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EDUCATION BUDGET

Move to Cut 2 Hearings Opposed

Advocates Urge Council to Reject Fenty Proposal

By [V. Dion Haynes](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Education advocates urged members of the [D.C. Council](#) yesterday to reject [Mayor Adrian M. Fenty](#)'s proposal to eliminate two school budget hearings intended to gather public comment each year before the spending plan is considered by the council.

Fenty (D), who gained control of the 49,422-student school system last year, is seeking to do away with a requirement that he and [Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee](#) conduct separate hearings before the budget is submitted to the council. The two hearings were held this year.

The proposal, which would not affect council budget hearings, is part of an effort to have the school system treated the same as other city agencies, Rhee's spokeswoman said. But advocates, testifying at a hearing on the schools' proposed \$773 million fiscal 2009 budget, complained that Fenty and Rhee have reduced public access to information on school spending.

"I believe citizens have a right to know, in detail, how their representatives are proposing to spend their money," said Marc Borbely, who heads FixOurSchools.net. He was among several advocates who unsuccessfully sued Fenty for failing to provide the public with a detailed proposal before submitting the school budget to the council.

Cherita Whiting, whose son attends [McKinley Technology High School](#) in Northeast Washington, said the budget proposal submitted to the council lacked details about spending at the 140 schools.



D.C. Council Chairman Vincent C. Gray said he, too, is concerned about the amount of information being provided on school spending. (By Gerald Martineau -- The Washington Post)

[Council Chairman Vincent C. Gray](#) (D) told Borbely and Whiting that he agreed with them.

"The amount of information we get makes it difficult to evaluate the spending proposal before us," Gray said. "We share the same concern . . . about the adequacy of information and transparency."

Rhee said she would continue to hold a hearing early in the process of formulating the school budget. She also pledged to provide specifics next year on school-by-school spending much sooner than she did this year.

Also yesterday, members of the advocacy group DC VOICE urged city and school officials to improve services offered to special education students.

At a news conference at the [John A. Wilson Building](#), the group released a report on whether schools were ready on the first day of the school year to meet the needs of special education students.

Eighty-four percent of principals said their schools were fully staffed and equipped to serve special education students on the first day. Those principals who said their schools were not ready cited a lack of certified teachers or a lack of therapists or other specialists needed to help the students function in class.

Eight percent of the principals said they were without a special education teacher on the first day; 5 percent said they were without an occupational therapist; and 4 percent said they were without a mental health coordinator.

If services are not provided, special education students "won't learn to read, are more likely to drop out and more likely to be involved in the delinquency system," Judith Sandalow, executive director of the Children's Law Center, said yesterday at the news conference. The law center represents numerous D.C. special education students and helped conduct the survey.

She urged that principals be given earlier access to incoming disabled students' individualized education plans so there will be more time to train teachers and otherwise prepare for the students.