



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

**Hearing on the Master Facilities Plan  
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education  
June 5, 2019**

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

The Master Facilities Plan provides a valuable baseline of information about facilities. In some cases, such as capacity utilization for charter schools or its rough projections about charter growth, we think it misses the mark, as I will discuss later. But in many ways the report offers a valuable, even encyclopedic resource about school facilities in the District.

The report also contains some very helpful recommendations. The report's recommendations, beginning at page 4-2, are almost all constructive and ones that we endorse. Particularly important are the recommendations around expanding school facilities and improving the utilization of these facilities.

As the MFP points out, the city is coming to the end of an era of surplus facilities. We already see this in some wards. Within ten years, according to the MFP, we will see it in most. This era has lasted longer than most of us have been alive, and so it's difficult to conceive of doing things differently, but as public servants it is our job to face the future and act on it.

It is for this reason that we applaud the recommendations in the MFP. For example, the MFP calls for 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. These are exactly the kinds of things the city needs to be doing to plan for the future, and we commend the Deputy Mayor for including these recommendations in the MFP.

The MFP also calls for more co-location across sectors. This is another recommendation we strongly endorse. The MFP documents numerous

school buildings with several hundred vacant seats. Meanwhile public charter schools are forced to locate in office buildings, windowless warehouses, and church annexes. Co-location is truly a win-win. It could provide the children in a charter school with proper educational space while offering the co-locating schools millions of dollars in rent. All through the budget season we heard about budget cuts to DCPS schools. But the rent from a co-location would vastly exceed these cuts. Charter schools currently spend over \$20mm paying rent to private landlords. Shouldn't this money instead be paid to other schools, and the money used to benefit kids?

The tragedy of the MFP is the gulf between its solid recommendations and the actual actions of this administration. The report calls for making better use of district facilities for educational use. But as we meet, a dozen school buildings, with over a million square feet of space, with fields, gymnasiums, theaters and sunny classrooms, sit empty, deteriorating, while the pleas of charter school families go unaddressed.

While this administration has converted some short-term leases to long-term ones, it has not released any vacant school buildings during its tenure. Not one. In fact, it's gone in reverse. Three buildings that used to house public charter schools have been removed from the charter inventory. This is in sharp contrast with the policies of Mayors Williams, Fenty, and Gray, who each released a dozen or more school buildings. Against this backdrop, we were encouraged by the news last week that the mayor has put out a RFO for Ferebee-Hope. We look forward to the process and hope the outcome produces a great result for the community.

As a result, public charter schools in DC are facing a housing crisis. As you have heard today, the opportunities for expanding quality schools and opening new schools is challenging and becoming increasingly impossible with the current facility inventory and systems we have in place for enrollment.

With such decisions, our most in-demand schools cannot grow, and the innovative and exciting new schools that we have recently chartered face daunting prospects in finding facilities.

This year, 59% of public charter schools had longer waitlists than they did last year, and roughly 67% of applicants on waitlists are waiting for a seat at a top-ranking public charter school.

Currently, public charter schools offer the only 4 STAR schools in Wards 7 and 8, across seven different schools that educate grades PK3-12. Outside of Ward

3, 24% of DCPS students in schools with STAR scores attend a 4- or 5-STAR school, compared to 33% of public charter school students.

I want to now address two items in the MFP that we believe misstate the current situation. The first is charter growth and market share. 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. It also uses the results of a survey of schools asking about their hopes and dreams for growth, most of which will not come to pass. As a result, some of the discussion of charter growth in the MFP is alarmist and wrong. Charter school market share has stabilized at around 47%. This year it declined. When we consider approved growth authorized by DC PCSB and compare it with forecasted population growth, we find that our growth is well under half of the projected growth. Next year DCPS will open more new schools than public charter schools do. It is important to dispel this false narrative that public charter school growth is out of control, or that it will drive out DCPS. Charter market share is 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 calculate true capacity, which takes into account both of these constraints. When we do so, we find that public charter schools are at 92% of capacity utilization, not the 82% that the MFP show for charter facilities. The MFP considers any school within 80 to 95% of utilization to be "balanced". Fewer than ten of our PK-12 schools are under capacity, and several of these will be closing next year.

Also, I want to close by addressing a broader issue – the availability of housing. Every year the percentage of homeless children in our schools rises. We see cranes everywhere, but how many are building affordable houses for families. We welcome the Mayor's and this Council's support for more affordable housing for families. But we need more. We are creating schools that cause families to choose to live in the District. We need to ensure they have a place to live. And, as we do, we need to be sure that the city is adding educational facilities that they will demand.

Just yesterday the Mayor released EdScape. This is an important step towards the collaboration plan envisioned by the cross-sector task force, and we look forward to engaging on it.

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. By providing the access to facilities, we can be more thoughtful in our planning. It starts with DMPED, continues with incentivizing developers to be more family friendly and ends with both sectors working together to be more efficient. The Master Facilities Plan is a nice first step in our thinking, but it does little to solve the puzzle. We look forward to engaging on this issue in the future and I am happy to answer any questions you have.