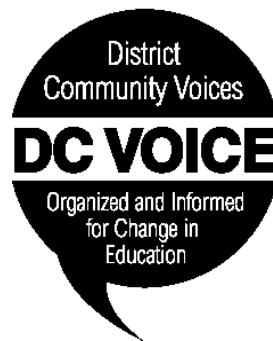


A REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

STARTING OFF RIGHT: Were the District of Columbia Public Schools Ready for our Students?

**THE READY SCHOOLS PROJECT
December 2004**



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The DC VOICE Board of Directors and Program Strategy Committee thank the over 50 volunteers who gave generously of their time to help design the **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT**, recruit schools to participate, attend training sessions, review checklist drafts, and go to schools to conduct the checklist. Their efforts brought this project to life. Community members continue to call DC VOICE to ask if there is still an opportunity to participate. There is. We will be contacting them and others as we continue into the next phases of this project, including parent and teacher interviews, and community briefings on the project findings.

Because school principals were assured that their responses were confidential, the names of the principals and schools participating in the project will not be identified. However, they know who they are and we thank them not only for the excellent information they provided, but also for their formidable efforts –often in the face of great obstacles – to provide the conditions their teachers need to teach and their students to learn.

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KEY TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT

CGCS: Council of the Great City Schools (www.cgcs.org). The Council issued a report about the District's schools in December, 2003: *Restoring Excellence to the District of Columbia Public Schools*. At the request of former Superintendent Paul Vance and former Interim Superintendent Elfreda Massie, a CGCS strategic team studied why student performance has not improved and recommended ways to boost it. Recommendations included the need for a comprehensive academic plan and the need for greater accountability at all levels. See Appendix II for more information. (<http://www.cgcs.org/pdfs/DCPSReportFinal.pdf>)

DCPS: District of Columbia Public Schools (www.k12.dc.us). At present, the 147 schools—101 elementary, 20 middle and junior, 20 high schools and 6 education centers—enroll over 60,000 students.

LSRT: Local School Restructuring Team. These teams perform governance functions in local schools. One of their responsibilities is to develop and approve the school's annual plan, including how it will spend its budget each year. The membership of LSRTs includes parents, teachers, support employees, school administration and community members.

Rulemaking: The legislative function of the **DC Board of Education**. The typical procedure includes voting on proposed language about an education function, posting that action in the DC Register so that it is available for the public to comment on it, considering any public comments made in changes to the proposed language, and then voting on it again to finalize it. At that point, the new rule becomes official policy and is added to Chapter 5 (the education section) of the DC Municipal Regulations. (www.k12.dc.us/dcps/boe/boerules.html)

Springboard: The College Board Springboard Program prepares students in grades 6-12 with the critical thinking, reasoning and writing skills they need to be successful in college. Initiated in eight DC high schools and several junior high schools this year, the Springboard program provides intensive math and English/language arts, professional development, curriculum, resources and assessments for secondary schools. (www.collegeboard.com/springboard/index.html)

SQT: Supports for Quality Teaching and Learning. DC VOICE has developed a framework of the conditions or supports schools need in order to provide high quality teaching and learning to benefit all students. The framework includes: Recruitment and Hiring, New Teacher Induction, Professional Development, School-level Administration, Teaching and Learning Conditions, Human Resources and Community Involvement. See Appendix I for more information.

Systemic Supports: The basic concept of supports for local schools used in this report includes both the school system and the community. Systemic supports refer to those that 1) are made available for all school levels and in all parts of the city, and 2) enable local schools to provide high-quality teaching, resulting in high achievement for all students. The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** particularly focused on systemic supports necessary for the optimum conditions for teaching and learning, and ensure that these supports are in place starting with the first day of school.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every year, parents and education advocates worry whether the District of Columbia schools will be ready for students when they return in the Fall. They ask questions like: *Will schools be staffed adequately? Will textbooks and materials be available? Will school buildings be in good repair?* And, of particular concern this year, *Will the barriers to instruction that were cited in the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) report, Restoring Excellence to the District of Columbia Public Schools be addressed?*

DC VOICE launched the **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** to gather and analyze data from a representative number of DC Public Schools (DCPS) to determine their degree of readiness. Forty-three DCPS principals were interviewed. They responded to a checklist that focused on whether schools had the supports needed to open fully-prepared to educate our children. The principals were interviewed between September 23 and October 23, 2004. They offered frank information on their local school's efforts and provided their thoughts on what supports from the school system and community they think are necessary for schools to function effectively, so that the optimum conditions for teaching and learning are in place on the first day of the school year. The next phase of the project will include interviews and discussion groups with parents and teachers to document their impressions of their school's degree of readiness, and to discuss actions for improved student achievement in our public schools.

Over 50 volunteers were involved in this research effort. For consistency, they participated in training for administering the checklist. Volunteers worked in teams of two and included interested citizens—parents, grandparents, community members and advocates—from all parts of the city.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** findings show that many DC school personnel work hard to ensure that schools open smoothly in the Fall. The findings suggest that progress is being made from past years; however, there is still much work to be done to ensure smoothly-functioning schools where quality teaching and learning can proceed without obstacle. The findings also show that Superintendent Dr. Clifford Janey's planned reform priorities—a focus on academic standards and improved management systems and facilities operations—are necessary and on target. Finally, the findings suggest appropriate solutions and actions that the school system and community can take to improve schooling for all our students.

PROJECT FINDINGS

School Staffing

A number of principals said the Human Resources Office (HR) was doing a much better job this year than in past years. As a group, they reported a range of issues impacting timely recruitment and hiring this Fall:

- 49% of the principals reported teacher hiring complete by the opening of school; the other 51% reported openings in multiple areas, with the greatest number in science, math, music, physical education, English as a Second Language, special education and early childhood education.
- 40% reported that vacancies occurred after the start of school, predominantly in the areas of early childhood and special education.
- 56% reported hiring delays for multiple reasons, with "Human Resources Office slow to process paperwork" and "Not informed early enough by staff" (of their intent to retire and other reasons for not returning) topping the list.

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- 72% said that all budgeted professional support positions were filled, and 74% said that custodial positions were completely filled by the opening of school.

New Teacher Support

A resolution endorsing a comprehensive new teacher or induction program was passed by the Board of Education on March 17, 2004, followed by an implementation plan submitted in June, 2004. The checklist addressed the issues of hiring, orientation and mentoring for new teachers (other induction issues include professional development and resources tailored to new teacher needs).

- 51% of the principals reported that all of their new teachers were hired in time to attend DCPS' new teacher orientation sessions in late August.
- 100% of them said their new teachers would receive mentoring support this year. However, 94% of the principals reported taking the responsibility for establishing their own mentoring programs, mostly by pairing more experienced teachers with new teachers. Only 17% also reported receiving school system-provided mentoring for new teachers.

Professional Development

The checklist questions on professional development focused on training for both the new reading series and Algebra I provision for all 9th graders (CGCS report recommendations), and on training for the College Board Springboard program in selected secondary schools.

- Training on the Houghton-Mifflin reading series was offered but not mandated, and teachers were given little advance notice about the training sessions.
- Most elementary school principals attended the three-day Houghton-Mifflin training in June.
- 50% of high school principals reported receiving the necessary resources to implement the new DCPS 9th Grade Algebra I requirement.
- Secondary schools participating in the College Board Springboard program this year reported that 100% of their teachers received training this Summer and early Fall.

Teaching and Learning Conditions

Both the Board of Education and DCPS administration told the community last Winter and Spring that they would put an emphasis on new reading and Algebra I programs this year. Accordingly, the checklist included questions about texts and supplies in these areas.

- 55% of the principals reported that the reading series books arrived before the first day of school, and 48% reported that the supplemental teaching materials arrived in time.
- 51% received all other required textbooks in time for the opening of school.
- 77% of the respondents reported having adequate instructional supplies.
- 65% reported functioning computers in all classrooms; 67% of them with Internet accessibility.

Safety and security

Most of the schools had safety and security equipment and personnel in place: 86% of the schools had their full allotment of security personnel in place at the opening of school.

Facilities

The state of the facilities ranked second after HR concerns as a major issue and constant worry for local schools. There was a serious lack of work on facilities accomplished this Summer, with stacks of back work orders to prove it.



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- 47% of the principals reported receiving central administration support on basic maintenance this Summer (e.g. grass cutting, painting).
- Only 19% reported that major buildings and grounds repairs were completed before school started.

Parent and Community Involvement

Checklist questions focused on the systemic efforts in place both from within and from outside the school system to boost parent and community support for schools.

- 67% of the principals reported school system supports such as local school restructuring team (LSRT) training and the availability of parent materials in several languages.
- 100% reported having community or business partners that provide a broad range of support for schools.

Overall Rating

Of particular note, all principals were asked to rate the systemic supports received to be ready for the opening of school. On a scale of 1 to 5 (low to high), the average response was 2.7.

PROJECT OBSERVATIONS

All stakeholders can play a role in finding solutions to the problems reported in the observations delineated below. Project observations are reported in two primary categories: specific observations that flow from the data and broader observations that flow from the whole project.

Observations based on project data

- **Some areas of DC Public Schools' administration have improved over the past years and, with good management, could continue to improve.** For example, even though the Human Resources office continues to receive mixed reviews, it seems to be doing a better job now than in the past.
- **One of the biggest obstacles to a smooth school opening was in the area of facilities.** Facilities issues provide great challenges to school principals, often consuming a great deal of time that takes them away from their role as instructional leaders in their schools.
- **Project findings were similar in all parts of the city.** This was true at all school levels and school locations.
- **Some of the findings point directly to solutions.** For example, in some cases it was clear that poor communication was the main problem. In others, management processes need the greatest attention. Some of the specifics surfaced in the findings can point the way to specific actions for change.
- **Other findings raised new questions and issues requiring further examination.** As with most research efforts, the findings generated additional questions. For example, more information is needed about the DCPS recruitment and hiring process.

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- **The Central administration-local school relationship needs to be examined.** Roles and responsibilities in some areas are unclear, and right now, it appears that many principals are making things work at their schools in spite of a lack of systemic supports.
- **A preoccupation with obtaining systemic supports distracts schools from their primary mission: To provide quality teaching for all students and enable them to achieve at high levels.** If we are to hold the principals directly accountable for student achievement, we must also give them the resources and necessary assistance to provide effective instructional leadership that can lead to greater student achievement.

General Observations

- **The data collection process was empowering for community members.** For some of the volunteers, this was their first opportunity to directly explore issues of school operations. For them and others, it will now be easier to go to their own neighborhood schools and both ask for information and offer to help improve the school.
- **The project generated a unique set of data on the systemic supports needed by local schools for the successful opening and continued operating of school.** The same checklist was used at all 43 principals interviews. Its student achievement focus was ensured through use of DC VOICE's Supports for Quality Teaching Framework and the Council of Great City Schools' report on DCPS.
- **There's a role for everyone to work together to improve our schools.** Our school system has a lot of work to do towards the goal of raising student achievement, and both the system and the superintendent will need broad community support to improve teaching and learning for all students.

As noted earlier, several of the project findings are in line with the reform priorities the superintendent has communicated so far in the areas of academic standards, management systems and facilities improvements. The findings provide support for specific reform efforts in those and other areas. DC VOICE stands ready to work with the superintendent in the next months and years to help make higher academic achievement a reality for all of our students. We invite the community to join DC VOICE's broad-based collaborative efforts to help ensure that every child in our schools receives a high-quality public education.

INTRODUCTION

DC VOICE believes that the public needs to be engaged, informed and organized to work effectively to help schools improve so that all students can achieve at high levels. We also believe that schools must have certain conditions in place in order to provide high-quality teaching and learning for all students. Schools must be supported to provide the educational settings students need to do well.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** focuses on the systemic supports available to school building leaders and their staffs for the successful opening and operationalization of schooling. In undertaking the project, information was gathered concerning the conditions that existed as DCPS schools welcomed children, staff and families for the 2004-2005 school year.

