

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

**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 MICHELLE A. RHEE
CHANCELLOR
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

THURSDAY, JULY 19, 2007

Good morning Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich, and members of the Subcommittee. I am honored to appear before you today and am grateful for your interest in the District of Columbia Public Schools.

My name is Michelle Rhee. Last week I was confirmed by the Council of the District of Columbia to become the first Chancellor of DCPS. In this capacity I have oversight of DCPS's 141 schools from the elementary through the high school level. I establish school curriculum, set performance standards for school staff and central office employees, provide the supports needed for teachers and students to succeed, oversee the school district's budget, and set policies for all of the schools in DCPS.

As Chancellor, I will work closely with my colleagues – the Deputy Mayor, the director of the Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization, the State Superintendent, and the State Board of Education – to ensure that the educational needs of the District's children are met.

I would like to begin by telling you a bit about myself. I have worked in the field of urban education for the past 15 years. My career in education began as a classroom teacher at Harlem Park Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland. My experience there shaped the rest of my career. I saw that students who were performing far below grade level could quickly achieve at the highest levels if they were exposed to a quality academic program.

I did three main things as a classroom teacher. First, I had high expectations for all students. Next, I engaged parents and the community in what we were trying to accomplish. And last, we worked hard and long. Seeing the growth of my students showed me that the academic outcomes of our students had nothing to do with their ability and potential (which was endless) and everything to do with the education they were receiving in the schools.

To help more children realize this potential, I founded The New Teacher Project, one of the country's most well-respected education reform organizations. TNTP is dedicated to improving public education by increasing the quality and quantity of teachers who work in low performing schools and districts across the country. In its work with some of the largest urban school districts in the nation, The New Teacher Project has had a positive systemic impact in ways that were not thought possible.

Across the country, The New Teacher Project has brought in over 23,000 teachers to educate over 2 million children in urban school districts. I've advised some of the most successful superintendents in urban districts on teacher quality, including Joel Klein in New York City, Barbara Byrd Bennett in Cleveland, John Deasy in Prince George's County, Maryland, Arne Duncan in Chicago, and Michael Bennett in Denver. Having worked in so many school districts, including DCPS, I know first hand the challenges (and potential) our urban districts face.

This brings me to the first principle that will drive my work – the critical importance of having high quality education professionals throughout the school system. I believe that people are absolutely paramount to the success of the district. To achieve this goal in the District, I will focus relentlessly on building a corps of effective principals and teachers for our schools through aggressive recruitment efforts. At the same time, because we currently have many excellent educators in the system, it's critical that they are supported, recognized and rewarded.

In short, we must have outstanding induction, professional development, and career growth opportunities for staff at every level. Building human capital in this system will require improved working conditions in schools, a truly supportive central administration that gives educators the tools they need, when they need them, and professionalism on all levels. Finally, the role of the school principal is critical in identifying and growing talent. We must support our school leaders so they can become great talent managers..

Next, I believe we must transition from a culture of diffuse accountability to individual responsibility for student achievement. The Mayor has made clear that he will focus on accountability, and I intend to do the same. The way to do this is clear – through a combination of high expectations for performance and substantial support to meet those expectations. We will establish and communicate very clear expectations for everyone in the system, from teachers and principals who will be responsible for improving student achievement to students and parents to staff and administrators who will be responsible for creating an environment in which educators can focus on children. Everyone must understand what they are responsible for doing, how it is aligned to student achievement, and how their performance will be evaluated.

After we lay out these expectations, we must, as a system, ensure that all individuals have the training, support, and resources they need to be successful. And we must hold everyone accountable for providing a quality education to each student in this district. We expect most people to succeed, but where failure has a negative effect on student achievement, we will make immediate changes.

Last, I am going to insist on an instructional approach that is consistent and aligned throughout our schools, beginning with reading. By consistent and aligned, I mean that nearly every school will adopt the same highly proven programs and implement them with fidelity across grades and classrooms. Professional development will focus entirely on these specific programs, and will be delivered in most cases by a single specialized provider across schools. We will track progress in implementing the curriculum rigorously and consistently across schools and across classrooms.

However, consistency will not mean a one-size fits all approach to every single school in the district; clearly, we must provide some autonomy in instruction to high-performing schools. We have many schools that have shown strong academic results in recent years or are making solid progress towards their goals. Those schools will be able to continue with their programs and, in fact, we will look to demonstrated best practices in those buildings to inform our broader work and decisions.

In addition to these overarching priorities, there is one specific issue facing the District that I know we must attack head-on, as soon as possible. The existing special education system has failed too many students, and previous administrations have failed to deliver on promises to fix it. Parents and students have waited far too long for improvements. Until we address this critical need, we will continue to lead the nation in cost per pupil to educate while trailing the nation in test scores. The current special education arrangement is costing us dearly at the expense of every DCPS student.

We will rebuild this system. It will cost money up front. It cannot be done overnight. We must begin this effort by focusing on a child's needs well before he or she winds up on a long bus ride to a school far from their neighborhood. We must articulate a vision for inclusive, comprehensive special education services that meet the needs of our special needs populations in an efficient and effective manner and we must execute that vision across the system.

Finally, I will implement a high quality interim assessment program that will measure our progress as we go, not just at the end of the year. Parents will be able to use this data to know whether their children are on track. Teachers will use this data to better understand and respond to their students' strengths and weaknesses. School leaders will use this data to focus their professional development on areas where it is most needed. And central administration will analyze the data to identify where, as a system, we are seeing results and where we are falling short. We will not drive blind. We will have a constant, determined focus on student achievement that is supported by accurate and timely performance data.

Reaching out beyond the schools, I will ask our corporate, philanthropic, civic and artistic communities to contribute to DCPS at a new level of focus and intensity. In exchange, I will offer them the support they need to really make an impact in our schools. As I said when I was appointed, it is time that the wealth of this great city – economically, socially, culturally, politically – is reflected in its public schools.

We could talk about a lot of other things, but to summarize, the following components will be the core of my strategy for all students, regular education students and special education students:

- A relentless focus on the quality of the professionals working with them;
- An insistence on individual responsibility for success and failure;
- Common instructional programs measured by aligned interim assessments; and
- A campaign to engage students, parents, educators and the broader community in an intensive city-wide effort to drive achievement.

We have everything we need to do this – and we can do this if we take our collective talents, resources, desires, and minds and turn them into an undeniable collective will. For me that is truly the question before us today – do we have the will to move forward, to do what is right, and to deliver on our promises to our children? I believe we do.