

**GREAT EXPECTATIONS: ASSESSMENT,
ASSURANCES AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE
MAYOR'S PROPOSAL TO REFORM THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOL
SYSTEM**

**UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT
MANAGEMENT, THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE AND THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**THE HONORABLE DANIEL K. AKAKA, CHAIRMAN
THE HONORABLE GEORGE V. VOINOVICH, RANKING MEMBER**



**TESTIMONY OF DEBORAH A. GIST
STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF THE STATE SUPERINTENDENT**

THURSDAY, JULY 19, 2007

Good afternoon Senator Akaka, Senator Voinovich, distinguished members of the committee, committee staff and guests. I am Deborah Gist and I serve as the State Superintendent of Education in the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), formerly known as the State Education Office. I am pleased to be here this afternoon to share my vision for the Office of the State Superintendent of Education that was created by the *DC Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007*. As specified by the requirements of the legislation, the OSSE is currently engaged in developing a detailed transition plan that will be submitted to the Mayor of the District of Columbia no later than September 10, 2007. This transition plan will provide a timeline and roadmap for the transfer of each state-level function to the authority of the OSSE.

It is important to note that the DC Public Education Reform Amendment Act accomplishes the goal of separating the local education functions from the state-level education functions, a goal that has long been sought by the US Department of Education and more recently by the US Senate. This structure allows for independent SEA oversight over all LEAs, fair treatment of all LEAs, equitable distribution of funds to all LEAs, and equal treatment of all LEAs under federal and local law. In 2006, Senate Committee Report 109-281 that accompanied S. 3660 noted the following for the record:

“the current management and accountability structure in the District of Columbia Public School system commingles the functions of the local education agency and the State Education agency and vests both in the DC Board of Education. Under this structure, there are no clear delineations in funding, reporting, accounting, or staffing.”¹

The structure established in the District of Columbia by the *Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007*, will accomplish this goal in several ways. First, staff in the LEA and SEA will have separate reporting streams; the LEA through the Chancellor and the SEA through the State Superintendent of Education. As such, both the LEA and the SEA will be housed in different locations, with different staff performing their respective functions. On the state side, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education will be responsible for ensuring equitable distribution of federal funds, compliance with federal and District law, and independent oversight of all LEAs including the District of Columbia Public Schools and the public charter schools.

Under the structure established in the education reform legislation, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education will be able to move forward with a distinct agenda from the DCPS LEA. The Office of the State Superintendent will provide a structure whereby enhanced oversight, accountability and monitoring will replace a system with inherent conflicts of interest. As such, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education will have the responsibility (as defined by federal law) to provide supports and interventions for LEAs when they are noncompliant with the law. On the LEA side, the District of Columbia Public Schools will be able to move forward implementing their core mission, educating the children in the District of Columbia, absent the distraction of performing state-level education functions.

This new structure insures the independence of the Office of the State Superintendent of Education and its state level policy-making and compliance-related activities, while

¹ United States Senate Appropriations Committee Report 109-281 to accompany S. 3660, p. 19.

providing for oversight of the agency by the Mayor and Deputy Mayor for Education. This independence is achieved through the appointment of the State Superintendent of Education to a fixed term from which she can only be removed for cause. This is the key distinction that provides the SEA with the autonomy required to effectuate necessary reform. The structure established by the Education Reform Amendment Act calls on the “state” to provide the oversight and compliance characteristics necessary under federal law such as the *No Child Left Behind Act*. In this case, while the State Superintendent reports to the Deputy Mayor for Education and ultimately the Mayor of the District of Columbia, there is a level of autonomy granted to the State Superintendent of Education by the independent appointment.

Senate Appropriations Committee Report 109-281 directed the District of Columbia to:

“develop legislation that is consistent with the following: implementing the State planning and accountability requirements of NCLB; best practices for State agency organization and functions; and Federal requirements for State roles and responsibilities.”²

The *District of Columbia Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007* is consistent with each of these requirements. Specifically, the legislation places the Office of the State Superintendent of Education in charge of implementing the state-level requirements of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*. Second, the distribution of state-level functions established in the legislation is consistent with the structures in several states. In New Mexico and Texas for example, the Governor is responsible for the appointment of the Chief State School Officer while the State Board of Education is an elected body.³ The structure established under the education reform legislation mirrors those state structures and is consistent with state level functionality and governance required in the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee language. Finally, the *Education Reform Amendment Act* establishes a strong and clear framework with regard to implementation of federal law. Specifically, the legislation states:

“The Office of the State Superintendent of Education shall serve as the state education agency and perform the functions of a state education agency for the District of Columbia under applicable federal law, including grant-making, oversight, and state educational agency functions for standards, assessments, and federal accountability requirements for elementary and secondary education.”⁴

This language clearly identifies the responsibility of the state office to perform the duties required by federal law and demonstrates a consistency with other states in the nation.

