

# DC VOICE READY SCHOOLS PROJECT

*Special Report on Facilities Readiness for School Year 2007-2008  
in conjunction with the 21st Century School Fund*



## A Special Focus on Facilities

### DC VOICE

An overarching tenet of DC VOICE is that everyone in the community is needed to raise academic achievement. Consequently, the DC VOICE mission is to inform and mobilize the public to hold both the schools and the community accountable for providing high quality teaching and learning for all.

### 21st Century School Fund

The 21st Century School Fund was founded on the premise that communities are responsible for creating healthy, safe, and educationally appropriate learning environments. Our mission is to build the public will and capacity to improve urban public school facilities. Our vision is a country where every child learns in an educationally appropriate, healthy and safe school that serves as a community anchor and is built and maintained in an environmentally and fiscally responsible manner.

The big District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) school facilities issues right now are the proposed closing of underutilized school buildings and the effects of new grade-level reorganization and consolidations. However, this report focuses on another critical issue – the basic condition of all DCPS school buildings. This special report of the Ready Schools Project analyzes DCPS principals’ assessments of the 2007 summer repair program, what was done and how it was managed, and provides some background on the importance of school facilities to teaching and learning as well as the basic condition of DCPS school facilities. Recommendations for continued improvements in our public school buildings are also included.



## What did we evaluate? How was it done?

In the fall of 2007, 191 volunteers from every Ward in the city interviewed the principals of 137 schools to gather data for the community audit organized and sponsored by DC VOICE. Volunteers were trained to administer the checklists and assigned to teams of two to five people that visited each school. The principals were promised confidentiality, knowing that nothing they reported would be attributed directly to them

but rather serve to develop a composite picture of the local schools as well as the school system’s accomplishments and needs. As part of the 2007 Ready Schools Project (RSP) community audit, principals were asked about the readiness of their school buildings for the 2007-2008 school year based on their experiences in trying to establish positive teaching and learning conditions in classrooms across the city.

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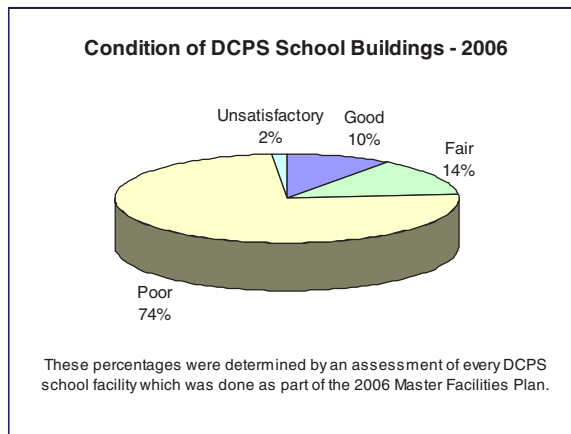
## School Facilities Matter

Facilities are an essential component of overall school quality. A school’s condition – both the grounds outside and spaces inside – influences teaching and learning. Facility conditions can influence teacher and student attendance, concentration, enrollment and even teaching strategies and the curriculum offered.

Both national and local studies show a significant relationship between the quality of school buildings and the level of student achievement and teacher success.<sup>1</sup> But even without the studies, students and staff know that peeling paint, leaking roofs, and uncomfortable classroom temperatures affect their work performance.

## Condition of DCPS Schools

As part of the preparation for the 2006 DCPS Master Facilities Plan, building engineers inspected every DCPS school building. While 10% (13 schools, all of them new or fully modernized buildings) were in good condition, they rated nearly 75% of the schools in poor condition. Poor condition translates into peeling paint, worn out carpet, dim lighting, windows that don't open or close, bathrooms with fixtures that don't work, classrooms that are too hot in summer and too cold in winter, in addition to many other problems that may be associated with health, safety and appropriate design.



## 2007 DCPS Repair Initiatives

To address the facility problems which were so widely experienced in the schools, DCPS had five major initiatives all taking place simultaneously during the summer of 2007:

**Blitz Program:** Aimed at eliminating outstanding work orders – spent an estimated \$80 million.

**Targeted Repair:** Comprehensive repairs and maintenance improvements – spent an estimated \$24 million.

**Renovation of Athletic Fields:** Updated six high school fields – spent an estimated \$27 million (including \$4 million in partnership with Fannie Mae).

**Buff and Scrub:** Partnered with private donors to deep clean and do minor cosmetic improvements – donations and in-kind work.

**Beautification Day:** Third annual city-wide community effort to clean up the school grounds just prior to the opening of school – donations and community volunteer work.

Principals were almost universal in their approval of the work done in their schools over the summer. During the summer, four schools were under construction for full modernization, but other than these schools and the continuing elementary school library up-upgrades and athletic field makeovers, this summer's work almost exclusively involved repairing and maintaining existing facilities. Work did not focus on re-designing and adapting buildings to better serve current education initiatives.