It was our hope in implementing this project that we, as a community, could get beyond our collective impressions and individual stories about school conditions and begin to collect hard data representative of the whole school district. Our goals in initiating the project were to:

- Raise public awareness about the supports schools need to do their job
- Empower parents and communities to ask critical questions about their schools
- Focus not only on present conditions, but also on finding solutions and initiating actions
- Provide helpful information for everyone, including the school system, the new superintendent, and the community at-large
- Generate community pressure for improvement and change

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The Board of Directors of DC VOICE initiated discussions regarding the project in the Fall of 2003. Increasingly concerned about the frequently changing leadership, shifting school policies and practices and the resulting impact on students, the Board directed and provided resources for the development of the **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT**. Under the leadership of the DC VOICE Program Strategy Committee and Project Working Group, the project checklist was developed and tested during the Summer. Preparations were made to conduct the checklist in September and October, 2004.

With the concurrence of DCPS, DC VOICE invited principals from across the city to participate in the project. Forty-three principals agreed to be interviewed. Their schools were representative of the system as follows:

- **School Levels** (29 elementary, 6 middle and junior high, and 8 high schools)
- **Geographic Diversity** (the number of schools included in each ward was based on that ward's percentage of the total number of schools in the district)
- **Student Ethnic and Racial Characteristics**
- **Student Achievement Levels** (based on the 2004 SAT 9 test results)
- **Socio-Economic Levels** (percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch)
- **Enrollment** (the 43 schools enroll 18,000 of the district's more than 60,000 students)

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

The checklist was based on the DC VOICE *Supports for Quality Teaching and Learning Framework* and on the recommendations offered in the Council of the Great City Schools Report *Restoring Excellence to the District of Columbia Public Schools*. Drawing from both resources, the checklist included questions about the systemic supports in place for the opening of school in six areas:

- ✓ **School Staffing**
- ✓ **New Teacher Support**
- ✓ **Professional Development**
- ✓ **Teaching and Learning Conditions**
- ✓ **Facilities**
- ✓ **Parent and Community Involvement**

The checklist also gave principals the opportunity to provide an overall rating of the systemic supports received and to suggest what should be in place for the opening of school next year.

This report details information provided by principals of the 43 schools in the six areas. Each section provides background including the relevant district policies in place and the checklist questions asked about the implementation of the policies; the basic findings; and a short discussion on the section topic.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Over the next weeks and months, DC VOICE will use the project findings in its continuing efforts to monitor both the supports schools need to ensure quality teaching and learning, and the recommendations of the CGCS report. As a follow-up to the interviews with principals, interviews and discussion groups will be held with teachers and parents to ensure that their voices are also heard on the same issues addressed by school principals.

DC VOICE will continue to work to:

- **Engage** more parents and community members in school improvement efforts;
- **Train** parents and community members to gather information on the progress of school and student improvement;
- **Use** the data provided as a baseline for future studies; and
- **Identify** specific issues and areas for community organizing and system change.

This report reflects information gathered at one point in time—the opening of school, Fall 2004. It is based on the responses of principals at 43 of the district’s 147 schools. Nevertheless, the findings provide not only a basis for other studies in the future, but, more importantly, timely information that the school system, the new superintendent of schools, and the community can use right now to improve all schools for all children in Washington, DC.

SCHOOL STAFFING

BACKGROUND

The teachers students interact with every day have a direct effect on their academic achievement. When a classroom lacks a permanent teacher, children start their first day of school with a substitute. Sometimes they do not get a regular teacher until months into the school year. There are several reasons why these situations occur in the DC Public Schools (DCPS). Voluntary teacher transfers can be made up until August 31, which is usually after the starting date for teachers and, in some years, after the starting date for students. Involuntary transfers have no limiting date and only require two weeks notice and consultation with the teacher and union building representative. Historically, teachers have been allowed to wait until late Spring to inform the school system they would not be returning in the Fall. An additional factor affecting timely hiring and school assignments this year was the position abolishment process DCPS initiated this Summer to help balance the FY 2004 budget.

“It is likely that **late hiring discourages** some individuals from entering teaching or leads them to take positions in other professions or industries that **make their job offers much earlier.**”
(Johnson et al.)

A study by the New Teacher Project (Levin & Quinn, 2003), found that, due to “successful” recruitment efforts, there is no shortage of qualified teachers applying to some urban school districts. However, because of late hiring, these applicants are dropping out of the pool and many of these districts are finding themselves short on teachers late into the Summer and at the beginning of the school year. This situation in the District of Columbia is confirmed by the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS): “...teacher hiring [in the District] is often not done until mid-August, resulting in many qualified candidates taking jobs in other school districts that could make earlier hiring decisions” (CGCS, 2003, page 47).

On March 11, 2004, the DC Board of Education took action to address this very issue: it passed a new policy that changed the date when teachers are required to declare their intent to leave the system from May 30 to April 15. The goal of this policy was to obtain an earlier and more accurate projection of the number and placement of teachers needed for the following year.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** checklist included a series of questions about timely hiring of school staff:

1. Was school staffing completed by the start of the school year?
2. If not, what were the most common vacancy areas?
3. What caused teacher hiring delays?
4. Did teaching vacancies occur after school started?
5. How did the Spring-Summer position abolishment process affect schools?

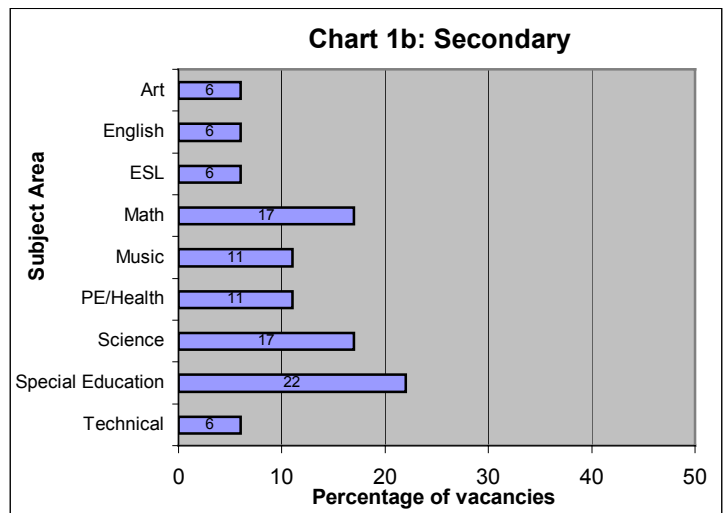
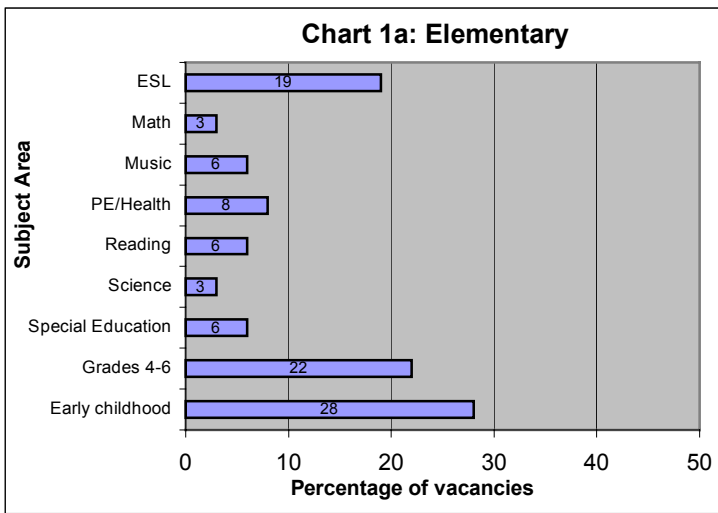
Findings are broken out by elementary and secondary school levels in Charts 1 through 5.

WAS ALL HIRING COMPLETE BY THE START OF THE SCHOOL YEAR?

FINDINGS

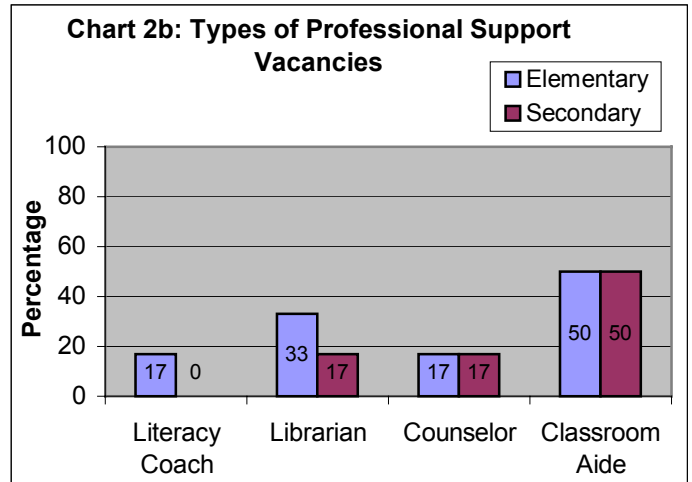
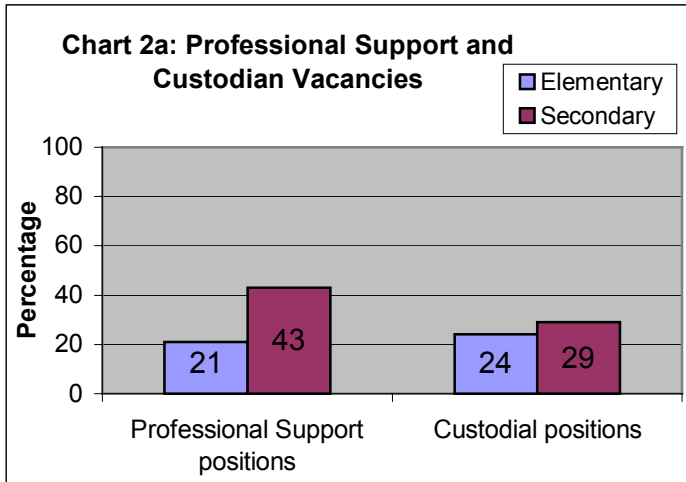
Across schools, school levels and city wards, 49% of the 43 participating schools had all teachers in place by August 27, 2004, the first day of school for teachers. There were 54 reported teacher vacancies in these 43 schools at the start of school. Chart 1 reports vacancies by school levels. In elementary schools, for example, several areas of need were reported, including English as a Second Language (ESL) and Pre-K through 6th grade classroom teachers. In the secondary schools sampled, special education teachers represented the largest number of vacancies, followed by vacancies in math and science.

*Chart 1
Percentage of teacher vacancies by subject area at the start of school*



In the 43 participating schools, professional support (e.g. literacy coaches, counselors, nurses, librarians and classroom aides) and custodial positions were more fully staffed than teaching positions by the start of school. Overall, 72% of the schools had budgeted professional support staff in place and 74% reported being fully staffed with custodians. With 79% of professional support positions filled, elementary schools fared better than secondary schools, at 57%. Fifty percent of the schools with vacancies reported classroom aide vacancies and 25% of them reported librarian vacancies. The 26% of schools lacking custodians ranged from one to two vacancies per school.

Chart 2
Percentage of professional support and custodian vacancies at the start of school



DISCUSSION

The principals interviewed had a lot to say about recruitment and hiring over the Summer. Several principals reported that the Human Resources Office (HR) is doing better than in previous years. For example, one principal reported being fully staffed before August 1, much earlier than in past years. Another principal reported getting more assistance in identifying a good pool of potential candidates. However, many schools expressed frustration with the hiring process even with a small number of vacancies. One principal commented that she only had to fill one vacancy, but that was done “not thanks to the system, but by the grace of God. Imagine if I’d had a lot of vacancies!”

