

students

parents

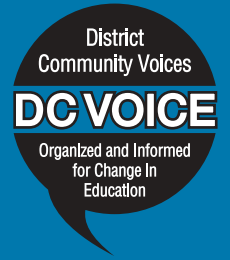
teachers

principals

administrators

community activists

policy makers



"INFORMATION PLEASE!"

A Public View on Education Information Needs in the District of Columbia

researchers

community groups

adult learners

school staff

government officials

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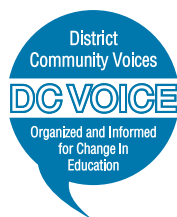
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"INFORMATION PLEASE"

A Public View on Education Information Needs in the District of Columbia

**DC VOICE SPECIAL REPORT TO THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA STATE EDUCATION OFFICE (SEO)**

March 2003

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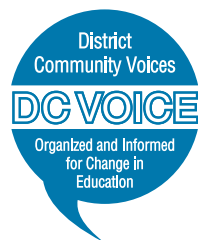
SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Glenda Partee, Ph.D.
Adam Lowe
D.C. Public Education Research Consortium (PERC)

This research was funded by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to DC VOICE.
DC VOICE is largely supported by the Ford Foundation,
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*The report is an edited version of a larger study. For more details, please contact
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This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings
and conclusions presented in this report are those of DC VOICE alone,
and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.



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Numerous reports have called attention to serious and persistent problems with the availability, reliability, and credibility of information about elementary and secondary education in the District of Columbia. Research shows that many states have systemic human resource and technical difficulties similar to those facing the District of Columbia.

The D.C. State Education Office (SEO) has asked for information on how states handle these challenges, and it has called for input by the public about what would be considered reliable information for all stakeholder groups in the community—students, parents, educators, policy makers, and researchers alike—so they each can make sound judgments about the quality of local education.

PARENT

**“We need
more outreach
to parents.”**

RESEARCH DESIGN

The first phase of this research was a survey of the types of data that community members want collected in an education database. Responses to a questionnaire with approximately 15 items revealed insights around these three broad queries:

- What types of descriptive information are necessary to accurately characterize the quality of education in the District of Columbia?
- What are the appropriate formats for dissemination of education information?
- What reports should the SEO provide to inform parents, teachers, school administrators, and the wider community about the quality of education in the District of Columbia?

In Spring 2002, this questionnaire was circulated at community group meetings and e-mailed to organizations and individuals in the District who are concerned with public school education. One hundred

fifty-five respondents answered, including parents, teachers, principals, DCPS and charter school administrators, community activists, and members of the nonprofit, for-profit, and research communities. The majority of respondents were those with access and skill on the Internet. Only 12% were parents and 14% teachers.

During Summer 2002, a search of websites of state and local education agencies was carried out to identify exemplary education data collection and dissemination practices. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with six state and two local education agencies to provide greater detail.

During Fall 2002, nine community based focus groups (involving students, parents, teachers, and policy makers) discussed these three questions:

- What information do you need about education?
- How do you want to get education information?
- What obstacles are there to getting education information?

This paper reports findings of this research in three sections:

- (1) Exemplary States – Major Findings;
- (2) Washington, D.C., Results; and
- (3) Implications and Recommendations.

TEACHER

**“A lot of decisions
that are made
that directly impact
both teachers and
students alike
are made devoid
of classroom
teacher input,
and I feel that we
are the experts.”**

**“Very often
the question is
how do we
compare to
other districts?”**

EXEMPLARY STATES — MAJOR FINDINGS

This part of the study examines the current status of education data collection, dissemination, and evaluation in exemplary states and school districts. The eight sites selected for this study include Florida; Chicago, Illinois, and the State of Illinois; Montgomery County, Maryland, and the State of Maryland; Michigan; Ohio; and Texas:

- Most sites are moving toward a single-record system, which tracks students and teachers over time and combines multiple information sources into one system or data warehouse.
- All sites currently disseminate school report cards and a wide amount of school- and district-level information directly to the public.
- All sites have comprehensive websites to allow for dissemination of information and provide data using multiple formats (e.g., pdf, html, and MS Excel).
- Most sites rely on software systems and internal staff to ensure high-quality data.
- Rarely do stakeholders give input into the development of data systems and dissemination methods, nor are they trained to use the system.
- Most sites rely on informal internal evaluations of the effectiveness of their data efforts.

