

Better Buildings: Better Schools, Issue 50 January/February 2009

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

Where's School Construction in the Stimulus Bill?

After years of local and state efforts to reduce inequity in public school facilities, the original economic recovery plans proposed by the U.S. House and Senate brought us closer than ever to being able to bring substantial, nationwide relief to the neediest children in the poorest buildings. There was strong support for improving the conditions in public school facilities with new federal funding. Encouraged by the backing of President Obama and his economic advisors, in January the House of Representatives passed a \$14 billion PK-12 school construction bill and the Senate Appropriations Committee recommended \$16 billion for school construction as part of a defined and dedicated element of the economic recovery program, targeted to the neediest children in the worst buildings.

Unfortunately, due to fierce opposition from a small minority to federal funding for school construction, *all* school construction funding was removed from the final Senate version of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The President, the House and some Senate leaders were so upset by this that they insisted that school construction had to be put back into the bill during conference. However, Senator Collins (R- Maine) one of the key Senators working on the compromise, said she would not vote for the overall package if the school construction funding provisions were included. Since her vote was needed, a compromise position on federal funding for school construction was sought. Amazingly, school construction was one of the most contentious provisions to reconcile.

Because of the commitment of the President and House leadership, PK-12 and higher education school renovation and repair were included as permissible uses of the money in the state stabilization fund. However, unlike the original House and Senate bills, the final legislation does not require that the money be spent on school construction, only that it "may" be spent on school repair or renovation; there are no guidelines on its allocation or use. The decision of whether and how funding is to be spent was left up to the states, leaving districts with great uncertainty about how much, if any, funds will be made available to them for school facility improvements. In addition to the stabilization funds that can be used for school repair and renovation, there is a \$20 billion new credit enhancement program in the tax code for PK-12 school construction bonds. This is designed to improve the ability and reduce the cost for school districts to borrow, although it will likely have the greatest impact in higher wealth districts. Additional legislative detail can be found on the [Department of Education website](#).

Given the significant support for a federal school construction program from the President and Congressional leaders, this issue will come up again. If you are interested in participating in an organized effort to establish an ongoing federal role for school construction support, please contact us at mallen@21csf.org or 202-745-3745, x12.

DCPS School Close-Ups

The 21st Century School Fund updated [DCPS School Close-Ups](#) for the District of Columbia Public School's out-of-boundary process. [DCPS School Close-Ups](#) provides ready access to school specific information on:

- School contact information;
- School enrollment, staffing, and demographics;
- School location, colorful maps, and metro information; and
- Student performance information.

Research on DCPS Enrollment Changes

21st Century School Fund, Urban Institute and Brookings Institution are working on two major projects for the DCPS Chancellor's Office of Transformation Management: 1) analysis of the impact of the 2008-09 school closings and grade configuration changes, and 2) development of enrollment projections for DCPS. The analysis of enrollment pattern changes from the school closings and new grade configurations found evidence of real difficulty for families at the transition from elementary school to middle school. Some interesting early findings are:

- 80 percent of the students from the closed schools enrolled this year in another DCPS school, with students more likely to enroll in their assigned receiving school at the consolidated schools than when several receiving schools were designated.
- The transition of 29 elementary schools from PK-6 to PK-5 seems to have accelerated the enrollment of 6th graders at public charter schools, with nearly 46% of public school 6th graders attending charters in 2008-09, compared with 36% in 2007-08.
- The share of students remaining enrolled in DCPS after 5th or 6th grade was higher at the new PS/K-8 schools created by adding grades to existing elementary schools than at the new PS/K-8 schools created by consolidating elementary and middle schools.

Because of the unique and complex system of choice and high student mobility in DC, the team is working with Professor Jack Buckley at New York University, an expert on statistical modeling and education policy, on the development and testing of a process and model for projecting DCPS enrollment at each grade at each school. An early model was used to inform enrollment projections as part of developing DCPS preliminary school budgets for 2009-2010. The team is currently refining the model for use next year.

Recent Discussion: Supporting Facilities for Inclusive Schools

In partnership with the Arc of DC, a non-profit organization assisting people with disabilities for more than 50 years, the 21st Century School Fund hosted a discussion of inclusion programs within the public schools in the District. On February 25th a small group of parents, educators, advocates, and teachers from DCPS and charter schools, along with administrators from the DCPS Office of Special Education and the DC Office of Disability Rights talked about the implications of plans for increased inclusion of students with disabilities - - both the program expansions and building alterations that might be required.

The [Chancellor's Draft 5 year Plan](#) (pg.19-22) shows a clear policy direction moving DCPS from stand-alone facilities and separate classrooms toward a fuller integration of special needs students along with general education students. Although the current [Master Facilities Plan from OPEFM](#) (Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization, pg. 18), provides few specifics, it states the intention to close DCPS' stand-alone special education facilities. Furthermore, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education is in the process of finalizing policy on inclusion which emphasizes the placement of students in general education classrooms if at all possible, with assistance provided as necessary for them to thrive in the least restrictive environment.

People talked about the lessons that might be learned from DCPS' new SAM (School-wide Application Model) initiatives started this year with eight schools and expected to expand. At SAM schools, *all* students are integrated into the least restrictive environment possible. Staff development includes team-building for general and special education teachers who work together to support each student in every classroom. The first eight SAM schools include both elementary and preK-8th schools with a wide array of different buildings, from the like-new renovation at Noyes to the enormous 1970s open-space building at Wilkinson/Moten Elementary to generic red-brick classroom blocks from the 1920s, 1950s and 1960s at Raymond, Murch, Simon, Stanton, Hendley and Beers. These facilities might provide a laboratory of best practices in facilities adaptations for inclusion programs.

Note that Hyde Elementary, currently a full-inclusion program in a 19th century building, is expected to expand into the adjacent and completely modernized Addison building later this year. Addison will be fully compliant, greatly expanding critical program space for students with disabilities at this small school.

If you are interested in notification of further discussions of facilities for inclusion programs please contact Nancy Huvendick at the 21st Century School Fund: nhuvendick@21csf.org.