

A Letter to Mayor Fenty

A Plan to Make a Difference

By Alvin Mason

Dear Mayor Fenty,

There is an old saying “be careful what you ask for because you might get it.” Well, I think that saying is appropriate for the takeover by the Mayor’s office of the public school system. In my opinion had you known what you were getting into, you might have left it alone.

Mayor Fenty, enjoy the honeymoon period that has you and Michele Rhee receiving favorable publicity, but remember how this city works. No sooner than the next ratings sweepstakes come around will your administration be sacrificed, as media outlets scramble to report news and specifically be the first to report eye catching news stories. Hence you better recognize the problems that need to be addressed.

The good thing is that one person can now be held accountable. The bad thing is that the person to be held accountable is you. I wish I could have given you this when we talked on my front porch.

Another good thing is that the games superintendents play should now be over. The superintendent games include changing textbooks and the assessment test. The superintendents often work for book publishers in between jobs, i.e., Franklin Smith and Clifford Janey, et al.

Once on the job the assessment test is changed to a format unfamiliar to DC students. In the case of the Beckman/Ackerman Regime the CTBS test was replaced by

the Stanford 9 which actually tested a student's ability to critically think as much as reading comprehension. Critical thinking in a test was a shock for DC students.

The first test is historically low. So low it is of course considered unacceptable and then resources are thrown at the problem. After the first test results the students are taught how to take a particular test. Naturally test scores improve the first couple of years. The superintendent is then credited with improvement at which point that individual becomes a hot commodity or in demand. Of course with the DC Schools past oversight issues the superintendent had a great excuse to jump ship.

Let's take a look at some of the other problems. Unrealistic expectations are a good place to start. If you review the contract or requirements charged to former superintendent Andrew Jenkins the failure of which was given as a reason for his ouster, you will see that none of the subsequent superintendents completed Jenkins unfinished business. Ever since Jenkins I have seen new leadership including yours, spend time publicizing problems of previous administrations.

I have seen new policies that make absolutely no sense. One such policy was to give Principals one-year contracts at the end of which they could be kicked to the street. Let me ask you Mr. Mayor, what sense does it make to offer a one year contract to a dynamic person who might be able to turn a poor school into a good school. Can you or your chancellor turn around the worst school in the system in one year. Why would you expect a good principal to leave a setting in which they have the power of past accomplishment for a one year contract. It only makes sense, if the principal retires from one jurisdiction and receives a salary with their pension. Would that principle be a short term fix or part of the long term solution?

If principals are still being offered a one year contract and expected to show improvement in a year, should you and the new chancellor be held to the same standard?

Mayor Fenty, with four children, two that have attended and two that presently attend DC Public Schools, including the youngest two who are presently attending Benjamin Banneker and Stuart Hopson respectfully and my oldest son who attended Eastern, (at a time that saw 3 principals in 3 years) and struggled at North Carolina A&T, I have a parent's perspective of what I think needs to be done and what I believe can't be done. This is from a parent who is not politically connected and does not wish to be. I will discuss the DC Public Schools from the three major components that make up the school system, first the administration, then the children, and finally the teachers.

The Administration

The administration problems include, but are not limited to incompetence, the lack of reliable input into decision-making, the inability to plan and execute, the perspective of some administrators who act as though they have property ownership in their areas of responsibility which leads to turf battles and just plain pettiness.

Incompetence is inherent in organizations that foster an atmosphere of alliance. Like any organization, DC Public School employees have veteran workers who have made friends with coworkers. In many instances, a gifted teacher, but more often a gifted principal is put in an administrative position. Many times the new administrator surrounds themselves with former coworkers who are allies. In many cases the new Central Office employees were great principals or teachers, but didn't have the management know-how to be effective with their new responsibilities. Thus, too many times, people were put into positions for which they had insufficient skills or knowledge.

But after years of frontline frustrations getting out of the classroom or schools was and still is a better choice especially when salary is considered. Taking retirement benefits into account, it is then prudent to leave the school for an administrative position.

Another cause of incompetence, not only in the school system but in the city government as a whole, is the inability of a qualified person to be seriously considered for a position by sending a resume or applying without networking with an insider. Even worse, is when a homegrown DC product with talent and achievement has to either network or kiss-up to get in government. Mr. Mayor working for the DC Government has always been a private party and everyone has not been invited. The problem with workers being selected from associations is that there is an inherent privileged mentality, thus no sense of urgency for the task at hand.

