

Better Buildings: Better Schools

Issue 40 (January/February 2007)

Monthly news 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

Proposed Changes: Who Runs the DC Public Schools?

The Mayor's Proposal - On January 4th Mayor Fenty announced his desire to take direct control over the DC Public Schools. He provided detailed legislation to accomplish this. Among other things, his plan:

- Strips the Board of Education of all authority except for 2 state-level matters;
- substitutes a Chancellor appointed by the Mayor for the Superintendent;
- sets up a Department of Education; to deal with all state level responsibilities;
- adds an ombudsman's office to deal with complaints;
- establishes a large commission to coordinate human services that affect children;
- sets up a separate School Construction Authority to maintain and build schools.

The Board of Education's Proposal - On January 29, the Board of Education unveiled its own legislation for changing DCPS. The Board's plan:

- Retains the Board of Education which appoints the Superintendent;
- sets benchmarks for student achievement and reforming special education in the next 18 months;
- creates a Department of Education to deal with all state level responsibilities;
- adds an ombudsman's office within the Board of Education to deal with complaints;
- creates a special Commission for Facilities under the Superintendent.
- gives superintendent broad powers to renegotiate union contracts.

Please see our website at www.21csf.org for a matrix outlining the major differences between the two different plans and links to the legislation itself.

There have been numerous hearings, forums, meetings, editorials and letters to the editor about these proposals. Both the Mayor's legislation and the Board's proposal are very complex; they propose major changes to how the District operates and the schedule is moving very fast.

Several useful ways to consider these issues is to ask:

- whether the proposed changes will actually affect children and teachers in the classroom;

- whether the changes will have a long term benefit beyond the present elected and appointed officials;
- whether DC residents want privatized public education;
- whether the electorate and public officials have had enough time to study the plan and its implementation.

Council Hearings - The mayor's proposal is being considered by the DC Council with a series of public hearings. The first was on January 18th with the Mayor and the second was January 30th with the Board of Education, Superintendent Janey and a long list of education experts, union members and local school activists groups. The third hearing, on February 7th, included members of the general public; the 4th hearing was of students; and the 5th of outside experts, including Mary Filardo of the 21st Century School Fund on the issue of the proposed facility authority. There is only one more public hearing scheduled: Tuesday, February 20: general public – starts at 1:00 pm and Tuesday, February 27: Mayor Fenty

Call 724-8196 to get on the speakers list. All hearings are at the Wilson Building in the Council chamber on the 5th floor.

Board of Education Community Meetings - The Board of Education also had a series of community meetings to discuss these proposals:

Thursday, February 8, 2007;
Bell Multicultural Senior High School
3101 16th Street, NW

Monday, February 12, 2007
McKinley Technology High School
151 T Street, NE, Room 150

Saturday, February 17, 2007
Shepherd Elementary School
7800 14th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20012
10am-12 noon

“Blitz” and “State of Good Repair” Funds for Quality of Life Issues

At its January 17th meeting, the Board of Education passed a 10 year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), DCPS' budget for its facilities from 2008 to 2016. This budget lists the expenditures and the general schedule for modernization projects, small capital repairs (boilers, windows, roofs, etc.) and major maintenance for the next ten years.

The document is available on the 21st Century School Fund website (www.21csf.org; see “Data Shop” at the right and scroll past page 32 to the matrix of figures (these pages can be printed out on legal size paper).

The Board voted to re-program roughly \$30 million from the funding set aside from the “State of Good Repair” program in the new budget and apply it to the 2007 budget for an exceptional program of immediate repairs that may start as early as next month. This adds up to a 2-year, roughly \$75 million program for DCPS’ “blitz” repairs intended to get every school clean, safe and comfortable.

Problems will be addressed at the 76 schools listed on the 4th and 5th pages of the budget (lines 147-223). The funds available for each school range from \$3,830,000 at Dunbar High School to \$195,000 at Hearst Elementary. Schools not on the list are either already modernized or planned for modernization in the very near future.

It would be prudent for PTAs and LSRTs at these schools to organize committees to work with their principals, custodians and building engineers to:

- 1). consider what repairs would make the most difference to the daily life of students and teachers in the classrooms (fresh paint, new carpets, good lighting, windows to see out of, etc.)
- 2). meet with their assigned DCPS project manager to determine the schedule and scope of work and
- 3). keep watch over the improvements as they are implemented.

“Deliberately Flexible” Master Facilities Plan Will Continue To Be Refined

The Board of Education also formally accepted the Master Facilities Plan at its meeting on January 17th. This is a more than 1000 page document, the latest revisions of which are available on the DCPS website: click on the MFP 2006 box and look for: “What’s New” for the Summary of Recommendations (400 pages) and “Revised Recommendations” Summary of Modifications dated January 4, 2007 (28 pages).

The resolution passed by the Board acknowledges that this is a “deliberately flexible document which allows a fuller exploration of a number of areas that would benefit from additional study and community involvement.” It also authorizes the Superintendent to “establish a process and working groups in order to continue to refine elements of the Master Facilities Plan.”

The Summary of Modifications states that “From this point forward the Master Facilities Plan recognizes a community engagement process that begins with the MFP recommendations and concludes with the modernization of a DCPS school. If a consolidation is recommended this process begins with public consolidation hearings, community work sessions and Board of Education hearings. A modernization, or new school construction, will begin with a site specific education specification and feasibility study including community input and representation in the design process.”

Out-Of-Boundary Season January 26th to February 28th: Schools Can Help Parents with On-Line Applications

DCPS has a history of providing extraordinary opportunities for students to attend schools other than their assigned neighborhood school. More than 50% of DCPS elementary and middle school students exercise this option. Students often simply attend a different school within their neighborhood.

Several years ago a formalized central lottery system was instituted for the majority of DC public schools to make the process of securing out-of-boundary status more equitable, although a handful of city-wide specialty schools continue to manage their own admissions.

However, this year the administration instituted an on-line only application policy. Although this may make it easier to track applications (and it includes a much needed survey) this change could discourage parents from applying, particularly if they don't have ready access to a computer and printer. To apply for out-of-boundary go to: <https://webb.k12.dc.us/OOB/index.asp> ; for information on all DCPS public schools go to DCPS close-ups at <http://www.21csf.org/schoolcloseups>.