



**Testimony of Scott Pearson  
Executive Director  
DC Public Charter School Board**

**Planning Actively for Comprehensive Education Facilities  
Amendment Act (PACE)  
Committee on Education  
July 11, 2016**

Good afternoon Chairman Grosso and, members of the committee, my name is Scott Pearson and I am the Executive Director of the Public Charter School Board. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today regarding the future planning of education facilities in the city.

In 2009 – just seven years ago – the city reached a turning point. After public school enrollment declined for 40 years, it turned around and began growing again. Since then, the city has added more than 16,000 new students to DCPS and public charter schools, averaging more than 2,000 new students each year. This growth is driven by trends that should continue: a rejuvenated city where families choose to live, an improved quality of DCPS and public charter schools, and an increased participation of 3 and 4 year olds in formal schooling.

The Office of Planning forecasts that the public school population will grow even faster in the coming years.

At this pace, both DCPS and public charter schools will need to add dozens of schools over the coming decade. This is particularly the case for public charter schools, which continue to be very popular among DC families. Last year alone, 8,526 individual students were on a waitlist for public

charter schools, representing an increase of 1,321 students from the previous year. With such long waitlists, space is at a premium. This challenge is compounded by the fact that the city, for the past two years, has not meaningfully utilized any of the dozen vacant public school buildings in its inventory.

We know students in both sectors attend schools in substandard facilities. But the situation is far worse in public charter schools, where more than a quarter have reported they do not have appropriate space for a school nurse. Too many public charter school students are attending classes in buildings designed for other purposes, such as offices, warehouses, and basements in churches.

For example, while the city spent a reported \$180 million renovating the Duke Ellington School for the Performing Arts, the other school for the performing arts, the William E. Doar Public Charter School, operates in a converted warehouse with no proper theater or performance space. While we should commend charter LEAs for their creativity in transforming these commercial facilities into educational space, these are all public school students and we can do better by them.

Last year, DC PCSB staff conducted a survey and found that many schools felt they were housed in inadequate facilities. For example:

- 12% of the schools responding disagreed or strongly disagreed that their current facility “supports the school’s academic mission.”
- 11% had safety concerns about their building.
- 44% were concerned with the adequacy of their health and fitness areas.

- Thirteen reported an immediate need for room to accommodate new students or to find a permanent facility.

While the proposed amendments in the PACE Act largely affect DCPS facilities planning, we welcome the opportunity to have an honest conversation about the facilities situation for public schools, including the need to plan for and finance new schools, the critical need for the city to release vacant public buildings, and strategies for financing public charter school facilities.

In this regard, we note that the per-pupil facilities allowance for public charter schools has lagged behind the rate of inflation over the past eight years, despite rising construction and land costs during this time. Public charter schools are using that facilities allowance not only to pay rent but to pay for preventative maintenance such as fixes to boilers, water fountains, and various other routine expenditures. Those seemingly innocuous expenditures are a key use of the facilities fund and add up very quickly.

Recently you may have seen reports about a Walton Foundation grant to public charter schools across the country, causing some to ask why our schools need more assistance from the government. While public charter schools sometimes have access to additional funding through one-time grants and occasional philanthropic donations, these alternative funding sources often come in the form of loans. The reality is that loans and small grants are putting a Band-Aid on a larger problem. We need to think differently about how we ensure equality across sectors and bridge the funding gap.

While we hope the conversation will focus on these broader topics, we have some specific suggestions for the bill. Most significantly, we believe the data collection process for charter LEAs should continue to be managed by the Public Charter School Board as a way to reduce the burden on both LEAs and the DME. And we strongly believe there is no need for punitive measures for schools which fail to provide data. This is because DC PCSB has never had difficulty collecting needed information from schools, and has a solid track record of providing reporting required by this Council to the public.

Chairman Grosso, thank you for starting the conversation around comprehensive facility planning. We look forward to being a partner with you and other city leaders. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.