



Turning Around Schools in the Nation's Capital



When 2015 Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were released in fall 2015, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) had cause to celebrate. Since 2007, DCPS students have posted double-digit score increases in 4th grade math and reading and 8th grade math on the biennial assessment. Enrollment in DCPS is on the rise, and according to DCPS Chancellor Kaya Henderson, the school district's workforce is "the best it has ever been."

Just a decade ago, DCPS was on a vastly different trajectory. Between 1997 and 2007, DCPS churned through six different superintendents. Half the district's schools were considered failing in reading and math, even though per-pupil spending was among the highest in the nation. Schools opened at the beginning of the year without teachers or textbooks, and principals waited two years (or longer) for the central office to repair leaking roofs and broken windows.

In less than 10 years, DCPS has turned the page and embraced a new culture of high expectations, innovation and professional growth—and students are benefitting.

"By virtually every measure, DCPS has improved faster than any other city in the nation. And the sense of momentum, the hope, the pride, the optimism that exists simply would have been impossible to think about 10, 15 or 20 years ago."

Arne Duncan, former Secretary, U.S. Department of Education

The beginnings of reform

In 2007, the D.C. City Council passed legislation that gave then-Mayor Adrian Fenty decision-making authority over public schools. Fenty used this new authority to appoint Michelle Rhee as DCPS' first-ever chancellor. Rhee quickly made big moves: She closed schools, pushed for greater accountability for educators, and took on DCPS' bloated central office bureaucracy, terminating 98 employees and recruiting new executive talent by offering top salaries.

Henderson served as Rhee's deputy and oversaw DCPS' talent reforms. Henderson negotiated a new contract with the Washington Teacher's Union (WTU) in 2010 and led the development of DCPS' new educator evaluation and support system, IMPACT.

Henderson succeeded Rhee as Chancellor in 2010 and is now in her fifth year leading the district. Henderson has expanded many of the educator effectiveness reforms initiated during Rhee's tenure. She also has emphasized rigor and instructional improvement; closed schools and tightened budgets; and collaborated closely with families, educators, charter schools and the community.

District of Columbia Public Schools

Urban District
2015–16



DISTRICT PROFILE



113 SCHOOLS

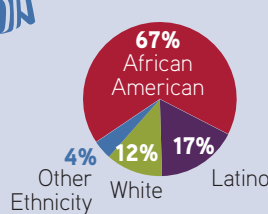
60 elementary 11 middle 15 high
18 multi-grade-level campuses 9 other



3,800 TEACHERS 109 PRINCIPALS



48,653 STUDENTS



16% special education
10% English language learners
76% free or reduced-price lunch (2013–14)

- 115 public charter schools operate within DC.
- The DC Public Charter School Board authorizes new charters.
- The Chancellor of DCPS reports to the DC Deputy Mayor for Education.

Source: District of Columbia Public Schools

To boost student achievement, Henderson launched DCPS' five-year plan, *A Capital Commitment*, in 2012. The plan sets goals to raise student achievement, increase enrollment and improve student satisfaction by (1) recruiting and retaining great people; (2) providing students with rigorous content and high-quality instruction; and (3) engaging students, families and the community.

The urgency and vision of this plan led newly elected Mayor Muriel Bowser to support retaining Henderson as chancellor in 2014.

Recruiting and retaining great people

DCPS uses a comprehensive set of strategies to place an excellent educator in every classroom, enabled in part by the 2010 contract between DCPS and the WTU. Under the contract, high-performing teachers can earn higher salaries and bonuses, and principals can dismiss low-performing teachers regardless of seniority. The contract also includes a “mutual consent” clause that eliminates guaranteed spots to teachers who lose their positions in schools and gives principals additional flexibility over who they hire.

By the time the contract was ratified, DCPS had already begun implementing IMPACT, a new educator evaluation and support system, and IMPACTplus, a performance-based compensation system for all educators. In 2012, DCPS rolled out the Leadership Initiative for Teachers (LIFT), a career ladder that provides high-performing teachers with special recognition and leadership opportunities.