Too further support my point, I can name many instances when Superintendents and other top administrators bought in their own people. When the top officials left for another job, the people they bought in followed them. I contend to you that when bureaucrats obtain their position on the coattails of a top official, that their allegiance is to the official that brought them in, instead of to the children

The first solution to solving incompetence is to ask everyone in central office to explain exactly what they do and how their job relates to improving education. The second solution is to provide a level playing field (fair competition) for any vacancy.

The lack of reliable input into decision-making starts with a bigger problem which is that administrators who make decisions and set policy are too far removed from the front lines.

A perfect example is open space schools. Years back, top administrators traveled to areas where open area schools (without walls to separate classrooms) worked or were an innovative concept. Any urban educator with common sense and input from the front lines would never have wasted taxpayer money building such schools. Remember a few years ago when other jurisdictions changed their buildings back to traditional schools as DC wanted to but didn't have the money to make such conversions.

The problem with unreliable input into decision-making is discussed throughout this letter.

The inability to plan and execute starts with a visionary who can sell their vision for improving DC Schools to the administration holdovers using the power of persuasion. Too many times, the new plan is forced down the administration holdovers throats by the new hierarchy's position power rather than the power of persuasion or personal power, that few dynamic people possess. All too often the positions that people in the hierarchy have are bigger than the men or women in them.

Is your takeover of schools going to be the same top down decision making approach, or is there going to be real input from teachers on the front lines. In most organizations that have problems, the one consistent fact is that information from the front lines does not flow to the top or is not given consideration by decision-makers.

A lot of unsuccessful programs could have been scrapped before time and money was wasted if the programs had been introduced properly to teachers and those same teachers had been encouraged to give their honest opinions. In other words, if the majority of teachers could have said in an open forum that this idea or program is BS without retribution, a lot of unsuccessful programs would not have failed.

If you have a plan Mr. Mayor, do you want to surround yourself with yes men and women who are going to let you and the new school chief implement a BS plan that won't work. When your reputation and perhaps job is on the line to improve schools, isn't it better to present a plan and have it shot down by pessimist, and ask those people how can we make it better? Then make necessary adjustments using front line input particularly with foreseeable problems that experienced teachers and principals would recognize. Wouldn't the plan be better?

Execution will occur only when there are proper communication channels for feedback. With planning and execution, there must be feedback, analysis, and adjustments.

Another big problem is the inability of any administration in the DC government to integrate technology into the planning and execution model. Today technology is crucial to proper feedback. Most of the higher-ups need to thoroughly understand database management which is a relatively new concept to older educators and administrators.

All student records should be put in a database to eliminate such problems as parents being told; their child needs shot records, when records had been already given to the schools sometimes more than once. The lack of a proper database has coaches carrying [in case of emergency] forms to athletic events.

One well publicized event was the scanning of countless documents. I now ask you how the organization of such documents will improve education. What action was taken to improve book ordering. Simply have a programmer update the system so principles can verify that publishers received their book orders. Critical ordering systems

are part of life. Just as UPS televises the ability to track a shipment, many organizations integrate their ordering systems with suppliers. Additionally the system should show how many surplus books a school has so another school can obtain needed books through an inner school transfer, instead of waiting for a supplement order to be sent. Sometimes it is the system not the people.

The proper use of technology will also keep track of expenditures as daily or weekly variance reports can compare the difference between actual cost and the budget thus eliminating planned programs not being completed as has happened many times with DC Public School Master Plans.

Mr. Mayor, you were on the City Council so you know what a turf battle is all about. However, pettiness flows from people who are not committed to what is in the best interest of children or as the Beckman regime put it, administrators not putting “Children First.”

One example of pure pettiness that actually hurt DC Public School children was the unwillingness of DC school personnel particularly in the athletic department to help Desmond Dunham find a track coaching position within DC Public Schools.

Everyone involved in athletics in DC knew of Coach Dunham’s achievements with the DC Redwing Youth Program. The team only had over 20 national champions in five years.

Coach Dunham eventually became a coach at Eleanor Roosevelt in Greenbelt, Maryland. This past season (the 2006 -2007 school year) which was Dunham’s first year as head coach, the Eleanor Roosevelt girls track team ranked nationally in Cross Country, a real achievement for an urban or suburban school with black runners. Additionally, the

Roosevelt girls beat the traditional high school track powerhouses such as California's Poly and Wilson high schools, New York's Boys and Girls and won two events at the Penn's Relays against the best Jamaican teams.

The fact that Desmond Dunham, a DC resident did not get a position as a track coach in DC Public Schools is a travesty. I have personally witnessed Coach Dunham help at least 20 kids become productive students. I would bet the house that Desmond could have achieved similar results at any DC Public High School. He is the type of dynamic individual that DC Public Schools need and someone should have to explain why more was not done to help Desmond find something in the District.

