

HALF THE SOLUTION

**The Supports DC Students Need
to Meet High Academic Standards**

**A DC VOICE Community Based Research Project
funded by
the Poverty and Race Research Action Council
&
The Ford Foundation**

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The Supports DC Students Need to Meet High Academic Standards

January, 2001

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This report was written by DC VOICE with funding from the Poverty and Race Research Action Council and The Ford Foundation. Copies of this report are available from DC VOICE, PO Box 73055, Washington, DC, 20056, phone: 202-986-8535 fax: 202-238-0109, website: www.dcvoice.org

DC VOICE is a collaborative of teachers, parents and community members committed to ensuring every child in Washington, DC a high quality public education. Our belief is that schools will improve when the public is strong enough, by being organized and informed, to both provide support to the school system and hold it and the city accountable for the education of our youth. In working to strengthen the public voice in public education, DC VOICE has a three-pronged approach: constituency building, professional development and research.

Executive Summary

The DC Public Schools and many other school districts have adopted standards-based reform to improve student achievement. However, there has been limited attention to the supports needed to help students meet the standards. This concern has been well stated by Dr. Asa G. Hilliard, III:

The standards movement as it is now progressing at the national and state level is half the solution to the problem.... To hold children responsible for the outcomes without giving the same level of sophisticated attention to guaranteeing the standards of exposure [to learning] is an abandonment of the responsibility of adults for the education and socialization of children." -Rethinking Schools, Summer 1998

When Dr. Hilliard spoke at a DC VOICE Seminar in December 1999, he advocated setting high standards for student achievement. He argued that at the present time, standards are being used in a superficial way: standards are put in place, but without the resources needed to ensure that each child can reach them. Standards are often treated as if they are the end. Rather, they should be the beginning.

WHY ARE STANDARDS IMPORTANT?

Standards-based reform argues for high expectations for all students and promotes universal academic achievement and equity. The movement began as a response to concerns that U.S. schools were not preparing students sufficiently to compete in the international economy and called for increased academic rigor. The aim was to create a set of standards for all students, including those in low-income and underserved school districts. School districts across the country aggressively promote standards-based reform as a

solution to years of poor instruction and low performance by a disproportionate number of students, primarily low-income students and students of color.

The DC Public Schools (DCPS) began developing standards in the mid-90s and in 1998 formally introduced *Standards for Teaching and Learning* to guide instruction and assessment. Learning goals have been set for major content areas at all grade levels. Many teachers, administrators and parents have welcomed the setting of high standards for District schools, but are concerned that the supports are not in place to ensure that students can achieve those standards.

WHY THIS PROJECT?

In response to these concerns about the supports needed for student learning, DC VOICE launched a unique research project to document conditions and advocate for improvements. The project goals were to:

- engage parents, teachers, students and community members in dialogue about standards and the supports needed to achieve them (using Opportunities to Learn (OTLs) as a framework);
- document parent, teacher, student and community member perceptions of both the supports needed and those that are in place; and
- utilize the final report as a tool for future organizing efforts within the Columbia Heights/Shaw community and citywide to strengthen public education in Washington, DC.

WHO PARTICIPATED?

Community-based organizations and local schools were the driving force of this

“Opportunity to Learn standards describe the learning conditions required to ensure that students have a fair chance to meet the content and performance standards.”

The Education Trust

report. In March 2000, outreach workers and local school staff were asked to convene some of their constituents for focus group discussions that could lead to school improvement. Most of them readily agreed to be involved in the participatory research. They see first hand the devastating impacts of insufficient supports and poor schooling on parents and youth. Approximately thirty organizations were involved, and focus group discussions were conducted with seventeen organizations and schools.

Each focus group took place at a location convenient for participants, typically at a local school or community center. Discussions lasted 60-90 minutes. The number of participants per group ranged from six to fifteen. Teams of DC VOICE staff and consultants facilitated the groups and documented comments via handwritten notes and/or a tape recording of the conversation. Additional one-on-one interviews were conducted with parents, teachers and students in the community.

WHY USE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN STANDARDS?

This project was designed to collect data and also to engage and educate participants about Opportunities to Learn. OTLs describe the conditions needed for students to be able to meet high academic standards. Simply stated, they define what it takes to have a good school. Focus group participants were asked questions based on the following Opportunities to Learn:

- School environment, culture and organization
- Quality of instructional program
- Quality of teaching
- Quality of out-of-school supports available to students
- Effective parent and community partnerships

Their comments reflect ways that the school system and the community-at-large either support students or fail to support students both in and out of school.

WHAT WERE THE FINDINGS?

The following findings are based on the focus group discussions and interviews

with students, teachers and parents about existing conditions for learning in the Columbia Heights/Shaw area. They illustrate that while some support for student learning exists, there is not a cohesive system of supports. The OTL-focused discussions and the subsequent findings have implications for schools and for school-community collaboration.

SCHOOLS: Findings with primary implications for the school system:

- **Parents and community members do not understand the standards and how they relate to student achievement.**
- **The Stanford Achievement Test, Edition 9, undermines standards-based reform because it is not aligned with DCPS’ Standards for Teaching and Learning.**
- **Teachers face challenges integrating standards into their classrooms because the district does not provide adequate training, curriculum and technology support, and appropriate assessments for standards-based teaching.**
- **Inadequate facilities and lack of basic resources such as books, technology and equipment obstruct efforts by students and teachers to meet the standards.**
- **Teachers report a lack of opportunity for quality professional development and productive interaction with other teachers and administrators.**
- **Parents are most satisfied with welcoming “open door” schools that respect parents and encourage their participation.**

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION: Findings with implications for the school system and the community-at-large:

- **Expanded programming by community-based organizations is needed to address students’ academic and social issues, especially for middle and high school students.**

- *Safety is of great concern to students, parents and teachers and distracts from learning.*
- *Increased collaboration between community-based organizations and the schools is needed to prevent isolated and duplicated academic and social services.*
- *Students need more adult support to overcome the obstacles they face in their home, community and school environments.*
- *Parents, teachers and students are committed to their local schools and are eager to participate in efforts to improve them.*

Most participants expressed an interest in getting involved in further efforts to improve the quality of educational support for students in the district. These findings can be used to hold the city and schools accountable for providing *all* students the help they need to meet high academic standards.

HOW IS THE REPORT ORGANIZED?

This report is divided into three main sections: 1) an overview of national research on standards; 2) an examination of the DCPS approach to standards reform; and 3) the perceptions of local community members on how schools and community can help students meet high academic standards.

“An Overview: Content, Performance and Opportunity to Learn Standards” defines key terms, including: standards-based reform, standards, standards-based instruction, assessment and opportunity to learn standards.

“DCPS Approach to Standards-Based Reform” describes how DCPS introduced and implemented elements of standards-based reform (standards, standardized testing and supports for student achievement) and compares their approach to national research on standards. Included is an examination of the local implementation of standards in DC Public Schools.

“Perceptions of Columbia Heights/Shaw Parents, Teachers and Students” summarizes focus group discussions and interviews with parents, teachers, students and community members. This section reports their impressions of the implementation of standards-based reform and its affect on students, teachers and parents in the Columbia Heights/Shaw neighborhood. It also contains responses to questions about supports available in and out of school to assist student learning.

DC VOICE believes that the public must be informed and organized in order to strengthen public schools. This research project was designed to inform the public through data collection and dissemination and to lay the groundwork for organizing.

The outcomes of this project will be valuable to DC residents, and to organizers and advocates here and across the country working to ensure that higher standards don’t translate to higher obstacles, but instead include greater opportunity and equity for all children.

Funding for the Project was provided by the Poverty and Race Research Action Council (PRRAC) and The Ford Foundation.

The findings are based on research in Columbia Heights/Shaw, but have implications city-wide.

An Overview: Content, Performance and Opportunity to Learn Standards

TABLE 1 Key Features of Standards-Based Reform

- *Effective collaborative efforts between educators, parents and students define criteria for successful student achievement and district systems.*
- *Content and performance standards are aligned to assessment tools and provided for each school discipline.*
- *The standards (content, performance and opportunity to learn) and assessments promote better teaching through improved professional development for teachers and administrators.*
- *District and state level educators work together to establish a system of public accountability for meeting the standards.*
- *Educators work with parents and students to develop mechanisms for ongoing refinement and alignment of standards and assessment.*

(Lessons learned by educators and advocates from across the country).

To understand how DC VOICE constructed and analyzed its research, it is important to understand the distinct meanings of *standards-based reform*, *standards*, *standards-based instruction*, *standards-based assessment*, and *opportunity to learn standards*. The following reflects the commonly used definitions and best practices related to each term.

WHAT IS STANDARDS-BASED REFORM?

Standards-based reform began as a response to concerns that U.S. schools were not preparing students sufficiently to compete in the international economy. Disappointed with U.S. students' poor performance on international assessments, public officials and educators called for increased academic rigor in schools. The aim of the standards-based reform movement is to improve academic achievement in schools by creating a set of standards that are the same for all students, including those in low-income and underserved school districts. Standards-based reform argues for high expectations for all students and promotes universal academic achievement.

Standards-based reform starts with the premise that all students should be required to meet uniform high standards. Many school districts across the country aggressively promote standards-based reform as a solution to years of poor instruction and low performance by a disproportionate number of students, primarily low income students and students of color.

The experiences of school districts that have successfully employed standards-based reform are useful guides. These districts employ systemic rather than piecemeal innovation. Successful standards-based reform emphasizes change over maintaining the status quo and involves key stakeholders – parents, teachers and community members – as partners in reform. For example, parents attend workshops describing expectations for students and discuss how to help students master

academic work. More important, parents and teachers can work together to create and assess the goals and strategies of the local school reform effort. When parents and teachers understand and support content and performance standards, they solve problems together and advocate for a variety of teaching methods, enrichment programs and assessments that will help all students. National research maintains student success is greater when a clear vision for learning is openly communicated to students, teachers, parents, administrators and the public.

As part of standards-based reform, local and state leadership often implement accountability systems that tie consequences to student achievement in the classroom. Accountability policies require that schools make academic progress, sometimes specifying progress among sub-groups of students. Accountability efforts can include sanctions for schools that do not improve over time. School progress is often measured by indicators such as scores on standardized tests.

While implementing standards-based reform, many educators and policy makers incorporate *Opportunity to Learn (OTL)* standards. OTL's lay out the framework of enabling conditions for students to meet the standards. OTL standards measure the quality of education and the availability of education resources, such as books, good teachers, adequate classrooms and out-of-school support.

WHAT ARE STANDARDS?

The term *standards* is used to describe the specific goals and expectations that define student achievement. Most state frameworks include content and performance standards, assessment and systems of support and accountability.

Simply put, *content standards* define the knowledge and skills students should know in a given subject by the end of a certain period of time. In many cases, these expectations are expressed as "exit

content standards” and they determine whether a student is promoted. At key intervals — usually 3rd, 5th, 8th and 10th grades — students are assessed to determine their proficiency in the content areas. Ideally, during the year, teachers are layering their teaching from one period of time to the next to prepare students for the next level of instruction.

While content standards define what students need to know, *performance standards* provide teachers with the criteria against which to assess student work and examples of actual student work that meet the standards. Performance standards measure how well students demonstrate what they know through a variety of assessment tools, i.e., grades, criterion-referenced standardized tests and portfolios. Performance standards should be aligned with content standards to help teachers measure student progress toward the content standards. If done well, students are tested on what they have been taught.

Ideally, setting standards is a collaborative process involving key stakeholders in the education community. In order for standards to impact student achievement, students, parents and teachers should be able to state clearly the content and performance standards and students must be taught to the standards. In a standards-based school, standards should be visible and accessible to parents and students. Ideally, a standards-based classroom would post standards on the wall, display rubrics for acceptable work along with examples of student work that meets the standards or is progressing toward them.

Standards-based reform (see Table 1) promotes proven, effective teaching techniques that support student learning. Standards provide teachers with clear and sequential learning goals and objectives that facilitate student learning. Standards also set high goals for student performance, with the expectation that all students will succeed. As part of a standards-based reform model, teachers are also expected to teach at a high level; teachers are accountable for *all* of their students.

WHAT IS STANDARDS-BASED INSTRUCTION?

Standards-based instruction begins with the standards. From these guideposts, assessment and instruction are “backward-mapped,” ensuring that the standards, assessments and instruction are aligned. Because all students must meet the same standards, teachers need to develop “scaffolding,” which, like scaffolding erected against a building, provides additional structure and support for those who otherwise could not reach a particular height. Teachers, schools and school districts must also clearly communicate the standards and student achievement of the standards to students, family and community so that all of these groups can both support and demand accountability for student achievement.

WHAT IS STANDARDS-BASED ASSESSMENT?

To determine if the standards are being taught effectively, there needs to be reliable assessment of student learning. Experts agree that the best way to evaluate student learning of standards is to implement varied (hands-on, multiple choice, essay, presentation, etc.) and multiple (throughout the year) assessments. The assessments should be designed to match the school district’s standards. The results of these assessments provide valuable feedback to everyone, from the individual student to the classroom teacher, to the system as a whole.

In contrast to the assessment described above, many districts rely almost exclusively on standardized tests to assess student performance on the standards. The use of standards is often confused with *standardized tests*, partly because of the use of the word “standard” in both. Simply stated, a standardized test asks the same questions, and uses the same scoring, format, instructions and time limits for all test takers. If it is a criterion-referenced test, it measures student progress against content; if it is norm-referenced, it measures students against each other. Because standardized tests are given to large numbers of students throughout the country, the scores are presumed to offer an objective yardstick or standard of measure.

“What we need is honest school improvement that acknowledges both high standards and high quality of school input.”

-Dr. Asa G. Hilliard,
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TABLE 2 A Sampling of Opportunity to Learn Standards

Opportunity to Learn Standard*	Indicators
1. School Environment, Culture & Organization – Effective school site leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each student esteemed for his/her unique abilities and experiences • Local school-site decision-making • Collaborative teacher-principal relations • Comprehensive school-based solutions • Class size promoting learning and support
2. Quality of Instructional Program – High intellectual standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear standards and expectations for student achievement • Standards alignment and connection to curriculum, instruction and assessment • High quality curriculum, technology, textbooks, teaching materials and instructional supports • Adequate time for instruction • Use of multiple assessments • Native language instruction
3. Quality of Teaching – Well-trained, professional & culturally competent teaching staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for quality professional development programs • Sufficient time for reflection, planning and outreach • Quality recruitment, pre-screening and retention of teaching professionals • Opportunities for peer coaching and mentoring • Strategies for reaching diverse student populations and students with different learning styles
4. Out-of-School Supports – Academic achievement promoted in and out of school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family access to proper health, nutrition and additional human services • Availability of out-of-school remedial and enrichment programs • High at-home support for learning – i.e., low hours of television viewing, quiet time and space for completing homework, adult tutor with homework assignments
5. Parent and Community Partnerships – Parents & community members as co-educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent involvement in the schools • Schools and communities working together to best meet student needs and deliver comprehensive services • Teacher and administrator outreach to parents and families at home and in the community • Educator responsiveness to the diverse needs of parents • Educator goals integrated with community services

* There are two other commonly used OTL standards, *School Readiness* and *School Financing*, that are not examined in this report. The research and the report focused on school climate issues and the connections between schools and community. However, both *School Readiness* and *School Financing* should be considered when determining a more complete range of supports necessary to improve student achievement. This table is adapted from a description of OTL standards in "Opportunity to Learn Standards: Their Impact on Urban Students." by Wendy Schwartz, ERIC/CUE Digest Number 110, 1995.

