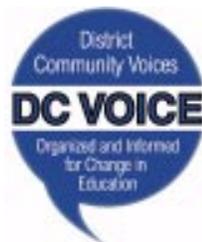


STARTING OFF RIGHT 2005: A School System in Transition

Part I: READY SCHOOLS PROJECT 2005 Findings 2004-2005 Comparisons

December 2005



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DC VOICE thanks everyone who volunteered and supported the READY SCHOOLS PROJECT (RSP) this year and made it a success. Volunteers helped design this year's effort, recruited schools to participate, attended training sessions, reviewed checklist drafts, and visited schools to conduct the checklist with school principals. Community members continue to call DC VOICE to ask if there are other opportunities to participate. There are. RSP doesn't stop with this report. In the next few months, we will be contacting people to participate in community briefings, and also to help with follow-up efforts on the 2005 findings.

Because school principals were assured that their responses were confidential, their names and school names will not be identified. However, they know who they are and we thank them for the excellent information they provided, and for their continuing efforts to provide the conditions their teachers need to teach and their students need to learn. In addition, we thank the participants in the eight teacher and parent focus group and interview sessions conducted this fall. The findings from those sessions will be included in Part II of this 2005 report scheduled to publish January 2006.

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INTRODUCTION

DC VOICE believes that schools need supports to provide the educational setting students need to do well. The READY SCHOOLS PROJECT (RSP) focuses on the systemic supports necessary not only for the start of school, but during the whole school year. Our goal was to move beyond individual impressions and stories about school conditions and begin to collect data representative of the whole school system. .

This year's report will be produced in two parts: Part I contains this year's findings from the interviews with 52 school principals, as well as comparison data based on the schools and principals that participated in both 2004 and 2005. Part II will be released in January 2006 and will contain the findings from teacher and parent focus groups, as well as additional analyses of the findings and comparison data in Part I.

Since DC VOICE launched the RSP in 2004, a new superintendent and a new administrative team were hired to lead the DC Public Schools (DCPS). A new education plan, *Declaration of Education: Keeping Our Promise to the District's Children* (Strategic Plan), was developed with community involvement during the winter and early spring and released in May 2005. The Strategic Plan commits DCPS to three mutually supportive goals (Appendix A):

1. High quality teaching and learning
2. Management and operations support for teaching and learning
3. Community collaboration and open communication

The Strategic Plan aligns well with the teaching and learning focus of the 2005 RSP checklist that addressed five areas: school staffing, professional development, teaching and learning conditions, facilities, and parent and community involvement. Furthermore, the Strategic Plan directly addresses some of the issues cited in the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) 2004 Report, *Restoring Excellence to the District of Columbia Public Schools* (Appendix B). A year ago, when no comprehensive education plan existed, the CGCS report, as well as DC VOICE's Supports for Quality Teaching and Learning Framework (Appendix C), provided the basis for designing the RSP checklist. A year later, it is gratifying to have DCPS's own plan providing the direction for efforts to improve the education and achievement of all students all across the city.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

This year 52 school principals participated in the interviews, nine more than the 43 school principals who participated in the 2004 RSP. The 52 principals represented 35% of DCPS's 147 schools, and were representative of the school system in the following ways:

- **School level type** (38 elementary, 7 middle and junior high, and 7 high schools)
- **Geographic diversity** (the number of schools included in each ward was based on that ward's percentage of the total number of schools in the district)
- **Student ethnic and racial characteristics** (2004 data)
- **Student achievement levels** (based on the 2004 SAT 9 test results)
- **Socio-economic levels** (percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch)
- **Enrollment** (the 52 schools enroll 19,738 students of the district's 59,616 students)

The 52 principal interviews were conducted between September 26 and October 21, 2005. Over 60 volunteers from all parts of the city were involved in this community-based research effort. To ensure reliability, the volunteers were trained to administer the checklist, always interviewing principals in teams of two. All principals were promised confidentiality, which helped ensure candid responses and kept the focus on systemic issues.

Our analysis of their responses is divided into three stages. In the first stage, we used SPSS to review the descriptive data on the principals' responses. In the second stage, we used NVivo to review the qualitative responses that accompanied many of the principals' quantitative responses. In some cases, these comments sought to clarify the numbers. In other cases, they actually presented a contrasting "feeling" to the numbers. This second stage analysis has made the overall reporting of the principals' experiences more complex as discussed throughout the report. In the third stage, comparison data between 2004 and 2005 results is presented.

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

This Part I report is organized in three sections. Section I contains the findings from the interviews with principals in five teaching and learning areas:

1. School Staffing
2. Professional Development
3. Teaching and Learning Conditions
4. Facilities
5. Parent and Community Involvement

Section II compares 2004 with 2005 findings for the 31 schools and principals that participated in RSP 2004. Of the remaining 12 schools that comprised the 2004 cohort of 43 schools, eight had new principals, and four could not participate this year for various reasons. The Conclusion includes additional discussion of the 2004 and 2005 data and information about the next RSP report.

DCPS IN TRANSITION

This year's findings paint a clear picture of a school system in transition. DCPS is in the throes of changing from the fragmented and unfocused system described in the CGCS report to one more focused on higher academic and operational standards, and on standardization, accountability, and equity. A transition process can be chaotic and stressful, and the benefits of change may not be readily apparent. Consider the process of renovating an old school. Before the renovation starts, it might be barely functional, but at least it's operating, even at a low level. It's hard to see many of the early-phase improvements, like electrical and pipe replacements. As the work progresses, floors, walls and ceilings are ripped out. For a while it's a mess, and very difficult to operate in. More visible improvements like new windows and decorating come later, after the infrastructure is fixed and in place. In the case of the school system, the future goal is greater order and support, as well as higher and improved functioning for everyone, including students, teachers, parents, and community.

Why do we focus on this here? Because several performance outcomes in this RSP report are lower this year—but the overall ratings of systemic supports provided are higher. We have concluded that principals gave higher ratings this year because they know that things are in transition, that they are changing. Their higher ratings of system support seem to reflect both their appreciation of the efforts being made as well as their own hopes for an improved school system in the future.

2005 FINDINGS

SCHOOL STAFFING

Having the right staff in place well before the start of the school year is one of the most important factors in opening school successfully. The Strategic Plan indicates that DCPS will “develop and maintain a superior human resources system to ensure the district maintains a highly quality workforce” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 2, Strategy 2). The READY SCHOOLS PROJECT (RSP) checklist asked a number of questions about timely hiring of school staff, including classroom teachers, support professionals, specialty teacher positions (in the areas of music, art and library/media), and the reasons for hiring delays, if any.

Was all hiring of teachers complete by the opening of the school year?

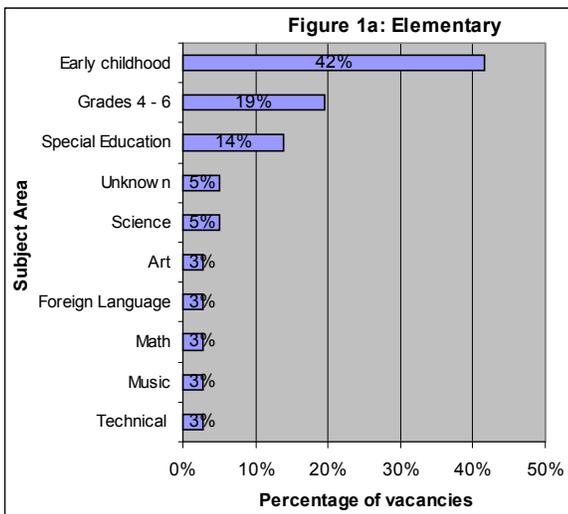
Twenty-two of the 52 participating schools had all teachers in place by August 23, 2005, the first day of school for teachers. Among the 30 schools not fully staffed, there were 56 teacher vacancies. Figure 1 shows the percentage of vacancies in subject and grade areas, by school levels.

Figure 1a

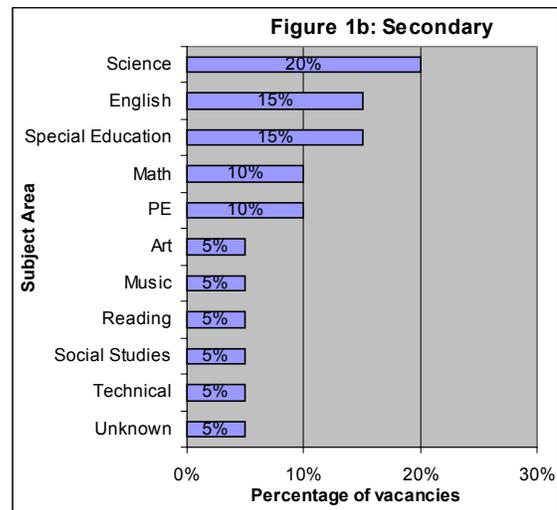
Percentage of teacher vacancies by subject area at the start of school, elementary

Figure 1b

Percentage of teacher vacancies by subject area at the start of school, secondary



*Includes 21 elementary schools that had teacher vacancies



*Includes 9 secondary schools that had teacher vacancies

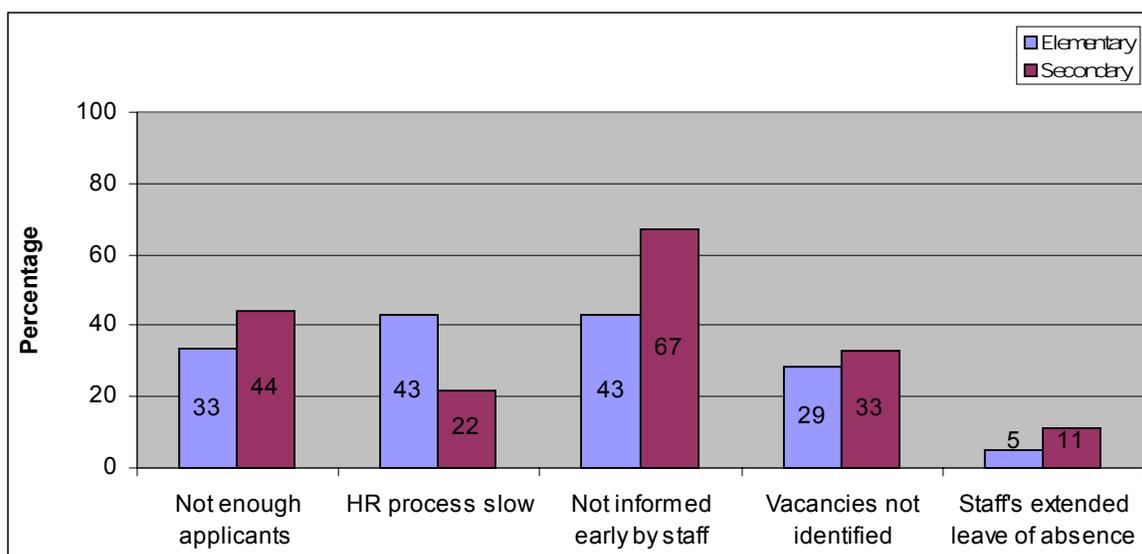
Were all new teachers hired by the beginning of DCPS's New Teacher Orientation?

At the time interviews were conducted in October, the 52 participating school principals reported having hired 127 new teachers. Fifty-three percent of the schools reported that these new teachers had been hired in time to attend New Teacher Orientation starting on August 19th, 2005.

What caused hiring delays?

Fifty-five percent of elementary and 64% of secondary schools reported experiencing hiring delays that led to vacancies at the start of school. As Figure 2 shows, some of these delays were related to issues of systemic support, although many principals cited individual staff issues.

Figure 2
Reasons for hiring delays

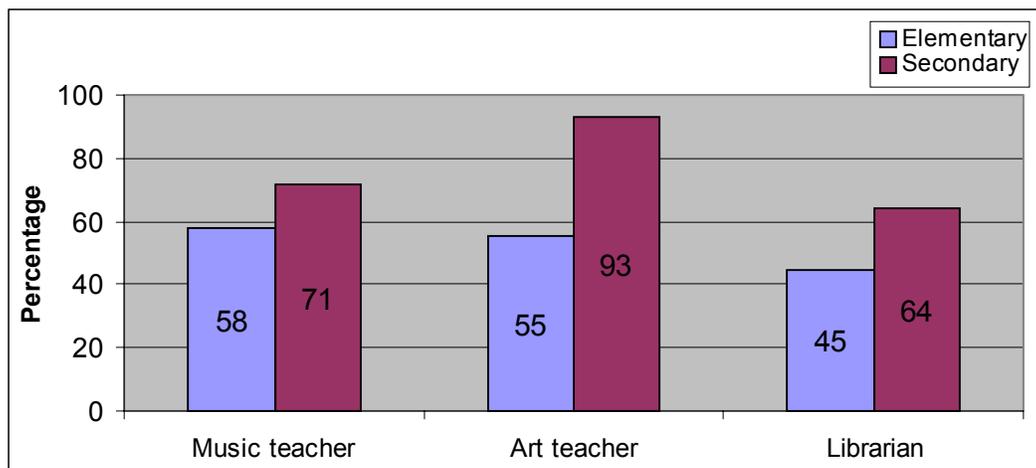


Did schools have DCPS funded music and art teachers and librarians?

The Strategic Plan indicates certain non-negotiables for all schools, including “offering music and art as part of the core and having a librarian” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 1, Strategy 3). The 2005 RSP checklist added questions to determine the effectiveness of staffing in identified areas. As Figure 3 specifies, these areas differed between elementary and secondary schools.

Figure 3

Percentage of schools reporting music and art teachers and librarians



Discussion

Despite ongoing concerns, many principals indicated improvements in the Office of Human Resources (HR). One principal said, “Hiring was better this year than ever.” Others indicated that DCPS started hiring earlier, which made the difference and noted, “This was the first time I’ve been fully staffed in four years.” Whether principals were completely staffed for the opening of school or not, they felt they were part of a supportive and positive process. Several principals also indicated that the early hiring fairs were beneficial, communication with HR had improved, and the process that enabled principals to go online, learn about candidates, and contact them directly was very helpful. These improvements added up to, as several said, a “big change.”

Although the RSP interviews elicited many positive comments, principals still voiced some concerns about HR. Some principals noted that they were not informed soon enough when a teacher applicant was not going to be acceptable because of, for example, certification issues. Others described continuing communications and customer service problems with HR. A few said some of the paperwork and fingerprinting processes had not improved enough. Several principals expressed the need to attract more highly qualified applicants, especially to the neediest schools so that the best teachers would teach at those schools. Others indicated the need for more assistance in recruiting and hiring bilingual and foreign language teachers.

Finally, as the figure on hiring delays shows, there were staffing problems that were not caused by insufficient system support, but by staff persons themselves. “Not informed early enough by staff” was a major cause of for hiring delays.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The 2004 CGCS report noted that “the DC school system has a very disjointed professional development program that mirrors the incoherence of the instructional strategies” (CGCS, 2004, page 13). The Strategic Plan referenced this problem when it said “All schools must be responsible for teaching the same curriculum; without consistency and coherence, standards alone are meaningless, and we will perpetuate the fragmented, ad hoc approach that the Council of Great City Schools cited in its 2004 report” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 1, page 8). As a response, the Strategic Plan says DCPS will “establish a comprehensive, tiered approach to high-quality teacher development, aligned to district-wide learning standards and goals” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 1 under Strategy 4). Regarding new teachers, the Strategic Plan says DCPS will “provide additional mentoring and peer support to new teachers to increase retention and satisfaction” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 1, under Strategy 4). The RSP checklist included questions about principal and teacher professional development, including mentoring support for new teachers, and specific questions about training on the new academic standards.

Did principals participate in DCPS training this summer?

Ten of the 52 principals were new to their schools for the 2005-2006 school year, while 42 principals were in their current school during 2004-2005. Of the 42 returning principals, 84% of elementary, 83% of middle/junior high, and 100% of high school principals reported receiving training through DCPS this summer. Training was overwhelmingly focused on the new standards. Specifically, 79% reported participating with two of their teachers in the new standards training in late spring. Other professional development participation areas are noted in Figure 4b.

Figure 4a

Percentage of principals receiving training through DCPS during 2005 summer

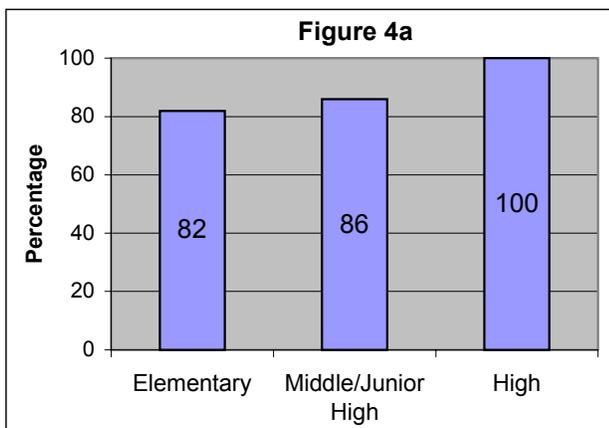
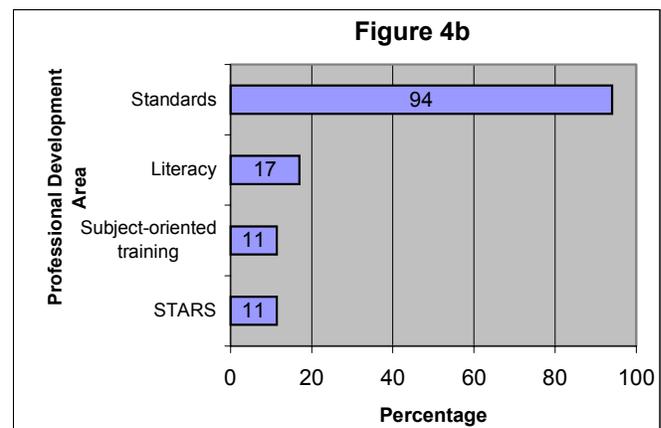


Figure 4b

Areas in which principals received professional development training



How many teachers participated in new standards training?

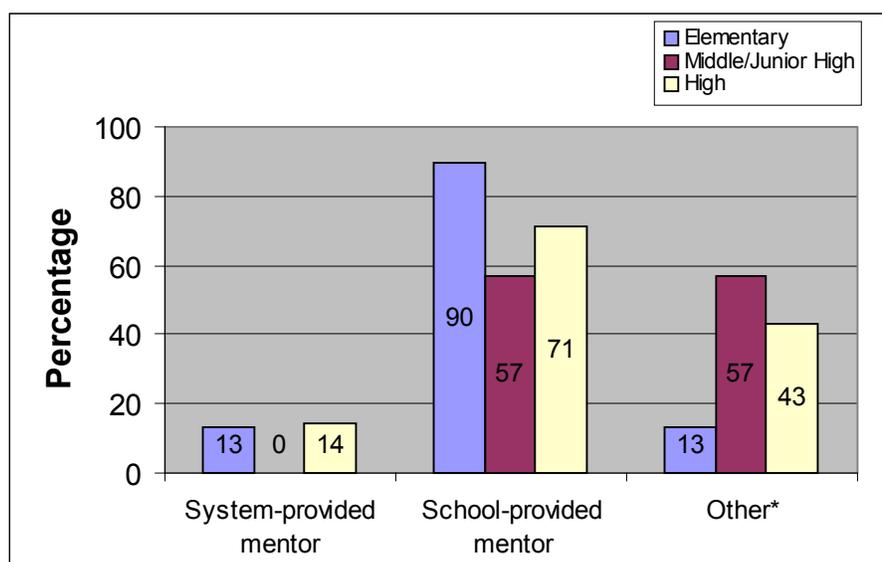
Although many teachers participated in standards and other training during the summer, principals could not report exactly how many teachers participated or name what specific standards training sessions. RSP reporting on this issue was impacted by changes in the name of the standards training over the summer and confusion between summer and early fall standards training once school started.

