

School Improvement Teams (SIT Teams) in DC Public Schools

Community Recommendations

*The following are findings on the purpose and importance of SIT Teams and recommendations on appropriate roles and responsibilities for them in the school modernization process. These grew out of a discussion facilitated by the 21st Century School Fund on September 10, 2015 involving a dozen people with experience on 23 DCPS SIT Teams ranging from long completed schools to those going into construction in 2016.*¹

Fully modernized schools improve conditions for teaching and learning, strengthen neighborhoods and increase the vitality of the city over generations. SIT participants understand that neighborhoods across the entire city should benefit equitably and speedily from these major civic investments.

The role of SIT Teams in school modernizations can be understood within a framework of roughly seven to eight major phases. The process is complex and necessarily iterative, not always moving forward one step after the next, but often requiring a return to earlier steps for revisions as for instance, when a preliminary budget is refined as the project progresses through design and bidding.²

I. Importance and Purpose of SIT Teams

1. DCPS can use SIT Teams as a vehicle for school improvement and increased parental involvement

The SIT Teams are the vehicles through which teachers, students, former, current and future parents, as well as staff from the school convene to provide ongoing input into site specific planning and design requirements of the school. In the educational specifications process SIT Teams can help a school clarify and articulate its vision, philosophy and mission, as well as describe the programs and services currently offered in a school and the programs and services that the school community aspires or would plan to provide. In these roles the SIT Team has enormous potential for contributing to school improvement and even transformation, in part through developing the kind of deeply committed, on-going parental and community involvement that is known to strengthen school communities and increase student achievement. Also, when principals are replaced or projects delayed, SIT members provide continuity for the local school's vision and planning.

2. DCPS and DGS³ need to support SIT Teams to secure greatest benefit and equity from capital investments

SIT Teams are the only civic body that is engaged in examining individual school modernization plans in detail. Community engagement is important because every DCPS neighborhood is different and every DCPS facility and school site is unique. Schools and neighborhoods have

¹ Schools projects represented included: Ballou HS, Bancroft (playground), Bruce-Monroe ES, Cardozo HS, Coolidge HS, Deal (Reno Addition), Eastern HS, Ellington HS, Garrison ES, H.D. Cooke ES, MacFarland MS, Marie Reed ES, McKinley HS, Murch ES, Oyster ES, River Terrace/Sharpe Sp. Ed., Roosevelt HS, Savoy ES, School Without Walls HS, Stuart-Hobson MS, Takoma EC, Watkins ES, Wilson HS.

² A detailed outline of a standard modernization process is attached. School modernization phases generally involve: 1) assessment, 2) visioning, 3) planning, 4) budgeting and scheduling, 5) design, 6) construction, 7) commissioning and transfer and finally 8) evaluation.

³ DGS is the Department of General Services, responsible for almost all municipal construction, maintenance and repair in the District of Columbia.

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histories that are an important context for planning. Community members on SIT Teams understand this and can advance planning by informing architects or school administrators who lack local knowledge. Since Washington D.C. does not have a Board of Education, a School Construction Advisory Commission or a Public Facilities Review Committee to examine or engage in site specific school planning, these important responsibilities to provide local knowledge and input have devolved to the SIT Team.

As District tax payers, parents and community members on SIT Teams are the stakeholders most concerned with controlling the scope of modernizations independent of the business interests and ambitions of architects, contractors, project administrators, and public officials. SIT Teams want their schools to be fully adequate to serve their neighborhoods. But as taxpayers, they also understand the citywide budgetary impact of unnecessary or poorly focused capital spending. At present, public reviews and approvals are only required by the City Council as a part of the capital budget process. Without effectively functioning SIT Teams the agencies involved in school planning and construction proceed with little formal civic and local school input. This means that major modernization decisions are made without information and knowledge that an informed public and engaged end users bring.

II. SIT Team Roles and Responsibilities

3. SIT teams should have clearly defined standing and roles

SIT Team effectiveness is constrained currently because they lack standing and clearly defined roles. This is particularly problematic because at present, SIT Teams are brought in too late in the process and are not provided sufficient or timely access to critical information. Lack of standing and defined roles makes it even more difficult for SIT Teams to be effective at schools with constituents who are perceived to lack political power. Better defined roles for the SIT should improve the equity of project planning and development because standard roles and responsibilities will ensure that the influence and impact of SIT Teams extends to all school and communities equally.

4. SIT Team should be a full partner in the development of the educational specifications

One of the most important documents and processes in establishing the quality and character of a project is the school-specific educational specifications. The educational facility planning consultant assigned to prepare the educational specifications should work closely with the SIT Team, with its school and community representation, from the beginning of the educational specification process.

5. SIT Team should have defined milestones for reviews and recommendations

Modernization projects should have requirements for SIT Team reviews and recommendations at important and defined junctures. At a minimum, SIT teams should be required to provide recommendations on the following documents/decisions: the School Assessment Report, Project Scope, Concept Designs; Educational Specifications; Schematic Design, Swing Space Decisions and whenever there are major changes resulting from value engineering or

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unforeseen events. SIT Teams should strive for consensus comments on these milestones and register their due diligence with resolutions recorded in SIT Team minutes and any objections noted in detail. Agencies should be required give these resolutions great weight.

III. Constitution of the SIT Team

6. SIT Teams should be inclusive

Based on the input of the members of the 23 different SIT Teams, the most functional SIT teams have been made up of volunteers. SIT Teams constituted by members selected exclusively by the principal have not been accepted by constituents as valid and frequently included few parents or community members. Sufficient parent and community representation is important because while the principal works frequently with the architects, DCPS and DGS, the parent/community voice is heard *only* at SIT Team and Community Meetings.

