

D.C. schools slammed

BY MICHAEL NEIBAUER
Examiner Staff Writer

While the District's economy is as strong as ever, its schools are in disrepair and its students are failing as a result, a U.S. senator told top city officials Wednesday during a hearing on the city's fiscal 2006 budget.

Mayor Anthony A. Williams, Council Chairman Linda Cropp, Superintendent Clifford B. Janey and Chief Financial Officer Natwar M. Gandhi all testified during the hearing before the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on the District. On the agenda was the \$7.35 billion budget adopted last month by the council, as well as the city's requests for funding through next year's federal budget.

The city was praised for turning around once-dismal city finances. Subcommittee Chairman Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., called it a "dramatic improvement" while the ranking Democrat, Louisiana Sen. Mary L. Landrieu, congratulated District leaders for the "extraordinary turnaround on the financial side."

"In the mid-'90s we were [nearly] bankrupt," Gandhi said.

But even as the economy hums along, the schools are a great disappointment, the senators said.

"For years we've been failing a generation of school students in the District and now we're reaping some of the consequences," Brownback said, citing high adult illiteracy rates and growing unemployment.

School closures proposed

Brownback urged Janey to close under used schools, sell or lease the property and then use the new revenue to fix up those that remain open.

Landrieu recommended co-locating public schools and charter schools — an action now under review by the school system. Solving the school problem, she said, "is not just about money; it's about management."

Closing schools, Janey responded, is one of the most controversial ideas a school system can broach. As part of a master education plan, currently under development, Janey expects to know by the end of the year how many schools might be considered expendable for "right sizing."

"Often it comes down to political will," he said. "Where will people

stand?"

In his testimony, Janey said the system must "regain our public integrity, raise student expectations and establish a system of accountability." There exists a "malaise" but the \$1 billion fiscal 2006 budget will set the stage for improvement.

Williams offered Janey his "full, emphatic and unequivocal support."

The budget might have been the topic for the hearing, but the city's representatives used the moment to lobby for other needs.

For example, they called for action to reduce the fiscal imbalance of between \$400 million and \$1.1 billion cited two years ago by the General Accounting Office. The city cannot tax federal property, nor can it tax commuters' paychecks.

"As we seek solutions to address the structural imbalance and address our long-standing problems," the mayor said, "it is clear that taxing our residents more or providing fewer services are not viable alternatives."

The District's budget was marked up by a House committee on Wednesday without a hearing, said Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton.

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Life begins at 50

Book details women's journey beyond mid-life

BY RAHKIA NANCE
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Most life stories start at the beginning. But more than halfway through life, three Northern Virginia women say they have only just begun to live and have published a book about the "epiphany" of life after 50.

Through 122 pages of anecdotes Renee Fisher, Joyce Kramer and Jean Peelen share the magic of mid-life in "Invisible No More: The Secret Lives of Women Over 50."

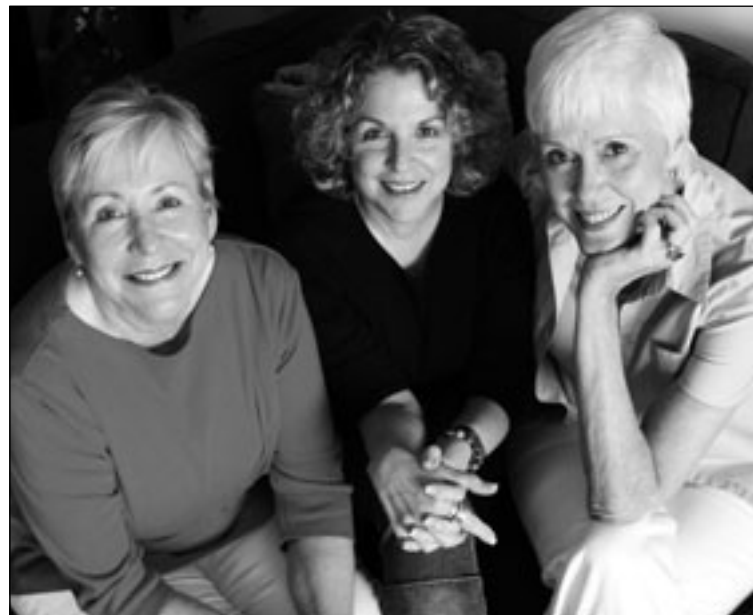
Fisher, 58, remembers the exact moment the book was born — three years ago during "a complete idiotic weekend" in Rehoboth Beach, Del.

