



## **DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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Testimony of Michelle Rhee, Chancellor

Meeting of the Committee on Education and Labor,  
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable George Miller, Chairman  
The Honorable Buck McKeon, Ranking Member

"Mayor and Superintendent Partnerships in Education:  
Closing the Achievement Gap"

July 17, 2008

Good afternoon, Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon and members of the Committee. I am honored to testify today about mayoral governance and closing the achievement gap. Considering the great challenges of DC Public Schools, we are fortunate to be the ‘new kids’ on the mayoral governance block. I am grateful to the leaders in New York and Chicago who have created strong models for mayoral governance. We have already been able to apply their lessons for reform to the unique needs and promise of Washington, DC.

I have been proud to work with urban public school systems across the country for the past 15 years, and for one year as chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools. Last summer I entered a system that showed a 70% achievement gap in some of our schools. We are the only district in ‘high risk’ status with the Department of Education, and only 9% of our entering freshmen graduate from college within 9 years of beginning high school. I entered a system in which one-third of our schools have proficiency rates below 20% in either reading or math. In other words, four out of five students in those schools—about 14,000 children—were not even meeting the most basic level of proficiency. In a district that is 81 % African-American, this is one of the greatest institutionalized injustices imaginable. The old ways of addressing this long-standing injustice have not been working. No matter how difficult, the solutions to this problem must be radical and unprecedented.

Many have asked me why, considering the severe dysfunction of the system, I would take on such a challenge. In fact, when Mayor Fenty first raised the possibility of my appointment as chancellor, I declined; but it was not for the reasons you might expect. I have met enough students to know that their proficiency levels do not reflect their ability. I know first-hand from speaking and working with students that our poor and minority students have aptitude that rivals anyone. Rather, I knew that I would not be able to create a system that was strong and just if I had to bow to the adult and political priorities that have prevented progress for children for years. I was not willing to lead a system that asked children to wait another patient minute while adult priorities and timelines diminished students’ life chances. When I raised this concern with the mayor, his response was clear and immediate. Education was his first and highest priority. He would back our students every step of the way, whatever the political cost. I knew I was

talking to someone who knew that the health and vitality of a city depends upon the quality of education it delivers to its children, whose skills will be critical for driving the city's progress in future years.

Now, after one year as chancellor under a mayoral governance structure, I see even more clearly that it takes enormous courage to stand by this commitment. The deepest and most far-reaching results will be seen long after a leader has left office. With this in mind, placing self-interest and preservation behind students' needs may be the most difficult and human challenge of every publicly elected official. But to truly honor the letter and spirit of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, it is absolutely necessary. I can unequivocally say that without mayoral governance, and without a mayor who is willing to prioritize educational reform no matter how muddy the political waters become, we would not have been able to achieve what we have achieved in DCPS this year.

For years in school districts across the country, school boards led by principled and competent officials have had difficulty making deep reforms that have equalized education. They are bound by the political tug-of-wars that block swift action. Many superintendents have ideas similar to mine regarding school policy and education reform. In most cases they know the same best practices that research tells us will be most effective, and they know how they would apply these practices to meet their own district's needs. But they do not have adequate authority to assess their students' needs and take action to meet those needs. They spend much of their time jockeying with school boards who are as bound to politics as they are to the needs of children. Despite good intentions and the hard work of competent professionals over the years, this structure is one of the reasons that 54 years after desegregation we still struggle to achieve justice in education.

What is it about this governance structure that can enable us to change the tide? First, unlike many other superintendents, I report to a boss who knocks barriers out of the way. He runs political interference when necessary and has not flinched once in supporting a decision I felt was best for students. Under mayoral governance I believe we can finally reverse long-standing failures of urban public education. In many ways DC is a microcosm of urban public education systems across the country: as our most

pressing challenges exist on a national level, reform here can be used as a model for the country.

Second, one of the most striking challenges we face in DCPS and in other urban districts is an utter lack of accountability. This year I met students who appealed to me about teachers who did not show up to class. On another occasion, one of my staff members took a call from a teacher who had applied to teach summer school. After 20 minutes of conversation he told my staff member, “Hold on, I have to dismiss my class.” This was a person who knew he was talking to someone in the chancellor’s office.

