

The Ready High Schools Project

*What DCPS Comprehensive
High Schools are Doing to Ensure that our
Students are College and Career Ready*

A DC VOICE Community Action Research Project



INTRODUCTION

This year DC VOICE changed the focus of its community action research. After six years of the **Ready Schools Project's** focus on the supports all schools need in order to provide high quality education for their students, DC VOICE focused solely on the 10 comprehensive high schools, those schools that have open enrollment with no selection criteria other than the school's geographical boundary. Two conditions spurred this decision:

- Over the past six years, DCPS has improved how it provides schools the basic supports they need – and that is wonderful news, and is a testament to the power of the data collected by DC VOICE volunteers each year as part of our community action research. Now it was time to go deeper in our information gathering.
- One of the biggest challenges for our schools today is ensuring that our high school students graduate ready for the worlds of work and college. While we knew that the stated mission of DCPS – and of the nation – is to graduate students college and career ready, we also knew, at least from available test data, that many of our students arrive at our high schools – particularly the open enrollment comprehensive ones – several grades behind academically, and poorly prepared to fulfill that mission.

At the same time DC VOICE collected data through our interviews with high school principals we worked with the Data Team provided by our Collaborative for Education Organizing grant to collect publicly available data on DC high schools. The big lesson learned from this latter effort was that there is a great deal of data available, but not all of it is readily accessible, and not in formats useful for the very persons most affected by the data, i.e. parents, students and teachers. We are indebted to both the persistence of the Data Team and the assistance of DCPS' Office of Accountability for additional information on our high schools.



We used a two-part survey instrument for the confidential interviews with principals:

- Part I continued to build on the community schools and parent/community involvement data DC VOICE has gathered in past years, leading to action by community members at DC VOICE Town Hall meetings.
- The Part 2 questions were based on a college readiness framework developed by the Annenberg Institute (Annenberg Institute, 2007). Based on the effective practices in a group of “beating the odds” high schools in New York City, the framework has four

sections: 1) Promoting Academic Rigor, 2) A Network of Timeline Supports, 3) A Culture of College Access, and 4) Effective Use of Data.

This report presents the college and career readiness data. While we reviewed suggestions from other sources (see list at end of this report), we based our inquiry on the *Annenberg Framework* because it reflects what is working at other urban high schools, and is research-based and field tested. We adapted it to include:

- **More emphasis on career as well as college readiness.** Not only are there many good jobs and careers that do not demand a college degree, but also the same readiness level is required for success in both career and college.
- **The importance of starting earlier than high school** to focus on college and career readiness. We added questions on whether our high schools are working with their feeder schools and whether career/college readiness work is beginning at 9th grade, and not waiting until 11th or 12th.
- **More emphasis on how much parents are involved** in career/college readiness preparations and decision making. Research continues to highlight the importance of high school students having strong supports from the adults in their lives, both at school and at home.
- **Use of a four part rating system for the responses:** 1) not implementing, 2) beginning to implement, 3) moderately implementing, and 4) full implementation.



Four themes emerged from the interviews conducted with the 10 DC high school principals. Each of these themes becomes a call to action on issues presently challenging our high schools and their students in Washington, D.C.:

- 1) **Remedial vs. Advance Placement (AP) compete for resources/focus.**
- 2) **College/career supports are needed by all students and early on.**
- 3) **Parent/community involvement is a great challenge for most high schools.**
- 4) **High school leadership changes affect school improvement progress.**

DC VOICE thanks the many volunteers who helped design the **Ready High Schools Project**, and who attended training sessions and then conducted the interviews with high school principals. We are also grateful to the principals who made the time to meet with our volunteer researchers and provide the information in this report. We know how very busy and demanding

their days are, and appreciate their willingness to participate in this year’s DC VOICE community action project.

Our intent here is to provide baseline information about the college and career readiness of our high schools. Our principals and indeed our whole community know much more needs to be done. At this time of transition to a new Mayor who has promised to keep education reform front and center, our hope is that this report can spur high school reform efforts. Such efforts – to support and enable our high schools to provide the quality education our students deserve to launch them successfully into the world – must involve all of us: not just our schools, but the whole city of Washington, D.C.

