



D.C. POLICY CENTER

Education Policy Initiative

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

YEARS 5 & 6 OF THE D.C. POLICY CENTER'S EDUCATION POLICY INITIATIVE

Education for Opportunity

An examination of how D.C.'s public schools create opportunity through progress into upper grades and transitioning to workforce

JULY 2021 - JUNE 2023

Established in 2017, the D.C. Policy Center's Education Policy Initiative (EPI) brings original and objective analyses to education policy discussions and formulation in the District of Columbia.

EPI's research questions reflect the D.C. Policy Center's broad urban policy perspective, making our work unique in the education research space.

We recognize that public schools factor into where families want to live; how public schools mix students from different backgrounds can increase opportunities (or amplify inequities); schools can shape neighborhoods, and vice versa, even in a unified school district with a great degree of choice; and that schools can alter how employers perceive the local workforce.

Thinking of the public school system through this urban policy lens is important because it focuses the policymakers on what local laws and policies can do to bring about change.

EPI is also unique among other organizations engaged in education research or policy formulation in D.C.

In its first two years (2017-2019), EPI explored how demographics and schools intersect in D.C.

The EPI team examined how feeder patterns impact the demographic and economic make-up neighborhoods, painted a landscape of diversity in the District's public schools, and examined how D.C.'s millennials (currently aged 24 to 39) could change the demands on public school systems as they transition into parenthood.

During Years 3 and 4 (2019-2021), our focus moved from demographic change to equity: we examined how accessible the District's most racially diverse schools have been through the city's common lottery; showed that the relationship between school enrollment, neighborhood population and housing prices has been weakened; and identified "leveler schools" that have created the best environment for students who are at greatest risk of academic failure.

The main purpose of our research is to increase knowledge and change education policy for the better.

As such, our research is increasingly driven by demand from policymakers, schools, and education-focused agencies. For example, in 2019 and 2020, in response to demand from schools and the District agency that is responsible for common lottery, EPI published two reports on how a voluntary preference for at-risk students adopted by schools that participate in the common lottery could change student outcomes, school demographic profiles, and therefore economic and racial inclusion at schools.

The first report used school-level data shared by partner schools to show that while the systemwide impact of an at-risk preference might be small, such a policy could make a profound difference in access to schools with low shares of at-risk students and high wait lists.

The second report, which used student-level data obtained from the District government under a data sharing agreement, found that while students who are at-risk of academic failure use the District's common lottery to apply for out-of-boundary or public charter schools, they often submit applications after the common lottery deadline and are thus more likely to end up on waitlists at schools where all open seats have been filled.

These findings helped support the D.C. Council's adoption of legislation in 2020 to allow for such a preference. Schools can opt-in to this preference for the first time in the 2022-23 school year (and the lottery period from December 2021 to March 2022).

Similarly, our research on how the school district could benefit from independent education has directly shaped legislation that the city adopted to create a Research-Practice Partnership, of which we are now a part.

In 2020, we also published our first *State of D.C. Schools* report, which is now the “go-to” source for those who want to learn how the District’s public schools changed over time, where they

have excelled, and where more work needs to be done.

Our research agenda for the next two years is driven by demand from stakeholders.

In choosing our focus area (Education for Opportunity) and research products for the next two years, we followed feedback from education-focused government agencies, schools, policymakers, our community partners, and our advisory board. As such, this proposal reflects our synthesis of the needs and interests of those who can make a real change and the research questions we raise will allow for deeper dives into issue areas where new or better knowledge is needed.

We understand that successful changes to education policy requires persuasive research and buy-in.

To strengthen our ties with community and understand stakeholders better, we convened stakeholders for critical discussions around key issues (for example, how a priority for an at-risk preference in D.C.’s common lottery could best help students furthest away from opportunity). We have also created a knowledge base of education community resources with our State of D.C. Schools report and created the D.C. Voices series in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to provide real-time updates on how students, their families, and schools are navigating school closures at a time when data on the situation are scarce.

Why is the D.C. Policy Center’s Education Policy Initiative Important in the District’s Education Policy Landscape?

The Education Policy Initiative’s work to date has provided data-rich analyses of the complex landscape of traditional public and public charter schools in the District of Columbia.

