

D.C. Schools Seek Input on Building Redesigns

by: James Wright Special to the AFRO jwright@afro.com / (AFRO File Photo) / June 29, 2016

A group of elected leaders and community activists received a briefing on the District's school modernization process. The Ward 8 Education Council, an organization of ward residents and leaders led by Iris Jacobs, held a meeting on June 27 at the Anacostia Library to listen to how District school officials plan to construct and renovate schools in the near future.

The renovations are being done as part of a school modernization project that will come out of the general funds, supplied by tax dollars, for DCPS. Josh Tuch, who works in facilities planning and design for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), told the audience of 20 people that, unlike the past, the school system wants to get community input into how schools should be designed.

"We have gone to several wards so far to get feedback to see what District residents want their schools to look like," Tuch said. "We have a process in place where we visit each ward to solicit input on a draft document that will be worked on this summer. In the fall, we will come back to the community to get more input on the draft document and after that, we will work on the final draft that will be presented to the chancellor, the D.C. State Board of Education, the mayor, and the D.C. Council as well as to the general public later this year or early next year."

Former D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty, in 2007, launched an aggressive effort to renovate and rebuild school buildings, some that hadn't been worked on since the 1950s. While the effort started with Fenty, his successor, D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray and the present mayor, Muriel Bowser (D), have continued school modernization with the support of the D.C. Council.

In Ward 8, with the exception of Ballou High School, the schools mostly have been ignored for various reasons ranging from institutions being shuttered or the political process resulting in the prioritization of schools with stronger community ties. For example, Orr Elementary School in Ward 8 has been promised by mayors and D.C. Council members for renovation for years but has been ignored despite media reports that the school has rats, peeling paint, faltering bathrooms and water fountains, and



Tierra Jolly represents Ward 8 on the D.C. State Board of Education. (AFRO File Photo)

is cold in the winter.

Ty Specht, an educational facilities planner for Brailsford & Dunlavey, a program management firm in the District working with the school modernization process, made a slide presentation that showed the modes in which schools are being designed to the audience.

“These slides are not meant for schools that students attend today but for the students of tomorrow,” he said.

His 15-minute presentation showed schools being designed with more open spaces instead of the standard classroom. There were slides of students working on computer screens imposed on their desks, a wireless library, cameras in classrooms that can transmit educational activity to the next room or overseas, students with small cubicles for their learning, and relaxing spaces.

“In our survey with students, we find that they loved to learn sitting on a couch or in special chairs,” Specht said. “We also found that students like comfortable lounge chairs and spaces in the school building where they can teach themselves, such as a high-tech chalkboard.”

Specht presented instruction spaces such as school garden and a kitchen lab, as well as learning environments that aren’t in classrooms. “Learning can happen anywhere,” Specht said.

Michael Crier, a Ward 8 resident and educator, appreciated the presentation but added that some basics shouldn’t be forgotten. “Students want a safe environment in which to learn,” Crier said. “Students want to have different learning experiences such as vocational opportunities.”

Many residents linked school design suggestions with ills of the community such as making spaces for parents and alumni, addressing concerns with hunger and violence, and resources to deal with gentrification.

Ward 8 D.C. State Board of Education member Tierra Jolly said that the meeting was productive. “Facilities are such a big deal and parents, community members and stakeholders had a good conversation on how we move forward with the schools.”