

MIETRO

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COURTLAND MILLOY

D.C. Students Voice Simple Demands

To fix D.C. public schools — better yet, to make the school system a model for the nation — look no further than what the students say they need. Donell Kie, a sophomore at Ballou Senior High School, and fellow student leaders came up with a pretty good list that was shared Saturday at a D.C. Council hearing on school reform.

Among the things that they wanted to see in every public school: “books when school starts,” “heat in winter,” “air conditioning in summer,” “healthy meals,” “water fountains that work,” “music and art classes,” “counselors who are able to help us” and “teachers who care about their students and can teach.”

Now, really, how hard can those be? Let’s start with the books. Why would getting school books be such a problem? It’s not like trying to provide each of the city’s 57,000 or so public school students with autographed copies of the Gutenberg Bible. We’re talking basic textbooks. A school system that can’t provide

school books on time is no school system at all. It’s a joke and a cruel one at that. Rent a fleet of trucks, cut a check that won’t bounce and even I could get the books. Better to send the school procurement officer off to the New York publishing houses with a mule train than let those students show up for the first day of school to not get books.

Next: heat. (And not the hot air everybody in the city blows when claiming to care about the students.) Every winter, including this one, some schools have to close because the boiler pipes burst. And even when the boilers do work, students at some schools must sit in cold classrooms dressed like arctic explorers. Stuffed into heavy coats, wearing thick gloves and mittens, they couldn’t turn the page of a book even if they had one.

At the hearing, after listening to several students talk about attending toxic schools that

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Requests of Students for D.C. Schools Are Simple — and the Basis for a Better System

MILLOY, From B1

make them sick, council member Jim Graham (D-Ward 1) asked: “Did you know that the council allocated \$200 million for school repair that is just sitting in some bank, that none of it was spent last year?”

Rachel May, a senior at the crumbling School Without Walls, let out a sigh of disgust. “That’s just ridiculous,” she said. “I don’t understand it.”

“Me either,” Graham said.

But what’s not to understand? Boilers are breaking, roofs are leaking, ceilings are falling down — and somebody’s butt is blocking \$200 million of taxpayer money earmarked for

school repair. Kick the butt, get the money and fix the schools. It’s not rocket science; it’s plumbing, wiring and roofing.

As for not providing students with healthy meals and having water fountains that don’t work, that’s child abuse. And the people who know about it and do nothing to fix it ought to be charged as part of an ongoing criminal conspiracy. A federal pen ought to be their next stop.

Donell and his friends said they’d like to study music, art and foreign languages. Make those required courses. But teach the students how to become lifelong learners, too. This is the heart of school reform.

“The lessons and curriculum I experienced in

public schools had no ‘big picture’ and were rarely challenging,” said Aimmee Pollard, a freshman at Archbishop Carroll High School who transferred out of D.C. public schools. “We would learn things that weren’t connected and were often tested on what we felt was useless knowledge. It was common for students to lose interest and fall asleep in class.” She urged city officials to stop “driving those with options out of public schools and driving those without options out of school entirely.”

Make no mistake: D.C. public schools have some fantastic teachers. But they cannot be expected to teach in a freezing classroom any more than students can be expected to learn while exhaling

frosty breath. Fix the schools. Raise the expectations for teachers and students alike. It can be done.

The time for dithering and churning out studies that end up on warehouse shelves is over. Every parent, politician and school official needs to put up or shut up. And if, as many of the students who testified suspect, nothing will change, then at least do this: Give the kids their money back — nearly \$25,000 per student that the D.C. government claims it spends to educate them each year. They’d do better hiring a private tutor or enrolling in some boarding school far from here.

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