DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Important Steps Taken to Continue Reform Efforts, But Enhanced Planning Could Improve Implementation and Sustainability

What GAO Found

Early efforts to improve student achievement at DCPS have focused on improving student performance, closing underutilized and reorganizing underperforming schools, and creating and enhancing data systems. During the first 2 years of its reform efforts, DCPS implemented many initiatives to improve overall student performance, such as classroom-based initiatives to improve basic skills of students. In addition, under the No Child Left Behind Act, DCPS restructured 22 schools before the fall of 2008, after the schools failed to meet academic targets for 6 consecutive years. Finally, DCPS and the state superintendent’s office are developing new ways to monitor student achievement and school performance. Specifically, a longitudinal database is being developed that is intended to allow DCPS and other key users to access a broad array of data, including student test scores. DCPS is modifying its approach to many of these initiatives such as focusing on effective teaching as opposed to implementing disparate programs.

DCPS has focused on improving the quality of its workforce by replacing teachers and principals and by providing professional development, but it has encountered challenges in effectively implementing these changes. After the 2007-2008 school year, about one-fifth of the teachers and one-third of the principals resigned, retired, or were terminated from DCPS. However, because DCPS did not have an effective way to evaluate teacher performance, officials are uncertain if the new staff improved the quality of its workforce. DCPS is currently working on a new teacher evaluation system. In addition, DCPS introduced professional development initiatives for teachers and principals. For example, it began placing teacher coaches at schools to support teachers at their work sites. However, late decisions to hire these teacher coaches led to inconsistent implementation of this initiative during the 2008-2009 school year.

The state superintendent’s office and DCPS each developed their 5-year strategic plans and involved stakeholders in developing these plans. The state superintendent plan and the DCPS draft strategic plan each contain many elements of effective plans, such as aligning short-term objectives to long-term goals. DCPS has recently increased its efforts to involve stakeholders in various initiatives; however, it has not always involved stakeholders in key decisions and initiatives.

DCPS and the state superintendent’s office have taken steps to improve accountability and performance. For example, both offices have started implementation of new individual employee performance management systems. However, while DCPS has taken some additional steps to improve accountability, it has not yet linked its employee expectations and performance evaluations to organizational goals to improve central office operations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Mayor direct DCPS to (1) establish planning processes that include evaluating internal capacity and involving stakeholders at key junctures; and (2) link individual performance evaluations for central office employees to organizational goals to strengthen accountability. The District’s education offices agreed with GAO’s recommendations and provided additional information which was incorporated as appropriate.

View GAO-09-619 or key components. For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov.