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Can D.C. Schools Be Fixed?

After decades of reforms, three out of four students fall below math standards. More money is spent running the schools than on teaching. And urgent repair jobs take more than a year . . .

By Dan Keating and V. Dion Haynes
Washington Post Staff Writers
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Kelly Miller Middle School opened its doors in a struggling Northeast Washington neighborhood in 2004, a \$35 million showcase for the District's public schools, every classroom equipped with a whiteboard and computers. A particular source of pride was a media production room, where students could broadcast announcements and produce programs to be viewed on TVs wired in each classroom.

Three years later, there have been no broadcasts. The room still needs a last, critical piece of equipment, which fell into a bureaucratic chasm. Until a few days ago, the principal had never been told what the part was or when it was coming. For now, the \$150,000 production room is a storage closet for unused books and furniture.

As [Mayor Adrian M. Fenty](#) (D) prepares this week to become the first Washington mayor with direct control of the schools, his team promises a clean slate and a rapid turnaround. Yet a detailed assessment of the state of the school system, based on extensive public records, suggests that the challenge is enormous: The system is among the highest-spending and worst-performing in the nation. Kelly Miller is one small example of a breakdown in most of the basic functions that are meant to support classroom learning.

- Tests show that in reading and math, the District's public school students score at the bottom among 11 major city school systems, even when poor children are compared only with other poor children. Thirty-three percent of poor fourth-graders across the nation lacked basic skills in math, but in the District, the figure was 62 percent. It was 74 percent for D.C. eighth-graders, compared with 49 percent nationally.
- The District spends \$12,979 per pupil each year, ranking it third-highest among the 100 largest districts in the nation. But most of that money does not get to the classroom. D.C. schools rank first in the share of the budget spent on administration, last in spending on teachers and instruction.
- Principals 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.
- The schools spent \$25 million on a computer system to manage personnel that had to be discarded because there was no accurate list of employees to use as a starting point. The school system relies on paper records stacked in 200 cardboard boxes to keep track of its employees, and in some cases is five years behind in processing staff paperwork. It also lacks an accurate list of its 55,000-plus students, although it pays \$900,000 to a consultant each year to keep count.

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· Many students and teachers spend their days in an environment hostile to learning. Just over half of teenage students attend schools that meet the District's definition of "persistently dangerous" because of the number of violent crimes, according to an analysis of school reports. Across the city, nine violent incidents are reported on a typical day, including fights and attacks with weapons. Fire officials receive about one complaint a week of locked fire doors, and health inspections show that more than a third of schools have been infested by mice.

"I don't know if anybody knows the magnitude of problems at D.C. public schools. It's mind-boggling," said Abdusalam Omer, the school system's chief business operations officer, who was hired in February to tackle payroll, purchasing, personnel and repair operations.

Omer, who worked for the schools as chief financial officer a decade ago, said little has changed.

"It's like I've been in a coma for 10 years and just woke up," said Omer, who left the schools to be chief of staff to former mayor [Anthony A. Williams](#) (D) and then worked in [Kenya](#) for the [United Nations](#).

He said that when he walked into the personnel office this year, it was "strikingly scary" to find the mountain of boxes holding files on more than 11,000 employees.

The pressures on the schools to succeed have increased in recent years as a congressionally mandated experiment with independent, publicly funded charter schools has taken root. Viewed by proponents as a way to both improve the traditional public schools and give parents an option, charters have proven to be uneven in quality but hugely popular. Nearly one-fourth of public school students now attend the city's 55 charters, and because funding follows the students, regular public schools with shrinking enrollment are losing funds.

MacFarland Middle School off Georgia Avenue in Northwest, for example, is surrounded by charters, and enrollment has dropped from more than 600 to about 300 in two years.

"I don't try to compete with them anymore," said Antonia Peters, in her ninth year as MacFarland's principal. "I try to work with the kids that we have. Most of my students are ELL [English language learners] or special education, but they take the same test as mainstream kids in English. It's hard if you don't know the language or have special needs, but we're held to the same standards."

As with many other schools across the city, her program has been pared to the basics, with foreign language and art classes gone from the curriculum.

She reaches out to community groups to bolster her resources for instruction. A former employee volunteers to watch over students who have been suspended so they don't have to be sent home. Peters can't hire an art teacher, but a custodian at the school with a flair for art, Kenneth McCrory, helps students paint portraits before he cleans the building.

'Below Ground Zero'

Like school districts in most large cities, Washington's faces daunting problems, including a large population of students from poor families living in troubled neighborhoods. About three-fourths of elementary students are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Across the city, dedicated teachers and principals work every day to help non-English speaking children learn to read, challenge bright students to stay engaged and provide a secure refuge for children coping with damaged families.

