



DC APPLIED

EDUCATION

2006

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esident S.B. summed up the feelings of a large number of those who responded to the *Solving DC Problems* Campaign when he said that “the biggest problem facing the District of Columbia is public education.”

There were some radical solutions, from Resident J.S. championing year-round schooling, to Resident M.H. suggesting that the whole system be shut down for a year to re-tool. Highlighted below are some of the specific suggestions that local residents offered to improve the quality of education in the District, both in and out of the classroom.

## I. SYSTEMIC CHANGES TO DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (DCPS)

Most residents feel that DCPS must undergo fairly far-reaching changes in order to meet the needs of District students. With policy changes, adequate funding, and support, residents strongly believe that the District can do better for its children.

### A. Governance and Accountability

To keep a closer watch on the practices of DCPS, several residents recommended that DCPS hire independent auditors to improve efficiency and results.

Two residents suggested an electronic “report card” system for the schools to make it easier to compare their success rates. Such a system could be in the form of a centralized public database. Resident S.G., who endorsed the centralized “report card” database, added that by creating such a system, teachers and administrators would be accountable to the public at large. Others agreed that it was important that administrators be held accountable for the successes and failures of their schools. Resident J.R. suggested that the salaries of teachers should be determined by the success rates of their students.

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Another suggestion to improve fiscal responsibility came from Resident E.M., who recommended that teachers be allowed to more closely monitor the spending of their schools. This suggestion is rooted in the idea that teachers are more informed than administrators on the needs of individual schools, and may be better equipped to handle micro-managing decisions. Taking this idea a step further, Resident J.C. proposed privatizing DCPS and ceding control to the teachers.

### B. Divide DCPS?

Two residents suggested that splitting the District into two or more school districts would improve the quality of education by introducing an element of competition. Additionally, these residents believe this solution would make it easier for administrators to efficiently run the schools since they would be responsible for fewer schools.

### C. Facilities

Many residents are concerned with the state of the school facilities and athletic fields in the District. Resident D.P. suggested that a board of parents, principals and building inspectors be assembled to repair schools and libraries at no cost to taxpayers. Under this scheme, schools and libraries would post a listing of necessary repairs on a secure website. In turn, a pre-approved list of contractors could sign up to make the repairs in exchange for tax incentives. Further incentives would be granted if the contractor hired District residents.

Resident S.M.J. suggested that the District focus on creating more environmentally friendly schools, pointing out that this would not only improve the environment outside schools, but would be healthier for students inside the schools.

### D. Technology and Supplies

Several residents were concerned with the lack of technology in DCPS. Resident S.P. recommended working with companies and government agencies to provide almost-new equipment that is no longer needed to public schools. As for computers that are damaged, one resident said, “Let students (or others) who need community service hours ... fix up donated computers for schools and libraries.”

Residents were similarly upset by the scarcity of textbooks and other necessary supplies in DCPS. Resident J.S. suggested contracting with textbook vendors “to have all school books, all yearly school book addendums, and all instructional material provided as electronic files, maintained on a central Web server controlled by DCPS. Classroom teachers could print whatever textbooks or instructional materials were needed by themselves on an as-needed basis” and the saved money could be used to purchase other classroom supplies.

## II. TEACHERS

### A. Attracting the Best Educators

Many residents saw attracting quality teachers as the most important step in improving DCPS. Suggestions included increasing salaries, waiving property taxes for teachers, and tapping into the supply of graduate students at local colleges and universities.

### B. Improving Teacher Performance

Some residents were concerned not only with attracting high quality new teachers, but also in improving the skills and productivity of teachers already employed by the District. Resident K.A. proposed creating a mentoring program whereby experienced teachers could share their knowledge with younger teachers. Resident P.H. suggested instituting a policy of periodically videotaping lessons in order to give teachers more timely feedback and suggestions for improvement.

To increase teacher productivity, Resident C.B. proposed giving every teacher a laptop which would make everything from record-keeping to attendance-taking more efficient and secure.

## III. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

### A. Attendance

Residents expressed a great deal of concern over the high truancy rate in DCPS. Resident N.W. took issue with the fact that students must either walk or use public transportation to get to school. To provide some supervision, N.W. suggested transporting students to schools on school busses. To encourage students to “show up,” several residents proposed various forms of incentives, including Resident K.A. who suggested that a point system and a lottery could be used to give students rewards from “stakeholders” (such as local businesses) based on their school attendance. Other residents suggested monetary incentives, even as much as a payment of \$5 per day for attendance at school.

