



On Point Memo

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Improving K-12 Education in the District of Columbia: A Blueprint for Lasting Reform to Boost Academic Achievement

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About the Author

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The views expressed in this article are his own.

Executive Summary

For decades, policymakers in the nation's capital have struggled with the challenge of providing students with a quality education in Washington, D.C.'s public schools. Today, the District of Columbia spends more than \$18,700 per pupil for all children enrolled in its public schools—more than every state and well above the national average of \$11,300.ⁱ Yet many children continue to pass through the D.C. public school system without mastering basic skills.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as “the nation’s report card,” 56 percent of D.C. fourth-grade students scored “below basic” in reading in 2009.ⁱⁱ Only 17 percent scored “proficient or better”—what is commonly considered as performing at the appropriate grade level.ⁱⁱⁱ Failing to master essential skills like reading in elementary school can doom a student to fall ever further behind during middle school and high school. Too many students never catch up. In D.C. public schools, at least four in 10 drop out of school before earning their high school diploma.^{iv}

Despite these grim statistics, D.C. residents have reason to be cautiously optimistic about the future of the District’s public schools. Over the past 15 years, significant changes and reforms have altered the landscape of the D.C. school system. Most notable among these reforms is the growing charter school sector, which has expanded options for families and created real pressures on traditional public schools to improve. In recent years, School Chancellor Michelle Rhee attracted national attention by championing aggressive public school reforms aimed at improving teacher quality and strengthening academic accountability. There is some emerging evidence that D.C. students’ performance is actually improving, with D.C. students making strides on the 2009 NAEP exam.^v

However, there is a long way to go, and it is unclear whether the current efforts to reform the public school system will endure beyond Chancellor Rhee’s recently concluded tenure.^{vi} Regardless of who leads the District’s school system in 2011 and beyond, D.C. policymakers should enact lasting policy reforms that fundamentally change school governance and accountability to ensure that all children have access to a high-quality education.

This paper examines the condition of education in Washington, DC, makes the case for urgent reform, and offers a blueprint for comprehensive, lasting changes. The policy recommendations presented are based on emerging academic research that suggests that the right policy prescriptions can significantly improve students’ learning opportunities. The reform blueprint is inspired by the experience of Florida—the state that has gone furthest in implementing comprehensive, lasting reforms and has witnessed dramatic improvement in students’ academic achievement as a result.

Growing empirical and practical evidence shows that reforms that force schools to focus on the singular goal of student learning can spur dramatic progress in students’ academic achievement. These reforms include maintaining high academic standards and measuring results, holding schools and students accountable for their performance, expanding students’ learning options and choices, and strengthening teacher quality. By enacting the right policies, the D.C. school system can become a model for urban education—rather than a national tragedy—and ensure that all children have an opportunity to receive a safe and high-quality education.

The State of Public Education in Washington, D.C.

“Public education is supposed to be the great equalizer in our country. It is supposed to be the thing that ensures that it doesn’t matter if you’re black or white, rich or poor. We have public schools so that every child can have an equal chance in life to be successful. So, if you work hard and do the right thing, you should be able to live the American dream. That’s not the reality we have in Washington, D.C. today. The reality that we have in Washington, D.C. today is that if a child lives in Tenleytown or in Georgetown versus Anacostia, they get two wildly different educational experiences.”^{vii}



-- Former D.C. School Chancellor Michelle Rhee, October 2008

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, the D.C. public school system spent \$18,700 per pupil for all children enrolled in public schools in 2006-2007, the most recent school year for which that data are available.^{viii} This means that the average child entering first grade in the nation’s capital can expect to have well over \$200,000 invested in her education by taxpayers if she remains enrolled in D.C. public schools through graduation. Tragically, statistics show that, for many children, this considerable taxpayer investment does not purchase a quality education that adequately prepares a student to take full advantage of life’s opportunities in adulthood.

Academic Achievement: According to the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as “the nation’s report card,” roughly half of all D.C. fourth- and eighth-grade students score “below basic” in both reading and mathematics. (See Table 1.) According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a student who scores “below basic” fails to demonstrate “partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade level.”^{ix} Fewer than one in five D.C. students scores “proficient” in either reading or mathematics, which indicates that a student is performing at grade-level.

