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D.C. Council Requires Plan to Improve Education Data

OSSE to take steps, including using longitudinal data use, course collection, and creating a statewide Early Warning System, as outlined in Auditor's report

Aug. 10, 2021 (WASHINGTON)—The FY 2022 Budget Support Act of 2021 approved by the D.C. Council today includes three measures designed to move the District closer to the kind of education data use that can contribute to student academic success as called for in the Office of the D.C. Auditor' (ODCA's) March report, [Measuring What Matters: More and Better Data Needed to Improve D.C. Public Schools](#).

The legislation requires the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to submit a plan to the Council by next spring detailing how it would:

- Improve the District's Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) to conform with national standards on data capacities, including the ability to link standard data "elements" longitudinally and across all public schools—national benchmarks that the District does not now meet.
- Collect data on courses, credits and grades that will be especially helpful to the nearly 2,000 District high school students who transfer schools each year—who are more likely to be students who are Black, "at-risk," individuals with disabilities, and/or homeless.
- Develop and implement an "early warning system" using statewide data from all public schools to proactively identify students at risk of dropping out of high school.



The Office of the D.C. Auditor recommended sweeping improvements in education data collection in the report released in March. "While we would have preferred that the Council require OSSE to take these steps now including longitudinal data use, the course collection and a statewide Early Warning System, requiring them to develop a plan to conform to all of these best practices clearly moves in the right direction," D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson said today. "The chairman and the Council are to be commended for this action to improve public education and student achievement."

In June, journalist Debbie Truong [reported in a WAMU story](#) on the plight of Aaliyah Jones, who was preparing for college at Virginia State University when she discovered that she had not actually graduated from National Collegiate Prep High School. She attended a total of three high schools in the District, transferring to avoid bullying. She was two classes short of graduation based in part on a lack of District-level alignment between different courses and credits in the schools she attended, none of which was communicated clearly to her prior to walking across the stage at Collegiate Prep.

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A major factor in her struggle was the failure of the District to collect and maintain a standardized database of all courses, grades, and credits across all D.C. public schools, traditional and charter. This is a basic capacity of the kind of longitudinal data system most states maintain, as noted in the education data audit published in March—but a capacity the District lacks.

The OSSE data provision in the Budget Support Act was drafted by Council Chairman Phil Mendelson in response to the audit. It requires OSSE to detail how D.C.'s state education agency would collect the needed course and credit information from all District local education agencies using standards developed by the federal government and now used by a majority of states including Maryland and Virginia. D.C.'s neighboring states began these collections in 2010 (Virginia) and 2013 (Maryland.)

As detailed in the audit, the students most likely to be negatively impacted by the District's lack of course alignment and course monitoring are those who transfer schools, and District students experience more school moves than is typical. Of the students who experience mid-year transfers, 81% are Black, 67% are considered at-risk, 29% have disabilities, and 18% are homeless. On average, Black students, students considered at-risk and students with disabilities transfer schools more than three times throughout their K-12 school career.

“Collecting citywide data on courses, credits, and grades will help all of our students like Aaliya get the courses they need,” Patterson said.

In requiring a plan to bring the District's education data system up to the standards of a Statewide Longitudinal Data System, the Budget Support Act provision on data capacities and elements will require OSSE to explain how they will develop a system that is interoperable, longitudinal, and portable, and able to collect and use 18 major data elements as outlined by the U.S. Department of Education. These include student enrollment by program type; student attendance; student discipline; teacher role, demographics, qualifications, certifications, retention and salary; as well as early childhood, career and technical, and adult education data, and postsecondary, workforce, and other agency data linked to education. As highlighted in the audit, all of these elements must be complete across students, schools and time and must be regularly checked for quality assurance. Conducting regular, internal audits will allow education decision makers across the District to have up to date data any time it is needed on key elements of interest, like student attendance, enrollment, drop-out, or discipline, for example.

Patterson noted that capturing all 18 of these major data elements is an interconnected exercise. For example, many state education agencies use their course, credit, and grade collection to implement the student-teacher data links and associated teacher qualifications needed in a statewide longitudinal data system. Both the course collection plan and the plan to implement a complete statewide longitudinal data system should reflect this interconnection and other similar links.

“We will know that the District is serious about implementing a statewide longitudinal data system when we see a plan that demonstrates actual use of longitudinal data,” Patterson said. The ODCA audit found no examples of OSSE using individual student data over time and across multiple data elements. An example of such use would be showing patterns in individual English language learner student graduation or postsecondary enrollment linked with multiple school and student characteristics, over five to 10 years. Importantly, demonstrated longitudinal data use by a state education agency is also a federal standard established by the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Grant Program.

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In outlining their plan for an Early Warning System, OSSE is expected to describe both a mathematical model and the supports staff will need to make use of the early warning system. The legislation includes the elements to include in the system, including 8th grade chronic absenteeism and truancy and standardized test scores, and the plan will need to describe how these data will be prepared and verified. The second major part of an Early Warning System is a robust system of supports, resources, and interventions for school leaders, teachers, and other school staff, and families—including training, outreach, and a plan for evaluating its success.

In a response to earlier Council questions, OSSE has written that they plan to spend \$2 million in federal COVID-19 funds on developing the course collection portion of the data requirements. “We look forward to working with the new State Superintendent of Education and her team, as well as Chairman Mendelson and the Committee of the Whole in providing assistance based on the education data audit in developing the plans as outlined in the budget legislation,” Patterson said.

“A comprehensive data system and the use and sharing of data can make a huge difference in the lives of District of Columbia students.”

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