

DISRUPTED

PUBLIC-EDUCATION REFORM IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL

WHEN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA'S CITY COUNCILORS handed 36-year-old Mayor Adrian Fenty control of the city's public schools in 2007, they were hoping for salvation. Or maybe just absolution.

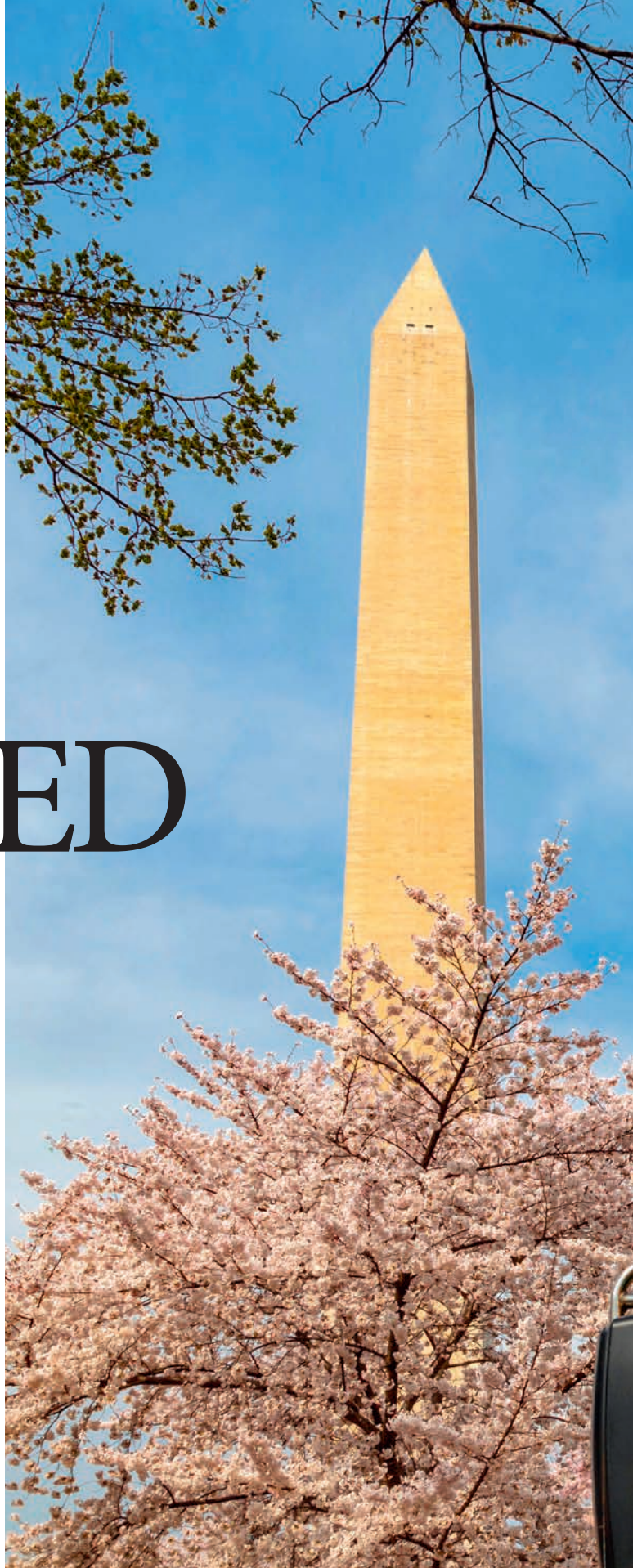
The city's elected school board had been running a school system whose leadership didn't know how many students attended school from day to day. New hires didn't get paid for months. New textbooks gathered dust in warehouses while there weren't enough to go around in classrooms. Elementary schools didn't teach art or music, and high school electives were rare. The system was losing students to charter schools at a rapid clip.


Low pay made it hard for teachers to live in the city and forced many to take second jobs. And, in the absence of a common curriculum and citywide teaching standards, teachers were never sure what or how to teach. Test scores lagged far below the national average, and while more than 90 percent of the city's students performed below grade level, 95 percent of teachers earned satisfactory ratings.

The day after Fenty won control of D.C.'s schools, he appointed Michelle Rhee, then-president of The New Teacher Project, as

by **THOMAS TOCH**

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The reforms of the past decade have transformed public education in D.C. from a traditional, single-delivery model to a competitive, performance-based educational ecosystem—providing a promising new example of urban public education.

chancellor. She was the school system's seventh leader in a decade.

Many of Rhee's critics saw her as a tough-talking but inexperienced outsider, an ingénue with an attitude. They also charged that education reform in D.C. began and ended with Rhee's determined effort to remove underperforming teachers from the city's classrooms. Neither aspersion is true.

