

DC VOICE Ready Classrooms Project

Do D.C. Secondary School Teachers have what they need to prepare
our students for college and careers?



Interviews with DC Public School Middle and High School Teachers

SPRING 2009

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DC VOICE Ready Classrooms Project

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INTRODUCTION

For the past five years, DC VOICE has conducted the Ready Schools Project which assesses the preparedness of the DC Public Schools for the opening of school in the fall. Trained volunteers conduct this community action research. Working in teams, volunteers conduct confidential interviews with local school principals. Started in 2004 with 50 volunteers who interviewed a representative sample of principals in 43 schools, the project has grown to include interviews with 109 school principals in 2008 and over 200 volunteers.

Each year Ready Schools Project volunteers and others have asked, “When are we going to interview teachers?” In the spring of 2009, with the support of grants from both the Community and Gates Foundations, DC VOICE was able to launch the Ready Classrooms Project. The volunteer researchers interviewed 104 teachers from 30 DC Public School middle and high schools between March 1 to April 9, 2009. The teachers interviewed were diverse in years of experience, race and ethnicity and content areas.

To construct the survey instrument, DC VOICE established a core committee made up of university and other researchers, reviewed existing teacher surveys used elsewhere, and field tested the survey drafts with current local teachers.¹ The reviews of other surveys helped create the three-part framework for the Ready Classrooms Project survey: Instruction, Relationships, and School Climate.

Several important themes emerged from the teacher responses in each area of the framework:

- **On instruction:** The good news is that 100 percent of the teachers unhesitatingly reported that they are available outside of class time to assist students when they need extra help. The not so good news is the lack of adequate curriculum to reach the needs of all students, and inadequate teaching resources and physical facilities in many schools.
- **On relationships:** Teachers listed the many strategies they utilize to get to know their students well, as well as how much they share materials, resources and/or instructional strategies with other teachers. The amount of administrative attention to and support for teachers appears to vary widely, and parent and community involvement is very low in many schools, and schools lack DCPS support to increase that involvement.
- **On school climate:** On the positive side, 89 percent of the teachers reported that they have the opportunity to teach the subject and grade that they know best and enjoy the most every day. But the supports for them to be as effective as possible are sorely lacking, including tangible resources as well as their own opportunities to be involved in decision making that directly affects them, and to receive praise for their work.

As with the Ready Schools Project, the interviews were confidential, and neither the names of participating teachers nor their schools will be used in this report. The data collected was entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and analyzed in several ways, including by school level and by the teachers' years of experience. The resulting findings have been reviewed and analyzed by both the Ready Classrooms Project core committee and by the Project's volunteer team leaders.

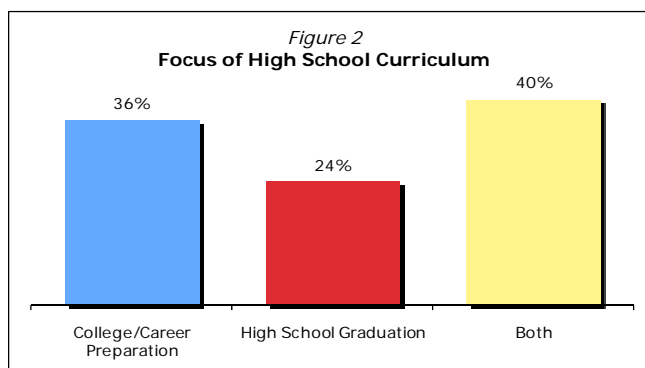
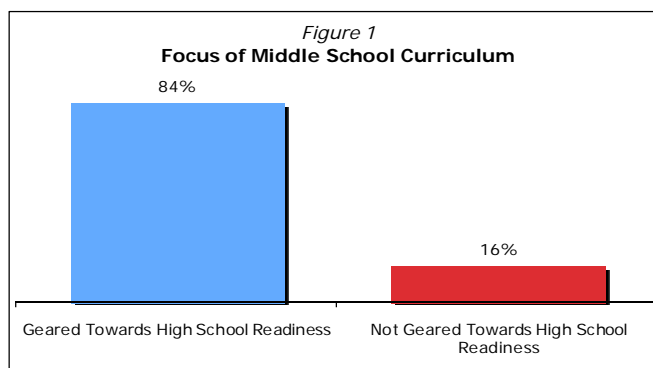
Given this is the first year for the Ready Classrooms Project, the data in this report provides a strong set of baseline data which can be used for taking actions to improve our secondary schools, and on which to build future inquiries. We welcome your feedback.

INSTRUCTION

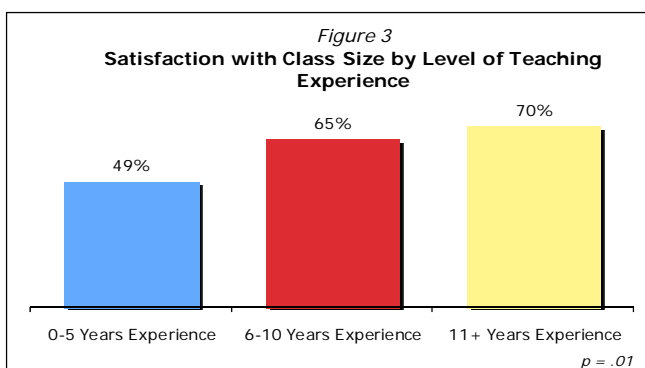
Felder and Brent (1999) defined good teaching as “instruction that leads to effective learning, which in turn means thorough and lasting acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and values the instructor or the institution has set out to impart.”² To achieve this goal, teachers must have certain basic tools: a school well organized for teaching and learning, the needed resources in place, and access to on-going training opportunities so that they can continue to improve their practice. These are the instructional issues raised in the Ready Classroom Project — school organization, resources, and professional development.

SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

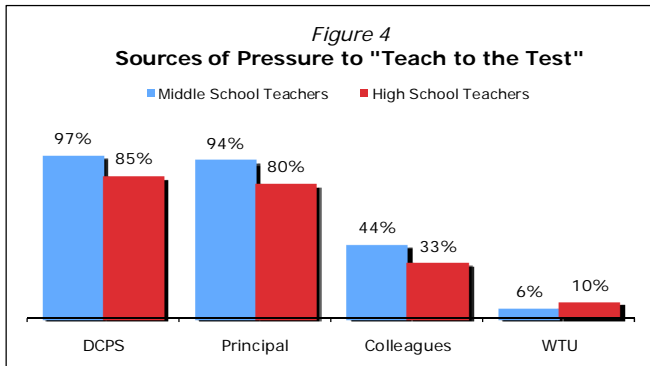
Both middle school and high schools teachers were asked about the focus of the curriculum at their school: whether it was focused primarily on graduation rates, on student’s readiness for their next education level or on both. As can be seen, 84 percent of the middle school teachers reported that their curriculum is geared towards high school readiness, 16 percent said it was not. At the high school level, 36 percent said the curriculum focuses on college/career preparation, 24 percent that it focuses on high school graduation, and 40 percent that the curriculum focuses on both.



The middle and high school teacher’s answers were very similar on satisfaction with class size: 63 percent of middle school teachers and 61 percent of high school teachers reported satisfaction with class size. But when broken down by years of teaching experience, the satisfaction numbers differed markedly. Of note at the high school level, several teachers reported large class rosters — in one case as many as 52 assigned to one class. However, actual attendance is in the 20s so the actual size at any one time is quite manageable.

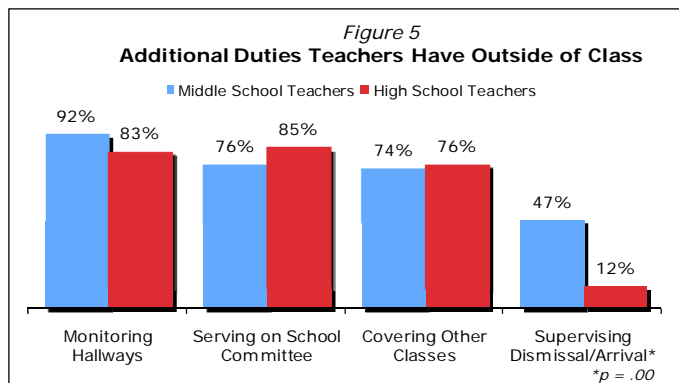


The answers to the question on whether teachers have pressure to “teach to the test” varied a great deal depending on the grade level the teachers were teaching. At the high school level, for



example, only the 10th grade is tested, so the question had less relevance for the 11th and 12th grade teachers interviewed. Of greater interest is where the pressure comes from: as Figure 4 shows, it’s almost equal between the school system and the local school principal, with much less pressure coming from colleagues, zero percent from parents, and a small amount of pressure from the Washington Teachers Union.

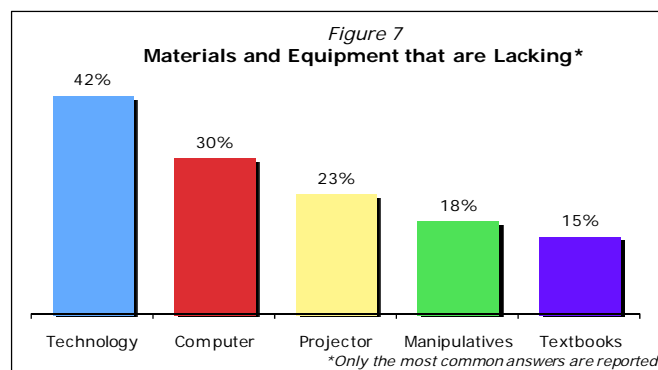
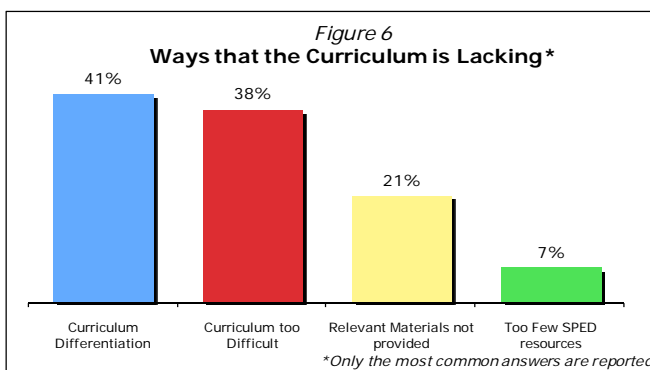
One hundred percent of the teachers reported that they are available outside of class time to assist students, mostly before and after schools, but also at lunch time and during school. When teachers were asked what additional duties they have in addition to classroom instruction, they responded as shown by school level (Figure 5). The high expectation that teachers cover classes when other teachers are absent suggests that teachers lack control over their own work, primarily because this results in the loss of planning periods.



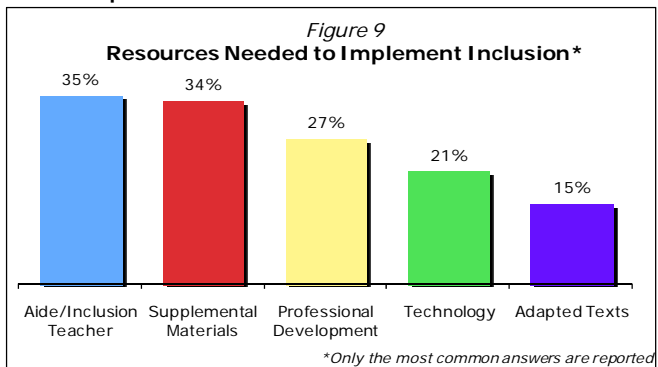
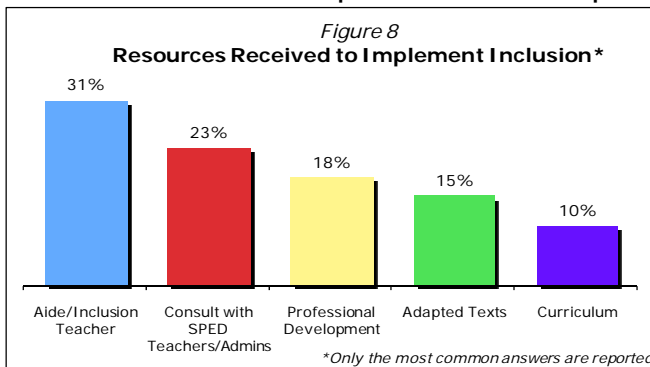
RESOURCES NEEDED

All teachers were asked if they have the curriculum, materials and equipment to meet the learning needs of all students, regardless of whether they are struggling, doing okay, or achieving at a proficient level. If they answered no to either question, they were then asked a follow-up question on what they need. The answers to the initial questions were not encouraging: just 43 percent of the teachers said the curriculum met all needs, and 57 percent replied the curriculum did not.

