



District of Columbia Public Schools, Washington, D.C.

Preparing principals to lead reform in the nation's capital

School buildings: 110

High schools (9-12): 17

Middle schools (6-8): 10

Elementary schools (pre-K-5): 60

Education buildings (pre-K-8): 16

Other: 7

Total enrollment: 45,557 students

African American: 76.2 percent

White: 8.5 percent

Asian American: 2.1 percent

Hispanic: 13 percent¹

District of Columbia Public Schools, or DCPS, serves more than 45,000 students in Washington, D.C. Approximately 70 percent of these students are African American, and close to 80 percent of them are economically disadvantaged.² The system had well-documented challenges when Adrian Fenty (D) was elected mayor in 2006. After taking office, Fenty introduced legislation to eliminate the school board and shift authority for the city's schools to the mayor's office, which was subsequently passed by the city council.³ Less than two weeks later, Mayor Fenty introduced Michelle Rhee as the new chancellor of DCPS.⁴ Rhee, who had gained prominence within education reform circles as a result of her work with The New Teacher Project—which she founded in 1997—wasted no time becoming an agent of change within the DCPS system. Both lionized and demonized by the media, Rhee gained national notoriety before her resignation in 2010.⁵ The reform measures set in motion during her tenure have positioned DCPS as a national leader of the education reform movement.

In 2009, Rhee introduced IMPACT, a rigorous teacher-evaluation system that tied teacher job security and compensation to student-growth measures. She argued that “by using value-added analysis we will be able to reward and recognize the significant contributions of every adult in the school building.”⁶ With the implementation of IMPACT, DCPS became the first district to tie student-growth measures to teacher evaluation and compensation. Innovation, however, did not come without controversy. *The Washington*

Post predicted that the system was “likely to be another flashpoint in Rhee’s turbulent relationship with local and national union leaders.”⁷ The president of the teachers union claimed that the new system, in effect, had transformed teaching from an art to nothing more than “bean counting.”⁸

Despite initial skepticism, a study released in fall 2013 showed that IMPACT has been successful at increasing voluntary attrition of the lowest-performing teachers—and improving the performance of retained teachers who have been incentivized by the prospects of lucrative bonuses or increased job security.⁹ As the system shed its weakest teachers, it replaced them with stronger performers and facilitated improvement of the teachers who remained. Kaya Henderson, who worked alongside Rhee before succeeding her as chancellor in 2010, hails this as a triumph. “The system we designed to improve the quality of teaching,” she explained, “is actually improving the quality of teaching.”¹⁰

The initial success of the IMPACT program likely has to do with the careful design of the policy, as well as with heavy financial investment on the part of the district, which budgeted for increased levels of instructional support to help teachers improve, generous performance bonuses of up to 25,000 dollars, and permanent raises of up to 27,000 dollars.¹¹ Three years into the implementation of IMPACT, student scores on the District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System, or DC CAS, are beginning to show modest gains.¹² More impressively, however, the district is outpacing other urban districts on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP. In fact, the district’s NAEP data, across all grades and subject areas, is at the very top of the 21 urban districts across the nation that took part in the Trial Urban District Assessment project.¹³

Teachers are evaluated under IMPACT in four areas, the first of which is student achievement as measured by the DC CAS—or other assessments if the teacher is in a subject or grade not tested by the DC CAS. Second, teachers are measured on their instructional expertise through as many as five annual observations, three of which are conducted by the building administrator and two of which are conducted by “master educators” who are not tied to a specific building. Third, teachers are rated on their collaborative skills. Fourth, teachers are scored on professionalism.¹⁴

For the student-achievement measure, DCPS contracts with the firm Mathematica Policy Research to design and calculate an individual, value-added student-achievement score, which comprises 35 percent of the teacher’s evaluation measure.¹⁵ The score is, essentially, a measurement of the difference between the predicted and actual scores that a teacher’s students get on the DC CAS. Another 15 percent of the teacher evaluation comes from student performance on “teacher-assessed student data.”¹⁶ Forty percent of a teacher’s evaluation under IMPACT comes from multiple observations and feedback against the district’s “Framework for Teaching and Learning” (see Appendix A)¹⁷ The number of observations a teacher experiences varies depending on the teacher’s proficiency level, with beginning teachers receiving five annually and expert teachers receiving one to three.¹⁸

In the 2012-13 school year, DCPS rolled out IMPACT for school leaders. Under IMPACT, principals are evaluated under two separate categories: student-achievement goals and the leadership-framework standards. For the first category, principals are responsible for setting student-achievement goals for the building, against which they are held accountable via their evaluation. These goals must address both proficiency and growth on the DC CAS exams in reading and math, as well as school-specific goals, some of which must align with district areas of focus.¹⁹ For example, at the high school level, there must be a school-specific goal with a ninth-grade focus and another with a graduation focus. At the elementary school level, principals must focus at least one school-specific goal on a literacy-related district initiative, such as phonics, small-group literacy instruction, or shared reading strategies.²⁰