Rhee knew Washington's schools well. She had worked with school officials for nearly a decade as the founder of the New Teacher Project, an organization conceived by Teach for America's Wendy Kopp to help urban school systems recruit talented teachers outside of the traditional education-school pipeline.

While Rhee's crusade to strengthen teaching during her three years as chancellor landed her on the cover of *Time* with a broom in her hand and a hard look on her face, she and her longtime colleague and eventual successor Kaya Henderson did far more than sweep out underperformers. They introduced a robust set of teacher reforms, transforming the occupation into a performance-based profession that gives teachers responsibility, recognition, collegiality, support, and significant compensation.

Rhee and Henderson did the same for principals—and much more. They revamped the way teachers teach, expanded pre-schooling, transformed the district's central office into

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an engine of school improvement, rebuilt nearly half the city's traditional public schools, and introduced rigorous achievement standards, as well as a new curriculum and new instructional materials.

Since 2012, new leadership at the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board has further strengthened the quality of the city's expanding charter-school sector. Acting on a belief that rigorous oversight is critical, the board's director has taken charter authorizing seriously, increasing student achievement even as charter enrollment has expanded to 47 percent of Washington's public-school population since the mid-1990s.



D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee talked to Joshua Young, 4, during a walk-to-school event in Washington on August 24, 2010.

ALAMY- UPI/KEVIN DIETSCH

The two sectors have collaborated to permit the city's 93,000 public-school students to select traditional public schools and charters through a single, centralized application system that matches as many students as possible to their top choices while allowing families to make apples-to-apples comparisons through a universal school-rating system. Today, only 27 percent of students attend neighborhood schools.

These changes represent a dramatic transformation of urban public education that has translated into higher-quality teachers, more learning, and increasing enrollment in public-school classrooms. Student proficiency levels have increased on national assessments, and high-school graduation rates have climbed.

The improving results and growing number of easy-to-navigate educational options have increased parents' confidence, even among the well-educated, middle-class families who had abandoned public schools in the past. Citywide public-school enrollment has risen to 93,000 from 71,000 over the past decade, including steady increases in D.C. Public Schools enrollment since 2009, with the school district adding more students than the charter sector in 2018–19 for the first time.

In fiscal year 2017, the District of Columbia spent \$21,974 per pupil, the second-highest spending in the nation as measured against states, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Survey of School System Finances.

Despite the presence of a federally funded private-school voucher program, the percentage of students in public schools increased to 88 percent in 2016, from an estimated 82 percent in 2005, according to data compiled by the mayor's office.

To be sure, significant challenges remain. Though school quality has improved overall, weak schools persist, as do substantial achievement gaps between white students and their African American and Latinx counterparts. These gaps have closed slightly in reading but have increased in math, even as the performance of every racial group has improved. Despite extensive school choice, many students attend racially isolated schools, and half of the city's white students attend private schools.

Still, the public-education infrastructure in the nation's capital is far stronger today than it was in 2007. The reforms of the past decade have transformed public education in D.C. from a traditional, single-delivery model to a competitive, performance-based educational ecosystem—providing a promising new example of urban school reform.

Demography Is Not Destiny

What lies at the crux of these dramatic reforms? Michelle Rhee believed that excellent teaching was key to exploding

the notion that poor kids couldn't learn—to proving, in her words, that “demography is not destiny.” With so many of Washington's teachers earning satisfactory ratings despite the city's dismal educational results, she resolved to build a new evaluation system that made performance matter.

Kaya Henderson, who had been Teach for America's D.C. director and then managed Rhee's work with The New Teacher Project in the city, supervised the project as the new chancellor's chief of human capital. She worked with Jason Kamras, who had arrived in Washington a decade earlier through Teach for America



D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson applauds at a 2011 fundraiser.

and was named national Teacher of the Year in 2005–06.

At the beginning of the 2009–10 school year, Henderson and Kamras launched a comprehensive teacher-evaluation system, setting citywide teaching standards for the first time. In the past, teacher evaluations had involved principals spending a few minutes in teachers' classrooms every year, looking mostly for quiet students and clean blackboards. Under the new system, every teacher would be observed five times a year—three times by their schools' administrators and twice by “master educators” from the central office who would provide an independent check on principals' ratings. Other assessment criteria included a teacher's “commitment to the school community” and student performance on non-standardized assessments, such as evaluations of science projects. Principals could dock teachers for chronic absenteeism and other failures of “core professionalism.”

To signal the importance of academic results, Rhee and Henderson also wanted to rate teachers based on their “value-added” to students' standardized test scores. They ordered that these scores make up 50 percent of teachers' ratings if they taught tested subjects and grades. That turned out to be only 15 percent of the school system's teaching force, but the move

stoked anxiety and resentment among teachers.