In some jurisdictions, performance on standardized tests can become the primary or sole basis for decisions on student progress, teacher and principal evaluations and overall school district performance. There are several problems with using standardized tests as the primary assessment of student achievement: 1) Standardized tests are often not designed to match district standards. 2) Because there is intense pressure on schools to have high test scores, teachers understandably focus most of their attention on preparing students for the test, leaving real teaching of the standards until May or June when the testing is over. 3) Because standardized tests often focus on mechanical, lower-order skills, teachers are faced with the dilemma of providing instruction they know fosters a student's understanding versus drilling students in isolated skills and facts that will help them do well on the standardized test. 4) Standardized tests measure students at one moment in time instead of following progress throughout the year.

Meaningful and reliable systems of standards-based assessment include standardized tests but do not rely on them as the exclusive measurement of a students' or a schools' progress. Instead, standards-based assessment should use a variety of instruments and methods, should be integrated with instruction and should be used to inform instruction rather than as a threat or punishment. In addition, the assessment results should be made available to teachers, students, parents and community members along with assistance in interpreting the data. As noted in Education Week's *Quality Counts 2001*, without a better balance among standards, tests, and support, the standards movement could fail.

WHAT ARE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN (OTL) STANDARDS?

No effective standards-based reform can be implemented without creating the opportunity for all students to learn. The Opportunity to Learn framework grew out of concerns about the particular issues confronting students in low-performing poor schools and school districts. For this population of schools, education policy

makers and researchers understand that it is not sufficient simply to hold students accountable to content and performance standards. They recognize that in order to hold students to new standards, appropriate opportunities must be in place for all children to learn.

Table 2 outlines five Opportunity to Learn standards and helpful indicators to examine resources in place to support student achievement. The OTL framework places the responsibility on adults in the school system and in the community-at-large to offer deep and intensive involvement with curriculum content through excellent teaching and clear standards, an appropriate school environment and family and community engagement to support student learning. It is important for all students to have equitable access to school funding and to well-prepared teachers and other professional staff who understand how to teach challenging, standards-based content to diverse learners.

Opportunity to Learn standards can be used as a framework to improve public schools. Effective schools that implement OTL standards typically exhibit:

- a strong focus on ensuring academic success for each student;
- a refusal to accept excuses for poor performance;
- a willingness to experiment with a variety of strategies;
- intensive and sustained efforts to involve parents and the community;
- strong and effective school leadership;
- an environment of mutual respect and collaboration; and,
- a passion for continuous improvement and professional growth.

Because OTLs often outline specific strategies and practices that can be monitored and evaluated, many educational policy makers believe that using OTL standards will help schools in poor, urban areas determine and advocate for their needs more effectively in the budget and policy processes.

Opportunity to Learn standards can be used as a framework to improve public schools.

DCPS Approach to Standards-Based Reform

HISTORY OF DCPS STANDARDS-BASED REFORM

In 1992, DCPS developed its first standards document, *Curriculum Renewal Framework*. Over the next three years, standards for English/language arts, history, math, science and technology were developed supported by grants from the U. S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation. These broad-based efforts included teachers and community members and were closely aligned with the standards being developed by national organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. These standards laid out what students were expected to know and be able to do by the end of grades three, five, eight and eleven. Formal adoption and implementation were interrupted by the federal takeover of school system governance in 1996.

In the fall of 1998, DCPS presented the *DCPS Standards for Teaching and Learning* to principals and teachers. According to the *DCPS Standards for Teaching and Learning* documents: "The performance standards for mathematics, science, and reading were developed

through a collaboration of the Learning Research and Development Center of the University of Pittsburgh and the National Center for Education and the Economy (NCEE) in partnership with states and urban school districts." The *DCPS Standards for Teaching and Learning* provide content and performance standards to guide instruction at all grade levels.

DCPS IMPLEMENTATION OF CONTENT & PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

To understand the impact of the DCPS approach to standards-based reform, it is necessary to understand the information provided to teachers regarding the *DCPS Standards for Teaching and Learning*. For teachers, the standards are presented as a packet of tables and charts outlining specific skills students need to master by the end of the academic year. Table 3 shows an example of the DCPS Standards, taken from the DCPS Reading/Language Arts framework.

The overall goal of the DCPS Reading/Language Arts content standards is to develop a literate citizenry that knows how

TABLE 3 Example of DCPS Standards for Reading/Language Arts (Grade 2)

CONTENT STANDARD 1: Students comprehend and compose a wide range of written, oral and visual texts in the process of making meaning in the English Language Arts.		
Performance Standards	Essential Skills	Technology Integration
<p><i>The student demonstrates using phonics skills in reading and writing:</i> Uses a range of cueing systems, e.g., phonics and context clues, to determine pronunciation and meanings Reads with a rhythm, flow and meter that sounds like everyday speech (fluent reading) Uses syllable blending of words Uses initial and final consonant sounds Uses onset and rhymes</p>	<p><i>The student demonstrates mastery of previous skills in addition to the following:</i> Recognizes 200 sight words Selects and reads books of a variety of purposes (informational, critical technical) Connects text to prior knowledge Uses key elements of the text to construct meaning Uses strategies to read and write for meaning (monitors, cross checks and self-corrects) Applies phonics rules to text reading and writing</p>	<p><i>The student demonstrates the appropriate use of technology to enhance reading/writing:</i> Uses basic operations and concepts of computers Uses input devices (e.g., mouse, keyboard, remote control) Uses output devices (e.g., monitor, printer) Uses a variety of media and technology resources for directed and independent learning activities</p>

to use and interpret words well. The English/Language Arts content standards are:

- *Language as meaning maker.* Students understand and are able to compose written and oral texts.
- *Language as literature.* Students understand literary texts as essential to culture.
- *Language for research and inquiry.* Students can use language, maps, graphs and charts to interpret, organize and communicate information to solve problems.
- *Language for social communication.* Students can use language in a variety of social contexts.
- *Integration of technology.* Students are able to use word processing, publishing, graphics and email as tools for communication.

For each grade level and subject area, teachers are expected to “use standards-based curriculum documents to guide instruction in their classroom.” For example, second-grade teachers are expected to address the “language as meaning making” standard by focusing on word identification, phonics, main idea, prediction, spelling, dictionary skills and vocabulary.

Presently, teachers are challenged to effectively implement the standards in their classrooms. Because DCPS created

and implements the standards using a top-down approach, more emphasis has been placed on enforcement rather than support. For example, classrooms are inspected to ensure that content and performance standards are posted. And while recently adopted textbooks are more closely aligned with DCPS standards, DCPS has no curriculum to support standards-based instruction.

