Key Takeaways

Washington, D.C., is one of the fastest-improving and fastest-growing urban districts in the country, thanks to years of hard work on the part of district, charter, nonprofit, and civic leaders and the educators and families in the schools. Cities around the country continue to look to D.C. as an example of how to collaborate across sectors, how to continually push the quality of education, and how to establish good policies for family choice. Sustaining this momentum means tackling some of the hardest problems: inequitable access and outcomes. The city must continue to focus on improving family access to quality schools and developing systems for ongoing, sustained community engagement.

SPOTLIGHT

Families Take the Lead to Open a New School

A small group of parents in one of the city's most impoverished wards spearheaded a process to open the kind of school they wanted for their neighborhood. Parents from the ward and from a nearby military base solicited input from the community, which they then used to set guidelines for school applications from charter operators.

Available land on the military base provided a rare opportunity for such a deliberate process, but some groups hope that family involvement in identifying what a school should look like and in vetting operators can become commonplace.

Over the past several years, the charter application process has included much more emphasis on showing concrete evidence that families want a specific type of school in their neighborhood. To push this work forward, some groups are starting to collect better information about the kinds of schools that families want to see and where they should be sited.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

▶ Taking responsibility for common problems

The D.C. mayor's cross-sector collaboration task force has been meeting since 2016, taking on issues like developing a new funding plan and reducing midyear mobility. A good foundation is in place, with regular meetings occurring among all key leaders. But more focus and accountability may be needed to take on the complex, persistent issues that remain, like inequitable access and outcomes. The city has good demand data from the My School DC lottery system and has supply data from an annually released Master Facilities Plan. Strategies for cross-sector facilities planning and school siting would also benefit from task force leadership.

▶ Being strategic about opening new schools in a growing system

D.C. has the data to know where schools need to open or expand. With plans in place for a citywide rating system, the city will have even better information to make school supply decisions. Having information is not enough, however. Cross-city, transparent processes around facilities management and identifying where the city needs new grade spans are two possible ways District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and DC Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB) can each be more strategic while still maintaining their autonomy.

Leadership from the mayor's office or a local nonprofit can help ensure that facilities are available where they are needed most and that the city is using common criteria to inform decisions. For example, a third-party entity could guide a public facility trust that holds buildings until there is a community need. Redrawing district boundaries in 2013-14 provided the opportunity to open schools using a strategic public process. Some charter operators already do a good job of making sure they open schools in areas that are most in need of new, high-quality seats. However, both sectors should consider collaborating to define best practices for siting and to establish common criteria to guide individual school and sector decisions about where schools locate.

▶ Taking on 2.0 choice problems

D.C. is a nationwide leader in establishing enrollment policies that help families choose from a variety of school options. Families are taking advantage of these options: Approximately three-fourths of students attend a school other than their assigned, in-boundary district school. Next steps will be for the district and charter sectors to address issues that continue to be barriers for some families, such as differing enrollment practices, the effect of lottery preferences, and transportation. D.C. has good information systems in place, but communities still cite this as

a barrier. My School DC and DCPCSB school profiles do not yet provide clear information about special education or English language learner services at individual schools, though they do link to detailed information on discipline, suspensions, and mobility. While support exists in the city's most impoverished neighborhoods for families to understand their options, some community organizations report that more is needed. This may require further outreach using existing parent advocacy organizations or making connections with other trusted sources in the community.

▶ **Centralizing data, not decisionmaking**

A key tension in D.C., as in many high-choice cities, is between accountability and school independence. Public, transparent data can give all actors the information they need to make sound decisions without centralizing authority. Currently, both DCPS and DCPCSB are using good, but slightly different information. Public data about demographic trends, programmatic demand, and school quality can help guide decisions about school closures and openings and provide transparency to the public about the process. Shared data about family satisfaction will help advocacy groups, the mayor's office, DCPS, and DCPCSB set initiatives. And shared, citywide information about the quality and movement of school leaders can help the city establish more pipelines and training initiatives like the newly created Georgetown Executive Master's in Leadership program. Creating common definitions and providing information about curricular models will also help schools that want to open or expand, and help families looking for the right fit.

