

**DC Public Education Reform
Amendment Act (PERAA) Report No. 5**

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The Education Consortium for Research and Evaluation (EdCORE)



EdCORE

at The George Washington University

DC Public Education Reform Amendment Act (PERAA)
Report No. 5:

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT
IN DC PUBLIC EDUCATION:
OFFICIALS' REPORTS AND STAKEHOLDERS'
PERCEPTIONS

Submitted to the



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*The Education Consortium for Research and Evaluation (EdCORE)
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Foreword

This report is the fifth and final in a series of interim reports on the District of Columbia's Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (PERAA) prepared by the Education Consortium on Research and Evaluation (EdCORE) at the George Washington University (GW), under contract with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The reports provide analysis to inform the work of the NAS Committee on the Five Year (2008-2013) Summative Evaluation of the District of Columbia Public Schools.

The NAS summative report will respond to the mandate for independent evaluation included in PERAA; these interim reports provide updates by school year, highlight trends across years in the PERAA evaluation topic areas, and provide additional data collected for long-term analysis.

With guidance from the DC Auditor and adherence to the PERAA legislation, four broad topics have been the focus of EdCORE's inquiry:

- Business practices and strategies, including organizational structure and roles, financial management, operations management, facilities and maintenance; resource allocations; public accountability; interagency collaboration; and stakeholder engagement and responsiveness.
- Human resources operations and human capital strategies, including the number (and percentage) of highly qualified teachers; retention rate for effective teachers; schools and wards served by effective teachers; length of time principals and administrators serve; types of leadership strategies used; and responsibilities of central office versus school level leadership.
- Academic plans, including integration of curriculum and program-specific focus into schools and grade progression and credit accumulation.
- Student achievement, including a description of student achievement that includes: academic growth, proficiency, and other (non-academic) educational outcomes.

The first two EdCORE reports provided annual snapshots of each of these topics presented above for the years 2010-2011 (Report No. 1) and 2011-2012 (Report No. 2). The third report focused on DCPS teacher effectiveness trends for the years 2009-2009 and 2012-2013, and the fourth report highlighted student achievement trends across the District during years 2006-2007 and 2012-2013. This fifth report focuses on stakeholder engagement and responsiveness, as outlined in PERAA under Business Practices for the years following its passage in 2007.

As noted in our previous reports, we caution readers about findings and implications of these analyses. Though informative, the data presented here are not sufficient to fully describe PERAA implementation across the entire citywide education landscape or infer trends or their causes. In this qualitative report, we rely on data provided by the firsthand accounts of stakeholders and officials to understand perceptions and experiences. Our goal is to describe a phenomenon—not to make causal links.

In addition to the direct support of the DC government through NAS, the work reported here was supported indirectly by funds from a combination of public and private organizations that have helped create and build the EdCORE consortium. Acknowledgements go to the National Science Foundation (NSF), American Institutes for Research (AIR), CityBridge Foundation, and Judy and Peter Kovler for their generous support of EdCORE. We also wish to thank GW Vice President for Research Leo Chalupa and Provost Steven Lerman for their institutional support, without which it would have been impossible to fulfill the demands of the PERAA evaluation and related activities.

We are especially grateful to our colleagues at the NAS—Alix Beatty, Stuart Elliott, Bob Hauser, Natalie Nielsen, committee co-chairs Carl Cohn and Lorraine McDonnell along with the members of their committee—for their confidence in EdCORE and for their wise counsel on matters both technical and stylistic. Finally, we wish to thank DC Auditor Yolanda Branche and Deputy Auditor Lawrence Perry for their consummate professionalism and gracious management of the budget and contracting process.

This report was written by Heather Harding, Executive Director of EdCORE at the George Washington University with guidance from Dr. Arshad Ali, a faculty member at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development (GSEHD) and Brenda Turnbull of Policy Studies Associates (PSA), and editorial contributions from Nancy Kober and the EdCORE professional staff. Sahar D. Sattarzadeh provided technical, logistical, and conceptual support during all phases of the work. Our able team of research associates included Ashley Briggs, Esa Syeed, and Leslie Ward. The deft handling of contractual matters by Viola Horek (of NAS) and Maxine Freund, Vinnie Mitchell, and Christine Tomasik (of GW) was also greatly appreciated.

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List of Acronyms

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)
Critical Response Team (CRT)
District of Columbia (DC)
District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)
District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB)
Education Consortium for Research and Evaluation (EdCORE)
Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission (ICSIC)
Local Educational Agency (LEA)
Local School Advisory Team (LSAT)
Office of Family and Public Engagement (OFPE)
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME)
Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)
Parent and Family Resource Center (PFRC)
Parent-Teacher Association (PTA)
Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC)
Performance Management Framework (PMF)
Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (PERAA)

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN DC PUBLIC EDUCATION: OFFICIALS' REPORTS AND STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS

I. Overview

Over the past two decades, several cities have shifted greater authority for the public school system to their mayors—Boston, Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC are a few notable examples. Typically, these reforms give the mayor the power to appoint school board members and, in some cases, select the superintendent or chief school executive. While the specific motivations for mayoral control vary by city, reformers often maintain that this approach will enhance coordination and clarify lines of authority across the system, improve the recruitment of teachers and other personnel, allow for better financial management, and improve learning opportunities for all students.¹

In many cases, advocates for mayoral control also seek to bypass some of the interest-group politics associated with elected school boards. However, the abolition of elected school boards and the changes in managerial structures that accompany mayoral control create a different set of challenges for community and public engagement with the public schools.

In the District of Columbia, the Public Education Reform Amendment Act (PERAA) of 2007 shifted control of most key aspects of the city's public schools to the mayor. With the dissolution of the elected school board, the appointment of a chancellor who reports directly to the mayor, and the establishment of a state department of education tethered to the mayor, stakeholders had to learn overnight how to navigate a new system.

Only a few provisions of PERAA directly mention public and stakeholder engagement. Most notably, the legislation calls for the creation of the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education “to serve as a communication and problem-resolution mechanism for residents regarding issues related to public education”² (This position was vacant for five of the past seven years, however, and a new Ombudsman did not begin service until April 2014). PERAA also directs the mayor to engage the public in the selection of the Chancellor and the development of policy governing the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Finally, stakeholder engagement is one of several topics mentioned in PERAA's mandate for an independent, five-year evaluation of progress in the DCPS.

This report has been developed in response to the requirement for an evaluation of the engagement of stakeholders and the responsiveness of the District's education agencies to stakeholders. It is the fifth in a series of interim reports that support a larger study overseen by the National Research Council to fulfill the PERAA evaluation mandate. This report draws on qualitative data and addresses two important questions:

¹ For a fuller discussion of the history of and research on mayoral control of education, see National Research Council. (2011). *A Plan for Evaluating the District of Columbia's Public Schools: From Impressions to Evidence*. Committee on the Independent Evaluation of DC Public Schools. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

² Introduction of the District of Columbia Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 Enrolled version.

- 1) What strategies and institutional arrangements do DC officials report using to engage the families of public school students and members of the community? What are the primary objectives of these efforts?
- 2) What perceptions and attitudes do “grasstops”³ community members and family representatives have about the strengths of the school system’s engagement strategies? What criteria do stakeholders use to judge the schools' efforts to engage, respond to, and be accountable to them?

II. Summary of Main Findings

Our study produced several findings about the strategies for stakeholder engagement and the experiences of interested stakeholders since the passage of PERAA:

- Centralizing governance has not met the challenge of creating stronger citywide collaboration across sectors or across city agencies, but there is some evidence that it has expedited a focus on school-level academic improvements.
- The current governance model has made it difficult for stakeholders to have access to decision-making and has reduced transparency for both stakeholders and officials.
- Stakeholders remain uneasy about the loss of an elected body with governance powers over education.
- Officials do not articulate an aligned, citywide vision for public engagement. Rather, agencies have pursued a variety of engagement strategies with a common focus on “strategic” communications.
- Communicating information from the schools to families and community members is the primary engagement strategy by officials citywide, but stakeholders seek more two-way means of communication that would allow them to provide input on the schools.
- The quality of information available has improved, yet access to some platforms remains inequitably distributed across the city.

