

Findings on the DCPS School Consolidation Effort

Part of the

2008 DC VOICE Ready Schools Project

The consolidation of the D.C. Public Schools (DCPS), also sometimes referred to as “school reorganization,” is part of a process that has been ongoing roughly since the February 2006 announcement—in the DCPS Master Education Plan—of the need to “right size the system” by closing schools with declining enrollments. In 2006, DCPS closed 5 schools and created 9 consolidated or receiving schools.

DC VOICE, whose goal has been to remedy the serious and persistent problems with the availability, reliability and credibility of information about elementary and secondary education in the District of Columbia, has, since its March 2003 report entitled “Information Please,” pursued work to involve a broad community constituency in generating, and ultimately engaging in progressive policy advocacy around, data on the D.C. Public Schools.

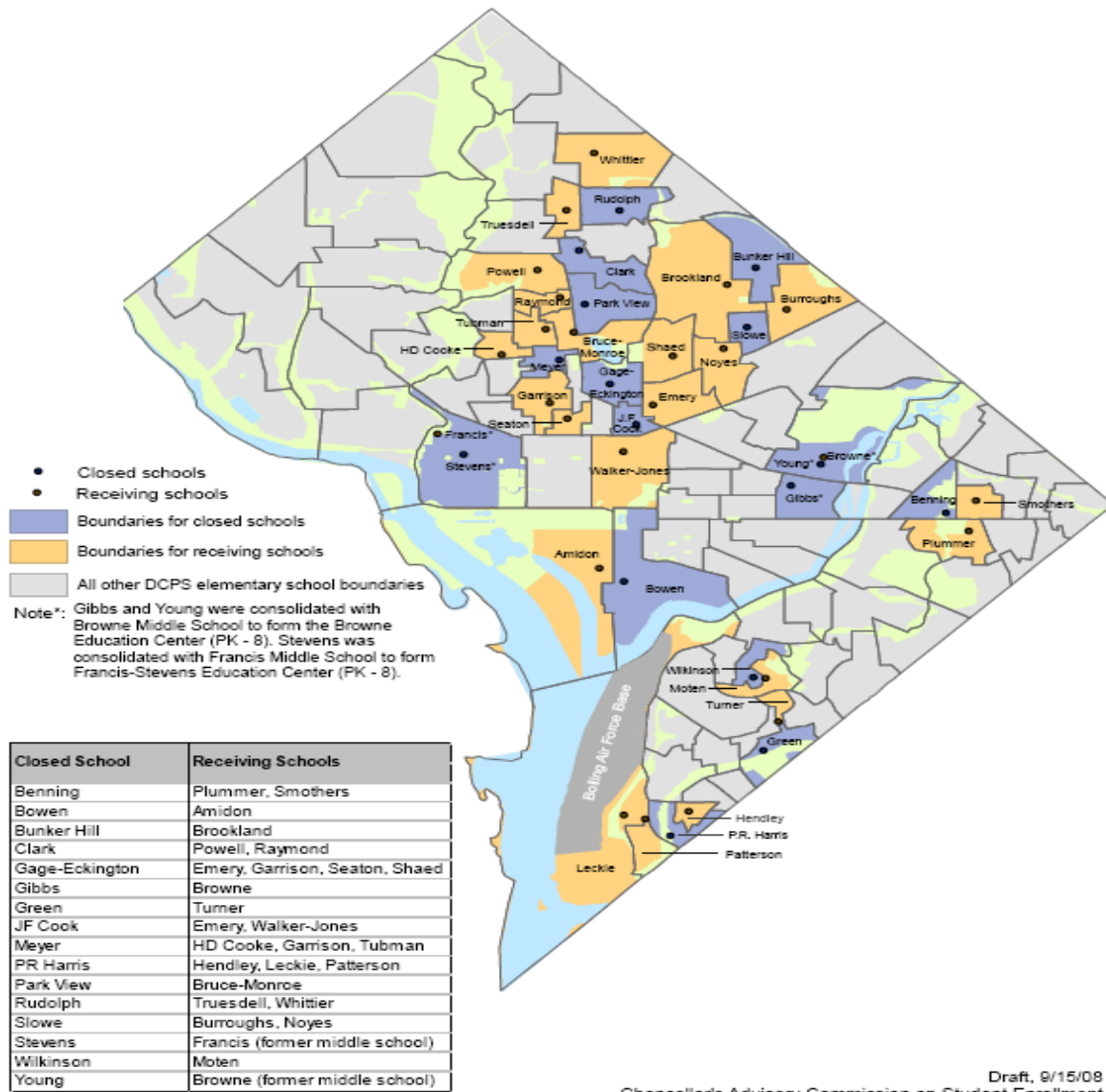
In DC VOICE’s November 2006 report on the school consolidation process, produced in consultation with parents, principals and teachers, three major issues stood out in the first wave of school consolidations: adequate time for consolidation; improved management in the consolidated schools; and effective communications. DC VOICE found that, while facilities improvements from school consolidation generally received high marks, educational opportunities expanded unevenly. Though good principals made the difference between effective and ineffective transition processes, the shortage of time in the closure and consolidation process impacted the effectiveness of the transition, comprehensive planning was insufficient, and good communication and information sharing were often lacking.



In February 2008, DCPS definitively announced the impending closure of 23 additional schools, bringing the total number of school closures under the consolidation plan to 28. According to an article published in *The Washington Post* following the announcement, closing the 23 additional schools would result in the relocation of about 5,300 students, slightly more than 10 percent of the DCPS system's enrollment. DCPS Chancellor Michelle Rhee estimated that the closures will save the system \$23 million, which she said will be used to improve academics and boost staffing at the remaining schools (Haynes, 2008).

(The image below is courtesy of the 21st Century School Fund, Brookings and Urban Institute)

Closed Elementary and Receiving Schools and Boundaries, 2008-2009



Draft, 9/15/08
Chancellor's Advisory Commission on Student Enrollment

DCPS issued a “Comprehensive Staffing Model” for the schools it was consolidating. The plan would provide academic support staff, wellness support staff, enrichment staff and administrative support to each newly consolidated school. To “provide additional academic support to students,” according to the model, staff in each consolidated school should include a media center specialist, guidance counselors, literacy coach, math coach and an assistant principal. To meet enrichment staff goals, each consolidated school should have an art teacher, music teacher, PE teacher, and health/life skills teacher. To “ensure schools have a team of practitioners to help students and families with socio-emotional needs,” wellness support staff should include a social worker, psychologist, nurse, in-school suspension facilitator and dean of students. Finally, to “free up principals’ time to focus on instruction,” administrative support in each school should include a business manager, IT support, registrar and custodian foreman (DCPS, 2008, p.7).

The 2008 edition of the DC VOICE survey on consolidated schools investigated the adequacy of staffing, the efficient transfer of student records, the level and kind of community involvement in the transition process, the adequacy of systemic supports for the opening of the consolidated schools, the condition of new or repaired facilities, the adequacy of school space, and the foreseeable overall benefits and detriments of the consolidation process.

Process for School Consolidation

The primary criteria DCPS used for selecting schools for consolidation involved enrollment declines in excess of median system enrollment declines during the 5 years through 2006, and total 2006 enrollment levels less than the DCPS median enrollment. This translated into five-year enrollment declines of 21 percent for elementary schools, 29 percent for middle schools, 14 percent for comprehensive senior high schools and 7 percent for specialty senior high schools. The additional selection standard, median 2006 enrollment, was 272 for elementary schools (PS-5), 334 for middle or junior high schools (before moving 9th graders to high schools), and 825 for senior high schools. The primary criteria generated 33 elementary schools and 7 middle or junior high schools as candidates for closure, co-location or consolidation (DCPS, 2008, p. 9).

