

***The Muzzled Dog That Didn't Bark:***  
**Charters and the Behavioral Response**  
**of D.C. Public Schools**

Margaret D. Sullivan, *Georgetown University*

Dean B. Campbell, *Georgetown University*

Brian Kisida, *University of Arkansas*





## The University of Arkansas

was founded in 1871 as the flagship institution of higher education for the state of Arkansas. Established as a land grant university, its mandate was threefold: to teach students, conduct research, and perform service and outreach.

The College of Education and Health Professions established the Department of Education Reform in 2005. The department's mission is to advance education and economic development by focusing on the improvement of academic achievement in elementary and secondary schools. It conducts research and demonstration projects in five primary areas of reform: teacher quality, leadership, policy, accountability, and school choice.

The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), based within the Department of Education Reform, is an education research center devoted to the non-partisan study of the effects of school choice policy and is staffed by leading school choice researchers and scholars. Led by Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, Professor of Education Reform and Endowed 21st Century Chair in School Choice, SCDP's national team of researchers, institutional research partners and staff are devoted to the rigorous evaluation of school choice programs and other school improvement efforts across the country. The SCDP is committed to raising and advancing the public's understanding of the strengths and limitations of school choice policies and programs by conducting comprehensive research on what happens to students, families, schools and communities when more parents are allowed to choose their child's school.

*The Muzzled Dog That Didn't Bark:*  
**Charters and the Behavioral Response of  
D.C. Public Schools**

Margaret D. Sullivan, *Georgetown University*

Dean B. Campbell, *Georgetown University*

Brian Kisida, *University of Arkansas*

April 2008

School Choice Demonstration Project  
Department of Education Reform  
University of Arkansas  
201 Graduate Education Building  
Fayetteville, AR 72701  
479-575-6345  
<http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>

The opinions expressed are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the positions of any individuals or institutions that contributed to the production of the paper.



## Executive Summary

As of the 2006-2007 school year, 19,733 students attended charter schools in the District of Columbia, representing over a quarter of the District's total public school student population and one of the largest charter school markets in the country.<sup>1</sup> It is under such circumstances, some suggest, that choice will spur competition, ultimately leading to the improvement of public education. Yet, surprisingly little research has evaluated the behavioral response of public schools in D.C. to this source of competition. Most research to date on school choice in D.C. and elsewhere focuses on the largely positive "participant effects" that school choice programs have on choosers. By looking at the issue from the ground level of one of the most choice-prevalent districts in the United States, we seek to closely examine the causal dynamics of "systemic effects" induced by competition from within the D.C. education establishment. Our study consists of a series of interviews, focus groups, and surveys along three levels: District elites, principals, and teachers.

Our research suggests a disconnect between the priorities of the educational elites and the dilemmas haunting principals and teachers in public schools. For years, continuous turnover in District leadership and persistent financial troubles captured the attention of most of the D.C. education sector. As such, it is unsurprising that our discussions with elites focused more on these issues than on responding to charter school competition. Though few interviewees mentioned charter school competition directly when asked to list the major issues in DCPS over the previous few years, the majority cited declining enrollment or the

---

1 National Center for Education Statistics. Common Core of Data.  
<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>

need to consolidate facilities as the most pressing problems facing the District, issues intrinsically linked to the presence of charters. Although education experts acknowledged that DCPS needed to improve in the wake of charter school competition in addition to facility right-sizing, their general sentiment suggested that such a behavioral response hinges on the motivation of individual schools, not the District as a whole.

Unlike elites, most principals did not initially cite declining enrollment as a chief concern, but many were highly aware of the long-term threat of school closure by the District. While acknowledging this threat, most principals felt disempowered to make the changes that they deemed necessary to reverse negative enrollment trends. Their overarching concern was a lack of autonomy to hire and fire teachers, obtain supplies, and maintain their facilities. Principals linked the source of their frustration to the bureaucracy of the administration and, in the case of staffing decisions, the limitations brought about by the District's teacher's union contract. Without the capacity to implement systemic change, many principals instead focused on recruitment efforts as the next best alternative. Some cited the use of common recruiting tools such as e-mail, flyers, open houses, newsletters, radio ads, newspaper ads, church meetings, and other methods of advertising. In addition to recruiting, principals also mentioned offering "extras," such as pre-K and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, school uniforms, and adult classes in parenting and English to attract and retain new students.

Like principals, teachers expressed an understanding of the need to maintain a good image in order to boost student enrollment, yet they did not feel compelled to change their behavior in the classroom as a result of competition. Specifically, when asked how district-wide changes affected their instruction, they routinely replied that they had not changed their approaches to teaching and many reported that they "put on a show" when being observed to ensure that they appear to be doing what their principals and the district tell them to do. Thus, according

to our sample, it appears that most of the changes that schools are making in order to attract more students have more to do with services for parents and the image of the school than with improving the educational attainment of students.

Our investigation suggests that market forces that might otherwise be expected to spur a competitive response to school choice in D.C. are watered down by a lack of commitment to a truly competitive model that incorporates non-trivial consequences for failure. Efforts to enforce such a competitive model are hampered by political dynamics and burdensome regulations. District leaders preoccupied with politics, leadership problems, and administrative headaches have left individual schools to respond to charter school competition on their own. Meanwhile, D.C. principals are not responding to competition from charter schools in the ways that elites expected because they do not have the appropriate autonomy and resources to do so. Furthermore, our study suggests that the schools most affected by the exodus of students to charter schools continue to be mired with dysfunction.

While most people realize that something is not working in the public school system in D.C., the response from all parties appears to be muted. One might liken this situation to a watchdog that neglects to bark upon witnessing a disturbance in its home. Playing on this analogy, our research suggests that the bureaucracy endemic to the D.C. public school system serves as a muzzle to prevent the dog from barking. Before the dog can bark, the District must find a way to remove the muzzle.

Recent actions of Mayor Fenty and his staff, however, including school closings, changes in funding schemes, and staff changes, indicate that the competitive mechanisms of school choice might be enforced more strictly in the future. If these recent plans come to fruition and spark further reforms in line with school choice theory, further examination of the behavioral response to charter school competition will be required to determine the extent to which public schools react to competition. As Fenty and his staff take their first steps, many residents of D.C. hope that the muzzled dog that has yet to bark might begin to growl.





## ***The Muzzled Dog That Didn't Bark:*** **Charters and the Behavioral Response of D.C. Public Schools**

Much of the debate over school choice has been framed by proponents who argue that choice will spur competition, ultimately leading to the improvement of public education. Although a significant body of research is emerging regarding the largely positive “participant effects” that school choice programs have had on choosers, precious little research exists on the “systemic effects” of choice programs on entire public school systems and communities. While some school choice studies have greatly contributed to our understanding of systemic effects, they have mostly been large-scale econometric exercises that measure responses from a valuable, yet distanced, vantage point. These studies have focused mainly on the relationship between the presence of school choice competition and student achievement in both choice and traditional public schools. While analyzing achievement through test scores is useful, such findings are limited in that they tell us very little about the forces that may drive public schools to respond to competition.

In light of those limitations, this study is another useful contribution to a small but important set of studies examining the inner-workings of systemic effects of competition.<sup>1</sup> By looking at the issue from the ground level of one of the most choice-prevalent districts in the United States,

---

1 Studies of other urban district responses to school choice competition to date include: John Bohte, Kenneth J. Meier, Robert D. Wrinkle, and J. L. Polinard. 2003. Examining the Impact of Charter Schools on Public School Performance. Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 3-6, 2003; Frederick Hess. 2002. *Revolution at the Margins: The Impact of Competition on Urban School Systems*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press; Teske, Paul, Mark Schneider, Jack Buckley and Sara Clark. 2000. Does Charter School Competition Improve Traditional Public Schools? Civic Report 10 (June), Manhattan Institute for Policy Research; Frederick Hess, Robert Maranto, and Scott Milliman. 2001. Small Districts in Big Trouble: How Four Arizona School Systems Responded to Charter Competition. *Teachers College Record* 103 (6): 1102-1124; Frederick M. Hess and Patrick J. McGuinn. 2002. Muffled by the Din: The Competitive Noneffects of the Cleveland Voucher Program. *Teachers College Record* 104 (4) 2002: 727-764; Eric Rofes. 1998. *How Are School Districts Responding to Charter Laws and Charter Schools? A Study of Eight States and the District of Columbia*. Berkeley, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education.

the District of Columbia, we seek to closely examine the causal dynamics of systemic effects from within the D.C. education establishment. Our study consists of a series of interviews, focus groups, and surveys along three levels: District elites, principals, and teachers. A better understanding of the viewpoints, reactions, and relationships within these three groups, and their effect on the behavior of public schools in light of school choice competition, will illuminate the findings of previous research on participant effects and student performance measures. Knowledge as to how competition instigates public schools to respond, how that response is perceived at different levels within the system, and why schools fail to respond will assist in the design of future policies by providing insight into the specific mechanisms of a system that has embraced choice.

### *What do past studies suggest about the way the introduction of choice impacts behavior?*

There are two dominant lenses through which to investigate the impact of school choice competition: impacts on student achievement and changes in organizational behavior. Several recent studies of the competitive effects of school choice focus on the effect of charter schools or private schools on public school student achievement. A review of twenty-five major studies of competitive effects conducted between 1972 and 2002 concluded that approximately one-third of the research documented a positive relationship between the level of competition and student achievement gains, with the majority of the studies showing no statistically significant relationship between the two.<sup>2</sup> For example, Greene and Winters found that public schools in Florida whose students were eligible for vouchers made gains that were 5.1 percentile points greater on math tests than schools not forced to compete for their students.<sup>3</sup> Other studies of Florida's schools by Chakrabarti, Figlio and Rouse, and West and Peterson have had similar

---

2 Clive R. Belfield and Henry M. Levin. 2002. *The Effects of Competition on Educational Outcomes: A Review of U.S. Evidence*. Occasional Paper 35, New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.

3 Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, "Competition Passes the Test," *Education Next*, Summer 2004.

findings.<sup>4</sup> In Wisconsin, Hoxby found that schools in Milwaukee that were most exposed to voucher competition increased math scores by 7.1 percentile points between 1999 and 2000 compared to 3.7 percentile points for schools not exposed to the challenge.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, studies conducted by Kevin Booker et al. (2005), John Bohte (2004), G.M. Holmes et al. (2003), Jay Greene and Greg Forster (2002), and Caroline Hoxby (2001), found positive impacts of charter schools on traditional public school student achievement.<sup>6</sup> While proponents of choice champion such results, not every situation in which competitive effects are anticipated has yielded positive findings. In an evaluation of the effect of charter school competition on public school student achievement in Michigan, Bettinger found no statistically significant gains.<sup>7</sup> Buddin and Zimmer came to a similar conclusion after studying charter school competition in California.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, a few studies have even found negative effects: Carr and Ritter concluded that charter school competition produced small, but significant negative effects on traditional public

- 
- 4 Martin West and Paul Peterson, "The Efficacy of Choice Threats Within School Accountability Systems," Harvard PEPG Working Paper 05-01, March 23, 2005, [http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/West\\_Peterson\\_ChoiceThreats.pdf](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/West_Peterson_ChoiceThreats.pdf); Rajashri Chakrabarti, "Impact of Voucher Design on Public School Performance: Evidence from Florida and Milwaukee Voucher Programs," [http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~rchakrab/Papers/Fl-Mil\\_Chakrabarti.pdf](http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~rchakrab/Papers/Fl-Mil_Chakrabarti.pdf); David N. Figlio and Cecilia Elena Rouse, "Do Accountability and Voucher Threats Improve Low-Performing Schools?" NBER Working Paper No. 11597, <http://www.ers.princeton.edu/workingpapers/14ers.pdf>
  - 5 Caroline Minter Hoxby, "The Rising Tide," *Education Next*, Winter 2001.
  - 6 K. Booker, S. Gilpatric, T. Gronberg, & D. Jansen. 2005. The Effect of Charter Schools on Traditional Public School Students in Texas: Are Children Who Stay Behind Left Behind? National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University; John Bohte. 2004. Examining the Impact of Charter Schools on Performance in Traditional Public Schools. *Policy Studies Journal*, 32(4), 501-520; G. M. Holmes, J. DeSimone, & N. G. Rupp. 2003. Does School Choice Increase School Quality? National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series, 9863; J. P. Greene & G. Forster. 2002. Rising to the Challenge: The Effect of School Choice on Public Schools in Milwaukee and San Antonio. *Civic Bulletin* 27 (October), Manhattan Institute for Policy Research; C. M. Hoxby. 2001. How School Choice Affects the Achievement of Public School Students. Hoover Institution, Koret Task Force.
  - 7 Eric Bettinger. 1999. The Effect of Charter Schools on Charter Students and Public Schools. New York: National Center for Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.
  - 8 Richard Buddin, & Ron Zimmer. 2005. Is Charter School Competition in California Improving the Performance of Traditional Public Schools? RAND Working Paper.

school student achievement in Ohio.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Bifulco and Ladd found small negative effects in North Carolina only in reading.<sup>10</sup>

Many scholars hypothesize that such differing conclusions of competitive effects can be explained, in part, by variations in analysis methods. Additionally, it is likely that the feasibility of a positive response from public schools is conditional on school characteristics that lend themselves to a competitive environment. A few past studies of school choice competition suggest that the mere presence of charter school and private school alternatives is rarely sufficient to incite a response from traditional public schools. In particular, Hess' *Revolution at the Margins* developed the notion that school choice may or may not have an impact on traditional public schools at length, offering concrete reasons why competition may not bite as much as some might expect. This study and others suggest that important factors, such as the size of the competition and its impact on traditional public school budgets, the quality of the competition, and the political will and ability of the traditional public schools to change all contribute to the degree to which public schools will respond to school choice competition.