The remaining sections of this report describe our methodology and present data to support these findings. The bulk of our findings rely on interview data from a select group of DC officials and DC stakeholders. In addition, we consulted the language of the PERAA legislation and reviewed publicly available reports that describe the policy and actions of relevant government agencies.

³ The term “grasstops” refers to activists or members of a formal or informal group, organization, or geographic area who have a “high” professional and/or public profile and “may be part of the “political family” for a decision maker, and can raise public attention or influence decision makers through established connections. For example, an organization’s board members and founders, community leaders, and nationally recognized individuals (including experts, professionals, etc.) constitute potential grasstops advocates. “Grasstops advocates can reinforce grassroots action, move an issue into the spotlight, and carry a message between the general public and more powerful targets” (M+R, 2009)

III. Research Design

Guided by the conceptual framework on parent and community engagement presented by Henig, Gold, Orr, Silander, and Simon (2010), our research questions aimed to identify interpretations and perceptions of public engagement strategies reported by DC officials and stakeholders. This framework (refer to Figure 1.1 below) helped to illuminate both collective and individual levels of engagement and to consider both intentions and outcomes. Since the purpose of the study was to understand public engagement knowledge and experiences—as perceived by the participants—the research questions were deconstructed into interview questions (see Appendix) customized for each participant groups (i.e., officials or stakeholders). Qualitative, semi-standardized interviews enabled the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of key words, phrases, and ideas that could not be obtained in quantitative interviews, surveys, and questionnaires (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Furthermore, such interviews provide opportunities for researchers to observe and record non-verbal cues, which may offer additional relevance or significance to the findings. Most interviews were conducted in person. However, four interviews were conducted by phone to accommodate the availability and convenience of interviewees. Each respondent participated in only one interview, which lasted, on average, between 45 minutes and one hour.

Figure 1.1: Types of Parent & Community Engagement

	Implementation	Policy Formulation
Individualistic (Student & Family)	A. Information and choice	B. Student-centered collaboration
Collective (School or District)	C. Supportive partnerships	D. Advocacy, strong democracy <i>Versus</i> E. Accountability through mayoral elections

Source: Adapted from Henig, Gold, Orr, Silander, & Simon (2010)

A total of 28 individuals participated in this study—14 officials and 14 stakeholders. The sample size and selection were constrained by three factors: 1) limited time and resources for conducting interviews and analyzing findings; 2) a limited number of officials with experience relevant to the scope of the study; and 3) the availability and willingness of individuals to participate within the research time frame. Officials were invited to participate according to their roles and publicly stated responsibilities for public engagement, and with an eye toward representing the various mayoral administrations from 2007 through 2014. Stakeholders were selected based on participation in public forums and referrals from stakeholders and officials. The researchers conducted a broad outreach to solicit participants through emails to various formal groups focused on advocacy and support of public schools (e.g. Ward Education councils, Empower DC, etc.). The researchers' prior knowledge about major events in the DC education landscape also informed the selection of both groups.

Because of the limited number of interviews, we pursued a strategy of inviting and selecting stakeholders who were identified as “grasstops” and were actively engaged in public education (pre-and/or-post-PERAA) and working on behalf of parents, families, and communities. Active engagement was documented through publicly available sources found in the media or in the public record. Although efforts were made to include officials and stakeholders whose work and service areas (not their primary residence) were representative of all wards throughout the city, those who agreed to participate in the study focused on either citywide work or served wards 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, or 8.

There was a diversity of experience and tenure within and across both participant groups. The officials interviewed served in various offices and positions pre-and/or-post-PERAA at the government, city, and/or system (DCPS or charter school) levels. The grasstops stakeholder participants were members of nonprofit organizations, advocacy initiatives or groups, PTA leadership, parent advocacy groups, ward education councils, and/or community advisory groups.

In order to attempt to capture the most authentic and transparent findings, all officials and stakeholders who consented to participate were assured that their identities (i.e., personal names, as well as past and current affiliations and roles) would be confidential and anonymous to the public. The number of officials, in particular, who worked or are currently working in public engagement in DC public education is quite small, so in order to avoid compromising their identities, this report broadly identifies participants as “officials” or “stakeholders.” Subsequently, quotes from officials are identified by the letter “O” and a number (e.g., O14) and for stakeholders, they are identified by the letter “S” (e.g., S5).

The research team split the sample into two distinct groups—stakeholders and officials—and then pursued an interview schedule and analytic strategy that juxtaposed the differences and highlighted the similarities between these two interconnected groups. As much as possible, officials were interviewed first to help the research team frame the intended and identified strategies for public engagement against the experiences of stakeholders. Semi-standardized interviews proved to be the most effective method in exploring how officials and stakeholders understood and acted upon public engagement efforts in DC public education. Interviewers were assigned to one group to help us see patterns within each group. Documenting the experiences and perceptions of DC officials was a much more straightforward task, given the finite number of individuals in positions with public engagement responsibilities.

To analyze the data, we developed a coding scheme based on predetermined and emerging themes that aligned with the research questions, guided by the Henig et al. (2010) framework. Codes were cross-analyzed by multiple researchers in order to strengthen both reliability and validity of the interpretation of the findings.

The researchers recognize that the voices of grasstops stakeholders captured in the study are only a part of a much larger public that includes parents, families, and community members whose experiences would vary based on their knowledge, level of information, access, and

degree of political influence or power. The researchers, therefore, do not suggest that this study represents the experience of the "average" DC parent, family, or community member. Rather, the purpose of this study is to offer a glimpse into the similarities and differences expressed by officials and stakeholders about parent, family, and community engagement in public education prior to and after PERAA legislation was adopted in DC.

IV. Governance

Governance issues are an important starting point for considering stakeholder engagement. In a democracy, citizens elect leaders to represent their voices in the political process. The District, however, has a unique governance structure and an emotionally fraught history, both of which influence stakeholders' views of the PERAA reforms. Until Congress passed the Home Rule Act in 1973, DC had no independent governing authority. Even now, Congress retains considerable authority over DC's budget and affairs, and DC's single Representative does not have a vote in Congress. Any tinkering with Home Rule triggers an intense emotional reaction from Washingtonians who can readily recall old and current battles with Congress for representation and self-rule. Therefore, the PERAA legislation holds meaning beyond what happens in public education.

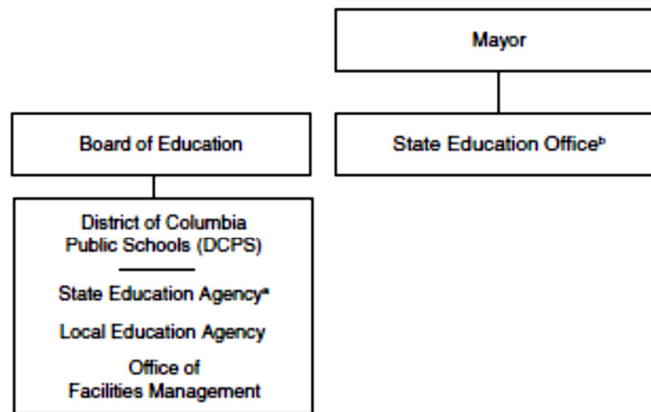
Simply put, PERAA replaced the locally elected board of education with a multi-tentacled structure headed by the city's mayor (see Figure 1.2 below). Under PERAA, the mayor appoints a Chancellor who acts as chief executive of the DCPS and reports solely to the mayor, just as the heads of other city agencies do. PERAA created the Department of Education, an entity with broad responsibility "for planning, coordination, and supervision of all public education and education-related activities"⁴ from pre-K to 16. Led by a Deputy Mayor for Education, who is also appointed by the mayor, the Department of Education oversees the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (another mayoral appointee), manages facilities, and coordinates interagency work. Originally, the Department of Education also managed the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education. PERAA further called for the establishment of an elected state board of education, which sets curriculum standards, high school graduation requirements, and other policies typically addressed at the state level; the board also advises the state superintendent.

