**Joint Testimony**

**District of Columbia Public Charter School Board**

**FY12 Performance Oversight Hearing**

**Scott Pearson, Executive Director and**

**John H. McKoy, Chair**

**March 14, 2013**

Good morning Education Committee Chairman Catania, Chairman Mendelson, and members of the DC Council.  I am Scott Pearson, Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board.

I am joined by John (Skip) McKoy, our newly elected board chair of PCSB.   Today we are here to talk about our fiscal year 2012 performance. We will highlight how our work as a charter authorizer continues to create and sustain charter schools as a vital public education option for thousands of DC students. I will begin our testimony with an overview of the past year.  Then, Skip will conclude with a look forward at our challenges and priorities. The Board’s mission is to provide quality public school options for DC students and families. We do this through four ways:

* a comprehensive application review process,
* effective oversight,
* meaningful support, and
* active engagement of our stakeholders.

We oversee 57 charter schools that operate 102 campuses across the city, in every ward (except ward 3). Our schools serve nearly 35,000 students from pre-kindergarten to adults. Our charter schools are public schools, open to all. And all of our schools are schools of choice.

Fiscal year 2012 was my first year on the job. I focused on four key priorities: **Fidelity; Autonomy; Accountability**; and **Quality**. Quality schools, of course, are at the heart of why charter schools exist, and why they have been so successful.

Charter schools, as you know, consistently outperform the state average in reading and math proficiency as we enroll higher percentages of low-income students and students of color.

[CHART #1] As you can see in this chart, charter schools enroll a higher percentage of students who are African American, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged. The next graph is about student performance. [CHART #2] When it comes to the performance of these students, you can see here in this chart that the proficiency rates for these same groups, plus special education students, is higher than DCPS. Our charter schools are getting great results with our children.

These results have come even as charter schools have grown each year. [CHART #3] Throughout this growth, you can see that student proficiency has increased each year from 2006 to 2012. We are especially proud of these results. But we want to grow the quality of the charter sector even higher.

With 15,000 names on waitlists of our highest-performing schools, we are aware that there are still not enough high-performing school seats available for DC children.

In the past year we have taken ambitious efforts to improve the quality of our charter schools. We use the Performance Management Framework to implement a portfolio approach to our charter schools.

Doing that means three things:

* **work to create more high-quality schools**;
* **close, restructure, or turnaround our low-quality schools**;
* **and help those in the middle get better**.

We have real results to share from this effort. Between this year and next year we expect to add 1,031 new seats in high-quality schools, through the expansion of schools like KIPP DC and Achievement Prep Academy. We recently authorized California’s highest performing charter school system serving low-income to open its first of two approved DC campuses in fall 2015.

Many other top tier DC charters are considering expanding. We are pleased to support the work of four of our dual-language charter schools to jointly create DC International. DCI will be a middle-high school that will open in 2014 and serve more than 1,000 students with an International Baccalaureate program.

Our top schools are rated Tier 1, and there is nothing that would bring more immediate education benefits to DC children than helping our Tier 1 schools grow. The challenge, as always, is facilities. We have identified 25 public school buildings that are or will be vacant.

If we as a city care about educational quality for our children, there is no good reason not to provide these buildings to high quality schools.

On school closure, we have been more aggressive.

This year low-performing charter schools like Howard Road Academy, Community Academy - Amos III, IDEA, and Septima Clark are either in the process of either closing all together or attempting to improve their performance, by significantly reducing grade spans and the number of students they will serve.

I expect the pace of such closures and restructurings to continue or accelerate in the coming year.

[CHART #4] In this chart you can see that we anticipate 2014 to have 234 fewer seats in our PMF Tier 3 and 1,031 more Tier 1 seats than we had in 2012. We know that quality goes beyond just proficiency rates. Attendance rates and truancy rates are also a critical measure of quality. Students aren’t learning if they aren’t in school. And so we have stepped up our oversight.

We recognize these issues are multi-dimensional, and that schools don’t control all of the levers, but we also believe that PCSB and our schools have an important role to play.

Hand in hand with quality is a priority we call fidelity – that means fidelity to the idea that charter schools are public schools and have the obligation to serve all children. This is a core belief of mine personally, and it is a top priority of PCSB. In pursuit of this priority we have launched many initiatives. On special education, for example, we created a “mystery shopper” program where we call charter schools posing as parents of special needs children seeking to enroll their child.

