

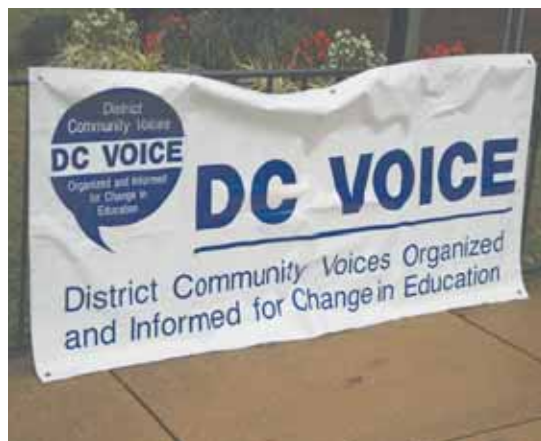
Renovations + Reforms = Readiness?

DCPS Audit Reveals Mixed Results

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

DC Public Schools received their fifth annual “readiness” report card last month, and DC Voice, a 10-year-old education reform collaborative, has already begun coordinating remedial efforts.

The Ready Schools Project (RSP), an expanding endeavor of DC Voice and partner organizations, has gathered data about staffing, facilities, supplies and safety at the start of each school year since 2004. In the first audit, 50 volunteers visited 43 schools. This year, over 200 volunteers visited 109 schools. Each year, DC Voice has shared data and recommendations with school and government leaders. This year, in addition, community members will more directly “use the information to take meaningful and responsible action.”



Partial results for 25 consolidated schools were presented at an Oct. 30 DC Council hearing. Full data were introduced by Jeff Smith, executive director of DC Voice, and Erica Landberg, program director, at November “Green Eggs and Ham” Town Hall meetings.

These citywide discussions drew more than 100 participants each and generated ideas for improvements. Among early suggestions, for example, was development of community supports for distribution of textbooks and supplies, a perennial problem area. Green Eggs and Ham gatherings also considered models from other parts of the country.

“It’s time,” Smith said, “for the community to find its own voice for educational reform.”

Quarterly town hall meetings are planned. Working groups are now forming to transform discussion into action.

Improvements and Concerns

The percentage of classrooms with computers and internet access – among oft-repeated questions allowing longitudinal comparison – increased substantially (to 92 and 86 percent, respectively). In questions added to the survey this year, however, only 58 percent of schools reported teachers trained in computer assisted lessons, and 68 percent said that teachers regularly use technology for instruction.

Also new this year were reports of resources and strategies for lower performing students: workbooks, games, supplemental texts and educational software; teacher coaches, instructional aides and trained tutors.

The percentage of schools with safety/security personnel by opening day increased from 93 percent in 2007 to 98 percent in 2008; only 86 percent of schools reported a full complement in 2004. Safety/security equipment increased from 82 percent in 2007 to 89 percent in 2008 (and “most” in 2004).

Required textbooks were missing in 27 percent of schools on day one, versus 22 percent in 2007. This is an improvement over previous years, however; only 51 percent of schools surveyed in 2004 reported all required books received.

DCPS-funded music and art teachers were in place at 89 percent of schools, according to the 2008 RSP, while fewer than 70 percent of schools had such teachers in 2007. The percentage of librarians decreased slightly.

This year, 36 percent of schools reported hiring complete by the first day of school, compared with 66 percent in 2007 (45-49 percent of schools reported complete hiring in early audit years). The average 2008 vacancy rate was 3.3 per school, with 225 open positions reported in 68 schools. The 2007 rate was 2.4 per school (114 vacancies in 47 schools).

Promise and Reality

“Granted, there may be a few examples where some work is still required,” Mayor Adrian Fenty said of DCPS school facilities on opening day. According to the RSP,

however, less than half of schools – and only one-third of consolidated schools – reported all promised repairs complete.

Still, repair figures for 2008 represent a quantitative improvement: This year, 45 percent of schools reported “all promised repairs” complete – 31 percent some, 18 percent none – by opening day; in consolidated schools, 33 percent reported all promised repairs – 52 percent some – finished on time. Last year, 12 percent reported all repairs complete, 80 percent some and 7 percent none. Only 19 percent of schools reported “major building and grounds repairs” before school began in 2004.


Nancy Huvendick of the 21st Century School Fund testified at the council hearing that auditors found that “work done quickly was not always what was needed,” that money-saving planning was lacking, and that renovation quality was uneven.

Most consolidated schools (92 percent) reported having transition teams this summer and finding their work helpful. The RSP also noted an improved lead time, compared with 2006, for consolidation planning. Only 50 percent reported that all records were transferred on time, however, with IEPs (Individualized Education Plans for students receiving special education) the most frequently missing record, followed by summer school, academic, health and “other” records.

“If you can’t identify in the budget the person responsible, it won’t happen,” Smith told the council, adding that RSP results illustrate how the “race to send money to schools can negatively affect planning and other important central office functions.”

Shital Shah, DC Voice volunteer from Ward 2, testified that successful school consolidations involved communicating information to all affected school communities. DC Voice recommends DCPS using the same strategy to include parents in building ownership of other planned changes.


For Ready Schools Project details and to join future discussions, call 202-986-8535 or visit www.DCVoice.org. ★



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