Data collection and reporting are both a policy consideration and an important technological consideration. Locations across the nation that are doing a good job of collecting data use state-of-the-art data-warehousing tools, as well as the Internet and web-based tools.

The states and school districts that identify weaknesses in their information systems frequently cite outdated technology as a major impediment to overcome for future success. Technology is critical for improving annual and semiannual transmission of data from districts to the state, maintaining the integrity and quality of data, and reporting data in a timely and user-friendly manner.

WASHINGTON, D.C., RESULTS

A. SURVEY RESULTS

This section reports survey findings on the data elements that study participants believe should be collected and made available to the public by the State Education Office. (The percentage of respondents indicating an interest in each option is reported.)

QUESTION: *What kinds of schools and educational programs do you think should be included in a publicly accessible state-level database about education in the District of Columbia?*

- 93% would like information concerning D.C. public schools
- 86% – public charter schools
- 82% – adult education programs
- 79% – college and university programs
- 72% – technical training
- 63% – parochial schools
- 63% – private elementary and secondary schools
- 55% – home schooling

POLICY MAKER

“We need very simple information that is not easily available, and that is: Are the schools teaching the kids to read? Are they teaching them to write? Are they teaching them to speak? Are they teaching them to figure? And are they giving them any subject matter knowledge? Very basic.”

**“Whenever we get calls from parents,
they want to know
what’s special
about this school...
They want to know what the education
program is.... They want to know if there’s
anything special that the school does,
that kind of identifies it
compared to other schools.”**

Results suggest that respondents are particularly interested in a wide variety of data on elementary and secondary schools in the District of Columbia. Survey respondents most frequently requested access to information on basic school contacts, school programs (particularly day care availability), school themes, science labs, at-risk student populations, graduation rates and continuance in higher education, and teacher certification and turnover. In the area of adult education, respondents are interested in GED and English language programs; survey respondents are also interested in higher education information, especially on certificate programs and the Tuition Assistance Grant.

QUESTION: *How should the education data be provided to the public?* (Respondents were asked to check all items that answered this question for them; no priorities were sought.)

- 87% of respondents would like the data available via the Internet
- 56% – available upon request via e-mail, possibly in hard copy
- 52% – published in the media
- 40% – automatically if on a mailing list
- 31% – at each school
- 25% – at educational workshops provided by the SEO

**“I know the D.C. Public Schools website...
compares schools to each other; but I think
that if we were to move to having a
citywide database,
those things should also be included
for all of the schools in a similar way.”**

QUESTION: *What periodic reports on the status of education in the District would you like the SEO to develop and produce?*

- The overwhelming responses to this request were the development of 1) school report cards, which include information on standardized achievement tests and other measures of student outcomes, and 2) student and school characteristics for each school, and if possible, comparisons with other schools or district totals.

POLICY MAKER

“I would like to see not just student performance data but standardized student performance data. We need that. Every public, private, independent school would report their student performance in the same way.”

B. FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Focus group discussions deepened the survey results and contributed viewpoints not previously revealed, including additional secondary school information requirements and detailed elements for data collection, a range of ways for schools to disseminate information, and perceived obstacles to that dissemination. (A more detailed report with specific comments of focus group participants is available upon request from DC VOICE.)