Most importantly, the D.C. Policy Center (including its Education Policy Initiative) is arguably the only D.C.-focused think tank that can persuasively speak to representatives of any political stripe. This is because our research is well-respected by a wide variety of policymakers, education practitioners, researchers, and journalists. Our work is data-driven and ideologically agnostic, and our demeanor is respectful, inclusive, and considerate of all points of view. In the education sphere, for example, we have the ears of local advocates who support both traditional public and public charter schools; those who support or have objections to the mayoral governance of the school system; and a wide group of leaders including education-related agency heads, school leaders, the legislative branch in charge of oversight, and the auditor.

The D.C. Policy Center’s Education Policy Initiative is remarkably generative.

Since October of 2017, the Education Policy Initiative has authored 9 major reports and over 50 articles. We have also expanded our engagement, hosting three in-person or virtual events that attracted between 50 and 100 attendees each, developing stronger relationships with schools by seeking input on the upcoming research-practice partnership, and interviewing stakeholders for our *D.C. Voices* series.

We have made the jump from relying solely on publicly available data to gaining the trust of schools and education agencies to share their

data in confidence with us. Our work is regularly mentioned by local media including *WAMU* and the *Washington Post* and has also been highlighted by national outlets such as *EdWeek* and *The 74*.

Why “Education for Opportunity”?

The intense competition for jobs in the District and the surrounding metropolitan area demands a strong skill set in addition to education credentials.

For the 94,000 public school students in the District, schools must provide the foundational knowledge and skillsets for a successful life. Yet the District’s public schools are not providing an equitable education for all students¹ and life outcomes for students are drastically different across subgroups. And for many, outcomes are not known.² Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these inequities: Early signs show that the disruption to learning has been greater for at-risk students.³ Therefore, decisions by school leaders, efforts by teachers, and parent engagement are even more important for future opportunity than before.

Through its next two years of research, EPI will focus on pathways to opportunity through schools and beyond in the District of Columbia by connecting the education system to other parts of the policy landscape.

We will examine opportunity at schools by making connections between how students are served today and what that means for their future, with a focus on how COVID-19 has altered the paths to opportunity. Additionally, as school success is not enough to compete for the region’s high paying jobs, we will explore what else is needed for the District’s former public school students to succeed and how the city could track outcomes for its young people.

¹ Even before the pandemic, learning outcomes on the state assessment for students at-risk for academic failure were lower than their peers: The gap in the percent meeting or exceeding expectations between at-risk students and other students was 29 percentage points in ELA and 26 percentage points in Math in school year 2018-19 – on average, one in every five at-risk students met or exceeded expectations in ELA or Math, and one in every two not at-risk students did so. For details, see Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE). (2019). *D.C. State Report Card, 2018-19*.

² Coffin, C. & Meghjani, T. (2020). *Transition to College or Career for the District’s High School Students*. D.C. Policy Center.

³ Fall assessment data for students at DCPS and 11 public charter LEAs estimate that during school closures from March 2020 to the fall of 2020, this sample of students likely lost four months of learning in math, and one month in reading. At-risk students in this sample likely lost five months of learning in math and four months in reading. EmpowerK12 (2020) *COVID-19’s Impact on Student Achievement and Academic Growth in DC*. Retrieved from: <https://www.empowerk12.org/research-source/covid-impact-achievement-dc>

EPI Years 5 and 6: Education for Opportunity planned work

	1. The COVID Challenge	2. Opportunity at Schools	3. Transition to Workforce
Reports	<p>State of D.C. Schools, 2021-22: Topic to be determined in March 2022</p> <p>State of D.C. Schools, 2022-23: Topic to be determined in March 2022</p> <p>Enrollment after COVID-19: Will enrollment growth return after COVID?</p>	<p>School financing and equity: What does the funding formula mean for equity at the school level?</p> <p>School boundary primer: What are the potential outcomes from redrawing school boundaries in D.C.?</p>	<p>Adult and alternative charters: How do adult public charter schools advance life outcomes for their students?</p> <p>Measuring early career outcomes in D.C.: How can the District track life outcomes of former public school students?</p>
Questions for planned briefing papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did programs support student well-being and socioemotional learning? • What was the supply of high impact tutoring? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did enrollment or outcomes for at-risk students shift at schools due to the at-risk preference? • How were ESSER funds spent and informed? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do the skills of District's current talent pipeline match the skills valued by local employers?
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • D.C. Voices • Community advisors • Focus groups (parents, employers, teachers, and others) 		
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council and State Board of Education testimony • Cross support for other organizations in the space • Briefings with policymakers 		
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicly available data • Data generated by the D.C. Policy Center: D.C. Policy Center regional survey of parents • Student level data (requested from District's Office of the State Superintendent of Education, or accessed through the research-practice partnership) • Data shared by schools 		