

Community Involvement in Public Education: A Focus on the District of Columbia

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Abstract

This thesis was designed to investigate the importance of community involvement on public education. The work takes a three-pronged approach to the topic of community engagement. The first is an analysis of the work and research of five different theorists and education experts on the influence and value of involving community actors in education reform and the general functioning of the public education system as a whole. The second prong takes a specific look at the District of Columbia's methods for addressing and fostering community involvement since the hiring of Chancellor Rhee in 2007. The district has attracted national attention, both positive and negative, for the reform efforts of its Chancellor and this thesis looks at a number of the programs created and promoted by Rhee that are aimed at creating a more inclusive and community. The third portion of the thesis consists of five interviews of community members, from students to parents to Central Office staff, these conversations provide first hand testimony regarding the importance community involvement in effective public education reform. Using these three prongs I was able to analyze and critique the recent reform efforts within the District of Columbia through a multifaceted lens that was composed of research, first person analysis, and district policy.

MOTIVATION

Public education is a foundation of American society. From the beginning of the country's history, value has been placed on the education of the masses. In order to have a progressive and enlightened democracy, Thomas Jefferson advocated on the behalf of the public school system in the early 19th century. Based on the notions of equality and a right to have the opportunity to succeed, the public education system has become a bedrock of American cultural and social life. Mandatory schooling from kindergarten through high school is designed to create an open-minded society that is functional and promotes an equal chance for advancement of the citizenry.

The question lingers: what are the goals of education? Public education is a free schooling service, created to enable citizens to fulfill their patriotic duties and harness their potential. It is an experience that extends beyond the daily interaction of the classroom and the intricacies of lesson plans. Education is more than facts and figures, but should be expanded to instruction that encourages critical thinking and supports intellectual growth. If the goals of education are to provide a versatile and comprehensive opportunity for academic and personal growth, then how this goal is achieved is of critical importance. Education is not something that simply starts and ends with the ring of a school bell, but rather it is a continuing process that occurs in school, at home, and within the community as a whole. A student is influenced by a multi-faceted composition of sources, from their family, to their peers, to their teachers, to the school system in general, to their own personal enthusiasm for the learning process and drive to succeed. These influences create a complex community around the student that reinforces how education is approached, administered, absorbed and utilized. When I refer to community

members I mean all the individuals that influence the child's education on a daily basis. This includes family units, teachers, the students themselves, and school administrators.

I am a Georgetown student and the product of a public school education. I attended different public schools from kindergarten through my high school graduation. After graduating from a public school system, I attend a private university in the country's capital. My primary education, in a middle class New York suburb, gave me a platform from which I was able to seek out higher education options. I was afforded the opportunity to prove myself academically there, in order to be offered a spot in the university that I now attend. Upon arriving at Georgetown University, I was immediately aware of minor gaps in the education that I received. Whether it was the amount of work that we had been given on a daily basis, the types of problem solving we were expected to practice or the rudimentary elements of speech and grammar that were never explicitly taught, as a freshman I first began to question the education that I had received. Where did these elements slip through the cracks and whose responsibility was it to make sure that I was adequately prepared for college? Was the responsibility solely mine, or that of my teachers, or my mothers? It seemed that many of my peers, most from public schools and some from private schools felt that their education had similarly failed them. It was from this initial questioning of my educational experience that I began to wonder about the foundations and structures that support an effective educational system. To what extent was the community that surrounds each student culpable for all that a child learns?

I have worked part time in the DC Public school system throughout the past four years. While working in the DC Public school system (DCPS) I have noticed significant differences between the educational community in which I was raised and the DCPS system. DCPS is nationally recognized as one of the worst in the country and I have a passionate interest in

finding out why this is. The current policy of spending a large amount of money per student and maintaining low student to teacher ratios is not working. As of 2007 the district ranked third nationally in per pupil expenditures at \$15,511 and fifty-first 4th grade math and reading proficiency. The nationally defined graduation rate in DC in 2007 was at 54.9% and the student poverty rate was the third highest in the nation in 2008(New America Foundation, 2010).

Throughout my college career I have worked in four elementary schools and one high school in Wards 7 and 8 of the District of Columbia. Most of my work has been with third grade students but has ranged from first graders to seniors in high school. These experiences have allowed me to witness the education system in the District in action and observe some of its successes as well as failures. While talking to my young students about what their ideal schools would look like, although there are always suggestions, few dream of truly radical changes. They ask for homework help and teachers with more time. Many of the elementary students with whom I work, list reading and writing as their favorite hobbies during our first meeting. Discovering how this passion for academic subjects changes for the better or worse as the child matures and how it is fostered and encouraged by the community interests me. The old axiom “it takes a village to raise a child” is valid. Success in primary education requires more than a simple passion for learning. It requires an atmosphere in which the student is given the opportunity to succeed and pursue their goals with full confidence that they are attainable.

I originally became interested in directly researching the idea of community within schools and the surrounding education centers at a family event that I attended in the fall of 2009. Currently, in my fourth year of working in DCPS elementary schools I attended a Back to School Night in Ward 7 in early September. I was surprised on a number of levels at the disconnection within the school community. At the family event, an event designed to foster

community, less than ten of the students' guardians attended. The administration's presentation was boring at best and did not give incentive for the parents and extended family members to get involved. A few days after this event, I was walking past a private elementary school in Ward 3 that was having a similar family event that was packed with parents, each equipped with a binder of information and paying rapt attention to the speaker. Upon reflection I kept returning to the question what ramifications does community participation, or lack thereof, have on the student population's success? In this thesis I will look into how the central administration of DCPS works with the community, with particular focus to the tactics employed since the installment of Chancellor Rhee in 2007.

Community is important to understand as a lens through which education policy is being shaped within DCPS. The extent to which it is acknowledged, built, and supported has significant implications for how students are treated, what programs are implemented, and how efficiently the education system is operating. This is strongly interconnected with justice and peace studies because how education is delivered and approached has significant implications for how students develop and succeed. The available resources and support systems impact not just the individual student but society as a whole.

GOALS

This thesis seeks to explore the changes in the DC public school system in respect to how community is addressed, discussed, and fostered under Chancellor Rhee in comparison to its existence before her tenure. Beginning with a question of the efficacy of a cohesive support system in fostering positive developmental atmosphere, I look at education and peace and justice

theorists and their ideas regarding community. Next I will discuss Chancellor Rhee and her tenure thus far in DCPS. From her hiring in the summer of 2007 to current programs that the Central Office has instituted under her direction, this section will provide a context for what is happening in DCPS as of the early spring in 2010. The thesis will address the structural changes that have been implemented by the Chancellor, responses to her policies, and the discourse that is surrounding the issue of community. Next, the thesis will discuss specific programs that have been put into place, designed to promote community action, under Chancellor Rhee. This thesis will use interviews with various members of the educational community to bolster the research and comment on the role that community support has been used in and the extent to which it has been effective in recent years in promoting school reform. In conclusion I will reflect on the potential implications that the changes within DCPS and how the information that I have attained from the interview process relates to these changes.

PART ONE: Research and Theory

The following section will look at the work of Robert Putnam, the National Education Association, Sandra Murray Nettles, Xitao Fan, and Kevin Swick to illuminate the importance of community in educational success and the most effective avenues for reform. Each of these sources provides a look at the value of having strong supportive networks surrounding a school. Putnam discusses the importance of social capital in the cultivation of educational success. The NEA argues the significance of community support in closing achievement gaps. Nettles created a four-facet process that characterizes effective community involvement, and through this process members of the educational community are most effectively able to promote reform. Fan describes various levels of participation for parental involvement in a school community. Swick

also writes about parental involvement, with particular focus on parent-teacher partnerships.

Robert Putnam's widely known theory that is explained in his 2000 book Bowling Alone emphasizes the importance of social capital. Social capital is the interconnectivity of individuals, the networks that they form and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that manifest because of these relationships (Putnam, 2000 p. 288). It uses concepts of civic virtues and duties as aspects that are embedded within social capital and make it cohesive. Social capital helps individuals to facilitate goals, creates collective resolve, and enhances cooperative strategies to problem solving.

Social capital is necessary within an educational community. Putnam explains that "Civic connections help make us healthy, wealthy, and wise" (Putnam, 2000 p. 287). Using the premise that social capital is a highly valuable aspect of culture, Putnam argues that within an educational community it is a necessary feature to have an effective learning environment. Through the example of the Parent Teacher Association as a civic organization, Putnam demonstrates the potential impact that one network within an educational community can have. The "PTA serves to establish and enforce norms of commitment and performance on the part of school officials, teachers, and perhaps even students. It also allows for the deepening of interpersonal bonds and "we-ness" between families and educators..." (Putnam, 2000 p. 290). This network creates a venue for the resolution of common problems, cooperation, and a platform to create trust and widen the awareness of community interconnectedness. Through collective means individuals are able to approach the schooling of their children in a multi-pronged effort that, according to Putnam, is more likely to yield an effective result. Putnam writes, "those states with high social capital have measurably better educational outcomes than

do less civic states. The Social Capital Index is highly correlated with student scores on standardized tests taken in elementary school, junior high, and high school, as well as with the rate at which students stay in school" (Putnam, 2000 p.299). When parents and teachers become more involved in the creation of an ideal learning environment, they invest their time and effort and become intertwined in a network of mutual interest. This network increases commitment to the improvement of education and is necessary for the advancement of educational goals.