The District of Columbia School Reform Act passed by Congress in 1995 created a federally appointed board, the Public Charter School Board (PCSB), with authority to establish charter schools. The DC City Council followed suit by allowing the local board of education to also create charter schools. In dissolving the local board of education, PERAA mandated the removal of school chartering authority from locally elected officials and transferred oversight of all existing charter schools to the PCSB. Although some charter advocates contend that the PERAA legislation "wasn't meant to" impact charters (O4), the separation of powers it brought about has protected charter autonomy in some ways.

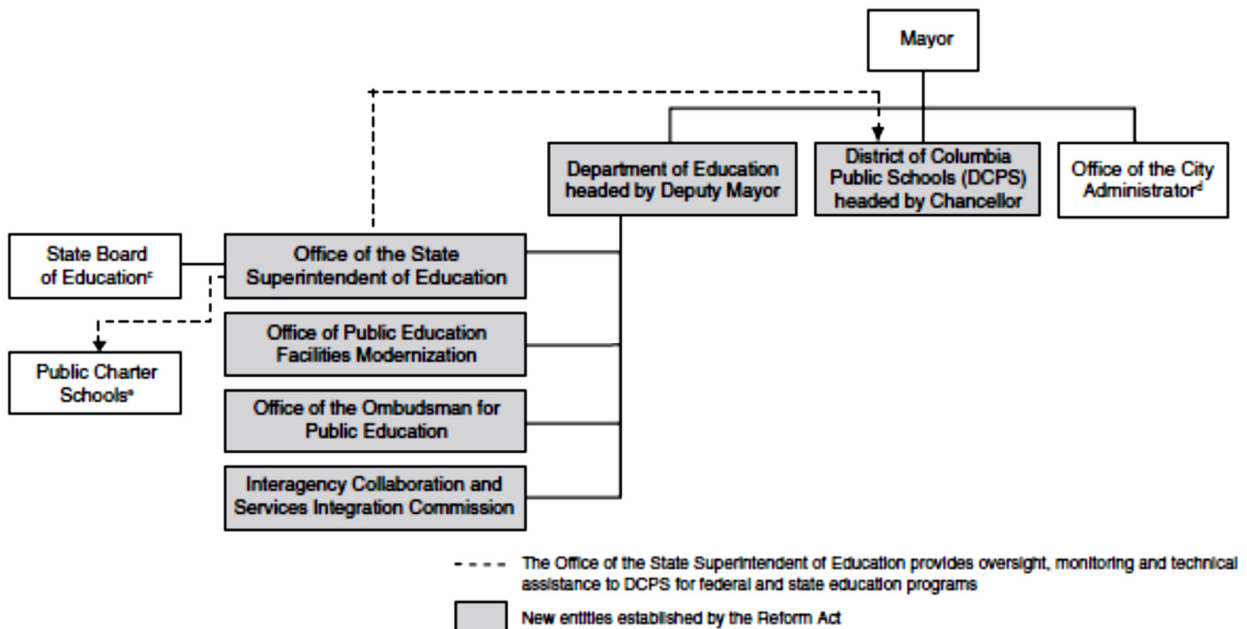
⁴ PERAA, Title II, Section 202, (b) (2).

Figure 1.2: DC Public Education Governance Structure, Prior to PERAA and After PERAA

Before the Reform Act of 2007



After the Reform Act of 2007



Source: Government Accountability Office (GAO), (2009)

Our study reached three broad findings about the impact of PERAA's governance changes on public engagement. First, mayoral control does appear to have expedited the pace of decision-making and implementation of reforms, but at a price. By most accounts, many changes have been afoot over the last seven years and there is acknowledgement that there is less dysfunction and more activity on the part of officials. But in return for expediency, some citizens feel that their voice in government has diminished with the abolishment of an elected school board.

Second, DC's version of mayoral control has not improved coherence, clarity, and coordination of educational services, according to officials and stakeholders alike. Although the PERAA reforms centralized power with the mayor, they also added complexity to lines of reporting and accountability. There appears to be continued jockeying for authority, making it difficult for officials to focus effectively and for stakeholders to address their concerns to the actual decision-makers.

Third, the expansion of charter schools under a governance structure that does little to integrate them has led to frustration among community members and some officials.

Each of these findings is explained in more detail below.

Changing the Pace

For DC officials directly involved with the development of PERAA, the move to mayoral control was intended to speed up implementation of much needed reforms by removing the barriers presented by politics. There was also hope that under mayoral leadership, increased interagency collaboration would lead to greater efficiency in providing services across the traditional and charter school sectors. Both officials and stakeholders seem to indicate that the primary driver for a system of mayoral control was avoiding what had become a dysfunctional political environment. One official explained:

[T]he legislation was an effort to try to create a better governance system . . . [A] lot of hard decisions were watered down when it came to implementation and . . . the net effect of that was sustained kind of inefficiencies in the district, and . . . a very slow trajectory to improvement . . . [U]nder mayoral control it would be easier to accelerate some of, and to implement some of, the decisions that the board and school officials had been slow to follow through on (O5).

Another official alluded to the problem of getting the elected board to make decisions in a timely way:

[A]s the school superintendent you were hamstrung. Like every decision had to be brought through the Board of Education . . . [T]here is no way that [a superintendent] could move the city to where it needed to go. So dissolving the board [and giving] a chancellor the full authority to make decisions that needed to be made was really, really crucial (O4).

Many stakeholders view the loss of a locally elected school board as a diminution of their role in the democratic process. As characterized by a stakeholder engaged in grassroots community organizing, there was evidence that the DC Council was a difficult venue for public engagement, and the "centralization of power" that removed the school board impeded the organizing of a public voice:

[P]art of it is the loss of, you know, democracy that we've seen, at least for parents of color. We worked primarily with black parents, African-American parents, low-income

folks here in the district. So that's kind of a lens [through which] we approached all of our work. So I quickly realized PERAA and looked at all of that and the centralization of power . . . I started pulling up some of the old council meetings . . . so, so contentious back then (S5).

A majority of the stakeholders we interviewed articulated concerns about the democratic process and the extent to which they have a voice in government. Stakeholders reported that advocacy now requires an advanced level of political knowledge to gain access to government (i.e., community members have to know where to go to seek help with their particular issue, given the distribution of authority over budgeting, academics, etc.). Theoretically, the Office of the Ombudsman would have provided a centralized way for families to understand and negotiate access to decision-makers, but because this aspect of PERAA implementation was interrupted, advocates sought out more varied routes for influence. Yet, even as conceived, officials familiar with the initial days of the Office of the Ombudsman suggest that the role was constrained by antagonistic political forces. An official with firsthand knowledge recalled that some Ombudsman reports were used as political fodder in conflicts between council members and the mayor. Because the Ombudsman was not effectively positioned or empowered to avoid such conflicts, it had difficulty addressing some citizen concerns.

Lines of Authority and Interagency Collaboration

If the hope was that a more centralized system would yield a clearer and more accessible citywide vision for education that supported greater collaboration to city services, this failed to materialize. According to both stakeholders and city officials, interagency collaboration has so far been a missed opportunity of PERAA. The creation of the Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission (ICSIC) by the Deputy Mayor's Office did not turn out to be as "useful and productive" as officials had thought, noted one interviewee (O4); the commission did not issue its required reports, and its role was later assumed by a new public-private partnership called Raise DC (EdCORE, 2013b). In addition, the use of facilities remains a loud and active complaint of charter school advocates and a topic of ongoing debate across the city. The elevated visibility of education reform in the District led some education agencies to operate with a "crisis management orientation," one official suggested, leaving little time or capacity to deal with public engagement (O6). Officials expressed frustration and confusion about the lines of authority. One summarized the problem in this way:

I think that there is trouble when the Office of the State Superintendent of Education [OSSE] reports to the Deputy Mayor, who then reports to the Mayor . . . OSSE is lower than DC Public Schools, [which] is now a cabinet-level position. I think that is a challenge. I think the fact that the Chancellor and the State Superintendent are both selected by the Mayor causes a significant challenge to that. And you can't quite tell who is speaking on whose behalf (O5).

This same official pointed out the unique challenge of DC having to manage both state and local responsibilities and questioned whether the current structure of mayoral control provides enough checks and balances.

