



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
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JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

Ward 4 Councilmember
Chair of the Committee on
Facilities and Family Services

COMMITTEE MEMBER

Committee on Transportation and the Environment
Committee on Executive Administration and Labor
Committee on Public Works and Operations

September 4, 2024

Delano Hunter
Director, Department of General Services
3924 Minnesota Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20019

Lewis Ferebee
Chancellor, District of Columbia Public Schools
1200 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Director Hunter and Chancellor Ferebee:

I write to share my gratitude, observations, and recommendations following this summer's school facilities readiness tours.

Throughout July and August, my fellow Councilmembers and I visited many of the District's terrific public schools across all eight wards. I thank DGS and DCPS for their coordination of and participation in these valuable tours. I also appreciate State Board of Education members, the Washington Teachers' Union, Advisory Neighborhood Commissioners, Parent Teacher Associations, and community members for their tireless advocacy for their schools and communities, particularly regarding school facilities.

I am deeply grateful to the dedicated school staff, especially administrators, operations managers, foremen, and custodians, who spent a tremendous amount of time and effort this summer making their buildings functional, safe, clean, and welcoming for educators and students. I am also thankful to and in awe of DGS' diligent and skilled trade workers and contractors who completed many projects and work orders this summer, as they do year-round.

I cannot overemphasize the benefits of schools designed, built, and maintained to empower students and teachers to thrive. The facility conditions of schools (and recreation and senior centers, shelters, and municipal buildings) is not just a facilities or education issue; it is an issue of public safety, public health, economic development and justice, environmentalism, accessibility, and chronic absenteeism.

There is no doubt a substantial amount of time and effort was exerted to improve the facility conditions of our schools over the last several months. However, as detailed below, I am concerned current efforts, budgets, and processes are not guaranteeing our public schools are secure, safe, healthy, and accessible for District students, educators, parents, and communities.

Yet, I expect and am hopeful the Council, DGS, and DCPS can and will collaborate better to raise the quality and quantity of work, improve processes, and ultimately, deliver a better experience for our students, educators, and school communities. They deserve nothing less.

Sincerely,



Janeese Lewis George
Ward 4 Councilmember
Chairperson, Committee on Facilities and Family Services

CC:

Phil Mendelson, Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia

Kevin Donahue, City Administrator

Robert C. White, Jr., At-Large Councilmember

Brianne K. Nadeau, Ward 1 Councilmember

Matt Frumin, Ward 3 Councilmember

Zachary Parker, Ward 5 Councilmember

2024 Summer School Facilities Readiness Tour Observations and Recommendations

HVAC

Observations: Some schools are unable to keep safe and comfortable temperatures consistently due to unreliable HVAC systems and not enough effective contingencies.

- At Roosevelt High School, the list of issues and previous efforts to fix the VRF system are firmly established in the [Auditor's report](#) and during my Committee's [roundtable](#). Despite eight years passing and millions of dollars spent, Roosevelt still struggles to maintain temperatures suitable for occupation.
- DGS and contractors were incessantly working to resume normal operations in all four zones. I was pleased the summer's Zone A project was completed successfully and on-time and share the agencies' hope this method can be used for other zones. Unfortunately, some rooms still were left with ineffective contingencies when school resumed.
- I appreciate DGS' renewed attention to HVAC issues with the HVAC Watch List and dedicated HVAC preventative maintenance funding. However, I'm worried these efforts may not be enough to maintain classroom temperatures from straying outside of a safe and comfortable range due to **long lead times for parts, lack of funds for units or systems, and ineffective contingencies.**

Recommendations: DGS and DCPS should continue their recent strategies and adopt new ones to better address under- and non- performing HVAC systems.

- DGS should be more open about the causes, solutions, and timelines for HVAC issues and repairs. One critical component of this transparency will be weekly publication of the HVAC Watch List, as will be required in October by my DGS Process Improvements Amendment Act. Educators, parents, and students deserve to know what temperatures to expect in schools.
- DGS should invest in temperature contingencies that are effective. For years, we have known spot coolers are ineffective at lowering a room's temperature unless the ventilation is routed outside. This is because when the ventilation is merely routed into the ceiling, the hot air does not escape and can even raise the temperature of the room further. DGS should no longer consider spot coolers vented interiorly as contingencies. For smaller spaces like classrooms, window units with heat pumps should be the preferred contingency so they provide relief from both high and low temperatures. In schools with unreliable HVAC systems, DGS should install functional contingencies in every room, so a full or partial system failure does not disrupt normal operations.
- DGS should alter windows in order to install window units or exterior ventilation of spot coolers. Although some windows do not allow for easy installation of window units nor exterior ventilation of spot coolers, such instances should not be a reason for high temperatures or a lack of or ineffective contingencies. **This should be done at Roosevelt** and similar schools in which severe HVAC issues are chronic, but the buildings are ineligible for system replacements for many years. While window alterations may be costly in the short-term, they are a necessary step that will pay off over time until every school has a reliable HVAC system.

Security and Safety

Observations: Some schools were not fully secure nor safe when we conducted the tours.

