



THE WASHINGTON LATIN SCHOOL

8 June 2006

Russ Williams
District of Columbia Zoning Commission
441 4th Street, NW
Suite 210 South
Washington DC 20001

#06-06

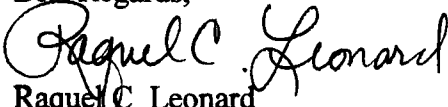
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Dear Mr Williams,

Per your email sent on 7 June, please find the written testimony of Mr T Robinson Ahlstrom, Head Master of The Washington Latin School Mr Ahlstrom was present at the 11 May hearing of the Zoning Commission

Please confirm receipt of this testimony to rleonard@washingtonlatin.org or (202) 223-1111 Thank you for your attention in this matter

Best Regards,


Raquel C Leonard
Assistant to the Head Master

**ZONING COMMISSION
District of Columbia**

CASE NO. 06-06

EXHIBIT NO. 54

Testimony before the Zoning Commission of Washington, D.C.

11 May 2006

T. Robinson Ahlstrom

Head Master – The Washington Latin School

I rise in opposition to proposed changes in the zoning laws of the District of Columbia—changes that would threaten the real reform charter school are bringing to the District's schools.

On December 5, 1804, the new City Council of The District of Columbia passed an act "to establish and endow a permanent institution for the education of youth in the City of Washington " At the first meeting, the Trustees of the new school board elected as its first president, the nation's third President, Thomas Jefferson.

From that day until this—for more than 200 years—the District's public schools have been able to locate in residential neighborhoods as a "matter of right." Over the past decade, that "matter of right" has extended to the newest public schools—those chartered by the DCPS and the DC Public Charter School Board.

The proposed zoning restrictions before this Committee represent a fundamental abridgement of that right and a real diminution of the Districts historic support for free public education

I commend this commission for faithfully discharging its responsibility to hear the very legitimate concerns of tax paying citizens who wish to protect the loveliness and livability of their neighborhoods. Indeed, some of my neighborhood representatives are here tonight, and their concerns are real and in need of redress. Clearly, some institutionalized process that facilitates dialogue between public charter schools and the neighborhoods in which they settle would be a very good thing

Surly there is a way that such a process can be established, without compromising a tradition codified more than two hundred year ago—the tradition of giving special status to the schools that educate our children

The unfortunate fact, of which we are all aware, is that some individuals are seeking these changes, not to protect our neighborhoods, but to protect the G.O.P.—the *Grand Old Publics*. Their agenda is not to save the neighborhood from crime or congestion, but to save the old central system schools from competition

Back in the 1970's there were corporate executives and union leaders in Detroit who believed that restrictive tariffs and bumper stickers reading “buy American” could save the auto industry from competition and keep Americans buying Fords rather than Toyotas. They were wrong.

The only thing that saved General Motors, Ford and Chrysler was to build better cars. The old central system of DC schools cannot be saved *from* competition. Indeed, if they can be saved at all, they will be saved *by* competition. In the end, to survive, that system must build better schools

This commission is right to respond to good neighbors and good citizens who want to protect their neighborhoods. Do not allow your efforts to be hijacked by those whose agenda has nothing to do with the work of this committee

Keep in mind that, in the end, property values are critical to the health of any neighborhood—and nothing will do more to raise property values within a neighborhood, than to build a good school in it

The District's old centralized system of schools is the nation's most expensive, and among the lowest performing. Until someone comes up with a better idea, chartering

public schools that are free from the massive mismanagement of that system is the only chance for any real reform.

While the old centralized system sits on more than five million square feet of unused and unneeded space, scrappy charter schools fight to obtain facilities in a competitive real estate market with the lowest commercial vacancy rates in the nation. We struggle to capitalize lease hold improvements on temporary space while trying to find the resources to build campuses worthy of our mission

Recently, New York City Schools Chancellor, Joel Klein remarked that, "Charters can stimulate innovation We need to create an environment in which charter schools can be supported and thrive." I'm asking you to help the District create and maintain such an environment "

Schools that actually teach and children that actually learn and play are not threats to any neighborhood They are the heart and soul of the neighborhood They are its laughter, its light—and its future.

These days, it's hard to imagine a sitting President of the United States allowing himself to be elected Superintendent of the Washington, D.C schools. That should tell us something about the relative value placed on free public schools then and now. Maybe we should listen to Jefferson's logic.

The education of the common people was the surest security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty "