

Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Neighbor:

On November 4th the world witnessed an amazing triumph. We learned that the Politics of Cynicism can give way to the Politics of Hope when that hope is met with passion, determination and action—not a blind optimism that merely wishes for the best and waits for eventual improvement—but an intentionality that requires involvement from ordinary citizens like me and you.



Well this Fall, we gather around the same principles as we reach further into the community to share new important school findings and formulate plans of action around those findings. DC VOICE has completed its 5th annual Ready Schools Project, in which more than 100 teams of ordinary citizens volunteered to visit 109 schools and interview principals about school needs and city support. We are pleased to be co-hosting quarterly town hall meetings, starting this November, to share findings from this project and other data concerning school reform.

We are joining with others to host these meetings to obtain help in understanding the information we've gathered, recognizing that everyone has a unique and important experience to contribute. But it will be important that we not view these forums as question-and-answer sessions. Instead, we must ask ourselves—and help determine—how we can use this information to take meaningful and responsible action.

We hope that these forums will provide an opportunity for community members to learn the results of this year's Ready Schools Project and, more importantly, to share impressions, recommendations and reactions to this year's information. Each town hall forum will feature engaging conversation in small groups, with the opportunity to begin formulating plans of action that embody our community's vision for school reform. During these town halls, information gathered from small groups will be transferred to the entire assembled party on a large TV screen, providing participants the opportunity to respond using hand-held polling devices the size of small TV remotes. Citizens from local churches, the D.C. City Council, DCPS, parents, students and educators will be on hand to join in the deliberations.

We thank our partners, like Tellin' Stories, The DC Parent and Information Center, SHAPPE and others who have helped us gather the community for these meetings and encourage you to share the information you receive here with your PTA, civic associations, ANCs and elected officials, and let DC VOICE know how we can help.

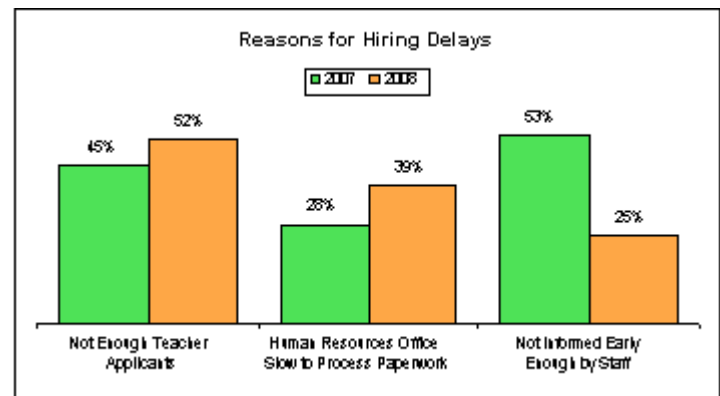
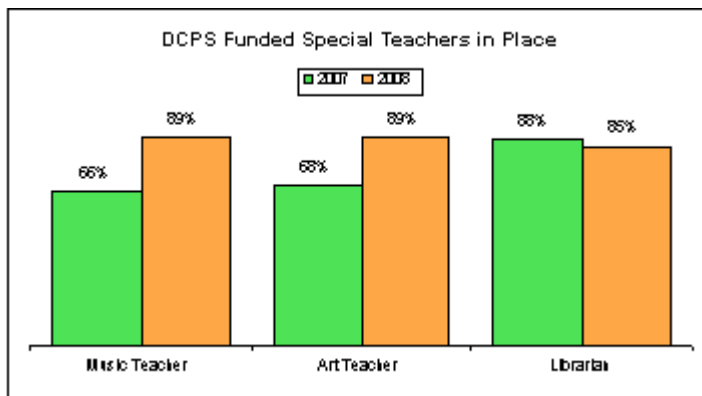
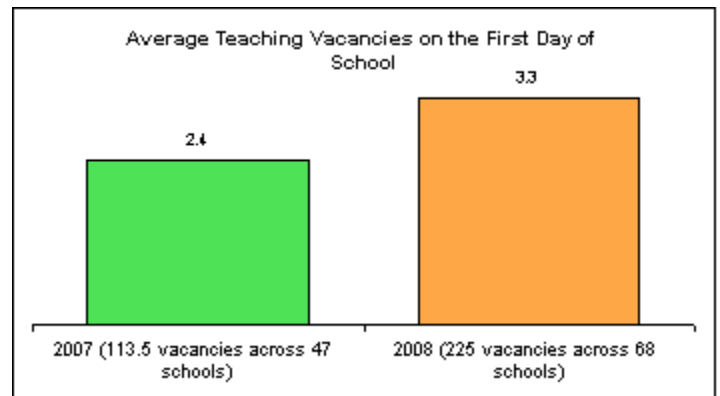
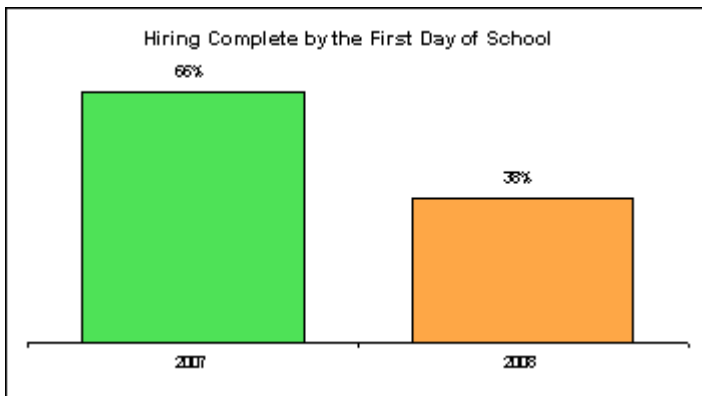
Jeff Smith
Executive Director



Staffing

What did we find out this year?

Overall this year, DC VOICE found that DCPS’s success in recruiting and hiring new teachers for the beginning of the school year declined in 2008, as teaching vacancies nearly doubled their 2007 level. The most commonly given reason for hiring delays in 2008 was lack of adequate numbers of teacher applicants. Principals surveyed in 2008 were most likely to report needing math and special education teachers and least likely to report lack of a music teacher, with DCPS-funded art and music teacher staffing improving since 2007, but with DCPS-funded librarian staffing declining slightly.



A full list of works cited in this report is available at www.dcvoice.org or by request to (202) 986-8535 or dcvoice.@dcvoice.org

Staffing (*continued*)

How does this affect our graduation rate?

School readiness begins with having a well-qualified teacher in every classroom. The Education Trust estimates that if children from lower-income and minority backgrounds were taught by teachers of the same quality as other children, roughly half of the achievement gap could be erased (The Education Trust, 1998). Too often, however, cumbersome hiring policies impact the quality of teachers in the classroom as the most qualified applicants withdraw from the process or find employment in school districts with more efficient hiring (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996).

What's happening elsewhere?

A number of experimental mentoring and teacher residency programs are currently being implemented throughout the U.S. The Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) in Chicago is one such teacher residency program initiated in 2008. AUSL emphasizes highly selective admission, comprehensive pedagogical training, and mentoring. Participants earn a reduced-tuition master's degree at a local university and receive a training salary of \$32,000 with health benefits in exchange for a commitment to teach for five years at an under-performing Chicago public school while receiving intensive coaching and mentoring from an AUSL Professional Field Coach for the first three years (Gatlin, 2008).

What's happening in DCPS?

The major staffing issues identified in DC VOICE's 2008 RSP data reflect a complex context influenced by the teacher quality mandates of the 2001 Federal No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education, 2003); DCPS actions including the 23 school closures which resulted in the relocation

Staffing is based on enrollment, and we had an increase in enrollment, so we need two more teachers. [We have] 100 more students than anticipated... and need five more teachers.

DCPS Principals

[There were] not enough highly qualified applicants in special subjects... not enough teacher applicants for math.... The quality of teachers interviewed was not satisfactory.

DCPS Principals

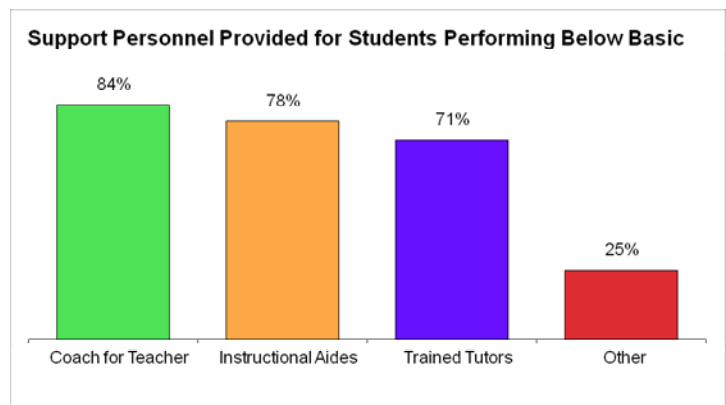
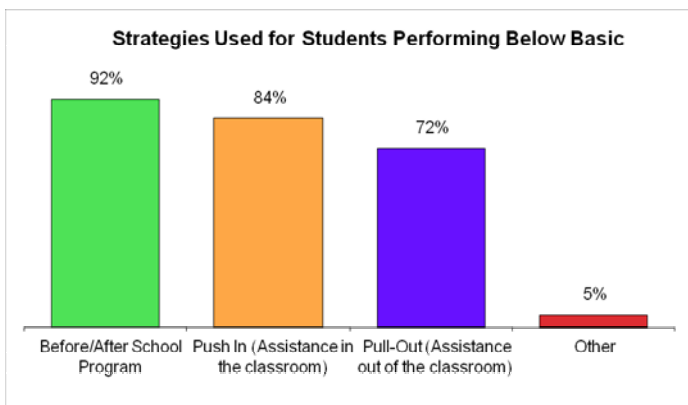
of teachers and students to 28 newly-consolidated schools; the staff reconstitution efforts in several schools in restructuring under NCLB and the introduction of a comprehensive staffing model this year. The latter specifies that all schools have art, music and physical education instructors as well as media specialists/librarians. In addition, each consolidated school should have wellness support staff, administrative support and additional academic support staff, including math and literacy coaches (D.C. Public Schools, 2008). Another component of the present staffing picture in DC is the Chancellor's teacher contract proposal that would create two tracks of employment, including one that would cause teachers to

forfeit tenure in exchange for greater compensation based on standardized testing results and other student achievement data.

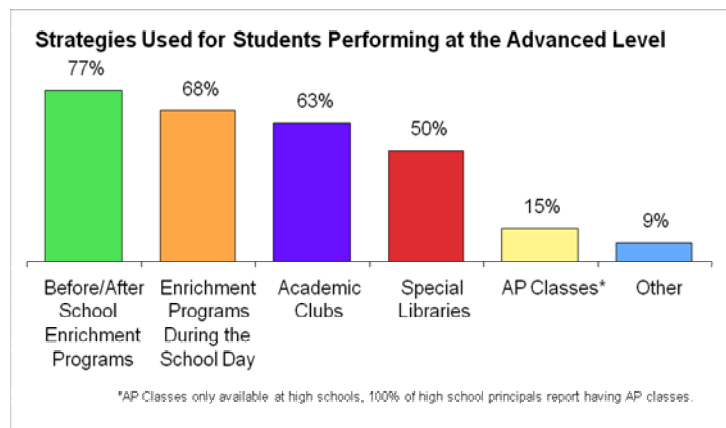
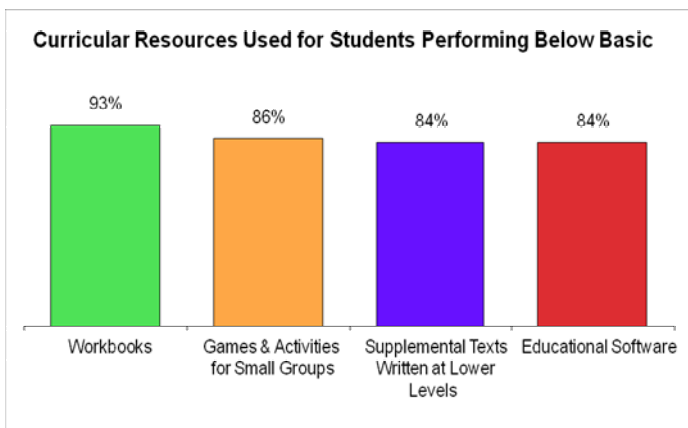
Instruction

What did we find out this year?

This year a new section on instruction was added to the Ready Schools Project core checklist. We asked principals what strategies, support personnel and curricular resources their schools were using to assist students performing below basic level in reading/language arts, math, or science, and what strategies they were using to accommodate the learning needs of students performing at the advanced level in the same subject areas. In summary, we discovered that schools are employing a



wide variety of strategies and resources in each area, with the most focus on students performing



below basic

Choosing a suitable instructional method is as integral to a school as developing the proper curricula.