With a second set of selection criteria, DCPS took a second look at the initial list. These criteria included possible geographical isolation of the school community; projections of growth in student population based on demographic and housing trends; neighborhood and school-level enrollment patterns and the likely capacities of receiving schools; the physical capacity characteristics of likely receiving schools; safety, pedestrian friendliness and accessibility to major public transportation;



systemic growth potential as a result of the structural changes; and characteristics of individual school programs (DCPS, 2008, p. 9).

Background on DC VOICE Consolidated Schools Survey

Looked at through the lens of an education transformation process, DC VOICE's 2006 Consolidated Schools report on that year's closing of five schools made six recommendations for the future:

1. Make decisions early
2. Create community task forces to guide the transition
3. Select strong local school principals
4. Develop new student enrollment strategies
5. Formalize the transfer of programs
6. Improve communications.

DC VOICE is happy to observe that DCPS took actions that addressed three of these recommendations in 2008:

- ◆ **Advance Notice**—In light of our suggestion that DCPS make school consolidation decisions as early as possible, we were delighted to see that DCPS issued and posted to its website a tentative list of proposed school consolidations in November of 2007 for changes that were to be definitively revised the following February and then implemented this fall. DCPS sent letters to parents of children attending the closing schools to notify them of the impending consolidations well in advance of the school closures. Altogether, this marked a considerable improvement over the rushed timing of the prior transition process.
- ◆ **Transition Taskforce**—Given our recommendation that DCPS create a school and community taskforce to guide the transition, we were pleased to observe that DCPS acknowledged the importance of involving the community through transition teams, and 97 percent of respondent principals in our 2008 Ready Schools Project survey have indicated that transition teams were in place this summer.
- ◆ **Student Enrollment Strategies**— Following upon our suggestion that DCPS develop new student enrollment strategies, we were pleased to see that DCPS moved up its enrollment date and was more aggressive in working to get students to enroll in the newly consolidated schools, including distributing a flyer to students and parents concerning early enrollment.

To an extent, DC VOICE's concerns in 2006 were also reflected in the November 2007 report produced by the 21st Century School Fund, Brookings Institution, the D.C. Government and the Urban Institute entitled "Reorganizing DCPS Schools to Support Comprehensive Educational

Programs and Services.” In addition to a policy-sensitive argument and plan for school consolidation, that report emphasized the importance of “community engagement and implementation planning.” According to the report’s recommendation, “Once the city has developed a preliminary list of schools for reorganization, there must be a process whereby local community members can constructively engage and advise the District on its plans and decisions. We believe strongly that such an outreach effort will improve the quality of the city’s plan” (21st Century School Fund, 2007).

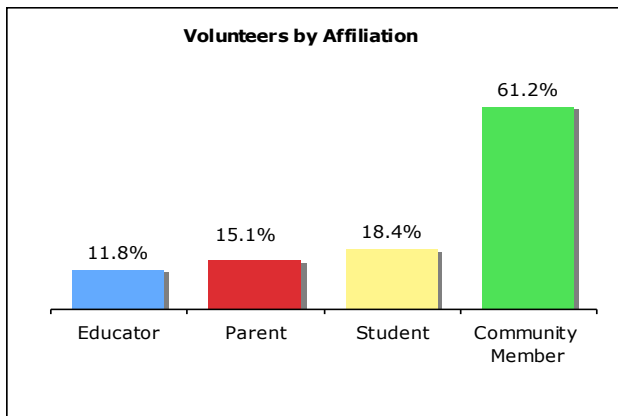
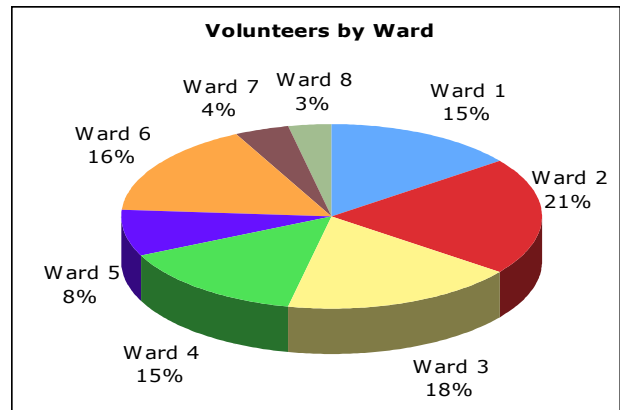
Following DCPS’s November 2007 announcement of tentative plans to close an additional 23 schools, DC VOICE and its partners produced a “Campaign for Good Information” booklet on DCPS’s proposed School Reorganization Plan. The booklet detailed the lack of adequate community information about and engagement concerning the proposed school closings, the intended new academic programs, the reorganization plan’s implications for concurrent school restructurings mandated by the Federal No Child Left Behind legislation, and the budget impacts of the combined actions in light of the announcement of DCPS’s significant budget shortfalls in the early part of the 2007 fiscal year (DC VOICE, 2007).