IMPACT is widely considered to be the gold standard of district evaluation and support systems. Principals observe and provide teachers with targeted feedback up to five times a year. The district customizes IMPACT for educators’ specific roles and responsibilities, eschewing some of the “one-size-fits-all” policies that have undermined evaluation efforts elsewhere. And DCPS continues to improve IMPACT over time; the latest changes reflect the district’s emphasis on professional learning. Beginning in 2016–17, teachers will meet weekly with their peers and an instructional coach to discuss content and pedagogy.

Educators are eligible for annual bonuses and salary increases under IMPACTplus, DCPS’ performance-based compensation system. “Teachers don’t go into the profession to become rich,” says Jason Kamras, a former National Teacher of the Year who now is DCPS’ chief of instructional practice and an early architect of IMPACT. “But they certainly deserve to be. So that’s what we set out to achieve in DCPS.” Highly effective educators at high-poverty schools are eligible for bonuses of up to \$10,000, plus an additional \$10,000 if they teach at one of DCPS’ 40 lowest-performing schools. IMPACTplus is a retention strategy, so educators receive bonuses only if they plan to return to the classroom. In 2010–11, DCPS awarded bonuses to 476 of its 3,600 educators, and 235 of these educators also received salary increases.

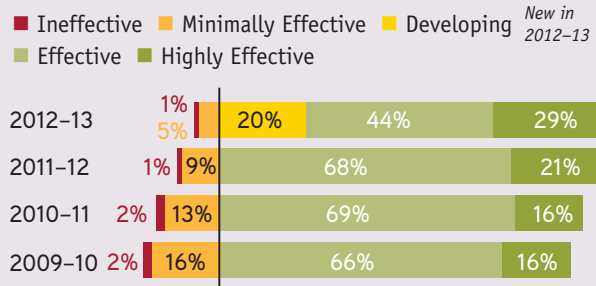
“LIFT is innovative and it demonstrates DCPS’ commitment to the profession. Teachers come to DCPS because they have opportunities to take on leadership roles without leaving the classroom.”

Meghan Raderstrong, Teacher, Tubman Elementary, DCPS

LIFT, DCPS’ career ladder, provides teachers with additional compensation and advancement opportunities without them having to leave the classroom. Teachers advance through stages of the career ladder by earning Effective or Highly Effective IMPACT ratings. As they advance, teachers can earn a higher base salary and participate in leadership opportunities involving policy design and implementation, curriculum development, coaching and mentoring, and recruitment and selection.

IMPACT improves teaching quality by...

...differentiating teacher performance



...helping struggling teachers get better

\$5 million

The amount DCPS is spending to fund the district’s professional development system, where teachers meet weekly with small groups of their peers and an instructional coach

5 observations

Teachers at early stages of the career ladder are observed five times a year, compared to expert teachers, who are observed 1–3 times a year

...and hiring and retaining high-performers

More than 2,200

Educators who have received more than \$44.9 million in performance-related bonuses under IMPACT since 2009–10

4 months of learning

Teachers who leave for performance-related reasons are replaced by teachers who increase their students’ learning by an average of four additional months

Source: District of Columbia Public Schools

DCPS’ educator effectiveness reforms have been controversial at times—in 2013, DCPS discovered errors in the evaluation ratings of 44 teachers, and researchers have found that teachers deemed most effective are more likely to teach in the wealthiest parts of the city—but IMPACT and its progeny are working largely as they were intended. Researchers found that IMPACT caused minimally effective teachers to substantially improve their performance and helped the district retain 92 percent of its highly effective teachers. In the past six years, DCPS has dismissed in total over 400 teachers (roughly 4 percent of its teaching force) for performance-related reasons and replaced them with better teachers who accelerate their students’ learning by an average of four additional months.

Meghan Raderstrong, a teacher at Tubman Elementary, credits LIFT with helping to recruit effective teachers. “LIFT is innovative and it demonstrates DCPS’ commitment to the profession. Teachers come to DCPS because they have opportunities to take on leadership roles without leaving the classroom.”



Providing students with rigorous content and high-quality instruction

DCPS also is committed to increasing rigor in classroom instruction and better preparing students for college and careers. DCPS is implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and administering the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments to measure students' ability to think critically and solve complex problems.

