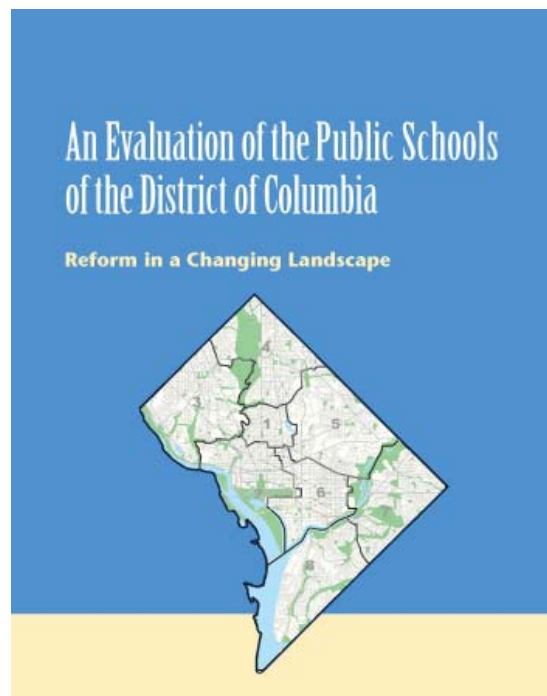


AN EVALUATION OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: REFORM IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE



In 2007 the District of Columbia passed the Public Education Reform Amendment Act (PERAA), which gave control of its public schools to its mayor and made other changes in school governance. The law's purpose was to allow leaders flexibility so they could make bold changes to improve a school system that had been performing poorly for decades. The law also called for the National Academy of Sciences to conduct an independent evaluation of how well the public schools have fared under the changes.

In response, the National Academy of Sciences appointed a committee of experts in education, education research, and public policy to conduct the evaluation. In their report, *An Evaluation of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia: Reform in a Changing Landscape* (2015), the committee examines the available evidence to determine whether the law has brought intended improvements to the governance structure and to learning conditions and outcomes for students.

The committee concludes that progress has been made in many areas since the PERAA reforms were put in place, but that significant disparities remain in learning opportunities and academic progress across student groups and wards. Moreover, the city's current oversight structure does not adequately monitor learning conditions and outcomes for all students and groups; nearly half the public school students attend charter schools, but the governance structure does not clearly address monitoring for these students. The committee recommends that the city take action to address disparities, create a comprehensive data warehouse to better track the education received by all students, and support ongoing evaluation of all publicly funded schools.

Some Improvements in Operations, but Oversight and Coordination Fall Short

The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) have used the flexibility and the authority they gained under PERAA to pursue improvements that show promise. Both agencies appear to be operating more effectively than they were before PERAA.

PERAA also created three new agencies: the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), and the State Board of Education (SBOE). These three agencies are operating, but their missions and lines of authority are not clearly defined. No agency has the primary responsibility for monitoring and overseeing the quality of public education for all students; a single entity should be responsible for this essential function. In addition, there is evidence that the Office of the State Superintendent of Education is not consistently functioning effectively as a state agency, and a systematic evaluation of the office is needed.

Because many DC students live in poverty and have needs beyond what schools can provide on their own, PERAA also called for the creation of a structure to coordinate the work of education agencies with that of other agencies concerned with the well-being of children and adolescents (for example, justice and human services agencies). This structure was initially created but discontinued. While there is some coordination among agencies, it is not sufficient to meet the objectives of PERAA.

Efforts to Improve Teacher Quality Show Progress, Disparities

After PERAA was passed, the mayor and the DCPS chancellor set improving teacher quality as a top priority. They implemented a new teacher evaluation system for DCPS, IMPACT, to evaluate teachers' effectiveness based on classroom observations of their teaching, the level of improvement in their students' test scores, commitment to the school community, and professionalism. The system offers incentives to help all teachers to improve their practices and for the most-effective teachers to stay in the system.

With its multiple measures of teacher performance, feedback and supports provided to teachers, and opportunities for professional development, the IMPACT system reflects the guidance in research literature. The evidence available to date shows that most DCPS teachers receive high effectiveness ratings, and that those teachers are largely choosing to remain in the system. However, teachers with high effectiveness ratings are distributed unequally across DCPS schools; the DCPS teachers in the lowest income areas have lower IMPACT ratings, though the reasons are not clear.

Some aspects of IMPACT's rating process need attention; for example, procedures are needed to ensure that scoring criteria are consistently applied when rating teachers' core professionalism and commitment to school community. And IMPACT provides information only about DCPS teachers, not about teachers in charter schools. The city would benefit from maintaining additional data—for example, on years of experience, education level, and attendance rates—about teachers in both DCPS and the charter schools. These data should be available to researchers, educators, parents, and the public.

