

**D.C.’s Failure to Establish Longitudinal Data System Imperils
School Effectiveness, Student Progress, Learning Loss Recovery**

Despite \$35 million in federal and local funding, the District is behind other states in collecting and using the array of information needed to ensure equity and student achievement

WASHINGTON—March 10, 2021—While the D.C. Public School system has enjoyed a reputation as a rapidly improving urban district, a new report by the Office of the D.C. Auditor warns that the District’s failure to build a state longitudinal data system limits its capacity to identify where investment and intervention are most needed to support students and ensure educational equity across the city.

At a time when the disruption of schools due to the pandemic has put even more children at academic risk, the District does not have the information it needs to accurately assess where children stand, how much learning has been lost, and what learners need to achieve their fullest potential. The District’s lack of a robust data system puts the most vulnerable children at even greater risk academically. At schools with the highest populations of underserved Black students, those with disabilities, suffering homelessness or highly mobile, teachers simply do not have the information they need to best serve students’ needs.

Measuring What Matters: More and Better Data Needed to Improve D.C. Public Schools, concluded that the District lacks a comprehensive and vigorous approach to collecting, sharing and analyzing data on a range of critical learning and growth indicators. The dearth of consistent data on everything from student academic progress, behavior and pathways throughout school years puts the school system behind that of other states. This despite a \$35 million investment from federal and local sources and a commitment by three administrations.

The D.C. auditor’s two-year audit of public education data was recommended by the 2015 National Research Council report, [An Evaluation of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia](#), and mandated under the District of Columbia Education Research Practice Partnership Establishment and Audit Act of 2018. The auditor’s office reviewed data practices and datasets over six school years, from 2014 through 2019, to document what education data are collected and how they are used.

“As we face the urgent crises of the past year related to COVID learning loss and the legacy of racial injustice, the District does not have the capability to tap the power of a strong data system to understand where students are academically, the gaps in their learning and how best to intervene and get them on the path to success,” said D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson. “It is disheartening that, despite millions in federal and local dollars and a long-standing promise to

build a robust longitudinal data system over the past 14 years, that the District has not done so. We cannot stand by and continue to mask this lack of data capacity, especially at this moment when it is essential to a strong recovery and the well-being of children.”

The auditor’s review found that the District lacks data integrity, has not exercised its authority to develop the strong data systems needed for sound decision-making, and limited research to gauge the impact of academic programs and drive continuous improvement efforts. The findings show that the District has:

- Failed to build the data system capacity required under its federal grants or the data warehouse mandated by D.C. Code.
- Failed to provide longitudinal data across schools and districts.
- Perpetuated flawed systems of collecting and reporting data on attendance and chronic absenteeism.
- Failed to track the trajectory of large numbers of high school students assigned to alternative programs.
- Suppressed student college enrollment data.
- Failed to adequately track transfer trends of high school students who leave charter and the District’s selective high schools for regular public schools.
- Failed to track course-taking, credit completion and other indicators that would allow for the development of an early warning system to support struggling students and keep them on track to graduation.
- Failed to ensure data integrity, thus raising questions about the validity of data published in school report cards.
- Failed to ensure other essential data collections are complete.

While the auditor commended the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) for the progress made in collecting essential teacher data and, this year, establishing unique identifiers for individual teachers, the report outlines disagreement with OSSE’s claims that the District’s commitment to data is sufficient.

As a result of significant federal and local investments, the field of statewide longitudinal data systems is extraordinarily robust. Collectively, these systems offer a portfolio of established best practices and standards aimed at improving student outcomes and ensuring equity. These long-term investments continue to provide benefits at all levels of government, particularly at the intersection where education researchers and state and local policymakers do their work.

These investments are not visible in the District. The report recommends a comprehensive improvement plan to address the gaps in the District’s data systems and suggests legislative and oversight approaches to monitor the progress in achieving those goals.

"Our students are currently facing an unprecedented degree of learning loss due to the many challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. And to address this growing issue, our school communities will need access to accurate and interconnected data in order to develop tailored student learning recovery plans," said D.C. Councilmember Mary Cheh. "Unfortunately, and as

was suspected, the Auditor's report has uncovered that the District is not following the established best practices around data quality. We cannot provide appropriate services and supports for our students until we address this data problem—and the need is more urgent than ever."

D.C. Council Chairman Phil Mendelson has called for a public hearing with the auditor and OSSE before the Committee of the Whole on March 18 to address the findings and questions about the District's lack of a state longitudinal data system.

"The most urgent matter in our city is to make our schools work for every child, regardless of race or income. Without the data to measure student progress, it is impossible to fix the deep opportunity divide for our students," said D.C. Councilmember Robert White. "What gets measured gets managed. My hope is that this report spurs our collective action to collect that right data on students, and to respond to the data in front of us on schools. Without the right data, we are guessing our way forward. We can do better than that."

The U.S. Department of Education defines a longitudinal data system as one that ["collects and maintains detailed, high quality, student- and staff-level data that are linked across entities and over time, providing a complete academic and performance history for each student."](#) In the District, critical data needed to determine how the most disadvantaged children are performing over time are lacking because the state education agency has never effectively collected them, the auditor finds, despite having clear statutory authority to do so. Data on attendance, dropout rates, in-school suspension rates, graduation rates, post-high school college and career success data disaggregated by race, gender, and socio-economic status across all of our public schools over time are compromised or nonexistent, according to the report.

"Knowledge is power," Patterson said. "Other districts are using robust student data to track progress—looking both backward and forward—to gain important insights into student needs. This allows for informed decisions about where resources must go to address learning loss and meet real student needs. The District is, at best, relying on anecdotal evidence and good intentions. At worst, we are fumbling in the dark."

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