



Spotlight on Parents

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ABOUT DC VOICE

DC VOICE is a citywide, community-based collaborative of education activists committed to ensuring every child in Washington, DC the conditions for quality teaching and learning. We believe that key to achieving this is an engaged and informed public that both supports public education and holds schools and the full community 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. PEN and the Ford Foundation have provided multi-year core support, with additional support from diverse individuals, corporations, and foundations such as the Fannie Mae Foundation and Eugene and Agnes Meyer Foundation.

This report is part of the READY SCHOOLS PROJECT (RSP) that focuses on the systemic supports in place so that DC public schools (DCPS) can provide high quality teaching and learning for all students. *Spotlight on Parents* presents what parents have to say about the supports their schools and students need to succeed. They made many suggestions for improvement, including the following:

- Parent and community involvement can be increased by providing welcoming school environments. (see page 4)
- Teacher training should be ongoing and should cover several specific areas. (see page 5)
- Regarding facilities, expectations need to be raised, equitable services provided, and communications improved. (see page 5)

The reporting on this year's RSP is being presented in two parts: the Part I report focused on the findings from 52 school principal interviews (For a copy of *Starting Off Right 2005: A School System in Transition*, please visit our web site: www.dcvoice.org). The Part II reporting will consist of a series of short reports on parent and teacher focus groups and interviews, and further analysis of four areas: hiring, professional development, facilities, and parent and community involvement.

This report examines the responses of parents in five focus groups and three interviews. The 26 participating parents represented schools from across the city and across all grade levels. Questions were asked regarding the "first day of school" experience, and in three core areas:

- Parent and Community Involvement
- Teaching and Learning Conditions
- Facilities

We thank the parents, grandparents and guardians who participated in these discussions. Your voice will help to make a difference in the lives of all DC public school children.

PARENTAL VIEWS MIXED ON SCHOOL PROGRESS

Parents were asked to rate their sense of the school's readiness to open, where the high rating meant there was nothing to worry about, and the low rating that they wished they had kept their child home for another week. The majority of responses were in the middle—the first day of school was okay, but a couple more things needed to be in place.

"If people had some sense of hope, they'd be willing to kind of stick it through the frustration of trying to get things done."

-Elementary and Junior High school parent

As in the principal interviews, parents gave many examples of things not working well, but they also reflected a growing sense of hope that things will improve. As one parent said, "...dealing with the DC Schools is just pure frustration..." But that same parent went on to say: "...Things seem to be improving with the political climate and cooperation...and having a new superintendent...I think things are definitely moving in a more positive direction." Some parents worry that needed supports are provided at some schools and not others; they are not available systemically to all schools.

Many parents reported a positive school opening:

- "It was a pretty smooth process from the school standpoint."
- "It was fantastic!"
- The "principal does his best to make sure that these new students as well as the teachers and new parents know their way."
- "It was better than it was last year..."

PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Parents recognize that their involvement is a critical component of student achievement. As one parent said, "[parent involvement] is good for our community. I know that it's good for our children, too." They described their experiences this year and offered ideas to encourage greater involvement.

"The average principal...that has open arms to parents [being in the school], ... that building usually grows. When you have a closed-minded leader, then you have a close-minded school."

-Elementary and Middle school parent

Parents recommend encouraging greater parent and community involvement by creating a welcoming school environment. Most parents stated that their schools are welcoming. Some feel that school leadership sets the tone, while others attributed a welcoming environment to a "PTSA that's very involved," or, as one parent reflected, she felt comfortable, "because [parents] were on the welcoming committee."

"We have a large PTA involvement... They also provide a...ListServe and they also have a homework hotline, which I think is very supportive and...helpful."

- Junior High school grandparent

Communication between schools and parents remains an important issue for parents. Local schools use several methods, including web sites, list-serves, and e-mails to facilitate communication among school personnel and parents. In some schools, parent-teacher

organizations have taken the initiative in encouraging and using these methods. Most parents, however, report they receive little to no support from local school personnel or DCPS central offices for better communication.

Most parents have heard about the new academic standards, but do not have enough information to understand them. Some parents learned about the new standards at Back-to-School Night, and are glad to know "what to expect for the next year, and kind of prepare your child." Distribution of the parent guide on the new standards was haphazard, even among parents whose children attended the same school.

"The teachers just gave a handout [on the standards] and they didn't elaborate."