*“(The blitz) did not start until mid-July, so (the school) was not ready for teachers. But, overall (I) have been very happy with the results.”*

-DCPS Principal

*“This is the most work I've seen done in all my 20 years at DCPS.”*

-DCPS Principal

*“Work orders from the past five years were completed.”*

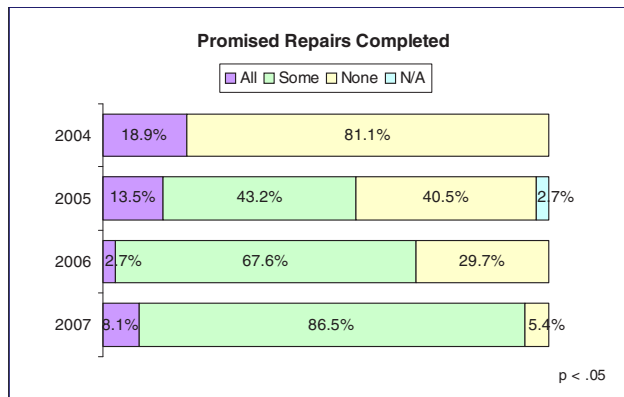
-DCPS Principal

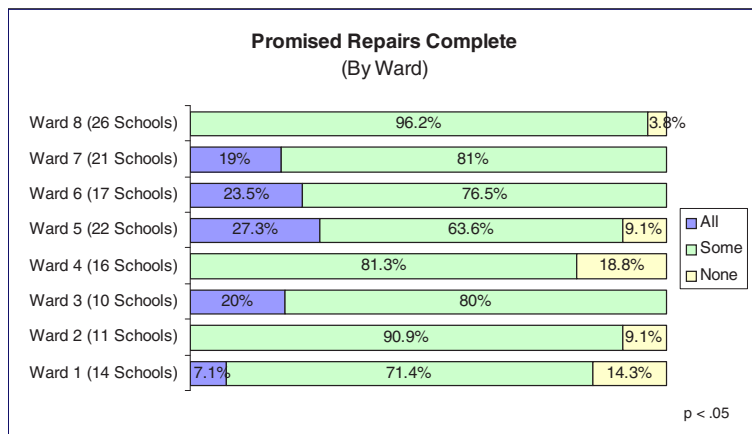
## Facilities Progress this Summer

Seventy one percent of principals reported that all of the basic maintenance (i.e. grounds maintenance, deep cleaning, and small plumbing work) was carried out in their school this summer. Only 1% reported that no maintenance had been done and 28% reported that some maintenance was done. Twelve percent of principals reported that all repair work (system-provided repairs specifically requested through work orders) was completed this summer, while 8% reported that no repair work was completed. Eighty percent reported that some repairs were completed, with many adding that the work was continuing into the fall.

The repair work completed this summer represents a dramatic increase over the four years of the RSP. Please see

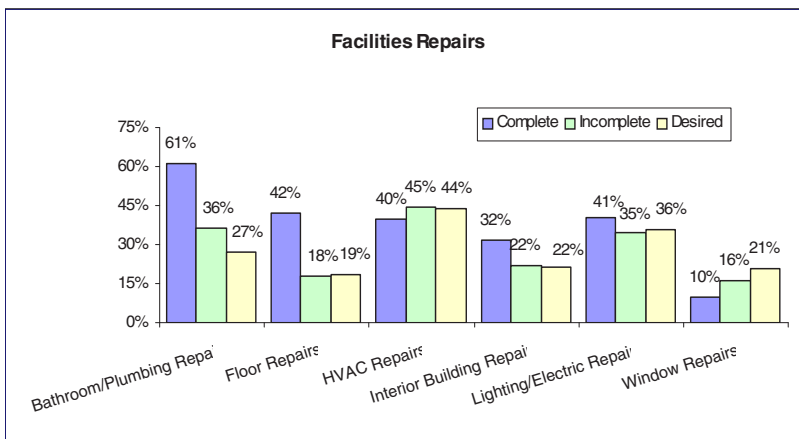
the graph below, which compares the repair work completed at the 37 schools that have participated all four





(61%). The principals cited heating, ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) repairs as the work that was most likely to be incomplete (45%). While the work reported to have been done included everything from door to fire alarm system repairs, the same facilities issues rose to the top in three different ways: work that was reported as complete, work that was reported as incomplete, and future repairs most desired by principals. The top five categories of work principals reported were bathroom and plumbing repairs, interior building repairs, flooring repairs, HVAC repairs, and lighting and electric repairs. Where the work did not meet principals' priorities was in window repair.

years. It is important to note that the amount of funding spent this summer is also far greater than has been spent on maintenance and repair in more than a decade (for instance only \$12 million was spent on summer repairs in 2005). However, the school improvements were not evenly distributed across wards. Schools in wards 3, 5, 6 and 7 were more likely to report that all repairs were completed while schools in wards 1, 2, 4, and 8 were more likely to report that either some or none of their repairs were completed.