First, several studies have found that charter and private school students must comprise a *large enough market share* to significantly affect public school enrollments such that those schools associate the loss of students with financial hardship. For example, in their study of student enrollment in Texas from 1996-2000, Bohte, et al. found that charter school enrollment did not significantly contribute to public school enrollment trends. They attributed this result to the small number of students enrolled in charter schools (50,000) relative to the overall number of public school students in Texas (4.2 million).<sup>11</sup> Another interview-based study with District officials in Massachusetts revealed that student transfers to charter schools were offset by a growing local population, such that the enrollment in the traditional public schools was

- 
- 9 Matthew Carr & Gary Ritter. *Measuring the Competitive Effect of Charter Schools on Student Achievement in Ohio's Traditional Public Schools*. New York: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.
  - 10 Robert Bifulco & Helen F. Ladd. 2004. *The Impacts of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: Evidence from North Carolina*. Sanford Institute Working Paper Series.
  - 11 John Bohte, Kenneth J. Meier, Robert D. Wrinkle, and J. L. Polinard. 2003. *Examining the Impact of Charter Schools on Public School Performance*. Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 3-6, 2003.

essentially unaffected by competition.<sup>12</sup> In situations like these, it is hardly surprising that studies of behavioral responses to school choice competition have found few system-wide reforms. Yet even in a market with substantial charter and private school enrollment, the mere presence of a sizeable market share creates little financial hardship for traditional public schools unless the school funding structure is tied to enrollment. In separate studies, both Rofes and Hess present data suggesting that districts that are more dependent on state funding, which typically follows enrollment, respond more strongly to declining enrollment.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, in order for a competitive model to work, it makes sense that there would need to be *quality competition* to induce a behavioral response from the traditional public schools. As Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby noted in a recent interview, charter schools can provide innovative and effective methods of instruction, organizational models, and extracurricular programs that public schools may consider replicating.<sup>14</sup> In some instances, it is possible that school leaders might choose to model programs after choice programs even in the absence of market pressure if they view such choice programs as effective.

A third and possibly the most important component necessary to generate a behavioral response from public schools is the *political will and ability to change*. Teske and Schneider, for example, conducted a qualitative study of five urban Districts, including D.C., and found that superintendents who implemented District-wide reforms in response to charter school competition were already “reform minded” regardless of the charter school climate. On the other hand, while principals in this study reported that they “adopt more innovations at their school in direct proportion to the competitive enrollment pressure that they feel,” many felt that they still lacked the autonomy necessary to fully respond to charter school competition.<sup>15</sup>

---

12 Paul Teske, Mark Schneider, Jack Buckley, and Sara Clark. 2001. Can Charter Schools Change Traditional Public Schools? In *Charters, Vouchers, and Public Education*, edited by Paul E. Peterson and David E. Campbell, 188-214. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

13 Eric Rofes. 1998. *How Are School Districts Responding to Charter Laws and Charter Schools? A Study of Eight States and the District of Columbia*. Berkeley, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education; Frederick M. Hess. 2001 Hints of the Pick Axe: Competition and Public Schooling in Milwaukee. In *Charters, Vouchers, and Public Education*, edited by Paul E. Peterson and David E. Campbell, 188-214. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

14 Caroline M. Hoxby. 2000. “The Battle Over School Choice,” PBS Democracy Project/Election 2000 Special, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/vouchers/>

15 Paul Teske, Mark Schneider, Jack Buckley and Sara Clark. 2000. Does Charter School Competition Improve Traditional Public Schools? Civic Report 10 (June), Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

In a second study of four Arizona school districts, Hess, et al. found that districts responded to charter school competition by replacing not only principals, but also superintendents with “more reform-minded” leaders.<sup>16</sup> These studies suggest that the district leadership’s disposition towards school choice, as well as their formal authority to implement change, greatly influence the type and degree of behavioral response.

In locations where one or more of the aforementioned criteria have been met, several studies have documented a range of competitive responses from school districts. Some districts focus on reorganizing management and incentive structures to influence behavior. Teske and Schneider, for example, noted that changes implemented by reform-minded leaders in response to choice competition in several urban districts involved replacing large numbers of school principals, implementing school-level accountability plans, and designing school-level per-pupil funding schemes to penalize schools for the loss of students. Another study conducted by Hanushek and Rivkin investigated the effect of school competition on teacher “hiring, retention, monitoring, and other personnel practices.” Their findings suggest that Texas school districts facing the most competition implemented strategies to hire better teachers and improve the quality of existing teachers through increased emphasis on professional development.<sup>17</sup> A third study by Sack also reported that one Arizona school district increased opportunities for teacher professional development in the wake of school choice competition.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, several studies have found that charter school competition often encourages “piecemeal” responses to school choice competition. Teske and Schneider’s study of D.C. and other urban districts, for example, documented the implementation of Montessori programs, the use of more technology in the classroom, Saturday class offerings, and the expansion of elementary schools from Kindergarten (K) through 6th to K through 8th grades to increase school enrollment. Similarly, Hess found in Arizona that school curricula were expanded to include “extras” such as all-day kindergarten, foreign language programs, after-school

---

16 Frederick Hess, Robert Maranto, and Scott Milliman. 2001. Small Districts in Big Trouble: How Four Arizona School Systems Responded to Charter Competition. *Teachers College Record* 103 (6): 1102-1124; John Bohte, Kenneth J. Meier, Robert D. Wrinkle, and J. L. Polinard. 2003. Examining the Impact of Charter Schools on Public School Performance. Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 3-6, 2003.

17 Eric A. Hanushek and Steven G. Rivkin. 2003. Does Public School Competition Affect Teacher Quality? In *The Economics of School Choice*, ed. Caroline Hoxby. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

18 Joetta L. Sack. 2002. Charter Pioneers Force Public School Officials to Modify Operations. *Education Week* online edition, April 24, 2002. <http://www.edweek.org>

enrichment programs, art and theater programs, and programs for the gifted and talented. A second Hess study of school choice programs in Milwaukee, WI, Cleveland, OH, and Edgewood, TX, coupled with Bohte's study of urban districts in Texas, found that districts commonly undertake "aggressive public relations and advertising campaigns" to inform the community about changes and improvements, a behavior likely borrowed from competitors.<sup>19</sup>

### *What type of response should we expect to see in D.C. public schools?*

If a behavioral response from D.C. public schools is conditional on the aforementioned criteria—the amount of the market share diverted to choice and related financial burden, the quality of the competition, and the political will and ability of a school system to change—the casual observer might expect to see a competitive response to charter schooling. Indeed, elements of all three components clearly exist, albeit to varying degrees.

As far as market share is concerned, D.C. charter school enrollment has exploded in recent years and now has one of the largest charter school markets in the country. As of the 2006-2007 school year, 19,733 students attended charter schools in the District of Columbia, representing over a quarter of the District's total public school student population.<sup>20</sup> In 1996, the first year of charter school implementation, there were 78,648 students in traditional public schools. However, by the fall of 2006 the District reported an enrollment figure of only 52,191 students attending traditional public schools (excluding charter schools) – a decline of 33.6 percent.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, for almost a decade, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) has employed a weighted student formula to fund individual schools based on their student enrollment. Thus schools that lose students to charter schools lose the associated per-pupil funding. As a result of declining enrollment and subsequent student funding shortages, seven D.C. Public Schools were closed in the first two years following the passage of the Charter School Act in 1996 and

19 Frederick Hess. 2002. *Revolution at the Margins: The Impact of Competition on Urban School Systems*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press; John Bohte, Kenneth J. Meier, Robert D. Wrinkle, and J. L. Polinard. 2003. Examining the Impact of Charter Schools on Public School Performance. Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 3-6, 2003.

20 National Center for Education Statistics. Common Core of Data. <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>

21 Percentage based on change in DCPS enrollment from 1996-2005 from 78,648 to 52,191 students. 2006 enrollment count based on audited total published by the D.C. Public Charter School Board: [http://www.dcpubliccharter.com/startschool/docs/DCPS\\_Audited\\_Enrollment\\_Data\\_Fall\\_2006.pdf](http://www.dcpubliccharter.com/startschool/docs/DCPS_Audited_Enrollment_Data_Fall_2006.pdf)

five were closed in the summer of 2006. Prior to his departure, former Superintendent Clifford Janey's Master Facilities Plan called for the closing of several public schools in light of continued enrollment declines. This suggests that the market share gained by choice schools has been recognized and deemed significant.

Concerning quality, even though D.C. charter schools do vary considerably, recent reports suggest that schools chartered by the D.C. Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB) are, on average, exhibiting higher achievement than traditional DCPS schools. Schools chartered by the DCPCSB achieved greater proficiency than traditional DCPS schools for all subjects and grade levels in 2006. Most noteworthy was secondary student performance in math, where 37.9 percent of DCPCSB charter school students were proficient compared to just 22.7 percent of traditional DCPS students. On the other hand, while charter schools overseen by the D.C. Board of Education performed slightly better than traditional DCPS schools in elementary school reading, they also performed worse than DCPS schools in secondary reading and in math at both levels.<sup>22</sup>

We would obviously be remiss if we relied solely on the simple use of test scores as a method of comparison, as selection effects and other omitted variable bias could skew the results and exaggerate the extent to which students at many charter schools outperform students in public schools. However, in the end, one would expect public perception to be conditioned by such measures. If charter schools can point to higher test scores in addition to other features designed to attract families and students, they stand to gain a greater share of the market. Several charter schools boast lengthy waiting lists—for example, Capital City's 600-person waiting list has prompted the school to consider adding a second campus.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, recent approval by a chartering authority to add an estimated 6,800 students over the next several years signals that demand is not likely to waver anytime soon. Additionally, the Teske and Schneider study found that D.C. parents believe that charter schools in the District have better facilities, are safer, and have "friendlier and more helpful" staff.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, District leaders, principals, and teachers should feel pressure to improve the performance and appeal of DCPS, either substantively or in image, if public schools are to compete with neighboring charter schools for student enrollment.

---

22 AYP results posted on the District of Columbia Public Schools website: <http://webb.k12.dc.us/NCLB/>

23 Dion Haynes and Theola Labbe, "A Boom for D.C. Charter Schools." *Washington Post*, April 25, 2007, A01. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/24/AR2007042402542\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/24/AR2007042402542_pf.html)

24 Paul Teske, Mark Schneider, Jack Buckley and Sara Clark. 2000. *Does Charter School Competition Improve Traditional Public Schools?* Civic Report 10 (June), Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.



While we now see a substantial number of charters striving to provide a high quality alternative to traditional public schools, the amount of political will and a desire to change within the District has also emerged in recent years, as demonstrated more fully in the next section. To the extent that in recent history the district has adopted per pupil funding, authorized 72 charter schools to date, and implemented a voucher program, one could argue that DCPS has some degree of political support for reform from its school boards, elected officials and voters.<sup>25</sup> Mayor Adrian Fenty's recent takeover of the public schools, coupled with the firing of Superintendent Janey and the appointment of Michelle Rhee as Chancellor of DCPS, is yet another signal in a long chain of events that suggest D.C. is still moving towards change. What remains unclear is whether or not the political will to change policy in D.C. transforms into an administrative competency that truly influences school-level practice, a question we will explore further in later sections.