Key Takeaways: Student & School Outcomes

The graduation rate in D.C. has been increasing, but enrollment in the city's top-performing schools tilts toward white students.

Is the education system continuously improving?

**What is the city's graduation rate over time?**

WASHINGTON, D.C.
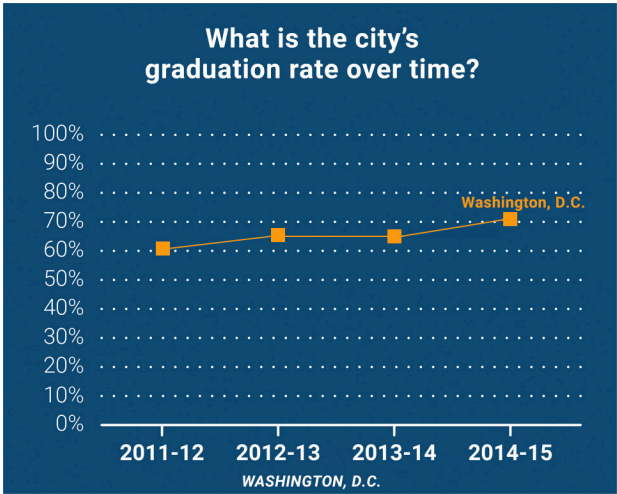
▶ **The city's graduation rate has been increasing.**

Data: Percent of first time 9th grade students graduating in four years, citywide.

Source: EDFacts Initiative, U.S. Department of Education, Assessment and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates Data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?

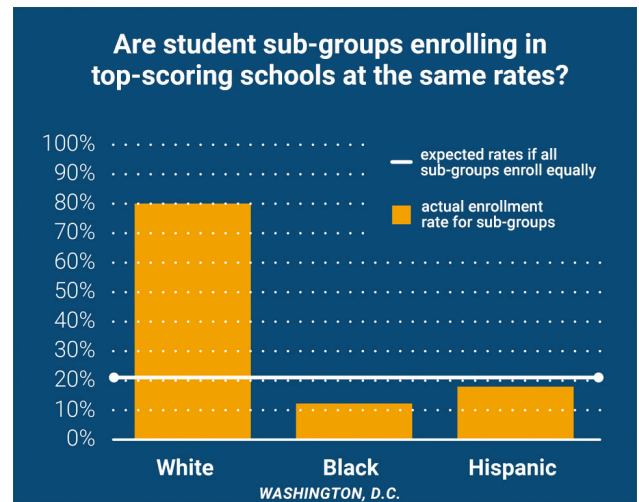### How does participation in advanced math courses compare across groups?

- % of population
- % of advanced math enrollment

White Black Hispanic Other
WASHINGTON, D.C.
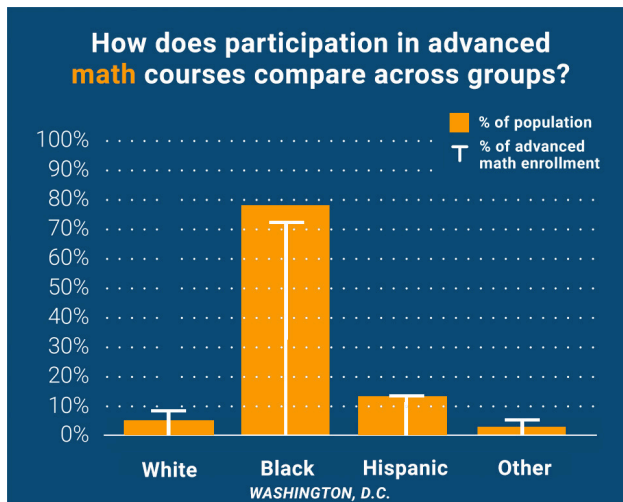
▶ In 2013-14, all students were enrolled in advanced math coursework at similar rates than the total high school population.