QUESTION: *What information do you need about education?*

Focus group participants requested more of the following types of information (not in priority order):

- Careers, college preparation, college search, and financial aid
- Details about each school, program or curricular options, ways schools collaborate, high school entry, and graduation requirements
- School security and safety
- Rights and responsibilities of students and parents regarding education, e.g., in special education and school placement

PARENT

**“You want to know about special ed.,
you want to know about
graduation requirements, you want
to know about day care,
after-care, early admission.”**

- Special education laws, rules, and procedures—specifically:
 - Federal and District special education laws
 - Policies on inclusion of students with special needs
 - Rules and procedures for individual education plans (IEPs) and 504 plans
 - Styles of special education programs offered at each school
- Student assessments and student progress in school
- Parent support, involvement, and satisfaction
- Information on teachers, such as salary pay scales, recruitment and hiring practices, and content expertise
- School administration and budget breakdowns

POLICY MAKER

**“I’m always looking at suspension,
dropout, pushout data.... A good
school is not suspending a lot of kids and
it is not pushing out a lot of kids....
The dropout data is virtually
not collected properly anywhere.”**

**“We don’t have...definition[s]
universally across the District.”**

PARENT

**“Written information by mail...
one side in English and the other
side in Spanish.”**

STUDENT

“Daily updates on AM [radio].”

QUESTION: *How do you want to get education information?*

Focus group discussions yielded understanding about the desire for more personal means of communication in education, as well as the need to empower community members in the use of information technology—specifically:

- Person-to-person (oral) communication
- Culturally sensitive communication, carefully translated and in uncomplicated English
- Audio and visual media communication of education information
- School public address systems and radio stations
- School access to cable television
- Ads on radio and television
- Audiotapes in parent centers

PARENT

**“I’d like to see you use
that D.C. [television] station
to give parents information. Sometimes
parents are up at 12, 1, 2 o’clock in
the morning. We need to be able,
24 hours a day,
to go there and have a schedule.”**

- The Internet, through school computers
- The Internet, through home computers
- A public relations campaign
- Written communication: newsletters, more targeted mailings to students and parents

QUESTION: *What obstacles are there to getting education information?*

Focus group members identified several major obstacles they encounter when they seek information about education in the District:

- The D.C. Public School System and its schools do not convey information openly or thoroughly.
- Neglected yet important groups of stakeholders—students, parents, teachers—do not feel that they have a say in getting the information and how it is disseminated.
- The protection of information about individuals, groups, and institutions involved in education—though critical—conflicts, obscures, and interferes with getting more transparent and available information that people feel entitled to receive.

TEACHER

“Just cut out a level of middle management. You know, if there’s too many people in that chain, then the communication gets lost; it becomes crazy.”

POLICY MAKER

“There are issues of protection and confidentiality.”

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research is intended as a catalyst to bring about change. Its strength is that it draws from a much-needed cross-alliance of stakeholder groups: the grassroots, midlevel service providers, community and university researchers, and policy makers. The following priorities were identified by all stakeholder groups for education information:

- Basic school information about elementary and secondary schools, especially on student enrollment and demographics and several measures of student progress
- Adult education information, particularly on GED and English language programs
- Higher education information, especially on certificate programs (such as teacher credentialing and certification) and the Tuition Assistance Grant
- School report cards and reports on teacher quality such as certification and qualification information

PARENT

**“Only one parent
[in this group of twelve] has
a computer at home.”**

Researchers found that the digital divide across this city is a strong reason why a range of constituencies—students, parents, teachers, and policy makers from a variety of institutions—should take part in any further discussions to plan a better education information system.

With this great digital divide, especially among parents, education information must be presented in a wide number of ways. In addition to catchy and comprehensive websites and timely, resonant audiovisual media, these avenues must include person-to-person approaches and communication that is culturally sensitive as the number of English language learners increases citywide. Meanwhile, the entire community faces the challenge of training more youths, parents, and teachers to use computers so that a culture of data use permeates all parts of the community.

Exemplary jurisdictions around the country are moving toward single-record systems combined into data warehouses. All sites provide school report cards and a wide amount of school- and district-level information, usually on comprehensive websites in multiple data formats.

This city can become a leader with an excellent education information system if that system is sensitive to stakeholder groups' needs, if it is highly communicative, and if it is carefully developed. Nationwide evidence shows that the success of this task will depend on deliberate, timely, and responsive partnerships among visionary government officials, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and the public.