Surprisingly, given the strong likelihood that D.C. is in a unique position to give researchers an opportunity to test theories of choice, little research has evaluated the behavioral response of D.C. public schools to competition. To date, Paul Teske, Mark Schneider, and their colleagues at SUNY-Stony Brook have conducted one such study in 2000. As discussed in the literature review, their study concluded that charter school competition has led urban public school systems, including that of D.C., to implement specialized programs and other small-scale reforms appealing to parents rather than inducing large-scale reforms in management or district-wide policies. While this study is useful and informative, only 6,980 students were enrolled in charter schools then—roughly a third of the amount presently enrolled in charter schools. Our investigation, now a decade into the charter school era of DCPS, is more current and has the potential to observe a larger impact as choice has become more prevalent throughout the District. Choice has become further embedded in the make-up of DCPS over time, creating a need to re-evaluate any behavioral response in the District as the charter and choice movements have matured.

---

25 The District of Columbia has 72 charter schools as of the fall of 2007 according to the Center for Education Reform website. <http://www.edreform.com/index.cfm?fuseAction=stateStats&pSectionID=15&cSectionID=44>

## *Introduction to the District of Columbia Public Schools*

In the nineteenth century, the District of Columbia was a pioneer for public education. Founded in 1804 and chaired by President Thomas Jefferson, the D.C. Public Schools boasted the first secondary school for African-Americans by 1870 and was thriving. Yet one hundred years later, despite judicial attempts to improve the quality of public education for African-Americans through desegregation, the District's education system remained deeply divided. White flight to the Maryland and Virginia suburbs and an increase in private school enrollments were driven by racial tension and heightened school violence during the Civil Rights Era, such that by the 1970s the DCPS student body was over 90% black and equally as poor. Thus D.C. public school advocates faced the daunting challenge of improving a public school system that many of the city's most elite had left behind.

By the early 1990s, despite decades of attempted incremental reforms, the District of Columbia was suffering from an unprecedented period of high crime, budget shortfalls, and mismanagement that affected all areas of governance, including its public schools. In reflecting on this period, one former public school official lamented, "There's no excuse for incompetence anywhere, and there was plenty of that, and there was plenty of corruption, and waste, and abuse that existed." Although he acknowledged that relationships with external organizations, such as Congress and the teachers' union, made it difficult to implement reform, the same former public school official described a general apathy towards improving the public schools that spanned several decades. "You had a city that had chosen to disinvest itself of its children and of its schools, which was the exact opposite of surrounding jurisdictions which were investing and, in fact, reinvesting in their children and their schools... and so you had a lack of political will to improve the school district and a lack of political support to improve it." Such a climate provided ample opportunity for proponents of school choice to make an impact, whether they focused specifically on a competitive model or merely any model that provided an alternative to the failing status quo.

## *The Introduction of School Choice*

The Republican landslide in the 1994 Congressional elections set the stage for a philosophical shift in the approach taken to address public policy concerns in the District. Republicans had long been known for embracing market solutions to social problems, and the increase of 54 seats in the House of Representatives gave them the majority needed to experiment

with a market approach to education reform in D.C. Though an “out of boundaries” process was already in place to give District students the option to apply to the public school of their choice, details of implementation made it difficult for most students to transfer to the best D.C. public schools.<sup>26</sup> Following the election, Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-WI) took the lead in shaping D.C.’s education reform agenda, proposing the creation of a charter school law and a more controversial voucher program to provide public funds for low-income students to attend private schools at the urging of some parents and Republican members of Congress. While the voucher provision lacked District support and did not survive, the provision for charter schools did, and in 1996, Congress passed D.C.’s charter school law as part of the School Reform Act of 1995. Although city council members and then-superintendent Franklin Smith had already advocated for the creation of charter schools, opposition primarily from the Washington Teachers Union prevented them from moving forward until Congress took the lead.<sup>27</sup> In 1996, D.C. passed its own Public Charter Schools Act. The two charter school laws provided for the application of up to ten charter schools (later amended to twenty) each year to either the D.C. Board of Education, which also oversees the District’s traditional public schools, or to the D.C. Public Charter School Board, an independent organization created under the new law to grant charters and manage these schools.<sup>28</sup>

Despite legislative success, the charter school movement started out slowly: only two schools opened in the first year after the law was enacted, partially due to a lack of support from Congressional Republicans still irked by the failure of the voucher provision.<sup>29</sup> Yet an even greater impediment was the continuous turnover in District leadership that captured the attention of most of the D.C. education sector. Persistent financial and managerial troubles largely due to the bungling rule of Mayor Marion Barry, coupled with an ongoing legal battle over fire code violations in old school buildings, had just led to a Congressionally appointed

---

26 The program, still in place today, gives first priority for transfers to students with siblings enrolled in the desired school, to those who previously attended a feeder school, or to those within walking distance, ensuring that affluent parents are able to hold their seats in affluent schools.

27 Sara Mead. “Capital Campaign: Early Returns on District of Columbia Charter Schools.” Progressive Policy Institute, October 2005.

28 However, the D.C. Board of Education recently requested to relinquish its chartering authority, asking that charter schools under its jurisdiction be transferred to the D.C. Public Charter School Board. The move is intended to consolidate chartering authority and streamline management of charter schools in the District.

29 Sara Mead. “Capital Campaign: Early Returns on District of Columbia Charter Schools.” Progressive Policy Institute, October 2005.

Control Board taking over the public school system in 1995.<sup>30</sup> After firing charter supporter Superintendent Franklin Smith in 1996, the Control Board turned to General Julius Becton (1996-1998), a retired army general and former director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in an effort to “rescue” the failing school system with his more despotic management style. Yet Becton lasted less than eighteen months on the job and left little impression on the charter school landscape.

By the fall of 1998, however, charter school enrollment skyrocketed. Becton's replacement, Chief Academic Officer Arlene Ackerman, was less opposed to charters ideologically than Becton. However, she was frustrated with the lack of consistency in charter school authorizing and lack of accountability for charter school growth. This environment set the stage for a bold policy change that would ultimately force DCPS to feel the financial pains of competition from charter schools.<sup>31</sup> Ackerman's team adopted a weighted student funding formula where the money follows the student. Although she and her staff implemented this policy primarily to overhaul a system that awarded more funding to the most vocal principals and to give schools more autonomy over their budgets, one former staff member acknowledged that this policy change secured a minimum funding level for charters at some loss to traditional public schools. Had traditional public schools not fudged their enrollment numbers until audits began in 2001, and had DCPS not increased the per-pupil allocation every few years, the financial loss to traditional public schools of student transfers to charters would have been worse.

In addition to changing the school funding mechanism, Ackerman also established a “Parent Enrollment Fair” to help educate parents about the traditional public schools that existed with high quality programs and rigor. These initiatives are possibly the first willingness to respond to charter school competition at a District-level. Yet, like previous D.C. superintendents, Ackerman's stay was short-lived. The Control Board hired Superintendent Paul Vance, a lukewarm charter supporter, to replace her in July of 2000. Thus in the first few years of D.C. charter schooling, their slow start, rapid growth, and any attempts to respond were entangled with the more troubling leadership climate.

---

30 April Witt, “Worn Down by Waves of Change.” Washington Post, June 11, 2007, A01. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/10/AR2007061001496\\_5.html?hpid=topnews](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/10/AR2007061001496_5.html?hpid=topnews)

31 April Witt, “Worn Down by Waves of Change.” Washington Post, June 11, 2007, A01. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/10/AR2007061001496\\_5.html?hpid=topnews](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/10/AR2007061001496_5.html?hpid=topnews)

Meanwhile, new plans began brewing to reintroduce vouchers to the District. While previous attempts spearheaded by Congressional Republicans had failed in 1995, 1997, and 1998, the new approach was much more business-oriented and had community support. Additionally, it sought to strengthen District traditional public schools and charter schools as well, a departure from previous voucher policies. Representatives of Fight for Children, a D.C. organization active in education reform, helped lead the effort. Even Mayor Williams, facing ongoing pressure from Mayor John Norquist of Milwaukee, an acquaintance through the U.S. Conference on Mayors, pledged his support along with Board of Education President Peggy Cooper-Cafritz, Superintendent Paul Vance, and Council Education Committee chair Kevin Chavous, a previous voucher opponent. Recognizing the political hurdle of passing a singular voucher bill and the simultaneous need to get additional resources for D.C. charter and traditional public schools, the group agreed that a “three-sector strategy” was ideal.

After visiting 109 private schools in the District and enduring numerous meetings in church basements, many meetings with The Association of Schools of Greater Washington, and “a lot of coaching and hand-holding” the three-sector advocates had garnered sufficient District support to approach the White House by the fall of 2002. Over the next several months, meetings took place between the White House’s domestic policy advisor Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Education Rod Paige, deputy chief of staff Josh Bolton, President Bush’s chief legal counsel (and the vice chair of the board of Washington Scholarship Fund) Boyden Gray, AOL founder Jim Kimsey, Kaleem Caire of Fight for Children, and numerous other corporate leaders who were working to gain support for the three-sector policy. At the same time, Congressional Republicans made yet another attempt to push for a D.C. voucher bill of their own. Yet, according to one meeting participant, Spellings agreed that a three-sector approach was ideal out of concern that a singular D.C. voucher bill would be “very divisive” and reflect negatively upon the White House without including support for public schools as well. Throughout the negotiations, she sought to ensure that the group advocating for the three-sector strategy was sincere in seeing all three sectors through.

Amidst ongoing debate, a bill was finally introduced to provide funding for traditional public schools, charter schools, and private school vouchers in the District. After failing to get enough votes to pass in the Senate in late 2003, the D.C. School Choice Incentive Act of 2003 became law in early 2004 as part of President Bush’s budget bill. The bill provided annual appropriations of approximately \$45 million to transform D.C. Public Schools, \$15 million for charter school facilities, and \$20 million to establish the first ever federally funded K-12 voucher program. Known as the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, the voucher program is administered by

the non-profit Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) and seeks to assist students from families living at least 185 percent below the poverty line to attend a private school in the District. Scholarships of up to \$7,500 are awarded to eligible children annually, with the highest priority given to students in schools deemed in need of improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under NCLB. The Opportunity Scholarship Program is the only D.C. voucher program that provides full tuition for private school enrollment.

Both charter schools and the voucher program generated considerable backlash from some members of the D.C. community, including devout public school supporters, residents frustrated with Congress' ongoing involvement in D.C. policy-making, and specific to vouchers, those who were philosophically opposed to providing federal funds for students to attend parochial schools. Several members of the D.C. education establishment also expressed resentment regarding the school choice initiative. One elite interviewee, a former member of Superintendent Vance's staff, stated that "the goal of the three-sector strategy was to bring all people together to improve education for all D.C. students," yet he felt that the outcome was just the opposite. He went on to argue, "Introducing vouchers was one of the most damaging things to happen to the D.C. schools—not the vouchers themselves, but the fact that their presence undid everything we were trying to do." Such statements, though not necessarily representative of general sentiment, suggest that school choice programs carry a political symbolism of DCPS failure for some people, irrespective of their specific goals. As articulated by one former city council staffer, the growth of school choice generated a self-esteem problem for many within the DCPS administration, making them very defensive of their "turf" that they perceived to be viewed by everyone else as a "dump."

In the overall context of school choice in D.C. today, almost 20,000 students now attend charter schools, whereas only 2,000 students currently attend a private school in the District through the voucher program each year—about one-tenth of the number of students who attend charters. Consequently, vouchers have done little to change the landscape of D.C. public schools. The cap on the voucher program and lottery admission system prevents any one District school from experiencing a drastic loss in student enrollment. Furthermore, legislation stipulates that DCPS be held harmless for the voucher program financially—Mayor Williams reimbursed DCPS for any per-pupil funds lost to voucher transfers. Thus while this study began with the intention of investigating the behavioral response of the District of Columbia Public Schools to both charters and vouchers, it quickly became apparent that charter schools are the bigger story. Nearly every interviewee and the majority of teachers surveyed discounted any effects of the voucher program on DCPS. When asked if they knew of any schools that

lost pupils as a result of the program, none of the participants responded affirmatively. This sentiment was so prevalent among participants that we altered our strategy relatively early in the process to concentrate more thoroughly on charter schools and school choice in general. Although we asked about vouchers in our survey, focus groups, and interviews, the focus is mainly on charter schools.

