
Case Study: Achievement Prep

Washington, DC | Grades 4-8 | 100% African-American | 85% Free and reduced lunch | Founded 2008

Dreaming the Mission and Vision

The road to Achievement Prep winds past DC public housing complexes before it ends in front of the school. Rusty metal grates cover the windows, and visitors are greeted with heavy metal doors. For the students here to move beyond this isolated road to college, founder Shantelle Wright knows she will have to teach them not only reading, math, and writing, but much, much more.

Wright remembers the dreams she and her childhood friends would outline when someone would ask what they wanted to do with their life.

"You just have such big goals and big hopes and you would say anything," says Wright. "I just realized there were more and more children—they weren't dreaming any more.

There were no more thoughts about 'I could do whatever,' or the 'world is available to me.'"

As the attorney-turned-charter-school director set about establishing Achievement Prep, she thought long and hard about what children

who were grade levels behind would need to be ready for college. *"I wanted us to have very clear indicators of what it meant to be at our school and very clear values of how we would interact with each other," she says. Wright, who says she grew up in a neighborhood similar to where her students come from, knew it was those values instilled in her by her mother and others that got her where she is now. "It's one thing to have dreams; it's another to be equipped with the tools you need to execute on those dreams," Wright says. "To say to a child, 'Oh, dream big!' and then you don't teach them to read; that's not fair."*

She found her vision and mission in DREAM—an acronym for Determination, Respect, Enthusiasm,

Accountability and Mastery. Children must have Determination *"because despite everything you see every day, despite what may have happened this morning when you got up, before you could even get to school, or last night before you went to bed, you gotta be determined to do something different,"* she says. Respect and enthusiasm are musts to creating a positive learning environment. Accountability goes to the core of the school's emphasis on continual growth and improvement. Wright included Mastery because *"it's not enough just to accomplish something and pass, it's about really moving and taking it to the next level."*

“Wright realized the staff needed to create a common vocabulary so children knew how to meet expectations.”

Wright realized the staff needed to create a common vocabulary so children knew how to meet expectations. When *"life is hard and we say to them 'I need you to be determined,' that's a common language that you'll hear in our school that then it means something. It creates something for them so they know what we expect from them,"* she says.

But it was important for DREAM to be more than just a slogan, static and ignored. Many a slogan has hung on the wall of schools that later ended up failing, the words meaningless because teachers didn't actually teach the values behind them or follow through to make sure the children were living by the message

So at Achievement Prep, students are evaluated at the end of each class by those DREAM values. *"Posture and tracking were really good today,"* says one teacher to her class, measuring them according to the DREAM value of Accountability. For their attempts at Mastery that day, she points out that students' *"exit slips look great."*

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Hiring for the Team

To identify teachers who will best carry out the vision, Achievement Prep founder Shantelle Wright and Chief Academic Officer Susan Cannon send every applicant a written questionnaire with four questions:

- What do you know about Achievement Prep and why do you want to teach here?
- Are you warm or strict and why?
- How do you feel about standardized testing?
- You have a scholar, John, who will receive Wednesday detention if he gets one more demerit. He comes to school 30 minutes late, which warrants a demerit. He tells you he overslept because his mom didn't wake him up in time. Would you give him the demerit or not?

Their goal with the questions is to weed out people who are not philosophically aligned. When it comes to the last question, *"at our school you should give him the demerit,"* Wright says. *"We don't make excuses for what happened."* Staff members will remind John that school starts at 7:30 a.m. and he needs to be on time. But they also will ask if he needs an alarm clock, or they will help him figure out how to set his watch. Some applicants might argue that they can't blame a student for the actions of the mother. But, *"we already have to do so much around PD and supporting our teachers, we can't then try to work with your philosophical thoughts and beliefs,"* Wright says.

If the written responses show the person's views match up with the team, a phone interview will follow with similar scripted questions that probe deeper into the candidate's philosophy. If that hurdle is passed, the applicants are invited to the school to see what they're really signing up for. Wright wants people who are not just attracted by the school's reputation. Potential teachers deliver a lesson and then receive the same type of feedback

as staff teachers. *"The more we like you, the harder your feedback is because we want to see how you respond to feedback,"* Wright says. *"If, before we can ever finish, you're like 'Yep, yep. I would have done that.' Or 'yep, yep. I was going to do that,' then you're probably not going to work here because we do a lot of talking, we do a lot of feedback in your face."* Those who turn out to be the best fit for the staff are the ones who pull out their pens and start taking notes on the feedback because they want to grow, she says.