- Not all interior and exterior doors in every school closed or locked securely.
- Some schools did not have functioning PA systems and/or security cameras in all or parts of the building, while other schools had fire extinguishers months or years past expiration.

Recommendations: DGS and DCPS's new school security capital project should continue until each school—regardless of age or time until modernization—is fully secure.

- Implementation of my DGS Process Improvements Amendment Act will also give lock and door work orders high prioritization in Salesforce. I urge DGS to not just label the work orders as high priority but address the work orders within the required Service Level Agreement (SLA) (within less than 10 days).
- Agencies should also focus on **standardization of security methods** and tracking and timely collection and deactivation of keys, fobs, and cards, so schools never again face the same security vulnerabilities.
- Agencies should be even more proactive about replacing fire extinguishers.
- DCPS should ensure Vision Security is fully fulfilling its contractual obligations, so security cameras are functioning, placed in schools' desired locations, and have clean and properly adjusted and angled lenses.

Accessibility

Observations: Some schools are too inaccessible for students, educators, and visitors with disabilities.

- As in years past, elevators were a pressing issue raised during this year's tours. For example, the elevator at Mann Elementary has experienced chronic issues since it was installed and continues to stop in between floors, rendering it unreliable and unsafe for people with and without disabilities. Further, at Mann, there is no accessible pathway to get from the school to the field—which in addition to recreation is used as the evacuation location in the event of a fire. Students with mobility disabilities should not need to transfer to another school while their current school's facilities prevent them from having the same opportunities and rights as other students.

Recommendations: DGS should continue and expand its collaboration with the Office of Disability Rights to more quickly identify and resolve facilities issues that constitute potential violations to the Americans with Disabilities Act. I hope to see these new trainings and procedures implemented as soon as possible.

- As recommended in my Committee's [Fiscal Year 25 Budget Report](#), DGS should begin categorizing ADA facilities barriers as a new problem type in Salesforce and prioritize ADA work orders as high priority.

Schools Awaiting Upcoming Modernizations

Observations: Facilities issues at older schools that are close to modernization should not be passed over until the schools are modernized.

- As Whittier Elementary received its phase one modernization fourteen years ago, the building's condition is understandably poorer than more recently modernized schools. Fortunately, Whittier is scheduled to swing to a temporary modular space in the summer of 2026 and to reopen as a fully modernized school for the 2028-2029 school year. I'm concerned given the age of the building, Whittier, and schools in similar situations across the District, will not receive the facilities investments necessary to prevent them from becoming hazardous while awaiting modernization. For example, during the first week of school at Whittier, classroom temperatures at Whittier consistently reached above 90 degrees, and the Pre-K 4 classrooms did not have any air conditioning.

Recommendations: DCPS and DGS should consider the facilities needs of schools with upcoming modernizations the same as newly modernized schools—that includes preventative maintenance.

- If anything, these schools need more, not less attention and resources from DGS and DCPS. Some schools awaiting modernization may require work that may have a non-insignificant cost. However, DGS and DCPS should not be deterred from doing work because it will be addressed in the modernization. The same security, safety, and health standards that apply to new schools also apply to older schools.

DGS-Client Agency Communication and Training

Observations: Many tours revealed ongoing problems with miscommunication between DGS, DCPS, contractors, and school staff.

- This has resulted in many work orders being open beyond their SLA not because of long lead times on parts or insufficient funds but misunderstandings and misuses of current processes and procedures. For example, at one school a foreman was unaware they were supposed to receive notifications when work orders were completed by DGS or a contractor and that there is a 14-day period for school staff to confirm or reject whether the issue was fixed. On numerous occasions, multiple work orders for the same facilities issues were submitted, opened, "completed," and paid for; yet the issues persisted not because it broke again, but because it was never properly fixed in the first place and the work order was closed without any in-person inspection.
- There was also frustration about school administrators and maintenance staff not receiving notifications when DGS or contractors enter or leave the building. School staff involvement in both in-house or contracted work is an essential, as it is the only in-person quality control done before work orders are closed and contractors get paid. We also learned some school staff are still not getting the notification emails that start the clock on the 14-day review period. We previously discovered these email notification issues during last year's oversight and have since been assured DCPS fixed the problem by updating the proper distribution lists.

Recommendations: DGS, DCPS, and schools should get on the same page regarding facilities processes and responsibilities.

- DGS should alter and **expand its training efforts** for current and new school staff, DGS in-house employees, and contractors, so all tools available are properly used to complete new projects and fix existing issues.
- DCPS should ensure the Salesforce distribution lists for are updated regularly.

DGS and DCPS Transparency with Communities

Observations: DGS and DCPS should include community members regarding persistent and serious facilities issues.

- My and other Council offices continually receive inquiries from District residents frustrated with agencies' inability to provide information, whether it be an update on a specific work order or a capital project. For example, the Roosevelt community, including the PTO, was not provided with adequate information regarding the causes of, work being done, and timeline to fix HVAC issues until facilities tours were conducted.

Recommendations: DGS and DCPS should provide updates to communities that include explanations of the cause of the facilities issue, demonstration of what actions, if any, have already been taken, and a timeline of the next steps to get the issue resolved.