## **The Behavioral Response of District of Columbia Public Schools to School Choice Competition**

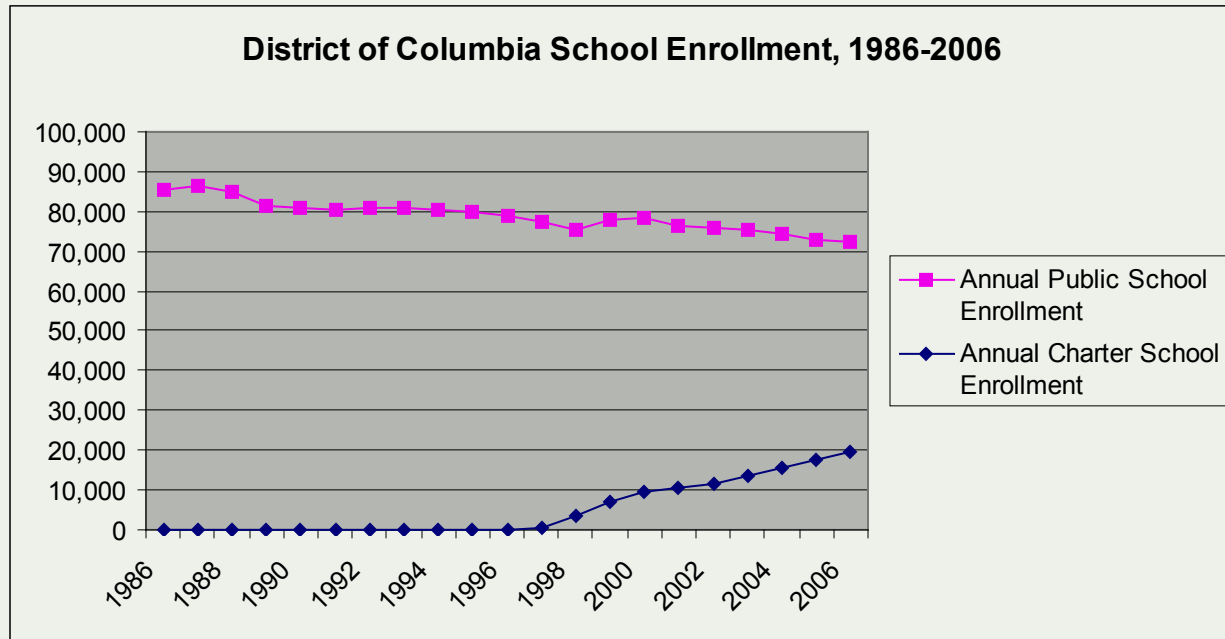
### *The Elite Perspective*

Our study's first group of interviewees was a host of experts we refer to as "elites" in the field of education in D.C. They consisted of past and present members of D.C.'s Boards of Education and City Council, as well as DCPS administrators, consultants, activists, and former superintendents. Their experiences and expertise provided us with insight into the overarching issues affecting DCPS, including the role of charter schools.

Very few of our elite interviewees mentioned charter school competition directly when asked to list the major issues in DCPS over the previous two years. In fact, only two people, one of whom was involved primarily with District finances, explicitly said that charter school competition was one of the major issues facing the district. Yet across our elite interviews, 11 of 13 elite interviewees working within DCPS cited declining enrollment or the need to close and consolidate facilities as among their most pressing problems. In particular, elites acknowledged that declining enrollment and consequential funding problems have led to the closure of several public schools and the shifting of school personnel, neither of which is popular with parents or educators. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the District has lost over 25,000 students over the past 10 years, of which an estimated 76% can conservatively be accounted to charters.<sup>32</sup>

---

32 Given the propensity of traditional public schools to over-report their student enrollment prior to the institution of enrollment audits in 2001, it is likely that charter school transfers account for an even greater decline in DCPS enrollment than was reported.

**Figure 1. Enrollment Trends in Traditional D.C. Public Schools and Charters**

Though only one elite interviewee initially stated that the push towards facility “right-sizing” was a result of charter school enrollment, the data suggest that charter schools are the primary cause of this stance.

The consensus of elites suggested that the political will to close schools amidst declining enrollment exists, whether elites acknowledge charter school growth as the impetus or not. For example, one school board member emphatically stated that the “board is unanimously committed to the idea...for reducing excess space.” Moreover, recent actions taken by the former Superintendent and city council indicate that other sectors of the elite education establishment are already responding. At the same time that the majority of these interviews were being conducted in the spring and summer of 2006, Superintendent Janey announced the closure of five D.C. public schools citing low enrollment and poor performance, a kick-off to his newly drafted Master Facilities Plan that was released the following fall. The plan outlines a five year timeline for the renovation and reconstruction of a majority of D.C. schools, with up to an additional fifteen schools slated for closure across several phases of right-sizing District facilities. Around the same time, council member Kathy Patterson successfully pushed for the passage of a bill to provide capital funding for these school renovations after years of effort. Despite another school board member’s contention that school consolidation can be “the most



painful process that communities go through,” our elite interviewees were in agreement that addressing the facility surplus issue was necessary.

Notwithstanding the elites' shared vision of right-sizing the District, only five DCPS schools have been closed since a series of closures took place in 1997. When asked why such a plan had not transpired earlier, the elites responded unanimously that political consensus across policy-makers was a relatively new phenomenon. While school choice was a highly contentious issue several years ago, a majority of the elites that have been continuously involved with DCPS sensed that opposition to the choice movement has decreased over time as charter schools become increasingly viewed as an established alternative to traditional public schools. The debate has changed from one that asks whether or not to allow charters to a debate about how great an influence charters should have on DCPS. One city council member described this phenomenon by saying that the board of education is more open and willing to see how charters perform in order to learn from the results. Moreover, a former superintendent stated, “now that charter schools are a reality, most public schools are aware that that’s our competition... there’s an awareness that the school system has to improve or they might lose parents to other options.” These accounts of increased cooperation in governance, coupled with a greater will to respond to charter school competition, result in part from a sense that charters are here to stay and may indicate why a District response to charter school competition could be only now beginning.

Despite their acknowledgement that DCPS needed to improve in the wake of charter school competition in addition to facility right-sizing, very few elites could offer examples of specific District-wide reforms intended to achieve this goal. The only example they provided was the perception that former Superintendent Janey’s Master Education Plan (MEP) was designed with the intention of cutting the flow of students outside of DCPS and working to draw them back into traditional public schools. One former school board member suggested that in designing the MEP, Janey wanted to bring charter school innovations to public schools within DCPS. Another former board member credited the MEP with establishing the standards by which all of the district’s programs would be evaluated, including facilities and budgeting. However, a representative of the charter community proposed that the MEP would have happened with or without the advent of charters in the District, opining that the MEP was necessary because of the general state of DCPS. Contradictions in reporting such as these were common across the elite interviews, and thus it is difficult to conclude what influence, if any, charter schools might have had on the Master Education Plan.

Overall, while the majority of elite interviewees mentioned problems resulting from declining enrollment, few mentioned charter school competition as a significant issue facing the District outright. Rather, discussions with elites focused more on resolving facilities, funding, and leadership issues. Interestingly, when we specifically asked elites about the District's response to charter school competition, not only were elites unable to offer much evidence of District-level responses to competition aimed at improving the quality of D.C. public schools, but none of them suggested that such a response would even take place at a district level. For example, one former member of the Board of Education stated that responses to competition depend on school-level leadership and suggested that the district does not do anything to encourage such changes. Moreover, a city council staffer claimed that it matters most what the PTA and principals do—this is “where your reforms live or die.” Thus it appears that such a behavioral response hinges on the motivation of individual schools, not the district as a whole. In fact, all of the experts that we spoke with expected schools to be doing more to compete with charter schools, and one optimistic former Board of Education member suggested that although a “competitive dynamic” hasn't really happened yet, it may be on the cusp of beginning.

### *The Principal Perspective*

We also spoke with thirteen principals in DCPS to gain an understanding of the major issues facing individual schools in the district and the concurrent changes taking place.<sup>33</sup> Of our thirteen principals, nine had been in their current positions for less than two years at the time of the interview. Only two principals had been staffed at their current school for over a decade—a rarity in DCPS. While the small size of the sample and the relatively low levels of experience of the participants prevent us from considering the sample to be a comprehensive representation of all DCPS principals, their observations are important for our understanding of the dynamics that choice had introduced.

The overarching concern voiced by our sample of principals was a lack of autonomy to hire and fire teachers, obtain supplies and maintain their facilities. They linked the source of their

33 In order to obtain a sample of principals, we attempted to send an email to every principal in the district. Due to principal turnover and variance in the structure of email addresses, the e-mail reached a majority of principals, but not all principals. The email provided a general description of the study and asked them to reply if they were willing to participate. Principals were promised a gift card for their participation in the study. In presenting the perspectives of our principal interviewees, we acknowledge that our sample may not be representative of all DCPS principals.

frustration to the bureaucracy of the administration and, in the case of staffing decisions, the limitations brought about by the District's teacher's union contract. Unlike elites, only one principal cited declining enrollment as an issue without prompting. When probed a bit further, all but one of the principals claimed that charter schools directly affected their enrollment and were able to describe the enrollment trends at their schools. Eleven of the twelve principals who spoke to enrollment changes accurately portrayed the trend of their enrollment figures reported in the DCPS Fall Enrollment Audit Reports over the past several years—seven lost students while four experienced consistent or growing enrollment. Only one principal underreported the degree to which her school lost students. While only two principals spoke directly to the need to gradually cut staff due to declining enrollment, a greater number were focused on the long-term threat of school closure by the District. While acknowledging this threat, most principals felt disempowered to make the changes in staffing, procurement and facilities maintenance that they deemed appropriate in reversing negative enrollment trends and instead focused on recruitment efforts as the next best alternative.

All but two of the principals interviewed from historically under-performing schools that have been losing students to charter schools said that school-level recruiting efforts have increased over the past several years, and two secondary principals were happy to report that since “vigorously recruiting” their enrollments have already improved. As one of these principals noted, to generate change we “need an entrepreneurial spirit in D.C.” Principals cited the use of common recruiting tools such as e-mail, flyers, open houses, newsletters, radio ads, newspaper ads, church meetings, and other methods of advertising their schools in hopes of increasing enrollments. Three principals even described the creation of advisory boards at their respective schools to spearhead recruitment efforts. Of the two principals who admitted losing students to charter schools but did not recruit or advertise, one principal claimed to be without the resources to do so. The other principal stated that she does not recruit students for fear that advertising will attract the “bottom of the barrel,” an outcome that is tough for her to swallow in an NCLB accountability era. In reflecting on the evolution of her attitude towards charter schools, she concluded, “I'm not as concerned as I used to be; I've adjusted.”

That principals used recruitment tools to increase student enrollment is not as noteworthy as is the fact that they initiated these recruiting efforts independent of the administration. The DCPS administration did not provide these principals with advertising templates or instructions. In fact, only one principal recalled receiving directions from an assistant superintendent to establish advertising practices. Although one elite interviewee avowed that there is momentum towards starting a public relations campaign at the District-level, it has yet to be seen. At

present, the principals considered District involvement in encouraging advertising to be limited to only the threat of school closures in the event that enrollments did not increase. Thus the individual schools took the initiative to develop marketing practices and techniques on their own. Interestingly, our principal interviewees were not aware of specific recruitment strategies employed by other schools, and three principals clearly indicated that they did not think that other schools advertised at all. Principals from the New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) program demonstrated a greater familiarity and success with advertising programs than did other principals, describing advertising as a normal part of the job rather than something done in response to declining enrollments.<sup>34</sup> This begs the question as to whether or not principals' advertising efforts were a direct response to competition or were part of standard operating procedures learned through training programs such as those required for NLNS principals.