Will all new teachers receive mentoring support?

Almost all of the principals interviewed said their new teachers would be given mentoring support. However, the support was reportedly organized mostly at the local school level, not by the system. Figure 5 shows the percentage of schools, by school level, reporting on sources of mentoring support for new teachers.

Figure 5

Percentage of schools reporting on sources of mentoring support for new teachers, by school level



*Other includes Teach for America, DC Teaching fellows, and community-based professional development organizations.

Discussion

Participating principals offered their views on their professional development experiences, especially on the new standards, which were the focus of most of the summer training for principals and teachers. There was confusion about standards training implementation: the “train the trainer” model implemented in the spring changed to training invitations to all teachers over the summer. In addition, some principals noted an over-reliance on a train the trainer model, which one principal said did not include any assurance on how the original training was then shared with other teachers.

Over the summer, the course descriptions for the standards workshops seemed to shift, making it difficult for principals to report how many teachers had taken what courses. Several principals commented that information about summer professional development activities was sent out late, preventing many with prior summer commitments the opportunity to participate. How the spring-summer training process connected to that during the teacher orientation days at the beginning of the school year appeared to vary greatly, school by school.

Several principals indicated that they thought the system was trying to do too much too soon, noting that everyone needed more time to both digest and reflect on the new standards and to process how to use them. As one principal said, "It's a big job to learn standards and new textbooks at the same time." Another said, "You can't make a person eat a whole sandwich without chewing."

Finally, several principals wanted more principal training - on the new standards and the new textbooks but also in areas involving other system initiatives -so that they could be better instructional leaders. It's important to note that these negative comments concerning the initial implementation of standards should not be taken as negative views about the need for new standards, quality professional development, and appropriate assessments. Indeed, several principals praised the school system for moving in the right direction and for trying hard to do the work of several years in one. One principal captured this by saying: "The timeline is crazy, but you know what? It needed to happen! And they did it in a ridiculously short time."

TEACHING AND LEARNING CONDITIONS

Research has shown that in order to provide high-quality teaching and learning, teachers need resources - goods and services - that are equitable, appropriate, on time, and aligned to appropriate curriculum and standards. The Strategic Plan states that the system will “develop and maintain a procurement system that enables the easy and quick purchase of goods and services while ensuring the best value through competitive processes” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 2, Strategy 1). This year’s checklist included questions about the availability and delivery of textbooks and other teaching materials, instructional supplies and computers, as well as safety and security.

Did all required textbooks arrive in time for the opening of school?

Although almost all principals reported receiving textbooks, often the shipments were incomplete. Some schools had insufficient copies for the number of students, and others were missing teachers’ editions. The reasons offered varied, from the numbers submitted by local schools to actions by central offices to correct distribution numbers when needed. Figure 6a identifies the percentage of schools that received all necessary copies of their new textbooks before the first day of school.

Figure 6a

Percentage of schools receiving all the new required textbooks prior to the start of school

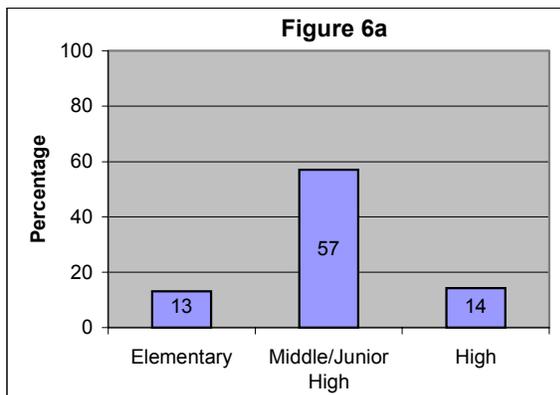
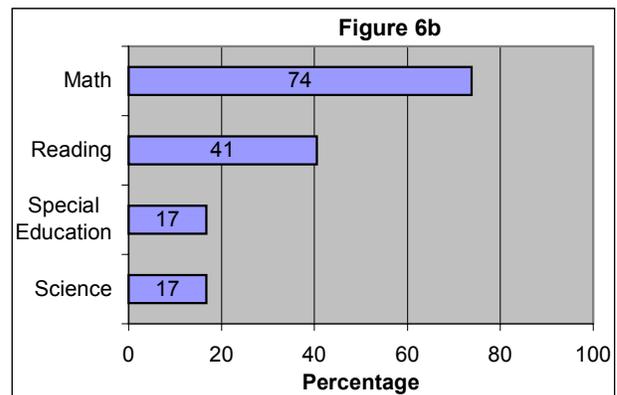


Figure 6b

The major areas in which textbooks were not available at the start of school



Did schools have adequate instructional supplies and functional computers in place for the opening of school?

Fifty-two percent of the principals reported having adequate instructional supplies provided by the school system, including basics such as paper and pencils, as well as science and math manipulatives. Many of the schools supplement with supplies provided by community partners and parents. Seventy-seven percent of the principals reported having functional computers available in all of their classrooms.

Figure 7a

Percentage of instructional supplies delivered on time

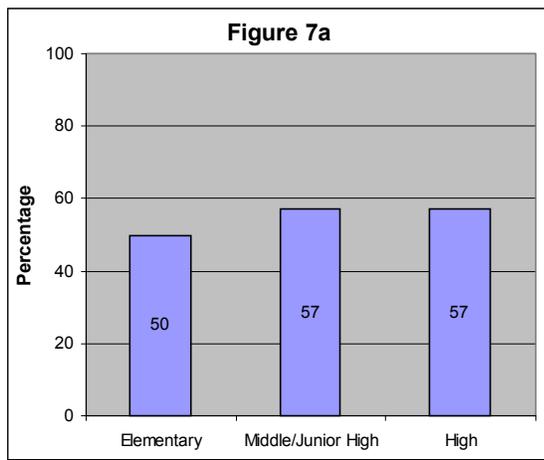
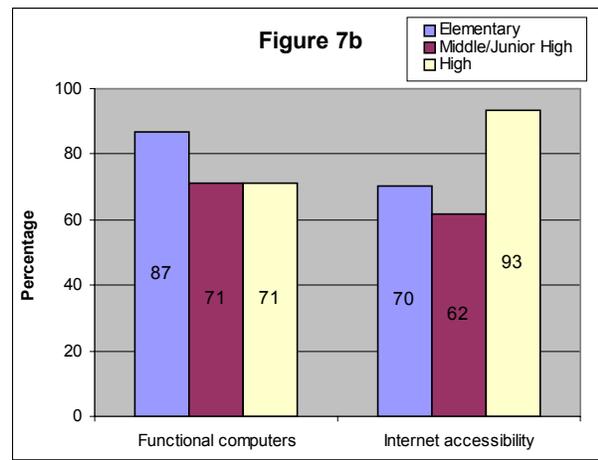


Figure 7b

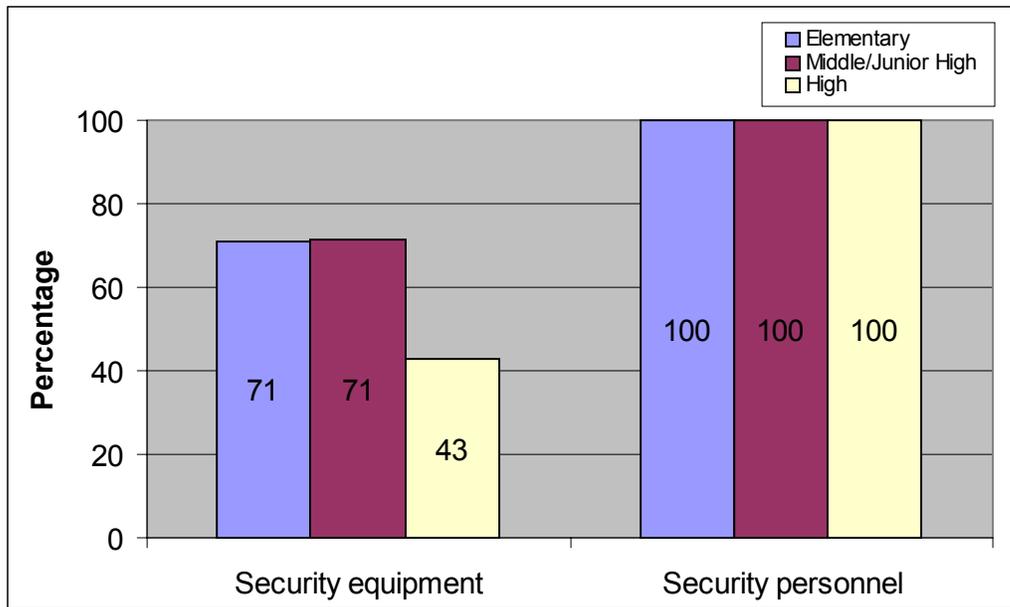
Percentage of schools with functional computers in all classrooms and Internet accessibility



Were budgeted security equipment and personnel in place for the opening of school?

The Strategic Plan indicates that the school system will “develop and maintain a safety and health system to provide safe, healthy, and orderly environments for students and teachers” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 2, Strategy 4). The responses to checklist questions showed that the majority of the schools had their security equipment in place, and 100% reported that their security personnel were in place for the opening of school.