"We were at the beach, eating 30 hours a day, complaining about men and being fat and Jean said, 'I have a great idea. Let's write a book,'" Fisher said.

After returning to Northern Virginia, the three pored through several books within the genre in which they would be writing.

"There was not one book on that mantel that had anything written on them that would make me want to read it," Fisher said, adding most of the books were how-to's on aging or observations from psychologists and sociologists.

The women named the book after Fisher had talked to several women about being 50.



Arienne Starnes/For The Examiner

Joyce Kramer, Renee Fisher and Jean Peelen, the authors of "Invisible No More: The Secret Lives of Women over 50," pose for a photograph in Alexandria.

"[They said] the worst thing about being 50 had nothing to do with the sags, wrinkles or host of other things," Fisher said. "The No. 1 thing was feeling invisible. [Men] didn't do that billionth-of-a-second look that all guys are hardwired to do," she said. "It's like you disappear because you don't have that youth and sex appeal."

The women spent a year writing the book and decided to self-publish after mainstream agents told them there was no market for their book, which the authors say sends a message of empowerment.

"It's very powerful to say, 'I am the creator of my own life,' to say 'I am my

own person,'" said Kramer, 63.

"We've all reinvented ourselves in one way or another," said Peelen, 64, a civil rights attorney-turned-model and actress.

Kramer, a former English teacher, is now a health communication consultant. After launching an online dating service, Fisher became a real estate agent.

"Nothing is beyond our limits," Peelen said, noting the 75-year lifespan the average woman can look forward to.

Their book is available on amazon.com, barnesandnoble.com and invisiblenomore.com.

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Commentary

End of the educational road

Erica Jacobs

The end of high school is like the end of your car's life or a doomed relationship: you've fought to keep it alive, but finally it's time to succumb to the inevitable.

Welcome to my world. For the past four months my students have felt guilty about the senioritis that has spread plague-like through the class, but during the last month there is no pretense of guilt.

They just want to get out.

This morning fifteen students were absent from our class at its 7:20 a.m. start. Will came in shortly after Anthony, followed by Matt thirty minutes later and Katie an hour into class.

Jeff, Chris and Daniel asked permission to skip class to join in a "mandatory kickball game" between their AP physics class and AP biology. The word "mandatory" was meant as a joke. I think.

My teaching partner, younger and newer to the profession than I am, finds our students' disaffection depressing. To me, it's amazing they've hung on this long.

Eliot and I have taught this interdisciplinary course together for four years, and have changed what we do the last month four times. Each time it's a variation on a theme: Students create a seminar of their own, modeled on the ones that have given the course its name.

But this year we included a writing component that asks them to reflect on how Senior Seminar fits in their educational past, present, and future.

In between parties, the pool and "sleeping in" when they should be in class, our 115 reluctant students have come up with powerful observations about what they have learned and what they haven't learned in K-12.

Truthfully, I thought most of them would "phone in" this assignment — i.e. fill up the

page with words they thought we wanted to hear, then add "The End" at the bottom.

But what appeared when they pressed "print" was unexpectedly honest and often quite moving. One girl was scared to ask questions because teachers "have made me feel stupid...but both teachers offer constructive criticism and only made me feel smarter."

Students saw the point of the seminars: "They were a forum of sorts, where you were free to move beyond sheer statistics and AP prep and express your opinion ... with real world examples."

Shannon commented that "...everything we've done all year, regardless of how painful it was at the time, has had a point. How amazing is that?"

And Rachel had a tip for next year's seniors: "If you sit on Dr. Jacobs' side of the room it is as cold as Antarctica over there — so bring a snow suit."

The greatest intellectual transformation was probably Patrick's, who wrote "... there was something dynamic, perhaps even mystical that pushed me into a need for knowledge as opposed to a need to fill course requirements."

Just when I think I can predict how uninterested students are in the class, they surprise me with their thoughtfulness and wisdom. Eliot and I might change our curriculum again next year, but the reflections on their educations will stay.

Their words have almost made us forget how delighted our students are to be leaving us.

Do you have a comment? Send 150 words or less to threads@dceaminer.com. E-mail Erica Jacobs at ejacob1@gmu.edu.

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