

CASE STUDY: WASHINGTON, D.C.

Case study to Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford B. Janey, “Putting Democracy Back Into Education”

Clifford Janey | November 10, 2016

The communities of Washington, D.C.—residents, and particularly their children—endured inequalities by race and income long before my time as superintendent of schools, and sadly, they are still felt today, if less so. Inequalities have had a long history of discussion in the nation’s capital, via the Supreme Court—from the landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 to and beyond *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. In Washington, D.C., inequalities by income and/or race had been compounded over the years by financial scandals in various levels of government. When I arrived, I knew dramatic action was needed, and suggested the creation of a new strategy. I was personally not unfamiliar with segregation in public education. Growing up in a segregated section of Boston public housing, I came face to face with the effects of segregation. My departure from the infamous Dearborn school and entrance in Boston Latin School was more a result of exception at the classroom level and continued family support, than the Boston Public School System providing equal access to excellence in

teaching for all. The Boston experience was not unique, as Colby King (the *Washington Post*’s Pulitzer Prize recipient) recently wrote: “second class status can go beyond the use of books and materials discarded by elite schools in a district.”

THE D.C. COMPACT

Building a new compact between District of Columbia Public Schools for both its local and state responsibilities required a community commitment in which collaboration became a value shared and practiced by members of the compact. The D.C. Education Compact (DCEC)—with more than three hundred members and one hundred stakeholders, including Mayor Anthony Williams, School Board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz, and City Council Chair Linda W. Cropp—worked side by side with parents, teachers, principals, representatives from local foundations, social service agencies, community-based organizations, and local community colleges and universities. It was from a sector of D.C. education Compact that I was able to present a new set of state learning standards based on the

nationally recognized standards of Massachusetts. We formed a collaborative relationship with the Office of the Commissioner of Education in Massachusetts, led by Dr. David Driscoll. This collaboration proved to be vital for a citation from the Council of Great City Schools as one of the fastest-improving districts in the country on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It formed the framework for a different sector group to determine the formation of a new state student assessment system; that is, the District of Columbia Assessment System (DCAS), modeled after the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Moving forward, turning community good will into results became the mantra of the district. With the creation of the Master Education Plan, I was able to move the district academically forward while repairing out of date, inefficient support business systems. During my tenure from 2004 to 2007, I began implementing the Master Education Plan which led to some strong results. The outcomes were more positive, in fact, than for my successor, Michelle Rhee, who claimed to improve D.C. public schools with such fanfare.

Diane Ravitch, writing in the Washington Post, noted: “From 2005–07, under Janey, black fourth-grade students made a five-point gain in reading, but only a three-point gain under Rhee; Hispanic students made a 13-point gain in reading during Janey’s tenure, but only a one-point gain from 2007–09.”¹

These academic gains made during my tenure were not achieved with half of the district’s teachers and a third of the principals having resigned, fired, or retired, as was true under Rhee.

People who think education reform is going to happen with a walk-off home run are sadly mistaken; there’s no magic bullet, no single, untested remedy. In its laser focus

on teacher quality, the reform movement is ignoring the economic and social health of urban neighborhoods. Turning around schools means doing the same with the communities in which those schools reside.

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Notes

¹ Diane Ravitch, “Richard Whitmire’s account of Michelle Rhee’s schools tenure,” Washington Post, April 8, 2011.