

DCPS Reductions Spread Unevenly

High Schools Describe Post-RIF Environment

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ



East of the River schools lost disproportionate instructional staff in the recent DC Public School reduction-in-force (RIF). Moreover, according to Washington Teacher Union data provided to the DC Council, high schools, particularly those in Wards 7 and 8, were hardest hit:

- EOR/DCPS: Of the 266 instructional staff – teachers, counselors, librarians and social worker/psychologists – RIF'd, 110, or 44 percent, were cut from schools east of the river. The school population in those wards represents only 32.2 percent of the DCPS total, however.
- High Schools/DCPS: Only 22 percent of DCPS students are high schoolers, but 38 percent of the RIF'd positions (103) were high school faculty: 82 teachers, 17.5 counselors, 2.5 librarians, and one social worker.
- EOR High Schools/DCPS High Schools: Anacostia, Ballou and H.D. Woodson lost 37 instructional positions – 36 percent of the high school RIF – although these

schools comprise only 22 percent of DCPS high schoolers and only 30 percent of the enrollment loss at the high school level this year. (Lower DCPS schools gained 486 students this year compared with last, but high schools lost 622, with a drop of 198 in Wards 7 and 8.)

High School RIF Experience

On Sep. 16, Mayor Adrian Fenty and DC Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee announced a system-wide RIF to take place two weeks later. “Our students are our priority,” Fenty said, “and we remain committed to ensuring that budget reductions do not affect the quality of academic programming.” Testimony given at recent DC Council hearings by students, teachers and other personnel at DCPS high schools suggests otherwise.

“Now I sit in class with 35 students, fighting for the teacher’s attention ... and a seat,” Jeill Richardson, an H.D. Woodson Business-Finance Academy senior, testified to the DC Council on Oct. 16. Six weeks into the term, she explained, her business

management class absorbed students reassigned when the sole English 4 teacher was RIF'd. Neither the former English students nor the management class were faring well, she noted.

Martha Blackford, another H.D. Business-Finance senior, told the council that, following the RIF, “schedules had to be changed, students are stressed, teachers are overloaded, and classes are too large.” In addition, the RIF occurred on the day of a scholarship deadline, leaving graduating seniors without the counselor responsible for related paperwork. (The academy director stayed late, scrambling to meet the deadline.)

At recent hearings, Ward 7 Councilmember Yvette Alexander and Ward 8 Councilmember Marion Barry described disruptions to foreign language studies, college counseling and other essentials at high schools east of the river, which had been reported to their offices.

The Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals and Educators (SHAPPE) collected data from high schools across the city regarding the RIF. Based on this

information, SHAPPE Director Cathy Reilly testified to the council on Oct. 16: The RIF compromised the “ability to deliver basic services to many of the DCPS high schools ... by design or mismanagement, [the RIF] came at an unacceptable expense to many of our high school students, and they are some of the most challenged and vulnerable.”

While the council “signed on to school reform,” Council Chairman Vincent Gray said at the Oct. 29 hearing, “No one signed on to chaos, disrespect of teachers and parents, and students being subjected to the classroom disruptions resulting from this RIF.”

After the RIF and public testimony, DCPS released “Chancellor’s Notes,” reporting that “the majority of schools was not significantly affected,” with 102 of 123 schools losing two or fewer positions. In addition, these Oct. 23 “Notes” stressed fourth- and eighth-grade testing gains, adding, “Now that’s what I’m talking about!” Nowhere in this or other post-RIF communications did the chancellor address the upheaval experienced by many high schoolers.

Lessons Learned

High schoolers should have been addressed directly, Blackford suggested, instead of being left – as teens all over town were – to discover dismissals in roundabout ways. “I feel disrespected by my principal and by the chancellor.”

Beyond schedule changes, high schoolers are bearing burdens, including distress for faculty members left with more work, that younger students may not: Blackford noted, for example, that she is helping in the academy office, because a secretary was RIF'd. Adele LaFranque, a veteran, certified and award-winning counselor who was RIF'd from Ballou, reports that former students, whom she meets around the community, seem concerned for her as well as for their own loss.

“But this is a teachable moment,” says the Rev. Anthony Motley, an active minister in Ward 8 and candidate for council at-large. “These hearings teach our young people to activate good government process – dialogue, use the law, respond verbally – that’s how you squash a beef, rather killing or beating someone up.”

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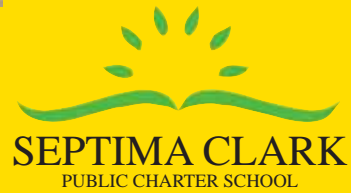
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