Table 1 -- 2009 NAEP Achievement Levels, by Percentage

	<i>Below Basic</i>	<i>At or Above Basic</i>	<i>At or Above Proficient</i>	<i>Advanced</i>
<i>4th Grade Reading</i>	56	44	17	5
<i>4th Grade Math</i>	44	56	17	3
<i>8th Grade Reading</i>	49	51	14	1
<i>8th Grade Math</i>	60	40	11	2

Source: 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress.^x

However, there is some good news. D.C. students have demonstrated improvement on the NAEP exam since 2003. (See Table 2.) D.C. fourth-grade students, at least, are slowly closing the gap between their scores and the NAEP exam’s national average. Between 2007 and 2009, D.C. students made greater gains on the fourth-grade reading assessment than students in any state.^{xi}

Table 2 -- Average NAEP Scores from 2003 to 2009, DC vs. National Average

	4th Grade Reading		4th Grade Math		8th Grade Reading		8th Grade Math	
	D.C.	Nation	D.C.	Nation	D.C.	Nation	D.C.	Nation
2003	188	216	205	234	239	261	243	276
2005	191	217	211	237	238	260	245	278
2007	197	220	214	239	241	261	248	280
2009	202	220	219	239	242	262	254	282



In addition, D.C. students appear to be making impressive strides compared to other large urban school districts, according to the 2009 trial urban reading assessment.^{xii} This improvement suggests that District students *can* make learning strides. However, while students, residents and educators should be encouraged by recent gains, the District has much further to go to ensure all students in the nation's capital receive a quality education.

High School Graduation Rates: The District's alarmingly low graduation rate provides clear evidence of the system's significant room for improvement. High school graduation rates serve as an important indicator of whether a school system is succeeding in the basic task of ensuring that children complete secondary school with the skills necessary to earn a diploma. On this measure, the District of Columbia continues to disappoint. Both District and national statistics indicate that too many D.C. children continue to drop out. According to the D.C. Public School System (DCPS), 72 percent of D.C. students graduated in 2008-2009, the most recent school year for which that data is available.^{xiii}

However, there is reason to believe that this estimate may overstate the number of children graduating in the District's schools. Researchers reviewing graduation rates typically find a large variation in government statistics. An independent analysis of national graduation rates conducted by *Education Week* in 2010 found that just 57.6 percent of D.C. students graduated in 2005, the most recent year evaluated.^{xiv} This means that a D.C. student, despite having hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on his or her education by taxpayers, has little more than a 50-50 chance of earning a high school degree.

School Safety: Poor academic achievement is just one of the problems that persists in D.C.'s public schools. Statistics also reveal that D.C. schools also too often fail on perhaps the most important measure: providing children with a safe environment to learn. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reported that 11.3 percent of D.C. high school students reported being "threatened or injured" by a weapon on school grounds during the previous year—a rate well above than the national average.^{xv}

A 2009 report by The Heritage Foundation and the Lexington Institute examined data provided by the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department reporting the number of 911 calls made from D.C. schools during the 2007-2008 school year. The data show that 912 violent incidents were reported at D.C. schools, a rate of 1.9 per 100 students. There were 648 reports of simple assault, a rate of 1.3 per 100 students.^{xvi} (It should be noted that these data only represent incidents reported to police, suggesting that the actual rate of violent incidents in D.C. schools may be much higher.) Citing these statistics, the *Washington Post* editorialized: "No wonder many parents cite school safety when explaining why they want choice in where their child goes to school."^{xvii}



Management and Governance Problems: One problem that contributes to the poor performance of the D.C. public school system is poor management and governance. Before Chancellor Rhee, the District had experienced constant turnover in leadership: six superintendents passed through the school system during the previous ten years.^{xviii} Rhee and other officials have stated that the school district suffered from a complete lack of accountability at all levels. For example, according to a DCPS official, the district's data system was "essentially broken" before 2007, with no student achievement data in the district's information system.^{xix} The school system has also struggled to track employees. In 2007, *The Washington Post* reported that the school system had spent \$25 million on a personnel management system that had to be discarded because there was no accurate list of employees available.^{xx}