A similar situation almost occurred with Nathaniel Metts, a former Red Wings Assistant who was offered assistant coaching positions at high schools that had a handful of runners. Metts coached my oldest daughter Monica, a 9 time national track and field champion, at Stuart Hobson Middle School where they won two city titles. He eventually became the head track coach at Theodore Roosevelt.

The fact that potentially great motivators are not hired or promoted in DC is a problem that will continue until people step outside of themselves or stop looking out only for their best interests. Has anyone ever been given credit for recommending the hiring of a DC employee who exemplified themselves and helped the school system?

Too often, top jobs go to out-of-towners who don't foster relationships with administrative holdovers or teachers. Teachers as important as they are find themselves on the low end of the hierarchy and every administration openly talks of eliminating poor teachers or uncertified teachers. Can the conversation include retraining or supporting teachers?

Another problem has been the combative nature between the administration and the teacher's union. This sometimes war but eternal flame is doused with gasoline every time big contracts and additional bonuses are given to the higher-ups and budget constraints are used as an excuse when considering the salary of teachers, janitors, bus drivers, and other support but essential front line personnel.

A big part of the administration's problems are that top administrators have forgotten who they are (teachers first) and where they came from (the teaching profession).

The Children

Children in DC Public Schools are a big problem. However, it is not their fault up to a certain age. The problem lies at home with the parents of problem children. Of course, there are medical and psychological issues.

The problem with many children is they were/are not loved properly or disciplined. Improper or inadequate love is one reason why a person can make the wrong decision to kill another person over a trivial matter. It is my contention that a person that was loved properly and appreciates the love from relatives, cannot make a callous decision to kill so easily. A qualification is necessary at this point, some kids who have killed were loved by their parents but that love did not overcome the atmosphere that the kids encounter attending DC Public Schools.

The child still is a reflection of the home. The sad but cold blooded truth is that there are not enough positives in some homes or the negatives far outweigh the positives. Part of the problem with discipline is the law. A parent cannot touch their child anymore. In my opinion spanking is not a problem if the person spanking actually loves the child.

The problem occurs when boyfriends who are not the kid's father or girlfriends who are not the kid's mother apply discipline. When I was a kid, we feared the belt, and we would not let our behavior warrant a spanking. We also knew that we better not ever disrespect any adult! Of course you don't have to spank a kid if you effectively use the right words to achieve the desired outcome and/or set proper examples. How many times do we as parents effectively use words and/or set proper examples consistently?

Opinions on spanking will vary greatly, sometimes differing opinions are due to culture. I have observed people similar to myself economically, holler or hit their child in public and some observers have a disdainful look of disbelief. On the flip side, I have witnessed parents who I perceive as well off begging their kid to sit down or letting their child act out by saying no or I want something right now as observers have a similar look of disbelief. One group of observers wonders why a parent could hit a child, while the other group of observers wonders why the parent doesn't smack the hell out of the brat.

Unfortunately, the problem with parenting is seldom addressed because it is not politically correct to call a spade a spade. Remember the flack over Bill Cosby's comments.

We as parents need to know that the biggest challenge to our parenting is having more influence over our children than outside forces. From birth to a certain point, (usually age 10 to 14) parents have almost total influence over their children. As kids get older it is normal for outside the home factors to have more influence over our kids than we do. Parents need to take advantage of their influence and do all they can to model their children in the early years.

I honestly thought that being a good parent or a strong father figure could overcome any negative outside influences. Was I ever wrong! With 5 college degrees I could not convince my oldest son to study or put his best effort in class because taking school seriously was not cool. My son wanted to fit in. I use to proudly say my kids go to public school or I am strictly a public person.

If I could do anything differently I would have sent my kids to private school. Mayor nothing will change until the atmosphere in schools brings a different attitude to the youth. I hope this letter can save some parents my frustrations and help you and the Chancellor see the light.

A few years ago the City Counsel passed legislation to hold parents accountable for the actions of their children. I contend to you that the legislation was recognition that some parents don't meet their responsibility. However the legislation fell short of addressing the needs of kids and filling the void in children's lives.

All children want attention, but many don't know how to attract attention in a positive way. It is my hope that A Plan To Make A Difference will help many children get the attention they are craving for.

If any one reading this becomes upset at my analysis of the children problem let me ask, "Where do your kids go to school?" Too many times parents take the alternative school road, private school or move to the suburbs. Charter schools have not solved the problem.