In order to determine the best methods for advertising, several of the principals in our sample conducted surveys to ascertain the needs and desires of parents and families in their neighborhoods. Based on these surveys, principals believe that District parents are looking for renovated and/or new facilities, pre-K and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, school uniforms, and adult classes in parenting and English. The physical appearance of school buildings was said to have the greatest impact on enrollment trends. Due to their understanding of parents' preferences in selecting schools, several principals mentioned a common push towards making their schools span pre-kindergarten to 8th grades in order to compete with charter middle schools.<sup>35</sup> We noted that principals did not tend to focus on test scores or academic achievement in their lists of attributes that parents sought when selecting schools. Instead, efforts to raise test scores were aimed at meeting the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Overall, it was clear that boosting enrollment is the motivation that many principals have in mind when they establish programs such as these, and as such, proponents of school choice might argue that competition is having its intended effect on traditional public schools. However, advocates of charter schools often argue that they can improve the quality of

---

34 It should also be noted that four of the thirteen principals come from the New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) program. This program specializes in training educators to succeed as principals in urban areas and currently supplies roughly one-third of the District's principals according to a NLNS D.C. staff member.

35 According to the elementary principals in our sample, enrollment tends to decline, even in "good" schools, at the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade in traditional public schools because parents move their children to private and charter schools with the hope of gaining favorable admission status to private and charter middle schools due to their perception that DCPS secondary schools are of poor quality.

instruction within public schools through competition. According to our sample, it appears that most of the changes that schools are making in order to attract more students have more to do with services for parents and the image of the school than with improving the educational attainment of students.

### *The Teacher Perspective*

In order to delve further into the behavioral response to charter schools within DCPS over the past few years, we held four focus groups with 24 teachers and surveyed 143 teachers from a variety of grade levels and special education fields.<sup>36</sup> Survey questions asked about the structure and composition of classrooms, the amount of preparation time for classroom activities, teacher contact with parents or guardians, classroom observations of teachers, sources of support for teachers, teacher control over classroom resources and practices, teacher roles in setting school policy and practice, school working conditions, school reform efforts, teacher reactions to school reform proposals, and future teaching plans.<sup>37</sup> The focus groups touched on similar issues, while probing a bit deeper into the teacher-perceived impetus for changes in the aforementioned policies and behaviors.<sup>38</sup>

The teacher survey was to be distributed to teachers in thirty-two D.C. elementary schools, selected equally from four cells (i.e., 8 schools per cell) at random to participate in the survey:

---

36 The teacher survey was designed according to similar surveys administered by Frederick Hess (2001, 2002) in previous analyses of competitive effects.

37 A crucial concern was the threat of unacceptably low survey response rates since the survey asked teachers to participate in an exercise that is prompted by reforms they may generally find misguided or threatening. To encourage survey response and attain more honest responses under such conditions, teacher names were not required and the surveys were coded discretely with a unique school identification number. In addition, a \$25 American Express gift card was offered to teachers upon completion of the survey. To protect participant confidentiality even further, respondents were provided with a separate envelope to provide contact information for receipt of the gift card apart from returning the survey.

38 To attract participants for the focus groups, we collected e-mail addresses for as many teachers as possible through individual school websites. We also contacted several education related organizations and asked for their assistance in locating teachers who were willing to participate. Participants received gift cards for participating in the focus groups and for completing the survey. Clearly, our sample of teachers participating in focus groups is not a representative sample of DCPS teachers either. The sample may be biased due to its reliance on teachers who read their e-mails and teach at schools with websites. Additionally, the participants drawn through other organizations might have a bias towards the causes of those organizations. The sample may be biased further by the fact that these teachers were willing to attend the focus groups. While we attempted to draw teachers from every area of DCPS, we were not able to do so with such a small sample.

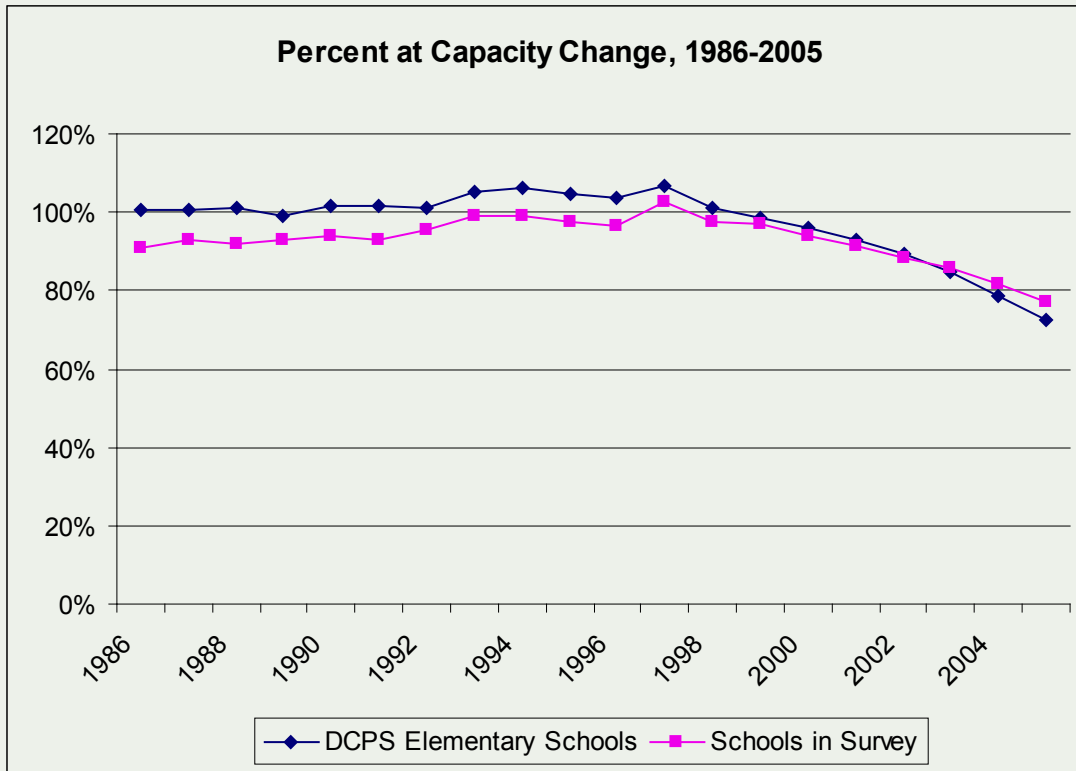
Northwest Schools In Need of Improvement under NCLB (designated SINI), Northwest non-SINI, non-Northwest SINI, and non-Northwest non-SINI.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, teacher survey data were only collected from twenty-three of the original thirty-two schools in the sample due to problems with District cooperation.<sup>40</sup> As a result, schools located in the southern-most tip of Anacostia, an area representing some of the poorest and most segregated African-American neighborhoods in the District, are underrepresented in the sample. Fortunately, schools that did participate in the survey represent all geographic quadrants of the city, all political wards, and both SINI and non-SINI status under NCLB, suggesting that there is enough variation in schools across the sample to support some general data analysis. Moreover, as Figure 2 illustrates on the following page, the teachers that participated in the survey came from schools that follow the same general trend of enrollment declines as DCPS on the whole.

---

39 The purpose of the stratification was twofold. First, the NW quadrant is more affluent and whiter than the other city quadrants, and such students presumably have the option of attending a private school using their own resources. NW schools are also reputed to be safer and of higher quality than most other D.C. Public Schools. Second, the SINI designation is a national standard for judging a school's performance in math, reading, and attendance (to ensure that the majority of the qualifying student body took the test) under NCLB. SINI classifications for the purpose of creating a stratified sample were determined by whether or not a school made AYP in reading, math, and attendance in 2005, the most recent year for which data were available.

40 Prior to delivering the surveys to all of the schools in the sample, the researchers received notice from the District that their paperwork submitted for research project approval was incomplete and they were to discontinue distribution of the survey until the research project was formally approved. This notice came five months after Georgetown University researchers originally submitted their paperwork for research project approval and attempted to follow up numerous times with phone calls and emails. Although the research team resubmitted the requested follow-up paperwork and was promised a response from the District in 2-4 weeks, six months after re-filing and eleven months after initially filing the paperwork, at the time of this publication the District has failed to respond.

**Figure 2. Capacity Trends in DCPS and Teacher Sample**



As with the teacher survey, the teacher focus groups are also subject to bias due to our inability to obtain teacher names from the District to generate a random sample. Thus we will proceed with describing the results of our teacher survey and focus groups acknowledging that they might not be representative of all DCPS teachers.

***Teacher Perceptions of Charter School Competition***

Through the teacher survey, we first attempted to gauge teacher awareness of enrollment trends as the elite and principal interviews suggested that this was the most visible evidence of charter school competition. According to the survey data, teachers were well aware of their school’s enrollment patterns. Considering that teachers probably base their perceptions of enrollment declines more on general trends than specific annual counts, we used a measure of the difference in percent at capacity enrollment from a recent period, 2002 through 2005, and compared it to how teachers responded to a question regarding their perceptions of recent

enrollment trends.<sup>41</sup> Of the teachers from schools that experienced actual declines over this period, 90% reported that they had indeed perceived recent declines. Teachers at schools that experienced gains were somewhat less accurate, with only 69% correctly reporting gains when they had in fact occurred. Using a lengthier longitudinal measure of enrollment changes since charter inception, 97% of the teachers from schools that experienced over a 10% decline during this period accurately reported they had perceived recent declines. Thus, when we focus on the simple question of whether or not teachers were conscious of enrollment patterns, we are confident that they were, especially where declines are concerned. The fact that the teachers were aware of the enrollment trends gives us confidence that their responses to other survey questions and participation in focus groups reflected an informed view of the enrollment situation.

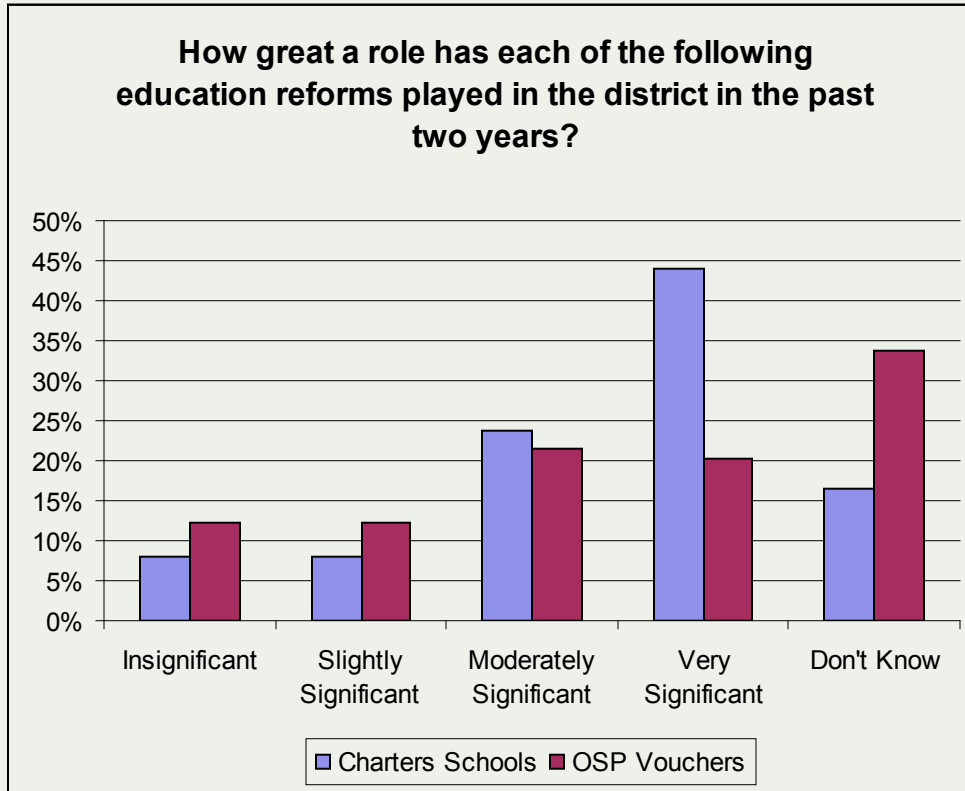
In order to probe the impact of school choice further, the survey asked teachers about the extent to which charter schools and the voucher program played a role in the District in the past two years. Generally speaking, the teachers seemed to be of the opinion that charter schools played a large role, while vouchers did not. Additionally, as evidenced by the high levels of “Don’t Know” responses in Figure 3 and Figure 4, more teachers were either unfamiliar with the voucher program or ambivalent concerning its effects.

