

D.C. commissions a schools analysis

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-commissions-a-schools-analysis/2011/08/17/glQAwqJdOJ_story.html

By Bill Turque, Published: August 18

The Gray administration has commissioned an Illinois firm with close ties to the charter school movement to study how D.C. neighborhoods are served by the public education system and help officials decide which schools should be closed and where new ones might be opened.

The study by the Illinois Facilities Fund is the strongest signal yet that Mayor Vincent C. Gray (D) is prepared to treat charter schools — which are publicly funded but independently operated — as full partners in a reform effort that was heavily focused on traditional schools during the tenure of his predecessor, Adrian M. Fenty (D). About 40 percent of the 75,000 D.C. public school students attend charter schools.

D.C. officials also will use the analysis, expected to be completed by mid-October, to guide what may be a significant round of school closures next year. The city has more than 40 traditional schools with less than 300 students apiece. Chancellor Kaya Henderson called the IFF study a potential “game changer” and acknowledged that it could lead to a smaller traditional public school system and further expansion of the fast-growing charter sector.

“If it helps us to better deliver on the promise of a great education for every child in every neighborhood in the city, I’m willing to change the game,” Henderson said Thursday. She succeeded Michelle A. Rhee last fall as head of the school system.

It will also help assess a proposal for a new middle school in Northwest Washington promoted by council member Mary Cheh (D-Ward 3).

IFF, a nonprofit organization based in Chicago, said it will conduct what amounts to a supply-and-demand analysis. It will look at the distribution across neighborhoods of seats in what it calls “performing” public schools — those that meet D.C. academic standards — comparing it with the population of school-age children in those areas. It will then rank neighborhood needs according to school performance, demographics, enrollment and building capacity.

It is a rare instance of the city forming educational plans by looking at both public sectors — traditional and charter — as one. Deputy Mayor for Education De’Shawn Wright, whose office is responsible for school facility needs, said he pushed for the study because the city needs a clearer picture of how it should proceed.

Wright also said he hoped to use the findings to guide decision-making by the D.C. Public Charter School Board, which authorizes the opening of charter schools.

“For the first time ever, we want to give them some front-line guidance about what the districtwide needs are,” Wright said. There are 53 public charter schools on 99 campuses, the heaviest concentration in any U.S. city outside of New Orleans. Thirty-six of the campuses are in Wards 7 and 8, east of the Anacostia River. Those communities also have most of the District’s lowest-performing and underenrolled traditional schools.

The study’s genesis could make it controversial in a city where public school advocates say that heavy private and corporate support for charter schools threatens to marginalize the 123-school public system.

The study’s \$100,000 cost has been covered by the Walton Family Foundation, a leading charter funder, through a grant to the D.C. Public Education Fund, which raises private money for the city schools. The Walton foundation also is underwriting bonuses for D.C. teachers under the IMPACT evaluation system.

Wright said he requested Walton’s help because he had been impressed with IFF’s work in such cities as Kansas City, Milwaukee and Denver.

Founded in 1988 to offer financial support and real estate consulting to nonprofit groups, IFF has made more than \$57 million in loans to charter schools, according to material it provided the District. In 2007, it received a \$10 million federal grant to leverage charter school financing in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri and Wisconsin.

In 2004, IFF consulted with Chicago Public Schools — then headed by Education Secretary Arne Duncan — on the Renaissance 2010 project, designed to close underperforming schools and increase the number of good ones in underserved areas. IFF identified about 228,000 students in 25 Chicago communities shut out of “performing” schools. About 100 schools, roughly half of them charters, have been opened through 2010.

Some public school advocates question the choice of IFF to conduct the study. “What I would say is that it is not a strong choice for the deputy mayor,” said Mary Filardo, executive director of the 21st Century School Fund, which works for improvements in school facilities and planning. She described IFF as “a charter intermediary.”

“I really don’t understand why a foundation should be able to come in and define what needs to happen,” Filardo said.

