

District Residents Engage the New Office of the State Superintendent of Education

To help Mayor Fenty achieve improved school performance and accountability, a new state education agency under the Mayor was created on June 12, 2007: the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

Since June, the OSSE's employees worked to develop priorities and action areas to improve education in the District. We have also created a detailed transition plan to prepare for the transfer of authority over all state-level education functions to the OSSE, which will occur on October 1st.

Mayor Fenty recently held a public roundtable to seek public feedback on the transition plan. The Mayor's Public Roundtable Discussion took place at Burrville Elementary School on August 30th. More than 100 educators, neighbors, and parents discussed three main questions:

- **What are your thoughts regarding the OSSE's four policy priorities: early childhood education, educator quality, preparation for postsecondary education and workforce, and early, family and adult literacy?**
- **What are your thoughts regarding the OSSE's three critical action areas: special education reform, federal grants reform and the statewide longitudinal data warehouse?**
- **How will you know that the OSSE is doing a good job in achieving its mission and what are the top three ways for the OSSE to get information to and from the public in a timely manner?**

Dialog 1: Top policy priorities for the OSSE.

Early childhood education was most often recommended as the top priority by parents. They expressed that a quality experience from pre-K through postsecondary school is important to support continuous learning. Parents expressed a desire

to have early childhood education be full-time, universal, and free.

In addition, many urged that special needs children be proactively identified and integrated as soon as possible.

Most participants stated that education must begin between infancy and age three.

Parents want strong early childhood programs: "Early childhood education is key to the improvement of education in DC."

Parents also wanted high quality teachers. This priority was the second highest concern. Participants urged improvements in teacher licensing programs and expansion of continuous professional development opportunities for teachers. One participant said, "We should improve and promote programs that provide opportunities for teachers to earn masters degrees." They also recommend certification for elementary school teachers.

Participants noted the critical role that parent involvement plays in education.

They recommended that the OSSE take the lead by funding more programs for parental involvement and improving the statewide information call center.

Another suggestion included programs to teach adult learners to help their children.

Increased parent involvement is a top priority: "Parents are a child's first teachers."

Standards are another important topic for residents. Many participants posed the question: How will the OSSE measure quality? Parents voiced support for strong, clear standards that send a consistent message.

On the topic of workforce preparation, one participant said, “DC needs a first class community college with for-credit work beginning in 11th or 12th grade [that is] closely linked to employers.” Many parents expressed enthusiasm for offering vocational education at earlier ages. Also, many wanted to see greater accountability for college counselors. Another suggestion was to institute an exit exam for graduating seniors that would carry weight with potential employers.

Dialog 2: Critical action areas for the OSSE.

Special education was highlighted as the most pressing of the OSSE’s critical action areas. Parents recommended devoting more resources to support special needs students and service providers. Many participants expressed concern about the identification process for special needs children and recommended that referral rates be reduced. Parents noted that many children with learning disabilities are incorrectly placed in special education classes. They encouraged better training and improved qualifications for teachers. Participants believed dropout and truancy rates could be improved by integrating special education students into general education as much as possible.

Parents want inclusive education:
“Special education is one of the first areas to tackle.”

Parents demanded that federal grants mismanagement be addressed. They are in strong agreement that the District must improve its business and financial processes in order to maintain compliance with federal grant requirements. They urge improved grant management and the development of a more coherent strategy regarding which grants are aligned with the District’s educational needs. As one participant said, “there are real costs associated with free money.”

At the roundtable, robust discussions took place about the statewide longitudinal data warehouse. Parents pose several questions, wondering how the data would be used and whether the data would be made available to all stakeholders: LEAs, parents, non-profits, and other communities. In addition, parents cautioned that it is critical to have a strategy before collecting data, to ensure that the data will allow the OSSE to answer the questions that matter. They also urged against displaying data that reveal how schools are failing and recommend highlighting data that is inspiring. One participant responded, “Data needs to be actionable, purposeful, and real-time so that principals, educators, and parents can use it to motivate and incentivize.”

Dialog 3: How you will know that the OSSE is performing its mission.

Participants envisioned that student test scores will rise, the race and class-based achievement gap will be eliminated, fewer schools will be in need of improvement, and dropout rates will fall. If the OSSE is doing a good job, participants believe that dropout rates will fall, attendance and enrollment will rise, and students will be happy and engaged while at school. Also there will be a system in place to continuously monitor and check educational performance across the District.

Participants express that the District will no longer be in high-risk grantee status when the OSSE has accomplished its mission. Parents say that if OSSE is succeeding, students, teachers, and parents will be getting the resources they need. There will be less teacher burnout and better qualified teachers as a result.

Many parents expressed hope that the OSSE will communicate success by establishing clear benchmarks and then reporting its progress against them. Many suggested that the OSSE develop a customer satisfaction survey that is distributed to parents, students, and teachers.

Participants envisioned a lower number of special education students, if the OSSE is doing a good job, because many will be integrated into general education classrooms.

For communicating information to the public, many participants recommend holding more community events, such as roundtables and town hall meetings. They also suggested making public service announcements through a variety of media. Emailing residents and maintaining an interactive, up-to-date website were also encouraged.

Residents want to be engaged:
“Encourage and support community volunteerism.”

Parents want the State Superintendent of Education and staff to visit neighborhoods and schools. Many support efforts to increase community involvement and civic engagement in education matters. Parents would like the OSSE to advertise its educational successes in clear, simple language.