

THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

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Steady improvement

Some four years after the city approached Dupont Circle residents with plans to improve the Stead Recreation Center, the city held a groundbreaking ceremony on a new playground and entrance plaza.

The long-delayed project is emblematic of the extensive woes chronicled in a recent 132-page audit of the Department of Parks and Recreation's capital-improvements program. The inspector general's report identifies repeated delays, poor workmanship and almost no oversight of two companies that were managing millions of dollars of construction contracts over the past seven years.

In particular, the Office of the Inspector General focused on projects at six facilities, including the Chevy Chase Community Center, Takoma Aquatic and Community Center and Hearst Park. Many of the problems are linked to the open-ended, multiple-project contracts that the financial control board awarded in 2001, but the department's rapid management turnover — six directors between 1999 and 2007 — contributed mightily to the lack of proper oversight.

But if the many delays in planning the improvements at Stead are indicative of the agency's problems, last week's ceremony underlines hopeful signs 10 months after Clark Ray became director. At a community meeting last week, he vowed that he is "not going anywhere" and vowed to continue "moving projects off the desk."

Stability, vigor and a sense of urgency at the department's helm represent major progress, but much work remains before the department is proceeding full steam ahead in the right direction. Vigilance in oversight is also essential. To that end, the inspector general ought to return to the department in six months to conduct a follow-up audit to ensure that proper management controls are in place.

Civic-minded

When PNC Bank chose Michael N. Harreld as its regional president for the Washington area, few would have predicted that his selection would help propel one of the most important school reforms the District has undertaken.

But Mr. Harreld's personal background and commitment to education helped bring about the D.C. Council's recent passage of legislation to strengthen the city's pre-kindergarten offerings.

Since arriving in D.C. in 2005, Mr. Harreld has devoted more than a quarter of his time to working on local education matters. He is a member of the D.C. Education Compact, a group that aims to improve D.C. schools. He has spent untold hours with D.C. Council members discussing the dramatic benefits offered by quality pre-kindergarten programs. He also persuaded the D.C. Chamber of Commerce and other business groups to become active on the issue.

Mr. Harreld spent most of his career in Louisville, Ky., where he headed a local bank that was ultimately acquired by PNC. He was active in civic affairs, including leadership roles on the boards of four Kentucky universities. In response to his prodding about the need for so many "prep courses" to bring freshmen up to a university level, the institutions' presidents told him that all too many local students had finished high school unable to do college-level work.

Later, as chair of the Kentucky Council on High Education, he explored the issue further. High school principals attributed the problems to failures in middle school, whose administrators noted that many students from low-income families — unlike their middle-class counterparts — could not read when they entered first grade. He also learned of research from Ypsilanti, Mich., that showed the value of strong pre-kindergarten programs in improving subsequent academic performance by at-risk students — and, later in life, boosting their job prospects and reducing their likelihood of incarceration.

Though Mr. Harreld's contributions to education are particularly laudable, he also serves on various local boards. The D.C. Chamber of Commerce selected him as Business Leader of the Year. We are fortunate that PNC Bank convinced Mr. Harreld to come here.

Board plays key role in education reform

VIEWPOINT

SEKOU BIDDLE, LAURA MCGIFFERT SLOVER,
MARY LORD, LISA RAYMOND AND TED TRABUE

Almost a year has passed since Mayor Adrian Fenty took control of D.C. Public Schools — turning the Board of Education into the D.C. State Board of Education. That's right — the "state board." The District may lack voting rights, but when it comes to education, we have the same functions and responsibilities as California or any other full-fledged state. Now we have a state superintendent and a state board leading this work.

So what does the state board do? Unlike the old school board, we don't oversee the day-to-day operations of the D.C. Public Schools. We can't help you with a leaky roof or intervene with a teacher. However, the state board continues to play a crucial role in school reform. We are the public's voice in public education, and together with the Office of the State Superintendent for Education we wield direct influence over educational issues that affect all learners, from toddlers to undergraduates to adults.

Ours is the big-picture view from 35,000 feet. We set the performance bar, define the measures of success and determine what D.C. schools — both public and public charter — should offer students to ensure that they graduate prepared for college and careers in the 21st century. We also engage the public and experts in hearings to answer big-picture questions: What does it mean to be well-educated? What does a successful education system look like? How will we measure progress so all students receive the high-quality education they deserve?