The Long-Term Costs of Failure

The widespread and persistent problems in the District of Columbia's schools impose significant long-term costs, both on individual students and the community as a whole. Poor educational attainment is linked to reduced social and economic mobility, lower quality of life and life expectancy, significant social and community costs, and greater dependence on government services.^{xxi} Consider some of the ways in which the failure to ensure all children have access to a high-quality education affects individuals and the community:

- **Low Adult Literacy:** A 2009 report by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 19 percent of D.C. residents are functioning at a below-basic level of prose literacy, meaning that approximately one in five D.C. adults lack the literacy skills to function effectively as members of society.^{xxii}
- **High Incarceration Rates:** According to a study by the Pew Center, Washington, D.C. has the fourth highest incarceration rate in the nation, with approximately 5 percent of D.C. adults incarcerated.^{xxiii}
- **Employability and Lower Lifetime Earnings:** The D.C. Chamber of Commerce reports that D.C. residents are losing their share of jobs to suburban workers, largely because of the lack of educational attainment among too many D.C. workers.^{xxiv} A 2007 study by the Alliance for Excellence in Education estimated that one class of high school dropouts in Washington, D.C., would have earned an additional \$614 million in lifetime earnings had they earned a high school degree.^{xxv}

Strong Public Support for Reform

Given the persistent and widespread problems in the District of Columbia's schools, it is not surprising that there is strong public support for reform. A 2009 poll found that D.C. voters view improving K-12 education and schools as a top priority. Despite the other problems like crime and the economy, 29 percent of D.C. voters cited education as their top concern. Seventy-six percent of respondents rated the D.C. public school system as "fair" or "poor." The survey also revealed strong support among



respondents for efforts to reform the school system. A majority of D.C. voters supported former Mayor Adrian Fenty's and former Chancellor Rhee's education reform efforts. Respondents also indicated strong support for reform initiatives like the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program (the federally funded private school voucher program for low-income children), charter schools and linking teacher pay with performance.^{xxvi}

Recent Education Reform Efforts: Encouraging Progress, Uncertain Future

Over the past 15 years, the District of Columbia's school system has experienced significant reforms that hold promise for expanding access to high-quality educational opportunities for more children.

Charter Schools: The most significant reform has been the burgeoning charter school sector. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that agree to meet certain performance standards set by governing authorities, but are otherwise free from the bureaucratic rules and regulations that encumber traditional public schools. Enacted in 1996, the District of Columbia's charter school law is the strongest in the nation, according to the Center for Education Reform, a non-profit organization that favors charter schools.^{xxvii}

In 2009, roughly 28,000 students attended public charter schools in D.C.—approximately 38 percent of all the city's public school students.^{xxviii} In other words, more than a third of all students attend schools that were not in existence 15 years ago. The proliferation of charter schools has expanded options for families, spurred innovation and the opening of many promising schools, and has increased the pressure on traditional public schools to improve or risk losing students.

Opportunity Scholarships: Another successful education reform initiative in the District is the federal D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program. Enacted in 2004, the federal D.C. School Choice Incentive Act provided extra funding to the D.C. school system and created the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program to provide low-income children with tuition scholarships to attend private school.

Over the past six years, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program has proven effective in improving families' satisfaction with their children's educational experiences and boosting students' academic achievement, according to a rigorous academic evaluation overseen by the U.S. Department of Education.^{xxix} In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education reported that students who used vouchers to attend private schools through the program had a graduation rate that was 21 percent higher than their peers who did not use vouchers and, therefore, likely remained in public school.^{xxx} Despite this track record of success and student improvement, the Obama administration and Congress have passed legislation that effectively sunsets this program overtime as students graduate out of the program.^{xxxi}



Public School Reforms: In 2007, then-Mayor Adrian M. Fenty launched a mayoral takeover of the city’s schools, and appointed Michelle Rhee, the former head of the New Teacher Project, to be school chancellor. Under Rhee’s leadership, D.C. public schools have undergone significant changes. Multiple school principals were fired. Many public schools, facing declining enrollment, were put on track to close. Rhee also reached an agreement with the Washington Teachers Union to reform the school district’s teacher contract. The deal provides teachers with significant pay increases, but introduces performance-based evaluations and weakens teachers’ seniority and tenure rights. In August 2010, Rhee fired hundreds of teachers, including 165 that had been rated as “poor” under the new evaluation system.^{xxxii}

The Uncertain Future of Reform Efforts: Considering the long history of failure in the D.C. public school system, recent reform efforts hold promise for the future. However, it is uncertain whether current reforms, which face considerable political opposition from teachers unions, will be continued. The successful but controversial D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program’s recent demise in Congress highlights this problem. After the recent mayoral election, new leaders will take over the leadership of the District’s school system and will have the opportunity to chart a new path for school reform in the nation’s capital.