But first, the entire community must collectively nurture the political will to see to it that the state of education information is improved. In the District of Columbia, it appears that it will be worth every bit of effort and resources put into it.

TEACHER

“There needs to be more communication...about what we teach, how we teach, and we need more opportunity to talk to each other.”

A. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION BY THE SEO, MAYOR AND DISTRICT COUNCIL, DCPS, CHARTER SCHOOLS, PRIVATE SCHOOLS, AND THE WASHINGTON TEACHERS' UNION

1. Expand the Communication of Information

- Translate all DCPS and charter school data into forms that are accessible to non-English-speaking families and families with low literacy.
- Ensure that appropriate information is distributed equally to all schools and is readily accessible to teachers, parents, and students.

TEACHER

“Maybe we [should] get back to the parent centers. Everybody was supposed to have a parent center in their school.”

- Provide information on schools and educational opportunities through a wider range of media:
 - Use person-to-person opportunities such as school meetings, workshops for parents, parent centers, conferences, and phone calls to communicate information to parents. Promote more time for individual and small group discussions among school administrators, teachers, parents, and students.
 - Make greater use of newsletters and audiovisual media to communicate with students.
 - Create and distribute program and school directories in catalog form.
 - Provide teachers' e-mail addresses to parents.
 - Reach out to Advisory Neighborhood Commissions (ANCs) and other neighborhood organizations to distribute written and oral information to parents, and to also encourage teachers, school administrators, and city officials to share information with their representatives at their meetings.
 - Produce television or radio shows on choosing a variety of careers, training and college options, financial aid, and scholarships. Include important statistics. Have shows repeated in predictable time slots. Increase the use of public service announcements.
- Make school report cards available through various modes of communication.
- The teachers' union, assuming broad outreach to new and long-term teachers in all wards of the city, should play a key role in dispersing important data and information, both person-to-person and electronically.

TEACHER

“Community meetings are the key. You need to meet with all of the stakeholders, just like a successful business.”

“Information [should] be distributed equally...so that there is support from all groups...for the overall benefit of everyone.”

B. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION BY THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (DCPS) AND THE CHARTERING AUTHORITIES

The following recommendations should be enacted by the DCPS Administration, the D.C. Board of Education, and the Chartering Authorities:

1. Improve Data Gathering and Analysis

- Increase the capacity of DCPS and the Chartering Authorities to gather and produce more and better-quality information.
- Make explicit the rules of confidentiality and of access to confidential information and train staff to follow them. Protect privacy and produce usable data with trustworthy and transparent information systems.
- Revise customer satisfaction surveys from DCPS and the Chartering Authorities to tap more complex issues, such as the content and flow of information.
- Involve the community (select community based organizations, Washington Teachers' Union, etc.) to advise DCPS, Chartering Authorities, and other schools in the city, on what information is gathered and how it is analyzed.

“Change can't be made because they [administrators] don't get to talk to us.”

**“I feel like there is a large body...
of core data that...if it could
be produced and updated...it
would answer a lot of...the kind
of questions that come to me...
answers about...which schools have
AP classes...things like that.”**

2. Expand Use of the DCPS Website

- Greatly enrich the DCPS website, with more types of information about schools, and make the website more user-friendly and enticing for students, parents, and teachers.
- Provide information on a range of policies that affect teachers, parents, and students (e.g., special education rules and regulations, and time frames for carrying them out).
- Expand information on educational opportunities (e.g., special programs, science and technology labs) for students within public schools, including opportunities elsewhere in the city (e.g., access to museums, internships) and for career planning (e.g., SAT prep, job and college fairs).
- Expand information about special programs offered by each school—especially high schools.
- Provide information for and about teachers, such as certification, teaching experience, and pay scale.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION BY THE STATE EDUCATION OFFICE (SEO) OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

- Create a Districtwide oversight group:
 - To give citizen and frequent-user input into system development and information dissemination and to guide expansion of the use of education information.
 - To gather and ensure consistency of education information.
 - To ensure protection of privacy and representation from traditional public, charter, and parochial and other private schools, as well as of individuals.