Let me admit that my oldest daughter Monica attends Bishop McNamara High School. She chose McNamara because they wanted her. After elementary school she was so far down on the waiting list of the two middle schools she wanted to attend,

Stuart-Hopson and Alice Deal that we didn't know what we would do. Her mother and I wrote letters, e-mails and talked to everyone we could. No one seemed to care that the system did not distinguish achievers from non-achievers. Tommy Wells then with the school board talked to us on the street and gave us some helpful advice about our options with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, (PL107-110), unfortunately when we talked to Wells there was about 2 weeks before the start of school.

It was Coach Metts, who took it upon himself to speak to the Principle of Stuart-Hopson, Ms Ellis. He took Monica's report cards and test scores to show her that a deserving honor roll student who tested in the top 5 percent nationally and at the time was a 7 time national track and field champion wanted a chance to attend a good school. A week before school started Monica got in. I challenge any bureaucrat to bend a rule when the facts warrant helping a deserving student.

Another coach, Jimmy Green, another person who has helped many kids, attempted to help Monica get into Deal, but the principle would not let her in. We believe that had Monica attended Deal that she probably now would be attending Wilson.

Student accomplishments don't matter until applying to high school. By the time students enter high school many are set in their ways. When a Child does everything that is asked of them and the system doesn't reward them something is wrong. Why would a child east of the river aspire to attend Harvard, when achievement is not recognized in elementary school?

Monica had her choice of high schools, but that experience stayed with her. Monica wanted to attend a high school that offered excellent academics and track. I wanted her to attend Ballou, so she could run with Andrea Smallwood a high school All-

American who asked Monica to come to Ballou. Smallwood told me that she would mentor Monica. I knew that with Monica, Smallwood and the talented Noble sisters that a DC high school would have something very special, similar to what Eleanor Roosevelt achieved. Monica's mother vetoed Ballou. One parent has veto power. Monica made her own decision. She chose McNamara over Banneker partly because she didn't want me to train her anymore.

It is encouraging that groups of parents are planning to send their kids to DCPS in such neighborhoods as Capitol Hill. However, Mr. Mayor, it is foreseeable that sensitivities will arise as problems get attention because white parents are complaining when the same problems were swept under the rug when black parents complained.

I remember when my children went to Kenilworth. There were children in my kids classroom that hit the teacher and an incident when a student spit on the teacher. When the parent came to school she accused the teacher of provoking her son. This teacher, Ms. McKinley, was one of my favorite teachers of all the teachers that my 4 kids had. The last I heard Ms. McKinley left the school system for a charter school.

The problems at Kenilworth were so prevalent that we had a rule that our children were not to let another student put their hand on them in elementary school. When a kid let's another kid hit them and doesn't respond the kid becomes a victim, not just at school but at the recreation center or walking to the store.

An elementary school kid could not realistically to seek mediation at that time since strict enforcement of violent behavior was not happening. An educator must take into account when making policy that a kid violates the code when they tell on a

classmate. The kid's code is similar in concept to the code adults follow when they go along with poor policy or other BS instead of speaking out or rocking the boat.

The problems with DC school children in elementary school were not gang related, just simply no home training. Today many kids go to school to do everything but learn. What do you think the percentage of kids that come to school and seriously want an education is? You can easily find out by surveying the teachers in a blind survey. Remember that teachers are in the classroom!

Although it is not politically correct to say this, you must consider the following when evaluating a plan of action. A high percentage of school children are coming to school with little or no home training. Many kids don't know who their fathers are and too many kids have little input from their fathers. Perhaps even more disturbing is that a significant percentage of school children are being raised by grandparents or other relatives. The public school administration knows this is a fact as evidenced by many forms which request parent or guardian signatures.

The problems with children are so complex that educators cannot pinpoint a solution. Educators thought a better physical environment would improve education. Of course the buildings should be fixed. But educators don't seem to realize that you can build new schools with the same acceleration as the new baseball stadium, and you will still have the same problems. The same way that school uniforms did not improve achievement. There is statistical proof available to support my theory or prove me wrong. Compare the test scores of the newest buildings to include my alma mater Kelly Miller with the older buildings.

I wonder if education policy makers ever took psych 101 or soc 101 where you learn that a person is the product of their heredity and their environment. Look at the environment that some of the public school kids come from. Neighborhoods where young men are on the corner. Where men and women go in and out of prison and wear the prison experience as a badge of honor. When youth see a person get a hero's welcome when they get out of prison, similar to a college kid coming home for the holidays, or a soldier coming home, is there any fear in not excelling in school? Do educators understand how this type of environment effects a kids enthusiasm for learning and the conduct of many kids in the classroom?

