

The District

Throwing Bricks

In attempting to build charter schools, two D.C. public schools declared war on the school system. Is a real estate skirmish the system's way of firing back?

By Laura Lang

No one thought D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) administrators would be particularly helpful when Paul Junior High School's leaders decided to convert their school to a charter academy. After all, organizers say DCPS's lack of support for previous school initiatives, such as tutoring setups or teacher-training programs, was what had turned them off in the first place ("Dropping Out?" 10/22). They hardly expected school higher-ups to change their behavior in the face of a plan that would yank students from the system entirely—and take precious tax dollars with them.

Their first step didn't really need DCPS's help: In September, the independent D.C. Public Charter School Board approved Paul Principal Cecile Middleton's plans to open her school next fall as a charter in its current location, at 8th and Oglethorpe Street, NW. But last month, despite local and federal laws that encourage the school system to keep conversion charters in their original buildings, school officials notified Middleton that DCPS would need the Paul building—telling her she should look elsewhere for property to house her charter. They never explained why.

On Nov. 23, Middleton—who has drawn raves from parents for the improved test scores and revamped curriculum she has brought to the school—got a hint. That day, DCPS officials mailed letters to all Paul parents, as well as to parents of students at the nine elementary schools that feed into Paul, informing them that the school system was suddenly planning a new "Technology and Arts Program" for Paul. The letter boasted that the new program would feature a "cutting-edge curriculum."

There were no more details, but the mailing did include a survey asking parents what program they would support. The survey offered five options: the technology program—"located at Paul Junior High School," the text emphasized—topped the list of options; "[t]he proposed public charter school formerly known as Paul JHS" landed somewhere in the middle. Parents could also indicate that they'd be sending their kids to another DCPS school or a private school, or check "Undecided."

DCPS officials said in the letter that their plan will "coincide" with Mayor Anthony A. Williams' proposal for a technology high school. DCPS spokesperson Devonya Smith adds that the new program could be a boon for the Brightwood neighborhood, where the Paul building is located, and will give an extra option to those who don't want to attend the Paul charter school.

Charter advocates, meanwhile, see the survey as a last-ditch effort to foil Paul's conversion. It's bad enough that DCPS won't let the charter school stay in its rightful building, says Friends of Choice in Urban Schools (FOCUS) Executive Director Robert Cane. But now school officials appear to be trying to lure parents back to the public school system with the vague promise of a deluxe—if undescribed—technology program.

"I'm sure it's something they slammed together to try and entice people to stick with the

Charter Flight: Cane says DCPS practices unfair competition.

building and this super new DCPS program," says Cane.

"It's a phony plan that was just concocted to create confusion and to disrupt the plans of Paul," adds Jack McCarthy, a managing director at the AppleTree Institute for Education Innovation, a partner in the proposed Paul charter school. "There's been no mention of any sort of program in the past. It's a very cynical action on the part of the superintendent."

Smith counters that the school system has nothing against the proposed charter. She says the sur-

vey is simply a way of determining which program best suits the Paul building. "Of course, the system is not against the charter schools," says Smith. "[DCPS Superintendent Arlene Ackerman] does need to get information from the community, and, from that point, come up with a program or programs that meet the needs of parents...I don't think anything is written in stone. Information is being gathered, and things are being assessed."

And school system higher-ups might also argue that the benefits of competition are part of the

line

charter movement's central canon. If it takes the threat of a charter to make DCPS bring a big-time tech program to 8th Street, isn't that one of the things charters are supposed to do?

Middleton and others say their real problem is with an intentional effort by DCPS to confuse parents. She says she first learned of the proposed program when a student came in with a copy of the letter and a message from his mom, who wanted an explanation. Since the end of November, adds Middleton, she's been deluged with phone calls from confused parents—many of whom signed off on the charter-school idea months ago.

Paul parent Audrienne Womack also thinks the survey could be a way to distort parental support for the charter school. "I could see how people could maybe get confused—that we have a charter school, but maybe we can choose the focus of the school [by checking off on the technology program]," she says. "If only 10 parents turn the form in and say [they support the technology program], is that the meat of the data? Things like this are very iffy to me. My whole thing is: What is the purpose of this data collection?"

Jack adds that DCPS's interest in parents' opinions comes a wee bit late. Paul applied for charter status three times in the last three years. This spring, as part of the application process, school leaders gathered signatures from more than two-thirds of parents, who said they supported the school's conversion to a charter. Similar numbers of Paul staffers endorsed the effort.

"Why weren't they concerned about our opinions years ago?" asks Womack. "The system did not give a needs assessment asking about a technology program... Who said a tech program is what we want?"

"The point is, this is a community school," says Lex Towle, another managing director for Apple-Tree. "It's always been a community school, and here's Ackerman trying to create this fictitious role for the building so that she can shove 700 kids from the community...out in the cold. That's exactly what she's doing."

If DCPS really needs a new junior high or middle school technology program, adds Middleton, there are plenty of places to do it. Backus Middle School, located not too far from Paul, at 5171 South Dakota Ave. NE, already has a science and technology program that could be expanded or replaced by the DCPS initiative, she says. A new technology program could also help struggling schools that need to boost enrollment—unlike Paul, which for the last few years has operated at or above its 726-student capacity. The 412 students at nearby Macfarlane Middle School represent only 55 percent of the building's 753-student capacity, according to DCPS figures.

As for DCPS's contention that the survey's amorphous technology program jibes with Williams' promise to build a new technology school, Williams spokesperson Peggy Armstrong says that mayoral staffers have mostly focused on creating a high school program—not a junior high program like Paul's. "I'm sure Mrs. Ackerman has been focusing on comprehensive programs, but we have not gotten into that level of detail," she says. Armstrong confirms that the mayor's concept had the high school situated in Southeast D.C.—which leaves critics wondering how a technology program in Northwest would help.

"There's a lot of space in DCPS," says Middleton. "It doesn't take a lot of thought to figure out what's going on here."

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