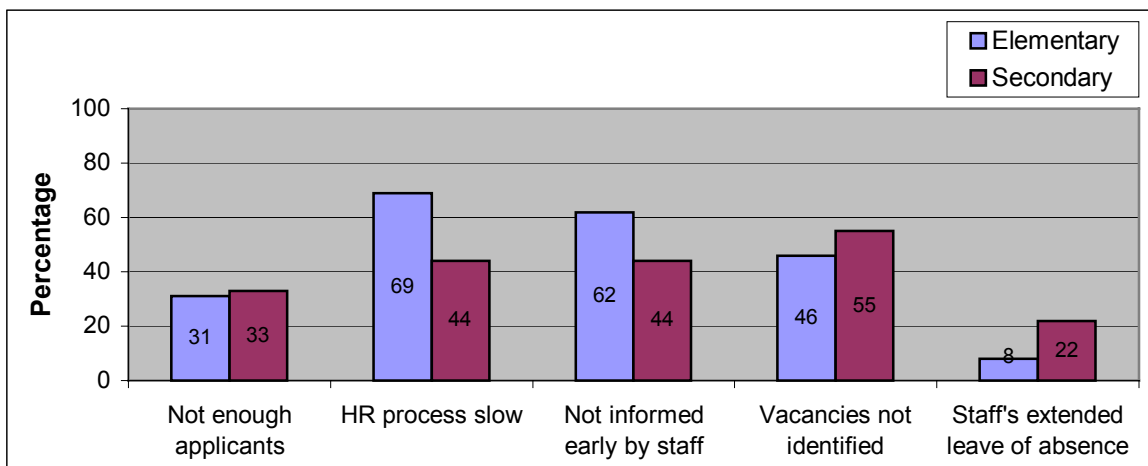
Principals sometimes found themselves in compromising positions due to HR. One principal described a situation involving the hiring and subsequent loss of a qualified teacher as a “complete debacle on the part of HR.” Basically, many feel that they “don’t trust HR” and that it is a “constant struggle with HR to ensure adequate staff are on board.” They want someone to “take a good look at HR—change its focus to school-centered instead of central office-centered.”

WHAT CAUSED TEACHER HIRING DELAYS?

FINDINGS

Sixty-four percent of secondary and 45% of elementary schools experienced hiring delays leading to vacancies at the start of school. There were many and varied reasons for these delays, with some minor differences by school level: elementary schools cited problems with HR more often, and secondary schools said teaching vacancies not identified in time was the most severe problem.

Chart 3
Percentage reporting reasons for hiring delays that lead to teacher vacancies



DISCUSSION

As previously mentioned, the slow hiring process is of major concern and frustration for DCPS principals. There are, however, several other issues that also hinder the hiring of teachers. One is ineffective communication from HR. Principals said they were not informed in a timely manner when teachers were hired, or when they resigned. Timely and accurate pay is also an issue. For example, one principal complained that “problems with payroll and human resources abound. New teachers have not yet received their paychecks.” This was particularly difficult in the case of one teacher who had a hard time getting his benefits in place last year as a new teacher. This was finally accomplished by the end of the year. During the Summer, his position was abolished, but he was re-hired as a classroom teacher. When he received his severance pay, his benefits were also abolished and now it appears he has to start from scratch to get the benefits back. Other principals gave similar examples, which made starting off the year a struggle for some teachers.

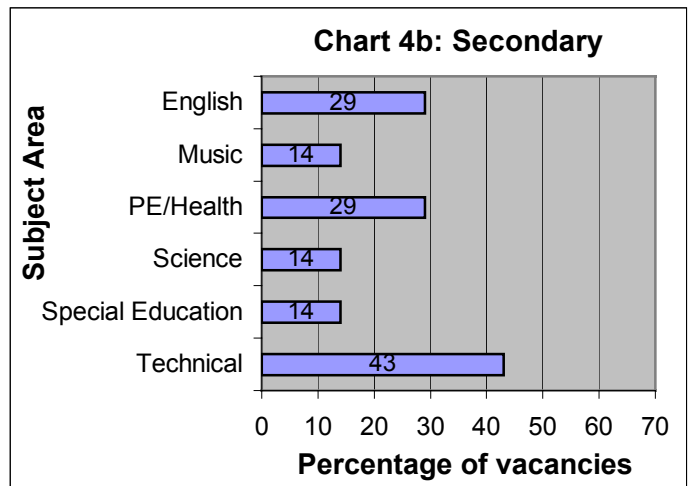
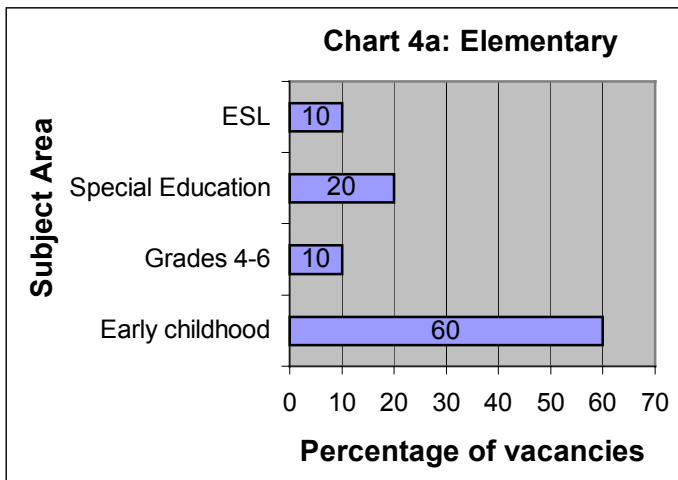
DID TEACHER VACANCIES OCCUR AFTER SCHOOL STARTED?

FINDINGS

Forty percent of the 43 school principals reported that teaching vacancies occurred after the start of school. These vacancies occurred most often in Pre-K through 3rd grade in elementary schools, with some vacancies also in special education. Secondary schools reported the most vacancies in technical courses (e.g. business, career education and computer applications), followed by English, PE/health, science, special education and music.

Chart 4

Percentage of teaching vacancies by subject area that occurred after the start of school



DISCUSSION

Though most of the issues related to teacher vacancies can be attributed to HR, there was one issue reported affecting teacher hiring and vacancies after the start of the school year that is not HR-related per se: Teachers can give notice to retire after the start of school, as allowed in the union contract. “Teachers retiring at the last minute” created hiring problems for principals and for the system. One principal had a teacher who “announced retirement two days after the start of school.” Principals are forced to hold on to spots, knowing that they will be open, but not exactly when. Consequently, principals and the school system can find themselves playing catch-up after the start of the school year.

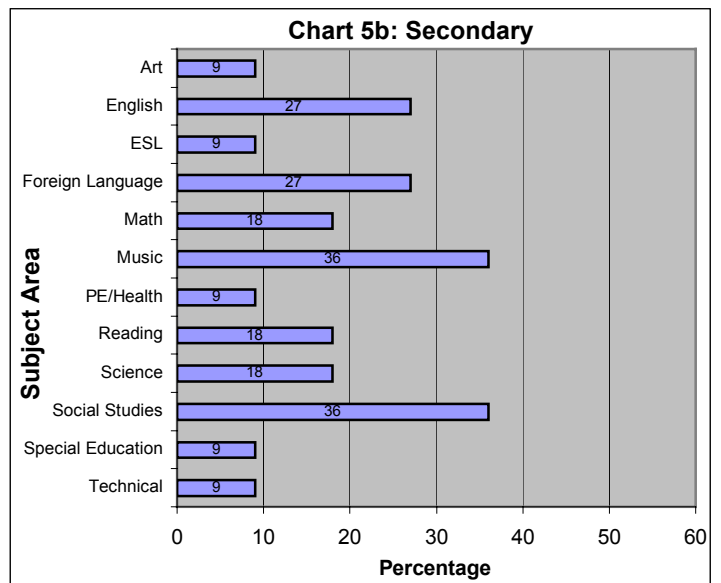
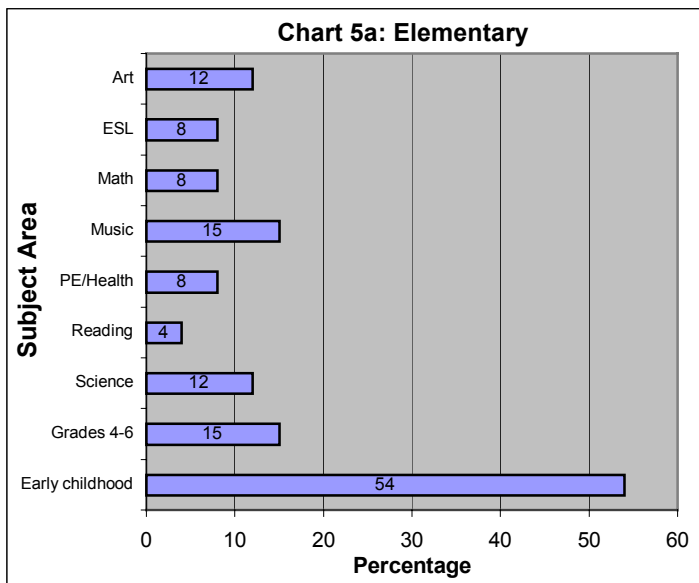
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HOW DID THE DCPS SPRING-SUMMER POSITION ABOLISHMENT PROCESS AFFECT SCHOOLS?

FINDINGS

Eighty-six percent of the school principals reported being impacted by the abolishment process. In elementary schools, the hardest hit were Pre-K–3rd grade classroom teachers at 54% of the participating schools. At the secondary level, the teaching positions most impacted were social studies, music, foreign language and English positions. Chart 5 shows grade and subject differences by school level.

*Chart 5
Subject areas affected by the Spring-Summer 2004 position abolishment process*



DISCUSSION

Principals found various ways of dealing with the abolishments they faced during the Spring and Summer. Some were able to drop the positions of retiring teachers so they “lost positions, not people.” Others removed non-instructional personnel such as custodians or “lost an assistant principal instead of cutting teachers.” Another principal said that “a librarian was lost as a choice instead of a classroom teacher.” Also “those not certified were the first to be abolished.” Other principals explained that the position abolishment process led them to have to combine classes and increase class sizes for other teachers.

NEW TEACHER SUPPORT

BACKGROUND

“Thirty percent of new teachers—up to 50 percent in urban schools—leave their jobs within three years. And 9 percent quit before even finishing their first year” (Black, 2001).

This is just one example of national research showing what happens when new teachers are not supported during their first three years with timely hiring, high-quality orientation, mentoring by veteran teachers, professional development tailored to new teacher needs, and special resources including enough time, materials, and administrative support.

In 2003, DC VOICE conducted local research and published *The New Teacher Survey* (Reynolds, 2003). According to the survey, 40% of new teachers reported that their recruitment experience was poor, 50% that their hiring experience was poor, and 45% that the placement process was poor. A majority of new teachers did not have mentors and of those that did, 45% rated their mentoring experience as poor. Over the past two years, DC VOICE and its collaborators have worked with DCPS to turn this situation around.

“The most serious long-term consequence of high teacher turnover is the erosion of teacher quality and student achievement.”

(The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future)

On March 17, 2004, the DC Board of Education passed Resolution R-04-09 adopting a new teacher induction policy, and also directed the superintendent to submit an implementation plan. An Induction Implementation Task Force was convened by the Office of Academic Services/Office of Teacher Affairs to work on the plan. The Task Force was co-chaired by DC VOICE and included community-based organizations, two high school principals, a parent, a teacher, a university faculty member, and DCPS Central Administration representatives. In June 2004, an implementation plan for the new teacher induction program was presented to the Board of Education for implementation during school year 2004-2005.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** checklist included these questions about teachers new to the school system:

1. How many new teachers were assigned to your school this year?
2. Were all of the new teachers hired by the beginning of DCPS' new teacher orientation?
3. Will all of the new teachers receive mentoring support?