Catlett and Hsu, 2008

Instruction (*continued*)

How does this affect our graduation rate?

When students are not taught at their interest or readiness levels, frustration and boredom increase, causing a lack of motivation. Boredom can reduce achievement and increase drop-out rates.

Behavioral issues can arise out of boredom and academic frustration and can transform the classroom into an uncomfortable and unnerving place for students, damaging their self-esteem and making some reluctant to participate. Allowing students choices for activities during free time, giving them tiered assignments keyed to their ability levels, and employing assessments that give the teacher a full understanding of the students' strengths, weaknesses, wants, and needs have all been shown to be effective in creating a more positive, productive learning environment (Danzi et al., 2008).

[The involvement of] 3 community partners is designed to enhance reading, literacy, fluency, and reading comprehension in school and out of school

DCPS Principals

What's happening elsewhere?

The following strategies can help school communities identify productive systems of instruction:

- **Differentiated instruction is student-centered**, focusing on the notion that students have different ability and readiness levels, preferences, and interests; and by varying their approach to instruction based on these differences, teachers can create a more efficient and successful learning environment (Ivory, 2007). This differs from individualized instruction in that it goes beyond simply different assignments for different people, but rather involves a proactive exchange and interaction between students and teachers to design a more productive learning method, allowing students to take responsibility for their own growth and learning.
- **The principal of the school is best suited** to spearhead efforts to design, assign, and assess instructional methods because of his/her unique position as a leader of the school. Instructional methods will be most effective when created and assigned on a school-specific basis. Furthermore, school research has verified that schools are rarely high-performing unless the principal is an effective instructional leader. This correlation is especially strong for schools with high proportions of low-income students (Andrews, 1986).

What's happening in DCPS?

These and other strategies are being employed by DCPS in constructing successful instructional strategies and leadership roles. Several of the principals interviewed as part of RSP 2008 commented favorably on the high quality data and instruction-focused professional development principals participated in this past summer. In addition, DCPS instituted "pacing guides" this year so that teachers can better monitor

the pace at which they are teaching and ensure that all content is covered. As part of DCPS's Renew, Revitalize and Reorganize plan, it is launching a full service school model in eight middle schools that will focus on individualized support to students in need of intense behavioral and/or mental health services.

