

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Danny Franklin and Shira Angert, Benenson Strategy Group
RE: DC Education Polling Results
DATE: October 19, 2015

Methodology

Benenson Strategy Group conducted 686 telephone interviews from September 28-October 6, 2015 on behalf of Education Reform Now. All respondents were registered voters who live in Washington, DC. The sample included oversamples of parents and cell phone users to ensure adequate representation within the survey. The margin of error for the data set is $\pm 3.68\%$ at the 95% confidence level and it is higher among subgroups.

Note: Throughout this memo, “parents” refers to voters who have a child under 18 years old

Key Findings

- Voters in DC see progress in the city’s schools, with more than 6 in 10 (63%) saying the quality of schools in DC has gotten better over the past few years.
- However, it’s clear that voters believe there is more work to be done to ensure all children have access to a high-quality school. They give city schools an average rating and overwhelmingly believe the progress made has been lopsided, benefiting more affluent neighborhoods rather than the city as a whole.
- To address this, voters want changes to be made to the system now, believing we can’t afford to wait. There is a strong sense that one tangible step the city can take is to reopen currently-vacant buildings and allow high-quality public charters to open in some of them to meet demand for top-performing schools.

Voters See Progress, but Also Inequity

- Voters in DC see progress in the city’s schools, with more than 6 in 10 (63%) saying the quality of schools in DC has gotten better over the past few years.
 - ✓ This feeling is even stronger with parents, as 76% say DC schools have gotten better.
- But voters believe there’s more work to be done to improve the city’s schools.
 - ✓ The grade voters most often give for DC schools is an average rating of a ‘C’, and only 1 in 3 parents would rate DC schools as an A or a B.

Grade for Schools in DC	All Voters	Parents
A	4%	4%
B	25%	30%
C	44%	46%
D	13%	10%
F	3%	3%



- At the same time, voters identify a glaring inequality in the education that students receive.
 - ✓ Those who say schools have gotten better believe it is only in certain parts of the city. Among those who say the schools have improved:
 - 62% say schools have improved only in certain neighborhoods
 - 28% say schools have improved across the board
- 7 in 10 voters agree (including 75% of parents) that “schools are improving in upper-income areas of DC, but schools in lower-income parts of the District are being neglected.”
 - ✓ This perception of inequality is even more pronounced outside the Northwest quadrant of the city, where 75% agree with the above statement, compared to 65% who agree within NW DC.

Voters Want Change Now

- Concerns about fairness in a school system that is falling short in many neighborhoods leads DC voters to say significant changes are needed urgently.
 - ✓ 86% agree that “it should not be the case that in our nation’s capital, we have an inequitable school system where some students get a great public education while others are struggling to get the quality education they deserve.”
 - ✓ 77% agree that “there are too many schools in DC that are failing to provide our children with a quality education.”
 - ✓ 82% of voters believe “we cannot afford to wait for better schools.”
 - This urgency to fix our school system is felt even more strongly in areas outside Northwest DC, where 85% of voters agree we can’t afford to wait for better schools, compared to 78% within NW.
- Further, 82% of voters say the school system has problems that need to be addressed, including nearly half, 49%, who say there are serious problems that need to be addressed immediately. This number is even higher among parents.

The pre-K through 12th grade school system in DC...	All Voters	Parents
Has serious problems that need to be addressed immediately	49%	52%
Has some problems that need to be addressed eventually	33%	31%
Is doing a good job of educating our children	11%	12%

Voters See Improving DCPS and Expanding Public Charter Schools as Part of the Solution

- When it comes to fixing the city’s schools, voters want solutions that have a track record of success, with public charter schools playing a role to help improve the quality of education.
 - ✓ 76% agree, including 83% of parents, that “in order to keep young families in DC, we need to improve the quality of traditional DCPS schools, but we also need to expand the top-performing public charter schools so more parents can choose a school that is right for their child.”
 - This sentiment is strongest among voters in Southeast DC, with 85% agreeing.

- When it comes to specific policies for improving education, voters want top-performing public charter schools to be involved with school partnerships and vacant buildings.
 - ✓ 2 in 3 voters (65%) support a proposal for DCPS to partner with a “top-performing public charter school” to help turn around struggling schools.
 - This partnership is broadly popular with voters across the city, not just those in areas with more struggling schools: 62% of voters in NW DC support this partnership proposal and 68% of voters outside of NW support it, not a significant difference.

% Support	All Voters	Parents
Charter-DCPS Partnerships: Some people have proposed that in some struggling schools, DCPS should partner with a top-performing public charter school. All of the students would remain in the same building and the school would get support from DCPS, but a public charter school with a record of success would run the school, hire teachers, and set the curriculum and culture.	65%	68%

- 3 in 4 voters (76%) believe public charter schools should be part of the solution for vacant school buildings.
 - ✓ 58% say vacant buildings should be used by a combination of both top tier charter schools and DCPS, and 18% say they should all be leased to top-performing charter schools.

Which of the following do you think should be done with vacant or underutilized school buildings in DC?

	All Voters	Parents
A combination of the two where some are leased to top tier charter schools and DCPS holds on to some of them.	58%	56%
Allow top-performing charter schools with a record of providing high-quality education to open new charter schools in those buildings.	18%	27%
Have the DC Public Schools system hold on to the vacant buildings so when the population grows, they can open more traditional DCPS schools.	13%	11%
Neither	5%	6%
Don't know/Refused	6%	0%

- What’s more, voters want city leaders to take action on these issues now.
 - ✓ 92% of voters say it’s important for the city government to take action on vacant school buildings, including 66% who say it’s very important.
 - ✓ Two-in-three voters want the mayor to decide what to do with vacant buildings within the next year or sooner (33% say immediately and 33% say within the next year).
 - This urgency is felt even more strongly in Southeast DC, where 76% want the mayor to act on vacant buildings within the next year or sooner.
- In sum, voters and parents in DC see progress in the city’s schools, but are acutely aware of inequities that remain. They are seeking changes that increase access to high-quality schools across the city, both by improving existing DCPS schools and by expanding top-tier public charter schools through access to vacant buildings and charter-district partnership schools.