

Making School Choice Work for Families: DC School Reform Now's High Quality Schools Campaign

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Introduction

Like many cities across the nation, Washington, D.C., has looked to school choice as one way to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. School choice attempts to “level the playing field” between students of different backgrounds by making it possible for all families to have access to a city’s high-quality public schools—whether students live near these schools or not. But the process of school choice requires substantial investments of time and resources, something not all families are able to do. As a result, the option of school choice, on its own, does not resolve gaps in access to high-quality schools.

Across the country, school districts and community-based organizations are working to develop new strategies to help all families take full advantage of the opportunities school choice offers. This includes developing [comprehensive guides](#) that provide school information to families, [streamlined enrollment systems](#) that make applying to schools easier, and better [counseling resources to support middle and high school students](#) to choose schools. While these supports have helped reduce problems for families navigating school choice systems, none have eliminated the gaps in access between families of different socioeconomic circumstances.

DC School Reform Now (DCSRN) launched the [High Quality Schools Campaign](#) (HQSC) as an effort to address the challenge of ensuring that school choice works for all families in Washington, D.C. This initiative connects families in the city’s most underserved regions—where fewer high-quality schools are available—with “parent advocates” who guide families through the process of choosing a school, from learning about schools (with an emphasis on schools receiving high performance ratings) to completing the application to enrolling their child in school for the fall. The goal of the HQSC is to dramatically increase the number of families who actively take advantage of school choice and enroll in the city’s top-rated schools (both district and charter).

With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, DCSRN partnered with the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) to conduct an evaluation of the HQSC. This partnership aims to accomplish two goals:

- Inform DCSRN’s ongoing work to expand the HQSC to serve more families and expand their impact.
- Document best practices that can be used by other school districts and community-based organizations to improve families’ access to high-quality schools.

CRPE’s evaluation is grounded in a mixed-methods research design that intends to document key supports offered to families and advocates, track impacts on participating families, and offer timely recommendations to support improvement and disseminate best practices. Over the course of the first year of the evaluation, CRPE has interviewed program staff and parents, surveyed parents involved in the 2016-2017 campaign, and tracked the kinds of support that parent advocates provide families. This brief is the first in a multiyear series that examines the HQSC and offers lessons for other districts and organizations interested in offering better support for families navigating the process of choosing a school.

The HQSC offers a new model for supporting disadvantaged families’ access to school choice. The combination of direct outreach, persistent follow-up, and personalized support through the school choosing process means that DCSRN is more likely to reach the families who possess the fewest resources to navigate school choice. But this type of outreach is not without challenges. Families are difficult to reach and advocates say the work requires persistence and an upfront investment of time and effort. Perhaps most importantly, parent advocates cannot resolve some of families’ most pressing access challenges. Limited seats in high-demand schools and constraints around school locations means that for some, high-quality schools remain out of reach. These findings suggest the path to supporting disadvantaged families’ access to school choice is more complicated than often acknowledged and both district and community-based organizations have roles to play in addressing families’ challenges.

The Challenge of Making School Choice Work

Washington, D.C., hosts one of the nation's most expansive systems of school choice. Families can choose between a multitude of schools within the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), including their neighborhood school, out-of-boundary schools, selective admissions schools, and schools offering specialized programs like Montessori and language immersion, as well as dozens of charter schools. The majority of D.C. families participate in school choice: in 2012, three-quarters of all public school children in D.C. were enrolled in a school outside of their neighborhood, and nearly half of all public school students attended a charter school.¹ Yet, as is true in other cities, not all families are equally likely to participate in school choice and better resourced families are more likely to opt out of their neighborhood school. CRPE found D.C. parents with a high school diploma or less were 15 percent less likely to choose a non-neighborhood public school compared to parents with a bachelor's degree or more.²

In 2013, as an effort to simplify the school choice process, the city adopted a unified application and lottery for charter and district schools, eliminating the need for families to submit separate applications for every school they considered. This reduced the paperwork burden on families and made it easier for them to apply to schools.