[Superintendent Clifford B. Janey](#) -- the sixth superintendent in a decade -- said he is making steady progress and hopes that new test results, to be released in the coming months, will show significant gains in

achievement.

He and others point to pockets of excellence: The predominately low-income students in a French program at J.O. Wilson Elementary School in Northeast consistently finish near the top in national competitions, the number of students taking Advanced Placement classes has increased by nearly one-third in the past three years, and the rate of graduates going to college has doubled since 1999, according to one study.

In his nearly three years in the District, Janey has drawn praise for imposing rigorous systemwide standards on what should be taught at each grade, a curriculum to accomplish that and a testing program to measure its success. That reversed a trend of letting each school set its own path, which was widely criticized in education circles.

Janey said he inherited not only poor classroom performance, but an agency where the computers didn't work, the payroll was a mess, schools lacked supplies and textbooks arrived months late.

"We were at or below ground zero and had been hovering there for some length of time," he said. "We are not in denial. We are doing the work in spite of that. That's the proposition we were given. It's an obstacle, but it hasn't paralyzed us to distract from our core mission. I'll be damned if it'll paralyze us."

For years, debates about the quality of city schools revolved around a central question: Does lagging academic achievement -- two out of three students are not proficient in reading and three out of four are not proficient in math -- merely reflect the high number of students who are poor and unprepared for learning? Or are other urban districts with similar student populations better at improving performance?

That question finally has an answer, thanks to an expansion of a federal program that tests student achievement across the country. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, had been reporting results by state since 1990, but in recent years began isolating test scores from selected urban school systems.

Eleven city school districts were tested in 2005, including [New York](#), [Boston](#), [Atlanta](#), [Cleveland](#), [Miami](#) and [Chicago](#), as well as the District. The Washington Post's analysis of the data shows that D.C. students ranked last or were tied for last on every measure. That is true even when poor children in the District are compared only with poor children in, say, Atlanta.

Indeed, on almost every cut of the scores, District students finished at the bottom, including students who were not poor and whose parents were better educated.

The one group that scored well was white students, creating the widest gap between white and minority students among the cities tested. The District's white students, who make up 6 percent of the school population, tend to be affluent and are concentrated in a few schools.

The test results from NAEP combined students from public and charter schools. The Post's analysis, separating out the charter results for the first time, turned up a significant change: D.C. charters had lower scores in both reading and math in 2003, but they moved slightly past the other public schools in both subjects in 2005.

This could mean either that charters are able to do more for their students or that charters are simply drawing the best students from the public schools.

Overall, District scores improved slightly between 2003 and 2005, the latest results available. But those in the other urban districts improved more, leaving Washington at the bottom.

A Voice From the Gym

Benjamin Hosch arrived from [Chester, Pa.](#), to become principal at Theodore Roosevelt High School in 2005 and quickly decided he didn't have "the level and caliber" of staff he needed. Only one in six students were meeting the basic standards. He thought he'd scored a coup when "one of the best math teachers in the District" agreed to come from a charter school. He sent the paperwork downtown, but the hiring was delayed so long the teacher took a job elsewhere.

Hosch was disgusted by the filth at the 75-year-old school on 13th Street Northwest. "No one has ever walked in my building in my career as a principal and said my building looked dirty -- until I got here," he said.

He tried to get rid of his custodians, only to find that the personnel office put them back in his school because there were no openings elsewhere. And the office failed to fill three teacher openings in core subjects by the time school opened.

But when he questions the office on why things have been going off track, Hosch said, "the things people say to me don't make sense."

Just around the corner from Roosevelt, at Powell Elementary School, Principal Lucia Vega said she has had to "warehouse" at least one unwanted staffer.

Walking down the hallway recently, Vega stopped and commented: "Hear that singing? Coming from the gym?" said Vega as a lone voice echoed down the hallway. "That's my literacy coach." The coach "was given to me" by the central office, Vega said, adding that the coach does not work with students, and, in Vega's view, doesn't contribute much to the school. "That person is totally useless. . . . That \$80,000 is something I could have used for my students."

The coach, Cheryl Mabry, said she has been with the schools for 34 years and has been trained to help teachers work with students who are struggling to read and write. She said she was sent by the central office to Powell because, like most D.C. public schools, it did not meet academic targets.

"As far as what I'm doing, I think I'm making an impact," Mabry said, but she does not expect to be back next year. "Ms. Vega has other ideas. I don't think I fit into her plans."

When Vega was informed last year that she had overspent her budget, she knew something was wrong and visited the regional administrative office to check the ledger. There, she discovered that her budget included salaries for two teachers who did not work at her school and whom she had never heard of. The personnel office, for unknown reasons, had assigned them to her payroll.