Another official underscored the lack of clarity in lines of authority and responsibility:

So I think the most ineffective piece of PERAA has been the governing structure; I am sure you've heard that before. I mean, it's the deputy mayor, a state superintendent of education, a chancellor, and an executive director [of DC PCSB], all of whom are responsible for the schools and all of whom want to be the only one responsible for their schools, right? I mean that everyone should report to the deputy mayor. I don't even know if we need a state superintendent—I don't know that we need both . . . I still don't understand the difference between those two offices, really; they seem to pick and choose different projects (O4).

Several interviewees pointed out that the Chancellor, in both design and actual practice, enjoys the strongest connection to the Mayor and has an outsized influence on decisions that affect all schools. One official cited the selection of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment under the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) adoption process as an example of “one loud voice and ten quiet voices” in meetings that brought together representatives from DCPS and charter schools to inform the decision (O4).

The Charter Sector

Many stakeholders raised concerns about the lack of coordination in governance citywide. Many commented about the growing number of local educational agencies (LEAs)⁵ and the perception that mayoral control applies only to the DCPS rather than to the entire portfolio of citywide schools. A few stakeholders described charter growth as a direct threat to the stability of DCPS, but most interviewees acknowledged that charter schools have offered families a much-needed option when the traditional district failed to provide a quality neighborhood school. Many interviewees—both officials and stakeholders—argued that better collaboration and partnership between DCPS and charters is desirable. In particular, some would like to see charters filling a gap in current services rather than competing against traditional district schools.

One stakeholder noted that the mayoral control of the schools means “DCPS [being under mayoral control]—not the charters” (S9), translating into a political arrangement that didn’t provide “real support for education as a whole.” Another stakeholder voiced that a citywide approach was lacking:

[It] should be obvious once a mayor takes over the schools, that the whole city, as appropriate, would be behind the effort, that resources would be coordinated, made available, that interagency constructs would be effective in doing some of the work that so obvious[ly] needs to be done. You don't see that. You don't see enough of that . . . What's the point [of mayoral control]? What's the point if you're not going to bring to bear the

⁵ A local education agency (LEA) is a government-recognized entity that operates elementary and secondary schools. In the District of Columbia, there are 61 LEAs. DCPS is the largest, and the remaining LEAs are charters school operators—some with multiple campuses.

whole city? What do you need it for, if you're not going to make it a part of the whole city effort? (S9).

One official noted that the “zero-sum” competition between traditional and charter sectors complicated decision-making about such issues as facilities. “I think we are losing an opportunity, and that’s the place where PERAA could make some corrections” (O7). Another official suggested that this competition may improve engagement practices for the traditional system; in a competitive environment, this official said, “to make people feel vested in your schools is really important because it’s about your actual existence. And so you need to pay a lot of attention to that sense of investing and buying in” (O6). But stakeholders—particularly those who represented parent concerns—worry about families choosing charters. One such stakeholder said: “My belief is that . . . once folks go into the charter system, they mostly leave DC Public Schools” (S2).

A stakeholder put a finer point on this anxiety about charter growth and the lack of collaboration:

Where I live, both [the charter] sector is growing very rapidly . . . and we have more and more schools showing up in our communities but there’s not really ways for the community . . . to really . . . be a part of that process, even though that process is happening and the proliferation of those schools is just cannibalizing [DCPS]. And because there are so many schools that are opening, so many different types of curriculum, so many different structures for [the schools’ grade spans], and I mean so many different things that common planning would really help. [This would] not take away any type of autonomy from [charters], but just make it more understandable and digestible for families who don’t really care about one sector or the other, they just care about education (S11).

This tension between choice, school quality, and governance highlights a disconnect between PERAA’s design and a more inclusive citywide system. PERAA’s separate governance structures for the traditional and charter sectors have allowed charter independence to flourish, thus potentially enlarging individual families’ array of choices for their children’s schooling. But the separation appears to have had costs in civic engagement and system coherence. Parents seem to be in search not only of quality schools but also of venues for their input. By characterizing charter growth as “cannibalizing” DCPS schools (S11), this stakeholder illustrates what other stakeholders worried about—the competition for students trumping a citywide vision for all.

Officials also expressed concerns about charter autonomy. One official, for example, questioned the effects of charter school expansion:

A model of choice is fine. I have come to, in some cases, appreciate it; it wasn’t always there. But I don’t like uncontrolled expansion of the number of schools that we have in the city because we have more LEAs in the city than most other states do. And when you have 260-something campuses, or whatever that number is because it changes every year, we already have under-enrolled schools and the perception that charter schools are all doing better. But the perception is different than reality, when charter schools

have just as much variation [as] DCPS has . . . So I think that there is room for increased collaboration, communication with the charter sector, and I think that there should be a little bit more. The word is not accountability; I think it's closer to coordination (O4).

V. Public Engagement: What Did DC Officials Intend?

Since the passage of PERAA—and perhaps even before—public engagement in Washington’s public education system has been inconsistently defined and understood. PERAA did little to clarify the meaning—or meanings—of public engagement. Consequently, the city agencies that govern education have incorporated engagement practices into their work in a variety of ways. The unevenness of engagement has yielded divergent experiences for officials and stakeholders. Public officials point to a constellation of political and social forces that can facilitate or impede public engagement.

Our study was particularly interested in what officials reported as their chosen public engagement strategies as a framing point for investigating stakeholder experiences. Our data support two broad findings about officials’ intentions for engagement.

First, many (though not all) DC officials share a vision that parents, families, and community members should play a critical role in their work. Very few, however, can point to specific strategies to realize that role or have created pathways for engagement.

Second, while the evidence suggests general support for stakeholder engagement, officials articulated different goals for directing that engagement. Some focused on providing students with academic supports, others talked about needed input for policy decisions, and others framed engagement as a broader civic responsibility.

The following examples from our interview data elaborate on these conclusions.

Many officials spoke of their strong commitment to public engagement. For example, one official asserted that “a school district runs when it is a kind of a partnership, you know, among community members and a school district” (O2). Another said that “we just should not be creating anything new in DC that impacts students and families without considering the role that community should play in providing feedback or bouncing ideas off of them” (O3). Community members, family members, and other stakeholders can bring fresh perspectives and different kinds of expertise to engagement opportunities, as another official explained:

Our community members, our parents see on a day-to-day basis the lines, the kids being turned away from school, because they're late or they're not in the regulation uniform. They see the non-residents dropping their kids off. They see the libraries that have no books, and they're an essential voice for reporting out. They're essential truth tellers. You can't fix what you don't know about them (O8).

One official listed a variety of groups, including ward-based organizations, nonprofits, alumni networks, neighborhood leaders, educators, health workers, and others, that “are all

communities of support, and they are totally vital” (O8). Another official made a similar point: “I also think that folks that aren’t parents have a right to be engaged on the topic as well, whether it’s just as neighbors or as employers or in other roles” (O5). According to one official, leaders “should take the input and bring about best practices on how to address their concerns” (O9).

However, officials are aware that public engagement efforts do not always enjoy universal support among city leaders. One official emphasized the importance of building public engagement into the routine operations of education governance, rather than treating it as an add-on: “[I]t always pained me when people talk about engagement as just sort of a separate strategy. I think we have got . . . [to build it] into the fiber of everything you do” (O7). Several of the officials interviewed also pointed out the failures of other agencies in engaging the public in recent years. In the eyes of some officials, the fact that the Ombudsman’s office was defunded and the position remained vacant for several years is a strong indication that public engagement has not been given its due. One official lamented the fact that a major study of facilities and a public engagement process—both commissioned by the Deputy Mayor for Education—were carried out by a consulting firms, rather than done in house, as an indication that the office lacked a commitment to authentic engagement (O6). Interestingly, in its 2012 report on public engagement, Public Agenda, the firm engaged by the DME to conduct a process of public engagement, summarized stakeholder sentiment as skeptical of mayoral control:

The public education system in DC is perceived as being overly complex, impenetrable and unwelcoming toward resident concerns. Repeated throughout each ward was great concern for budget transparency, meaningful parental involvement, a mistrust of mayoral control and a desire to create or improve democratic structures governing schools, frustration at the lack of unified city plan for public education, confusion about what theory of change is driving increased privatization of education, and so on. Residents are generally unsure where to go with concerns regarding their children’s education and are not aware of a public engagement constituent services office (Public Agenda, 2012).