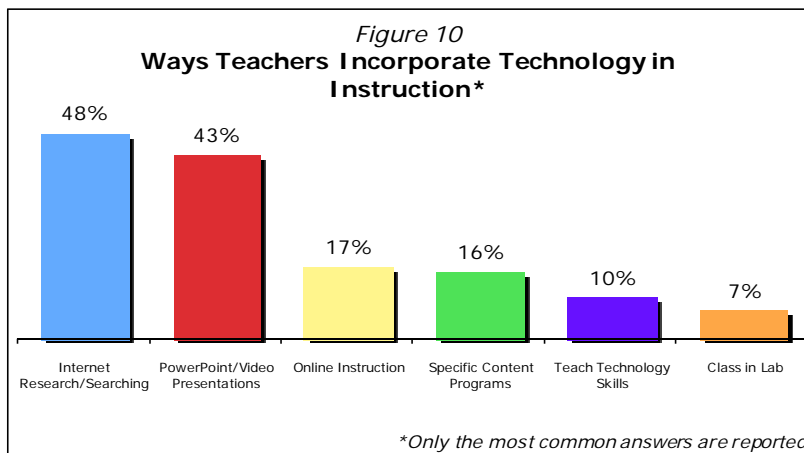
On materials and equipment 42 percent said they had what they needed to teach effectively, and 58 percent said they lacked what was needed.



On Special Education, the teachers were asked first whether they receive the resources needed to successfully include special education students in their classroom instruction, and also to list the kinds of support they have received as well as what additional supports would enable them to effectively implement inclusion. Interestingly, almost all teachers immediately responded that they implement inclusion in their schools, but as the findings show, the resources are often not in place to make this a successful reality. Just 37 percent reported having the resources needed to successfully include students with special needs in their classrooms, 61 percent replied they do not have what is needed, and two percent did not respond to this question.

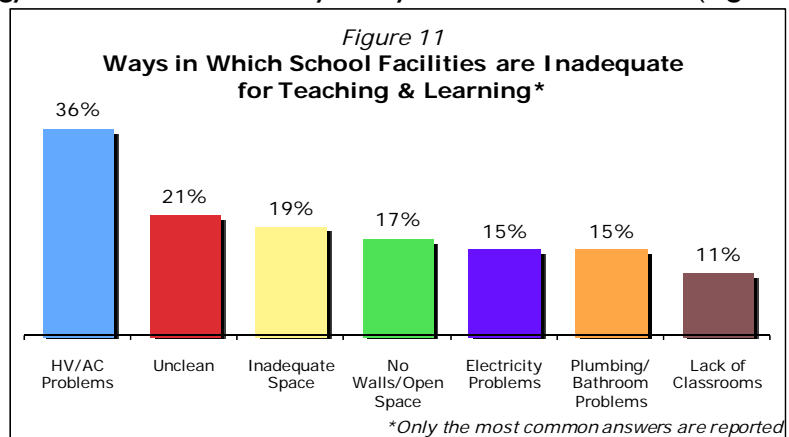


Eighty-four percent of the teachers reported using computers and the Internet in their instruction,



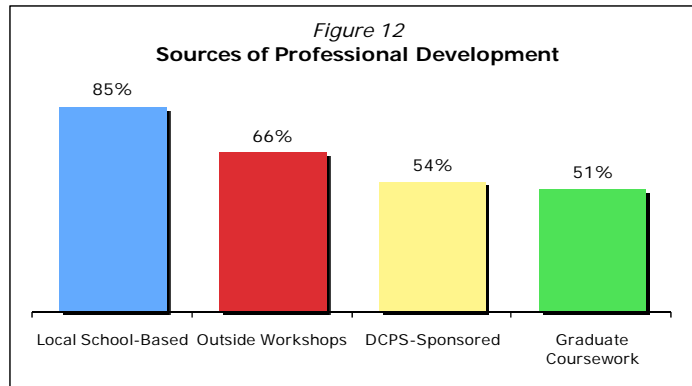
15 percent said they do not incorporate it, and 1 percent did not respond to the question. The number would undoubtedly be higher if more classrooms had enough working computers in them. Local school technology problems reported included nonworking or not enough computers, no computer labs in some schools, and lack of badly needed technology tools such as LCD projectors.

Teachers who reported using technology listed the various ways they use it in instruction (Figure 10). Teacher views on the extent to which their school's physical facilities adequately support teaching and learning are split right down the middle, with 49 percent of the teachers saying yes and 51 percent saying no. If they answered no they were asked what was lacking (Figure 11).

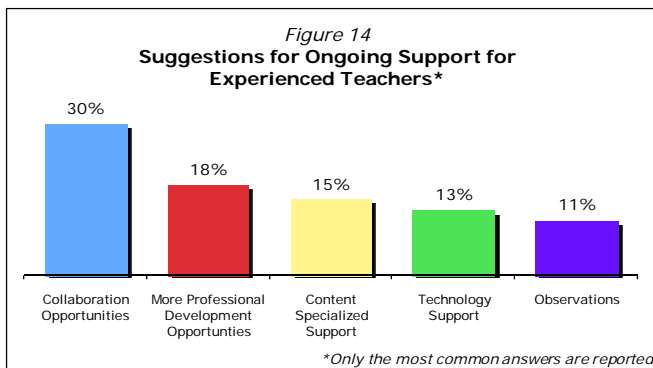
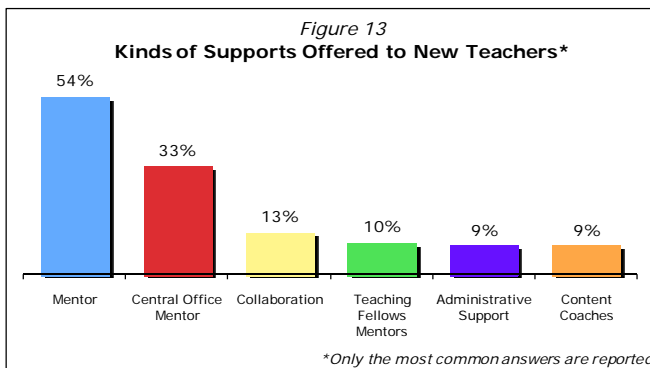


PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT and NEW TEACHER SUPPORT

Almost all of the teachers, over 93 percent, reported participation in professional development so far that school year. When asked whether they have input on topics for training, 39 percent said yes, 21 percent said no, and 40 percent said somewhat. Seventy-one percent reported they had received standards training in their content area in the past four years, 24 percent reported no standards training, and 4 percent did not respond to this question. The teachers reported the sources of professional development (Figure 12).



Teachers were asked about supports for both new and veteran teachers. Sixty-six percent reported that the new teachers at their school receive special support, and also listed the kinds of support they receive (Figure 13). Ninety-four percent of the teachers said they thought there should be ongoing support for experienced teachers and offered suggestions for the kinds of opportunities that should be provided (Figure 14). When teachers were asked if they have the opportunity to be mentored by other teachers, 42 percent said yes and 58 percent said no. However, when asked if they themselves had the opportunity to mentor other teachers, the numbers reversed: 64 percent said yes and 35 percent said no.

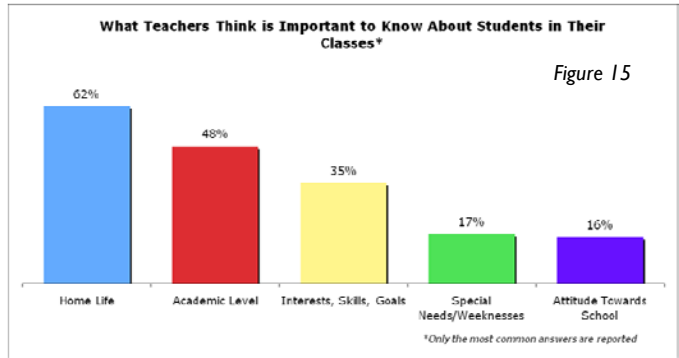


RELATIONSHIPS

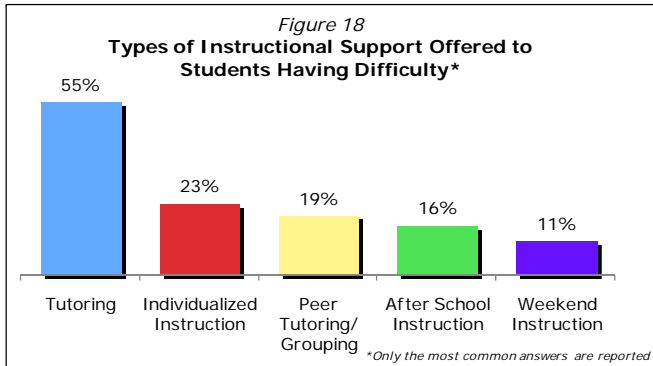
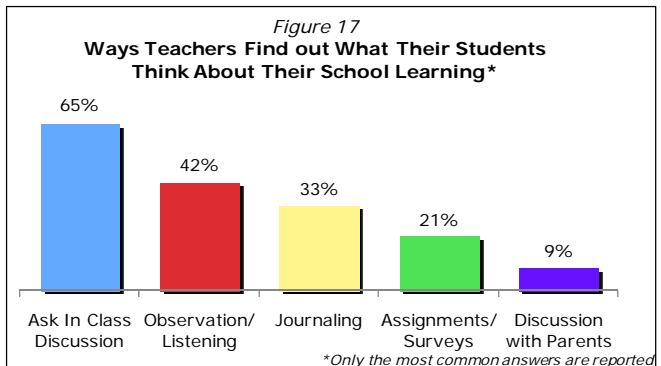
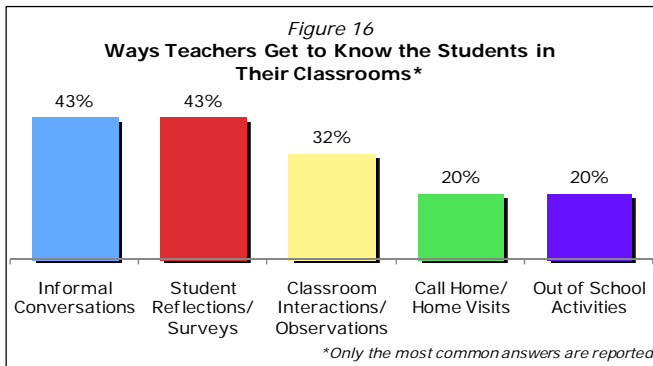
A significant body of research indicates that student achievement and student behavior are influenced by the quality of relationships between teacher and student, teacher and fellow teacher, teacher and parent/community and teacher and administrator (Bergin, 2009; Chance, 2009; Jones, 1981; Murray, 2009; Sather and Barton, 2006).³ A communicative and collaborative school atmosphere fosters an environment conducive for academic learning. The relationship questions in the Ready Classrooms Project covered four kinds of interaction: teacher/student, teacher/teacher, teacher/administrator, and teacher/parent.

TEACHER/STUDENT

The teachers were asked to list the three things they think are important to know about the students in their classes, how they get to know their students, and how they find out students' opinions about what they are learning in school. As can be seen in Figure 15, 62 percent of the teachers said it is important to know about their students' home life, followed by academic level at 48 percent and interests and goals at 35 percent.