With this new level of responsibility it is important for the objectives of the Office of the State Superintendent of Education to be clearly defined. The OSSE is currently in the process of designing a high performing state education agency that is reflective of best practices and focused on action, achievement and accountability. There is no question that we are currently engaged in a critical moment in the history of the District of Columbia and the time for action is now. Our achievement gap is wide, our overall academic performance

² United States Senate Appropriations Committee Report 109-281 to accompany S. 3660, p. 20.

³ National Association of State Boards of Education, Internet, http://www.nasbe.org/new_resources_section/State_Ed_Governance_Models_Chart_07.pdf, Accessed 13 July 2007.

⁴ District of Columbia Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007, DC Act. 17-0038, Internet, <http://www.dccouncil.washington.dc.us/images/00001/20070423153411.pdf>, Accessed 13 July 2007, p. 7.

is low, and too many of our children are not being adequately served. We must ensure that our children are prepared to be competitive with other students in the region, around the country, and throughout the world. We need to act to ensure that our students have access to postsecondary opportunities, that our standards are aligned with college and workforce readiness expectations, and that we have citywide strategies aimed at student dropout recovery and prevention.

To ensure the success of our actions, we will build an autonomous state-level education agency that is centrally focused on student achievement so that our students are prepared to succeed in fulfilling careers and throughout their lives. To enhance student achievement, we must ensure that we establish the right expectations for our teachers, and that we have a targeted strategy and set of regulations aimed at securing the most highly qualified teachers to work with our children in the District of Columbia. Achievement cannot be accomplished, however, unless we institute a culture of accountability around our goals. Perhaps the strongest tool at the state's disposal is the ability to hold all schools accountable to the performance and strategic goals that are set.

Additionally, I am confident that the requirements established under federal law, particularly the *No Child Left Behind Act*, provide the Office of the State Superintendent of Education with the tools it needs to support all local education agencies in the District of Columbia, to intervene when necessary and to hold all LEAs accountable for student and teacher performance. For the first time in the history of the District of Columbia, there will be a separate, autonomous state-level education office with the authority to provide this necessary oversight.

It is important to note, however, that many challenges will be faced as we move through our transition process. First, we need to ensure that the separation of responsibilities at the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) is carried out in a thoughtful and thorough manner. Currently there are employees at DCPS who manage both state and local functions in a given day and specific attention must be paid as to how the responsibilities and time of these employees is ultimately divided. Second, we must ensure that the federal grants process meets the needs of the US Department of Education's corrective action plan for the designation of a "high risk" grantee. Also, we must pay specific attention to how we manage the special education functions during the transition process to ensure that we make wise decisions about the needs of our students. This includes developing the systems that will ultimately lead to high quality service delivery that reflect the needs and values of our community. It also includes enhancing transparency, services and efficiency. Despite these challenges, I am deeply committed to ensuring that the transition of state-level education functions is a success and that we act to utilize every tool at our disposal to make the necessary changes to increase student achievement and enhance our systems of accountability.

Transition Phases

The transition will be accomplished in four major phases. Phase 1 of the work, was focused on the mobilization of the transition governance structure and development of a plan to communicate the OSSE's transition work to appropriate stakeholders and the community. Phase 1 began in May and was completed on June 30, 2007. The accomplishments of Phase 1 include:

- Developing a new strategic vision for the OSSE;
- Establishing and convening transition task forces on specific content areas; and
- Developing a communications plan to ensure that information pertaining to the transition is appropriately communicated to stakeholders and the community.

Phase 2 began on July 1, 2007 and will extend into December 2007. The Phase 2 work will be focused on the organizational design of the office, work that has already begun, and the development of specific plans to integrate state-level functions into the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Specific deliverables of Phase 2 include:

- Designing a new organizational structure and processes;
- Developing integration recommendations from the transition task forces;
- Executing the communications strategy developed in phase one; and
- Conducting task force analyses around integration strategies.

Phase 3, which will overlap with Phase 2 by two months, will be focused on the initial implementation of the transfer of state-level responsibilities. The initial implementation work of Phase 3 is scheduled to begin in October 2007 and will run through March 2008. During this phase, the OSSE will focus on accomplishing the following deliverables:

- Implementation of the task force initiatives;
- Executing critical stages of the integration effort; and
- Adjusting integration plans as necessary.

In Phase 4 of the transition process, final implementation of the integration effort will occur. This phase will be carried out through the remainder of 2008.