The 2008 Consolidated Schools Survey

Process: This year, as in 2006, DC VOICE included a supplemental list of questions in its Ready Schools Project directed to principals at the 28 consolidated schools resulting from this year’s closing of 23 schools. A map showing where those schools are located is included on page 1.

DC VOICE always asks a set of core questions on teaching and learning in its Ready Schools Project. The supplemental questions each year reflect current priorities and actions.

This was the fifth Annual Ready Schools Project, a DC VOICE community action research project that involves the community in gathering data and reporting on teaching and learning conditions. This year we:



- ◆ Trained over 200 community members to be action researchers and collect data;
- ◆ Interviewed the principals of 109 DCPS schools, including 25 of the 28 consolidated schools;
- ◆ Produced data that represents what is happening at schools all across the city and at all

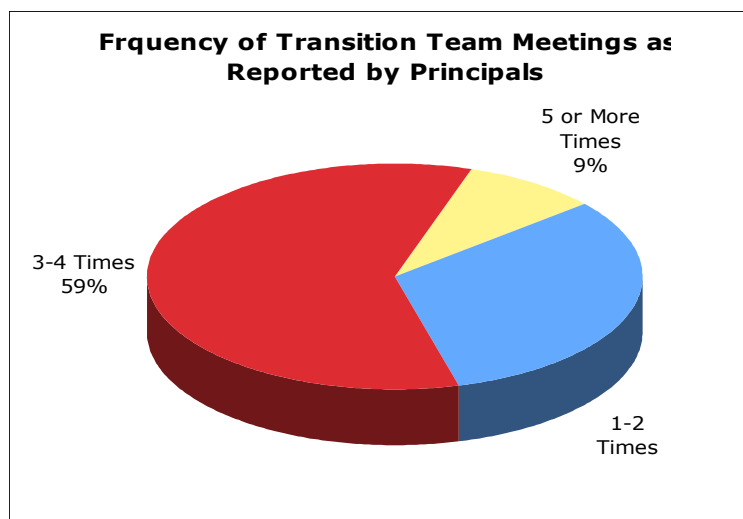
grade levels, and that can lead to actions to improve all schools.

Our community researchers interviewed 25 of the 28 principals. Overall, we completed interviews with 109 principals system-wide.

Transition Teams

DC VOICE was pleased to see an effort by DCPS to involve community members in the consolidation process through transition teams this summer. The potential of these teams was that by operating close to the ground, they could empower the local community to help monitor progress, take part in some decision-making, and communicate information to the rest of the community on how consolidation efforts were progressing.

- ◆ 92 percent of consolidated school principals reported having transition teams this summer;
- ◆ A majority of the principals noted that teachers, parents and community members served on the teams;
- ◆ More than half gave DCPS high marks for helping establish teams and staffing them;
- ◆ 59% noted that the team met 3-4 times during the summer; and 9% reported that their teams met five times or more; the remaining 32 percent of respondents reporting teams in place said their teams met one or two times.



In this year's Consolidation Supplemental, we specifically asked about welcoming activities at the receiving schools that would involve families from the closed as well as the receiving schools. This was another area where we saw transition teams playing a role. Several principals indicated, however, that such activities did not happen because construction work was not completed in time for schools to be ready for parent and community visits during the summer.