They get to know their students in a variety of ways, with informal conversations and student reflections/surveys being the most frequent method at 43 percent, followed by classroom observations at 32 percent (Figure 16). To find out what the students think about their own

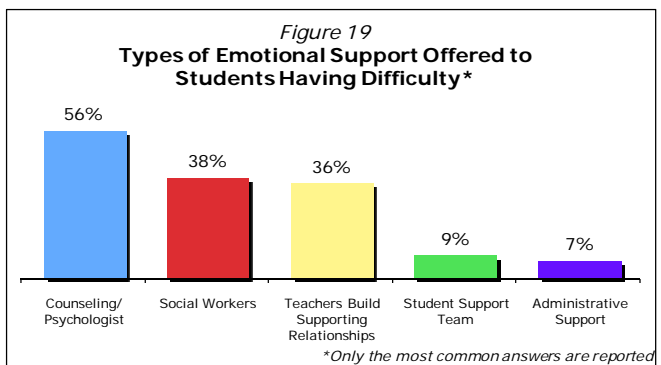


school learning, 65 percent of the teachers ask them directly as part of class discussions, 42 percent use observation and listening, and 33 percent have students communicate with them through journaling (Figure 17).

The teachers were also asked what types of both instructional and emotional supports are

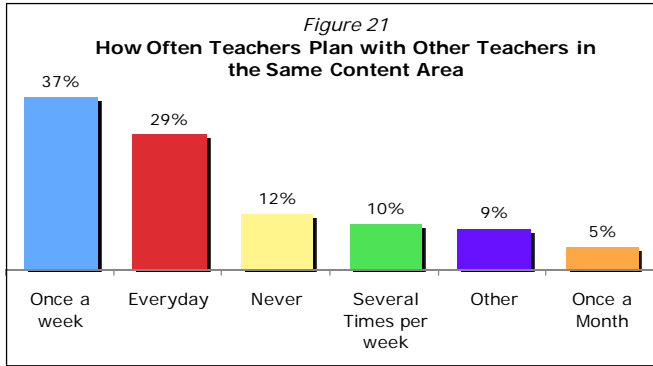
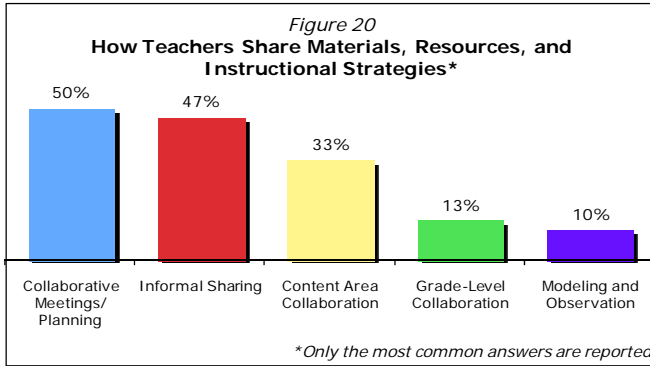
offered to students having difficulty inside or outside the classroom. Tutoring, at 55 percent, was the biggest response on instructional support, followed by individualized and after school instruction (Figure 18).

For emotional support, the three top responses were counseling/psychologist services at 56 percent, social workers at 38 percent, and reliance on supportive relationships that teachers have built with their students at 36 percent (Figure 19).



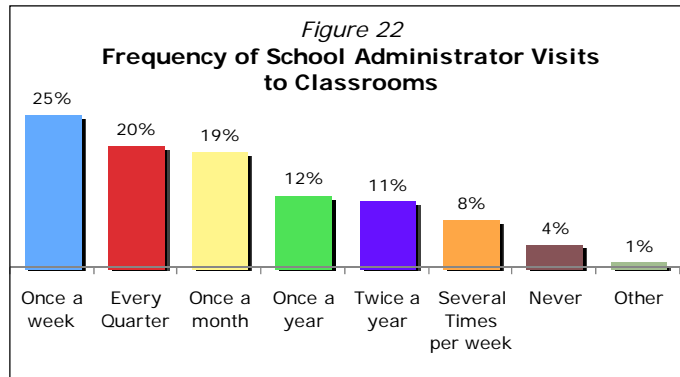
TEACHER/TEACHER

Teachers were asked not only if they shared materials, resources, and/or instructional strategies with other teachers, but also how they do so. Ninety-one percent indicated that they share with colleagues, with 50 percent saying sharing happens through collaborative planning meetings, 47 percent through informal exchanges, and 33 percent through content area meetings. When asked how often they have opportunities to plan with teachers who teach in the same content area, 37 percent said weekly, 29 percent daily and 10 percent several times a week. Just 12 percent reported never having such opportunities (Figure 21).



TEACHER/ADMINISTRATION

Teachers were asked how often administrators visit their classrooms, and the extent to which they meet with teachers individually to discuss instruction, testing data and/or student progress. Figure 22 shows that 25 percent of the teachers reported weekly visits, followed by 20 percent reporting every quarter and 19 percent once a month. When asked if principals regularly meet with teachers individually to discuss instruction issues, 32 percent responded yes and the remaining teachers pointed out that depending on the size of the school, such individual meetings would occur with assistant principals, department chairs, instructional coaches, etc.



TEACHER/PARENT/COMMUNITY

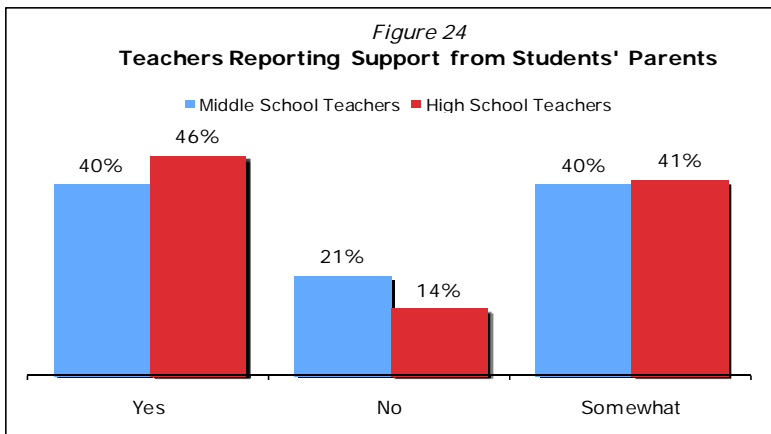
The questions regarding teacher and parent/community relationships covered parent support, school involvement with the surrounding community, and supports the school may receive from DCPS to help with parent and community involvement.