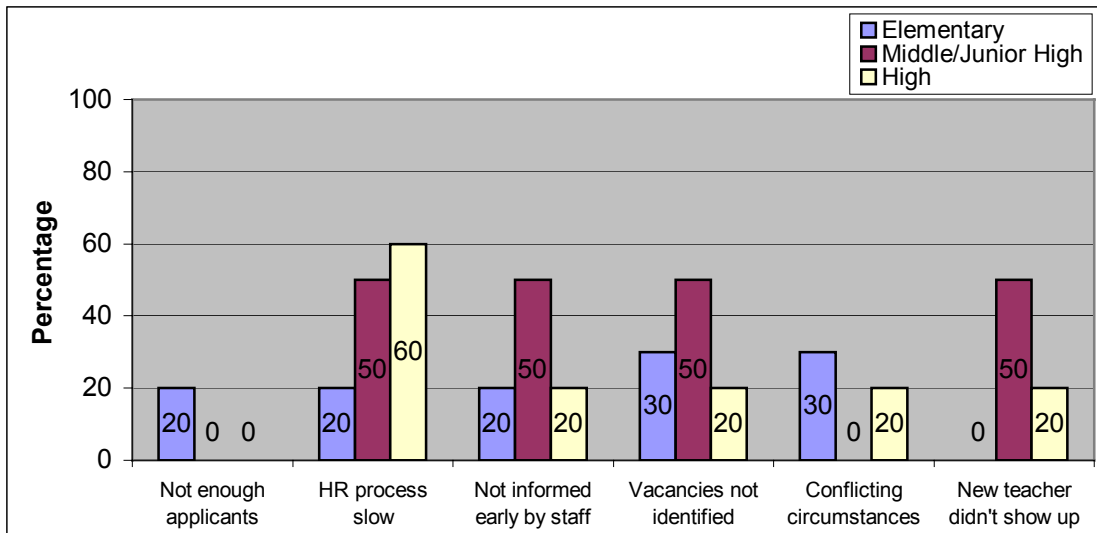
Findings, broken down by elementary, middle/junior high, and high school levels, are noted in Charts 6 and 7.

WERE ALL NEW TEACHERS HIRED BY THE BEGINNING OF DCPS' NEW TEACHER ORIENTATION?

FINDINGS

The 43 participating schools had 124 new teachers this Fall. However, only 57% of the new elementary teachers, 60% of the middle/junior high teachers and just 29% of the high school teachers were hired in time to attend the August 23-25, 2004 DCPS orientation for new teachers. The various reasons for hiring delays reported by the principals are presented by school level in Chart 6.

*Chart 6
Reasons for delays affecting the hiring of new teachers*



DISCUSSION

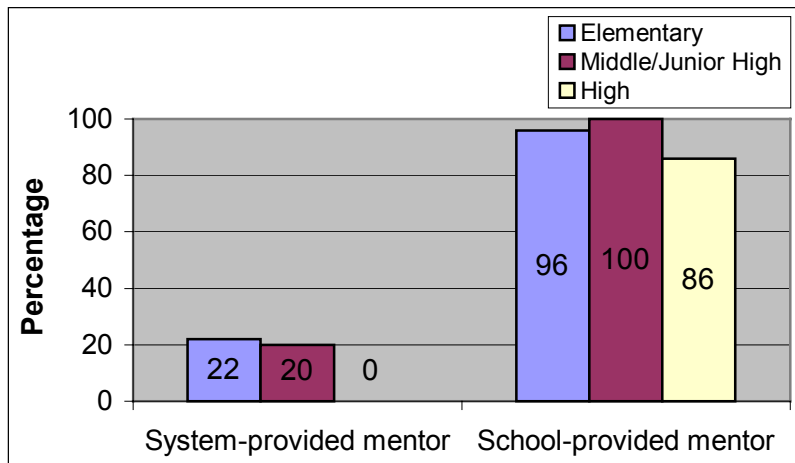
The recurring theme was the slow hiring process in place to get new teachers in the district's schools. Many principals complained that "DCPS had not hired in time" for their needs, and that the "DCPS application process is very inefficient," resulting in hiring delays and miscommunications concerning if and when teachers were hired for certain positions. One of the biggest issues was finger-printing. One teacher was hired on August 20th and the finger-printing process did not begin until August 27. This teacher was still not approved at the time of the interview in late September, and the school had placed substitutes in the classroom in the meantime. For most principals, the "process is just too slow" and "surrounding counties are faster." Some believe there should be "some sort of fast-tracking for the highly qualified" teachers.

WILL ALL OF THE NEW TEACHERS RECEIVE MENTORING SUPPORT?

FINDINGS

All of the principals interviewed said their new teachers would be provided mentoring support. However, 94% of the principals reported that they had to take responsibility themselves, at their building level, to establish their own mentoring program. They did this mostly by pairing new teachers with more experienced teachers who already had full teaching loads. Only 17% of the principals reported receiving some school system-provided mentoring support. As seen in Chart 7 below, the source of mentoring support varied by school level.

Chart 7
Sources of mentoring support for new teachers



DISCUSSION

As reported, at the present time, principals have to take mentoring into their own hands. Although all principals at all school levels reported having some kind of mentoring mechanism in place, their various comments reflect a range in the delivery of mentoring and the impact of budget:

- “The staff member we selected to also serve as a school-based mentor received a stipend in the past, but that is not the case this year.”
- “Our culture is that everyone is a mentor; each department chair is a mentor; mentors meet monthly with the new teacher committee.”
- “We plan on pulling a great teacher (i.e., who received awards in the past) out of the classroom in order to have him/her mentor four to five new people. Then, hopefully, we can hire an additional teacher to take the place of that teacher...but it’s a budget issue.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BACKGROUND

Research shows that continuous high quality professional development contributes to high quality teaching and increased student learning. The National Staff Development Council provides standards for school district professional development, covering the following areas: the development of professional learning communities, quality leadership and adequate resources, research and data-driven workshops, collaboration, equity, and family involvement.

What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future (1996) stressed the importance of collaborative professional development that offers opportunities to work on problems of practice directly related to students' learning. It is also important to form teacher networks that allow for in-depth inquiry, peer coaching, and sharing of knowledge so that real transformations of practice are possible.

“The district’s professional development program is a fractured series of “events” that are not continuous, in-depth, differentiated, or systemic. The training generally lacks quality or focus and presents little motivation for teachers to attend.”
(Council of the Great City Schools)

Implementation of these research-driven ideas requires a comprehensive and cohesive concept of professional development in the district and in the local schools. However, as the CGCS report noted, “The DC school system currently has a very disjointed professional development program that mirrors the incoherence of the instructional strategy. To be more effective, the district needs to centralize and standardize the professional development provided to teachers and organize the district’s training around

the implementation of the new comprehensive reading and math plan and the use of data” (CGCS, 2003, page 13). In its emphasis on the importance of data, the report said, “Professional development efforts for principals and teachers appear not to include much materials on the use of data to inform instruction.”

DCPS offered principal and teacher training in several areas this past Summer, particularly in support of the Houghton-Mifflin reading series in elementary schools, and the College Board Springboard program in selected secondary schools.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** checklist reflected both the CGCS recommendation stated above and follow-up statements made by the school system in the Spring of 2004. Principals were asked to respond to the following questions on professional development:

1. Did teachers receive training through DCPS this Summer?
2. Has reading series training been completed or scheduled for elementary teachers?
3. Did secondary schools receive the necessary resources (including training) to implement the new 9th grade Algebra I requirement?
4. Did secondary teachers receive College Board Springboard training this Summer?
5. Did principals participate in DCPS professional development activities this Summer?

STARTING OFF RIGHT

Findings related to both teacher and principal professional development are included in Charts 8 and 9.

DID TEACHERS RECEIVE TRAINING THROUGH DCPS THIS SUMMER?

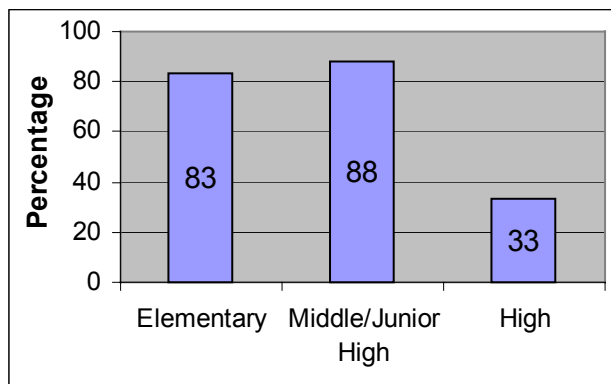
FINDINGS

Eighty-three percent of the elementary schools, 88% of the high schools, and just 33% of the middle/junior high schools reported that some of their teachers received training through the school system this Summer. Principals did not have information on exactly how many were trained.

The training areas reported were as follows:

- Advanced Placement
- Counseling/Behavior Management
- Houghton-Mifflin reading series
- Literacy
- Math
- Multicultural Education
- Peer Mediation
- Prentice Hall 6th grade reading series
- College Board Springboard secondary program
- Technology
- Voyager kindergarten – 3rd grade reading series

*Chart 8
Percentage of principals reporting teacher training through DCPS this Summer*



DISCUSSION

Analysis of the principal interviews suggests that information and knowledge about DCPS' Summer professional development offerings were, at best, uneven this year. This resulted in participation also being uneven for both administrators and teachers. First, each of the professional development areas involved different resources and mandates: the Houghton-Mifflin reading series training was offered but not mandated or compensated; the Springboard training provided stipends for participants; and elementary school principals were required to attend the Houghton-Mifflin training in June. Second, several different reading series are being used both within and across all elementary schools. Of the 29 elementary school principals interviewed, 93% are using Houghton-Mifflin, either for kindergarten through 5th grade, or just for grades 4 and 5 in the schools using Voyager in kindergarten through 3rd grade. Most elementary schools reported using Prentice-Hall for 6th grade students.

Another factor that negatively impacted participation in Summer professional development was the limited advance notice given to teachers. As one principal remarked: "My teachers had already made Summer plans they couldn't change by the time the notice was sent about the Houghton-Mifflin training." Another principal shook her head in frustration at the idea that teacher training on the new reading series would finally be accomplished in late October, nearly two months after the opening of school.

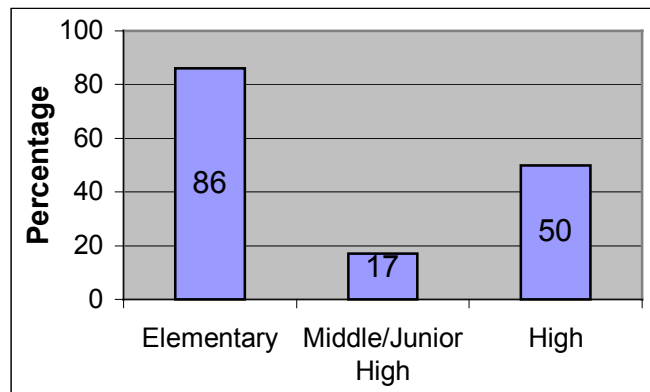
DID PRINCIPALS PARTICIPATE IN DCPS TRAINING THIS SUMMER?