PROMOTING ACADEMIC RIGOR

The *Annenberg Framework* provides many examples of strategies used to promote academic rigor, from the ways teachers and departments work together, to how rigor and quality are monitored at all levels, i.e. supervisory and teaching practices, course content and curricula, and the tracking of student progress.

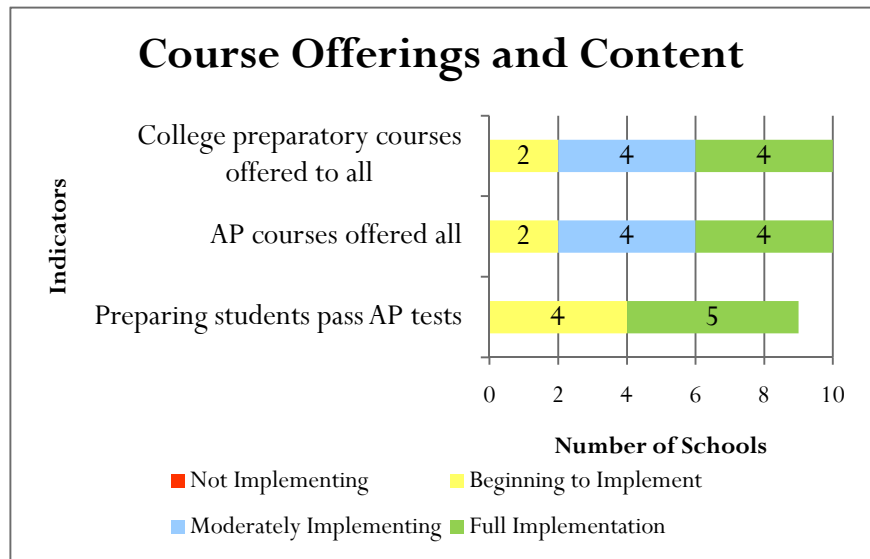
The first set of questions DC VOICE asked the principals focused on what courses high schools are offering to ALL students. This is where the remedial vs. advanced courses divide surfaced. One principal noted that 11 percent of that school’s students were “advanced” and 60 percent need remedial classes. With so many students coming to the school three and four grades below grade level, some schools have to dedicate more of their scarce resources to remedial instruction to help students catch up. The problem was posed like this in recent budget hearing testimony: “Should more challenged students get less financial support than more academically successful students?” (SHAPPE, 2009).

THEME ONE

Remedial vs. Advanced Placement (AP) compete for resources/focus

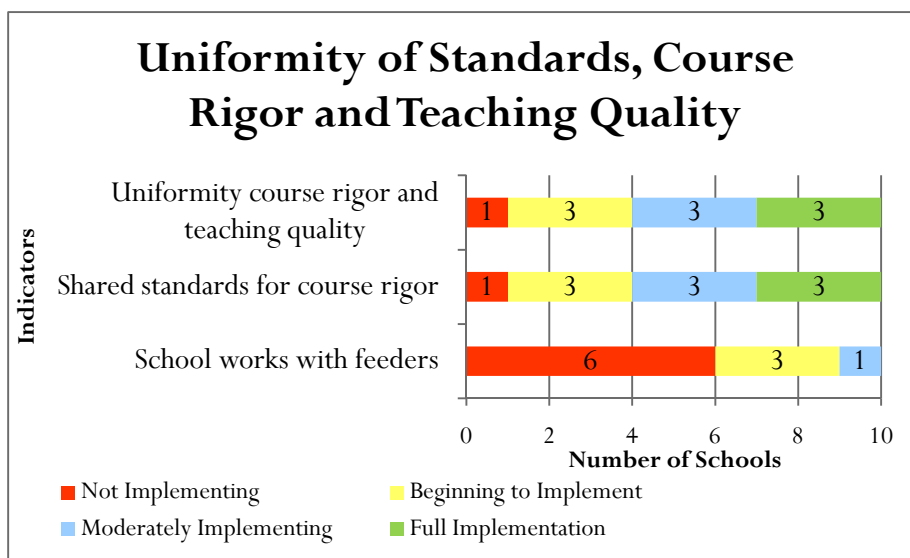
By next year DCPS plans to have AP courses in all core areas. This can create tension in schools with large numbers of students requiring remediation: Principals are having to make hard choices on where to put their resources depending on the needs of their students.