This paper offers a blueprint for D.C. leaders who want to press forward with aggressive reform efforts. Given the serious and widespread problems in D.C. schools, and the real and lasting costs that these problems create for students and for the community, D.C. policymakers should consider the status quo a state of emergency and press forward with even bolder reforms to ensure that all children receive a first-class education.

Florida: A Model of Systemic, Lasting Reform and Student Progress

For a model of bold education reforms, D.C. policymakers should look to Florida—the state that went the furthest over the past decade in reforming its schools and witnessed dramatic progress in student learning. Policymakers of all political stripes—from Indiana’s Republican Governor Mitch Daniels to New York City’s Democratic former Schools Chancellor Joel Klein—are now pointing to Florida as a model of successful school reform.

What did Florida do? Following the 1998 election of Jeb Bush as governor, after he had campaigned on a platform of education reforms, Florida enacted reforms that were grounded on two fundamental ideas:

1. The state should establish high standards and hold public schools accountable for results.
2. Families should have greater choice in where their children attend schools.

Subsequent reforms were added to the Sunshine State’s aggressive reform cocktail, including: increasing the focus on literacy instruction, ending social promotion and providing aggressive remediation for low-achieving elementary school students, and



reforming policies for hiring and compensating teachers. (See the below text box for an overview of the Florida education reform model.)^{xxxiii}

The Florida Education Reform Blueprint

Academic Standards and Testing: The centerpiece of the Florida reform plan was the 1999 “A+ Accountability Plan,” which (years before No Child Left Behind) required students in grades 3 through 10 to be tested annually in reading and math through the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). This assessment was developed to track students’ performance over time, and measured students’ performance against state standards, while also comparing Florida children’s performance with students across the nation.

School and Student Accountability: Under the accountability plan, states and students became accountable for results on the FCAT exam. Schools were graded based on students’ performance and ranked on an A-through-F scale, with school report cards being issued to parents and the public. Schools that received an “F” for two out of four years were required to implement state-sanctioned reforms. Social promotion was curbed to hold students accountable for their performance. Students were required to pass the FCAT reading exam before beginning fourth grade with remedial instruction provided to students who failed.

School Choice Policies: Florida became a leader in offering families the power to choose their children’s school with private school choice options (including tuition scholarships for low-income children and students with disabilities), charter schools and public school enrollment options, and a growing virtual school program.

Focusing on Improving Literacy: Florida implemented a campaign, “Just Read, Florida,” which focused on improving reading instruction. The campaign included teacher training (literacy academies to improve instruction), as well as the hiring of thousands of reading coaches to work in classrooms across the state.

Strengthening Teacher Quality: Florida reformed its policies for hiring and compensating school teachers to strengthen the state’s teacher workforce. First, the state enacted alternative teacher certification policies to provide talented professionals with a less onerous pathway into the classroom than traditional certification. Second, the state enacted a series of performance-based pay initiatives, including school-based and individual teacher bonuses linked with students’ performance on exams.

Florida’s aggressive education reform initiatives have been followed by a significant improvement in student learning. The rise in Florida’s students’ test scores has outpaced the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Importantly, minority students have made the greatest progress, making significant strides toward closing the racial achievement gap. While minority children have



traditionally had lower than average test scores on the NAEP, Florida's minority students are now performing at a higher level than average students in a growing number of states. For example, Florida Hispanic students' NAEP fourth-grade reading scores were higher than the statewide average (that is, the average of all students) in 31 states. Florida's African-American fourth graders outperformed eight statewide averages on the NAEP reading test.^{xxxiv}