DCPS has made efforts to assist teachers and parents in implementing the standards. DCPS has designated “standards specialists” in all schools to help teachers integrate the standards into their classroom teaching and has conducted trainings on the standards for both parents and teachers. The Office of Parents Affairs has recently developed: “*A Parent Handbook to Standards*” for elementary, middle and high schools. The standards are available to the public on the DCPS website: www.k12.dc.us/dcps/home.html.

DCPS IMPLEMENTATION OF STANDARDIZED TESTS

To measure student achievement, DCPS has adopted a standardized test, the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition, known as the SAT-9. In the DCPS public system and public charter schools, the SAT-9 is administered twice a year – at the beginning of the fall term and near the end of the spring semester. The tests are administered to track progress in reading and math, and are administered in English, with some accommodation for ESL students.

TABLE 4 Selected Demographics of DC Public Schools

Demographic Profile of DCPS (District-wide)
Total DCPS Enrollment: 70,792 (SY 1999-2000)
Average Per Pupil Expenditure: \$7,510 (FY 2001 as of Spring 2000)
Average Reported Teacher/Student Ratio: 17.5
Drop Out Rate Over Four Years: 33% (1999)
Students Receiving Free/Reduced Lunch: 63% (SY 1999-2000)
Third graders at basic level or higher on the SAT-9 Reading: 70% (1999)
Eighth graders at basic level or higher on the SAT-9 Reading: 42% (1999)

While DCPS has developed specific in and out-of-school strategies and programs, it does not currently have a framework, such as the OTL standards, by which to measure available resources to support all students.

Students receive two types of scores from the SAT-9. One score measures how students perform on the test compared with other children in the national norm group. The second type of scoring measures student performance against grade level expectations. There are four categories of performance:

Below basic—Little or no mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills for this grade level.

Basic—Partial mastery of the knowledge and skills needed for satisfactory work at this grade level.

Proficient—Solid academic performance for this grade level.

Advanced—Superior performance beyond grade level mastery.

In recent years, student performance on the SAT-9 test has been used to determine promotion to the next grade and access to supporting academic services, such as:

- after-school/weekend instruction
- one-on-one tutoring
- summer remediation

The SAT-9 scores by classrooms, grade levels and buildings are aggregated to measure “how a school is doing.” Test scores have an impact on DCPS principals’

evaluations, and their annual contract renewals are based, in part, on a formula involving SAT-9 scores. By influencing the principal’s evaluation, the test impacts the teaching and learning in the schools. The SAT-9 is not, however, aligned with the DCPS content and performance standards.

DCPS IMPLEMENTATION OF OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN STANDARDS

As DCPS has instituted system-wide content and performance standards, it has developed strategies to assist students who score “below basic” on the SAT-9. While it has developed specific in and out-of school strategies and programs, DCPS does not currently have a framework, such as the OTL standards, by which to measure available resources to support all students.

During focus group conversations, DC VOICE solicited parent, teacher and student opinions and concerns about whether DCPS is meeting Opportunity to Learn standards by providing adequate support for students. In their responses, participants discussed the quality of education currently offered in their neighborhood schools and made recommendations for what strategies are needed to effectively increase student achievement.

Perceptions of Columbia Heights/Shaw Parents, Teachers and Students

COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH PROJECT

In spring 2000, DC VOICE launched a study to examine the perceptions of parents, teachers and students regarding the success and challenges of implementing DCPS standards and actions to support student achievement. Participants include more than 150 individuals who were diverse racially and culturally and included elementary, middle and high school students, in and out-of-school youth, youth development program staff, teachers from diverse disciplines and grade levels, and native English speakers and language minority parents.

In focus groups and interviews participants responded to a series of questions designed to determine supports available to students as measured by Opportunity to Learn (OTL) standards:

- What supports and barriers exist to increasing student achievement?
- How are the DCPS standards influencing instruction and student achievement in the schools? How aligned are curriculum, instruction and assessment to the standards?
- How effective are current approaches to teacher professional development? What needs to be improved?
- What relationship exists among the school leadership (i.e., principals) and teachers, parents and students?
- What partnerships exist between family, school and community organizations to further student achievement?

PARENT, TEACHER AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

OTL 1: SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

FINDINGS:

Inadequate facilities and lack of basic resources such as books, technology and equipment obstruct efforts by students and teachers to meet the standards.

Safety is of great concern to students, parents and teachers and distracts from learning.

Many parents send their children to school each day trusting that the school will be a safe and nurturing environment for learning. However, teachers, parents and students reported concerns about various aspects of the facilities, school culture and relationships among school personnel.

RESOURCES AND FACILITIES Participants cited inadequate facilities, overcrowded classrooms and long waiting periods for building maintenance as barriers to student achievement. Some of the problems respondents listed when asked about facilities and resources included:

- not enough materials, supplies, textbooks, books of all kinds and science equipment
- inadequate technology support; outdated or ineffective computers
- lack of training on how to use the existing technology
- inoperative bathrooms
- insufficient ventilation
- insufficient heating and cooling leading to extremes in temperature
- inadequate lighting

DC VOICE met with more than 150 culturally and racially diverse Columbia Heights/Shaw community members.

“The DCPS Standards were developed with good intentions but are not user friendly.”

-DCPS Teacher

- “open” classroom building designs
- overcrowded classrooms for popular school-based programs

In addition to “sending students a message of what they deserve,” the lack of resources and poor facilities disrupt student learning and impede efforts to meet new standards. Teachers explained that when they lack interesting and up-to-date books, it is difficult for students to meet the 30 books per year standard set by the school system. In science, the first standard addresses scientific inquiry, yet teachers are not given proper equipment for experiments. Although the standards require teachers to integrate technology into their lessons, teachers have encountered many obstacles to effective use of technology equipment. As one teacher pointed out, “We held three trainings for teachers to learn the computers, but each time, the software hadn’t arrived. Now we have the software, but the teachers are too frustrated to come back.”

When asked about the facilities, one teacher remarked, “The climate makes it difficult to learn. There are no open windows, the rooms take a long time to heat and because of ventilation problems, some students have to undress in overheated classrooms, while others wear coats and mittens in underheated classrooms.” In addition to negatively impacting student achievement, some facility conditions place students’ and teachers’ physical health at risk. As one teacher commented, “The excessive heat gives me a splitting headache and makes me feel faint.”

Many teachers were also concerned about continuous interruptions during instruction. They complained that class time is constantly interrupted by unnecessary announcements, unscheduled assemblies, students arriving late to school and requests that the teacher come personally to the office to pick up supplies, messages, etc. Due to constant interruptions, a teacher commented, “I no longer feel like doing lesson plans. I can never get through a lesson because of so many interruptions.”

SAFETY Focus group respondents believed that students and parents bring their fears and wounds from community problems with them into the school. Unfortunately, the school often is unable to the increasing social needs parents and students have as a result of these out-of-school experiences or to adequately respond to the criminal activity outside of the school. Students responded that they were concerned that “students sneak weapons into the school” and were distressed that some of their classmates were lost to violence, commenting “there were people from my school that died and have been killed.”

Some participants expressed concern that schools that do respond to student misbehavior lack sufficient social workers and use outmoded disciplinary policies. Students who did feel safe in school commented on the atmosphere generally set by the staff and security officers, “The staff makes me feel safe” and “It’s a small school where you know just about everyone.”