Sometimes teachers who bombed are given a chance to revamp their lesson and reteach it, with the staff's feedback. *"What we're testing there: OK, so it wasn't a great lesson, but we saw potential. It's not just about receiving feedback. Can you implement feedback and how quickly can you implement?"* Wright says.

Because the mission of the school was so clearly interwoven into the systems and structures, teacher Michael Rabin says he knew right away that he wanted to be part of the team. Before working at Achievement Prep, he worked at a large school district in Maryland. *"I really struggled with being in an environment where I had really high expectations and standards in my classroom and the students who came into my classroom, knew what my expectations were. But the second they left the classroom, it was just a free for all, and what was going on in the classrooms around me—in the hallway and the lunchroom—just didn't meet the expectations I had,"* he says. *"When I did a school visit here at Achievement Prep, just being able to go from classroom to classroom to see the exact same things, to hear the teachers say the exact same things, to hear the administration and the leadership team all say and do the exact same thing, to see the scholars really understand from class to class what the expectations were really blew my mind."*

During his interview, the questions were not limited

to, "Tell me about your classroom," Rabin says. "It was 'how do you use data? What do you do with the data you get at the end of the class?'" Plus, the feedback he received from his sample lesson he could take back to school that afternoon and use in his classroom. "It wasn't 'Oh, this is a goal you need to work on over the next year.' It was 'this is what you can do when you go back into your classroom the next period.' That absolutely makes sense. Small things that I could tweak and make a huge difference," he says. "That, in the interview, showed me what I could expect and what I was going to get if I was hired."

Adult Culture Sets the Tone

Wright also saw the need for structural elements to keep the adults in the building on task. Success is "about how you mobilize and use the adults in your building," she says. "I don't think anyone opens and wants to fail. What ends up changing is the adults in the building and how you get them on the same page and understanding the vision."

To start, during a four-week summer institute, staff members plan through every minute of the school day—"every little thing that needed to take place to have that ideal experience. Where are the adults, how is this consistent for them, how is it different?" Wright says. When students arrive, they should not be able to tell which teacher has been on staff from the beginning and who is new to the crew.

A daily morning meeting from 7-7:15 a.m. aims to start the entire staff on the right path for the day, bringing people together so they can clear their heads and focus on the mission. The leadership generally kicks the meeting off by telling everyone to find someone and talk about their plans to increase student achievement for that day. Or, it may be that everyone is directed to find another staff member whom they haven't talked to recently and spend a few minutes chatting. These few minutes each day are geared toward fostering key relationships, reminding staff of the school values and creating a positive, trusting adult culture. "Part of what we try to do is create a space where it doesn't feel so much like a burden," Wright says. "It doesn't feel like

there's so much of a sacrifice because my job is not draining me, too." For teachers, the meeting "sets the tone every single morning for what the expectations are for that day," says Rabin. "It gets your mind right. If you're thinking about the 20 other things going on in your life, it really is your opportunity as we come together, to refocus yourself as an adult on what we're focused on today and what we need to be doing as a team to make sure our scholars achieve." Instead of teachers flying in as kids are entering the building, throwing their bags down and rushing to write instructions on the board, the focus is on camaraderie. "It's—by 7 a.m.—everything's done and this is our 15 minutes as a team that's nonnegotiable," Rabin says.

The staff also works on team-building every Wednesday when teachers come together for their weekly professional development. The staff has a "shout-out box" where people are invited to share notes about helpful teammates. Those notes are then read in front of the staff. "Every week our shout-out box is filled with different things teachers are recognizing about each other," says Jhatia McKnight, 4th grade science teacher. "Knowing somebody is noticing those small things at a really difficult point just really helps you push through." While there are small touches that go toward building trust and respect, they strive for honest conversations about where the school and where each teacher is in working toward their goal. Each week, the evidence is thrown up on a giant screen for everyone to see, in the form of the weekly quizzes and interim assessments. "It's all transparent," Wright says. "It's all in one database, and every Monday we project it on the board, and we all talk about it and we all own it." By staring the evidence in the face, the staff then determines next steps and strategies they will undertake.