- In conjunction with DCPS, conduct a thorough needs assessment of the DCPS information infrastructure.
- Conduct a mapping of the state of education information not only within DCPS but also among charter schools, parochial schools, and other private schools.
- Conduct a deeper technical analysis of single-record information systems that track individuals over time.
- Conduct a deeper technical analysis in order to decide which data-warehousing and software relates best to data needs in the District of Columbia.
- Conduct a deeper technical analysis to determine which software can best ensure that data are of high quality. Develop rules to systematically check data quality.
- Develop a system to take complaints, arbitrate disputes about data, evaluate data and systems periodically, and feed information about issues that arise back to the SEO so that it can make changes to the information system.
- Develop a long-range plan for an all-encompassing education data management and dissemination system.
- Make information available in formats that can be used by independent, nongovernmental groups to analyze and report on—even to criticize—and to keep transparent the information necessary for education change to happen.
- Develop a comprehensive website that makes data available in a variety of software formats.

POLICY MAKER

“I don’t think there’s...a real strong state level force that says this is what everybody is required to do and this is how everybody should report it, and I think it’s a lack of a central point. In the absence of that, all of the entities are doing their ‘best shot’ at it, doing what they think is good. But that’s what creates an obstacle in having the appropriate comparisons.”

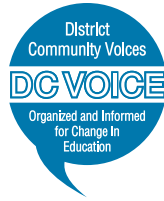
- Determine objections of decentralized school units (such as specific public, charter, and parochial and other private schools) to a centralized data system and find a mutually agreeable solution for a comprehensive, coordinated information flow.
- With the community's help, build the demand side for education information, encouraging more stakeholders to ask for and use data.

CHARTER SCHOOL DECISION-MAKER

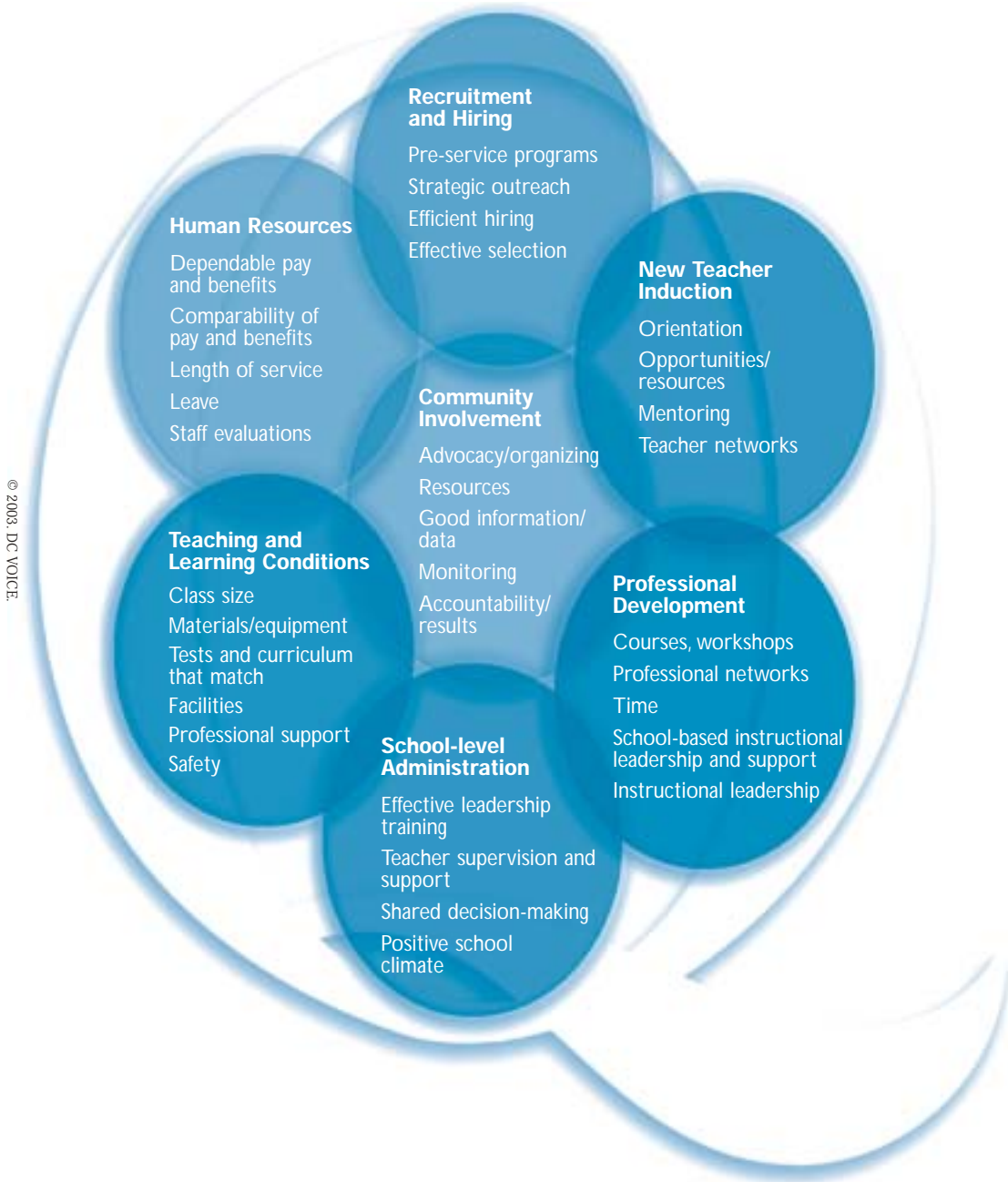
“There isn’t a common software that’s used, and that would facilitate things coming out in the same way.”

