



Durham Public Schools: Creating an Environment for Success

Keeping a school clean is about more than just outward appearances. As noted by Kenneth Barnes, Executive Director of Maintenance Services at Durham Public Schools (DPS), the way a school looks affects how students feel, and this has a direct impact on how they perform. Barnes' commitment to this belief is what drove him to support hiring SSC for custodial services nine years ago when the district was choosing a support service partner.

At that time, the growing district was considering outsourcing as a way to free up principals to focus more of their attention on academics, recalls Minnie Forte-Brown, Vice Chair of the Durham Board of Education. Administrators wanted to find a company that would honor the loyalty and dedication of their existing in-house custodial staff. "Durham is a special place that honors the community," Forte-Brown explained.

As the district was deciding on the right custodial partner, Barnes was moving into the role of principal at the district's Southern High School (recently renamed

the Southern School of Energy and Sustainability). That particular school was facing some tough environmental challenges at the time, and Barnes believed that the general lack of pride in the school was causing some families to enroll their kids elsewhere.

Within DPS, families have a choice of which high schools their kids may attend, Barnes explained. Naturally, they want to choose a place where their children will have the best opportunities to succeed.

Barnes knew how SSC operated, because they had done some work in the district

during the prior year. He felt confident they would be a good fit and would support the turnaround he was looking for. "Outside appearances make a difference when you're trying to change a culture," he said. "I wanted kids and staff to feel better and take more ownership in their school."

SSC went on to win the contract, and Southern High School went on to be recognized for having the cleanest school for five of the next six years. "The biggest turnaround for me was that college recruiters wanted to come and visit because the school looked different, it felt different," Barnes recalled.



MINNIE FORTE-BROWN
VICE CHAIR OF THE
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ABOUT DPS

Today, DPS remains one of SSC’s largest K-12 partners, with over six million square feet, more than 50 schools, and about 275 custodial employees. SSC maintains a contract with a local minority vendor to help with more than 30 percent of the cleaning responsibilities. This model has proven to be a win-win situation for the district and the community.

“It’s always good when you have a company as big as SSC to have local people who are involved and employed,” Barnes noted. Many of these workers have grown up in the area and feel a sense of pride and ownership.

Maintaining a strong minority partnership is one of the many ways SSC has made good on its promise to be a true partner with the community, Forte-Brown noted. SSC embraced the workforce that DPS already had in place and effectively transitioned employees who had been loyal and efficient and wanted to stay on, she said. When the high school football team won the state championship, SSC helped the team purchase championship rings to commemorate this huge accomplishment, and SSC continues to support students through scholarship contributions.

“They are a partner in public education,” Forte-Brown said.

ACHIEVING CONSISTENCY

Outsourcing custodial work to SSC has supported consistent, quality cleaning across the district and relieved principals of the day-to-day custodial concerns, as intended, noted SSC Senior Regional Manager Mark Collins.

Forte-Brown acknowledged there have been some hiccups along the way, but these have been resolved amicably, she said. Consistent communication helps to keep the partnership thriving and people informed when an issue needs to be addressed. A monthly custodial report card gives each school an opportunity to rate the service and provide feedback.

Beyond SSC’s reports, there are 120-plus county-mandated inspections within the school district per month. The schools have passed all of these in last several years, Collins noted.

FINANCIAL SAVINGS

As the district has evolved and introduced six newly constructed sites over the past nine years, SSC has stayed focused on achieving the district’s custodial goals while also recognizing budgetary objectives. For example:

- Since the start of the partnership in 2005, SSC has gradually reduced DPS employee rosters by approximately 100 employees through attrition. Collins estimates that this has resulted in personnel-related savings of approximately \$500,000.

- In 2012, SSC reduced its contract costs by \$500,000 during the rebidding process. Savings were achieved by restructuring some of the cleaning operations and adjusting for days such as teacher workdays, when a full staff is not needed.

- Through its buying power, SSC saves the district about 35% to 40% on products. In 2005, SSC invested \$1 million in cleaning equipment for DPS, and in 2012, they invested another \$500,000.

- ***The savings achieved through outsourcing custodial services are estimated to be \$2 million altogether.***

Barnes reiterated that the ultimate goal is to provide the best learning environment for students and reinvest any financial savings into academic-related programs.

“Any money that we save goes directly into teaching and learning,” Forte-Brown echoed. These may include things like professional development or summer camps, to name just a couple. “The bottom line,” she concluded, “is that it all goes to help the district accomplish its one goal—which is student achievement and making sure that students are ready for the 21st century.”