

District of Columbia Public Schools: Essential Practices to Guide Educators

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) is a local education agency that oversees 115 non-charter public schools in the nation's capital.²⁷ As evidenced by assessment data, a large achievement gap currently exists between the eight DCPS wards. According to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), wards 7 and 8 — the lowest income-neighborhoods²⁸ — have the lowest number of students demonstrating proficiency in mathematics and English language arts.²⁹ Therefore, ensuring a high-quality learning experience for all students is a major priority for the district. This goal is reflected in DCPS' 2017-2022 strategic plan, which states that the district will “[d]efine, understand and promote equity so that we eliminate opportunity gaps and systematically interrupt institutional bias.”³⁰ One major source of the district's inequity was that teachers often were not adequately coached on how best to serve students using evidence-based practices. In 2009, although 95% of teachers received a high evaluation score, teachers felt that they were left largely “unclear exactly what was expected of [them].”³¹ To address this mismatch, district leaders needed to rethink their vision for what an effective classroom looks like and build teachers' capacities to execute that vision.



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²⁷ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (n.d.a). *Our schools*. Retrieved from <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/our-schools>

²⁸ DC Economic Strategy. (2019). *Household income by race and ward*. Retrieved from <http://dceconomicstrategy.com/household-income/>

²⁹ Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). *DC's 2018 PARCC results*. Washington, D.C.: OSSE. Retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2018%20PARCC%20Results%20Release%20%28Aug.%2016%2C%202018%29.pdf

³⁰ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (2017). *A capital commitment: 2017-2022 strategic plan*. Washington, D.C.: DCPS. Retrieved from https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/publication/attachments/DCPS%20Strategic%20Plan%20-%20A%20Capital%20Commitment%202017-2022-English_0.pdf

³¹ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (2016a). *We the people: How the DC Public Schools to get, grow, and keep great teachers and principals*. Washington, D.C.: DCPS. Retrieved from https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/page_content/attachments/DCPSWeThePeople.pdf

A New Human Capital Development Initiative

Jason Kamras, the 2005 National Teacher of the Year and DCPS' chief of human capital, began this vision-setting process by consulting various experts in evidence-based instruction, including key developers of the Next Generation Science Standards as well as researchers like Carol Dweck, Robert Marzano and John Hattie. DCPS leaders also partnered with research organizations like Mathematica that identified a number of DCPS teachers who were "beating the odds" by consistently showing high student achievement despite demographic disadvantages. Mathematica also interviewed these high-performing teachers and recorded their classroom proceedings to derive common practices shared among them.³²

Findings from this process were initially consolidated into nine different facets of effective instruction. DCPS instructional superintendents subsequently helped condense this list down to five categories, forming the basis for what would become the [DCPS Essential Practices](#). The Essential Practices are a core set of evidence-based practices that all DCPS teachers are expected to demonstrate in their classrooms. Principles grounded in the learning sciences are thoroughly incorporated into the Essential Practices. For example, Essential Practice 3B, titled "Skillful Facilitation," leverages the dual coding theory of learning, calling teachers to "[present] content in multiple ways (e.g., explanations, visual representations, concrete examples)." Essential Practice 4B, titled "Supports and Extensions," calls on teachers to recognize limited working memory capacities of young students and "[deconstruct] concepts into smaller components."³³

Policies to Implement the Essential Practices

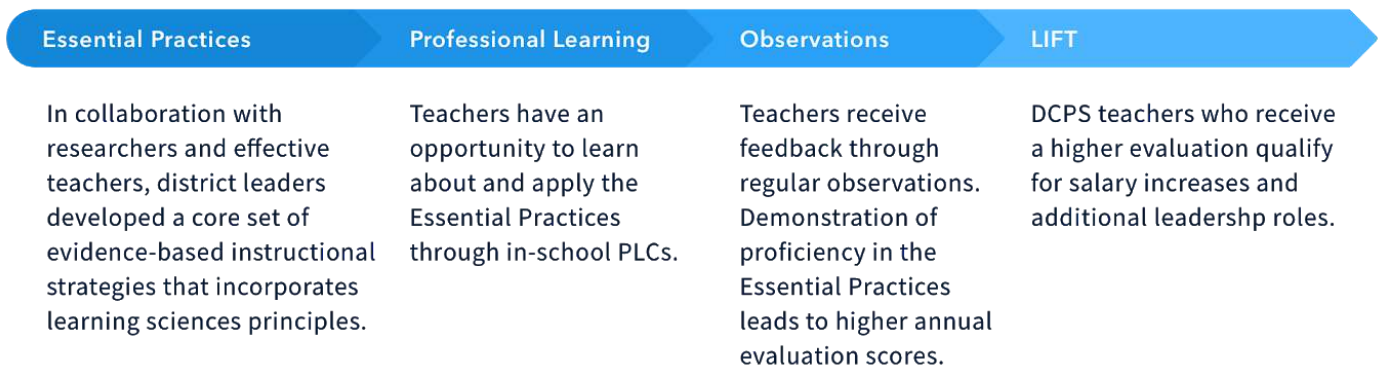
DCPS leverages several of its district policies to ensure that the Essential Practices are implemented within classrooms. For example, the district's current teacher observation system requires school administrators to conduct at least three formal observations throughout the school year where they have an opportunity to look for alignment between the teacher's instruction and the Essential Practices. Feedback based on these observations provided to the teacher within a two-week time frame to highlight areas of excellence and growth.³⁴ DCPS teachers are additionally incentivized to improve their classroom instruction in alignment with the Essential Practices, as the observations account for a certain

