

D.C.'s career education strategy has a gap: Adult learners

Only 18 out of every 100 D.C. ninth graders go on to earn a degree or workforce credential after high school. The FY2027 budget makes smart investments in closing that gap. It also makes a cut that works against that goal.

What the budget proposes

The FY2027 budget invests \$2.4 million in Advanced Technical Centers (ATCs), which are high school programs that combine classroom learning with hands-on career training, and \$200,000 in the Education Through Employment Pathways (ETEP) data system that tracks whether D.C. students actually find good jobs after graduation. At the same time, it cuts funding for Adult and Family Education (AFE) grants by \$0.4 million, a cumulative reduction of \$2.5 million since FY 2025. These grants help adults without a diploma or basic literacy skills gain credentials and find work.

What we found

The difference education makes in D.C. is measurable: 65 percent of adults raised in D.C. with a bachelor's degree report earning a living wage, compared to just 17 percent of those with only a high school diploma. But career-connected programs are making a difference. D.C. students who participated in apprenticeships or career-focused high school programs report stronger earnings and better preparation for work. Students who complete ATCs show strong rates of credential attainment and better attendance. Meanwhile, approximately 40,000 D.C. adults lack a high school diploma. AFE-funded programs are reaching them effectively, with 39 percent of participants securing employment.

Why it matters

D.C.'s graduation rate is at a record high; but a diploma is not a destination. It is the starting point for a longer journey toward economic security that many D.C. residents never complete. The programs in this budget are designed to extend that journey. ATCs give students a head start, ETEP tells the city what's actually working, and AFE gives adults who missed those opportunities a second chance. Cutting AFE breaks the chain.

Recommendations

The D.C. Policy Center recommends the Council take the following steps:

- Maintain the \$2.4 million investment in ATCs. Data show that students are completing programs, earning credentials, and showing up to school.
- Keep funding ETEP to help the District understand which programs are actually working.
- Restore the \$2.5 million cut to AFE grants to help 40,000 D.C. adults without a diploma find a path forward.



A city that works requires fiscal discipline, economic growth, and effective government services. Following the release of the D.C.'s 2027 budget proposal, experts from the D.C. Policy Center are sharing key insights for policymakers to consider as they review the budget proposal and prioritize investments.

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