The problem with educating undisciplined children is exasperated by restraints put on educators. No hollering nor threatening, only positive motivation, and let's not forget don't ruin their self esteem.

As a parent with street knowledge I suffer with the children at some of the administrations policies to improve behavior.

Let me ask you what has been more effective at reaching at risk kids. Programs such as Scared Straight or programs that give classes a group grade and a group reward for behavior only to have 20 decent kids lose recess because 5 kids act out. In urban public schools, are 20 good kids going to influence 5 bad kids to behave well, or do the 5 bad kids behavior influence group behavior, as the good kids test the boundaries? If you don't know the answer to this, ask the people on the front lines, the teachers.

The Teachers

The third component of the education system is the teachers. When I was a student in school, teaching was a calling. Today too may times teaching is a job partly

because teachers are sandwiched between the incompetence of administrations to include political games as well as the brunt of the school children's problems.

Of course there are teachers in the classroom whose true calling is not education. My question is in the current environment can most teachers excel. Can you realistically evaluate a teacher in one school located in what is considered a better neighborhood where the majority of kids come from two parent homes against a teacher at a school in a problem neighborhood with a majority of single parent households? Many of the government formulas consider children receiving free or reduced lunch or English as a second language. The essential disadvantage is children who have limited relationships with one or more parents or the juvenile crime rate in the surrounding community of a particular school. How can you evaluate teachers when you don't properly list or consider the intangibles that make their mission more difficult?

If it were as simple as good teachers and bad teachers then the simple solution would be to staff one poorly performing school with good teachers however you evaluate them. The problem is that many teachers would refuse to move, some choosing to teach in another jurisdiction and many of those willing to go to an underperforming school would want additional compensation. Why because teachers are on the front lines and they know that they cannot perform magic in every situation.

It should be noted that one instance of a staff change that drastically improved a school occurred at Roper Middle School now Ron Brown. A dynamic individual Helena Nobles Jones was made principle and selected the staff. One ingredient for success that also occurred with Benjamin Banneker High School was the selective criteria for students. What I remember doing the Brown glory days was a dedicated individual

Coach Huff, the track coach achieving outstanding results with kids and spending his own funds to expose the kids to outside track meets. Ms. Jones got her staffs best efforts. Jones is now principle at Flowers High School in PG County. Any serious reform of DC Public Schools should at least include a conversation with Helena Jones to include why she left the system after being promoted to the central office. Such mistakes cannot be repeated.

One thing teachers can do effectively is identify children in their classrooms who are at risk of not being productive members in our society, from behavior witnessed in class. That is the one thing no educator or bureaucrat requires of them. Thus, no program is put in place to change dangerous behavior patterns until it is too late.

In the 50's and 60's, I can remember that virtually every teacher I had was dynamic. Today a kid is fortunate to have interacted with 5 dynamic adults in their adolescent life. The problems that school systems face are a big reason that potentially great teachers choose other professions. The restraints put on teachers limit their ability to command or demand respect. When administrators don't respect teachers why should kids? How easy is it for a teacher to teach when they are not respected at the beginning?

Despite all this My kids have had the luxury of experiencing outstanding teachers. Kenilworth had other great teachers. Ms. Wright and Ms. Randolph who taught pre k and kindergarten respectfully had my Monica reading at an advanced level before first grade. Monica was very fortunate because her first and second grade teachers at Smothers Mrs. Russell and Ms. Foster were excellent. In her first four years of school, Monica had 4 of the best teachers. Another great teacher at Smothers Ms McCoy left the school system because of pay and benefit issues. The unique ability of Ms. McCoy was

that she was able to take the good students to the next level while helping the deficient student's catch-up. Can any school system afford to lose even one great teacher?

My youngest children had great Pre-K and kindergarten teachers at Smothers in Ms. Brown and Ms. Dove. My children have had great experience with the staffs at Brent Elementary and Stuart Hopson Middle Schools. From my interaction with my children's teachers I know the problem is not primarily the teachers. Any talk concerning eliminating teachers lets me know that it is the same game with new players.

Today, not only are teachers underpaid, but they are also underappreciated and even sadder under used. Teachers are largely an untapped resource, mostly because superintendents come in with their own ideas and plans with little or no input from those educated individuals on the front lines.

A big part of the problem is that educators must put themselves out as experts in educating children. With many children's education issues there is no such thing as an expert. Yes, there are people with experience in different areas. But I warn you that anyone who claims they have all the answers should be treated cautiously. There is not a one size fits all solution with dealing with kids. I learned that the hard way by raising my 4 kids and preparing them for school and extra curricular activities the same way particularly with regard to how I prepared them mentally for events. My kids all have different psyches and abilities. That is one reason Monica did not want me training her.