Figure 8
Percentage of schools with security equipment and personnel in place for the opening of school



Discussion

Although the checklist questions concerning teaching and learning conditions covered textbooks, supplies, computers and safety and security, the biggest issue on principals' minds was textbooks. The problem reported was two-fold:

- o Not enough textbooks and teachers' editions were delivered for general education subjects and grades. One principal said the projected enrollment numbers were wrong; another reported missing mostly the teachers' editions.
- o Many principals reported that new textbooks were not delivered for special education students and their teachers. This finding surfaced in principals' overall comments rather than in response to the direct question about textbooks by grade and subject area, which are reflected in Figure 7a.

Some principals talked about a disconnect between the budget cycle and the school calendar. They had to order supplies early in the spring to be sure they were in place for the opening of school. The lack of computers with Internet access continued to be a problem, which was attributed to both funding and the inadequate infrastructure of school buildings.

FACILITIES

School facilities can have a direct effect on teaching, learning, and teacher retention (21st Century School Fund, 2003, *Public School Facilities and Teaching: Washington, DC and Chicago*). The Strategic Plan indicates that the system will “develop and maintain a facilities system that ensures schools are clean, safe, healthy, educationally appropriate and anchors of their communities” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 2, Strategy 3). Additionally, the plan identified immediate maintenance activities for summer 2005. The checklist included questions about both basic maintenance and major repairs.

Were promised maintenance and repairs completed during the 2005 summer?

Thirty-one percent of the principals reported receiving all basic maintenance system support, and another 59% reported receiving some basic maintenance support. Only 12% reported that the major building and grounds repairs needed were completed before school opened. Another 37% reported that some of the promised repairs were completed.

Figure 9a

Percentage of schools receiving all, some or none promised basic maintenance during the 2005 summer

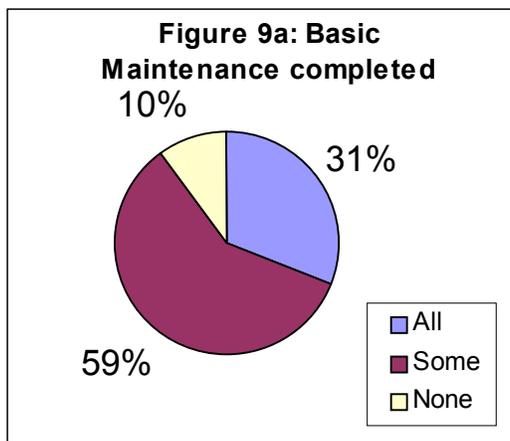
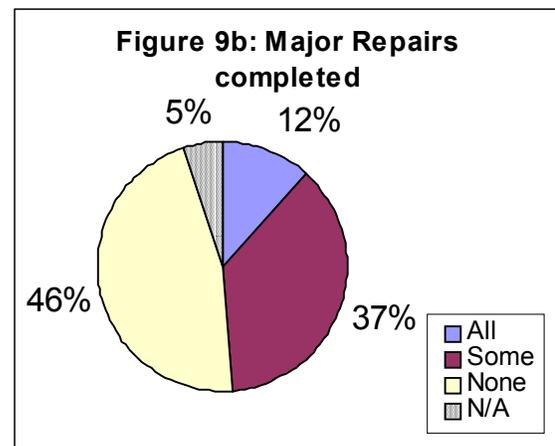


Figure 9b

Percentage of schools receiving all, some or none promised major repairs during the 2005 summer



Discussion

The city provided an additional \$6 million to get facilities ready for the opening of school this year, which had a positive effect: 91% of the principals reported that some maintenance and small repair work had been completed this summer. However, because the facilities conditions were so serious due to years of neglect and inadequate funding, the summer work often just scratched the surface, and principals' comments presented a very mixed picture, ranging from glowing reports of many repairs made this summer, i.e., “they fixed lighting, plumbing, flooring, locks, and walls,” to concerns about doing “band aid” work instead of treating the deep facilities problems. Also, as one principal noted, “when repairs are partially done but not finished, you can't get credit for what work was done.”

School facility conditions garner a great deal of public attention since so many of the district's schools are still in need of full modernization or replacement. Also, the DCPS facilities department is in the midst of reorganizing to provide better service. In the meantime, concerns continue about the need to make repeated requests in order to get any response, and work that is started but not completed. As one principal noted, there is still a “putting out fires mentality” instead of acting on thorough planning. Nevertheless, several comments reflected a new level of energy in facilities, which led some principals to have more hope for the future in this area.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

“When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more” (Henderson, A. and Mapp, K. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, page 7). The Strategic Plan is very clear: “Unless parents, school partners and other members of the community know where we are headed - and how specifically they can support our work - it will be virtually impossible to synchronize our efforts or to achieve our ambitious goals for improved student achievement” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 3, page 28). Accordingly, the plan says the system will “ensure that all stakeholders - internal and external - receive timely, accurate and strategic information, and have regular opportunities to provide input and participate in important decisions” (DCPS, 2005, Goal 3, Strategy 1). This year’s RSP checklist included questions about the new parent guides on the academic standards and on the supports in place to help local schools increase parent and community involvement.

Were the parent standards guides received at the school, and did parents get information on the new standards?

Seventy-five percent of the principals reported receiving the parent standards guides; 81% reported disseminating the guides and/or other information to parents about the new standards. These percentages are broken down by school levels in Figures 10a and 10b.

Figure 10a

Percentage of schools that reported receiving parent guides

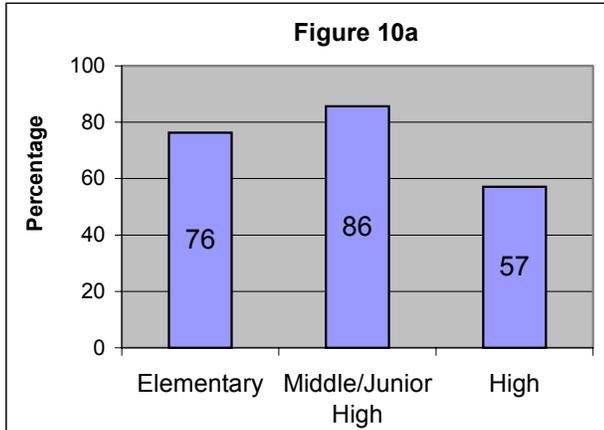
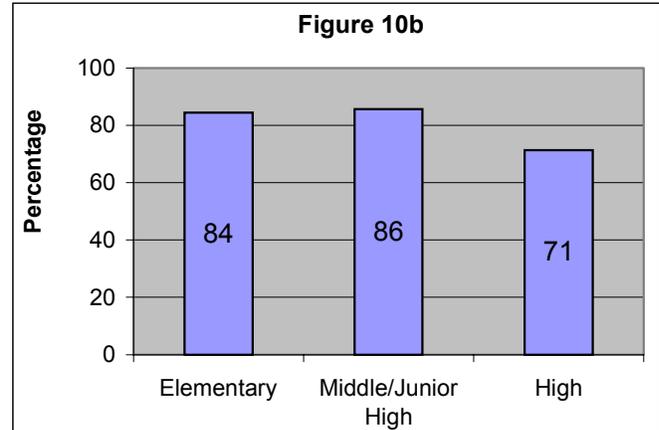


Figure 10b

Percentage of schools providing information to parents on the new academic standards

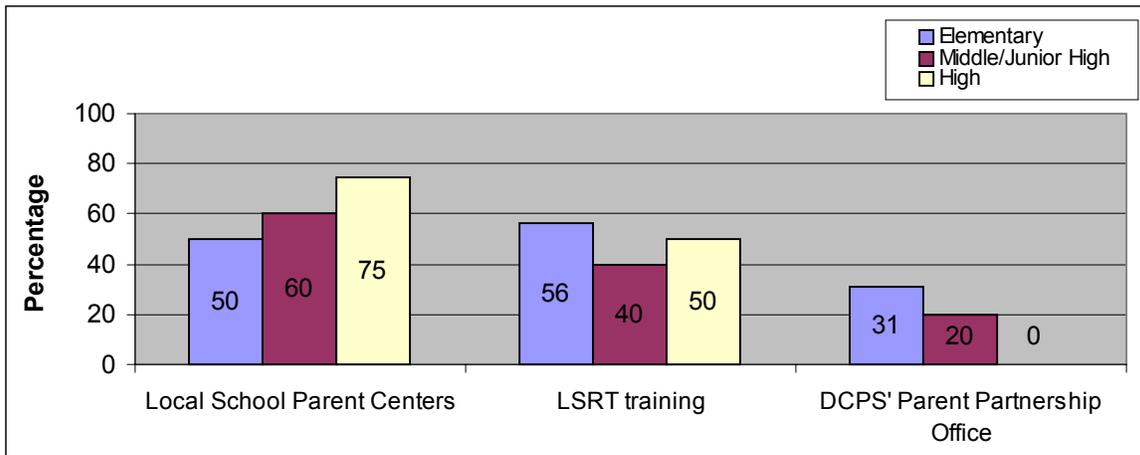


What system supports do schools receive to help with parent and community involvement?

Forty-eight percent of the principals reported that they received system supports to help them increase parent and community involvement. Some of these supports are listed in Figure 11.

Figure 11

Types of system supports in place to help increase parent and community involvement



Discussion

Most of the principals interviewed said the responsibility for increasing parent and community involvement was currently left to local school efforts, with few systemic supports in place to help them.

As one principal remarked when asked what kinds of supports were needed, “some of us are better at networking [in the community] and some of us are lousy!” However, several principals were very explicit about the kinds of support that would be useful. They noted the need for parent coordinators, local school parent centers, Local School Restructuring Team (LSRT) training, staff training on how to work with parents and community members and how to involve them, and help in finding non-traditional means to communicate with and involve parents.

On the new standards guides for parents, some schools did not know they had received them, and there was no system-supported plan in place for effective distribution to parents. One principal especially liked having a guide just for parents because “it helped parents know their part [in implementing the new standards].”

