



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

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Abstract

Parents' perceptions of public schools are an important source of feedback for policymakers and District school leaders, who frequently hear from the parents and caregivers of D.C.'s public school students (including both District of Columbia Public Schools, or DCPS, and public charter schools). However, it is rare that those parents who decided not to enroll their children in public schools or who took their children out after initially enrolling them express their reasons. In the District, this could be a significant gap in knowledge: Over 40 percent of children born in the District leave the public school system before the start of high school to attend private schools or public schools elsewhere.

Based on a regional survey of parents conducted in January and February of 2021, this report presents findings on the dynamics behind these decisions to stay or leave. The results capture both those parents who stayed with D.C.'s public schools and the "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 either by moving to a nearby jurisdiction or enrolling their child in a private school. Given the timing of the field work, the report also presents findings on shifts in enrollment during the pandemic.

The report finds that D.C.'s public school parents and Leavers have different socioeconomic profiles, use different sources of information when selecting a school for their children, and rank school characteristics differently. Many Leavers initially consider D.C.'s public schools for their children, and their decision to leave is tied to a combination of housing costs, school quality, and safety considerations. D.C.'s public school parents have a more positive perception of school quality across public schools, and some D.C. parents do mix public and private schools for different children. Despite challenges related to COVID-19, there wasn't an exodus of students out of the District's public schools during the pandemic, and as of the spring of 2021, D.C.'s public school parents' satisfaction with core academically-related aspects of schools remained strong.

Table of contents

- Executive summary 5**
 - Different profiles 5
 - Differences in schools perceptions and decisions 5
 - Leavers 6
 - D.C. parents 6
 - D.C. parents during the pandemic 7
 - About the survey 7
- List of figures and tables 8**
- Part 1: Motivation 9**
 - Key questions 12
- Part 2: Methodology overview 13**
 - How to interpret the findings 14
 - How the data are aggregated 14
- Part 3: D.C. parents and Leavers: Perceptions, priorities and choices 15**
 - Key differences in household makeup between D.C.'s public school parents and Leavers 15
 - School choices 18
 - Leavers 20
 - D.C. parents 24
 - School decision of D.C. parents 24
- Part 4: D.C. parents and schools during the pandemic 29**
 - Enrollment changes during the pandemic 29
 - School enrollment changes during the pandemic 31
 - Satisfaction with D.C.'s public schools and the pandemic 34
- Part 5: Implications for future enrollment in public schools, academic outcomes, and policy 37**
 - Policy implications 38
- Appendix A: Methodology 40**
 - Sampling 40
 - D.C. sample 40
 - Suburban sample 40
 - Data collection 41
 - ABS sample: Mailing protocol 42
 - Panel sample: Contact protocol 42
 - Qualitative research 42
 - Weighting 42
 - ABS sample 43
 - Panel sample 43
 - Margins of error 43
- Appendix B: Survey questions 44**
- Notes 46**

Executive summary

Enrollment in D.C.'s public schools¹ had been steadily increasing since 2009 until the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trend. In the first full school year affected by the pandemic (2020-21), enrollment in pre-kindergarten to grade 12 in D.C.'s public schools only grew by 111 students, with losses in enrollment concentrated in the earlier grades that have historically driven enrollment growth.

Even during years of enrollment growth, a significant share of babies born in the District did not attend D.C.'s public schools, and many who enrolled left as they moved into upper grades: Over 40 percent of children born² in the District leave the public school system before the start of high school to attend private schools or public schools elsewhere.

Amidst increased uncertainty around future enrollment levels, this report presents findings on the dynamics behind these decisions to stay or leave. Drawing from a regional survey of parents, it captures both “D.C.’s public school parents”—those parents who stayed with D.C.’s public schools for their children’s education—and the “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 either by moving to a nearby jurisdiction or moving their student to 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.

By bringing the perspective of those parents who left the public school system, the report fills an important knowledge gap in how schools are perceived by Leavers, what kinds of factors weigh heavily in Leavers’ school decisions for their children, and what policy actions can increase their likelihood to attend

D.C.’s public schools. The key findings of the report are that D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers have different socioeconomic profiles, use different sources of information as they make choices in about their children’s schooling, and attach different weights to perceived school characteristics.

Key findings, tabulated at the household level, show the following:

Different profiles

D.C.’s public school parents have different household compositions than Leavers. The families of D.C.’s public school children are more likely to be 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. Among D.C.’s public school parents, 65 percent have incomes either below \$50,000 or above \$150,000, compared to 38 percent among Leavers.

A higher percentage of D.C.’s public school parents are Black. For this group, 48 percent are Black compared to 28 percent of Leavers.

Differences in school perceptions and decisions

D.C.’s public school parents were more likely to report a positive perception of schools compared to Leavers. Out of D.C.’s public school parents, 69

percent 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 their personal networks in making school decisions. Of this group, 48 percent mentioned word of mouth among the most influential sources of information compared to 36 percent of Leavers, who were more likely to use school websites (39 percent) compared to D.C.'s public school parents (26 percent), for example.

D.C.'s public school parents also weighed school quality more heavily in their decision-making process compared to Leavers. Leavers cared about quality as well, but safety was a more important factor in their decision-making compared to D.C.'s public school parents.

The other main findings of the report are the following:

Leavers

Many parents who leave do so before their children start school. About half of all Leavers moved out before their children began school, which can be as early as pre-kindergarten in D.C.

Some Leavers consider D.C.'s public schools as a potential alternative as they make their decisions. Among Leavers, 23 percent initially considered DCPS and 14 percent initially considered D.C. public charter schools as a potential schooling option for their child or children.

Housing and school-related reasons are commonly mentioned as reasons why Leavers move out of D.C. While housing and school-related reasons are often considered together, for 40 percent of Leavers, school-related reasons are reported as the only or most influential factor in decisions to leave.

Lower housing costs, combined with a perception of higher quality schools could have kept some of the Leavers in D.C. When asked what would have needed to change to have stayed, school quality is the most mentioned item (40 percent) followed by affordability of housing (37 percent).

Among Leavers, a larger share had left the public schools prior to major reforms. The study suggests that 40 percent of Leavers left prior to 2007, before reforms were enacted that transferred school governance responsibilities from an elected school board to the Mayor and revamped chartering process to increase rigor.

D.C. parents

Regardless of their final choice, D.C. parents (including those with children in private schools) are more likely to include DCPS schools among their options for school than other alternatives (including public charter schools). When initially considering schools for their first child, 75 percent of D.C. parents included DCPS schools as a potential choice while 53 percent of D.C. parents considered public charter schools and 18 percent considered private schools.

School quality plays a much larger role in the decisions of D.C.'s public school parents, compared to school security and commute. Among parents who selected D.C.'s public and public charter schools for their children, school quality rises to the top as the most mentioned factor influencing that decision (45 percent). One in ten of D.C.'s public school parents mention school safety (10 percent) or school commute (11 percent).

While the majority of D.C. parents send their children to public schools, they do not always make the same decision for all their children. Seven

percent of D.C. parents enrolled at least one child in a private school and one child in a public school, compared to 74 percent in all public schools and 18 percent in all private schools.

School mixing is more common among parents whose children attend DCPS. Parents who choose a public charter or private school for their first child are more likely to stick with the same type of school for their younger children.

D.C. parents during the pandemic

Most surveyed parents have not made—or even considered—a change in school enrollment because of the pandemic. 88 percent of D.C.’s parents did not make a change, and 65 percent of D.C.’s parents reported that they did not even consider a change.

There was no huge exodus to private schools or out-of-state options. Among the 12 percent who switched schools, the percentage enrolled in these types of schools changed by less than three percentage points.

Those who switched schools during the pandemic consider this a temporary decision. 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. Even in the spring of 2020, immediately after schools closed, most of D.C.’s public school parents reported satisfaction with quality of teachers and staff (73 percent among D.C. parents), teacher communications (65 percent), communication with or from the school during the

period of the pandemic (63 percent), the ability of their child to complete assignments (62 percent), and academics and curriculum (56 percent).

About the survey

For this report, the D.C. Policy Center, in collaboration with SSRS, conducted a regional survey of parents in the Washington metropolitan area.³ The field work was done in January 2021 and February 2021. A representative sample of D.C. parents from all eight wards were recruited through address-based sampling. Leavers living in Maryland and Virginia were identified through survey panels.

The survey questions explored perceptions and satisfaction with D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools, and how parents choose a school for their child. The survey also asked questions on how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced enrollment decisions. As data collection took place midway through the 2020-21 school year, parents were also asked their opinions about the current school year.

Please find additional tables prepared with the survey data here: <http://dcpolicycenter.org/publications/school-leavers/>

Figures

Figure 1. Gross Cohort Retention for children born in 1998, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2010, and 2013	9
Figure 2. Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade enrollment in School Years 2019-20 and 2020-21	11
Figure 3. Key differences in household makeup between D.C.'s public school parents and Leavers	16
Figure 4. Key socioeconomic differences between D.C.'s public school parents and Leavers	17
Figure 5. Parents' initial considerations, initial enrollment decisions, and current enrollment decision, by school type (calculated for oldest child only)	18
Figure 6. Sources of information used to make school decisions	19
Figure 7. Time of leave and children's age when they leave	20
Figure 8. Reasons for Leaver to move out of the city	21
Figure 9. Reasons for not choosing D.C.'s public schools, by residence	22
Figure 10. Level of influence that D.C.'s schools had on the move out of the city for Leavers	23
Figure 11. What would have needed to change for Leavers to stay in D.C.'s public schools?	23
Figure 12. Enrollment in D.C.'s public schools (pre-kindergarten through grade 12) by sector, 2020-21 School Year	25
Figure 13. Distribution of enrollment between public and private schools in D.C. by grade band, 2015-19	25
Figure 14. Reasons for selecting D.C.'s public schools	26
Figure 15. Perceptions of D.C.'s public school among D.C. parents and Leavers	27
Figure 16. Pre-pandemic satisfaction levels among D.C.'s public school parents	28
Figure 17. Pre-kindergarten to grade 12 enrollment over time	30
Figure 18. Change in audited enrollment between school years 2019-20 and 2020-21	30
Figure 19. D.C. parents' considerations for making a switch and reasons for those who did	32
Figure 20. Reasons for choosing a new school for parents who switched during the pandemic	33
Figure 21. School environments pre-March 2020 and post-March 2020 for those who switched	33
Figure 22. Satisfaction over time with school environments pre-March 2020 and post-March 2020 for D.C.'s public school parents	35
Figure 23. Satisfaction with pandemic-related changes and initiatives school among D.C.'s public school parents	36
Appendix A - Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by geography	41

Tables

Table 1. Definitions of parent groups	13
Table 2. Key differences between D.C.'s public school parents and Leavers	15
Appendix A - Table 1. Inner and outer counties surrounding D.C.	40
Appendix A - Table 2. Weighting Variables	42
Appendix A - Table 3. Margins of error for the subgroups reported throughout the report	43

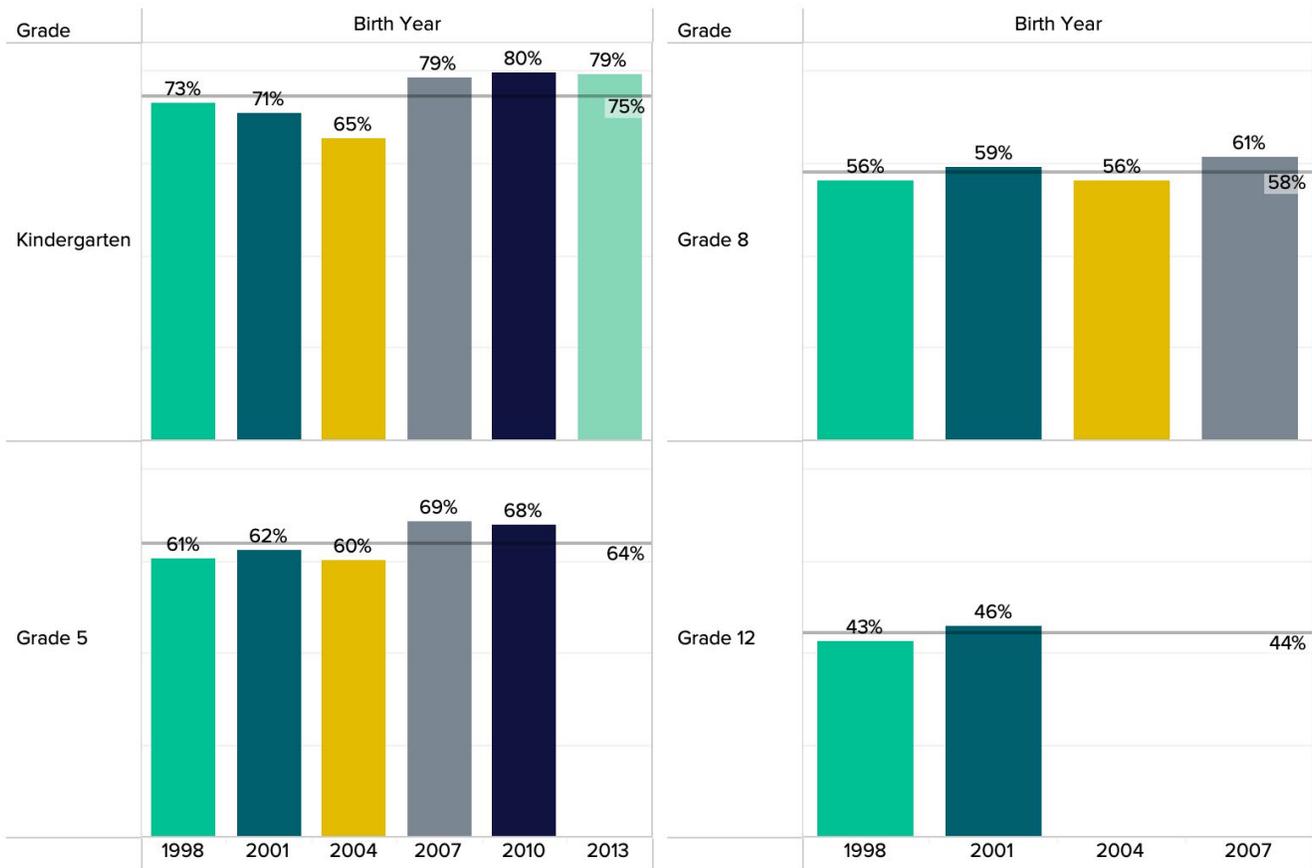
Part 1: Motivation

The continuous growth in enrollment in D.C.'s public schools has shown that schools have been an important factor in attracting families to and keeping them in the District of Columbia. But this aggregate enrollment number hides the great variation in parents' decisions to attend, stay with, or leave D.C.'s public schools. While the majority of parents in the city choose public schools for their children, some families never enroll, or at some point leave.

Some of these families remain in D.C. but enroll their children in private schools; others move out of the District of Columbia. Sometimes these moves are necessitated by changes that have little to do with the schools—a job change that takes the family away, for example. Other times, dissatisfaction with school options in D.C. is the main driver. And for families with school-aged children, access to high quality schools is always an important factor in their

Figure 1. Gross Cohort Retention for children born in 1998, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2010, and 2013

Ratio of public school enrollment to children born in D.C. for that cohort, by grade level



Source: D.C. Policy Center estimates based on OSSE's enrollment audits and the CDC Wonder database.

decision-making process. Comparing the number of children born in the District to public school enrollment shows that many families leave D.C.'s public schools before their children complete high school (Figure 1). In recent years (select cohorts born between 1998 and 2013), the share of children who were born in the District, and stayed with D.C.'s public schools increased, but many still leave. On average, about 25 percent of babies born in the District did not attend public schools by age 5, and another 9 percent left by the end of 5th grade. Children born more recently are more likely to attend the District's public elementary and middle schools, but exit rates remain high, over 40 percent leave before the start of high school.

While growth in the number of children in the District have contributed to higher enrollment numbers, increases in cohort retention, or the share of children who attend public schools, amplified this growth. To illustrate, in 2010, there were 7,607 babies in the District under the age of 1, or 1,321 more than in 1998. But this cohort added 1,496 more students to kindergarten five years later compared to the 1998 cohort, because nearly four in five of the 2010 cohort attended a D.C. public school compared to two in three in the 1998 cohort. Had the parents of the 2010 cohort opted in at the same rate as the 1998 cohort, enrollment would have grown by only 963 students. While continuous improvements in the District's public school system contributed to growing demand for D.C.'s public schools, parents' perception of D.C.'s public schools and how they choose one option over another ultimately drive enrollment.