In another example, in the fall I learned that an employee had failed to fill out a form for one of our special education students, and to conduct a meeting with another. Her mistakes resulted in a half-million dollar cost to the system when by law the students had to receive private placements. I called in the employee and asked her what happened. She told me “You need to understand. I’m a very busy person. Sometimes things fall through the cracks.” I explained that this student’s placement was under her job responsibility, and that if she did not feel up to these responsibilities then she may want to consider another job. She responded that this was “not fair.” At the time I did not have the authority to make this employee and others, accountable for meeting their job responsibilities.

As a result, we lobbied for a change in the law that would convert central office employees to ‘at-will’ status. With the support of the DC Council we became better able to ensure that our central office employees are working in the best interest of students. Also this year, we created a new performance evaluation system. Many employees had been with DCPS for years and had never been formally evaluated. Already the combination of these two actions has begun to change the culture to one of accountability and professional striving.

Third, like many other school districts, DCPS also has historically had a culture driven more by politics and adult concerns than by the needs of children. This tension is especially clear during discussions of school closings and consolidations. In DCPS, the previous superintendent—after an extensive period of community engagement—released a Master Education Plan, in which multiple collaborators concluded that due to under-enrollment, it was necessary to close schools. The community agreed that it

would save the system millions of dollars that could be redirected to classrooms. Yet even for schools that are not performing at high levels, few families want their schools to close. Because elected officials must serve the constituents in their particular wards, even in cities led by mayoral governance a debate ensues in which everyone agrees that schools must close but few politicians want any schools to close in their own wards. Fortunately, with the backing of the mayor we were able to address under-enrollment effectively by closing 23 schools and re-directing resources to schools for next year. The mayoral governance structure has allowed us—for the first time—to bring a librarian, teacher, music teacher, psychologist, and physical education teacher to all schools that need them.

In the years to come, I am confident that we can turn our children's potential into achievement. Due to much hard work in our schools this year, and with greater authority to act on and build upon the strong foundations built by those before me, **our achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students has decreased over the past year by 6 points in reading and 5 points in math. The gap between Hispanic and Caucasian students has decreased by 8 points in reading and 7 in math. One school, Lafayette Elementary School, has decreased its achievement gap between African American and Caucasian students by 19 percentage points.** In the year before I began as chancellor, 52 schools had raised both their math and reading scores over the course of one year. Considering the significant systemic challenges we saw, when we set our performance goals we projected that as a district students could move that number to 57 for the next year. ***They moved it to 99.*** 117 of our schools have increased their math scores and 110 have increased their reading scores. The number of schools with proficiency rates below 20% has been almost cut in half, decreasing from 50 to 29. Some schools have even doubled or tripled their average reading and math scores. While we still have significant challenges ahead, this kind of growth shows promise for the reforms mayoral governance has enabled.

To further these gains and decrease the achievement gap, we must continue to increase the level of accountability for everyone in the system, including teachers. There is no other profession that simultaneously requires the most competent and

innovative professionals and at the same time can discourage them from bringing their gifts to our students. We must be able to significantly reward teachers who are successful and to exit those who, even with the right supports, are unable to increase their students' academic growth. We can do this by working closely with union leaders to create the contracts that will support these goals. When we consider the difficulty of what we are asking teachers to do and the consequences to our children and cities for not doing it well, it puzzles me that the issue of rewarding teachers for success rather than seniority, is a controversial one. Quality teachers in urban districts successfully raise student achievement levels even in the face of poverty, violence, high rates of AIDS and other STDs, low expectations, obesity, teen pregnancy, and other issues that enter our schools with our children. We should not be afraid to reward those who meet the very high demands we must place upon them. Without investing in our teachers by rewarding them in a tangible, meaningful way, we make it very difficult to attract and retain the teachers who can close the achievement gap.

We have seen through the years that desegregation was not enough to bring racial justice to education, which has not yet become the 'great equalizer' that Horace Mann intended public education to be. As we work to become what he envisioned for public education in this country, this year we are introducing the most dramatic and rapid changes this system has seen since the desegregation of our schools. If there has been one challenge I have heard most frequently since I accepted this challenge, it has been that we are moving *too quickly*. But our students have been waiting since long before 1954 for a just, challenging, and equal system of public education. With mayoral governance under a mayor who is willing to make the education of a district's young people the number one priority, we can create accountability in systems that have not seen it before. We can support principals and teachers in setting high expectations for students and we can ensure that they have the tools to meet those expectations. In DC and across the country, we can deliver the public education to students that is theirs by right.

Thank you for your support and for your commitment to closing the achievement gap in DC and across the country. I am happy to answer your questions.