

# STARTING OFF RIGHT: WERE THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS READY FOR OUR STUDENTS?

## *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

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

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

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

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

## **PROJECT FINDINGS**

### **School Staffing**

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

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

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

### **New Teacher Support**

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

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

### **Professional Development**

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

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

### **Teaching and Learning Conditions**

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

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

### **Safety and security**

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

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## ***Facilities***

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

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

## ***Parent and Community Involvement***

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

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

## ***Overall Rating***

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

## ***PROJECT OBSERVATIONS***

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

### ***Observations based on project data***

- **Some areas of DC Public Schools' administration and management have improved over the past years and, with good management, could continue to improve.** For example, even though the Human Resources office continues to receive mixed reviews, it seems to be doing a better job now than in the past.
- **One of the biggest obstacles to a smooth school opening was in the area of facilities.** Facilities issues provide great challenges to school principals, often consuming a great deal of time that takes them away from their role as instructional leaders in their schools.
- **Project findings were similar in all parts of the city.** This was true, no matter what school level or school location.

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- **Some of the findings point directly to solutions.** For example, in some cases it was clear that poor communication was the main problem. In others, management processes need the greatest attention. Some of the specifics surfaced in the findings can point the way to specific actions for change.
- **Other findings raised new questions and issues requiring further examination.** As with most research efforts, the findings generated additional questions. For example, more information is needed about the DCPS recruitment and hiring process.
- **The Central administration-local school relationship needs to be examined.** Roles and responsibilities in some areas are unclear, and right now, it appears that many principals are making things work at their schools in spite of a lack of systemic supports.
- **A preoccupation with obtaining systemic supports distracts schools from their primary mission: To provide quality teaching for all students and enable them to achieve at high levels.** If we are to hold the principals directly accountable for student achievement, we must also give them the resources and necessary assistance to provide effective instructional leadership that can lead to greater student achievement.

### General Observations

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

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



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## ABOUT DC VOICE

**DC VOICE** is a collaborative of education activists committed to ensuring every child in Washington, DC a high quality public education. We believe that key to achieving this is an engaged and informed public that both supports public education and holds schools and the city accountable for the education of our youth. DC VOICE is a Local Education Fund and part of the Public Education Network (PEN), the nation's largest network of independent, community-based school-reform organizations. 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*. As of December 2004 DC VOICE is receiving support from the Fannie Mae Foundation.

For the full report, please visit [www.dcvoice.org](http://www.dcvoice.org). For more information about DC VOICE and this initiative, call 202.986.8535 or email [dcvoice@dcvoice.org](mailto:dcvoice@dcvoice.org).