DC VOICE asked the principals whether standards, course rigor and teaching quality are systemically developed, maintained and monitored. While energetic effort was reported here, principals also emphasized that these efforts are hampered by a lack of high school curriculum, which makes it difficult for teachers to know what they should be teaching and when, and for supervisors to effectively monitor progress. We also asked about high schools working with their feeder middle and elementary schools to vertically coordinate course content and expectations. Action in this area appears to be sparse, even as the intent is there. Some principals reported that how the school divisions are set up makes this difficult. Others said they wanted to do more with feeder schools, but also that they had not heard anything from the district about this.



Summary:

As can be seen in the preceding graphs, the implementation of offering high level courses is fairly high, but there is lower implementation on ensuring uniform standards, course rigor and teacher quality. Regarding the latter, several principals noted that lack of curriculum makes



monitoring for uniformity across courses and teachers difficult. The lowest implementation level in this category concerned working vertically with feeder schools on course content and academic expectations.

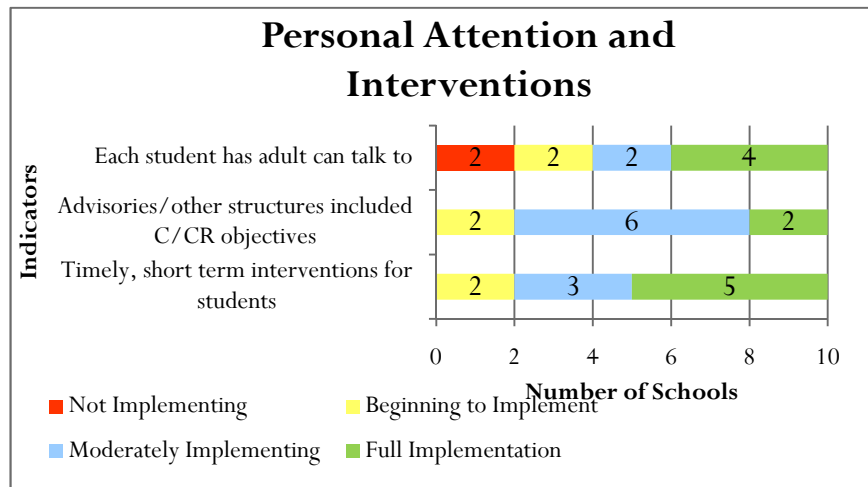
A NETWORK OF TIMELY SUPPORTS

The *Annenberg Framework* has a dual focus in this category: personal attention to all students, and the interventions and strategies used to help students. It references practices at the “beating the odds” high schools where school staff is organized to “ensure that no student’s academic, behavioral or personal needs go unnoticed: each student is assigned to one or more adults on campus” (Annenberg, 2007). Successful schools employ a range of interventions that begin with assessing the skills of 9th graders and providing a systemic program of interventions to help students who are behind.

DC VOICE researchers asked questions about personal attention in two ways: 1) whether there were advisories or other small group structures in place, and 2) whether each student has an adult at school they could talk to. Principals reported mixed success with innovative ways of

providing small support groups as well as frustration in this area, ranging from getting push back from the teachers union to a lack of any systemic support for efforts to provide more personal attention to students. Just over half of the schools were implementing efforts to ensure each student had an adult he or she could talk to, and a couple of schools had not

begun any implementation in this area. In general these efforts are often quite informal and not part of any formal program in the school or systemic direction from the district. The need for college and career preparation for all students coupled with increased supports is well presented in *Youth Voices on the DC Graduation Crisis* (S.T.E.P. Up and Johns Hopkins, 2010).



