

Better Buildings: Better Schools

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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

Principals in Training Attend Facilities Management Workshop

On March 22nd, 21CSF staff conducted the first of two training workshops on facilities management for the District of Columbia New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) Principal development program. The March 22nd training was given to the current group of Resident Principals. The day long workshop was conducted at Raymond Elementary School during which 21CSF staff provided instruction and facilitated discussion of the impact of facilities on learning, the roles and responsibilities of principals in facility operations, and the planning and design of building improvements. The team of principals in training walked the Raymond Elementary School building and site during the workshop to learn how to visually assess building planning and condition issues. Included in the workshop was information on principal responsibilities for fire safety. The second workshop, planned for current NLNS Principals, is expected to be this coming summer and will give current principals an opportunity to identify and problem solve issues of site based management as it relates to their facilities and staff and contractors responsible for facilities operations, repair, maintenance and improvements.

DC Council Passes the Mayor's School Governance Bill

On Monday, April 23rd, Mayor Fenty signed the District of Columbia Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007, the school governance bill that passed the Council on a vote of 9-2 the previous Thursday. This is the biggest change in District government since Home Rule was instituted in 1974.

Here's a brief outline of the most important changes in the new legislation:

- Most state responsibilities are shifted from the former DCPS Board of Education, which is abolished and transformed into the new State Board of Education.
- The new State Board of Education will be largely advisory to the new Office of the State Superintendent of Education (formerly called the State Education Office) and the State Superintendent of Education (formerly called the DC State Education Officer). All of this is under the responsibility of the Department of Education.
- The Council will have line-item authority over the DCPS budget within two years.
- The Mayor appoints a Chancellor to take control over DC Public Schools.
- A new cabinet-level Department of Education headed by a Deputy Mayor for Education takes responsibility for all public education in the District including early childhood and adult education - - except for the University of the District of Columbia.
- An Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization is established to take control over all aspects of planning, design and construction for new and modernized public school buildings. It is overseen by the Department of Education.
- An Ombudsman's office is created within the Department of Education.

- An Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission is established to be chaired by the Mayor and include 20 human service divisions of the District government with the aim to better coordinate and deliver programs and services for at-risk children; an improved data-base with appropriate safe-guards is to be developed and coordinated between the agencies.
- Charter schools formerly under the Board of Education are put under the Public Charter School Board.

The District of Columbia Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (Act A17-0038), is extensive and broad reaching with nine titles. You can find the entire text at the Council's web site: <http://www.dccouncil.washington.dc.us/images/00001/20070423153411.pdf>.

Any implementation of this legislation must wait until the legislation it is enacted by Congress, a process that could take several months. An effort to collect signatures to force a referendum on school governance is expected to start soon.

Cuts Proposed in the Mayor's School Budget for Next Year

Local education experts testified at the Council's budget support act hearing April 24th (see www.21csf.org for testimony from Mary Levy, Cathy Reilly and Margot Berkey). Prior to this, a coalition of Education Advocates (including the 21st Century School Fund, DCPTA, DC Voice, Fix-Our-Schools, Parents United for the DC Public Schools, Save Our Schools Coalition, S.H.A.P.P.E., Sr. High Alliance of Parents, Principals and Educators, Youth Education Alliance) sponsored a community discussion on the DCPS Operating Budget on April 3.

Nicole Conley-Abrams, Director of Resource Allocation and Management for DCPS, helped the group of about twenty people understand the construction of the budget and the problems involved with forecasting revenues and making sure that schools are supported as equitably as possible.

Mary Levy, director of the long-running Public Education Reform Project of the Washington Lawyers Committee, provided an alarming analysis of the proposed budget for the school system (the complete text can be found by [clicking here.](#))

Essentially, about \$30 million would be cut from the school systems operating budget for next year. This assumes a loss of about 3,000 students during the first year when the mayor takes over responsibility for the system. The mayor also rejected a recommendation from his Chief State School Officer that the per-pupil funding be increased by 8%.

Cuts of this magnitude would make it impossible to fund improvements and reforms outlined in the Master Education Plan. One such program in jeopardy is the Summer Bridge Program which is designed to help rising 9th graders prepare for high school by attending school in the summer. This program helps students with study skills, gets students familiar with the new schools they will be attending in the fall, and assists them with basics in reading and math.

The final Council vote on the budget is scheduled for May 15th. Please contact your Council member to help them understand how this budget will affect DCPS schools.

DCPS Restores Weighted Student Funds to Local Schools

At the end of April, the school system restored about \$200 per student to individual school budgets. They did this by re-calculating the amount of money allocated for teacher salaries next year. That change will greatly help principals prepare for next year. However, those restorations will only go a little way toward supporting the regular public schools at a level where they can improve. A copy of the revised local school budgets can be found at [21st Century School Fund's Data Shop by clicking here.](#)

Commentary: How Will Governance Change Improve Educational Facilities?

Looming over all this governance change is the larger question of how it may translate into improved education at the 143 DCPS schools?

With respect to facilities, the legislation provides a two-page outline to establish the new Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization. This office will manage over \$200 million per year of capital and modernization funding. It gives the responsibility for all decisions about planning, locating, designing, modernizing, re-building, and commissioning facilities to the Director of the new office, who is required to have construction experience. Decisions require only consultation with the School Chancellor, the State Superintendent of Education and the Public School Modernization Advisory Committee, an oversight committee set up by the School Modernization Financing Act of 2006. Only the responsibility for maintenance and repair of buildings remains with the Chancellor.

Previously, the Board of Education publicly approved building projects first as part of a master planning process, then as part of the annual capital plan and budget. This process had its flaws, as undefined projects made their way into the capital budget. However, DCPS had begun to establish a project specific process for the planning and design of new or modernized schools that, if managed properly will result in high quality school buildings and grounds. The new Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization has no asset or management plan. Into this vacuum we see that already legislation is being introduced by the Council to lease DCPS facilities on an emergency basis with little consideration or public input.

We urge the Mayor to put forward a proposal within 90 days that describes how he will manage the information systems, planning, design, financing, project management, internal and external controls, procurement, and decision making on DCPS buildings, sites and projects. While local business and educational expertise is readily available to guide District leadership in developing a solid framework of efficient and effective systems and process, the quality and utility of our public school buildings will not be secured without a Facilities Modernization Office that goes beyond quick and efficient. This office must aspire to high quality planning and design, with a long view. It needs to engage principals, teachers, parents and community members in public planning for our public schools. Only through a requirement for careful consultation with the public which uses and lives among the schools will the District's modernization program result in school buildings, school yards and athletic facilities that will be a benefit to our neighborhoods and support high quality public education in our schools.