



The Washington Post

D.C. School Study: Fears for Tiers are Premature

January 26, 2012 | By Bill Turque

So what does it mean if your child attends a school designated as Tier 3 or 4 by the newly released IFF study? Short answer: difficult to say at this point.

What's important to remember is that despite all the buzz it has generated, for both its findings and ties to the charter movement, the study produced by IFF (formerly known as the Illinois Facilities Fund) is still just a stack of data — not a policy. And there are shelves in the Wilson Building filled with similar volumes that never amounted to much.

What IFF did do was shine new light on a number of vexing policy questions. One is DCPS' capacity to turn around schools that have been impervious to improvement in the five years since mayoral control began. Another is the extent to which DCPS and the D.C. Public Charter School Board (PSCB) — the city's sole authorizer of charter schools — are willing or able to collaborate in the kind of centralized planning that IFF appears to envision.

In some instances, a Tier 4 designation is merely a spot on a list. Cardozo High School may be Tier 4 for poor academic outcomes, but it's clearly not going to be closed after a \$100 million modernization. Same for Anacostia and H.D. Woodson high schools.

More at risk are the schools afflicted with a combination of poor academic performance, light enrollment and buildings that would cost more to renovate than replace. There are a bunch of those in the neighborhoods profiled by IFF.

“Evaluate the condition of each building, estimate the cost of renovation and assess the feasibility of modernizing or rebuilding the facility,” the report said in its recommendation section. “Then, evaluate the location of the building in the context of trends documented in this report, the current grade configuration of the school and the service gap of each grade division for alignment with the needs of the neighborhood. Based on this needs assessment and on resource constraints, select a realistic number of DCPS schools for turnaround.”

So what does that mean? What's a realistic number? For that matter, what's a turnaround? Most of the schools in Tiers 3 and 4 are years deep into various stages of NCLB improvement, corrective action or restructuring. Staffs have been reconstituted, principals serially replaced. What else is DCPS going to bring to the table?



“Solving the education service gap in these neighborhoods will require a sustained and coordinated effort between DCPS and PCSB,” the study said.

Again, what does that really mean? It goes on to say: “As necessary, authorize a charter school within the same building or in the immediate vicinity before school closure. With cooperation and coordination between DCPS and PCSB, PCSB can use the buildings as incentives to recruit the highest-performing charter operators into the Top Ten priority neighborhood clusters.”

This suggests that the PCSB will take on a more proactive role in selecting and steering charters into targeted neighborhoods. It also seems to suggest that charters, which draw citywide for their enrollment, would somehow replace neighborhood schools. And is there really is a deep bench filled with the “highest performing” charter operators yearning to take over distressed public schools?

Much more on this in the coming days.

By Bill Turque