2005 FINDINGS SUMMARY

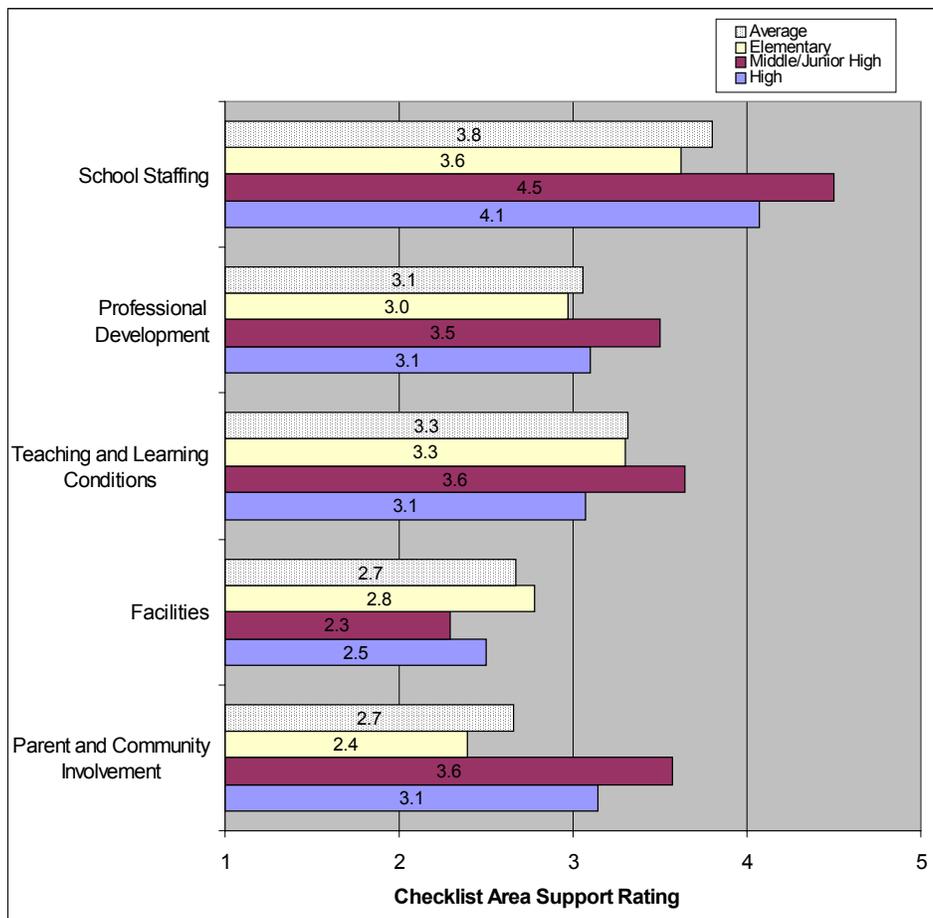
All principals were asked to rate the systemic supports received to help their building and teacher readiness for the opening of school. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 meaning very little support and 5 signifying all necessary supports were in place), they were asked to rate the systemic supports levels received in each of the categories of the checklist, the implementation of the new standards, and the overall impression for all systemic supports.

Ratings in Each Category

Figure 12 shows principal ratings on each of the checklist categories: Staffing, Professional Development, Teaching and Learning Conditions, Facilities, and Parent and Community Involvement. Principals noted the difficulty of doing this because even when a checklist category focused on one area, it covered several aspects of that area. For example, Professional Development covered several kinds of training and also the mentoring of new teachers; Teaching and Learning Conditions covered textbooks, supplies, computers, and security equipment and personnel. The ratings are presented by school levels, with an overall average rating for each category.

Figure 12

Principals' ratings of systemic supports in each area of the checklist, by school level

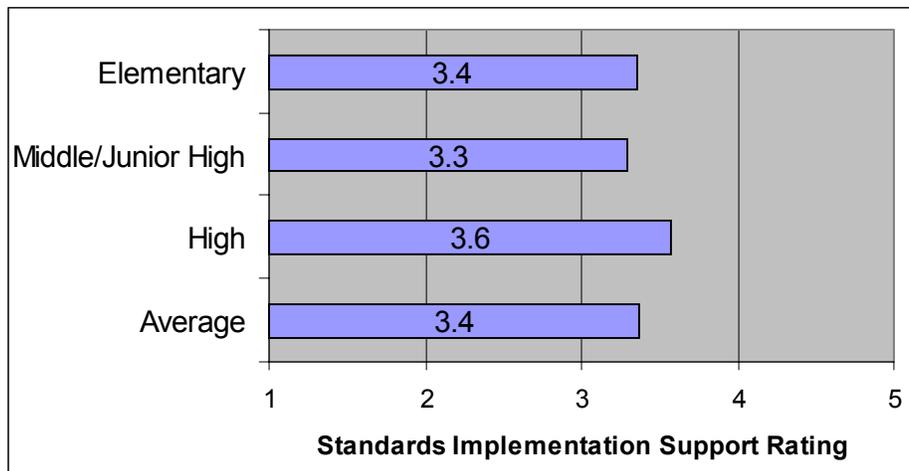


Ratings on new standards implementation

The average response was 3.4. There was near universal agreement that it was a huge job to learn about the new standards and new textbooks at the same time and in a short timeframe. Quite a few principals were very critical about process issues like lack of notification and confusion about the standards courses, as well as insufficient time and training on the new textbooks. Nevertheless, principals voiced support for efforts to both raise and unify DCPS academic expectations, and they gave standards implementation an above average rating. Figure 13 shows the breakdown by school level.

Figure 13

Principals' rating of standards implementation systemic support

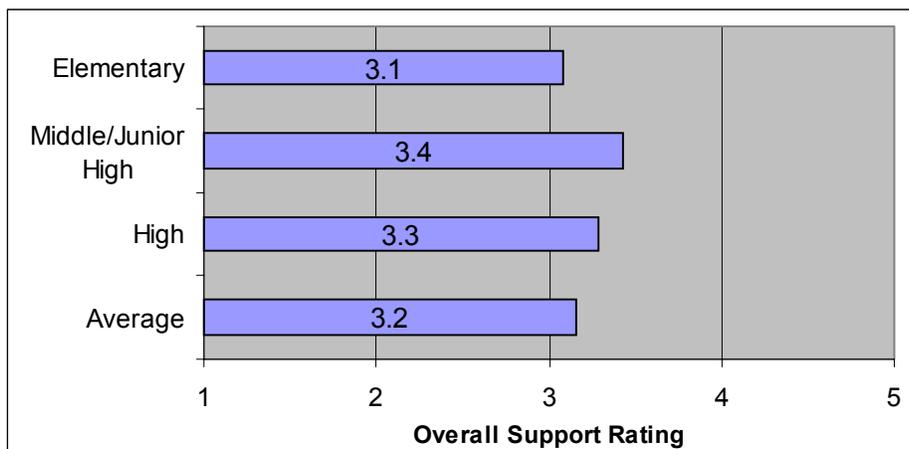


Overall rating on the systemic supports provided to schools

The average response was 3.2. Even as principals were often critical about the systemic supports they did or did not receive, they were equally understanding of the stresses central administration staff are under as well in preparing for the opening to school. Several were positive about the system being “headed in the right direction” toward increasing accountability and making adjustments as needed. Finally, in several areas, principals noted “it was better than last summer.” These positive conclusions, even in face of a summer overloaded with new information and new expectations, resulted in an above average rating for overall systemic supports.

Figure 14

Principals' overall rating of systemic supports for the opening of school



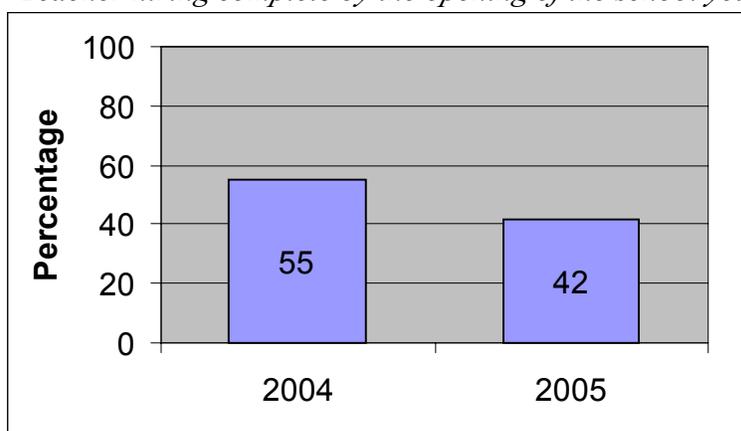
2004-2005 COMPARISONS

The following comparison data are based on the 31 schools and principals that participated both last year and this year in the READY SCHOOLS PROJECT. Of the 43 schools that participated in 2004, eight had new principals this year, and four others did not participate for varying reasons.

SCHOOL STAFFING

In 2004, 55% of the participating schools reported being fully staffed by the opening of the school year; in 2005 42% were fully staffed. However, the hiring task was greater this year, as these 31 schools needed 124 new teachers compared with a need for just 78 new teachers last year.

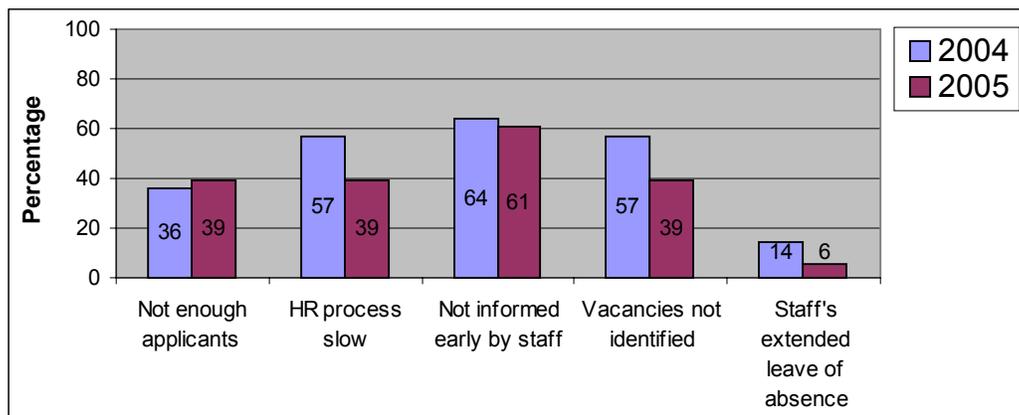
Comparison Figure 1
Teacher hiring complete by the opening of the school year



There was no statistically significant difference.