Figure 24 breaks out teacher responses on parental support by school level. Parents demonstrate their support in various ways, including contacting the school themselves and being responsive when teachers contact them, helping fundraise and provide supplies for the school, volunteering at school, and attending parent/teacher conferences.

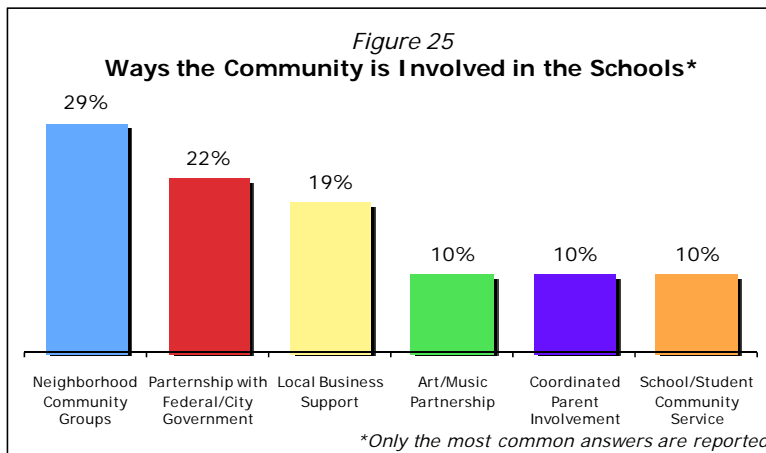
Several teachers indicated that parents have good intentions but lack knowledge on how to be involved. When asked if their school receives DCPS supports to help with parent and community involvement, 25 percent said yes, 61 percent said no, and 14 percent said they did not know if the school received any support in this area. When broken down by school levels, the answers differed markedly: 37 percent of middle schools but just 18 percent of high schools reported receiving DCPS

supports for parent and community involvement. Forty-two percent of the middle school and 71 percent of the high school teachers reported no support from DCPS; and 32 percent of middle school and 11 percent of high school teachers said they did not know if any support was received (Figure 23). Sixty-eight percent of the teachers re-

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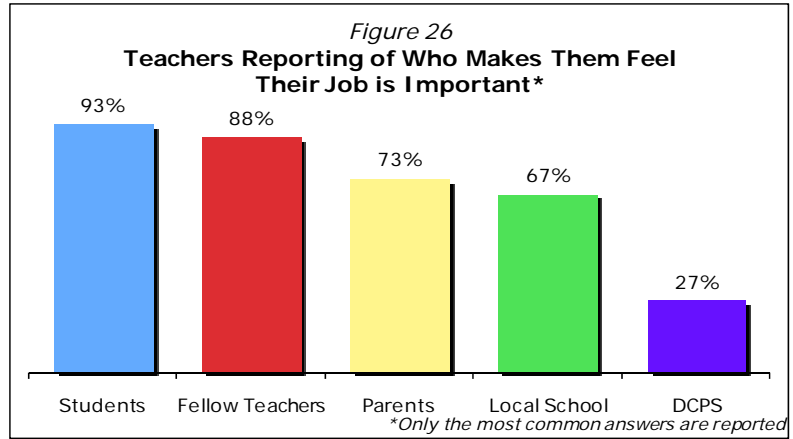
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SCHOOL CLIMATE

Research shows that school climate can have a big influence on both teaching and learning in schools. According to the National School Climate Center (2008), “School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures.”⁴ Accordingly, the Ready Classrooms Project questions on school climate covered daily experiences for both teachers and students as well as school environment and safety.

TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

To explore their sense of personal efficacy and empowerment, teachers were asked if they teach the subject and grade they know best and like most; how much input they have school decision-making; and whether they have received praise recently and are made to feel their job is important. Eighty-nine percent responded affirmatively when asked about what they teach at present. But teachers were also asked to use a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 meaning a low level of input and 5 a high level of input) to rate



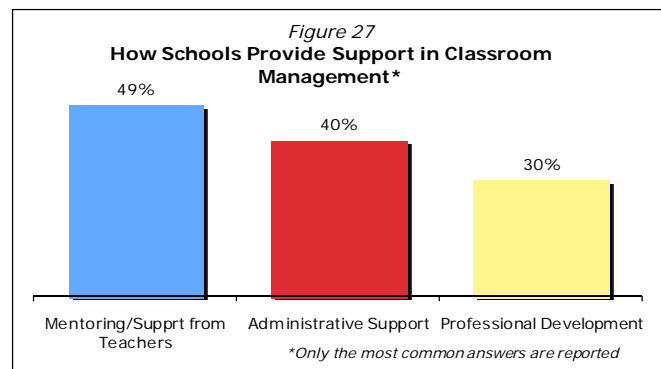
the extent to which they have input into decision-making. The average teacher rating was only 2.7.

Fifty-six percent of the teachers said yes when asked if they had received recognition or praise in the preceding seven days.

The teachers were presented with several options for entities/people who might make them feel their job is important; they could respond with more than one category. As Figure 26 shows, 93 percent of the teachers mentioned students, with fellow teachers at 88 percent, parents at 73 percent, the local school at 67 percent and DCPS at 27 percent. This question provoked comments that teachers feel that their experience is not presently valued or rewarded. Such comments came particularly from veteran teachers, but also came from younger certified teachers who plan to make teaching a career.

