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Writing Sample: Reform DC Public Schools

DC School Failure

DC schools are failing. Spending record amount of money, the system frequently ranks lowest in the nation. Directives are ignored; data is unreported. Stakeholder groups disagree on policy. Even if changes were agreed upon, the system does not function well enough to implement them.

Confusing hierarchy and stakeholder dissension cause the failure. Currently, two elected boards oversee the system. Both promise change to voters and then hold the Superintendent to unrealistic expectations. The Superintendent supervises the system, but lower administrators actually run schools. In addition to administrators and officials, other stakeholders are teachers, parents, and students. Intractable bureaucracy results from these conflicting interests.

Reform must fix the system and encourage administrators to provide better education.

Creating a Functional School System

Clear authority and real accountability will reverse bureaucracy, making improvement possible.

Clear hierarchy. DC should make education policy the same way it makes other policies: by the City Council in collaboration with the Mayor and staff. Abolishing the Board of Education would result in a clearer line of accountability. Administrators report only to the Superintendent. The Council and Mayor supervise the Superintendent.

Real accountability. Administrator pay should be based on how well they perform. For example, raises could be based on making required changes, managing the budget, or achieving objectives. Performance-based incentives reverse bureaucracy. After the City Council sets policy, the Superintendent will be responsible for executing it. The Superintendent's office should have direct and sole authority over all school administrators. When changes are not implemented, everyone will know where the blame lies.

Empowered people and strong reporting requirements will ensure education improves.

Empower personnel. Decisions should be decentralized to the most effective level, empowering personnel. While the Superintendent should measure progress, administrators should be able to use their own methods to reach assigned goals. Within a context of strong accountability, administrators should be free to run their own schools.

Financial management. The Superintendent should create a new auditing and accounting system. Waste will not be stopped until real management systems exist. While the Superintendent should enforce reporting, schools need flexibility in how they meet objectives. This system will give the Superintendent regular reports, thus enabling accountability to the Council and the public.