All schools reported employing various kinds of interventions to help students succeed and particularly to help those who have fallen behind, i.e. tutoring, mentoring provided by local community organizations, credit recovery courses, and online courses. This was

the second occasion in the interviews where principals particularly emphasized the challenge of having many students performing well below grade level, either on 5th and 6th grade reading levels and lower, or being chronically truant which caused them to be behind in course work. Schools send letters, call parents, and do home visits, even as they search for more effective ways to reduce truancy by, for example, creating a better partnership arrangement with the Metropolitan Police Department’s Truancy Task Force.

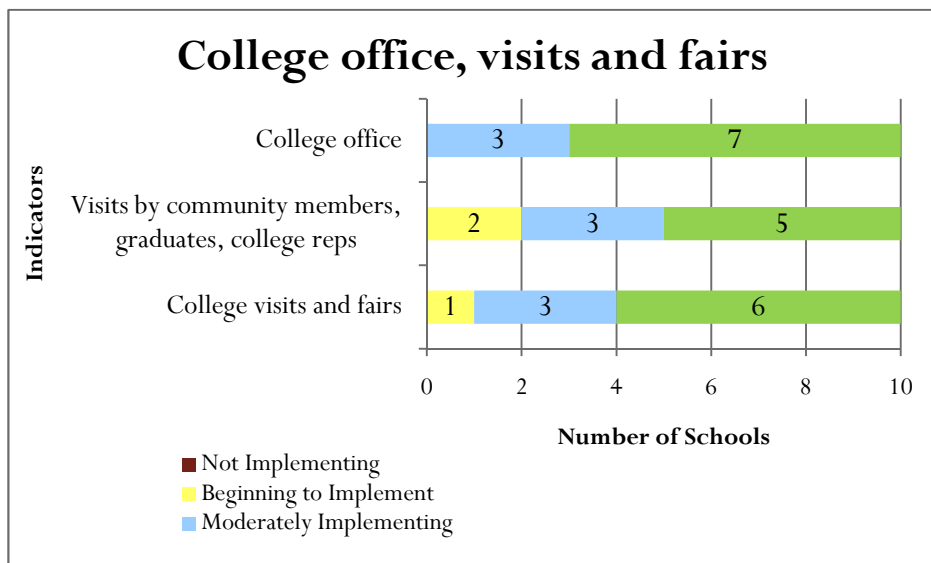
Summary:

As noted, almost all schools report implementation of tutoring, mentoring and other services to support student progress and help students who are behind catch up. The two mechanisms for providing personal attention for all students – whether through small group settings such as advisories or ensuring every student has an adult to talk to – are at lower levels of implementation in more than half of the schools.

A SCHOOL CULTURE OF COLLEGE/CAREER ACCESS

The indicators of best practice noted in the *Annenberg Framework* reference mechanisms that involve several constituencies: college visits and fairs that provide information about specific colleges; information on tests, admissions, and financial aid provided by college offices in the school; visits to the school by community members and graduates to share the possibilities and the value of being college and career ready; and ways to involve parents in supporting their students and planning for the future.

In general, most DCPS high schools are doing well on having college and career information structures in place, including college offices, visits by community members, and college and career visits and fairs.

