



# Ready Charter Schools Report

Interviews with DC Public Charter School Principals



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# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Public School Supporter:

Traditionally the Ready Schools Project (RSP) has focused only on the non-charter schools in the District. It was designed to help present a picture of how ready our schools are on day one of each school year. The Ready Schools Project is a model of community action research that engages hundreds of stakeholders in public education in the District.

Thanks to the dedication, support, and participation of hundreds of volunteers throughout the District, the Ready Schools Project remains successful and is emerging as a national model for best practices in community action research in public education. In fact, DC VOICE and its partners are currently in the process of replicating the Ready Schools Project model in other school systems across the United States.



The following report marks our first attempt to respond to the suggestions of replicating our traditional Ready Schools Project model for non-charter schools with a focus on charter schools. In response, we have adapted the Ready Schools Project survey of school principals to charter schools and have collected, analyzed, and synthesized the data into this report.

As you read this report, it is important to keep in mind a fundamental similarity between charter and non-charter schools. Both types of schools are integral parts of the District's public school system. As such, each receive the same amount of local government funding per student based on the same funding formula.

It is also important to keep in mind a fundamental difference between charter and non-charter schools. Whereas both types receive funding based on student enrollment numbers, charter schools have been granted a greater degree of freedom to organize and operate around a variety of educational philosophies and strategies that often differ from the operations and strategies of non-charter schools. Since they too are within the public school system and receive funding from our tax dollars just as non-charters do, it is important that we also work the charter schools to ensure each is meeting the needs of our children and communities just as we work with non-charters.

Sincerely,

Jeff Smith  
Executive Director, DC VOICE

## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps Alex Medler and Joe Nathan said it best in their book *Charter Schools...What Are They Up To?*, a 1995 survey, reminding us that charter schools are public schools with the freedom to innovate. They are often formed by entrepreneurial parents and teachers wanting to bring their vision of successful education to fruition. As public schools, charter schools must abide by the same rules that promote safety, civil rights, and health in our non-charter public schools. The difference is that our charter schools are free to innovate and experiment in curriculum decisions, length of school day and year, number of class requirements for students and what those classes entail, the hiring of teachers and staff, and other areas that determine the framework within which our children are educated. This framework provides the structure around which critical school decisions are made. These decisions involve multiple areas, including: staffing, non-core class offerings, professional development, instruction, school climate, the physical conditions of classrooms and buildings, school supports, and educational policy. As such, they were the educational dimensions of most obvious relevance for exploration in this year's first report on charter schools.

This report includes many of the same sections included in the previous five annual Ready Schools Project reports on non-charter schools. This was *not* done to create a tool for comparing charters with non-charters. Instead, it was done out of a belief that many of the same areas that concern non-charters also concern charters.

Also included are new sections especially relevant to charter schools, including: non-core classes, supports, and policy. These sections carry special relevance to the unique nature of charter schools and speak to the comparative freedom to determine class offerings, on one hand, and to the high degree of dependence on outside partnerships for support, on another.

This report should be seen as a launching pad for future community-led endeavors and discussions (or a supportive tool for existing ones) aimed at tracking charter schools' progress towards meeting the needs of public education students at continuously improving levels. The report is presented in sections that represent areas of concern deemed important by the community of public education stakeholders in general. This is not to say that future editions will not evolve to include other areas of concern, they could and perhaps should.

Until then, we shall start with these areas already identified as important to the charter school community. Each is a great place to begin the process of community-driven information exchange and public dialogue that helps shape the future of public charter schools in the District of Columbia.

