



CHANCELLOR'S NOTES

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

August 26, 2010

Back to School in DCPS



This week, when you are waiting at the crosswalk for a gaggle of children to pass on their way to school, think of all the beginnings happening in the life of every child in the group. I am excited by all the signs of a new school year every fall, when children have new chances to succeed, new topics to be curious about and explore, and new abilities to discover in themselves.

School Opening 2010

Monday was the [first day of school](#) in Washington, DC, and there is a lot to be enthusiastic about. Over the past three years we have built a strong foundation for an excellent school system. Knowing that this year we can build on that progress together, I am pleased to report that we opened our doors on a successful and energizing first day.

School and central office staff have been busy preparing for this school year, and I thought I'd share some highlights—all of which are setting children up for achievement.

Textbooks Delivered On Time

In my third month on the job, fire trucks saved the day when they delivered textbooks from our warehouse that had never made it to schools. We've come a long way since then, and **99.8 percent of textbooks** that schools ordered have been successfully delivered, with the remaining orders placed last week.

Expanding Early Childhood Education

This week we opened [early childhood](#) classrooms to more children than ever, after much work last year and an all-out weekend door-to-door recruitment effort two weekends ago. Sixty volunteers canvassed DC neighborhoods to enroll children in early childhood education for this year.

Since 2008, DCPS has added 1,000 preschool (3-year-old) and pre-kindergarten (4-year-old) seats across all eight wards.

For 2010-2011, this will mean 42 new classrooms in 33 schools, representing an increase of more than 400 preschool seats and nearly 300 pre-K seats.



Enrollment – Meeting our Targets and Improving Every Year

Due to a system-wide effort, we are on track to beat enrollment at this time last year-- the first time enrollment has steadied in decades. We started the school year with 2,000 more students pre-enrolled than last year, allowing for an even smoother first day.

This did not happen by accident. For the first time, all schools were required to hold open houses to welcome parents. This summer, schools were building websites and [Facebook pages](#), reaching parents in new ways. We were on citywide buses and on radio, inviting parents to check out our schools.

We also conducted specific targeted efforts with [18 recruitment schools](#) that were each given intensive support to plan activities to recruit students.

Thank you to all the schools and community partners, civic associations and ANCs who have worked tirelessly to welcome parents and build community.



They have staged carnivals and other events; reached out through door-to-door canvassing; published community newsletters about schools; created school-branded items such as bumper stickers and t-shirts to instill pride and spread visibility; utilized neighborhood e-mail listservs; posted signs and banners; partnered with feeder schools to hold “buddy” days for older children to acclimate younger children coming into their school; spread the news to press; networked with alumni; and more.

Truly the energy of the DC community and staff has been unsurpassed in this collaborative effort.

New Facilities All Over the Place!

It is testament to the backbone of our city that we have put almost \$1 billion into rebuilding schools, which will graduate our work force in future years.

Thanks to our colleagues in the [Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization](#) (OPEFM), a few thousand more children and their parents will walk into new facilities this week.



I love that I have been able to share news like this for the past few years, especially compared to the news we all used to hear about school facilities in the years when they were not receiving the attention they needed. It is heartening to see that children’s learning environments are now a top priority in Washington, DC.

Last week we [cut the ribbon at Stoddert Elementary School](#), and it felt terrific to see parents happy and students excited to enter their new school.

[Eastern High School](#) students also walked into a new building this week, thanks to the work of the entire Eastern community, who came out night after night to invest in creating a new vision for the school.

Children in nine schools walked into entirely renovated classrooms, and work has begun on entirely new facilities for Wilson and Anacostia students, who walked into temporary spaces this week and are adjusting to their new school homes for this year.

Milestones in Special Education

This summer we hit enormous milestones in special education in the DC Public Schools. In 2007, the DCPS timeliness rate of response to special education cases was 19.5 percent, and we had a backlog of 600 open special education disputes. This summer we were up to a **responsiveness rate of 90 percent**, and down to zero backlogged dispute cases!

Healthier Food

After a competitive bidding process for [two new food service contracts](#) and continued work with our existing food service vendor to increase food quality, DCPS is leading the way in ensuring that students get the nutrition they need to perform in school.

Fourteen of our schools will have one of two new [pilot lunch service models](#), and students in all of our schools will be served meals that meet higher nutritional standards than those required by the USDA.



Additionally, more students will eat breakfast this year through an expanded Breakfast in the Classroom pilot and a new Grab and Go breakfast initiative.

Beautification Day

Once again the community came out to support schools on Saturday with a record number of **2,790 volunteers** registered to beautify school grounds.

We may not have had the bulldozers that our friends in the Office of Facilities Modernization have, but we were happy digging in the dirt to plant new flowerbeds, paint outside railings and signs, and create beautiful entryways that welcomed children and families.



School Turnarounds

We are implementing plans for turnarounds in 21 of our most struggling schools, including significant staffing changes at six schools being reconstituted under the No Child Left Behind law. Students at Stanton Elementary School will also see a longer school day under a school turnaround partner.

More Autonomous Schools

Every year schools showing the most significant results can apply for autonomy, which means the principal has more flexibility in areas such as budgeting, instructional programs and professional development. Schools in which at least 75 percent of children are proficient, or in which proficiency has gained 10 percentage points for three consecutive years, are eligible for consideration. This year three more schools earned this standing, for a total of seven [autonomous schools](#).

Themed Catalyst Schools

We've completed our planning year for new themed schools across the district, and this year we are implementing those plans. At 13 [Catalyst schools](#), doors opened this week in six new [Science, Engineering, Technology and Mathematics \(STEM\) schools](#), four new [Arts Integration](#) schools and three new [World Cultures](#) schools.

Planning for a New City-Wide Arts Middle School

Leaders in the Arts—from the artistic director of the Washington Ballet and the director of the DC International Film Festival to the chief operating officer of the Corcoran College of Art, and more—have come together to help us plan a new [citywide arts middle school](#) this year. I know many parents and children are as excited as we are about this!

A Few More Facts...

There is so much more to report, but it's time to get to the hard but powerful work of a school year. I'll leave you with a few more facts to think about while you're sitting at intersections across the city, waiting for children laden with backpacks to cross on their way to new chances, questions and discoveries this year.

- Number of **textbooks** delivered to schools this summer: 244,007
- Number of **schools** with dynamic new principals: 30
- Percent of **teacher** vacancies filled by the first day: 99
- Number of **preschool** and pre-K seats added in DCPS since 2008: 1,000
- Number of **schools** with waiting lists this year: 106
- Number of **schools** that had waiting lists this year for the first time in decades: 14
- Number of DCPS elementary and middle **afterschool programs** up and running on day one in 2007: 0
- Number of DCPS elementary and middle **afterschool programs** up and running on day one in 2010 (with other schools providing programming through outside partners): 84
- Number of central office **school opening ambassadors** sent to support schools on the first day: 141



Garrison Elementary, Ward 2
Photo by Bel Perez-Gabilondo

- Number of students enrolled in a successful **summer school** program this year (exceeding our target!): 9,773
- Number of summer school **graduates**: 345
- Number of **schedules** mailed home to students in grades 6 – 12: 19,050

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