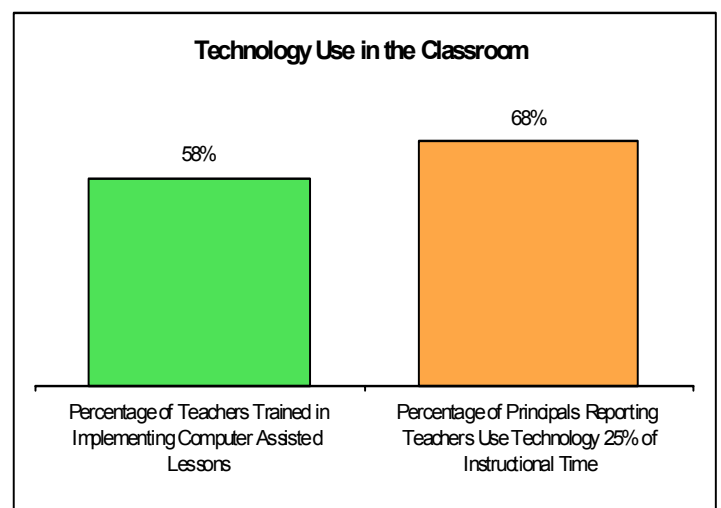
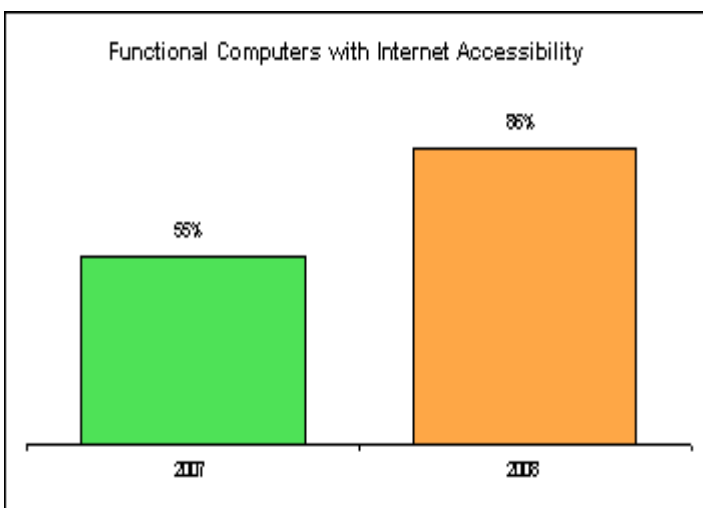
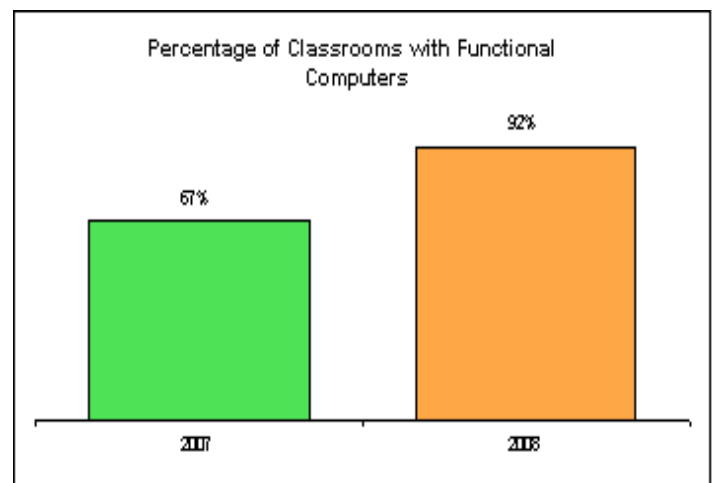
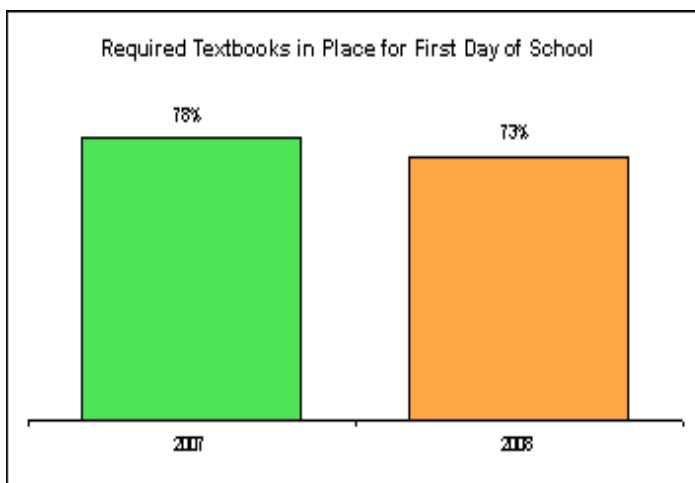
[Strategies include] differentiated instruction, resource specialists, science fair programs, computer lab, library research materials and other resources.

DCPS Principals

Textbooks and Technology

What did we find out this year?

Ready Schools Project textbook and technology questions this year covered whether all required textbooks were in place for the opening of school, whether classrooms had functional computers and internet accessibility, and to what extent teachers are using technology in instruction. Seventy-three percent of the principals reported having all textbooks in place; 92 % stated that all of their classrooms have functional computers; and 86 % said the computers have internet accessibility. The principals said that just 58 % of their teachers have been trained in implementing computer-assisted lessons, and 68 % incorporate technology in their instructional delivery at least 25% of the time.



Textbooks and Technology *(continued)*

How does this affect our graduation rate?

Textbooks are not the most important learning tool, but they serve as a tangible manifestation of the overarching conditions in the school. The way textbooks are presented to students contributes to the perception of teaching and learning conditions and strongly biases student and teacher attitude towards the school. With new textbooks in good conditions, both groups are much more likely to respect other aspects of the classroom and the school, thereby contributing to a more positive learning environment. In practical terms, textbook shortages can pose a distinct challenge for both teachers and students as the learning environment is compromised by students having to share textbooks or not being able to follow along with the lesson. Late arrival of textbooks can lead to lost learning time.

...a sound basic education includes: "sufficient and up to date books, supplies, libraries, educational technology and laboratories.

