



**D.C. POLICY**  
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PUBLIC OVERSIGHT ROUNDTABLE ON  
**THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL REFORM IN THE  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, PART II**

Before the Committee on Education  
Councilmember David Grosso, Chairperson

May 16, 2018 at 4pm  
John A. Wilson Building

Testimony of Chelsea Coffin  
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Good afternoon, Chairperson Grosso and members of the Committee on Education. My name is Chelsea Coffin and I am the Director of the Education Policy Initiative at the D.C. Policy Center, an independent think tank focused on advancing policies for a growing and vibrant economy in D.C. I thank you for the opportunity to testify at this Public Oversight Roundtable on the Future of School Reform in the District of Columbia.

There are many ways to evaluate D.C.'s school reforms. I focus my testimony on one metric that measures how families are valuing District's schools: whether families choosing to stay in District and enroll their children in public schools at higher rates. Looking at the data, we know there are more children living in the city now than before the D.C. Public Education Reform Amendment Act (or PERAA). From 2008 to 2016, the school-age population more than doubled, rising from over 77,500<sup>1</sup> to over 158,500.<sup>2</sup> In addition to more families living in the city, higher shares of children are enrolling in public elementary and middle schools. From 2008 to 2016, the number of students in kindergarten as a percentage of births in D.C. five years earlier rose from 67 percent to 81 percent. The number staying in public school through middle school is also increasing: from 2008 to 2016, the number of 8<sup>th</sup> graders as a percentage of babies born in D.C. 13 years earlier grew from 50 percent to 59 percent.

Families choosing to stay in D.C. and its public schools after PERAA represents a turnaround, coming after at least 25 years of a declining child population. Expanded school choices have played a big role in increasing enrollments. About three-quarters of public school students attend a public charter school or a DCPS school other than their in-boundary school. School

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<sup>1</sup> American Community Survey (ACS) 2008 3-year estimates of population age 5 to 17 (5-year estimates not available).

<sup>2</sup> ACS 2016 5-year estimates of population age 5 to 17.

options are especially critical outside the Wilson HS boundary and its feeder schools: 79 percent of elementary school students living within the Wilson HS feeder pattern attend their in-boundary school, compared to 26 percent of elementary school students living elsewhere in the city.<sup>3</sup> And options have become more important as most enrollment growth has occurred outside the Wilson boundary. The estimated number of students enrolled at Wilson and its feeder schools remained constant from 2008 to 2016, while other DCPS and public charter schools added over 15,000 students.<sup>4</sup>

Despite increased confidence in D.C.'s schools as demonstrated by higher enrollment rates, recent data scandals have called into question the success of D.C.'s school reform. To address these data issues, there has been a move to create a research advisory board, establish a research collaborative, and undertake an extensive audit of education data since 1998.

There is no doubt that the city needs accurate data to assess progress in education. However, the proposed comprehensive audit of education data would require a tremendous amount of resources, and would not focus research efforts to address recent issues such as improving the quality of graduation rate data. It would be better, for example, to target efforts and systematically check transcripts against attendance records or credit recovery against current coursework. If an independent assessment is needed to shine light on specific data, the District's Office of the Auditor already has broad authority to request data without creating a new body.

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<sup>3</sup> D.C. Policy Center analysis of Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), SY2016-17 Public School Enrollments per DCPS Boundary.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE) enrollment audits for 2008 and 2016. This incorporates changes in feeder patterns that reduced the number of schools feeding into Wilson.

Separately, there is the question of streamlined access to education data to improve education research. However, models of research alliances that generate this outcome—for example data consortia similar to those in Tennessee and Chicago—look very different from the proposed legislation. Successful research alliances by and large are associated with a university, and set research agendas in collaboration with education stakeholders to provide constructive findings. Most importantly, they are not guided by political appointees.

To conclude, families have been attracted to the District and its public schools at higher rates since the school reforms of 2007. Resolving data issues is critical to continued school reform, but any efforts should improve data quality within existing organizations in collaboration with existing education stakeholders. Thank you very much for your time, and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.