## METHODOLOGY

Over 30 volunteers from the District of Columbia worked with the DC VOICE staff to administer in-person, one-on-one surveys of 22 of the District's 60 charter school principals. Principals were chosen from each of the District's 8 Wards. It was important to represent the diversity of charter schools found in the District. The schools ranged in aspects from low to high enrollment, different grade levels, different types of facilities, and different educational philosophies. Confidentiality was promised at the onset of the survey and was upheld throughout the project. The survey collected quantitative data in the following areas: Staffing, Non-Core Classes, Professional Development, Instructions, School Climate, and Physical Condi-

tions. In addition to quantitative data (yes or no questions), the survey also collected qualitative data (principal's opinion and open-response items), inviting principals to elaborate on concerns in the above areas, as well as, others not addressed by the survey, but deemed important by the principal. Descriptive statistics were generated using standard Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

## HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Ever since DC VOICE started conducting community action research projects on teaching and learning issues in the system schools, residents requested similar studies on charter schools. DC VOICE conducted the first study focused on charter schools in the fall of 2008 and hope to include charter schools in future projects as well. This initial effort included 37 percent of the city's 60 charter schools at that time. Those 22 schools were located in all eight wards of the city and included elementary, middle, and high schools.

One of the challenges in this project was to fashion the survey questions with charter school autonomy in mind. The Ready Schools Project focuses on "system supports" provided to facilitate high quality teaching and learning. There is no "system" for most charter schools. In addition, DC VOICE's research approach focuses on whether schools and staff have the tools needed to provide quality teaching and learning and not on specific individuals current performance. Given these parameters, the questions were fashioned as fairly as possible to provide data on how our charter schools are doing as each strive to provide quality teaching and learning for students.



Since public charter schools are independent schools, each have autonomy in several areas that are not available to all schools that are part of the school system. For example, the hiring of personnel is not accomplished through a central human resources office, but directly by school principals or committees consisting of administrators and teachers. With this kind of direct control over hiring and budgeting, charter schools can arguably avoid some of the negative effects of school district hiring policies, including: barriers to early hiring (such as late notification by resigning teachers), teacher transfer requirements, and cumbersome paper work that can delay final hiring decisions.

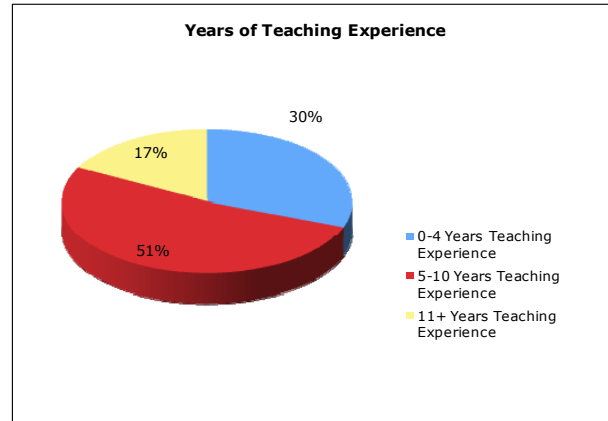
Once that data is tabulated and produced it can lead to taking action to improve our schools. It is our hope that the data provided in this report can contribute to the public knowledge available about charter schools in Washington, D.C. and contribute to the efforts to improve those schools for the children each school serves.

## STAFFING

### What We Learned

The charter school principals were asked to estimate the years of teaching experience of their teachers. Nearly one third of the teachers are new or have up to four years of experience, 51 percent have 5-10 years of experience, and 17 percent have over 11 years of experience.

*“With 85% of teachers with 0-4 year experience...a program outlining how to work with urban youth would be beneficial”*



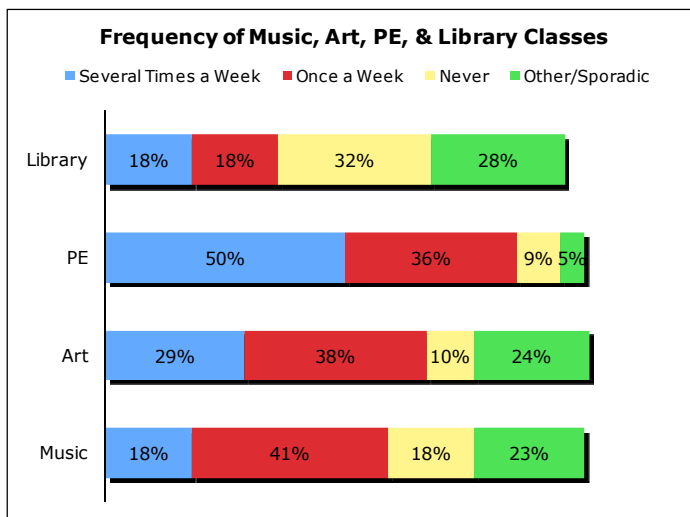
### Why This Is Important

Research shows that experience matters in the classroom. New teachers in high poverty, high minority schools are less effective than those with 3-5 years of experience. Following 5 years, the added benefit of additional years can stagnate and teachers sometimes become less effective.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