- These types of thorough updates should not be reserved only for infrequent statements and presentations but should be available upon request by District residents and the Council.
- Information beneficial for all community members should not be shared with only the requesting party. DGS and DCPS should begin regularly publishing updates on facilities issues of community concern on a publicly accessible forum. I am confident intergovernmental and external communications will be more efficient and effective if agencies are more proactive, upfront, and detailed when communicating with communities.

Summer Blitz Priority Lists

Observations: Schools' facilities priorities often were not reflected in DGS and DCPS' summer blitz priority lists.

- These lists are intended to function as a collaborative understanding between DGS, DCPS, schools, and the Council about what facilities issues will be addressed over the summer. Yet, on several tours, schools learned about this list for the first time—after decisions were made. In fact, at least three schools provided their own priorities list, on which only a few items were aligned with DGS' provided lists. For example, only one of a school's six priorities were on DGS' list, only three of another school's twelve priorities were on DGS' list. When shown a DGS-provided priority list, one school facilities staff member said, *"This list is not one that I would have created."*
- As a result, a great deal of time on the tours was spent adding schools' priorities to the official list. While some of schools' priorities arose since the official list was created—as is inevitable, — most often, the issues schools needed prioritized existed for months and years before. The tours should be an opportunity to add issues that arose since the list was created rather than issues schools deemed a priority but DGS and DCPS deprioritized without schools' knowledge or consent.

Recommendations: The process of developing the summer blitz priority list **should start and end with schools**, as school staff know their buildings best.

- DGS and DCPS should solicit schools' priorities first. When solicited, schools should be allowed to submit every facilities issue that needs to be completed for their buildings to be ready for the return of educators and students.
- Then, DGS and DCPS should determine the feasibility of completing schools' lists by accounting for time and funding. As DGS and DCPS consider adding, altering, or removing items from schools' priorities, schools should be consulted during the entire process. Schools should be aware of and approve the summer blitz priority list before the academic year ends, as well as any changes to the list made due to issues that arose afterwards.

School Facilities Readiness Process

Observations: This summer's school facilities readiness process was not coordinated timely, collaboratively, or efficiently enough.

- Schools' summer blitz priority lists were finalized too late, resulting in quite a lot of work not starting until mid- or late- summer. Council tours also did not begin until July— at which point last year's tours were already finished. Unfortunately, given the late timing of the tours, some schools' top priorities were not completed before school began.
- DGS did not follow previous years' practice of providing complete lists of approved and submitted work orders. As a result, the Committee needed to provide tour participants lists of approved work orders; the insight of which was limited to information on the public dashboard.
- DGS and DCPS informed Councilmembers when their tours would occur, resulting in several needing to be rescheduled or canceled. This practice again conflicted with previous years when Councilmembers provided the Executive a list of many dates to hold for tours while the agencies then coordinated with school staff and other stakeholders. DGS also withdrew their April offer for Councilmembers to revisit the schools after the blitz so we could see for ourselves the progress made over the summer.
- The Executive limited each Councilmember to only three tours, did not allow for DGS-attended visits to DPR centers, and did not invite nor inform school administrators, such as principals and vice principals, and State Board of Education Members about the tours in advance of their scheduling or occurrence.

Recommendations: DGS and DCPS should work with the Council to develop beneficial processes and expectations for future summer school facilities readiness tours.

- As explained in the preceding section, the process to generate the priority list should start sooner and include more collaboration with schools. Then, the tours should occur in late May or early June so the priority lists can be finalized so in-house plans, Request for Proposals submissions, and contractor selections could all be completed for most priorities before the school year ends. Hammers need to start swinging the day after school ends, not July and August.
- DGS and DCPS should provide Ward Councilmembers the priority lists of each school in their ward, and At-Large members, the Committee of the Whole, and the Committee on Facilities and Family Services the priority lists of each school in the District. DGS should

also provide a list of all approved and submitted work orders (including security sensitive work orders) to tour participants in a digital format before a tour and hard copies at the beginning of a tour. These comprehensive lists enable tours to function more productively by focusing on the causes of and next steps for facilities issues, rather than whether work orders have been submitted or not.

- DGS and DCPS should take a more inclusive and cooperative approach to coordinating tours. The agencies should resume previous years' practice of allowing Councilmembers to provide agencies a list of dates to hold for tours while the agencies then coordinate with school staff and other stakeholders to determine the best date and time. Councilmembers should also be afforded the opportunity to revisit schools throughout and at the end of the summer to check on progress. As I and the Council understand DGS and DCPS's capacity limitations during the blitz, we are comfortable with smaller agency delegations on tours.
- The Council should be able to choose the number of schools or what other agency buildings Councilmembers are able to visit. Further, State Board of Education members should be invited to school tours; they have every right to attend as Councilmembers do. In addition, DGS and DCPS should not schedule a tour without prioritizing the attendance of principals and vice principals. I have seen first-hand how tours are rendered ineffective by groups that are too large participants. However, SBOE members and school administrators possess institutional knowledge of the schools that is uniquely helpful.