Staff problems go beyond how teachers are deployed. Citywide, fewer than half of core courses are taught by teachers who are considered "highly qualified" in their subject, which requires that they have earned a degree or passed a competency test in that subject. Nationally, the numbers are worse in only one state -- [Alaska](#). In most states, the figure was over 90 percent.

Within the District, teachers are less likely to meet this "highly qualified" standard at schools with poorer students, according to a Post analysis.

At Deal Junior High, which has relatively few poor students, two-thirds of the core classes have highly qualified teachers, twice the figure at MacFarland and Garnett-Patterson middle schools, where almost all the students come from poor families.

Across the city, 58 percent of classes in the junior high and middle schools with the most affluent students are taught by highly qualified teachers, compared with 38 percent at the poorest schools, The Post found. The gap is smaller at elementary schools.

Under the law, parents must be told if their child's teacher does not meet this standard. But that hasn't happened because the District is more than a year behind in submitting the data.

Students are also hurt by the system's management problems. A 2003 audit, for example, found mistakes in student transcripts at all of the city's 16 high schools.

Flying Sparks

The list of repair requests from D.C. schools, compiled in a database at the central office, details the crumbling condition of many of the city's school buildings. This spring, it contained thousands of unfilled requests, including 1,100 labeled "urgent" or "dangerous" that have been waiting to be fixed, on average, for more than a year.

Of the 146 schools, 127 have a pending repair for electrical work, some of which caused shocks or flying sparks. Those typically have been on the books for two years.

At the start of the 2002 school year, a student from Ferebee-Hope Elementary in Southeast was taken to the hospital after being gouged by sharp edges on a broken railing. It took the school system more than four years to make that repair, records show.

Gage-Eckington Elementary in Northwest notified the central repair office in May 2006 that a plexiglass window was dangling from its frame in the second-floor boy's restroom, posing a danger because a student could fall out. Two months later, the head custodian sent a second request labeled "Dangerous." A third request went out in September, and a fourth in November, reading "asap! This is a safety hazard." The principal said it took workers until January to replace the window.

More evidence of neglect has been uncovered by city health inspectors sent to check school cafeterias. In the most recent round of inspections, 85 percent of cafeterias had violations, including peeling paint and plaster near food, inadequate hand-washing facilities and insufficient hot water. Well over one-third of public school cafeterias showed evidence of rodent or roach infestations in the past three years, according to health inspections.

Ariel Smith, an [American University](#) student who taught recently in an after-school program at Bruce-Monroe Elementary School in Northwest, said she initially was appalled at the mice scurrying around the cafeteria and kindergarten classroom. They are so common, she said, that students have given them names and drawn their pictures.

"These kids are so used to it, it doesn't faze them anymore," Smith said. "First it upsets you, then you get used to it, then you work around it."

Broken Promises

Families at H.D. Cooke Elementary School have seen firsthand how grand plans can derail.

A \$19 million project to rehab the building in [Columbia Heights](#) has dragged on for years. The schools relocated students to a vacant building in 2004, spending at least \$3 million since then to transport them, but broke ground only last week.

Troy Robinson isn't letting his two daughters get their hopes up. "All I've heard is promises," he said. "Seeing is believing."

In the years since the construction plans have been on the table, five charter schools have opened in the area.

A similar disconnect is playing out across town at Kelly Miller Middle, over the \$150,000 media production room and the missing equipment.

When Principal Sheena Tuckson arrived at the school in the fall, she was thrilled when she learned about the plan for student broadcasts.

"I see it as learning about job training, looking to their future, what are the possibilities out there," she said.

She had assumed the long-awaited, mystery piece of equipment could arrive any day.

When The Post inquired about the missing part, Renard Alexander, who heads the instructional television program, said it was a \$2,000 custom camera. But, he said, it was not his department's job to provide it. He said it is up to the principal to order and pay for the camera out of her school budget.

But nobody had told Tuckson.

This is the latest glitch in a series that stretches back three years. The ambitious plan first stalled in the mad rush to open the school. The media room became a low priority that was put on hold when the funding was used for other purposes. Responsibility slipped from the construction managers down the chain to Alexander's department. Some equipment was eventually installed -- most recently in March, when workers told Tuckson's staff that the school needed just one last piece.

Now, the room has a rack of media components, a DVD/VCR and a television. A second black rack, designed to hold more components, lies empty on its side.


Stanley Johnson, director of instructional technology, said all new buildings are being designed with production rooms, but most are not being used. Changing priorities among top administrators and smaller federal grants have left the schools without money for the remaining equipment and training.

"It is a unique set of learning tools that we're talking about," he said. "We have these great things we can do. I've got great plans. We could be so much further along."

Research editor Alice Crites contributed to this report.

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