TEACHER/PRINCIPAL RELATIONS

Teachers wanted a much more collegial and supportive relationship with school leaders. They felt that administrators did not trust teachers and as a result did not treat them as professionals.

Teachers believed that “outside pressure” on principals prevented them from offering more opportunities for teachers to be creative and work with each other and parents to address student achievement. Sometimes the negative treatment of principals by their superiors is then transferred to teachers and students. In some instances administrators criticize or yell at teachers in front of their students. One teacher commented, “I know the principals are treated this way too, but they know how it affects them, so they must know how it affects us.” Teachers praised administrators who were responsive to their needs and did not take them for granted.

STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICE Parents also expressed concerns about the mutual uneasiness that exists when African-American and Latino parents are brought together to discuss issues within the school. Stereotypes and prejudices “get in the way as schools try to accommodate the needs of one group, but may overlook the needs of the other.” Parents recognized this as a problem for school reform efforts in Columbia Heights/Shaw, but did not have any clear recommendations for addressing it.

OTL 2: QUALITY OF INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

FINDINGS:

Parents and community members do not understand the standards and how they relate to student achievement.

The Stanford Achievement Test, Edition 9, undermines standards-based reform because it is not aligned with the DCPS’ Standards for Teaching and Learning.

Although many participants supported DCPS’ implementation of high standards for all students, confusion exists regarding the implementation of standards, standardized tests, the importance of standards and the process for implementing standards in the classrooms.

PERCEPTIONS OF DCPS STANDARDS

When asked about their familiarity and understanding of the DCPS Standards for Teaching and Learning, focus group participants shared their experiences and perceptions of the standards, the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) and the need for DCPS to institute additional assessment tools.

Among the participants, *teachers* were the most familiar with the standards. They described the standards and the District’s approach in the following ways:

- “Good intention ...not user friendly”
- “Confusing and vague”

- “[They] don’t address the needs of the whole child or family.”
- “They have no meaning.”

Teachers felt that they were not involved in the development of the standards, and received minimal orientation or training in how to integrate the standards. Among their concerns:

- In certain subjects and grade levels, teachers believed that too many standards are provided without clear priorities or suggested length of instruction.
- With increased pressure from District officials to post and teach to the standards, teachers are left to decide on their own how to adapt curriculum, instruction and assessment.
- Schools required to adopt a “school-reform” model because their students have historically exhibited low performance on standardized tests must juggle the standards and curriculum of the reform model with the DCPS standards.
- The standards remain unavailable for certain subjects, specifically foreign language and special education.

Students and parents are unclear about the role of the standards. When asked what relevance the standards had to their education or life, one student stated, “The standards are not for us, but for the principal and superintendent.” The ability of parents to provide details about the standards depended upon their level of contact with their child’s school. On the low end were parents who had never heard of the standards. However, the majority had received information about the standards during back-to-school parent meetings and parent-teacher conferences. Parents who were regular volunteers or were employed by the school as teachers or support personnel were the most familiar with the standards. These parents expressed concern about clarity and degree of usefulness of standards in the classroom.

Teachers report that they received minimal orientation or training in how to integrate the standards into their classrooms.

VIEWS OF THE STANFORD ACHIEVEMENT TEST, NINTH EDITION (SAT-9) In the District of Columbia, the Stanford Achievement Test is promoted as the primary measurement of student achievement despite the fact that the SAT-9 is not aligned with the standards. Focus group participants offered the following opinions of the SAT-9.

- “The SAT-9 is unrealistic... not grade appropriate.”
- “Preparation for the test takes priority over lesson plans.”
- “The SAT-9 provides an indication of how students are doing.”
- [SAT-9 results] confirmed my belief that my son should not be placed in special education.”

As these comments reflect, perceptions of the usefulness of the test varied from individual to individual. However, opinions about *how* the test is used to maintain accountability were consistently unfavorable.

Many teachers indicated that preparation for the exam, more so than the standards, currently dictates instructional technique and content. Students are constantly in test preparation mode until the exam is administered in the fall and spring. This minimizes student exposure to other content and modes of learning. Also, because the SAT-9 only tests reading and math, subjects such as science and social studies are pushed aside to prepare for the test. Parent and teacher participants were concerned that the exam was being used to punish rather than assess, and as a result teachers and students “suffer” under the pressure of the test.

Many of the focus group participants used the terms “Standards” and “SAT-9” interchangeably. Parents in particular responded with concerns about the SAT-9 when asked to give their opinion of the

Standards for Teaching and Learning. This misperception blurs parent commitment to the standards, particularly if they hold negative opinions of high stakes standardized tests. There is also confusion about the test itself. Many parents do not understand the categories used to score students: below basic, basic, proficient and advanced. This lack of understanding prevents parents from being fully informed of their child’s progress on the test.

ASSESSMENT BEYOND THE SAT-9 During broader discussions of current approaches to assessment, participants expressed the need to supplement the SAT-9 with other forms of assessment that would be much more authentic and defined by a focus on development and achievement over time. However, there is a lack of consistency from classroom to classroom because teachers are not provided with opportunities to work with other teachers to define common criteria and methods of evaluation. Ideally, the standards would provide a foundation for consistency; however, little time is dedicated to the interpretation of the standards and their alignment with in-class assessments.

Sometimes teachers did take the initiative to support each other where the system or school did not. In an effort to be more strategic, a few teachers mentioned meeting within grade levels and, when possible, across grade levels to define assessment priorities and develop a common understanding for the seamless transition of students from one grade to the next.

The absence of multiple criteria for how to measure student progress has a direct impact on student perceptions of assessment and teacher evaluation. When asked how they would strengthen current assessment approaches, parents and teachers mentioned portfolio assessment as a means to foster individualized student goal setting and a means of linking assessment to student interests.

“Preparation for the exam, more so than the standards, currently dictates instructional technique and content.”

-DCPS Teacher

OTL 3: QUALITY OF TEACHING

FINDINGS:

Teachers face challenges integrating standards into their classrooms because the district does not provide adequate training, curriculum and technology support, and appropriate assessments for standards-based teaching.

Teachers report a lack of opportunity for quality professional development and productive interaction with other teachers and administrators.

In each focus group, participants echoed sentiments of goodwill toward teachers and parents who provided students with the additional support and encouragement they needed to achieve. They applauded teachers who made themselves available before and after school, and who interacted with students during non-school related events in the community. At the same time, teachers, students and parents expressed their frustrations with the lack of support for teachers and complained of uncaring and unqualified teachers.

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT In the teacher focus groups, a series of questions were asked to solicit opinions of the frequency and quality of professional development opportunities offered to DCPS teachers.

Overall, teachers were dissatisfied with the quality of professional development offered by the District of Columbia and raised concern about the lack of training first-year teachers receive prior to leading a classroom.

Teachers expressed the following concerns:

- “There is insufficient time for internal development and work sessions... no time to walk through [information] and make interactive...no formal opportunity for teachers to meet.”
- “Staff meetings are dominated by administrative announcements.”

- “[Training] is usually linked to technology or textbook purchasing.”
- “The trainers have not been in the classroom for years... it is helpful when led by a master teacher.”

Teachers valued professional development workshops that “emphasize strategies” and are “highly interactive and immediately applicable.” Teachers also recommended that peer observation be added to the professional development program. One teacher stated that she actually preferred when DCPS provided teachers with a professional development allocation that could be spent on courses and conferences outside the system. She stated that such stipends “ensured that teachers identified training to meet their specific needs and interests.”