We worked together with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education to create satellite classrooms that allow charter schools to pool resources to serve students. And we are in the process of creating an entirely new approach to monitoring special education programs. It moves from beyond mere compliance to a focus on the quality of instruction as measured by student performance.

Another key effort under the fidelity priority is discipline. We recognize that some DC charter schools have higher expulsion rates than the national average.

Since I arrived in January 2012 we have released school discipline information and started tracking disciplinary incidents on a monthly basis. When schools’ data shows unusual patterns, PCSB meets with them. This is not to dictate to schools what to do, but to seek to address the issue in a spirit of joint problem solving. We recognize we still have a long way to go.

For example we are just now beginning to dig into the issue of mid-year withdrawals. But we are proud of the progress we’ve made over the past 12 months and expect you will see results at the end of this school year.

The third priority is preserving the autonomy of our schools.

The freedom that charter schools have over their school policies, operations, budgets, and personnel gives them the ability to be high performing. It also attracts some of the country’s top educational entrepreneurs. Charter schools can react quickly to unforeseen issues and navigate hurdles. We know of charter schools that have significantly changed their programs, personnel, curricula, and student discipline policies mid-year.

Autonomy alone won’t make a school excellent. But we believe it is a necessary condition for excellence. So as we work with our schools around solutions to issues like discipline and mid-year withdrawals, we need to do it in a way that preserves the very independence that generates energy in the charter sector and allows schools to deliver a high quality education for our children.

However, with autonomy comes an obligation for accountability. As I said recently in a presentation to more than 70 charter leaders, we cannot expect the freedom to operate as we wish without also being willing to be open about what it is that we are doing.

Public charter schools next year are forecasted to spend over a half billion dollars of DC taxpayer funds. Charter schools, and PCSB, must be as open and transparent as possible. We have taken important steps towards that goal this year, with the publication of discipline data, and more recently in publishing detailed analyses of charter school finances. Also, we are looking into televising our board meetings and publishing more data on our website and school wait lists and available slots.

To support this accountability we have strengthened our oversight function. We reorganized our school performance staff around functional responsibilities, rather than having a single individual responsible for all aspects of a given school.

We have beefed up our data systems that form the backbone of our oversight, so our data are more accurate, timely and less burdensome to schools. We changed our qualitative reviews of schools so they are at once less burdensome and more authentic. For example we now routinely visit schools unannounced.

In sum, I am proud of what we’ve accomplished over the past year. But I’m also keenly aware that we have much more to do. To address this, I’d like to turn the microphone over to PCSB Board Chair Skip McKoy.

**Skip McKoy, PCSB Board Chairman**

Thank you, Scott, and thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Council. The growth of public charter schools in the District has been remarkable and has changed the landscape of public education in our city to the point where charter schools now serve 43% of DC’s students.

This has been a *good* thing for our city. Parents have morechoice and the qualityof our schools grows each year. Since the revitalization of DCPS under the past two chancellors, their enrollment has stabilized. Combined with charter growth, that has led to the first sustained growth in public school education enrollment in nearly fifty years. That is something to celebrate.

We recognize that this kind of growth, and change, brings challenges and opportunities. The choice system can be quite something for parents. There are different measures of quality between DCPS and charters, and enrollment processes vary. Fifty separate lotteries don’t allow for parents to easily identify and select their school preferences.

PCSB has taken a lead role in helping to address the challenges parents face in applying to charter schools. We facilitated the creation of a common application deadline, with more than 45 LEA’s representing 91 campuses voluntarily adopted the common application deadline of March 15. These campuses used to have more than 30 deadlines – now they have one.

We launched a major promotional effort around the city so that parents are aware of this deadline. We are now in early discussions with these schools about creating a common system of choice and are optimistic that we will have the same sort of voluntary participation as we had with the common deadline.

In January, we held our fourth annual charter school Expo, which attracted nearly two thousand parents from across the city to this one-stop opportunity to apply to charters. In addition, as part of our increased focus on community engagement, we have put information about school quality at their fingertips. We created a mobile app, MyDCcharters, and a Parent Guide to Performance Reports, copies of which are available at libraries throughout the city.

The so-called “waitlist shuffle” that occurs each September involves thousands of students and disrupts the first month of school for many more.

According to a recently released OSSE study on student mobility, we know that after the October count, mid-year mobility is too high as well. This has an often-detrimental impact on educational outcomes. Unfortunately the current funding formula does not create the proper incentives around this, because money does not follow the student.

