



The Evolution & Revolution of DC Charter Schools:: A Transformation of Public Education In Washington, DC

Mrs. Josephine C. Baker

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Washington, DC stands out as a leader in education reform. It is now a city with a rich array of educational options for families. In addition to being home to many nationally-renowned independent, private and parochial schools, Washington, DC is home to one of the nation's largest concentrations of public charter schools. This charter school sector coexists with a public school system whose reforms attracted the attention of local and national education policy leaders, media and public officials. As of the 2013-2014 school year, 44% of all DC public school students were enrolled in DC public charter schools.² DC is third to New Orleans and Detroit in percentage of public school students attending charter schools. During the decades before charter schools were introduced, parents and community members had already begun to lose confidence in DC Public Schools (DCPS). Between 1967 and 1990, there was a steady drop in enrollment in DCPS.⁴ Families were leaving the city or enrolling their children in private and parochial schools. Although the DC charter school sector got off to a bumpy start in 1996, its gradual growth and progress forced the traditional school system to change or die. With much support from local elected officials and active parent groups, DCPS's decision to change and improve has certainly contributed to all boats lifting for the benefit of DC families. This dynamic, combined with aggressive real estate and economic development in DC, have no doubt contributed to the steady influx of new residents into the city, and notably fewer young families leaving. In the fall of 2013, Mayor Gray also announced that approximately 1100 new residents were moving into the city each month. DC's education story, with all its moving and interacting parts and players, and its unique positioning within the nation's capital, is an interesting one that may offer valuable lessons to other urban cities. Washington, DC stands out as a leader in education reform. It is now a city with a rich array of educational options for families. In addition to being home to many nationally-renowned independent, private and parochial schools, Washington, DC is home to one of the nation's largest concentrations of public charter schools. This charter school sector coexists with a public school system whose reforms attracted the attention of local and national education policy leaders, media and public officials.

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