
Monthly news and commentary on DC Public School facilities from the 21st Century School Fund (21CSF), a Washington DC based, nonprofit - working to build the public will and capacity to improve urban public school facilities. To subscribe/unsubscribe, please email: newsletter@21csf.org

3 New Modernized DCPS Buildings Open
Congratulations to the District on completing three new DCPS secondary schools: Sousa Middle School in Ward 7, Hardy Middle School in Ward 2 and Phelps Technical High School in Ward 5. All of these buildings are large, major educational facility modernizations.

Sousa and Hardy students are returning after several years in swing space. Sousa families and neighbors were treated to a Community Day open house Sunday, August 17; Hardy held Saturday morning open-house events just before school started.

Phelps Architecture, Construction and Engineering High School is a new, city-wide program opening with 9th grade this fall and adding a grade for the next two years until it reaches its expected full compliment of 800 students in 2011 with a first graduating class. Phelps students were first welcomed into the new building for an August 12th orientation and tour followed the next week by a public ribbon-cutting.

DCPS schools actively in construction are: Addison (Hyde Elementary Annex), Savoy Elementary School, Deal Middle School, Webb/Wheatley Education Center, HD Cooke Elementary School, Wilson High School Pool (Ward 3 Aquatic Center), School Without Walls High School, and Walker-Jones Education Center.

2008 Lowe’s Toolbox for Education K-12 Grant Program
Lowe’s Charitable and Educational Foundation supports parent-teacher groups at schools across the U.S. The Foundation gives preference for funding requests that have a permanent impact such as facility enhancement (both indoor and outdoor), as well as landscaping/clean-up projects. Projects that encourage parent involvement and build stronger community spirit are encouraged. Eligibility: Nonprofit organizations. Deadline: October 17, 2008. Funds: $5,000,000 is available to fund awards ranging from $2,000-$5,000 (some are larger). Information: http://www.toolboxforeducation.com/.

21CSF Awarded Grant from Prince Charitable Trust for Green School Yards
Prince Charitable Trust granted 21CSF $10,000 for a publication that will help raise the bar on what parents and the public expect from their neighborhood school yards. The purpose of the publication is to increase community awareness of the educational and environmental potential offered by greening and beautifying the over 700 acres of land in DCPS inventory—much of it asphalt or other hardscape. In addition, 21CSF will work with community based organizations to develop a policy agenda to eliminate barriers to high quality schoolyards. 21CSF and its partners will review the city’s green space plan, the school district’s capital improvement plan, and maintenance and custodial protocols and will prepare a policy brief offering recommendations for establishing policy and budget priorities to support improving the condition, design, utilization and management of schoolyards. To become involved in this initiative, contact Nancy Huvendick at nhuvendick@21csf.org.

21CSF Commentary:
Waiting for a DC Educational Facility Master Plan & DCPS Capital Budget
With the transfer of responsibilities from DCPS to OPEFM, the new Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization, two fundamental responsibilities were not fully addressed: educational facility planning and capital budgeting.
There is no clear definition for who is responsible for decisions about the scope of work needed in each school, which schools get modernized, repaired or replaced and to what standards or specifications, what schools will be done first, and how many projects can be managed at one time, given budget and management capabilities or constraints.

Answers to these questions should be found in a comprehensive educational facilities master plan. This major planning document will provide an on-going framework for billions in spending. It will deeply impact the vitality of local neighborhoods. The Council has provided OPEFM with two extensions to update the 2006 Master Facilities Plan (MFP). This was given on top of the extension granted OFM last year. The deadline for a revised MFP is now September 10, 2008.

An educational facilities master plan requires thorough public input and review to ensure that complex educational and neighborhood issues can be addressed fully and creatively. However, although public meetings for input have been promised for more than a year, no community meetings have been held and no drafts of the plan have been available to the public as yet.

Not only is there no Facility Master Plan, there was no detail in the 2009-2014 Capital Improvement Plan submitted by the Mayor to the Council. Rather than the usual detailed description of multiple projects with a six-year spending schedule, there was no indication of how the $1.36 billion dollars allocated to OPEFM for school facilities will be spent. The Council approved this budget, even though individual school projects were not defined in any way.

The result of this complete lack of planning is that facility improvements for DCPS have been focused on stabilizations and “blitzs”. Hurried projects mean that architects and contractors can do little planning or checking back with local schools and communities; short time frames mean high costs for basic maintenance and repairs, since contractors must pull workers off other jobs to meet OPEFM time pressures; condensed deadlines means poor oversight and inspections, leaving contractors in charge of their own quality control. The cost of this large volume of last minute work has yet to be reported, but the total spending is likely to be unprecedented and far more than if the work had proceeded with proper planning, bidding and time for quality implementation.

The energy and sense of urgency brought to public school facilities improvements by OPEFM is extraordinary, long overdue and welcome. Nevertheless, the lack of a comprehensive Master Facilities Plan, a complete lack of detail in the FY2009 Capital Improvements Budget, and the ad hoc nature of this summer planning point to the fact that OPEFM is still very much a work in progress.

OPEFM needs major improvement if it is to meet its responsibility to provide equitable, efficient and educationally appropriate public school facilities and grounds in the District of Columbia. The District is losing opportunities for well planned projects that will serve the District’s children long into the future—not just for the short term. We welcome your comments on how to improve the planning and management of our DCPS school buildings and grounds. Please send comments to: info@21csf.org.

SEE OUR WEBSITE at www.21csf.org/csf-home/datashop.asp for a guide to evaluating the Master Facilities Plan. Click on the link or go to Data Shop on www.21csf.org.