



# Capital CAMPAIGN

## Early Returns on District of Columbia Charter Schools

by Sara Mead

**PPi**  
PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE

# Preface

As our nation's capital, Washington, D.C., holds a special symbolic place in the hearts of Americans. The District of Columbia, however, is also home to more than half a million people, 20 percent of whom are children under age 18. And, unfortunately for these children, the District's public schools are among the nation's most troubled.

In an effort to help address this embarrassing state of affairs, Congress and President Bill Clinton passed an ambitious education reform act 10 years ago, creating charter schools in Washington, D.C. By many accounts, District charter schools have been a rousing success. More than 20 percent of the District's students are enrolled in charters—more than in any state in the country and nationally recognized Washington, D.C.-based charter schools are creating promising new educational options for students who previously had none.

But that is not the whole story. Just as the District of Columbia's role as the nation's capital overshadows some of the city's challenges, the successes of the District's best charter schools has overshadowed the fact that others have serious academic and oversight problems. Though there are many outstanding charter schools in Washington, others are not delivering the academic achievement they promised and must improve.

In this new report for the Progressive Policy Institute's 21st Century Schools Project, PPI fellow Sara Mead examines charter schooling in Washington, D.C., including the region's unique history of charter schooling and the challenges these schools face. Mead is optimistic about the future of the District's charter school movement, but argues that District and congressional leaders must address some of the problems Washington, D.C., charter schools face in order for them to fulfill their promise.

Mead's report is an important resource for educators, policymakers, journalists, and others interested in charter schooling, both in the District and nationally. This report is the ninth in a series that analyzes state and urban experiences with charter schooling. Previous reports looked at California, Minnesota, Arizona, Ohio, Texas, Indianapolis, New York City, and Chicago. Later this year, the 21st Century Schools Project will release a similar analysis of charter schooling in Colorado.

A generous grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made it possible for the 21st Century Schools Project to produce this report. We are grateful to the Gates Foundation for their support of this project and their overall commitment to educational improvement.

The 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute works to develop education policy and foster innovation to ensure that America's public schools are an engine of equal opportunity in the knowledge economy. The Project supports initiatives to strengthen accountability, increase equity, improve teacher quality, and expand choice and innovation within public education through research, publications, and articles; an electronic newsletter; and work with policymakers and practitioners.

The Project's work is a natural outgrowth of the mission of the Progressive Policy Institute, which is to be a catalyst for political change and renewal. Its mission is to modernize progressive politics and governance for the 21st century. Moving beyond the right-left debates of the last century, PPI is a prolific source of the Third Way thinking that is reshaping politics both in the United States and around the world. Rejecting tired dogmas, PPI brings a spirit of radical pragmatism and experimentation to the challenge of restoring our collective problem-solving capacities—and thereby reviving public confidence in what progressive governance can accomplish.

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October 2005

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# Introduction

The District of Columbia is a city of contradictions and anomalies. It is home both to the most powerful democracy in the world and to citizens without full representation in the U.S. Congress. It has some of the nation's greatest cultural treasures and worst public schools. Twenty-one percent of its residents have graduate or advanced degrees, yet 30 percent lack even a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup> It has a higher per-capita personal income than any state and a higher poverty rate than all but five states.<sup>2</sup>

The District government provides virtually all of the services that states and cities provide individually.<sup>3</sup> Unlike other major U.S. cities, however, it does not benefit from revenue transfers from its affluent suburbs. It is far smaller geographically than any state and, with only about 570,000 residents, has a smaller population than any state except Wyoming.<sup>4</sup>

The District is also home to one of the nation's most robust public charter school sectors. A higher percentage of its students are enrolled in charter schools than those of any state.<sup>5</sup> More than a one-fifth of students enrolled in District public schools attend one of the city's 51 public charter schools. More than 98 percent of the 15,500 charter school students enrolled in charter schools in 2004-2005 were African American or Hispanic and 74 percent came from low-income families. Test scores show these students outperform their peers in the city's traditional schools: 54.4 percent of District charter school students are proficient in math versus 44.19 percent of students in traditional schools. In reading, 45.37 percent of charter school students are proficient, compared to 39.14 percent for other public schools.

Nevertheless, the District's charter school system, like the city itself, abounds with contradictions. The District is home to some of the best and worst charter schools in the country. How did the city associated with government bloat and bureaucracy come to host one of the nation's most promising educational innovations? The District of

Columbia's flourishing charter school movement was born of the very contradictions that make the city unique.

The Washington, D.C., charter movement was conceived out of conflict between congressional and local leaders and between the two national political parties about how to reform the District's troubled public education system. The system's appalling condition created an outcry for reform and high-quality educational options. Idealists drawn to Washington in the hope of "changing the world" helped get the charter movement off the ground. Longtime community leaders familiar with the city's byzantine politics played a vital role, too. Charters have given the city a way to harness its immense cultural and human resources to improve the lives of disadvantaged children.

The District's charters face many of the same challenges that confront similar independent public schools across America. Many have been badly managed with the results reflected in poor student performance. Monitoring the rapidly growing charter sector has been a challenge as well. While the District's Public Charter School Board (PCSB)<sup>6</sup> has a strong record as an authorizer, the quality of the District of Columbia Board of Education's oversight has been mixed. Obtaining facilities remains a challenge, and District charter schools continue to face political opposition from some quarters.

In sum, the District of Columbia's charter school movement is strong, despite growing pains. As the District closes its first decade of charter schooling, national policymakers in Congress and District leaders in the City Council, mayor's office, Board of Education, and PCSB should continue to strengthen the movement by:

- ❑ Expanding charter school access to excess space in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) buildings;
- ❑ Closing low performing charter schools;

- ☐ Raising the quality of charter schools in the middle of the pack;
  - ☐ Clarifying authorizer roles and improving authorizer quality;
  - ☐ Improving the quality, usefulness, and accessibility of data on charter schools and their performance; and
  - ☐ Integrating charter schools more fully into education reform efforts, District of Columbia redevelopment initiatives, and with other social services provided by city agencies, such as social workers or police officers.
- By taking these steps, District of Columbia leaders can foster a truly world-class system of public school options in our nation's capital.

# History of Charter Schooling in the District of Columbia

## *The Strange Birth of Charter Schooling in the District of Columbia*

The District's charter movement emerged in 1996 amid high tension between District of Columbia leaders and the U.S. Congress, partisan conflict in Congress, and the most contentious federal appropriations process in recent history.

Relationships between District of Columbia leaders and Congress have always been tense. For most of its history, the District had neither self-government nor congressional representation but lived under the rule of a Congress its residents had no part in electing. Even following the 1974 enactment of the Home Rule Act, which gave the District's residents self-government by an elected mayor and city council, the District's budget remains subject to congressional approval. This creates ongoing tension between local residents and elected officials and their congressional overseers. This tension and the unusual governance arrangements to which the District of Columbia is subjected shaped the District's charter school movement, for better and worse.

The District of Columbia's charter school law was enacted by Congress, which has authority to pass legislation for the District, as part of the School Reform Act of 1995.<sup>7</sup> Charter schools had already been proposed locally by City Council members William Lightfoot (I-At Large) and Kathy Patterson (D-Ward 3) as well as then-School Superintendent Franklin Smith, but the teachers union and other opponents prevented local efforts from advancing until Congress intervened.

Congress and President Clinton put the District of Columbia government under the authority of a Fiscal Control Board in early 1995 because of serious management and financial problems. In the spring of 1995, House Republicans, emboldened by their newly gained legislative majority, announced a major legislative initiative to reshape the District's government and public services, particularly education. While Republican leaders were genuinely

concerned about the problems facing the District, House Speaker Newt Gingrich's idea to use the District as a "laboratory" for conservative reforms sparked strong resistance.<sup>8</sup>

Charter schools were one of an array of education reforms proposed by then-Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-Wis.), Gingrich's point man on Washington, D.C., education reform. Most controversially, the package included a proposal to provide District students with "scholarships" (i.e., vouchers) to attend private schools. Gunderson's package, incorporated into the 1996 Federal Appropriation for the District of Columbia, moved easily through the U.S. House of Representatives, but encountered resistance in the Senate. Then conflict over the federal budget between President Clinton and congressional Republican leaders resulted in federal government shut downs in mid-November and December. Although most major budget issues were resolved by January 1996, the District education reform package remained stalled until March 1996, when Gingrich agreed to drop voucher provisions.

Finally, on April 26, 1996, Congress passed and President Clinton signed the Omnibus Consolidated Rescissions and Appropriations Act, which included the District education reform package. Although less ambitious than Gunderson's initial proposals, the bill included a strong charter school provision.

The voucher debate in 1995-1996 mostly worked to the advantage of District charter supporters. Unlike vouchers, charters schools were a reform that could draw strong bipartisan support. And as reform skeptics focused on defeating subsequent District voucher proposals, the District's fledgling charter system began to put down roots. But the fight over vouchers also had its downside for charters. For example, conservative Republicans in Congress, upset by Gingrich's surrender on vouchers, denied District charter schools crucial early funding for authorizers and start-ups, which delayed the schools' roll-out and arguably contributed to their early quality problems.

## ***The District of Columbia's Public Charter School Law***

The District of Columbia's charter school law is generally regarded as one of the country's strongest. It provides for multiple authorizers, including the elected District of Columbia Board of Education and the District's Public Charter School Board (PCSB)—one of the first independent charter authorizing

agencies in the country. The law allows the District City Council to designate a third authorizer, but it has never done so.

The law allowed five new schools per authorizer annually, later amended to 10. This may appear small relative to many other state charter laws, but is actually quite dramatic given the District's small size and population, as well as the fact that the Washington, D.C., school district has only about 150 schools.

**Table 1: Passage of the District of Columbia's Charter School Law**  
Timeline of Key Events

April 10, 1995	Congress and President Clinton create a Financial Control Board to oversee District finances and management and restore fiscal solvency.
May 1995	House Speaker Newt Gingrich announces D.C. Reform Task Force; Rep. Steve Gunderson will head up education reform efforts.
Summer 1995	Gunderson consults with local officials and puts together a reform agenda.
August 1995	Gunderson agenda presented at a "town hall meeting" at Eastern High School in Northeast Washington, D.C. Key provisions include a voucher program, charter schools, and a new per-pupil funding formula for all schools.
October 1, 1995	FY1996 begins.
November 1995	House passes FY1996 Federal Appropriations for the District of Columbia, including most elements of the Gunderson plan.  Senate passes FY1996 federal appropriations for the District of Columbia that includes a charter school law and creation of a Commission on Consensus School Reform, but does not include vouchers.  Stalemate ensues between the two congressional houses, as well as between Republicans and Democrats.
November 14 - 19, 1995	Federal government shuts down when congressional Republicans and President Clinton could not agree on neither a budget nor legislation to continue federal spending while the budget is being negotiated.
December 16, 1995 - January 6, 1996	Federal government again shuts down.
April 26, 1996	President Clinton signs the Omnibus Consolidated Rescissions and Appropriations Act, which includes District of Columbia Education Reform legislation, including a charter school law and creation of a Consensus Commission on Education Reform.

SOURCES: *District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995*, 104th Congress, 2nd sess., H.R. 2546 EAS; "Lawmaker Offers Schools Plan," *The Washington Post* August, 10, 1995, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>, pg. J03.

The District's charter law is particularly strong when it comes to finance. A key provision of the 1996 District school reform package created a per-pupil funding formula for all public schools, including charters, to ensure that charter schools receive the same per-pupil funding as traditional schools. Charter schools are recognized in the law as separate local education agencies, not dependent on the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) for most purposes, which gives them greater autonomy and allows them to receive federal and other funding directly.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the law now provides charter schools with one of the nation's most generous per-pupil facilities allotments.

Already strong at its passage, the law became even stronger in the following years as charter school advocates worked with members of Congress and then-City Council education chair Kevin Chavous (D-Ward 7) to extend charter terms from five to 15 years (with a five-year review), create a per-pupil facilities allowance, and amend the per-pupil funding formula to allow charters and other public boarding schools to receive additional per-pupil funding. Table 2 (pgs. 10-11) provides a full summary of the law's current provisions.

### *Charter Schools Take Root*

The District of Columbia's unusual governance system and tumultuous political climate left an indelible mark on the development of its charter schools.

The School Reform Act's late April 1996 passage left far too little time to run a thorough charter application process or allow schools to plan for opening in the fall of 1996. But the Board of Education, which felt itself under congressional pressure to authorize charter schools, authorized five schools over the summer of 1996, three of which planned to open that fall. The results of this hasty action were predictably disappointing.

Charter schools were hardly the greatest of the Board of Education's concerns in the fall of 1996, when serious facilities problems prevented many DCPS schools from opening on time. In November, the appointed Financial Control Board, frustrated by a lack of action by either the City Council or the Board of Education to address the DCPS' myriad problems, took control of DCPS, shifting decisionmaking power from the elected Board of Education to an appointed Emergency Board of Trustees, firing Superintendent

Franklin Smith, and hiring retired U.S. Army Gen. Julius Becton to serve as superintendent/CEO of schools.