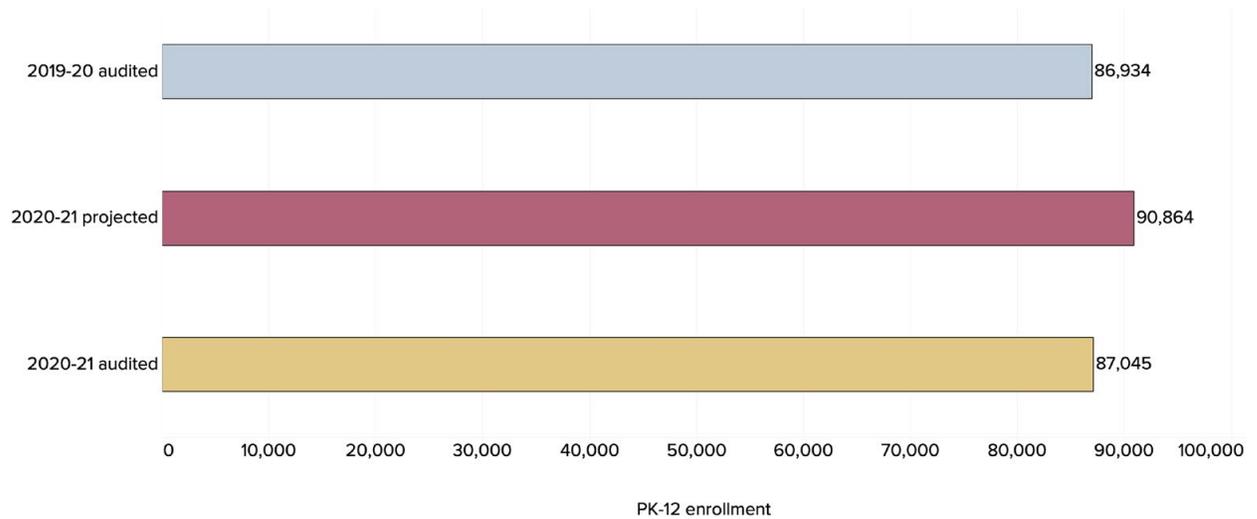
Thus, enrollment growth is highly dependent on how parents perceive the District's public schools and what kinds of factors they consider as they make their choices. Previous work underscores the importance of parents' perceptions of schools and

how they use a multitude of factors when choosing schools for their children. For example, parents frequently emphasize academic quality in national surveys when asked their top priority for deciding on a school, especially one that is not their in-boundary school.⁴ In the District, a 2014 survey of 500 public school parents confirmed this finding locally: 80 percent of parents said that they chose a school based on academics instead of school safety or location.⁵

However, the reported importance of academics (one part of school quality) does not always translate into actual choices. Research that examines revealed preferences shows that parents also value non-academic factors that are related to demographics and location.⁶ A study of how parents rank their preferences when they apply to the District's common lottery found that parents care about academic outcomes, but they also generally prefer schools close to home and exhibit an "own-group" preference for race and ethnicity when ranking schools.⁷ That is, parents prefer schools where most students have racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds similar to their own children. And a recent analysis of comments posted to the DC Urban Moms forum found that when privileged parents choose schools, they tend to choose schools that have a higher percentage of white students.⁸

But existing research does not make a distinction between who leaves and who stays, missing the voices of those who exit. This is particularly important in the District, where the population is highly transient with many people moving in and out of the city every year. While those who move into the city tend to be younger and come from farther away, those who move out tend to be older, have children, and frequently relocate within the Washington region. D.C. loses more parents than

Figure 2. Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade enrollment in School Years 2019-20 and 2020-21



Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2020. "2019-20 School Year Enrollment and Data". Available at: osse.dc.gov; Government of the District of Columbia. 2020. "Fiscal Year 2021 Approved Budget Financial Plan". Available at: dc.gov; Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2021. "2020-21 School Year Enrollment Audit Report Data." Available at: osse.dc.gov.

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it gains through moves, which impacts school enrollment. For every parent that moves into D.C., two leave for other states – and middle-income parents are more likely to move out of the District than low- and high-income parents for any reason.⁹ These movements have a big impact on overall student cohort retention and impact who D.C. hears from on education needs.

The pandemic, followed by a shift to online learning, added new complexities to parents' schooling decisions for their children. In the 2020-21 school year, pre-kindergarten to grade 12 enrollment in D.C.'s public schools was initially projected to grow by nearly 4,000, but it increased by only 111 students (Figure 2). Losses relative to the forecast were concentrated among the youngest learners. It is too soon to tell if this lower-than-projected enrollment during COVID-19 is a permanent shift in trends, but preliminary analysis shows out-migration during COVID-19 is on the rise in D.C., mimicking the trends observed in some other high-cost, urban, coastal

markets.¹⁰ Additionally, housing appreciation patterns across urban, suburban, and exurban counties of the Washington metropolitan area—where an estimated 61 percent of jobs can be worked remotely¹¹—suggest that the importance of long commute times is declining for homebuyers, and this could also put a dent in future enrollment in D.C.'s public schools.¹²

At present, limited information exists on the factors residents consider in their move decisions. For example, the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey includes questions about reasons for relocation, and their findings suggest that people move to the District for jobs and move out to the other jurisdictions in the metropolitan Washington area for housing.¹³ However, very little is known about how and why families make the decision to leave D.C.'s public schools. Prior studies that explore parent preferences are based on D.C.'s common lottery applications, and therefore are only able to capture those who have already chosen to participate in the city's public school system.¹⁴

They miss families who expressed their preferences earlier in the process by settling in the Virginia or Maryland suburbs or by sending their children to a private school, or later, by unenrolling their children from D.C.'s public schools.

This regional lens is important—many residents in the metropolitan area weigh housing and neighborhood characteristics, commute times, and education options in deciding where they settle, sometimes trading longer commutes for better housing or access to a preferred school. Without this regional lens, the policies that shape the District's public education system consider the demands from those who stay, but rarely address the reasons why families leave. The main motivation for this study is to fill this important knowledge gap.

COVID-19 has added increased urgency to answering our research question. Knowing why parents exit D.C.'s public schools is especially important given the impact of COVID-19 on population growth, school enrollment patterns, and the overall demand for urban living. A better understanding of reasons for why families move out of the District or choose private schools will enhance citywide school planning efforts and inform policymakers on what policies can help the District keep its current residents.

Key questions

Parents who choose D.C.'s public schools for their children have voice. They call their school principals, the Chancellor or their elected representatives. They organize and testify. Importantly, they enroll in one public school over another. Those who exit, on the other hand, have no need to provide input. But understanding the characteristics of the families who left, and why they left could still inform the system, especially by highlighting what kind of information

parents seek, how they access this information, and how they shape their perceptions.¹⁵

To better understand the characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of parents of school-age children, the D.C. Policy Center partnered with SSRS, a survey research firm, to survey D.C. parents and parents who at one point lived in D.C., but who have since moved elsewhere in the metropolitan Washington area. The survey, which took place in January and February of 2021, also inquired about perceptions of and satisfaction with D.C.'s public schools (both District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and D.C. public charter schools) before and after March 2020 when the pandemic first began. Key research questions included:

- (i) Why do parents leave D.C. and D.C.'s public schools (DCPS and public charter schools)?
- (ii) Are parents who leave D.C. and D.C.'s public schools different from those who stay? Do they weigh different concerns in making their decisions?
- (iii) How are their sentiments different from parents or caregivers who have chosen D.C.'s public schools for their students?
- (iv) How did COVID-19 change school decisions and parents' satisfaction with schools?
- (v) Are there any policies that can make D.C.'s public schools more attractive to those who leave?

Part 2: Methodology overview

To hear from parents of school-age children in D.C. and the surrounding regions in Maryland and Virginia, SSRS conducted a survey and qualitative research on behalf of the D.C. Policy Center. The research included two distinct groups of parents:

(1) parents of school-age children residing in D.C. and (2) parents of school-age children residing in the suburbs of Maryland and Virginia that surround D.C., and who had formerly lived in D.C., whom we call “Leavers.”

Table 1. Definitions of parent groups

Parent group	Parent subgroup	Definition
D.C. parents (n=618)*	All students in D.C.’s public or public charter schools (n=427)	Parents who report that all their school-aged children are enrolled in D.C.’s public or public charter schools.
	Some students in D.C.’s public or public charter schools (n=50)	Parents for whom at least one school-aged child is in a DCPS or D.C. public charter school; and at least one child is in a private school, a parochial school, a public school located outside D.C., or is being home schooled.
	No students in D.C.’s public or public charter schools (n=133)	Parents in this group have all school-aged children attending schools outside the DCPS or D.C. public charter school system.
Suburban parents, by geography (n=812)	Inner counties (n=476)	Suburban parents of school-aged children residing in the inner suburbs: Montgomery County, MD; Prince George’s County, MD; Fairfax County, VA; Arlington County, VA; Fairfax City, VA; Alexandria, VA; and the City of Falls Church, VA.
	Outer counties (n=336)	This describes suburban parents living in one of the following areas: Anne Arundel County, MD; Prince William County, VA; Loudoun County, VA; Howard County, MD; Manassas City, VA; and Manassas Park City, VA.
Subset of suburban parents: Leavers (n=332)	Leavers with no D.C. students (n=281)	This label has been given to the subgroup of suburban parents who once resided in D.C., did send or could have sent a child to DCPS or D.C. public charter school, and have no children currently enrolled in a DCPS or D.C. public charter school. They reside in either the inner or outer counties of Washington, D.C.
	Leavers with a student in a DCPS or D.C. public charter school (n=51)	Regardless of geography, this small segment of suburban parents represents those who left D.C. and continue to have a child enrolled in a DCPS or D.C. public charter school. This group could share custody of a child with another parent still living in D.C., for example.

*The D.C. parents by category do not sum up to the total because some respondents did not answer the question about school enrollment.

Source: D.C. Policy Center groupings of surveyed parents, and SSRS survey

Data collection took place from January to February 2021. The D.C. sample was a combination of a probability address-based sample (ABS), where a randomly selected subset of D.C. households likely to have children received a letter with a small monetary inducement, and a non-probability panel sample of parents¹⁶ were recruited into panels.¹⁷ The sample for the suburban parents in cities and counties surrounding D.C. came exclusively from non-probability research panels pre-developed by research companies. The analysis disaggregated Leavers by how far away they live from D.C. (inner and outer counties)¹⁸ to see if any differences emerged between the two groups. County selection was based on the U.S. Census Combined Statistical Area (Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA,MD-WV MSA) and the Urbanized Area designations.

For the non-probability research panels, initial qualification to participate in the survey included all parents of school-age children. Only the true segment of interest—suburban parents who once lived in D.C. and did send or could have sent a child to a DCPS or D.C. public charter school—completed the full survey instrument, which further probed their decision-making related to school in comparison to the D.C. resident parents. Data represented in this report primarily includes the parent group of particular interest, those who once lived in D.C. and did enroll or could have enrolled a child in a DCPS or D.C. public charter school, referred to as “Leavers”. Throughout this report, the language in Table 1 is used to describe parent groups. See Appendix A on Methodology for a full explanation of the methodology.

How to interpret the findings

The study is based on the survey of a representative sample, so the findings are inferences about the

population of certain parents. The margin of error is ± 5.0 percentage points for the total D.C. sample and ± 4.2 percentage points for the total sample of suburban parents at the 95 percent confidence level.¹⁹ This means that in 95 out of every 100 samples drawn using the same methodology, estimated proportions based on the entire sample will vary by no more than 5.0 or 4.2 percentage points respectively.²⁰ See Appendix A for margins of error of specific subgroups.

Sample sizes vary across segments and questions. Sample sizes between 50 and 99 are noted as being of a *small sample size*; base sizes <50 are noted as being of an *extremely small base size*. Data reported among groups with a small sample size should be interpreted with caution. Data for segments with groups of an extremely small base size are included for completeness but are not reported on in the text or findings.

How data are aggregated

Parents, both in D.C. and the surrounding areas, were asked about each individual school-aged child in their household as it relates to enrollment and school decision-making questions. For the purposes of reporting, results in the main report have been aggregated to the household level (the full data set includes the individual child-level data). Throughout the report, when describing school environment, enrollment decisions or other lines of inquiry where individual child level data were collected, the findings will be described as “parents with a child” or “parents with at least one child,” to indicate that households’ relationship to the question. Please find additional tables prepared with the survey data here: <http://dcpolicycenter.org/publications/school-leavers/>

Part 3: D.C. parents and Leavers: Perceptions, priorities, and choices —

In this study, D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers are characterized by different schooling choices they make for their children. While they are similar in what they value in schools (quality, safety, access, among others), they differ greatly in how they perceive D.C.’s public schools and how they learn about schools in D.C. and elsewhere. Importantly, analysis of household characteristics shows that Leavers and D.C.’s public school parents are also from different demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The table below summarizes the key differences between D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers.

Key differences in household makeup between D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers

There are some important differences between the demographic characteristics of families of D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers.

First, D.C.’s public school parents are twice as likely to live in single-adult households (23 percent) compared to Leavers (9 percent). This aligns with

Table 2. Key differences between D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers

Characteristic	D.C.’s public school parents	Leavers
Household size	More likely to have single-adult households	More likely to have two-adult households
Racial make-up	A larger share are Black residents	A larger share are white residents
Household income	More income segregation	More likely to be middle-class
Initial considerations	More likely to consider public schools for their children	More likely to consider private schools for their children
Valued school characteristics	Primarily care about school quality	Primarily care about both school quality and school safety
Information sources	More likely to rely on word of mouth	More likely to rely on school materials and school websites
Perceptions	Have a strong positive perception of school quality and are not particularly worried about safety or commute times	Have mixed perceptions of school quality; are concerned about school safety

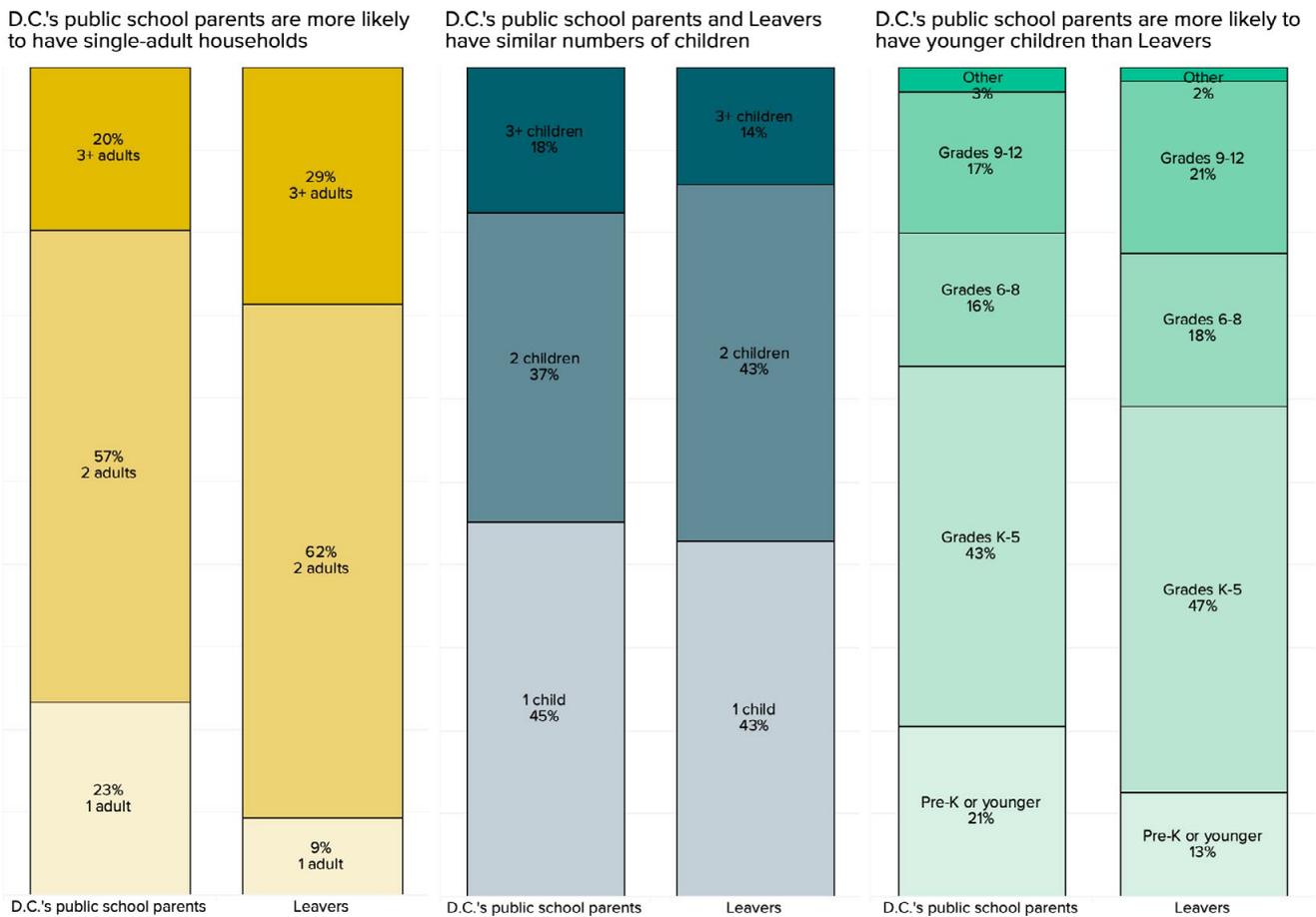
other sources of data on the average number of adults per household across the region (1.7 adults in D.C. compared to 2.1 in surrounding areas of Maryland and Virginia).²¹ However, the number of children at home for D.C. parents and Leavers is similar, with one child or two children in most households.

Second, D.C. parents are more likely to have younger children (21 percent in pre-kindergarten or younger) compared to Leavers (13 percent in pre-kindergarten or younger). This result itself could indicate that perceptions have improved over time.

There is evidence that in more recent years, more parents have chosen to stay in the District because they want to take advantage of universal Pre-K (implemented in 2009) or have found schools to be more attractive after the major reforms of 2007.²² In fact, as will be shown later, 40 percent of the Leavers in our sample left before 2007.

Third, there is more income segregation among D.C.'s public school parents. Compared to Leavers, D.C.'s public school parents tend to have high or low incomes instead of incomes in the middle. Household income for nearly two-thirds of Leavers

Figure 3. Key differences in household makeup between D.C.'s public school parents and Leavers



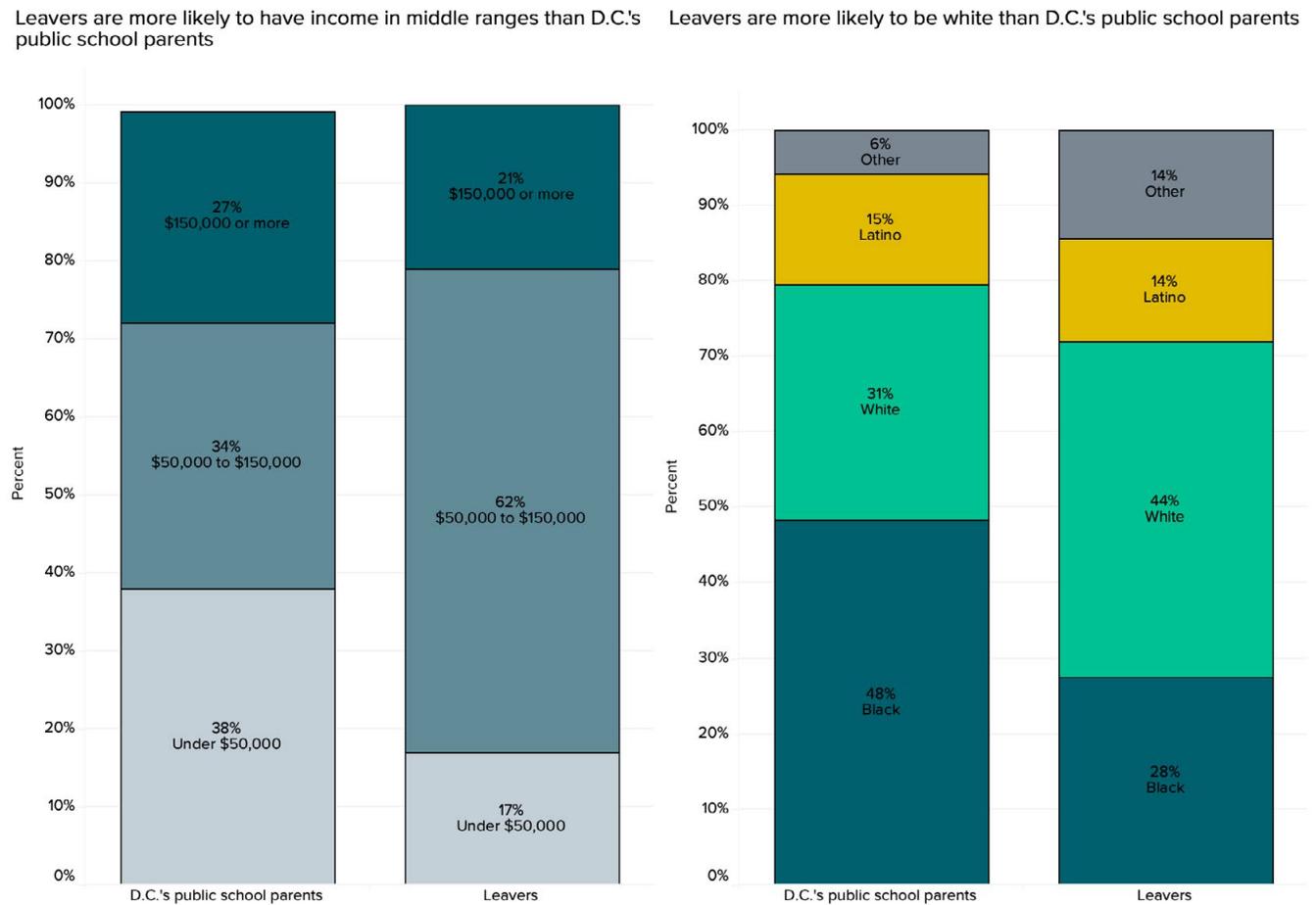
Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

was in the middle ranges as described in the survey (between \$50,000 and \$150,000) compared to about a third of D.C.'s public school parents in this range. Instead, higher percentages of household income for D.C. parents were in the highest and lowest ranges (27 percent above \$150,000 and 38 percent below \$50,000) compared to Leavers (21 percent above \$150,000 and 17 percent below \$50,000). Among other factors, this could be related to the lack of housing stock for middle income households in D.C. Only twenty-eight percent of single-family homes with at least two bedrooms are

affordable to a household with two adults earning the area median income, for example.²³

Fourth, a higher percentage of D.C. parents are Black. Demographically, 48 percent of D.C. parents are Black, more than the percentage of Leavers at 28 percent. This is an important finding because it shows that while population loss among D.C.'s Black residents has been great, moves within the region have been more common among families with school-age children headed by a white resident.

Figure 4. Key socioeconomic differences between D.C.'s public school parents and Leavers



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

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School choices

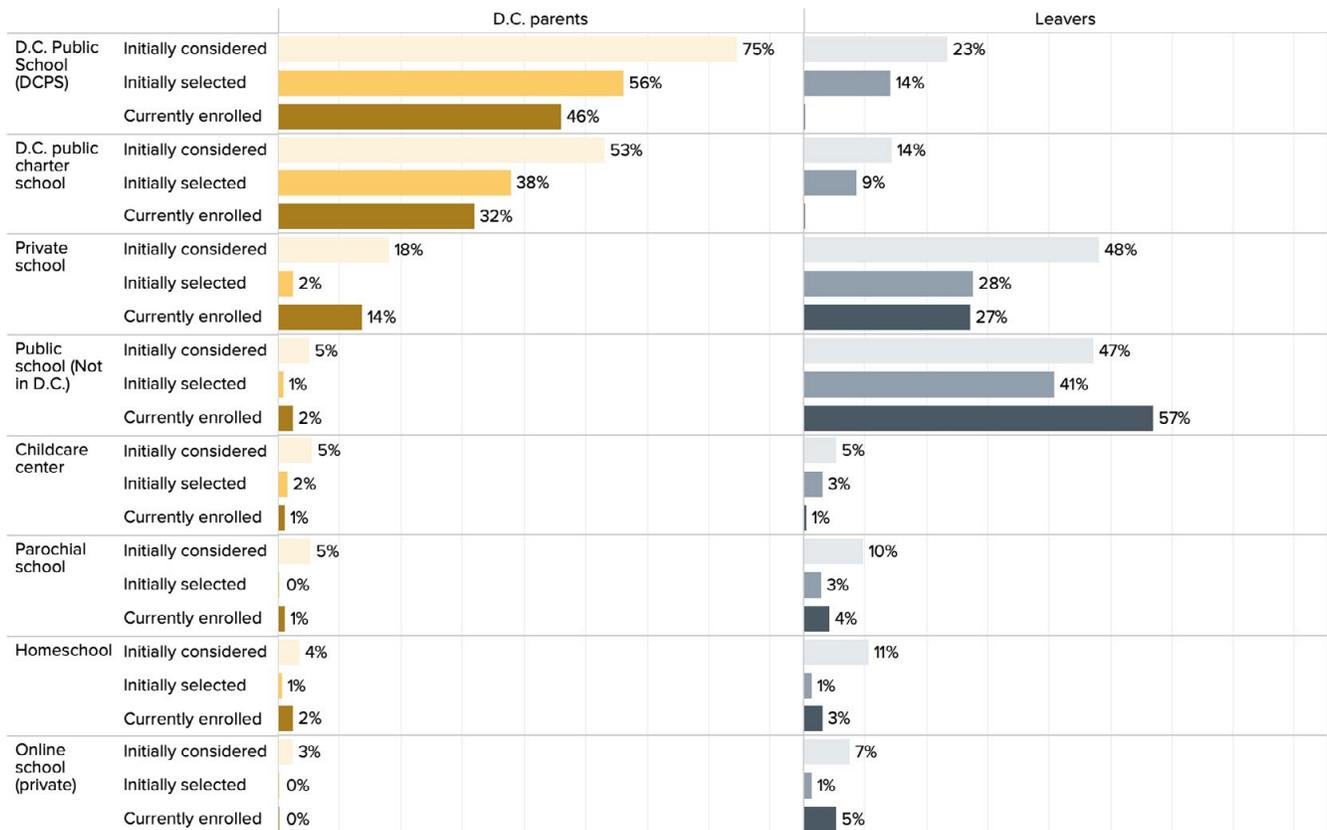
Even before their first child begins school, Leavers are much more likely to consider schools other than D.C.’s public schools, compared to D.C.’s public school parents. About half of Leavers considered public school outside of D.C. compared to five percent of D.C.’s public school parents for their first child. Similarly, about half of Leavers considered private schools for their first child compared to 18 percent of D.C.’s public school parents. However, Leavers still do think about DCPS and public charter school options: 23 percent of Leavers considered DCPS and 14 percent considered public charter schools as options for their first child. This suggests Leavers have already considered the decision to

move as they weigh school options—a theme that will be further explored later in the report.

In contrast, when D.C. parents are considering school options for their children, they are largely focused on public school options, especially DCPS. Three-quarters of D.C. parents consider DCPS schools, and more than half consider charter schools as an option before they enroll their children. Only five percent give weight to any public school outside of the District.

When initially enrolling their oldest child, some Leavers do start in D.C.’s public schools: 14 percent enrolled in DCPS and 9 percent enrolled in public charter schools before exiting at a future date. When

Figure 5. Parents’ initial considerations, initial enrollment decisions, and current enrollment decision, by school type (calculated for oldest child only)



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

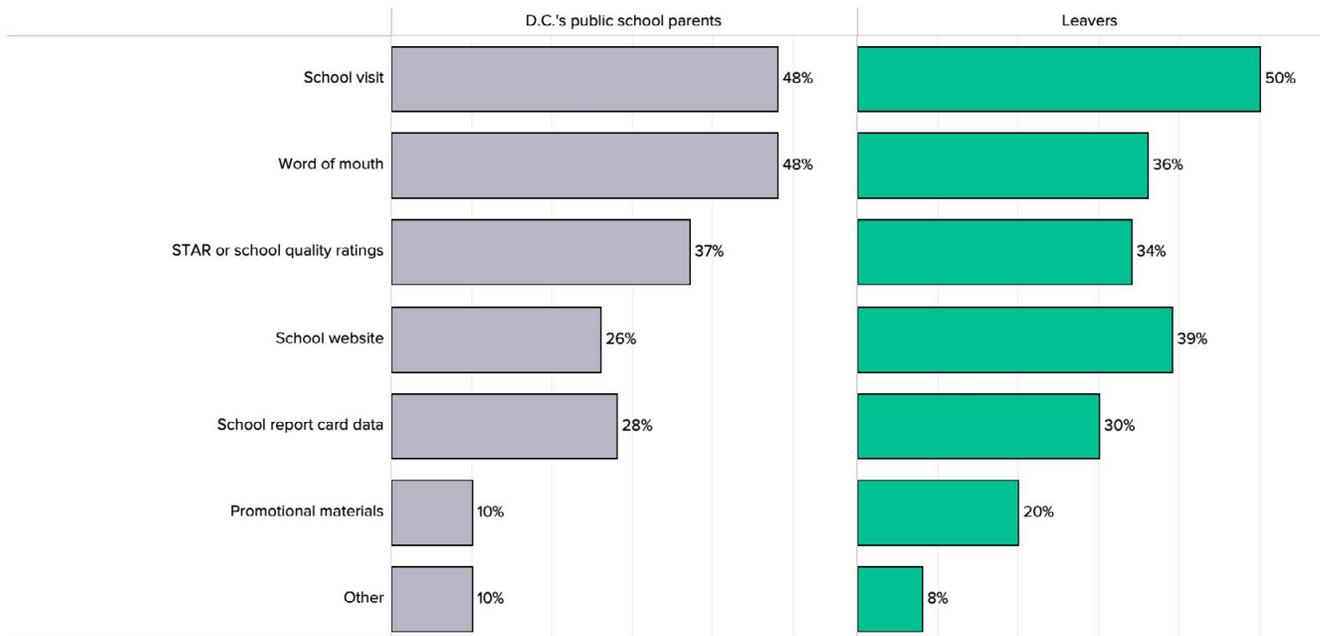
these parents move away, they are most likely to choose public schools. Between the initial selection of school and the current enrollment status, the share of Leavers enrolled in public schools outside of D.C. increases by about 16 percent.

For Leavers, private school decisions appear to be sticky. 28 percent of Leavers initially enroll their children in private schools and over time, only about 1 percent leave. Among D.C. parents however, private school participation increases as children progress over the years. Only 2 percent of parents report that they initially choose a private school for their oldest child, but eventually switched to a private school, bringing the total share to 14 percent.²⁴ Other types of schools do not constitute a large share of initial or current enrollment, but they generally receive greater attention from Leavers as they contemplate school choices.

D.C.’s public school parents rely heavily on their networks when they make decisions about where their children attend school.

D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers use different sources of information as they make their schooling decisions. Half of D.C.’s public school parents mention word of mouth (48 percent) and school visits (48 percent) as influential sources of information in selecting their child’s school. Other influential factors for D.C. parents include STAR or school quality ratings (37 percent), school report card data (28 percent), and school websites (26 percent). Leavers also use school visits, but they are more likely to use websites to make their school decisions than D.C.’s public school parents and less likely to use word of mouth.

Figure 6. Sources of information used to make school decisions



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

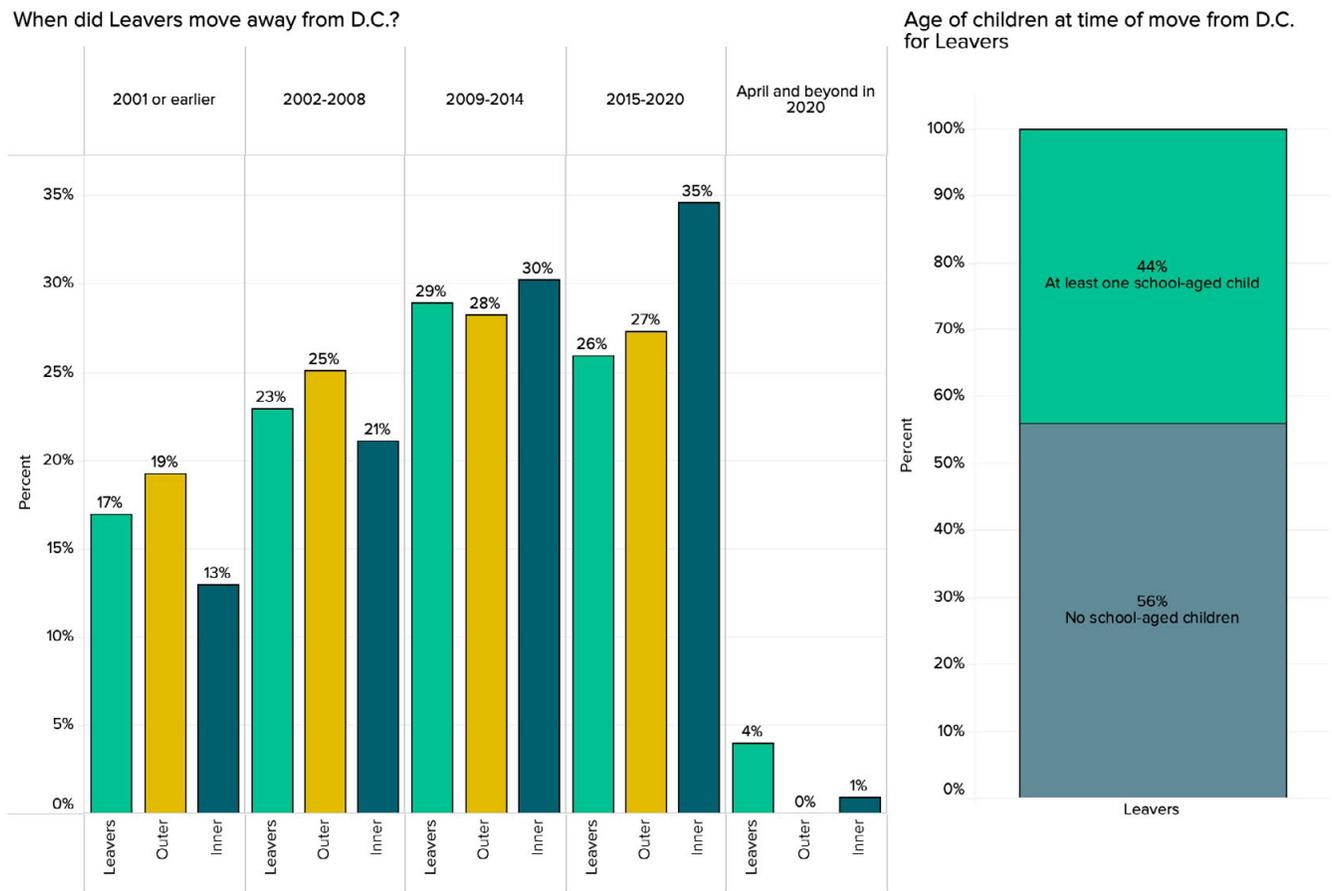
Leavers

This section presents some stylized facts about the Leavers including when they left the city, why they left, and the extent to which schools played a role in their decisions. It also explores what would have had to change for Leavers to stay in the District and send their children to public schools.

Many Leavers left before major reforms were implemented and before their children began school.

In our sample, out of all Leavers, 40 percent left D.C. in 2008 or earlier before the implementation of the 2007 school reforms and universal pre-kindergarten (which could make families more likely to stay beginning in 2009)²⁵ while the remaining 60 percent left in 2009 or later. This means that for about 17 percent of families, the oldest child associated with the move is now a high school graduate; for about a third, the oldest child is at least in elementary school. It also means that for those who moved years ago, school perceptions were formed in a different educational environment.

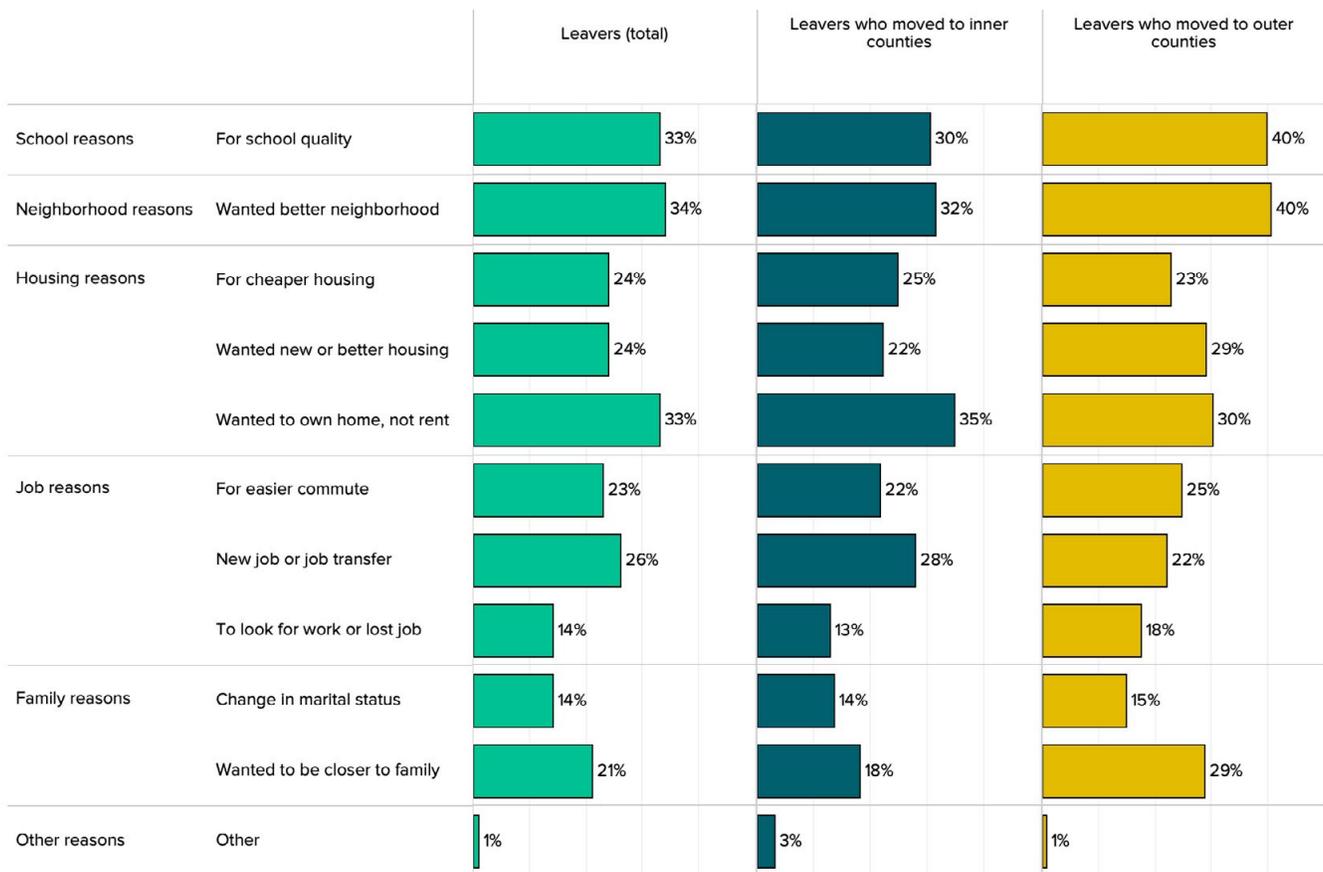
Figure 7. Time of move and children’s age when they leave



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

Note: Inner counties include counties surrounding D.C. (Montgomery County, MD; Prince George’s County, MD; Fairfax County, VA; Arlington County, VA, Fairfax City, VA; Alexandria, VA; and City of Falls Church, VA). Outer counties include counties farther away from D.C. (Anne Arundel County, MD; Prince William County, MD; Loudoun County, MD; Howard County, MD; Calvert County, MD; Manassas City, VA; and Manassas Park City, VA).