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Show Students a Clear Path to Succeed

Early in the school year, founder Shantelle Wright noticed that teachers were not handing out consistent messages around which type of behaviors warranted a detention, which a deduction or which a verbal warning. *"Scholars were saying 'when I did it with her, I didn't get a detention, but Ms. Wright gave me a detention,'" Wright says. The leadership wanted to bring everyone back to the same page as soon as possible. "Part of what we pride ourselves on is scholars can navigate our school very clearly," she says. They know "what's going to happen and what results happen from their behavior." The next professional development session was dedicated to norming teacher responses to certain behaviors. The leadership aimed to set an environment where the team could hash out their differences, deal with conflict effectively, and reach an agreement. Teachers were presented with the following scenario: You have asked for silence and while transitioning a group, a scholar begins to have a conversation. Teachers were told to hold up a red card if they would give a detention, green if they would give a deduction and white if they would give a warning. "We would put it up and we began to see the inconsistency in the group. 'Wow, Ms. Wright you would have given him a deduction for that?'" Wright says. "You had your opportunity to make your argument to the group, this is what I like to do... and maybe you sway the group, maybe you don't, but whatever it is, we all agree and we know when this happens we're going to do that."*

Support Students to a Higher Bar

In setting the foundation for Achievement Prep, Wright was careful to keep expectations high, but to also support students to that high bar. *"You say at the end of the day, I want children who are here and able to be academically challenged from 7:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. What does that take for a child who lives in poverty, who may have slept on the floor?" she says. "You can't just open the doors and within 10 minutes you're in class. You have to build in some advisory*

time so that you can begin to catch those issues... so that somebody can pull them aside, give them a minute and help them cope. You create systems and structures of supports to help them meet those expectations, you never lower." As she sees it, in their future, no one is going to look at a bad choice made by the child as an adult and say "Oh, I'm sorry—that's right, you grew up poor, and you didn't get everything you needed." In some circles, educators have "gotten so busy trying to do the job of healing all the social ills we've forgotten our expectations still need to be here," Wright says.

Invest in Students

DREAM is heard throughout the building, but one word that's not heard as often is a common one for schools: Students. Here, they are "scholars," and the adults who teach them are "platinum teachers." *"The phrase goes that platinum is more valuable than gold," explains teacher Michael Rabin. "The teacher is dedicating their life to you as a scholar, to make your brain stronger and to make sure you go to college and do whatever you want so you can be successful. You will treat them as if they are platinum, as if they are the most valuable resource out there...It's one of the very first things (students) hear that you are here, and you are with platinum teachers." Wright or another school leader shakes the hand of every scholar as they walk through the door in the morning.*

With concepts like "swarming," the administration aims to invest every teacher in every student's success. Erica Franklin, 5th grade math teacher, remembers during the interview process, Wright explained to her the idea of swarming: If a scholar is in the hallway having some problems and needs to come back into the classroom, every nearby adult is expected to become involved. *"If you see that happening and you see a teacher talking to the scholar, you don't just walk past, you join the conversation, so it's not just Ms. Franklin vs. a scholar issue," explained Franklin. "It's 'no, this is how we*

do it at Achievement Prep. We're going to help and support you to get back in the classroom as a team and you can expect that from the entire building."

The adult investment in students is further reinforced through the advisory system. In AM Prep and PM Prep periods, students check in with their two advisors. In the morning version, they eat breakfast, organize homework, and socialize a bit. *"Teachers check in with individual scholars, and I can already tell if a scholar has had a rough morning,"* says Rabin. If you have to *"close a loop"* with a scholar from the previous day, that's the time to do it, he says. (The school has a formal conflict resolution process that encourages students to *"close the loop"* with the teacher after acting out in class.) In the afternoon, it's time for announcements and DREAM block tracker where students review their goals related to DREAM values. They talk with teachers about what they need to do to reach those goals. *"You are also your advisory's biggest cheerleaders,"* Rabin says.

