

**Testimony by Courtney Schwalen (courtney@schwalen.com), parent at Capitol Hill Montessori at Logan School, at the Committee on Transportation & the Environment Budget Oversight Hearing on the Department of General Services**

**April 22, 2016**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. My six year old son attends Kindergarten at Capitol Hill Montessori at Logan (CHML) and I live in Ward 6.

CHML has been left out of the Mayor's proposed budget for school modernizations which means that for at least the next 6 years, our children will continue to go to school in conditions that threaten their health and safety and undermine the ability for us to provide an environment conducive to learning.

When we received our lottery results in 2013 (at the time residents of Ward 3), I could not believe my son was one of the dozens out of nearly a thousand applicants who had been accepted to CHML. The school is sought after by families across the entire city who want a Montessori education for their child(ren). Although the building was not new and modern, I was committed to Montessori philosophy and understood there was a plan in place to modernize the physical space.

Unsure of the long term feasibility of public schools in DC, when my son was first born my husband and I contemplated moving to the suburbs once he became eligible for Kindergarten. After his first few months at CHML, we thought it was clear we no longer needed to worry and could remain in DC. Our son was thriving both socially and academically at CHML, the modernizations seemed to be underway with a new playground and plan for more and the school was expanding to 8th grade over the next couple of years. With sibling priority on the waitlist, we thought we were set for both of our boys (our youngest will be eligible for PK3 at CHML in SY 2017-2018) through middle school.

In the past couple months however, we have questioned our decision to have faith in the DC Government to provide a safe and healthy physical environment for our children.

- We have learned that our school has been taken off of the modernization schedule completely, seemingly without even having a needs assessment. I am at the school multiple times per day, I am active with the PTSSO and I am a registered school volunteer. I see hazards all over the school. To name a few: In one of the girl's bathrooms there is a rusted heater that the younger children need to step on to reach the soap to wash their hands; outside of my son's classroom there are loose electrical wires; on the playground there is a pipe that sporadically bubbles over splattering boiling water on whomever is standing below it; I know of only one window in the whole building that can be opened to let fresh air in; and the building is so hot (and, therefore, dry) from the heating in the winter that children wear short sleeves and the teachers need to keep the window air conditioning units on.
- Our school closed for a day this winter because the boiler malfunctioned.
- We recently learned from an article in the Washington Post that there is lead in the water our children use for drinking, cooking, washing produce, etc. The lead was detected at least as early as August 2015 and no one at the school was notified.

I know my son has suffered ill effects from the environmental deficiencies at CHML. He is prone to nosebleeds and cold sores, both of which are aggravated by hot, dry air. Despite lip gloss, vitamin supplements, saline nasal spray and other treatments at home, with the heat always being so high at CHML we are constantly battling these ailments. It is amazing how quickly a long weekend or school break will clear these up. Of course these are not pleasant for my son, however, we try to manage them and it seemed reasonable to believe that once the windows at school got fixed (and, therefore, could be opened) as part of the modernization plan, my sons nosebleeds at school would decrease along with the amount of cold sore break outs. According to the new modernization plan, or lack thereof, no new windows are coming to CHML any time soon.

Then I learned about the lead in the water. The possible physical and cognitive effects of lead cannot be so easily managed. As soon as I learned about the lead issue at CHML I called my pediatrician to schedule a lead test for my son. They had so many children coming in for lead tests because of the recent reports on lead in DCPS schools, they had run out and had to order more. Unfortunately, as I write this testimony, I do not yet have the results of his lead test. I can only hope that it is within normal limits, especially since, due to lack of communication from DGS and DCPS, I missed a critical window to have him tested in August when the lead exposure was originally detected.

I have provided primarily a perspective as a concerned and involved parent at CHML. My professional experience is in Early Childhood Education and I hold an M.Ed. in Human Development and Psychology from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. One of the first lessons you learn in *any* education program is that in order to teach effectively, the children must have basic needs met. DCPS and DGS are failing miserably at providing the basics of health and safety for my child and all of those enrolled at CHML. Ironically, DCPS is simultaneously putting pressure on our administration and teachers for higher student performance on standardized tests. Shame on DCPS, you know better. How can students who overheat and ingest lead be expected to perform well?

Despite the teachers, staff and fellow families at CHML creating an excellent learning environment for my son and community for my family, if my child's basic needs cannot be met I have no choice but to consider a move to a private school or a school district in Fairfax or Montgomery County that will take health and safety seriously. I know I am not the only parent who feels this way.

Please work to earn our trust and commitment back by directing DGS to come to CHML and fully assess it to understand the needs of our building. In addition, include full funding for a CHML modernization in (or, ideally, before) FY19 in the final 6-year budget approved by the Council. If that can be done, it would go a long way to keeping my family as DC residents, and therefore, our tax money contributing to the success of DCPS. Thank you.