### B. Supervising students

Resident A.S. suggested that monitoring specific “problem” students would be easier if teachers had a more technologically savvy way of handling the problem. The resident proposed a database that would monitor truancy and identify students who miss a certain number of days. The priority and visibility of

attendance information would ensure that “more solutions will be found for children early on, before they become accustomed to the spirit-numbing behaviors and attitudes that cause mass tardiness and 50% absence rates currently tolerated in DC high schools.”

### C. Learning Styles

Some residents believe that creating single-sex classrooms could reduce distractions and improve student performance. Additionally, they think that such schools would be able to address the different learning styles of male and female students.

Resident C.W. proposed testing students to determine their ideal learning style (e.g., kinetic, visual) and then placing them in classrooms with teachers trained to gear lessons toward these needs.

### D. Tutoring and Mentoring

Several residents proposed providing programs before the start of the school day that would afford students additional individual attention from teachers, particularly in the subjects of math and reading skills.

Some residents stressed the importance of community, and Resident F.W. incorporated this need into a suggestion for after-school care. The resident suggested housing after-school programs in retirement communities and assisted-living facilities to “brighten” the lives of elderly residents and enable children to form relationships with older members of the community. As Resident F.W. remarked, “What child wouldn’t love to have as many grandmas and grandpas as possible, and what senior citizen wouldn’t want as many grandkids as possible?”

Resident P.W. believes that politicians should be required to play a closer role in mentoring programs. This resident proposed that every politician in the District of Columbia area be required to mentor a certain number of at-risk youths, who would in turn would be required to mentor others. The resident pointed out that “even a third grader can help a first grader while an older teen can help those in junior high or middle school.”

## IV. SPECIAL EDUCATION

Resident P.H. called for the District to improve its special education programs and thereby reduce the number of students that must find special education services outside of the District’s public schools. Resident R.G. suggests that if Individualized Education Programs cannot be followed, the District should re-group and build facilities that will accommodate these students and quickly reduce the amount of government money spent on private schools for special needs students.

Resident P.M. proposed the creation of an Office of the Special Education Students’ Advocate that would develop a comprehensive plan to improve special education services and then implement the plan.

## V. CHARTER SCHOOLS

There was, generally, strong support for charter schools in the District among resident respondents. Resident S.G. suggested that parents would benefit from a centralized admissions process for charter schools. This would simplify the process of applying to charter schools and help to disseminate information about the various charter schools in the District.

## VI. LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Many submissions centered on opportunities for young people to learn outside of school hours. These submissions included ways to engage students in a variety of educational, cultural, employment- and service-oriented activities.

### A. Cultural Activities

A large number of residents urged the District to create recreational centers to give young people a place to engage in positive activities during their downtime. Resident D.M. pointed out that many young people who live in D.C. do not take advantage of the cultural offerings here, and suggested that mentors could engage children in these offerings. Many suggested giving young people opportunities to express themselves through the arts.

### B. Employment

Multiple residents suggested that every student - not just academically gifted students - who wants a summer job should be able to get one. These residents argued that in addition to providing an alternative to the destructive behavior that students might otherwise turn to, these jobs provide skills and responsibility students can use as adults.

### C. Community Involvement

The DCPS requirement of community service was praised by several residents. Resident D.H. suggested that students fulfill this requirement by doing service projects around their schools or by tutoring other students. Other residents made similar suggestions, many of which centered on cleaning up trash and promoting recycling in the schools.

## VII. VOCATIONAL AND ADULT EDUCATION

### A. Vocational Training

Several ideas promoted the virtues of vocational education programs that have existed in DCPS in years past, and suggested that reintroducing these kinds of programs will give students real, marketable skills upon graduation. Resident K.M. summarized this position by saying that if the District “put back into the DC school system the vocational schools ... more kids would stay in school and finish and get good respectable jobs and contribute to communities.” As an expansion to this type of program, Resident R.W. proposed connecting vocational education programs with employers who could hire students upon completion of training.



## B. Adult Education

One of the problems discussed by a number of residents was the issue of uneducated, unskilled ex-offenders who perpetuate the cycle of poverty by being unable to find work once they are released from jail or prison. Residents M.R. and P.H. both expressed the need for job training programs that acclimate recently released ex-offenders back into society.

## VII. UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Resident J.S., arguing that UDC is too small to “effectively compete in the university marketplace,” suggested building a new UDC campus on RFK Stadium’s parking lots, keeping the stadium as an athletic center. Such an expansion would attract new students and tax-paying residents into the city. Other residents suggested moving parts of the campus to the Anacostia waterfront or to other locations in the eastern half of the District. Resident R.E. proposed that funding for new locations along the Anacostia River could come from the sale of some of UDC’s Van Ness property. Other residents agreed, stressing the importance of placing higher education institutions in communities with high unemployment rates. A third suggestion came from Resident C.T., who believed that UDC would benefit from a “full residential campus” in addition to a graduate studies center in the current MLK Library.