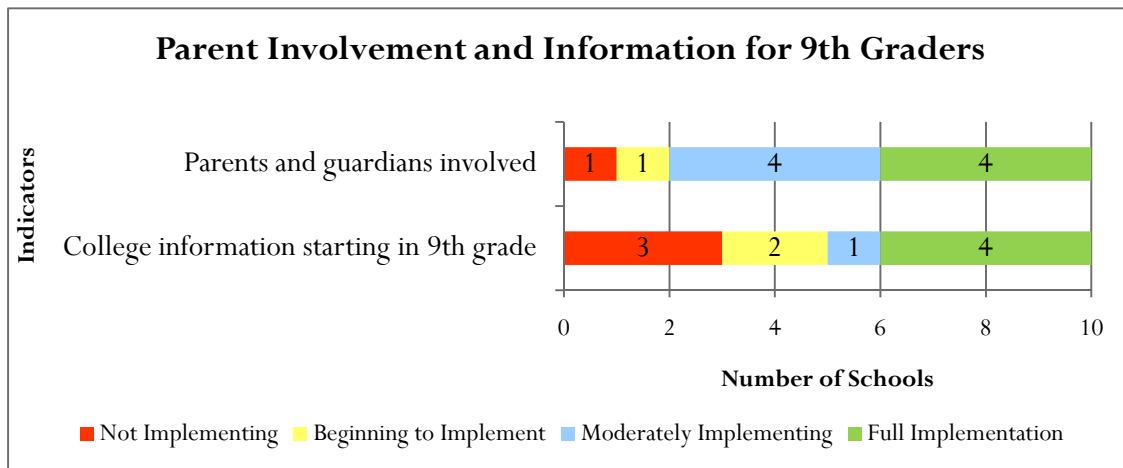


DC VOICE added another component to readiness efforts, i.e. starting early. We asked principals whether they were making college and career information available in 9th grade, and not waiting until the upper grades. The information provided here was very thin. Also, whether a school had mounted a full court press on providing college and career information to all grades seemed to be affected by how long the school leadership had been in place. More than one new principal said that upon arrival he/she found 12th graders not prepared for graduation and beyond, and had to start with them, and over time move to include the lower grades.

THEME TWO

College/career supports are needed by all students and early

Schools report striving mightily to provide what students need to be ready for their next steps after graduation. But as with the choices forced in Theme I, the range of supports needed is very broad, and it appears the resources are not always there to begin at 9th grade and earlier.



THEME THREE

Parent and community involvement is a great challenge for most high schools

Involvement of parents, guardians and community members is uneven across schools/city. Some schools struggle to get any parents in the door at all, and others report that parents are very involved. Some schools effectively tap community and alumni resources to expand what the school can do, and some not at all.

The involvement of parents and guardians also depended somewhat on how long the school leadership had been in place (Education News Colorado, 2009). Veteran principals had had more time to build relationships with the students' parents. Most but certainly not all of the schools noted that involving parents was one of their greatest challenges.

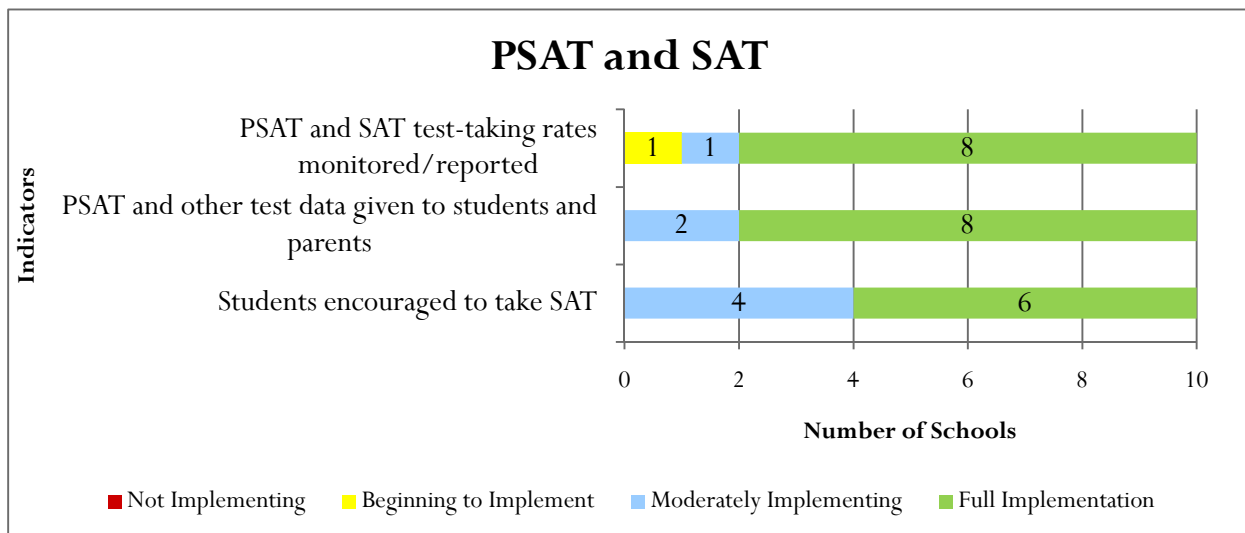
Summary:

In general, schools do better in the areas they can control, i.e. setting up a college office, and college/career visits and fairs in and out of school. Reaching down to the 9th grade was closely tied to how long a principal had been at the school; new principals understandably saw 12th grades as their first priority. Getting parents and guardians involved in college and career readiness efforts and planning was challenging at many of the schools.

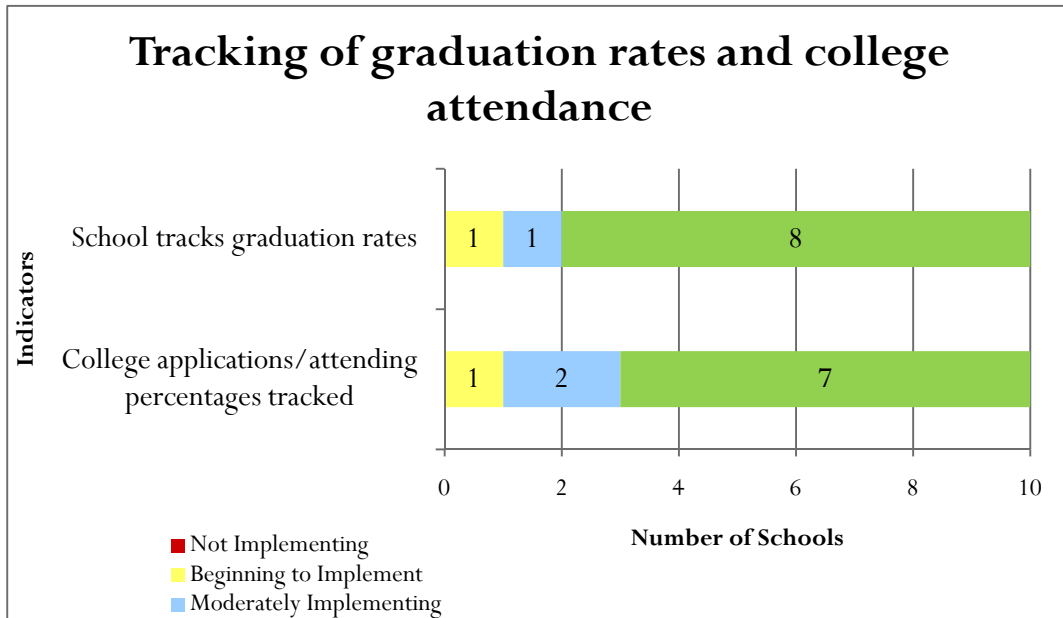
EFFECTIVE USE OF DATA

The *Annenberg Framework* states that the effective use of data is when “the school uses data to strengthen programs and practice, as well as analyzes graduate rates and reviews other data to keep track of students and inform their programs” (Annenberg, 2007).

The information provided by the principals gives a fairly positive picture of how DC high schools are tracking data on student performance and making it available to students and their families. Most principals reported that their schools monitor and report PSAT and SAT test taking rates as well as test results. Also, schools encourage students to take the SAT, and several provide supports including helping students feel comfortable in signing up to take it, and providing transportation to the test site. Although a couple of schools mentioned using PSAT data to then encourage qualified students to take AP courses and the SAT, in general the whole area of how schools use the data they monitor was not explicitly captured in this baseline inquiry.