Rhee's team deepened teachers' angst by not conducting a pilot of the new teacher-evaluation system—dubbed IMPACT—despite the fact that many principals weren't trained to use it and that teachers in some schools weren't briefed on it until after the school year had started. Suddenly, teachers were confronted by a new, untested evaluation strategy, and their livelihoods were on the line.

"People were panicked about losing their jobs," said Eric Bethel, a D.C. Public Schools administrator who was a teacher at the time. "Everyone thought IMPACT was aimed at getting rid of veterans."

Before IMPACT, Rhee fired dozens of untenured teachers for sleeping in class and other misbehavior. She removed 250 teachers and 500 teacher's aides for lacking proper teaching credentials. Within weeks of rolling out IMPACT, she announced that budget cuts required her to lay off another 266 teachers. She fired a quarter of the city's principals, including the one at her daughters' school; she even showed one principal the door in front of a PBS camera. She announced the closing of 23 under-enrolled schools without prior notification. And she declared in a speech at the National Press Club that consensus building and compromise were "totally overrated."

With IMPACT, she was firing veteran teachers for ineffective

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teaching—a rare phenomenon in public education. When the program's first evaluation scores were released in July 2010, 75 teachers were labeled “ineffective” and received termination letters with their scores. Since then, more than 1,000 teachers have been fired under IMPACT, about 3 percent of the teaching force annually. Even so, many teachers, tired of working harder to covering for substandard colleagues, like the city's new standards.

Although 663 of Washington's 4,195 teachers were rated “highly effective” and given bonuses that year, the nation's teachers unions deployed their considerable influence against Rhee. The story became a cable news staple.

Ultimately, Rhee cost Adrian Fenty, her patron, his political career. She was firing Washington's predominantly black educators during the height of one of the worst recessions in



KATHERINE FREY / THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

the nation's history. The city's majority-black voters held Fenty responsible. He lost the September 2010 Democratic primary by a landslide. With a primary victory tantamount to election in the Democratic city, Rhee resigned in October and went on to launch the advocacy organization StudentsFirst.

Five months later, the reform movement in the city suffered a devastating blow. In March 2011, *USA Today* ran a front-page story headlined "When Standardized Test Scores Soared in D.C., Were the Gains Real?," an examination of suspected Rhee-era cheating. While investigations found no evidence of widespread cheating and school leaders ultimately didn't face criminal indictments for tampering with standardized tests as their counterparts in Atlanta had, strong evidence indicated that cheating took place in several schools. The scandal fueled critics' claims that teacher reform in Washington was misguided and mostly about test scores.

Even strong proponents of teacher accountability, including former Rhee allies, now say, at least privately, that by relying on student achievement in teacher evaluations, school officials paid a substantial price in teacher morale and political support. A less controversial strategy might have been to calculate value-added scores but use them only to check the classroom observation ratings made by principals. If principals rated teachers much higher than teachers' value-added scores, they could have been required to provide additional documentation to justify their generous rankings.

In the wake of Rhee's departure, the school system worked hard to stay out of the spotlight that Rhee had welcomed. Kaya Henderson, Rhee's successor, refused to talk to the national media at the outset of her nearly six-year tenure as chancellor.

But rather than abandon Rhee's commitment to teacher reform, Henderson doubled down. She had spent her early years in public housing just north of the Bronx as the only child of a single mother who was a public educator by day and a postal worker by night. After attending public and parochial schools, Henderson went on to Georgetown University and then back to the Bronx to teach. For her, school reform was personal.

Before becoming chancellor, she had led bruising contract negotiations with the Washington Teachers Union. In exchange for a 22 percent salary hike for many teachers, the new deal, inked months before Rhee departed, stripped senior teachers' right to claim vacancies; made performance, rather than seniority, the key factor in layoffs; and effectively ended teacher tenure.

It also scrapped public education's sacrosanct "single salary

schedule"—paying teachers strictly based on their academic credentials and longevity in the classroom—in favor of performance pay. "Minimally effective" teachers would be frozen on the salary scale. But their "highly effective" counterparts would qualify for bonuses and permanent hikes that lifted Washington's top teachers' salaries to \$132,000 from \$87,000.



Chancellor Michelle Rhee (left) listens as Mayor Adrian Fenty speaks during a 2010 news conference at the end of her tenure.

ALEX WONG / GETTY IMAGES

Henderson and Kamras, who succeeded her as human capital chief, launched projects to recruit and retain high caliber teachers, because it wouldn't help much to fire bad teachers if they couldn't replace them with better ones.

With the support of a young Stanford graduate and Rhodes Scholar named Scott Thompson, the team used the new evaluation and performance-pay systems as a foundation for a "career ladder" that would give teachers access to new opportunities and higher pay as they climbed up. The important and lucrative work of teaching summer school, for example, would go to the city's best teachers, rather than the most senior ones.