Those moves complicated the environment for the emerging charter school sector. The Board of Education was the first and, from 1968 to 1974, the only elected governing body in the District of Columbia, a history that conferred on it tremendous political significance.<sup>10</sup> Stripping its power exacerbated already-high home rule tensions. More than a few local elected officials and DCPS staff members resented charters and other congressionally imposed reforms. The Board takeover destabilized an already tense political situation in the school district, contributed to DCPS staff turnover, and created power struggles between different governing bodies—all of which slowed the implementation of charter policies.<sup>11</sup> The Emergency Board of Trustees was itself split on the value of charter schools and together with Becton was primarily focused on triage of the existing DCPS schools. Charters were at best a secondary concern.

In February 1997, a second authorizer, PCSB, was launched with seven Board members appointed by then-Mayor Marion Barry from a list of nominees provided by then-U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley. The PCSB took a more considered approach to chartering than the Board of Education, hiring expert consultants who put together a comprehensive approval and accountability process for charter schools that is considered one of the strongest in the nation.<sup>12</sup> That June, the PCSB opened its first application process. The Board of Education also resumed accepting charter applications that year. By the end of October, the PCSB had received 26 applications and the Board of Education received eight.

The group of schools chartered in the 1997 cycle, most of which opened in the fall of 1998, mark the real takeoff of the charter school movement in the District of Columbia. From the spring to the fall of 1998, the number of charter schools in the District of Columbia rose from just two schools to 17, and the number of students served from less than 300 to 3,600. In a compact city like the District of Columbia, the impact of 15 new schools was dramatic. Virtually overnight, nearly five percent of the District's student enrollment was in charter schools—more than the percentage of children enrolled in charter schools in most other jurisdictions. In addition, the crop of charter schools that opened in 1998 included several exemplary schools that have been nationally recognized for their achievements, including the César Chávez

**Table 2: Key Provisions of District of Columbia Charter School Law**

Number of Schools Allowed	There is no overall cap; 20 new schools (10 by each existing chartering authority) may be authorized per year.
<b>Approval Process</b>	
Eligible Chartering Authorities	-District of Columbia Board of Education -The District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (The law allows the Washington, D.C., City Council to designate or create another chartering entity, but it has not yet done so.)
Eligible Applicants	Applicants include: an individual or group of individuals, including public and private organizations, which may include teachers, administrators, other school staff, parents, or other members of the community in which a charter school proposed.
Types of Charter Schools	Converted public schools, converted private schools, and new charter start-ups
Multiple Campuses	A school may open multiple campuses under a single charter.
Appeals Process	None
Formal Evidence of Local Support Required	Two-thirds of teachers, two-thirds of parents of minor students, and two-thirds of adult students must support a public school's conversion to a charter school.
Recipient of Charter	Charter school board of trustees (a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation)
Term of Initial Charter	15 years, with at least one review every five years
<b>Operations</b>	
Automatic Waiver From Most State and District Education Laws, Regulations, and Policies	Yes
Legal Autonomy	Yes
Governance	A board of trustees must be established, as specified in charter; board must have an odd number of members (not to exceed 15), must include at least two parents of enrolled students, and a majority of board members must be District residents.
Charter School Governing Body Subject to Open Meeting Laws	Not addressed
Charter School May Be Managed or Operated by a For-Profit Organization	Charters may not be granted directly to for-profit organizations, but the schools may be managed by them.
Transportation for Students	District charter and traditional school students are eligible for reduced public transportation fares; District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) provides transportation only for disabled students, so most charter schools do not provide transportation either.
Facilities Assistance	Preference over vacant DCPS buildings is mandated (but not always applied).
Reporting Requirements	Annual reports must be submitted to the chartering authority, DCPS, and Chief Financial Officer for the District of Columbia.

Funding	
Amount	100% of District per-pupil operations funding follows students; charter schools also receive per-pupil facilities funding.
Path	Funds are disbursed directly to charter schools from the District Chief Financial Officer. Disbursements are approved by the relevant charter authorizer. Federal funds pass through the DCPS Office of Federal Grants Programs.
Fiscal Autonomy	Yes
Start-up Funds	Federal funds are available.
Teachers	
Collective Bargaining/District Work Rules	Teachers may negotiate as a separate unit with a charter school's governing body or work independently.
Certification	Not required (although some charter schools require certification)
Leave of Absence From the District	Two years, renewable indefinitely
Retirement Benefits	A public charter school may establish a retirement system for employees; employees who previously worked for DCPS may elect to continue participation in the District teacher retirement system, and the charter school must make matching contributions on their behalf.
Students	
Eligible Students	All District students
Preference for Enrollment	District residents, siblings, and previously enrolled students of converted schools
Enrollment Requirements	Open enrollment: Charter schools may not limit enrollment based on academic ability or achievement.
Selection Method (in case of over-enrollment)	Lottery/random process
Accountability	All District of Columbia standards and assessments apply to charter schools. Charter schools must obtain accreditation from an accrediting body deemed appropriate by the chartering authority. If a school includes preschool or kindergarten, it must be licensed as a child development center by the District government.

SOURCES: Center for Education Reform, <http://www.edreform.com>; Friends of Choice in Urban Schools, <http://www.focus-dccharter.org/>; the District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995, 104th Congress, 2nd sess., H.R. 2546 EAS.

Public Charter High School for Public Policy,<sup>13</sup> Community Academy, Friendship-Edison Public Charter School's Chamberlain and Woodridge campuses, Maya Angelou Public Charter School's Shaw campus, and the Schools for Educational Evolution and Development (SEED) Public Charter School.

Rapid growth caught the attention of District of Columbia leaders, who were concerned about the amount of funding, students, and teachers leaving

DCPS for charters. Although Becton supported charter schools, Arlene Ackerman, who succeeded him in May 1998, did not. Members of the Emergency Board of Trustees and Financial Control Board worried that DCPS's reform efforts might flounder if too many students and teachers left for charter schools.

Charters also became an issue in the District of Columbia's 1998 mayoral election to succeed Barry. Councilman Jack Evans (D-Ward 2) called for a

**Table 3: Who's Who in Washington, D.C., Governance**  
A Guide to Boards and Elected Bodies

Board	Dates	Method of Selection	Function
<b>United States Congress</b>	1787 - present	National elections from the 50 states establish Congress, yet the District has a non-voting delegate.	Congress approves the District's budget and passes federal appropriations to compensate the District for lost taxes on federal land and services to the federal government; it can also pass legislation for the District.
<b>Council of the District of Columbia</b>	1974 - present	The Council is elected from eight wards with two at-large members and a president elected at large.	As the elected body governing the District, the Council passes legislation and budgets, which must be approved by Congress; the Council was under the authority of a Financial Control Board from 1995-2001.
<b>Board of Education for District of Columbia Public Schools</b>	1968 - present	Prior to 2000: The Board was elected from eight wards with two at-large members and a president elected at large.  After 2000: Four Board members are appointed by the mayor; four members elected from "super-districts" (representing two wards), and a president elected at large.	Overseeing the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and state education agency (SEA), the Board has authority to charter schools in the District of Columbia, and its functions are carried out by DCPS.  From 1996-2000, the Board lost most authority to Emergency Board of Trustees, advised Emergency Board of Trustees on voter opinions, and could still charter schools unilaterally.
<b>District of Columbia Financial Control Board</b>	1995 - 2001	Appointed by the president	After overseeing District government and budgets and restoring the city to fiscal solvency, the authority of the Control Board dissolved once the District managed three years of balanced budgets.
<b>Emergency Board of Trustees</b>	1996 - 2000	Appointed by the Financial Control Board	Assumed responsibility for DCPS from Board of Education
<b>Public Charter School Board</b>	1997 - present	Appointed by the mayor from nominees offered by the U.S. Secretary of Education	As an independent board for the District, the Public Charter School Board authorizes and oversees charter schools.

SOURCES: The District of Columbia Board of Education, <http://www.k12.dc.us/dcps/boe/boehome.html>; District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, <http://www.dcpubliccharter.com/>; Council of the District of Columbia, <http://www.dccouncil.washington.dc.us/>; and Brookings Institution, <http://www.brook.edu/>

moratorium on new charters, while two of his opponents, City Council education chair Chavous and Statehood Party candidate John Gloster, supported reducing the number of charters that could be awarded annually. The eventual victor in the race, Chief Financial Officer Anthony Williams, supported the growth of charter schools while also calling for careful monitoring.

Another key moment came in 1999 when educators at Paul Junior High School, one of DCPS's better-performing middle schools, sought conversion to a charter school. Their effort was strongly opposed by both the Washington Teachers Union and Superintendent Ackerman, who saw the proposed conversion as a rejection of her reform efforts. Despite opposition, the Paul group obtained support from two-thirds of the parents required to convert to a charter school, as well as a charter from the PCSB in spring of 1999. However, it continued to face challenges as Ackerman tried to prevent Paul Charter School from remaining in the building it occupied. The Control Board eventually stepped in to allow Paul to keep the building.

The Paul educator's experience illustrated the appeal of chartering to educators in the school district as well as the independence of the PCSB. But the political fallout from the controversy persuaded other DCPS educators not to pursue conversion efforts, and Paul remains the only conversion charter school in the District, although educators and parents in a few schools, including DCPS's best-performing non-selective high school, Woodrow Wilson High School, have begun discussing conversion again recently.<sup>14</sup>

In 1999 and 2000 the numbers of charter schools and charter school students continued to grow, and charter schools were increasingly recognized as an

element of the District's educational landscape, with a growing constituency of parents, educators, and a network of supporters influential in both District and congressional politics.

## *An Evolving Context*

Broader changes in District politics favored the growing charter movement. The Financial Control Board was scheduled to return authority for the schools to the elected Board of Education in 2000, but reformers of many stripes agreed that it had to be restructured to better manage the schools. In the summer of 2000, District residents voted to replace the existing Board of Education with a new one composed of a combination of elected and appointed members, and the Control Board agreed to return power to the new school board following the 2000 election. The reformed Board of Education, particularly the four members appointed by Mayor Anthony Williams, was more "charter friendly" than the previous one, but it was also more serious about holding poorly performing charter schools accountable. Also in the summer of 2000, Superintendent Ackerman, not a charter school supporter, left to become superintendent of San Francisco's public schools. She was replaced by Paul Vance, the former superintendent of neighboring suburban Montgomery County, Md., who was more charter friendly than Ackerman.

Today, charter schools serve more than 20 percent of the District of Columbia's students—a higher percentage than any state in the country. The District of Columbia's charter school movement has clearly taken root and has strong community, parent, and official support, but it continues to face obstacles.

## Capital Briefing: SEED Public Charter School

**Location:** 4300 C Street, S.E., Washington, D.C.

**Opened:** Fall 1998

**Grades Served:** 7th - 12th

**Enrollment:** 310

**Authorizer:** Public Charter School Board

The SEED (Schools for Educational Evolution and Development) Public Charter School is the nation's only public urban boarding school. It admits students through a lottery designed to ensure that roughly one-half of the students are boys and one-half are girls. Virtually all its students are black, three-quarters come from low-income families, and the vast majority come from families east of the Anacostia River.

The SEED school is the brainchild of co-founders Eric Adler and Raj Vinnakota. By the time Congress passed the School Reform Act of 1995, both Adler and Vinnakota had independently reached the conclusion that many disadvantaged, urban children would benefit from a traditional college-preparatory boarding school—an experience that would provide academic and cultural opportunities while also removing students from environmental factors working against their success. When Adler and Vinnakota met in December 1996, they decided to work together to achieve their goal of opening a boarding school to serve disadvantaged students and, in 1997, quit their consulting jobs to work full time developing the school.

The SEED school received a charter from the Public Charter School Board in the spring of 1998 and opened that fall with its first class of 40 7th graders. In June 2004, these students became SEED's first crop of high school graduates. All of the students in its first graduating class were admitted to a college or university.

While SEED has not yet reached the high academic goals of its founders and staff, its academic performance is strong. It was one of only a few charter high schools—indeed, one of the only high schools in the District of Columbia—to make adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2003-2004.\* Despite having students who enter with significant academic disadvantages, SEED achieves these results through its focus on academic and personal excellence, the added support offered by a 24-hour boarding environment, and the use of a “growth year” between 8th and 9th grade for students who have not yet mastered the basic skills needed to tackle a college-preparatory curriculum.

The SEED school is located in a recently renovated former District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) building east of the Anacostia River. Before SEED acquired the building from DCPS, it had been burned down several times and had fallen so far into disrepair and neglect that the school system had literally lost track of it. Today, however, the site is not only a renovated school building, but also home to two new dormitories (one for girls and one for boys) and a student/recreation center that houses a cafeteria and gym.

