



Highlights of [GAO-08-549T](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In response to long-standing problems with student academic performance, the condition of school facilities, and the overall management of the D.C. public school system, the D.C. Council approved the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (Reform Act). The Reform Act made major changes to the operations and governance of the D.C. public school system, giving the Mayor authority over public schools, including curricula, personnel, and school facilities. While other large urban districts have transferred governance of schools to their mayors, D.C. is unique because it functions as both local and state offices for many education responsibilities.

GAO's testimony focuses on (1) the status of the District's efforts to reform its public school system, and (2) what the District has done to establish accountability for these efforts. To address these issues GAO reviewed documents, interviewed District education officials and interviewed principals from nine D.C. public schools.

What GAO Recommends

To sustain D.C.'s efforts to transform its public school system, GAO recommends that the D.C. Department of Education develop a long-term districtwide education strategic plan. In response, the District supported the need for a strategy, but preferred a formal process rather than a written document to coordinate and sustain its efforts.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-549T](#). For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

While Early Reform Efforts Tackle Critical Management Issues, a District-Wide Strategic Education Plan Would Help Guide Long-Term Efforts

What GAO Found

The early efforts to improve D.C. public schools have focused largely on broad management reforms and other activities that lay the foundation for long-term improvements to the D.C. public school system. The broad management reforms included the transfer of many functions from D.C. public schools (DCPS) into the new office of the state superintendent, which could allow for more effective oversight of the District's education programs. Prior to the Reform Act, there was no clear separation of funding, reporting, and staffing between local and state functions. A new facilities office was also created to improve the conditions of DCPS school facilities. Moving state-level education and facilities functions out of DCPS is intended to give the head of DCPS, called the Chancellor, more time to focus on issues that directly affect student achievement. The management reforms also included specific human capital initiatives such as new DCPS central office personnel rules and new systems for evaluating central office and state-level employee performance. In addition, both the State Superintendent and the Chancellor are working to improve their data systems to better track and monitor the performance of students, teachers, and schools. DCPS also completed its school consolidation plan that identified over 20 schools for closure over the next several years. In addition, the school facilities office is working to address the backlog of repairs. The director of the facilities office told us that he found that school heating and plumbing systems were inoperable, roofs leaked, and floors needed replacing. In addition, he said many schools were in violation of District fire codes. To address the backlog and ongoing facilities needs, the new office undertook several repair programs this summer and early fall.

The D.C. Mayor and education officials have introduced a performance-based process designed to establish accountability for their school reform efforts. This process includes weekly meetings to track progress and accomplishments across education offices. In addition, the Mayor's office required agencies to develop annual performance plans. D.C. Department of Education officials told us they review the individual performance plans of District education offices, such as DCPS and the state superintendent's office, to ensure they are aligned. Officials told us they have not yet developed a documented districtwide education strategic plan. According to department officials, they do not intend to develop a written plan at this time, in part, because they are addressing immediate issues. They questioned the need for a written document as opposed to a formalized process that would help ensure that individual plans are coordinated. While developing a strategic plan takes time, it is useful for entities undergoing a major transformation, such as the D.C. public school system. A strategic plan helps organizations look across the goals of multiple offices and identify if they are aligned or working at cross-purposes. Without a plan that sets priorities, implementation goals, and timelines, it may be difficult to measure progress over time and determine if the District is truly achieving success. In addition, given that leadership changes, a strategic plan would provide a road map for future District leaders by explaining the steps taken, or not taken, and why.