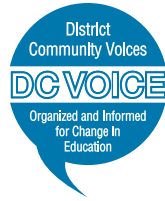
D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION BY THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA MAYOR AND COUNCIL

- Mandate that important types of data are made explicit and uniform among all schools in the District (e.g., school safety data and dropout statistics).
- Mandate that basic information be gathered in a common format and delivered to a central database, including public, charter, and parochial and other private schools. This information format should be compatible with the information formats of other city agencies to provide cross-agency support for students and families.
- Mandate that all schools use data-reporting software that provides uniform data, and give staff the necessary technical support.



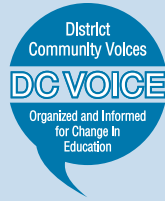
A Framework to Benefit Student Learning: Supports for Quality Teaching (SQT)





DC VOICE is a collaborative of education activists committed to ensuring that every child in Washington, D.C. receives a high quality public education. We believe that the key to achieving this is an engaged and informed public that both supports public education and holds schools and the city accountable for the education of our youth. DC VOICE is a Local Education Fund and part of the Public Education Network (PEN), the nation's largest network of independent, community based school-reform organizations. DC VOICE is supported by the Ford Foundation Collaborating for Educational Reform Initiative, and the Annenberg Foundation through the Public Education Network Teacher Quality Initiative. This study was supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Since its founding in 1998, DC VOICE has emphasized the need to increase the accessibility of data and ensure that school reform efforts are based on accurate information. DC VOICE collaborators believe that the public must be informed so that people can organize to demand needed changes, and can hold both themselves and schools accountable for providing a top quality education for all children in Washington D.C. Through public engagement, policy change and support for effective practices, DC VOICE seeks system-wide change to assure quality teaching for every child in every public school classroom. DC VOICE has developed a comprehensive framework to benefit student learning that demonstrates the supports needed for high quality teaching and learning.



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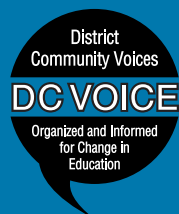
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