

Meeting with Obama highlights D.C. Public Schools as leader in reforms

By [Michael Alison Chandler](#) March 18 at 3:37 PM

The D.C. public school system has long been used as an example of what's broken in American public education, listed at the bottom of national rankings, and written off for its low performance. But this week, President Obama held up the city's school district as an example of what's promising in education today.

Obama cited the District along with Fresno, Calif., and Cleveland as examples of positive change.

"These are school districts that, despite enormous challenges, have made real progress," he said. And he said he would fight for them "to make sure that this progress continues."

The remarks came after a [conversation with a group of urban school leaders from the Council of the Great City Schools](#), including D.C. Schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson, on Monday.

Afterwards, Henderson said it was "one of the most inspiring days" of her time as chancellor.

"This job is really hard. People criticize you every day. Something goes wrong every day. It's hard work. Progress is not fast enough for anyone," she said. "But it really feels heartening when the President of the United States is with

you on the same issues you are fighting for and the things that are important to you are important to him”

She gave an emotional account of the meeting that afternoon. She said the day started at 4 a.m., when she woke with nerves, through when she was humming on adrenaline during the mid-day meeting. By 3 p.m., she was exhausted.

As the leader of one of the most closely watched urban school reform efforts in the country — which also happens to be in Obama’s back yard — Henderson has had invitations to the White House before. The school system also has played host on many occasions to the President or First Lady or to members of the administration, including U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan.

But Henderson said the meeting this week was a more intimate and prolonged opportunity to share the work and progress in the city’s schools and to talk about the future.

The District has aggressively pursued many of the reforms that the Obama administration has championed, spearheading a controversial overhaul of teacher evaluations and putting hefty investment into early childhood education.

The District was an early adopter of the Common Core State Standards and rewrote its curriculum to reflect them. The city’s school system has remained a steady supporter, despite increasing political fallout nationally.

The city has embraced the president’s call for innovation and has directed millions of dollars in funding for turnaround schools. More recently, Henderson pushed for a major investment in programs and supports tailored to minority boys in the schools, echoing work that the president has done for minority males through his “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative.

Henderson said the political support and resources from the Obama administration have been fundamental to improvements.

The District received a \$75 million federal Race to the Top Grant to support many of its reforms and a \$62 million federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant to support compensation, retention, and training for teachers and principals.

Henderson said the urban school leaders went to the White House this week to talk about progress but also to ask for continued support for these reforms, as Congress debates the federal No Child Left Behind law and the nation debates the role of testing in schools and the Common Core.

She said they left with the message that Obama shared their priorities.

In his closing remarks, Obama said: “I want to thank everybody who’s around this table and know that they’re going to have a strong partner in my administration.”