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PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: WHAT PRIORITIES SHOULD THE COUNCIL ADDRESS DURING THE REMAINDER OF COUNCIL PERIOD 19

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Members of the DC Council, and Chairman Phil Mendelson,

Thank you for this hearing. I have to say that your brief time as chairman, Mr. Mendelson, feels like a welcome and fresh opening to public discourse and accountability to the public.

My name is Mark Simon. I am a DCPS parent, reside in Ward 1, and have been a close watcher of DC public schools for the past 14 years. I am also an education policy analyst at the Economic Policy Institute, and from that vantage-point have been an observer of and have written about education reform efforts nationally. I was also a high school teacher for 16 years and the teachers' union president in Montgomery County for 12 years when the union was helping to lead reforms in MCPS. So I have some experience recognizing the hallmarks of when reforms are working and when they are counter-productive.

The thing about public education is that the public has an important role. The schools have to be accountable to the public. That's what makes them different from private, parochial or even privately managed charter schools that are not so accountable.

Quite frankly, the level of discourse and accountability to the public has suffered in this city since the changes in the Education Reform Act of 2007, which brings me to my first recommendation.

1. **Sept. 15 Evaluation** – There was to be a thorough evaluation of Mayoral control and the Education Reform Act on September 15th of this year. That requirement was secretly altered in the fine print of the omnibus budget act two years ago, I believe, which was a tragic mistake. The fact that it had been changed was never discussed by the Council. Most of us thought such an evaluation was going to take place in 2012. We were only made aware recently that the evaluation language was changed. This 5 year experiment really needs to be assessed before we go much further. I urge the DC Council to please follow-through with the evaluation, even though the law no longer requires the Council to do so.

2. **Lack of Transparency** – Since mayoral control and the Education Reform Act the DCPS budget has become opaque, programs are started and stopped and never assessed and there is little transparency about what DCPS is doing and whether it is succeeding or not. We can no longer figure out where the money is going. It is clear that DCPS has been spending a lot more money than it did just 6 years ago. The lion’s share of the increase seems to have been going into central administration and what they call “support for schools.” A large amount has gone to consultants and outside contractors. The only person I know who has actually tried to track this stuff is Mary Levy, so I would urge you to listen to her expertise so that DCPS can be made more transparent and accountable.

3. **Results Don’t Look Good** – The reform approach in DCPS has not been working. With an unhealthy and almost single minded focus on tests and test scores, the scores have not been going up. There was a slight bump in 2009 in the DC-CAS, but in 2010 and 2011 the scores went down. Some experts suggest that the bump may have been the result of widespread cheating and extraordinary efforts that principals and teachers made, both of which stand to get huge bonuses for unusual gains in test scores, to impact test scores beyond what student learning might generate. Neither principals nor teachers asked for these bonuses. My experience at the school level is that they are received as wasted money, and about one third of the recipients turned them down in the first year. So you might want to re-think the money spent on bonuses. NAEP scores in the past five years have actually been improving at a slower rate than they were under superintendents Clifford Janey and Paul Vance¹. Also, the black/white, Latino/white test score gap has been widening, not narrowing. I’m not sure test scores are the best way to judge the quality of schools, but by the standards that Michelle Rhee set, the reforms begun five years ago seem to have failed. Kaya Henderson seems to at least acknowledge that an unhealthy emphasis on standardized tests may not be wise, but she has done little to change course.

4. **Teacher/ Principal Turnover; Churn for the Sake of Churn** – The Rhee/ Henderson approach has driven unhealthy levels of staff turnover. New research shows that turnover hurts student achievement². It is bad for schools. I’ve written about this in the

¹ Alan Ginsburg,
http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/District_Dossier/2011/02/rhees_record_on_dc_academic_ga.html

² Matthew Ronfeldt, Susanna Loeb, Jim Wyckoff, “How Teacher Turnover Hurts Student Achievement” 2011
<http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/teacherbeat/TchTrnStAch%20AERJ%20R%26R%20not%20blind.pdf>

Washington Post. You may have seen my Op-Ed on June 15th³. Turnover has reached crisis proportions, and it's been an approach of choice under both Rhee and Henderson. Talk with teachers and you will understand that teachers who are in their fourth year are now frequently some of the most senior teachers in the school. Most DCPS teachers never hit what most researchers consider their stride as professionals. We are spending an unnecessary \$12 Million each year simply recruiting, training and replacing teachers. What does it tell us that we can't get teachers to stick around in this school system. We have created a work environment and a learning environment that is driving our workforce away. It's wrong. Principals are unceremoniously let go as if principal turnover is a good thing. Most of the principals brought in by Michelle Rhee are now gone.