DC VOICE believes that School Consolidation Transition Teams provided a way for the community to be involved in a substantial and focused way on a school improvement project, and in general in helping local schools reach out to their communities. Successful school consolidations involved everything from efficiently moving tangible goods such as furniture and

textbooks, to forming new coordinated teams of teachers and staff at the consolidated school, to communicating important information to all stakeholders in the community of the closed school as well as that of the receiving consolidated school. Although we did not specially ask if the transition teams were asked to help with student outreach and building enrollment over the summer, we think such teams could be employed in the future to help market local schools and both maintain and build enrollment.

Records Transfer

The transfer of student records was mixed in this year's consolidation effort. More than half of the principals reported problems such as:

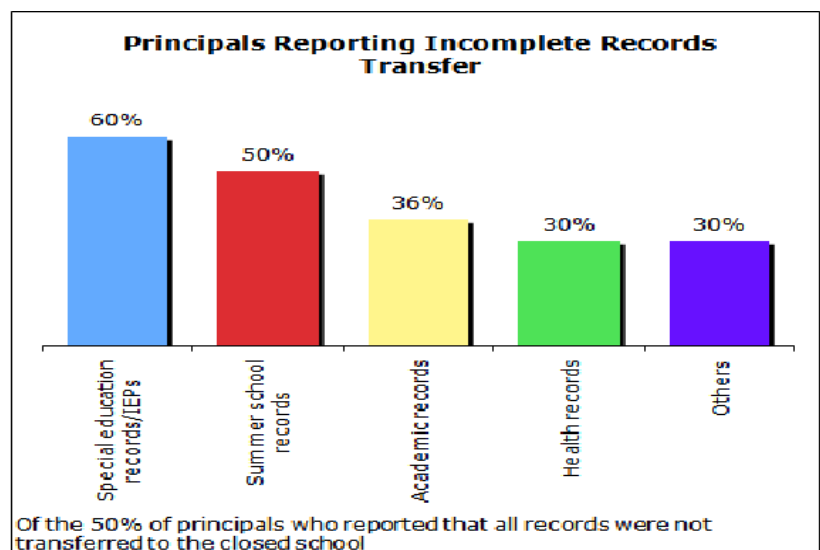
- ◆ Missing some records, or getting incomplete ones;
- ◆ Records going to another school instead of the receiving school;
- ◆ Receiving students from as many as five schools, which may have made records transfers particularly complicated.

The question about records transfers produced the following data:

- ◆ 50 percent of the principals reported that all student records from the closed schools got transferred to the receiving schools; 46 percent said all records were not received and 4% indicated that the question was not applicable;

- ◆ Of the 46 percent reporting that all student records from the closed schools did not get transferred to the receiving school, special education or IEP records constituted the largest reported failure, with 60% of those principals reporting that special education records or IEPs were missing;

- ◆ Summer school records were the next area of records most commonly missing, with 50% reporting these missing ;
- ◆ Academic records were reported missing by 36% of the principals;
- ◆ Health records were reported missing least often, with 32% reporting that they had not been received;
- ◆ Finally, addressing a residual category for “other” missing records, 30% reported that other records were missing.

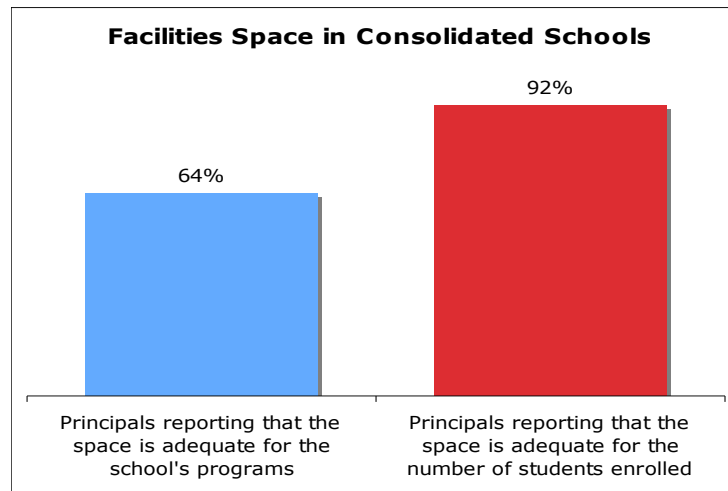


In summary, through health, academic and “other” records appear to have come through fairly well, the uncertain transfer of special education and summer schools records raises particular concerns.

