



Capital City Public Charter School

Washington, D.C. | Karen Dresden, Head of School

Grades Served: PreK3-12 ■ **Enrollment:** 983 in 2015-16 ■ **Year Opened:** 2000

Instructional Strategies: Expeditionary Learning Education, Developmental Designs, Whole Child Approach, Arts Integration

Student Demographics: 46% Hispanic; 38% Black; 8% White; 5% Multiracial; 2% Asian; 73% Low Income; 16% English Learners; 14% Special Education

A Mission to Serve

Capital City Public Charter School was the first parent-founded charter school in the nation's capital, opening its doors to students in 2000. The school's mission is to serve a diverse student body through an EL Education model (formerly Expeditionary Learning) that ultimately "graduates young adults who are self-directed, intellectually engaged, and possess a commitment to personal and civic responsibility."

The school's EL Education instructional approach is founded on four core elements—deeper learning, authentic experiences, personalized instruction, and a whole child approach—to integrate project-based student learning with real-world applications, while meeting rigorous academic and character standards. The school's social curriculum is based on the Responsive Classroom Model and is designed to promote safe and positive learning communities. Capital City was the first school that President Obama visited after his 2009 inauguration, and he was joined by the First Lady and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. The First Lady returned to Capital City in 2014 as part of her "Reach Higher" initiative to celebrate students during their March to the Mailbox, an annual tradition where seniors mail in their college applications.

From Vision to Reality: How CSP Funds Enabled Capital City to Open

Capital City received startup funding through the federal Charter School Program (CSP) when the school was launched more than 15 years ago. The startup funds were critical to help cover the tremendous number of initial expenses, such as facility renovation and purchasing furniture, equipment, and supplies. Head of School Karen Dresden noted, "Without those CSP funds, we would have needed to pull from the school's operating budget for initial purchases. That would have really tied our hands and limited our ability to operate a high-quality instructional program in those early years."

The other benefit to receiving CSP startup funds was that it enabled the school to start small and add a grade level in each subsequent year of operation. Ms. Dresden said, "I think we got off to a strong start because we did start so small. If for funding reasons we had needed to start with a lot more students, I'm not sure that we would have built such a strong foundation."

Capital City also received CSP dissemination grants totaling \$200,000. The first round of these grants was used to help two other D.C. charter schools build out their curricula based on innovations and best practices developed at Capital City. The second CSP dissemination grant was used to assist two

STATEWIDE IMPACT

- The D.C. Public Charter School Board ranks the high school at the highest level (Tier 1) based on its growth and performance on standardized exams.
- All graduating seniors have been accepted to college since its first graduating class of 2012.

"Our alumni remember us and they want to give back. Not necessarily just monetarily, but of their time. They want kids to know how valuable a Capital City education is."

— Belicia Reaves, High School Principal



district-run schools within the D.C. Public Schools system develop Common Core aligned tests.

In addition to continued CSP funding for new school launch and disseminating innovative practices, Ms. Dresden feels that Congress can support charter schools by making funds available for school expansions. She stated that when Capital City's high school program launched, "We encountered a lot of the same challenges that we did when we initially started around having to invest in more equipment and build slowly. But since we weren't starting with a new charter, we weren't eligible for startup funding."

Finding Facilities

When Capital City launched in 2000, the school served 130 students in PreK through fourth grade in rented commercial space above a CVS Pharmacy. Eventually the school moved to a permanent facility, but it outgrew that space as well. Capital City then rented another commercial space while it conducted a \$24 million renovation of a new facility. The new permanent facility serves grades PreK-12 all under one roof. Each grade section—elementary, middle, and high school—has distinct space within the building, and the seven acre campus has a full gym, garden, library, playgrounds and athletic fields. Although the new facility is located three miles away from its original neighborhood, 85 percent of its families stayed with Capital City when it moved in 2012.

Ms. Dresden said, "Looking back, I think we were pioneers at a time when things like trying to get a facility for a charter school were just really, incredibly difficult hurdles. In fact, we were one of the first charter schools to get our own building. But that was just one of the many challenges that charter schools face, when the everyday challenges of trying to educate students should be your biggest area of focus."

Heard in the Halls: Student and Teacher Perspectives



"I feel like being a student with a learning disability, the school really helps accommodate you and it doesn't neglect what problems you might have. I used to believe that I wasn't really good at anything. But the teachers here taught me that all I really need to do is try to do my best, and I'll be able to achieve whatever I really want to do. I'm hoping to go to college and get a bachelor degree in aerospace engineering."

—Fred Chopin, Senior



"For both students and teachers, Capital City offers more of a community. It's a family, and that's built through the more intimate, individualized settings and the lower student to teacher ratios."

—Rebecca Dunn, High School Mathematics Instructor

IN THE COMMUNITY

- Capital City has more than 150 community partnerships that support EL Education fieldwork and arts and fitness programs.
- Expedition projects require fieldwork, community service, and advice from experts to demonstrate in-depth content and standards mastery.