Henderson revamped teacher recruitment by marketing D.C. schools to 15,000 traditional and charter public-school teachers in the region and nationally—a move that prompted local charter-school leaders to complain and take teachers' email addresses off their websites.

Meanwhile, the IMPACT system was producing vast amounts of previously unavailable data. For example, the numbers showed that under the IMPACT evaluations, which use a scale of 100 to 400, teachers hired by the end of May subsequently scored 20 percent higher, on average, than those hired after August 1. So Henderson and Kamras pressed principals to push up their hiring timelines. University of Michigan researchers discovered that teachers hired under the new, centralized teacher-screening

system, called TeachDC, earned higher IMPACT scores than those recruited by principals. So Henderson and Kamras encouraged principals to use TeachDC.

By 2017–18, three times as many recruits were under contract by the end of the previous school year, more new hires had previous teaching experience, and external researchers had found that replacements for the teachers dismissed under IMPACT produced four or five months' worth of additional student learning in math and nearly as much in reading over three school years.

Henderson and Kamras worked just as hard to keep top talent from leaving. Beyond the better pay and the career ladder, they made changes to IMPACT to get more teacher buy-in, including reducing the influence of student test scores on teacher ratings. They revamped the central office to better support teachers. They also established the Teacher Retention Team, which feted high performers with leadership opportunities and an annual black-tie event at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, complete with Grammy-winning entertainers and a rooftop dinner.

The retention strategies paid off. While charter schools and surrounding suburbs once poached school-district talent with impunity, the district lost only 6 percent of its top-rated educa-

In exchange for a 22 percent salary hike for many teachers, a new contract, inked in 2010, stripped senior teachers' right to claim vacancies; made performance, rather than seniority, the key factor in layoffs; and effectively ended teacher tenure.

State Standards, which the school district had adopted in 2010.

After watching teachers struggle to deliver the new subject matter, Pick's team created sample lessons for every subject at every grade level to give teachers models, again with the help of the school system's leading teachers.

In the summer of 2016, Henderson and Kamras went further, assigning teachers to teams in every school to deliver a comprehensive new teacher-training curriculum. These "LEAP" teams—short for "Learning Together to Advance our Practice"—convene for weekly 90-minute sessions led by subject-matter expert teachers and administrators. Faculty work together to hone their teaching techniques, deepen their subject-matter knowledge, and review student work and school data. The sessions are followed up with weekly informal observations in every classroom, giving teachers regular feedback without the high stakes attached to IMPACT.

A Robust Charter Sector

The synergy between school system and the charter sector has figured prominently in Washington's reform story. The school district has embraced choice, permitting students to attend any traditional public school with empty seats. This policy has strengthened an already robust competition between charters and traditional public schools and spawned a range of new educational programs in response to parental preferences.

A Republican-controlled Congress paved the way for charter schools in Washington with the passage of the D.C. School Reform Act of 1995. The dismal performance of the city's traditional public schools at the time, combined with the law's generous funding of charter schools, led to the rapid expansion of the city's charter sector with modest oversight.

In 2012, that began to change.

Congress had established the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board as an independent city agency and the sole charter-school authorizer in the nation's capital. The organization focused on expanding the city's charter sector.

In 2012, a former technology industry executive and Obama administration education official named Scott Pearson became the charter board's executive director. Pearson saw charter schools as a source of innovation and expanded opportunities for underserved students in public education—but he also saw a sector that needed to pay far more attention to school quality.



Jason Kamras, a 7th-grade math teacher at Sousa Middle School, was named Teacher of the Year by President George W. Bush.

tors after the 2017–18 school year, even as "highly effective" teachers grew to 37 percent of the teaching force. That contrasted sharply with the 49 percent attrition rate among teachers rated "minimally effective," who made up 4 percent of the force. Not all attrition is equal.

In addition to upgrading the talent pool, Henderson and Kamras worked on ratcheting up the overall performance of the teaching force. Brian Pick, another Teach for America veteran in the school district's central office, worked with high-performing teachers to craft new reading, math, and writing curricula based on the demanding Common Core

Pearson's team started conducting rigorous annual academic and financial reviews of every D.C. charter school, ultimately ranking each as top-, mid-, or low-performing. "We, the authorizers, are the levers of change," Pearson has written. "We can let this movement sink into mediocrity by tolerating poor performers. Or we can nurture promising leaders; grow our best schools; find smart, low-burden ways to monitor our schools without distracting them; and have the moral courage to do our hardest job—closing low-performing schools."