Facilities Improvements

Facilities improvements received high marks in DC VOICE’s 2006 Consolidated Schools Report.

Overall, 78 percent of principals in the 2006 study reported that some or all of the consolidation related facilities work had been completed in their buildings at the beginning of the school year.



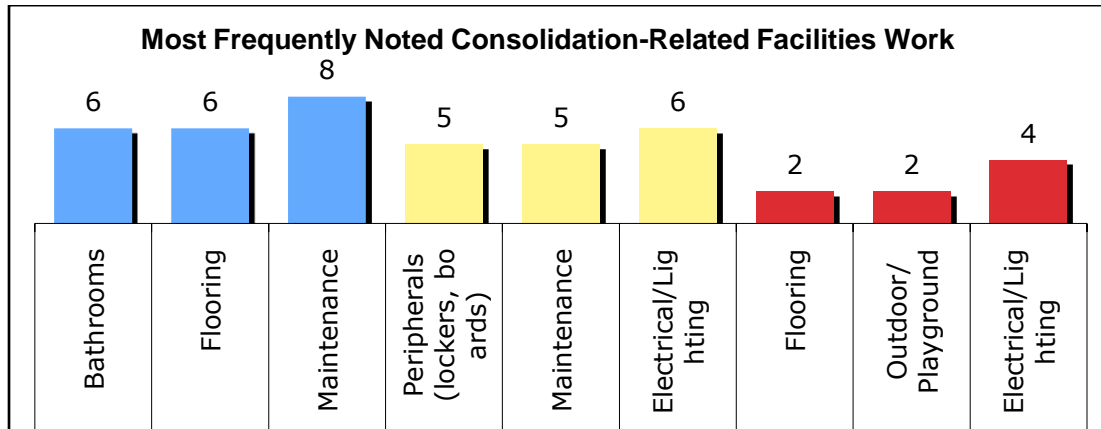
In this 2008 report we are pleased to announce that DCPS appears to have improved its consolidation-related facilities record further. This year, 92 percent of principals of consolidated schools reported that their schools received consolidation-related facilities work during the summer.

This year we also asked questions about the adequacy of space in the consolidated schools for current programs and number of students:

- ◆ 64 percent of the principals reported that their space was adequate for the programs their schools currently have (The biggest concern was not enough office space for teachers and staff);
- ◆ 92 percent of respondents reported that their school space was adequate for the number of students the school now has (Some said present space was adequate but they had concerns about the future.).

Concerning the completion of promised repairs, however—including system-provided repairs and major projects—the record is a bit more ambiguous.

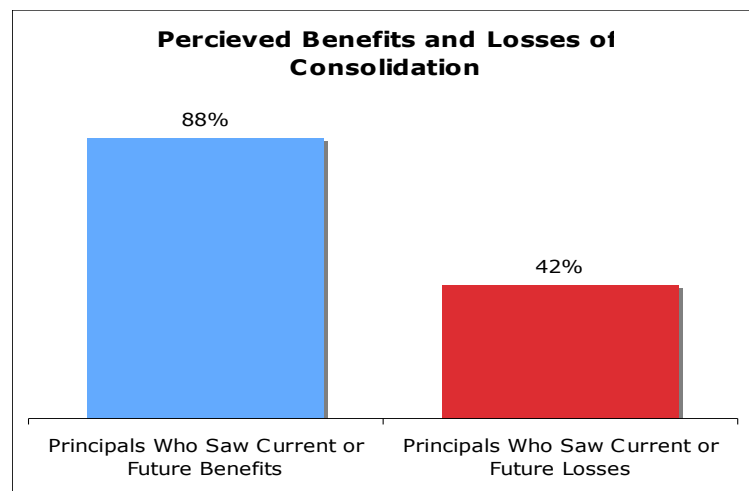
- ◆ Only 33 percent of principals of consolidated schools reported that promised repairs had been completed by the opening of school;
- ◆ 52 percent reported that some of the promised repairs were completed.



