

Council's Hearing on the District of Columbia Schools 2003 Budget
April 19, 2002

Submitted by Jordan Spooner, Director for District of Columbia Programs
21st Century School Fund

My name is Jordan Spooner, and I am the Director for District of Columbia Programs for the 21st Century School Fund. I am here today to speak in support of the modernization and replacement plans for the District's 17 high schools, and to urge you to maintain the capital funding at a level sufficient to keep their renovations on track.

In the DCPS Capital Improvements Program, there are three high schools in Tier 0.5 (Bell/Lincoln, McKinley, and Phelps) and two high schools in Tier 1 (Luke Moore and Woodson) for which modernization or replacement work has begun. If the program is funded in FY03 at the Mayor's targeted level of \$183 M, instead of the \$327 M requested by the school system, these high schools and the remaining ones will be facing a massive slowdown in their schedules. For example, McKinley is already significantly behind schedule and over budget compared to its original plans, and this situation will be greatly exacerbated if the capital budget is funded at the lower level. Also, the high schools at the bottom of the list to be modernized are trusting that their turn will come, and if the schedule continues to be delayed, their trust and hope will surely dwindle.

The citizens of the District need to better recognize that our high school buildings are beautiful and historic structures that were once sources of civic pride. Many of them are irreplaceable buildings on large campuses overlooking the city, with broad lawns, playing fields, swimming pools, gymnasiums, green houses, and large and impressive auditoriums. They are evidence that the District once took great pride in the education that it provided its children. Because of the complex and large nature of these buildings, and the fact their average age is 70 years, we will need a major reinvestment to modernize them. For instance, the amount requested by DCPS in FY03 for the three Tier 0.5 high schools is over 40% of the \$183 M set forth by the Mayor.

Its time for the District to do something extraordinary to save our high schools, and to restore them as sources of civic pride once again. Over one third of them were built during the Depression, and we found a way to build them then, so we should be able to find a way to fund their modernization now. In the Depression the solution to the high building costs was federal funding, and the 21st Century School Fund believes that is probably our best solution now. The District needs to specifically request federal help to modernize our high schools. The high schools will not survive without it.

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A SLOW DOWN IN CAPITAL RENOVATION = AN INCREASE IN MAINTENANCE

While waiting for renovation, our schools are full of children and teachers who need a tolerable environment at the very least. Cutbacks in the capital improvement program

necessitate equal increases in the maintenance and repair budget. With old, deteriorating buildings it is all the more important to keep them clean, painted, well lit, comfortably heated and cooled with the grass cut and the trash collected. It's a direct relationship - - the slower the rebuilding, the higher the maintenance and repair costs.

Yet the budget for facilities, maintenance, building engineers, and roving custodians has been steadily decreasing at a tremendous rate:

\$31,997,000 in 2000
\$25,745,800 in 2001
\$19,044,000 in 2002

The budget has dropped by about one third since 2000, and that's without even one re-built school. Even with an immense increase in 2003, we still have to climb out of an ever-deepening pit of deferred maintenance.

We've finally provided our custodial workers with a much-needed pay increase, but the number of people employed to keep the schools in good repair are not nearly up to the levels required for upkeep in an aging school system. Contracting these services out has failed in the past. For instance, we have thousands of doors and only seven locksmiths. The school system employed about 200 repair workers in the early 90s, and now we have around 70.

Without renovated schools, it is even more important to put energy into smaller projects such as bathroom replacements, drinking fountains, office renovations, laboratory renovations, telephone installations, computer wiring, playgrounds, etc. These can make an immediate positive difference to educational programs. My own pet concern is windows you can see out of - - about twenty years ago plastic windows were installed in some of our schools. The plastic has since turned an opaque tan making rooms that should be flooded with light feel like basements. Why replace glass now when a school is scheduled for renovation in a few years? Because - - for a modest price - - it will make an immense difference this year to twenty children and their teacher.

Certainly we can use our budgeted dollars more wisely. We should take a hard look at money allocated for technology at McKinley: \$9 million for a school that does not have any students yet and that was presented as a magnet for private dollars. As much as we all would like to see this program succeed, we have to consider the cost more carefully. The Transformation schools provide a wonderful experiment to see what one million dollars will do for nine schools, but we need to concentrate our efforts on ways to make education better at all of our schools. Another obvious center of inefficiency is in special education transportation. Somehow we have to find the energy and creativity to bring costs down from \$5,000 per pupil each year just to get to school.

Nancy Huvendick