

Washington, DC schools chancellor unveils new scheme to defund public schools

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A recent change in policy by the Washington, DC Public Schools system (DCPS) will allow for the wholesale defunding of traditional education in the District of Columbia. D.C. education chancellor Kaya Henderson has stated that DCPS funding will decrease by \$8 million due to a decision to reclassify the majority of public schools as “small schools.” The announcement comes as D.C. mayor Vincent Gray’s budget proposal for fiscal year 2014 has been under discussion by the district’s legislative bodies. Buried inside the proposal are plans to decrease funding to public education in the city.

The drop in funding is being couched in claims that the new status will be a closer reflection of projected enrollment than in previous years. According to Henderson, DCPS had been receiving funding for a projection of 47,000 students when the total enrollment number was closer to 45,000. The new funding formula is an attempt to “fix” the discrepancy. This means that schools with smaller enrollment numbers this year compared to last will see a significant decrease in funding.

One such school, Stuart Hobson Middle School, is losing \$400,000 in funding as a result of having 50 fewer students than projected. As a result, the school will lose many full-time positions, including a librarian, two special education instructors, a technology instructor and its entire Spanish language program.

Furthermore, school size classifications, which determine funding for full-time staff and faculty, are being retooled to increase savings for the city government. Previously, a school with fewer than 300 students was designated as a “small school,” thus receiving less funding. Now, that designation applies to schools with upward of 400 students. The average school size of DCPS is 400 students, with the majority

of them being elementary schools. Such a policy allows for the manifold downgrading and defunding of the majority of D.C. public schools.

A DCPS spokeswoman said the changes to the small-school threshold will allow 250 teachers to be added to the system, citing examples of elementary schools that will for the first time receive programs like art and foreign language. “We made a deliberate decision this year to invest in classroom and related arts teachers at elementary and education campuses,” she added. However, this is robbing Peter to pay Paul, as more than two dozen schools will lose funding for full-time library, art, and foreign language positions.

Conversely, public charters will see an increase in funding due to a 10 percent boost in enrollment. The public school system exists parallel to D.C.’s public charter system, which, at roughly 40,000 students, manages a number nearly equivalent to traditional schools. Next to New Orleans, Washington is the most charter-friendly school district in the United States.

As it stands, the broader classification will affect school librarians the hardest. Previously, schools with at least 300 students were given funding for one full-time librarian. Under the new classification, the 28 District public schools with fewer than 400 students will have their funding scaled back to support one part-time librarian.

The plan to defund public schools comes months after Henderson’s decision to close one in ten schools in the District, as well as eliminate 140 teaching positions. Prior to that decision, Henderson had held several large District ward “community meetings,” in which parents, students and teachers had protested the attacks being planned on public education in the city (see “Washington DC parents and teachers express outrage over schools plan”).

Due to this popular outrage, several members of the D.C. political establishment have sought to pose as conscientious defenders of students and schools. David A. Catania (I-At Large), who chairs the D.C. legislative council's newly formed Committee on Education, is one such individual. Catania has been highly critical of efforts by D.C.'s executive branch to enact education reform, calling it "uncoordinated and often haphazard."

The council member is referring to efforts by the past two schools chancellors to reform public education in the District. Both Henderson and her predecessor, Michelle Rhee, have enacted massive school closures in recent years. In 2010, Rhee's decision to close 23 public schools resulted in a loss to the city of more than \$40 million; similar costs are being predicted with Henderson's recent announcement. These provocative acts have raised the ire of better-off sections of the D.C. political establishment. Sensing an opportunity for self-promotion, Catania seeks to boost his own prestige by offering a more measured approach to the dismantlement of public education.

Related to this, a report showing that Catania is attempting to retain the services of an outside law firm, Hogan-Lovells, to conduct education reform policy research is noteworthy. The goal would be to introduce a bill that would address a number of reform issues, such as tying the funds that schools receive to performance targets while penalizing them when they "fall short," as well as defining protocols for handing over vacant school buildings to charter operators.

Members of Hogan-Lovells's research team, such as Maree Sneed, have also worked on the "reforming" of Philadelphia's public school system, whose superintendent, William R. Hite Jr., recently announced measures to close more than two dozen schools in the city. Donors to Catania's initiative also include figures such as Emanuel J. Friedman, a wealthy Wall Street power broker whose firm, EFJ Capital LLC, has seen success speculating on banks receiving bailouts under the US Treasury's Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP).



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