want to eat.
- The finally-finished roof, with its historic trim, means that we can begin to address modest classroom and studio improvements – without worrying that they'll be destroyed by the next storm.
- Bathrooms have been repaired and improved.
- Our science lab, after 20+ years, finally has running water – well, dripping, there's no pressure.
- There are now working air conditioning units in most all classrooms.
- Paint, new lights, and lowered ceilings have given our hallways an entirely different feeling -- and will save energy.
- In November, students got new lockers large enough to hold most instruments and other special materials.
- Our freight elevator -- critical to school improvements and arts productions -- is about to go back on line.

But we've got a long, long way to go:

- As in many DCPS schools, we have antique boilers. We like many historic aspects of our building, which was once so popular that Arlington students walked across Key Bridge to attend it.

But **these** antiques are either on or off. And when they are on, they are very, very hot. So hot that they make most classrooms and studios unbearable and unhealthy.

Unless we open windows or turn on the brand-new air conditioners. So you pay twice: for inefficient systems and unneeded fuel.

- Another historic challenge is the serious deterioration of the columns on our precious facade. They continue to crumble – along with the front steps.

Also alas, part of the façade was not included in the roof construction contract. Our hardworking administrative staff have been trying to get a change order to fix this for more than a year.

- While our students are artists-in-the-making, we also want them to have a full array of academic skills. They can't learn modern science when we still do not have a single working science laboratory.
- We also want them to develop physically – without the risk of injury from the current, long-buckling gym floor. The weight room and classroom space in the gym are in desperate need of complete renovation.
- The theater, used extensively at least 5 times a week, has no functioning air conditioning. It's simply intolerable to try to put many people in this stifling, unvented space.
- The emergency fire connection in the theater that firefighters would need to get water to put out a fire does not work.
- The outdated theater sound system has been known to stop working in the middle of a guest performance – or any other random time.
- Many of the theater seats are soon going to collapse. The current arrangement, constructed in 1980 prevents us from truly welcoming and accommodating many grandparents and elderly neighbors who try to see our performances.
- The theater lift long ago ceased working. But it's still there. So we have a crowded, unwieldy orchestra pit that can barely accommodate a small ensemble, much less a full orchestra.
- We need serious, systemic help with plumbing:
 - The nurse's office has no hot water;
 - The showers don't work; and
 - The Dark Room has been out of commission for over a year. (While much photography is now digital, students must learn how to develop photographs, to learn the art form.)
- Our electrical systems are in equally dismal shape:
 - Many internal lights are inadequate for academic activity and safety;
 - Security cameras are outmoded and way too limited for the amount and frequency of events and the length of the school day;
 - The Main Distribution Frame (MDFO) is another antique; and
 - External doors aren't alarmed and can't be monitored properly.

- We note that the Master Facility plans lists “repaving parking” at Ellington as an item for consideration. How we wish there was parking to repave!

We desperately need to level and pave the grassy area behind the school, on 36th Street and put in a curb cut, so that our staff – who often arrive and leave before dark – can focus on their work, rather than whether or not they’re getting parking tickets.

- The one ancient passenger elevator is badly deteriorating. It needs an overhaul or replacement to ensure continued access *for all to all* parts of the building.
- Finally, ***perhaps most importantly, we have yet to get a detailed, comprehensive survey and redevelopment plan.*** Our current building use is largely based on what we can squish where – rather than what we need and how to fit it all together.

For instance, the Visual Arts studios are now in the basement, where they get the least amount of natural light – even though there are spectacular windows on other floors. And the Vocal and Instrumental Music are currently on the third floor, as far away from the stage and other performance spaces as it is possible to be.

- We also need a comprehensive reconstruction plan, similar to the successful one utilized by the Baltimore School of the Arts, that allows us to remain in the building, without disrupting or destroying programming, during reconstruction.