Wright, a founding partner of the Newark Charter School Fund before his appointment by Gray, said he wasn’t concerned about IFF’s connections and was confident that its work would be objective. But he also echoed Henderson’s assertion that if the solution involved more charter schools, that was fine.

“I am very much wedded to quality, and I don’t care where it comes from,” said Wright. “And let’s be completely candid here,” he added. “We have to right-size the [school system], and we have to be honest about where we’re not providing high-quality schools to our children. And if that ruffles feathers, then so be it.”

Jose Cerda, IFF’s vice president for public policy and communications, also discounted concerns that it favors charter schools. “Almost every city we’ve been in, no one part of the system is the solution,” he said. “It would be a mistake to say this work is charter-centric.”

Wright says stakeholders will get chance to weigh in on IFF study

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/dc-schools-insider/post/wright-says-stakeholders-will-get-chance-to-weigh-in-on-iff-study/2011/08/19/gIQAMmAuPJ_blog.html

By [Bill Turque](#)

There was not a lot of discussion at the front end about [the selection of IFF](#), the firm tapped by the city to do what looks to be a foundational study of neighborhood school capacity. Because Deputy Mayor for Education De’Shawn Wright sought out private financing through the Walton Family Foundation, the project did not go through the usual “Request for Proposal” and bidding process.

But Wright said Thursday that community groups will have an opportunity to weigh in before the work is complete.

“We haven’t yet determined the full outreach strategy, but the way IFF generally does it is they first present their preliminary analysis informally to a small group of local stakeholders and community leaders (which we will help shape & determine),” Wright said in an e-mail.

“We expect this will happen in early October. This may involve a series of meetings with community leaders, education advocates, parent organizations, local foundations, etc. Their feedback will inform the final report.”

For more discussion of the study and its implications, check out my colleague Valerie Strauss on [The Answer Sheet](#).

D.C.’s move toward charter-centric school system

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/dcs-move-toward-charter-centric-school-system/2011/08/18/gIQAqhHpOJ_blog.html

By [Valerie Strauss](#)

Are we seeing the beginnings of the “[New Orleanization](#)” of the D.C. public school system?

There is new evidence suggesting that D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray is taking the initial steps in a move toward molding the system into one that has a small core of traditional public schools and a larger collection of independently run charter schools. For a lot of reasons, D.C. residents should be concerned.

Remember when [Michelle Rhee](#) quit as D.C. schools chancellor last October, insisting that she had to leave because the soon-to-be-new-mayor, Gray, wasn’t committed to her brand of reform? Wrong again.

Gray didn’t blink in staying on the path she plotted. And now, according to my colleague Bill Turque [in this story](#), his administration has asked an Illinois firm with close ties to the charter school movement to figure out where schools are underenrolled and which communities are in need of schools.

What could that mean?

It means that Gray and other D.C. officials could be moving the District's reform program, started under Rhee, into a new phase that leans toward the opening of many more charter schools. In her new role as head of the StudentsFirst advocacy group, [Rhee](#) has gone around the country promoting a reform agenda in which charters figure prominently, though her emphasis while chancellor was on the traditional schools.

Charter schools, which are public schools that are publicly funded but run independently from the traditional school bureaucracy, already educate 40 percent of the city's 75,000 public schoolchildren. That percentage is far more than the national figure, which is 5 or 6 percent, in part because the District was used as an experiment by Congress to push school-choice initiatives that also included publicly funded vouchers.

The overall notion is that charter schools, which have independent administrations, have the freedom to be more innovative than traditional public schools, are not all burdened with expensive union contracts (although some charter schools are unionized) and can better address the needs of certain communities.

However, a [2009 study of U.S. charter schools](#), the largest of its kind to date, found that only 17 percent of charters were better, in terms of standardized test scores, than traditional public schools, and that 37 percent of charter schools got worse results.

Over the past five years, traditional public schools in the District have done marginally better on standardized test scores than the charters. But in truth, charter schools are separate entities and not a monolithic block, so that may be an apples and oranges comparison, even though it is made all the time.