Figure 8. Reasons for Leavers to move out of the city



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

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Leavers who now live in outer counties are more likely to have left in 2008 or earlier (44 percent), compared to 34 percent of Leavers who now live in inner counties. A little less than half of all Leavers (44 percent) report having a school-aged child at the time they lived in D.C. For them, school options were an immediate concern directly affecting the lives of their children.

Leavers report that they move out of the District for a variety of reasons, and not all of them are related to schools.

Leavers note that they left in search of a better neighborhood (34 percent), for the opportunity to

own a home rather than rent (33 percent), because of a new job or transfer (26 percent), for access to less expensive housing (24 percent), or to fulfill a desire for new or better housing (24 percent). This is aligned with findings from the Current Population Survey, where 54 percent of parents mention housing issues as the main reason for moving out of D.C. from 2010 to 2020. School quality is a reported reason for about a third of the Leavers.

While all Leavers, regardless of where they move in the metropolitan Washington region, share these reasons, those who moved to outer counties express school- and family-related reasons more frequently. A larger share of these Leavers who are

located further away from the District mention school quality. They are also more likely to emphasize being closer to family (29 percent compared to 18 percent among those who moved to inner counties), suggesting that either childcare or the need to be closer to elderly family members might have motivated their moves over longer distances.

For some Leavers, school choice was secondary to the decision to move.

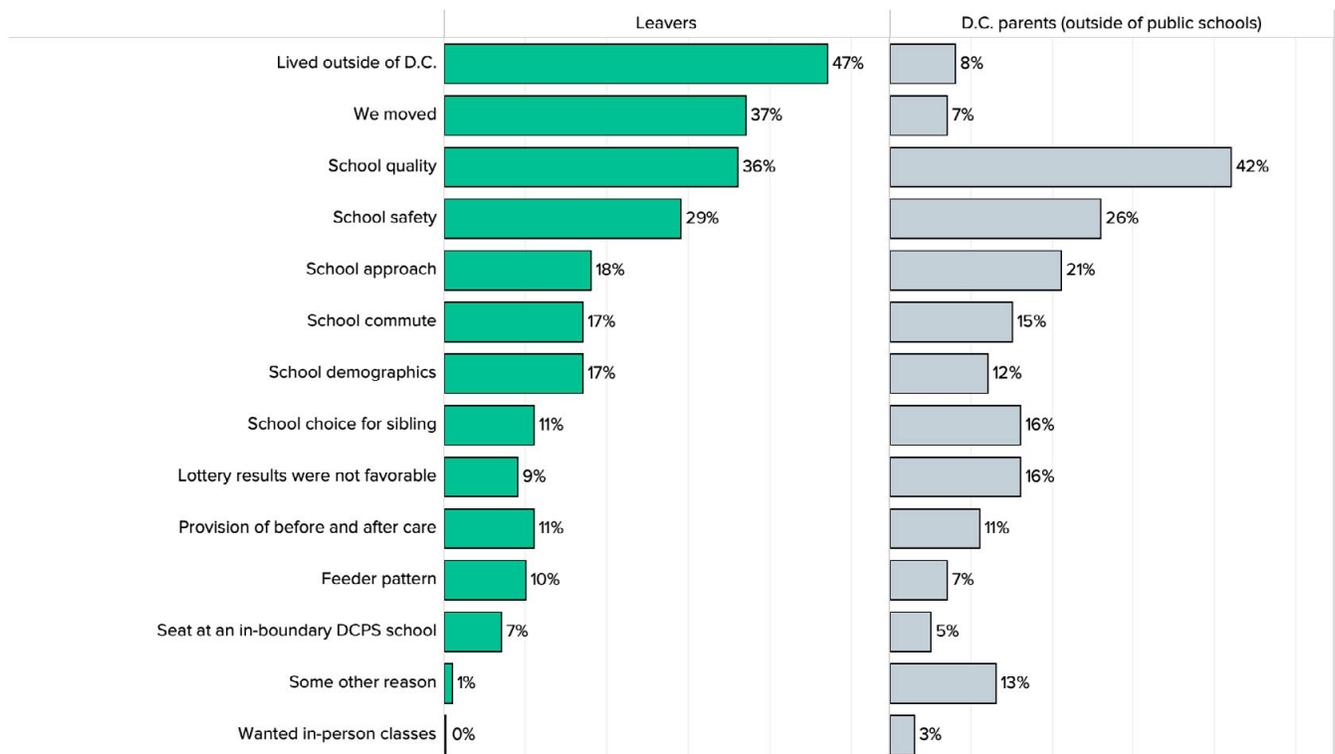
For many Leavers, the main driver for not attending D.C.’s public schools was the move itself (37 percent), suggesting that for them where they sent their children to school was a consequence of the decision to move. At the same time, Leavers frequently cite school quality (36 percent) and school safety (29 percent) as the top two reasons why they

did not choose D.C.’s public schools. These findings track with the reasons for D.C. parents to exit as well: among D.C. parents who have chosen a school other than a public school for their children, 42 percent mentioned school quality and 26 percent mentioned school safety as their main reason.

However, for many, schools were influential in their decisions to move.

Leavers’ responses to a question on how they ranked school-related reasons suggest that these reasons were an influential factor. About two-thirds (64 percent) of Leavers mention schools as an influential factor, 12 percent say schools were the only reason, and 28 percent say it was the main reason. This is especially true among Leavers living in outer counties who mentioned schools as

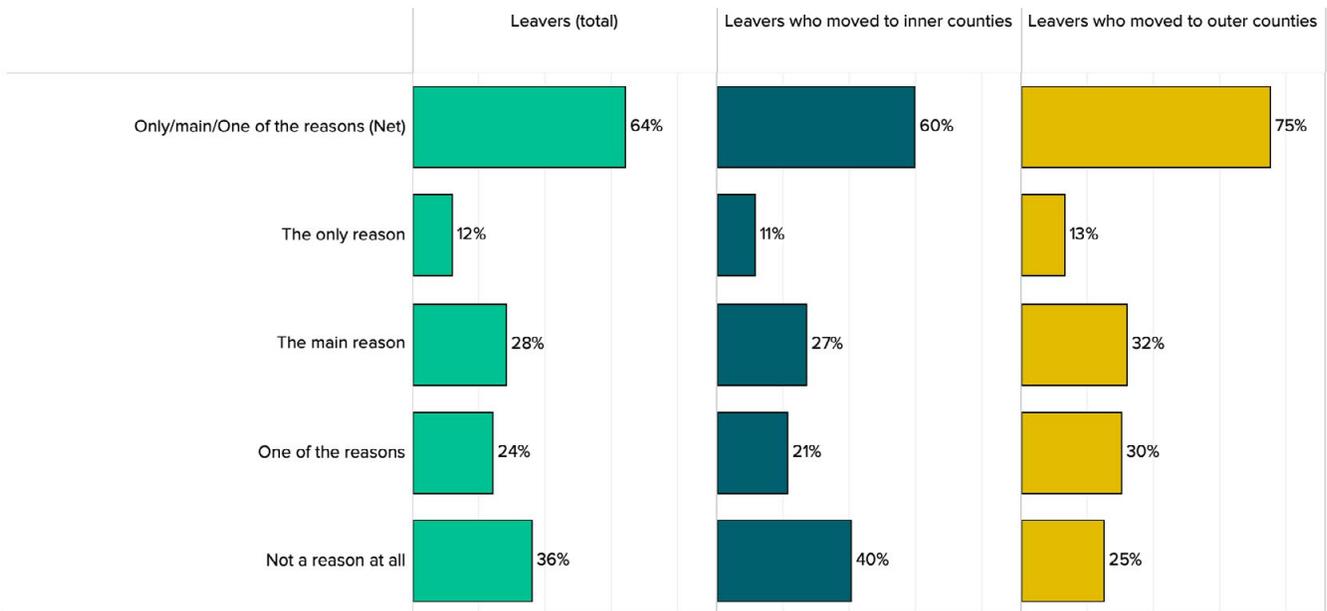
Figure 9. Reasons for not choosing D.C.’s public schools, by residence



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

Note: D.C. parents are limited to those who at one point chose schools outside of public schools in D.C.

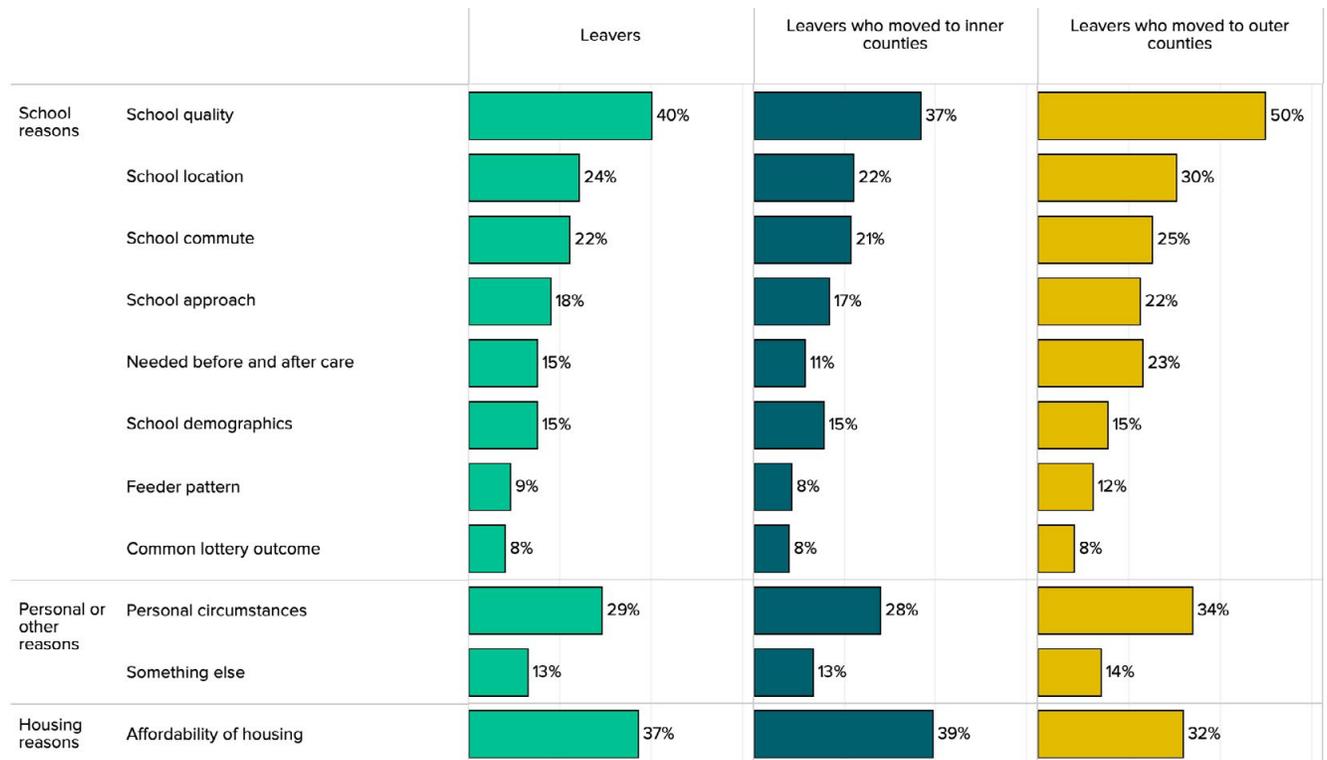
Figure 10. Level of influence that D.C.'s schools had on the move out of the city for Leavers



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

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Figure 11. What would have needed to change for Leavers to stay in D.C.'s public schools?



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

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one of the main reasons for the move (75 percent compared to 60 percent of those in inner counties).

Leavers could have stayed if they had a more positive perception of school quality.

Building on this theme, when asked what would have needed to change for non-D.C. parents to have stayed in DCPS or D.C. public charter schools, school quality is the most commonly mentioned item (40 percent), and much more so for outer county parents (50 percent compared to 37 percent of inner county parents).

This is an important finding because it highlights some informational gaps that could be improved by policy. For these parents, school quality is made up of a multitude of factors. Qualitative feedback based on one-on-one interviews for this research suggests that “school quality” is a catch-all phrase that might describe everything from classroom size to extracurricular activities.

When asked about components of school quality during follow-up interviews, parents mentioned: strong communication with teachers and administrators; modern approaches and methods; a safe environment; rigorous academics and curriculum; robust extracurricular choices; smaller class sizes; an excellent, experienced teaching staff; diversity; and modern facilities. While existing data (for example through report cards) can inform parents on some of these aspects, parents rely entirely on perceptions for others (for example safety, environment, teacher communications, etc.).

Other factors include housing affordability (37 percent), personal circumstances (29 percent), school location (24 percent), and school commute (22 percent). While these sentiments are similar among parents who moved to different parts of the metropolitan Washington area, they are different from the sentiments of D.C. parents, as will be shown in the next section.

D.C. parents

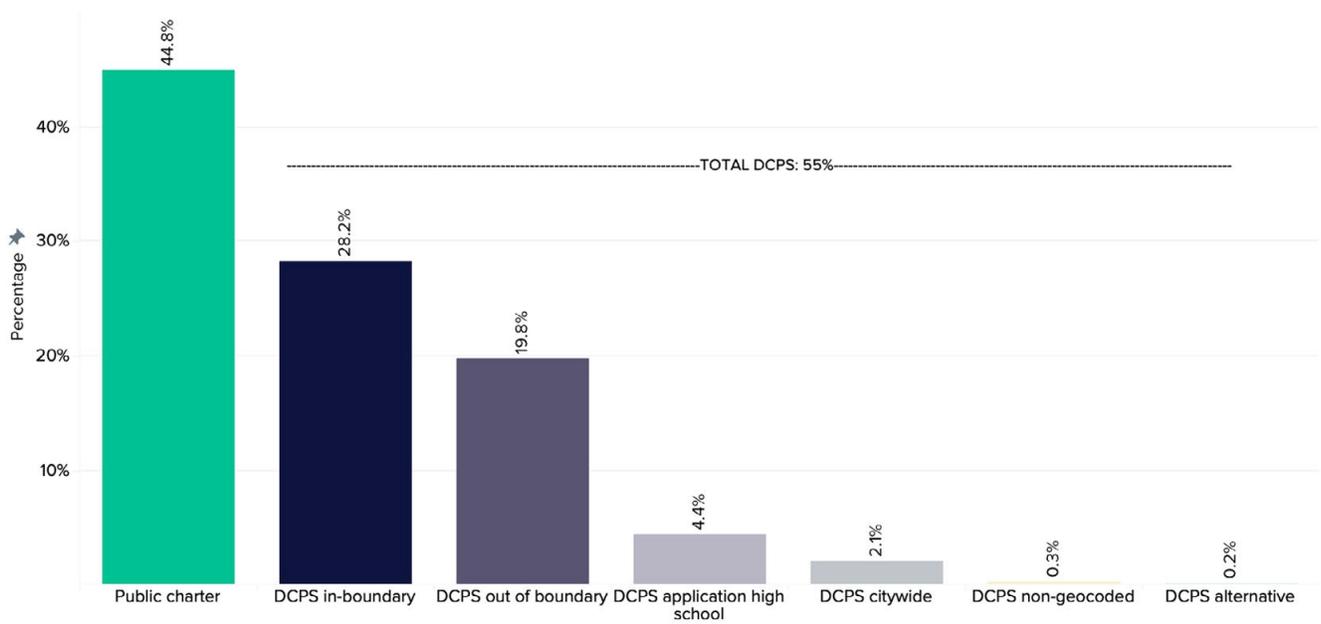
Before exploring the perceptions, priorities, and choices of D.C. parents, it is important to set the context by reviewing the current enrollment patterns in the District of Columbia. D.C. has a strong public education presence with a great degree of choice within the public sector. The majority of school-aged children in D.C. attend public schools, but only 28 percent of public school children attend their in-boundary schools.²⁶ Aside from in-boundary enrollment, 45 percent were enrolled in a public charter school, 20 percent of students were enrolled in a DCPS school as an out-of-boundary student, and four percent were enrolled in a DCPS application high school (see Figure 12).

