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Study: Help or shut schools in poor D.C. areas; add charters

BY BILL TURQUE

A new study commissioned by D.C. Mayor Vincent C. Gray recommends that the city turn around or close more than three dozen traditional public schools in its poorest neighborhoods and expand the number of high-performing charter schools.

The findings of the study by the Chicago-based IFF, to be made public Thursday, are likely to rekindle impassioned debate about possible school closures and the future of public education in the District. The study also signals the start of an unprecedented attempt to coordinate decision making between two school sectors that have operated independently and at times competed for funding and other resources.

More than 40 percent of the city's 78,000 public students attend publicly funded, indepen-

dently operated charter schools, the largest concentration in the nation outside of New Orleans. At current rates of growth, a majority of the city's public enrollment could be in charters within three to four years.

Some advocates of traditional public schools have raised questions about possible bias in the study. IFF, which provides financial support and real estate consulting to nonprofit organizations, has made more than \$57 million in loans to charter schools, according to information it provided the District. The study was underwritten by a \$100,000 grant from the Walton Family Foundation, one of the nation's leading benefactors of charter schools. Walton is also a major private donor to D.C. Public Schools. Company officials have

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said that their work looks at both school sectors objectively.

The study could also eventually serve as the basis for another major round of traditional public school closures, a politically and emotionally bruising process last undertaken by then-Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee during Mayor Adrian M. Fenty's administration. Although traditional public school enrollment has leveled off at about 46,000 after decades of decline, the system still has an excess of capacity. More than 40 schools have 300 or fewer students, many of them struggling academically.

City officials said that decisions about any major restructuring will not be made for at least a year and only after close consultation with affected communities.

Gray (D) said Wednesday that there is no basis for concerns that he will hand the city school system over to charter schools, especially given the hundreds of millions of dollars the District has invested in renovating and rebuilding traditional school campuses.

"It's ludicrous," he said. "I believe very strongly in both sectors, and I'm looking for the best education solutions."

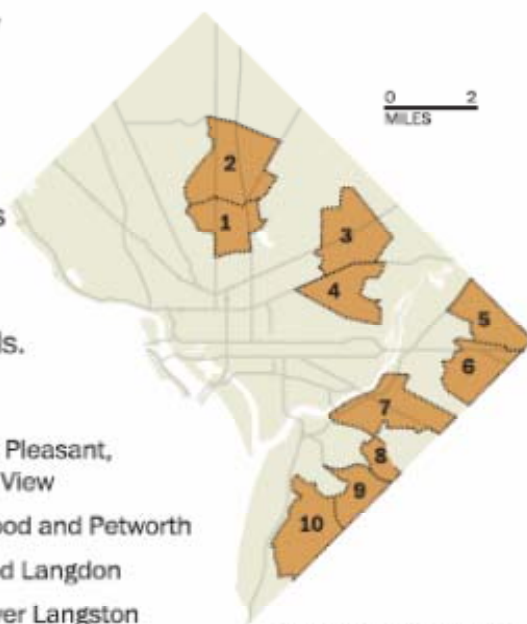
De'Shawn Wright, the deputy mayor for education, said the plan is to meet with Chancellor Kaya Henderson, who heads the school system, and charter school leaders to map out a scenario for meeting the needs of underserved neighborhoods.

Matching supply and demand

A consulting firm hired by the District identified 10 neighborhood clusters as having the greatest need for seats in high-performing schools.

NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER

- 1 Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant, Pleasant Plains and Park View
- 2 Brightwood Park, Crestwood and Petworth
- 3 Brookland, Brentwood and Langdon
- 4 Ivy City, Trinidad and Carver Langston
- 5 Deanwood, Burrville, Grant Park, Lincoln Heights and Fairmont Heights
- 6 Capitol View, Marshall Heights and Benning Heights
- 7 Twining, Fairlawn, Randle Highlands, Penn Branch, Fort Davis Park and Fort Dupont
- 8 Woodland/Fort Stanton, Garfield Heights and Knox Hill
- 9 Douglas and Shipley Terrace
- 10 Congress Heights, Bellevue and Washington Highlands and Bolling Air Force Base



Source: IFF report "Quality Schools: Every Child, Every School, Every Neighborhood"

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The report is organized as a supply-and-demand analysis that divided the city into 39 groups of neighborhoods.

Using a formula based on standardized test score trends and projections to 2016, it separated eligible public schools into quartiles, or four performance tiers. Schools without adequate

test data were excluded from the study.

In schools designated Tier 1, anywhere from 60 to 100 percent of students tested at or above grade level and showed the steepest improvement curves.

Researchers then looked at student populations in each neighborhood cluster to determine

Statistical data from the new D.C. school study

The new IFF study of school location and performance in the District is the most detailed look at the city's public schools in several years. Some key points:

67 percent: Proportion of children in traditional public schools living in households with income at or below 185 percent of U.S. poverty guidelines.

75 percent: Proportion of public charter school children living at or below 185 percent of poverty.

67 percent: African American enrollment in traditional public schools.

87 percent: African American enrollment in public charter schools.

2045: The year 75 percent of D.C. students will test at grade level in math if trends hold.

2075: The year 75 percent of D.C. students will reach grade level in reading if trends hold.

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which communities had the largest shortage of seats in top-tier schools.

The biggest shortage — about 27,000 seats — is concentrated within 10 neighborhood clusters, most of them south and east of the Anacostia River in wards 7 and 8 and others cutting across portions of wards 1 and 5 in Northeast and Northwest Washington. More than half of the shortfall is for kindergarten through fifth grade.

The bulk of IFF's findings are not new, but they place in bolder relief than ever the dearth of good schools in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Of the 45 schools assessed by IFF as Tier 1, just six are in wards 7 and 8. All are public charter schools. Of the 39 schools in Tier 4 — the lowest rating — 22 are in wards 7 and 8. Eighteen are traditional public schools; four are public charters.

Among the areas identified by

IFF as having the greatest need is the group of Ward 8 neighborhoods that includes Congress Heights, Bellevue, Washington Highlands and Bolling Air Force Base. Only two of the 14 schools studied in those neighborhoods are in Tier 1, and they are both charters: Achievement Prep and Friendship Tech Prep. The firm recommended attempting to turn around or close all four traditional public schools in Tier 4 — Simon, Patterson, Terrell-McGogney and Ferebee-Hope elementary — and closing two bottom-rung charter schools, Center City Congress Heights (pre-K to 8) and Imagine Southeast (pre-K to 5). It also suggested investing more resources into improving a Tier 2 charter, Friendship Southeast elementary.

The report says that any closures of traditional public schools should be offset by new charters or building new traditional schools.

Most of the other surveys of the 10 critical neighborhood clusters follow the pattern. In all, 38 traditional public schools and three charter schools were recommended for turnaround or closure.

In the report, IFF urges the city to consider expanding the footprint of charter schools in the 10 targeted neighborhood clusters. It calls for the D.C. Public Charter School Board to authorize about 6,500 new charter seats (current enrollment is about 32,000). It also recommends that the board “actively recruit the highest performing charter school operators and ask them to replicate their performing school model” in the top 10 clusters, using former public school buildings as incentives.


It's virtually certain that city officials will tinker with IFF's recommendations. The report lists for turnaround or possible closure, for example, schools that have received tens of millions of dollars in capital investment, including the new H.D. Woodson High School in Ward 7.

Wright said the IFF study would be just the beginning of a lengthy review requiring “lifting the hood” over each underserved area for a close look at its needs.

“This is complicated work,” he said, “and it's got to be done on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis.”

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 On postlocal, find a link to a detailed report on the state of the District's public schools.