Putman emphasizes the importance of social capital for families and neighborhoods with few financial resources. This is particularly relevant for the DC public system. In the 2007-8 academic year, the DC public school system reports that 70% of the enrolled students received free or reduced meals. In 2007 the rate of children under 18 years of age that were below the poverty was about 23% and the overall poverty rate was at 16.4% as compared to the national average of 12.5% (Office of Planning, 2009). This indicates the importance the cultivation of social capital within the DCPS system. According to Putnam, "states with disproportionately large numbers of poorly educated adults and low-income single-parent families tend not to have as many vibrant civic communities as do states where residents have the economic luxury and practical skills to participate. Indeed, across the various indicators used by Putnam, social capital is second only to poverty in the breadth and depth of its effects on children's lives" (Putnam, 2000 p.297). The benefits on learning that are yielded from a vibrant community that is rich with social capital are irreplaceable. Teachers report lower levels of student misbehavior, kids are less likely to spend time watching TV, are more likely to excel academically, and overall school performance has been shown to improve (Putnam, 2000 p.301-3).

In 2008 the National Education Association published a policy brief called "Parent, Family,

Community Involvement in Education”. This policy article outlined the importance of community involvement within public education. The NEA argues that “broad-based support is essential to closing achievement gaps” and that a student’s social needs must be addressed in order for the student to flourish in a learning environment. By social needs the NEA means that the networks of which students are already a part of, such as community groups, family units and the like should be recognized as valuable players in the administration and distribution of education.

The National Education Association found that parent, family and greater community involvement has been proven to show marked increases and improvements in the lives of children. Grades, retention rates, attendance and a multitude of other factors were enhanced by increased rates of community-centered involvement. “The evidence holds true for students at both the elementary and secondary level, regardless of the parent’s education, family income, or background” which is significant in arguing for the implementation of policies that support community based discussion. It is important for a school system to incorporate community opinion, and interact with and utilize various networks in the goal setting and reform processes (National Education Association, 2008).

The NEA defines community involvement using the six criteria developed by Joyce Epstein of Johns Hopkins University. These criteria are communicating, parenting, decision making, community collaboration, volunteering, and at home learning. Educational networks and community partnerships need to include these six factors to be considered successful and thorough in their delivery of support for students. Parents assist schools in helping educators understand the backgrounds and goals that their kids have. They provide invaluable support systems for students, teachers and administrators. Inter-network communication between

administrators, educators, community members and parents allows for the articulation of the goals. At home families converse about school and share attitudes about education and its value. Only through communication is the educational community provided with the tools for collective agreement about the goals and strategies for public education. Volunteer networks should be incorporated and familiar with the educators that they work implicitly with, because they work with the same children. As support systems, volunteer networks offer another avenue for community support (National Education Association, 2008).

Programs that seek to help students need to be integrated into the goals of the school and school system as a whole. Areas that parental involvement is promoted throughout the US and where it has been proven effective are early literacy, school safety, retention, ESL, and at-risk youth intervention. Recognizing that parents, youth, administrators and neighborhood members all have a shared responsibility toward building an effective educational community is an important step toward the realization of that community. The NEA argues that school reform tends to ignore the indisputable evidence that community influence has a positive effect on school performance. Rather than taking a community-centric approach, much reform tends to be centered on events that take place in the classroom. Understanding and accepting that education is not just the responsibility of teachers is one of the first steps that policymakers, community leaders and parents need to take to create a more cohesive and effective learning community. This is not to say that what is taught in the classroom is not of great importance, but that reform plans must also recognize the powerful resource and influencer that different facets of the community have in effecting the way that children learn and view the educational community (National Education Association, 2008).

Creating a substantial, sustainable and permanent network of parents and other adults that are committed to educational advancement of their children is important. The NEA explains that as children age, parental involvement typically declines. Maintaining this network is integral to maintaining thorough educational support. Members of the school community must recognize the roadblocks that parents anticipate and encounter when seeking to have influence in their children's schools. Time, culture, and past experiences may all influence the way a parent interacts with their school community. Educators and administrators must engage parents, the NEA describes, and enmesh them in an educational community. Engagement opportunities must be provided to develop partnering skills, articulate goals and strategies, provide better information about policies and the schools themselves, enhance teacher-parent relationships, collaborate with institutions of higher education, and develop multiple avenues for community outreach as well as other benefits. Recognizing that the community as a whole, parents, educators and administrations all are stakeholders in the education of the students of the area can enhance performance, improve the learning environment and close achievement gaps (National Education Association, 2008).

In a 1991 article published by the American Educational Research Association, Sandra Murray Nettles reviews the effects of community involvement on students. Community involvement is conceived as a good thing for what Nettles calls educationally disadvantaged students. These students face "multiple impediments to success in school" and the majority of these students are comprised of poor African-American and Hispanic children who are most at risk for "negative educational outcomes" (Nettles, 1991 p. 379). Community involvement is defined as "the actions that organizations and individuals (e.g., parents, businesses, universities,

social service agencies, and the media) take to promote student development” (Nettles, 380). For Nettles, community itself is a concept that incorporates both the location of the neighborhood and the social interactions and networks that exist within these locations but that can also transcend them.

Community involvement is characterized as a four-facet process that is made up of conversion, mobilization, allocation of resources, and instruction. These approaches include both direct and indirect action to improve the educational community. Changing the beliefs and behavioral outlook of the student constitutes conversion. Mobilization seeks to increase organizational participation within the educational community. Citizen participation and community organizing both are included within the idea of mobilization. Effective community influencers generally target institutions such as school boards and policy as sites for reform. This indirect method of community mobilization typically takes on a top down approach towards improving student achievement. Partnerships between businesses, parents, students and community organizations help to give a sense of ownership and mobilize a force for reform. Nettles argues that in order for these partnerships to be successful they must promote an egalitarian sense of ownership and responsibility among the participating parties. Historically, the distribution of resources to youth and for the goals of improving education has been the definition of allocation. Allocation of resources as a form of community involvement began with the desegregation of schools and presently exceeds simple distribution of school materials to extend to the potential distribution of financial resources in the form of incentives for achievement and social support. The portion of the process known as instruction involves the rules and norms that govern social networks and those that direct these networks to incorporate education-based goals (Nettles, 1991 p.380). Both intellectual and developmental learning

require instruction. Within the educational community students learn necessary skills for success. Nettles explains that “social interactions in the home and the wider community are important contexts in which children learn emergent literacy skills, self-regulation of cognitive and other tasks, and other abilities and behaviors needed for performance in schools” (Nettles, 1991 p.382). Forms of community instruction can happen both at home and in more formalized settings such as tutoring programs, church groups and after-school activities.

Nettles calls for the evaluation of community involvement programs, to analyze the efficacy of practices among the numerous programs that are out there. Identifying these successful approaches will help to increase student participation within these activities. “Communities that function well are in some respects the counterparts of effective schools” (Nettles, 1991 p.400),

Professor Xitao Fan of the University of Virginia conducted research in 2001 to better understand the influence that parental involvement has on academic success. Fan argues that a fluctuating definition of parental involvement has led to a discontinuity of the findings on research on the effects of parental involvement. Fan notes the work of Epstein who has created a typology for parental involvement that includes four levels of participation. These levels are the fulfillment of basic obligations, communications between the home and school, involvement at school itself, and the use of learning activities at home. Epstein expanded this list in the early 1990s to include school provided opportunities for parental interaction. These opportunities include assistance in child rearing skills, volunteer opportunities for the parents, communication between the school and the parents, involvement in decision-making and community collaboration (Fan, 2001 p.29).

Fan based his research on the National Center for Education Statistics' study of 24,500 students known as NELS:88. Fan focus on the data collected from 1988 to 1992 in this study, which yielded a vast amount of data that included social, demographic, and information on parental involvement. Through his research Fan found that parental involvement is made up of several dimensions but parents' "Education Aspiration" for their children stood as having the most obvious effects on the academic growth of students. His research suggests that an aspiration for success potentially translated into "a variety of educationally beneficial activities and behaviors during a child's life" (Fan, 2001 p.57). From Fan's research it seems that projected and agreed upon goals for success within the families is one of the most potent forces that affect academic achievement. Although there are numerous limitations to Fan's research, such as a limitation to the definition and measurement of parental involvement, the age of the students (the study represented 8th-12th graders and this might not be the most critical period for parental involvement) and many of the students did not participate in the whole length of the study, it is still useful in illustrating at least one correlating feature between academic success and parental involvement. This feature is the educational aspirations that the parents maintain for their children. In other words, how far the parents expected their children to go educationally was indicative of their children's actual academic success.

