

Exit & Voice

Perceptions of the District's public schools among stayers and Leavers

Chelsea Coffin & Yesim Sayin Taylor | October 13, 2021



D.C. POLICY CENTER

Education Policy Initiative

Drawing from a regional survey of parents, this report captures their sentiments toward D.C. public schools and factors that helped them make decisions on where to send their children to school. Importantly, the report captures both “D.C.’s public school parents”—those parents who stayed with D.C.’s public schools for their children’s education—and “Leavers”—those who once lived in D.C. and did send or could have sent a child to a DCPS or D.C. public charter school, but then left primarily by moving to a nearby jurisdiction (results in the full report are available for D.C. parents who enrolled their child at a private school). As the field work was conducted in January and February of 2021, the report also presents findings on shifts in enrollment during the pandemic.

Read the full report at dcpolicycenter.org/publications/school-leavers.

Differences between Leavers and D.C.’s public school parents

D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers have different demographic and socio-economic profiles:

- Compared to Leavers, D.C.’s public school parents are more likely to be part of single-adult households (23 percent compared to 9 percent of Leavers).
- Compared to Leavers, income segregation is greater among D.C.’s public school parents, who tend to have high or low incomes instead of incomes in the middle. Leavers are more likely to be part of middle income households.
- A higher percentage of D.C.’s public school parents are Black. For D.C.’s public school parents, 48 percent are Black compared to 28 percent of Leavers.

D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers differ in how they perceive D.C.’s public schools and how they make decisions on their children’s schooling:

- 69 percent of D.C.’s public school parents reported positive perceptions of D.C.’s public schools compared to 53 percent of Leavers.
- D.C.’s public school parents were more likely to rely on information and opinions from their personal networks when making school decisions, whereas Leavers were more likely to rely on publicly available material.
- Both D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers valued school quality, but community safety was a more important factor in decision-making for Leavers compared to D.C.’s public school parents.

Perceptions of Leavers vs. D.C. parents

Leavers tend to move out of D.C. before their children start school, citing both school and housing reasons:

- About half of all Leavers moved out before their children began school: as early as pre-kindergarten in D.C.
- While housing- and school-related reasons were often considered together, 40 percent of Leavers reported school-related reasons as the only or most influential factor in their decisions to leave.
- When asked what would have needed to change for them to have stayed, school quality was the most mentioned item (40 percent of Leavers) followed by affordability of housing (37 percent).

D.C. parents consider and choose a variety of schools, placing an emphasis on quality:

- When initially considering schools for their first child, more D.C. parents included DCPS schools as a potential choice (75 percent) compared to public charter schools (53 percent). And 18 percent considered private schools.
- A small share of D.C. parents with more than one child mixed schooling choices for their children. Seven percent of D.C. parents enrolled at least one child in a private school and one child in a public school. In comparison, 74 percent of D.C. parents enrolled all their children in public schools and 18 percent enrolled in all private schools.
- Among D.C.'s public school parents, school quality rose to the top as the most mentioned factor influencing that decision (45 percent). One in ten of D.C.'s public school parents mentions school safety (10 percent) or school commute (11 percent).

D.C.'s public school parents during the pandemic

Almost all D.C. parents stayed with public schools during the pandemic. Those who switched said it is likely a temporary switch:

- 88 percent of D.C. parents did not make a change during the pandemic. Overall, 65 percent of D.C. parents reported that they did not even consider a change, and 23 percent considered a change but did not execute it.
- Accordingly, there was no huge exodus to private schools or out-of-state options. The level of school changes during the pandemic were similar to a normal school year (12 percent).
- Among those who switched schools, two out of three reported that they are extremely likely or very likely to return to their prior school environment in fall of 2021.
- D.C.'s public school parents' satisfaction with core academically-related aspects of schools remained strong through the pandemic.

Read the full report at dcpolicycenter.org/publications/school-leavers.