In addition to public school choice, an estimated 14.7 percent of students in kindergarten through grade 12 attend private schools in D.C. (with a margin of error of 0.9 percent).²⁷ As students grow older, more leave public schools to attend private schools: 7.7 percent of kindergarteners attend private schools compared to 17.4 percent of high schoolers.²⁸ An even larger share of the families who have opted out of public schools actually live in parts of the city with access to the most desirable traditional public school feeder pattern (i.e., those that feed into Wilson High School): In communities west of Rock Creek Park, over 40 percent of the school-age population is enrolled in private schools.²⁹

School decisions of D.C. parents

This report offers two new findings of interest about D.C. parents. First, some D.C. parents make a multitude of choices for different children within a family, mixing various school options when they deem appropriate: Eight percent of respondents enrolled some children (but not all) in public schools, compared to 69 percent in all public schools and 22 percent in all private schools.

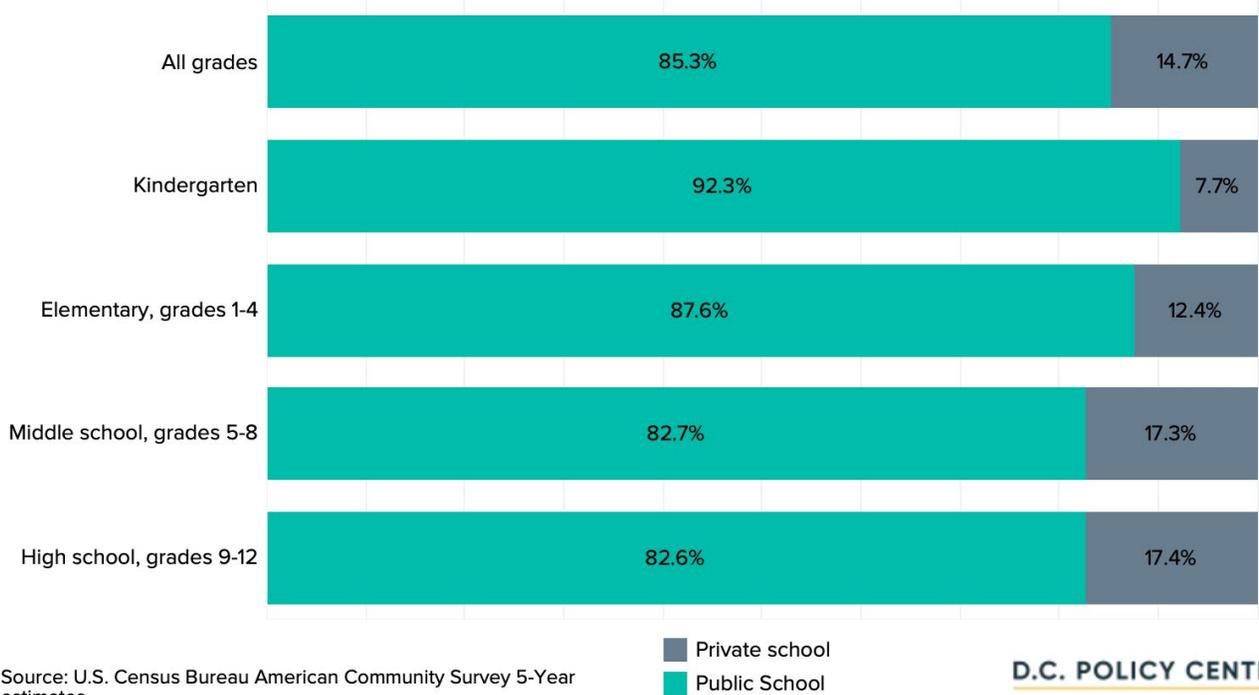
Figure 12. Enrollment in D.C.'s public schools (pre-kindergarten through grade 12) by sector, 2020-21 School Year



Source: Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME). 2021. "EdScape: Chapter 4: Enrollment Patterns." Available at: <https://edscape.dc.gov/page/trends-enrollment-sector>

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Figure 13. Distribution of enrollment between public and private schools in D.C. by grade band, 2015-19



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-Year estimates.

Private school
Public School

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Second, 71 percent of D.C. parents applied for school placement through the common lottery system. Even among parents with no students in D.C.'s public schools, half have applied to the common lottery at some point, indicating a certain level of interest (or maybe previous enrollment) in public schools.

For D.C.'s public school parents, school quality was the top-most reason for sending their children to D.C.'s public schools.

Among surveyed parents who selected D.C.'s public and public charter schools for their children, school quality is the most commonly mentioned factor influencing that decision (45 percent among D.C.'s public school parents). One in ten D.C. parents mentions school safety or school commute. Seven percent mentioned school approach and six percent mentioned a guaranteed seat at an in-boundary

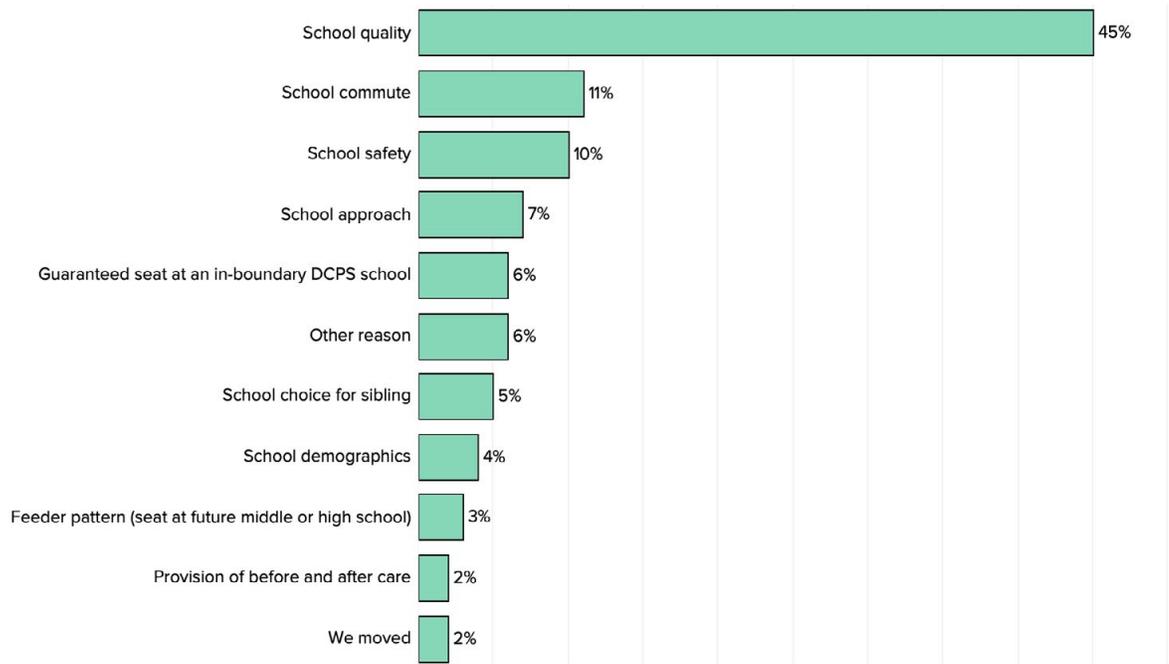
DCPS school in the neighborhood. D.C. parents and Leavers differ greatly in this aspect as school quality is the dominant driver for D.C. parents, while Leavers report giving greater weight to safety and commute.

Among D.C. parents, the perceptions of DCPS and public charter schools are generally positive.

While perceptions of D.C.'s public schools are generally positive across all types of parents, they are particularly strong for D.C.'s public school parents. Two-thirds of parents with all children enrolled in D.C.'s public schools (69 percent) have a positive view of DCPS and public charter schools, compared to fewer than half of parents with no enrolled children (47 percent) and 53 percent of Leavers.

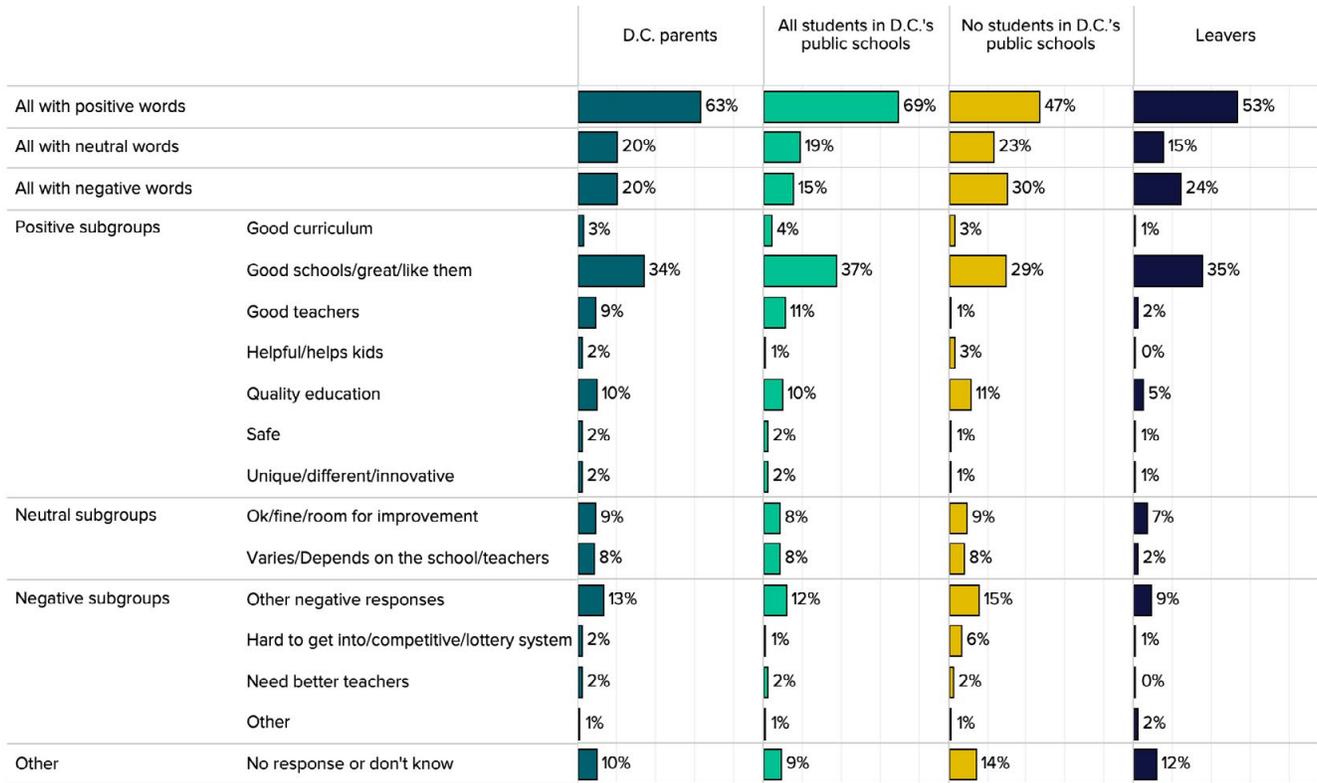
These findings are consistent with a survey conducted by the Office of the D.C. Auditor

Figure 14. Reasons for selecting D.C.'s public schools



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

Figure 15. Perceptions of D.C.'s public school among D.C. parents and Leavers



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

(ODCA) in July 2018 that found that a majority of parents are very satisfied (66 percent) with the quality of their children’s education.³⁰

Across all parent groups, those with positive perceptions, however, often did not articulate the reasons why, and simply stated “good schools,” “great schools,” or “I/we like them.” D.C. parents were twice as likely to mention quality as a positive characteristic compared to Leavers. D.C.’s public school parents also mentioned good teachers as a positive characteristic.

Among those who expressed negative views, there was not much of a consensus. For D.C. parents who do not have children in public schools, not surprisingly, the difficulty of getting a

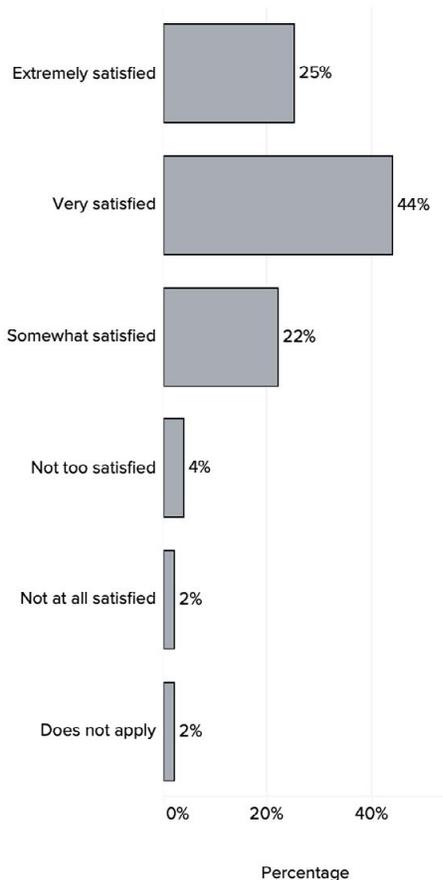
spot through the lottery was the most commonly mentioned negative characteristic.

Prior to the pandemic, D.C.’s public school parents were generally satisfied with D.C.’s public schools.

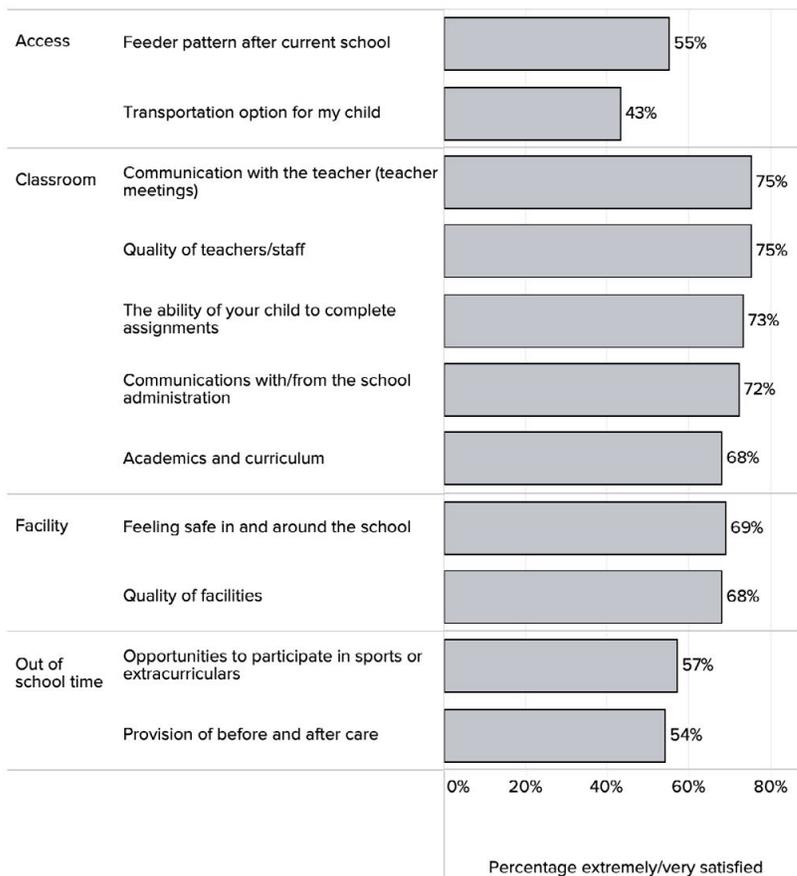
Among D.C.’s public school parents, 69 percent were very or extremely satisfied with public schools prior to March of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began. This high level of satisfaction was especially driven by classroom experiences: Three-quarters of D.C.’s public school parents were very satisfied or extremely satisfied by the quality of the teachers and staff and communications from their teacher, and nearly 70 percent were satisfied with the

Figure 16. Pre-pandemic satisfaction levels among D.C.'s public school parents

Pre-pandemic satisfaction levels among D.C.'s public school parents



Satisfaction with aspects of school for D.C.'s public school parents



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

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academics and curriculum, as well as various aspects of the facilities.

Satisfaction was lowest for access-related aspects: less than half of the parents were satisfied with transportation options for their children, and only 55 percent were satisfied with

the feeder patterns, which is an important aspect with respect to exit in later grades.

Satisfaction was also relatively low for after-school activities including extracurriculars and out-of-school time programs.

Part 4: D.C. parents and schools during the pandemic

On March 9 of 2020, D.C. documented its first case of COVID-19 and declared both a state of emergency and a public health emergency. DCPS and public charter schools closed within a week and shifted to distance learning, which continued for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year.

In the fall of 2020, as the pandemic persisted, DCPS and public charter schools largely continued with distance learning. Some began to explore limited in-person offerings, and by February of 2021, all DCPS schools³¹ and 86 public charter schools offered some amount of in-person learning for a limited group of students.³² However, an estimated 88 percent of students in the District of Columbia were still learning from home as of March 2021.³³ Most students participating in in-person learning were only at school one day a week as of March 2021.³⁴

On top of other stress and health risks caused by the pandemic, distance learning directly impacted all parents in D.C. Families, especially those with younger children, had new childcare responsibilities alongside working outside the house (as an essential worker) or working remotely from home. Balancing childcare and work was not feasible for all, and an estimated 12,000 D.C. parents and caregivers had to stop working as of September 2020 because they were caring for children not in a school or daycare.³⁵ In the same month, unemployment rates were higher than usual at 8.7 percent across the city, and even higher in Wards 7 and 8 at

14.6 percent and 18.9 percent, respectively.³⁶

Parents dropping out of the labor force and high unemployment meant that many households also faced economic instability during this time, putting additional pressure on housing choices in addition to school decisions.

Enrollment changes during the pandemic

Public school enrollment in D.C. has generally been increasing over time in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. From the 2015-16 to the 2019-20 school years, enrollment increased by an average of 1,500 students per year. However, amidst COVID-19, the annual increase in enrollment shrank in the 2020-21 school year to just 111 additional students, indicating that some students who would otherwise have attended public school in D.C. may have left for other options.³⁷ Enrollment growth could be smaller than usual or expected because of enrollment decisions made during COVID-19.