Our work is collaborative and DCPS has taken to reaching out to us when a student is transferred to them in the middle of the school year and the transferring school is slow at getting them the necessary documentation to place students. We take this very seriously and work on the side of the student to make sure that s/he receives the best resources DC has to offer.

We want parents to be engaged in all aspects of their child’s charter school experience, and that includes if the parent has a complaint about the school. PCSB has a parent complaint line, which receives an average of 35 calls a month. Once a complaint is lodged with us, we follow-up with the school to make sure that the issue was properly addressed and the situation resolved.

Let me reinforce and elaborate upon one of the points that Scott made. Closing poor performing schools is necessary to preserve quality in the sector. Of the 95 charters awarded in DC since 1996, 35 schools are no longer operating. Quality, however, is attained not just by closing schools.

Quality comes from learning, over time how to authorize new schools with an outstanding probability to succeed, once they are open, at providing a great education for our children. Quality is further secured by providing critical analysis and feedback to charter schools whose current performance is mediocre. Quality improves as those charter schools make sound management and instructional choices, enabling them to make the climb from Tier 3 or Tier 2 to Tier 1 schools.

On the issue of facilities, a charter school cannot serve children without a suitable space to call home.

Because charter schools locate wherever they can find a suitable building, our schools are distributed around the city. Some neighborhoods have many schools; others have few. And when we look at the location of high performing schools, we find educational deserts in many neighborhoods. The recent closures of DCPS schools add to these neighborhood inequities.

Short of instructing charters where to locate, we believe we have to collaboratively find a way to better rationalize our ability to meet parent demand for accessible quality schools.

Moreover, there remain real inequities in the treatment of charter schools. Students in charter schools continue to receive fewer city resources than their peers in DCPS -- whether those resources are nurses, mental health professionals, crossing guards, or maintenance dollars. DCPS is funded based on enrollment estimates while charter schools are paid based on actuals.

As Scott mentioned, 25 city school buildings with fields, gymnasiums and cafeterias are or will be empty. Meanwhile, charter schools continue to operate in church basements and above drug stores, hold recess on the sidewalk, and spend millions of dollars renovating commercial space.

We are proud of the collaboration that takes place with DCPS, but there is so much more collaboration we can do that can benefit families, strengthens public education, and save money. We know that from the perspective of city agencies, dealing with 57 charter LEAs isn’t always easy. This creates challenges in including charters in citywide initiatives.

We want to improve our liaison capability so that, whether the issue is public safety or AIDS prevention or access to library resources, our charters are better integrated into the city.

Our communication and collaboration with DCPS is substantially higher than in the past, and PCSB is now far more present in meetings on citywide efforts. For example, we now participate monthly in the Mayor’s education cabinet meeting. We embrace our role and responsibility to be an ally in improving DC public education. But we can still do much more.

We are eager to engage in discussions around how joint planning and collaboration can make our unique public education system work better for families. The Mayor issued a call for such an effort in his State of the City address, and we support this, as we do this committee’s work.

Any such plan should take as its starting point the need to offer families more high quality seats. For charters, that means respecting their autonomies, for that is the bedrock of their quality. But that is no reason that we can’t make tremendous progress on many fronts.

We believe that our city benefits from having a strong DCPS and a strong charter school system. We are confident that, working together, we can make substantial progress in the coming year.

I would be remiss if, before closing, I did not acknowledge the fine work and dedication of my predecessor as board chair, Brian Jones. Brian served on the PCSB for six years, three of them as board chair. It was under his leadership that PCSB developed our Performance Management Framework, one of many examples of Brian’s tireless work on behalf of higher quality educational options for DC students. Of course we stand on the shoulders of charter pioneers Jo Baker, Nelson Smith and Tom Nida.

I’d like to close with the observation that PCSB’s success and its national reputation as a model charter authorizer is thanks to the quality of individuals appointed to the board by the Mayor and the result of the Board’s autonomy as an independent agency.   As with charters, so with PCSB – with autonomy should come accountability.

In this regard, the DC Public Charter School Board considers itself accountable to this Council, and the Mayor, and – as always, extends itself as a partner in the transformation of public education in the District of Columbia.  We appreciate the Council’s ongoing support and look forward to building on the great working relationships we have developed with Council members and staff.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.

###