TEACHER CONCERNS Some teachers feel isolated from parents because of language, culture and economic barriers. Teachers feel that parents are often overwhelmed by their responsibilities as parents, which leads some to give up on their children. Teachers commented that many of their students live in group homes or have parents who threaten to throw them out of the house.

Teachers are also frustrated by students who they perceive as having stopped wanting to learn. And they worry that students are taking on adult responsibilities at home. As a result, students have limited exposure to experiences outside their immediate community and family.

Teachers expressed their concern about student comments such as “I can’t do it” and “I’m stupid,” which can signal low self-esteem. Also, students’ lack of respect, initiative and commitment to education are often barriers to high academic achievement. Teachers responded that they wanted more time to adequately work with students to help them overcome their fears and doubts about their intellectual ability. Teachers are also very concerned about the extreme diversity of skills and knowledge which they see as a consequence of social promotion.

Teachers valued professional development workshops that “emphasize strategies” and are “highly interactive and immediately applicable.”

Veteran and first-year teachers alike stated that increasing numbers of teachers were being hired with little content area experience and very little experience with classroom management skills. Teachers cite minimal effort within the District to address this growing professional development need. Teacher mentors who do exist are usually overburdened and not given the necessary time to devote to assisting new teachers. In order to survive the stress and challenges of teaching, teachers found one or two colleagues within the school, such as another teacher or school support staff, and active parents in which to confide. Teachers also considered access to social support staff, such as school nurses, day care providers, social workers and college prep counselors, as an important layer of support for students.

Students want teachers to be more interested in their success rather than their failure.

STUDENT AND PARENT CONCERNS

Although students could recall individual teachers who they perceived as fair, consistent and clear, they stated that what they typically hear from teachers is negative, rushed, vague and rarely combined with the support they need to improve. For example, students are provided “deficiency notices,” which, according to students, only point out their “academic failures” without details on how they can improve their performance. Students prefer teachers who take the time to have a one-on-one conversation about their performance and work with them to improve over time. Specifically, students want teachers to be more interested in their success rather than their failure and commented that parents also become frustrated with the “bad news” teachers often share. Parents stated that parent-teacher conferences don’t provide enough time for them to receive an in-depth review of their child’s progress. Teacher, parent and student respondents acknowledged the important responsibility parents and teachers have as co-educators to overcome barriers to high student performance. Certain behaviors by parents and teachers signaled to students a lack of respect or belief in their ability to achieve. Concerns were raised about teachers who lack an understanding of how to respond to student needs and interests, and a lack of parent interest in student progress. Also,

rather than setting high academic standards, teachers tend to teach “at the average” due to the diversity of needs and performance levels of students.

OTL 4: OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUPPORT

FINDINGS:

Expanded programming by community-based organizations is needed to address students’ academic and social issues, especially for middle and high school students.

Increased collaboration between community-based organizations and the schools is needed to prevent isolated and duplicated academic and social services.

The people of the Columbia Heights/Shaw neighborhood grapple with many of the challenges that face other low-income areas. As respondents pointed out, many young people arrive at school affected by problems they face in their homes and neighborhoods. In dealing with these problems, both students and teachers are diverted from focusing on academic achievement. While some students find extra support in out-of-school and in-school programs, students call for an expansion of activities to assist them with academic and life skills.

COMMUNITY CHALLENGES In addition to in-school environmental risks, participants shared concerns about the influence community problems have upon student achievement. Problems such as gang activity, drug abuse, unemployment and poverty were mentioned as barriers to parent involvement and student social and academic development. One group of parents from a neighborhood housing development commented that they came together because they witnessed home environments that did not nurture students. They commented that late nights, inadequate meals, parental criminal activity and neglect were reasons they wanted to provide a safe, learning alternative for children living and growing in such homes.

Teachers commented that they do not have access to the social support services needed to respond to parent and student needs. Symptoms of this problem included:

- *parents* who are unavailable to teachers and unable to help students.
- *students* who are unable to concentrate because of problems at home or in their neighborhood.
- *students* who lack the basic life skills and experiences to bridge what they are learning at home, in school and in the community.

“Outmoded” disciplinary policies that may not take into account issues such as a lack of parent involvement or the need to involve social workers make it difficult for teachers to respond to the behavioral problems students may bring to class. Participants suggested the following recommendations:

- *Increase the number of social workers* available to schools to address the academic and social needs of students and families.
- *Reduce class size* to allow for adequate attention to students and improved classroom management.

SUPPORTS IN AND OUT OF SCHOOL. Focus group participants cited programs coordinated by local schools and community-based organizations as important supports to student achievement. School-based programs include:

- STARS
- Voyagers
- SMART Choice

DCPS’ STARS and SMART Choice programs offer low-achieving students additional tutoring and skill building; Voyagers offers special programming to high achieving students. There is no program identified for those who score basic or proficient (grade level). These in-school programs utilize teachers, parent volunteers and Ameri-

Corps volunteers as staff. There are also many out-of-school community-based organizations (CBOs) in Columbia Heights/Shaw that are working to meet the needs of children and families. As one CBO worker explained, “Most of these kids are raising themselves. Some of our parents are not much help; they are in trouble, have health problems, poor nutrition, stress and are not sleeping well.”

Community-based organizations provide an array of support for students, from mentoring and homework to dynamic programming with students and their families. Activities offered by local CBOs include GED preparation, cultural programs, translation, workshops on diversity and social issues, creative writing, photography and video production, parent support and empowerment groups. Often CBOs provide one of the few safe havens for children in the neighborhood.

Student respondents believed that more programming exists for elementary school students than middle and high school students. Specific participant suggestions in this area included the need to:

- expand vocational and technical training opportunities available to high school students;
- increase the number of after school tutors, homework clubs and bilingual immersion courses available to all students;
- increase the number of school-sponsored after school activities for families, such as projects for parent and child to work together, meet and greet sessions and special gatherings;
- increase community outreach for adult education, parenting classes or clubs; and,
- improve relationships between teachers and staff from community youth development programs.

There is minimal interaction among community-based organizations or between community-based organizations and schools.

OTL 5: PARENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

FINDINGS:

Students need more adult support to overcome the obstacles they face in their home, community and school environments.

Parents, teachers and students are committed to their local schools and are eager to participate in efforts to improve them.

Parents are most satisfied with welcoming "open door" schools that respect parents and encourage their participation.

Parents would like to see an increase in meaningful opportunities for them to meet other parents, to work with teachers and principals, and to provide services and supports to students.

Focus group reflections indicate the absence of effective collaboration between public schools and community-based organizations. Due to the lack of communication, there is often duplication and isolation of services.

INCREASED SCHOOL/COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Parents and students could identify a number of youth-serving programs addressing the social and academic development needs of students. They understood these programs to be "out-of-school" with minimal interaction among CBOs or between CBOs and schools. Conversely, teachers were less able to name specific programs outside of the school serving parents or students, and frequently identified themselves as "alone" in efforts to develop their students.

Similarly, CBO workers feel disconnected from the schools. They expressed some resentment that they are expected to "do the job of the school system." One participant explained: "We face a tension between whether to help students do their homework, much of which does not seem pedagogically sound, or introduce activities which are better pedagogically and would promote more critical thinking skills. The former will help the young people graduate, the latter will help them learn."

Many of the community-based organizations in Columbia Heights/Shaw do work directly with specific schools and principals, but would like to develop closer and more productive relationships with local schools. Rather than "building individual relationships with school staff to sustain and protect student learning," there is a need to work more systematically with the school system to "change the overall conditions for every child."