These lower-than-usual enrollment numbers were driven by decreases in the number of very young students in noncompulsory grades: 1,000 fewer students enrolled in pre-kindergarten classes in school year 2020-21 than the previous school year. This corroborates with the experience of younger grades being particularly difficult to continue virtually and with the national trend of kindergarten enrollment (usually the initial

Figure 17. Pre-kindergarten to grade 12 enrollment over time

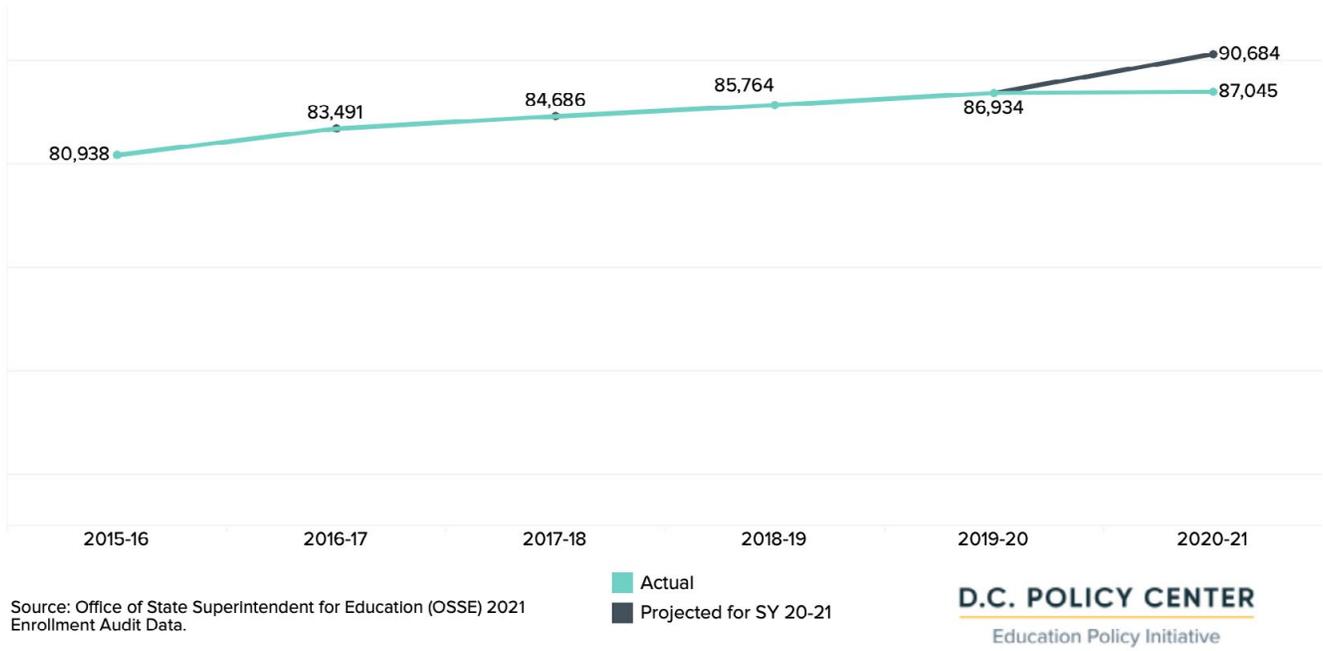
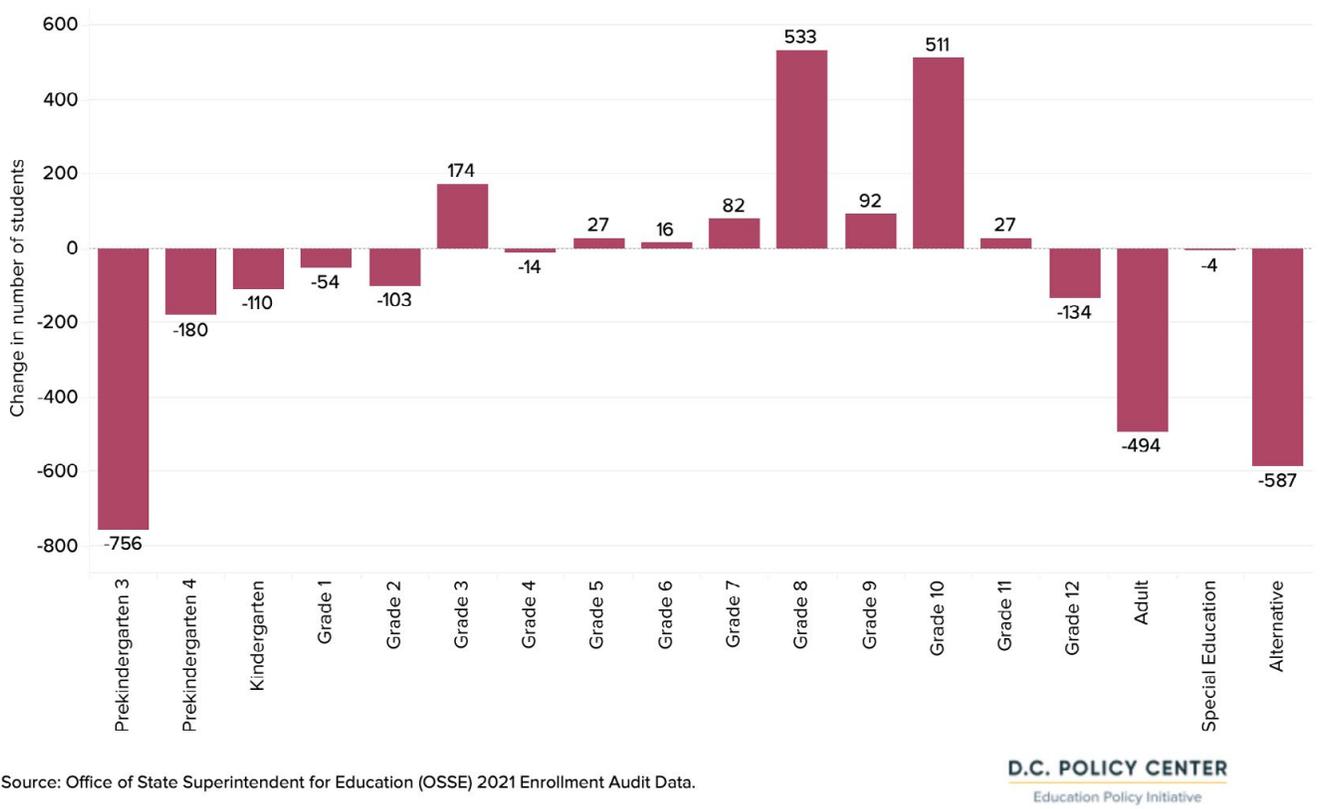


Figure 18. Change in audited enrollment between school years 2019-20 and 2020-21



grade of public schooling across the country) experiencing the largest dips (down by 9.3 percent in the fall of 2020 compared to 2019).³⁸ Lower enrollment in these grades could mean that pre-kindergarteners are opting into child development centers, private preschools, or staying at home with parents.

Declines in other compulsory grades are relatively small and could simply be a result of fewer new families moving into D.C. during COVID-19, and this could have reduced the number of new students entering D.C.'s public schools. Students also switched to other options in 2020-21, including private schools that offered in-person or hybrid instruction or homeschooling,³⁹ but as will be discussed next, our survey results show that there is no evidence of an exodus to the surrounding areas or private schools. These suggest that the enrollment dips are largely temporary, and enrollment will rebound if the youngest learners return and if migration patterns revert to pre-pandemic trends.

School enrollment changes during the pandemic

When the fieldwork for this survey was conducted in January and February of 2021, almost all of D.C.'s public school students (88 percent) were participating in school from home.⁴⁰ For these students, learning virtually had implications for how well they could learn and how parents and caregivers could balance childcare and work, while supervising their children's learning. Even amidst these disruptions, most D.C. parents (including those with children in public and private schools) did not make or even consider a change

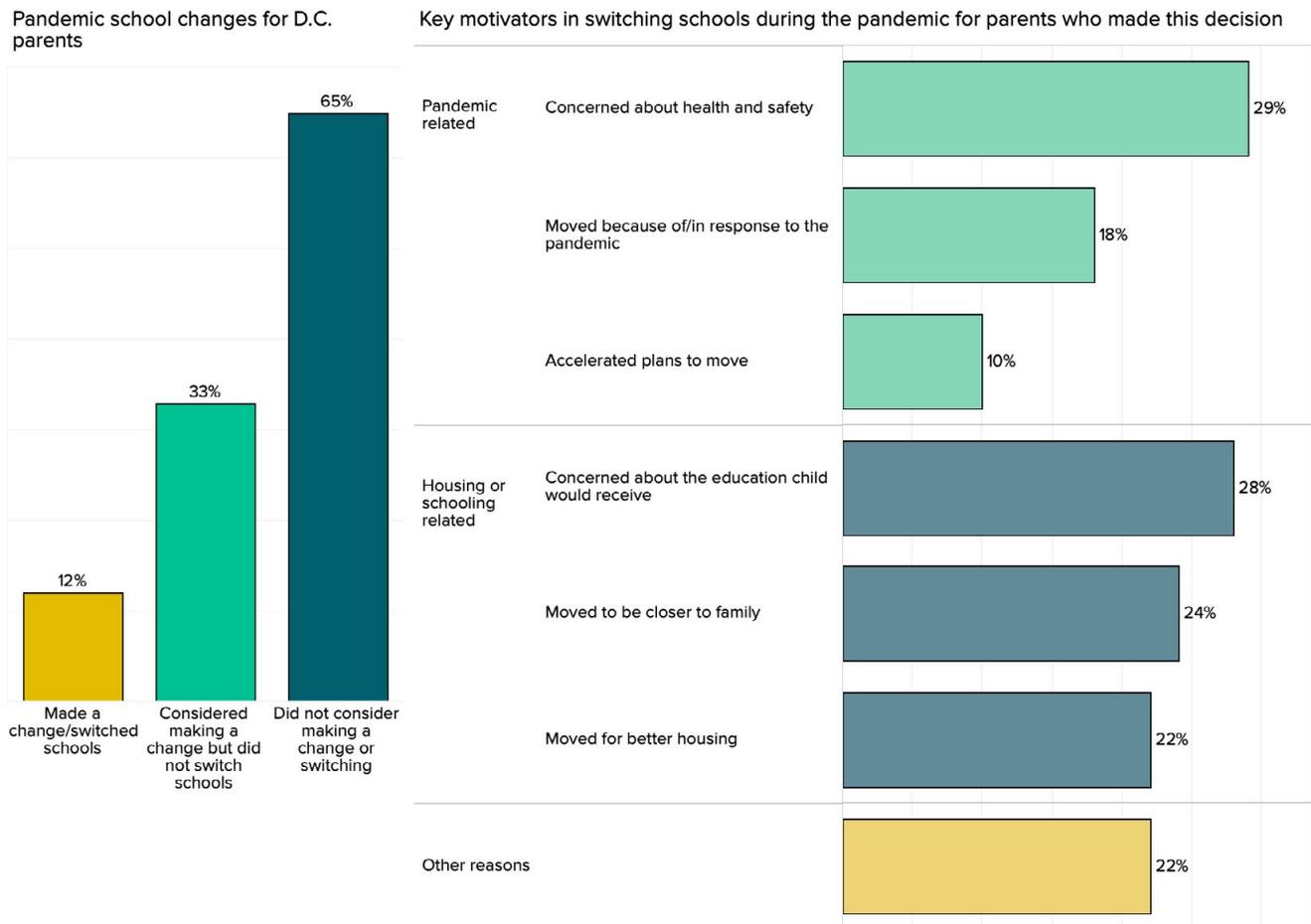
in school enrollment because of the pandemic (65 percent). Just over one in ten D.C. parents (12 percent) made a change in a child's school enrollment since March 2020, either switching them from one public school to another or taking them out of public schools.

Historical data show that a "switch rate" of 12 percent is not out of the ordinary. In a more typical school year, 18 percent of students eligible to reenroll at their public school in D.C. don't do so and instead switch to another school (including another public school in D.C., a private school, or an out-of-state option, for example).⁴¹ While this difference appears to be large, it should be interpreted with caution because the estimate is based on a small sample size.⁴² Our findings indicate that the 2020-21 school year could have had less student movement between schools than a typical year.

While parents who switched schools were motivated by pandemic-related concerns—29 percent were worried about health and safety—the remainder of the concerns are not particularly different from what parents consider in a typical year. For example, among those who made a change, 28 percent mentioned concerns about the education their child would receive, 24 percent wanted to move to be closer to family, and 22 percent moved elsewhere for better housing. In addition, 10 percent of the parents accelerated their plans to move rather than waiting for the end of the school year or for their children to complete a certain grade band.

When asked why they chose a new school, D.C. parents who switched cited school characteristics parents have valued even prior to the pandemic. These include school quality (34 percent), school approach (30 percent), school safety (25 percent), and even school demographics (13

Figure 19. D.C. parents' considerations for making a switch and reasons for those who did



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

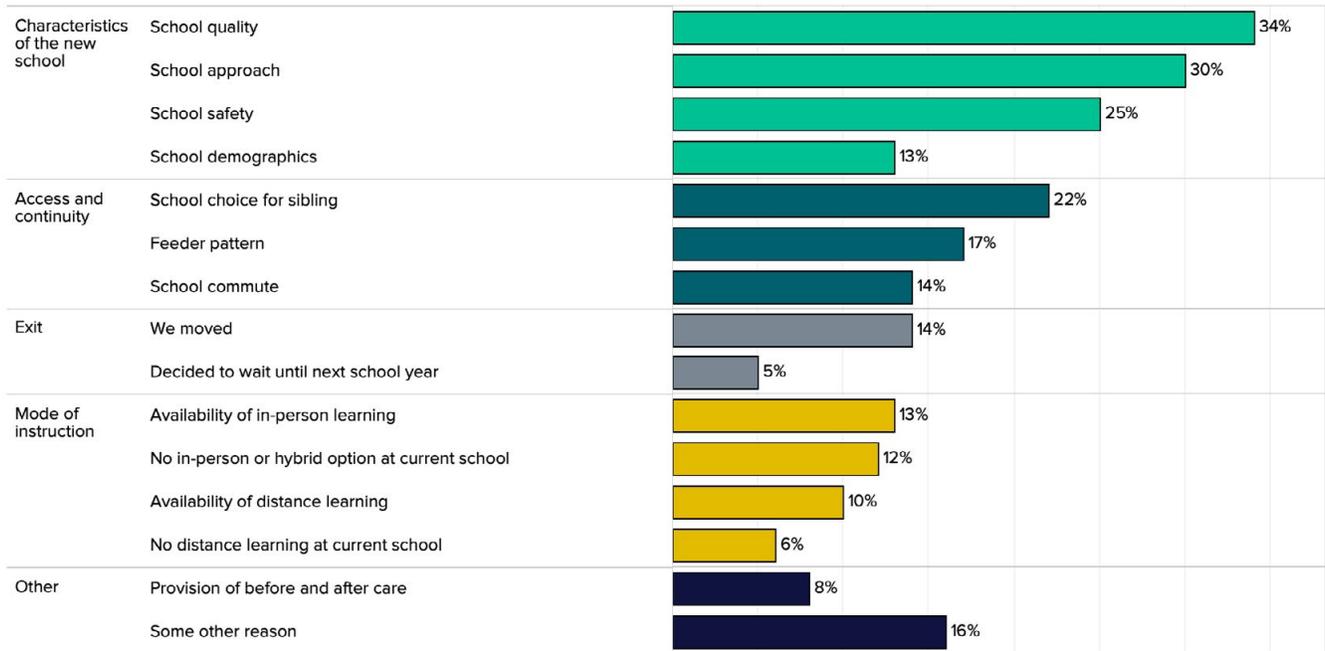
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percent). Access and continuity also played a strong role with 22 percent of parents mentioning school choice for a sibling as a factor prompting the change. Mode of instruction—perhaps the characteristic most directly related to the pandemic—was mentioned far less frequently, with 13 percent of those who made a switch reporting the availability of in-person learning as a reason and 10 percent reporting availability of distance learning as a reason.

Importantly, survey results suggest that while the pandemic was the catalyst for switching schools, it generally forced parents to execute a decision they were already considering. Nearly half of the parents who made a switch were already planning to change schools prior to March 2020.

Among those who switched, a DCPS or D.C. public charter school is still the most common school environment (77 percent pre- and post-March 2020), but on net, more parents switched

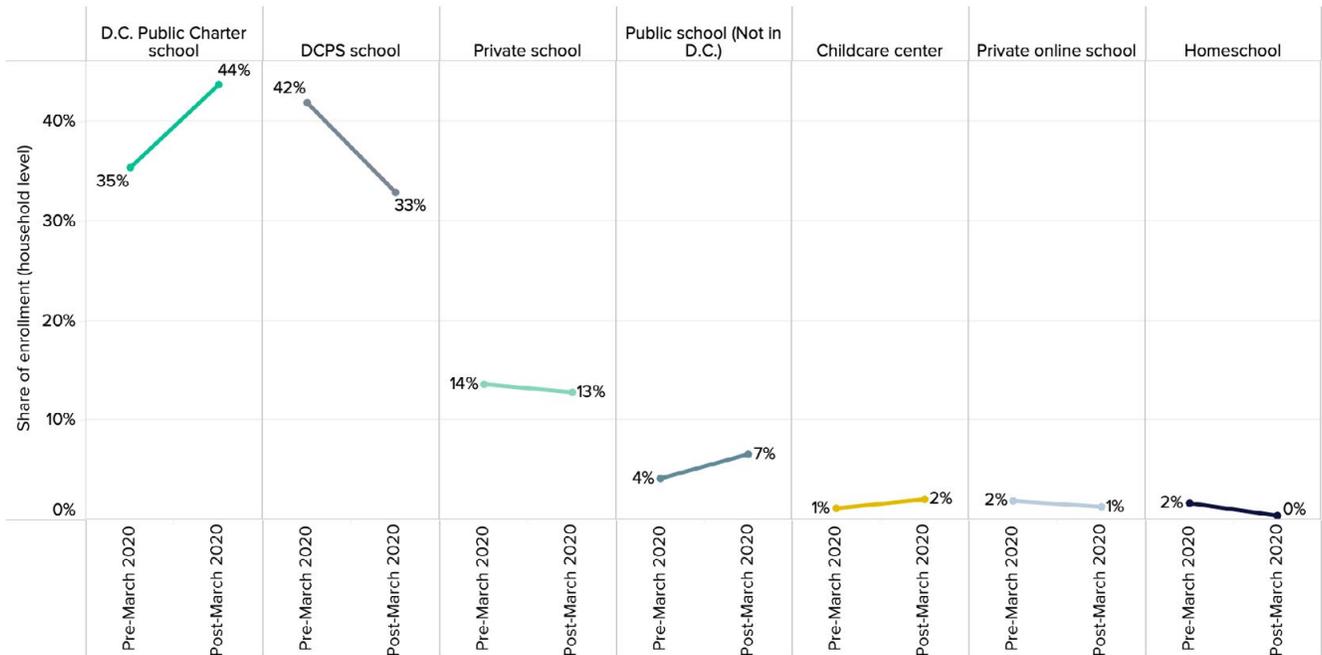
Figure 20. Reasons for choosing a new school for parents who switched during the pandemic



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

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Figure 21. School environments pre-March 2020 and post-March 2020 for those who switched



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

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from a DCPS school to a public charter school. 44 percent of parents report a child attending a D.C. public charter school post enrollment change compared to 35 percent pre-March 2020. Similarly, there is a decline in enrollment in DCPS schools (33 percent post-March 2020 compared to 42 percent pre-March 2020).