But simplifying the process did not address all the barriers under-resourced families experienced. As DCSRN Executive Director David Pickens explained, many families struggled to understand how to take advantage of the opportunities available in D.C.'s system of public school choice, even as the city worked to reduce common problems in the process. Choosing a school, it turns out, is hard work that requires time, effort, and information that is not always widely available.

What Is the High Quality Schools Campaign?

DCSRN created the HQSC in 2011 to address a growing need in the district: helping families navigate a rapidly evolving and complex system of public school choice to gain access to high-quality schools. DCSRN targets families with school-age children living in Wards 7 and 8—neighborhoods that are more likely to be economically disadvantaged³—and matches them with a parent advocate who provides personalized information about schools and resources, and support to apply to and enroll their children in a high-quality school.

DCSRN actively recruits families through its relationships with a host of nonprofit and government organizations, including housing providers, homeless shelters, public schools, and child development centers. These organizations provide DCSRN with connections to families and, perhaps more importantly, they help families see DCSRN as a trustworthy partner. To reach families, DCSRN engages in a range of activities, including old-fashioned door knocking, hosting informational events, and connecting with families via community-based partners.

While DCSRN does not currently collect demographic data on participating families, DCSRN staff report that the majority of participants are low-income families of color. Parent advocates told us that the families they work with often bring specialized challenges, such as limited English proficiency, a child with special needs, or youth incarceration. Three-quarters of families have children in a transition grade (entering kindergarten, 6th, or 9th grade) and nearly two-thirds have never participated in the My School DC application and lottery.⁴

Once families are connected with DCSRN, they are assigned a parent advocate who acts as a case manager to support the family as they work to understand their options, fill out an application, and complete enrollment paperwork. Parent advocates work with DCSRN on a part-time basis, though most are also employed full-time in other jobs. All parent advocates during the 2016-2017 campaign were persons of color, and their professional backgrounds and experiences varied considerably. Parent advocates are K-12 teachers in Washington, D.C., city government employees, and parents who have faced their own challenges in the school choice process. One parent advocate from the 2016-2017 campaign was a first-generation college graduate who told us the work offered her a chance to “give back” before continuing her education. Parent advocates are compensated for their work on the campaign, which runs from January through the end of May each year, with a stipend of up to \$20,000. For the 2016-2017 campaign, DCSRN engaged 8 parent advocates who worked with the families of 808 students.

Being a parent advocate is not easy work. Families are busy and hard to reach, their contact information changes, and deadlines can come up quickly. Parent advocates have a caseload of roughly 100 families and spend an average of two to three hours with each family over the course of the campaign. They help families understand their options, submit their applications on time, and then finally complete enrollment, which often requires that families submit specialized documents on a strict timetable. By the end of the campaign, parent advocates have provided a wide range of supports to parents, most frequently helping with deadlines, understanding their lottery status, and completing the application. See Figure 1 for a breakdown of how parent advocates helped families over the course of the 2016-2017 campaign, based on a survey of participating families.

Re-Envisioning the School Tour: DCSRN's Virtual School Tours

The HQSC began as an effort to improve underserved families' access to high-quality schools. But early in the process, even as access to high-quality schools increased, not all families were equally well-positioned to demand high-quality options via school choice. David Pickens observed that many parents did not understand what a high-quality school looked like, defaulting instead to the schools their parents and grandparents had attended, even as new options were becoming available.