The state board already has made great strides toward improving achievement and learning — while tackling such social ills as the District's epidemic rates of childhood obesity and teen HIV/AIDS infection — by approving new academic standards. Standards detail what students should know and be able to do in every grade for every subject, and they form the foundation for everything that occurs in the classroom. Both public and charter schools must provide a curriculum and textbooks aligned to these standards. Teachers must teach them, and students must learn them. In the past six months, the board has held public hearings and unanimously approved the District's first-ever standards for health, physical education and the arts. All three promise to challenge conventional classroom practices, compel collaboration and encourage healthy lifestyles.

The board has other important functions, includ-

ing setting graduation requirements. How many years of math or science should students take? Last year, the board upped graduation requirements to match leading states, putting D.C. graduates on par with the nation's best. When the new requirements commence in 2011, all students will need four years of English and math, three years of science and a host of other courses including art.

The board also determines the federally required tests to measure how well schools and students are doing. Our students take the D.C. Comprehensive Assessment System test in third through eighth grades, and again in 10th grade. But these snapshots show how children are doing only in English and math. A well-rounded education includes much more, which is why the board is working with the superintendent's office to broaden our assessment system. Among options being explored: high school exit exams in key subjects, portfolio assessments and other performance measures.

If standards and tests are our education system's backbone, teachers and principals form its heart. Studies show that an effective teacher is the single most important factor in student achievement, yet the District's current system squeezes the talent pool to a trickle. A NASA engineer couldn't teach high school algebra in D.C. unless she had a math degree! The board, which has major responsibility in determining what it takes to be a quality teacher or principal, recently removed this senseless impediment by approving a new definition of a "highly qualified teacher," a No Child Left Behind requirement. We now are working to strengthen certification policies so D.C. Public Schools can recruit the best and the brightest.

Perhaps the board's most important role is engaging the public on critical education issues. We have held hearings on such issues as educator quality, home schooling, academic standards and turning around failing schools. Hundreds of parents, educators, students, researchers, community organizations and pastors have turned out to voice their opinions and to hear others express theirs. We also have brought together members of our respective communities to create a vision for quality public education.

At 6:30 p.m. June 2, the public has another opportunity to have its say. Please join us and co-sponsor Mary Cheh at Murch Elementary for a Ward 3 education forum. With your help, we can continue to build a world-class education system for all our residents.

Sekou Biddle, Mary Lord, Laura McGiffert Slover, Lisa Raymond and Ted Trabue are members of the D.C. State Board of Education.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Wilson softball team needs safe field, too

I write in reference to The Current's May 21 article "Fort Reno closure prompts worries among neighbors," in which Wilson High School athletic director's statement implies that the safety of the girls softball team is not a concern of his.

Theirs is the only team that practiced on the Fort Reno field prior to the park's recent closure, since it is in such poor condition and is unsafe for a junior varsity game or even a practice. Is it that

they're just girls, so they don't count? Please explain.

Bonnie Coe
American University Park

Submetering could harm District renters

It seems like every time the District's tenants get a loophole closed, another one opens. First it was the 95/5 transfer, which robbed tenants of an estimated \$340 million in properties. Then, it was the 120-day 501(f) notice to vacate, which was used to clear buildings of tenants. Then, it was the vacancy exemption, which helped landlords empty more than 200 buildings and robbed the District of \$16 million in fees. Now, it's a potential back-door rent increase with submetering.

The D.C. Council is currently considering amendments to energy legislation that would permit submetering of apartment build-

ings in the District.

The main argument of submetering advocates is that it encourages energy conservation. But submetering could end up reducing energy conservation. Tenants will be forced to pay for all the inefficiencies of the different components of a building, and the owner will have no incentive to improve the systems since they won't be paying the utilities.

If this amendment passes, it will likely open the floodgates for new leases and hidden costs that will adversely affect D.C.'s rental community. In a city with an abundance of clever lawyers, a landlord lobby determined to exploit every loophole in the law and a history of weak enforcement of housing protections, submetering appears to be the next assault on tenants — under the guise of "energy conservation."

Deborah Akel
U Street Corridor

Tom Sherwood is on vacation. His column will resume next week.