

WHITE HOUSE REACHES OUT TO DC'S TROUBLED SCHOOLS

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WASHINGTON (AP) _ Growing up in one of this city's roughest neighborhoods, Meggan Thompson never imagined walking into the White House, let alone getting a hug from the first lady. That all changed when the high-achieving 17-year-old from southeast Washington visited the presidential mansion, where she and dozens of local girls dined in the East Room with Michelle Obama and other accomplished women.

``It was breathtaking," Thompson said. ``The marble, all of the pictures, so much history was in that place."

District of Columbia students are a familiar sight at the White House these days. Since Barack Obama became president on Jan. 20, they have been invited to break ground for a new vegetable garden, celebrate Black History month and, in Thompson's case, get a pep talk from the first lady on the importance of working hard to reach their potential.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan said the White House is reaching out to support the efforts of Mayor Adrian M. Fenty and schools superintendent Michelle Rhee, who are taking aggressive steps to turn around Washington's struggling schools.

``For far too long, D.C. schools have not been a shining example," said Duncan, referring to low test scores, decaying facilities and other long-running problems. ``Things are now going in the right direction."

The White House recently announced the first internship program specifically for D.C. students, placing them in part-time unpaid positions over the summer. And on Monday, about 2,000 D.C. students from elementary schools that have seen gains in achievement earned the chance to frolic on the South Lawn thanks to coveted tickets to the annual Easter Egg Roll. It's the largest number of tickets given to local schools in more than a century, officials said.

``I've been here long enough to know this doesn't happen every day," Anita Berger, principal of Banneker High School, said about all the recent attention. ``It's really been amazing."

Students say getting invited to the White House left them ecstatic.

``It was beyond *words*," high school junior Machel Ross said, describing her brief meeting with the first lady. ``She made you feel like you were the only person in that

room."

Improving Washington's public schools has been a priority for Fenty.

Since taking office in 2007, the mayor has dismissed the school board and won the power to hire and fire the superintendent. Rhee, the founder of the New Teacher Project, which trains teachers to work in urban schools, has streamlined the central office and closed nearly two dozen under enrolled schools.

Their efforts have caught the attention of the White House, particularly Michelle Obama, who has made her new home accessible to the public.

"They have been very supportive of what we've been doing," Rhee said.

In a recent chat with students at Washington's Anacostia High School, Michelle Obama spoke of growing up near the University of Chicago and never setting foot on the campus because it seemed so fancy and different to her.

The first lady, whose daughters Malia and Sasha attend private schools, said she believes many kids in D.C. probably have a similar view of the White House.

"I wanted to be a part of opening the doors and taking off the veil and saying, this is what's going on there," Mrs. Obama told the students.

Carl Sferazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies' Library, said the symbolism of America's first black first lady working with students in D.C.'s predominantly black school system makes her involvement a natural fit.

"She doesn't even have to say anything. She just has to be who she is," he said.

Laura Bush was a teacher who also took an interest in education while in the White House, Anthony said, but wasn't as focused on the city. Instead, she pushed for giving girls equal access to schools and health care in Afghanistan.

Pat Nixon helped organize a series of summer concerts for inner-city youths. Lady Byrd Johnson focused on fixing up school yards and playgrounds as part of a broader effort to beautify Washington.

High-achieving D.C. students who were invited to the White House to meet the first lady and 21 other accomplished women, including Olympic gymnast Dominique Dawes and singer Alicia Keys, said the message was clear: Work hard to achieve success and keep at what you enjoy.

"She was talking about how you should pursue what you are interested in and not just because it gives you money," said Lynda Nguyen, 16, a high school junior who wants to travel and be a journalist. "And that just really stuck with me."

Thompson, a senior who has been accepted to more than a half-dozen colleges, said the attention sends a message that D.C. students aren't being ignored.

``So many students feel as though nobody really cares," she said. ``We are some of the smartest people you will ever meet but we get bypassed and looked over because of some of the negatives that go on all around the city, and I don't think that's fair."