## NON-CORE CLASSES

### What We Learned

As independent schools, charter schools have autonomy over daily schedules and curriculum and class offerings, including: the types and frequencies of non-core classes such as music, art, physical education, and library. The principals were asked how often students have these subjects and what resources they utilize in these areas. As the graph shows, the number of classes in these non-core subjects varied widely. Nine percent of the schools reported they never offer PE class, 10 percent never offer art, 18 percent never offer music, and 32 percent never offer library. In the area of libraries, when asked what resources schools provide, just 18 percent of the schools reported having a librarian on staff, 23 percent reported having a school library, and 32 percent had classroom libraries.



*“Our facilities only allow for some classroom libraries”*

<sup>1</sup>“Improving Teacher Quality”. [http://www.subnet.nga.org/educlear/achievement/quality/quality\\_problem.html](http://www.subnet.nga.org/educlear/achievement/quality/quality_problem.html) (accessed 9/28/2009).

<sup>2</sup>“Tennessee’s Most Effective Teachers”. [http://www.tennessee.gov/education/nclb/doc/TeacherEffectiveness2007\\_03.pdf](http://www.tennessee.gov/education/nclb/doc/TeacherEffectiveness2007_03.pdf), March 2007 (accessed 9/28/2009).

*“Our facilities do not accommodate a dedicated Library. We take monthly trips to the area public library.”*

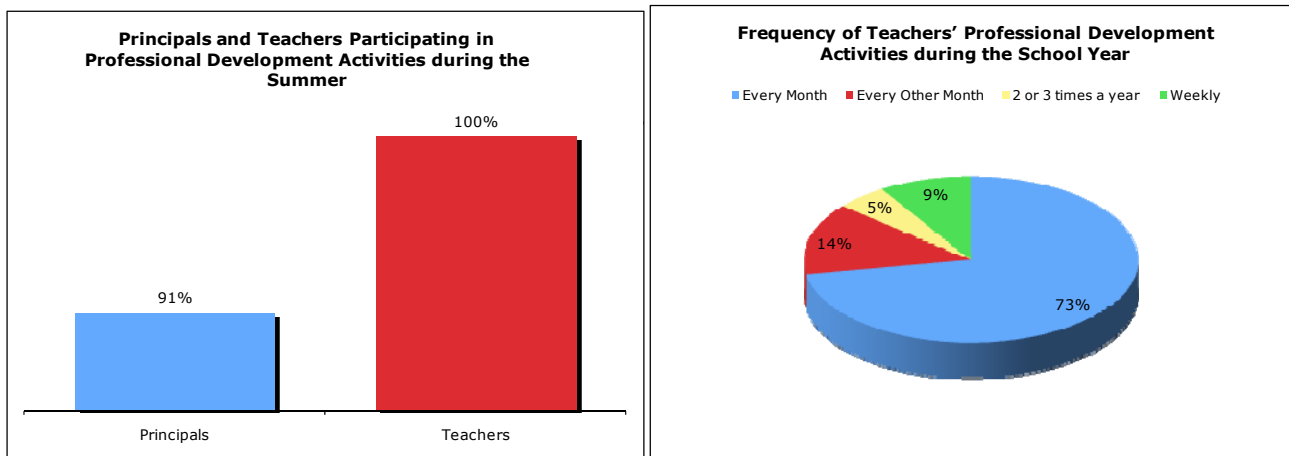
### Why This Is Important

DC VOICE’s community action research project started tracking staffing in these subjects areas several years ago, given both the academic importance and the present emphasis on standardized testing just in limited subject areas. With the potentially positive effects of instruction in areas such as music, art, and physical education and the importance traditionally accorded these disciplines in the pursuit of intellectual balance and individual empowerment, it may strike some that these instructional resources are relatively rare in the D.C. charter school environment.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### What We Learned

Principals reported that during the summer of 2008, 91 percent of principals and 100 percent of teachers participated in professional development opportunities. During the school year, nearly three quarters of teachers participated on a monthly basis, with curriculum, instruction, and testing as the most common topics of the training sessions. Principals also reported that 96 percent of their new teachers receive mentoring support, with instruction and classroom management as the primary areas of focus.



