

CIVIC FEDERATION SCHOOLS COMMITTEE TESTIMONY AT SCHOOL BOARD
PUBLIC HEARING ON THE PROPOSED BUDGET MARCH 15, 2007

Good evening. I'm here as chairwoman of the Civic Federation Schools Committee to provide our preliminary views on the budget. These are the views of the Federation's 10-member Schools Committee -- they will be presented to the Federation generally on April 3 -- and they're posted on the Civic Federation's website at www.CivFed.org.

I have three areas to discuss.

First, the Committee is concerned about the Superintendent's use of two million dollars in reserve funds for this year's extra contribution to retiree health benefits, or "OPEB." The Board's budget guidance was to maintain four million dollars in the reserve fund, and this proposal clearly does not follow that guidance. Our Committee sees the reserve fund as money for one-time, unforeseen emergencies -- like the roof blowing off a school in a storm. The need for increased OPEB contributions is different: it was apparent more than a year ago that additional money would be needed in some amount, and it's not one-time. More money will be needed next year, as we build over five years to a new, higher annual contribution level. Further, the Schools Committee believes that four million dollars is an appropriate size for a reserve fund, given the size of the system's operating budget, and the fund should be kept at that level. If the Board maintains the reserve at four million for the future, then the money removed this year will have to be replaced next year, and another substantial OPEB contribution will still be required. The Committee does not see where the additional revenue will come from next year to do that.

The Schools Committee also is concerned about the four hundred and ten thousand dollars in redirected and new funds for the Data Warehouse. We question whether our needs could be better met by other means, such as outsourcing to companies that specialize in data aggregation and analysis, which is the trend in the federal government. We are also concerned whether the investment in a data warehouse will produce the answers to questions that have long been raised by our Committee, Board members and members of the public concerning the progress of students on a longitudinal basis, turnover of students and staff, and other factors affecting subsets of teachers and students for which data has so far been unavailable despite the recent substantial investments in various computer systems.

Finally, on expanding the Elementary Foreign Language Program to more schools, the Committee feels this should be delayed, until we see the results of the programs already underway. If there is a trend to eliminate early release Wednesdays, additional core instruction should be considered, at least at schools that have a history of not making AYP.

Thank You.

William Barker
Gerry Collins
Barbara De Pauw

John De Pauw
Herschel Kanter
Royce Lowry

Roger Meyer
Tim Wise
Reid Goldstein
Beth Wolffe, Chairwoman