



Washington Teachers' Union



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## **Washington Teachers' Union and EmpowerEd**

### **Survey of DCPS Teachers on Grading, Promotion Policies**

#### **Executive Summary**

The mission of a public school system is to incrementally, grade by grade, year by year, prepare children for college, career and life. Truthful accountability by the central office, principals, teachers and other school employees is essential so that students, parents and the community understand how students and schools are performing and so all parties can make informed decisions about how to help students who are struggling.

In the decade since District of Columbia Public Schools have been under mayoral control, there has been a hard-charging effort to show school and student performance improvement. However, during this period, DCPS teachers have consistently raised serious questions about the validity of publicized improvement and have questioned the effectiveness of reform policies, to little or no avail. The most recent revelation of irregularities in grades and student attendance records at Ballou High School is just the tip of the iceberg, as shown in a survey of 616 DCPS teachers conducted by the Washington Teachers Union and one of its allies, EmpowerEd.

With Antwan Wilson as the new chancellor, the Washington Teachers Union and EmpowerEd are hoping to work collaboratively to change the counterproductive policies and practices that deceive the public and ultimately and tragically hurt students.

Structural change is essential to create a new, professional culture in schools across the DCPS system so that real problems are not hidden, students get the help they need, and teachers reconsider leaving the system, hopefully reversing the high teacher turnover rate.

Part of the solution will require true collaboration between teachers and administrators. Teacher voice in developing and implementing policies will create an essential check and balance for the system. Chief among the recommendations is to collaboratively revamp teacher

and principal evaluation systems. In survey comments, teachers expressed anger that they were told their evaluations would be affected if they didn't change failing grades.

The WTU-EmpowerEd survey was conducted in November and December 2017 because of concerns over perverse incentives aimed at both teachers and principals to ensure that publicly available data did not reflect the troubling reality. DCPS evaluation and accountability policies are designed to show improved school results on standardized tests, graduation rates and other indicators to prove the effectiveness of citywide reforms. But it has become a system built on dishonesty, with pressures on teachers to pass and graduate struggling or failing students. In schools in every quadrant of the city, an environment of fear and mistrust is doing a disservice to students and our community.

The survey results show a systemwide problem of coercion and pressure, not just at Ballou High School—which has received the most attention recently—but in schools across the city. Responses came from nearly every public school.

A total of 616 teachers responded to the survey. Here are some highlights:

- Nearly half, or 46.5 percent, of all respondents said they felt pressured or coerced by a school administrator either to pass a student who didn't meet the expectations for passing or to change a grade. The pressure is especially acute in high-poverty schools (so-called 40/40 schools—the district's 40 lowest-performing schools, which were targeted by the former chancellor for a 40 percent increase in proficiency rates), where 50 percent felt pressured. Of the high school teachers who responded, 60 percent said they felt pressured.
  - One teacher commented: "Pressures are put on us daily to change any grade below 50% to a 50% if a student 'attempts.' An attempt can be just writing their name."
- Almost half of the respondents, including 61 percent of the high school teachers, said their school set up barriers to prevent teachers from failing a student.
- Nearly one-quarter of all respondents, or 22.2 percent, said they submitted grades or attendance records that had been changed by someone else at the school.
  - "As far as attendance," said one teacher, "the attendance report I receive nightly in my email does not accurately reflect the attendance I input during the day."
  - One teacher commented: "I remember inputting grades and then logging back into the system to notice that they had been changed by someone else."
- Just over half of the high school respondents, or 55.1 percent, said their school's graduation percentage is not an accurate reflection of student performance.

- One teacher commented: “There have been seniors to fail my core class and still graduate. I have also felt pressure to change grades or provide students with frivolous assignments to make up a school year’s worth of work.”
- Just over one-quarter of all respondents, or 26.4 percent, felt school administrators do not trust their professional judgment regarding student achievement. For high school teachers, 34 percent felt mistrusted.

EmpowerEd and the WTU said the results demonstrate the need for systemic solutions to address systemic problems. Recommendations include:

- Overhauling the teacher and principal evaluation systems so that their chief purpose is to help improve educator and student performance. Under the current IMPACT teacher evaluation system, teachers and principals face high stakes and unacceptable pressure to show improved student performance, which has put teachers in a terrible position.
- Instituting real collaboration between teachers and school administrators. Teacher voice and trust must be embedded in the system so that educators are part of the team that identifies problems and develops district policies. The chancellor’s suggestion of an ombudsman is not enough. Teachers need to be at the table and their voices heard and respected.
- Analyzing and developing student interventions early in students’ education must be a product of whole-team collaboration, rather than placed exclusively on individual teachers’ plates, so that social promotion in early grades does not become chronic student absenteeism in later grades.
- Collaboratively, analyzing and finding solutions to the chronic high rates of teacher and principal turnover. This high churn rate has affected schools’ professional culture, the lack of teacher voice and the drive to hit numeric targets.

These survey results present the school system and the city with an opportunity to work with educators closely to shift the school culture from fear, deceit and mistrust to a true partnership focused on fixing, in a collaborative manner, the serious problems that are ultimately doing a disservice to students. Trust, honesty and transparency among all DCPS employees are the foundation for everything that follows.



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