Operating a boarding school is expensive, and SEED supports its work through a combination of both public charter school funds and vigilant fundraising—including support from such well-known philanthropies as Oprah's Angel Network and a host of District-focused charities. In addition to the standard per-pupil allowance for all public charter schools in the District, Adler and Vinnakota worked with members of Congress and then-City Councilman Kevin Chavous (D-Ward 7) to secure legislation authorizing a boarding school add-on to the District's per-pupil school funding formula, so that SEED receives over \$20,000 per student in public funds. These funds support more than 90 percent of the school's operating budget, with the millions of dollars SEED has raised through private fundraising going primarily to support the acquisition and construction of its buildings.

Despite SEED's accomplishments, Adler and Vinnakota are not content. They want to create a network of urban boarding schools to serve disadvantaged youth across the country and are currently in discussions with a variety of cities, as well as moving forward with preliminary plans to open a SEED school in Baltimore and another District campus.

\*SEED did not have adequate yearly progress results in 2004-2005 because of insufficient test data.

SOURCE: Adler, Eric, Public Charter School Board, interview with author, April 2005.

# What Does the District of Columbia Charter School Movement Look Like Today?

## *Demographics*

In the 2004-2005 school year, the District of Columbia had 42 public charter schools operating on 52 campuses, educating some 15,500 students. The majority of both schools and students fall under the authority of the District's Public Charter School Board (PCSB), which oversaw 26 public charter schools operating on 31 campuses, serving 11,555 students. The District of Columbia Board of Education oversaw 16 schools serving nearly 4,000 students.

Of the more than 13,000 elementary and secondary students<sup>15</sup> attending District charter schools in 2003-2004, roughly 98 percent were from minority groups. Specifically, 90 percent of District public charter schools students in prekindergarten through 12th grade were African-American, 7 percent were Hispanic, and 2 percent were white. Seventy-four percent of students enrolled in District charter schools come from low-income families, 11 percent receive special education services, and 4 percent are English language learners.<sup>16</sup>

District charter school students are less white, more African-American, and more likely to be disadvantaged than students in traditional District schools. In general, District charters serve lower proportions of students in special education programs or who are English language learners than do traditional schools.<sup>17</sup>

## *Student Achievement*

The most common way of measuring how well schools are doing is to look at their students' test scores. Like other public schools in the District of Columbia, District charter schools participate in the SAT-9 test, which is used in the District's school accountability system under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).<sup>18</sup>

In the 2004-2005 assessment, 54.4 percent of District charter school students tested met the accountability system's standard of proficiency in math and 45.37 percent met the proficiency standard for reading.<sup>19</sup> Although a single snapshot across all schools is hardly sufficient to judge charter school performance

**Table 4: Demographics of District of Columbia Public Schools and Public Charter Schools in the District of Columbia**

	District of Columbia Public Schools	Public Charter Schools in the District of Columbia
African-American	84.4%	90.4%
Hispanic	9.4%	7.5%
White	4.6%	1.56%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.6%	0.28%
Other	0.5%	0.21%
Low-income or Disadvantaged	60.8%	74%
Special Education	18.6%	11%
English Language Learners	7.7%	3.77%

SOURCES: District of Columbia Public Schools Fact Sheet, <http://www.k12.dc.us/dcps/offices/facts1.html#4>; author calculations.  
NOTE: Data in this chart is from the 2003-2004 school year.

relative to other public schools in the District of Columbia, these statistics compare favorably to those of the District public schools overall, where 44.19 percent of students tested proficient in math and 39.14 percent tested proficient in reading.<sup>20</sup>

Sixteen of the District's charter school campuses failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) under NCLB for the 2004-2005 school year. Thirteen other charters did make AYP, and 22 do not have AYP ratings because they have too few students, serve only children in grades that were not tested, or are for adults.<sup>21</sup> Of 51 charter school campuses, 19 schools, or 37 percent, were identified as "needing improvement" or corrective action under NCLB, meaning they had failed to make AYP for at least two consecutive years. In contrast, 81 of 145 District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), or 55 percent, were flagged for improvement or corrective action.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Comparison with District of Columbia Public Schools***

Of 20 charter elementary schools with test data, compared to the DCPS average for similar traditional schools, eight had higher percentages of students proficient in both reading and math, two others had a higher percentage of students proficient in reading only, and four had a higher percentage of students proficient in math only.<sup>23</sup> At the secondary school level, nine of 25 charter middle and high schools had higher percentages of students proficient in both math and reading, three had higher percentages of students proficient in reading only, and four had a higher percentage proficient in math only.<sup>24</sup> Further, a December 2004 study by Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby found that charter school students in the District of Columbia were 12 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 14 percent more likely to be proficient in math than their peers in the closest DCPS schools with similar racial compositions.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Additional Measures***

Annual proficiency rates are important because they reflect the skills students need to be successful in life. But they do not tell us anything about schools' effectiveness at expanding student skills and knowledge over time. Such data are especially valuable in the District, where majorities of students come to both

charter and traditional public schools far below grade level. Some schools with very low test scores and percentages of students proficient may actually add more value than schools with higher test scores that started out with higher-achieving students. While a few District charter schools track cohort data on their own and several states have adopted or are beginning to put such tracking systems in place, neither the Public Charter School Board nor the Board of Education collects or publishes such data.

The Public Charter School Board (PCSB) does, however, collect and publish data on charter students' year-to-year test score gains. These figures provide at least some information about how much students are learning over time. Essentially, if the change in student scores, as measured against a normal curve, is positive, they are making more than one year's worth of learning progress; if the change in scores is negative, students are making less than one year's progress. If students are making typical progress, we would expect their scores to fall at the same place in the normal distribution from year to year.<sup>26</sup> In 2004-2005, 13 of 20 charter schools with SAT-9 gain scores had positive average student gain scores in reading and 12 had a positive average student gain score in math.<sup>27</sup> Across all schools chartered by the PCSB, 54.68 percent of students had positive gain score in reading and 49.52 percent in math. The average student gain score across all schools chartered by the PCSB was 1.22 in reading and -0.49 in math. It is important to take gain scores with a grain of salt, however, because they are highly volatile. If a school's students have high positive gain scores in one year, it is quite likely they will have negative ones the following year. Weeding out the District's underachieving charter schools from those showing progress with the most at-risk students will require a much more systematic effort to track cohort data.

### ***Looking at Subsets of Charter Schools***

The charter school model encourages the creation of a diversity of independent schools—and the District's charter sector is certainly diverse. It can be helpful to compare charter schools with similar characteristics to identify factors that contribute to their success. A few key things stand out.

First, charter schools authorized by the Board of Education are, on average, not performing as well as those authorized by the PCSB. Of the schools

chartered by the Board of Education, 41.79 percent of students tested proficient in math and 43.12 percent in reading. For those chartered by the PCSB, 59.1 percent of students tested proficient in math and 46.26 percent in reading.

The Board of Education and Public Charter School Board have about the same number of schools serving at-risk students and those with special needs,<sup>28</sup> and both have schools clustered at the bottom of the performance distribution in both math and reading. But the PCSB has authorized slightly more schools at the top of the performance distribution, particularly in math. In addition, higher-performing PCSB schools tend to have large enrollments and poorer performing ones have smaller enrollments—a trend that does not hold for schools chartered by the Board of Education. It appears that both authorizers have some seriously underperforming charter schools, but the PCSB may be more adept at fostering success or attracting quality charter applicants. This is not surprising, given complaints made by some charter leaders that the Board of Education is not always charter friendly and its decisions sometimes lack transparency.

In addition, charter elementary schools are outperforming charter middle and high schools, but charter middle and high schools are doing better relative to the performance of DCPS schools.<sup>29</sup> These differences, which are most pronounced at the high school level, are not surprising. Although DCPS's overall academic performance is abysmal, it has some high-achieving elementary schools, particularly in affluent neighborhoods. In most of the city, however, students in DCPS schools who enter school already behind fall further below grade level every year as a result of poor instruction. As a result, by the time students get to either a charter or traditional high school, they need much more help to catch up to grade level than younger students.

Some District charter high schools, for example the César Chávez Public Charter High School for Public Policy, have expanded to serve middle school students, in order to catch them earlier before they fall too far behind and to have more time to bring them up to grade level. Some schools, such as the SEED (Schools for Educational Evolution and Development) charter school, have always served students in middle through high school for similar reasons. The KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) D.C.: KEY Academy, which serves 5th through 8th grades, focuses on middle

school students with a strong college-prep curriculum; the goal is to ensure that, by the time they are high-school age, KIPP students are performing well enough to be admitted to the District's higher performing competitive public high schools or win scholarships to elite private high schools. In addition, KIPP leaders are planning to open a high school in the District of Columbia to provide more quality public high school options, which are currently in short supply.

In sum, the District of Columbia has some public charter schools that are performing very well and some that are performing very poorly; and many charters are performing as well as or a little better than their DCPS counterparts but not nearly as well as necessary.

## *Closures and Standouts*

Because there is so much variation in charter schools, it is worth looking at the outliers at both the high and low end of the performance spectrum. The District of Columbia appears to have had more than its share of both. Of the 50 charter schools that opened in the District of Columbia from 1996-2004, eight have had their charters revoked and one has given up its charter voluntarily. This gives the District of Columbia a 16 percent charter closure rate, significantly above the national average of about 9 percent.<sup>30</sup>

This higher-than-average closure rate, however, does not reflect poorly on the District's charter system. Charter schooling promises that schools that do not perform will be shut down, so the District's high closure rate may mean that the District's authorizers are doing exactly as they promised. On the other hand, it may mean that they are chartering too many schools, some that should never have been opened in the first place. Over time, the quality of charter applicants has improved, and charter authorizers have also developed stronger practices to weed out low-quality applicants and monitor existing schools.

Seven of the schools closed to date were authorized by the Board of Education:

- ❑ **The Marcus Garvey Public Charter School**, one of the first schools chartered in 1996, lost its charter in 1998 after a series of scandals, including questionable curriculum, problems with its board, and the high-profile criminal trial of its controversial principal. By all accounts, Marcus Garvey never should have received a charter.

- ❑ The **Young Technocrats Math and Science Charter School**, opened in 1998, had its charter revoked after one year in operation due to serious financial troubles.
- ❑ The charters of the **Richard Milburn, World, and NewVisions** charter schools were revoked in 2001 when the newly reconstituted Board of Education sought to execute its chartering authority more responsibly and close down schools that had serious management problems and were unable to demonstrate that they had adequate curricula or supplies. Two of the schools, Richard Milburn and World, challenged the Board's revocation in court and remained open until 2002, when a D.C. Court of Appeals ruling for the Board of Education set an important precedent about the authority of authorizers to revoke charters. Later that year, the Board of Education also revoked the charter of the **Techworld Public Charter School**.
- ❑ The **Village Learning Center's** charter was revoked in 2004 because of serious debt and financial problems.

The Public Charter School Board revoked only one charter, that of the **Southeast Academy**, in the spring of 2005 because it repeatedly failed to meet academic targets and did not track required student data. The Board of Education has been much more likely to close schools than the PCSB, which has a stronger application vetting process and has encountered fewer serious financial and operational problems in the schools it chartered. The PCSB faces the challenge of balancing its responsibilities as an authorizer with its other role as an advocate for charter schools—two priorities that may conflict when it comes to school closures.

The District of Columbia is also home to several nationally recognized charter schools. The SEED Public Charter School in Southeast Washington, D.C., is the nation's only public boarding school and outperforms non-selective District public high schools on assessments. All graduates of the SEED and César Chávez public charter schools are accepted to college and both have been featured on the *Oprah Winfrey* TV show. Thurgood Marshall Academy, also in Southeast Washington, D.C., was recognized by *The Washington Post Magazine's* Jay Mathews as one of 30 exceptional

District-area high schools.<sup>31</sup> The Arts and Technology Public Charter School was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education in a report highlighting eight successful charter schools across the country.<sup>32</sup> The Washington Math, Science, and Technology Public Charter School has been included in *Newsweek's* list of top high schools in the United States. Other nationally recognized District charter schools include Community Academy, KIPP D.C.: KEY Academy, the four schools that are part of the Friendship Edison charter, and the Maya Angelou Public Charter School, that serves students who have dropped out or are at risk of doing so. (For more information on some of the District's standout schools, see the sidebars on pages 14, 19, 22, and 28).

### *Impact on District System*

By design, charter schools are supposed to inject competition into public school bureaucracies for students, as well as the dollars and resources that come with them. That competition, in turn, is expected to yield improvements in traditional public schools.

Is this theory working out in practice in the District of Columbia? Are traditional District schools improving? Thus far, there is no clear evidence that charter schools have had a direct impact on student achievement in DCPS schools or otherwise driven systemic reform. The School Reform Act of 1995 created a variety of other reforms in the District of Columbia's education system other than charter schools, most of which have since been abandoned. Since 1996, DCPS has had six superintendents and three different school boards. Each launched new reforms that differed from those of their predecessors.

The DCPS has lost a large percentage of students to charter schools and is also losing talented faculty and staff who leave to launch their own charter schools. Per-pupil funding for DCPS schools has risen, however, limiting the financial pain of student losses. In addition, DCPS schools are funded based on the past year's enrollment, protecting them for one year from the financial impact of student defections.