The concern among some critics of charter schools is that there is less accountability than there is for traditional schools, that some of them get better scores by "counseling" out children especially difficult to educate, and that they are seen by some for-profit companies as money-making opportunities rather than schools that shouldn't operate on a business model. There is also a continuing debate about whether charter schools by their very design — they require a parent to go through the process of applying — start out with students, even those living in poverty, who have more parental support than others and therefore have an advantage that could result in better test scores.

There are plenty of reasons for D.C. residents to be concerned about this contract and what it could mean for the city's school system.

For one thing, officials didn't really need to go to Illinois to find a company that could do a study of city demographics and school usage. There are people in Washington, D.C., who already have the information; for example, the 21st Century School Fund, in the District, has experts on the subject. It wasn't, then, really necessary to have the \$100,000 study funded by the [Walton Family Foundation](#), which is a prime supporter of charter schools across the country.

Meanwhile, the Chicago-based Illinois Facilities Fund, which was chosen to do the study, is heavily involved in charter schools, and Deputy Mayor for Education [De'Shawn Wright](#), whose office is responsible for school facility planning, used to work in New Jersey and is a founding partner of the Newark Charter School Fund.

Wright told Turque that he hopes to use the results of the study to help the D.C. Public Charter School Board — a separate entity that authorizes the opening of, and monitors, the city's charter schools — do its work. That suggests more of a collaboration in the future than exists today between the traditional school system and the charter board, a dynamic that would be important in a school system in which charters are given equal or even more importance than traditional schools.

Nobody in the District said that they are looking as a model to [the New Orleans Recovery School District](#), but that is the one charter-dominant school system in the country, with nearly 75 percent of public schools being charters.

The New Orleans district has become the center of a lot of attention from reformers, U.S. officials and the mainstream media because of its own reports of rising test scores, but there are serious issues that are often breezed over — issues that matter in a discussion about the role of charter schools in public education.

For example, when the district trumpeted its test scores in 2009-10, it actually left out 30 percent of its schools, according to [a report](#) by Barbara Ferguson, board chair and attorney for Research on Reforms, a nonprofit foundation.

Another big problem in New Orleans — and elsewhere where there are charter schools — is the issue of students with special needs. In New Orleans, so many couldn't find charter schools that would enroll them that a complaint has been filed with the state Department of Education.

In Washington, D.C., 18 percent of students in the traditional public schools are special education students, while 11 percent of students in charter schools are designated special ed.

Charter schools across the country have largely lagged in addressing the needs of special education students as well as English Language Learners. And a few studies have shown charter schools to [be more segregated than traditional schools](#), though charter advocates have pushed back on the results.

The question is not whether some charter schools are better than some traditional schools. Some are. The real issue is that many fear we are setting up a two-tier public education system. That is something Americans, the home of opportunity for all, should not allow.

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School closings not a question of 'if' but 'how big'

By [Bill Turque](#)

The [dismal survey data](#) highlighted by DCPS at Tuesday's D.C. Council middle school hearing had the effect of obscuring a crucial take-away: that a new round of school closings is not a question of if, but only how extensive.

When the hammer falls, probably sometime before the end of the year, it will be difficult to make the case that Chancellor Kaya Henderson took school communities by surprise. Back in March, during the rollout of FY12 school level budgets, she [made plain](#) in a message to parents that the city can no longer afford to operate more than 40 schools with fewer than 300 students--more than half of them in Wards 6, 7 and 8. The decision this summer to commission a [school-capacity study](#) from the Illinois Facilities Fund --initiated by Deputy Mayor for Education De'Shawn Wright--sent up another hard-to-miss flag that big changes are coming.

Henderson's testimony Tuesday, while ostensibly about middle schools, once again carried the message. She cited the Prince William County system, which serves 80,000 students across 90 schools (79,115 in 89 schools, according to the PW Web site). DCPS, by contrast, has 47,000 students enrolled in 125 schools.

"We have not planned well," Henderson said.

She added later: "I expect to spend this winter, hunkered down with my team and the deputy mayor's team." Their objective will be how to make DCPS smaller and, hopefully, more effective.