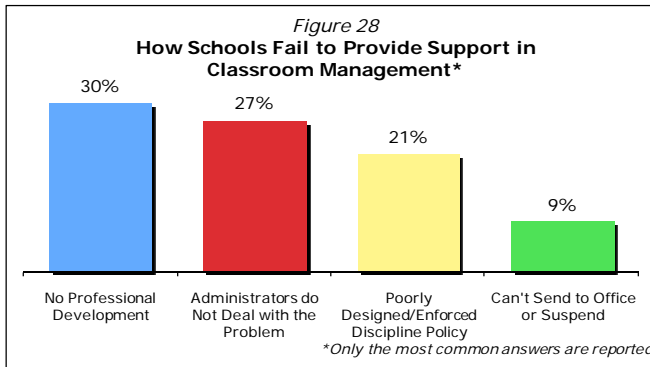
STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

Questions about school commitments to students and their teachers concerned the presence of a commitment to educate all students, supports teachers receive in classroom management, and presence of clearly stated and enforced school-wide expectations for student behavior. Fifty-nine percent of the teachers reported that their schools endeavor to educate



all students with no exceptions, noting the importance of committed staff with an attitude that all students can learn. The 41 percent responding negatively to these questions noted the negative impact of behavioral issues and an overemphasis on teaching to students achieving at the middle range, at the expense of those who are struggling or achieving above average.

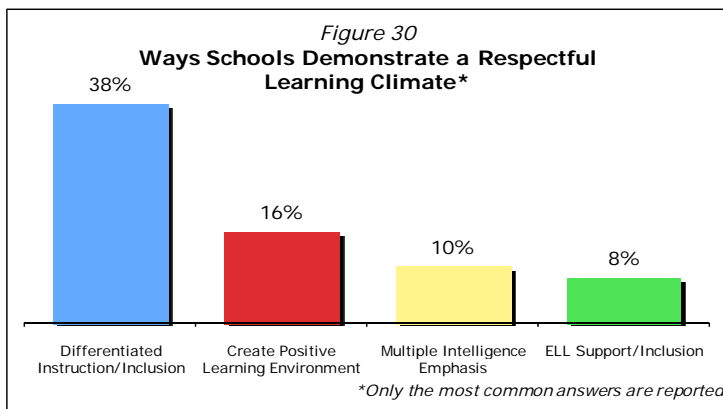
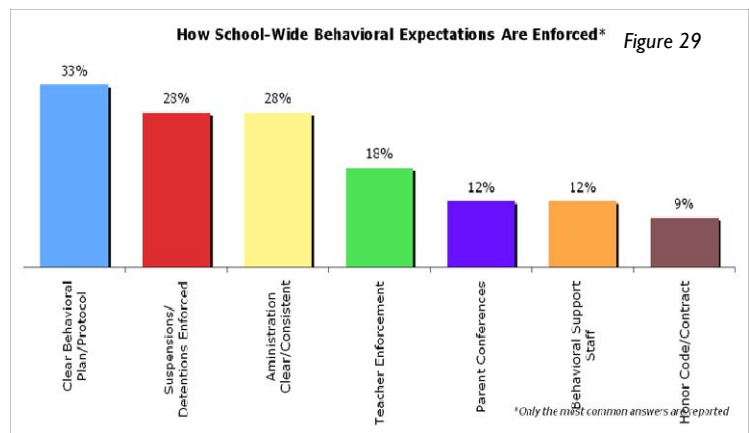
Just 45 percent reported that teachers receive support in classroom management. The remaining



teachers provided a range of examples to demonstrate this lack of support (Figure 28). The reporting on school-wide expectations for student behavior came in as a tie: 45 percent said yes and 45 percent said no regarding the presence of clearly stated and enforced expectations. Seventy-five percent of the teachers said enforcement needs to be consistent, and 44 percent said that rules and expectations need to be clearly stated (Figure 29).

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND SAFETY

The questions on environment and safety covered school climate and safety issues. Fifty-nine percent of the teachers reported that their schools have a climate that respects the way students learn, and they offered examples of the schools do this (Figure 30).

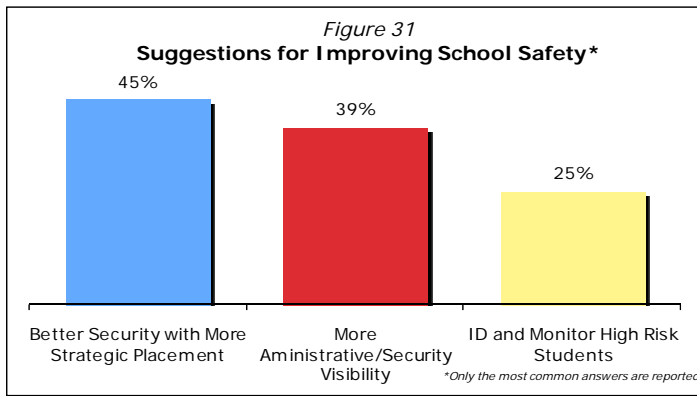


Teachers were asked to use a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 meaning not at all welcoming and 5 meaning extremely welcoming) to rate how welcoming their schools are to students. The average response was 3.2. When responses were broken out by teachers' years of experience, the numbers shifted: teachers with 0-5 years of experience responded at 2.7; teachers with 6-10 years at 3.5 and teachers with 11 and more

years of experience at 3.7.

Teachers rated the safety in their schools at a 3 on a 1-5 scale. This rating also changed depending on the years teachers had taught. Those with 0-5 years of experience rated the school's safety at 2.8; those with 6-10 years at 3.1 and those with 11 or more years of experience at 3.4. Teachers provided several suggestions for improving safety at their schools.

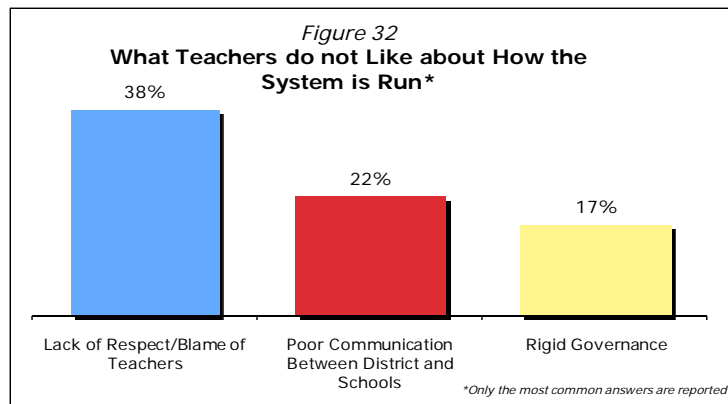
DCPS AND TEACHERS



The teachers were asked if they like how the school system is run and to provide reasons for their answers. Eighty percent of the teachers replied no to this question, 8 percent replied yes, and 12 percent replied that they both like and don't like how the system is run. Only 20 of the 104 teachers who were interviewed said they liked how the system is run, citing high standards and accountability, no-nonsense governance, and

efforts to professionalize teaching and improve evaluation as reasons for approval.