---

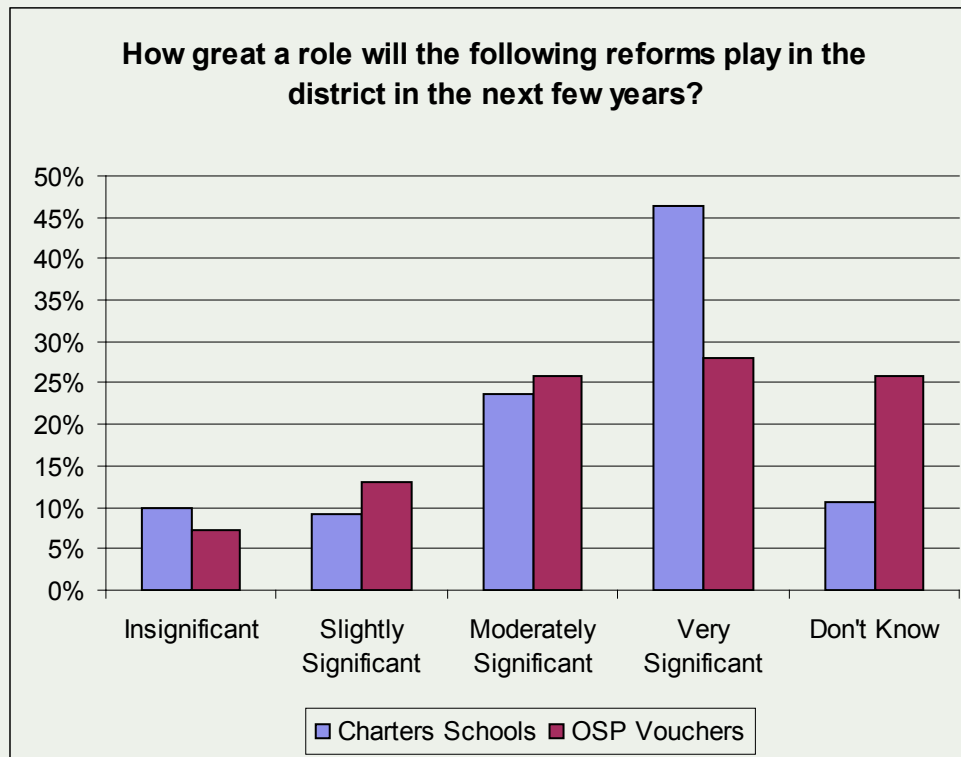
41 The public elementary school capacity statistics used in this analysis are those most recently generated by the 21st Century School Fund to replace previously published school capacity statistics deemed to be inaccurate.



**Figure 3. The Perceived Impact of Reforms**

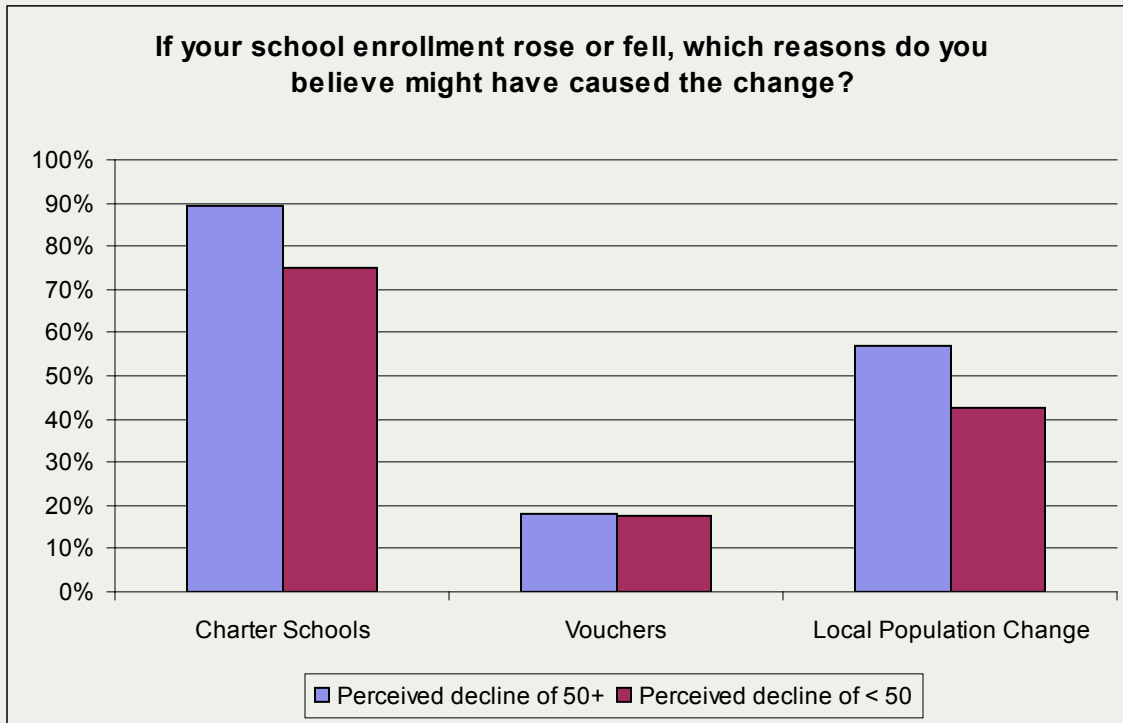


However, surveyed teachers were also asked to project the impact of these reforms over the next few years, and while the results are essentially unchanged for charter schools, there is a noticeable upward shift in the perceived importance that vouchers might play in the future. For example, as Figure 4 shows, the percentage of respondents who felt that vouchers would play an insignificant role drops from 12% to 7%, while those thinking vouchers would play a very significant role rises from 20% to 28%.

**Figure 4: The Perceived Future Impact of Reforms**

To determine whether or not teachers felt competitive pressure from school choice directly, the teacher survey asked teachers if they thought that enrollment changes at their respective schools were a result of charters, vouchers, or local population changes. The overwhelming consensus amongst teachers was that charters were most responsible for the effect. As shown in Figure 5, which is broken down by teachers that perceive their schools to have had declining enrollment over the past year of over 50 students or less than 50 students, most teachers attributed the trend to charters more than local population changes and vouchers combined.

**Figure 5: Causes of Enrollment Decline by Teachers' Perceptions**



The evidence from the teacher survey gives us reason to conclude that most teachers are aware of declining enrollment and consider school choice alternatives to be significant now and in the future. Teachers participating in focus groups were also aware of enrollment declines, which they largely attributed to charter schools, and the focus group format allowed us to probe them regarding the impact of losing students. Most teacher focus group participants agreed that loss of students to charters was a financial concern. Many teachers expressed frustration with students returning from charter schools mid-year and disrupting their routine too late to bring their per-pupil allocation back with them. One teacher, however, expressed a dissenting viewpoint. “About losing kids, I disagree [that all teachers are concerned]. I worked at two schools before coming to [school name], and if they had kids there, it was a good day. Because it’s that hard. When I had a full class of kids there, I was ready to pull my hair out.... I’m not going to call parents and get kids to come who are obnoxious, I’ll be blunt...so when they don’t come I’m not going to worry about them going to another school or whatever. You know, I’m

lucky if I can survive. And I look at them closing schools and putting all these kids now together into one room—it's going to be a zoo.” Though focus group participants disagreed somewhat on the impact of charter school enrollments on their respective schools or classrooms, they unanimously expressed an awareness of the direction of these trends. With that in mind, we now turn to specific responses to charter school competition reported by teachers in the survey and by those who participated in the focus groups.

### *Teacher-Reported Changes in Public School-Level Policies and Behaviors*

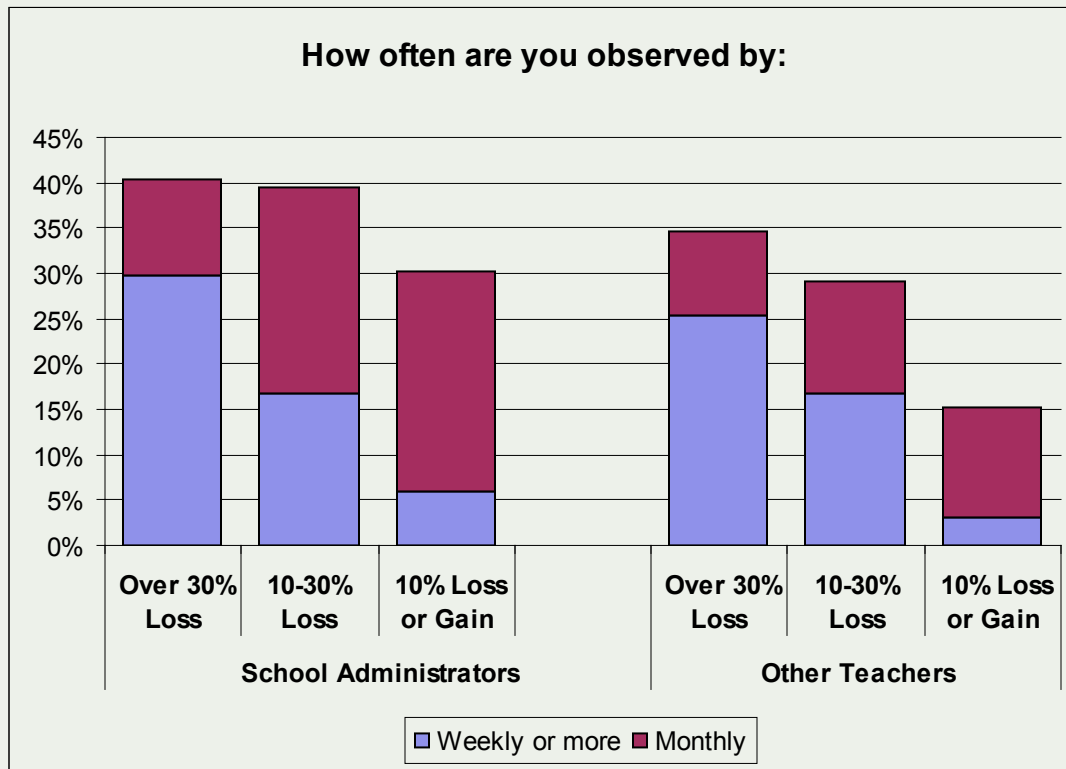
With regard to how schools have reportedly responded to competition from charter schools, both the teacher survey and the teacher focus groups suggest that teachers at schools facing declining enrollment are less involved in school-wide policymaking than they were several years ago. In a separate quantitative analysis conducted by the authors, teachers who reported a loss of students to charter schools were more likely to report a *decline* in their involvement in shaping the school budget, establishing classroom discipline policies, arranging class schedules, and hiring new teachers.<sup>42</sup> While teacher participants in the focus groups did not comment on their involvement in establishing the school budget, classroom discipline policies, or class schedules, they told a similar story in regards to their participation in hiring new teachers. Many teachers described their former involvement in teacher hiring as participants on their schools' local school restructuring team (LSRT) committees, bemoaning that principals consulted this body less frequently as enrollment declines worsened. These findings suggest that schools experiencing the most competition from charter schools reportedly provide less opportunity for teacher involvement in crafting school-wide policy. This is not to say that we have identified a causal relationship, as many factors are at play in the matter, but rather that a correlation appears to exist between competition and teacher involvement in policy.

Second, the teacher survey indicates that a strong relationship exists between teacher observation and actual enrollment declines. Patterns were evident when analyzed by breaking the sample into three subgroups based upon three levels of enrollment declines--over 30% loss, 10-30%, and less than 10%. According to Figure 6, teachers from schools that had more than a 30% loss in enrollment at capacity from 1999-2005 reported being observed by administrators

42 In a bivariate regression of teacher-reported loss of students to charter schools on teacher-reported participation in crafting various school-wide policies, the following were found to be significant: shaping the school budget ( $p=0.049$ ), establishing classroom discipline policies ( $p=0.000$ ), arranging class schedules ( $p=0.013$ ), and hiring new teachers ( $p=0.001$ ).

at nearly six times the rate that teachers in schools with the lowest losses reported. The results concerning the amount they were observed by other teachers show an even greater disparity between the schools experiencing high rates of loss and those that did not.

**Figure 6: Teacher Reported Observations**



Naturally it is difficult to determine exactly what this relationship means. On the one hand, more outside observation of teachers could be a simple reaction by administrators who are troubled by enrollment declines. On the other hand, it could be the case that the primary causal mechanism is poor performance, which in turn is causing both an exodus from schools that are under-performing as well as bringing increased oversight from administrators. However, it is worth noting that poor performance has plagued DCPS for some time, while programs that give students options are relatively recent. It is likely that the introduction of choice was a catalyst for increased efforts by administrators to oversee the duties of their staff. Either way, teacher focus group participants said that whenever being observed by principals or District administrators, they were careful to use the classroom techniques promoted by the District. However, they admitted that they did not use these techniques under normal conditions.

