

1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Suite 204 • Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202-822-9000  
Fax 202-822-5077



**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT  
MANAGEMENT, RESTRUCTURING, AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**IMPROVING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES IN THE  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**By:**  
**JEANNE ALLEN**  
**PRESIDENT, THE CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM**  
**April 17, 1997**

MR. CHAIRMAN, MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

I truly appreciate being invited to this all-important committee meeting.

The current condition of our school system here is no different than what Chicago, New York, Milwaukee, San Francisco, or Los Angeles, are experiencing. Nor is much of what the District's schools are facing different than what one finds in many suburban school systems; that is, a growing and urgent concern that we are not doing enough, that too many children are falling through the cracks, and that too many aspects of the system are simply irreparable. With all this said, Washington, DC is unique in that there are unprecedented opportunities available here for change and scores of dedicated people willing to bring that change, that reform, into fruition.

First and foremost, there is the extraordinary opportunity to open charter schools, in fact, to convert all District schools to charters and open up brand new ones. The Center's research shows that Washington, DC has the nation's second

strongest charter law. It is completely open to a diverse array of schools, and provides any charter school the important building level, independence and freedom that has allowed the nation's 480 charters to flourish. But theory and practice are two different things. The District has languished since the charter law was enacted, and lost many an opportunity to provide immediate relief for children from failing schools.

Let me explain how this has worked elsewhere: In virtually every state with charter schools, the authorizing bodies set-up a procedure for application and ways to inform the people of charter opportunities. From there, private groups drummed up interest, such that teachers, parents, civic and business leaders were made aware of what they could do. In most cases, this process took less than a year. States "friendlier" toward the concept worked even quicker.

Of the six states - North Carolina, Florida, South Carolina, Illinois, New Jersey, and Connecticut - and the District of Columbia - that passed charter legislation between January and July of 1996, five of those states [Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, and North Carolina] have already approved a total of 98 charters to open this Fall and the numbers are still rising. The District, on the other hand, was to approve as many as 10 charter schools by legislation passed last year by the Congress. But compared to the others, its pace for getting the process up and running was much slower. In fact, one could even say that at times, it was stopped dead in its tracks. Most people in the District still do not know what they have been given and those that do don't have the foggiest notion of who's in charge or what the procedure for applying will be, unless they happen to be friends with one of the board members. That, I am afraid, is a sad commentary on actually helping children.

Meanwhile, terrific charter schools are successfully serving over 105,000 children around the country and as many as 50,000 more will be in new charters this fall.

Schools like The Accelerated School, based in Los Angeles, was started by two teachers, one a former union steward. They have taken a group of over 80 children whose lives were continually influenced by gangs, violence in and ineffective schools, and created a school tailored to their needs...an oasis from what they had come to expect. The Accelerated School, praised by everyone from California's Governor Pete Wilson to Education Secretary Richard Riley, has over 90% attendance daily, virtually no sign of violence, and a rigorous curriculum that expects all children to learn.

Phoenix, Arizona's ATOP Academy is also that way. The Connect School in Pueblo, Colorado, though more suburban, offered parents an alternative to what they viewed as declining standards. After its first year, Connect posted 8-10% gains in math and reading scores.

Charter schools in Boston caused the teacher's union there to negotiate an unprecedented arrangement to take control of six pilot schools in exchange for being evaluated, like a charter, based on results.

Members of the Committee; there are literally thousand of real life examples like these we could share, and while the objective evidence of success is only now starting to trickle in as the charter movement matures, these stories are evidence in and of themselves that children who weren't, are now being well served, that a higher level of casework and more challenging curriculum are attracting parents from all walks of life, and that in charter schools, you find more integration of different people, different colors, and different levels of ability than what a traditional public school, segregated by artificial attendance zones, has to offer.

That is why watching the District's approach to charter schools is so infuriating for most of us who have seen how charters truly make a difference in the life of a child. Because of one bad apple, the rest of the branches have been cut

back. The District's commendable education leader, General Becton is obviously concerned. Yet we still seem to lack the drive, the initiative, and the sense of urgency to light a fire under the charter movement here. The bureaucracy is something with which you are all well-acquainted. But suffice it to say that those existing 20-30 interested teachers, parents and civic leaders that are fortunate enough to know about charter schools here have all but had their energy, drive and determination sucked out of them waiting for decisions to be made.

Even an approved charter, KIDS I, ready to start in January to serve special education children was forced to pull out of the District because of the failure of school officials to give the final go-ahead. KIDS I is a nationally-acclaimed company which provides a superior and affordable education to children with special needs. So many DC children would have had the chance, for possibly the first time, to be considered truly special and not be warehoused in a traditional DC public school without appropriate attention.

The bureaucracy is even sucking the life out of the District's only real, high quality charter school, The Options School at the Capitol Children's Museum. Director Catherine Martens is serving some of the most challenging students in her school, yet she has been fighting the bureaucracy over whether some of her students qualify for special education funding.

Must she bring in a crew from PrimeTime Live to expose the unnecessary delays, as Yvonne Chan of the Vaughn Learning Center Charter did when her district was two years overdue in its obligations? I would think your answer would be no.

Based on my experience, here is what the District - with the Congress's help - must do:

1. Require that the new charter boards be extensively briefed about charter schools from A-to-Z, by people who have created and managed the process in states such as Massachusetts, Arizona, Michigan and Florida, and by operators of specific schools.
2. Send the new charter board and the school board to spend two days in and around charter schools in Michigan, Minnesota or Boston.
3. Announce and promote [through the media, The Federal City Council's Committee on Public Education and other education leadership groups like FOCUS] the application process, deadlines, etc. The new charter board should not limit itself to consideration of applications once a year. They should be on a rolling schedule, and set several review periods.
4. The new charter board should be given its own autonomous staff, separate from the staff who serves the school board and the superintendent. Congress intended the charter board to be an advocate. Staff of the DC Department of Education who must be responsive to all viewpoints in the community cannot adequately promote and maintain a focus on charter schools.
5. Enforce a timeline of not more than five months to accomplish the above, in the hopes that charters may begin to open up in early 1998.
6. Finally, once operating, require that 100% of the average per pupil expenditure for traditional schools follow the child to the charter school and that special education moneys bypass the District completely and go from the US Department of Education to the charter school.

With such broad experience across the country, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. As I stated when I began, the District is not unique in that respect. But it could truly be a national crown jewel if all of the combined hearts and minds that

are based in this city are pulled together...prodded, cajoled, and encouraged to reform the schools, and to act now.

I am grateful for the opportunity to be here today, and I'm happy to offer the services of The Center for Education Reform in helping Washington to maximize its educational opportunities.