



D.C. POLICY
CENTER

PUBLIC HEARING

JOINT BUDGET OVERSIGHT HEARING: COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION & COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Before the Committee of the Whole & the Committee on Education,

Chairperson Phil Mendelson and Councilmember David Grosso

June 4th, 2020, at 12pm

Virtual platform

Testimony of Chelsea Coffin

Director, Education Policy Initiative

D.C. Policy Center

Good afternoon, Chairperson Mendelson, Councilmember 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, where our education research focuses on how schools connect to broader dynamics in the District of Columbia.

In the proposed FY21 public education budget, the funding weight of 0.225 for at-risk students and criteria to determine which students receive this funding have not expanded. In D.C., about half of students are considered to be at-risk, and receive TANF or SNAP benefits, experience homelessness, are involved in the foster care system, or are over-age in high school – and many at-risk students are also students of color.

As the pandemic continues, the needs of students who are furthest from opportunity are likely to be even higher next year to ensure they continue to develop and grow, both academically and personally. Compounding these needs from a pandemic with a sudden onset that is disproportionately impacting communities of color, the past two weeks especially have brought front and center the hurt from generations and generations of injustice and racism faced everyday by Black communities in America. This budget is a chance to provide funding for students who need resources the most during these extraordinary times.

The combination of school closures with public health and economic crises likely makes the lived experience during this time even more challenging for students who live in low-income households, many of whom receive at-risk funding. For example, 88 percent of households with children who receive SNAP benefits¹ are in families led by a single parent,² which can bring an additional challenge to juggling extra childcare responsibilities and distance learning due to school closures – complicated even further next year by suggested alternating day attendance. And before schools stepped in to provide additional technology this spring, an estimated 59

¹ An estimated 89 percent of at-risk students received SNAP benefits in school year 2018-19. Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2019. OSSE's FY19 Performance Oversight Questions. Available at: <https://osse.dc.gov/page/fy19-performance-oversight-questions>

² U.S. Census Bureau. 2014-2018. American Community Survey 5-Year Public Use Microdata. Available at: [census.gov](https://www.census.gov)

percent of households with children receiving SNAP benefits did not have access to a computer or broadband internet, making it more difficult to participate in distance learning.³

In addition, neighborhoods with more at-risk students are more likely to be disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 public health crisis. As of May 27th, Ward 8 residents have accounted for the highest share of fatalities in D.C. (93 deaths, or 21 percent of the total), while Ward 2 residents accounted for the fewest (27 deaths, or six percent).⁴ This means that students living in Ward 8 communities may be more likely to know someone who has had COVID-19 or experience additional stress around either contracting it themselves or having a loved one fall ill. This will make it harder to focus on school, requiring additional engagement from educators to support students.

The economic crisis is taking a toll in neighborhoods with a lot of at-risk students as well. As of May 22nd, the unemployment rate in the District of Columbia stands at 11.1 percent — the highest rate seen in recent history. The unemployment rate is almost twice as high in Ward 8, at 20.7 percent, which is 8.2 percentage points higher than where it was in March 2020.⁵ These increases in unemployment also mean that more students are likely to fall into the at-risk category next year, indicating that schools may need more resources than allocated in this budget to support all students.

The budget's three percent increase to the per student funding amount is a commendable decision, even though it is a smaller increase than initially proposed before the pandemic. This increase means that schools will have an additional \$330 per student in a budget cycle where D.C.'s projected revenues decreased by over \$700 million in the current and upcoming fiscal years. However, we have an obligation to prioritize resources for students who will have the greatest needs in the upcoming months and perhaps years. Increasing funding for at-risk students toward the 0.37 weight suggested in the 2014 Adequacy Study is one way to do this. How schools are

³ U.S. Census Bureau. 2014-2018. American Community Survey 5-Year Public Use Microdata. Available at: [census.gov](https://www.census.gov)

⁴ Government of the District of Columbia. 2020. Coronavirus Data. Available at: <https://coronavirus.dc.gov/page/coronavirus-data>

⁵ Sayin Taylor, Y. 2020. Pandemic-induced unemployment has hit the District's Hispanic, Latino, and younger workers more intensely. D.C. Policy Center. Available at: <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/pandemic-induced-unemployment-in-the-district-of-columbia-has-hit-hispanic-and-latino-workers-and-younger-workers-more-intensely/>

able to help students to move through this fragile time is going to have implications for students' wellbeing and earnings over their lifetimes.