Finally, teacher focus group participants indicated an array of other school-level efforts to increase attendance. Consistent with the principal interviews, teacher focus group participants said that most of the changes related to boosting enrollment were predominantly related to the image of the school, as opposed to improved instruction. They listed changes such as boutique programs, better use of technology, pre-K programs and an increased emphasis on open houses.

Overall, we found that teachers understand the need to maintain a good image in order to boost student enrollment, yet they did not feel compelled to change their behavior in the classroom as a result of competition. Specifically, when asked how district-wide changes affected their instruction, they routinely replied that they had not changed their approaches to teaching. When being observed, many reported that they “put on a show” to ensure that they appear to be doing what their principals and the district tell them to do. Thus despite their decreased involvement in school policy-making and increased observation by superiors, teachers do not feel pressured to compete with charter schools.

## **Barriers to a Behavioral Response to School Choice Competition**

Using the perspectives of each group above, we attempted to piece together the inner workings of school choice in D.C. We sought an explanation as to why choice has not brought about as much of a behavioral response as many would expect in a district that appears to have the necessary inputs. Our findings revealed three major stumbling blocks to reform: 1) a lack of a truly competitive model that identifies and facilitates a desired response from key players to respond to competition, 2) an inability of schools to initiate reforms independently, and 3) an unclear focus on improving school quality as a means of attracting clients.

### ***Lack of a Truly Competitive Model***

While choices may be necessary for a competitive model to operate efficiently, choice alone does not equate to competition. Only when there are both incentives and penalties attached to outcomes can a system be truly described as competitive. Moreover, the benefits of a competitive system operate most effectively if the incentives and penalties of competition are communicated and felt at all levels of the system. When implementing organizational and cultural change, obtaining buy-in from key stakeholders is essential for success. DCPS appears

to have failed at motivating its stakeholders at all levels, particularly due to inconsistent leadership, a lack of punishment for poor performance, and poor communication with teachers.

The elites and principals from our samples described a school district that grappled with a lack of consistent leadership and general political friction among the boards of education, mayor, city council, Congress, and a host of superintendents. In particular, they felt strongly that the revolving doors to the Superintendent's Office over the years had a negative affect on the district as a whole. Over the past decade since charter schools came to D.C., the District has experienced considerable turnover in leadership, with 5 superintendents, 3 interim superintendents, and now a new chancellor in 11 years, not to mention 2 school board management structures.<sup>43</sup> Without a Superintendent who stayed long enough to create and implement a plan, it was difficult to hold anyone accountable for the district's failures. And without a sense of accountability and stability at the top level, it was difficult to establish consistent priorities for the rest of the district. As long as priorities are not established for a program's implementation, it is less likely that stakeholders like principals and teachers will buy-in to the program.

The inconsistent direction from the administration has left it vulnerable to political opposition when attempting to reinforce the competitive framework within the choice model. For example, in order to quell the concerns of those resistant to the school choice movement, the Mayor of D.C. has traditionally promised to replenish any funds lost to DCPS as a result of students using vouchers to attend private schools. And while traditional public schools have not been similarly reimbursed for enrollment losses to charters, the portions of school budgets that are based on enrollment figures have been based upon enrollment figures from the prior year. Since public schools are losing students every year to charter schools, this means that school budgets are based on inflated enrollment figures and therefore delay the financial impact of declining enrollment such as laying off more teachers. Many of our elite interviewees contend that without more serious financial hardship resulting directly from enrollment declines, competition from charter schools will not inspire an adequate response from schools that lose students.

---

43 The unelected Financial Control and Management Assistance Authority, known as the Control Board, replaced the all elected school board from 1996-2000. Since 2000, a hybrid school board made up of elected and appointed members has led DCPS.

Another example of the district's inability to make necessary tough calls in the wake of competition is their failure to close a sufficient number of public schools as their enrollment declined prior to the creation of former Superintendent Janey's MEP. Although twelve schools have been closed since the advent of charters and between fifteen and twenty additional schools are targeted for consolidation, some people suggest that this effort is insufficient. Bowing to political pressure to keep schools open, public schools continue to operate well below capacity, a costly inefficiency that runs contrary to a competitive framework. The failure of the District to close enough schools in the face of severe enrollment declines illustrates the consequences of a weak and inconsistent leadership struggling to obtain a true commitment to a competitive model from the general public.

While the District's leadership has not done an optimal job of motivating many stakeholders, feedback from the principals we spoke with indicates a strong degree of attention to the competitive model. Principals are aware of enrollment declines and the potential for school closures as a result. Thus they are cognizant of the impact that such declines have on their job security. Given the efforts that some principals make to attract students, it appears that principals are responding to competition for pupils. If anyone is held accountable for maintaining student enrollment levels, it is principals. On the other hand, this attention to accountability does not reach the teachers that principals supervise. Despite teachers' awareness of enrollment trends, as profiled above, there is little personal incentive for them to attempt to retain students—the fact that their school is losing students should, in the simplest sense, make their jobs easier. Furthermore, many teachers questioned the nature of the competitive model. Some showed animosity towards charters, describing the charter movement as an attempt to put traditional public schools out of business. As one teacher opined, "They want us to fail. They want to close these public schools." One teacher discussed her doubts in the political motivations behind the movement, stating, "I think a lot of people are using us from the Hill as a guinea pig to see what they can push here so they can go home and try to replicate it back in their districts."

Others discussed varying degrees of willingness among their colleagues to accept reforms put in place in their schools. Younger teachers described veterans as being reluctant to collaborate with their less experienced peers. Veteran teachers appeared to be less enthusiastic about district mandated changes to the curriculum, perhaps jaded by the variety of reforms that have come and gone over the years. And when such reforms were instituted, the teachers reported, principals rarely described the reasons for the change. It is difficult to inspire change in a



group that is unaware of the rationale behind the reforms taking place. All of these sentiments contributed to both a reluctance to change and a distaste for the choice movement.

With little recourse for a lack of response to enrollment declines from teachers, principals are left to their own devices to prod their teachers to work towards a collective goal. This is a difficult task without the ability to affect teachers' job status or earnings and even more difficult when teachers feel out of the loop or alienated when changes are implemented. As such, some teachers do not feel an urgency to respond to declines in enrollment and only feel truly threatened by the prospect of school closures.

### *Inability for Principals to Mount School Improvements*

While the failure to incorporate incentives and consequences has impeded the development of the competitive model in DCPS, some would contend that even with such motivation, public schools are not in a position to make the changes necessary to compete for students. Without district intervention, individual schools are on their own to sink or swim. Leaving financial resources out of the equation, and assuming that principals know what improvements need to be made to retain students, it can be argued that public schools are not prepared to adequately compete in the education market for two reasons: 1) lack of principal autonomy in core functions, and 2) inadequate personnel resources required to successfully right the ship.

Despite the passage of the Home Rule Act in 1974 intended to leave the District free to self-govern, D.C. public schools are still subject to considerable control by the federal government. Most burdensome is the requirement that DCPS follow the congressional budget cycle beginning in October, rather than in June or July like most school systems. Thus it is extremely challenging for budget decisions to be made at both a District and school-level regarding teacher hiring and professional development, textbooks and supplemental resources, facility improvements, and student support services, prior to knowing actual budget figures. As a former superintendent explained, without a separate D.C. budget office "it was difficult to manage a function that you don't have control over." From our interviews, we surmised that this unique relationship is a contributing factor to a burdensome bureaucracy surrounding the District's procurement process and facilities maintenance.

The school-level experiences of our principal interviewees articulated these problems. The procurement process was criticized for taking too long, resulting in difficulty obtaining supplies for classrooms. These claims are consistent with reports from the Washington Post throughout

2007 of general mismanagement and corruption within the administration.<sup>44</sup> For example, a recent article described an incredulous Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee castigating the central administration for its failure to purchase and distribute books in a timely and orderly manner.<sup>45</sup> Principals desired increased autonomy to ensure the timely receipt of such supplies. Meanwhile, maintenance was consistently described as unreliable. Several principals suggested that a lack of urgency on the part of the district resulted in long delays in service, a claim corroborated by a Washington Post article in 2007 stating that “(p)incipals reporting dangerous conditions or urgently needed repairs in their buildings wait, on average, 379 days – a year and two weeks – for the problems to be fixed. Of 146 school buildings, 113 have a repair request pending for a leaking roof, a Washington Post analysis of school records shows.”<sup>46</sup> Along with a lack of urgency in responding to maintenance issues and supply requests, the district was said to have problems in communicating effectively with principals, due in part to the high turnover rate in assistant superintendents.

A second concern articulated by principals is the inability to hire and fire teachers as they see fit due to collective bargaining agreements. While principals can identify and interview candidates to fill teaching positions, district administrators must adhere to district and union policies in staffing schools. As a result, sometimes principals are not able to hire their preferred teachers. What is often assumed, and what our aforementioned finding of greater scrutiny from administrators reported by teachers at schools with large enrollment losses suggests, is that teachers will be pressured to improve from above—from principals and administrators—or face consequences. Yet the contract between the district and the teachers union requires a painstaking and time-consuming process in order to fire teachers. The process is so detailed that many principals do not attempt to start the process, knowing that they will be unable to follow the necessary steps with 100% compliance. This means that principals must make do with their staff, no matter how weak any individual members are. The most common means for parting with teachers is to find a way to eliminate a position, which generally requires a decline in enrollment and/or an increase in class size. Teachers lost through such changes are referred to as Excess Teachers and they earn priority in placement as the district seeks to fill other vacancies. What this boils down to is that while held accountable for school performance and

---

44 Washington Post website: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/metro/interactives/dcschools/#fullseries>

45 Theola Labbe and Dion Haynes, “Rhee Blasts Textbook Process For Letting Supplies Languish.” Washington Post, August 4, 2007.

46 Dan Keating and Dion Haynes, “Can D.C. Schools Be Fixed?” Washington Post, June 10, 2007, A01.

in many cases wanting to implement changes, principals lack the ability to control the quality of their teaching staffs and do not have an effective means of motivating teachers to adopt student retention goals.

The teachers in our sample were not unsympathetic to principals' desires to remove ineffective teachers. Younger teachers were more likely to suggest a better means for removing ineffective teachers and complained that the low quality of applicants in the Excess Teacher pool created an incentive for principals to maintain larger class sizes in order to avoid hiring Excess Teachers. Veteran teachers were more inclined to resist teacher firings, not because they disagreed with the fact that some teachers were ineffective, but because of a sense of camaraderie. In spite of their differences in opinion, both young and veteran teachers agreed that it is extremely difficult for teachers to be fired. They contended that teachers were only threatened by losing their jobs in the event of a school closure, not as a result of a poor performance review.

As a result of these experiences, the principals we spoke with would prefer to have greater autonomy over staffing, purchasing, and maintenance services in order to improve their schools in a way that more directly affects the quality of education received by their students. Without this authority, many principals of public schools focus their attention on improving image and providing family services as a means of increasing enrollment because the bureaucracy of the district inhibits their ability to make other changes that the principals believe would improve their schools' performance. From a theoretical perspective, it only makes sense to offer a greater degree of autonomy to principals as they are held increasingly accountable for their results. Interestingly, the principals in our sample felt that, throughout the district, principal autonomy increased along with better school performance, indicating that the best schools were the most capable of making school initiated improvements.

This concept alludes to an ironic wrinkle in the theory of competitive effects. Proponents argue that failing schools will somehow respond positively to competition, in light of the fact that they are, well, *failing*. Mired by a host of existing problems, it seems likely that at some point poor performance has become so prevalent, such a deeply ingrained aspect of a failing school, that concocting a turn-around from the inside is simply an unreasonable expectation. If it is the case that the highest numbers of students fleeing are doing so from the worst schools in any system, then such a theory almost necessitates action from the very schools where we have the least expectation such a response would be possible. Realizing this anomaly should lead policymakers to retool their specific concepts of what types of behavioral responses could work

and prove most effective in reversing the inertia of failure at troubled schools. It might also lead policymakers to more eagerly accept the prospect of closing failing schools that are unlikely to turn around.