### Why This Is Important

The high percentage of summertime professional development participation and mentoring support for new teachers suggests this is a priority for charter schools. Given the research showing a close correlation between professional development and quality teaching and between quality teaching and high student performance, it would be interesting to track over time the academic achievement impacts of this professional development focus. Furthermore, given that mentoring is seen as an effective tool to support and help retain new teachers, charter school focus on this speaks to a commitment to develop and also retain effective teachers.

# INSTRUCTION

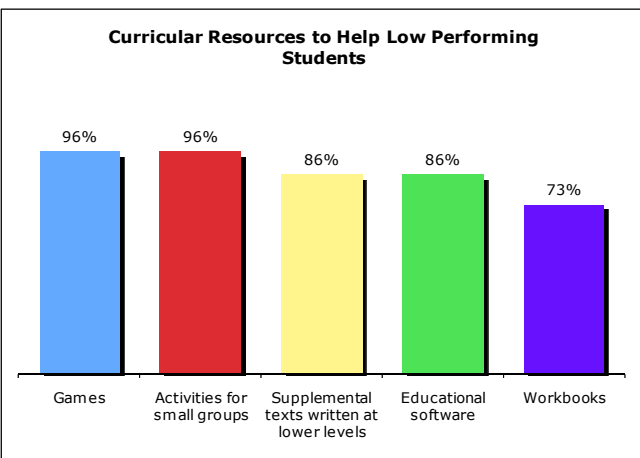
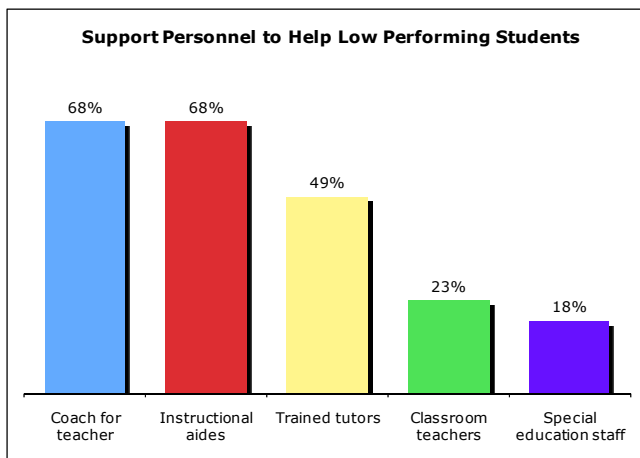
## What We Learned

The principals were asked what strategies, personnel, and resources they use to accelerate the learning of students performing below basic levels and also at advanced levels. The principals reported multiple strategies, including: tutoring for students, coaches for teachers, various types of materials and special enrichment programs. Of special interest were the responses to questions about differentiating instruction and incorporating technology. Ninety-six percent, or nearly all principals, reported that teachers incorporate technology in their instruction delivery, using both traditional and more contemporary types of technology.

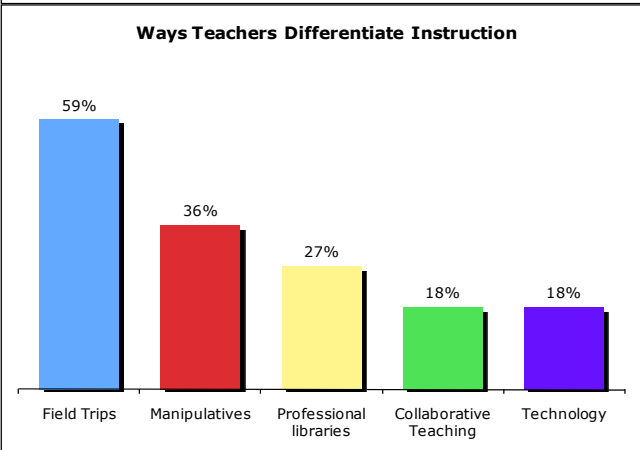
*Personnel:* As seen in the graph below, charter schools use a wide array of personnel to help low performing students. Sixty-eight percent of the schools reported using teacher coaches and instructional aides and 49 percent of the schools use trained tutors.