"We needed a curriculum strategy that matches our talent strategy. Our teachers want to be creative. They don't want to teach in a place where every lesson is scripted."

Brian Pick, Chief Officer of Teaching and Learning, DCPS

DCPS assembled teachers and content experts to create CCSS-aligned units of study and scope and sequence guides. DCPS shares instructional planning resources through an online portal and provides teachers with school-based coaching on incorporating instructional shifts into daily lessons. DCPS also schedules systemic professional development days after interim assessments so that teachers can reflect on their instructional strategies and discuss how students are progressing toward mastery of standards.

DCPS requires teachers to use district-developed instructional materials, but Brian Pick, the chief officer of teaching and learning, encourages teachers to "elegantly adapt" the curriculum and materials to meet their own style and students' needs. Teachers can choose different texts, add resources or even alter the pacing and sequence of activities, provided they don't change the cognitive demand placed on the student. "We have a lot of great teachers because of our talent efforts, and they appreciate the flexibility,"

DCPS and Public Charter Schools, Partners in Educating DC Students

The first public charter school in DC opened in 1996. Today, [44.6 percent of DC students attend public charter schools](#), the [third-highest percentage](#) of all major U.S. cities.

Although schools compete for students and the financial stakes are high, DCPS and public charter schools have found opportunities to collaborate. "DCPS and the charter sector share the same vision for our city—a world-class education for every student," says Jennie Niles, DC's deputy mayor for education. *Race to the Top* brought together DCPS and public charter school teachers to collaborate on professional development materials. Niles also points to professional networks, like Teach For America and New Leaders, that work and share ideas across both sectors. DCPS and charters also partnered with the deputy mayor for education to create [My School DC](#), a common application and lottery for the district's public school options, both charter and traditional. This year, Niles is launching a task force to identify new ways for DCPS and public charter schools to collaborate and improve the education experiences of students and families.



Cornerstones: Providing all students with quality learning experiences



"I think Cornerstones is going to offer a really unique opportunity for DC students and teachers. Not only will it bring all of the content together into a meaningful problem for students to solve collaboratively, but the teachers will have the lesson plans, the resources, the professional development, the opportunity to reflect, and it will be available to all teachers and all students, providing a real equitable platform for all of DC students."

Vanessa Ford, Think Tank Facilitator/Science Coordinator, Maury Elementary School

Pick notes. "We needed a curriculum strategy that matches our talent strategy. Our teachers want to be creative. They don't want to teach in a place where every lesson is scripted."

This year, DCPS is rolling out [Cornerstones](#), engaging and rigorous lessons that are part of the DCPS curriculum, aligned to CCSS, and taught through proven, high-impact instructional models. Every DCPS student experiences Cornerstones in all grades and subject areas. In 2nd grade PE classes, for example, all students will learn how to ride a bicycle as part of a unit plan that includes content on health, nutrition and reading maps.

Engaging students, families and the community

Under Chancellor Henderson's leadership, DCPS has made family and community engagement a key component of its theory of action to improve schools. "We've built great systems for attracting, building and retaining high quality educators, and we've built a rigorous curriculum for all kids," explains Josephine Bias-Robinson, the chief of the Office of Family and Public Engagement. "But research tells us that if a school system doesn't also focus on family engagement, then chances of sustaining improved student outcomes drops to almost zero. Our commitment and approach to engagement is helping to transform educational experiences for DCPS families and students."

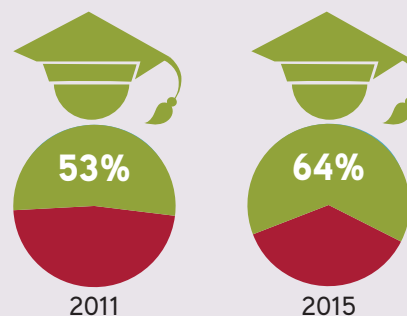
Chancellor Henderson engaged parents and educators when she proposed to close 20 under-enrolled schools in 2012. DCPS held public hearings, hosted community meetings and created a website to encourage the public to comment on the proposal. "We received over two thousand comments on the proposal," Robinson says, "and I read every single one before we made the final decision. The feedback informed our decision to only close 15 of the schools we had initially proposed. This was markedly different from previous school closing processes."