OSSE Priorities

During the initial transition process, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education will focus on three major short-term objectives. First and foremost, the OSSE will ensure that constant points of reevaluation will be built into the planning and implementation of the phased transition approach. This will allow for adjustments as we move forward to ensure that the transition objectives are met. Second, the OSSE will need to work with DCPS, the Office of the Chief Financial Officer and the US Department of Education to ensure that the state education agency meets the needs of the corrective action plan pertaining to the “high-risk grantee” status. This is a necessary step to ensure that federal funding and programs continue to flow to the District of Columbia for the benefit of our education programs. Third, the OSSE will focus its attention on the state-level special education functions. The OSSE has developed plans to implement its internal “stat” process on the special education functions in an effort to problem-solve around complex issues and increase efficiency. It is necessary that we meet the needs of this office from the initial moment of transition implementation. We will be working with Chancellor Rhee and her team to ensure that this process begins as soon as possible, and that the problems associated with special education service delivery in the District of Columbia begin to be addressed.

In looking at long-term priorities, it is essential that the OSSE focus its efforts on preparing students to meet the needs of the 21st century creative economy. We must ensure that the District’s residents have strong basic skills as well as new sets of skills to meet the increased requirements for technical experience and innovation prevalent in the District of Columbia’s

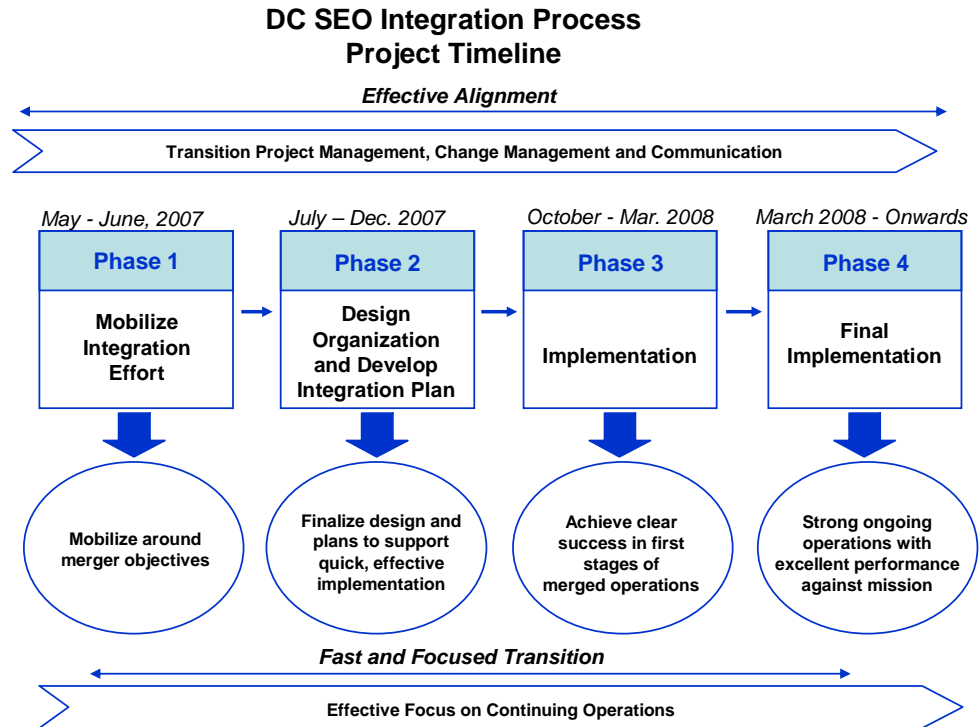
regional economy. The new jobs that are being created in the District of Columbia are technology and knowledge-based, particularly in professional and business services which make up 34% of the regional labor market. Recent research suggests that only 28% of jobs in the District of Columbia belong to residents of the District. This is in large part a result of the skills required to obtain these jobs.⁵ It is also a result of a career education structure that is not designed to meet the needs of the local economy. The need for sound state-level education policy that is effectively executed and successful in helping to develop these skills in our students is an essential priority that the Office of the State Superintendent of Education will address.

To address this issue, the OSSE, with the advice and support of the State Board of Education, will focus on ensuring that state standards are aligned with college and workforce readiness expectations, that teachers are of the highest caliber and that students enter the classroom ready to learn and meet the expectations that we all share. The OSSE also has to ensure that there is focus on providing high quality early care and education and literacy programs to the citizens we serve. Operationally, the OSSE must ensure that efficiency of internal administrative processes are enhanced, that transparent methods of operation are achieved, and quality customer service is provided to the residents we serve.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on our transition efforts and priorities this afternoon and I look forward to further dialogue as we move forward with the transition effort. I look forward to answering your questions.

⁵ Fuller, Stephen S., Ph.D., *The District of Columbia Chamber of Commerce State of the Business Report 2006*, D.C. Chamber of Commerce, February 2006.

Attachment A Transition Phases



Note: Timing of Phases 2 through 4 are contingent on a number of factors, including timely passage of enabling legislation.