## VIII. LIBRARIES

### A. Facility Improvements

Residents who discussed the DC Libraries all agreed on the need to improve both the buildings themselves and the technology available to patrons. Resident B.J. was concerned about the fact that four DC Libraries are closed for renovation until 2008. During the intervening time, the “lack of easy access to libraries as they evolve into informational hubs is devastating to our community.” To compensate for these library closures, the resident suggested setting up temporary libraries in recreation centers and other available facilities.

### B. Funding

Some offered ideas to generate funding to make needed improvements to District libraries. Resident A.C. suggested that all catered food events and all food and beverage vending machines in the District be subject to a .5% tax.

Moving in the direction of donation-based support, Resident N.L. proposed a program called “Friends of the D.C. Public Library” which would include several levels of membership. Each level of membership would come with commensurate perks (e.g., discounts at local bookstores, invitations to intimate author readings and/or dinner receptions).



### 3RD PLACE WINNER

**Give young people an alternative to high school and college with an expansive technical/trade education system that meshes with an apprenticeship program upon graduation.**

*Submitted by Roxanne Walker*

*resident of Ward 6 in the District of Columbia*

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DC needs a new generation of tradespeople just as much as we need white-collar workers, and right now the DC school system does not offer many options for those not interested in college. After getting a solid academic education through 8th grade, students demonstrating literacy, aptitude and interest should be given the opportunity to enroll in schools where the emphasis is on learning a trade—carpentry, masonry, plumbing, etc.—in conjunction with a curriculum that teaches life skills, business basics, technical reading and writing, and finance.

Students who complete the four-year program should be provided an apprenticeship in DC in their chosen trade, which would qualify them to be fully licensed and ready to work. The students win with a good-paying skilled job and the community wins with qualified and well-trained tradespeople and a lower dropout rate.

### CONTEST FINALIST

**UDC-East...A New Educational Paradigm**

*Submitted by Shomari McCrimons*

*resident of Ward 5 in the District of Columbia*

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Washington DC needs to establish UDC-East, a two-year College option for aspiring students interested in pursuing academic studies in the city. Two-year Colleges cater to community needs and develop curriculum to support local economy. Currently, UDC represents the only “state” school option for DC residents. In comparison, Maryland has fourteen four-year state Universities and approximately fifteen two-year schools. By developing a two-year “state” school under the UDC umbrella, the city will accomplish the following:

1. Higher DC Resident Retention: DC currently has approximately 550,000 residents, down significantly from its peak during the 1970s. Further, DC encourages College bound residents to leave the District through DC TAG, which offers up to \$10K per year for residents to attend a Public College in any state. By creating a two-year College, DC will increase its ability to retain young minds it has nurtured from K-12 and, also, develop a prepared homegrown workforce.

2. A Stronger Middle Class: Approximately, 19% of DC residents live in poverty, 4th highest in the Nation. College graduates earn approximately twice as much as High School graduates. The skills that DC residents will obtain at UDC-East will allow them to enter the workforce after two years or to transfer to another local school for a Bachelor's degree. An educated workforce will help reduce poverty and develop a stronger middle class

### CONTEST FINALIST

**“Green” DC public schools would improve children’s health**

*Submitted by Sally Murray James*

*resident of Ward 6 in the District of Columbia*

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Children suffer disproportionately from the pollution in our region. Smog from traffic and power plants has been linked to increases in childhood asthma, which sends kids to the emergency room and keeps them home from school. Their small, rapidly developing bodies are more vulnerable to the health effects of toxic fumes from building and cleaning materials. And many DC children are being raised by relatives who are elderly—another group at particular risk from pollution.

Our schools should strive to protect children’s bodies while challenging their minds. If DC public schools go “green,” we’ll all benefit from cleaner communities, healthier families, fewer emergency room visits, and increased civic pride. Less runoff means cleaner rivers. Energy efficiency helps reduce smog and greenhouse gases. Students will see us leading by example and can even gain expertise in solving environmental problems by using their school buildings as science labs.

#### Greening our schools could include:

- Using nontoxic and energy-efficient materials whenever possible;
- Using nontoxic cleaning supplies;
- Replacing blacktop schoolyards with surfaces that are safer and more fun for play and that reduce storm runoff;
- Installing green roofs (a covering of live plants) to reduce runoff, increase insulation, and lower summertime ambient air temperatures;
- Linking school food programs to organic gardens;
- Providing public transportation subsidies for public school staff; and
- Creating a “green academy”—a school where state-of-the-art environmental technology is showcased and where students study environmental sciences.