5. **School Closings** – Deputy Mayor for Education De'Shawn Wright seems to be pushing for the closing neighborhood schools in high poverty neighborhoods and opening national charter chains in their place. This strategy is just not supported by the research. National charter chains have a very mixed track record and concern has been raised that the churn is not worth the result. Nevertheless, it was his orientation when he arrived. He hired IFF to do a study that everyone knew would make such a recommendation. The IFF study was one of the worst studies I have ever seen, and I look at a lot of research. Nationally, the research on charter schools is not good. A new study from Chicago concluded that the main turnaround provider in the city significantly underperforms compared with neighborhood schools with similar demographics, and yet the turnaround schools cost more. We who watch DCPS closely do not believe that there is a need to close schools at all. We certainly do not consider national charter chains a panacea. This bias and approach needs to be questioned by the DC Council. Mayor Gray and his Deputy are wrong on this.

6. **Fragmented School Systems** – While some individual charter schools are doing a good job and others not, continued unchecked expansion of charter schools is wreaking havoc in this town. Charter schools are far less accountable. Each one is its own school district. They frequently spend more, per child than DCPS schools. They counsel-out students they don't want, and yet they do not perform, on average, much better. But there are no limits on the DC Charter Board continuing to expand the number of charter schools. There is no limit. They are autonomous. We have dozens of separate school systems,

³ Mark Simon, Washington Post, June 15, 2012 http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/is-teacher-churn-undermining-real-education-reform-in-dc/2012/06/15/gJQAigWcfV_story.html

not just two, and they don't coordinate with each other. They compete and do damage to each other's enrollment patterns. It has created an educational environment of chaos when our youth and their families need an environment of stability.

7. **The Path Not Taken** – My professional career as an educator was in Montgomery County. Our neighbor to the north has carried out nationally recognized reforms that have had the opposite effect than those of the Rhee/ Henderson approach in DCPS. They worked with their teachers to design reforms instead of making war on the workforce. Teacher evaluation aims to support teachers. They turned around low performing schools by working with the staff of those schools, rather than trying to fire their way to reform. They focused on creating a knowledge-rich culture about teaching and learning, rather than a test-driven focus on shortcuts. There are better reform approaches than those being taken by the current DCPS leadership. A close examination, with the participation of parents, teachers and students will help correct mistakes where an unaccountable reform regime has erred.

As I said at the opening, I believe it is time to seriously evaluate the approaches DCPS and DC as a whole have been taking. A better direction is needed. I have long been an advocate of reform in the DC Public Schools, but, it's time to assess the problematic aspects of the direction taken in the past five years.

In today's Washington Post the editors had the nerve to weigh in advising the DC Council to stay out of the schools' business. They had the nerve to advocate continued lack of transparency and continued lack of accountability. Their anti-public education, pro-voucher, pro-privatization bias is well known, but in this editorial they went further. They actually advocated a position that the public has no right to know and no right to question the management policies of its public schools. They told the Council, the body that has the explicit authority to hold the public schools leadership accountable, to butt out. I take the opposite point of view. You've been out too long. The students, teachers and parents of DC have missed you.

A March 4th, 2011 report by the National Research Council entitled "A Plan for Evaluating the District of Columbia's Public Schools: From Impressions to Evidence" made suggestions for how DCPS reforms should be evaluated. It did not do the evaluation. In other words, the Council agreed that the radical reforms needed to be evaluated but no evaluation has yet been done.

I hope the Council takes responsibility for the oversight that to-date it has been unwilling to shoulder. There is no one else.

Please treat the September 15 date as a serious step in the evaluation of the radical reforms and underwhelming results of the past five years. At least hold a hearing. Listen to the public. Many of us who have had close first-hand knowledge of the effect in schools would be pleased to come before you to present in-depth analysis of the data and ways we could, as a city, be doing so much better. There is much to tell.

Thank you for asking about priorities for the remainder of your work this year with DCPS. Please begin the process of evaluating the reforms.