Within the broader umbrella of community involvement, the role of parents in the educational community is undeniably important. Although Fan's tangible results illustrated the importance of the educational aspirations that parents hold for their own children, there are numerous ways in which parent-involvement can affect a school community. Fan's study shows how one particular element of the relationship between parents and their children can directly influence the academic experience that children have and the extent to which they excel in the

classroom (Fan, 2001). As community members who are directly connected to the school system through their children, parents play a vital role in the educational community. Fan's work suggests that higher expectations yield higher results. This familial concept can and should be extrapolated to include the whole educational community. If expectations rise for all of the students of a district, it is likely to create a learning environment that is more supportive and involved in its' students success.

Kevin Swick, like Xitao Fan, discusses the importance of the parent involvement with a particular focus on the parent-teacher partnership. Parents and teachers have common goals and can create viable partnerships based on their complementary roles. Swick argues that the relationships that each of these adults has with the students are both unique and integral to the child's development. To be successful they must agree on their aims to foster a cohesive relationship. The relationship can be defined by varying degrees of intensity and involvement on the parts of both the teachers and parents. Parents contribute to their children's education by learning, supporting, doing and decision making according to Swick. To do these things parents acquire knowledge and skills that relate to parental competence, support their children in their learning process to give value to their academic pursuits, become energetically engaged in "collaborative activities with teachers through school and home learning experiences" and help formulate the goals for school reform and class improvement (Swick, 1991 p.45). Teachers must utilize their parental partners to maximize their interactions to benefit the children. The partnership must be malleable and change with the needs of the students. Swick notes "together, parents and teachers need to conceive of their partnership as growth-oriented experiences in

which they seek to nurture each other toward becoming full partners in their support of children's learning and development" (Swick, 1991 p.117).

In order to be successful in their partnership "Parents and teachers must articulate and actualize a commitment to carrying out the needed planning, dialogue, and responsive involvement essential to their partnership. Teachers and parents must continually strive to become 'children's advocates' through the significant roles of nurturing, teaching, and modeling" (Swick, 1991 p.78). Mutual support for common goals that are created by parents and teachers in an open format is essential. There is no definite structure that the parent-teacher relationship should take but one of mutual respect and collective goals are essential to success. Swick offers a number of partnership strategies that are useful in fostering the parent-teacher network. These include home visits, study groups, conferences, newsletters, notes, lending libraries and learning centers, and others.

The roles of teacher and parent collectively enhance the classroom experience and both community contingents should be involved in curriculum-related decision making. Acting as advocates for both the students and at times the teachers themselves, parents can be a powerful voice affecting the ways that schools are administered. The partnership is an integral one for fostering an effective school environment. Swick explains that "parents should seek [...] information and resources that strengthen their position to be their children's teachers, and partners with their children's teachers [...] teachers should reconstitute their view of teaching to be inclusive of learning and mutually supportive relationships with parents" (Swick, 1991 p.116). Evaluation is an essential part of every partnership. To maintain a high-value relationship both partners must be seen as legitimate voices in the discussion. Their roles must be seen as supportive of each other and their goals recognized as the same.

This section discussed a number of views on the importance and relevance of a strong educational community. All of the works underline the value of interconnected networks that support school systems and the significance of relationships between different members of the educational community. The research described above indicates that educational reform and student progress require and are influenced by multiple different facets within the community.

SECTION 2: Chancellor Rhee

Section two will discuss the current structure of the District of Columbia's education system. It begins with a brief historical context of DCPS and goes on to discuss the hiring of the current Chancellor of DCPS, Michelle Rhee, and her tenure thus far. Section two will address some of the community reactions to the policies that have been recently instituted by the Chancellor. It will detail a number of specific defining events in the last three years and discuss Rhee's overall approach to educational reform in the district. This section aims to describe the official position and action that DCPS is taking in regards to working with the educational community.

Brief Historical Context for DCPS:

In the academic year 2008-9 about 45,551 students enrolled in DCPS and 25,729 in charter schools throughout the district, this is significantly less than the 71,889 DCPS students and 3,594 charter school students who received an education in the district in AY1998-9. A 2008 Kids Count report shows that black and Hispanic children make up 47% of the under 18 population in DC. Specifically in DCPS these populations make up 90% of the enrolled students (Kids Count, 2010). The unemployment rate in DC was at 7% in 2008, fluctuating between 8% a

decade earlier and a low at 5.7% in 2000. Kids Count reports that approximately 28,000 of the districts children lived in poverty in 2008, which is about 26% of the total child population that inhabits the district (Kids Count, 2010). Education Week gave the DCPS system a D+ grade overall and a F in achievement in their 2008 annual report, results from before Michelle Rhee became the Chancellor (Education Week, 2010). At the time of her hiring graduation rates in DCPS were 28 points behind the national average (Andrews, 2008). In 2010 the grading summary from Education Week is virtually the same with DCPS rated as 51st overall in the nation (Education Week, 2010).

Prior to 2007 the DC Board of Education governed the school system. The board was composed of eleven members, including two student representatives, who debated policy and employed a superintendent. The mayor at the time would appoint four members to the board and the remaining five were elected. The superintendent oversaw the day-to-day operations and acted as the chief officer of DCPS. The organization of DCPS central office changed in 2007. The school board was disbanded and mayor Adrian Fenty took over control of the school system and appointed Michelle Rhee to run and reform the district's education system. Currently the district is run by a leadership team under the Chancellor Rhee. Six instructional superintendents are under the leadership team and work in clusters to help principals and school leaders to increase efficacy.

The Chancellor Michelle Rhee

Michelle Rhee was appointed by Mayor Adrian Fenty as the Chancellor to the District of Columbia public school system in mid-June of 2007. Fenty eliminated the elected school board and replaced the former D.C. School Superintendent Clifford B. Janey with Rhee. As part of his election platform Fenty promised educational reform in the district and sought Rhee to facilitate

that change to the failing system. Mayor Fenty made it well known that he was looking to appoint a Chancellor who would be bold, understanding of the urgent need that the district had for reform and willing to make distinct changes to improve the system. The mayor explained that, "We did not want to pick someone to tinker around the edges. . . . I was impressed on every level with Michelle: her intellect, sense of urgency and management acumen"(Nakamura, 2007).

Rhee became the seventh head of DCPS in 10 years, and entered the district with three years of Teach for America teaching experience in a Baltimore elementary school nearly a decade prior to her appointment. In 1997 Rhee created the New Teacher Project. The NTP is a New York based teacher-training program designed specifically for urban school districts. It currently employs 215 full-time employees and has trained for hire approximately 37,000 teachers for high-need schools across the country(New Teacher Project, 2010). It operates as a non-profit and has become nationally respected and renowned for its practices and teacher placement (Nakamura, 2007). Rhee agreed to a five-year contract with the district, that in 2007 placed her in a position to oversee 11,500 employees and over a billion dollars in budget (Nakamura, 2007).

Rhee was originally met with praise from the president of the Washington Teachers' Union, George Parker, and the head of the State board of Education. Fenty explained that he was looking to hire someone with a dedication to the job, not simply a career superintendent who was likely to move on to another post in a few years. Some of the early worries surrounding the hiring of the Chancellor focused on her lack of experience in running large operations (Nakamura and Stewart, 2007). Rhee did not have any superintendent experience when she was appointed to the position and her New Teacher's Project was then comprised of 120 employees compared to the 55,000 student district in 2007 (Nakamura, 2007). Today the number of students

has decreased to 45,000 students with a staff size that has decreased from 11,500 to about 7,500 (DCPS Who We Are, 2010). Rhee replaced former superintendent was Clifford B. Janey, who had two-years at the helm of DCPS after being appointed in 2004. He succeeded the interim superintendent Robert C. Rice who took over after Paul L. Vance resigned in 2003. In the spring of 2006 118 out of 146 schools had failed to make academic progress. Janey was criticized for not working fast enough to create a substantial change during his tenure (Haynes, 2006). In the summer of 2007 there was a lot of hope surrounding the appointment of Michelle Rhee. Community members hoped that perhaps an individual who is not a veteran of the failing school system would be the person who could truly make a difference in the district's improvement (Wickham, 2007).