Data: Enrollment of students in math courses above Algebra II. Rates calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in advanced math by the number of students in the school. Sub-group rates determined at the school level.

Source: U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-2014.

Are student sub-groups enrolling in top-scoring schools at the same rates?

- expected rates if all sub-groups enroll equally
- actual enrollment rate for sub-groups

White Black Hispanic
WASHINGTON, D.C.

▶ In 2013-14, 22% of students in D.C. enrolled in the city's top-scoring schools. White students enrolled in top-scoring schools at much higher rates than they enrolled in medium- and low-scoring schools.

Data: This figure shows whether students are equitably enrolled in the city's top 20% performing schools, based on student proficiency in state reading assessments. Within a single student sub-group, we identify what percent is enrolled in top-, middle-, and low-performing schools. If the share of students enrolled in top-scoring schools citywide and the share of a particular sub-group are similar, this means that the sub-group is equally distributed across low-, middle-, and top-scoring schools.

Source: Performance and enrollment data District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent, 2013-14.

Data & Scoring

Where did we get this data?

▶ Publicly available state and federal data, making our results comparable and reproducible.

▶ The most up-to-date data available for all 18 cities at the time of our data collection. See Methodology & Resources for more information.

What makes the data citywide?

▶ We include all charter and district schools within the municipal boundary of a city.

▶ In Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, and San Antonio we use school data from multiple districts within the municipal boundary.

Key Takeaways: System Reforms

Washington, D.C., established procedures to help families choose schools, along with an infrastructure that helps the city be more strategic about its school supply. The next steps will be making sure reform and improvement initiatives are rooted in the community by engaging all families and responding effectively to their input.

Do students have access to a high-quality education?

Good

Do school choice and supply meet family needs? This goal addresses how well the city is doing with providing families access to quality schools. We look at what the city is doing to ensure quality schools are in every neighborhood, and how well the choice process is working for families who want to use it.

Exemplar

Does the school supply represent an array of models?

Washington, D.C., has a variety of instructional and curricular models in both district and charter schools. Of the 21 new schools that have opened or expanded since 2014-15, over a third are nontraditional and include models like Montessori, single gender, and blended learning. However, not all families are aware of their options. About half (53%) of surveyed families who said there is programmatic variety among schools also reported struggling to find a school that is a good fit.

Good

Is the enrollment process working for families?

The city has a unified enrollment system, My School DC, that includes all but a handful of its public schools. Most families now know about common enrollment and how it works. However, some families still find the application, acceptance, and enrollment process daunting. About a fifth of surveyed families said it was difficult to understand school eligibility and navigate all the different applications when applying to schools.

Good

Is transportation working for families?

The city provides free transportation on public bus and rail service to students enrolled in all district and charter schools. In 2015-16, the city extended the hours that students can travel for free and made it easier for families to obtain a free pass. However, most K–3 students cannot ride alone on public transportation. This limits their options for early elementary, which has a cascading effect on learning in later grades. Of surveyed families, nearly a quarter said finding transportation was a barrier when applying to schools.

Good

Do families have the information they need and know how to use it?

Families can go to several places to find information about school performance and curricular models. Despite the availability, about a fifth of surveyed families said finding enough information is still a barrier when applying to schools. Community members believe that families need more nuanced information, like information about school culture, and more support to both understand their choices and find a school that meets their needs.

Developing

Is the city being strategic about opening and closing schools?

Both the DCPS and the DC Public Charter School Board are closing schools based on enrollment and/or performance, and for the most part, schools are opening where there is a need for quality options. Only 10% of surveyed families worry that public schools across the city are getting worse. However, the city does not yet have a high-quality school in every ward. While the right ingredients are in place—the data to drive decisions and good coordination between the charter board and the district—the school siting process is still not strategic. New schools open because a community has successfully advocated for one, space happens to be available, or schools want to replicate near others in their network. Half of the surveyed families had a fair amount or great deal of confidence in the city to provide every neighborhood with a good school.

Is the education system continuously improving?