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP, PARENTS, TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Focus group participants held high standards for the performance and attitude of school officials. To date, there have been few formal opportunities for parents, teachers and students to work alongside principals and other school and district administrators to set policy and develop innovative educational programs. Parents were most satisfied with schools that promoted an "open door" policy:

- Welcoming parents on site
- Providing learning opportunities in the form of adult education courses
- Providing information about resources and services they need

They would like to see an increase in meaningful opportunities for them to meet other parents, to work with teachers and principals and to provide services and supports to students.

Teachers also see the value of programs that support parents. As one teacher pointed out: "Some parents need to learn how to be parents. Support services must be available to children, they need to be better prepared for schools." Teachers expressed their desire to help parents find the support and resources they need to be more successful parents.

Students were very sensitive to the personal attitudes of their peers, their parents and their teachers. In an attempt to explain bad behavior among students, one student participant stated that "students 'act bad' because they need attention and respect." Students described classroom experiences where teachers became angry and embarrassed students

by disciplining or criticizing them in front of the class. They mentioned knowing when teachers needed a coffee break or were "stressed out." Students stated, "teachers get tired and stop trying to teach us."

INCREASED RESPECT, COMMITMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In focus group discussions, participants passionately expressed the need for parents, teachers and students to demonstrate respect toward each other and a commitment to educational excellence. Participants avoided placing sole responsibility for increasing student achievement on parents, teachers or students in isolation from one another.

Positive expressions of these values were evident in teacher, parent and student anecdotes about individuals who "go the extra mile":

- *Teachers* stated that they enjoy teaching when students begin to "teach and motivate themselves."
- *Parents* valued schools with teachers who were professional and the principal knew their child and the child's progress.
- *Students* praised teachers who stay after school to tutor and answer questions, who build relationships with them beyond their academics and who seek their feedback for improving their teaching.

Conclusion

Setting high academic standards is only half the solution to increasing student achievement in DC. The other half is to provide in-school and out-of-school support for students to meet those standards.

Setting high academic standards is only half the solution to increasing student achievement in DC. The other half is to provide in-school and out-of-school support for students to meet those standards. Through discussions with people most closely associated with schools – students, parents, teachers and community members – this report has laid out ways in which schools and communities are failing to provide quality assistance for young people in the public schools.

The report's key findings are presented below along with additional discussion points from the focus groups and interviews. These findings can serve as a starting point for the development of recommendations and action to improve supports for students in school and within the larger community.

KEY FINDINGS FOR SCHOOLS:

Parents and community members do not understand the standards and how they relate to student achievement. Students, parents and teachers are unclear about the role of standards and connections between standards and improved instruction and between standards and higher student achievement. This lack of understanding of standards among parents impedes support of standards and full participation in children's progress.

The Stanford Achievement Test, Edition 9, undermines standards-based reform because it is not aligned with the DCPS' Standards for Teaching and Learning. Students, parents and teachers do not see the connection between SAT-9 and academic standards or the connection between SAT-9 performance and the school system's Saturday and summer academic assistance programs. Focus group participants express consistently unfavorable opinions about how the SAT-9 is used to maintain accountability; the test is seen as a tool for punishment, not assessment. Parents and teachers cite portfolios as an alternative form of assessment that is linked to student performance.

Teachers face challenges integrating standards into their classrooms because the district does not provide adequate training, curriculum and technology support, and appropriate assessments for standards-based teaching. Teachers say they receive little direction in aligning standards with instruction. This is one key factor resulting in instruction being driven more by the SAT-9 than the standards.

Parents are most satisfied with welcoming "open door" schools that respect parents and encourage their participation. Schools that are perceived as more accessible, provide learning opportunities and information about resources and services receive higher satisfaction ratings from parents.

Teachers report a lack of opportunity for quality professional development and productive interaction with other teachers and administrators. Teachers cite disappointment with the quality of professional development opportunities available, particularly those for new teachers. Teachers say limited content-area expertise and classroom management skills – particularly among new teachers – impede student progress. Teachers, parents and students show frustration with lack of support and accountability for high-quality teaching and learning.

KEY FINDINGS FOR SCHOOL-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION:

Expanded programming by community-based organizations is needed to address students' academic and social issues, especially for middle and high school students. Students call for increased programming to provide support that is sometimes unavailable at home or at school.

Safety is of great concern to students, parents and teachers and distracts from learning. Schools often use outmoded and ineffective discipline policies and are unable to respond effectively to students' out-of-school experiences.

Increased collaboration between community-based organizations and the schools is needed to prevent isolated and duplicated academic and social services.

Teachers say they have limited access to support services needed to respond to parent and student needs. The lack of communication and collaboration between schools and community-based organizations result in isolation and duplication of services. Programs that do exist are seen as having minimal interaction among community-based organizations or between community-based organizations and schools. Many parents and teachers commented that few programs exist to assist parents. Community-based organization staff members feel disconnected from schools and express interest in developing closer relationships to schools and the school system.

Inadequate facilities and lack of basic resources such as books, technology and equipment obstruct efforts by students and teachers to meet the standards.

Lack of resources and poor facilities disrupt student learning and impede efforts to meet new academic standards. In general, teachers cite poor school climate as a factor that hampers the creativity of their instruction.

Students need more adult support to overcome the obstacles they face in their home, community and school environments. Due to heightened challenges in low-income neighborhoods, students call for expansion of activities to

assist them with academic and life skills – particularly for middle and high school students.

Parents, teachers and students are committed to their local schools and are eager to participate in efforts to improve them. Teachers, parents, students and community members all acknowledge the importance of shared responsibility for student achievement. Parents would like to see an increase in meaningful opportunities to meet with other parents and work with teachers and principals. Most of those involved in the interviews and discussions were interested in being involved in further efforts to address issues that surfaced in the focus groups.

This report will be disseminated in collaboration with the organizations involved in the data collection and will be used as a tool to galvanize students, parents and teachers to work together to address gaps in providing supports for students. Schools, principals, DCPS administrators, community-based organizations, parents and teachers are urged to use the findings in their efforts to improve student achievement for all children in the District of Columbia. This project will continue to involve parents, teachers and community members through the convening of community dialogues to create specific recommendations to support student learning. Only through such ongoing collaborative efforts will DC students be provided with the “other half of the solution” – the supports they need to meet high academic standards.

Appendix A: Acknowledgements

This publication does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the funders and the reviewers.

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Asian American LEAD
Bell Multicultural High School
Bell Youth Action Research Group
Bruce-Monroe Elementary School
Calvary Bilingual Multicultural Learning Center
Cleveland Elementary School
Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Collaborative
Columbia Heights Village
Columbia Heights Youth Club
Community Impact
DC LEARNs
DC SCORES
Garnet-Patterson Middle School
Latin American Youth Center
Martha's Table
Mary's Center
Parents Striving for Joy
Sarah House
Shiloh Baptist Church Family Center
Sister to Sister/Hermana a Hermana
Sojourner's Neighborhood Center
Tellin' Stories Project

Appendix B: Compilation of Participant Profile & Surveys

These surveys were not completed for every focus group in the study.