*“We provide over 25 after school programs, offer coaches and instructional aides for teachers, and maintain enrichment programs and academic clubs for student performing at advanced levels.”*

*Resources:* The graph shows a high percentage of charter schools provide an array of curricular resources for low performing students, ranging from 73 percent to 96 percent, depending on the specific resource.



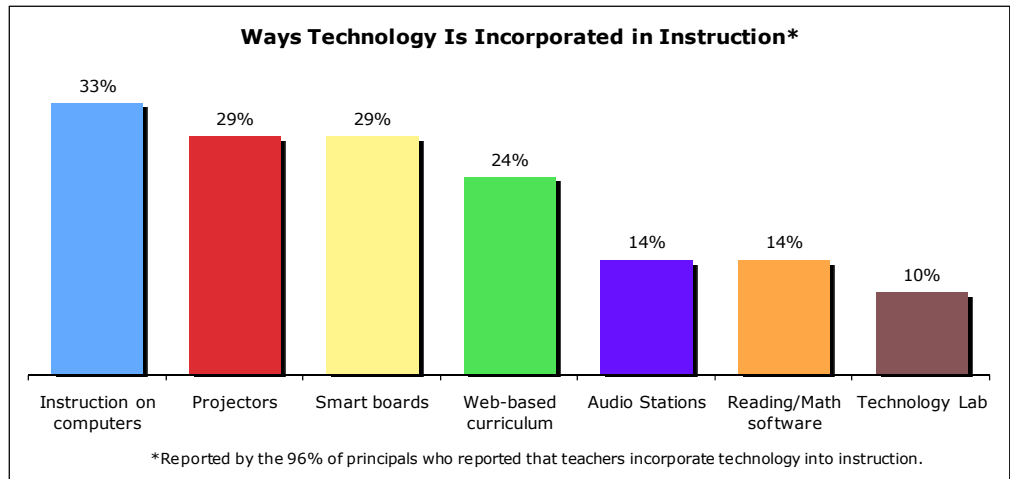
*Differentiating Instruction:* Charter schools also use an array of tools to differentiate instruction. On the low end are technology and collaborative teaching, with 18 percent of schools reporting use in both cases. On the high end are field trips, with 59 percent reporting use. Falling between these two ends of the spectrum are professional libraries, at 27 percent, and the use of manipulatives (such as protractors, science kits, and tangram sets), at 36 percent.



*Incorporating Technology:* Ninety-six percent of principals reported that technology is incorporated into classroom instruction through both traditional and contemporary types of technology. Traditional types include projectors and audio stations, while contemporary types include computers, labs software, smart boards, and the internet. The graph depicts the wide array of means by which technology incorporation is achieved. Worth noting, is the use of web-based/internet technology and computer technology.

**Why This Is Important**

Teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and techniques necessary to assist and enrich the education to students beyond the normal classroom. Support for students who may fall behind academically will ensure that these students are continually engaged and not left behind. Integrating interactive

