



Better Buildings: Better Schools Issue 26 (March 2005)

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 or unsubscribe please email: newsletter@21csf.org.

DCPS Capital Improvement Program & Budget – Update

This year, the Board of Education and the DCPS Administration have deliberated over a series of possible FY2006-2011 Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and related budget options, with the Administration (but not yet the Board!) recently settling on “Option D.” This option significantly reduces the scope and budget (while not changing the school order) of the current modernization program, with the intent to redirect funds to focus on the systemic needs and deficiencies at many other schools that would not benefit from the current CIP. Option D would allow for the completion - without scope change - of modernization projects in progress at Thomson ES, Bell-Lincoln SHS/MS, Brightwood ES, Luke C. Moore SHS, Randle Highlands ES Phase III, Hardy MS, Sousa MS, HD Cooke ES, and Wheatley ES, but would reduce the scope to “systemic rehabilitation” projects at other schools. For more details on proposed Option D, including DCPS’ definition of “systemic rehabilitation,” see www.k12.dc.us/dcps/OFM/dcofmhome.html.

The Board of Education has continued to deliberate over Option D, and it is expected that they will vote on their final decision at a public meeting this Wednesday, March 16th (6:30pm) at 825 North Capitol Street, 5th floor. The public is encouraged to attend this meeting.

21CSF supports the proposed Option D, please see the *Commentary* section below.

DC Education Compact – Update

The DC Education Compact (DCEC) is a community-wide private/public partnership that has come together to improve learning and achievement among DC public school students. Officially launched with a retreat in early November, the Compact is a unifying dialogue bringing together fragmented discussions, encouraging citizens and public officials to collaborate. Work has continued since the retreat by a planning committee, 11 issue groups, and 8 sector groups.

Four community forums were held around the city in February, during which members of the public provided input to support the work of the issue groups, and each group was then tasked to revise preliminary reports that had been prepared. Final issue group reports, as well as final reports of the sector groups, are due in March. These reports are intended to inform a new school system business plan expected to be developed by the superintendent by April.

The facilities issue group (which 21CSF is chairing) held another meeting after the community forums, on February 24th, to begin finalizing their report. The minutes of the minutes and reports are available on our website (www.21csf.org), as well as on the new Compact website (www.dcec.org).

Mayoral Hearing on FY06 Education Budget

The Executive Office of the Mayor held a public hearing on the proposed FY 2006 Education Budget on Tuesday, February 15, 2005 at 4:00 p.m. Many community stakeholders turned out to share their thoughts on the Education Budget with the Mayor, including 21CSF's Mary Filardo, Jordan Spooner and Nancy Huvendick (testimony available at www.21csf.org). These comments will be considered in the crafting of the Mayor's final education budget for District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools.

Small Schools Discussion

Currently, 44% of the District's publicly funded schools have enrollments of less than 300 students. 21CSF hosted a discussion on these "small schools" on February 15 at our offices. Community activists and advocates gathered to talk about the implications of the District's low enrollments and to consider planning steps to accommodate them. The minutes from this meeting are available at www.21csf.org. For more information or to get involved in the ongoing discussion, please email info@21csf.org.

Prospect Learning Center Opens – 5th New DCPS Facility this Year!

After two years in swing space at Douglass School in Southeast, Prospect Learning Center celebrated its return to its "like new" home at 920 F Street, NE (the former Goding Elementary School, built in 1959). More than a dozen students and teachers helped cut the ribbon after a program for the assembled school which included DCPS administrators as well as Prospect principal Eve Byford-Peterson, parents, teachers, students and neighbors.

Prospect Learning Center is DCPS' first example of "systemic rehabilitation" where, rather than being torn down and replaced or gut-renovated, schools are systematically refurbished with new systems so that they preserve the basic structure but are as good as new. The rehabilitation showcases the attributes of the original fifty year-old structure: generous stairwells, both a cafeteria and an auditorium/gym, wide, window-lit halls covered with glazed tiles and small classrooms that are a good fit for the school's special education program.

New windows, exterior panels, floors, ceilings, light fixtures, heating and cooling systems have been installed along with new furniture and carpets. Prospect Learning Center shares the entire block with the new Sherwood Recreation Center, providing ample green space nearby to supplement the new playground equipment at the school.

Commentary

For DC School Buildings, a Practical Plan Instead of a Wish List (as seen in the *Washington Post*, Sunday, March 13, 2005)

Somewhere in the District, a little girl sits in a public school classroom trying to learn, but it's difficult. She's wearing two sweaters because it is cold, and as her teacher lists spelling words on the chalkboard, she is distracted by a large stain on the wall, the residue of a recent plumbing problem. The girl rarely gets to use a computer because her school is not wired for the high-tech world.

While this story is fictitious, this situation is real for thousands of D.C. children who go to class in substandard buildings. But here's the irony: It's all part of the "plan."

That plan would be the D.C. Public Schools' Facilities Master Plan, which calls for modernization or replacement of about a third of the city's schools by 2020. The plan, adopted in 2000, is balanced and comprehensive, but it's burdened by a \$3.5 billion price tag. So far, only nine projects have been completed; almost 140 more rehabilitation or rebuilding projects are left. And that doesn't count lesser needs -- boilers that should be replaced, roofs that need repair. Children whose schools are far down the list probably will graduate before they get the new buildings they've been promised.

This is why the 21st Century School Fund welcomes School Superintendent Clifford B. Janey's "Option D," which is being considered by the D.C. School Board this week. Instead of gutting or replacing a school, Option D calls for comprehensive rehabilitations. "Comprehensive" means replacing major elements such as wiring, heating and air conditioning systems, along with windows and fire alarms. It also means making modifications to accommodate early childhood programs and to conform with the requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

We believe Option D is the way to go because:

- It is more equitable than the facilities plan. The same \$70 million needed to build one high school can fund the rehabilitations of a high school, a junior high and four elementary schools. Under Option D, more children will have the safe and attractive schools that they deserve -- sooner and at a lower cost.
- It is economically more realistic. The District has budgeted \$640.8 million for its school facilities during the next six years. But the facilities plan requires \$300 million a year to complete its projects, meaning most of the big projects it calls for will have to be put on indefinite hold.

Because the costs of systemwide rehabilitation are much lower than school replacement, Option D can be covered by anticipated funding.

The Prospect Learning Center, a D.C. public school facility for special education, is a good example of what can be accomplished by systematic rehabilitation. This structurally sound 1959 building is receiving new windows, flooring, electrical fixtures and specialized facilities at a cost of about \$6 million, far less than the cost of new construction.

Some people feel shortchanged by Option D, especially those who have been waiting their turn for one of the new buildings called for by the facilities plan. That's understandable, but under Option D, they would keep their place in line for a school replacement. Meanwhile, their children can be sitting in a learning-ready building. Given the uncertainties of school construction in the best of times, trading grand promises for a common-sense option seems to be an easy call.

-- **Mary Filardo** is executive director of the 21st Century School Fund, a nonprofit organization devoted to improving urban public school facilities. info@21csf.org