FINDINGS

Eighty-six percent of elementary, 17% of middle/junior high, and 50% of high school principals reported receiving training through DCPS this Summer. Of the elementary school principals who received training, 92% reported attending the Houghton-Mifflin reading series training at the end of June. Of the secondary schools participating in the Springboard program, almost all principals reported attending training in August. The training areas mentioned were as follows:

- Houghton-Mifflin reading series
- Superintendent’s Summer conference (assessment/evaluation, staffing, facilities, etc.)
- Effective Schools Program
- Springboard secondary curriculum
- Voyager kindergarten – 3rd grade reading series

Chart 9
Percentage of principals receiving training through DCPS this Summer



DISCUSSION

Several principals reported that the Houghton-Mifflin training was good, but the timing was poor. The three-day training was scheduled just as school was ending and principals were trying to tie up loose ends and close out their schools, or were preparing for Summer school to begin. A few principals also reported that they had participated in effective professional development activities over the Summer that were sponsored by outside organizations.

TEACHING AND LEARNING CONDITIONS

BACKGROUND

Research shows that compensatory concerns are not the only issues that affect teachers' decisions to stay in the profession or to leave (Haser, 2003; Marlow, 1996; Munoz, 2001). These conditions include everything from manageable class sizes to sufficient textbooks and instructional materials, and physical environments that are safe and conducive to high-quality teaching and high student achievement. Furthermore, in order to provide high-quality teaching and learning, schools need not only equitable and appropriate resources, but resources which are aligned with appropriate curriculum and standards.

“Teachers rated their pre-service preparation, support from mentors and peers, control over instructional decisions, and access to adequate instructional materials as having the most influence on their ability to teach effectively.”
(Public Education Network)

The CGCS report states that “the DC school system currently allows each school to pursue almost any programs and strategies it wants to” (CGCS, 2003, page 13). In an effort to move towards a district-wide comprehensive reading and math plan, the Board of Education and the DCPS administration told the community last Winter and Spring that they would put an emphasis on new district-wide reading and Algebra I programs this year. On July 21, 2004, the Board of Education adopted resolution RO4-80, approving the purchase of a new Houghton-Mifflin reading series for elementary schools. On February 18, 2004 the Board passed proposed rulemaking that set Algebra I as a graduation requirement by 2008, and mandated that all students be enrolled in Algebra I by grade 9 or earlier.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** checklist included these questions:

1. Did the reading series books and supplemental teaching materials arrive before the start of school?
2. Did all required textbooks arrive in time?
3. Do schools have adequate instructional supplies?
4. Are there functional computers available in all classrooms, and what percentage have internet accessibility?
5. Were budgeted safety and security equipment in place?
6. Were budgeted safety and security personnel in place?

Findings regarding teaching and learning conditions are noted in Charts 10 through 13.

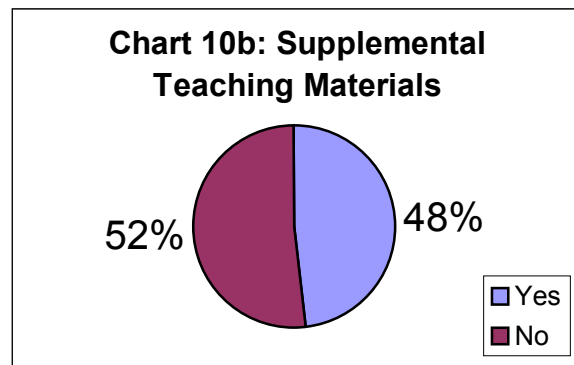
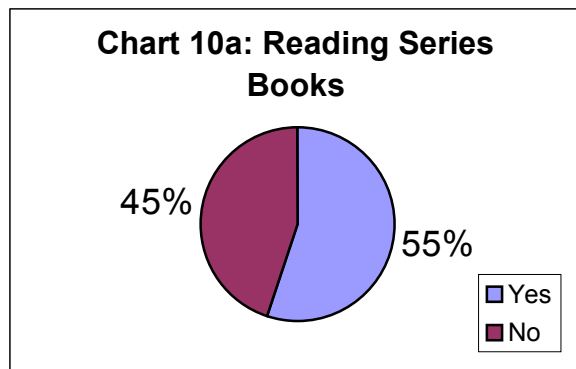
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DID THE READING SERIES BOOKS AND SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS ARRIVE BEFORE THE OPENING OF SCHOOL?

FINDINGS

Fifty-five percent of the elementary principals reported that the reading series books arrived before the first day of school and 48% reported that the supplemental teaching materials arrived in time.

*Chart 10
Percentage of schools receiving reading series books and supplemental teaching materials prior to the start of school*



DISCUSSION

The school system's performance in ordering and delivery of textbooks and supplies did not match the importance it placed on instituting new reading and Algebra I programs this year. As seen in Charts 10a and 10b, many schools did not have the resources they needed to implement these new programs successfully at the start of school. Principals reported that supplemental reading materials, particularly, were not only arriving in bits and pieces after school started, but also were sometimes inappropriate to their own schools' needs.

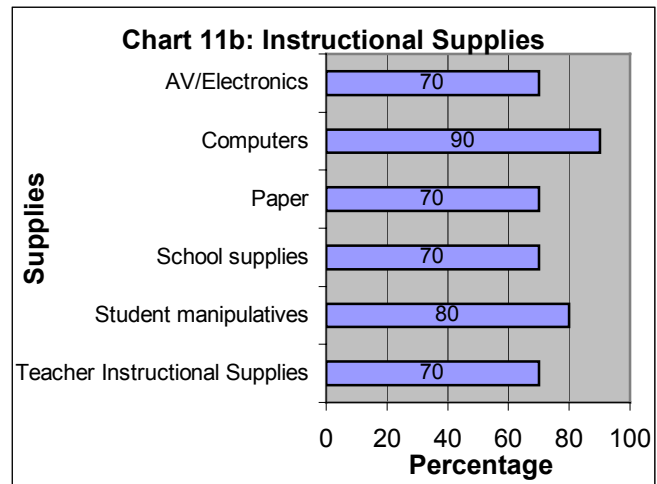
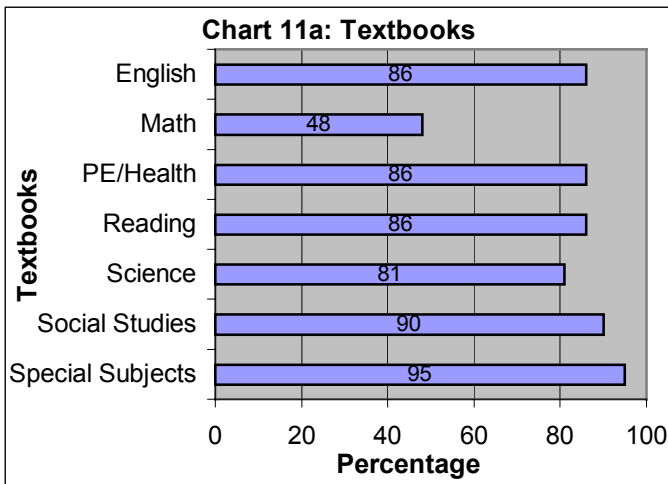
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DID ALL REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS ARRIVE ON TIME? DID SCHOOLS HAVE ADEQUATE INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPLIES?

FINDINGS

At all school levels, 51% of the other required textbooks arrived on time. Seventy-seven percent of the principals reported having adequate instructional supplies. The following charts show the percentage of textbooks and supplies in place for the opening of school.

*Chart 11
Percentage of other required textbooks and instructional supplies delivered on time*



DISCUSSION

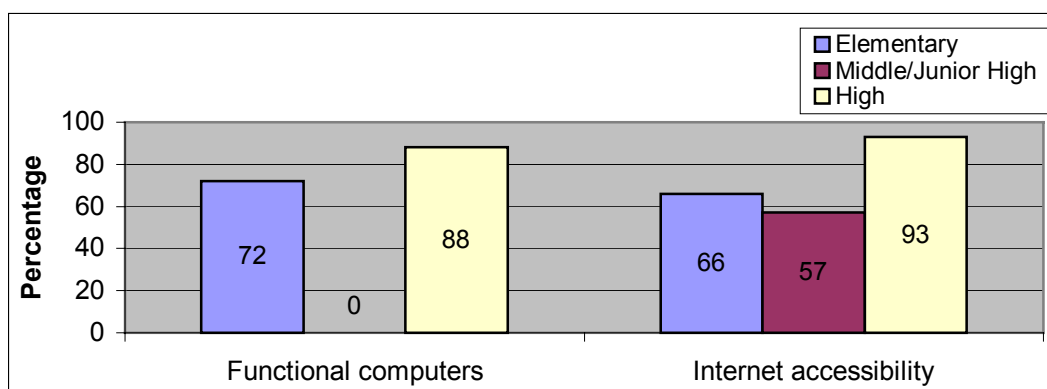
A few principals reported ordering books in the Spring that had not yet arrived. On the plus side, however, other principals reported that this was one of the first years they had all textbooks in place for the opening of school. One principal applauded the leadership of the division's assistant superintendent, who facilitated getting orders in early and making contingency plans in case supplies were not on hand when needed.

ARE THERE FUNCTIONAL COMPUTERS IN ALL CLASSROOMS? WHAT PERCENTAGE HAVE INTERNET ACCESS?

FINDINGS

Across all schools, sixty-five percent of the school principals reported functioning computers in all classrooms, 67% of them with Internet accessibility. As Chart 12 shows, the percentages of both functioning computers and Internet accessibility are highest at the high school level.

*Chart 12
Percentage of schools with functional computers in all classrooms and Internet accessibility*



DISCUSSION

The technology situation varies from school to school: some have all the computer technology they need, others are lacking what they need. Many factors were reported as contributors to the lack of technology in DCPS schools, including the physical structure of the school, difficulties in getting technicians from the system to work on computer problems, or getting administrative passwords needed to make computers functional. Other principals reported that their schools were well-equipped with computers because of community support from businesses, local law firms and parents. As one principal reported, “the computer situation is very good...this has been possible because there is a cadre of parents that keeps the machines up and running, coming in on Saturdays to load software, etc.”

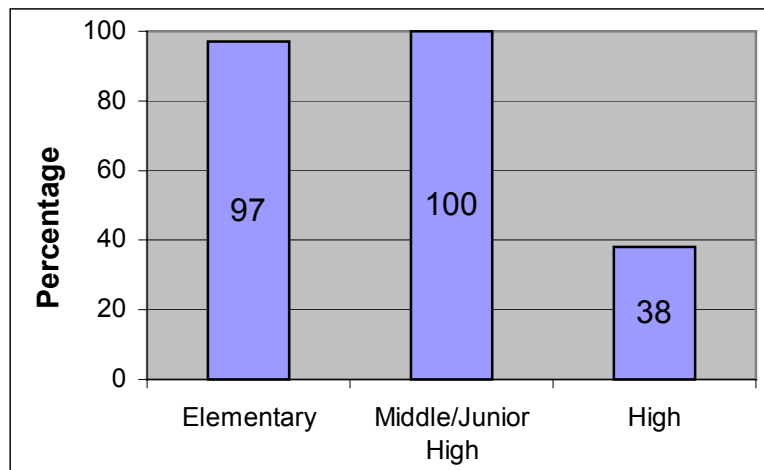
Computer set-ups vary from school to school as well. Some schools have computers in labs and others have chosen to spread them out among classrooms, particularly when there is lack of space for a lab. Schools with labs have usually successfully networked the computers.

WERE BUDGETED SAFETY AND SECURITY EQUIPMENT AND PERSONNEL IN PLACE FOR THE OPENING OF SCHOOL?

FINDINGS

Most of the schools had safety and security equipment and personnel in place for the opening of school. While 86% overall had their full complement of security personnel, the break-out by school levels showed that 97% of elementary, 100% of middle/junior high, and just 38% of high schools had all personnel in place at the opening of school.