All schools reported high implementation in tracking their school’s graduation rates, but some principals noted the challenges of being a transient school, and also that the data in the past has not been tracked from 9th grade as it should be. As can be seen in the graph, tracking how many students apply and then attend college is less well monitored. Other comments in this area came from new principals finding little past year data available, and the concern of many principals that some students go to college but do not finish and graduate.



Summary:

In general, there was high implementation reported in the data area; the lower implementation level for students taking the SAT reflected several schools that reported they had many students performing below grade level. In general the whole area of how schools use the data they monitor was not explicitly included in this baseline inquiry.

THEME FOUR

High school leadership changes affect school improvement progress

Half of the high school principals are new this year. Our interviews showed how difficult it is to sustain continuous or long range school improvement efforts if the leadership changes often.

CONCLUSION

The highest numbers reported in the four areas of this research project are in the college/career access culture and effective data sections; the lowest are in the areas of promoting academic rigor and providing a network of supports. At present there is more emphasis on objective goals but less on the foundational actions needed to make those goals real.

Given this is a baseline inquiry, we don't make a judgment on this other than to say that the Annenberg research "beating the odds" high schools demonstrated that all four areas are important, and if we came back one year from now with the same questions, it would be good to note progress in all four areas of the Framework.

There is a great deal of other data available on our high schools. For examples, data on student performance, course-taking trends, attendance, suspensions, overage students, teacher experience and turnover, and counselor/student ratios are all part of creating a fuller picture of how well our schools are doing and our students are prepared for the future. We hope this baseline inquiry spurs further analysis and use of the data that is publicly available on our schools, leading to actions for change.

At the same time, many of our schools struggle with two challenges regarding students and their families that are harder to present as precise data points. There is concern about how to boost student motivation to learn, including how to deal with the issues of tardiness, attendance, and extreme truancy in some cases. And getting parents and community members involved in planning and supporting students on their next step after high school is very challenging for most of the schools.

But effectively addressing these issues cries out for action from the community as well as from schools. The new report *Building a Grad Nation* talks about creating a multi-sector and community-based effort, noting that "the community bears the costs of the dropout crisis and should be deeply involved in its solution" (Civic Enterprises, Johns Hopkins, America's Promise, 2010). And it's a two-way street: not only must communities step up in specific ways to support schools, but schools should collaborate with the households, neighborhoods, and nonprofits willing to help. Ultimately, the community at large has to fully support its schools, including ensuring that there is sufficient funding and other resources provided: there is a "need for equitable funding for the high schools" (SHAPPE, 2010).

Our hope is that this short baseline inquiry and report on our 10 comprehensive high schools can provide the impetus for new action to improve our high schools. Our high school students belong to all of us, and they deserve the very best supports and preparation we can give them as they are poised to enter the worlds of work and college.

For more information on high schools and college and career readiness:

Alliance for Excellent Education: *Is your local high school making the grade? 10 Elements of a Successful High School*, 2006.

Archer, Carol, Henderson, Anne T., and Maguire, Cindy, *Putting Kids on the Pathway to College Framework and Rubric*, Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, 2007.

Balfanz, Robert, Bridgeland, John M., Moore, Laura A., Fox, Joanna Hornig, *Building a Grad Nation, Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic*, Civic Enterprises, Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University and America's Promise Alliance, November 2010.

Darling-Hammond, Linda, and Friedlaender, Diane, *Creating Excellent and Equitable Schools*, Education Leadership, May 2008.

Fox, Joanna Hornig, and Hilton, Megan Elizabeth, *Youth Voices on the DC Graduation Crisis*, S.T.E.P. Up DC, convened by DC Alliance of Youth Advocates and Critical Exposure, and Johns Hopkins University's Everyone Graduates Center, 2010.

Pinkus, Lyndsay M., *Moving Beyond AYP: High School Performance Indicators*, Alliance for Education, June 2009.

Reilly, Cathy,, *Testimony to the Chancellor of DCPS*, Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals and Educators (SHAPPE), November 29, 2010.

Wilensky, Rona, *How Principal Turnover Hampers High school Reform*, Education News Colorado, November 10, 2009.



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