Two of the top three reasons given for hiring delays were similar in both 2004 and 2005, i.e., in 2004, 36% of the schools reported an insufficient number of applicants, and in 2005, 39%; in 2004 64% of the schools said they were not informed early enough by staff, in 2005, 61% gave that as a reason for late hiring. The two areas of difference were in 2004, when 64% said that the Human Resources office was slow to act and in 2005, just 39% gave that as a reason for hiring delays; in 2004, 57% said that vacancies were not identified in a timely manner, and in 2005, 39% gave that as a reason for hiring delays.

Comparison Figure 2
Reasons for hiring delay

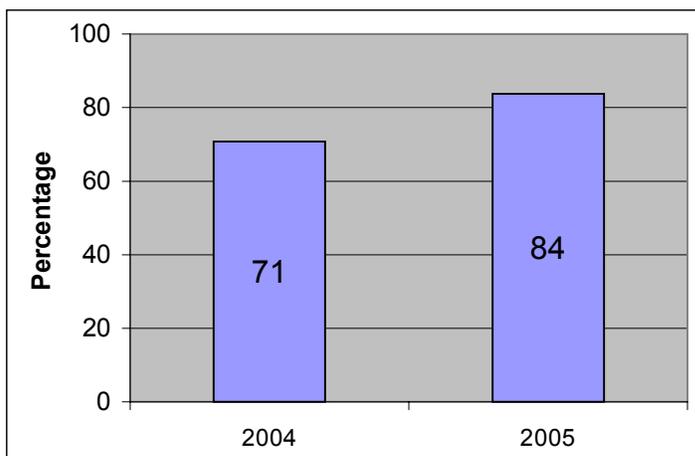


There were no statistically significant differences.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Two areas for comparison between 2004 and 2005 were the number of principals participating in professional development, and the percentage of new teachers receiving mentoring support. Although it was not statistically significant, principal participation in summer training rose from 71% in 2004 to 84% in 2005, in large part because of the new standards training during the summer. The mentoring data remained similar and continued as a local school responsibility with little system support.

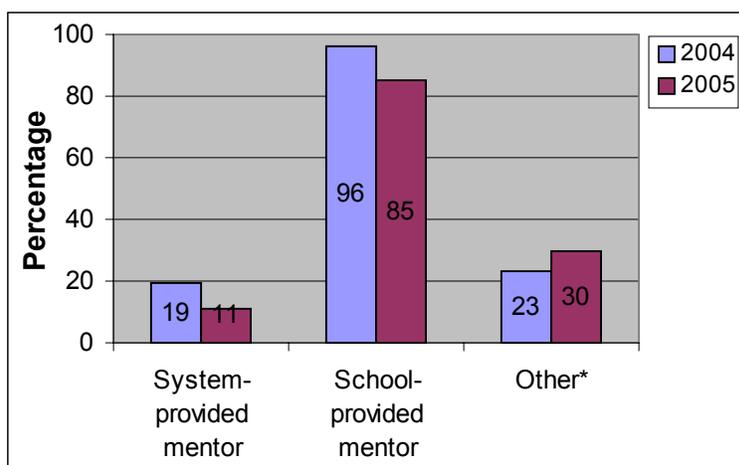
Comparison Figure 3
Percentage of principals receiving summer training through DCPS



There was no statistically significant difference.

Comparison Figure 4

Percentage of schools reporting on sources of mentoring support for new teachers



There was no statistically significant difference.

*Other includes Teach for America, DC Teaching fellows, and community-based professional development organizations.

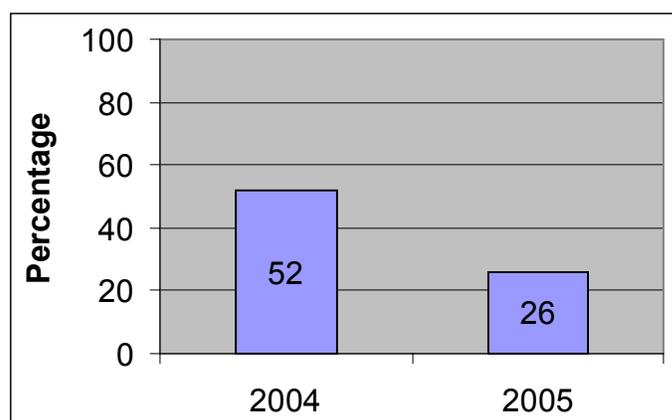
TEACHING AND LEARNING CONDITIONS

Comparison areas in teaching and learning conditions included textbooks, computers, and security. Textbooks were ordered in insufficient numbers for both students and teachers, with just 26% of the principals reporting that their textbooks arrived in time for the opening of school in 2005. This was significantly less than the 52% of principals in 2004 who reported having all required textbooks in time for the opening of school. Though there was not statistically significant difference, the percentage of schools with functional computers in all classrooms increased slightly, from 65% in 2004 to 75% in 2005.

The percentage of principals reporting that all of their security equipment was in place for the opening of school fell slightly from 74% in 2004 to 65% in 2005. However, the percentage of security personnel in place for the opening of school rose from 84% in 2004 to 100% in 2005, which was statistically significant.

Comparison Figure 5

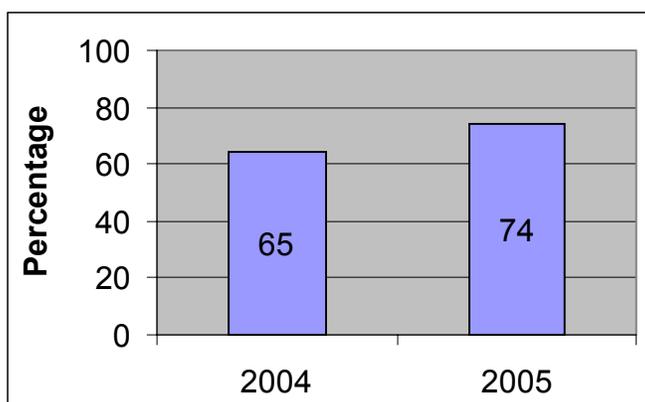
Percentage of schools receiving all new required textbooks prior to the opening of school



The difference was statistically significant. ($\chi^2 = .30$; $p = .02$)

Comparison Figure 6

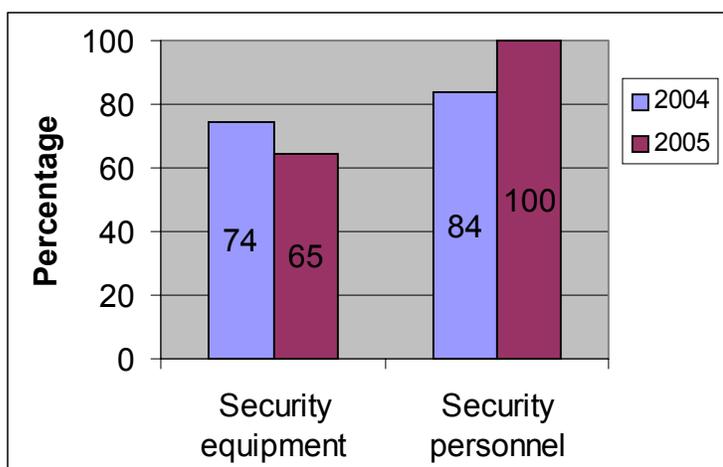
Percentage of schools with functional computers in all classrooms



There was no statistically significant difference.

Comparison Figure 7

Percentage of schools with security equipment and personnel in place for the opening of school



There was no statistically significant difference for security equipment.

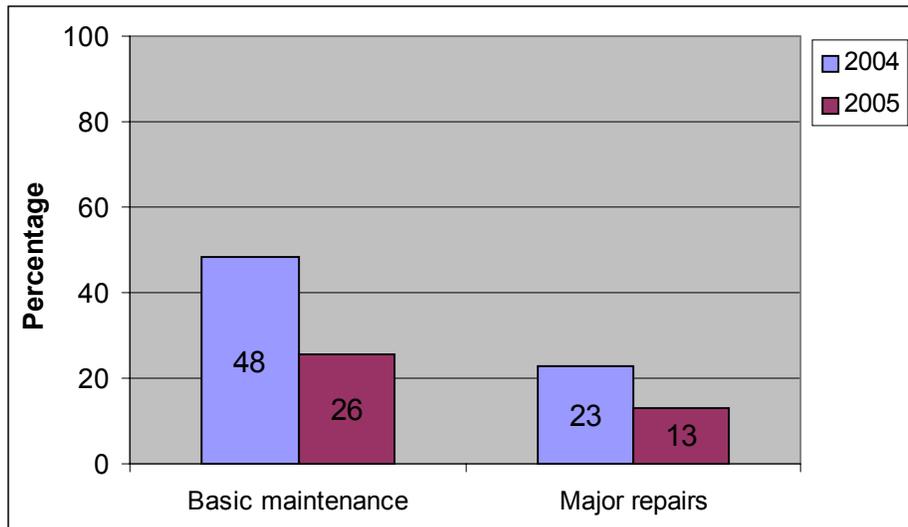
The difference between security personnel was statistically significant. ($\chi^2 = .30$; $p = .02$)

FACILITIES

The percentage of schools receiving system-provided basic maintenance during the summer fell from 47% in 2004 to 26% in 2005. Those reporting completion of promised repairs during the summer also fell from 23% to 13%. Neither of these differences was statistically significant.

