



Highlights of [GAO-09-619](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

In response to long-standing problems with student achievement and the management of the District of Columbia (D.C. or the District) public school system, the D.C. Council approved the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007. This act made major changes to the governance of the D.C. public school system, giving the Mayor authority over public schools.

This report follows a GAO testimony in March 2008 and focuses on the primary reform approaches the District has taken. This report examines the steps the District took to: (1) address student academic achievement; (2) strengthen the quality of teachers and principals; (3) develop long-term plans and involve stakeholders; and (4) improve accountability and performance of the D.C. public schools (DCPS) and the state superintendent's central offices. GAO reviewed documentation on District initiatives, and interviewed District education officials as well as representatives from the teachers' union, community organizations, and research institutions. GAO also conducted visits to four urban school districts with mayoral governance.

## 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](mailto:ashbyc@gao.gov).

# 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.