

# The New Regime for DC Public Schools:

## Reconstituted State School Board To Be Elected This Fall

by Barbara Yeomans & Naomi Glass

On May 19 two experts on DC Public Schools addressed a general meeting of the DC League of Women Voters: *Mary Levy*, Director of the Public Education Reform Project, Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs and *Erika Landberg*, once the School Board Member for Ward 3 and currently Program Director for “DC Voice,” a civic group organized and informed for change in education. They emphasized that power has shifted from the School Board to the Mayor.

In a very effective format, the speakers addressed three blocks of interests, taking questions after each: a) what led to the mayoral takeover of the under-performing DC Public Schools (DCPS), b) how does the new system work, and c) problems in implementation. The speakers provided an information packet (copy at our office).

### History

In addition to problems of performance by the school system, there were two structural reasons for change per the June 2007 legislation.

(1) Unlike elsewhere, DC functions as both a state and city/county government. For example, state functions it fulfills is to award and oversee federal grants, especially those of the U.S. Departments of Education and Agriculture. In the past there were too many irregularities and not enough oversight for Agriculture grants. A limited State Office of Education was established to correct matters.

2) In 1996 Congress granted authority for establishing Charter Schools. The School Board and an independent Charter School Board each had separate authority. The school system was not able to oversee charter schools and the authority has been consolidated in the Charter Board, which still is composed of seven members selected by the Mayor from a list of fifteen names provided by the U.S. Department of Education.

Further, there was the “blame game” exacerbated by the budgetary arrangements, with the School Board determining allocations within a total funding level set by the Mayor and Council. “There is not enough.” “What did you do with what we gave you?” Additionally, so many school buildings are so old that the a major modernization effort was needed. Moreover, the School Board was accused of micro-management. Yet it was often pressured by activist parents for specific fixes.

### New System

The 2007 legislation made several big changes in authorities and responsibilities.

1. It abolished the DC Board of Education which had been charged with day-to-day, or “local,” school operations, and reconstituted it as the DC State Board of Education, advisory to a new DC State Office of Education, headed by the State Superintendent, also known as the Chief State School Officer (currently Deborah Gist) who reports to the Deputy Mayor for Education.
2. The Board no longer hires the Superintendent; the equivalent is now the Chancellor (Michelle Rhee), hired by and reporting directly to the Mayor.
3. A separate authority (Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization, headed by Allan Lew, reporting through the Deputy Mayor for Education, Victor Reinoso) is responsible for school building renovation and maintenance.
4. There is a new Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission, chaired by the Mayor to address the needs of at-risk children.
5. A new Ombudsman (Tonya Kinlow) investigates complaints.

The (now State) School Board will revert from the current hybrid body comprised of elected and appointed members to an all-elected body. There will be nine total, with one member elected by each Ward and one elected at large; those elected will

chose their own president. The election will be non-partisan, coinciding with the Presidential election next November.

The State School Board's functions apply to all DCPS and public charter schools. The Board focuses on such matters as: standards, policies, and regulations for all schools in the District; allocation of federal grants; high-school graduation requirements; vocational education; standards for high-school-equivalency credentials; definition of the adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation; policies for parental involvement; rules for residency verification; the list of charter school accreditation organizations, and standards for home schooling.. (Note that the DCPS standards developed by Superintendent Janney have been accepted by the U.S. Department of Education. The standards are highly regarded by recognized professional organizations.) The School Board's organizational structure, staff, budget, operations, etc. are set by the Mayor. Staff support is provided by the State Education Office.

The Mayor is integrating schools into government operations, e.g., police cover security, the Attorney General has legal operations, financial matters are handled by the Chief Financial Officer (CFO), and health continues as the responsibilities of school nurses. Chancellor Rhee is now like any other agency head.

Before the District's financial troubles (1996) the Superintendent appointed the heads of the school system's budget and financial offices. After the 1996 Congressional action establishing the Control Board, the CFO took over all financial operations for the school system.

All budgetary preparation is now done behind closed doors. The budget for the school system is made available in March as part of the Mayor's budget. Previously, the Superintendent got a "mark" or target budget level to begin the process and then held hearings. The School Board shaped the budget. The Mayor and Council had authority to approve the total funding level but had no line-item veto. (This could lead to finger-pointing, especially if the Board's budget exceeded the amount set by the Mayor).

The DC Council has new oversight powers. Chairman Vincent Gray has placed education under the Council's Committee of the Whole rather than in a dedicated committee. The Council has partial line-item veto authority now; it will have complete authority next year.

The budget still must go to Congress in June. DC has not yet gained budget autonomy over its own monies; legislation to grant this authority has stalled.

## **Implementation**

Parents face a big adjustment. Since the School Board does not have responsibility for administration and operation of schools, parents will need to consider taking individual problems first to teachers and principals, then to the Ombudsman, or perhaps to the Chancellor, or Mayor, or even to a District Council Member.

The Mayor has clear accountability for the schools. Yet he is responsible for a lot besides the school system. The only authority with say over school operations besides the Mayor is the Council. It, too, has more to do than just oversight of the schools.

The issue of public access and involvement is on several levels with respect to seeking help and advice on involvement. On the individual level parents have recourse just noted but constituent pressure may increase on the Council. Parents do not have the same power to interfere with the Chancellor as the old School Board did with the Superintendent. There are broad matters such as policy changes in support of the public good requiring general advocacy of DC citizenry. In between are operational policy changes and effects such as staggering hours of school attendance.

The new law requires annual evaluation of the school system, with evaluators appointed by the Mayor and the first report due this June. This is a "work in progress;" the projected benchmarks for evaluation are not due until September. Overall, there is now doubt that serious reform of the school system would not occur without bold, energetic action, as exhibited by the Mayor and Chancellor. On the other hand, we do not want to wind up with new folks making the same mistakes, repeating history.