Benefits and Losses

Each time we have interviewed the principals of consolidated schools, we have asked them if they realized any benefits or losses because of the combining of two schools, and what they were. This year, principals reported an overall sense that their schools have benefited or will benefit from consolidation. As one principal said, “there were more gains than losses from consolidation.”

- ◆ 88 percent of the principals reported that they see current or future benefits for their schools from the consolidations;
- ◆ 8 percent reported no benefits;
- ◆ 4 percent reported that the question was not applicable.



The lists of benefits varied. Several principals mentioned having more community involvement including a more active PTA and greater community unity. Others noted increases in resources, including better classrooms and science labs. A few mentioned the positive benefits of facilities work and renovations.

A majority of the principals of consolidated schools mentioned having more staff, both in numbers and in specific areas such as coaches, special subjects teachers and support personnel. As one principal said, “with more staff we can now provide full services to students.”

A few principals were positive about being able to keep the same students longer, keeping them in the same building through the middle school years.

Asked if their schools lost some things in the consolidation process:

- ◆ 42 percent said yes;
- ◆ 54 percent, a majority of principals, said their schools did not lose some things in the consolidation process;
- ◆ 4 percent reported that the question was not applicable.

The most often mentioned losses were the additional space, or “the freedom of space,” as one principal noted, as well as the smaller class sizes some schools had before consolidation. Several principals mentioned staffing challenges, including having to trade some positions for others, as well as having some teachers not certified for the areas in which they’re now teaching. Whether school test scores would drop and endanger making adequate yearly progress (AYP) was mentioned as a potential loss.

Others mentioned the challenges of reinforcing the school’s culture with the influx of new students. On the other hand, another loss reported was the loss of students in the consolidation.

Summary and Comparisons

The final question on the Consolidated Supplemental Checklist was how principals would rate the support they received for the consolidation transition process this summer, on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 meaning little support and 5 meaning all necessary supports). The answer, compiling the answers of all 25 principals, was 3.9.

On the core checklist we asked all principals how they would rate the overall systemic supports they received to be ready for the opening of school. Interestingly, the answers of the consolidated school principals held steady at the same rating – 3.9 – compared with a rating of 3.6 by the non-consolidated school principals.

This general rating, in addition to data gathered in other areas, indicate that the consolidated schools got more support and services this summer than the non-consolidated schools covered by the Ready Schools Project. Consolidated Schools had more:

- ◆ Music, Librarians, Physical Education, Literacy and Math coaches in place;
- ◆ System-provided mentors for new teachers;
- ◆ Safety and security equipment and personnel in place for the opening of school.



In other areas, however, consolidated schools fared worse than the unconsolidated schools. The consolidated school principals reported;

- ◆ Not having enough teacher applicants as a reason for delayed hiring more often;
- ◆ Less teachers trained in implementing computer assisted lessons, and less teachers incorporating technology in their instructional delivery;
- ◆ Less of the required textbooks in place for the start of school;
- ◆ Less functional computers in all classrooms, plus less accessibility to the internet.

In a few areas such as the following, the consolidated and non-consolidated schools fared almost exactly the same:

- ◆ Amount of incomplete hiring at the opening of school;
- ◆ Number of principals who participated in professional development over the summer;
- ◆ Percentage of principals reporting mentoring in place for new teachers;
- ◆ A 4-point satisfaction rate (on a 5-point scale) with the safety and security at their schools.

Conclusion

Using data from the 2008 Ready Schools Project and other sources, DC VOICE will join DCEC, SHAPPE and others this November to begin hosting quarterly town hall meetings on education to examine what steps the community must take to improve school quality and graduation rates city wide. Please visit www.dcvoice.org for details.

