

**Joint Public Oversight Roundtable DGS; Practices for Constructing and Modernizing DCPS  
Schools**

**Committee on Education & Committee on Transportation and the Environment**

**Wednesday, July 8, 2015**

**Testimony, 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Fund**

My name is Nancy Huvendick, I am DC Program Director for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Fund, a small 20 year-old DC-based non-profit dedicated to improving public school facilities both here in the District and nationally. Thank you for the opportunity to weigh-in on how DGS works with DCPS and community members when contracting, constructing and maintaining DCPS schools.

First, we are encouraged that, finally, the DC Auditor is taking the law that requires an annual audit of the modernization program seriously. We hope that it will continue to dedicate time and resources to this important work. The auditor should also investigate the quality of the modernizations and the quality of the maintenance of these modernizations, so the District never has school facilities in the horrendous shape they were in by the early 1990s.

**Transparency and Timely Public Involvement at all Stages**

If there had been a transparent public process at key stages of school facilities planning, design, budgeting, and construction, many of the vulnerabilities described in the July 2015 Audit of the School Modernization Program could have been avoided.

A defined process for public input is especially important with mayoral control because there are very few forums where DCPS parents and community members may voice their interests in the policy around the modernizations. Having regular audits and a Council Committee on Education helps a lot. However, Council hearings necessarily involve oversight. They provide little access to the discussion *before* priorities are set.

**Recommendation 1** Reinstate the Public School Modernization Advisory Committee as recommended by the Audit.

**Transparency and Timely Public Involvement in the Master Facilities Plan**

Updating the MFP every five years as required<sup>1</sup> should provide a forum for discussion of school facilities modernization, quality, equity and affordability. However, there have been decreasing levels of public input with each successive MFP since the establishment of mayoral control in 2007. Without a location for discussion and clearly defined decision-making, it has been mainly the communities with political access that got complete modernizations first - - especially under mayoral control. It is worth noting that all but one of the 13 Wilson High School feeder schools will be completely modernized (and that one exception will have a Phase I modernization) by 2021 but only two of the Woodson High School feeder schools will be completely modernized

---

<sup>1</sup> D.C. Code section 38-2803 (a) and (b).

by 2021; the other eight will only have had Phase I modernizations by then. A well-developed and solid MFP needs to balance out such inequities in the future.

Currently, the law calls for the Mayor to consult with “key stakeholders throughout the community” but does not specify a process for public input. This problem could be remedied very soon with the next MFP by instituting a process to involve stakeholders—including most importantly parents and community members—along with agency experts and administrators, and informed by numerous community meetings. Such a process should be able to produce clear recommendations that include - - as the Audit recommends - - project-specific sequences with budget estimates.

#### **Recommendation 2**

The Education Committee should monitor how the next MFP is planned. Now is the time to define this process and get it started. Specifically, ensure that the unit required for this purpose within the DME to develop the MFP has sufficient capacity.

#### **Recommendation 3**

A critical foundation for a Master Facilities Plan is a Master Education Plan. The MEP is what should guide the MFP. DCPS does not have one and the city falls short by providing a muddled vision for DCPS and charter coordination. This needs to be a top priority for the District and DCPS.

### **Transparency and Timely Public Involvement in the Annual Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) 6-Year Capital Budget**

The Capital Improvement Budget (CIP) is the annually updated six-year schedule of expenditures planned for school facilities. The CIP must be subject to change, but changes in priority should be rare and then only with proper justification. With a solid MFP, the CIP process should be much more straightforward. If a school modernization is in the CIP, then the school community should be able to bank on the project happening in approximately the time-frame outlined unless extraordinary circumstances occur. All too often, school projects have been scheduled, then repeatedly pushed back, undermining everyone’s faith in government and leaving every school community desperate to jump forward in the queue.

The Education Committee made a measured and rational effort to steer the DCPS capital budget back on track in the few weeks available this budget season. This was very helpful - - having a set of policy guidelines and some public outreach were absolutely right - - but there was time only for discussion among the Council, the agencies and Mayor. There was little time for school communities to weigh in systematically. Budget hearings help but are biased toward those communities that can mobilize and do it quickly.

**Recommendation 4** Continue with the Education Committee’s efforts to institute a workable process for developing the CIP. A pilot for next year’s CIP might start with input *earlier* in order to provide more time to test and weigh information. This effort

should aim to minimize negative impacts on projects that do not have vocal communities.

### **Transparency and *Effective* Public Involvement in SIT Teams**

I have served on four different school's SIT Teams to date, each a very different experience. SIT teams are the main connecting point between DGS/DCPS and the local school. They typically consist of local school stakeholders - teachers, staff, parents and community members - who are convened by the principal and shepherded by DGS representatives; they also include architects, engineers and contractors. Stakeholders are charged with providing input on the front end of projects by taking part in development of the educational specifications and schematic designs. Thereafter they serve as the community conduit for monthly updates on construction progress from the ground-breaking through the final punch-list.

Effective collaboration between SIT teams and DCPS/DGS has been very rare but is crucial to the success of school building projects. Neither DCPS nor DGS has adequately scheduled, staffed or charged these committees so they can properly do the work. Committees are assembled too late for effective input on educational program specifications and scant time is provided for schematic review. In fact, delayed projects have often benefited from additional time for planning. Too often, SIT communications are only from the agency to the stakeholders with no chance for - and often absolutely no desire for - authentic input or detailed sharing of information. Records of meetings are rare; requests from SIT members for standard information (floor plans, educational specifications, estimated costs - or even meetings) have frequently been rebuffed. The most functional teams involve stakeholders who themselves have the energy and resources to support an effective process and who are perceived to have some standing - a situation which exacerbates concerns about equity in school projects because more collaboration results in better buildings.

Getting the most from SIT Teams is the best way DGS/DCPS can ensure the kind of full, up-to-date communication with local communities that leads to successful new schools. It would mean that schools are built with the local knowledge that enables appropriate design and hassle-free construction that has full backing and support from the community using the school.

**Recommendation 5** The Council should ensure that a review and deliberate re-organization of the entire SIT process is undertaken by DCPS and DGS. This has to be done with input from those community members and parents who have been involved with SIT teams. Properly staffing SIT teams will require more staff support but will pay off in better project results.

### **Phased Modernization - - Review this Unique Approach before the Next MFP**

The concept of modernization in three distinct and discontinuous phases was introduced with the 2008 Master Facilities Plan. It was a unique approach in an effort to try to deliver substantial improvements to students and teachers in classrooms as fast as possible. But the effectiveness of phasing in this way remains un-examined. We have not yet moved

systematically through any Phase IIs (assembly space, administrative space and specials space) or Phase IIIs (systems replacement) to compare against complete modernizations. The scope and quality of work covered by Phase I projects has been extremely variable and the definition of what's included in a Phase I seems to be changing. This has been confused by the fact that several schools that started with Phase I planning have ended up in full modernizations stretching over consecutive summers.

**Recommendation 6**

The Council must ensure that the benefits, drawbacks, comparative costs, and final appropriateness of design associated with phased modernizations as envisioned in the 2008 MFP are reviewed before modernizations are planned for the remaining schools.

Nancy Huvendick  
DC Program Director  
21<sup>st</sup> Century School Fund  
1816 12<sup>th</sup> St. NW, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
Washington, DC 20009  
202-745-3745 x 15  
nhuvendick@21csf.org