Responding to Disruptions

Achievement Prep's discipline policy strives to keep scholars in class. Constantly sending a struggling student out of class sends the message that the student is not wanted in the classroom, says Carmen Player, one of two deans of solutions. If a student is disruptive in class, and sent to the office, Player says staff wait to have a conversation, letting students fill out a reflection form so they can write down their side. *"It gives them time to calm down, and then we have a conversation about what led to this, what can we do different next time, what are the repercussions of these decisions,"* she says. The dean will fill out a behavior tracking sheet that lays out what needs to be done for the student to return to class. Students then fill out a *"close the loop"* form in which they explain what led to the problem, what impact it had on their education and the education of others, what they could do differently, and what supports they need from the teacher. A dean escorts the student back to class, and the student has a conversation with that teacher. *"A lot of times it's 'I just don't get the math homework and I got mad,'"* Player says.

The DREAM Store

In the clean but bare main office, a young woman is making calls to the homes of students who have not shown up to school by 9:05 a.m. *"I'm making calls to find out why (John Smith) is absent today,"* she says, finishing the call politely and telling the person on the other end that she hopes the student feels better soon. From attendance to uniforms, the staff here keeps students—and parents—accountable on many fronts.

Students' performance on the school DREAM values is tracked on a clipboard where every teacher records "DREAM dollars" awarded to students for being helpful, and any deductions for being off task or disrespectful. For more egregious infractions like saying 'shut up,' students can get a lunch detention.

In Ms. Alyssa Roark's 4th grade English/Language Arts class, students are shaking their hands above their heads. This is known as *"sending enthusiasm."* The class is reviewing the *"Q Square,"* the school's version of a Do Now, completed at the beginning of each class. *"I'm hearing too many small noises. They will get in the way of our Mastery today,"* Ms. Roark says and the voices cease. Mastery is represented by the 'M' in DREAM. Together with their advisories, students set goals according to the DREAM values, culminating each week in the DREAM Block Challenge, where advisories compete to see which class is the closest to achieving its goals.

To balance out the close eye that teachers keep on students, there are also celebrations. On Wednesday, when it's time to see how students did for the week according to the DREAM measurements, eyes follow the teacher expectantly as she walks around the room with their weekly statements. Those students who have performed well get a special red lanyard placed around their neck. The teacher hands a lanyard to one boy in the back of the room, and he quickly slides it over his head, looking up to the ceiling with a big smile. He then surveys the room, checking to see who else has noticed his prize. He does a little dance in his chair. For several minutes, even after his classmates have started eating their

lunch, he continues to stare at the paper that details what a good job he did this week. Then all the students who earned lanyards line up excitedly with their statements and walk down the stairs, past staff members who are cheering them on. Once inside the “DREAM Store” students survey the merchandise spread out on tables in an otherwise empty classroom. They can select from individually wrapped packages of food, small toys, balls, and other trinkets. When they cash out, students get another pat on the back from the chief academic officer and other staff.

As the students file down the stairs toward the Dream Store, most wear giant smiles, but one fourth-grader hangs his head. He struggles to keep a slight smile from taking over his face. “*Stop right there!*” the teachers say and make a big deal out of his points and his work this week. He shyly tries to rein in his pride. He shuffles past them, down toward the Dream store. A short time later, he returns again with a shy smile, holding the bag of Doritos that he bought, walking slowly past until the teachers notice him and give him more praise.

Cheering

Before school starts, students who are brand new to the school will attend Prep Academy where they will learn all the Achievement Prep systems and procedures. “*In Prep Academy, we don’t even pick up a book. We just talk about what it means to be an Achievement Prep scholar,*” says Wright. “*How to enter the restroom, how to treat peers, how to sit in a chair. We teach them everything we hold them accountable for, and we tell them the why behind every expectation.*”

Students will learn the rules, but they will also learn what brings joy into the classroom—the Achievement Prep chants. Each year, teachers in each content area will come up with a chant to whatever song is popular at the time.

Wednesdays during advisory, the chants—some about reading, some about excelling—thunder through the halls. Inside the classrooms, most students give their all to shouting, clapping and dancing to the chants, a few here and there trying to stay coolly detached.

Parental Expectations

The school’s structure and emphasis on high expectations can be an adjustment for parents. Monica Almond recently moved from California and chose the school because she felt like the neighborhood school was not an option. But she hasn’t fully adjusted to the school’s strict environment. “*They take procedures to another level,*” she says. For Wright, she says the staff believes that parents are enrolling themselves in the school as well. Achievement Prep has a liberal open door policy for parents. “*I don’t believe there is anywhere you should ask a parent’s child to go that you don’t let the parent go as freely,*” she says. “*You don’t get to say ‘I’m going to take your child for nine hours a day, but you can only come and see them if you call us 24 hours in advance or if you sign up and tell me that you’re coming to see what I’m doing.’*” With most scholars at the building from 7:15 a.m. until 5:15 p.m., then spending more time doing homework, the scholars are with the staff longer than they’re with family. Recently, one father whose daughter was struggling with pre-algebra asked if he could start sitting in on the classes. He had never taken this type of math class, and was unable to help her. “*I think that kind of partnership with a parent—you can’t buy that, and you can’t schedule that,*” Wright says.

John Jones, father of a 5th grade boy at the school, says Achievement Prep has been much different from his son’s old school. “*It shows kids this is an early stage of college. They get homework every day and I like that. We get phone calls every day.*”

Teacher Jhatia McKnight says that sometimes parents may be reluctant to fully invest in Achievement Prep at first because they’ve been promised so many things before. “*Once they see we’re going to fulfill all those things we promised...then there’s a lot more investment by the end of the school year,*” she says.

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Results Hour: Respond to the Data

Teachers use the Common Core standards to create their curriculum alignment templates, going through every single Common Core standard and thinking about what objectives will need to be taught, says teacher Erica Franklin. On Fridays, students take weekly "Show What You Know" quizzes based on the week's objectives. The results are entered into a database. The following Monday, after students are dismissed at 4 p.m., teachers gather for their weekly "data day." Everyone's data is thrown up on the board. Teachers divide into grade-level teams. "We put it on the screen from every grade and class and use that data to form 'Results' groups," says head

of school Shantelle Wright. The first 45-50 minutes, the staff is parsing the data to create plans for that week's "Results Hour," deemed one of the keys to the school's success. Results Hour is an intervention block held every morning to help students with whatever skills they're not mastering. In addition, every 6-7 weeks, classes take their interim assessments, which Achievement Prep gets through the Achievement Network, a nonprofit that provides testing and then coaching on how to use that data.

Results Hour aims to give teachers a chance to respond to the data. "There's always this big push around data, and it to inform instruction and using the data to create a rigorous action plan of how you're going to intervene, or how you're going to remediate, or how you're going to accelerate based off what your data says," Wright says. But schools often don't provide teachers with the time to do all of this, she says. "(You should) be responsive to data, let that data inform your instruction, but still continue with the scope and sequence, still continue

with your yearly plans, your weekly plans. Don't miss your pacing guides. I just thought that was crazy. How can you do both?" she says. "We can't expect teachers to actually respond to their data if we don't then provide time within their day in order to implement."

Teachers welcomed the idea of being able to act on the data but continue with the pacing for their regular class. With a longer school day, Achievement Prep found the time for double blocks of English/Language Arts and math, and then the 45-50 minutes for Results Hour. Every adult in the building

is used to maximize the adult-to-scholar ratio, as every adult is responsible during results. The administration tries to set it up so teachers from certain content areas can lead the groups in those subjects, either pushing ahead with remediation plans, acceleration, or additional practice. In Results, sometimes teachers may have a whole class reteach, to correct a misconception. "The teacher obviously taught it, but (students) didn't learn it, so at our school, you didn't teach

"We can't expect teachers to actually respond to their data if we don't then provide time within their day in order to implement"

it. It's not just about 'Oh, I taught it. They just didn't get it,'" Wright says. "At our school we say, 'you didn't teach, you have to do it again.'"

Wright started an early version of Results the first year, held every other day. But the staff realized it was too sporadic that first quarter. "If we really wanted to get results, it had to be consistent, it had to be daily," Wright says. "It had to have a direct response to the data." About midway through the quarter, the leadership changed the schedule. Up until last year, Results Hour was the last period of the

day. *"One of the things we found is by the time we got to the end of the day, after having gone through all of their classes, their openness and malleability to intervention was not there. It was like 'I hear you. I know I got it wrong, but I'm just tired at this point.'" Wright says. Not just the scholars, but the teachers as well.*

"We found that what our teachers would do if we weren't monitoring very closely, the Results block just became an additional time to get whatever I didn't get to during class,"