DCPS also created CCSS-related materials for families, including grade-specific [Parent Roadmaps](#) and [Curriculum Guides](#) that help parents understand the standards and how they can support their children's learning at home. High school level guides also provide parents and students with information about applying to college and entering the work force.

Results

In 2015, the percentage of DCPS students scoring proficient or higher on [NAEP/TUDA](#) rose, while nationwide scores declined. The district's steady improvement has vaulted it ahead of other urban districts it previously lagged, including Baltimore, Chicago and Philadelphia. DCPS students are gaining in other areas too. For four consecutive years, [four-year high school graduation rates have risen](#), from 53 percent in 2011 to 64 percent in 2015. Students are taking more rigorous coursework; [AP participation rates](#) increased from 17 percent in 2011 to 24 percent in 2015. Parents and families are noticing DCPS' rise and voting with their feet; DCPS [enrollment increased](#) from 45,191 students in 2011–12 to 48,653 students in 2015–16.

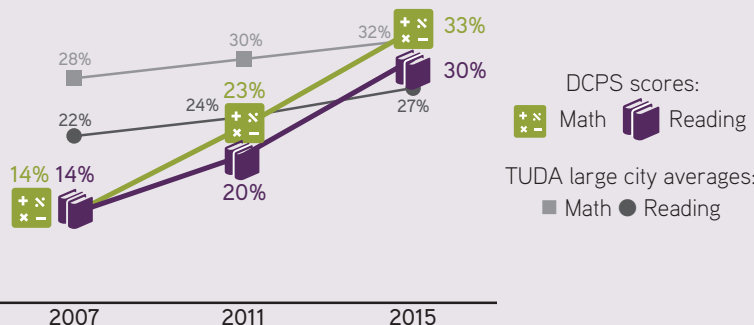
Graduation rates rise 11 points



Source: District of Columbia Public Schools

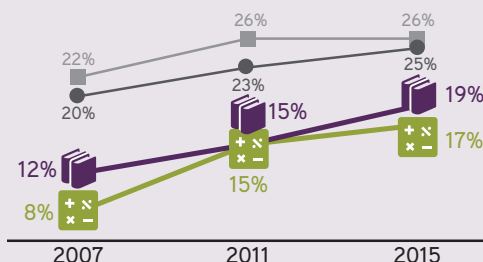
More DCPS students are scoring proficient or higher on NAEP/TUDA

4th grade proficiency rates increased by 16 percentage points in reading and 19 percentage points in math



Source: NAEP

8th grade proficiency rates increased by 7 percentage points in reading and 9 percentage points in math



Conclusion

DCPS still has a lot of room for improvement. According to 2014–15 PARCC assessments, only 25 percent of students in grades 3–8 met or exceeded expectations in English language arts compared to 48 percent of students who scored proficient in reading on the 2014 DC CAS, DCPS' previous statewide assessment. In a [letter to DCPS parents](#), Chancellor Henderson explained that these declines are due in part to higher standards—as expected. “[T]oo many of our students were still not ready for

college or a career when they graduated from high schools. The DC CAS showed we were making progress, but it also showed that we weren't setting goals for our students high enough.”

[Graduation rate gaps](#) narrowed slightly between 2007 and 2014 but persist, especially between white students and students of color and among students living in poverty and those from more affluent households. DCPS has launched interventions to address achievement gaps, including 9th grade academies and a mentorship program for African American male students. DCPS recently established the Office of Instructional Practice, led by Jason Kamras, to house the professional development and supports used to improve teaching and link educator effectiveness with the CCSS.

Still, DCPS teachers, principals and leadership are succeeding like never before—through a combination of ambitious reforms, hard work and committed talent—and are setting DCPS on a new trajectory for success.

“Five years ago, I think nobody would have been able to predict how much progress we've made in such a short amount of time. I want us to be the national model for what a great urban education looks like in America.”

Kaya Henderson, Chancellor, DCPS



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Photos courtesy of District of Columbia Public Schools