*Chart 13
Percentage of schools with budgeted security personnel in place
for the opening of school*



DISCUSSION

Principals commented on the need to have more highly-skilled personnel in place, and some schools, particularly high schools, needed more personnel. One high school had a police officer assigned, but the officer arrived three days after the opening of school. As with teacher hiring and other hiring delays, there were comments about the lack of coordination of clearance processes such as finger-printing and tuberculosis tests.

FACILITIES

BACKGROUND

According to a study conducted for the 21st Century School Fund (Schneider, 2003), school facilities have a direct effect on teaching and learning. Poor facilities conditions drive approximately 1/3 of DC teachers to either change schools or quit teaching altogether at some point during their careers. The 2000 DCPS Master Facilities Plan identified most DC schools to be in need of full modernization or building replacement, with 70% in poor physical condition. In 2000, the average age of the school buildings was 65 years. All of the schools operating in 2000 were constructed prior to the modern uses of computer and internet technologies. In 2003, the Plan was revised, calling for the full modernization and right-sizing (i.e., aligning the amount of building space to the number of students enrolled) of each school over a ten-year period.

“Decisions about school facilities, once translated into brick-and-mortar, affect the daily performance of the generations of teachers and students who use them.”
(Schneider)

Several budget issues are causing the present maintenance and repair problems. Faced with overall budget shortfalls, DCPS has typically cut maintenance spending, leaving funding at about half the industry standard. In addition, the number of custodians budgeted for each school is linked to the number of students at each school, rather than the number of square feet of the facility, which leaves custodians with more space than they can adequately support. The Master Facilities Plan itself has serious flaws, including a one-size-fits-all approach to facilities management and misleading budget and finance plans.

Today there are 147 operating elementary, middle/junior high and high schools in the District of Columbia public school system. Nearly all of them are still in need of full modernization or replacement. Nevertheless, building maintenance continues to be seriously under-funded in the school system budget.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** checklist included these questions:

1. Was basic maintenance (e.g. system-provided cleaning and painting) carried out this Summer?
2. Were promised repairs (e.g. system-provided major repairs such as roofs and new playgrounds) completed during the Summer?
3. Do schools have sufficient custodial supplies?

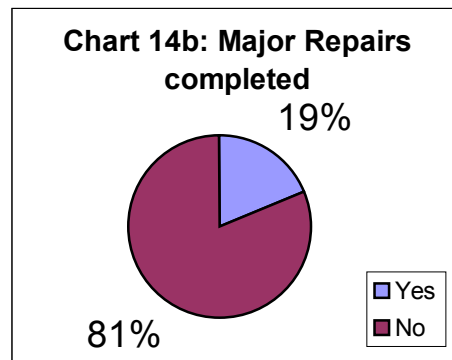
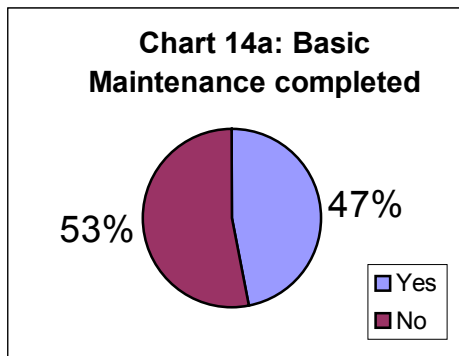
Findings regarding maintenance, repairs and custodial supplies are noted in Charts 14 and 15.

WERE PROMISED MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS COMPLETED DURING THE 2004 SUMMER? DO SCHOOLS HAVE SUFFICIENT CUSTODIAL SUPPLIES?

FINDINGS

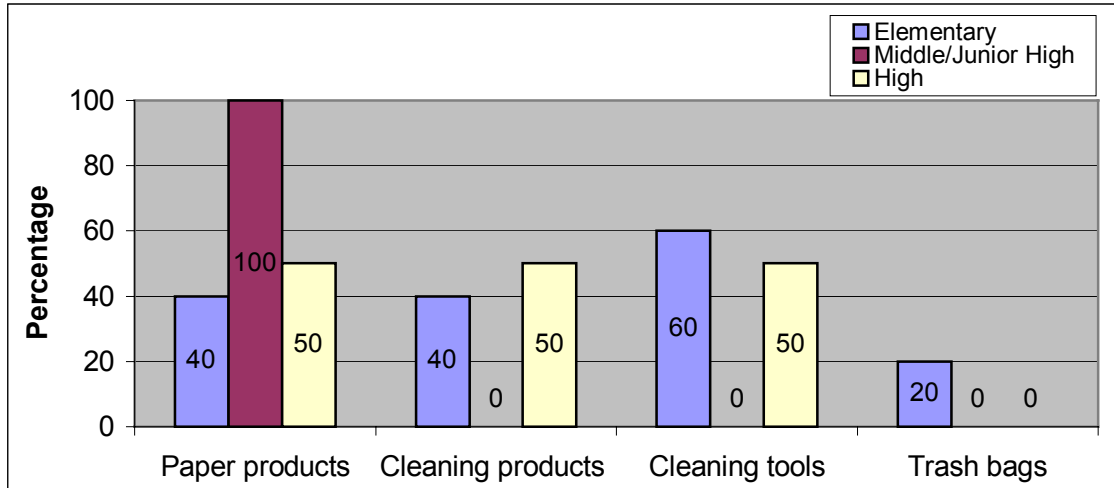
Forty-seven percent of the schools reported receiving central school system support on basic maintenance this Summer, but only 19% reported that the major building and grounds repairs needed were completed before school opened.

Chart 14
Percentage of schools receiving promised maintenance and major repairs during the Summer



The principals reported that there was great variance in the amount and quality of custodial supplies available for the opening of school. For example, 83% of elementary, 67% of middle/junior high and 75% of high school principals interviewed said they had sufficient custodial supplies for the opening of school. They cited shortages in paper products, cleaning products and tools, and basic supplies like trash bags.

Chart 15
Types of custodial supplies needed at the start of school



DISCUSSION

There was some confusion on which maintenance responsibilities belong to the central facilities management office and which belong to the local school. There seemed to be a system contract for grass cutting in place, but principals reported having to make numerous phone calls to get the grass cutting done.

Across all 43 principal interviews, facilities ranked second after HR as a major issue and constant worry for the local schools. The principals said that throughout the 2004 Summer, there was a serious lack of facilities repair work accomplished. This was evidenced by stacks of unfulfilled work orders, some going back to the 2002-2003 school year. The following comments offer evidence of the extent of principals' concerns:

- “Facilities remain our biggest problem. There are issues that need immediate and definitive attention and we don’t get a lot of feedback from that office.”
- “When it rains outside, it literally rains inside.”
- “Basic repairs just do not get done. Repeatedly, people come out to assess a problem, say they will return and nothing happens.”

Another principal reported that the school only got its HVAC controls adjusted because of repeated calls from angry parents when students had to be evacuated from a classroom that routinely rose in temperature to over 100 degrees. Bottom line, said one principal, “...the facilities department needs to be more effective and keep its promises.”

PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

BACKGROUND

This section of the checklist focused on systemic supports provided from both inside and outside the school system. This approach was based on the belief that schools cannot, by themselves, provide everything students need to perform well academically. The community must be involved. Efforts to boost parent and community support for schools and ultimately to boost student achievement will be more productive if they are broad-based and include schools and communities working in partnership.

“...for schools to provide the **quality education** our children deserve, **families, schools, and communities must be involved** as purposeful **partners** in the education process.”
(The Tellin' Stories Project)

System support for parent and community involvement has shifted in the past few years. In 2002, the Office of Parent Affairs was disbanded, and Parent Partnership Officers were placed in each of the five divisions; one for each of the three elementary divisions, and one each for the middle/junior high and high school divisions. In 2003, a community-based task force worked on a new parent involvement policy which was passed by the Board of Education in the Fall of 2003. The federal No Child Left Behind legislation contains numerous provisions regarding parent rights and responsibilities, including parent involvement policies at both the district and school levels,

school-parent compacts, and school report cards readily available to the public.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** checklist included these questions:

1. What system supports do schools receive to help with parent and community involvement?
2. Do schools have the personnel/resources available to communicate with special populations?
3. Do schools have community or business partners this year and how do they contribute to the successful opening of school?

Findings regarding system supports to help with parent and community involvement and community and business partners are noted on Charts 16 and 17.

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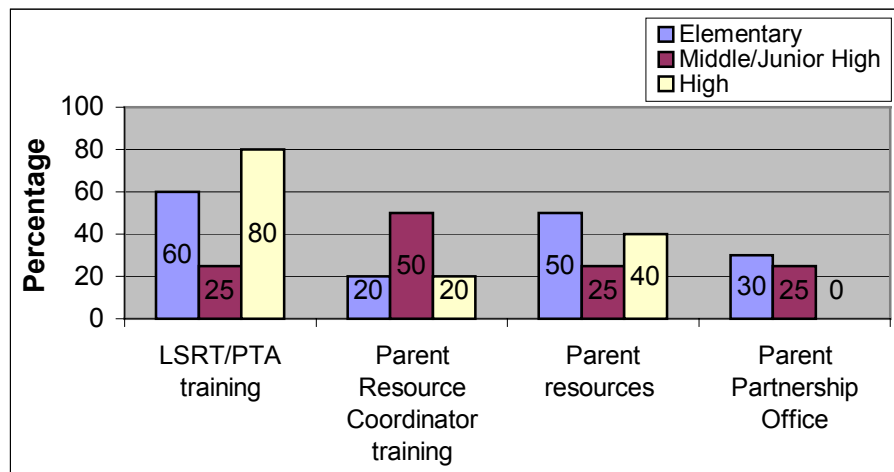
WHAT SYSTEM SUPPORTS DO SCHOOLS RECEIVE TO HELP WITH PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT?

FINDINGS

Sixty-seven percent of all the schools across all levels reported system supports such as Local School Restructuring Team (LSRT) training, Parent Resource Coordinator training, the availability of parent materials in several languages, and support provided by the Parent Partnership Officers. The findings are broken down by school level in the chart below.

Chart 16

Types of system supports in place to help increase parent and community involvement



DISCUSSION

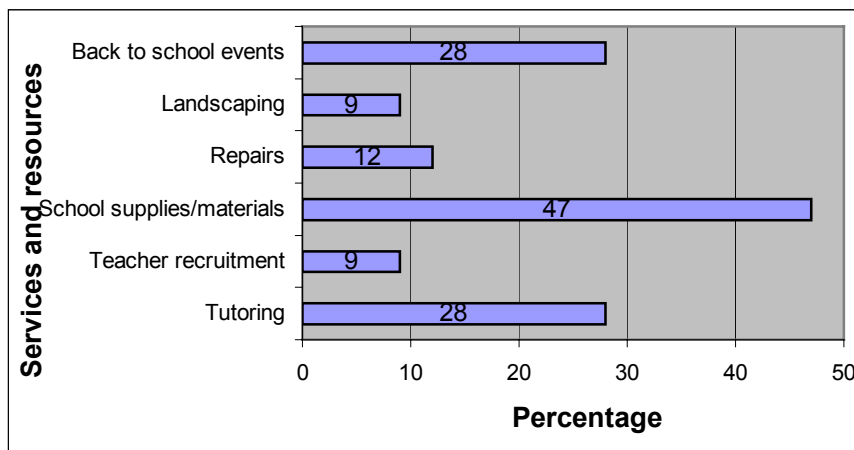
As shown in Chart 16, the responses to questions on system supports to help with parent and community involvement were very uneven across school levels. **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** interview teams also noted great inconsistencies among schools. On LSRT training, for example, even though some principals said their teams had completed training recently, others said they were unaware of any training offered in the past year. Several principals noted the need for “more parental engagement to demand reform.” One said: “We haven’t had a working PTA for years. We don’t have the parental backing to support changes. [Parents] can get things done.” Another school reported that on its own and without any system support, it had fixed up its parent center, organized and funded a parent mentor workshop.