Comparison Figure 8

Percentage of schools receiving all promised basic maintenance and major repairs during the summer



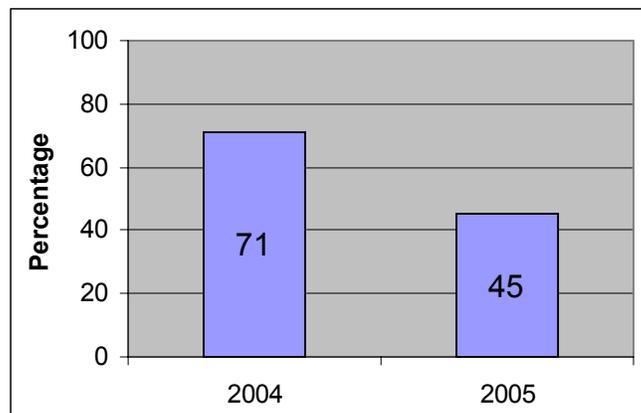
There was no statistically significant difference.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The percentage of schools reporting that they received system supports to help with parent and community involvement fell from 71% in 2004 to 45% in 2005, which was statistically significant. A comparison of reported parent and community involvement supports in 2004 and 2005 shows less LSRT training and general parent resources provided to schools in 2005.

Comparison Figure 9

Percentage of schools receiving systems supports for parent and community involvement

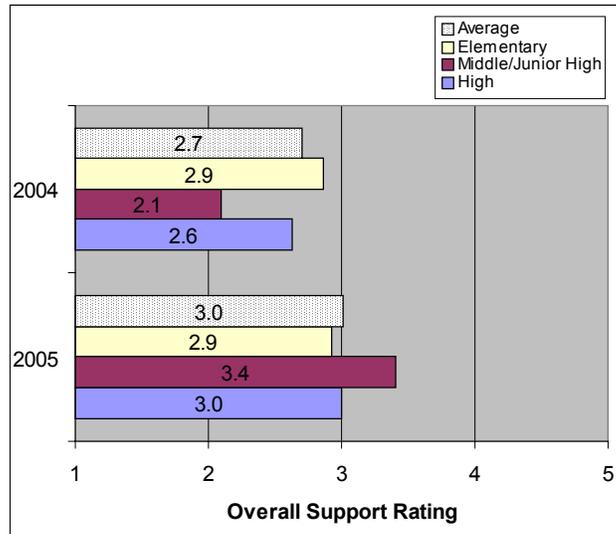


The difference was statistically significant. ($\chi^2 = .26$; $p = .04$)

SUMMARY

The rating that principals gave for the overall systemic supports received to be ready for the opening of school rose from 2.7 in 2004 to 3 in 2005.

Comparison Figure 10
Principals' overall rating of systemic supports for the opening of school



There was no statistically significant difference.

Discussion

Initial attempts to analyze the 2004-2005 comparisons did not surface easy answers for why some 2004 performance outcomes went up and others went down in 2005. The uneven findings demonstrate both the complexities and challenges facing DCPS and demand additional analyses beyond the scope of this Part I report.

The findings that went up were easier to understand than those that declined: the greater number of principals participating in professional development seemed to stem from the emphasis on and availability of standards training this summer; the rise in functional computers reflected continuing improvements in school infrastructure and wiring; the 100% of security personnel in place may be connected to the new arrangement with the Metropolitan Police Department and the change in contracting for security aides; and the overall higher rating for systemic supports in all areas seems to flow from the principals' appreciation and understanding that the school system is in transition. All of these issues, however, require more analysis.

The findings that declined were harder to explain and require a great deal more research and analysis: the actual numbers about staff in place for the opening of school went down even as principals reported improvements in hiring; the lower textbook deliveries mainly reflected partial shortages here and there instead of whole grades or schools lacking books; the facilities numbers did not change significantly even with the infusion of extra short-term maintenance funding this summer; and the parent and community involvement findings may or may not be tied to expectations fostered by this focus in the *Declaration of Education*. In addition, the increased emphasis on this subject in the RSP checklist this year may have raised principals awareness of the kinds of supports they need but do not have as of yet.

DC VOICE plans to deepen the analysis of these findings in Part II of STARTING OFF RIGHT 2005.

CONCLUSION

This is the second year that DC VOICE has conducted the READY SCHOOLS PROJECT. The basic goal remained the same: to document the systemic supports in place for local schools to begin the school year capable of providing quality teaching and learning for all students. This year, another goal was to compare 2005 findings with those in 2004 and to begin to measure progress over time. The DC VOICE Supports for Quality Teaching and Learning Framework, the Council of the Great City Schools 2004 report, *Restoring Excellence to the District of Columbia Public Schools*, and the DCPS Strategic Plan, *Declaration of Education*, provided the foundation for the checklist used to interview 52 school principals.

DC VOICE asked two questions when school opened as it embarked on this year's RSP:

1. "What has happened since 2004 to ensure that the D.C. Public Schools are ready for the students when school opens?"
2. "What recommendations from the *Declaration of Education* are being implemented this year?"

The answers to the second question, particularly, sparked thoughts about the school system being in transition and generated attempts to assess the impact of that at the local school level, where the RSP was conducted. This year the school system has simultaneously focused on improving operations and management, and introducing new standards, new textbooks, and related training sessions. This multi-faceted process has been stressful for local school principals and their staffs. Principals commented on "too much too fast" but also said that the changes needed to happen. It should be noted that the requirements of the No Child Left Behind federal legislation requires many of these changes, especially on the academic side.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS

While it is true that principals reported lower performance outcomes in several areas this year compared to last year, they also gave higher overall ratings of the supports they have received to provide quality teaching and learning conditions at their schools. This seeming contradiction, as well as the points made below about some of the key findings reinforce the notion that there are multiple points of responsibility and interrelated relationships that come to bear on performance. Neither blame nor praise can always be assigned to just one office or entity: there are many interconnected parts involved in making a large school system function well.

1. Hiring practices improved even as reported hiring deadlines were not met.

Principals reported hiring that happened earlier and with greater support than before. Specific improvements included the online capacity to check resumes and contact applicants, the earlier job fairs, and greater assistance from HR staff. Significantly more analysis is required here to ascertain how and why the obvious improvements did not result in improved performance outcomes on local school hiring, as measured by the RSP checklist.

2. Facilities challenges continued to outpace increased spending and work.

Given that so many of the schools are old and/or in poor condition, the added \$6 million for summer facilities work made band aids-level repairs possible, not the deep surgery required to bring facilities up

to standard. Nevertheless, several principals said, “they tried” when asked about the maintenance and repair work completed during the 2005 summer. The impact of planned facilities management changes needs to be monitored in the future.

3. Professional development goals were both ambitious and confusing.

The adoption of new academic standards across the system and the initial standards training sessions offered principals and teachers a start. However, it appears that during the summer, plans for how all teachers would be trained, and at what levels, became confused. Notice to teachers was often last minute, and the prevailing sentiment was that too much had been attempted in too short a timeframe. In addition, no systemic mentoring/coaching elements were put in place. How this effects adequate implementation and subsequent assessment remains to be seen.

4. Parent and community involvement expectations were raised but delivery of promised services has not happened as of yet.

At the present time, increasing parent and community involvement is still left to the local schools. Simultaneously, however, there has been a fair amount of public notice about plans to provide greater systemic supports in this area: the explicit promises under goal three of the *Declaration of Education*, the plans to establish a new central Office of Parent and Community Partnerships, and the development and opening of neighborhood family resource centers. How these plans match actual local school and principal needs will require further study.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

This report comprises Part I of STARTING OFF RIGHT 2005 and includes the 2005 findings and comparative data with 2004. In January 2006, DC VOICE will publish Part II, which will include but not be limited to the following:

1. Further analysis of the 2005 findings, particularly factoring in:
 - the principal changes at 10 of the 2005 schools;
 - any differences between the 31 schools and principals that participated both years, and the eight other schools that participated both years that had new principals this year;
 - new baseline information based on checklist questions, and on the addition of 13 new participating school principals in 2005.
2. More analysis about the information produced by the comparisons between 2004 and 2005, i.e., how these issues are connected to planning and policy initiatives and regulations.
3. The RSP 2005 Teacher Focus Group Findings.
4. The RSP 2005 Parent Focus Group Findings.
5. A set of observations based on all of the above.

In the meantime, DC VOICE invites all community members to use this report to raise issues about the systemic supports needed to provide quality teaching and learning at local schools, in meetings with public officials, as part of testimony at upcoming budget hearings, and in conversation and action with other parents and community members. By working together to both support and demand better public education we can ensure that all students, all across the city, have full access to high quality teaching and learning conditions.

APPENDIX A

Declaration of Education: Keeping Our Promise to the District's Children

Goal 1: Provide High-Quality Teaching and Learning in Every Classroom in Every School

- Strategy 1:* Develop strong and aligned academic standards, curriculum, instruction and assessment supported by effective data systems.
- Strategy 2:* Create a system of effective schools with multiple paths toward completion and success.
- Strategy 3:* Create schools that are welcoming, safe, engaging and organized for student success.
- Strategy 4:* Ensure the recruitment and retention of high-quality instructional staff by providing systematic opportunities and supports for professional improvement.
- Strategy 5:* Provide multiple supports directly and with partners to ensure student success.
- Special Education: A Special Challenge

Goal 2: Ensure Management and Operations Support High-Quality Teaching and Learning in Every Classroom in Every School

- Strategy 1:* Develop and maintain a procurement system that enables the easy and quick purchase of goods and services while ensuring the best value through competitive processes.
- Strategy 2:* Develop and maintain a superior human resources system to ensure the district maintains a highly-qualified workforce.
- Strategy 3:* Develop and maintain a facilities system that ensures schools are clean, safe, healthy, educationally appropriate and anchors of their communities.
- Strategy 4:* Develop and maintain a safety and health system to provide safe, healthy and orderly environments for students and teachers.
- Strategy 5:* Develop and maintain a coordinated and transparent resource management system that responds to the school district's educational priorities and maximizes the school district's resources.
- Strategy 6:* Develop and maintain an integrated informational management system to ensure all staff have timely and accurate information needed for decisions.