The preparation for each child in many instances must be different to be effective. Parents learn that because even though we don't home school, we home supplement, which is a necessity. When a parent helps a child with a problem subject many times we try different approaches. Sooner or later we find a method that works.

I contend to you that one plan for all kids is going to fail a high percentage of kids. The teachers already know that they will be the scapegoats for any administration failure. That is why my idea – A Plan To Make A Difference, should be treated as one alternative plan/solution.

Teachers have experienced so many curriculum changes that it is not realistic to expect them to master whatever information they are expected to relay to students.

It is normal for an idealistic young college grad to enthusiastically take a teaching job expecting to make a difference in children's lives. A few years later they are frustrated and/or burnt out. The cause is administrations that don't know how to analyze problems or how to plan and execute and classes with too many undisciplined kids. It also doesn't help when teachers experience pay and benefit issues. The sandwich effect will do that to you. It happened to my sister.

Ellen Mason's lifelong dream was to become a school teacher. How many people actually achieve their childhood dream? Well after 30 years of teaching my sister was disillusioned with education. The frustrations of teaching played a big part in her death from illness at the age of 52.

The teaching profession once was one of the most rewarding careers. Years of children that sat in your class would come back to say hi and/or thanks. Bureaucrats ruined this great profession by making teachers force feed curriculum to children for the purpose of test results. Parents ruined the teaching profession by not training their children to respect adults and demanding their children make school a priority instead of tennis shoes and street status.

Having outlined the problems Mr. Mayor, I ask why you think you can change this by shifting power from the school board to yourself. Changing Police Chiefs did not stop senseless murders. Nor has changing the head of public schools been the solution in the past. Mayor Fenty, even throwing an additional billion dollars to the school system will not fix the problems that exist.

You cannot improve the current situation without a well thought out plan, which incorporates the social manifestations that negatively affects the mentality and spirituality of this city, unless you endorse gentrification which some people believe is the plan. The Master Education plan on the public school website is merely an outline with no specifics as to how the administration is going to deal with the real problems that hinder educational achievement.

I apologize to you for being blunt Mr. Mayor, but so far all I have seen is fluff. I challenge you and the well paid education guru's to develop a better plan than what this regular dude on the street offers you. I know that the environment that kids live in dominates the school environment, negatively affecting achievement for too many pupils.

No man or woman can turn this nightmare around without God's help.

A Plan To Make A Difference

This plan uses what God has given every person – talents and/or special abilities. Every person was born with God given talent. Some people will be good at some things and not so good at other things.

A “plan to make a difference” was conceived with the idea that everybody is good at something. One thing I have noticed over the years is that children who are good at a particular thing and are cultivating their talents are better students and get in far less trouble than kids who are not working toward a goal.

Easy examples that all of us would agree are that Barbra Streisand was born to sing and that Michael Jordan was born to play basketball. Of course all natural abilities are not restricted to sports and entertainment.

Let me ask this question. If a DC Public School child in a bad school had real talent in art, would his talent be developed? Would the teacher notice in an uncondusive environment if he or she hadn't been paid on time, and would he/she care enough to make a phone call?

Since there is a constitutional issue against promoting religion, to satisfy the separation of church and state, we can label what I call God given talent as natural gifts or born talents. Atheists and agnostics will agree that most people are born with natural abilities or special talents.

So a traditional education setting could be enhanced for some children if a program during, before, or after school were developed to ascertain what a kids interests were, and what a kids natural abilities seem to be.

Of course many kids excel in more than one discipline and in no way should a kid be steered to grow in a single discipline.

Additionally, it is foreseeable that a talent accessor would find a child's abilities to be in one area or areas, while the child's interest might be in something it appears is not a fit.

With this plan in the early years, grades 3 through 6 (or 2 through 4), a kid should be introduced to every conceivable discipline to include photography, baking, golf, working with animals, etc. At around the fourth grade, a kid should select one discipline and adults should select two for initial cultivation or development.

Once a kid starts mastering some concepts of a given discipline, then they will start appreciating their talent and gifts. It will be easier to get a child to read on their subjects of interest.

How this can improve education is because sample test questions can be made from those disciplines.

Let's say a kid is being developed in photography. (Something I know nothing about). A photographer could write an introduction about the wide angle lens and an educator could write test questions from the short story. A kid's reading, comprehension, and test taking ability could improve by this method.

