

Powell Elementary School

New Principal, New Perspective

BY HEATHER SCHOELL

Principal perspective can change the culture of a school. Powell Elementary's new leader, Principal Janeece Docal, brings with her the perspective of higher learning and exploration of ideas. Expectations of critical thinking, experiential learning and continued education – they come with her, too.

Believe It

This is important. We can do this. We believe in you. Work hard. Get smart. This is what Powell Elementary School students and families see when they come into the building. Powell, part of the Lincoln Hill Cluster, along with Barnard Elementary and MacFarland Middle School, and under the direction of Dr. Shirley A. Hopkinson, has a new campus leader at the helm – Janeece Docal. She is new to the school but not new to education.

Docal's young visage does not reflect that she is

a seasoned educational professional. After grad school at George Washington University, she spent nine years at Columbia Heights Education Campus, as an ESL (English as a Second Language) and English teacher, as English department chair, as academic coordinator in the Math and Science Business Academy (overseeing 150 students and 30 staff), as assistant principal and then as resident principal.

The effect of coming from middle and high school levels has translated into higher expectations of elementary-level students. To get children thinking in terms of higher

Powell's Core Values

Be there and be ready.	Este a tiempo y listo.
Be kind and considerate.	Ser amable y considerado.
Be respectful.	Ser respetuoso.
Be responsible.	Ser responsable.
Be trustworthy.	Ser digno de confianza.

learning, every teacher's alma mater is represented on canvas outside of their classroom. "Our focus is on rigor," says Docal. "We are family friendly, but we are planning backwards for the rigor of college, focused on readiness."

Students keep a portfolio of their work, including Kelly Hernandez's letter to US Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, asking the judge for an opportunity to meet (which they did). It includes projects from weekly experiential trips, such as an exploration of architectural design after a trip to the National Building Museum. Portfolios build up knowledge through investigation and discovery, but also sharpen skills in writing

and critical thinking. They provide proof of accomplishment. "Portfolios are something I did at Columbia Heights. This is not new. I am not a genius," says Docal. "I stand on the shoulders of giants with mentors of Maria Tukeva [founder of Columbia Heights Campus] and Dr. Hopkinson."

Changes Happening

Powell's status with DCPS is currently Restructuring I, meaning they need to get their standardized test scores higher. Their DC CAS (a test of DC students, beginning in third grade) had them in 2009 at 34 percent proficient in reading and 43 percent proficient in math. To obtain Safe Harbor, an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status of a

school that shows marked improvement, is a lesser goal. Docal is shooting for 74 percent in reading and 71 percent in math. "I want 80 percent mastery on everything," she says.

How will they get there?

There is a staff development meeting each morning, covering topics including teaching, testing and culture. "We're building collaboration, focusing on shared leadership," Docal explains. "We're working with Amer-



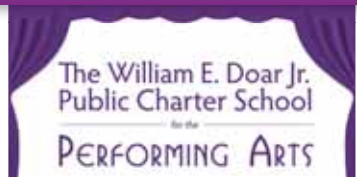
Cristian Bonilla, fourth-grader, writes in his notebook.



Kindergarten readers Trinity Hagler and Emerson Moreno-Hernandez. Photos by Belen Perez Gabilondo, courtesy DCPS.



Principal Janeece Docal with students.



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incorps volunteers, the Office of Latino Affairs, La Trenga Leadership, the Office of Bilingual Education." Powell welcomes volunteer support.

Buy-in from students helps, too. Dawit Amare, a fourth-grader from Ethiopia, has his eye on the prize – Panther Paws for Applause, which are merits for praise. "I like Panther Paws for free tickets for Papa John's cheese sticks," says Amare.

Keyley Garcia, also in fourth grade, thinks, "Last year was almost good, but this year is much better. They have core values. They make a difference." [See Core Values inset.]

Docal has instituted some changes in daily events. For example, instead of students playing around before school, there is a morning reading program from 8 to 8:45 a.m., during which family members serve as guest readers. There are monthly awards for most improved, adherence to the uniform policy and attendance (at an impressive 97 percent – the goal is 100 percent), as well as a cultural assembly showcasing student art and music.

Faces of Powell

Honduras, Eritrea, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Ethiopia, El Salvador – these are some of the countries represented by the families of Powell, the population is approximately 80 percent Hispanic and 20 percent African and African-American, with a few students of Asian or Pacific Islander descent. Nearly 72 percent are English Language Learners (ELL, also known as ESL). The diverse population of staff and the various lands represented by students brings a richness to the school, as well as challenges. The key is turning the challenges into learning opportunities.

To that end, Powell offers dual-language learning,

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Ms. Altman's kindergarteners Penial Bokretzion and Christopher Funes.

meaning English- and Spanish-speaking teachers are in each classroom. The opportunity for a 50/50 language split begins in kindergarten. Preschool and pre-kindergarten have a 45-minute block of literature in Spanish. Percia Williams, mother to a second-grader and a pre-k student and originally from the Philippines, says, "I love my [pre-k] son's teacher. [My pre-k son] can write, loves math and numbers, and comes home speaking Spanish!" Williams' older son won the spelling bee (the first one at Powell), beating out third- and fourth-graders. Unfortunately, he was not old enough to qualify for further rounds beyond the school – a disqualification to be proud of!

Culture and Climate

All Powell students wear a uniform of white tops and blue bottoms. "I love uniforms," says Williams. "You don't have to buy a lot of clothes, and it looks more presentable."

Powell begins with Head Start, a national program that promotes school readiness by developing children through health and wellness. Head Start students eat lunch in their room. Next year, Head Start and pre-k will incorporate at Powell. The older students' lunch and recess times are staggered, with pre-k to first grades eating at 11 a.m. and second to fourth grades having recess before lunch. Recess offers structured activities, including yoga, computers and robotics. "This gives students exposure to a new teacher and another opportunity for enrichment," says Docal.

The family is integral at Powell. Docal offers her office (which doubles as a meeting room) for parent meetings and morning and afternoon coffees with her to discuss issues important to the school – speed bumps to



Anthony Castillo-Hernandez, third-grader, reading in the library.

abate traffic, additional crossing guards and family literacy. "Our parents are invested in quality education," says Docal. "Parents weren't happy last year," she says, and she is working to change that.

Powell offers choices for participation. In addition to Docal's open office door, the monthly assembly and the family morning read, the media teacher, Ericka Lindo, offers parent classes twice weekly, teaching parents such things as resume-writing and computer skills.

Theodore Hinton, whom Docal was able to hire as a mentor principal, has 20 years of school leadership experience. He has her back on improving the school's relationship with the community, increasing parental involvement, and instituting standards for student behavior.

Extras

Powell offers aftercare until 6:30 p.m. with tutoring from teachers and volunteers from the Latin American Youth Center. Clubs include snowboarding, chess, science, greening, baseball and Lego robotics.

Stop in for a tour and a chat with Principal Docal and meet the staff and students