The impressive trends of Florida's performance on the NAEP exam suggests that real progress is occurring in Florida's schools. Readers considering how reform efforts might improve schooling in their community probably wonder which reforms in Florida are having the biggest impact on student learning. This is a challenging question to answer since they have been largely implemented simultaneously. In all likelihood, it is the combination of these reforms that has created the conditions to spur the improvement in Florida's schools. However, academic researchers have reviewed empirical evidence from Florida's reforms, controlling for other factors, and report that some specific policy changes, such as ending social promotion or providing choice to students in low-performing schools, have a positive effect in improving students' academic achievement.^{xxxv}

Another indication of Florida's positive experience with reform is the growing bipartisan political support for key reform initiatives, including the state's private school choice programs. While private school choice programs like vouchers and scholarship tax credits are strongly opposed by teachers unions, Florida's choice initiatives are attracting bipartisan support. In 2009, legislation to expand the state's corporate scholarship tax credit program, which encourages businesses to make donations to fund private school scholarships, was supported by Republicans and nearly half of the Democratic caucus in the state legislature. This bipartisan support suggests that even the most politically controversial of Florida's education reforms are likely to persist despite teacher union opposition.

An Education Reform Blueprint for the District of Columbia

Policymakers in the nation's capital should follow a similar, systematic approach to reforming public education. The purpose of the following plan is to force schools and educators to focus on the singular goal of learning by creating the right accountability mechanisms to ensure success. This includes both top-down accountability (holding schools accountable for result by maintaining transparency about school and student performance) and bottom-up accountability (expanding choices and options for families to get students into the best classrooms possible and create pressure on all schools to provide successful learning environments).

Despite its many, significant problems, the District of Columbia school system is actually further down the road toward systemic reform than most school systems. However, much work remains to be done. The following are the key principles and reform mechanisms District leaders should enact to transform education in the District of Columbia:



1. Hold Schools and Students Accountable for Results

- **Maintain High Standards and Quality Testing and Raise Academic Standards:** Top-down accountability occurs when policymakers establish high academic standards, use quality assessments to measure schools' and students' academic achievement, and create real transparency about school performance. The District of Columbia already has some of the key ingredients for effective top-down accountability. First, the District already has quality education standards. According to the Thomas B. Fordham Institute's 2010 review of states' academic standards, the District of Columbia's academic standards for both language arts and mathematics earned "A's" in 2010, up from "C" and "D" in 2005.^{xxxvi} Second, the District already has a quality assessment tool, the D.C. Comprehensive Assessment System (D.C. CAS), which measures both students' performance against the benchmark of district standards and student progress over time.^{xxxvii} However, one area in which the District of Columbia could improve is raising the level of its proficiency standards—that is, the number of questions that must be answered correctly on the CAS exam to score "proficient" under federal guidelines. Harvard University researchers comparing state proficiency scores with students' performance on the NAEP exam report that the District of Columbia's proficiency standards earned a "C" grade, with weaker proficiency standards than 16 states.^{xxxviii} To establish a higher bar for students and schools, the District of Columbia should strengthen its proficiency standards.
- **Create Transparency and Hold Schools Publicly Accountable with Parent-Friendly School Report Cards:** One of the important components of Florida's successful school reform strategy was the creation of school report cards and a simple "A through F" grading scale that all parents can understand. Today, under No Child Left Behind, all school systems across the country are required to grade schools on their progress meeting "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) for all students and for specific student populations. However, reporting whether schools made AYP does not provide parents with an easy-to-understand indicator of how well their school is performing. A better approach would be to grade schools annually on an A-through-F scale based on students' performance on the D.C. CAS examination. The grading system should be based both on overall student performance meeting the D.C. academic standards as well as a measure of students' progress over the previous school years. The latter will measure whether schools are boosting student learning over time. By creating this A-through-F scale, the District will create an easy-to-understand barometer of how well students and schools are performing, giving school officials the knowledge to focus school reform efforts and arming parents with the necessary information to bring about bottom-up accountability.
- **End Social Promotion and Provide Aggressive Remediation:** The District of Columbia should also hold students accountable by ending social promotion in certain grades to ensure that students attain basic levels of knowledge before being promoted to higher grades. This policy requires teachers and students alike to focus