7. Introductory Community Meetings should be held to identify SIT Team members

An introductory Community Meeting should introduce the project, present the broadest expectations for the schedule, outline SIT Team responsibilities, announce the first SIT Team meeting time and place and provide contact information so prospective SIT Team members can confirm their intent to volunteer. It would be helpful to have a SIT Team handbook to distribute.

Encouraging SIT Team involvement from a broad constituency provides a reservoir of interest and expertise from which to develop and sustain participation. This is especially important at schools without a strong parent organization or solid ANC backing. This broad constituency may require active recruitment from parents, teachers and administrators to ensure there are enough teachers and staff members at regular SIT Team meetings. In addition, those who can bring particular knowledge or skill may be encouraged to attend: alumni, planners, architects, people involved in the trades, budget and contract experts, meeting facilitators, ANC commissioners, council staff members.

8. SIT meetings should be welcoming and open to the public

Closing SIT meetings to the public has resulted in contention and distrust. Any efficiency expected from smaller closed meetings is generally lost in time consumed with managing the mistrust of those excluded - - and catching up with their input. People should feel welcome at all school meetings with everyone treated respectfully. A round of introductions is necessary at every meeting as the group becomes acquainted and because newcomers may attend.

IV. Management of SIT Teams

9. DCPS and DGS should start SIT Team meetings early in the process and continue regular meetings until the project is finished

SIT Teams need enough time to meet their responsibilities and those responsibilities are most critical at the beginning of the project. SIT Teams start by evaluating school assessment information in order to develop a valid project concept, scope definition, and educational program specifications - - work that can easily take a year.

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Following completion and acceptance of the educational specifications, and schematic design it is important for the SIT to remain informed on a face-to-face basis throughout the project, especially during the summer months when construction is busiest and rapid changes may be required. Further, as the advising civic body, the SIT has to remain actively involved with project updates throughout construction, commissioning, punch-list closeout and transfer of the building.

10. Principals of schools in modernization should have dedicated staff for SIT Team management

Local school principals are relied upon by DCPS/DGS as the first and last authority for all the details of local school planning and for the constitution and management of each SIT Team. However, principals rarely have the necessary experience in the school and the community, planning skills or sufficient time to devote to modernization as well as management of the SIT Team. Managing modernization at the local school level is a substantial task that few principals can find the time to do well.

Principals should share these tasks with a DCPS staff member assigned part-time as a partner during modernization. These local school modernization liaisons would be the main point of coordination between the school, DGS and DCPS and should be budgeted as part of the capital project. Their responsibilities in part would include SIT Team management, including making sure outreach is accomplished, members are recruited, meeting notifications go out, agendas are developed, meeting minutes are kept, meeting materials and other documents are posted, and member lists are updated.

11. SIT meetings should have regular schedules and adequate notice

It is important for people to rely on a regular monthly meeting schedule for the life of the project, at a time and place that is the most convenient both for school-based and community members. Meeting time and place should be posted on the DGS/DCPS website and reminder e-mail notices should be routine. Any cancellations or changes to meeting time and place should be held to a minimum with people informed well in advance via e-mail. Additional meetings may be required during the development of educational specifications and schematic design.

V. Information and Communications

12. DCPS and DGS should schedule Community Meetings at important intervals and work with the SIT Team on the agenda and outreach

Community meetings are a venue for input to the SIT process, as well as being a place for the public to ask questions of project managers and agency heads. Community meetings should be scheduled to align with major milestones and key decision points: concept development, project scope definitions, educational specification development, schematic design, design development, swing space decisions, and at intervals during construction progress.

Meetings should be at the school or at a place that is near the school and at a generally convenient time that is not in conflict with PTA, ANC or other important local civic events.

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Notification should be timely and go out to the broad community through students' backpack mail, the parent organization, local e-mail list serves, ANC commissioners, and churches. Flyers should be distributed in the adjacent blocks and be posted throughout the neighborhood, particularly at local businesses. This is especially important for the introductory meeting.

13. DCPS and DGS must provide timely and publicly accessible information to the SIT Team and the general public

SIT Teams and the general public must have ready and timely access to key documents and information about all phases of modernization in order to add value to the process. This information should be available on the DCPS/DGS website and be updated regularly. The local school modernization liaison assigned by the central office would be responsible for making sure this happens.

The record should include an overview with the scope, schedule, budget, expected LEED status, contact information for project managers, and DCPS staff responsible, and it should be illustrated with a Google-map view of the existing school, a characteristic portrait of the existing building and a concept illustration of the finished modernization as available.

A complete and current record of the school's modernization should be posted, remain available and be regularly updated on the DGS/DCPS website including at a minimum:

- All meeting minutes and presentations (with all participants listed)
- Contact information for DCPS and DGS representatives on the project
- A list of SIT Team members and their relation to the project (parent, alumni, etc.)
- Assessment reports, including but not limited to: building assessments, population projections, traffic studies, any historic or archaeological reports, soil studies, etc.
- Educational Specifications including draft versions
- All RFPs as for architects/engineers and contractors, with notifications to the SIT when they are issued
- Concept drawings with updates
- Schematic drawings (floor plans) with updates
- Site plans with updates
- Reports of major change orders
- Any reprogramming requests to the Council
- Construction progress photos if not included in SIT meeting records
- Emergency notifications of such things as street closures, etc.
- Events notices such as alumni walkthroughs, ground-breakings, ribbon-cuttings
- Maintenance agreements and contracts
- Post-Occupancy evaluations