

Testimony of Martha McIntosh
Co-President, Murch Elementary Home and School Association
Before the DC Council Committee on Transportation and the Environment
Public Oversight Hearing on DGS
February 25, 2016

Good afternoon, Councilmember Cheh and other members of the Committee. My name is Martha McIntosh and I am a Co-President of the Murch Elementary Home and School Association and a member of the Murch School Improvement Team.

I am here today to talk about the school modernization process. My nine-year-old daughter is at school today, but if she were in your place, she said that she would ask DGS, and I quote, "How is it possible to mess up so badly, so many times?" The entire Murch community shares her question.

I won't have time to go through all the things that DGS -- and DCPS, to be fair -- have messed up in the course of preparing to modernize Murch. But I want to highlight three areas where there is a need and an opportunity for change: facilities assessments, budgeting, and accountability.

Facilities assessments should be important tools to help determine priorities for school modernization. But each review by DGS over the years seems to provide vastly different conclusions, with no explanation of the underlying basis for the assessment. In 2010, the DGS assessment reported Murch's structure was poor and exterior finishes were unsatisfactory. Within a couple years, those were rated fair or good, but no work had been done on them. The Murch building was literally crumbling from age, and the wear of tear of serving nearly twice the number of students as its intended capacity. The central fire alarm was rated good and the fire control panel fair. But the fire alarm system is original to the 1929 building and does not comply with current code requirements. Staff knew the fire alarm panel did not work for much of the school year. The reality did not match what was on paper.

Another ongoing problem with DGS is their budget estimates. Forecasting and planning for large scale, multiple year, construction projects -- particularly within the structure of a government budget cycle -- is admittedly complex. There will be unexpected changes to priorities and costs. When the budget estimate for any one project is wrong, it directly affect the ability to complete other projects. That is why Murch's renovation was delayed for several years. When the estimate for virtually every project is wrong, however, the budget planning process is worthless.

Budgeting for the Murch modernization should have been relatively cut and dry. There was a feasibility study done at the school in 2014 to help assess challenges and costs. By January 2015, everyone involved knew the project likely would require students to be in offsite swing space for two full years. Everyone knew that significant components of the school's expansion would need to be built below grade if everything were going to fit. DGS assured the Mayor, the Council and the school community that the project needed \$68 million. \$68 million was budgeted.

During the year-long design process, the community regularly asked DGS if the design options under consideration would fit within the budget. There was never anything unexpected in the design. Then, four months before the scheduled start of construction, a builder was hired for the project and the community was told the current budget was \$20 million too low. They identified offsite swing space and building below grade as the two main factors driving up the cost.

DGS's budget estimate was wrong by nearly 30%. They are now trying to cut the scope of the project by \$10 million. They should be getting building permits, but instead are back at concept designs. And the best explanation we have gotten for why the estimate was so far off amounts to, "Oops!"

I know there are ongoing discussions about whether the District is paying too much for school modernizations. I believe they are, however, I will leave those questions to auditors

and other hearings. Many people are working to fix these processes, but the mistakes of the past are still being repeated. Until they are fixed, schools should not be the ones to suffer for the mistakes and broken processes.

I keep referring to DGS, but the final issue I want to address is that none of the people doing this work are DGS employees. In three years of dealing with modernization woes at Murch, I have met the DGS communications staff and the former Director of DGS, but not a single other employee of the agency that I can name. Contractors employed by DC PEP are responsible for project management. Many duties are contracted out further from DC PEP. When there are issues, we do not know who is reviewing their work. It is not clear how those contractors are supervised by DGS, who makes final decisions, and who can be held accountable for the mistakes. But if the school modernization process is ever going to function well and be accountable to the taxpayers of the District, there must be sufficient supervision of contractors. That supervision should be constant and done by District employees with the experience and expertise to review and challenge the work of those contractors. Anything less is a recipe for the broken system the District currently has. The experience of other government construction agencies, such as the federal Department of Veteran's Affairs have shown that to be true.

As my daughter also said, "Everyone makes mistakes sometimes." But she also knows that when you make mistakes, you can't shrug it off, you have to find a way to make it right.

I thank Councilmember Cheh for her ongoing support of Murch in this process, I thank the entire committee for your time today and your attention to these issues. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.