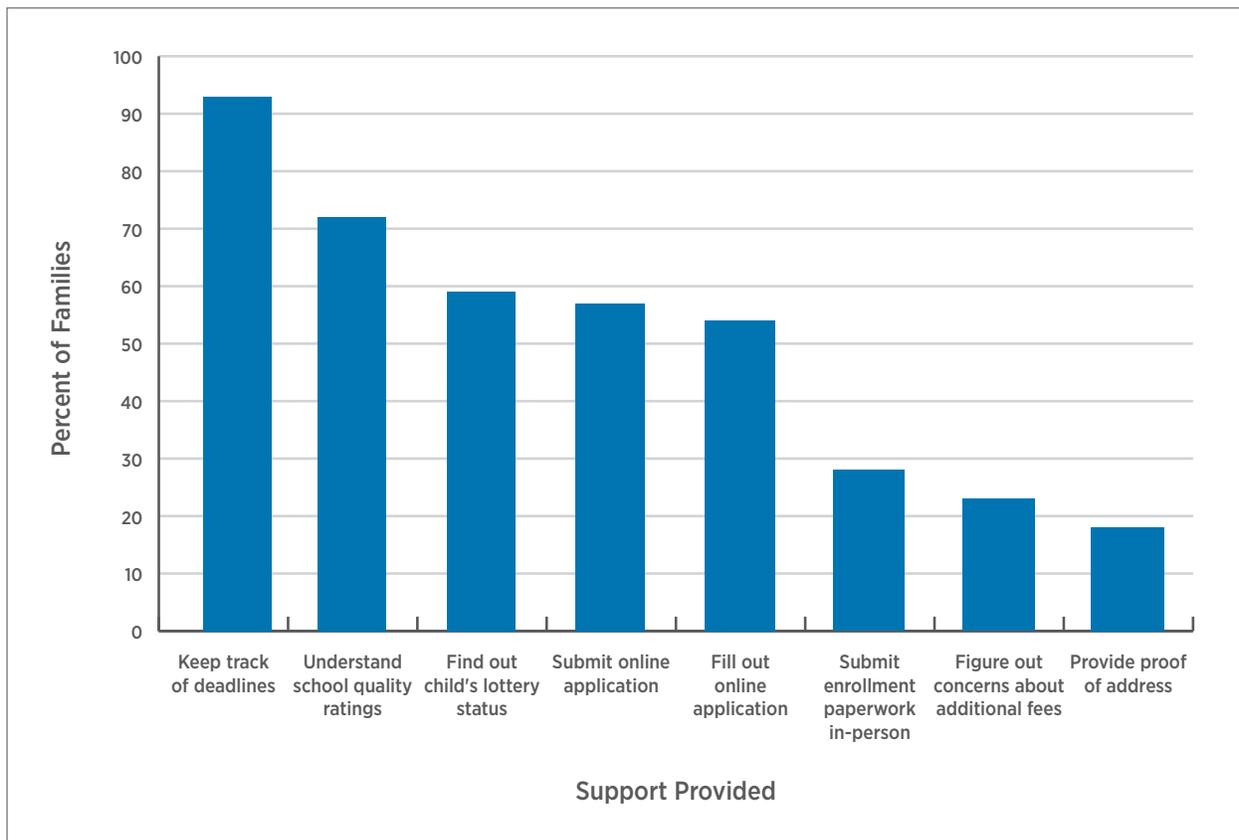
DCSRN initially organized bus tours that would take families on in-person tours of high-quality schools. But this proved taxing for families, many of whom worked long hours and had little flexibility in their work and child care schedules.

To solve this problem, DCSRN developed virtual school tours: professionally made video tours of high-quality schools available on YouTube and DCSRN's website. This enabled families to access information about schools at a place and time of their choosing. When DCSRN initially launched the HQSC, it was common for parent advocates to watch the virtual school tours alongside families, launching discussions about school quality and school choices from these viewings. Today, much of the interaction between parent advocates and families has moved to phone calls and parent advocates rarely sit down with parents to watch a virtual school tour. Instead, the virtual school tours are provided to families as a resource and parent advocates include the tours in their work with families through “movie nights” in which families are invited to view the virtual school tours and connect with a parent advocate for application support. Families told us they especially valued the opportunity to get a sense of school culture—observing passing period and lunch hour to assess how a school “feels” in its more informal spaces. Between 2012 and 2017, DCSRN has created profiles of 34 schools around the city, resulting in over 70,000 virtual school tours by families.

Most parent advocates communicate with families through phone calls and text messages, though the frequency and length of these vary based on family circumstances and the rhythms of the enrollment process. Early conversations tend to be focused on helping families identify schools that will meet their needs. Parent advocates offer reminders throughout the campaign of key deadlines and follow up directly with every family in their caseload to ensure they submit their applications and enrollment paperwork on time.

Some families need more support than others, such as families who have a child with special needs and want a school that offers high-quality special education programming. Parent advocates often go beyond their required duties, helping families research after-school options for their children and serving as a translator when non-English-speaking families need to communicate with school staff.

FIGURE 1. Parents Report Receiving a Variety of Help From Their Parent Advocates



Source: CRPE survey of participating families in 2016-2017 HQSC. Responses from “My parent advocate helped me: (select all that apply).” N = 155.

One defining feature of DCSRN’s approach is their commitment to direct outreach. Rather than waiting for families to come to them to request help, DCSRN proactively and directly engages families and sustains communication over the course of the campaign to ensure that important application and enrollment deadlines are met. As DCSRN staff explained, “We persist even when someone hangs up, when someone does not answer. The families who are the hardest to reach are the ones who most need our help.”

Before beginning work with families, DCSRN provides parent advocates with formal training opportunities that familiarize them with strategies for making connections, important resources and supports (such as My School DC, the entity that manages the school choice lottery, and local parent guides) that they will use, and procedures for documenting their work in the DCSRN internal tracking database. Parent advocates also participate in weekly group check-ins, which function as opportunities to gain support from peers about what is working to engage families and to celebrate wins along the way. Parent advocates say it takes persistence and a willingness to “roll with the punches” to be successful in the position.

Kiesha's Story

DCSRN collects stories from families who participate in the HQSC. This is one of them.

Kiesha Campbell works as an operating room coordinator and a pharmacy technician. In addition to two demanding jobs, she is a single mother living in Ward 8 with her aunt, teenage son, and twins Kendon and Kharis, who are rising kindergarteners. As a “full-time momma” with two jobs, she had not set aside time to start considering school options for Kendon and Kharis, so opting into DCSRN's services was an easy decision. Kiesha has her role as a mother down pat, but she said that when it came to the lottery process, her advocate “became the parent for the kids.” After working with her advocate, who provided her with one-on-one counseling, deadline reminders, and information about quality school options, Kiesha applied to five schools for Kendon and Kharis. When the lottery results were announced, Kiesha was excited to learn that Kendon was matched with his first choice, Shining Stars Montessori Academy, a quality public charter school close to one of Kiesha's jobs. Though Kharis did not initially match with Shining Stars, she was number one on the school's waitlist, so Kiesha was not nervous. Nearly one month after the initial lottery results were released, Kharis received an offer to join her brother and was removed from the waitlist.

Lessons From the HQSC

Emerging results from DCSRN's work on the HQSC suggest their support fills a critical gap for under-resourced families navigating the school choice process. But the work of engaging hard-to-reach families is time-consuming and challenging, and requires careful development if other cities are to find success with this strategy.

Direct outreach to families can help them overcome some barriers to participating in school choice.

With support from parent advocates, 627 of the 808 families who received outreach support from DCSRN successfully completed an application via My School DC's lottery.⁵ Of the families that DCSRN was able to follow up with, 386 (82 percent) of those who received a match through the lottery completed enrollment—a feat that requires not only securing a match through the competitive lottery but also completing registration paperwork by the deadline. The system average match-to-enrollment rate is 61 percent.⁶

Families we spoke with welcomed the help they received from parent advocates. As one parent said, “The first time [my parent advocate called me], I felt like I wasn't alone and if I had questions, I had someone to call and ask.” Of the 155 families who responded to a post-HQSC survey, 86 percent rated the services provided by DCSRN as “excellent” or “very good,” and 87 percent reported they would be “very likely” to recommend their parent advocate to a friend or family member.