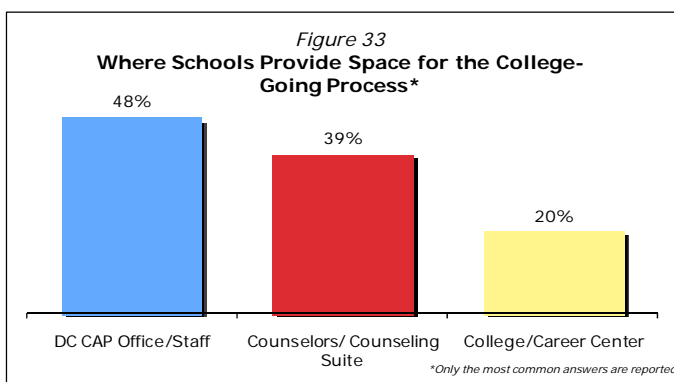
Thirty-eight percent said a lack of respect for and blaming of teachers are what they do not like about the how the system is run, 22 percent cited poor communication between the District and local schools, and 17 percent noted a rigid governance structure demonstrated by a top down approach that teachers say does not pay attention to what is happening in the classroom, nor allow for questions to be asked (Figure 32).



HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS ONLY

The high school teachers interviewed were asked three separate questions, about space in the school for college-going processes, about credit recovery, and whether every tenth grader is required to take the PSAT.

- Eighty-three percent reported their school devotes a prominent physical space to the college-going processes (Figure 33).



- Ninety-seven percent reported that students who have failed classes are referred to a credit recovery program.
- Eighty-three percent reported that every 10th grader is required to take the PSAT, 11 percent responded no on this, and 6 percent said they did not know.

CONCLUSION

One of the primary goals of the Ready Classrooms Project was to raise up the teacher voice; to hear loud and clear the views of the people who are on the frontlines every day in our classrooms, teaching our students and preparing them for college and the workplace. By talking to over 100 middle and high school teachers, we hoped to shine a spotlight on the challenges and successes teachers experience every day, and on what they need in order to do their jobs well. In reporting what teachers told us, we emphasized the importance of high quality teaching by providing information in three areas: instruction, relationships and school climate. As noted earlier, research has shown that high quality teaching is the single most determinant in student achievement. According to Stanford University professor Linda Darling-Hammond (2009), “In addition to training, recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers, the United States should look to the successful measures implemented by other countries. Those include adequate school funding, well-organized curricula, meaningful assessments, and strong teaching systems that include adequate compensation, mentoring and working conditions that foster collaboration, adequate planning time and opportunities for active research.”⁵

Unlike the Ready Schools Project that uses confidential interviews with local school principals to assess whether our schools are ready for the opening of classes in the fall, the Ready Classrooms Project conducted in the spring of 2009 focused on whether the supports needed for high quality teaching were in place throughout the school year. Together these community action research projects provide both a fuller picture of the DC Public Schools, and also provide information that all stakeholders, from parents to policy makers, can use to improve our schools.

The interviews with teachers demonstrated that on the one hand there is a great deal of dedication on the part of many teachers to do the best job possible. On the other hand, all too often the resources and supports teachers need are not in place. These resources and support have to come from many places, including DC Public Schools central administration, but also from administrators, parents, community members and students. We all have a part to play in making our schools places of excellence. Teachers certainly cannot do the job alone. We invite you to join DC VOICE in our efforts to rally resources and support for all of our schools and for the staff and students in them.

End Notes:

¹ Gordon, Gary, "Building Engaged Schools, Getting the Most Out of America's Classrooms" Gallup Poll organization questions for teachers, 2006; The Education Trust, "Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students", 2005; Fleischer, Cathy, "Teachers Organizing for Change, Making Literacy Learning Everybody's Business", 2000; National Center for Education Statistics, "Job Satisfaction Among America's Teachers: Effects of Workplace Conditions, Background Characteristics, and Teacher Compensation", 1997; Youth Investment Forum, "New Directions in School Reform: Youth-Centered Strategies versus Youth-Centered Reform", 2002; DC VOICE Ready Schools Project Teacher Focus Groups Questions, 2004 and 2005.

² Richard M. Felder and Rebecca Brent, "How to Improve Teaching Quality," Quality Management Journal 6(2) 1999: 9-21; <http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Papers/TQM.htm> (accessed 08/14/09)

³ Christi Bergin and David Bergin, "Attachment in the Classroom", Educational Psychology Review v 21 n 2 2009: 141-170; Patti L. Chance and Susan N. Segura, "a Rural High School's Collaborative Approach to School Improvement", Journal of Research in Rural Education v24 n5 2009: 1-12. Vernon F. Jones and Louise Jones, Responsible Classroom Discipline (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1981) 95-215; Christopher Murray, "Parent and Teacher Relationships as Predictors of School Engagement and Functioning among Low-Income Urban Youth," Journal of Early Adolescence v29 n3 2009: 376-404; S. Sather and R. Barton, "Implementing professional learning teams", Principal's Research Review 1(5) 2006: 1-8.

⁴ National School Climate Center, Center for Social and Emotional Education, and National Center for Learning and Citizenship at Education Commission of the States, 2008: 5.

⁵ "Darling-Hammond urges support for quality teaching", Education Minnesota; <http://www.educationminnesota.org/news/edmnupdates/090715questdarling-hammond.aspx> (accessed 08/14/09)

DC VOICE THIS FALL :

September:

Ready Schools Project 2010 Interviews with Principals

October:

Charter Schools Project Data Release

November:

Ready Schools Project 2010 Data Release



An overarching tenet of DC VOICE is that everyone in the community is needed to raise academic achievement. Consequently, the DC VOICE mission is to inform and mobilize the public to hold both the schools and the community accountable for providing high quality teaching and learning for all.

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