WHAT COMMUNITY AND BUSINESS PARTNERS DO SCHOOLS HAVE?

FINDINGS

One hundred percent of the school principals—across schools, school levels and city wards—reported having community or business partners. As seen in Chart 17, these partners provide various resources and services, including helping with back-to-school events, supplying supplies and materials, and providing tutoring for students to boost academic achievement.

*Chart 17
Types of services and resources supplied to schools by community and business partners*



DISCUSSION

Even though 100% of principals reported having community and business partnerships, they varied widely in both quantity and quality, and also in the formality of the partnership arrangement. Some principals reported local religious organizations playing a large and helpful partnership role, and another principal said “we have very good business partners.” Chart 17 shows that most partnership activities focused on the whole school year; just a few of their support activities focused specifically on the opening of school.

SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The CGCS report emphasizes both the necessity for the DCPS central administration to improve the supports provided to schools, and also the difficulty of changing its operations: “There will be skepticism...from school level staff—and others outside the school system—that the central office can redefine itself to support principals and teachers at the building level. The skepticism is well deserved. The central office has not been an effective instrument of progress or support to school staff. Many would argue that it is the problem and not the solution. Others would argue, however, that the central office and its leadership in the DC schools have no option but to lead change” (CGCS, 2003, page 65).

The summary section of the **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** checklist gave principals the opportunity to provide an overall rating on the systemic supports schools received to be ready for the opening of school and to add any additional information about the supports they need to provide quality teaching and learning for all students. It also provided the opportunity to look ahead and suggest what they would like to have in place in the future.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** checklist included these questions:

1. What overall rating, on a scale of 1 to 5 (low to high), would you give for the systemic supports provided to schools?
2. Looking ahead, what should be in place for the opening of school next year?

Findings regarding the principals’ rating for systemic supports and their recommendations for the opening of school next year are noted in Charts 18 and 19.

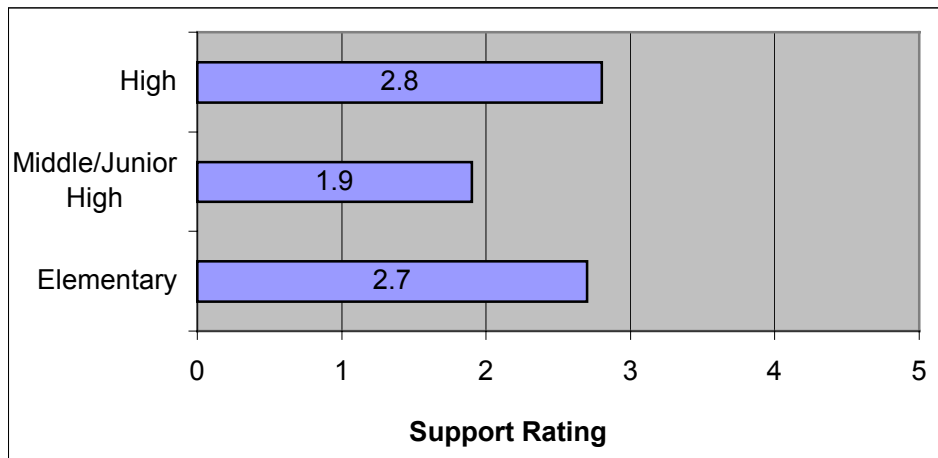
“Principals, teachers and parents figure out their own unique ways to fix or manage their own problems. If schools are doing this well without enough support, just imagine how good they would be if they had all the supports and resources they need!”
(Ready Schools Project Volunteer)

WHAT OVERALL RATING WAS GIVEN FOR THE SYSTEMIC SUPPORTS PROVIDED TO SCHOOLS?

FINDINGS

All principals were asked to rate the systemic supports received to be ready for the opening of school. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 meaning little support and 5 signifying all necessary supports were in place), the average response was 2.7. The following chart presents the ratings by school level.

Chart 18
Principals' overall rating of systemic supports for the opening of school



DISCUSSION

Several principals commented on the difficulty of assigning an overall rating. One principal gave this typical answer: “It varies by area. For example, this year I can give a 5 rating for HR, but only a 1 for facilities, and a 2 for procurement, etc.” Another principal said, “The public must know that I spend 75% of my time on management, and it’s a shame [because] I’ve so little time for instructional leadership.” Other principals commented as follows:

- “Principals get no real support from the system and are asked to perform miracles.”
- “I’m really hands-on for all [texts and supplies] ordering, which takes time away from other principal duties.”
- “I know how the system works and stay ahead of the game; I have good relationships at 825 North Capitol and am down there all the time.”
- After spending a day trying to get school-level personnel paid, a principal said “you can’t run a school if you have to spend your day on that.”

STARTING OFF RIGHT

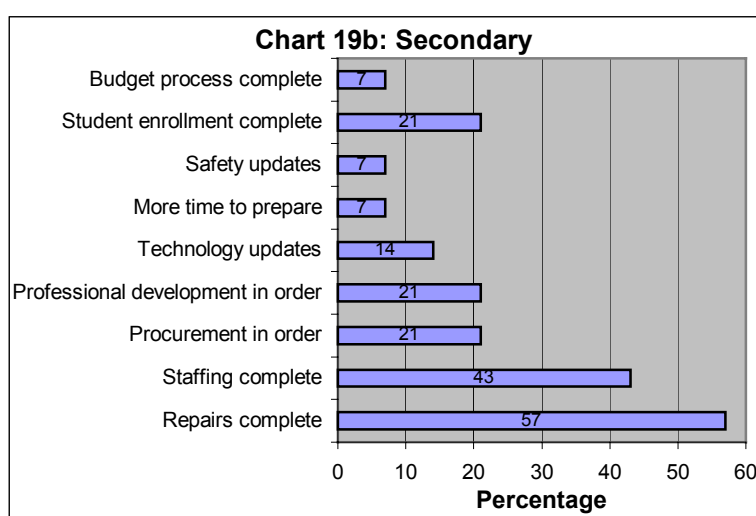
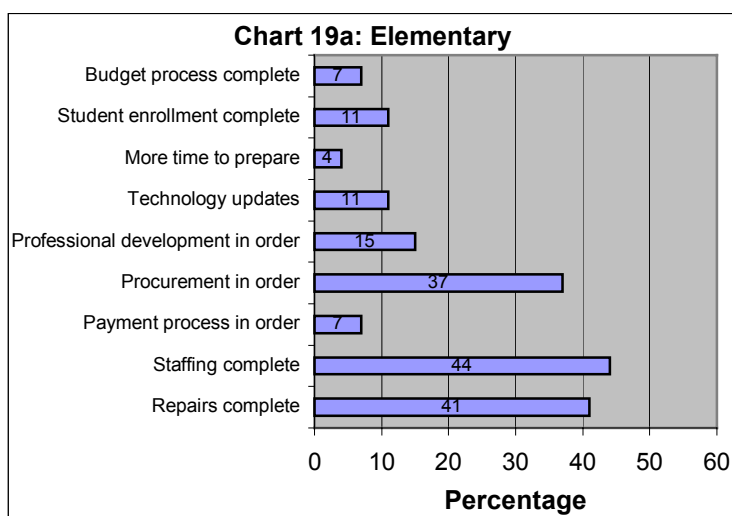
The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** interview teams sensed that the frustrations underlying comments like these led many principals to give a low rating to the systemic supports they received for the opening of school this year. Their comments also show that they spend an incredible amount of time physically down at central administration offices trying to get the supports they need.

WHAT SHOULD BE IN PLACE FOR THE OPENING OF SCHOOL NEXT YEAR?

FINDINGS

The 43 school principals interviewed had many suggestions for the systemic supports that should be in place for the opening of school next year, ranging from completed repairs to timely professional development. The suggestions made are presented by elementary and secondary school level in the following charts.

Chart 19
Principals' recommendations for the opening of school next year



DISCUSSION

As Charts 19a and 19b show, two areas—facilities reports and school staffing—far outstrip all the other areas principals would like to see improved for the opening of school next year. Many of their suggestions can be turned into strategies for creating a more efficient and effective school system. The Observations section of this report presents ideas for change that build directly on the findings of this report, including the suggestions made by the 43 principals interviewed.

READY SCHOOLS PROJECT FINAL OBSERVATIONS

As a collaborative of education activists, DC VOICE is committed to ensuring that every child in Washington, DC has access to and is offered a high quality public education. Since its founding, DC VOICE has been attentive to the changing conditions of public education, Pre-K-12, throughout the community of DC Public Schools. Over time, the community has encountered challenges and disappointments as the school system has attempted but failed to fully implement the promised visions for successful school improvement for teachers and learners.

The **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** report provides documentation of the current state of systemic supports that a representative group of DC schools had in place for the opening of school this Fall. Forty-three school principals were interviewed, and over 50 volunteers were involved in the project. The principal interviews and resulting report complete the first phase of the project. The next phase will involve interviews and discussion groups with parents and teachers to capture their voices on the same issues affecting the opening of school 2004.

All stakeholders can play a role in finding solutions to the problems reported in the observations delineated below. Project observations are reported in two primary categories: specific observations that flow from the data and broader observations that flow from the whole project.

OBSERVATIONS BASED ON PROJECT DATA

- **Some areas of DC Public Schools' administration and management have improved over the past years and, with good management, could continue to improve.** The Human Resources Office continues to receive mixed reviews. While there were many complaints about the office, some principals reported that the office seems to be doing a better job than in the past. HR could do a much better job in recruitment, selection, placement and actual hiring if several current policies were changed that appear to hamper hiring in a timely manner.

Findings in other areas such as safety and security equipment and the delivery of and support for technology in the classrooms, most specifically computers, showed fairly high performance at present as well as improvement over the past.

- **One of the biggest obstacles to a smooth school opening was in the area of facilities.** Principals across the city reported their frustration with the lack of system attention to the condition and needs of both buildings and grounds. Data suggest that there are ongoing issues with both communication about and the implementation of repair work. These issues are compounded by a lack of funding. Because of the many breakdowns in delivery of support for facilities repair and management, principals find their own individual "fixes" for their building, which often leads to greater disconnections between central offices and schools. A more comprehensive and transparent understanding of facilities management and repair processes is needed. Facilities issues provide great challenges to the principals, often consuming a great deal of time, taking them away from their role as instructional leaders in their schools.

STARTING OFF RIGHT

- **Project findings were similar in all parts of the city.** This was true, no matter what school level or school location. Arguably, this could lead to the application of common solutions benefiting schools in all parts of the city. On the other hand, schools do have differences among them and trying to use one-size-fits-all solutions can lead to new problems.
- **Some of the findings point directly to solutions.** For example, in some cases it was clear that poor communication was the main problem. In others, management processes need improvement. Under facilities, for example, it was unclear just what basic maintenance would be provided from the school system; in professional development, not only did the reading series training provided to principals seem to stop short of holding them responsible for follow-up training with their own teachers, but the Summer training offered separately to teachers was scheduled with little notice and was not mandated. These specific kinds of findings can help point the way to specific actions for change.
- **Other findings raised new questions and issues requiring further examination.** As with most research efforts, the findings generated additional questions. For example, while many school districts around the country suffer from a shortage of teacher applicants, DCPS had approximately five times as many applicants as were needed this year. However, there still seemed to be a shortage of teachers at the beginning of the school year. In addition, information is needed on the extent to which DC faces teacher shortages in specific subject areas as is true in other parts of the country.
- **The central administration-local school relationship needs to be examined.** Roles and responsibilities in some areas are unclear, and right now it appears that many principals are making things work at their schools in spite of the lack of systemic supports needed. Simultaneously, schools must deal with system mandates that not only do not provide the supports needed, but get in the way of progress. This is not to say that the system should be doing everything for principals. However, as long as the central administration/local school relationship is unclear, accountability for results at all levels will be unclear.
- **A preoccupation with obtaining systemic supports distracts schools from their primary mission: To provide quality teaching for all students and enable them to achieve at high levels.** Principals described in graphic detail how much time they spend on management issues and on personally securing the supports they need to open school in the Fall and operate it efficiently all year long. This takes them away from providing instructional leadership in general, but also specifically in areas such as new teacher support and professional development. If we are to hold the principals directly accountable for student achievement, we must also provide them with the time, resources and necessary assistance to be effective instructional leaders.