In 2005 Rhee's New Teacher Project released a study examining the detrimental effects that teachers unions can have on urban school districts. It noted that these contracts made it difficult to remove poor teachers from classrooms, thus hindering effective learning. This view has been reflected in some of the actions that Rhee has promoted during the time as the DCPS Chancellor. Her belief in the flaws of some union practices, tenure specifically, was made publicly evident in July of 2008 with the introduction of a payment proposal that was ultimately dismissed. The system would have created a two-tiered salary organization scheme in which teachers would decide whether or not they would like to receive substantial raises in salaries and bonuses in return for relinquishing tenure protections (Haynes, 2008). Those teachers who decided to remain in the red tier of the payment system would receive traditional raises and maintain tenure. Red-tier participants would still receive a 28% raise, retain tenure and receive \$10,000 in cash. Those who chose to go into the green tier would receive substantial raises, performance based bonuses, foundation grants and would have to give up tenure (Martin, 2008).

This would put many teachers at risk for dismissal without appeal, but would also offer teachers annual salaries as high as \$130,000 in return for more accountability. Teachers who opted into the non-tenured tier would undergo yearly reviews and be held directly accountable to the test performance of their students (Haynes, 2008). The Washington Teachers' Union was deeply divided over this issue. Some opponents argued that the Chancellor's offer could be seen as an attempt to destroy the solidarity of the union (Turque, 2008). However, Teachers' Union president, George Parker, supported the idea that higher salaries attract higher-quality teachers, but was concerned over the vulnerability to dismissal that the proposal created. Some felt that the proposal would create a generational divide between teachers, with the younger teachers in favor of the tenure-less plan whereas veteran educators felt that this proposal would completely eliminate seniority rights that are important to them (Sawchuk, 2008). In a 2008 interview on National Public Radio Rhee discussed the pay-proposal. She explained the tier-based system as a choice-centric system in which all teachers would benefit and be recognized for their value as educators. In response to the Washington Teachers' Union concern about the potential ramifications of the program that could result in arbitrary firings, she explained that that was never the goal nor did she see it as a system that would do so (Martin, 2008). The two-tiered proposal was ultimately rejected in early 2009.

In late 2007 Rhee announced the closing of 23 of the districts schools and in January of 2008 Rhee gained the power to fire non-union employees without cause, as a step to improve efficacy. Both actions led to rallies against Chancellor Rhee and an ad campaign was launched by the Washington Teachers' Union against the legislation regarding the firing of teachers (Stewart and Labbé, 2007). In lieu of closing schools parents, council members and community advocates rallied together to express their opinions that they thought were being marginalized.

Students “besieged” the office of the Chancellor at the end of January demanding a meeting with the Chancellor and were dissatisfied by the dismissive and mitigating response that they felt they received (WorkerFreedom, 2008). Upset constituents formed brief social networks to opposed the closings, these networks offered a potential structure for the further development of social capital. However, after the schools ultimately shut their doors the many of the networks dissolved.

Rhee is a strong proponent of good schools being a direct reflection of good teachers. For Rhee educational reform and success is about the power of educators to inspire active learning. The task of an educator and ability to teach effectively comes from prepared and gifted individuals who are supported by engaged principals (Andrews, 2008). Known for her brash nature and un-apologetic arguments, Rhee has battled for school district reform for the last three years. School closings and teacher firing practices have kept Chancellor Rhee in the news throughout her tenure. In her first year alone, in addition to the school closings, she fired 34 principals, 98 central office employees, offered buyouts to 700 teachers and pressured many more to leave (Andrews, 2008). Rhee supported these drastic changes because of the dire nature of the problems facing the district.

In February of 2009 Rhee published an article in the *Washington Post* amidst a storm of public outrage, which was directed at some of the national publicity that she had been receiving. Amongst other things, in December of 2008, Rhee had appeared on the cover of Time magazine with a broomstick implying that she was employed to ‘clean-house’ in the district. Some school officials and teachers alike found the image insulting. They felt that it implied that she was hired to sweep out many teachers and educators in a dictatorial fashion rather than work in collaboration with the community to improve the system. In the February op-ed piece Rhee

acknowledged the hard work that many of the district's teachers are putting into their performance. She explained that teachers are in fact the solution to DCPS' problems. The Chancellor used this platform of explanation to also push for her tiered pay proposal discussed earlier. She reiterated that she is "...often asked to name the most important factor in this district's success. It is teachers. It is their classrooms and what happens there, the expectations they set as they push students to go further"(Rhee, 2009). This expression of interest in the wellbeing of the teacher-aspect of the DCPS educational community is prevalent throughout much of the Chancellor's rhetoric.

Early in her career DCPS parents expressed that they, "certainly hope that Rhee and company will understand going forward that we really want to be partners. We don't want a combative situation" (Birnbaum 2008). However, soon after Rhee's hiring there were calls for increased transparency from community advocates, parents, and teachers alike. These calls for openness have persisted into 2010. She has frequently been accused of ignoring the needs and interests of the communities that her decisions are directly impacting in favor of fast-paced decisions and she perceives as the correct course of action. She has been a polarizing figure within the teachers union, reform and parental communities alike. Some readily are supporting drastic and rapid change, while others advocate for a more collaborative and concrete structure for reform that is created with community involvement. In 2008 Cathy Reilly who is the director of Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals and Educators, which facilitates partnerships between members from different branches of the educational community in 18 senior high schools in the district, expressed her concern that schools need to create a "welcoming and respectful environment" for students (Birnbaum 2008). In order for the Chancellor to facilitate this parents argued that she had to recognize the value of the opinions of the parents and teachers

on the ground. Swick and Fan would agree that emphasis on the importance parental involvement in their students' success is valuable in school reform. Although there are a number of programs that reach out to parents in DCPS, the bulk of reform has been focused on teacher quality. Parent-teacher partnerships and the bolstering and support of community networks have been advocated for as a way to facilitate more cohesive and effective educational reform.

In an attempt to increase transparency and to give parents a platform on which to voice their opinions the Chancellor has since created a number of forums, informal meeting times and other opportunities for community members to interact with her. Specifics of these programs will be further discussed later in the next section. Later in 2008 Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers, expressed similar calls for cooperation and transparency in a New York Times letter to the editor. She explained that Rhee discounted consensus, whether the collaboration was sought with teachers, community groups, or parents. Weingarten argued that "there has been no effort to sit at the table with educators and use the benefit of their years of classroom experience to advance the creative solutions demanded by our times"(Weingarten, 2008). In an attempt to utilize the experience of teachers the DCPS effective Schools Framework, more specifically the Teaching and Learning Framework, was created to delineate what effective and acceptable teaching looks like. This framework will be discussed in section 3 of this thesis.

More recently the Chancellor has been caught up in controversy over teacher firings in the fall of 2009. The Washington Teachers' Union rallied against the layoffs of 229 teachers in October, which was justified by the central office as an attempt to close a \$44million budget gap. The WTU sued to block the firings, in light of the fact that she hired over 900 new teachers in the spring with knowledge that layoffs in the fall were a potential possibility (Sanchez, 2009). A

number of teachers rallied against the firings in front of school headquarters on North Capitol before and after the official numbers of layoffs were announced (Turque, Sep 2009). Many veteran teachers felt that they were targeted specifically and felt that they were rifted without adequate explanation (Sanchez, 2009). Chancellor Rhee argued that the “union mentality to protect the jobs of its members at all costs, is not in the long term a viable strategy for radically transforming the learning outcomes for the kids in this city”(Sanchez, 2009). City Council Chairman Vincent Gray criticized Rhee for a lack of transparency in the firings and for ignoring a budget cut that was proposed by the council regarding to summer school which would have saved some of the jobs that were cut (Turque, Oct 2009). Later in a February, Rhee explained some of the firings in a Fast Company magazine interview. In this interview Rhee explained that some of the teachers were those who, “had hit children, who had had sex with children, who had missed 78 days of school”(Chu, 2010). Community members and union members were surprised and angered that these reasons were not given at the time of the firings and that specific details about these allegations were not made immediately public (Editorial, 2010).

In November and early January of this year, Rhee was denounced once again by teachers and community members alike for a lack of transparency and a refusal to seek consensus. In November of 2009 Rhee removed the popular principal Patrick Pope at Hardy Middle School in Ward 2 and transferred him to a position where he would begin the planning for a new magnet school for the performing arts. In reaction to this news parents and teachers held a two-hour meeting, filled to standing room only, in which Rhee tackled questions about her decision. They felt that removing a praised principle would not be in the best interests of the their students and that Rhee was failing to recognize their concerns (Turque, Dec 2009). In January there was a brief storm surrounding the future of the Ellington School of the Arts, which is also located in

Ward 2 just blocks from Hardy. It was rumored that the Ellington School was to be moved out of its current location to the former Logan Elementary School building in Northeast. The potential move would be justified as an effort to provide Ward 2 residents with a neighborhood high school. To centralize the location of the Ellington School, and in an attempt to retain more Ward 2 families in the public system after the elementary school level. Amongst the outrage and media storm that followed the discussion of moving the school, Chancellor Rhee assured the public that there are no plans in the near future to move the Ellington School (Turque, Jan 2010). The president of the Ellington School's governing board explained in a letter to Rhee that the proposed move would tremendously alter and negatively effect both the academic and art programs of the school (Christian, 2010). Ellington representatives expressed concern that talk of moving the school was distracting DCPS from "the task at hand, creating the highest quality education that we can provide to our students, by politics and innuendo" (Turque, Jan 2010).