Principals reported that bathroom and plumbing repairs were most likely to have been completed

## Facilities Management this Summer

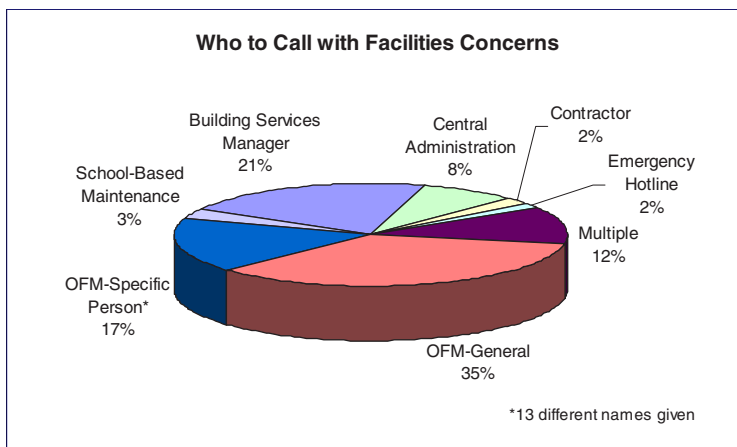
DCPS Office of Facilities Management (OFM), now the Office of Public Education Facility Modernization (OPEFM), is responsible for the maintenance and repair of DCPS school facilities. However, principals, as the on-site leaders, have a critical perspective on how their buildings could function better and which changes would have the most immediate impact on education. That is why the RSP asked if principals and their staffs were involved in planning for building maintenance and repair, whether their greatest needs were met, and what they understood to be the process for getting problems solved.

### Were School Staff Involved?

Seventy seven percent (105) of principals reported that they were involved in planning the repair work done at their schools last summer. Of those 105 who reported involvement, only 58 indicated that their work priorities were met. More elementary school principals (83%) than secondary school principals (about 68%) reported that they were involved in planning repairs. About one quarter of high school principals indicated that they were not involved in planning repairs at all, as opposed to 3% of elementary school principals. This is important because principals who reported that their work priorities were

met also reported a higher level of satisfaction with the supports they received from DCPS to get their school ready to open.

Nearly 95% of principals reported that they knew which office to contact when they needed assistance with facility concerns – but when asked to be more specific, principals reported a wide range of people and offices as the point of contact for facilities concerns.



## Recommendations

Because of the importance of facilities as a foundation for academic improvement, DC VOICE and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century School Fund plan to track DCPS' progress on improving facilities and planning facilities up-grades. On-going maintenance and repair services to the local schools as well as school modernization should be normal, not exceptional, aspects of local school operations. We offer these recommendations based on the RSP audit in order to give a clearer voice to local school concerns, to provide information and direction for community action, and to help sharpen the policy discussion needed for school improvement.

- **Follow-through on unfinished 2007 summer initiatives**, i.e. air conditioner installations, athletic facility up-grades and library face-lifts.
- **Plan now for summer 2008 maintenance** incorporating efficient management practices focused on quality control and avoidance of work delays.
- **Secure funding for sufficient long-term maintenance**, repair, and custodial personnel for all operating schools.
- **Involve the community at the initial stages of budget development** to build broad-based public support for school maintenance.
- **Issue detailed quarterly reports** on repair and modernization work and make them publicly available on the DCPS web-site.
- **Continue to enlist help and involve the larger community** in Buff & Scrub projects and the annual Beautification Day.
- **Define a clear chain of standard communications links** for system-wide maintenance and repair so that local schools know who is responsible for various levels of building problems.
- **Include principals, school staff, and school communities in setting priorities** for facilities repair work.
- **Establish facility committees in every school**, based on the School Improvement Team model (currently planned for schools undergoing modernization).
- **Include a facility needs check-off at the initial planning stages of new educational initiatives** (i.e. early childhood programs or rooms designed for art and music).

There is no doubt that school facilities matter greatly to their communities, as demonstrated by the outcry over proposed school closings. However, the current focus on school closings should not distract from efforts to improve all school facilities. In the best of all worlds, our schools are a source of neighborhood pride; they provide an attractive environment for students to learn and teachers to teach; and they serve as anchors for community activities. Schools cannot fulfill these functions if they are poorly maintained and neglected.

Principals' optimistic reactions to facilities improvements this summer demonstrate the power of adequate resources, efficient operations, and responsiveness. Communities can also begin to believe that the system is moving in the right direction – if assured that their schools are focused on instruction and not distracted by poor facilities conditions, and if they know that their ideas and involvement will be valued. Adopting the recommendations in this report is a first step DCPS can take to make this belief a reality.



<sup>1</sup>Buckley, J., Schneider, M., & Shang, Y. (2004). *The effects of school facility on teacher retention in urban school districts*. Washington DC: National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities.

Lackney, J.A. (1999). "Assessing school facilities for learning/assessing the impact of the physical environment on the educational process." Mississippi State, MS.: Educational Design Institute.

Phillips, R. (1997). *Educational facility age and the academic achievement of upper elementary school students*. Doctoral dissertation: University of Georgia.

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