Math could also be used. A sample question might be a memory card has so much capacity. A 5.0 megapixel camera uses this much memory per picture and a 7.0 megapixel camera uses this much capacity per picture. If the photographer needs to take 10 pictures which camera should he use.

It is a given, that a lot of black males will choose basketball and/or football. We could ask the Wizards and Redskins to write short bios and have an educator write questions. For instance, in a bio of Jason Campbell if he stated what he thought were the

three important things in his being a professional quarterback. A test could have questions with two of the three things listed as alternative answers and one answer that listed all three things and the kid would have to think and reason.

The first thing I would do if I worked in the education department would be to ask Michael Vick to write a short story or essay titled, "The mistakes I made." I would then have educators' develop test questions from his story. Many kids that don't want to read will want to read Vick's story and they could cultivate their test taking skills. I would share the final product with other urban jurisdictions.

This product could help our youth see the big picture while encouraging reading and comprehension. This would also help Vick as he seeks parole and reinstatement to the NFL.

Another thing I would do is find some lyric appropriate rap songs that are popular and have English scholars develop English lessons from them. Any kid aspiring to be a rapper should be told that they must master the English language. Educators can use this as a positive way of encouraging students to read and prioritize excelling in English.

Another idea could be to take a poplar tennis shoe and cut it into segments to show the engineering aspects which require math proficiency and the many aspects of product development that went into making a tennis shoe that these kids think they have to have.

A sample math question would be Gilbert Arenas scored 25 points against the Knicks, 17 against the 76ers, and 40 against Golden State. What was his average for the week? This talent cultivation to include educational enhancement would be in addition to traditional teaching, not necessarily in place of it.

One thing that could really help with implementing such a plan to attack the environment that DC youth grow up in would be the coordination of the recreational services with the school systems extracurricular activities. In the past the school system and the recreation system duplicated many activities with little coordination or cooperation. Both departments' activities were under funded, and neither the school system's extracurricular activities nor the recreation's activities were or are first rate starting with the instruction of fundamentals. Let me qualify my generalization by saying there are a few well run programs in some schools and recreation centers, and the good programs are the result of dedicated individuals.

One example of a great program is Ms. Jones dance program at Smothers Elementary School in Northeast. If anyone wants to see how one dedicated person can make a difference and how the staff of a school gives of themselves for the greater good of children, go to the Christmas program at Smothers in December. You will be in for a real treat. As a matter of fact, my youngest daughter still dances in a great program at St. Mark's Episcopal Church as a result of being introduced to dance by Ms. Jones. Let me also mention the DC Music Center where ten dollar music lessons are taught by such

dedicated musicians as Christopher Redding and others. Another treat is the D.C. Music Center's recitals.

In this city many of the best programs are operated by non-profits. This plan should encourage the continuation of such programs as the DC Music Center and all other programs that help kids develop.

Too many times dedicated individuals have to do everything including providing transportation and paying expenses for kids they are trying to help. Sometimes the frustrations are too much for volunteers to stay for the long term. Whenever someone is volunteering to help children, parental cooperation goes a long way.

I remember when I was a volunteer track coach at Smothers Elementary School. The first year the boys won the indoor city championship, and the girls finished third. I wanted to take 4 boys and 4 girls to a meet in Delaware (the Delaware Track Classic), to see how they would do against the best youth from Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. The 4 boys finished third in the 4x200 meter relay. These boys also won a flag football championship coached by another dedicated volunteer who's name is also Alvin. I could never get the 4 girls to practice at the same time. All 4 girls had great speed. One student's mother told me when I called about coming to practice that the young lady could no longer participate in track because she got a bad grade on a math test. The next week the girl went to a wrestling event at the then MCI Center on a trip sponsored by the DC Police. In outdoor season, another young lady told me after the 100 meter final that she couldn't run the 200 final. I told her to get out there and run. She ran and became the elementary school 200-meter city champion.

The fourth fastest girl of that quartet, Shontia Jackson became the DC Public School Cross Country Champion as a freshman. One of the boys Dominique Harris developed into a good 400 meter runner at H.D. Woodson. Shontia later become a basketball star at Anacostia. Harris is now playing football at Temple. The Anacostia and H.D. Woodson Athletic Departments deserve all the credit for those two individuals' achievements.

This problem of dysfunctional extracurricular school activities and recreational services can be solved Mr. Mayor because you now are in charge of both systems. The potential for kids is so great if the school systems activities and the recreation department activities had some coordination and cooperation. The recreation department could give the school kids the opportunity to explore more areas of interest. The library system could also offer disciplines for school children. Should the school system, Department of Recreation, and the library system be three independent uncoordinated operations? Coordination of city government should go even further to include summer jobs in childrens cultivated disciplines.