Approval ratings for Rhee have been declining in the past two years. In February of 2010 about 44 percent of district residents were polled as dissatisfied with her performance as compared to 29 percent in January of 2008. Similarly, about 54 percent of parents whose children in the DCPS system disapprove of the job that she is doing. Rhee's support among African Americans has dramatically declined where in 2008, 50 percent of African Americans approved of Rhee in 2010 this number has fallen to 28 percent with 62 percent of the residents dissatisfied with her performance (Turque and Cohen, 2010). The public perception of some aspects and problems facing the schools, such as violence, teacher quality and access to instructional materials has improved in this time period (Turque and Cohen, 2010). Rhee responded to these polls by noting some of the positive shifts in overall district approval. She stated, "I know that people don't like change, and if they associate me with change but like the

results, that's fine with me" (Stewart and Turque, 2010). *Washington Post* columnist, Jay Matthews warned against taking the results of the polls too literally. In a February column, he caution against the power that public opinion polls have on actual reform in and the perception of the schools. Matthews argued that the polls can mislead voters. For example, frequently readers will correlate a drop in favorability of the overall school system as a result of diminishing school achievement returns. This may not be the case, since these results are based on pure opinion of many community members, many of whom do not have direct access to what is going on inside the classroom (Matthews, 2010).

SECTION 3- DCPS Programs

Section three discusses a number of the specific programs and structural policies that have been instituted under Chancellor Rhee. Each of the policies and programs that are addressed seek to engage the community in some fashion or another. Many of programs are the main venues in which the Central Office interacts with the educational community as a whole on a regular basis.

Rhee is a strong proponent of the idea that the support that teachers have access to and administrators utilize is integral to their efficacy in the classroom. In this belief, she is supporting Putnam's research. In creating a strong teacher-network, a more cohesive educational community can exist. Repeatedly, Rhee has reiterated the point that teachers are one of the most fundamental aspects of successful teaching. In order for teachers to be effective they must have adequate resources at their disposal, a supportive and inspiring administration backing them, and recognition for a job well done. As crucial members of the educational community teachers, their attitudes toward their job and administration are vital for a collective and productive overall

school environment. Rhee has sated these crucial points to success numerous times. The following section will look at the districts' projects and efforts to enhance teacher support and engage the community.

The District of Columbia Collaborative for Change is a “citywide cluster of like-minded elementary schools” throughout the city whose principals are dedicated to sharing intellectual and material resources to address their various challenges. Targeting teaching practices, leadership retention, and student achievement the collaborative seeks to address the emotional and academic needs of their student bodies. Here administrators have banded together in an effort to create a system that is more strongly based on experiential learning and shares strategies for behavior management. As of March of 2010 DCPS has not provided any direct information of the efficacy of this program (DCPS, DC3, 2010).

The Teaching and Learning Framework is a policy designed to identify and structure teaching techniques and goals that will ensure ongoing academic growth (DCPS, Teaching and Learning, 2010). With three pillars of planning, teaching and increased effectiveness, the district promotes this framework as the necessary platform for academic success in DCPS (DCPS, Teaching and Learning, 2010). Designed as a collaborative effort amongst different members of the educational community, over 500 educators including principles, teachers, superintendents, and professional developers created the framework (D.C. Public Schools, 2009). The central office provides a number detailed packets, power-points, and handouts that are designed to explain what is expected of teachers and create a method of evaluation that is uniform throughout DCPS. With the underlying concept that all decisions for policy should be made by

data-driven assessments, the Teaching and Learning Framework breaks down all elements of a classroom into quantifiable segments. These segments utilized together are assumed to create a productive learning environment that promotes academic growth (DCPS, Teaching and Learning, 2010).

In order to help teachers attain the goals outlined in the Teaching and Learning Framework, the central office emphasizes a commitment to professional development. Instructional coaches are non-evaluative positions that were created during the 2008-9 academic years to assist teachers in improving efficiency. There are also a number of workshops and trainings designed to help educators (DCPS, Teacher Professional Development, 2010).

Two of the stated core beliefs of the central office of DCPS are that it “is critical to engage our students’ families and communities as valued partners” and that “schools must be caring and supportive environments”. Valuing the partnerships of families implies that the district will make a concerted effort to interact with parents and caregivers of DCPS students. A partnership suggests that there will be a give and take of information and opinion in an attempt to reach the best consensual outcome for the students. A supportive school environment should foster learning and be a safe place where DCPS pupils are challenged and excited to participate. These implied goals are stated in the core beliefs of the central office. This noted dedication to elements of the educational community is illustrated in a number of central office programs that will be discussed below.

Throughout the DC Public School System there are three parent and family resource centers designed to help adults support their students. These centers are located in Wards 1, 7, and 8. Offering workshops, linking teachers and schools to one another, the resource centers

have public calendars and are open to all DCPS parents and caregivers. These centers exist to facilitate opportunities for parents to support their children's learning and wellbeing. They are a conduit for information regarding DCPS in general and community engagement in general.

The Chancellor regularly holds formal and informal meetings to interact with the community. Rhee holds a number of monthly meetings known as the Community Forum Series, on a range of topics related to DCPS. The forums are frequently held at different locations throughout the district. For individuals on the DCPS list-serv finding out about the times and places of these meetings is relatively easy. They are also usually posted upon the homepage of the DCPS website. However, when searching the "Community Meetings" page on the DCPS website, as of February 2010 many of the links were dead, un-updated or inaccurate. The most recent entries in the community archives were from November of 2009 and the previous entry is from August of the same year. Rhee has offices hours throughout the month in which DCPS constituents can schedule 15minute blocks of time to speak with her in her office. The Chancellor offers to meet informally with small groups of people in casual discussions and concerns for success in her Living Room Meetings series. These meetings can be held by anyone and require a proactive effort on the behalf of the parents. The results of these meetings are hard to find. DCPS does not offer any direct notes from these meetings.

SECTION 4- Interviews

Listening to members of the educational community is one of the most important indicators to the actual implementation of and forms of community interaction that are present within the DC public school system. It is the voices of those on "the ground" that are insightful of the actual progress that the new structures are having on students and the educational

community as a whole. Section four is composed of the summaries and discussions of the five interviews that were conducted in February of 2010.

Janice Williams

Janice Williams has been working in the DC public school system for over five years. The majority of her time was spent at Anacostia High School and recently she moved to Adeline Davis Elementary School where she is the Parent-Teacher Coordinator. Starting out as a sub, she moved on to work with special education students in Anacostia and then became a parent-teacher coordinator. Growing up in a small town in South Carolina, strong community connections were definitive of Ms. Williams' childhood. Neighbors, church members, and relatives alike took an interest in all of the children in the town. It is this sense of mutual responsibility that Ms. Williams tries to implement in her job.

Ms. Williams cites U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, as one of her philosophical influences. Agreeing with the ideals that it take a proverbial village to raise and support a child, Ms. Williams finds that the idea of outside influences and positive pushing forces are the most helpful in a child's success. A support system that has vigilant parents, church support, and community member interest is of the most importance for an effective educational community, according to Williams.

She tries to structure community through the use of role models in her job. She believes that via examples of success, children of DCPS are more likely to choose a path that is likely to get them there. She creates programming designed to get children excited about new careers through the use of volunteers who have graduated from the DC public school system. When former community members demonstrate their interest in the success of students it has an

important effect on the goal building of the students. Ms. Williams believes that effective learning is purely experiential learning. It is from here that the phrase “seeing is believing” takes on a life of its own and has the ability to motivate students. She is a strong advocate for community service, alumni relations, and goal setting as avenues through which students can attain valuable educational experiences both inside and outside of the classroom.

Of the major challenges to the implementation of a cohesive educational community, Ms. Williams listed the mentality of many of the parents as potentially the largest detriment. Parents, she explained, need to have a strong concept of responsibility and commitment that she thinks many of them lack. Parental support is crucial to the development and academic success of the student. Accepting and embracing the fact that the parental responsibility is one that also fulfills the role model position is a distinction that she thinks is frequently neglected. Williams seemed to echo some of the research findings of Fan and Swick. She advocates for parents setting high goals for their children and their expectations as indispensable because they are one of the key role models in their students’ lives.

Since the hiring of Chancellor Rhee, Ms. Williams sees very few positive changes. If anything she believes that the data driven systems that the Chancellor has implemented makes community outreach programs harder to apply. Ms. Williams has had to cut a number of programs that involved alumni because of the she felt limited by new guidelines for programming.

Jazmine Carter

Jazmine Carter is in her final year at Woodrow Wilson Senior High School and planning on going to college in the fall of 2011. In her interview, Jazmine emphasized the importance of

community involvement for student motivation. To promote good schools she explained that a synergy of students, teachers, principals and parents must come together to create an active learning environment. She believes that it is the duty of parents and teachers to push children to succeed, but that personal motivation also plays a massive role in the success of each student. Jazmine noted that this inner motivation is in part a product of parental support and engaging teachers.

Jazmine identified detriments to students' success that happen inside and outside of the classroom. She explains that, in her experience, the neighborhoods that different DCPS students come from are a large factor in determining the baseline mind set of the students, but it is what happens in the classroom that is what proves most influential in the students' overall success. The formula for achievement, according to Jazmine, is twofold—it is the explicit actions of the teacher and the environment in which learning is supposed to take place. Within the classroom a lack of understanding between students and teachers leads to a disconnect that is detrimental to learning. The inability to relate to the personal circumstances that many of the students are experiencing, the lack of an attempt to understand these differences and the failure of teachers to relate the material to real life situations is one of the major academic shortfalls. Classes, Jazmine explained, need to be exciting by resonating with students and working with students interactively. A learning environment needs to provide an opportunity for students to interact with their educator and become immersed in the lesson. One of the largest blockades to this goal is the overcrowding that she experiences at Woodrow Wilson. The lack of individual attention that students receive during class time is detrimental to the overall learning process. She explained that teachers attempt to mitigate this problem by holding office hours, but even in this time allotted, the teacher could in no way get to talk to and work with all of his or her pupils.

It is the knowledge of what is going on in the “front-lines” of DCPS education that Jazmine believes needs to be heralded in order to promote reform. She explained that it is only when parents are directly confronted with disappointing grades that their children might be receiving that they are truly motivated to question what is being taught in their schools. Alone, one parent or one student is unlikely to be effective. Jazmine argued that it is the responsibility of the whole educational community to commit itself to improving the school district. She identified lack of funding as one of the biggest threats to education, in order to combat this she advocated for a community-based solution to fundraising. Utilizing the on-the-ground knowledge that teachers and students have, awareness raising community talks can and should target the general public for financial and political support. Jazmine ended her interview by summarizing the need for community support with the cliché that students are in fact “the future” and that all community members therefore have a responsibility to their educational success.

Peggy O'Brien

Dr. Peggy O'Brien is the Chief of Family and Public Engagement for DCPS. She started teaching in the district in 1969, specifically at Eastern and Roosevelt High Schools till the end of the 1970s, and has been involved in education since that time. Dr. O'Brien originally became working in education because she feels that education promotes the tools that can create social activism. As Dr. O'Brien stated, “getting people in touch with the power of their own brains” is the best way to excite individuals to work towards social changes that they are passionate about.

Supporting Mayor Fenty's education policies, she was impressed by Chancellor Rhee's conception of a system that needed to serve the needs of children rather than adults and that all children can achieve at high levels. She soon became a part of the Central Office and assumed

her current position as Chief of Family and Public Engagement. Dr. O'Brien believes that all children are capable of academic success regardless of the backgrounds that they come from. She pointed to the core beliefs of DCPS as markers for this belief. In particular the goals of "all children, regardless of background or circumstance, can achieve at the high levels" and that "achievement is function of effort"(DCPS, Who we are, 2010). Education, according to O'Brien, should equip children with a multitude of options for success upon graduation. The experience that children should receive in the DCPS system should be challenging and create a strong foundation of life skills for the graduates to use. Ideally, the educational community that supports these goals would be composed of principles, parents, members of the business community, the higher education community, and students. O'Brien noted that upper school students take part in stake holder surveys and that DCPS is currently working on developing a teacher evaluation system that will help assess efficacy in the classroom as an effort to include them in the structuring of their education.

Dr. O'Brien expressed the need for educational reform to be approached as a collective. To be successful students need to be held to high standards and supported by a genuine belief in their possible accomplishments. "No one person can create real change all by themselves," she said. O'Brien agrees with Chancellor Rhee in that teachers are the most significant people in school life. They require and deserve adequate professional development and encouraging principals supporting them for them to succeed in igniting the academic passions of students. O'Brien explained how the new model for teacher professional development differs drastically from the development that was practiced before the Chancellor was hired. The new system is not focused on out-of-school workshops, but rather, is embedded within the school structure. Each school in DCPS has an instructional coach who provides a more personalized and targeted look

into each teacher's job performance. Using more data-driven analysis, these coaches help teachers with more school and student specific approaches to professional development.

Since June 2007, Dr. O'Brien explained a number of the changes that have affected the educational community in DC public schools. Communication between the central office and the local schools with parents in particular was something that she cited as expanding. In addition to the traditional flyers, the district utilizes the DCPS website, individual school websites, emails, and is branching into texting, Facebook, and twitter communications. When asked what the central office was doing to make sure that those families without constant access to the internet were being reached out to, Dr. O'Brien gave a two part response. The first was that that most families have the access to the internet via a public resource, their phones, or home facilities and the second was that in the case that they did not have internet access that more tradition methods like flyers, phone calls and texts are the methods of choice that they should use. She did say that the district is constantly looking to expand its methods for contacting parents and that it is one of the responsibilities of principles to reach out to their parent community. It is interesting to note that in the AY 2008-2009 stakeholder survey that O'Brien mentioned as a method of involving the community input, that the High School that received the highest response rate was School Without Walls with 18% of the parents completing the survey (DCPS Stakeholder Survey Letter, 2009). This low turnout rate was surprising and begs to question as to how loudly parent opinion can be heard in these analyses. She also spoke of the parent resource centers and their evolving role and value. Before Chancellor Rhee, the centers weren't opened nor they were staffed, however they were conceptually alive in the minds of the school board. After Rhee's hiring they were opened. They were opened in the same fashion in which they were conceptualized; as a gathering place, outside of school, for parents to congregate and collect resources about their

children's education. Since, their opening, the centers have been modified and structured so that they hold can and host more events. The Central Office decided to move the parent center staff out of the center buildings and directly into the schools in an effort to pull together teachers and parents directly at the place of instruction. These staff members are in schools at the times where typical center attendance is low.

Dr. O'Brien spoke of the Chancellor's forums as a new program that was designed to replace the monthly school board meetings that had preceded Rhee. She explained how these forums have been very informative for the Central Office. Over the past years, they have become more participatory, designed to address a range of topics so that community members can interact with different leaders from the Central Office. Interestingly, she noted that the Central Office does not pay particular attention to attendance numbers when gauging the success of these events. This comment was particularly surprising because, Rhee is known for data-focused success metrics. It was noteworthy to find that these meetings are judged on somewhat qualitative methods, such as how engaged the attendees seem.

Dr. O'Brien identified two primary areas for development in terms of community involvement within DCPS. She felt that parents and community organizations are being underutilized. Parents, as one of the most valuable community resources, need to be empowered to understand that for all intents and purposes they are their child's first teachers. There are many barriers to parental involvement in addition to work conflicts, O'Brien cited language barriers, bad scholastic experiences that the parents may have had in the public school system, and the overall 37% literacy rate in DC as a potential explanation for the reluctance of some parents to get involved. O'Brien spoke of the changes to the parent resource centers as one of the efforts made to connect schools with their parental partners. She also spoke of the new parent academy,

which is designed to bring together community parents, such as SunTrust bank (which is involved in the Capital Gains¹ program), to hold seminars designed to be of use for students and parents. Dr. O'Brien also mentioned the informal living room meetings and the Chancellor's forums as a way that the district tries to connect with parents. In terms of community organizations, Dr. O'Brien expressed a need and want for more academic based groups. Many volunteers are willing to provide intermittent services that frequently involve beautification projects and structural improvements. She explained that although these efforts are appreciated, the district is in great need of sustained, continual academic-focused volunteer-base.

The report written by the National Education Association, discussed in section one mirrors some of the things that Dr. O'Brien was talking about. Programs need to integrate the goals of the school, parents, and the administrative system as a whole. Parental involvement is important for an effective and collaborative school environment. Dr. O'Brien expressed a genuine belief in this concept in her interview and discussion of the numerous parent-centric programs that the district has developed and is expanding. One of the most pressing reasons that O'Brien decided to join the Central Office was that she believes that under Rhee's vision and direction that the district is working toward recognizing the shared responsibility that all community members have in public education.

