

WHAT DID THE COMMUNITY HAVE TO SAY?

Reports from the Field: What participants had to say in Small Group Discussions on the Future of Public Education in DC: At a Fork in the Road
March 29, 2012

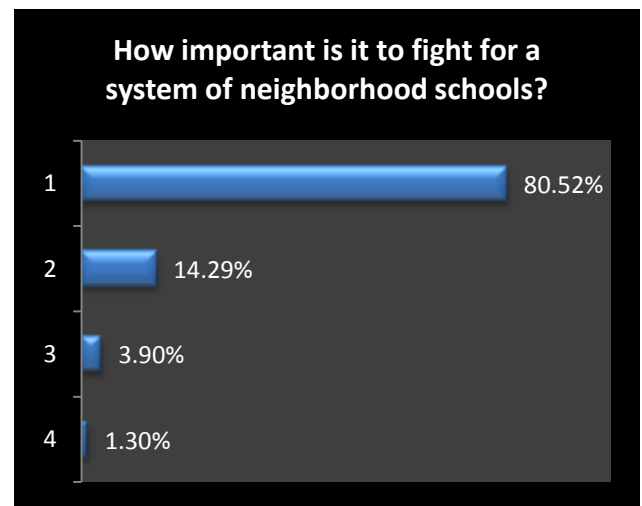
Over 100 persons from all parts of the city and diverse backgrounds and interests attended the March 29 Community Meeting on the future of public education in Washington, DC. In polling and small group discussions, participants had a lot to say, including recommendations for action.

ON LOCAL SCHOOLS

- **95 percent said it is important to fight for a system of neighborhood schools.**

Comments ranged from a desire to go back to neighborhood schools, to concern over the demise of schools systems. Most importantly was the concern that we have schools of right for all students. As one participant said, “there is no such thing as school choice; [instead] we have school ‘chance’”.

Another participant described the situation as a battle between a community approach of people helping each other versus a Darwinian approach in which the fittest get the lion’s share of resources and attention. Another reflected that a by-product of choice is a non system of schools and that we no longer have a public education culture. Everyone is looking after their own school, and not concerned about others.



Polling Choices: 1= Very Important, 2= Important, 3= Not Important, 4= Not Important At All

- **95 percent said labeling schools as failures based on test scores has not helped improve schools.**

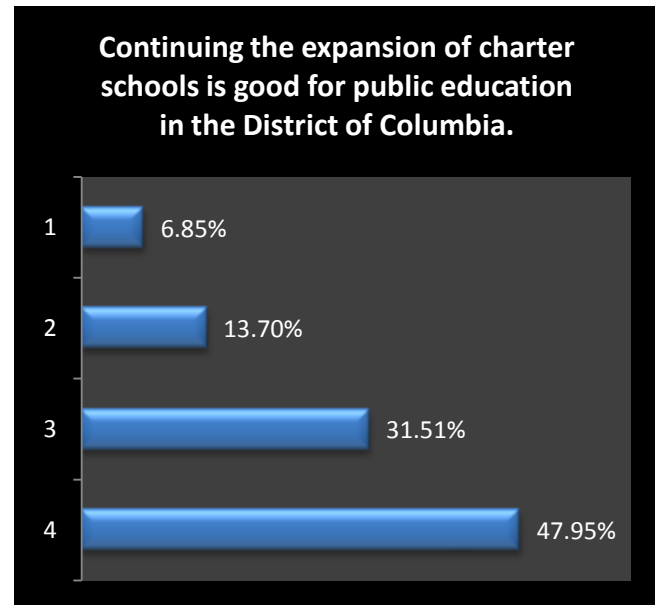
Community members reflected on changes over the past few years, including more emphasis on the use of test scores as the primary performance indicator for students, teachers, principals and schools, and there are not enough improved results for schools and their students to show for it. We’ve had more destructive turmoil than constructive change. Indeed, that we now have a culture of school competition – i.e. good vs. bad schools.



Polling Choices: 1= Very Important, 2= Important, 3= Not Important, 4= Not Important At All

- **79 percent said the continued expansion of charter schools is not good for public education in DC.**

This polling result reflected the general feeling that there is a lot of education decision-making going on in DC, but no comprehensive planning regarding schooling in the city. Furthermore, the communities and families and their students – those most affected by the changes – have no voice or control over any of it.