Some charter school advocates argue that robust charter school growth might actually help DCPS in the long run because it will become smaller, less unwieldy to manage, and potentially easier to turn around.

In addition, as charter schools and other options have increasingly become part of the District's

educational landscape, parents have grown accustomed to choosing schools that best fit their children. Many in the city remain optimistic that, by showing they can bring disadvantaged children to high levels of achievement and get them into college with the same resources as public schools, the District's best charters will pressure other public schools to do the same.

Meanwhile, some charter schools are collaborating with DCPS schools in ways that strengthen both:

- ❑ The Maya Angelou Charter School entered into an agreement with DCPS to open its second campus in a DCPS building east of the Anacostia

River. Maya Angelou gets a break on rent and its students may participate in DCPS athletics. In exchange, Maya Angelou accepts students from the DCPS system identified by counselors as needing alternative placements. This deal allows DCPS to expand much-needed opportunities for at-risk students and enables Maya Angelou to serve more students.

- ❑ The AppleTree Institute works with several public elementary schools and Head Start programs in the District of Columbia to improve early literacy education for disadvantaged students.

## Capital Briefing: César Chávez Public Charter High School for Public Policy

**Location:** 1346 Florida Avenue, N.W., Second Floor, Washington, D.C.

**Opened:** 1998

**Grades Served:** 9th - 12th

**Enrollment:** 251

**Authorizer:** Public Charter School Board

The César Chávez Public Charter School was founded in 1998 by former District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) administrator Irasema Salcido. Through its college preparatory focus and unique public policy and community involvement curriculum, the school aims to prepare future leaders in the model of the school's namesake, Hispanic civil rights and labor leader César Chávez.

The school serves 250 students in 9th through 12th grades, and approximately two-thirds qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. While Latino students are underrepresented in charter schools both nationally and in the District, nearly 60 percent of Chávez students are Latino—in part because the school is located in the heavily Latino Columbia Heights neighborhood and many Latino parents feel more comfortable with the school's inclusive approach and the leadership of Salcido, who is Latina and speaks fluent Spanish. In addition, about 37 percent of the school's students are African-American, and about 14 percent of the school's students are limited or non-English proficient.

Chávez students must complete a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, including five credits of English, three of math, and three each of history/government, science, and foreign language. In addition, all students participate in public policy "capstones," in which they focus for one day each month and the final three weeks of each school year. Freshmen students learn about key public policy issues, social justice, citizenship, empowerment, and power dynamics in shaping public policy. Sophomores work with a community-based organization to design and implement strategic action to address a community issue. Juniors complete a fellowship with a policy-related organization. Seniors must complete a public policy thesis and present their work to a panel of experts.

Academic results for the Chávez School are mixed. All of its graduates have been admitted to college. While Chávez students are performing better in math than any other charter high school in the city, they are still only 65 percent proficient. And the Chávez school has struggled to improve student performance in reading, particularly for English language learners. Salcido and her staff have produced improved student performance, but the school continues to struggle to meet the needs of students who enter far below grade level.

In the 2004-2005 school year, Chávez opened a second campus, serving both middle and high school students, near American University in Northwest Washington, D.C. By starting with students in middle school, the school's leaders hope to produce stronger academic results.

# Unique Features of the District of Columbia Charter School Movement

The District of Columbia is unique among U.S. cities and states. It carries out many of the functions of a state, but lacks the same autonomy or governance structure as a state. The District is much smaller geographically than any state and has a smaller population than any state except Wyoming.<sup>33</sup> No other city or state is subject to the same level of congressional governance or oversight or exists in the political environment that such oversight creates. In addition, the District's status as the seat of the federal government gives it a unique economy that also creates its own complications. These features have shaped the District of Columbia's charter school movement.

## *The Role of Congress and the Federal Government*

The District's charter school movement has clearly benefited from the U.S. Congress's involvement. Congress is generally more supportive of charter schools than many state legislatures. In particular, there is stronger bipartisan support for charter schools at the national level. District charter schools have found a diverse array of strong champions in Congress, including Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.), Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.), as well as Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

More importantly, congressional power to pass legislation for the District over the heads of elected city officials makes them more likely to act favorably toward charters, if for no other reason than to preserve their influence and authority. The fact that the U.S. Congress supplies a huge portion of the District's budget has also worked to the city charter schools' benefit; some have even benefited from earmarks in federal appropriations for the District or the U.S. Department of Education.

Federal involvement in local politics can have drawbacks for District charter schools as well. Their supporters know if they rely too heavily on Congress for help, they will antagonize influential home-rule advocates who prefer autonomous self-governance for

the District and resent congressional involvement in creating the schools. Supporters have wisely refrained from turning to Congress too often and focused on local advocacy instead.

Congress's direct involvement in local affairs also creates extra layers of politics and bureaucracy for District charters to contend with relative to charters elsewhere. And the fact that the schools are located in the nation's capital means they operate in a media fishbowl. Congressional action affecting them can assume outsized symbolic importance in national education debates.

## *Weakness of Organized Opposition*

In many states, the biggest challenge facing charter schools is political opposition from established interests with a stake in the status quo in public education, who too often see charters as a threat to their prerogatives and practices. This is not the case in the District of Columbia. The District does not have the mass of state-level education associations that lobby against charter schools in other states, and opponents cannot exploit tensions between urban and suburban school districts to build suburban opposition to charter schools, as they have done elsewhere.

The District of Columbia Board of Education and the Washington Teachers Union (WTU) are the District's primary educational interest groups. The Board's travails at the time charters were getting off the ground are described at length above. Since 2003, WTU has been under the authority of its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers, following a scandal in which WTU leaders embezzled more than \$2 million in union dues. The scandal seriously damaged the union's image and political clout.

Charter school opponents in the District of Columbia have frequently had more pressing concerns, particularly the constant congressional threat to enact voucher legislation, which it finally carried out in 2003. The federal D.C. School Choice Incentive Act gives vouchers worth as much as \$7,500 to as many as 1,700

low-income students in the District to attend private schools. As part of the bargain that resulted in the creation of the voucher program, Congress also appropriated an additional \$26 million divided between charter schools and District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).<sup>34</sup> (Much of the charter money has gone toward facilities.) District educators have been more concerned about the potential effects of proposed DCPS reforms, particularly privatization, than they have been about charter schools, and appear to see such changes as a greater potential threat than the creation of new competitors.

### *Drawing on Local Resources*

District charters have taken advantage of the region's rich cultural resources, political power, and outdoor space for their students' benefit. For example, the Thurgood Marshall Public Charter High School draws on the District's seemingly boundless supply of lawyers to tutor disadvantaged children and introduce them to the profession. It also draws on the financial resources of local lawyers, whose contributions have allowed it to begin constructing its own building. The District's charter

schools, taking advantage of greater hiring flexibility, have been able to recruit high-quality staff from the District's nonprofit and political sectors, and have capitalized on their political, fundraising, and public relations skills to support their work.

The District's charter schools have also tapped into the resources of community organizations. Four Friendship-Edison campuses are among the city's largest and most successful charters. These schools were started by Friendship House, the District's oldest social service organization, founded as a settlement house in 1904. Similarly, Community Academy grew out of the work of the Urban Family Institute, a community-based organization founded by former Xerox executive Kent Amos to promote the welfare of children and families.

In addition, charter schools have drawn on talent from within DCPS. Key staff members in several charter schools come with substantial DCPS experience. While many of the first charter schools were launched by outsiders or social entrepreneurs, a growing number of charter applicants are current or former DCPS educators seeking more freedom and control over resources to offer children services that DCPS is not able to provide.<sup>35</sup>

## Capital Briefing: Community Academy

**Location:** Multiple campuses in Northwest and Northeast Washington, D.C.

**Opened:** 1998 (original campus)

**Enrollment:** more than 1,000

**Grades Served:** Prekindergarten - 8th

**Authorizer:** Board of Education

The Community Academy Public Charter School (CAPCS) is a successful example of a homegrown or “community-based” public charter school in the District of Columbia. It was founded in 1998 by Kent Amos, a former Xerox executive with a long history of community leadership as a foster parent to some 87 children, and through the community based nonprofit Urban Family Institute, created to improve the welfare of children and families. The Community Academy grew out of the efforts of the Urban Family Institute and its “Kids House” after-school program. Initially, Amos intended to focus on parents and improving children’s out-of-school time, but as the school worked with children and parents, it became increasingly clear to Amos that the children Kids House served also needed access to world-class educational opportunities many were not receiving in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) system.

Community Academy serves more than 1,000 students on three campuses—an elementary school, an elementary-middle school, and a bilingual preschool and elementary program. Community Academy is expanding its service to students with an early childhood campus opened in the fall of 2005 and plans to eventually open a high school in a vacant DCPS facility. In addition, there is an online CAPCS program for children who cannot attend regular schools.

Community Academy operates on the philosophy that “smart is something you become, not something you are.” The school’s leaders recognize that many children come to school at a different place than more affluent students, but believe that with extra time, hard work, and good instruction its students can be brought to higher levels of education. Community Academy uses a rigorous Core Knowledge curriculum as well as the Responsive Classroom curriculum for classroom management and character development, beginning each day with a morning meeting in which children talk about what is going on in their lives. Teachers receive an extraordinary amount of professional development: an hour every day, as well as eight weeks in the summer, and one Saturday per month.

These efforts are reflected in the Academy’s student achievement. Both elementary and secondary schools are making adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act, and students in its flagship elementary school outperform DCPS averages in both reading and math.

Amos and other CAPCS leaders, however, are not satisfied. Beginning in fall of 2005, a new series of initiatives will be launched to bring CAPCS student performance to truly world-class standards. These efforts include: creating a “Bench Team” of prospective teachers who will spend one year working as substitutes and running the Kids House program to prepare them to be skilled teachers the next year; implementing Spanish instruction as early as 3 years old, so that students are proficient in two languages by 8th grade; ensuring that all students finish biology and algebra II by the end of 8th grade; bringing in specialists, coaches, and new highly-skilled staff to support these goals; and requiring all children and adults in the school to wear school uniforms.

Along with its focus on academic excellence, CAPCS takes a “mind-body-spirit” approach to educating the whole child as well as supporting families and parents. As Amos says, “We don’t just want children to be smart. We want them to function well and have good values.” Children receive regular instruction in the arts, music, technology, and physical education. CAPCS is the only school in the District of Columbia to have a pediatrician on-site full time, and it is working with Medicaid, Howard University, and Unity Health Care toward the goal of providing a school-based clinic for both children and the community. An on-campus parent center provides classes, child-rearing resources, support groups, access to mental health professionals, and investment clubs for parents, not only of CAPCS students but for anyone in the community who wants to access these resources, and works with community organizations to engage parents and the community.

SOURCES: Amos, Kent, Community Academy, interview with author, April 2005; Blalock, Cecilia, Community Academy, interview with author, April 2005.

# Challenges Facing Charter Schools in the District of Columbia

Despite rapid growth and a fairly secure political position, charter schools in the District of Columbia continue to face significant obstacles to their growth and quality.

## *Facilities*

Virtually everyone involved in the District of Columbia's charter movement says access to and funding for facilities is one of their most significant challenges. Although the city has a number of vacant District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) facilities, charter schools have encountered political and bureaucratic obstacles to obtaining these buildings. In addition, the "hot" local real estate market has made it extremely costly for charter schools to rent commercial space. While a few charter schools have obtained former DCPS facilities or raised funds to build their own, others struggle to meet students' needs in church basements or other inadequate spaces.

Several schools nearly closed before finding facilities at the last minute. Charter school directors often report that they devote a disproportionate amount of time to finding, keeping, and maintaining facilities. Some charters have been forced to move several times, which can disrupt enrollment and operations.

District charters, however, get more facilities help than those in most states. For instance, they received a per-pupil facilities allowance worth \$2,380 in FY2005 for non-residential charter schools.<sup>36</sup> Further, the Office of Public Charter School Financing and Support (OCSFS), established by the U.S. Congress in 2003, provides credit enhancement to help charter schools finance buildings. The program is funded jointly by the District and the federal Charter School Facilities Finance grant program, leveraged through a bond offering and financial institutions. Additionally, OCSFS administers a direct loan fund that provides as much as \$2 million to charter schools, which meet or exceed performance goals outlined in their charter contracts, for facility construction, purchase, renovation, or maintenance.

The authors of the School Reform Act of 1995 wanted charter schools to take over unused public school buildings in the District. Enrollment in DCPS schools had declined for two decades, and it has millions of square feet of unused classroom space, more than one dozen vacant buildings, and 37 other schools operating below two-thirds capacity.<sup>37</sup> But charter schools have had a hard time getting unused DCPS space, frequently losing competitions with commercial developers for surplus space removed from DCPS authority and placed in the mayor's control. The mayor supports charters, but is under severe pressure to make school buildings available for commercial or residential developments.<sup>38</sup>

Charter schools also have had trouble renting space from DCPS. Staff turnover and policy changes in the school system's real estate office are part of the problem, as is bureaucratic hostility toward charters. Some charter advocates charge that DCPS deliberately holds on to surplus buildings that should be turned over to the mayor to keep them out of the hands of charters.

