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**Statement of
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**Before the Committee of the Whole
Regarding the FY2007/2008 Agency Performance of
the District of Columbia Public Schools**

February 22, 2008

Good morning, Chairman Gray and members of the Committee of the Whole. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you regarding the FY 2007 and FY 2008 agency performance of the District of Columbia Public Schools.

My name is Shelley Ougheltree, and I am the Advocacy and Public Policy Intern for The Arc of the District of Columbia. The Arc of DC is a non-profit organization which was founded in 1950. For the past 50 plus years, The Arc of DC has sought to improve the quality of life of all District residents with developmental disabilities (DD) and their families through supports and advocacy. As my colleagues stated, The Arc of DC believes that all people, regardless of disability, deserve the opportunity for a full life in the community (The Arc & AAIDD, 2005).

The school setting is of particular importance with regards to preparing individuals with disabilities for community life. In fact, interaction with peers is one of the single best tools to prepare students with DD to live effectively in their communities. Accordingly, the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities be educated in regular classes with their non-disabled peers (Western Regional Resource Center, 2000).

Despite this law, many students with disabilities are educated in segregated schools and classrooms within DC Public Schools, giving them little to no opportunities to participate academically and socially in general education classrooms. The latest data available reveals that out of the 11,105 special education students enrolled in DCPS during the last school year, 2,231 were placed in outside schools (Myers, 2008). Additionally, two DC Public Schools, Mamie D. Lee and Sharpe Health, serve special education students *only*; Mamie D. Lee serves 118 students and Sharpe serves 140 (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2007). For all students with disabilities, especially those who are not afforded an inclusive educational setting, the preparation for effective community living is increasingly important and can be achieved through transition services.

Transition services are defined by DCPS as “activities intended to prepare students to make the transition from the world of school to the world of adulthood” and are based on the student’s individual needs (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2007). These services typically include, but are not limited to: development and review of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); identification of long term goals and a plan to achieve them; and linking students and families to post-school services, supports or programs before the student exits the school system (Western Regional Resource Center, 2000). IDEA mandates that transition services are to be initiated no later than when a student turns 16; however, the law encourages earlier transition planning when possible, with services initiated at age 14 (2000).

The most recent U.S. Department of Education data indicates that during the fall of 2006 DC Public Schools and Public Charter Schools served 3,626 students ages 14 to 21 in special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). With such a large number of transition-age students being served by DCPS, the need for transition services is of utmost importance. Historically, however, the provision of these services has not been a high priority for the District of Columbia Public Schools. This lack of services in combination with low levels of inclusion leaves many special education students in the District without a plan for work or post-graduation training and services. As a result, these students exit school unprepared for adult life in the community (The Arc & AAIDD, 2005).

In November of 2007 Mayor Fenty announced a proposal to overhaul the city's poor performing public schools (District of Columbia Mayor's Office, 2007). Among the academic programs highlighted in this proposal is special education, with a focus on inclusion and integration. According to the proposal, DCPS will take steps to better serve special needs students in inclusive settings in an effort to decrease dependence on outside schools (2007). The Arc of DC strongly supports the inclusion of special education services but feels that the need for transition services was not sufficiently addressed in this proposal, despite recent recommendations from the State Advisory Panel on Special Education regarding the provision and extension of transition services within DCPS.

In the State Advisory Panel on Special Education's 2006/2007 annual report, integration of students with disabilities within the school environment is indicated among its top three priorities. Furthermore, the Panel recommends increased collaboration between general and special education systems to ensure full inclusion of children receiving special education services (District of Columbia State Advisory Panel on Special Education, 2007). With regards to transition, the Panel believes that transition planning is "essential to enable students to move successfully from school to postsecondary education, employment, independent living and community participation," and recommends the extension of transition services to include plans for students under 16 years old, as appropriate (2007).

For all of these reasons, The Arc of DC makes the following recommendations:

1. The Mayor and Chancellor should immediately adopt and implement the recommendations for transition services made by the State Advisory Panel on Special Education;
2. The Mayor should make transition services for students with disabilities a priority focus of his school reform plan, and should actively involve students with disabilities and their families in developing a comprehensive citywide approach to transition services;
3. The schools should initiate transition services for students with disabilities beginning at age 14, as suggested by best practices; and

4. DCPS should strengthen its partnerships with other DC agencies that provide services and support for individuals with disabilities (e.g., the Department on Disability Services, the Department of Mental Health, etc.).

I will close by restating that all people deserve the opportunity for a full life in their community, regardless of disability. The District of Columbia Public Schools have the unique ability to recognize this opportunity through the inclusion and integration of special education, in combination with the provision of appropriate transition services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

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