The charter board has closed 35 schools since 2012 and put many more on probation. Yet even as Pearson has held weak schools accountable, he has grown the sector to 66 charter operators and 123 schools with 43,958 students in 2018–19, representing nearly half of D.C.'s public-school students, demonstrating that quantity and quality in the charter sector are not mutually exclusive.

The expanding charter-school presence has helped dilute the longstanding racial isolation of students in the nation's capital. Several high-performing charter schools in the center of the city are racially mixed. They are within reasonable commuting distance from most parts of the city and feature appealing educational offerings, such as Montessori programs. In 2019, for the first time in recent history, white students from throughout the city began traveling to a low-income African American neighborhood to attend a highly regarded dual-language elementary school.

A Common Lottery

While Rhee and Henderson made teacher quality the centerpiece of their reform efforts, Henderson also attacked an entrenched problem that hampers the fulfillment of school choice in much of the country. For D.C. families, taking advantage of expanding school choices meant navigating myriad application timelines and deadlines without information to make clear comparisons among schools. It meant oversubscribed schools pulling applicants' names out of paper bags, families pitching tents on sidewalks—or paying others to camp out for them—to get to the front of waiting-list lines, and schools cherry-picking applicants to get the most attractive students: a system favoring the well-educated, the wealthy, and the well-connected.

For schools, the system made planning almost impossible. Many students were admitted to multiple schools but didn't inform schools of their plans—causing thousands of wait-listed students to change schools through September and early October, leaving schools guessing about revenue and staffing, and disrupting instruction.

To address these problems, Henderson and Pearson came

together under the leadership of then Deputy Mayor for Education Abigail Smith to create a common enrollment system. Since the 2014–15 school year, the city's 93,000 public school students have selected traditional public schools and charters through a single, centralized application process that makes school choice more efficient and far fairer than it was in the past.

The common enrollment system, run by a unit in the Office of the State Superintendent of Education called My School DC, starts with schools submitting lists of open spots. Students or parents rank their preferences on the My School DC website, applying to as many as a dozen schools after searching on the



MARK PETERSON/REDUX

"We, the authorizers, are the levers of change": Scott Pearson (center), head of the D.C. Public Charter School Board, at Washington Latin Public Charter School.

site, via school fairs, or by attending public-school open houses.

Students receive random lottery numbers, and then an algorithm works to place as many students as possible in their preferred schools. Students who miss out on their top choices are automatically placed on waiting lists, and My School DC later matches students with preferred spots as they become available. To accommodate those who prefer to stay close to home, the district guarantees every student in the city a seat in a neighborhood school.

This approach levels the playing field for families who lack political connections or the time and resources to stand in lines, lobby school principals, and complete scores of applications. The process also eliminates multiple deadlines and the need for school personnel to input thousands of paper applications.

The common-enrollment system is generating a trove of information about school preferences that is shaping city leaders' thinking about what kind of schools to create, and where. For Henderson, the annual circus of charter admissions made it tough

to know who would show up at district schools. Under the new system, schools get real-time updates on new applicants and on how many current students are hoping to leave. Waiting lists are immediately updated when a student accepts a spot.

Common enrollment cuts out the cost and confusion of having more than 60 charter-school organizations running their own application systems. The computer-driven system also thwarts schools' attempts to discourage tougher-to-educate applicants, and schools can no longer draw on their waiting lists selectively. To Pearson, the new system "removes any sort of shadow that people cast on charter schools of gaming the system, of being secretly selective."

The common lottery has boosted fairness in the school-selection process—but it has also revealed the limits of school choice as an antidote to urban poverty and to the racial and socioeconomic segregation of many urban school systems. Five years in, data from My School DC indicate that many families, especially in disadvantaged communities, tend to make choices based on word-of-mouth recommendations and other factors,

In 2012, the D.C. Public Charter School Board started conducting rigorous annual academic and financial reviews of every D.C. charter school. The board has closed 35 schools since then and put many more on probation.

surprisingly, families living in a zone with top schools exercise their in-boundary advantage more often than families with weak neighborhood options.

Furthermore, because many of the highest-performing neighborhood schools are in predominantly white and more-affluent sections of the city, the My School DC preferences weaken the system's ability to reduce long-standing racial and economic segregation in Washington's public schools.

That the city's majority-white Ward 3 has no charter schools—with their mandate to take applications from throughout the city—compounds the problem. So does the fact that white students make up only 15 percent of the city's public-school enrollment; studies estimate that about half the city's white students attend private schools. One path to desegregating the city's schools, then, would be through persuading more white students to stay in the public sector.

Still, common enrollment is making school choices more transparent in Washington and has led to collaborative projects that benefit both sectors, such as a new school-rating system that allows apples-to-apples comparisons across all schools.