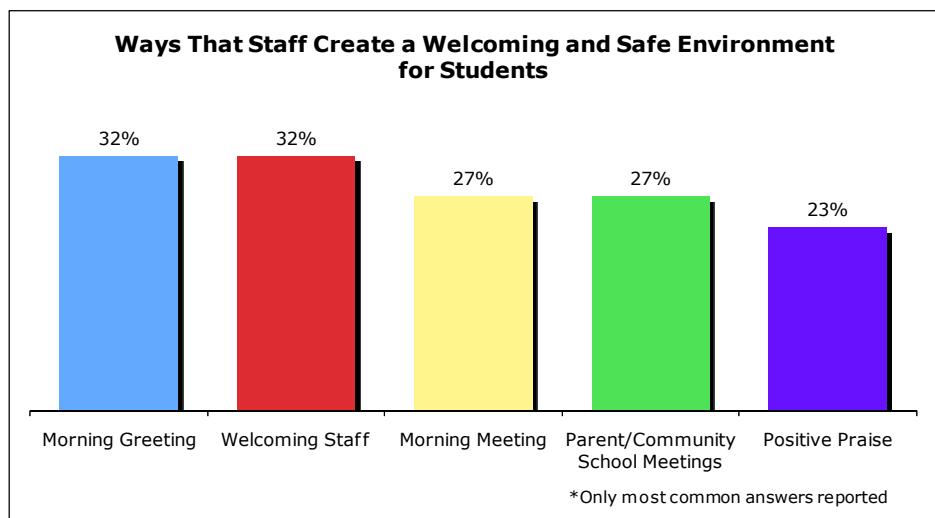


classrooms, learning expeditions, and manipulatives allows teachers to differentiate the normal classroom instruction. Furthermore, the continued addition of technology in the classroom allows students exposure to equipment and trends necessary for academic development.

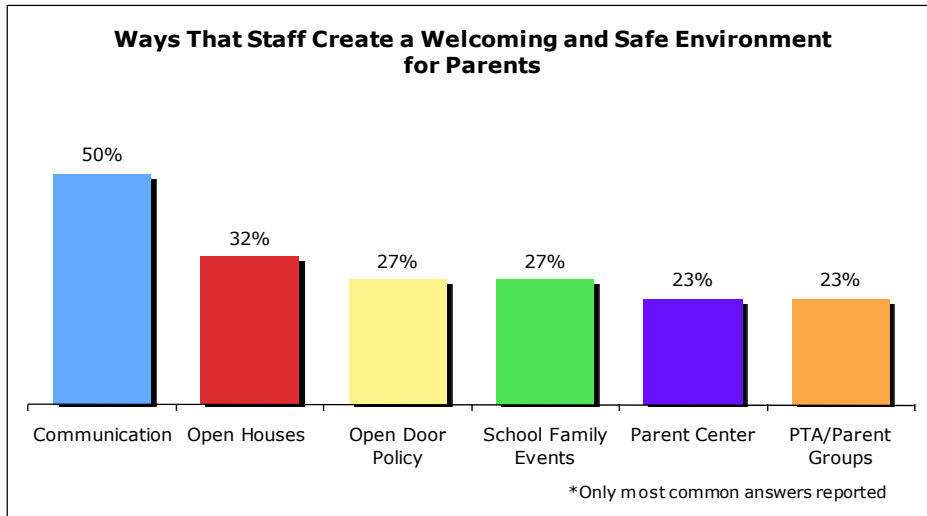
**SCHOOL CLIMATE**

**What We Learned**

As the following graphs show, charter school principals reported a wide array of means used to ensure a warm and welcoming climate for both students and parents. There appears to be an overall attitude of openness and cooperation among the charter schools, staff, parents, students, and school partners, achieved through the regular use of internal, direct, personal interaction and communication. The graphs show the extent and variety of ways that charter schools use to



create a safe and welcoming climate for students and parents. In a separate question, on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest), principals reported an average rating of 4 when asked how satisfied they are with the safety and security of their schools.



