

A chancellor up to the challenge

Washington Post

By Michael Casserly,

Published: June 10, 2011

A lot of people don't seem to know that the D.C. Public Schools still do not have a permanent chancellor. But it should come as no surprise to the D.C. Council that facing them this week is a candidate who has more than demonstrated her mettle over the past six months. I am speaking, of course, of Kaya Henderson, who has served as acting chancellor during this period.

The city has churned through more than its fair share of school leaders over the years — 12 superintendents in the past 30 years, to be precise. What the city does not need is another school leader who is just passing through. Based on what my organization has learned about what makes a good urban school superintendent — and one with staying power — I believe that Kaya Henderson is not only up to meeting the district's challenges, she is also more than worth keeping on the job for years to come.

The daughter of a teacher and principal, Henderson has education and leadership in her bones. And her strong roots in the community give her a head start on building the partnerships she will need to move the school system forward.

Henderson's recent four years in the top ranks of the school system's leadership have placed her front and center in the difficult work of turning around the system. She was pivotal in overhauling the central office, getting teachers paid accurately and on time, boosting student expectations, strengthening staff and teacher evaluations, modernizing school buildings, increasing the number of prekindergarten classrooms, and improving after-school opportunities.

So far, the work is paying dividends. Graduation rates increased by about 10 percent between 2006 and 2009. Enrollment has begun to inch up after decades of decline. Safety is improving. And, most important, student achievement is going up.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data show significant gains in reading and math scores in both fourth and eighth grades between 2007 and 2009. In fact, the gains in fourth-grade reading and math scores shown by students in the District's regular public schools were between three and four times as large as the growth seen among their peers in large cities overall during the same period. Gains in D.C. students' eighth-grade math scores were twice those of students in the large cities overall, and eighth-grade reading gains were significant and paralleled those of large cities overall. That's the good news.

The bad news, however, is that graduation rates are still low, and achievement gaps between the rich and poor sections of town remain vast. Despite the NAEP achievement gains, scores are still among the lowest in the nation's major city school systems. An analysis by my organization also indicates that the D.C. public schools score well below what one would expect statistically, compared with other cities with similar poverty, language, race, disability and family characteristics. Students show unusual difficulty reading and interpreting texts, evaluating and critiquing information, identifying appropriate measurement instruments, and solving problems involving geometric shapes. There is much more work to be done.

However, Henderson's skills and experience are perfectly suited for what lies ahead. And her priorities are precisely the right ones if further gains are to be made. Those priorities include attracting and keeping the best teachers; enhancing classroom instruction; and strengthening the curriculum, particularly as the new common core standards are being put into place.

Make no mistake, Henderson is also tough and reform-minded — as reform-minded as any forward-looking big-city school superintendent anywhere in the nation. But she is also compassionate, collaborative, accessible and community-minded. Political leaders will find her to be a sophisticated and transparent chancellor who has worked hard over the past few months to calm ruffled feathers and build long-term partnerships. Parents and community members will find her to be plain-spoken, committed and loaded with common sense. And children will find her to be their champion. On this there will be no surprise. The D.C. Council should move forward immediately with her permanent appointment.

The writer is the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.