Good

Do schools have the resources they need? School improvement happens at the school level, but making sure resources are available requires sound, citywide policy. Having the right talent in a city is critical for schools to be able to provide students with a quality education. Schools should also have control over their budgets so they have the resources to address the needs of their student population.

Good

Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?

District and charter leaders do not perceive that there is a problem with having enough school leaders, and the city's long-time emphasis on talent has set a high bar for quality. However, some still believe the city does not have enough quality leaders. Both sectors prefer to hire from within, and there is currently no citywide leadership strategy.

Good

Do schools have the kinds of teachers they need?

D.C. has many pipelines to attract and train new teachers. However, the city still faces shortages every year. A local nonprofit is starting to guide a citywide strategy to improve recruitment and retention. Anecdotally, the quality of teacher applicants in both sectors is suitable, but keeping master teachers is challenging in charter schools because teachers move to higher-paying positions in administration and in district schools.

Developing

Does funding equitably follow students?

DCPS allocates less than 5% of its budget via a student-based allocation formula, and some analysis has been done to explore the viability of a student-based allocation formula (based on analysis of fiscal year 2017-18). DCPCSB charter schools are provided funding on a per-pupil basis.

Is the education strategy rooted in the community?

Good

Is the whole community engaged? Education is a citywide endeavor. When families, community organizations, and city leaders have the opportunity to provide feedback and share in the vision, the strategy is more likely to be sustainable and meet the needs of all students. In this goal, we look at how well the city is doing with engaging key stakeholders.

Exemplar

Is there a strong and deep coalition of support for the education strategy?

The city has strong infrastructural alignment. Representatives from the mayor's office, district, charter board, and Office of the State Superintendent of Education meet regularly and are fairly aligned in their vision for the city. The public generally supports the direction the city is headed, although there is still some mistrust.

Good

Are a variety of groups engaged in education?

A variety of nonprofits are involved in education in the city. Advocacy groups work with families in both district and charter public schools, and with the most impoverished neighborhoods and wards in the city. However, there are still voices in the city that are not well represented, such as Hispanic families and students.

Developing

Does the education system respond to community feedback?

The city has many avenues for collecting community feedback, and the release of the budget and facility plan every year provides opportunities for community members to give input. Despite these avenues, there is still the feeling that the city is reactive, and "doing things to benefit the community but not engaging them," as one community leader said. More systems need to be in place so community members can give input early to ensure that the loudest voices aren't the only ones driving initiatives.

Developing

Does the city engage families in educational decisions that impact them?

The district has some good procedures in place to let families know about school closures and openings, and vocal community members are able to sway the process in their favor. In the charter sector, families are typically given less notice when schools close or open, and the degree of engagement in these decisions varies greatly depending on the operator.

Data & Scoring

Where did we get this information?

► Interviews with district, charter, and community leaders

► Policy documents from district, charter, and state websites

► School data from each city

► A 400-parent survey administered in March, 2017 in Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

How did we score the system reforms and goals?

► Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. See the **Methodology & Resources** page for details.

Score Levels

| Little in place | Developing | Good | Exemplar |

About Washington, D.C.

Washington, D.C., started opening charter schools in the mid 1990s. Currently, about half of the city's schools are authorized by the DC Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB). The other half is run the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). The two organizations collaborate with other city agencies on many initiatives, including a common lottery system launched in 2013. A new chancellor took the helm of DCPS in early 2017, starting his tenure with a listening tour of community concerns to guide his strategy for the district.

School Choice in the City

All families are assigned to a default school based on their location. Families can attend DCPS schools, out-of-boundary district schools on a space-availability basis, or charter schools.

Governance Model

DCPS and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education are under mayoral control. The Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 also made DCPCSB the sole authorizer of charter schools in the city.