For the 2012-13 school year, principals were scored on their goals in one of five ways. First, if the building exceeded a goal by more than 1 percent, then the principal received a “goal exceeded” ranking. If the building was within 1 percent above or below the goal, the principal received a “goal met” ranking. If the building did not meet the goal, the principal ranking reflected whether the building scores improved, declined, or stagnated.²¹ The proficiency and growth goals carried a greater weight than the school-specific goals. In order for a principal to earn an overall ranking of “highly effective,” he or she had to meet or exceed the proficiency and growth goals in reading and math and could not have declining or stagnant scores on any school-specific goal.²²

The second category for principal evaluation under IMPACT measures performance against DCPS’ “Leadership Framework for Principals,” which consists of the following six standards (see Appendix B):²³

1. Instruction
2. Talent
3. School culture
4. Operations
5. Family and community
6. Personal leadership

Each standard has “key themes,” or indicators, on which leaders are evaluated to be at one of four levels of proficiency: highly effective, effective, developing, or ineffective.²⁴ Instruction comprises 25 percent of a principal’s evaluation in this category, with the other five standards comprising the remaining 75 percent.²⁵ Principals are formally assessed on the Leadership Framework in the middle of the year and again at the end of the year.

The system is high stakes. Principals who are rated highly effective receive performance bonuses of at least \$15,000; they receive double that if they lead a high-needs school.²⁶ Since school principals serve one-year contracts in DCPS, they must be reappointed to their positions annually. A strong evaluation under IMPACT provides some measure of job security, as principals who have an average score of at least 3.0 on the Leadership Framework will not be considered for nonreappointment, while those who score below the mark remain candidates for nonreappointment.²⁷

In anticipation of the IMPACT rollout for school leaders, the school district doubled the number of instructional superintendents in order to facilitate greater support for building principals, including more observation and feedback, as well as opportunities for school clusters to meet more regularly for “customized professional development.”²⁸ According to Hilary Darilek, deputy chief of principal effectiveness at DCPS, “the goal was to move the superintendent role from a compliance-based position to one where the superintendent could observe and support principals and have a consistent and significant presence in schools.”²⁹ As a result, the instructional superintendents have developed stronger relationships with principals.³⁰

Additionally, the district brings administrators together each summer and at least four times throughout the school year for a Leadership Academy designed to support and enhance administrative capacity among principals and assistant principals.³¹ The instructional superintendents, senior district leadership, or members of the Principal Effectiveness Team facilitate the sessions. The Principal Effectiveness Team also solicits ongoing feedback from principals after each Leadership Academy, which informs and guides future leadership-development planning. The Principal Effectiveness Team’s willingness to solicit and consider feedback concerning the content and quality of its trainings provides an example to principals of how important it is for those at all levels of educational leadership to engage in the practice of continuous feedback and improvement.

DCPS also provides opportunities for principals to tailor their growth activities to their own specific needs and to access members of their peer groups as part of their professional-development network. Principals self-select into professional-learning communities that focus “on the subject most relevant to their work, interests or development needs.”³² Principals are also grouped together in learning communities within their geographic clusters to work on issues that may be presenting within their schools. Lastly, principals are given some autonomy over professional-development budget money for their buildings, which allows them to select trainings they might wish to attend or to send faculty members to selected trainings.³³

Change of this magnitude never comes easily, and IMPACT for school leaders came under fire when principal ratings for the first year were announced and half of the principals were rated as “developing.” The president of the administrators union decried IMPACT, suggesting that any system that ranked half of the principals as “developing” was inherently flawed. “It’s not fair. It’s not equal,” she was quoted as saying in *The Washington Post*. “These people are not failures. They’re doing outstanding work every day.”³⁴ Eight percent of the district’s 120 principals lost their jobs due to “ineffective” ratings, and only 14 were rated as highly effective and thus eligible to receive performance bonuses.³⁵ When the 2013-14 school year started, one-fifth of the schools in the district had new leadership due to promotion, nonreappointment, retirement, or resignation. The rate of principal turnover in DCPS is higher than that of the surrounding suburban districts and has been a flashpoint for critics of the principal evaluation, appointment, and reappointment process.³⁶ However, turnover among the principal force was actually higher in the years prior to the implementation of the IMPACT program. Principal attrition has decreased significantly under IMPACT from its levels of the prior two years, when close to 30 percent of buildings got new principals each year.³⁷