GENERAL PROJECT OBSERVATIONS

- **The data collection process was empowering for community members.** This was truly a collaborative action research effort. The over 50 volunteers included parents and grandparents, community members and community-based organizations, and representatives of national groups working locally on education issues. They were involved at every step of the project: recruiting schools, developing the checklist and field testing it, participating in training, conducting the interviews, and reviewing the final report. Some of the volunteers had participated in something like this before, but for others this was the first time they had practical experience directly exploring issues of school operations. For them, it will now be easier to go to their own neighborhood schools and both ask for information and offer to help improve the school.
- **The project generated a unique set of data on the systemic supports needed by local schools for the successful opening and continued operating of school.** A strong focus on the supports needed for high student achievement was ensured through the use of DC VOICE's Supports for Quality Teaching Framework and the Council of the Great City School's report on DCPS to frame the project checklist questions. Reliable data collection was ensured through recruiting and training over 50 community volunteers to conduct the same checklist in a consistent manner with all 43 school principals. The schools reflected the whole school district on a set of indicators, including geographic location, school levels, student performance, socio-economic levels, and student enrollment. It was our intent in implementing this project that we, as a community, could get beyond our collective impressions and individual stories about school conditions and begin to collect hard data representative of the whole school district.
- **There's a role for everyone to work together to improve our schools.** The first phase of the **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** included interested citizens—parents, grandparents, community members and advocates—from all parts of the city. Initial project goals included moving beyond the volunteers involved to include the broader community to:
 - Raise **public awareness** about the supports schools need to do their job
 - Empower **parents and communities** to ask critical questions about their schools
 - Focus, not only on present **conditions**, but also on finding **solutions** and initiating **actions**
 - Provide helpful **information for everyone**, including the school system, the new superintendent, and the community at-large
 - Generate **broad-based community pressure** for improvement and change.

As noted before, several of the project findings are in line with the superintendent's reform priorities: they correlate with those he has communicated in the areas of academic standards, management systems and facilities improvements. The findings provide support for specific reform efforts in those as well as other areas. DC VOICE stands ready to work with the superintendent in the next months and years to help make higher academic achievement a reality for all of our students.

STARTING OFF RIGHT

This project is just the beginning. In the next few weeks and months, DC VOICE will use the **READY SCHOOLS PROJECT** findings to reach out to other community members, to other organizations, and to public officials. Further analysis of the findings and future follow-up studies will shed more light on the systemic supports schools need to provide quality teaching that ensures high student achievement. Our school system still has a lot of work to do towards that goal, and both the school system and the superintendent will need community support to improve teaching and learning for all students. We invite the community to join DC VOICE's broad-based collaborative efforts to help ensure that every child in Washington, D.C. receives a high-quality public education.



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A Framework to Benefit Student Learning: Supports for Quality Teaching (SQT)



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RESTORING EXCELLENCE TO THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS **Council of the Great City Schools, December 2003**

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS*

- 1. Develop a COMPREHENSIVE PLAN for improving student achievement**
The district's leadership will need to charge the superintendent with drafting a concrete, five-year instructional plan for improving the academic performance of the district's schools – and commit to sustaining reform over the long haul.
- 2. Set MEASURABLE GOALS for math and reading improvement**
The district needs to define measurable goals and academic targets in reading and math that set high expectations. They must be tied to *No Child Left Behind* and include explicit goals for attendance, graduation rates, dropouts, etc.
- 3. Hold PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE for reaching the goals**
An accountability system that works across the system would tie the evaluation of central office staff and principals to the district goals. It would also let principals interview, select and hire their own staff and shape their own budgets.
- 4. Standardize DISTRICT-WIDE CURRICULUM and materials**
The district needs to end the present practice of allowing multiple, uncoordinated programs at local schools. It needs to centralize instructional decisions about curriculum, professional development, and teaching and learning materials.
- 5. Organize DISTRICT-WIDE TEACHER TRAINING**
The present disjointed professional development program needs to be standardized to train all teachers on improving math and reading instruction, for example. Concurrent local-school-developed training should focus mostly on individual school needs.
- 6. MONITOR CLASSROOMS for reading and math progress**
The present approach that allows each school to pursue almost any program or strategy it wants has not been effective. Instruction needs to become more standardized and then be monitored by principals, teachers, and content specialists.
- 7. USE DATA to monitor progress**
DCPS needs to use the results of student assessments to help improve instruction, track how students are doing over the course of the school year, and help shape, inform, and drive decisions about instruction and staff training.
- 8. Begin reforms at BOTH ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOL LEVELS**
Reforms may start with elementary schools, but high schools should not be ignored. The district needs to focus on upgrading its early childhood program, and overhauling all elementary literacy efforts; high school courses need to become more rigorous.
- 9. Focus on the LOWEST PERFORMING SCHOOLS**
The district's Transformation School program needs to be overhauled, including setting criteria by which schools can enter and exit the process, and creating a new set of incentives for encouraging the district's best teachers to teach in these schools.

* Excerpted from the report, pages 11 – 15

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS DESCRIBE BENEFITS OF CONDUCTING COMMUNITY ACTION RESEARCH: *THE READY SCHOOLS PROJECT*

September-October, 2004

The comments are presented in alphabetical order.

Marissa Bachman, 21st Century School Fund

I learned a lot about DC school readiness through both the training/planning process, as well as the actual live interview. The training process was so collaborative and inclusive that I felt really connected to the project, which had a large impact on how I felt during the actual interview. It was a wonderful experience to be on the front lines during the interviews. Just seeing the principals during a typical workday gave me a greater understanding of the tremendous work they are responsible for, and an appreciation for the many things we as community stakeholders can do to ensure that they have all the supports they need in place. This was a great experience! Thanks!

Alisa Gilmore, Organizer, Youth Education Alliance

Our participation in the Ready Schools Project confirmed many things that we speculated to be true about our public high schools. It showed us that principals are not always equipped with all the resources that they need especially when it comes to facilities and maintenance. The principals were very open and it was a good experience to meet with the leadership in schools that we hope to expand to in the near future. It was a wonderful opportunity to walk the halls of high schools and be received by students. We appreciate DC VOICE for allowing us to participate in the Ready Schools Project.

Jack Koczela, DCPS Parent, PROP 100

It was both a pleasure and honor to participate in the DC VOICE Ready Schools Project as one of many volunteers. I was able to participate as a recorder for two interviews, one in an elementary school and one in a high school, each in a different geographic corner of our city. Meeting two outstanding principals enhanced the experience and reassured me that, at least at those two schools, our children and our educational assets are in good hands, even if our system could not meet all of their needs and expectations for the opening of school.

Another benefit of participating as a Ready Schools volunteer was to have worked with three school board candidates who were also volunteering their time on behalf of DC VOICE. This kind of effort on their part demonstrates the kind of commitment everyone likes to see in our elected officials.

Glenda Partee, Charter School Parent, American Youth Policy Forum, DC VOICE Board Member

Participation in the Ready Schools Project offered a rare opportunity for me— citizen, parent and consumer of public education in the District—to improve my understanding of how school administrators prepare for the opening of schools. It provided first-hand insights into the relationships and respective responsibilities of local school administrators and DCPS central units, such as academic achievement, human resources, facilities, maintenance and procurement. Like a relay team, the successful opening of school is a coordinated venture. Success depends on members completing their task in a timely manner and making a smooth pass to the next member. Both central and local school administrations must plan and perform flawlessly; otherwise, our children get shortchanged.

The Ready Schools Project was a wonderful way for members of the community to get to know our schools and our school system better. Through the information gained, we are more knowledgeable and better positioned to hold our school leaders accountable for the success of our young people.

STARTING OFF RIGHT

Pocahontas Outlaw, Community Activist, President, DC ACORN

Living in DC for all these years and being an ACORN member for almost 6 years now, it has been evident that the community must come together if we are to bring about change in our DC Public Schools. Participating in the Ready Schools Project is one of many steps that we as ACORN community members are taking to insure that the voices of parents and guardians will be heard in DCPS.

Sonora Simpson, DCPS Parent

I wanted to let your readers know what an invaluable experience I had as a Ready Schools Volunteer. I strongly recommend this positive, personal development experience to any one should you continue this project next year. The comprehensive training with peers is very worthwhile in and of itself. Having that time to explore the issues with colleagues in a non-stress provoking environment (not to speak of the goodies to soothe the nerves in the early morning!), and knowing that a seasoned veteran will always be with you on your first visits to schools allays any doubts of a person's adequacy, no matter your background or experience. You were very thoughtful of time constraints and that is most important. Many times volunteers are treated as though they were employees who must march to an agency's drummer. That may account for the many reluctant volunteers that organizations complain about.

No one can actually get a feel for the frustration that many school principals express until you are face to face with them and hear their horror stories, appreciate the many unpaid hours they provide and express solutions to problems if only some one would listen. I believe the project will identify a number of readily achievable solutions to problems as well as point out the readiness of schools in September. Some recent actions by the new administration point to a willingness to address gross mismanagement quickly. I believe that they will also remove some of the impediments to readiness also. Thanks for allowing me to participate.

Richard Tagle, DC VOICE Board Member, Public Education Network

Being part of the Ready Schools Project team opened my eyes to a number of realities in our public schools. The myths of incompetent administrators, lackadaisical staff, and unstructured school days were shattered. Instead, I was face to face with school principals who are not only dedicated education leaders, but also stern and focused in how they manage their schools, maintain the safety and security of the students and staff, and most of all, strategic in their approach to the learning process. Despite the challenges they face dealing with central office, these principals take the initiative to address emerging problems and deal with issues head on. They have much to say about how we, as a school district and as a community, can improve systems of getting our public schools ready for our kids – getting high quality staff in place, securing all supplies and materials necessary, ensuring that the buildings are sound and safe, and that everyone is geared towards effective teaching, deep learning, and high student achievement. If everyone was only this well focused in their work, our public schools, and our school district for that matter, would be ready year-round.

Doris Watkins, Charter School Parent, Tellin' Stories Project

The DC VOICE Ready Schools Project was an interesting experience. While volunteering for the project, my team interviewed principals, and I think we really got the "meat" in information from them. We got more than we expected. I appreciated the kinds of information we were able to get from principals. Since we initially planned to also interview parents and teachers, I'm glad the project will now be talking with them to be sure their voices are heard about their experiences with the opening of school.

Whitney Watriss, DCPS Parent

I was glad to be doing something practical for our schools. It was wonderful to see what a dynamic principal and hard working staff can do to raise resources for a school in a poor neighborhood.



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ABOUT DC VOICE

DC VOICE is a collaborative of education activists committed to ensuring every child in Washington, DC a high quality public education. We believe that key to achieving this is an engaged and informed public that both supports public education and holds schools and the city accountable for the education of our youth. DC VOICE is a Local Education Fund and part of the Public Education Network (PEN), the nation's largest network of independent, community-based school-reform organizations. The Ford Foundation *Collaborating for Educational Reform Initiative* and the Public Education Network *Teacher Quality Initiative* provide multi-year core support, with additional recent support from the Fannie Mae Foundation.