Another set of officials had relatively little to say about public engagement and could not recall detailed examples of public engagement undertaken by their offices. “I think there is a lot of lip service paid to engagement, but not a lot of it’s done,” one official said (O10). Still others spoke of limits on the right role for stakeholders. One official stressed that stakeholders should have a spot at the “proverbial table” but added, “Do I mean that while someone is creating a curriculum for a new school that’s opening that a parent should be right at the table while you are writing? No, of course not” (O3). Another official was critical of parents who consider themselves “experts on education” and went on to say that “engagement and involvement is really important, but it’s hard when people “[only] know enough to *think* they know enough to influence or to change” (O4).

Some officials saw public engagement as a central responsibility of their offices; one official described their office's role in engagement as “making big decisions on behalf of communities” (O7). Many stakeholders and officials cited the recent school boundary revision process as an example of a successful, reciprocal relationship between officials and stakeholders.⁶ “People really understood the issues we were struggling with as policy makers, and we really understood the issues that they were struggling with as parents,” said one official (O6). Although several stakeholders specifically commented on the positive features of the school boundary process, its success was seen as an outlier. One stakeholder summed up the intent of officials in this way: “[Engagement] is a goal they have, but it’s a lofty one that doesn’t have a real roadmap or direction as to how it should be done” (S11).

I. Strategies for Engagement

As explained above, officials had different perspectives about where to focus engagement efforts, and many found it hard to articulate specific aligned citywide strategies for engagement. Still, a few broad findings about engagement strategies emerged from our data.

First, officials citywide focused on information sharing as a way of engaging parents and community. A focus on communications often translated into agency-initiated work to create more and better venues for sharing information, gathering feedback, and responding to criticism or problems. Here again, communication efforts served at least three distinct purposes: 1) to help families support their children by working directly with educators at the school; 2) to help families exercise school choice in both the traditional district and charter sectors; and 3) to introduce policy goals and solicit feedback, a purpose that was rarely articulated by officials but central to what stakeholders said they expect.

Second, city agencies have put considerable energy into improving and expanding vehicles for sharing and exchanging information. These include web-based platforms and social media, as well as more traditional avenues for engagement and communications, such as reports, public hearings, and appointed groups. However, access to these platforms is unevenly distributed across the city.

Third, although stakeholders noted the focus on strategic communication, they remain somewhat skeptical of its value because they experience it as one-way flow of information. Stakeholders report seeking more dynamic ways of engagement and expected routes to influence decision-makers. These expectations were largely unmet and fueled a sense that their voices are missing from important decisions.

⁶ In October, 2013, the Deputy Mayor of Education announced a process for revising the DCPS school boundaries and feeder patterns. An advisory committee was appointed representing families enrolled in public schools, professional affiliations and district government agencies. The author of this report was a member of the committee and participated in developing the recommendations accepted by the Mayor in August, 2014. Quotes on the boundary process used in this report are solely from interview participants.

Fourth, the Office of the Ombudsman was viewed by many officials and stakeholders as obvious vehicle for stakeholder engagement. Many participants discussed both the potential and actual implementation of this Office, and their comments reveal challenges to its effectiveness.

In the absence of an obvious place for engagement on major policies, stakeholders pursued multiple routes to making their case to decision-makers or to they went directly to the court of public opinion.

The remainder of this section provides more detailed evidence to explain and support these findings.

I.I Websites and Social Media

Improved communication was a major part of DC officials' intended vision for public engagement. Communication efforts took the form of multiple media formats with an emphasis on social media and web platforms. The use of Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and websites to share information and alert the community of issues has become standard operating practice for many education agencies over the last seven years. This, of course, cannot be attributed to the passage of PERAA, but it reflected DC officials' chosen goals. One official explained the efforts undertaken by one office to improve communication:

[M]y office recreated the website. The website was just . . . 18,000 PDFs . . . [And we] didn't even have the power to post stuff. So we . . . did focus groups all around the city about who and what kind of technology and what kind of stuff they would like to see on our website. We did a lot of polling . . . we got a lot of good suggestions and that was a massive job . . . [W]e put up a new website . . . And began social media and got every school to start their own Facebook page, and that was helpful . . . W]e also started a whole texting program. So that was very helpful and people felt much more connected (O2).

Many agencies employ online survey tools and direct email newsletters to engage parents, other constituents, and in some cases community members. DCPS contracted for stakeholder surveys (sent to parents, students, teachers, staff, and school administrators) in 2008, 2009, and 2011 (EdCORE, 2013a). Stakeholders report varying degrees of satisfaction with these methods of relaying information, and are generally much less satisfied with surveys and newsletters as a way to glean feedback.

I think having an online survey, saying, 'Please send me your priorities,' and two weeks later, closing the survey, and saying, 'We have asked for input' is not adequate. It's too technology heavy. It feels kind of . . . open-ended. I feel like the authentic engagement is something that is lacking in the current administration and maybe that's not a priority (S4).

Although social media has primarily been used to share information, it may also provide stakeholders with an avenue to voice their concerns and have them addressed. An official made this point:

[When stakeholders] find something they don't like, they use [Twitter] as a mechanism to let us know. I know that I have learned about a lot of parent complaints on Twitter . . . things of that nature that we are able to engage in a dialogue. [It] is always helpful to know how people feel and . . . if it's incorrect information, be able to steer them down the right path, or if it's a question, be able to inform them (O11).

Numerous officials refer to the power of social media, and Twitter in particular, as a platform for parents and other stakeholders to advocate for their particular needs. While it may indeed be useful, social media may not be accessed equitably across the city as a means for engagement. One official stated: “As much as I like to think the council or the Chancellor or the Deputy will get thousands of emails when they change the boundaries for families in [the affluent] Crestwood, I want to see them get thousands of emails from families on the eastern side of the city; but I think we need to work a little bit more on that” (O9). Another official indicated that there was a need for a “delicate balance” of engagement and opportunities for input between officials and stakeholders rather than what actually happens—“the loudest person gets heard” within social media spaces like Twitter, muting the voices of other members of the community who will be impacted by public education policies and decisions (O11).

Officials and stakeholders acknowledge that information is more readily available on these platforms but both worried about the ability of all parents to access them given internet access and general knowledge. Over time, DCPS and its non-profit partner, the Flamboyant Foundation have utilized web, social media, and phone texts to communicate with parents citing the challenges some low-income families face in keeping up with technology demands of these platforms.

I.II Traditional Communication

As one bright spot in communication and access, stakeholders reported that traditional communications remained robust, especially at the school level. “A lot of the families and community members, they just wanted to be listened to” (S12), said one stakeholder, who explained that the new principal of one school had meetings where the parents could come in and just talk. “We have a strong network of teachers and the students themselves. So I think it's the first place that we get our information from” (S6). Stakeholders we interviewed often held privileged positions within their own communities as “grasstops” leaders—and their experience reflected this status. “I have not had to go outside of the school level, and the principals know I know how to do that, but generally [I] have my issue resolved at the school level,” said one stakeholder (S12).

Advocacy groups act as a liaison between parents or community members and district officials by facilitating communication. The PTAs and Ward education councils are examples of this practice and are particularly important when schools are closed or facilities are updated. These intermediaries often have the ability to accurately communicate the displeasure, dissatisfaction, and distrust of their constituents because the individuals who lead them enjoy strong relationships at the school level and access at the system level.

One place where traditional avenues of communication appear to have failed was in school closures. Letters that are mailed and/or sent home with students to inform parents of issues, initiatives, and or major changes read as a shallow way to engage, as one stakeholder noted:

[T]hey did send letters home—it happened. But, you know, letters end up in kid’s bags or they end up in the mail, and . . . given what was about to happen . . . we didn’t think that they did enough on their due diligence to say, “Hey, you are going to be impacted” (S8).

