



**Testimony of  
John H. “Skip” McKoy, Board Chair  
DC Public Charter School Board  
FY2013 Performance Oversight Hearing  
DC Council Committee on Education  
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify, Mr. Chairman. My name is Skip McKoy and I am the Chairman of the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB). I am joined by our executive director Scott Pearson, and our deputy director Naomi DeVeaux.

Today we would like to talk about PCSB, our role as a charter authorizer and our focus on growing and strengthening charter schools so that they are quality options for thousands of DC families and students. Charter schools are critical to the revitalization of public education in the District, and are contributing to a more optimistic future for our young people.

The Board’s mission is to provide quality public school options for DC students and families. We currently oversee 60 charter school organizations operating 109 campuses in every Ward, except Ward 3. Our schools serve more than 36,000 students from pre-kindergarten to adults. Students from every Ward attend charter schools. About 72% of our students are low-income and 12% receive special education services.

The heart of PCSB’s mission – and indeed the principal reason for charter schools – is improved school quality. And I am able to report that, again, charter school quality,

as measured by DC CAS proficiency rates, has increased, as it has each year for the past seven years. Charter schools, as you know, consistently outperform the state average in proficiency rates. Performance by subgroup is even more impressive. And that performance contributes to a lower achievement gap. Indeed the Black-White student achievement gap in charter schools is ten points lower than the district average.

Last year the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) also confirmed the strength of charter schools. Moreover, a recent study by CREDO at Stanford University showed that each year a student attends a DC charter school, that student receives a year and a half of learning gains compared to a DC student attending a traditional public school.

This strong charter school quality drives demand: last year there were 22,000 names on charter school waitlists, up by nearly half from 15,000 the year before.

It has long been a rumor that charter school performance can be explained by their somehow serving a more “advantaged” population. In fact the opposite is true. Charter schools serve higher percentages of low-income students and students of color than do traditional District public schools.

The percentage of students with disabilities in charter schools, 12%, is within one percentage point of the city average. Here’s a figure most people would find surprising: charter schools serve the same percentage of level 3 and 4 special education students as DCPS.

The primary credit for this performance goes to the charter school teachers and leaders who work so hard on behalf of children. But PCSB's oversight has played an important part as well. For three years now, we have released the results of our Performance Management Framework (PMF), which tiers schools by quality. Using the PMF as a guide, we have closed low performing schools, encouraged high performing schools to grow, and used the data we have collected to help drive improvement at schools across the quality spectrum. From 2011 through next school year, we are projected to have added more than 4,000 Tier 1 seats in charter school classrooms and eliminated more than 2,000 Tier 3 seats. And there would be no Tier 3 seats in Wards 7 and 8.

These numbers show that PCSB is not just after the "market share" of public school students. Our focus is on increasing the quality of the charter sector. PCSB has chartered less than one-third of all applicants who wish to open a charter school. We have a rigorous 15-year charter renewal process. Our selective application process, coupled with an equally rigorous renewal process, has resulted in the lowest growth rate for charter seats in history – just 6.2% year over year. When you add in that DC public school enrollment is also growing, the result is that charter school growth was at its slowest rate ever, just 1% (43% to 44%). However, the share of quality seats within the charter sector has increased; from 2011 through next school year, there will be 13% more Tier 1 seats.

Another goal of our focus on quality has been to encourage the boards of low-performing schools to work with high-performing schools in the face of non-renewal or closure, to find an alternative to outright closure. This process provides stability and

continuity. It also provides increased opportunities for students and families, as they do not have to go through a lottery process to find a new school. Instead, they are assured a seat at the high-performing school along with all of the benefits that the school or network of schools provides.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) reconfirmed the quality of our work as an authorizer by conducting an in-depth evaluation over the summer. PCSB results were among the two highest of any authorizer NACSA has ever evaluated.

I want to review some successes we had this year in addressing some long-standing issues with charter schools.

The first concerns charter school discipline – particularly the high levels of suspensions and expulsions. When we testified two years ago, there were 227 expulsions at charter schools annually. Since that time we have worked closely with charter leaders on this issue and these efforts have borne results. Year to date figures show that expulsions are likely to be well under 100 this year. And we are seeing impressive reductions in out of school suspensions as well.

The second big success is the progress we have made on openness and data transparency. Our collaboration with OSSE and DCPS led to the publication this year of the city's first equity reports. These reports, which literally lead the nation in the quality of data presented, show student performance, growth, and discipline numbers by subgroup. Beyond the equity reports, we have significantly enhanced PCSB's website to

permit school leaders to explore the underlying data behind our accountability tools, the PMFs and Accountability Plans, and to allow parents to share our data on multimedia platforms.

The third is the progress we have made on improving the financial strength of charter schools. Two years ago we began publishing financial analyses of each school and providing technical assistance to those with weak financials. Since then, the number of schools with weak financials has declined from 13 to 3. It was not many years ago when charter schools would literally run out of cash in the middle of the year. Those days are over.

Finally, we have seen success with the charter school lottery. Thanks in part to the guidance of PCSB's Community Advisory Group, we moved aggressively first to put in place a common deadline and then this year to collaborate with DCPS and the DME to launch My School DC, a common lottery. Out of respect for charter school autonomy we insisted that participation be voluntary, but 90% of non-adult education schools are participating.

PCSB has worked hard over the past year to collaborate far more extensively across the city. This includes our participation in the common lottery, and in the joint effort around equity reports and our common efforts to reduce truancy. With this Council's support we created a new full-time position to better coordinate health and safety efforts at charter schools and improve collaboration with city agencies. For example, nine additional charter schools have been approved to receive a school nurse. Nearly 30 charter school staff members have been trained to administer medication, and

additional mental health staff will be serving four charter school campuses. Clearly these efforts are paying dividends for our schools and for DC families.

What remains unfulfilled is the full and equal funding of charter schools by this city. Nearly a year ago you held a roundtable on this issue, Mr. Chairman. And a recently released study showed that funding inequities remain, with charter schools receiving less funding per pupil and overall, compared with DCPS. It is past time that the District addresses these inequities and provides full and equal funding for charter schools.

I'd like to close with the observation that PCSB's success in creating quality DC schools and its national reputation as a model authorizer is thanks to the quality of individuals appointed to the Board, 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 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 working relationships with Council members and staff.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony, and we'd be happy to answer any questions.