Wright says. With Results moved to the first class in the morning, scholars are more alert, teachers more fresh, so *"it's not about trying to make up for the day,"* Wright says. *"It starts the scholars off and teachers off being able to find some instantaneous success."*

If a math teacher receives "Show What You Know" quiz data and can tell that of her two sections, about 15 students really did not grasp multiplying fractions with like denominators, she can set to work with her

partner teacher on targeting that idea in Results. The other teacher may not be a math teacher, but the two will collaborate to devise a lesson plan. Results

may be used to push the rigor with one group, and re-drill the issue with the other. Wright says on average, groups end up with a ratio of 10 students for every adult, and that teachers also work in smaller groups within the class. *"We really just dissect the data and whatever the data tells us, we respond to it,"* she says.



Teachers welcome the second chance. *"There's nothing bad you can say about an extra hour focused on what scholars need,"* says teacher Michael Rabin. Teachers usually say there's no time in the day to go back and reteach concepts before the DC-CAS (the DC annual standardized test), but with Results Hour, *"you have this built-in time every single day,"* says Rabin. *"If you need an extra hour, an extra 45 minutes, here's your time."*

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**School
Leader**

Shantelle Wright, Ryan Awardee 2013

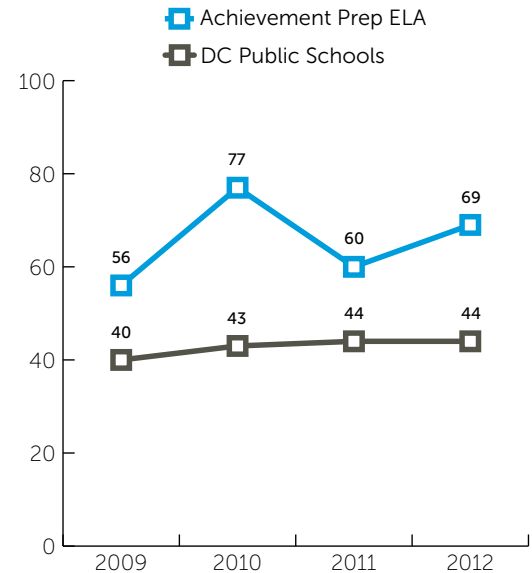
Achievement Prep is one of the highest-ranked schools in Washington DC when it comes to both student achievement on standardized tests and the progress that students make over time. The school is located in Ward 8 in Southeast DC and serves about 200 students. Students are in school for 196 days per year as compared to the traditional DC Public School calendar of 180 days.

Four times a week, students have “Results Hour,” an intervention block in reading and math that enables teachers to reteach skills that students did not master. The Results Hour enables teachers to act immediately on the data that they are collecting in class.

The word “DREAM” encompasses the school’s values of Determination, Respect, Enthusiasm, Accountability and Mastery, and it can be found everywhere. Teachers evaluate students based on the DREAM values and hand out DREAM dollars to reward students.

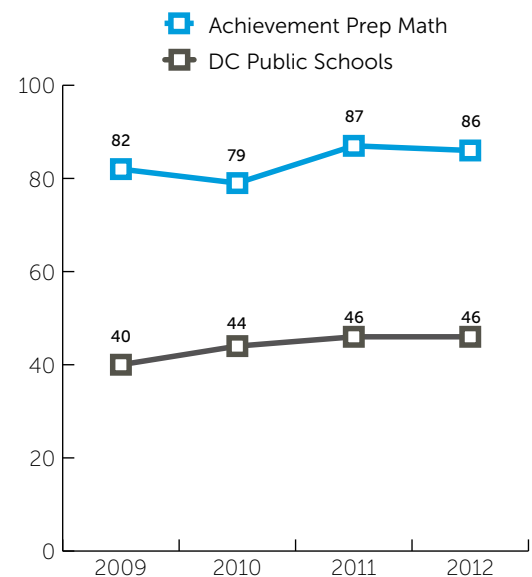
Wright earned a bachelor’s degree from Hampton University and a law degree from George Washington University School of Law. Wright started out as a corporate real estate attorney before she moved to the world of education. She worked as an administrator in another DC charter school, then completed a fellowship through Building Excellent Schools.

Achievement Prep Proficiency Rates on the DC-CAS-English/Language Arts



Source: DC Public Schools

Achievement Prep Proficiency Rates on the DC-CAS MATH



Source: DC Public Schools