Washington DC schools plan to expand charters, cut jobs

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Washington DC public schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson has announced a plan to "improve" public school performance in the District of Columbia. Among other things, the plan's implementation could result in the closing or replacement by charter of as many as three dozen public schools in the district. Other proposals include the possible elimination of school libraries and a regularly scheduled "excessing" of personnel.

Henderson commented on the plan: "As costs continue to increase in future years, we will need to make additional cuts unless we work together to establish systems of public schools—both traditional and charter—which use our limited resources wisely, strategically and efficiently."

If implemented, the closings would occur primarily in the "low-performing" southeast section of the nation's capital. The area is among the poorest in the US.

A study commissioned by DC Deputy Mayor for Education De'Shawn Wright uses a system of "tiers" to designate a school's ranking as high-performing or low-performing. The study by Chicago-based consulting firm IFF found that nearly three-dozen schools, or one third of the city's total, fell under the "low performing" category and recommended them for closure or "revamping". One proposal would extend the length of the school day in designated areas, mimicking the schedule of some charter schools.

IFF's findings have been criticized due to the firm's reported dealings with charter schools. The firm has allegedly made $57 million from loans to charters in the Chicago region. Consequently, the nonprofit's study was underwritten by a $100,000 loan from the Walton family, founders of Wal-Mart and renowned advocates of privatization of the public sector and school charterization. The family is a major benefactor for the charter school system in the District.

With 40 percent of its 50,000 student population in charter schools, DC is second only to New Orleans in charter enrollment.

In line with the proposals to expand charter schools, another announcement by the DC Public School board (DCPS) detailed its decision to "excess," or temporarily lay off, as many as 333 educators. This will result in an increased workload on teaching staffs as well as less qualified and underpaid teachers in the remaining schools. Students will be crowded into classrooms unable to meet their educational needs.

Though ostensibly tied to the shifting of budget funding and changing of school curriculums, the move comes amidst a general atmosphere of austerity and budget cuts being planned all across the board in the city's public sector.

In relation to the targeting of teachers' jobs, Henderson said that "the excessing process is essential as it helps us ensure that all of our staff [is] located where they are needed for the coming school year."

The decision provides that teachers with "good performance" who cannot secure a new job placement by August 15 could either receive a $25,000 buyout, retirement with full benefits, or a "grace year" in which a position within the school system will be "found" for them. The jobs of those deemed to have an unsatisfactory performance record would be subject to elimination. This process was used against 384 teachers in 2011 and 373 teachers in 2010.

These moves come in the aftermath of a 2010 contract signed by then-chancellor Michelle Rhee, who eased the criteria for eliminating teaching staff. Of particular significance was the "mutual consent" clause, which has allowed school principals a freer hand in eliminating senior staff members. The clause is

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widely seen as a method to eliminate higher-paid teachers in schools labeled “failing” by the administration.

Henderson, successor to Rhee, has stated her intent to follow in her mentor’s footsteps. Rhee shuttered more than two dozen schools in the District as public schools chancellor in 2007-2010. (See “Ex-Washington, DC schools chief escalates campaign against public education”)

The DC government web page states that “DCPS is also working with its union partners to provide as much information as possible about displaced employees to help facilitate the placement process.”

Another possibility floated was the elimination of school librarians in public schools with an enrollment count of fewer than 300 students. Of the District’s 123 schools, nearly a third fall into such a category.

In an interview with the *Washington Examiner*, Henderson was quoted as saying: “We have invested in full-time librarians for the last three or four years and we haven’t seen the kind of payoff we’d like.” This, despite the fact that school libraries have been connected to higher levels of literacy and learning, even being touted for doing so on the DCPS’s web site.

The funding for librarians at schools with more than 300 students will be shifted to school principals, who can then decide whether they want to hire a librarian at all.

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