I.III Reports, Frameworks, Home Visits, and Appointed Groups

Much like the strategies employed for overall engagement, communication efforts were quite diverse across agencies. Many enacted strategies coalesced around providing parents with more effective and accurate information about the academic programming at individual schools and about school choice. As examples, officials cited school quality reports for the charter school sector; improvements in the publicly available documents that rank or grade schools, which now include both OSSE’s school report card system LearnDC and the privately funded school equity reports, and the Public School Charter Board’s Performance Management Framework (PMF). It’s worth noting again that these could be characterized as unidirectional forms of engagement focused on helping families better understand school quality and building a shared vocabulary for school performance situated in a citywide system of choice.

Information is shared and packaged for families and parents in order to guide the selection of a school that fits their needs and preferences. As an example, officials focus on providing data to stakeholders, as one official explained:

We also have this thing called the Parent Performance Management Framework, and we did a small guide call Parent Guide, and basically it talks about all the factors that play into the performance management framework. And we do one-to-one interactions with families to educate them on how to choose a quality school and find a school that best fits the needs of their child (O11).

Officials and stakeholders cited other examples of efforts to gather information and update the public, including the Chancellor’s annual State of the Schools address and the DCPS Parent Council, a body of appointed parents who meet monthly and advise the Chancellor on issues brought to them. Much of this type of communication/engagement activity conceives of stakeholders in a supporting role of helping to promote students’ academic achievement. DCPS has a school level family engagement division that develops strategies for “anything that relates to really supporting families in a way that allows them to engage more—engage better with their teachers in their schools and their school leaders, in a way that supports student achievement,” one official explained (O3).

Finally, several stakeholders and officials mentioned the school-based partnerships with the locally based Flamboyant Foundation, which serve both DCPS and charter schools citywide. The Flamboyant model of home visitation provides the foundation for building relationships

between teachers and families and has been warmly received throughout the city; DCPS, in particular, has embraced several interventions being funded by the foundation.

I.IV Hearings and Public Meetings

Several stakeholders and officials mentioned public meetings and hearings as another example of communication and outreach. Meeting topics have run the gamut from changes in curriculum and facilities updates to the much more controversial school closings in 2010 and 2012. Sometimes meetings are held to discuss policies that have already been proposed to a large group—and feedback is invited. Other times, as in the public hearings held by the Education Committee of the City Council, stakeholders have not only initiated the topic, but organized a response. Stakeholders have mixed feelings about these public meetings and hearings.

While some stakeholders acknowledged that the second round of school closures offered more opportunities for engagement and influence than the first round, they nevertheless felt that officials were unreceptive to feedback that didn't fit with the proposed solutions. One stakeholder explained the process in this way:

[T]hat meeting was not a good meeting, in my opinion, because that is window dressing on public involvement, because they are coming out to the community, asking them what they'd like to see . . . done with this closed school. But then, the only thing they can do is give [the building] to a chartered school. Well, they didn't get anybody in that room saying that they wanted a charter school there . . . That room was packed. And they had a lot of ideas on what they wanted. Not a single one of those says a charter school (S1).

The revival of the Committee on Education on the DC Council has instilled hope in some stakeholders that greater access to decisions is on the horizon. From the year before PERAA was enacted, 2006, to 2012, the Council of the District of Columbia operated without an education committee but instead addressed education spending and policies as a committee of the whole. Late in 2012, the DC Council re-established an education committee, and the committee has subsequently initiated legislation on matters ranging from DCPS promotion policies to funding formulas (DeBonis, 2012). After observing the first meeting of the Committee on Education, one stakeholder described the committee members as “[Initially, the committee members] were just stricken” and “mortified to hear some of the things that parents were saying” (S10)—which implies that committee members were previously unaware of stakeholders' concerns and the needs of public education in the District. Several stakeholders echoed the sentiment that citizens have generally lost trust in officials in the post-PERAA years because they believe policy and programmatic decisions are made behind closed doors without public input.

The stakeholder expressed that a positive change is now visible regarding the efforts of the Education Committee hearings: “I feel like the reset button has kind of been hit, and there is a focus that didn't exist before” (S10). These hearings, which involved Ward council members, seemed to invite stakeholders' input into decision-making processes.

The reality though, is much more complicated given the earlier governance issues discussed above. While the DC City Council has budgetary oversight, the direction of DCPS is guided by the Chancellor alone; and charter schools are autonomous and overseen by private boards. Importantly, the revival of an Education Committee on the City Council can raise issues but may not provide access to decisions in the way stakeholders hope. Because of this complication, many stakeholders said they felt undervalued and unimportant. Several cited the Council's annual DCPS budget hearings, where they felt receptivity was lacking and financial commitments were not honored. One stakeholder felt that student advocates from public schools throughout the District who attended budget hearings were not taken seriously due to their age.

Although many stakeholders acknowledged that public hearings provided opportunities to engage and contribute input to the decision-making processes, they did not always perceive the intentions behind such hearings as genuine. If the lines of authority do not align with the venue for engagement, it stands to reason that stakeholders will perceive that engagement as shallow. In some cases, officials attempted to showcase public input by compiling public comments and sharing them online. Some stakeholders still felt this was insufficient and did not prove that public input was influencing any policy, programs, or engagement initiatives at any level.

One official observed that the loss of an elected School Board had left a "big hole" that could not be filled by new initiatives like the Parent Cabinet, which did not provide a "direct line" from residents to decision-makers (O13). Similarly, although parents may attend Council hearings, the proceedings do not always directly impact legislation or the outcomes of pressing policy decisions, such as school closures or boundary proposals. Another official maintained, however, that stakeholders "have a lot of opportunity for participation in the conversation and policy development . . . and it's just a matter of wanting to be engaged" (O14).

Several stakeholders and officials viewed the public meetings and hearings held by the Deputy Mayor for Education during the Committee on Boundaries and Student Assignment in 2014 as an effective example of engaging stakeholders and soliciting their input. A few stakeholders emphasized that this marked the "only time" they had encountered any form of engagement with DC education officials. Another stakeholder indicated that a survey assessing public satisfaction of the process yielded an approval rating of more than 56 percent according to a media poll (Chandler, 2014). Several officials and stakeholders believed that such a response would not have been possible without effective engagement strategies involving members of the community. Many saw this process as a model for advancing and enhancing public engagement strategies in the near future.

I.V Office of the Ombudsman

Public engagement provisions within PERAA were written with the intent⁷ of better serving the individual needs of stakeholders, namely through the Ombudsman's office and interagency collaboration. Together, these measures were intended to create an environment that is more responsive and easier for parents to navigate (O5).

Many interviewees recalled the challenges inherent in the prior elected school board, including political infighting, lack of technical expertise, and public grandstanding, and some made the point that certain provisions of PERAA were meant to resolve conflict between stakeholders and the governance structure. As one official noted, much of the energy of the school board and the school system administration went toward constituent services, but constituents' requests were sometimes at odds with each other. According to this official, the Office of the Ombudsman was created in PERAA as an independent channel, separate from the school administration, for listening to and responding to the requests and concerns of parents and other constituents. This official explained that the Ombudsman's office was also seen as "a mechanism for reporting out the types of concerns that were being raised, whether they were coming from DCPS parents or from charter schools parents. So, that was a prime mechanism for a stakeholder feedback" (O5).

Beyond the Ombudsman's office, officials tried incorporate similar customer service functions into other education agencies. An official pointed out that structures similar to the Ombudsman's function were created in DCPS's Office of Family and Public Engagement (OFPE) under PERAA to respond to critical issues faced by families. In Fall 2007, DCPS established Critical Response Teams (also known as CRTs or "DCPS Google") within the Office of the Chief of Staff under Chancellor Michelle Rhee to field all questions and complaints about anything and everything relevant to DCPS (Cardoza, 2013). On a parallel track, a trio of Parent and Family Resource Centers (PFRCs) based at elementary schools in Wards 1, 7, and 8 launched—initiated by the previous administration under Superintendent Clifford Janey. The PFRCs were open to all DCPS students and their families and aimed to provide a "one-stop shop" for parents by providing them with the tools and information they need to partner with their children and schools for academic success. In 2011, Chancellor Kaya Henderson decision to close the centers was based on the results of a 2010 survey that revealed that they were underutilized and most families were unaware of their existence (EdCORE, 2013b; Turque, 2011). Many parents and families, mostly from low-income communities, were disheartened. Another vehicle mentioned is the Local School Advisory Teams (LSATs). LSATs are comprised of elected and appointed members, consisting of parents, teachers, non-instructional school staff, a community member, and in some cases, students. One LSAT is intended to be established at every school, and they serve to advise the principal on matters that promote high expectations and high achievement for all students.

