



D.C. POLICY CENTER

Education Policy Initiative

**RESEARCH AGENDA
YEARS 7 & 8 OF THE D.C. POLICY CENTER'S EDUCATION POLICY INITIATIVE**

Changes to public education in the post-pandemic years

An examination of the pandemic's reverberating and long-lasting impacts on D.C.'s public schools

JULY 2023 - JUNE 2025

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); how 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 on the policymakers on what local laws and policies can do to bring about change.

Over the last six years EPI's research built new knowledge that is critical for developing sound public policy. In its first two years (2017-2019), EPI explored how demographics intersect in D.C. This foundational research explored the connections between the school feeder patterns and the demographic make-up of neighborhoods, painted a landscape of diversity in the District's public schools, and examined how D.C.'s housing stock limitations can shift demand on public schools as D.C.'s millennials 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 in-demand schools have been through the city's common lottery; and identified "leveler schools" that have created the best academic environment for students who are at the greatest risk of academic failure.

During Years 5 and 6 (2021-2023), we focused on how schools connect students to opportunities. EPI surveyed

families in the region to find out what makes them stay in and leave D.C.'s public schools, explored what it would take to know what happens to graduates after high school, and looked behind enrollment numbers to see what could be driving a decrease during the pandemic. Importantly, after COVID-19 began in the spring of 2020, EPI has been consistently checking with stakeholders to better inform research topics and elevate community voices.

How we've paved the way for education policy change

The main purpose of our research is to increase knowledge and change education policy for the better, especially in the areas of equity in educational opportunity, strong college and early career outcomes, and racially and socioeconomically integrated schools. Built on these values, our research is driven by demand from policymakers, schools, and education focused agencies and thus paves the way for education policy change. For example:

2018: We used our research on how school districts could benefit from independent education research to help craft legislation that the city adopted to create a research-practice partnership. This organization is now created, and we are a part of it.

2019 and 2020: We worked with a subset of public charter schools and My School DC to analyze how a voluntary preference for at-risk students in the common lottery could change student outcomes, school demographic profiles, and therefore socioeconomic inclusion in schools. Using student-level data obtained from the District government under a data sharing agreement, we found that while students who are at-risk of academic failure use the District's common lottery to apply for our-of-boundary or public charter schools, they often submit applications after the

common lottery deadline and 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, including seats specifically set-aside for at-risk students. Students opted-in to this preference for the first time in the 2022-23 school year. In our next research cycle, we will be asking for student-level data to examine how this at-risk preference changed access to schools for at-risk students.

2021: Based on demand from CityWorks DC and with interest from the Deputy Mayor for Education, we developed a blueprint for tracking early career outcomes in D.C. This report took stock of what D.C. government and public high schools already do to gather information on early career outcomes and presented three alternative paths through which other jurisdictions have undertaken this difficult task:

1. Making better linkages between existing administrative data housed in different government agencies (namely longitudinal student data and administrative reports employers file for unemployment insurance purposes);
2. Connecting state level data to national datasets (such as student data with Census data); or
3. Conducting periodic surveys. This work also offered considerations for how D.C. could pursue a longitudinal postsecondary and workforce data system.

EPI's response to COVID-19

When COVID-19 began, we had to shift our work from relying on data for analysis to a world where certain data (assessments, for example) were not released and other data points (teacher retention in previous years, for example) was not relevant to predict future outcomes. We also had to respond to an ever-changing education policy landscape. To overcome these challenges, we shifted to more qualitative research, in particular highlighting community voices and conducting focus groups.

In response to the pandemic, the EPI team launched a D.C. Voices series to provide real-time updates on how students, their families, and schools are navigating school closures during the pandemic at a time when data on the situation were scarce. D.C. Voices is deliberately different from our other education research and intentionally elevates community perspectives with a brief framing of the local context. Each article focuses on a particular subject relevant to the moment and includes reactions to the same questions from three to five stakeholders. The team published one D.C. Voices piece per month during the first year of the pandemic (now a quarterly publication) and has heard from those impacted the most intensely during distance learning – D.C.'s parent advocates, students, educators—as well as those in leadership roles at schools, child development centers, nonprofits, and education agencies, including the DCPS Chancellor, the Chief Performance Officer at DC PCSB, and the Deputy Mayor for Education, among others.

How we engaged the community in developing this proposal

Over the past five years, EPI has intentionally increased community engagement efforts and accessed new data. We have established student, parent, and teachers groups and leads for our regular outreach to community members; we brief agencies and elected officials on the issues that matter most to them; and we request and incorporate feedback from our research advisors and peer organizations throughout our research process.

Similarly, in choosing our focus area of change after the pandemic and research products for the next two years, we embarked on a three-stage engagement process where we convened community members, local organizations, and our research advisors to make sure that the next two years of research are relevant and important to their interest and needs.

