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## **Costs More Than Double for New Ellington School for the Arts**

**Washington D.C.** – The cost of a new Duke Ellington School for the Arts has grown from \$71 million to \$178 million without a comprehensive review by the D.C. Council on the location, other cost drivers, and all of the elements required for a performing arts high school, according to a new report by the D.C. Auditor.

“As is the case with other schools undergoing modernization, the budget for Ellington has more than doubled since it was proposed in the FY 2012 Capital Improvement Program,” D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson said. Factors in that growth in budget include location, underground parking, and an unusually high figure for space per student.

“Two other locations that may have cost less, based on various factors including historic designation and cost of parking, were considered but rejected, without public debate and without vetting by the D.C. Council,” Patterson said. The alternative sites: the Logan School near Union Station and Ellington Field several blocks west of the current site in Georgetown. The report details neighborhood opposition to using the field for the modernized Ellington, but does not explain why Mayor Vincent Gray and Chancellor Kaya Henderson chose the current Georgetown site over Logan School. A 2013 email from former Mayor Gray to Ward 2 Councilmember Jack Evans, confirms the decision to retain the school at the site of the former Western High School on 35<sup>th</sup> Street NW.

“The bottom line is that our school modernization program has had little discipline to date,” Patterson said. “We don’t use competition to help control costs, for example. There was no hard-dollar bid for the work on Ellington and, in fact, we don’t yet have a final construction price – and demolition began more than a year ago.” To address that shortcoming, the report recommends that the District return to a traditional “design, bid, build” procurement process based on nearly-complete plans followed by competitive bidding on the construction.

In a written response included in the published report, the Department of General Services (DGS) noted agreement with several recommendations, including seeking multiple program management firms and redrafting the DGS policies and procedures manual. The response states that DGS and DC Public Schools have already taken steps “to enhance planning, accountability and cost controls” in the school modernization program. These include clarifying that DCPS makes major decisions on school construction, DCPS redrafting Education Specifications that are the policy framework for new schools, and hiring additional capacity for project management within DGS.

The report describes the unusual scheduling used by the acclaimed performing arts school, in which students attend academic classes in the morning and performing arts classes in the afternoon – so that significant amounts of space are unused a large proportion of the time. The new school will provide roughly 466 square feet of space apiece for the 600 performing arts students who will attend, while space

utilization in other performing arts schools cited in the report ranges from 136 to 240 square feet per student.

The Auditor's report acknowledges that had the Council been presented with a comprehensive plan to spend \$178 million for a renovated Duke Ellington, the Council might well have approved that plan – but what has transpired instead has been a piecemeal approach with a budget growing in each of six annual budgets from \$71 million to the current \$178 million.

Other recommendations:

- Requiring completed “education specifications” for schools before a project is included in the Capital Improvement Plan.
- Greater transparency in decisions such as location.
- Using multiple program management firms, instead of a single program manager.
- Consider additional compatible uses for the new performing arts school to get more efficient use of the new space.
- Draft a new comprehensive policies and procedures manual governing capital construction with clear guidelines that are consistent with best practices.

Read the complete report [here](#). For more information on the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor, visit [dcauditor.org](http://dcauditor.org) or call 202- 727-3600.