⁷ Two PERAA authors we interviewed shared this intention for the Office of the Ombudsman—several other officials articulate this as a key intent of the legislation.

One public official expressed concern, however, that other agencies did not adequately incorporate customer service and public engagement into their offices because they did not deem it as inherently important to the work of every agency and instead saw it as a responsibility that could be ceded to a single office, the Ombudsman's Office. Even if the position of ombudsman had been consistently filled, the official noted, it would be unrealistic and ineffective for one individual in a centralized role to address the needs of all stakeholders citywide:

All of our jobs [are] to be ombudsmen, and you're going to tell me that one person is going to be able to support 40,000 kids and families when they have issues . . . with the public education system and . . . helping them understand their rights and to help them navigate through problems? (O7).

The first Ombudsman resigned at the end of 2008 after a year of service, and the office remained vacant. Funding for the office was eliminated in 2009. In 2013, the DC Council voted to reinstate its funding, and the second Ombudsman began service in April 2014. The officials, as well as the stakeholders, interviewed for this study expressed frustration about the lack of an ombudsman to listen and respond to stakeholders' concerns.

Within this environment, people turned to their Ward Councilperson when problems arose, according to officials and stakeholders interviewed. This was especially true when community groups sought to ensure their school's place on the modernization list or to address issues of facility updates. The recent return of the Office of the Ombudsman has relieved Council staff from this precarious role. One official reported feeling a greater security in managing constituent complaints: "I have referred people to the ombudsman. I am so excited . . . now I don't have to make that call . . ." (O13).

Several stakeholders said that many parents and families they work with are uninformed or lack knowledge about how to navigate the system to reach an ombudsman. Said one stakeholder:

I don't know if a lot of people even realized there is a new ombudsman . . . I think again there are not a lot of avenues [for engagement] . . . and what avenues are available, a lot of people don't know about. You know, they are still wounded by the fact that they took their school board member . . . (S3).

II. Outcomes of Engagement Efforts

As noted earlier, some stakeholders feel that by abolishing the local board of education, PERAA dismantled their direct pathway to communicate with decision-makers. Elected officials are charged with hearing and responding to concerns voiced by citizens. PERAA restricted a Ward-based pathway while opening up a single citywide one—the Mayor is accountable for the schools. A few participants interviewed viewed mayoral accountability as a powerful lever and pointed to Adrian Fenty's loss in the 2010 mayoral election as evidence that PERAA's governance model works. Others felt that one-way communication from officials to stakeholders is the norm, and the lack of transparency within the governance structure prohibits the public from exerting its will to the detriment of ongoing system improvement.

Overall, there was a general sense among stakeholders (and even some officials) that much more transparency and opportunities for genuine engagement and receptivity to stakeholders' voices and needs were still necessary. Some were unsure whether stakeholders' input had influenced policies or decisions about student assignments and boundaries.

This environment, they contend, fails to provide stakeholders with sufficient opportunities to influence policy at critical stages of decision-making. One stakeholder characterized PERAA as a "loss of any direct vehicle for an organized group of parents to engage with a system around issues" (S5). Another stakeholder described the frustration experienced by citizens in this way: "It's not that the relationships are not there, but again, I imagine what other people deal with, if they don't how to navigate. Then it's, well, who do I call? Then it starts with 311,⁸ then it's chairs of response team, then you are kind of getting funneled all over the place, so it can be very frustrating" (S12). Yet another stakeholder commented that "what we learned through the work we did around fighting school closures is that there [are] a lot of barriers to people just finding out information, knowing what's going on" (S5).

Officials did not deny these sentiments, but a few pointed out that historically, some community advocates had an outsized voice under the old regime. One official suggested that organizations and individuals who had access and influence under the previous governance structure either lost that influence or became more self-interested. "I think that the people who laid a claim to being those kind of community representatives in the past and lost access to that role—I think [they] are frustrated. Some of them continue to be frustrated to this day . . . but I don't think that, in particular, is a problem that needs to be solved" (O5).

Both stakeholders and officials believe that improved communication could break down barriers to engagement but acknowledge that building organic and genuine relationships and avenues for collaboration is difficult. One official summed up the need in this way:

[A]ll the stuff we are discussing today is the lack of effective communication . . . lack of meaningful engagement. I mean, there has been engagement, but people need to feel like they have been a part of the direction things were headed in because it's very personal to them . . . W]hat struck me is how many people are really excited about working with DCPS in particular . . . (O6).

One stakeholder said that other parents are often the most reliable source of information. This interviewee noted that communication has increased among PTAs and across schools—out of necessity, to some degree:

[A]n alarming number of parents in neighborhood go off to really large number of different schools in other neighborhoods, so you can live next door to two different people and you all go to four different schools. But there is a network now where you

⁸ Led by the Office of Unified Communications (OUC), 311 is a 24-hour call center operation for DC "constituents, residents, and visitors" seeking resources and/or services. More information about 311 is available at: <http://ouc.dc.gov/page/311-about>.

can find out about other schools, and you need parents who are placed all over the place. So I think that's very interesting. I know more people in the administration now. I know the parent engagement people better and are more comfortable with them; they know me (S10).

There appears to be a consensus among officials and stakeholders that the city and school system have increased initiatives to communicate and engage stakeholders and are using various methods to inform the public. Interviewees recognized, however, that much more needs to be done. One stakeholder summed up the need as follows:

With education, it has to be a really, really open line of communication, and I feel that the burden of proof is on the school to reach out as many times as possible—whether that's by phone, by mail, by e-mail, going to the home. You know, you can't find out anything about the student without knowing (S12).

A hopeful example from our interviews was the DME's School Boundary process conducted in 2013-14: "I think the DME's process was great. Now it was expensive. It was labor intensive but you know what? Real engagement is both of those things" (S10). Another stakeholder supported this view by saying the process was a departure from "the typical pattern of 'We decide, we come to our decision,' and everybody screams . . . because the decision has already been made" (S2). While the steep costs of the engagement strategy may have been evident to stakeholders, they believed the process of going out into communities and neighborhoods and conducting surveys that sought input about engagement were effective and meaningful because they implied a level of receptivity and access and provided a platform for stakeholders "to be heard." One official had a similar view of the process:

I think one of the things that made it [an engagement initiative] really successful was the information that was provided to people. I think there was lots of skepticism about that, because I think there is an assumption that parents and other community members aren't going to be able to process that much information or that it's going to be misunderstood or something. And I think there is a great effort on the part of policy makers to be that open and transparent with the data they are looking at and the information they are looking at. I think the fact that we did that throughout the process and always reflected back to the community what they told us was a real key part of the success. (S5)

VI. Moving Forward: Suggestions for the Future

Engagement can become more meaningful when adequate platforms are provided to the public, officials report. Therefore, thoughtful and deliberate design can provide for more high-quality engagement experiences. In general, ideas for improving engagement strategies focused on providing greater transparency and figuring out ways to ensure strong representation across the city, and reflected authentic effort on the part of city leaders.

Showing people how their input influences outcomes was highlighted as another key to effective engagement practices. “I think in some ways we have all these opportunities for community conversations, but then when you look around this sort of feels like nothing has changed,” said one official, “but a lot has changed actually.” (O14). The official further suggested that a major challenge to education leaders is helping stakeholders see their role in the “big picture” and see how “their voice was captured in a way that could then either influence or result in policy changes” (O14). Agencies can accomplish this, suggested one official, by designing engagement opportunities that “establish a better conversation in which every stakeholder really feels like it...will result in improvement” (O8).