Many parents moved their children across various public school options, but there was not a huge exodus to private schools or out-of-state options. Parents tended to switch within public school options, with an increase in reported D.C. public charter school enrollment post-March 2020: The change in school enrollment also shows a small uptick in the proportion of students attending a non-D.C. based public school (4 percent before March 2020 and 7 percent post-March 2020).

Additional information from those parents who made a switch suggest that the changes could have been temporary. When asked in January/February of 2021, two-thirds (67 percent) of switchers are extremely or very likely to return to their prior school environment by the current school year (Fall of 2021). Parents attributed this decision to continuity of schooling (40 percent), a belief that the health crisis will be under control (36 percent), a desire to support public schools (27 percent), and continuity of friendships for their children (24 percent).

Satisfaction with D.C.'s public schools and the pandemic

As shown before, pre-pandemic, overall levels of satisfaction with D.C.'s public schools were

already fairly high. Among those with any experience with a child in D.C.'s public and public charter schools, 69 percent of D.C. parents reported being extremely or very satisfied.

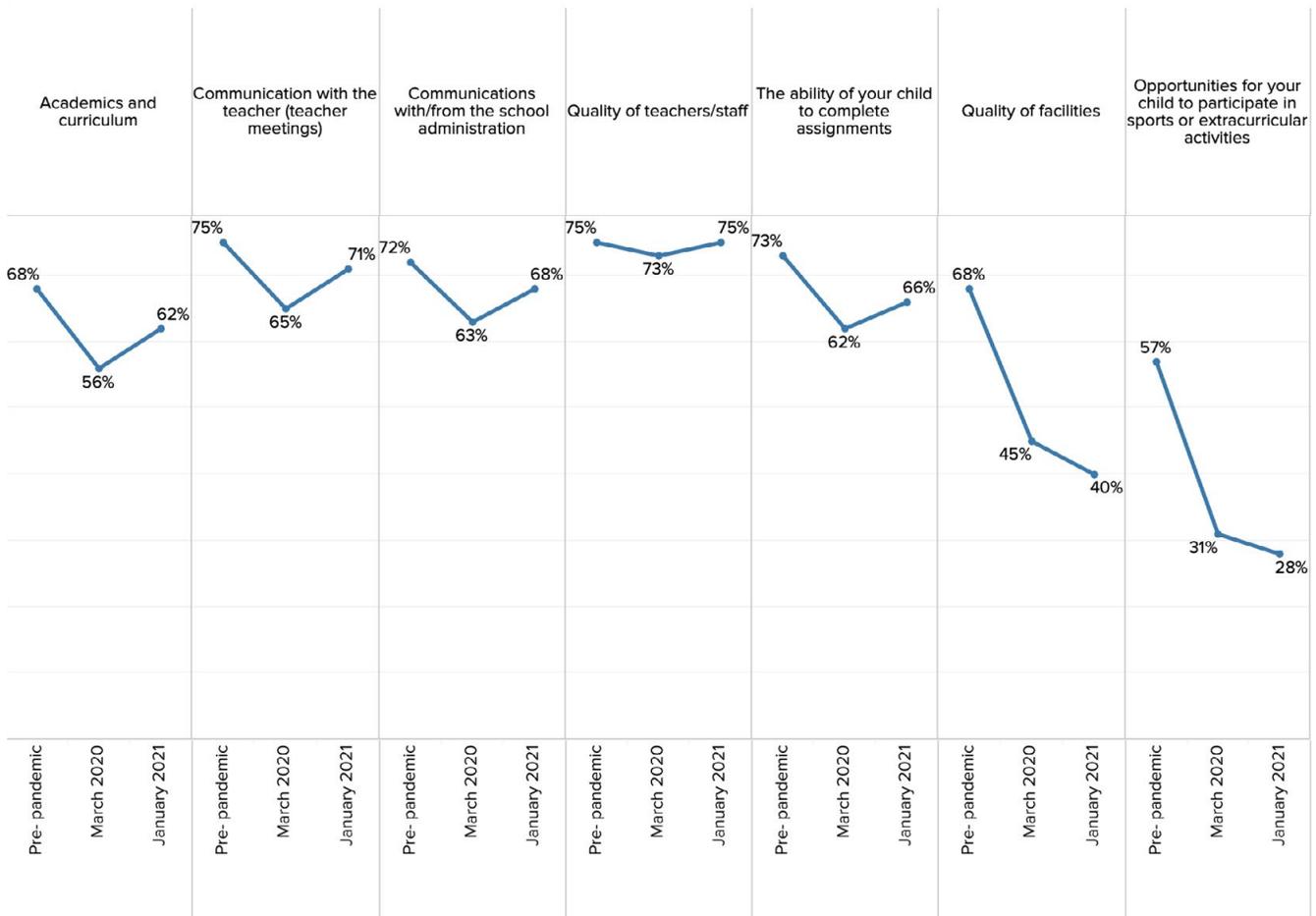
The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the 2019-20 school year in ways that school administrators, teachers, and parents could not possibly have anticipated or planned for. Despite these disruptions, parents remained generally satisfied with how DCPS and D.C. public charter schools were performing with ongoing pandemic actions.

The survey asked parents how their satisfaction levels changed immediately after the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, and further, where their satisfaction levels were about a year later, when the survey was being conducted. Overall, among D.C.'s public school parents, satisfaction levels dipped across all aspects the survey inquired about, but rebounded for aspects related to academics, curriculum, classroom experiences, communications, and quality of teachers and staff. However, outside of teacher and staff quality, satisfaction levels a year into the pandemic remained behind pre-pandemic levels. For example, the share of parents who are very satisfied or extremely satisfied contracted by 6 percentage points for academics and curriculum offered by schools and by 7 percentage points for the ability of their children to complete assignments.

The two areas where parent satisfaction continuously declined through the pandemic were the quality of facilities where the share of parents very satisfied or extremely satisfied shrank by 28 percentage points, and participation in sports and extracurricular activities where this share—which was already low at 57 percent—declined by 29

Figure 22. Satisfaction over time with school environments pre-March 2020 and post-March 2020 for D.C.'s public school parents

Share of D.C.'s public school parents who are very or extremely satisfied over time



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

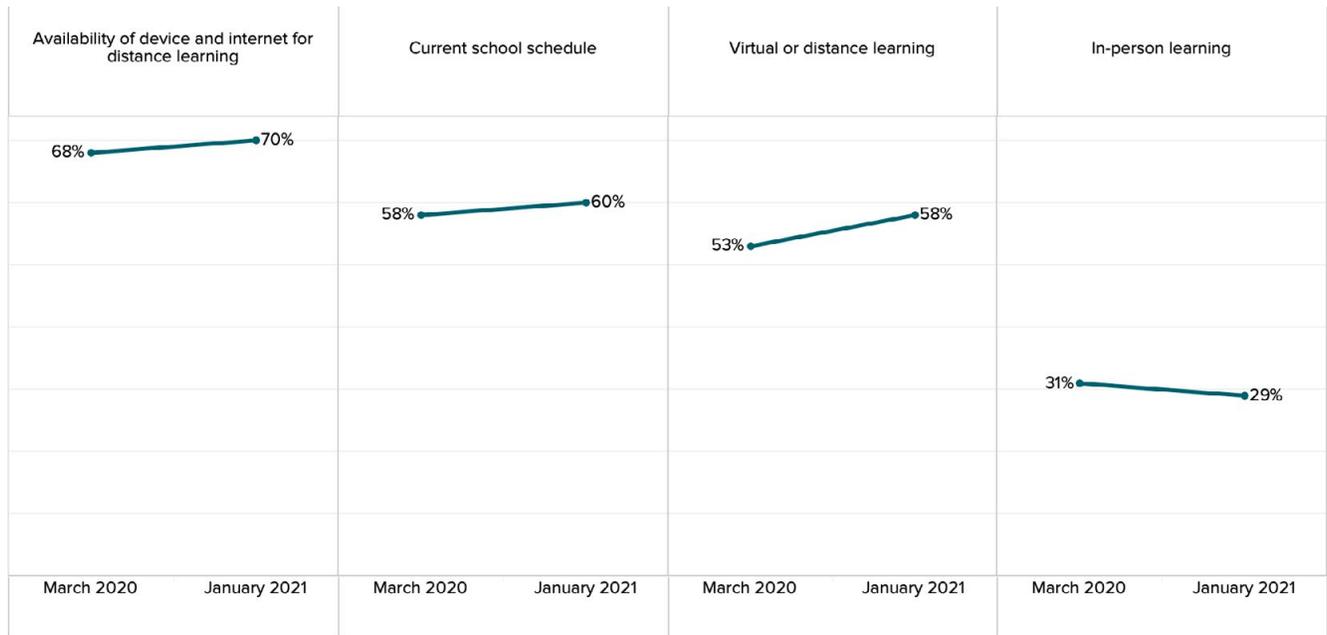
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percentage points. As students return to in-person learning this fall, perceptions and satisfaction levels in these areas will likely improve.

D.C.'s public school parents' satisfaction levels with changes and initiatives in response to the pandemic also improved through time. In January of 2021, most parents reported satisfaction with the core aspects of school including availability

of devices and internet for distance learning (68 percent), the current school schedule (58 percent), and virtual or distance learning (53 percent). These findings are aligned with surveys conducted during the pandemic by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education in June of 2020⁴³ and PAVE⁴⁴ in November 2020, both of which found that a majority of parents were satisfied with distance learning. As the survey was

Figure 23. Satisfaction with pandemic-related changes and initiatives among D.C.'s public school parents



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

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being conducted, there was great uncertainty about how in-person learning would take place, and schools were just beginning to return to in-person

learning on a very limited basis, and perhaps for these reasons, in these areas, satisfaction levels declined.

Part 5: Implications for future enrollment in public schools, academic outcomes, and policy

Enrollment in D.C.'s public schools had been increasing steadily before the pandemic. While more children being born in the District has contributed to growing enrollment, the key driver in enrollment growth has been an increase in the share of parents who choose D.C.'s public schools over other options. Still, according to the most recently available data, one out of five children born in the District do not even enroll in a public school for kindergarten; another child leaves public schools by 8th grade; and only two out of the five begin 12th grade in public schools.

In this study, we explored parent perceptions of schools and mechanisms through which they make decisions for their children's schooling. Importantly, we brought in the voice of those who exit — those parents who could have sent or did send their children to the District's public schools but eventually chose to leave, either by enrolling their children in private school or moving elsewhere in the region. This voice is important because it can provide insight on the factors that push families out of the District's public schools and out of the city. While some of these factors, such as getting a new job or changes in family circumstances, are beyond the influence of policy, others—a better understanding of what parents value in schools, how they perceive schools, what kind of information they use as they make choices, as well as their considerations of housing, transportation, and safety—can inform education policy and beyond.

Our findings show that there are notable differences between families who stay and those who leave, in terms of their socioeconomic characteristics, how they perceive schools, and how they use information to make choices. Our key findings and the consequent policy implications are summarized below.

Finding: Schools are an important factor in Leavers' decision to leave.

When asked in the survey, parents self-reported that the decision to leave D.C. is prompted by a variety of factors—but housing related concerns and school quality are reported far more frequently than other concerns. For less than a third of the Leavers, the decision to leave and exit the public school system was driven by factors outside of policy: change in personal circumstances, getting a new job, or wanting to live near family. For the remainder, housing and schooling factors are comingled and enforce each other.

Finding: For both D.C.'s public school parents and Leavers, school quality matters the most, but among Leavers, the reasons for why they think public schools are good or bad, are not well-articulated.

When asked what would have needed to change for Leavers to have stayed in DCPS or D.C. public charter schools, school quality is the most commonly mentioned item. However, what parents mean by quality is not always clear, and parents do not always provide detailed reasons why they have positive or negative perceptions of school quality, especially

when they are initially contemplating school choice and therefore do not have any specific experience with a specific school. This is evidenced by the generic statements on why perceptions are positive (for example “they are good schools” or “I like them,”) and even more generic observations on why schools are bad.

The findings of this report also underscore that quality is a broad term that captures many aspects of schools, and importantly, what parents mean by quality becomes more specific after they enroll their children in school. When asked during follow up interviews, parents mentioned: strong communication with teachers and administrators; modern approaches and methods; a safe environment; rigorous academics and curriculum; robust extracurricular choices; smaller class sizes; an excellent, experienced teaching staff; diversity; and modern facilities all as components of school quality.

Additionally, Leavers are more likely to mention broader concerns such as school safety, transportation options, and availability of before and after school programs as considerations. For those who have opted out of public schools even before their children started kindergarten, their perceptions are formed not by experience with a given school, but what they learn from third party information sources.

Finding: Leavers rely less on their networks and more on publicly available information in making decisions. D.C.’s public school parents rely more on experiences.

D.C.’s public school parents and Leavers use different sources of information as they make their schooling decisions. Half of D.C.’s public school parents mention word of mouth and school visits as influential sources of information in selecting their child’s school. Leavers also use school visits, but they are more likely to use websites to make their

school decisions than D.C.’s public school parents and less likely to use word of mouth.

Finding: Leavers tend to be middle-income, and their exit makes schools economically more segregated in ways that are not currently captured in data.

Nearly two-thirds of Leavers were in the middle-income ranges as described in the survey (between \$50,000 and \$150,000) compared to about a third of D.C.’s public school parents in this range. This means, as more Leavers take their children out of public schools, economic segregation increases at higher grade levels. At present, this changing economic profile is not captured in collected data—except by the share of at-risk students.

This has implications on how we should evaluate learning outcomes across different grade bands. For example, many have pointed out that changing demographics could explain, at least in part, improving learning outcomes. But little attention is paid on how increasing exit rates impact what we measure in later grades. By the same token, a loss of students from middle-income families could be explored to explain the drop in learning outcomes in high school.

Policy implications

Better understand different dimensions of quality.

A key component of increasing interest in public schools is providing information demanded by parents. As this and other research shows, parents value quality, but this term captures a multitude of characteristics, which are not always well understood. Importantly, perceptions of quality are more abstract among parents who have not yet sent their children to school. A city-wide study of what all parents in the city perceived as components of school quality can be informative on what parents value and why.

Expand available information on schools to include characteristics valued by parents. While existing data can inform parents on some of these aspects, parents rely entirely on perceptions for information about safety, environment, and teacher communications. The District and school leaders should consider releasing information on these characteristics, both for the entire school system and for specific schools.

Connect parents to networks even before their children attend school. Word of mouth and experiences of other parents can be an important source of information that could dissuade some Leavers from leaving. Connecting parents to other parents, for example, through Ward Education Councils, or having informational meetings at schools in addition to open houses where parents share experiences with those who are considering various school options can increase buy in.

Collect more data on the income characteristics of students to explore how economic segregation presents itself in enrollment and how this segregation changes across grade bands. At present, socio-economic characteristics of students' households are captured by who is considered "at-risk", which essentially divides the student body into two broad groups of "low-income" and "not-low-income." However, the results of this survey suggest that the degree of economic segregation increases at higher grades as middle-income families are more likely to take their children out of D.C.'s public schools. The District should collect more granular data on economic characteristics of students to better capture this changing picture.

Better examine the impact of shifting demographics across grade bands on learning outcomes. The socioeconomic makeup of Leavers has implications on how we should think of academic outcomes. Many have studied whether

improvements in measures of learning are largely driven by changing demographic characteristics due to gentrification, and not improvements in actual learning. This study suggests that the opposite could also be true, as in higher grades economic segregation in schools is higher. The District should consider better studying these opposing pressures of student demographics and how they relate to learning outcomes.

Expand before and after school program availability as well as transportation options, especially in earlier grades. Leavers frequently mention these two logistical items among the reasons for their exit.

Focus on overall housing affordability. Earlier D.C. Policy Center research shows that because of a high degree of choice in the public education system, the relationship between enrollment growth in schools and demographic and housing related changes in surrounding neighborhoods has weakened.⁴⁵ But this research shows that overall housing affordability continues to be a key factor in residents' decisions to stay or leave. The District invests a vast amount of resources for subsidized affordability, but many of the Leavers, who tend to be middle income,⁴⁶ would not qualify for these units. To keep families in D.C. and expand enrollment, policies that target overall housing affordability—especially through a less restrictive land use regime—would be far more effective than increasing subsidized affordability. The interaction between overall housing affordability and school enrollment is understudied and should be further explored.

Appendix A: Methodology

The methodology describes the sampling, data collection, and weighting approach for each group in detail.

Sampling

SSRS used a dual frame sampling approach with the goal of providing a representative sample of parents of school-age children in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. Sampled households were then screened, and qualified respondents – those who identified as parents of school-age children – were asked to continue with the interview. The sampling method used then drove the data collection protocol and weighting procedures.

D.C. sample

The sample for D.C. parents was a combination of a probability address-based sample (ABS) and a non-probability panel sample (381 from probability sample and 237 from non-probability panels). The ABS probability sample was drawn from the U.S.

Postal Service (USPS) Delivery Sequence File (DSF). Auxiliary data were then appended to the sample in order to run predictive models that would identify households more likely to have children so they could be sampled at a higher rate. This was done in two ways. First, using the appended data, the model was able to predict the likelihood of a household having children. Second, using geographic wards based on where people with children are more likely to reside in the district. The final sample consisted of 16,250 addresses. The non-probability panel sample targeted parents living in D.C. with school-aged children. The same vendors were used to select these cases and the non-D.C. parents.

