

**Testimony of Thomas “Tommy” Ratliff,  
President of Teamsters Local 639  
on  
Proposed DCPS Budget  
Thursday, November 15, 2007**

Good evening Chancellor Rhee and other school system officials. My name is Thomas “Tommy” Ratliff. I am the President and chief executive officer of Teamsters Local 639. My local, along with Teamsters Local 730, jointly represent over 1,500 DCPS employees, including full-time bus operator and aides, foodservice employees, custodians, boiler plant operators, skill trades repair workers and school system warehouse workers.

Speaking as parents, voters, union members and DCPS employees, the members of Teamster Locals 639 and 730 believe that the students, currently enrolled in the District’s traditional public schools, are the real future of this city. Therefore we feel that the office of the school chancellor, along with all other government offices, should do all they can to provide children with a clean and safe learning environment, something that for the most part does not currently exist in many DCPS schools, through no fault of the workers assigned to or providing services to those buildings.

I come before you today to ask your assistance in correcting a major wrong that has negatively impacted some of the most loyal and hardest working employees in the city public schools. Over the past 15 years or so, DCPS have been beset by a series of budget shortfalls. These shortfalls have translated into RIFs, layoffs, cutbacks and a lack of equipment and supplies for workers who struggle on a daily basis to hold the city’s school buildings together, keep the buildings clean, as well as ensuring that students and staff are warn and safe.

In what has sadly become an annual ritual, blue collar DCPS employees were sacrificed to appease the budget deficit “gods” and school buildings were left to suffer. In one motion, former DCPS Superintendent Arlene Ackerman laid off over 300 custodians, dooming scores of school buildings to dirty and unsafe futures. Ironically, these layoffs occurred on the heels of former Superintendent Ackerman having asked the City Council for additional funds to hire 200 more custodians because the current workforce was too overworked to keep up with the demands of keeping the city’s school buildings clean and safe. To date, this shortage of custodians has not been corrected.

Let me make one point very clear, the failure to meet the demands had nothing to do with Teamsters employed by DCPS not working hard. It has more to do with the age of the buildings, the lack of equipment and supplies, the shortage of staff, and the failure of the school system to put enough money into its operations budget that would allowed staffing at industry standard levels.

The results of that misguided approach are easy to see, if one simply goes into a DCPS building. Our schools are dirty. They are dirty because a small committed force of dedicated workers have been struggling for the past decade or more to keep the buildings clean and safe without the support of the DCPS’s central administration, the Mayor’s offices and the City Council. Let me give one striking example. When the new Shaw Jr. High School was first opened, it had 14 custodians assigned to keep the school clean. This year, a workforce of only four custodians are attempting to keep the same square footage clean.

There are a host other examples. There are only three certified pest control specialists attempting to eliminate rats, roaches and other vermin. There is only one

window shade mechanic, who is responsible for manufacturing window shades for the tens of thousands of different-sized window in DCPS buildings. There are shortages of locksmiths, electricians, plumbers, welders and sheet metal workers, just to name a few of the positions. These are not the exceptions. Sadly, these shortages have become the rule for DCPS.

Our building inventory is very different from those of surrounding school systems. Most of DCPS's buildings were constructed during the 1930s and 1940s. While the buildings are structurally sound, most have not been properly maintained because of budgetary issues. In fact, there are six school buildings in the city that were built in the 1800s that are still in daily use today. Like the monuments that dot the city's landscape, these structures require constant "TLC". Without that special care and attention, these buildings quickly show their age.

As a solution to these problems, we ask you to join with the blue collar DCPS employees in demanding that the city fund a school system budget that provides enough funding to:

- Fully staff custodial, skilled trades repair and boiler plant operator positions.
- Provide a budget with enough money for needed supplies and equipment. Such funding would mean that our boiler plant operators would not longer have to wait months into the heating season before receiving water treatment chemicals.

- Provide a budget with enough money to support necessary preventive maintenance that would help to prevent costly equipment failure in the dead of winter.
- Provide sufficient funds for training of facilities employees to keep them up-to-date on latest technology and “green” approaches to facility maintenance.

Teamster Locals 639 and 730 played a key role in helping to win the billions of dollars that will be spent on school system building modernization. In fact, the first meeting of what was to become the grassroots campaign that helped to win passage of the modernization funding was held at Local 639’s union hall. Now that the city is poised to spend billions on modernizing school buildings over the next eight years, the questions we have are “What’s going to happen in those buildings that are not slated to modernize for years to come? And, will there be a well-staffed and well-trained workforce for DCPS employees to maintain the modernized buildings?”

The students and staff in those buildings must be able learn and work in clean and safe facilities until it’s time for their schools to be modernized. In order to do this, our current facilities must be staffed and equipped so that they can do their jobs of cleaning, heating, cooling and repairing our city’s school buildings. Also, current workers must be trained to handle all the new systems that are being brought online in modernized building.

While we are a discussing the school system’s budget, there is another area that we must address. Not too long ago, our school system won national awards for the quality of the meals that were prepared in and served from the kitchens in our school

cafeterias. Since that time, short sighted individuals decided to eliminate the cooking of tasty and nutritious meals in most school cafeterias. These award winning meals have been replaced by “pre-plated” airline style meals that are rejected by both students and staff.

The school system has allowed itself to be put in the unenviable position of being held hostage by an institutional meals provider, who makes millions a year providing meals that students and staff don't like and many cases won't eat. In addition, the kitchens in many schools had their stoves and ovens replaced by convection ovens, so that even if DCPS wanted to start to cook meals for students, it would be very difficult. For the record, the members of Teamsters Local 639, employed in the DCPS foodservice are ready to cook and serve nutritional meals. All we want is a chance to show what we can do. With the rise in obesity that is hitting the young people of our city, we can not continue to allow commercial interests to dictate what we serve our children. Let us cook and serve the meals that will help prepare our children to learn.

Inclosing, we urge you, Chancellor Rhee, to submit a budget that reflects the real needs our school system.

- We need a system with the number of custodians necessary to bring DCPS in compliance with industry standards.
- We need a system with the number of boiler plant operators need to ensure that the heat stays on in school buildings during the winter months.
- We need a system that has the number of skilled trades repair workers need to close out the thousands of back work orders.

- And, finally we need the number of foodservice workers in place so that our students can get the hot, home cooked, nutritious meals they need to help them succeed academically.

These needs must be reflected in the DCPS budget, if there is any hope of our moving to create an excellent traditional public education system in the Nation's Capital. Thank you for your time and we hope you will join with us in making DCPS the world-class school system it should be.