-Elementary school parent

Parents recommend that the school system improve parent and community communications and involvement by:

- Providing parent workshops/trainings on such topics as cultures, languages, what students are learning, and computers
- Re-designing parent-teacher conference days to make them less stressful for both parents and teachers
- Inviting parents to schools during non-teaching days
- Providing more parent volunteer opportunities
- Providing technical support for school web sites, list-serves, phone directories and e-mail communications

TEACHING AND LEARNING CONDITIONS

In discussing teaching and learning conditions with parents, certain suggestions emerged:

- Have required textbooks by the opening of school
- Ensure that permanent teachers are in the classrooms by the first day of school
- Provide teacher training on how to work with parents and students more effectively

"I think teachers need, especially as the city's changing...more diversity training [on] how to deal with students...We have various students of different religious backgrounds in the classrooms and some teachers don't effectively know how to deal with them."

-Elementary school parent

"Two of the classes my kid was in didn't have textbooks... This is week five now. He still doesn't have a math textbook and they've been badgering the people downtown to figure out what happened with the procurement problem with textbooks."

-High school parent

One parent said her child's math teacher "still doesn't have the textbook. My understanding is that...70 textbooks are back ordered and they're just sharing books and making photocopies and trying to make do." Most parents said that their children have the books but they didn't know exactly when schools gave the books to them.

Parents report that DCPS has achieved partial success in its efforts to place permanent teachers in every classroom on the first day of school. While one parent stated, "Last year [the school] had more problems [with teacher hiring] than this year. This year it's much better," another said "we're so short-staffed... I couldn't tell you which ones are permanent and which aren't. "

Parents are particularly concerned about teacher training in areas such as how to work in the classroom, and how to relate to parents and students. They are concerned that teachers have little time to focus on training: "If you look at the day of the teacher...what time is there for training?"

Parents suggested that teacher training should cover:

- Laws and Board of Education policies
- Teaching to students' diverse learning styles
- Sensitivity and Culture training
- Creativity training
- Communicating with parents and students

FACILITIES

All parents are concerned about facilities issues, equity and safety. While some feel that facilities maintenance has improved, others are frustrated. Several parents are encouraged by the extra \$6 million provided to the school system for basic maintenance over the summer and the citywide

"[The Department of Facilities] got a little better over the summer; they did some of the improvements that [the school] recommended."

-High school parent

"It is a fairly well kept building and I think that's a lot due, not to DCPS, but due to the parent involvement and the community involvement."

-Elementary school grandparent

Beautification Day in

August. Nevertheless, many parents say that these efforts provide band-aids when school facilities really need deep surgery.

A couple of parents deeply involved in school modernization efforts this year suggested that facilities funding was being spent irresponsibly:

- "It was great to see the progress that was made...but it

would have been nice if it had been managed better. They didn't start until incredibly late in the summer."

- "It's really hard for those of us who are out there advocating for DCPS to get more money...when they don't do a very good job with the money they've got."

"I cannot understand how anyone in the city expects the kids to learn and the teachers to work in heat or in cold. To me, it's unconscionable and should not happen. I just don't understand why it has to go on year after year; why don't they fix it?"

-Junior High school grandparent

Parents are also concerned about the equity in spending on facilities. One parent states, "It shouldn't have to be the squeaky wheel is the one who gets the money...It's great that [a parent] is going to go down there [to the DCPS office] and fight, but why should you have to spend your time doing that? What about another school that doesn't have somebody to go down there? It's an inequity cycle. "

Parents report mixed feelings about the safety and security of their children:

- Some say that security is not adequate for schools with large buildings and/or heavy enrollment, while others feel there are "more than enough police officers and more than enough security officers on the first day."
- Parents are concerned that the security guards do not have enough experience. Parents are worried about police presence in schools, saying that the "uniform officers...on the campus are well-meaning, but...they bring too much of a police attitude," and the "regular DC uniformed officers here in the school are a little heavy-handed, frankly, for that school environment."

NEXT STEPS

In summary, parents want more information and more access to schools. They want the system to provide the supports students and teachers need for quality teaching and learning. Parents want to be ensured that schools are safe and secure, and that supports are equitably distributed across all schools.

"One school may think that the other school is better off than we are but...it's not; we all have the same common...goals we want to attain."
-Elementary school parent

Over the next few months, DC VOICE will release other updates in the following areas as part of the READY SCHOOLS PROJECT:

- Teacher Focus Group Findings
- School Staffing
- Professional Development
- Facilities
- Parent and Community Involvement

"I think that what we need as a community is to have...some sense of hope. I don't think there's been much of that...[and] there needs to be some sense of pride in the school system."

-Elementary and Junior High school parent

The intent of the Ready Schools Project and resulting reports and updates is to provide data and knowledge that can be used to 1) monitor progress for improvement, and 2) advocate more effectively for the supports needed for quality teaching and learning in all schools, for all students. We welcome your feedback and involvement. Please contact us at 202-986-8535, dcvoice@dcvoice.org.