Even when charters obtain surplus or rental space from DCPS, it is often in poor condition. Typically, DCPS offers charters one-year leases, often resulting in charters running the risk of spending heavily on renovation only to lose their lease one year later. They also frequently obtain access to facilities close to the start of the school year, leaving little time for repairs.

Despite these challenges, recent developments offer hope that access to charter facilities will soon improve. In the 2005 federal appropriations for the District of Columbia, staunch charter supporter Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) amended the School Reform Act of 1995 to give charter schools a "right of first refusal" to purchase facilities being liquidated from the surplus at 25 percent below their market value. This gives charter schools a stronger position than previous vague language, which gave them only a "preference."<sup>39</sup>

In addition, new Superintendent Clifford Janey appears committed to making DCPS space available to charter schools. Janey has identified several

underused schools with excess space available and urged the Board of Education to lease this space to charter schools. Officials within DCPS are increasingly aware that underutilized space is a drain on the system's finances, and that the millions of dollars the city's charter schools are pouring into commercial rent could be redirected into DCPS coffers. City Council Member Kathy Patterson (D-Ward 3) has backed legislation to give DCPS schools that co-locate with charters a preference in school renovation funding. School district officials are also moving to liquidate more of the stock of unused property held by both the mayor and DCPS.

## *Funding*

District charter schools typically receive much more equitable and generous funding relative to other public schools than charters in many states. Since the District of Columbia is only one jurisdiction, there is no distinction between state and local funding as there is in many states where charter schools have access only to state funds.

Yet, while charter and DCPS schools in the District are funded equitably relative to one another, this does not mean that either the District's charter or traditional public schools have enough funding to provide the services their students need. *Education Week* reports that the District of Columbia spends \$11,269 per student, more than any state. This statistic is misleading, however, because it includes the expensive private special education placements, which are a significant share of the District's budget and not part of the per-pupil formula.<sup>40</sup> In reality, District charter schools receive about \$7,000 per student, as well as additional money for students with special needs and a \$2,380 per-pupil facilities allowance.<sup>41</sup>

While District charter schools receive more on a per-pupil basis than charters in many other jurisdictions, they also serve particularly hard-to-serve students in a high-cost urban area. Many students enter District charter schools far behind and need substantial help to reach grade level performance. Many also require access to medical and mental health services to enable them to succeed in school—one charter school leader estimates the average student arriving at his school needs some \$10,000 in psychological counseling service to compensate for the violence and dysfunction many have witnessed in their home environments and

communities. While some DCPS schools work collaboratively with other District agencies to provide these services to students, charters have much less access to interagency resources, and many pay for counseling and medical needs out of their own operational funds. Others have raised significant philanthropic funding and federal grants to cover such services.

## *Authorizing*

The District of Columbia's charter experience underscores the importance of high-quality authorizing. Early high-profile problems in a few schools demonstrated the need for a stringent authorizing process and conscientious oversight after schools open. There is a clear contrast between the District of Columbia's two authorizers, the Board of Education and the Public Charter School Board (PCSB).

In a 2003 study for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, education researcher Louann Berlein Palmer evaluated the quality of charter school authorizing in 24 states with a significant charter sector. According to Berlein, charter school authorizing in the District received a grade of B-, which placed it in the top one-half of states. The District of Columbia's authorizing had several advantages, particularly the presence of multiple authorizers. The biggest concerns identified in Berlein's study related to poor support, oversight, and accountability for charter authorizers themselves, and a lack of transparency in some processes. The Public Charter School Board was also judged to be a more satisfactory authorizer than the Board of Education.<sup>42</sup>

The Board of Education and the PCSB both have limited resources and relatively small staffs for the number of schools and students they oversee. And unlike the situation in states, there is no "state education agency" in the District to monitor the performance of the Board of Education and PCSB as charter authorizers. To some extent this state oversight role has fallen to Congress, which recently asked the Government Accountability Office to evaluate the quality of charter school authorizing in the District of Columbia. Congressional oversight of authorizing has its own problems, however, in particular concerns about the District's home rule, or city-governance structures.<sup>43</sup>

## ***Board of Education***

It is hard to evaluate the performance of the Board of Education as an authorizer, because it has been completely overhauled since charters first appeared on the scene. In its first year as an authorizer, the Board clearly underestimated the seriousness of its task and lacked the resources to charter schools effectively. The Board strengthened its authorizing processes following the scandals surrounding the closing of the Marcus Garvey charter school, but continued to have difficulties. The creation of a reformed, hybrid Board in 2000 brought in pro-charter members appointed by Mayor Anthony Williams. New key elected Board members Julie Mikuta (District 1) and President Peggy Cooper Cafritz pushed to close charters with serious problems, and the Board strengthened its approval and oversight processes.

Despite these improvements, the Board of Education's authorizing continues to receive criticism, and some members remain hostile to charters. One observer familiar with city politics describes the Board's approach to charter school authorizing as "schizophrenic"—it is conflicted, at best, about charter schools but determined to use the chartering authority it has. Charter advocates who advise prospective charter applicants generally discourage them from applying to the Board of Education because its process is less transparent and more politically driven than that of the PCSB, which clearly defines expectations for a quality application. The Board of Education has allowed more charter schools with serious problems to open than has the PCSB, but has also closed several schools. Still, the average test performance of schools chartered by the Board of Education lags behind those chartered by the PCSB.

The Board of Education is undergoing yet another transition as an authorizer. During the 2004-2005 school year, it suspended issuing new charters pending its adoption of a new system-wide school reform plan by Superintendent Janey.<sup>44</sup> Some charter advocates worry that this moratorium combined with the Board's apparent increased deference to Janey on charter issues will stifle chartering. Others point out that Janey has so far shown an openness to charter schools, particularly regarding co-location. If the Board of Education is willing to build its authorizing capacity and quality, it has a valuable opportunity to learn from forward-looking school districts like New York City

and Chicago, which have made chartering a key plank in their reform strategies.<sup>45</sup> But it remains unclear whether there is the political will or competence to do so. If not, trends suggest that most future charter applicants will choose the PCSB.

## ***Public Charter School Board***

The Public Charter School Board (PCSB) has been an extremely conscientious and pro-charter school authorizer, and is nationally recognized as a model for its application process, performance contracts, and renewal process. It has adopted a rigorous two-stage application and approval process for prospective charter operators and continues to demand reporting and accountability after a school opens. It has revoked one charter for poor academic performance, and another closed voluntarily.

The PCSB faces its own challenges, among them the concern that it risks smothering schools with regulation, however well intended. Some charter school operators complain that the reporting and documentation demands of the PCSB cross the boundary into micromanagement. Others worry that increasingly complex application requirements will dry up the pool of potential applicants. The PCSB needs to strike a balance between authorizing and monitoring schools judiciously while giving them flexibility.

## ***Performance***

Charter schools in the District of Columbia are performing roughly on par with or slightly better than traditional public schools, particularly at the high school level, and there are several high-performing charter schools. Overall, however, their students' achievement does not match the expectations set by their proponents. Outperforming the District's public schools is a low bar, and charter advocates agree the schools must do better.

There are several District charter schools that are performing poorly, relative to both the city's other charter schools and DCPS schools, dragging down the District's charter school sector's overall performance. While everyone agrees these that these schools need to improve or be closed, doing so is a challenge. Identifying low-performing schools is not always cut-and-dried. For example, the Maya Angelou school is one of the District's most widely admired charters. It

serves at-risk high school students including those who have previously dropped out or have had run-ins with the law. Not surprisingly, it has among the lowest test scores in the city, but Maya Angelou is more successful than DCPS schools at retaining these students to graduation and sending them to college. It is clearly making a positive contribution to public education in the District of Columbia and to the students it serves.

Good charter authorizers can discern between schools that are truly failing and those with low test scores that are nonetheless improving student outcomes. Authorizers must use non-test indicators, such as graduation and college matriculation rates, as well as “soft” indicators, such as the results of school visits, to determine student performance trends. The District’s authorizers need more nuanced measures than the current assessments to gauge charter students’ growth over time, relative to their performance when they enter a charter school. This is particularly true at the high school level, where many students are entering several years below grade level.

Closing charter schools is also politically difficult for authorizers. In places like the District of Columbia, even low-performing charters may be superior to other public school alternatives. Low-performing charters that are safe, have small class sizes, or a nurturing environment can also retain strong parental and community support despite academic or other shortcomings. For example, when the Board of

Education revoked Village Learning Center’s charter in 2004 due to serious financial and operational problems, many parents protested because they liked the school’s teaching style and environment.

Closing the lowest-performing charter schools is not enough. Even the most successful charters admit they are not yet performing at ideal levels. Many other charter schools are simply mediocre and need additional support, as well as a kick in the pants from their authorizers, to improve.

### *Demonstrating Scale*

The growth of charter schooling in the District of Columbia presents its own challenges. At the most basic level, the increased number of charter schools makes it hard for authorizers to ensure school quality without replicating the bureaucracy that charters seek to escape.

More significantly, as charter schools gain critical mass in the District of Columbia, there is increasing pressure on the movement to satisfy the predictions and arguments of charter advocates about the benefits of full-scale charter reform and choice for individual students as well as for public education. It is no longer enough to simply have some good schools. Charter schools need to demonstrate that the sector as a whole is improving student achievement and how charters spur reform more broadly in a school district.

# Lessons for Other Cities and States

Despite the District of Columbia's unusual governance and other features, policymakers elsewhere can learn some important lessons from its charter movement's success.

## *The Importance of a Strong Law*

The District's strong charter school law was the key to the sector's rapid growth. Most importantly, the law:

- ❑ Provides for multiple authorizers, giving charter applicants more than one route and the local school district less ability to impede charter growth;
- ❑ Funds charter schools on an equitable basis with other public schools;
- ❑ Gives charter schools significant operational and academic flexibility;
- ❑ Provides charter schools additional per-pupil facilities funding; and
- ❑ Allows increased per-pupil allocations to support residential charter schools.

These provisions would greatly improve charter laws in many states.

## *Preschool Charters*

District charter schools receive per-pupil funding for enrolling preschool students. A few serve prekindergarteners and kindergarteners exclusively. This is important because many of the city's children come from disadvantaged families and enter school far behind. By providing disadvantaged young children with a high-quality educational experience, the District's preschool and kindergarten charter schools are preparing them for success. Cities and states elsewhere should consider this

model of expanding preschool and kindergarten opportunities through a diverse set of publicly accountable charters.

## *School Quality Creates Political Cover*

The wave of District charter schools that opened in 1998 included several "standouts" that went on to win national recognition. This success helped demonstrate the promise of charter schools and attracted parents looking for better educational opportunities for their children. Parental demand for charters has been critical to their political security. Their foes recognize that they must tread carefully.

## *Independent Authorizing*

The District of Columbia has one of the nation's few boards created specifically and exclusively to authorize charters.<sup>46</sup> Unlike pre-existing entities elsewhere that had charter authorizing added to their functions, the District's Public Charter School Board has a single mission: the creation of high-quality charters. It can focus all its human and other resources on that mission and it enjoys a degree of political independence that allows it to make decisions based on school quality and outcomes. Its biggest challenge now is to manage robust charter growth without becoming overly bureaucratic. States seeking to improve their charter school authorizing should consider adopting this model.

## *Charter Schools are a Robust Reform*

The District of Columbia's experience with charter schools compellingly demonstrates that they are more robust than other reforms. Education researcher Frederick Hess has written about the phenomena of "policy churn" (a rapid succession of reform strategies that are abandoned before their effects are known) in urban school districts,<sup>47</sup> and the District of Columbia is a prime example. The School

Reform Act of 1995 contained many reforms that were quickly forgotten. During the time the District of Columbia's charter school law has been in place, the District's school system has had three different school boards<sup>48</sup> and six superintendents.<sup>49</sup> Each brought in reforms that were displaced by successors.

In contrast to these evanescent reforms, charter schooling has been surprisingly robust. The Public Charter School Board's membership and executive

director have changed, but its process has remained consistent and transparent. Many District charter schools have grown and improved student achievement during the years. The turmoil in the District of Columbia Public Schools system has not derailed the charter school movement, which has been largely self-sustaining and independently driven. School districts seeking to avoid policy churn would do well to consider charter schooling.

## Capital Briefing: AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter School

**Location:** 700 I Street, S.W., Washington, D.C.

**Opened:** 2005

**Grades Served:** Preschool and kindergarten

**Enrollment:** 30 - 36

**Authorizer:** Public Charter School Board

AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter School is one of a number of District charter schools taking advantage of laws that allow public schools, including charter schools, to receive per-pupil funding to serve pre-kindergarten students.

The charter school is a project of the AppleTree Institute for Education Innovation, founded in 1996 by Jack McCarthy and Lex Towle, who have been active in both the Massachusetts and District of Columbia charter school movements. In its early years, the AppleTree Institute provided technical assistance and policy advocacy support for charter schools in the District of Columbia and worked with partners to help launch two of the city's recognized charter high schools—the César Chávez Charter High School for Public Policy and the Washington Math, Science, and Technology Public Charter School.