on the critical task of mastering key skills to ensure that students are learning at the appropriate grade level. Florida's strategy for ending social promotion involved requiring students to pass the reading test on the state assessment in third grade before entering the fourth grade. New York City has created similar rules—requiring students to meet certain standards in grades 3, 5, 7, and 8 before moving on to higher grades. In both Florida and New York City, retained students were provided with aggressive remediation to ensure that they master basic skills to keep on track with their education. Academic researchers analyzing both Florida and New York City's social promotion policies have found that the policy has led to improved academic achievement.^{xxxix} The District of Columbia should similarly end social promotion for students in elementary and middle school to ensure that students are mastering the necessary skills to succeed in higher grades. Retained students and those identified as at-risk of falling behind should be provided with aggressive remediation and tutoring.

2. Improving Students' Learning Options: Top-down accountability must be supported by bottom-up accountability, which will give schools real incentives to improve and provide all children with a high-quality educational environment. The strongest mechanism for bottom-up accountability is to provide families with the power to choose the best school for their children. The District of Columbia already has a range of school choice options, thanks to the charter school sector and—for the time being—the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program. However, the families of thousands of students assigned to low-performing public schools continue to be denied school choice options, since many charter schools are over-subscribed and have waiting lists, and because the District's out-of-boundary placement system offers families with few options to transfer to higher-performing public schools. To address this problem, policymakers should institute the following policy reforms to expand school choice options for D.C. families and ensure that all children have the opportunity to receive a high-quality education.

- **Expand the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program:** While Congress and the Obama administration are allowing the successful D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program to phase-out over time as current scholarship recipients graduate, District policymakers have an opportunity to expand the program to allow more students to participate. The Mayor and D.C. City Council should enact a policy so that the District government funds and oversees a local private school voucher program for low-income children. Importantly, the D.C. government can improve upon the existing program by allowing thousands of additional students to participate, increasing the tuition amount, and allowing students to attend private schools outside of the District when spaces in D.C. private schools are unavailable. Since the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program provides scholarships worth only \$7,500—less than half the public school per-pupil expenditure—an expanded D.C. voucher program that helps students transfer out of public schools could achieve significant cost savings and efficiencies for the D.C. government.
- **Enact a Special Education Scholarship Program:** The District faces many challenges to deliver on its federal responsibility of providing special education students with a high-quality education. D.C. has a high rate of students placed in



special education. It also has a high rate of due process hearings. In 2006, the D.C. school system was found to be out of compliance with federal law after parents brought a class action lawsuit challenging the District's failure to provide appropriate special education services to special needs students.^{xi} Moreover, the District spends approximately \$280 million annually on special education.^{xli} Much of these funds are spent to transport and pay tuition for the estimated one-quarter of special education students attending private schools through publicly-funded placements. Recent reports indicate that School Chancellor Michelle Rhee is considering creating a school voucher program for special education students. Florida's McKay Scholarship Program for students with disabilities has proven to be popular with families, cost-effective, and successful in promoting student learning.^{xlii} A scholarship program for special education students in D.C. should have similar benefits. Importantly, it would transfer control over the decisions that affect special education students from bureaucrats and lawyers to parents and the children themselves. A scholarship program would help the District overcome its challenge of ensuring that all special education students have access to a high-quality education that meets children's individual needs.

- **Strengthen Charter School Quality and Launch More Promising Schools:** The District already has a well-designed charter school law and popular charter school sector. No significant policy changes are necessary to encourage effective charter school growth. However, the D.C. Charter School Board has an opportunity and responsibility to improve the quality of the District's charter schools and promote the launch or replication of high-quality charter schools. It appears that the Board is pursuing this mission following the recent closure of an ineffective charter high school. The Board should pursue the mission of holding charter schools accountable for results by closing ineffective schools while continuing to allow new, promising schools to open to provide better learning opportunities for D.C. students.
- **Decentralize School Management and Allow Public Schools to Compete for Students:** Another way to expand choice would be to implement a system of decentralization, giving school principals greater authority to manage their schools and fostering more choice for parents within the public school system. This approach has been called the "weighted student formula," or backpack school funding, and has been successful in other cities.^{xliii} Under this system, schools receive funding based on student enrollment counts and each student's individual characteristics (with children with special needs receiving additional funding). Principals are free to determine how best to use funds to improve the school's performance. This ensures that more funds are allocated to the classroom and other uses that promote student learning. At the same time, parents are given greater freedom to choose the right public school for their children. Under this type of system, the public schools would be given the freedom and flexibility to compete more aggressively with charter schools—creating quality learning environments and developing school models that attract students to their school. Working toward a system of school-based management and real public school choice would be a promising way to create real choice within the public school system and improve overall school quality.