The city also needs to sponsor any kid that qualifies for a national competition. Any kid that progresses in school satisfactory and excels in any discipline qualifying for a

national competition should receive city funding. Do we want kids who are achieving standing in the street raising money with bucket fundraisers while adults go to retreats paid for by government?

First people need to fully comprehend what being a national champion or national finalist means. I remember my daughter's first title and national record, we sent the results to the media and as with all 9 national titles she never received a drop of ink. Had she robbed a McDonalds at 10 years old, she would have received all the press anyone could ask for.

Just remember Mr. Mayor that kids that are good at something are better students, and get in trouble less. Another positive will be that kids will appreciate the talents of other kids. So there will be more respect in an educational setting as kids share their talents with each other. Adults will also enjoy working with and watching school children master disciplines. Everyone wants to be associated with a winner. So the kid who takes school seriously won't have to be made fun of by kids who are not trying to achieve anything.

All a fourth grade teacher has to do is take the best basketball player kid on the court with the kid that other children think is a nerd, and let them play a game to 10. After the athletic kid beats the good student 10 to 0, the teacher can ask the other kids. Since so and so doesn't have a future in sports, shouldn't he or she pursue school work seriously, so when he or she is grown they can go to college and make a living? Having seen he or she is not gifted athletically, we should appreciate his or her dedication for school.

Mayor Fenty and Chancellor Rhee, everywhere you look you are going to find problems. But you don't have to look hard to find good, even greatness. A total housecleaning will eliminate some outstanding people. Even worse a housecleaning will take the focus off the kids.

Mayor Fenty, you stepped out of the box in choosing Michele Rhee as Chancellor. You and Ms. Rhee will have to step out of the box to successfully educate DC Public School children.

The problems that have persisted are because educators lack street knowledge, thus their educational plans don't incorporate the fact that all social dirty laundry comes into the classroom. Cleaning house or holding principles and teachers accountable for problems that administrators don't understand won't improve education. There has to be a new plan that addresses social problems with education.

In addition, try to reward parents and families for achievement. In the past, the council passed legislation to hold parents accountable for children's behavior. Why don't families that achieve be given priority for set aside housing in mixed income communities, and kids be given priority for summer jobs based on their report cards. One summer, my son, an entering college freshman (who captained his high school

football and baseball teams), and my daughter, Monica didn't have summer jobs. Rewards for achievement would encourage kids to excel.

I contend to you that the unwillingness of DC to reward public school achievers is one reason that accomplished DC Public School alumni don't presently reside in the District.

Mayor Fenty, the emphasis of the previous administration was economic development. For you to take this city to the next level the emphasis will have to be on people.

Mr. Mayor, you and Ms. Rhee have effectively engineered the public relations end of running the school system. The next step is a concrete plan with specifics. The long term solution will address social realities and improve education. The end result will be a drastic quality of life improvement for all citizens of the district.

Mr. Mayor, raising one kid in this city that goes to DC Public Schools is hard enough. You asked for and received responsibility for every kid in the city.

Despite my frustrations and reservations Mayor Fenty, I hope you are successful. That is why I am willing to help anyway I can. I don't want a job – I tried to get in government under the four previous administrations, but that's another story for another time. I urge you to try this plan in one neighborhood. A couple of schools with one recreation center and one library. Let's see what program coordination for the purpose of cultivating the talent that is within kids can do for improving education.

You didn't pay for my vote, and you or the citizens don't have to pay me for any assistance I can give you. The reason is because I care. The final advice I will give you is to put people in key positions that care. That is the one ingredient that has been missing for too long. When we hear of government positions being filled at six figure salaries with the rationale being that to get good qualified people you have to pay these types of salaries, it makes my blood boil. You can't buy your way out of this mess with high salaries. It didn't help before.

Mr. Mayor, qualified on paper doesn't mean quality. The quality that you want is for a person to care. I challenge you to let me prove that high salaries are not necessary by allowing me to work in any six figure person's position in the school system who thinks they are all that, free of charge for one month. I can do their job as well or better, and I am willing to do anything I can to make a difference absolutely free.

Remember you can hire all the great people for top administration positions, but the teaching is done in the classroom. Improving the student achievement will require changing student's attitudes in the classroom. You need to hire people who care so the caring will trickle down into the classroom and students will care about what is important, educational achievement. It will take people who care enough about making a

difference, and buy into building something special here in the District, that a competitive salary will do, just for the chance to make a difference.

I welcome all comments, especially criticism.

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