Cathy Reilly

Cathy Reilly is the head of the Senior High Alliance of Parents, Principals, and Educators, also known as SHAPPE. SHAPPE has been in existence since 1998 and began around safety and security issues affecting the district's high school students. Originally getting involved

¹ A program that uses monetary incentives to promote good behavior and grades in school.

in advocacy as a high school parent Reilly has been working for high school reform for over a decade. She formed SHAPPE as way for community members to address issues affecting them as a collective body.

Reilly describes the ideal educational community as one in which all of the stakeholders would be involved and have influence over decisions and a right to a role in the decision making process. Stakeholders would be composed of schools administrations, high school student representatives, parents, teachers and staff. All the constituencies that are involved in the educational process would be represented. Academic success depends on a child having the physical and emotional environment that will foster scholastic growth and engagement. Her group advocates for different types of reform from lobbying for basic amenities that some schools lack, such as adequate temperature control, to diverse and rich curriculum, and teacher support. Schools should be welcoming, promote positive problem solving strategies, have tutoring and mentoring opportunities, extracurricular activities, adults that students feel that they can confide in, and provide strategies and avenues for children who are behind to catch up. SHAPPE promotes these objectives at its monthly meetings at different high schools, by being involved with some of the committees that the Central Office has created, and at budget hearings where Reilly presents testimony that is reflective of the multitude of views that are represented within SHAPPE.

Arguing that the community is the most underutilized resource in DCPS reform, Reilly, described that ideally all major decisions that effect school planning should involve community representatives. She explained that the Chancellor's meetings seem to be forums in which Central Office informs the DCPS constituents how they are addressing the issues of school reform. It would by more helpful if these forums took place throughout the policy development

process and were grounded in public discussion. Reilly advocates for a system in which information is completely shared at all levels of the decision making process. She described a system in which leaderships teams would exist in every school that would be comprised of community advocates, school administrations, teachers, parents, and be supported by the Central Office. These teams would be involved in structuring the future paths of their schools and represent a true community effort towards progress, according to Reilly. An emphasis on this team mentality at each level of DCPS administration would underline the idea that each member of the educational community has something of value to add and would create policies that are more likely to be a synergy of ideas. Reilly explained that for community-centric education reform to be successful those who are involved must feel empowered by their actions and must believe that they have the ability to make a difference.

Since the hiring of the Chancellor, Reilly spoke of a change in environment within the advocating educational community. Prior to her appointment, the school board created a layering of the decision process. Public discussions were held where people from both sides of the policy debate were able to openly discuss their opinions. The public was privy to how and why the school board made the choices that it did. Reilly explained that now there is more of a sense of lack of potency to affect change.

In the meetings that the Chancellor has held, for example those that were related to the school restructurings, there was not a process that enabled the community to own the problems as well as the solutions. A more inclusive process of reform might have led to reforms that both the schools and the surrounding community were committed to and engaged in, according to Reilly. By the time that many of the meetings were conducted the decisions regarding the futures

of the schools had been made. This is a serious detriment to the efficacy of DCPS and its interactions with community partners according to Reilly.

Reilly's point of view speaks to the strength of social capital. It is in group work, collaboration and the utilization of social and professional networks that the best and more effective change can occur. In correlation with the NEA report, Reilly touts the benefits of developing partnering skills as a method to articulate goals and enhance relationships between different members of the educational community.

Tijwanna Phillips

Tijwanna Phillips is the parent of three children who have gone through or are currently in DCPS. Phillips is also an elected official on the advisory neighborhood commission in Ward 8. She felt obligated to become involved in education advocacy once her children were enrolled in district schools. Over the first few years of the Chancellors' tenure she participated in email correspondence with Rhee and soon became more involved in community actions and education reform in the district.

Phillips' ideal educational community would be composed of individuals who are committed to putting the interests of the students first at all times. Parents, students, teachers and other parties with vested interests in the education system would work together to secure the best educational experience for the district's children. Parents have the responsibility of advocating for their children to ensure that students are provided with a quality education. In advocating for their children's individual interest, increased parental involvement will help improve the educational system for all DCPS students. Teachers have the duty to engage their students, teach age and grade appropriate materials and cater to various learning styles. In general, according to Phillips, DCPS must take into account the economic and demographical composition of the

wards when it allocates resources more closely. Across DCPS Phillips feels that there is a lack of exposure to opportunity, which is hindering the educational experience of many of the districts' students. The fact that many of the elementary students in her ward have never been to the Smithsonian museums or to the monuments is a commentary on this lack of exposure. Ward 8, Phillips feels is under-resourced financially and yet has the largest percentage of children. One particular proposal that Phillips had in regards to future education funding in Ward 8 was directly related to development in the area. Her proposal is to integrate new business directly into the community. This would require new developers and companies to work with the schools in some direct way. Whether through a purely financial partnership, a mentoring program, providing jobs to students, or allowing community service hours to be fulfilled in conjunction with the new business somehow, these partnerships would force the development that is happening in the city to have a direct connection to the community and straightforwardly benefit the education system in tandem.

Parental support is the most underutilized resource that DCPS has. Phillips also contends that a sense of relative disengagement amongst parents is the largest blockade to student success. She explained that many parents do not support the chancellor, not because they necessarily disagree with Rhee's policies but rather because they are not educated in the specificities of the reforms that she is making. Phillips argues that many parents and community members fall victim to the negative cult of personality that is portrayed by certain media outlets against Rhee, rather than looking at the new DCPS policies with a unique analytical and constructive point of view. Phillips has found that since the hiring of the Chancellor, people seem more likely to be involved in discussions revolving around education issues. Although, not always constructive, the shift towards conversing about educational change is a positive one. Phillips wants to see a

shift towards a more collaborative parental effort that works with Central Office to affect change. She suggested that Rhee and other members of the Central Office may have to engage in more expansive outreach to their constituents. Perhaps attempting to speak at every single school and taking the time to explain new policies on site would be helpful in this effort, Phillips explained. In order for the current community forums to be more successful, more community members need to be involved. There needs to be a collective commitment to high expectations for the children of DCPS, Phillips argues. A change in the mindset of many community members needs to take place that would emphasize the vitality of education. In line with Fan's research, Phillips believes that it is only through high expectations that children can set and reach high goals. By creating a community culture around high expectations the DCPS student body as a whole is more likely to enhance its level of success.

The interviews provided an interesting perspective through which to look at the structure and utilization of community networks in DCPS. By talking to a number of community members from different social networks in the educational community, I was able to glean the perspectives of multiple people throughout the district. All of the interviewees discussed the importance of fostering community and creating an atmosphere of collective action. One of the focal points that came through in the interviews was the importance and value of direct parental engagement with the school system. In practice, DCPS has made a number of efforts to make visible contact with its different constituencies, how legitimately these efforts actually involve community members is a point of debate.

SECTION 5- Analysis and Conclusions

Analysis

Part one of this thesis reviewed a number of theories that stressed and studied the importance of community engagement within the educational experience of students. The information and data that was outlined in part one can be applied as a potential framework to the District's reform measures in the past three years. The majority of the works discussed stressed the importance of parental and community involvement and inclusion in their children's education.

Robert Putnam's research into the value of social capital lays a substantial foundation for the rest of the theorists' work to build upon. Social capital, or the general utilization of social networks to accomplish educational goals, is of great importance when looking to reform the district's public education system. Putnam's research indicates that the more that social networks are included within the educational process, more specifically, "when parents are involved with their children's education, children do better in school and the schools they attend are better" (Putnam, 2000 p. 303). Social networks are more complex entities than a single parent being involved in their child's education and after-school activities. Networks are groups of people who interact for and are connected by a common concern, in this case the quality of education that their schools provide. The groups, such as the PTA, will utilize the various strengths of their members to create a synergy of influence upon the central administrations. In working with network members, articulating goals and seeking change, social capital is developed, strengthened and members gain a sense of enhanced ownership in their cause. This augmented sense of ownership will ideally bolster the social networks' bonds, reinforce the importance of cause for its members, and enhance the longevity of the network.

When applied to the district and the tenure of Michelle Rhee, there seems to have been a number of efforts that are designed to directly allow parents to voice their concerns, but the actual building, encouragement and reinforcement of social networks seems to be lacking concerted Central Office support. Although not discouraged, community among parents is left to the parents to facilitate, for the most part. The majority of the community outreach measures are not aimed at creating sustainable social networks but rather, at increasing direct interaction between parents and Central Office and teachers. While, this is a beneficial tactic, Putnam's work suggests that both direct communication with the Central Office *and* collective action among parents as a group that advocates for reform are important.

