

# Former D.C. Children with

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*Reader note: The following story was reported and written several weeks prior to the Sept 14 D.C. general election, during which Councilman Kevin Chavous was unsuccessful in bid for reelection.*

**K**evin P. Chavous doesn't expect to profit from his new book.

He's sent a copy to every member of Congress - State, House and Senate Education committees as well as school choice leaders all over the country. Chavous said he sees his book, "Serving Our Children: Charter Schools and the Reform of American Public Education," as a call to action for every day people.

"The way the revolution will work is through a missionary approach where we bring people in who don't even know about it," he said.

Chavous, Washington, DC's Ward 7 councilman for the past 12 years, walked briskly through his suite door --- handshake and smile ready for an unfamiliar face - his resolute and affable manner indicating his latest project.

"I'm up for reelection," he piped while sinking into a couch in his office and stretching his legs out.

Chavous has many accomplishments to back his bid. In fact, a four-page bulleted list of them sits on a table covered with various pamphlets.

This list includes his achievements in the District's battle for school choice.

- *Increased funding of public and charter schools by more than \$300 million over a five-year period.*
- *Funded two new public high schools in the Ward 7 area.*
- *Funded the establishment of Seed Public Charter High School, "the first public residential high school in the country."*

Someday this list may include his first book, "Serving Our Children: Charter Schools and the Reform of American Public Education." A simply written book full of first-hand accounts and factual examples, Chavous hopes that "Serving Our Children" will influence educational innovations and the proliferation of school options across the country.

# Councilmember Kevin Chavous Serves New Book on Public School Reform

"When I wrote the book I could have put a lot of academic theory into it and made it more of an educational treatise, but I wanted to make sure it had stories so that it was readable," he said. "It is my main hope that people who are not in education would want to read the book to get something out of it."

"Serving Our Children," which was released May 2004, takes you through the mire of public education's failures and the success of public charter schools in DC. Chavous saw it as an opportunity to explain his opinions on school choice, free from the prying interpretations of others.

"I wanted to make sure that we keep the conversation going around this country about the need to change public education," he said.

However, in 1997 when Chavous first won the election to chair the DC Council's Committee on Education, Libraries and Recreation, he approached the issue of school choice with much skepticism.

"When I ran for office in '92 it was largely because I wanted to make a difference ... and while I knew education was important, I really hadn't focused on it," he said. "But once I came to realize that so many of our social problems are linked to lack of educational opportunities, I started paying more attention to schools."

Like many Democratic leaders, Chavous saw increased financial support as the best route for improving the District's failing school system. Working with the mayor, Chavous increased DC Public School funding by more than \$300 million over a five-year period - one of the highest per capita increases in the country. However, the results were "marginal."

"[The money] was being gobbled up by the bureaucracy and was not trickling down to the classrooms," Chavous said.

During that period, charter school legislation was passed. The teacher's union raged

with disapproval, and Chavous, who had never heard of charter schools, studied them with a wary eye.

He was surprised to see that some of them were working. And after dealing with the frustrating effects of a top-heavy school bureaucracy and meeting BAEO Chairman Howard Fuller, Chavous realized the public school system would not change from within.

"Since traditional education won't fix itself the only way it will change is through external pressure and the best form of external pressure is school choice," he said. "Since all children are different, you can't

have one system."

"The biggest insult is that there is an incredibly disproportionate impact on children of color," Chavous added. "Children of color respond to more innovative, creative, expressive education techniques and to try to force our children, specifically young black boys, into one system is an even bigger challenge. That's why the current system does us more harm than anyone else."

Chavous pushed hard and over seven years, the number of charter schools in DC increased from 0 to more than 40. Today, these schools hold 20 percent of the overall public school population - the highest in the country. Chavous hopes to increase that number to 35 percent while increasing the number of voucher recipients to 15 percent. "That means over half of our kids would be in some sort of school choice program," he said.

Chavous has many ideas on how to expand the school choice movement. He has worked with the mayor and others to approach businesses about funding and establishing charter schools. They believe this will open up enrollment options and get businesses to become vested in the educational system.

"If we have our kids in school choice programs then the competition alone ought to shake up the system," Chavous said.

And as the District struggles to find a new superintendent, Chavous' major criterion is to find someone who is "not wedded to the bureaucracy." "If we get a good superintendent who supports school choice in public education, that's a big step forward."

Chavous' greatest inspiration has been the resilience of children and parents. "The indomitable spirit is fulfilling, nurturing and inspiring."

He advises other school choice leaders to view the battle as a marathon as opposed to a sprint.

"This is life's work, he said, "this is not going to be easy and it may not even be solved during this generation."

Chavous' biggest fear is that charter schools fall prey to the entanglements that hamper public schools today.

"We have to be malleable and flexible enough to change our approach for the kids because the goal is to (start) charter schools to make sure all children learn. Charter schools are a tool to get us to that goal, but if it becomes bureaucratic, overly administrated or overly political then we need to change the tool," he said. "We have to have an open mind—that's the bottom line."



Chavous