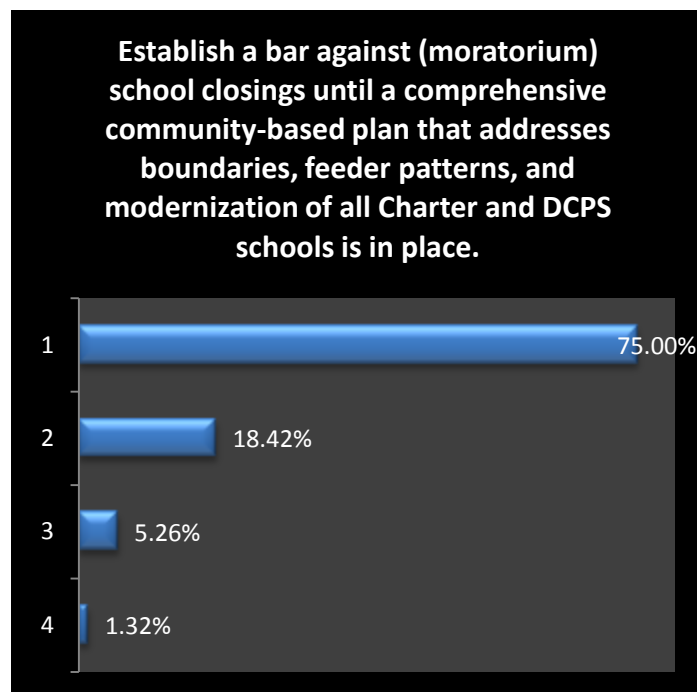
Polling Choices: 1= Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3= Disagree, 4= Strongly Disagree

ON SCHOOLS CLOSINGS

Discussion on this issue was prompted by the presentation made at the meeting about what is happening in Chicago, and the DC school turnaround and closing recommendations proposed in the recent report by the Illinois Facility Fund (IFF).

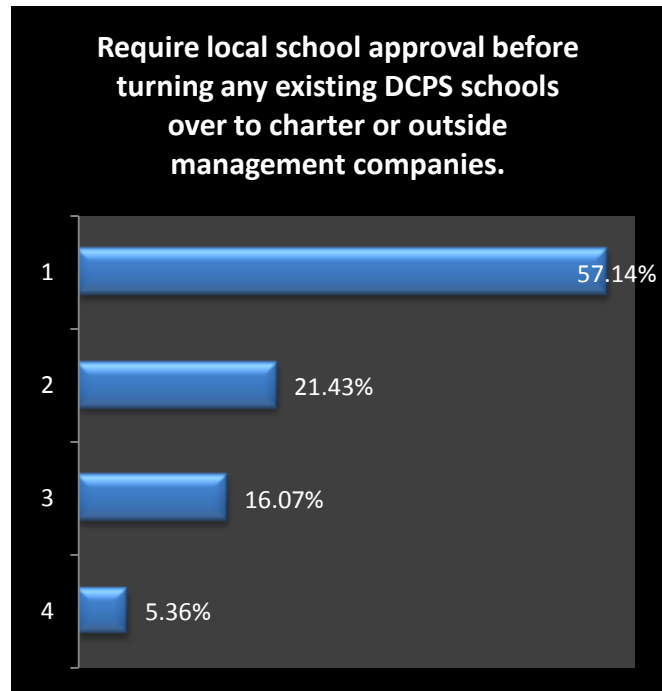
- **93 percent of attendees wanted a moratorium on school closings until a community-based plan could be developed.**

Such a plan would address school boundaries, school feeder patterns, and the modernizations of both charter and DCPS schools. Discussion on school closings reflected the complexities involved in providing high quality schooling for all students. For example, **87 percent did not think that just low test performance is a valid reason to close a school.** Attendees expressed that relying on just one indicator ignores other important factors that both reflect community and family needs and affect student and school performance.



Polling Choices: 1= High priority, 2= Priority, 3= Low priority, 4= Not a priority at all

- 78 percent said local school approval should be required before turning any existing DCPS schools over to charter or outside management companies.**
 This view was supported by the many concerns expressed about the present lack of community voice and control on school issues. And it was supported by the prevailing sense that some recent changes in school management have not resulted in higher student achievement.