**Why This Is Important**

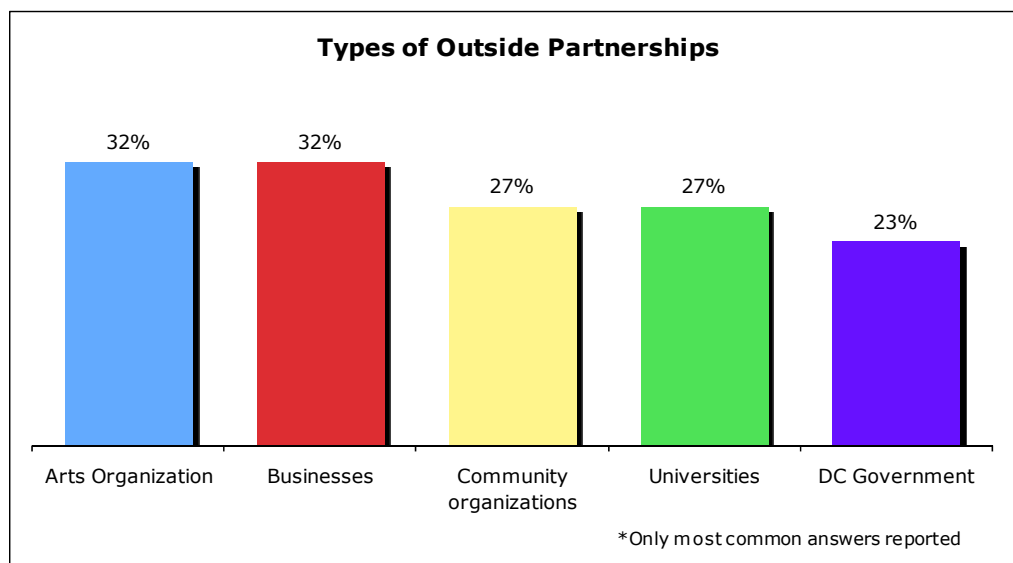
A warm, welcoming, and safe school climate is known to have positive impacts on students’ psychosocial and emotional health, which, in turn, impacts students’ ability to positively engage with their surroundings and learn to the best of their individual abilities. Charter school principals were asked to list the ways in which they and their school staff create such a climate.

*“I make an effort to shake hands and greet the students as they arrive each morning. Parents are encouraged to enjoy a morning cup of coffee and speak with a dedicated Parent Outreach Coordinator.”*

**PARTNERSHIPS**

**What We Learned**

The principals also reported forming school partnerships with many types of outside organizations and agencies. The graph shows the percentage of charter schools partnering with the DC government, universities, community organizations, businesses, and art organizations, the five most commonly reported partner-



ships. Other partnerships include: athletic facilities, area churches, and other charter schools.

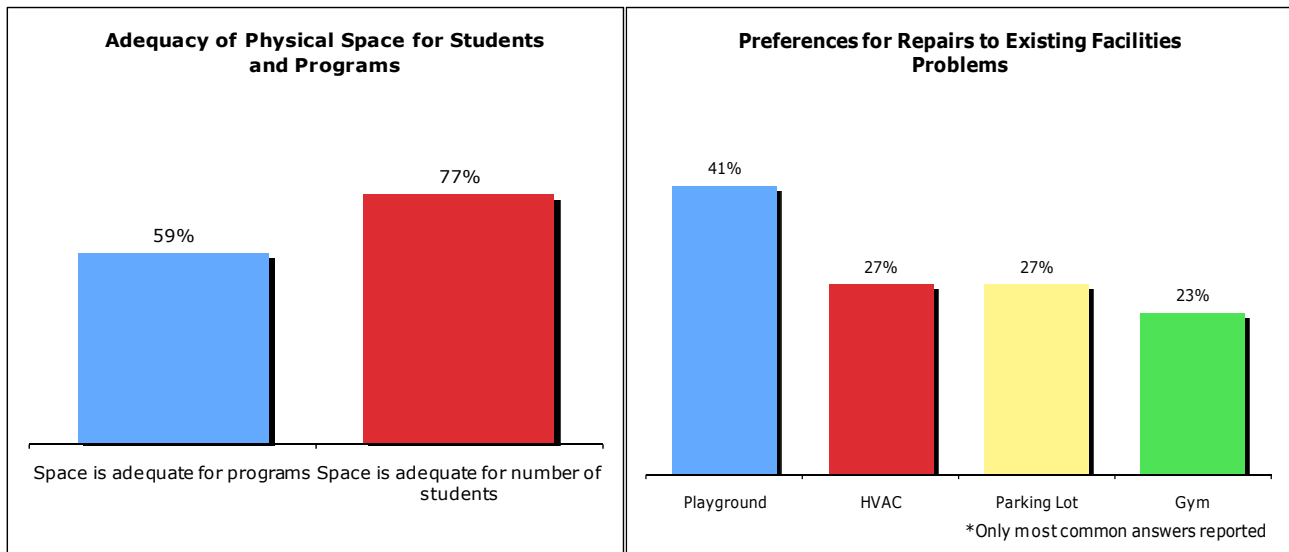
### Why This Is Important

The sheer number of academic and non-academic barriers that schools face make it impossible for schools alone to provide for all the needs of their students and families. Partnerships with outside organizations can help meet these needs. Community partnerships, particularly if well integrated into the strategic planning and vision of the school, can bring in new resources that schools would otherwise lack.

## PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

### What We Learned

The Charter School Project asked principals whether they had enough school space for programs and student enrollment. Principals noted that while they may have physical space to accommodate all the students, it does not necessarily allow for expansion of both core and non-core academic programs (such as science labs, music programs, and after school care). Principals were also asked to list the top three preferences for repairs to existing facility problems. As the graph shows, 59 percent reported having adequate space for existing programs and 77 percent reported having adequate space for current student enrollment. On facilities conditions, principals reported a range of facilities problems that need to be fixed, with playgrounds leading the list at 41 percent, followed by heating and cooling problems, parking lots, and gyms.



### Why This Is Important

Although appropriate facilities may not be a sufficient criteria in the creation of a high-quality educational environment, they are nonetheless absolutely necessary. The space available might be adequate for the present programs and activities, but not allow for continued expansion and development of the charter school. Adequate space must not only satisfy the present needs, but look to the future of the school and community. Maintaining the facilities will not only meet the standards necessary for a proper education, but attract additional qualified teachers and administrators who can contribute to the growth and development of the charter school.

## ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

The Charter School Project asked charter school Principals to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, the overall support they received in preparation for the opening of the 2008-2009 school year. The resulting average rating was 3.3. Principals were also asked for any statements about support for either school opening or the kinds of ongoing support needed for a successful school year and to list any statewide policies they wanted to see implemented or changed.

*“I would like to get the same support that non-charter DC Public Schools receive.”*

- **Opening of school support:** Several principals mentioned the good support received from their Boards of Trustees, from the Charter School Board, and from their staffs and parents. Even as some principals applauded the support from the Charter School Board, others said there was a lack of support from the Board and several expressed a strong desire for more community support in general for charter schools.
- **Ongoing support needed:** Out of over 50 responses on types of continuing support needed, there were 12 responses tied to funding needs and support. Nine responses covered a broad range of teaching issues, such as, more substitutes, teacher coaches and mentors, and more materials for teachers. Eight responses focused on the need for and importance of ongoing professional development and training. Specific unmet needs included school nurses and crossing guards.
- **Policies needing implementation or change:** The biggest response from the principals referenced the specific nature of charter schools in some ways, i.e. how they function in relation to non-charter schools, and how well supported they are by the community. The next most frequent suggestions were regarding funding, with particular attention to equity in funding for all schools. The third largest number of responses dealt with special education, with concerns about special education funding following the children and the role of the State office on special education issues.

DC VOICE’s first annual Charter School Project uncovered some of the dynamics associated with D.C. charter schools. While each charter school is operated independently of the other, DC VOICE found trends of both success and failure among the charter schools. This study confirmed that key to the development of the students and staff is the availability of professional development opportunities and the continued integration of innovative instructional techniques and technology across sectors of public schooling. Charter school principals strive to maintain secure and adequate facilities, but often lack the funding necessary to maintain and expand programs. We learned about needs in the charter school sector very similar to those within DCPS. It is a series of community driven conversations based on reaction to DC VOICE data on DCPS which inspired an ongoing Education-Reform campaign among DC VOICE volunteers and members. This campaign centers around 1) transforming neighborhood schools into community centers of learning, 2) establishing parent/community resource coordinators at each school and 3) funding comprehensive professional development for all school staff across the city. The findings from charter schools only strengthen DC VOICE’s Demand Reform Demand Equity Campaign.

To become involved with the Demand Reform Demand Equity Campaign or the work of DC VOICE, please contact Jeff Smith at [jsmith@dcvoice.org](mailto:jsmith@dcvoice.org)

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