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Health, Education and Human Services Division

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May 5, 1997

The Honorable Charles H. Taylor
Chairman, Subcommittee on the
District of Columbia
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Subject: District of Columbia Draft Emergency Supplemental Funding
Request for District of Columbia Public Schools

Dear Mr. Chairman:

On April 11, 1997, the Subcommittee received a draft request for emergency¹ supplemental federal funds to improve its public school facilities. This request for supplemental funds was made by the D.C. Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority on behalf of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).

DCPS, which has more than 150 schools, has requested \$36.85 million in supplemental funding for emergency public school facility improvements. DCPS has defined emergency, or critical, repairs as those repairs that if not done could result in schools closing for health and safety reasons. Major critical repairs include replacing roofs, boilers, and chillers, bringing facilities into compliance with requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act, and removing underground storage tanks. According to DCPS, \$86.9 million is required to make critical repairs to ensure that all schools will be ready to open for the 1997-98 school year. Of this amount, \$49.75 million is potentially available.

¹This is the terminology used in the request. We did not independently assess the appropriateness of this wording.

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You asked us to review the details supporting the request. The information in this correspondence is based on (1) our past work on the condition of America's schools,² (2) a review of documents DCPS and the Authority provided in support of the request, and (3) discussions with DCPS and the General Services Administration (GSA), which has estimated repair costs for each DCPS school facility.

In summary, we found no reason to challenge the validity of DCPS' need for critical capital improvements. DCPS' estimate of the cost of these improvements—\$86.9 million, \$36.85 million of which it is now requesting to cover its fiscal year 1997 funding shortfall—seems reasonable based on available data. We did not address the issue, however, of whether other, more appropriate sources of funding are available.

DCPS has developed a capital improvement plan for completing emergency school repairs by September 1997 and has hired a chief operating officer/director of facilities. Given the scope of the repairs required, however, and the number of schools involved, DCPS may not have enough staff to effectively oversee an effort of this magnitude in such a short time period. In addition, although DCPS officials said that they have been talking to major construction firms about construction management and precertifying individual contractors to execute the plan, the scopes of work and timing for each project in the plan have not yet been developed.

FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN FOR EMERGENCY REPAIRS OF DCPS FACILITIES

In a 1994 nationwide study of the condition of America's schools, we documented the less-than-adequate condition of the District of Columbia's public schools. Ninety-seven percent of District schools reported a need to upgrade or repair on-site buildings to good overall condition. At the time of our study, DCPS' facilities manager reported that the schools, which had an average age of 50 years, were structurally sound, but older buildings housed old—sometimes original—systems, such as the heating and air conditioning or electrical systems, which had major repair problems. For example, old boiler systems had steam leakages that caused such infrastructure erosion that whole

²School Facilities: Condition of America's Schools (GAO/HEHS-95-61, Feb. 1, 1995); School Facilities: America's Schools Report Differing Conditions (GAO/HEHS-96-103, June 14, 1996); and School Facilities: Profiles of School Condition by State (GAO/HEHS-96-148, June 24, 1996).

school wings had been condemned and cordoned off; leaky roofs were causing ceilings to crumble onto teachers' and students' desks; and fire doors were warped and could not be opened and closed. In addition, at that time, DCPS was under court order to fix the most serious of the estimated \$90 million worth of fire code violations by the start of the 1994-95 school year. In 1994, the facilities manager estimated that at least \$460 million was needed to make necessary repairs.

In 1996, the Congress requested GSA to do a complete study of the District schools. In response, GSA updated a 1991 study done by a contractor who had inspected all the schools. GSA then developed a detailed list on a school-by-school and repair-by-repair basis of work needed and its cost. The recent draft emergency supplemental appropriation request is based on GSA's work and DCPS' plan—which includes the prioritization of types and timing of repairs at individual schools—for fixing emergency facility problems.

DCPS officials consider the supplemental request necessary to complete the first phase of its three-phased school modernization and revitalization plan, which addresses immediate fiscal year 1997 needs. The priority given to the types of repairs specified in the first phase of the plan appears to be appropriate. These repairs include those identified as critical and, if not done, could result in school closings. The second phase of the plan involves what DCPS has termed "short-term" needs and identifies repairs, replacements, and improvements needed during fiscal years 1998 and 1999. During this phase, planning will begin on modernizing schools and disposal of excess space should progress. To meet the requirements of the District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995, DCPS has to develop a Long Range Facilities Master Plan. This long-term plan includes the final phase, slated for fiscal years 2000-07, to revitalize school facilities and property. According to a DCPS official, the Long Range Facilities Master Plan was submitted to the Congress on April 25, 1997.

Although our work on the condition of America's schools and GSA's work support the need for massive school facility repairs, another significant issue is the potential inability of DCPS to manage the magnitude of work involved in doing these repairs in the next 5 months. This effort will involve repairs in 44 schools with up to five contractors working at each school, according to DCPS officials. DCPS currently has 14 staff to manage what amounts to more than 200 projects. DCPS expects to soon hire 13 additional staff to help manage these projects. However, given the extremely short time frame for completing these projects and the time needed to orient and organize the new staff, it remains to be seen how effectively they—along with the existing staff—will be able to manage this large workload.

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AGENCY COMMENTS

The District of Columbia Public schools reviewed a draft of this letter and concurred with our assessment of cost issues. The Chief Operating Officer/Director of Facilities reiterated his position that the school system has the ability to tackle present needs and will have in place a fully functional team by the end of May. He also stated that the system intends to obligate the \$86.6 million by September 30, 1997.

We are sending copies of this correspondence to the Subcommittee's Ranking Minority Member. As agreed with your office, we plan no further distribution of this correspondence for 30 days unless its contents are made public before then. At that time, we will send copies to interested parties and make copies available to others upon request.

This correspondence was prepared by Eleanor Johnson and Harriet Ganson, Assistant Directors, and Joan Denomme, Senior Evaluator. Please call me on (202) 512-7014 if you or your staff have any questions.

Sincerely yours,



Carlotta C. Joyner
Director, Education and
Employment Issues

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