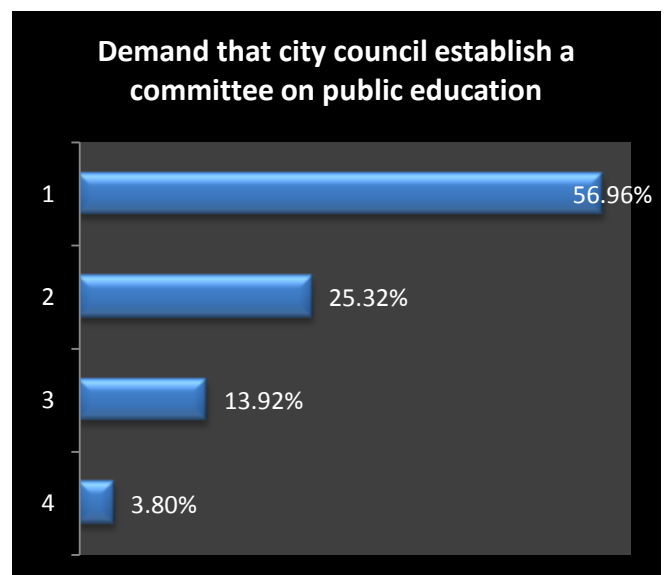
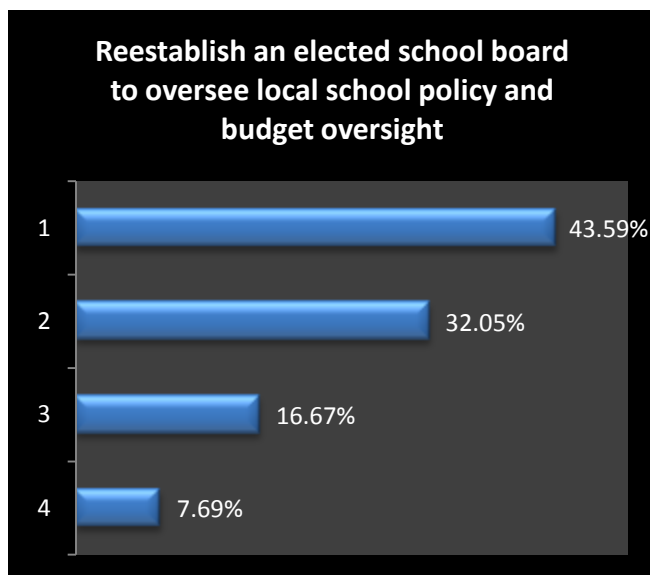


Polling Choices: 1= High priority, 2= Priority,
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ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

This topic had, by far, the most discussion. While the concern about lack of community voice and access was expressed in just two specific ways in the polling results, it dominated the small group discussions in multiple ways.

- 75 percent thought an elected school board should be reestablished.**
- 78 percent gave high priority to demanding that the City Council establish a Committee on Public Education.**



Polling Choices: 1= High priority, 2= Priority,
 3= Low priority, 4= Not a priority at all

These two polling results support comments such as, “It’s hard to get access; what part of DC power structure should we address?” “[Right now] educators and parents are disenfranchised.” One person suggested having a strong DCPS parent affairs office would help. Some participants thought there was a deliberate and systemic effort to “push the voice of the people out”. Others reflected that parents used to be more involved at local schools, that in general in the past, communities felt more empowered to be involved in education issues.

There were several direct calls for an end to Mayoral control of the school system and a belief that centralization has resulted in lack of access for the community, that we now have an oppressive school system. And most important: it has not produced promised results.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION BY THE COMMUNITY

The March 29th Community Meeting drew such a cross-cutting crowd of community members, teachers, parents, public officials, and students. And the recommendations for action were as varied as the participants. But two points of agreements stand out:

- 1. There is an urgent need now to build family and community power in public education.**
- 2. We need to develop and then communicate a unified message.**

The suggestions for action addressed both.

Building community empowerment would include efforts to: find out what parents want, produce more op eds in the paper, contact and advocate to the City Council, conduct tours of “failing” schools (i.e. get more people to know the schools better), hold parent training and organizing sessions, ensure there is a PTA or parent group in every school, mandate parent engagement, form Community Schools, encourage school-community partnerships, and coordinate community efforts through a coalition or people’s council.

Creating a unified effort and message could be aided by: holding a meeting like this in every Ward; conducting teach-ins to educate the community/parents on education and school issues – including information on how some present approaches are not working; holding meetings on the IFF recommendations; and forming working groups. **School-level activism** would mean getting all involved in working together – including getting principals on board and connecting with teachers, parents and students. **Student activism** can play a big role, including organizing the student voice to speak directly to policy makers, providing mentors, and providing opportunities for students to tell their stories.