Student Profile/Survey Results

Total Number of Surveys: 44

1. What school do you attend?

Bell Multicultural HS	6
Lincoln MS	2
Caesar Chavez Charter HS	5
HD Cooke ES	
Oyster Bilingual School	
Harriet Tubman ES	
HD Cooke ES	
Oyster Bilingual School	
Harriet Tubman ES	
Garnet Patterson MS	4
MacFarland MS	2
Calvin Coolidge HS	
Cardozo HS	3
Anacostia HS	
Roosevelt HS	2
Dunbar HS	
Floc	
Jefferson JHS	
Not in School	10

2. What grade are you in?

5 th grade	1
6 th grade	4
7 th grade	4
8 th grade	6
9 th grade	8
10 th grade	8
11 th grade	3
12 th grade	1

3. How old are you?

13-17	30
18-24	9
10-12	5

4. Are you male or female?

Female	25
Male	18

5. What is your ethnic background?

African American	17
Latino	22
Latino-African American	3

6. Do you live in the Shaw/Columbia Heights neighborhood?

Yes	32
No	12

7. What are your plans after graduation from high school?

Attend a 4-year college	27
Attend a 2-year college	5
Military Service	3
Vocational/Trade School	5
Work	3

8. Do you have an adult in your life who helps you to think about your plans for the future?

Yes	24
No	3

9. I am getting a good education at my school.

Strongly Agree	13
Agree	23
Neutral	5
Disagree	1
Strongly Disagree	2

10. The teachers and administrators at my school are involved in my community.

Strongly Agree	4
Agree	15
Neutral	10
Disagree	6
Strongly Disagree	8

11. My family's culture and heritage are respected and included in the curriculum and school activities.

Strongly Agree	12
Agree	12
Neutral	14
Disagree	3
Strongly Disagree	2

12. Would you like to be involved in a project to improve the quality of education available to you and other students?

Yes	19
No	6

These surveys were not completed for every focus group in the study.

Teacher Profile/Survey Results

Total Number of Surveys: 14

1. What subject do you teach?

ESL	2
Reading	1
Social Science	1
Math	1
English	1
Geography	1
Life Science	1
Creative Writing	1
Special Education	1

2. What grade levels do you teach?

K-8	14
-----	----

3. How many years have you been teaching?

1-3 years	4
4-10 years	8
11+ years	4

4. How old are you?

18-24	1
25-30	4
40-49	3
50+	4

5. Are you female or male?

Female	8
Male	5

6. What is your ethnic background?

African American	14
Asian	1
Latino/a	1
White	5

7. Do you live in the Shaw/Columbia Heights neighborhood?

Yes	5
No	8

8. How often is classroom instruction interrupted by loudspeaker announcements, schedule changes, assemblies and the like?

1-4 times/day	9
5+ times/day	5

9. How often were you able to meet with other teachers or school administrators to discuss ways to improve student achievement?

3 + times	11
1-2 times	2
Never	1

10. How often did you conduct meetings with your students' parents to discuss their child's progress in school?

3 + times	8
1-2 times	4
Never	1

11. How often did you attend a PTA meeting or other parent function hosted by the school?

3 + times	3
1-2 times	2
Never	3

12. How often have Parents actively sought you out to discuss their child's progress and ways for them to support instruction?

3 + times	3
1-2 times	3
Never	

13. The goals and standards set for my students by the school are consistent with the goals and standards I hold for my students.

Strongly Agree	
Agree	7
Neutral	5
Disagree	2
Strongly Disagree	

14. The teachers and administrators at my school are involved in the community surrounding my school.

Strongly Agree	
Agree	5
Neutral	4
Disagree	3
Strongly Disagree	1

15. The culture and heritage of my students' families are respected and understood by the teachers and administrators at my school.

Strongly Agree	
Agree	8
Neutral	5
Disagree	3
Strongly Disagree	

16. Would you like to be involved in a project to improve the quality of education available to your child and other children in the community?

Yes	12
No	2

These surveys were not completed for every focus group in the study.

Parent Profile/Survey Results
Total Number of Surveys 27

1. What is the name of your children's school?

Powell	2
Bruce Monroe ES	3
Cesar Chavez Charter School	
Harriet Tubman	4
Garrison ES	
Meridian Charter	2
Eugene Meyer ES	2
Magogney ES	
Calvary Bilingual Multicultural Learning Center	
Cardozo HS	
Seaton ES	4
M.M. Washington	
Woodridge Charter School	
Community Academy Charter	
Calvin Coolidge HS	
Duke Ellington HS	
Shaw	

2. What grade is your child(ren) in?

PreK-2 grade	8
3-6 grade	17
7 th grade	1
8 th grade	2
9 th grade	1
12 th grade	2
Not enrolled	3

3. How old are you?

18-24	2
25-30	4
31-39	12
40-49	7
50+	1

4. Are you male or female?

Female	26
Male	1

5. What is your ethnic background?

African American	26
African-Caucasian	1

6. Do you live in the Shaw/Columbia Heights neighborhood?

Yes	26
No	1

7. How far in school do you want your child(ren) to go?

4-year college	24
2-year college	1
Vocational Trade School	1
Graduate from High School	1

8. (How often) were you able to have a discussion with one of your child's teachers about their progress in school?

3+ times	23
1-2 times	2
Never	2

9. (How often) did you attend a school meeting for parents?

3+ times	5
1-2 times	19
Never	2

10. The goals and standards set for my child(ren) by the school are consistent with the goals and standards I hold for my children. (Agree or Disagree)

Strongly agree	3
Agree	9
Neutral	4
Disagree	4
Strongly disagree	3

11. The teachers and administrators at my school are involved in my community. (Agree or Disagree)

Strongly agree	
Agree	2
Neutral	7
Disagree	8
Strongly disagree	6

12. My family's culture and heritage are respected and represented in the curriculum and school activities. (Agree or Disagree)

Strongly agree	8
Agree	5
Neutral	9
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	1

13. My child has quiet time and a place to do homework and prepare for school. (Agree or Disagree)

Strongly agree	4
Agree	6
Neutral	
Disagree	
Strongly disagree	

14. Would you like to be involved in a project to improve the quality of education available to your child and other children in the community?

Yes	26
No	

Appendix C: References

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Additional Resources

For more information on standards:

Annenberg Institute for School Reform
Brown University, Box 1985
Providence, RI 02912
www.aisr.brown.edu

American Youth Policy Forum
1836 Jefferson Place, NW
Washington, DC 20036
www.aypf.org

Council of Chief State Officers
One Massachusetts Ave., NW, Ste. 700
Washington, DC 20001
www.ccsso.org

Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform
407 South Dearborn Street, Suite 1500
Chicago, IL 60605
www.crosscity.org

The Education Trust
1725 K Street, NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20006
www.edtrust.org

FairTest
342 Broadway
Cambridge, MA 02139
www.fairtest.org

National Center on Education and the
Economy
PO Box 10391
Rochester, NY 14610
www.ncee.org

New Visions for Public Schools
96 Morton Street
New York, NY 10014
www.newvisions.org

Public Education Network
601 13th Street, NW
Suite 900 North
Washington, DC 20005
www.publiceducation.org

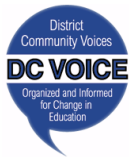
PRRAC
3000 Connecticut Ave., NW
Suite 200
Washington, DC 20008
www.prrac.org

Rethinking Schools
1001 E. Keefe Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53212
www.rethinkingschools.org

For more information on local schools and community organizations:

Columbia Heights Family Support Collaborative
1816 12th Street, NW #201
Washington, DC 20009
202-518-6737

DC Public Schools
825 North Capital Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4232
www.k12.dc.us/dcps/home.html



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