³² D. Pinder, personal communication, December 1, 2018

³³ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (n.d.b). *The DCPS essential practices: Grades 1-12*. Washington, D.C.: DCPS. Retrieved from https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/page_content/attachments/The%20DCPS%20Essential%20Practices.pdf

³⁴ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (2018a). *IMPACT annual reference guide: Cycle, dates, and supports*. Washington, D.C.: DCPS. Retrieved from <https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/publication/attachments/IMPACT%20Annual%20Reference%20Guide%202018-19.pdf>

percentage of their annual evaluation scores.³⁵ Greater evaluation scores help lead to advancement on the DCPS career ladder, qualifying teachers for higher salaries or school leadership positions.³⁶



Supporting Studies

Several studies have suggested that this observation and feedback system grounded in the Essential Practices have been effective in improving student outcomes and teacher performance. Researchers from the University of Virginia have found that the DCPS system generates “meaningful gains in student outcomes, particularly in the most disadvantaged students.”³⁷ DCPS’ growth on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) corroborates this finding. On the 2017 NAEP, DCPS students showed most growth in fourth grade mathematics since 2009 compared to students from similar urban school districts. Growth in eighth grade mathematics since 2009 ranked second only to Chicago Public Schools.³⁸

Remaining Challenges and the Critical Role of Leadership

David Pinder, a DCPS instructional superintendent, emphasized that simply establishing the Essential Practices and adopting policies surrounding their implementation is not enough to help the district’s educators use evidence-based practices and close the achievement gap. “We’ve given them the ingredients. The next step is to teach them how to cook,” he said with regard to the initiatives the district is undertaking to ensure that teachers adequately build their familiarity with the Essential Practices. LEAP — Learning Together to Advance Our Practice — is a professional learning community active in each school and led by in-house LEAP leaders who can be administrators, instructional coaches or other

³⁵ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (2018b). *2018-2019 IMPACT guidebooks*. Retrieved from <https://dcps.dc.gov/publication/2018-2019-impact-guidebooks>

³⁶ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (2016b). *LIFT: Leadership initiative for teachers*. Washington, D.C.: DCPS. Retrieved from <https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/publication/attachments/2018-19%20LIFT%20Guidebook.pdf>

³⁷ Adnot, M., Dee, T., Katz, V., & Wyckoff, J. (2017). Teacher turnover, teacher quality, and student achievement in DCPS. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(1): 54-76. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373716663646>

³⁸ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (2018c). *2017 NAEP results*. Washington, D.C.: DCPS. Retrieved from https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/release_content/attachments/2017%20DCPS%20NAEP%20Deck.pdf

teacher leaders in the school.³⁹ LEAP modules are explicitly tied to an element of the Essential Practices.³⁵ DCPS also provides teachers with a library of video resources they can access to view what classroom practices aligned to the Essential Practices look and sound like.³²

Instructional superintendent Pinder also recognizes the critical role that leadership plays in this process. He believes that specific training needs to be available for instructional coaches and school administrators to ensure that the post-observation feedback provided to teachers is consistent, action-oriented and pushes them toward a more thoughtful execution of the Essential Practices. For example, during one of his routine school walkthroughs, Pinder noticed that in alignment with Essential Practice 4, which states that teachers should “maximize student ownership of student learning,” teachers displayed high-quality student work around the classroom to help others evaluate their progress against these exemplars.³⁵ He would like to see teachers coached to push beyond this first step and explicitly help students understand the process and value of metacognition and self-reflection.³²

A Changing Landscape

At the end of 2018, Mayor Muriel Bowser appointed Lewis Ferebee as the new DCPS chancellor.⁴⁰ Instructional superintendent Pinder hopes that, to accelerate the positive trends in student achievement the district has observed in recent years, one of the new chancellor’s priorities would be to ensure that student learning experiences are shaped by evidence-based practices. He hopes that under the new leadership, DCPS will continue to provide opportunities to train teachers, instructional coaches and administrators on the Essential Practices, saying, “It’s one thing to have a gold standard in place like the Essential Practices. It’s another to help teachers and administrators unpack exactly what that looks like in the classroom. If the leadership doesn’t recognize the value of evidence-based practices, how do you expect teachers to?”³¹



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³⁹ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (2016c). *2016-2017 LEAP handbook*. Washington, D.C.: DCPS. Retrieved from https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/page_content/attachments/LEAP%20Handbook%202016-2017.pdf

⁴⁰ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). (2018d). *Mayor Bowser announces Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee as DCPS chancellor*. Retrieved from <https://dcps.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-announces-dr-lewis-d-ferebee-dcps-chancellor>