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New Research Finds D.C. School Choice Results in Declining Resources for High Poverty Schools

Report for D.C. Auditor suggests “unintended consequences” from current District policies

WASHINGTON, January 9, 2020—District parents are selecting schools with fewer students who are considered at-risk when not attending their in-boundary schools, leaving schools serving the highest concentrations of needy students with dwindling resources due to declining enrollments according to a new report from the Johns Hopkins School of Education Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE).

The report for the D.C Auditor confirms a high degree of school and residential mobility among students of color and students living in Wards 7 and 8—a kind of mobility that has been found to be strongly associated with negative impacts on student outcomes, including achievement. In the District year-to-year and mid-year moves are facilitated by D.C.’s robust choice model with a lottery-based enrollment system and approximately half of public-school students in charter schools. The report notes little information is available regarding the investments needed to support schools with a high degree of mobility, particularly for students considered at-risk.

“This research raises important questions about unintended consequences,” said D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson. “Choice affects mobility and mobility affects achievement, and we just don’t know enough about the impact of our current practices. Today some students attend two or three schools at each level, and we haven’t looked at who is changing schools, when, and the impact of that level of mobility on students and schools.”

The new report, **Enrollment Projections in DC’s Public Schools: Controls Are Needed to Ensure Funding Equity**, takes a deep dive into enrollment and lottery data provided through the Office of the State Superintendent of Education and MySchoolDC. The report focuses on the enrollment trends and projections of students of color, students considered at-risk under D.C. Code provisions, students with disabilities (SWD), and students who are English language learners (ELL).

The study finds that almost 40% of public-school students attended the school that was geographically closest to their homes. When students did not attend the school that was closest to their homes, they most frequently attended another school within their ward of residence, followed by a school in an adjacent ward.

The report’s critical findings highlight the intersection of public-school enrollment and resource allocation in the District. It finds a pattern of District families selecting and/or moving away from schools with more students considered at-risk to schools with fewer students considered at-risk. This pattern impacts schools with high levels of student poverty that subsequently face lower fall enrollment that results in fewer resources.

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In addition, the patterns in mid-year moves show a net loss in enrollment in the charter sector and a net gain in DCPS schools that is largely unaccounted for by a funding model that does not re-allocate resources mid-year. This raises the question of whether resources based on enrollment should account for mobility itself as a factor, and/or should consider a multiplier effect when schools serve increasing proportions of student who are at-risk, ELL and SWD.

“Our stated policies emphasize equity and serving those most in need, but our enrollment projections and the funding that follows don’t match our rhetoric,” Patterson said. “That is a challenge that needs addressing by education leaders. It will not solve itself.”

The report presents three major recommendations for District policymakers to improve the accuracy of enrollment projections, better align funding with actual enrollment, in large part due to mid-year entries concentrated in certain schools and ensure equitable funding for schools serving higher concentrations of students deemed at-risk. It stresses the need for additional research and evaluation on the long-term trends and their effects.

Consistent with the District’s Open Data policy and ODCA commitment to include as much data as possible in as accessible a format as possible, the report also includes several interactive data features and aggregated datasets. The interactive features illustrate where students move when a school is closed and the “actual feeder patterns” between schools. The aggregated datasets provide information topics such as how many students list each school on lottery applications and the number of seats made available in the lottery by school, year, and grade in addition to a multitude of other aggregated enrollment and projection data used in the report.

In commenting on the report, the Deputy Mayor for Education described a study that his office is now overseeing to assess adequate and equitable funding, particularly for students considered at risk, “The study focuses on at risk funding specifically including 1) the adequacy of the at-risk of academic failure UPSFF weight both in absolute terms and taking into account any interaction between the individual at-risk components, and 2) school-level concentration effects of high numbers of at-risk students.

The new CRRE report for ODCA is the latest in a series of comprehensive education research projects undertaken at the request of the Council of the District of Columbia.

In September 2018, ODCA published the report, [A Study of Enrollment Projections for D.C.’s Public Schools: Assuring Accuracy and Transparency](#), which was funded by the D.C. Council at the initiation of Councilmember Mary Cheh.

In June 2019, ODCA published the report, [District Schools Shortchange At-Risk Students](#), which found DCPS schools with the highest proportion of at-risk students had their base funding cut and at-risk funds used for teacher and social worker pay instead of for added efforts to improve academic achievement. In addition, high schools with large populations of students with disabilities have not received funding required by local and federal law, with at-risk funds also used to meet special education staffing requirements.

That report found that a funding stream created six years ago to directly address educational needs of students defined as “at-risk” by homelessness, poverty, and foster care, has been used primarily to fill budget gaps the DCPS central office created by reducing formula funds for schools with high at-risk populations. The at-risk funding law requires that the add-on funds be supplemental and not supplant other District or federal funds.

In commenting on the at-risk report, DCPS Chancellor Lewis Ferebee described steps the system is taking “to further our goals of equity and transparency.” The school system’s response included in the ODCA report noted that “DCPS has started an equity analysis which will include a rigorous internal financial review of funding systems, structures, and their effects at both the central and school level.” He also promised to work with the community “on the potential adoption of a new budget model.” Importantly, DCPS agreed with many of ODCA’s recommendations, including sharing information with schools regarding the quantity of supplemental versus base funds each school receives.

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