

“Examining the Challenges the District of Columbia will Face
Today, Tomorrow, and in the Future ”
Statement of Senator Daniel K. Akaka
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal
Workforce, and the District of Columbia
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
July 18, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Today’s hearing is a chance for the Subcommittee to look towards the future of the District of Columbia.

Over the past decade, the District has gone through a number of changes. In 1995, Congress established the DC Control Board to oversee the District’s fiscal management because of long-standing budget deficits, questionable internal oversight of city funds, and a failure to provide residents with adequate public services. Management of the District was returned to local officials in 2001 after the city balanced four consecutive budgets. Since then, Congress has sought to conduct oversight of the District while respecting Home Rule.

A key player in the District’s recovery is Mayor Williams – first as Chief Financial Officer and now as Mayor. It is imperative that the improved financial management practices put in place by Mayor Williams are sustained.

While DC governance has improved dramatically over the past few years, areas of concern remain.

As a former teacher and principal, I believe public education can help many of society's problems. That's why I'm concerned with low test scores and wasted funding in the DC Public Schools (DCPS). Moreover, this Spring, the U.S. Department of Education named DCPS as a high-risk grantee – citing inadequate financial accountability and poor management of federal funds. It is imperative that DCPS avoid providing fodder for the movement that is – in effect – working to abandon our public school system in favor of school vouchers. Just last week, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved an expansion of the DC school voucher program. I would like to see Congress move away from school vouchers and renew our commitment to public schools.

Superintendent Janey, you must help us ensure that DCPS is a good steward of taxpayer dollars and provides DC youth with a top notch education, particularly for those who cannot afford to attend private schools without voucher assistance.

Another serious and quite public issue facing the District is crime. As the nation's capital, DC is one of the world's primary tourist destinations. Its museums and national monuments are enjoyed by millions of people annually. Guaranteeing the safety of these visitors and residents alike must be a priority for the DC government. I am hopeful that the renewed commitment by the Mayor and Police Chief Ramsey to keep the District a safe and thriving city will yield positive results.

That brings me back to my push for improved educational opportunities for DC youth. Without significant resources and commitment, District youths may be denied the benefits of strong educational programs. Educational opportunities equal economic opportunities.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this timely hearing. I welcome our witnesses and look forward to their thoughts on where DC stands today and how the District can be improved in the future.