Learning Conditions and Student Performance Show Improvement, But Disparities Persist

The limited evidence available shows efforts to improve learning conditions in the city's public schools, but also differences across student groups and wards in access to educational opportunity and the quality of the educational experience. For example, the availability of Advanced Placement courses varies significantly by school and ward. The committee had very little information about learning conditions in charter schools. The city should collect and make available more systematic information about learning conditions in both DCPS and charter schools, such as information on school climate, students with particular needs, and academic supports for learning.

Overall, test scores for both DCPS and charter school students have shown some improvement. The percentage of all students scoring proficient or above in reading and math on DC Comprehen-

sive Assessment System (DC CAS) tests increased between 2007 and 2014. The increase is larger for math than it is for reading. The positive trends are also apparent on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

However, when performance is compared across student groups, stark differences are apparent. African American and Hispanic students, those with disabilities, those eligible for free and reduced price lunch, and English language learners are much more likely to be in the lowest performance categories than other students. Some improvement in test performance by these student groups is evident since 2009, but more than half of the students still score below proficient. There is little indication that the gaps are narrowing significantly.

Graduation rates in D.C. have fluctuated from year to year, with no discernable pattern, but they remain disturbingly low at a time when they are increasing nationwide. In 2014, slightly more than 60 percent of the city's DCPS and charter school students graduated. Again, there are disparities among student groups: While the graduation rate for white students was 79 percent, for Hispanics it was 62 percent and for black students 60 percent. Graduation rates for students with disabilities and for those eligible for reduced-price lunches were even lower—40 percent and 53 percent, respectively.

The signs of improvement in student test performance are positive, but a more complete picture of student outcomes is needed. The city should collect and make available data that cover a range of outcomes—for example, course completion and college enrollment—and that allow detailed analyses of trends across time and among student groups.

Recommendations

There is reason for optimism about the future for D.C.'s public schools. Using the flexibility that PERAA gave them, the District of Columbia Public Schools and the Public Charter School Board have made choices that show promise, and the city has sustained its focus on improvement over several leadership changes.

Nevertheless, the evaluation shows that:

- monitoring and oversight of learning conditions for all public school students with particular needs, such as students with disabilities and low-income students, is not adequate;
- DCPS schools in the lowest-income sections of the city have less access to teachers with high IMPACT ratings and advanced coursework than schools in other areas of the city. Data was not available on these points for the charter schools; and
- there are stark gaps in academic achievement and graduation rates across student groups.

The report offers three recommendations intended to help the city address longstanding challenges and build on the solid start it has made:

Address disparities. Washington, D.C.'s primary objective for its public schools should be to confront the serious and persistent disparities in learning opportunities and academic progress across student groups and neighborhoods by addressing needs for:

- centralized, systemwide monitoring and oversight of all public schools and their students, with particular attention to high-need student groups;
- fair distribution of educational resources across wards and neighborhoods;
- more effective collaboration among public agencies and with the private sector to encourage cross-sector problem-solving for the city's schools;
- ongoing assessment of how well strategies for improving teacher quality are meeting their goals;
- accessible, useful, and transparent data about D.C. public schools, including charters, tailored to the diverse groups with a stake in the system; and
- measures to strengthen public trust in education in a diverse, highly mobile city.

Develop a comprehensive data warehouse. The District of Columbia should have a comprehensive data warehouse that makes basic information

about the school system available in one place that is readily accessible online to parents, the community, and researchers. An optimal data warehouse would:

- integrate and track data that is relevant to schooling and students across DCPS and the charter schools and eventually across the education, justice, and human service agencies;
- provide data about learning conditions in all public schools, both DCPS and the charters, and their students, covering: students with particular needs, including those with disabilities; English language learners, and students in poverty; school climate, including discipline, attendance, safety, and facilities; and academic supports for learning;
- provide data about outcomes for all public school students, in DCPS and the charters, covering graduation rates, performance on tests including college entrance exams, attendance and truancy, course taking and completion, college enrollment and progression, and career outcomes; and
- be useful and accessible to researchers, educators, parents, and the public.

Support ongoing evaluation of the D.C. educational system. DC should establish institutional arrangements to support ongoing independent evaluation of its education system. The evaluation entity should have sufficient resources to collect and analyze primary data, including at the school level. All products should undergo rigorous peer review.

COMMITTEE FOR THE FIVE-YEAR (2009-2013) SUMMATIVE EVALUATION OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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For More Information . . . This brief was prepared by the Board on Testing and Assessment (BOTA) based on the report *An Evaluation of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia: Reform in a Changing Landscape* (National Research Council, 2015). The study was sponsored by the Government of the District of Columbia, Office of the District of Columbia Auditor. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the sponsor. Copies of the report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu> or via the BOTA web page at <http://www.nationalacademies.org/bota>.

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