- **Expand and Improve Virtual Education:** Another way to improve students’ learning options is to expand virtual education or online learning. Increasingly, students across the country are taking advantage of opportunities to learn online and early results indicate that this can be an effective educational tool. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education published a meta-analysis of evidence-based studies of K-12 and postsecondary online learning programs. The study found that, “students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction.”^{xliv} Opportunities to learn online are currently limited for D.C. students. The District should become a leader by expanding K-12 online learning programs through a District-wide virtual school with expanded course offerings that all students can access. In addition, virtual charter schools and hybrid school learning models should also be allowed and encouraged. Moving forward, the District should also explore opportunities to partner with other states and districts that have quality online learning programs.

3. Focus on Literacy and Launch a “Just Read, D.C.” Campaign: The District of Columbia should launch a campaign, modeled after “Just Read, Florida,” to promote literacy and reading instruction. This campaign should include K-12 reforms, including the hiring and placement of literacy coaches in school classrooms, reading instruction academies for teachers, and the distribution of new technologies like computer programs to assist students and teachers with reading instruction. It should also include community programs that provide illiterate adults with learning opportunities, since a child’s path to literacy starts at home. A particular focus of the literacy campaign in school should be to ensure that English Language Learner (ELL) students, who comprise approximately 9 percent of the D.C. student population, receive quality services and instruction to learn to read English. The District of Columbia has a low “reclassification rate” for ELL students (only 2.5 percent as of 2005-2006), meaning that few non-English speaking students are mastering the English language.^{xlv} To serve this at-risk student population, the District should provide aggressive remediation to these students to ensure they learn to read English.

4. Continue to Strengthen Teacher Quality: Chancellor Michelle Rhee’s plan to strengthen teacher quality by using a new pay scale, evaluating individual teacher performance, and weakening teacher tenure and seniority rights is a promising step toward improving teacher quality—a factor widely recognized as a main ingredient to boosting student learning. The District of Columbia should continue to strengthen teacher quality by focusing on individual teacher evaluation and providing both school-based and individual teacher-based performance pay rewards.

The Choice—
A National Tragedy or Model of 21st Century Public Education?

When the District of Columbia school system was created in 1804, then-President Thomas Jefferson was named a trustee and president of the school board.^{xlvi} At that time, the school board embraced the following mission: “In these schools poor children shall



be taught reading, writing, grammar, arithmetic, and such branches of mathematics as may qualify them for the professions they are intended to follow.”^{xlvii}

Two centuries later, it is evident that the District of Columbia has failed to meet this standard. Today, despite spending more than \$18,000 annually per student, a majority of students continue to pass through District schools without mastering basic skills. Roughly four in 10 students fail to earn a high school degree. This widespread failure imposes significant long-term costs, both on affected students and on the community as a whole.

Recent reform efforts hold promise for improving the quality of the District’s schools. But much more needs to be done, and it remains to be seen whether current reforms will last given the intense political opposition from teachers unions that favor the status quo, despite its failures.

District citizens and policymakers must make a choice. They must decide whether to embrace aggressive and lasting reforms to transform public education in the nation’s capital. Given the experience in Florida and other districts that have embraced real change, policymakers should have confidence that bold reforms will result in significant improvement in student learning. The policy blueprint outlined in this paper would make the District of Columbia a model for urban school reform, a system where ultimately all children will have access to a high-quality education.

The choice falls to policymakers. Will they continue down the path of aggressive reform or will they yield to the special interest pressures that favor the status quo? The future of a generation of children, and of the nation’s capital city, hangs in the balance.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2009, Table 183, at: http://www.nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_183.asp?referrer=list (August 20, 2010).

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