



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

**Hearing on the Master Facilities Plan
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education
December 18, 2019**

Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and councilmembers, thank you for inviting me to speak today on the planning of and facilities for our public schools. I am Scott Pearson, Executive Director of the Public Charter School Board.

As I testified in June, the Master Facilities Plan (MFP) provides a valuable baseline of information about facilities. At that last hearing, we also applauded the recommendations in the MFP future use. For example, re-using public facilities for educational use, using vacant parcels in mixed-use development for educational purposes, and establishing incentives for developers to incorporate educational uses into their housing developments. As we think about refining the plan, those recommendations need to be more specific. We hope that the updated MFP will speak to specific buildings and specific programs so that both the decision makers and the communities impacted will have a clear view of the future landscape.

On the topic of buildings, I would like to take a few minutes to review the specific buildings we believe should be made available to public charter schools. There has been a gulf between charter school advocates, who list ten to thirteen available buildings, and the DME, who cites far fewer. I hope with this testimony will help close this gulf.

We put city-owned buildings potentially available to charter schools into seven categories.

Category one is the one building that we and the city agree is vacant, and for which the city is currently seeking offers from public charter schools. This building is Ferebee Hope, a 193,000 square foot facility in Ward 8.

In category two are two buildings that we and the city agree are vacant, but for which the city says that DCPS is currently “evaluating programming” – which we fear is a euphemism for “allowing to demise.” The buildings in this category are Spingarn, a 225,000 square foot building in Ward 5, and

Winston, a 138,000 square foot building in Ward 7. Both should be immediately released to public charter schools.

Category three is a building that will soon be vacant. As this council well knows, a new Banneker High School is being constructed. When it is ready in Summer, 2021, the old building will be available, 146,000 square feet in Ward 1. The city should begin planning now to transfer this to a public charter school before the building deteriorates and requires major repairs.

Category four is a building that was wrongly removed from the list of surplus buildings. I say wrongly because it is a vacant school building highly sought-after by charter schools. Fletcher Johnson, a 302,000 square foot building in Ward 7, is instead being redeveloped by DMPED. All agree the site is large enough to accommodate both school and other uses. It is essential that the city ensure space at this redeveloped site for a public charter school.

Category five contains four DCPS buildings that in the past few years have been allowed to house other city agencies. Given our facilities shortage the city's first priority should be to use public school buildings for public schools. Moreover, in all of these sites the residing city agency is not using all of the space, so if these agencies won't move, they should at least co-locate. The four buildings are Emery in Ward Five, used for DCPS administration, Kenilworth in Ward 7, used by DPR, Malcolm X in Ward 8, used by DPR and DOES, and Wilkinson in Ward 8, used by the DC Infrastructure Academy.

Category six is a nearly empty, 100,000 square foot building owned by another agency. I'm referring to DC Public Library's Penn Center building at 1709 3rd Street NE in Ward 5. A careful review of city buildings would likely find other such opportunities, but this one is truly low hanging fruit.

Finally, in category seven are three buildings used by DCPS for swing space – Davis, Garnet-Patterson, and Meyer. DCPS needs swing space. But from time to time these buildings are empty for a year or more, as Garnet Patterson is this year. When vacant they should be made available to charter schools for temporary, swing, or incubator use.

We understand that DCPS is growing and in some cases may be reluctant to give up for a 25 year lease a building that it anticipates needing in five. I would argue that there are superior options than leaving this building empty and deteriorating. Making it available as incubator or short-term space to charter schools is certainly better for all concerned.

The MFP also calls for more co-location across sectors. We strongly endorsed this recommendation and hope that the rent paid by the co-locating charter

school directly supplements the budget of the host DCPS school. This will, we believe, make for a much for successful co-location.

It remains a fact that public charter schools in DC are amidst a housing crisis. This causes a ripple effect across communities. A recent example of this is the Birney building in Ward 8. As you may know, DCPS' Excel Academy has occupied the building for a few years even though the building is controlled by the charter school incubator Building Pathways. No one has any idea whether Excel plans to vacate that building at the end of their lease and no firm commitment has come from the city. As a result, Building Pathways is stuck and cannot give any potential public charter schools planning certainty.

This example is just the latest in a vicious circle of facility uncertainty. Schools cannot find adequate facilities, so they purchase land to build. Once the school tries to build a new facility, the community is upset because there are vacant buildings in close proximity that should be available to use. It creates confusion and ill will toward the school and public education more broadly.

Other than politics pure and simple, there is no good explanation for why there continues to be over a million square feet of space in empty school buildings collecting dust and rodents while multiple top-ranked schools struggle to find an adequate space to educate their students. These buildings are an eye sore to the community and could be better used as schools where kids can use the playground, gym. Places for ANCs and the broader community can convene meetings. We have a situation where commercial space is drying up, the executive refuses to release buildings and a school's only other option is to build wherever there is available, affordable land. There has to be a better way; lets fix it.

Before I conclude my testimony, I want to highlight two issues we raised in June that are important to consider when revising the MFP and one concerning the city's comprehensive plan.

The first is charter growth and market share. We continue to be concerned with some of the alarmist and incorrect rhetoric contained in the report. The MFP looks at charter market share many years ago, compares it to market share today, applies a straight line, and concludes that charter market share could reach 73% by school year 2028. The facts today are that charter market share has been, is and is likely to be fairly stable.

The second issue is capacity utilization. The MFP considers capacity utilization by comparing enrollment with the theoretical occupancy load of the building they occupy. However, this ignores the fact that many schools' programs do not permit the maximum use of a building, for example if they limit the

number of children in a classroom for educational reasons. It also ignores the school's maximum allowed enrollment, as controlled by the public charter board.

We would like the MFP to calculate true capacity, which takes into account both of these constraints. When we do so, we find that LEAs are at 90% of capacity utilization, not the 82% that the MFP shows for charter facilities. The MFP considers any facility within 80 to 95% of utilization to be "balanced." Fewer than ten of our LEAs are under capacity.

Finally, in the city's current draft update to the Comprehensive Plan Educational Facilities Element there is a troubling new recommendation, 1.1.5 that states: "Discourage siting of schools in areas zoned as PDR [Production, Distribution and Repair]." Given the difficult facilities challenges faced by public charter schools we do not need to pile on by discouraging them from locating in the very locations they are most likely to find available space.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. As you know, increasing access to facilities and quality schools has been a priority of mine for some time. We look forward to engaging on this issue in the future and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

ATTACHMENT: PUBLIC BUILDINGS POTENTIALLY AVAILABLE TO PUBLIC
CHARTER SCHOOLS

Category	Building	Ward	Size (Square Feet)
1. Available and out for bid	Ferebee Hope	Ward 8	193,800
2. DC agrees is vacant	Spingarn	Ward 5	225,000
	Winston	Ward 7	137,700
3. Will be vacant; DC has been silent	Banneker	Ward 1	146,600
4. Wrongly removed from surplus inventory and given to DMPED for development	Fletcher Johnson	Ward 7	302,000
5. DCPS buildings used by other agencies and should be used first by a school	Emery (DCPS Admin)	Ward 5	63,800
	Kenilworth (DPR)	Ward 7	57,100
	Malcolm X (DPR/DOES)	Ward 8	110,800
	Wilkinson (DC Infrastructure Academy)	Ward 8	144,900
6. Other agency buildings that are largely vacant and could be used as school buildings	Penn Center	Ward 5	100,000+
7. Swing space that should be made available to charter schools as well for swing space when unused by DCPS	Davis	Ward 7	71,000
	Garnet Patterson	Ward 1	83,921
	Meyer	Ward 1	62,200