Justice Leland Degrasse's ruling on a 2002 case against the New York City Public Schools

Computers are another important teaching and learning condition. With so much of the world becoming dependent on information shared digitally and an increasing reliance on technology for day-to-day tasks, it is vital that each student be able to amass basic computer skills. If there are not enough computers for everyone, if they are old or very slow as opposed to newer and faster, or if the teacher has not been trained to use technology effectively to assist instruction, the use of computers may actually waste time instead of contributing positively to the teacher's lesson plan.

What's happening elsewhere?

Nationwide, the good news is that technology issues are rapidly ceasing to be a problem. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the proportion of all instructional computers in the U.S. with access to the Internet was at 97 percent by 2005 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

What's happening in DCPS?

The good news in DCPS is that much more attention has been paid to both textbooks and technology over the past year. This year, principals cited unpredictable student enrollment numbers much more

All of the computers aren't working every day..teachers don't know enough to incorporate technology..[It] would be wonderful if [we] had a technology coordinator for the school

DCPS Principal

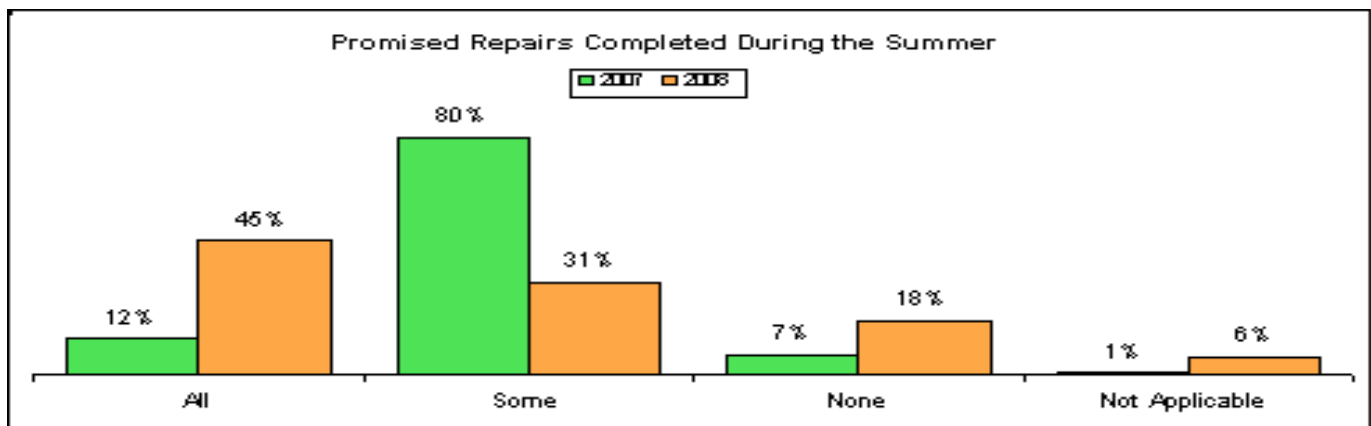
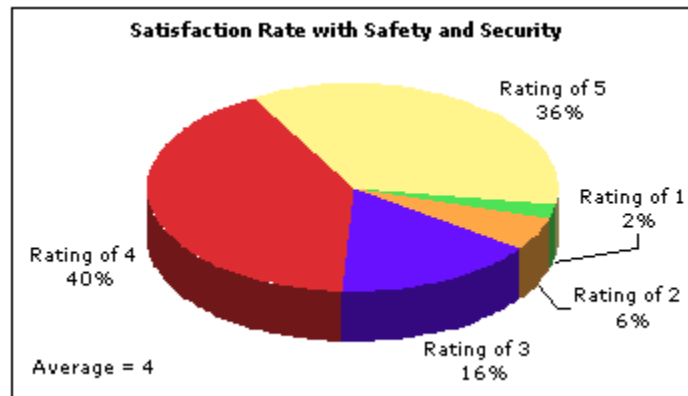
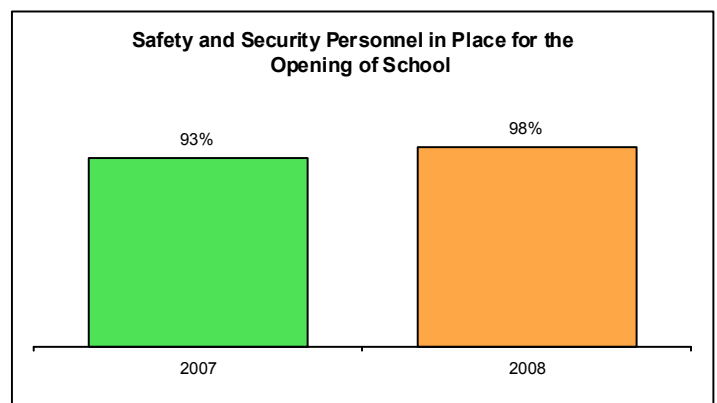
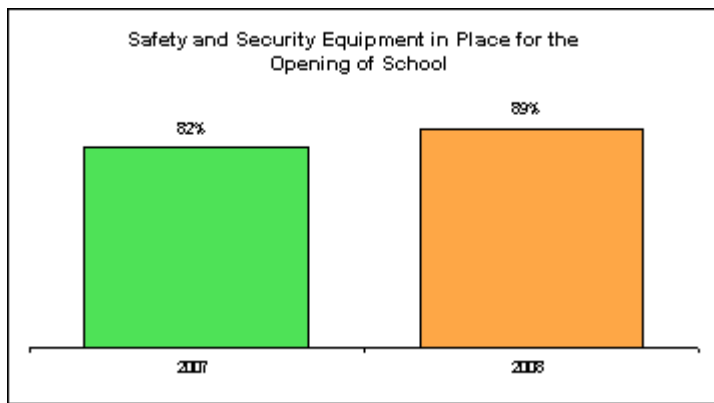
often than any management failures as reasons for lacking textbooks at the start of school. In November 2007, the Mayor and Chancellor Rhee announced a \$4 million initiative that included buying more than 6,300 computers, and also fixing