After seeing the tremendous educational deficits with which many students were entering these charter high schools, the AppleTree team decided to start with a "blank slate" by working with preschool children to help them enter school ready to succeed. In 2001, they opened the AppleTree Early Literacy Preschool, a full-day, high-quality preschool program focused on scientifically-based approaches to develop children's early literacy, numeric, social, emotional, and motor skills so that children would be ready for kindergarten. AppleTree uses the "Opening the World of Learning" comprehensive early literacy program and works directly with the program's author to provide its staff with some 50 days of professional development per year. In 2004, the school received a charter and, in 2005, will begin its first year as a public charter school, serving children ages 3 through 5 in both prekindergarten and kindergarten.

Most of the charter school's students come from the Southwest Washington, D.C., waterfront neighborhood, where the school is located. This is a diverse community that includes upper-middle and working-class families from white, black, and other backgrounds, as well as a significant population of low-income families living in subsidized housing. Even in its first year as a charter, the school has attracted parent interest in excess of its capacity.

AppleTree is also unique in its work to foster reform in other public school and early education programs in the District of Columbia. Under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Early Reading First program, AppleTree staff are working with several District-area Head Start programs, as well as a neighboring District of Columbia Public School (DCPS), Amidon Elementary, to institute "Opening the World of Learning" and scientifically based early literacy practices into their early childhood programs. AppleTree Executive Director Jack McCarthy is also considering innovative ways to expand AppleTree's program in collaboration with DCPS. One idea is co-locating AppleTree prekindergarten programs in surplus space in DCPS elementary schools—allowing the schools to essentially "outsource" their prekindergarten programs to AppleTree, which has greater staff capacity and training in early learning and literacy.

## Policy Recommendations

Several policy steps can make District charter schools even more successful than they have been to date. These recommendations deal with facilities, school performance, school authorizing, data collection, and connections with the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).

### *Facilities*

District charters still struggle to obtain facilities. Recent events—particularly new congressional legislation strengthening charters' right to bid on and purchase or lease surplus school buildings and DCPS Superintendent Clifford Janey's new openness to charter co-location—hold promise for improvement. But they do not address charters' fundamental problems with facilities.

#### **❑ Break the Monopoly on Facilities**

Current arrangements assume that public school buildings “belong” to DCPS and are available to charters only if DCPS allows it. In fact, these buildings actually belong to the city's taxpayers, and their interest in ensuring these buildings are used to provide high-quality education can be fulfilled just as well (or better) by charters than by DCPS schools. The status quo forces charters to jump through too many hoops and does not place a priority on school quality. It harms all District students because it fragments school facilities funding and diverts charter school rents that could be used to fix schools into the pockets of commercial property owners.

As charters grow and their enrollments increase as a percentage of total District enrollment, arrangements for allocating public school buildings need to be made more equitable.

The mayor and City Council could solve this problem by establishing an independent facilities board or agency to oversee the quality, upkeep, and allocation of public school

buildings. A local public school facilities real estate trust, along the lines proposed by education researcher Michael DeArmond, could be a useful model here.<sup>50</sup> Such an arrangement could:

- create a more level playing field in acquiring and maintaining buildings for charter schools;
- reduce the drain of resources to commercial landlords and unify facilities funding, maintenance, renovation, and planning for both charter and DCPS school buildings;
- improve service and repairs for DCPS and charter schools by bringing in experts from the private sector;
- manage the District of Columbia's public school building inventory more efficiently and responsively as enrollment shifts from DCPS to charter schools (as well as within DCPS schools);
- provide a single point of contact to better coordinate school renovation with broader development goals and city projects;<sup>51</sup> and

### City Build Brings Development and Charter Schooling Together

The congressionally funded "City Build" program links charter facilities and development needs in the District of Columbia. Launched in August 2004 with support from both Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) and Mayor Anthony Williams, City Build will provide \$1 million in incentive grants to charter schools that locate in one of 12 neighborhoods identified by Brookings Institution researchers and local leaders as prime areas for sustainable and pro-family development.

SOURCE: "Sen. Landrieu, Mayor Williams kick off 'City Build' Charter School Initiative," Press Release, Office of Mayor Anthony Williams, August 18, 2004, <http://dc.gov/mayor/news/release.asp?id=628&mon=200408>.

- lengthen lease terms to give charter schools more incentive to make substantial improvements to DCPS buildings.

### ❑ ***Incorporate Charter School Space Into Development Plans***

The District's leaders realize that improving school quality is essential to meeting its long-term development goals and keeping middle-class families in the city. District charter schools have been forced to compete for space with real estate developers for too long. It is time to bring the efforts of charter school leaders, city development officials, and private developers together to create more attractive communities for families.

Integrating charters in development plans is especially critical east of the Anacostia River, where many children are in need of better education options. Charter operators want to serve these children, but few charters have opened there due to a lack of usable space. District leaders must ensure that charter and other public school infrastructure is an integral element of development planning, especially in these neighborhoods. Doing so would help stabilize the city's middle and working classes, stabilize the city's tax base, and help the mayor reach his goal of attracting 100,000 new residents to the District.

Here are some ways the District can integrate charter schools more fully into its development efforts:

- *City housing and planning authorities should incorporate space for charter schools in key redevelopment initiatives*, such as Reservation 13 (the former site of the D.C. Jail and D.C. General Hospital), the St. Elizabeth's Hospital area east of the Anacostia, the Anacostia waterfront, and the neighborhoods adjacent to the new stadium planned along South Capitol Street.
- *The District of Columbia should give commercial, residential, and government developers incentives to collaborate with charter school operators.* These could include tax incentives, bidding preferences, or waivers similar to those now offered for affordable housing development. Charter authorizers should work with development agencies to steer charter schools toward

neighborhoods that are being redeveloped or need better schools.

### ❑ ***Create a District Infrastructure Bank to Help Charters Finance Facilities***

District charter schools generally have more access to credit and financing for facilities than those in many other states. Nonetheless, they need more support in funding and maintaining their facilities.

The federal government could help by creating an "infrastructure bank" to help District charters finance their facilities. These special-purpose banks operate at the state or local level, run by public or nonprofit groups, and offer community groups low-cost loans to meet local needs. The federal government provides the initial capital for loans, then loan payments and interest are recycled back into the bank to make new loans, and the banks become self-sustaining.

Due to its compact size, strong charter sector, and desperate need for more charter facility funding, the District would be an ideal place for the government to launch an infrastructure bank pilot project. Expanding the current direct loan program for charters into an investment bank would be a great way to start. As with the direct loan program, the bank should continue to limit investment to schools that improve student outcomes and meet the goals spelled out in their charters. If the project is successful, Congress could perhaps create a nationwide network of state infrastructure banks to help finance construction and renovation of both charter and traditional public schools.

## ***Strengthen Performance***

### ❑ ***Close Low-Performing Schools***

The District's two charter authorizers need to bite the bullet and begin closing and replacing low-performing schools. The dual role of the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) as authorizer and advocate for charters makes it hard for it to close schools. Still, its recent decision to close Southeast Academy for failure to meet academic goals suggests it is up to the challenge. The Board of Education has been more willing to close charters, but more for financial or operational problems rather than poor academic performance.

Both authorizers need to intervene in underperforming charters more aggressively and close the ones that fail to improve. Improved data collection would help support these difficult decisions. The mayor, City Council, and charter supporters can help, too, by backing authorizers when they close weak schools.

### ❑ ***Expand Technical Assistance and Other Supports to Enhance Charter School Quality***

District charter schools receive little outside support and technical assistance. Some charter school advocates and support groups, such as the District's Public Charter School Association, Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS), and the Center for Student Support Services, provide limited technical assistance and "back office" support. But the District's charters need more help from the DCPS, city agencies, donors, and the federal government.

- *The District's public school system must do a better job of sharing information with charters.* Charter operators often report they have trouble obtaining student records and other information from DCPS, for example information about what is required of charters under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.
- *City agencies must improve their cooperation with charters and provide them with more services.* Charter schools get the short end of the stick when it comes to city services for public schools, such as resource police officers, school nurses, and social workers. The mayor should direct these agencies to work more closely with charters.
- *Philanthropists and the federal government can help charters in a less direct way by supporting nonprofit groups and institutions of higher education that provide charters with technical assistance.*

### ❑ ***Attract More High-Performing Charter Networks and Replicate High-Quality Schools***

Most of the District's charter schools are homegrown "mom-and-pop" operations. Their roots

in the community give them tremendous vitality and connections with community resources. But some of the District's strongest charters have roots outside the District with nonprofit groups or for-profit education management organizations. And the District's strongest homegrown schools also tend to take an entrepreneurial approach, seeking to expand their schools to multiple campuses here or replicate them in other cities. Community leaders, charter authorizers, the mayor, and the City Council should support replication of the best charters regardless of their origins and recruit high-quality models from elsewhere in the country. Successful charters that want to open new sites or expand to other grades should be given preferential access to facilities.

### ❑ ***Focus on Improving Charter High School Performance***

There is tremendous demand for high-quality high school options in the District of Columbia. On average, the District's charter high schools perform better than DCPS high schools, but worse than the District's charter elementary schools. District leaders need to focus on improving the performance of both types of high schools. They should be transformed into laboratories for federal and foundation-supported research on how to turn adolescents who enter high school far behind grade level into successful college students.

The District has several vocationally-oriented charter high schools, most of which rank near the bottom of all charter schools in reading and math achievement. Several groups in the District have expressed interest in opening more vocationally themed charters. The Board of Education and PCSB should consider a moratorium on such charters until the performance of existing vocationally oriented schools improves.

### ❑ ***Create Performance Pipelines Across Grade Levels***

Most District charters operate independently of one another. As the charter movement in the District matures and young charter students grow older, students could encounter difficulties making the transition from one level of schooling to the next.

Charter leaders and advocates should consider creating “performance pipelines” among schools serving different grade levels to ease these transitions and keep children in high-quality schools. A few District charter schools are already doing this. For example, the founders of César Chávez Charter High School for Public Policy recently spun off a charter middle school to provide students with high-quality options before they reach high school. And KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) is launching a high school in the District. More pipelines could also help boost charter high school performance by supplying them with well-prepared incoming students.

## **Authorizers**

The District of Columbia’s two charter authorizers are outperforming authorizers in many states, but neither is performing as well as it could. Several changes could help boost their performance.

### **❑ *Improve the Quality of Authorizer Performance Data***

According to a national study, lack of authorizer oversight is one of the District charter system’s biggest shortcomings.<sup>52</sup> There is little systematically collected data about how the District’s authorizers operate upon which to evaluate their performance. Numerous anecdotes suggest that the Board of Education has serious problems as a charter authorizer, a conclusion school performance data supports. But otherwise, there is little data to go by.

The U.S. Congress moved to begin correcting this problem by requiring the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to evaluate the District’s two authorizers biennially. Congress and District leaders should work with GAO to develop indicators (such as anonymous surveys of charter operators and applicants, school performance figures, and an evaluation of school monitoring and charter approval processes) that give a clearer picture of how the authorizers are performing.

### **❑ *Standardize and Streamline Data Reporting***

Both authorizing boards should work with all government agencies and officials that collect information on charter schools to create a uniform

data reporting system. They should also work together to streamline data requirements. This would ease the reporting burden on charter schools and make it easier for parents to evaluate charter schools.

For example, the PCSB currently reports student gain scores on the SAT 9, while the Board of Education does not report any student gain information. This means that parents have less information by which to judge schools chartered by the Board of Education than they do PCSB schools. At a bare minimum, both boards should report gain score data for students in the schools they charter. A longitudinal data tracking system for *all* students in District public schools—charter and DCPS—would be even better.

### **❑ *Strengthen the Consequences—Short of Closure—for Schools not Meeting Their Goals***

Authorizers must revoke charters that are truly failing. But closure is not the only way to respond to underperforming schools. Authorizers need to strengthen the menu of corrective actions and technical assistance available to help underperforming charter schools improve before they fall so far into academic or operational trouble that they must be closed.

Authorizers understandably have reservations about judging the effectiveness of their own technical assistance when deciding whether charters receiving such assistance need to be closed. Congress or the City Council could solve this problem by enlisting local universities and groups with experience turning around low-performing schools to help struggling charters. Many education groups in Washington are qualified for this type of work.

### **❑ *Expand Successful Schools for Children Displaced by Charter Closures***

When the Board of Education closed Village Learning Center, it worked with the successful Community Academy charter to expand into the old Village Academy facility, creating a high-quality charter in the same location for former Village students. Both authorizing boards and charter advocates should remember this model as they move to close schools in the future. In particular, the charter school community should make sure that closed charter facilities remain within the charter community.