Suburban sample

The sample for the suburban parents came exclusively from non-probability research panels.⁴⁷ The non-D.C. parents were selected from the cities and counties surrounding D.C. Initial qualification to participate in the survey included all parents of

Appendix A Table 1. Inner and outer counties surrounding D.C.

Inner counties	City of Alexandria (VA) Arlington County (VA) City of Falls Church (VA) Fairfax City (VA) Fairfax County (VA) Montgomery County (MD) Prince George’s County (MD)
Outer counties	Anne Arundel County (MD) Calvert County (MD) Howard County (MD) Loudoun County (VA) Manassas City (VA) Manassas Park City (VA) Prince William County (VA)

school-age children. This broader group of parents (n=812) answered the screener and section of the questionnaire, focusing on household composition and current school enrollment. Once parents identified as having once lived in D.C., those that never lived in D.C. were asked demographic questions to be used for weighting purposes. The true segment of interest – 332 suburban parents who once lived in D.C. and did send or could have sent a child to a DCPS or D.C. public charter school – completed the full survey instrument, exploring their decision-making related to school in

comparison to the D.C. resident parents. Suburban residents were categorized as living in inner or outer counties, per Appendix A Table 1.

Data collection

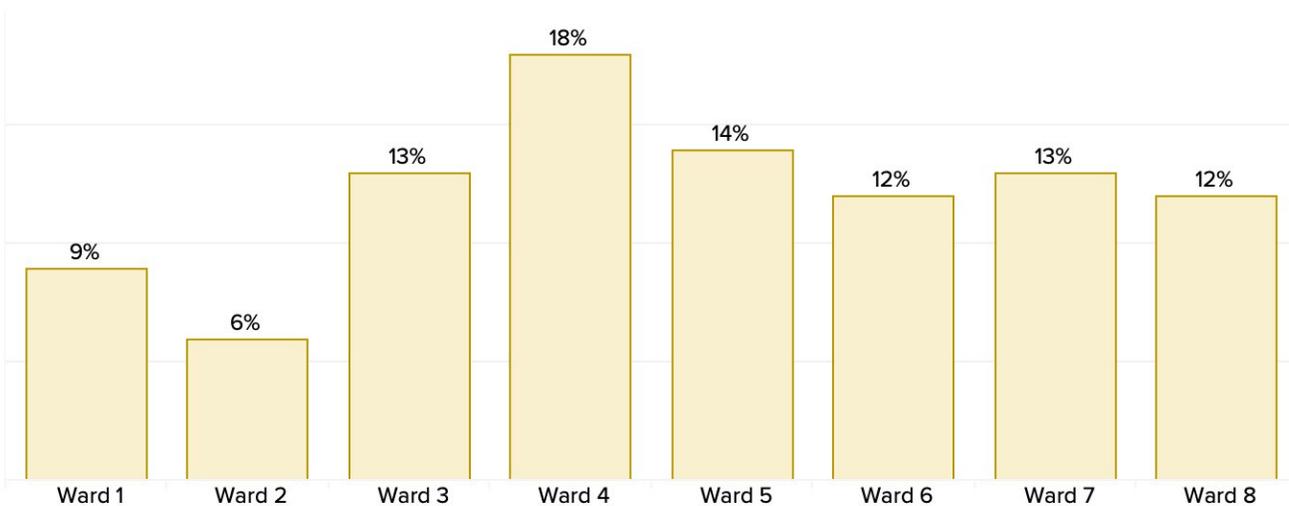
Responses were collected, in English, between January 4 and February 2, 2021. Participants, regardless of their method of selection, were invited to take the survey on the web or to call the SSRS toll-free 800 number where an interviewer would conduct the survey over the phone.

Appendix A Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by geography

Parents who moved from D.C. to suburbs



D.C. parents with children who attended public, private, or other types of schools



Source: D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey.

At the end of data collection, 1,429 respondents had completed the survey online and only one by telephone. The overall sample includes 618 parents of school-age children who reside in D.C. and as well as 812 parents of school-age children who reside in the surrounding areas (see Appendix A Figure 1).

ABS sample: Mailing protocol

The mailing protocol for the D.C. based ABS sample included two mailings. The first mailing included a one-page, full-color invitation letter and a \$1 pre-incentive sent via first class mail. The letter included the URL/QR code for the respondent to participate in the survey online. It also included an option for respondents to call the SSRS toll-free number to participate in the survey by phone. The second mailing was a reminder postcard, mailed roughly one week after the invitation letter. The postcard reiterated the importance of the research, the URL/QR code, and the toll-free number. SSRS mailed 16,250 letters and 16,250 reminder postcards and achieved 381 completed interviews from this sample, a ratio of 42.65:1.

Panel sample: Contact protocol

Participants in the panel were contacted directly by the panel company with language provided by SSRS. The participants received an invitation email with a link to take the survey. While the sample members did not receive \$1 like the ABS sample, they generally have benefits for participating in these panels. Participants were sent two reminder emails on average. Panels were used that were more likely to have parents who used to live in D.C.

Qualitative research

SSRS partnered with InsideOut Insights to conduct in-depth interviews. Eight one-hour interviews were collected before the quantitative data collection and seven were collected post quantitative data collection.

Weighting

SSRS used a hybrid weighting with calibration approach for these groups to minimize potential bias from the non-probability samples.

Appendix A Table 2. Weighting Variables

Sex	1 - Male 2 - Female
Age	1 - 18 to 29 2 - 30 to 49 3 - 50 to 64 4 - 65 or older
Education	1 - Some high school or less 2 - High school graduate 3 - Some college 4 - College graduate or more
Race/ethnicity	1 - White, not Hispanic 2 - Black, not Hispanic 3 - Hispanic 4 - Other race, not Hispanic
Internet user	1 - Yes 2 - No

ABS sample

The first step was to weight the probability sample to the weighting variables from Table 2, with the base weight applied. The second step was to extract hybrid calibration benchmarks from this weighted data.⁴⁸ The combined hybrid sample was then weighted to the target population benchmarks used in the probability sample weightings, plus the additional calibration variables. The benchmarks were derived from 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) data.⁴⁹

Panel sample

Suburban parents were weighted to parameters for all parents of school-age children in the

geographies of interest. The weighting used variables from Table 2, as well as the percentage living in inner or outer counties.

Margins of error

The margin of error for the total D.C. sample is ± 5.0 percentage points and ± 4.2 for the total sample of suburban parents at the 95 percent confidence level. Margins of error for specific subgroups vary according to the values in Appendix A Table 1.

Appendix A Table 3. Margins of error for the subgroups reported throughout the report

Group	Margin of error
D.C. parents	+/- 5.0
All students in D.C.'s public or public charter schools	+/- 6.0
Some students in D.C.'s public or public charter schools	+/- 19.4
No students in D.C.'s public or public charter schools	+/- 10.9
Suburban parents	+/- 4.2
Inner residents	+/- 5.5
Outer residents	+/- 6.5
Leavers	+/- 7.2
Leavers with student enrolled in D.C.'s public or public charter schools	+/- 17.0

Appendix B. Survey questions

1: Household Composition

S1. Including yourself, how many adults age 18 years of age or older live in this household?

S2. For how many of the children 18 years of age or younger living in this household are you the parent or guardian?

S2a. For how many children between the ages of 19 and 26 are you the parent or guardian?

Z9. Which of the following best describes the location of your main residence?

Z9b. Which ward in D.C. do you currently live in?

2: Current School Enrollment

S7. What grade of school is (CHILD's NAME) in this school year?

S9. Which one of the following best describes the school environment that (CHILD's NAME) currently attends?

S9c. Which, if any, of the following programs are provided by (CHILD's) school?

S9a. Where is (CHILD's) school located?

3: Perceptions of D.C. Public Schools

PS1. In your own words, how would you describe DCPS/D.C. Public Charter schools? Please think about your own experiences or base your answer on anything you might have seen or heard.

PS2. Thinking of your experience with DCPS/D.C. public Charter schools before March 2020, overall, how satisfied were you with DCPS/D.C. Public Charter schools?

PS3. Thinking of your experience with DCPS/D.C. Public Charter schools before March 2020, how satisfied are you with the following...?

4: School Decision-Making

SDM4. Which of the following was the most important factor in choosing a DCPS/D.C. public charter school for (child)?

SDM4a. What sources of information influenced your decision about where to send your child to school?

SDM4b. Did you ever apply to the common lottery or enroll in a DCPS or public charter school on behalf of your child?

5: Impact of COVID-19

COVID1. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, what is your level of satisfaction with DCPS and public charter schools as it pertains to...?

COVID3a. Thinking about this point in the school year, for each of these please tell us how well it is going for you or your child. How about...?

COVID4. Since March 2020, did you make a change, or did you consider switching schools?

COVID5. Please tell us why you (INSERT FROM COVID4) for (CHILD)?

COVID6. To what kind of school environment did you switch?

COVID6a. In what kind of school environment was your child/children enrolled before you moved/switched?

COVID7. Were you making plans to leave public school or move out of your DCPS or public charter school before March 2020, before the COVID health crisis began?

COVID8. Which of the following were your key motivators in this decision process?

COVID9. Ultimately, how important of a factor was the COVID health crisis in your decision to leave the DCPS or public charter school was enrolled in prior to COVID?

COVID10. How likely are you to return to your previous DCPS or public charter school for the fall of 2021?

COVID11. What are your top reasons for considering a return to your previous DCPS or public charter school?

6: Future Plans

FP1. How likely is it that that your child/children will change schools to one in a different feeder pattern in the future?

FP3. Please tell us for each child, will the new school in a different feeder pattern likely be...?

FP4. Why are you planning to make a change to a new school in a different feed pattern?

FP5. When are you considering making this change for (CHILD) in their feeder pattern?

7: Leavers

S15. To what degree did the choice of schools available in D.C. influence your decision to move out of D.C.?

LEAVE1. Which of the following would you say were reasons why you left D.C.?

LEAVE2. What would have needed to change for

you to have made the decision to stay in DCPS or D.C. Public Charter schools?

Z9a. Did you ever live in D.C.?

S11. When did your family move from D.C. to where you currently live?

S12. Was your child/Were any of your children school-aged pre-kindergarten through grade 12 when you lived in D.C.?

S13. Please indicate which of these children could have attended or did attend school in D.C.

Endnotes

- ¹ Public schools in this report refer to District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools.
- ² This is measured on net, by dividing the number of students enrolled in future years by the number of babies born in earlier years (not following individual students).
- ³ The survey was conducted by SSRS on behalf of the D.C. Policy Center.
- ⁴ Tedin, K., & Weiher, G. (2004, November). Racial/Ethnic Diversity and Academic Quality as Components of School Choice. *The Journal of Politics*, 66(4), 1109-1133. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1111/j.0022-3816.2004.00292.x>
- ⁵ Jochim, A., M. DeArmond, B. G., & Lake, R. (2014, December). How Parents Experience School Choice. Center for Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from Center for Reinventing Public Education: https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe_how-parents-experience-public-school-choice_1_1.pdf
- ⁶ Abdulkadiroglu, A., Pathak, P., Schellenberg, J., & Walters, C. (2017). Do Parents Value School Effectiveness? NBER Working Paper Series, Working Paper 23912. Retrieved from <https://economics.mit.edu/files/14573>
- ⁷ Glazerman, S., & Dotter, D. (2016). Market Signals: Evidence on the Determinants and Consequences of School Choice from a Citywide Lottery. Mathematica Policy Research. Retrieved from <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/market-signals-how-do-dc-parents-rank-schools-and-what-does-it-mean-for-policy>
- ⁸ Williamson, V., Gode, J., and Sun, H. 2021. We all want what's best for our kids: Discussions of D.C. public school options in an online forum. Governance Studies at Brookings Institution. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Discussions_DC_public_school_options_online_forum_Brookings-Report.pdf
- ⁹ Moored, G. and Metcalf, L. 2015. "D.C. Parenthood: Who Stays and Who Leaves?" D.C. Office of the Chief Financial Officer, Washington D.C. Available at <http://bit.ly/2j2Ts1S>
- ¹⁰ CBRE. 2021. COVID-19 Impact on Resident Migration Patterns. CBRE. Available at: <https://www.cbre.us/research-and-reports/COVID-19-Impact-on-Resident-Migration-Patterns>
- ¹¹ Dingel, Jonathan, and Brent Neiman (2020). "How many jobs can be done at home?" Becker-Freidman Institute for Economics at the University of Chicago, Research/White Paper
- ¹² Kolko, J., Badger, E., and Bui, Q. April 19, 2021. "The Upshot: How the Pandemic Did, and Didn't, Change Where Americans Move." *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/19/upshot/how-the-pandemic-did-and-didnt-change-moves.html>
- ¹³ However, the CPS does not inquire about schooling specifically. Sayin Taylor, Y. 2016. "Broadening our Thinking on the District." D.C. Policy Center, Washington, D.C. Available at: <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/broadening-thinking-dc-policy-center/>
- ¹⁴ Glazerman, S., & Dotter, D. (2016). Market Signals: Evidence on the Determinants and Consequences of School Choice from a Citywide Lottery. Mathematica Policy Research. Retrieved from <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/market-signals-how-do-dc-parents-rank-schools-and-what-does-it-mean-for-policy>
- ¹⁵ Here, we follow the construct first offered by Hirschman, A.O. 1970. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. Harvard University Press.
- ¹⁶ While the sample members did not receive the same small monetary inducement like the ABS sample, they generally have benefits for participating in these panels.
- ¹⁷ There were 381 from probability sample and 237 from non-probability panels.
- ¹⁸ County selection was based on the U.S. Census Combined Statistical Area (Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA,MD-WV MSA) and the Urbanized Area designations.
- ¹⁹ Margins of sampling error are not technically computable for non-probability online samples since selection probabilities of those panelists are unknown, and a portion of the target population is not represented in non-probability panels. We provide estimated margins of error here to provide a general assessment of error ranges that may be associated with the data. The reported margin of error from a nonprobability sample can be interpreted roughly as the margin of sampling error that would have been obtained from a probability sample of the same size with similar variation in the weights and does not account for any unmeasured error due to nonrandom selection mechanisms.
- ²⁰ Sampling fluctuations are only one possible source of error in a survey estimate. Other sources, such as respondent selection bias, questionnaire wording, and reporting inaccuracy, may contribute additional error of greater or lesser magnitude.
- ²¹ Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 [American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2014-2018]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V10.0>
- ²² Malik, Rasheed. 2018. The Effects of Universal Preschool in Washington, DC. Center for American Progress. Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2018/09/26/458208/effects-universal-preschool-washington-d-c/>
- ²³ Sayin Taylor, Y. 2018. Taking Stock of the District's Housing Stock: Full report. D.C. Policy Center. Available at: <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/taking-stock-full-report/>

- ²⁴ An estimated 14.7 percent of students in kindergarten through grade 12 attend private schools in D.C. (with a margin of error of 0.9 percent) based on the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates for 2015-2019.
- ²⁵ Coffin, C. 2018. Will Children of Current Millennial Become Future Public School Students? D.C. Policy Center. Available at: <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/future-public-school-students-report/>
- ²⁶ Data is from School Year 2020-21. Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME). 2021. EdScape: Trends in Enrollment by Sector. Available at: <https://edscape.dc.gov/page/trends-enrollment-sector>
- ²⁷ This is similar to findings in the D.C. Policy Center/SSRS survey, in which respondents reported that 14.8 percent of children attended private or parochial schools.
- ²⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. 2021. School Enrollment: Table S1401. American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2015-2019. Available at: <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=private%20school%20enrollment%20dc&tid=ACSST5Y2019.S1401>
- ²⁹ Coffin, C. 2018. Schools in the Neighborhood. D.C. Policy Center. <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/schools-in-the-neighborhood/>
- ³⁰ Belden Russonello Strategies, Inc. 2018. Shopping for Public School in the District of Columbia. Office of the D.C. Auditor (ODCA). Available at: <https://dcauditor.org/report/shopping-for-public-schools-in-the-district-of-columbia/>
- ³¹ District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). 2021. "#Reopen Strong: A safe return to learning for every student." Available at: <https://dcpsreopenstrong.com/>
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- ³⁷ Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2021. 2020-21 School Year Annual Enrollment Audit Supplemental Tables. Available at: <https://osse.dc.gov/page/data-and-reports-0>
- ³⁸ Goldstein, D. and Parlapiano, A. Aug. 7 2021. "The Kindergarten Exodus". The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/07/us/covid-kindergarten-enrollment.html>
- ³⁹ OSSE reported that the number of students registered for homeschooling almost doubled in school year 2020-21. While this sounds like a dramatic change, because of the low baseline, it only represented an increase of 375 students.
- ⁴⁰ Meghjani, T. 2021. D.C. public schools' plans for instruction in school year 2020-21. D.C. Policy Center. Available at: <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/dcps-instruction-2020-21/>
- ⁴¹ This data is based on reenrollment patterns during School Year 2018-19 and re-enrollment patterns in 2019. For details, see Office of the State Superintendent of Education. 2019. DC School Report Card: School Environment, Student Enrollment Changes. Available at: <https://dcschoolreportcard.org/state/99999-0000/student-movement>
- ⁴² The number of parents reporting a switch is 66, which is a small base.
- ⁴³ Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME). 2020. "Public School Family Engagement Survey Review." Available at: <https://dme.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dme/publication/attachments/DME%20Survey%20Deck.pdf>
- ⁴⁴ PAVE DC. September 2020. "PAVE Coffee Chat: Back to School Survey." Available at: https://www.dropbox.com/s/108939nqds8pohd/Back%20to%20School%20Survey%20Results_Final.pdf?dl=0
- ⁴⁵ Coffin, C. 2019. D.C.'s disconnect between citywide enrollment growth and neighborhood change. D.C. Policy Center. Available at: <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/districts-disconnect-between-citywide-enrollment-growth-and-neighborhood-change/>
- ⁴⁶ There is a dearth of middle-income housing in the District: 28 percent of single-family homes with at least two bedrooms are affordable to a household with two adults earning the area median income, for example.
- ⁴⁷ Facebook advertising was utilized to boost the sample size; however, this outreach resulted in no additional completed interviews.
- ⁴⁸ The calibration dimensions used were: go to the movies, know someone who is pregnant, hours on internet, first to try new products describes self, times moved to new home, and enrollment of first and second child.
- ⁴⁹ Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 [American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2014-2018]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V10.0>