

TESTIMONY OF TODD J. COCHRAN
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My name is Todd Cochran, and I am a parent of two second graders and a PK4 child at Capitol Hill Montessori at Logan (“CHML”). In addition, I am in my second term as the Vice President of our school’s PTSSO, and I am a Ward 6 resident. Thank you to Chairman Grosso and the Committee for the opportunity to testify today.

Parents and schools need better communications with DCPS. In fact, we demand it. But we should not have to make such demands. As the consumers of the public school system in the District, providing us with complete, timely, and relevant information should be a priority for DCPS. But, unfortunately, far too often we are left with insufficient information concerning decisions – or lack of decisions – affecting our children and schools, and we have to repeatedly ask for the information and then follow-up, prod, and beg to get any information at all.

As an example, as this Committee is well aware, CHML was the first school to discover that a number of the water sources in our school tested above the allowable threshold for lead. But neither DCPS nor DGS notified our community or school administration, and we independently discovered the failed tests months later. We had to constantly request information from DCPS and the other involved agencies and schedule regular meetings to effectively project manage the remediation of this issue.

And then again, just this month, one of our water sources in a PK3-Kindergarten classroom tested above the District-set threshold. The DCPS COO sent a letter to CHML staff and parents notifying us of the results (but the link to the testing results was incorrect in the letter sent to CHML and all other schools that tested above the threshold). Subsequently, the sink remained out of service for two weeks without any communication from DCPS or any other agency. So, we inquired about its status with the DCPS COO, and the only response we received was a generic statement that the safety of students comes first. So, again, we asked DCPS about the status of the sink, and we did not receive any response at all. Eventually, DGS – who we had also requested information from concerning the sink – provided us with a substantive response, but only after our PTSSO pushing for answers. Why did DCPS not provide us with information or a contact at DGS so that we could get answers if this was how the process was going to work? This example represents a systematic problem in which DCPS is serving as the communicator, but it does not have any substantive knowledge about the topic.

And we are not supposed to reach out to DGS, and relatedly DGS is not supposed to communicate with parents; yet DGS and its subject matter experts hold all the substantive knowledge. This disjointed communication must be fixed.

Also, just last week, a pipe in our cafeteria backed up, resulting in RAW SEWAGE in the kitchen and food service area, causing obvious concern over the quality of the food served and forcing children to eat in their classrooms. Our maintenance staff and principal put in an emergency work request, shortly after the problem was discovered, at 10:50 am. DGS sent one staff member to CHML in the mid-afternoon, but DCPS and DGS did not provide us any information. By late afternoon, parents had to resort to repeated emails to the DME and other city and agency leaders asking for any information on when this would be resolved, and only then was the immediate issue resolved overnight. Yet, parents had to ask again when a full assessment would be undertaken to address this repeated problem. At 9:07 pm, we heard from the Director of DGS to tell us that they were assessing the problem, and DGS, DCPS, and the DME would update us once they identified the cause. Two days later, we were told that we would have to wait until after the holiday weekend for an update.

This kind of slowly released, incomplete information is what continues to erode our confidence in DCPS. DCPS needs to remember that the concerns and needs of its students and their parents are important. Indeed, we are DCPS's consumers. We are important. And DCPS should treat us as such. And we deserve to know what is happening in our schools and to our kids.

The CHML community has not closed the book on working with DCPS. We need DCPS to help educate our children. In fact, the majority of our parents – myself included – strongly believe in the public education system in the District. But we want to be partners in this process. In fact, we demand it.

I urge the Committee to think about this issue from a consumer perspective and demand DCPS improve its communications with its consumers. I hope the Chancellor follows through on his pledge to not only visit every school, but to actively and comprehensively listen to each school's needs, challenges, and desires. I hope he engages in a fruitful, meaningful, and long-running discussion with the students, parents, and staff at CHML. We are, of course, willing to work with and assist DCPS, but we need an open line of communication to do so.

Thank you for your time.