Stage 1: Collect feedback from community members and policy stakeholders: One of our main

objectives was to center the interests of those most involved in day-to-day education operations: students, teachers, and parents. We convened listening sessions with each group of stakeholders to learn more about what research topics most touch their educational experiences and what they think our research priorities should be. Concurrently, we distributed a questionnaire to central education agencies and elected officials for additional insight and feedback.

Stage 2: Test our ideas with our peers: We took the main findings from the listening sessions and questionnaire and shared them with a group of representatives from local organizations to hear how these areas align with their own organizational priorities and what they see as most relevant for education policy in the next two years.

Stage 3: Shape research products with our research advisors: Taking the combined findings from the listening sessions, agency questionnaires, and feedback from peer local organizations, we presented a set of research priority areas and briefing questions to our EPI research advisors to get their feedback

on our proposed topic areas, methodologies, and connections to national contexts. As such, this proposal reflects our synthesis of the needs and interests of those who can make a real change for D.C.'s students. The research questions we raise will allow for deeper examinations of issue areas where new or better knowledge is needed.

Why post-pandemic changes in education?

Our research agenda for the next two years will focus on how students, teachers, families, and school communities are recovering from the impact of the pandemic.

The disruptions from COVID-19 imposed a profound toll on education. After a shortened school year in 2019-20 and a full year of virtual learning in 2020-21, several years of D.C.'s progress in improving learning outcomes and closing achievement gaps have been eroded. And enrollment in D.C.'s public schools has stopped growing, which, in combination with the pending expiration of federal recovery funds, means uncertain school budgets in the coming years. The recovery period also represents a chance to take stock of how education changed during the pandemic and how it should change for the better to meet current needs.

The reverberating impacts of the pandemic, from early childhood to postsecondary and career, will be the guiding theme for EPI's work in Years 7 and 8.

In Years 7 and 8 of EPI, the D.C. Policy Center will publish six major reports on topics and two annual State of D.C. Schools reports to create further knowledge and progress in the three themes (see Table 1, next page, for overview).

Specifically, the reports will focus on three themes:

1. The reverberating impacts of the pandemic;
2. Planning for the future; and
3. Measuring success.

Although the hardest years of the pandemic are behind D.C., the most challenging and crucial years of recovery are ahead. On recovery, two State of D.C. Schools reports and two-issue specific reports will analyze closely the impact and causes of declining high school attendance, the implications for available resources at the school level when federal recovery money expires, and taking stock of the education landscape. On planning for the future, the work will examine issues that impact the success of the public education system in D.C. and in other school districts: the teacher pipeline and building connections to college and career. On measuring success, reports will explore the case for improved information on early literacy at the systems level and the impact of the newly established equitable access option in the common lottery.

EPI Years 7 and 8: Post-pandemic changes to education planned work

	1. The reverberating impacts of the pandemic	2. Planning for the future	3. Measuring success
Reports	<p><i>The impact and implications of modified attendance policies on high school absenteeism</i> How has attendance shifted during the pandemic for high school students, and what approaches would help turn it around?</p> <p><i>The fiscal cliff the future of public education finance</i> What will be the impact when federal recovery resources (ESSER funds) end?</p> <p><i>State of D.C. Schools, 2022- 23 and 2023-24</i> How are D.C.'s schools and students recovering from the pandemic?</p>	<p><i>Teacher pipeline</i> What strategies are working to recruit and train teachers, especially teachers of color?</p> <p><i>Connections to college and career for high school students</i> What is in place, who participates, and how can we track outcomes?</p>	<p><i>The case for a citywide literacy assessment</i> How can more data on early literacy outcomes better inform the actions of policymakers and parents?</p> <p><i>Impact of the equitable access preference</i> Did enrollment or outcomes in the common lottery for at-risk students shift at schools due to the at-risk preference?</p>
Questions for potential briefing papers	<p>Which of the recovery priority spending areas (school-based mental health, workforce investments, high impact tutoring, for example) are likely to continue after ESSER funds?</p> <p>How are schools using data and technology now compared to pre-pandemic years?</p>	<p>To what extent is housing is affordable for early childhood educators who are working in the child care sector?</p> <p>What does it look like to experience staff shortages at schools?</p>	<p>What would a high school alumni survey look like?</p> <p>What measures do we have to track student wellbeing and how mental health resources are provided?</p>
Community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community listening sessions • DC Education Research Collaborative • D.C. Voices • Research advisors 		
Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council and State Board of Education testimony • Cross support for other organizations in the space • Briefings with policy makers 		
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicly available data • Student-level data accessed through the DC Education Research Collaborative and My School DC • Data shared by schools 		