DCSRN's direct outreach means they can reach families who may not know that they can choose a school for their child or that self-serve resources like parent guides exist. As one parent told us, "I didn't even understand the process of what was going on, I thought my child had to go to the neighborhood school, so I was stuck."

Parent-centered outreach comes with challenges.

The work of supporting families in the school choice process presents many challenges. By designing their organization around the needs of the hardest-to-reach families, DCSRN has created a support that is more intensive to deliver compared to the alternatives (for example, a parent guide or school fair), which could limit their efforts to expand and serve more families in the D.C. area. As noted earlier, parent advocates spend an average of two to three hours on behalf of each family throughout the course of the campaign. Often, a significant portion of this time is spent just trying to reach families, many of whom have limited availability due to working multiple jobs and whose contact information changes frequently. Both parent advocates and the families they serve say that parent advocates' dogged persistence pays off, but it requires a lot of upfront time and effort.

DCSRN must also navigate the ongoing tensions between charter schools and DCPS. Because parent advocates help families enroll in both charter schools and district schools alike, DCSRN must work hard at maintaining a strong partnership with DCPS. DCSRN has had difficulty maintaining strong partnerships with some community-based organizations, in part because supporting families to exit neighborhood schools can threaten those organizations' main strategy for delivering services to low-income families—neighborhood schools.

Parent advocates cannot solve some of families' most pressing challenges.

While the HQSC helps many families who might otherwise not take advantage of the opportunities school choice provides, parent advocates cannot resolve all of the barriers families confront in the school choosing process. As is true in other cities, D.C. families face real constraints around transportation, the location of high-quality schools in the city, and too few openings at the most desirable schools. Parent advocates can help families find and apply to better alternatives, but many families run up against the fact that demand for high-performing and well-regarded schools outstrips the supply and there are too few good options in their neighborhood.

While parent advocates connect families with local parent guides and other information about schools, participating families still struggle to get the information they want in the school choosing process. Nearly 4 in 10 families who participated in our post-HQSC survey told us that they wanted but were unable to get information on school safety, while one-third wanted but couldn't find resources to address transportation logistics. These gaps are difficult for DCSRN to resolve on their own and likely will require support from other city-level agencies.

Lessons for Organizations That Support Parent Choice

As other cities look to expand the supports they offer families in the school choosing process, DCSRN's experiences helping families offer suggestive evidence around how to provide deeper and more personalized support.

- ***Leverage partners that families already rely on and trust:*** Organizations like HQSC operate to ensure that disadvantaged families can take advantage of the same opportunities as their better-resourced peers. But this requires meeting families where they are, rather than relying on a set menu of options. DCSRN has addressed this challenge by relying heavily on recruitment partners, including schools and community-based nonprofits. These organizations help them to identify families who might benefit from support, and to build rapport with the families they seek to support by tying into existing organizations in the community. This strategy increases the likelihood that the most disadvantaged families are reached and supported in the school choosing process.

- **Develop high-quality supports for staff who work with families:** Engaging in direct outreach and providing intensive support requires a unique skill set and specialized training. Our interviews with DCSRN's parent advocates suggest that parent advocates face a variety of challenges in their work, such as learning how to navigate families' many challenges and being persistent in outreach. These are not skills that many come to the job knowing and instead require careful nurturing through training and mentorship. Parent advocates told us the most valuable source of support they received came from their peers. In this sense, the work of parent advocates is very much learned on the job and supported by those in the community. Creating ongoing opportunities for peer-to-peer support throughout campaigns helps parent advocates continuously improve and build a body of knowledge about best practices for engaging hard-to-reach families. Documenting these challenges and how parent advocates handle them can help inform future trainings for campaigns so that parent advocates are equipped with effective practices for responding to challenges before they arise.
- **Track families' challenges and results to continuously improve services:** Managing a caseload of 100 families, each with unique challenges and desires for their children's public school experiences, cannot be done effectively without systems for monitoring progress. DCSRN's parent advocates use an internal database to assess families' progress over the course of the campaign (initial outreach, submission of the application, lottery results, and enrollment) to ensure they remain on track. DCSRN staff uses these data to track families' challenges, such as problems completing enrollment, and assess impacts, including persistence and satisfaction with school placements. These data in turn can be used to identify promising practices (for example, strong recruitment partners) or address problems (such as the need for additional training and support for a parent advocate who is struggling).