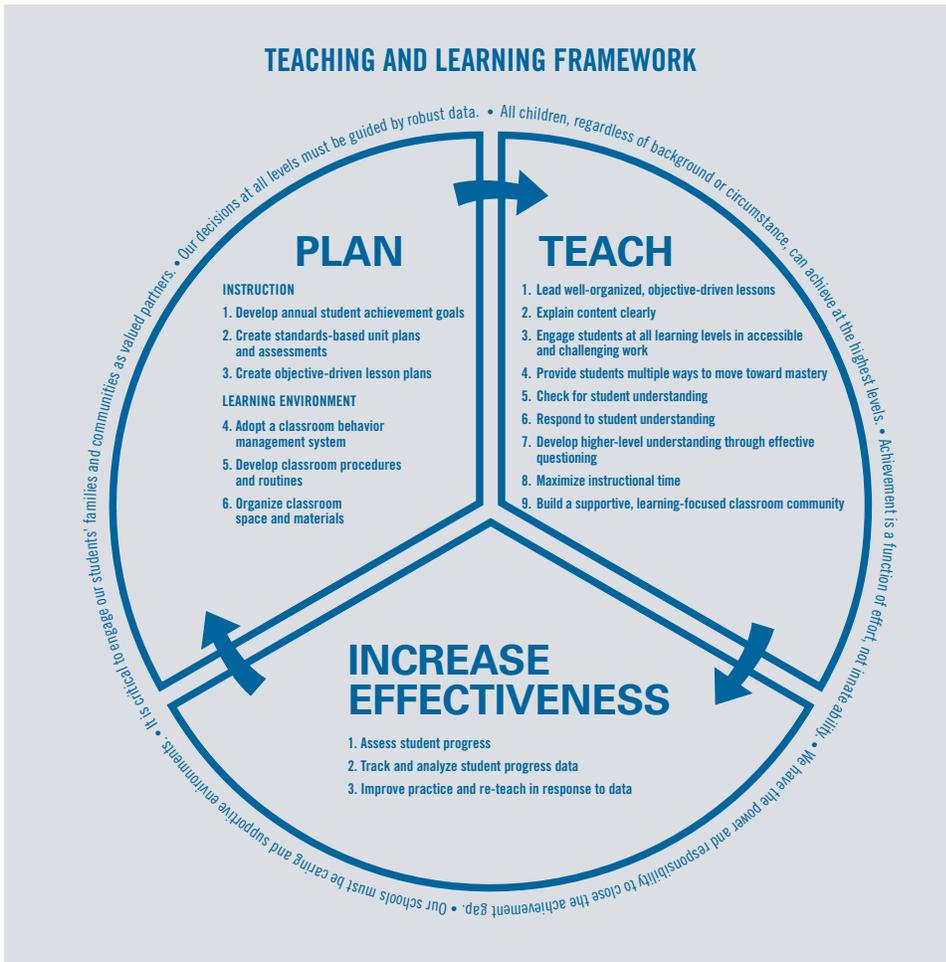
Acknowledging the importance of consistency in leadership, Chancellor Henderson places a high priority on recruiting and hiring the highest-caliber candidates to put in the new principal positions. “More than anything else,” she recently declared, “we need to get the right people leading our schools.”³⁸ While district leadership seeks to stabilize its principal force moving forward, it understands that transformative change is rarely comfortable and remains committed to reforming the system. “We expect that there will always be some level of attrition, whether it’s due to principals moving on to promotions or other positions or principals not meeting expectations,” reflected Darilek. “We are continuing to work on ways to recognize and reward our high-performing principals through performance-based bonuses, awards programs, and development opportunities.”³⁹

DCPS recognizes the importance of building the leadership capacity of its teachers in order to support the improvement of instruction at the building level. DCPS has invested in and partnered with external teacher-leadership programs such as the Turnaround Teacher Teams, or T3 Initiative, and it has also developed its own in-house Teacher Leadership Innovation pilot, which focuses on creating new teacher-leader roles in individual schools. These programs help identify teachers, coaches, and assistant principals with leadership potential and build their vital leadership skills. This type of capacity development is a vital support to the principal. DCPS offers a principal-preparation pathway known as the Mary Jane Patterson Fellowship, which is an 18-month, cohort-based program “characterized by rich learning experiences,” including a residency in a leadership position within the DCPS schools.⁴⁰ The district has also partnered with the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University to offer an executive master’s degree of leadership tailored for practicing principals within DCPS. The program objectives focus heavily on skills related to personal influence and effectiveness, such as motivational speaking, difficult conversations, stakeholder relationships, and influencing without authority.⁴¹