Goal 3: Create a Culture of Transparency, Open Communication and Collaboration to Support High-Quality Teaching and Learning in Every Classroom in Every School

- Strategy 1:* Ensure that all stakeholders — internal and external — receive timely, accurate and strategic information and have regular opportunities to provide input and participate in important decisions.
- Strategy 2:* Create multiple ways for parents and family members to be involved in supporting students and schools.
- Strategy 3:* Create a system to encourage, evaluate and better coordinate partnerships so that all community efforts are aligned to the school district's student achievement goals.

APPENDIX B

Restoring Excellence to the District of Columbia Public Schools Council of the Great City Schools KEY RECOMMENDATIONS*

December 2003

1. Develop a COMPREHENSIVE PLAN for improving student achievement

The district's leadership will need to charge the superintendent with drafting a concrete, five-year instructional plan for improving the academic performance of the district's schools - and commit to sustaining reform over the long haul.

2. Set MEASURABLE GOALS for math and reading improvement

The district needs to define measurable goals and academic targets in reading and math that set high expectations. They must be tied to *No Child Left Behind* and include explicit goals for attendance, graduation rates, dropouts, etc.

3. Hold PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE for reaching the goals

An accountability system that works across the system would tie the evaluation of central office staff and principals to the district goals. It would also let principals interview, select and hire their own staff and shape their own budgets.

4. Standardize DISTRICT-WIDE CURRICULUM and materials

The district needs to end the present practice of allowing multiple, uncoordinated programs at local schools. It needs to centralize instructional decisions about curriculum, professional development, and teaching and learning materials.

5. Organize DISTRICT-WIDE TEACHER TRAINING

The present disjointed professional development program needs to be standardized to train all teachers on improving math and reading instruction, for example. Concurrent local-school-developed training should focus mostly on individual school needs.

6. MONITOR CLASSROOMS for reading and math progress

The present approach that allows each school to pursue almost any program or strategy it wants has not been effective. Instruction needs to become more standardized and then be monitored by principals, teachers, and content specialists.

7. USE DATA to monitor progress

DCPS needs to use the results of student assessments to help improve instruction, track how students are doing over the course of the school year, and help shape, inform, and drive decisions about instruction and staff training.

8. Begin reforms at BOTH ELEMENTARY AND HIGH SCHOOL LEVELS

Reforms may start with elementary schools, but high schools should not be ignored. The district needs to focus on upgrading its early childhood program, and overhauling all elementary literacy efforts; high school courses need to become more rigorous.

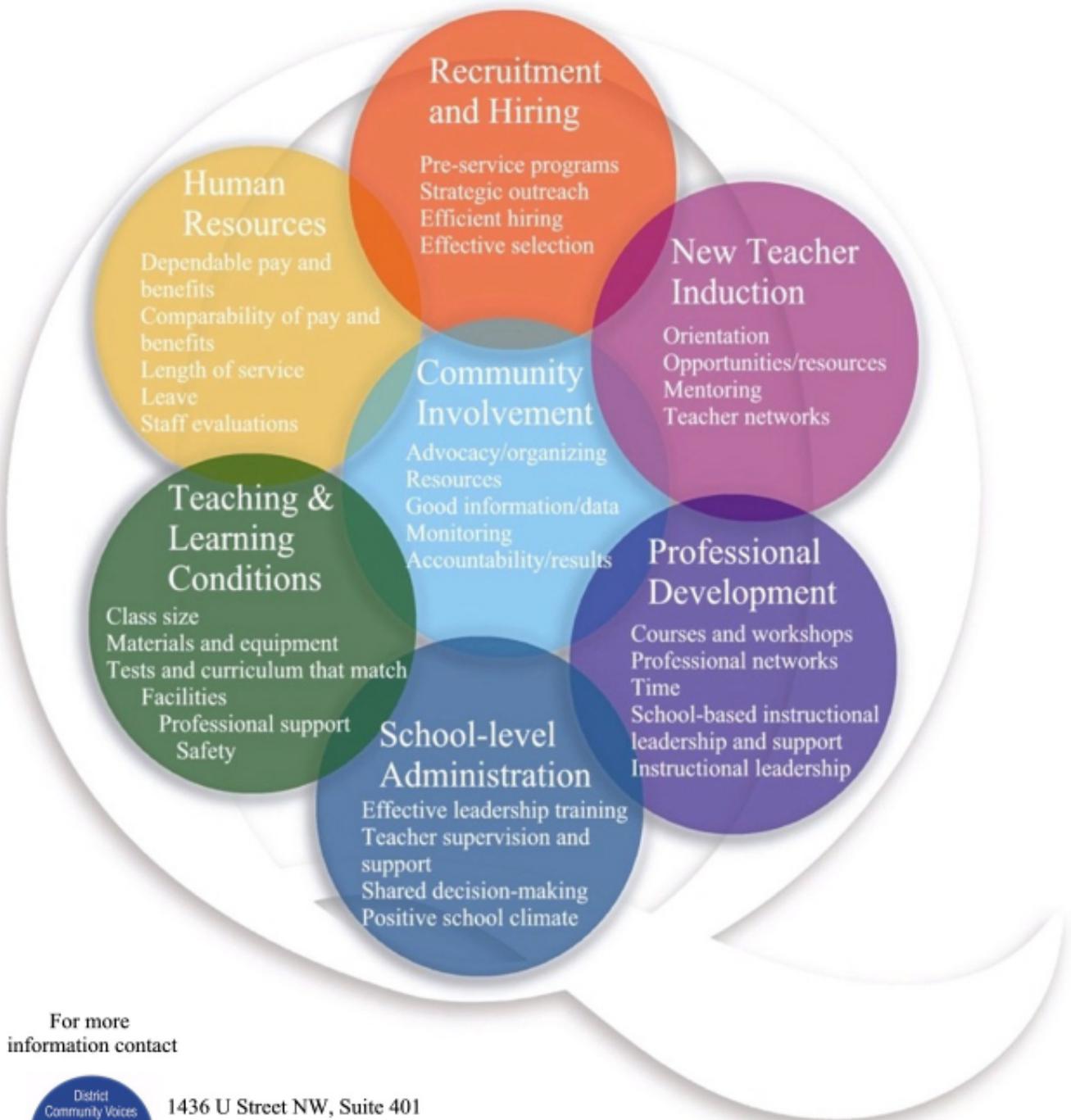
9. Focus on the LOWEST PERFORMING SCHOOLS

The district's Transformation School program needs to be overhauled, including setting criteria by which schools can enter and exit the process, and creating a new set of incentives for encouraging the district's best teachers to teach in these schools.

* Excerpted from the report, pages 11 - 15

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A Framework to Benefit Student Learning: Supports for Quality Teaching & Learning



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KEY TERMS IN THIS REPORT

CGCS: Council of the Great City Schools (www.cgcs.org). The Council issued a report about the District's schools in December, 2003: *Restoring Excellence to the District of Columbia Public Schools*. At the request of former Superintendent Paul Vance, a CGCS strategic team studied why student performance has not improved and recommended ways to boost it. Recommendations included the need for a comprehensive academic plan and the need for greater accountability at all levels. See Appendix B for more information. (<http://www.cgcs.org/pdfs/DCPSReportFinal.pdf>)

Declaration of Education: *Keeping our Promise to the District's Children: Initial Strategic Plan* issued by DCPS in May 2005 that highlights three mutually supportive goals: focusing on academics, management systems, and collaboration and communication. See Appendix A for more information. (http://www.k12.dc.us/dcps/frontpagepdfs/strategicPlan2005/strategic%20plan_final.pdf)

DCPS: District of Columbia Public Schools (www.k12.dc.us). At present, the 147 schools-101 elementary, 20 middle and junior, 20 high schools and 6 education centers-enroll 59,616 students.

LSRT: Local School Restructuring Team. These teams perform governance functions in local schools. One of their responsibilities is to develop and approve the school's annual plan, including how it will spend its budget each year. The membership of LSRTs includes parents, teachers, support employees, school administration and community members.

New Standards: Starting in the spring of 2004, DCPS began efforts to strengthen the District's academic standards. Standards spells out what students should know and be able to do in each subject, at each grade level and in every school. At this time, new standards for math and reading have been adopted. Standards for science and social studies are in development with standards for other subject areas to follow.

STARS: Student Tracking and Reporting System. A student data system that is designed to keep track of students' schedules, attendance, transfers, grades and graduation. It generates reports that can be used by principals, teachers, administrators, students and parents.

SQTL: Supports for Quality Teaching and Learning. DC VOICE has developed a framework of the conditions or supports schools need in order to provide high quality teaching and learning to benefit all students. The framework includes: Recruitment and Hiring, New Teacher Induction, Professional Development, School-level Administration, Teaching and Learning Conditions, Human Resources and Community Involvement. See Appendix C for more information.

Systemic Supports: The basic concept of supports for local schools used in this report includes both the school system and the community. Systemic supports refer to those that 1) are made available for all school levels and in all parts of the city, and 2) enable local schools to provide high-quality teaching, resulting in high achievement for all students. The READY SCHOOLS PROJECT particularly focused on systemic supports necessary for the optimum conditions for teaching and learning, and ensures that these supports are in place starting with the first day of school.

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ABOUT DC VOICE

DC VOICE is a city wide, 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