The two sectors have also responded to My School DC data on families' school

preferences by adding popular programs in neighborhoods that don't have them. "It completely changed the game," former chancellor Henderson told me, and ultimately led to "a big investment in music, physical education, and foreign languages. Families that were leaving DCPS because they wanted their kids to learn a language can now go to a neighborhood school."

The Results Speak

The reforms of the Rhee and Henderson eras have paid off in improved student achievement. Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress have risen significantly in both the D.C. public schools and the charter sector since



A computer-based common-enrollment system leveled the playing field for families.

rather than selecting the "best" school available to them. As one example, the lowest-rated charter school in Washington received 880 applications for 300 seats for the 2018–19 school year, just before the charter school board voted to close the school. This consumer behavior underscores the importance of sharing school-performance information with families.

Conversely, seats in good schools aren't always available to those who request them. Preferences built into the My School DC system, including for siblings of enrolled students, limit the number of slots. The so-called in-boundary preference makes it particularly tough to get into the city's best traditional neighborhood schools. The district guarantees students a spot in the traditional public school in their attendance zone, but not

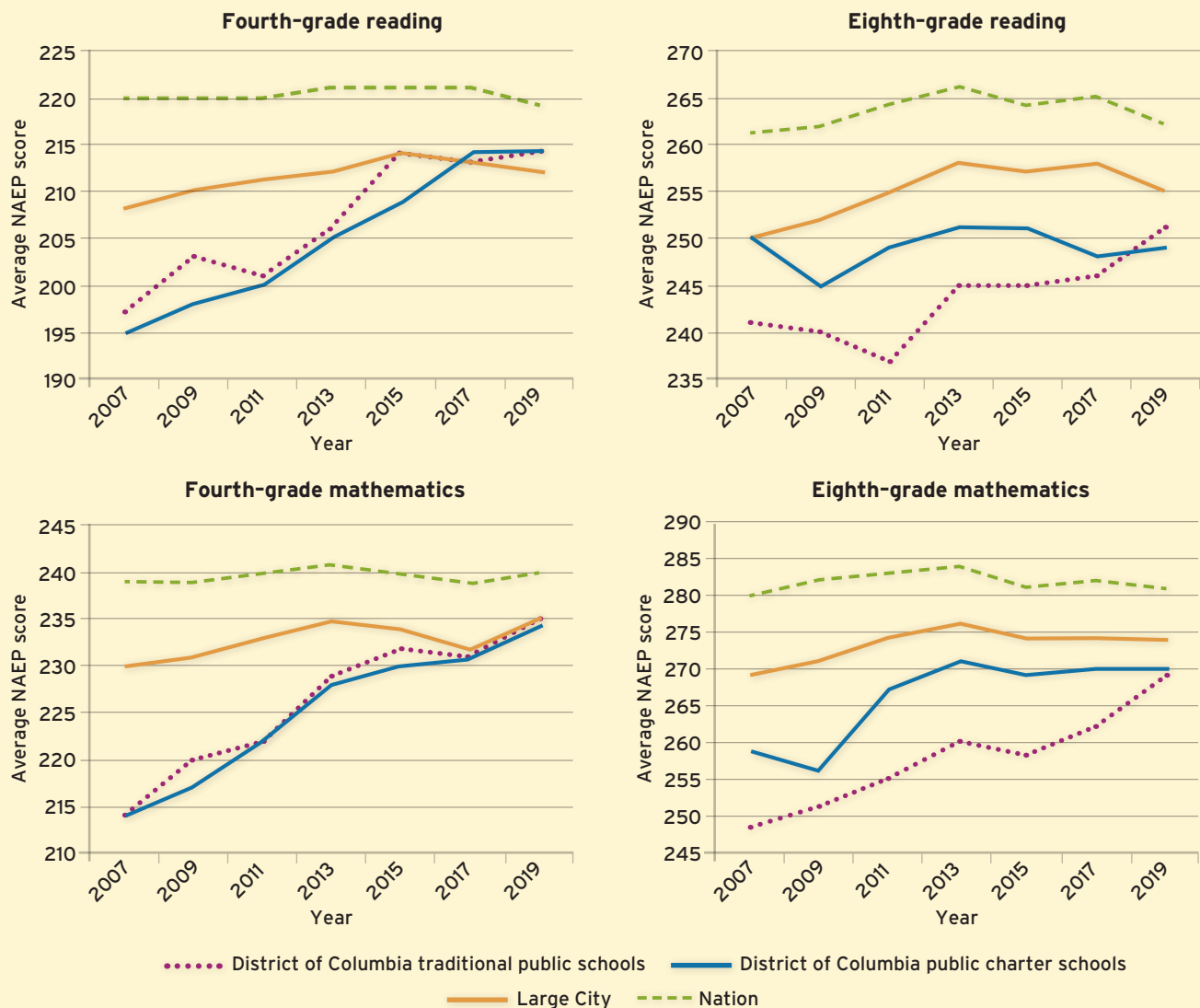
2009 in 4th- and 8th-grade math and in 4th-grade reading, with modest improvements in 8th-grade reading (see Figure 1). The school district has caught up to the middle of the pack of other urban districts at the 4th-grade level on the national exams. Scores track closely across the school district and the

city's charter sector and have increased even after accounting for an influx of wealthier students into the city.