DCPS is an example of an urban school system that has embraced ambitious reform and, despite resistance to change, persisted in going about the work of improving instruction and leadership in its buildings. The IMPACT program represents the leading edge of reform in regard to human capital management in the educational setting, and the district has admirably weathered the initial challenges of implementing the system. Recognizing the importance of school leaders in implementing IMPACT, improving instructional quality, and driving student success, DCPS has embraced the work of principal development in a comprehensive and strategic way. Through a robust leadership framework, increased access to observation and feedback, relevant training and peer support, and a pipeline for future leaders, DCPS is not only supporting principal development, but, more importantly, it is supporting its stated purpose of ensuring “that every DCPS school provides a world-class education that prepares ALL of our students, regardless of background or circumstance, for success in college, career, and life.”⁴²

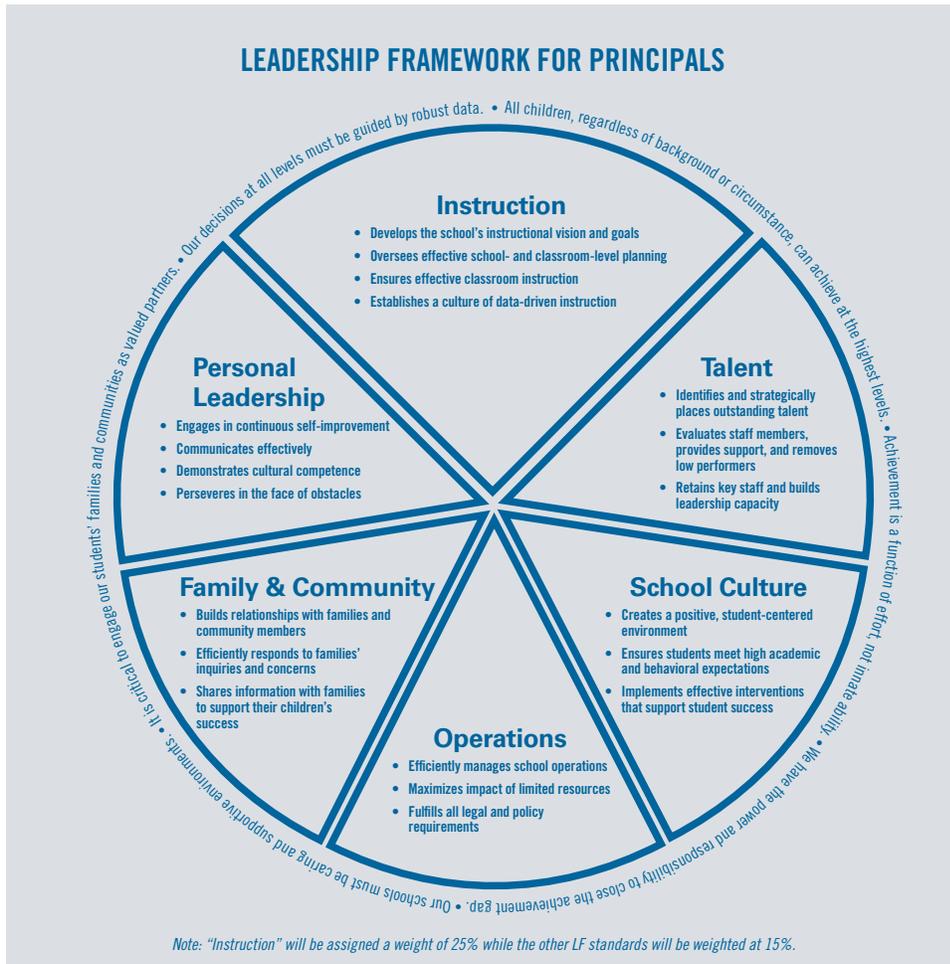
Appendix A

Framework for Teaching and Learning
District of Columbia Public Schools
(Reproduced with the permission of DCPS)



Appendix B

Leadership Framework for Principals
District of Columbia Public Schools
(Reproduced with the permission of DCPS)



Endnotes

- 1 For school buildings, see District of Columbia Public Schools, "Facts and Statistics: 2010-2011," available at <http://archive.today/emEP> (last accessed June 2014); personal communication from Meredith Zackey, coordinator, school leadership strategy and principal effectiveness, District of Columbia Public Schools, January 16, 2014. For demographics, see Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, "The State of the District of Columbia Public Schools 2010: A Five Year Update" (2010), available at <http://www.washlaw.org/pdf/DC%20Public%20Schools-5%20Year%20Update%20-%20Final.pdf>.
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- 18 Ibid.
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- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Personal communication from Hilary Darilek, deputy chief, principal effectiveness, District of Columbia Public Schools, January 15, 2014.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
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- 37 Emma Brown, "New principals for at least 24 DCPS schools," *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2013, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/new-principals-for-at-least-23-dcps-schools/2013/08/14/42f3518a-0135-11e3-9a3e-916de805f65d_story.html.
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