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Rodney Lamkey Jr./The Washington Times

Students from two D.C. public schools testified at a public hearing yesterday on a proposal to put the school system directly under the control of the mayor. Students repeatedly complained that the school system, its buildings and its students were neglected and ignored.

DISTRICT

'Where is money going?'

Students vent on city's troubled schools, Fenty's takeover plan

By Tarron Lively
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

D.C. students, in their lone chance to weigh in on Mayor Adrian M. Fenty's schools-takeover proposal, yesterday voiced their concerns about the District's education system at a special session of the D.C. Council.

Dozens of current and former students — some as young as 10 years — packed the council chamber at the John A. Wilson Building for the eight-hour hearing.

Lekeisha Harris, 16, a sophomore at Spingarn Senior High School in Northeast, expressed frustration with her school's bad food, crumbling facilities, outdated materials and inadequate instructors.

"When are our recommendations going to be recognized?" Lekeisha said. "Where is the money going?"

Mr. Fenty, a Democrat, sat quietly among the students and parents in the chambers for the first two hours of the hearing.

"Unfortunately, I've heard this for six years, being on the council

and when I visit the schools, but there's nothing like hearing it directly from these young people. I think they said it very clearly. We cannot continue down the current road we're on," Mr. Fenty said outside the chambers.

School board President Robert C. Bobb, who has proposed his own reform plan and pledged to resign if Mr. Fenty's plan is adopted, did not attend yesterday's hearing. Natalie Williams, a spokeswoman for Mr. Bobb, said he and other board members watched the hearing on television.

"By no means does the absence of the school board president suggest that student achievement is not at the top of his agenda," Miss Williams said. "The Board of Education will not be involved in a political grandstand with the city council. Our focus is on student achievement."

Mr. Bobb's absence and the absence of schools Superintendent Clifford B. Janey drew the ire of some council members.

Kwame R. Brown, at-large Democrat, said he was "truly disappointed that more [D.C. Public

Schools] officials are not here."

Marion Barry, Ward 8 Democrat, also chastised school officials for not attending.

"This is the formula for success — coming out of the mouths of 15-year-olds," Mr. Barry said. "The superintendent ought to be here, the top administrators ought to be here . . . listening to what these young people have to say. The problem I think we have is, they don't listen."

The council is expected to vote in late March or early April on Mr. Fenty's proposal, which appears to have the support of about eight of 11 council members.

Mr. Fenty's plan would reduce the role of the school board and place the school system under the authority of a chancellor who would report directly to the mayor. The proposal would require the approval of both the council and Congress.

Critics say Mr. Fenty's plan focuses too much on the structure of school governance instead of improving student achievement.

Mr. Bobb's proposal would allow the board to act more freely and promises specific academic outcomes within 18 months. Mr.

Bobb's plan also would require council approval.

The next scheduled public hearing on the measure is set for Tuesday, when Mr. Bobb, Mr. Janey and members of the school board are scheduled to testify.

Donell Kie, a sophomore at Ballou Senior High School in Southeast, said he was skeptical that Mr. Fenty's plan would make a positive difference.

"I would hope things will change for the better. But mayors, council members, [school board] presidents come and go, and they say they're going to fix these problems, and they never do anything," said Donell, 15. "That's why so many kids don't care about school."

Rachel May, 17, a senior at Schools Without Walls Senior High School in Northwest, called it "ridiculous" that funds allotted for school improvements have yet to be spent.

"How can teachers motivate children when there is little to no support from parents or from downtown?" she asked. "How can children be expected to make their education a priority when no one else thinks it is?"