

# What's the real story on student achievement in DCPS?



Each and every child in the District of Columbia—regardless of zip code—deserves access to a high-quality education. Great neighborhood public schools are those where parents want to send their children, students' love for learning new things is encouraged and teachers want to work.

DC Public Schools (DCPS) has a legal and moral imperative to provide the resources and supports all students need to reach their full potential and assure schools and teachers have the time, tools, and trust they need to do their job.

This is why the members of the Washington Teachers' Union believe it is time to set the record straight and tell the real story of District of Columbia's public schools.

## **Q. Are DC Public Schools working for all students?**

A. No. While certain segments of the DCPS student population have made modest academic gains (mostly the more affluent students), these last seven years of top-down "reforms" have left too many children behind. As 2014 research from Education Week, United States Chamber of Commerce show, and numerous others show the efforts of the district leadership have only served our wealthiest students. In the words of Education Week, "Poor students are now much further behind their more affluent peers than they were a decade ago." The U.S. Chamber dropped its rating of D.C.'s schools from an "A" in 2007, to an "F" just this month citing the lack of progress for our children in the most need.

Although the district's press releases would lead one to believe otherwise, results from the DC Comprehensive Assessment System (DC CAS)—the statewide student achievement exam—confirm the alarming inequities in academic achievement. Students from affluent families showed growth on the DC CAS, while children from economically disadvantaged families made virtually no gains. What's even more alarming, the only students who met their DC CAS targets in math in 2013 were white children.

How many flashing red lights do you need to see before you declare an emergency?

## **Q. Are schools sufficiently supporting all families and communities?**

A. No. DCPS's reform policies and practices have consistently undermined and destabilized many families, the schools, and the community they serve. Since 2007, the District has closed over 40 neighborhood schools—nearly all of them were located in communities where the majority of students were from

economically disadvantaged families. These massive school closings have placed undue burden on students and families, and:

- make it more difficult for students to receive a high-quality education;
- create unnecessary barriers to parental involvement; and
- remove the one place that served as a center for community activities.

## **Q. What are some of the policy-based factors that contribute to the uneven, unequal progress in DCPS?**

A. Unfortunately, the policies and practices implemented by DCPS in the name of school reform since 2009 are based on a top-down, punitive philosophy that uses intimidation, a lack of transparency, and misinformation to accomplish its goals.

For example, this approach has led to high teacher turnover which is an important factor in student progress. Over the past five years, DCPS has hired more than 3,000 new teachers in a school district that employs only 4,000 teachers. The National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) found that students in grade-levels with higher teacher turnover score lower in both English and math, especially in "schools with more low-performing and black students."

As we have seen time and time again, DCPS makes many decisions regarding closing schools and boundary changes without community, parent, or educator input. The recent proposal to change school boundaries is only the latest in a long line of top-down decisions by a small group of bureaucrats.

The truth is if the district administration continues to ignore the will of the public and treat teachers as easily replaceable cogs in a machine, the trend of poor student performance will not change, and increasing gaps in achievement will continue to grow.

The obsession with test-driven accountability has failed to improve teaching and learning in D.C. Schools, and the data show it. It is time to move from “test and punish” to “support and improve.”

**Q. What are some other policies that have a negative effect?**

A. Since 2009, the centerpiece of DCPS’s reform efforts has been a corporate-based and -backed education agenda that punishes students, educators and schools. This agenda places all of the accountability on the students, teachers and building principals, but gives them none of the responsibility to make truly meaningful changes.

Specifically, the District has:

- required a series of fragmented instructional programs, instead of giving all students a rich, rigorous and engaging curriculum that includes art, music and the sciences;
- created an environment where teachers are stripped of their basic rights, rather than ensuring that educators are well-prepared and supported; and
- closed or consolidated schools based on questionable economic data, rather than educational needs.

**Q. What can we do as a community to ensure that every student is given an opportunity to succeed?**

A. Creating strong neighborhood public schools where parents, school leaders and teachers have meaningful roles and share

the responsibility to ensure equal opportunity for each and every child in our city. We must reverse the failed efforts of the past five years and reject the obsession with standardized tests and bring what research shows works to our schools. Together, we must fight for community schools where:

- All children have a strong, comprehensive, and well-rounded academic curriculum that supports a holistic view of student success;
- Powerful partnerships between parents, educators, the school district and our community exist;
- Students and their families have access to supportive, wraparound services to meet their social, emotional, and health needs;
- Evaluative systems that are focused on organizational and individual growth and hold everyone accountable for student success;
- There are wide-ranging, properly resourced, and teacher-led professional learning programs that support continuous teacher development and student growth; and
- Educators have a strong voice and are empowered to advocate for our schools, our students and our profession.

We are at a crossroads in D.C. Schools. We can continue to do more of the same and show some modest gains for some students, but increase the gaps in achievement across the city. Or we can take a stand and finally say the current obsession with test and punish reform has not worked. Please join the Washington Teachers’ Union as we set a new path for our schools and our students.

It’s time to take the first step.

**It’s time for real change in DCPS.  
It’s time to reclaim the promise of great public schools.**