network cables, power strips and access points so that every classroom teacher and administrator would be able to have and use a computer.

Safety, Security and Facilities

What did we find out this year?

The local school principals participating in the 2008 RSP reported that 89% of their schools had the budgeted safety and security equipment in place for the opening of school, and that 98% had the budgeted safety and security personnel in place. Concerning facilities, 45% of the principals reported that promised repairs were completed during the summer, and another 31% reported that only some of the repairs were completed. On a scale of one to five, with one meaning not at all satisfied and five meaning completely satisfied, principals reported a four point satisfaction rate when asked about the safety and security at their schools.



Safety, Security and Facilities *(continued)*

How does this affect our graduation rate?

Teaching and learning conditions need to be exemplary in order for educators to effectively help students gain the skills necessary for success in the 21st century. These conditions refer to the broad environment in which students learn and encompass concerns about both school safety and the condition of school facilities. Student achievement is linked to classroom and school design and proper facility maintenance by architects and educators alike. A safe environment plays a significant role in teaching and learning, just as a stressful atmosphere and dangerous or violent conditions cause students and teachers to lose focus on learning and teaching. As research sponsored by the 21st Century School Fund has suggested, moreover, the quality of school facilities is an important factor influencing new and experienced teacher attrition in large urban school districts in the U.S. (Buckley et al., 2004).

There are powerful links between teacher's working conditions and both teacher attrition rates and student achievement levels in elementary, middle and particularly high schools."

Center for Teaching Quality

What's happening elsewhere?

Numerous safety and security plans related to school facilities are being advanced in many directions throughout the U.S. The Los Angeles Unified School District, for instance, plans to develop low-cost apartments on as many as 12 of its campuses in an effort to help teachers find less expensive housing and live closer to school (Zahnizer, 2008). Meanwhile, Maryland is planning a multimillion-dollar project to construct new walls in its 1970s-era "open-space" classrooms to facilitate what is believed to be a more contemporary instructional model (Fuller, 2008). The National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (www.edfacilities.org) provides information on a broad range of school facilities issues including security, technology, strategic planning and effective responses to threats, violent incidents, and natural disasters.

What's happening in DCPS?

Last year marked a dramatic increase in the amount of attention and money that was directed

You need to find someone in security who will work with your community, someone with resourcefulness who has the same outlook and vision the school has.