Results from the Common Core-aligned PARCC tests also demonstrate continued improvement. Proficiency levels in reading have increased every year at every grade level

Steady Test-Score Gains for D.C. Schools (Figure 1)

Schools in the District of Columbia have seen strong improvement in their National Assessment of Educational Progress scores, with particularly rapid gains for the District of Columbia Public Schools in the past few years. District schools and charter schools have made gains in tandem, narrowing gaps with other large cities and the nation as a whole.



NOTE: "Large city" category includes public school students from all participating cities with populations of 250,000 or more.

SOURCE: Trial Urban Districts Assessment, "The Nation's Report Card: District Average Scores"

for African American and Hispanic students in D.C. public schools since the tests were introduced in Washington in 2015. In math, they have increased every year at every grade level except one.

Charter-sector results have also trended upward over the four years, if not as uniformly. Overall, proficiency rates are slightly

in the wake of 2018 disclosures that as many as a third of public-school high school seniors were granted diplomas despite inadequate attendance, the citywide graduation rate in traditional public schools rose to 65 percent in 2018–19 from 54 percent in 2011–12. The graduation rate in charter high schools in 2018–19 was 76 percent.



ASTRID RIECKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

A class at LEAP Academy Early Childhood School at KIPP DC, a network of high-performing public charter schools in Washington.

higher for African Americans in charter schools than in D.C. public schools in both math and English language arts; for white students, these rates are lower in charters in both subjects. For Hispanics, proficiency rates are the same in English and lower in math at charter schools.

NAEP recently reported that achievement trends between 2017 and 2019 among the school district's African American, Hispanic, and low-income students mirrored those of their counterparts in other urban districts in mathematics and outperformed urban trends in reading.

Graduation rates have risen in both district schools and charters. Even after city officials recalibrated rates downward

Catalysts

Over the last decade, school leaders have effected a transformation in D.C.'s public schools. How did the school-reform stars align in a city beset by failure for so long? A number of catalysts enabled change:

School choice and the competition for students. The mounting loss of students to charter schools spurred the city council to wrest control of the schools from the elected board and hand it to the mayor. That shift enabled the hiring of tough-minded reformers like Rhee and Henderson, who pursued a coherent reform agenda for nine years—a long stretch of leadership for urban school districts.

Tenacious leadership. Rhee, Henderson, and their colleagues doggedly pursued their vision of a performance-based teaching profession and other reforms. They revamped the

Since the 2014–15 school year, the city’s 93,000 public-school students have selected traditional public schools and charters through a single, centralized application process that makes school choice more efficient and far fairer than it was in the past.

dysfunctional central bureaucracy and built a new administrative infrastructure to support the IMPACT evaluation system and other initiatives. Rhee’s commitment to reform attracted a level of talent to the central office that’s rare in public-education bureaucracies. Many of these leaders started in public education in Teach for America, a reflection of that organization’s substantial contribution to school reform beyond the classroom.

Tightened accountability for the charter sector, along with the willingness of Henderson and Pearson to put aside the usual district–charter hostilities to create common school-rating and enrollment systems.

Substantial funding for the reform agenda, first from federal and foundation grants (some \$200 million), then from school closings, rising enrollments, and savings from improvements in the city’s special-education system. D.C.’s investment in publicly funded preschool helped attract many young families to the public-school sector.

Few teachers union constraints. On Rhee’s watch, the Washington Teachers Union was weak, still reeling from a corruption scandal that had sent its president to federal prison. Earlier, Congress had stipulated that the system for evaluating Washington’s teachers could not be part of contract negotiations. Rhee seized on this freedom and created the IMPACT teacher-evaluation system that became the foundation for the redesign of the city’s teaching profession.

Challenges for a New Chancellor

Despite the magnitude of education reform in the nation’s capital over the past decade, ample challenges remain for current chancellor Lewis Ferebee, who took the helm in January 2019.

Many of the city’s high schools are troubled, requiring a comprehensive reevaluation of the high-school sector. An investigation commissioned by the city’s Office of State

Superintendent of Education found that a third of the city’s 2017 graduates earned diplomas despite accumulating credits through bogus makeup work or racking up more than 30 days of unexcused absences, which should have triggered failing grades under school-district policies.