A lack of transparency has led stakeholders to assume that officials are not receptive to the community. Officials’ failure to acknowledge and inform the community that action has been taken based on their feedback has caused many in the community assume that their concerns and needs are not being heard. As one stakeholder said, “When people don’t feel like they are respected or acknowledged, then you know they feel like you don’t care” (S12). The stakeholder further expressed:

[P]eople just don’t trust because they feel like, yes, you might be listening to me [and] you are letting me say this, but you are not going to do anything. But that’s where the transparency comes in as well, because if things can’t be done, then they need to tell the people that it can’t, and they need to tell why. But that doesn’t happen like that (S12).

There is a general perception among stakeholders that while officials may claim to communicate and engage, they are often simply informing. And in the process, one stakeholder noted, officials are overlooking a valuable source of input: “These are the clients, basically the customers, in the education consumption so, you know, they have the best sense of what is happening” (S5).

One stakeholder made this suggestion:

I don’t know if anybody has been surveyed on a wide enough basis to even know [about stakeholders’ experiences and perceptions]. That might be a great survey if somebody could develop it to figure out how people feel. I know that . . . DCPS [conducted] a survey of their stakeholders to see if they [were] more or less satisfied . . . But I don’t know if anybody has really done a survey . . . on a wider basis like that (S11).

VII. Concluding Remarks

The question of stakeholder engagement is a tricky one to consider under a governance model in which the main intervention was to remove a locally elected body. Stakeholders expect access to leaders though the power of the vote. PERAA sought to create a pathway around this political process as a way of easing and accelerating what the city’s leaders deemed as much needed reforms based on educational expertise and strong political leadership. These findings highlight the intense yearning for public input felt by DC community members who recognized the dysfunction of their elected body while also mourning the loss of representation. This much

seems apparent—PERAA did provide officials with the means to make decisions quickly without engaging in constituency politics. This allowed for improved communications of more accurate information on many levels and created a more robust appetite for information on school-level performance that was also fueled by the growing charter sector.

Where PERAA seemed to falter is on clarifying a citywide vision and governance model to help the various agencies understand their charge, encourage them to collaborate instead of compete, and guide their strategic actions. Our findings suggest that while stakeholder engagement was a value held by many officials, the lack of unified vision and strategy created conditions for the various leaders to dictate the style, tone, and urgency of engagement. Furthermore PERAA did not anticipate the growing role of school choice, which frames parent engagement in the city—meaning that families have to actively choose to access quality regardless of sector.

While no one would disagree that the city has seen some progress in school performance, almost all interviewed conceded that improvements were not enjoyed by all Wards of the city. Many struggled to say if things were better than they were seven years ago but begrudgingly pointed to the successful modernization of school buildings and a burgeoning focus on higher academic standards.

Concerns remain about the potential loss of democracy under mayoral control, the lack of coherence in a choice system, and the impact of choice on the most vulnerable families. As one stakeholder noted, “[T]hey make their decisions. They are going to do whatever they want, and we can’t do anything about it . . . You don’t like it go somewhere else. You know, go to . . . Wendy’s, go to McDonald’s” (S5). There are currently calls for city leaders to work on stronger collaboration across the traditional and charter sectors and to strengthen the authority of the elected State Board of Education as a way of re-engaging citizens.

For most part, though, recent efforts have offered hope on the issue of engagement. The soon-to-be elected new mayor will face many options when it comes to ensuring that community voice is an integral part of education reform. If the themes of this report are any guide, leadership would be well advised to articulate a vision that improves transparency on important decisions, assures collaboration, and harnesses the tremendous effort put forth by both officials and stakeholders who truly want the best for the children and families of Washington, DC.

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Appendix: Interview Protocols

DC Officials Interview Protocol

1. What has been your involvement with the schools in Washington, DC? How did you start? When did you start?
 - At the school or District level?
 - Length of involvement?
 - Membership in school support groups, professional educator associations, or advocacy organizations
 - What led you to become involved (if not already answered earlier)?
 2. What role do you believe communities should play in education reform in DC?
 3. What have district officials (does this refer to DCPS only, since you are interviewing DC officials with this protocol?) done to support your vision for community involvement in education reform and improvement? What challenges have you faced in realizing that vision of community involvement?
 4. What groups or individuals within the community have you worked most closely with in supporting your plans for public education? What did you do?
 5. Are there institutional or strategic changes you would you like to see in order to better support your vision for public engagement in education reform processes? If so, what are they?
 6. What would make education reform in DC more successful?*
- Finally, we would like to ask you several questions about the overall changes in Washington DC schools since the passage of PERAA. We are interested here not just in your assessment of family and public engagement strategies, but also in school policies more broadly such as how the schools are staffed, the curricular and other programs available to students, school facilities, and how resources are distributed between DCPS and charter schools and across areas of the city.
7. In considering all the changes that have been implemented in the operation of the public schools in the last seven years, are there any that you think have been either especially effective or ineffective in accomplishing their intended purpose? What are the likely reasons for their success or failure?
 8. In deciding whether or not programs implemented in the past seven years are effective, what criteria or yardsticks do you use? (e.g., how do you assess whether/if conditions and student outcomes have improved at specific schools)?
 9. In your opinion, is the public more or less satisfied with the public schools since the passage of PERAA (within the past seven years)? What evidence supports your answer?

DC Stakeholders Interview Protocol

1. What has been your involvement with the schools in Washington, DC? How did you start? When did you start?
 - At the school or District level?
 - Length of involvement?
 - Membership in school support groups, professional educator associations, or advocacy organizations
 - What led you to become involved (if not already answered earlier)?
2. What are your primary sources of information about the schools in Washington? (e.g., from your own involvement with the schools; local media; group blogs, newsletters, and reports; official school and district communications; word-of-mouth from other families/school activists)
3. When you [*and other parents/members of your group*] identify a problem with the schools, who do you typically contact to voice your concerns?
 - level(s) of the system contacted: individual school leadership, DCPS, charter board, OSSE, deputy mayor, city council, other advocacy groups
 - Does this vary based on constituency/problem/context/issue?
 - What kind of responses have you received? (e.g., tone of the interactions, extent to which problems were resolved and time frame, whether needed to move higher in the system or contact other offices to resolve problems)
4. Over the past seven years, what have been the most serious issues facing public schools in Washington?
 - How has the city and DCPS [*and the Charter Board*] addressed them?
 - Did you seek/obtain public input about the issue[s], and if so, how?
 - Are there strategies or activities that they could have done differently to ensure broader and more complete public input?
5. As you think about public education strategies to engage families and the public, are there initiatives or efforts that have been particularly effective?
 - Alternatively, are there ones that did not work well or that could be improved in the future?
 - What are the reasons for positive or negative assessments (e.g., target group for the engagement initiative, how it was organized, issue focus, ability to engage a range of groups and areas of the city, skill and personality of those involved)
6. What opportunities exist for input into DC public education decision-making? How have these opportunities changed in the last seven years? Why do you think these changes occurred/why do you think no changes have occurred?
7. In your view, what should be the role of families and other members of the public in decisions about Washington, DC public schools?
 - What function does family and public engagement serve?
 - What is the ideal role of family and public engagement in decision-making as compared

with that of elected officials and school administrators?

- Are there any non-profit or advocacy groups in the city that have been particularly effective in ensuring that public viewpoints are taken into consideration in school-related decisions? Why are they effective? Can you give examples of their effectiveness?

Finally, we would like to ask you several questions about the overall changes in Washington DC schools since the passage of PERAA. We are interested here not just in your assessment of family and public engagement strategies, but also in school policies more broadly such as how the schools are staffed, the curricular and other programs available to students, school facilities, and how resources are distributed between DCPS and charter schools and across areas of the city.

8. In considering all the changes that have been implemented in the operation of the public schools in the last seven years, are there any that you think have been either especially effective or ineffective in accomplishing their intended purpose? What are the likely reasons for their success or failure?
9. In deciding whether or not programs implemented in the past seven years are effective, what criteria or yardsticks do you use? (e.g., how do you assess whether/if conditions and student outcomes have improved at specific schools)?
10. In your opinion, is the public more or less satisfied with the public schools since the passage of PERAA (within the past seven years)? What evidence supports your answer?