DCPS Principal

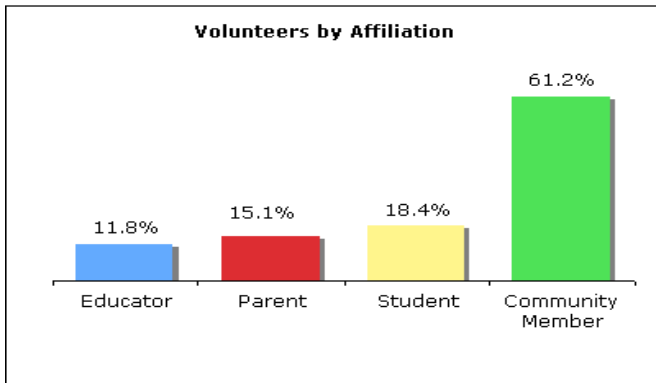
towards the improvement of DCPS facilities. Over \$200 million was spent to address major repairs including plumbing, athletic fields, and the Mayor's "buff and scrub" initiative, which involved work and materials donated by outside business. The focus on facilities continued during the summer of 2008, with another \$200 million spent on facilities work,

particularly in the consolidated schools that were receiving students from the 23 closed schools.

This fall the Mayor presented a \$1.3 billion master facilities plan (MFP) that promises to improve all school buildings by 2014. The 21st Century School Fund has developed an analysis of the MFP which is available on their web site at www.21csf.org.

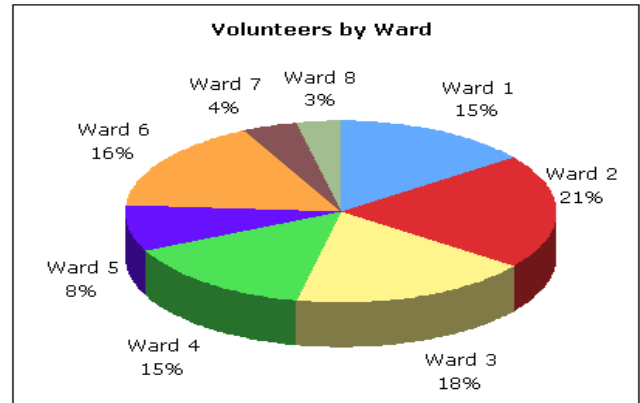
Acknowledgements

The Ready Schools Project cannot be conducted without volunteers – hundreds of them. This year well over 200 of them came forward to do everything from designing and field testing the survey instruments to attending training sessions to going to schools to interview principals to helping tabulate the data. Their dedicated work brought



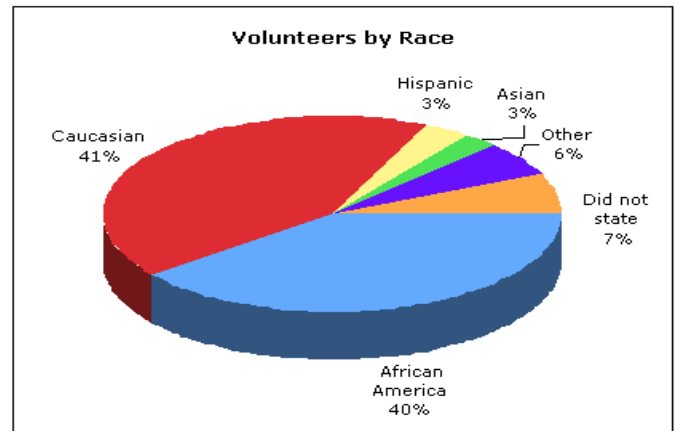
research teams. We thank them not only for the excellent information provided but also for their formidable efforts – often in the face of great obstacles – to provide the conditions their teachers need to teach and their students to learn.

Finally, we thank DCPS administration officials who themselves are working hard to increase the use of data in improving our schools, and who welcome our efforts to provide data gathered from the community’s perspective.



this community action research project to life and demonstrated once again the power of involving the community in collecting data that can lead to actions to improve our schools for all children.

So, thanks to all of our wonderful volunteers and a special thank you to the 109 principals who made time this year to talk with our volunteer



DC VOICE is committed to an ongoing dialogue around data and quality that can lead to a transparent framework for how we measure quality. There are places in the world, in this country and even in this city, where effective practices in public education occur every day. Our city must decide collectively how we hang on to what’s important and what trade-offs we must make to maintain them, while not standing in the way of changes that are needed to improve. We ask that you commit to attending one of these town hall discussions, once every three months, to share important data with your neighbors and learn how we can work together to improve public schools in our city. Working groups to turn these discussions into real action are also being formed. Visit www.dcvoice.org or call (202) 986-8535 to join them.