Congress and District elected officials can help authorizers to do this by clarifying the status of facilities owned by schools whose charters have been revoked. Currently, the PCSB is fighting to prevent the operators of Southeast Academy, whose charter the Board recently revoked, from keeping their building, which was purchased with taxpayer funds. In order for charter schools to obtain financing, it is important to ensure they can own their facilities. At the same time, if schools lose their charters, the public has an interest in recouping taxpayer dollars spent on the facilities. Legislation returning facilities to authorizers or independent facility managers when charters are revoked could address this situation, but must be carefully written so as not to undermine good charter schools' access to credit.

Authorizers could work with lenders to guarantee financed facilities will be occupied by another charter if the initial school's charter is revoked. Such agreements would be a win-win for all sides—they would guarantee that charter buildings financed with public dollars continue to be occupied by public charter schools and increase security for lenders by guaranteeing that another school will continue to make payments on the facility. As a result, lenders would be more willing to finance charter facilities. In addition, the Board of Education should require DCPS to seek other charter tenants for DCPS space previously occupied by defunct charter schools before allowing it to be used for other purposes.

The preceding recommendations apply to both authorizing boards; the following apply to the individual boards.

### ***The Board of Education***

#### **❑ *Become a Quality Authorizer or Get Out of the Business***

The Board of Education has always been conflicted about its role as an authorizer. It never asked for the job and has never expended the effort or resources necessary to be a high-quality authorizer. This conflict is not surprising—some Board members view charter schools as competition or resent congressional imposition of charters on the District. Quality authorizing takes time, resources, and political will. But some Board members may not believe that this is a worthwhile

investment given all their other challenges, not least of which is the need for sweeping reform of DCPS schools.

There are benefits of the Board of Education as an authorizer. Some of its members are elected and represent all areas of the city, giving it substantial legitimacy. The Board is also in a unique position to use chartering as a tool to complement DCPS reform efforts. But if the Board is not committed to being a quality authorizer, its authority to issue charters should be revoked.

The mayor and city leaders should work with Congress to set a five-year series of performance goals for the Board based on the forthcoming GAO report on charter authorizing. They should also establish a process for evaluating its performance after that time and then decide whether to extend or revoke its chartering authority.

#### **❑ *Re-evaluate the Relationship of the Board of Education With its Charter Schools***

The Board of Education should be held directly accountable for the performance of schools it charters. In many states, charter schools authorized by school districts are “dependent schools” that are not entirely autonomous and for whose performance school districts are held accountable. If this were the case in the District, the Board of Education could define a role for the DCPS superintendent in the chartering process, focus on filling gaps in the DCPS portfolio and be held more accountable for its chartering decisions.<sup>53</sup> Schools chartered by the PCSB would remain independent of DCPS, preserving the greater autonomy and competitive effects of this in-dependence. Congress would have to amend the School Reform Act of 1995 for such changes to occur.

#### **❑ *Allocate the Resources, Time, and Energy Necessary for Quality Authorizing***

The Board of Education has authorized about one-half as many schools, but has just one-third the charter school staff, as the PCSB. In addition, anecdotes suggest some Board of Education members dedicate insufficient time to their roles as charter authorizers.<sup>54</sup> If the Board wants to become a more effective authorizer, it needs to beef up its

charter staff. Board members also need to devote more time and energy to charters. The mayor needs to ensure that his Board appointees take their charter responsibilities seriously and community activists and journalists need to keep the Board members' feet to the fire.

#### **❑ *Use Chartering as a Tool to Support DCPS Reform***

If the Board of Education remains in the authorizing business, it should learn from school districts like New York City, San Diego, and Chicago that have used chartering to drive reform, replace low-performing schools, and serve unmet needs. The Board must become a dynamic authorizer that diagnoses gaps and needs in the existing system and puts out requests for charter proposals to fill them. The Board of Education's agreement with the Maya Angelou Public Charter School (which is authorized by the PCSB) to open a campus east of the Anacostia River for at-risk students referred from DCPS suggests the Board may be open to this sort of thinking—but it has a long way to go.

### ***The Public Charter School Board***

#### **❑ *Prevent Bureaucratic Creep***

Long-time observers of the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) say that the amount and complexity of information it requires of charter applicants has increased significantly since the Board's launch. Others complain that existing schools must submit information to the PCSB beyond what the law demands or what is necessary to prevent malfeasance and ensure student achievement. In addition, other entities, including federal and District governments, request data that authorizers must collect.

There is a risk that the PCSB is collecting too much data, rather than selectively collecting the right data. It should regularly review its application and reporting requirements to prune those that do not directly contribute to ensuring student achievement or preventing fiscal malfeasance. Biennial GAO reports can help with this. In addition, both authorizers should give schools a solid rationale for collecting any data they request and urge other agencies to streamline data collection if possible.

#### **❑ *Reward Schools with Good Performance Records by Increasing Flexibility and Reducing Reporting Requirements***

Strong schools need less frequent oversight. Reducing reporting requirements for them would free up their staff time and allow the PCSB staff to focus on schools that need greater oversight. The PCSB already does this to some extent, allowing schools with good fiscal reporting records to move from monthly to quarterly reporting, and it is also revamping its annual review process for charter schools so that high-performing schools will be reviewed less often.

#### **❑ *Encourage Additional Technical Assistance to Help Groups Meet Charter Application Requirements***

Local charter-consulting and advocacy groups are already beefing up their technical assistance and beginning to help schools with "back office" services. Philanthropists and congressional appropriators should invest in such efforts to aid community, faith-based, and other nonprofit groups meet the rigorous charter application requirements.

### ***Does the District of Columbia Need Another Authorizer?***

Given the Board of Education's shortcomings and the Public Charter School Board's challenges with expanding enrollment, members of the charter community are asking whether the District of Columbia needs a third authorizer. The District Council can designate a third authorizer, but it has never done so. There are good reasons not to designate a third authorizer now: there is no clear candidate for this role; the time, energy, and money it would take to set up a new authorizing board might be better used to strengthen the existing authorizers; and a weak board without adequate resources could do more harm than good.

Although the Board of Education and PCSB both need to improve, collectively they seem to be doing an adequate job. If the Board of Education cannot or will not make necessary improvements or if growth overwhelms the PCSB, a third authorizer may be needed. Charter advocates and elected officials should begin planning for such eventualities now.

## ***Improve Data***

The District of Columbia's charter movement needs both better data and more consistent, transparent data reporting by both charter and DCPS schools.

### **❑ *Collect and Track Longitudinal, Student-Linked Performance Data for all Children in District Public Schools***

Identifying and intervening in poorly performing charter schools requires more nuanced data than authorizers currently collect. Since most District charter schools serve students who enter with significant educational disadvantages, single year test scores alone will not adequately reflect schools' performance. Neither authorizer currently makes review or closure decisions based on schools' test scores alone; both conduct monitoring visits to the school and evaluate a variety of other measures indicated in schools' charters. But a strong accountability regime that gives authorizers strong ground to close charter schools for poor student performance also requires measuring longitudinal data to analyze student growth over time.

Despite the time and costs involved, Congress should authorize and fund a pilot project to implement longitudinal cohort data tracking for all public school students—charter and DCPS—in the District of Columbia. Implementing longitudinal student data tracking across all public schools would be more effective than efforts by either individual authorizer. Students in the District of Columbia, like those in most urban areas, are mobile, moving among neighborhoods in the city and between DCPS and charter schools. A city-wide longitudinal data system could maintain consistent student performance records across these moves and help teachers in schools to which students transfer obtain timely student performance data. In addition, a uniform longitudinal data system would allow parents to compare DCPS schools with those chartered by either authorizer. Such a system would not just improve accountability in the District of Columbia, but also serve as a laboratory to assess the practicality, advantages, pitfalls, and challenges of greater value-added measures for the rest of the country.

### **❑ *Make Data More Transparent, Accessible, and Comparable Across Authorizers and With District Public Schools***

Both charter authorizers publish annual reports, including school performance and environment information, but this information may not be easy for parents to use:

- The Public Charter School Board, the Board of Education, and DCPS do not report the same data, and when they do the reports are in different formats.
- Some school performance reports available on the Board of Education's website include obvious errors or inconsistencies.
- The Public Charter School Board publishes one-page school profiles that are easier for parents to use than the Board of Education's school report cards. But they do not explain the meaning of all data (particularly achievement data and student gain scores) in layman's terms.
- The mix of academic and non-academic outcomes reported can be confusing and does not indicate the relative importance of different outcomes or how parents should evaluate the outcomes reported.

As the number of school choices available to District families grows, parents need better, more transparent, and useful information about potential schools for their children. Requiring a more consistent set of indicators and conducting periodic audits of authorizer reports would address these problems.

A variety of school performance data systems, such as *greatschools.net* and *schoolmatters.org* now allow parents to access and compare school performance data on the Internet. An increasing number of District parents have access to these resources through the public libraries, community organizations, or places of employment. District officials should take advantage of these resources and ensure that they have the information they need from authorizers and DCPS to allow parents to compare public schools in the District.

❑ ***Improve Connections Between Charter and District of Columbia Public Schools***

The District's charter and traditional schools need to collaborate to achieve their missions. With 20 percent of the District's students now enrolled in charter schools and students constantly moving between charter and DCPS schools, neither system can afford to ignore the other. Creating a system of quality options for students demands that both systems be effective.

The District public school system and the Board of Education are missing a valuable opportunity to leverage the District's vibrant charter movement to support systemic reform. DCPS officials should identify practices that work in high-performing charter schools and use them in DCPS schools serving similar populations. The Board of Education should use chartering to meet needs that are not being served by existing DCPS schools. Both DCPS and charter

schools should build on one another's assets. For example, DCPS could open its athletic programs to charter students and charters could share their expertise in early literacy instruction or educating at-risk youth with DCPS staff.

In the longer term, charter schools could help catalyze more dramatic structural and governance reforms in DCPS. Most observers believe that a majority of District students will continue to be enrolled in DCPS schools. As the percentage of students enrolled in charter schools continues to grow, and some DCPS higher performing schools seek to become charters or use the threat of doing so to win greater autonomy,<sup>55</sup> school governance in the District of Columbia will increasingly come to resemble a "portfolio" system—where schools are overseen with performance agreements rather than direct management by a board of education. At some point, the impact of charter schools may prod elected leaders to shift DCPS to a more portfolio-like model.

## Moving Forward

Charter schools in the District of Columbia are at a critical crossroads. The District's charter school movement is one of the nation's most vital, enrolling more than 20 percent of the District's students—more than in any state—in a diverse array of schools. Yet significant obstacles to charter schools' growth remain, and many current schools are not living up to the quality of education they promised. As greater numbers of schools move past the five-year evaluation mark, pressure is growing for them to show they are improving student achievement. The oldest charter schools have had sufficient time to reach their stride and need to start demonstrating strong results. Authorizers need to clarify their roles and ensure that improving quality in an expanding charter sector does not mean replicating the DCPS bureaucracy.

Charter schools must also find their place relative to other reform efforts in the District of Columbia Public Schools. To provide a system of high-quality options for students, charter and traditional public schools must learn to work together rather than against each other.

Charter Schools in the District of Columbia are here to stay. Unlike many other cities and states, charter schools here are not threatened by an entrenched opposition that denies their right to exist. And, as in many cases, they have strong parental and community support. But simply existing is not enough. Charter schools were created in the District to improve student achievement and catalyze reform in the broader public education system. The degree to which this happens will depend on the decisions made today by key District decisionmakers and, most importantly, the schools themselves.

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Literacy Facts," District of Columbia State Education Agency, Office of Adult Education, <http://www.dcadultliteracy.org/literacyfacts.html>; U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, <http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Poverty Tables," Table 21: Number of Poor and Poverty Rate by State: 1980 to 2003, August 2004, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/histpov/hstpov21.html>; "Per Capita Income Growth Accelerated in 2004," Bureau of Economic Analysis, March 28, 2005, <http://www.bea.gov/bea/newsrel/SPINewsRelease.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Although the District of Columbia is not a state, it serves the functions of both a state and a school district when it comes to public education. The District is treated as a state by the federal government in terms of administering federal education programs; reporting demographic, achievement, and other data; and measuring accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act. In addition, the District operates under its own education code that is comparable to state codes enacted by legislatures in the 50 states. The District government must also carry out the same functions as state departments of education, most of which are conducted by the District of Columbia Public School system (DCPS) in its capacity as a state education agency (SEA). Some other state-level functions are carried out through the State Education Office, a part of the mayor's office. Although the District of Columbia is not a state, for some purposes discussed in this paper, particularly analysis of the District's charter law, states are the most appropriate unit of comparison.

<sup>4</sup> "States Ranked by Population: 2000," U.S. Census Bureau, April 2, 2001, <http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/phc-t2/tab01.txt>.

<sup>5</sup> In the 2004-2005 school year, the District had a higher percentage of students enrolled in charter schools than any state in the country and all but two school districts—Dayton, Ohio (26 percent), and Kansas City, Missouri (24 percent). Although 2005-2006 school year enrollment figures are not yet available it is likely that D.C. 2005-2006 charter enrollment will surpass those of one of both of these cities.

<sup>6</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, PPI President Will Marshall was appointed to the Public Charter School Board in 2005.