The importance of both collective action and direct communication being fostered by Central Office was an idea that was strongly advocated by Cathy Reilly in her support for community based interaction and reform planning. She stressed the significance of having a voice of the community that is representative of parents and other constituents as a whole. By utilizing the networks of individuals that are involved in education more comprehensive, community-based, and constituent supported changes can be made. It does seem, however, that Rhee is attempting to create stronger community among teachers. Although, Rhee herself is a polarizing figure among this constituency, the standardization of teacher evaluations throughout the district and the Central Office's focus on teacher quality forces teachers to work as a team in their respective schools. The fact that individual evaluations in part rely on the overall success of the school as a whole, is a step towards fostering community among educators.

The District should make an attempt to foster networks and partnerships among the different constituencies. The current relationships that are supported seem to be very diametric in that they are direct between the constituents and the Central Office. While these interactions are

vital, it is also important to foster bonds within constituencies. These networks, according to Putnam, will help enhance DCPS as a whole. As Putnam's research indicates "Where civic engagement in community affairs in general is high, teachers report higher levels of parental support and lower levels of student misbehavior... and being apathetic about education" (Putnam, 2000 p. 301). Civic engagement is one of the foundations and facilitators of social networks and its proliferation within the constituencies of DCPS will help to improve the district system as a whole.

The National Education Association 2008 report underlines the importance of partnerships between communities, parents, and educators when working for the academic success of students. Effective community involvement includes communication, parenting, decision-making and volunteering. Communication refers to a process by which the district connects the schools to the homes of students, informing them about the programs that the schools are offering and the progress that the students are making. Assistance with parenting skills and familial support, helping to facilitate positive learning environments and cultural engagement all fall under the NEA category of parenting. Effective decision-making, according to the NEA, involves families as active participants in school-related decisions and programming. The volunteering element of effective engagement requires the district to recruit and train families for school volunteering opportunities. The volunteer work should be both flexible in when it is conducted and have a "meaningful" goal (National Education Association, 2008). When looking at DCPS not all of these aspects are easily visible in the community outreach programs of Chancellor Rhee. The ways that the district reaches out to members of the community seems generally restricted to electronic mail and limited traditional flyering. Although, as Dr. O'Brien pointed out, the District is trying to branch out in its methods for

contacting parents and other community members, the current system is rather limited. In regards to communication between parents and Central Office, Central Office frequently suggests that it be conducted through electronic mail as well, where parents directly e-mail the district representative that their problem relates to. While it is positive that the district is utilizing available technology, it is equally important that a visible effort is made to contact, hear from, and reach out to those without direct Internet access and those who are not making the proactive effort to contact the Central Office. The district is, as the NEA suggests in their report, attempting to provide information on school policies and procedures. This is evident not only through online resources and at parent centers, but the forums and town hall meetings that are held to explain policies to the public. In an effort to create more community-based decision-making, the district, as Reilly suggested, should attempt to be as inclusive as possible at all levels of the reform process. School-parent partnerships are being fostered in DCPS by the schools themselves and by the parent outreach employees. The exact effectiveness of these measures is hard to determine. As the NEA report states it is important to “regularly evaluate the effectiveness of family involvement programs and activities” (National Education Association, 2008). The district has, as the NEA suggests, surveyed educators and families. However, these surveys have had surprisingly low turnout among parents and high school students. Increasing participation will help attain a better sample to determine the needs and interests of the constituency. The report suggests a number of strategies that the district could create and utilize to enhance the community involvement of its constituents. One of these suggestions is the creation of liaisons that are familiar with the culture of each community to contact parents, coordinate activities and help facilitate interactions between community members and the schools themselves (National Education Association, 2008). In the future, I think that the parent

coordinator position, in which employees from the parent centers are placed directly within schools, is envisioned to embody many of the skills of the community liaison that is described by the NEA. Offering training in effective communication and partnership-building skills is another method to engage educational stakeholders. In facilitating community involvement DCPS needs to make a concerted effort to making the interactions between the community and the educational institutions themselves, as well as Central Office, as effective as possible.

Xitao Fan and Kevin Swick both illustrate the value of parent involvement in their work. In agreement with their research, the district lists the engagement of “our students’ families and communities as valued partners” as one of its foundations. The importance of creating a community that places educational goals in high esteem and creates a strong academic culture is irreplaceable. An emphasis on academic and career goals seem to drive educational success, according to Fan’s research. This is particularly critical when the district is creating curriculum and holding community targeted forums. There should be a concerted effort to engrain values that emphasize the significance of educational success and the rewards that this type of success can produce. Improving college counseling, providing information on student loans, and focusing on student goals for post-graduation in the curriculum, could help to foster this environment. Parental understanding and advocacy for these programs is integral for their promulgation and success with students. As Ms. Williams addressed in her interview, without visible representations of what education can help students to achieve and parental support behind their goals, their motivation may be hindered and their attention diverted to other things.

Currently, the District is placing most of the responsibility for the parent-teacher partnership that Swick advocates for, on the teachers themselves to facilitate. This is problematic because, although it is well within the ability of the teachers to do so, many feel that their

obligations should focus on in-the-classroom interaction. On one parent-teacher conference day that I attended at Davis Elementary, I was speaking to a teacher who was disheartened that only two parents had shown up for the whole day. Within the context of their jobs, teachers are limited in the time and programming that they can be responsible for when trying to engage their students as well as their student' parents. It is understandably difficult for Chancellor Rhee to directly manage parent-teacher partnerships across the district. As Ms. Phillips argued, it is largely the responsibility of the parents to advocate on behalf of their students. However, it is important that Central Office and school administrations continues to look for ways that make this partnership as accessible and available as possible.

Conclusions

It is undeniable that the District of Columbia's public education system has undergone radical changes in the past three years. From the demolition of the school board and appointment of the Chancellor, to the closing of numerous schools and firing of educators, to the implementation of IMPACT (which is a policy that combines both in class evaluations and standardized test improvements to judge teacher ability), to a number of community initiatives that the Central Office has started, to numerous rounds of protests, objections, and pull back from certain members of the community against these changes, the district has seen drastic educational reform since 2007.

The district was in a dire situation when Chancellor Rhee took over control of DCPS in 2007 and it is not yet clear the full effects of her alterations to the system. With the district still one of the worst performing in the nation, the immediate years to come will be interesting in

assessing the success and viability of rapid and wide-ranging top-down educational reform in an urban district.

Michelle Rhee's leadership style and alterations to the system have no doubt shaken up the DCPS community. Her efforts to engage the community seem to be numerous, however I am forced to question their efficacy. From Dr. O'Brien's interview, I believe that the district is attempting to reach out to parental and guardian communities. But how they value and involve these community partners is up for debate. The parent coordinators, living room meetings and Chancellor's office hours certainly seek to directly engage community members in the actions and policies of DCPS. However, many of these meetings are retroactive. They revolve around a description of current policy and the changes that are planned to take place rather than a communal discussion about the direction that school reform should be taking and how to undertake these actions. In agreement with Cathy Reilly, I think that it is necessary to involve different community members in all levels of educational interaction. I have not seen adequate efforts to truly involve community members at the planning stages of reform thus far.

It is disappointing to find that the district is no longer evaluating the success of certain forum meetings based on attendance. While attendance is certainly not the only metric for a successful event, in the fall of 2008 when I went to some of these events there were upwards of a hundred people in attendance. The presence of a diverse array of community members from throughout the district and a number of representatives from the Central Office reinforced feelings of a truly collaborative effort. I felt that my presence and opinions were taken seriously. More recently, the events that I have attended have maxed out at 20 community members. Many of the events have the same familiar faces and it is disappointing to see this seemingly dip in collaborative community engagement. Perhaps it is because, as Reilly suggested, that community

members no longer believe that their voices are being taken seriously. In recent events, such as those that took place at Hardy and the Ellington School, there were surges of constituent activism and the formation of networks in protest to the decisions being made and considered regarding those schools. Multi-member groups quickly formed and dissolved whose sole aim was education reform. Many of these groups that are created in protest argue that their opinions are not being considered when reform decisions are made. The district should promote the development of these fast-forming networks and help them sustain past the expiration of the specific issue that they were formed to address. The social capital in such a passionate group, although formed around a particular issue, can result in a network that can assist in supporting and improving the education system in the long run. To truly utilize and build the vast array of social capital and networks that currently exist within the educational community, constituents must believe that their involvement and effort toward reform is worthwhile and that their voices are being heard.

Ideally representatives from all levels of the educational community, from administrators, to Central Office representatives, to parents, to teachers and students themselves, would recognize the value and importance of a cooperative view of education. The potential social capital that could be fostered by any number of these community sub-sections has the ability to harness a powerful voice in DCPS reform. Members of the educational community should play a valuable role in the steering of the future direction of DCPS because they have a vested interest in the success of the district. Understanding this value and utilizing this interest will require a tremendous effort from all members of the community in order to facilitate such a large and vital conversation that is aimed at achieving effective reform and improvement.

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