Student Body

Enrollment: 87,344
Race and ethnicity: 72% black, 17% Hispanic, 8% white, 3% other
Low-income: 79% free and reduced-price lunch

School Composition
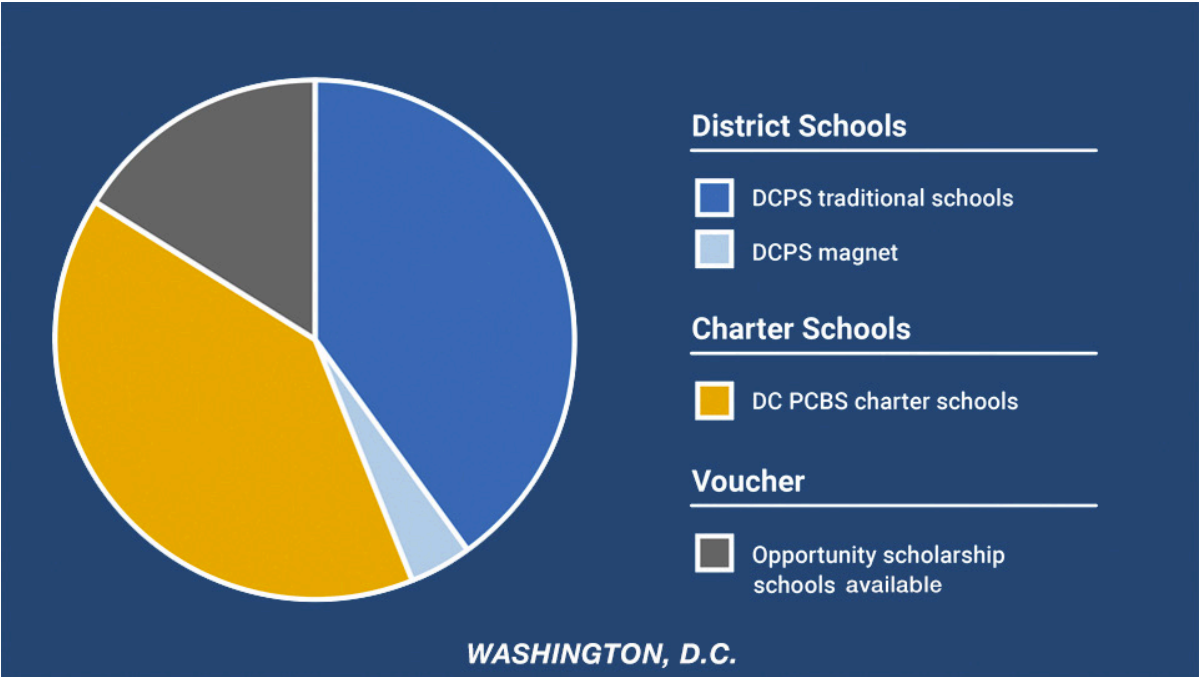
Source: Enrollment data from EDFacts, 2014-15.
School data from researcher analysis of public records, 2016-17.

About This Project

The Citywide Education Progress Report looks at how a city is doing across three goals:

• The education system is continuously improving

• All students have access to a high-quality education

• The education strategy is rooted in the community

Across each goal we present indicators of what the cities are doing (what we call "system reforms") and how they are doing (what we call "outcomes").

Our city reports focus on education strategies from the 2016-17 school year. Our analyses reflect developments through summer 2017. We will update the reports for the 2017-18 school year and publish them in summer 2018.

To understand how well cities are doing, we used state and federal data to track school improvement, graduation rates, and student access to high-quality schools. Our student and school data cover the 2011-2012 to 2014-2015 school years. To understand city strategies and identify early progress, we relied on interviews, surveys, public documents, and news articles from 2014-2015 to the present. This analysis uses data for district and charter schools to look at all schools within municipal boundaries, rather than just one sector or district.

We cannot say that employing a certain strategy will lead to a particular result, or even whether a particular strategy is effective in these cities. But the reports can help us to see how a strategy is working, what problem areas remain, and which cities are seeing promising results.

The 18 cities in this study include Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

> To learn more about the project, compare other cities, and read the cross-city analysis, visit:
>
> **research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up**

The Center on Reinventing Public Education is a research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell developing systemwide solutions for K–12 public education. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.