Opponents of performance pay and tougher teacher and principal evaluations seized on the disclosures as evidence that the reforms were pressuring educators into bad behavior. It’s hard to argue against having high-school principals prioritize students earning diplomas, though, and principals are also evaluated on other metrics, such as student achievement, teacher-retention rates, and the percentage of students who complete college financial-aid forms.

The central office’s failure to audit its high schools’ graduation data was the primary problem in the scandal, not the district’s performance standards *per se*. The central-office leaders of the high-school division lost their jobs as a result.

The neighborhood high schools that were at the center of the controversy served large numbers of high-needs students. These schools become catchments for students who don’t receive their preferred placements via the lottery, who don’t



Lewis Ferebee (right), acting chancellor for D.C. Public Schools, talks to Taivian Scott, 12, while touring John Hayden Johnson Middle School in January 2019.

ASTRID RIECKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

meet the standards of district schools that have selective admissions, or who are eased out of district and charter schools for disciplinary and academic reasons.

The city's school funding formula incentivizes schools to keep difficult-to-educate students through the city's early-October "count day"—the day when they receive a full year's funding for students—and then remove the students before standardized testing in the spring, so the students don't drag down the schools' achievement records. As Eric Fraser, a former principal of Anacostia High School, one of the schools caught up in the graduation scandal, told me: "We house everyone in our area that others don't want."

The scandal and the abrupt departure of chancellor Antwan Wilson after only a year damaged morale throughout the district and caused many senior central-office staff to leave. Wilson, who succeeded Kaya Henderson in 2017, was forced to resign after he circumvented the lottery process in transferring his daughter from one high school to another.

Although 81 percent of D.C. Public Schools teachers said in 2018 that they were satisfied with their jobs, many of them still oppose the changes of the Rhee and Henderson eras.

Teaching in Washington's many impoverished neighborhoods is stressful and challenging. While the school system is keeping most of its best teachers, its schools lose an average of 26 percent of their teachers a year; in the charter sector, attrition is 25 percent.

Much of the attrition in the district schools is attributable to the voluntary and involuntary departure of low-rated teachers, as well as transfers and promotions of higher-rated teachers within the system. (Teachers moving from one district school to another are included in the calculation.)

In the face of substantial staff turnover, it can be hard to maintain school culture and the momentum for reform, and that problem underscores the need for Ferebee to double-down on Henderson's teacher-retention work. He has launched a reassessment of the IMPACT teacher-evaluation system, giving him an opportunity to increase teachers' commitment to reform by offering them a role in fine-tuning the system.

Achievement levels among African American and Latinx students, who make up 82 percent of Washington's enrollment, seriously lag those of their white peers. Roughly 25 percent of the city's African American students scored proficient in reading on the demanding PARCC assessments in 2018, compared to about 80 percent of white students. Many students continue to attend racially isolated schools.

While expanding enrollments and funding increases made possible by Washington's booming local economy have helped offset the loss of previous infusions of federal and foundation funding, the price tag for performance-based teacher compensation continues to rise, and the city signed a new teacher contract in 2017 that includes a 9 percent across-the-board pay hike over three years. These growing expenses may limit

Ferebee's freedom to fund new initiatives.

Ultimately, the success of school choice in Washington will necessitate a higher number of strong schools. A third of the nearly 25,000 applicants for seats in the 2018–19 school year weren't matched with schools they sought. Until the city develops sufficient capacity in outstanding schools, some students will not benefit fully from D.C.'s expansive choice system.

Despite these challenges, Ferebee has inherited a much-improved education landscape. The transformation of the D.C. public schools has illustrated that traditional public-school systems, not just charter schools, can be laboratories of reform. Rhee



Chancellor Antwan Wilson of DCPS at the Washington Metropolitan High School after a visit during the first day of school in August 2017.

and Henderson have modeled effective strategies for rigorous teacher evaluations that also promote educator empowerment and professionalism. The common-enrollment system has quieted the fractious debate over neighborhood schools, preserving students' right to attend schools close to home. It has also brought to light the reality that some neighborhood schools are substandard and reinforce racial and socioeconomic segregation.

The depth and breadth of the public-education reforms in the city confirmed that many schools in Washington and nationally lack the capacity to improve on their own, that betterment at scale requires a degree of centralized leadership and substantial support. School leaders sought help from Henderson and her team when schools were struggling to implement the Common Core standards effectively. The IMPACT teacher-evaluation system gave principals the preparation they needed to appraise and improve their teachers. And the efforts of the charter-school board to ratchet up school performance have demonstrated a successful method for holding charters accountable for their performance and ensuring that they serve students well.

Ultimately, the past decade of reform in the nation's capital has shown how hard it is to raise the trajectories of students living in impoverished urban environments—and that it's possible.

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