

Testimony of Danica Petroschius
Parent at Capitol Hill Montessori at Logan
DGS Oversight Hearing
April 21, 2016

I'm Danica Petroschius, parent at Capitol Hill Montessori at Logan and a Ward 6 resident. I've attached testimony of parents who could not be here today. I hope you will read them.

Parents across the city have had one too many experiences with DGS's lack of communication, lack of transparency, lack of follow-through and lack of efficiency. They don't just hold the keys to our school buildings, they hold the keys to ensuring the health and safety of our children in them. And I say unequivocally that they are failing.

We saw it first-hand again this week when a team from DGS came to our school to answer questions about lead in our water. There were a few DGS staff there such as Kathleen Walsh and Brian Killian who are clearly subject-matter experts trying to answer our questions and help. But they cannot do their job well when the system around them is broken. It's time for solutions.

It's time for the Council to pivot quickly from oversight of DGS to legislation and consequences for failure. There are some basic things that Council can require in legislation – perhaps a “DGS Improvement and Accountability Act” – that would start to set DGS on a path to success – and help rebuild trust with parents and taxpayers across the city. I propose that new rules require that DGS:

1. **Create and implement a protocol for labelling data.** We were appalled this week to find out that one reason that DGS has a difficult time explaining confusing data is because “well, we have different testers each time so they might call sources different things.” There are many ways to ensure that every item can be tagged and tracked over time. Ask any grocer.
2. **Develop and Make 100% Accurate and Transparent Data on Every School.** The reality is that if you don't share, people think you are hiding something. DGS should be required to create an accurate and comprehensive data tracking system so that every building aspect has a unique identifier and each action taken on that aspect whether testing, remediation, retesting, repairs or replacement is tracked. Not only will it help us understand our buildings needs and progress, but it will drive informed decision-making to better prioritize and plan resources and staffing.
3. **Require Comprehensive Annual Assessment of Every School.** The current budget planning process falls short because even DGS and DCPS admit they do not have full data on every school's needs, capacities or structures. CHML has not been assessed in any recent year that we can find. This means that budgeting and prioritizing are a guessing game. DGS should be required to maintain public, updated annual data on every school building.
4. **Require Development of a Clear Communications Protocol.** DGS should develop a clear protocol that requires them to notify the principal, staff and parents of any health issues in the school and include how and when they are being addressed. We never want to hear again as we did Wednesday night from DGS, “There is no process for communicating to parents on lead issues.” We don't want this information to cause alarm and panic. Having a regular, open and honest stream of communication actually *builds* confidence and trust. If we know that there is a system to accurately maintain and share information, then we can begin to trust the system that delivers the solutions. The scariest part for every parent in this city is *not knowing* the information (even if it's bad news). It's the wondering about what we *don't* know that is scary. Share the information, explain the process, and show progress – then you build trust.

5. **Require Early and Ongoing Collaboration with School Communities in Planning and Designing Modernizations.** The SIT process to date has not resulted in collaboration and strong planning that accounts for actual school use. Parents and staff can't always have everything they want. But collaborative planning ensures efficiencies because only the school community knows how that school actually uses the building and how it will best function in the future. Without collaborating with the school community, DGS risks wasting dollars later having to rebuild or restructure what they just built.

We are about to spend billions of dollars on school modernization over the next six years and DGS has a leading role in ensuring those dollars are spent well. If DGS doesn't change how it does business, we risk wasting those dollars and further eroding public trust. I'm recommending common sense practices in the management of any publicly accountable organization. I hope you will consider these ideas and act on them. We all want a better DGS that leads to safe, healthy and modern schools.