<sup>7</sup> *The District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995* was part of a larger budget bill: 104th Congress, 2nd sess., H.R. 2546 EAS, sections 213-216. The District of Columbia actually has two charter school laws. Because the District does not have a state legislature, both the District of Columbia City Council and the United States Congress can fill some of the functions carried out by state legislatures in other states. The congressionally enacted School Reform Act of 1995 is the main DC charter school law. Shortly after its passage, the City Council passed its own charter school law, which is the one that is actually "on the books" in the District of Columbia Code. The Council's law differs from the School Reform Act in various provisions, but where the two contradict the School Reform Act prevails. Where they do not contradict, both are in effect. Overlaps and conflicts between the two legislative bodies, and the fact that Congress' legislation generally trumps council-passed District law can be a source of tension in the District.

<sup>8</sup> "House Panel Hears Testimony on Charter Schools for DC," *Associated Press*, June 8, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Charter schools have the option to be recognized as a local educational agency (LEA) for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (special education) purposes or to be part of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) LEA for IDEA purposes only. In addition, because Washington, DC, is not part of a larger state, DCPS carries out the functions of both an LEA and a state education agency (SEA). While charter schools are independent LEAs, they must still deal with DCPS as an SEA on areas where charter schools in other states must report to their state education agencies. For example, charter schools receive their federal funds through DCPS and must report to DCPS data required under the No Child Left Behind Act.

<sup>10</sup> From 1871 to 1874, the District of Columbia had a territorial government that included some elected officials. In 1874, the U.S. Congress temporarily suspended this government because of financial problems and, in 1878, passed the Organic Act eliminating the territorial government and stripping the District of elected governance.

<sup>11</sup> Spellman, Karin, "Charter Schools Await Federal Cash," *The Washington Times*, February 11, 199, pg. C7.

<sup>12</sup> "Charter Schools in the District of Columbia: Improving Systems for Accountability, Autonomy, and Competition," D.C. Appleseed Center, April 2001, <http://www.dcappleseed.org/index.cfm>.

<sup>13</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, Andrew J. Rotherham, former director of the 21st Century Schools Project and a senior fellow at PPI, is a trustee of the César Chávez Public Charter High School for Public Policy.

<sup>14</sup> Strauss, Valerie, "Successful D.C. School Weighs Charter Bid," *The Washington Post*, February 21, 2005, pg. B03.

<sup>15</sup> These figures exclude Carlos Rosario Public Charter School, an adult education school that primarily serves immigrants and enrolls no African-American students. Including students from Carlos Rosario, 83 percent of charter school students in 2004-2005 were African-American or black, 14 percent were Hispanic, 2 percent were white, 1 percent were Asian, and 1 percent were "other"—primarily Afro-Caribbean and African immigrants. Statistics for disadvantaged students, special education, and English language learners also do not include Carlos Rosario because its adult students are not eligible for these programs. Most Carlos Rosario students are English language learners, however.

<sup>16</sup> Author calculations, using data from: "Annual Report: Academic Year 2003-2004," District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, August 2004, <http://www.dcpubliccharter.com> and the list of schools chartered by the District of Columbia Board of Education, [http://www.dcboecharter.org/kindergarden\\_schools.htm](http://www.dcboecharter.org/kindergarden_schools.htm).

<sup>17</sup> District charter's lower number of special education students is due in part to the fact that, as children enter school for the first time in pre-K and kindergarten charter schools, those students with disabilities have not yet been diagnosed.

<sup>18</sup> The District of Columbia used the Stanford-9 assessment through the 2004-2005 school year. It is currently adopting a new set of standards, based on those used by Massachusetts, and a new set of assessments aligned with these standards. These assessments will generate different results than the current set of assessments.

<sup>19</sup> Author calculations, using data from: "Annual Report: Academic Year 2004-2005" District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, August 2005, <http://www.dcpubliccharter.com> and data provided to the author by the District of Columbia Board of Education's charter schools office.

<sup>20</sup> District of Columbia Public Schools, No Child Left Behind Data Reports, <http://silicon.k12.dc.us/NCLB/summaryreportcards.asp>.

<sup>21</sup> This totals more than 42 because of multiple campuses for some schools and because schools serving both elementary and secondary grades are counted separately for elementary and secondary in NCLB. In 2004-2005 a particularly high number of charter schools did not receive AYP ratings because only students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 10 were tested for the District's AYP calculations, rather than in grades 3-11 as in previous years. As a result, several charter schools that had previously received AYP ratings did not have a sufficient number of students tested to receive them.

<sup>22</sup> Hayes, V. Dion, "D.C. Charter School Data Show 8 Attain Benchmark," *The Washington Post*, August 9, 2005, pg. B05.

<sup>23</sup> Capital City, Community Academy (Amos Campus), Elsie Whitlow Stokes, Friendship-Edison Chamberlain, Friendship-Edison Woodridge, Hyde Leadership Elementary, Ideal Academy (Elementary), and Roots Elementary had higher percentages of students proficient in both math and reading than the DCPS average. Two Rivers and William E. Doar had higher percentages of students proficient in reading, but not math. D.C. Prep Elementary, Meridian Elementary, Tree of Life, and Tri-Community had higher percentages of students proficient in math, but not reading.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Jordan, Capital City Secondary, Friendship-Edison Blow Pierce, Hyde Leadership Secondary, Ideal Academy (Secondary), KIPP DC: KEY, Paul Public Charter School, Roots Secondary, and SEED all had higher percentages of students proficient in both reading and math than DCPS averages. Community Academy Secondary, IDEA, and Meridian Secondary had higher percentages of students proficient in reading, but not math. The César Chávez Florida Avenue and Massachusetts Avenue campuses, Friendship-Edison Collegiate, and Thurgood Marshall all had higher percentages of students proficient in math, but not reading.

<sup>25</sup> Hoxby, Caroline M, "Achievement in Charter Schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States: Understanding the Differences," Harvard University and National Bureau of Economic Research, December 2004, [http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/hoxby/papers/hoxbycharter\\_dec.pdf](http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/hoxby/papers/hoxbycharter_dec.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> The Public Charter School Board reports gain scores in normal curve equivalents. The Stanford 9 is scored on a normal curve, so that a student's raw score reflects where he or she falls along the normal distribution for students in that grade in that subject. This provides a very rough way to approximate how much a student learns from year to year. A student making expected progress from year to year would receive the same normal curve equivalent (NCE) score in subsequent years. A student whose NCE score rose would be judged to have made more than the amount of growth expected in a year, and one whose score fell less than expected. The average NCE growth score reported by the Public Charter School Board is the mean NCE growth score for all students in the school.

<sup>27</sup> Eleven schools did not have gain scores because they were in their first year, they do not serve students in grades that are tested, or the data was flawed.

<sup>28</sup> The Board of Education has only one charter school, Jos-Arz, that focuses solely on educating students with disabilities. Although Jos-Arz is one of the lowest performing charter schools in the District of Columbia, with only 10.53 percent of students proficient in reading and 15.79 percent in math, its enrollment is small. In addition, the Public Charter School Board has also chartered a school, the School for the Arts in Learning (SAIL), focused on students with special needs. The Board of Education has two charter schools, Options and Next Step, specifically focused on at-risk students with special needs. But Next Step is not included in the test results analysis because its enrollment is too small to publicly report results, and because of the school's design and mission, many students are there less than a year. Options, the oldest charter school in the District of Columbia, is the lowest performing charter middle school in the city. But the Public Charter School Board has also authorized a school serving at-risk students, the Maya Angelou Public Charter School.

<sup>29</sup> Author calculation based on previously cited achievement data. The data for high school students includes middle-school grade students attending middle/high schools, because the data available to the author did not separate middle- and high-school students attending the same school. Comparison of SAT-9 proficiency by grade levels is not available because only one set of results is reported per school.

<sup>30</sup> Vanourek, Gregg, "State of the Charter Movement 2005," Charter School Leadership Council, May 2005, <http://www.charterschoolleadershipcouncil.org/pdf/sotm2005.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Mathews, Jay, "High Schools that Work," *Washington Post Magazine*, April 3, 2005, pg. W10.

- <sup>32</sup> Office of Innovation and Improvement, "Innovations in Education: Successful Charter Schools," U.S. Department of Education, June 2004, <http://www.ed.gov/admins/comm/choice/charter/index.html>.
- <sup>33</sup> "States Ranked by Population: 2000," U.S. Census Bureau, April 2, 2001 <http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/phc-t2/tab01.txt>.
- <sup>34</sup> Hsu, Spencer S. "How Vouchers Came to DC" *Education Next*, vol. 4, no. 4, Fall 2004, pg. 44.
- <sup>35</sup> Quinones, Ariana, District of Columbia Public Charter Schools Association, interview with author, April 2005.
- <sup>36</sup> District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, <http://www.dcpubliccharter.com/>.
- <sup>37</sup> Hayes, V. Dion, "Officials Moving to Sell Some Schools," *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2005, pg. B01.
- <sup>38</sup> Congressional Testimony of Malcolm E. Peabody, D.C. Public Charter School Coalition Chairman, Friends of Choice in Urban Schools, House Appropriations Subcommittee on the District of Columbia, Public Hearing, June 22, 1999.
- <sup>39</sup> Alpert, Bruce and Bill Walsh, "On The Hill," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, November 28, 2004, <http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/washington/index.ssf?/base/news-0/110162608257540.xml>; and author interviews with Senator Landrieu staff, April 2005.
- <sup>40</sup> "No Small Change: Targeting Money Towards Student Performance," *Education Week*, Quality Counts 2005, Editorial Projects in Education, January 6, 2005, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/01/06/17overview-s1.h24.html>.
- <sup>41</sup> Residential Facilities (SEED and Maya Angelou) receive a higher facilities allotment (\$6,426) as well as a residential allotment of \$11,736 per resident student.
- <sup>42</sup> Berlein Palmer, Louann and Rebecca Gau, "Charter School Authorizing: Are States Making the Grade?," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, June 5, 2003, <http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=67&pubsubid=931>.
- <sup>43</sup> "Charter Schools: Oversight Practices in the District of Columbia," Government Accountability Office, GAO-05-490, May 2005, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05490.pdf>. This is a descriptive report looking at the practices of the District's two authorizers. A second report, later this fall, will provide a more normative evaluation of the performance of the two authorizers.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> Lake, Robin and Lydia Rainey, "Chasing Away the Blues: Charter Schooling in Chicago," Progressive Policy Institute, June 2005, <http://www.ppionline.org/>; Lake, Robin, "Seeds of Change in the Big Apple: Charter Schooling in New York City," Progressive Policy Institute, September 2004, <http://www.ppionline.org/>.
- <sup>46</sup> Currently, four states—Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, and Utah—have some type of independent board with the authority to grant charters. Colorado, Utah, and Idaho all passed laws creating these entities in 2004.
- <sup>47</sup> Hess, Frederick M., *Spinning Wheels*, Brookings Institution Press, 1999.
- <sup>48</sup> These are the elected Board of Education in 1996, the Control Board and Emergency Board of Trustees from late 1996 through 2000, and the hybrid Board of Education starting in 2001.
- <sup>49</sup> Franklyn Smith, Gen. Julius Becton, Arlene Ackerman, Paul Vance, Interim Superintendent Elfreda Massie, and currently Clifford Janey.
- <sup>50</sup> De Armond, Michael, "Getting Out of the Facilities Business: A Public School Real Estate Trust," chap. in *Making School Reform Work*, Paul T. Hill and James Harvey, eds., Brookings Institution Press, 2004.
- <sup>51</sup> There is currently little to no coordination of DCPS facilities investments with the District of Columbia's development goals and priorities, since DCPS conducts its facilities planning process separate from the City's budget and development planning processes, an issue local leaders have identified as a problem. Statement of Robert C. Bobb, Deputy Mayor/City Administrator, District of Columbia, before House Committee on Government Reform, May 20, 2005.
- <sup>52</sup> Berlein Palmer, *op. cit.*
- <sup>53</sup> As in California, where school districts may authorize independent or dependent charter schools, schools currently authorized by the Board of Education could be allowed to remain independent or to transfer to the Public Charter School Board. In addition, increased autonomy could be used as a reward for schools with strong performance. For example, Board of Education sponsored charter schools that pass their fifth year review with strong evidence of student achievement gains could be allowed to become independent charter schools.
- <sup>54</sup> Wilgoren, Debbi, "DC School Board Not All Ears at Hearing," *The Washington Post*, December 4, 1997, B06; "Another Charter School Board?" *The Washington Times*, May 5, 2000, A18. One charter school operator said that it was clear, when she presented her application to the Board, that several members had not looked at the application.
- <sup>55</sup> Strauss, Valerie, *op. cit.*

## About the Author

Sara Mead is a fellow of the Progressive Policy Institute and a senior policy analyst at Education Sector, an independent Washington, D.C.-based think tank focused on education policy. Ms. Mead is the author of numerous papers and analyses on federal education policy, early childhood education, teacher quality, and school infrastructure. She is a proud resident of the District of Columbia.

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