In the case of D.C., all signs point to the notion that the schools that are losing students are indeed struggling, and are potentially in no position to respond directly. To begin with, they have been overwhelmingly designated as failing to meet the AYP standards initiated by NCLB. Of the 15 schools represented in the teachers' survey that failed to achieve AYP in 2005, 12 have experienced more than a ten percent loss in enrollment proportional to their capacity since 1997. If these schools remain open, they are the least equipped to make improvements without external assistance.

Another indication of a dysfunction among schools losing students was detected through our survey data regarding teacher satisfaction with certain aspects of their working conditions. When examining their responses in the context of enrollment declines, a clear pattern emerges. As can be seen in Table 1, teachers at schools with heavier enrollment losses are more dissatisfied with their work environment. For example, teachers at schools with minimal losses or gains were nearly twice as likely to agree with the statement that they "look forward to each working day" than teachers at schools with the heaviest losses. Additionally, the teachers at the schools with smaller enrollment losses had more positive responses concerning the clarity of the school's goals, the innovation of their peers, and the extent to which their school "rewards excellence."

**Table 1: Teacher Satisfaction and Frustration Measures**

	Percent of Teachers who Strongly Agree/Agree		
	Over 30% Loss	10-30% Loss	10% Loss-Gain
I usually look forward to each working day	46%	49%	91%
Goals for the school are clear	51%	58%	79%
Teachers continuously seek new ideas	54%	63%	91%
My school rewards excellence	45%	44%	79%

Additionally, teachers were asked about their efficacy as instructors. As Table 2 illustrates, schools with heavy enrollment declines report high levels of frustration with student behavior, a lack of confidence in the students they are charged with educating, and almost a third of them feel that their own success or failure is beyond their control. In contrast, only 3% of teachers at schools that experienced smaller declines or gains in enrollment agreed that their students were

not capable of learning the required material and only 6% agreed that their success or failure was beyond their control.

**Table 2: Teacher Efficacy as Instructor**

	Percent of Teachers who Strongly Agree/Agree		
	Over 30% Loss	10-30% Loss	10% Loss-Gain
Student behavior interferes with my classroom instruction	63%	57%	30%
My success or failure in teaching is due to factors beyond my control	34%	33%	6%
Many students are not capable of learning the required material	41%	30%	3%

While there is a clear pattern amongst teachers' attitudes and school enrollment trends, it is difficult to interpret exactly what these findings mean in terms of causality. It could be the case that poorly managed schools with low morale are losing students to competitors. It could also be the case that the enrollment declines are causing some teachers to have more negativity towards their schools and their students, especially if the most difficult students are the ones who are sticking it out in the most troubled schools.

Such negativity is also present in the reported work relationships of schools that are losing students. Relationships between teachers and other teachers, teachers and parents, and teachers and their administrators in schools that are experiencing more competitive effects could be more innovative—or more strained—depending on the conditions of the responses to competition.

When we examine the attitude that the teachers have towards their administrators at schools with declining enrollment there is strong evidence of frustration and dysfunction (see Table 3). Whether it is because of the higher reported levels of administrators "looking over their shoulder" or part of a larger environment of tension and strained relationships, over twice as many teachers from schools that are not experiencing large enrollment declines agree (73%) that their administrators are helpful when it comes to solving classroom problems. Only around a third of teachers at schools experiencing the most loss agree that their administrators are helpful.

**Table 3: Are administrators helpful?**

Do [school administrators] help improve your teaching or help solve classroom problems?	
School Enrollment Capacity	Percent of Teachers who Strongly Agree/Agree
Over 30% Loss	34%
10-30% Loss	54%
10% Loss or Gain	73%

Digging deeper into the specific qualities of this finding, the results of the survey suggest that the teachers at the schools experiencing high enrollment declines feel like they are less trusted than schools without high losses. As shown in Table 4, they do not feel as much encouragement to try new approaches, are not consulted before decisions are made, and only 32% feel as if their administrators support their efforts to improve their curriculum. Also worth noting is that they are not as happy with the hiring and firing practices of their superiors—noting both dissatisfaction with their administrators' ability to hire the best teachers and to remove the ones that are failing.

**Table 4: Frustration and Friction between Teachers and Administrators**

Principal/Administrator:	Percent of Teachers who Strongly Agree/Agree		
	10% Loss-Gain	10-30% Loss	Over 30% Loss
They encourage me to try new classroom approaches	97%	71%	62%
Protects from outside pressure that may interfere	67%	38%	26%
Consults teachers before making decisions that affect them	48%	37%	27%
They effectively put new programs in place	70%	43%	29%
They support teacher efforts to improve curriculum	85%	53%	32%
They set clear expectations for staff	58%	42%	46%
They ensure teachers serve students or remove them	48%	33%	19%
They hire the highest caliber of new teachers	70%	36%	39%

The story of dysfunction illustrated by Table 4 could be a straightforward and accurate depiction by the teachers in our survey that calls into question the leadership capabilities of administrators at schools with heavy enrollment losses. However, this same pattern of findings could also suggest that administrators are making an effort to respond and teachers

are resentful of the added oversight and loss of autonomy. In a perfect system, administrators would be responsible for the productivity of their teachers and the guessing game of identifying who is responsible for success or failure would become moot. But, because administrators can usually cite the many ways in which their hands are tied with respect to choosing and controlling their staff, it is impossible to determine exactly where the buck stops.

### *Unclear Focus on Improving School Quality as a Response*

In the previous section, we point out that schools that show signs of a response to competition vary in their abilities to respond productively, and when they do respond, they are oftentimes preoccupied with the image and reputation of the school instead of its overall quality. This leads us to ask the question, “Does satisfying the desires of parents lead to better schools?” One approach to this question comes down to a discussion about the merits of paternalism as we decide if parents are in fact making the best decisions for their children. But we must also ask whether or not competition is serving students well in the aggregate. Competition came to D.C. in response to institutionalized segregation and insufficient services to poor and minority families. How is the competitive market in DCPS affecting this dynamic?

Clouding these discussions is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Only 20.1% of traditional D.C. public schools made Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in both reading and math in 2007.<sup>47</sup> Principals and teachers acknowledged district-wide efforts to improve the curriculum and standards while increasing the focus on test preparation were primarily focused on compliance with NCLB. They generally agreed that NCLB provides a greater push towards accountability and creates a greater sense of urgency around improving test scores than does charter school competition. An example of this pressure given by principals was the increasing emphasis on student test scores in principal evaluations. In addition, one principal reported that she was told by the district to hold a mandatory Saturday school session for all students in order to prepare for an upcoming test.

As an additional input, NCLB complicates the school choice model. Teachers and principals strive to improve test scores and academic performance in order to achieve the AYP standards of NCLB, seemingly disassociating academic performance with the need to maintain enrollment standards in response to competition from charter schools. Competition from school choice,

---

47 District of Columbia Public Schools website: <http://webb.k12.dc.us/NCLB/schoolsSummaryReports.asp>

therefore, is not solely responsible for efforts to improve school quality. In fact, based on our interviews with principals, we believe that choice dampens principals' efforts to improve the academic quality of their schools as it draws their attention more towards other means of attracting parents and students. Choice encourages principals to market the images of and family services provided by their schools in order to avoid losing students, while the threat of NCLB regulations pushes more towards the improvement of the quality of education. Part of this disparity may be related to principals' self-proclaimed powerlessness to make the changes necessary to improve their schools' performance, as detailed above. As it stands now in DCPS, school choice evokes a behavioral response from schools, but it is not the response that many expected, in part due to the influence of NCLB.

### *Summary*

An examination of the inner-workings of the D.C. education establishment suggests a disconnect between the priorities of the educational elites and the dilemmas haunting principals and teachers in public schools. Market forces that are expected to spur a competitive response to school choice are watered down by the lack of a true commitment to a competitive model that incorporates serious consequences for failure. The efforts to enforce a competitive model are hampered by political dynamics and burdensome regulations. Specifically, district leaders, preoccupied with leadership problems and administrative headaches, have concentrated their efforts on politics, budgeting and school choice, leaving individual schools to respond to charter school competition on their own. Meanwhile, individual schools have struggled with staffing, procurement and maintenance issues for decades. Thus principals are not responding to competition from charter schools in the ways that elites expected because they do not have the appropriate autonomy and resources to do so. Rather, they push to increase attendance by enticing parents through boutique programs, pre-K classes, social services and advertising efforts. While some of these programs could very well improve the overall well being of the community, it appears that principals would prefer to take additional steps to improve the quality of their schools that would require increased autonomy. Although some recent school-level changes suggest that there may be tremors in the usual firmament, our investigation suggests that the schools most affected by the exodus of students to charter schools continue to be mired with dysfunction. As such, it seems unlikely that an effective response will come from the school level anytime soon.



## Moving Forward: A District-Level Response?

As usual, change is afoot in the leadership of D.C. public schools. Since the bulk of our research concluded in the spring of 2007, Mayor Adrian Fenty's takeover of DCPS and subsequent appointment of Chancellor Michelle Rhee represent a new chapter in the life of D.C. education politics. Ms. Rhee's lack of previous experience as a Superintendent made her appointment controversial in some circles, but the D.C. Council approved her appointment unanimously upon the completion of her confirmation hearing. While some contend that these somewhat radical events are attributable to the effects of school choice, readers should keep in mind two contending factors. First, several other urban districts such as New York and Chicago have experienced mayoral takeovers in recent years in the absence of school choice competition. Secondly, D.C. has hosted a series of non-traditional superintendents who predated the charter explosion—Rhee's appointment is not as revolutionary as one might think. For now, it is difficult to defend any causal claims between school choice and these recent developments.

Yet other recent actions of Mayor Fenty and his staff are stronger indicators that the competitive framework of school choice will be adhered to more strictly in the future. For example, in order to meet his proposed \$12.1 million in cuts to public school funding, Fenty's Fiscal Year 2008 Budget proposes to begin funding all public schools on estimated enrollments for the coming year rather than audited enrollment from the previous year. This decision clearly represents a "political will" to cut the budget in response to charter school growth. Furthermore, he will no longer adhere to former Mayor Anthony Williams' policy of reimbursing District public schools for funds lost to the voucher program.

As for facilities maintenance, Fenty has committed \$17 million this summer for renovations at 33 schools and has obtained at least 40 donations from private businesses, each offering \$10,000 worth of repair services for DCPS schools.<sup>48</sup> Fenty also showed his commitment to facilities renovations in appointing Allen Lew, the chief executive of the D.C. Sports and Entertainment Commission, to manage the district's school modernization plan. And on November 28, 2007, Mayor Fenty and Chancellor Rhee proposed to close 24 campuses by the

---

48 Theola Labbe. "Summer Break, But Plenty of Work: Fenty Aims to Repair Crumbling Facilities." *Washington Post*, July 1, 2007, C06.

Summer of 2010 in an effort to align facilities space and costs with enrollment within the school district.<sup>49</sup>

Turning to the competency of the administration, the Washington Post reported in October of 2007 that the Mayor seeks to “amend city personnel rules to give (Chancellor Rhee) the power to fire hundreds of employees in a planned restructuring of the system’s central administration.” In addition to cleaning house upon receiving authority to conduct the restructuring, the plan is designed to improve performance management within the administration by moving administrators to an “at will” working status.

If these recent plans come to fruition and spark further reforms in line with the school choice model, further examination of the behavioral response to charter school competition will be required to determine the extent to which public schools compete. However, in spite of this strong showing of a commitment to change, the lack of communication between Fenty and the D.C. Council regarding a series of initiatives, most recently the plan to close 24 schools by 2010, hints towards the politics of old.<sup>50</sup> Only time will tell whether or not politics will wear down the momentum of the mayor’s policy agenda, but for the time being it appears that Fenty and his team are succeeding in their efforts to implement change. As Fenty and his staff take their first steps, many residents of D.C. hope that the muzzled dog that has yet to bark might begin to growl.

---

49 Theola Labbe. “Short Notice on Plan to Close Schools Angers Council.” Washington Post, November 29, 2007, B01.

50 David Nakamura and Nikita Stewart. “Fenty’s Mode On Schools Is Breeding Alienation.” Washington Post, December 3, 2007, B01. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/02/AR2007120202058.html?hpid=moreheadlines>





School Choice Demonstration Project  
Department of Education Reform  
University of Arkansas

201 Graduate Education Building  
Fayetteville, AR 72701  
479-575-6345

<http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>