Lessons for District and City Leaders Interested in Improving Access to School Choice

While school districts and city-based agencies are unlikely to take on the kind of direct outreach and support that DCSRN offers through its HQSC, they can learn from DCSRN's deep knowledge of families' experiences.

- **Design information systems with parents' priorities in mind:** Parent guides are an increasingly popular way to support families in the school choosing process. And yet, many guides fail to report on the information that families most want. Even with the support of their parent advocates, a significant number of HQSC families told us they still struggled to get information on school quality, transportation, and school safety. These gaps are particularly noteworthy in D.C., where city leaders are "ahead of the curve" when it comes to investing in parent information systems.⁷ School districts and city agencies could work together to offer non-education data (such as transportation resources for students and families) that could address some of families' most frequently desired types of information.
- **Engage in coordinated efforts to address families' access challenges:** The remaining challenges for families participating in DCSRN's HQSC are unlikely to be addressed by parent advocates alone. Issues like safe passage to schools, arranging transportation to high-quality schools, and expanding the number of desirable seats available are issues that will require coordination among district superintendents, city agencies, and organizations that support families. But these investments can pay off. Officials in Denver have invested in research and analysis to support better management of the city's portfolio of schools, targeting new school placements in high-need neighborhoods and working to coordinate district and city transportation resources to support better access for families living in the city's far northeast neighborhood. These types of investments are essential to ensuring school choice improves students' access to educational opportunity.

Conclusion

As cities around the country look to school choice to improve disadvantaged families' access to high-quality schools, education leaders must identify opportunities to provide parents better information and support. DCSRN's HQSC offers one promising model for filling this need. By offering direct outreach and more personalized support, the HQSC is more likely to reach the families who most need support, thereby helping to ensure school choice works for all families, not just those who can invest substantial resources in navigating the school choosing process.

There is still much to learn about the HQSC and similar efforts unfolding in other cities. Over the course of the next two years, CRPE will continue our study of the HQSC by documenting the work of parent advocates and their impacts on families' experiences with school choice. With a broader evidence base, school districts and community-based organizations in other cities will be better positioned to invest in strategies that offer information and support for families as they navigate an evolving system of school choice.

Endnotes

1. 21st Century School Fund, *The Landscape for Student Assignment and School Choice in D.C.* (Washington, DC: 21st Century School Fund, 2014).
2. Ashley Jochim, et al., *How Parents Experience Public School Choice* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014).
3. According to an Urban Institute study, the vast majority of D.C.'s economically disadvantaged residents are located east of Anacostia River (Wards 7 and 8). A variety of factors were considered in the study's assessment of economic disadvantage, including the unemployment rate, share of residents with less than a high school diploma, and percentage of households headed by a single mother. See "[Challenges and Choices for the New Mayor](#)," Urban Institute, accessed September 11, 2017.
4. According to DCSRN's internal tracking database.
5. DCSRN follows up with every family that receives services but not all families can be reached to confirm application completion, lottery results, and enrollment, despite repeated efforts to connect via phone and text messages. Families' contact information frequently changes and busy schedules mean that parents do not always get around to returning phone calls. DCSRN only reports information on those families for which they confirm status.
6. Match-to-enrollment rate, 2016 enrollment cycle, author's personal communication with My School DC official, September 21, 2017.
7. "[Washington, D.C.: Citywide Education Progress Report](#)," Center on Reinventing Public Education, accessed September 11, 2017.

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families. Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools. CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through philanthropy, federal grants, and contracts.