D.C.'s Quiet Crisis in College Access & Completion

November 2023

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ABOUT THIS REPORT AND ITS SCOPE

The purpose of *D.C.'s Quiet Crisis in College Access and Completion* is to help inform and influence policymakers in their development of policies to improve postsecondary enrollment and completion outcomes for students of color in the District of Columbia. The scope of this report is intentionally narrow: an overview of some existing policies ripe for reform as well as some new ideas that have worked well elsewhere. Views expressed in this report are solely those of Education Reform Now researchers and experts.

ERN
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

ABOUT EDUCATION REFORM NOW DC

Education Reform Now DC (ERN DC) is a local chapter of a national non-profit, non-partisan think tank and advocacy organization that promotes increased resources and innovative reforms in preK-16 public education, particularly for students of color and students from low-income families. ERN DC believes that all public school students must graduate from high school with essential skills and receive a high-quality, affordable postsecondary education and the work-based experience and credentials necessary to earn a livable wage.

For more information visit: https://edreformnow.org/chapters/district-of-columbia/

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The District of Columbia is experiencing a quiet crisis in college access and completion. For every 100 students who start high school together, 25 will not graduate, 37 will graduate but not pursue further education, and 30 will start college but not complete within six years. Only eight out of 100 will complete postsecondary within six years.[1]

This crisis has severe repercussions, especially for students of color. D.C. boasts the highest percentage of residents with advanced degrees compared to other states,[2] yet, only one in four young adults born and living in D.C. has any postsecondary degree at all. This leaves a staggering 75% of young D.C. natives ineligible for the 58% of jobs in D.C. that require a degree.[3]

Consequently, the average annual income of young adults (age 18 to 34) born and living in D.C. is only $31,658, a little more than half of what their peers earn, who are living in D.C. but came from somewhere else.[4] This is well below D.C.'s living wage of $80,000 per year for an individual with one dependent.[5]

Multiple factors have contributed to these unacceptable outcomes, thus multiple strategies must be pursued to improve them.

First, D.C. needs to improve college and career preparedness before students graduate high school. Too many D.C. students[6] are chronically absent from school, math and reading proficiency is devastatingly low, and profound, unaddressed trauma impacts their learning. This trifecta manifests in elementary school, worsens in middle school as students fall behind, and comes to a head for those who stay in D.C.'s public education system long enough to complete high school. Compounding these inequities are inflexible graduation requirements and a lack of understanding of financial literacy. Second, D.C. students face inadequate financial aid and support once they enroll in college. Financial barriers and caring for family members are the top reasons why students do not enroll in or complete college. Third, D.C. students need additional support from colleges and universities in D.C. – from providing more seats for dual

enrollment and early college opportunities, to strengthening its data, services, and supports, and implementing programs to help D.C. residents earn a degree. Combined, these circumstances hold back individual and household prosperity, and they limit D.C.'s competitiveness and hinder economic growth.

To address them, the Mayor of the District of Columbia, the D.C. Council, the State Board of Education, local education agencies (LEAs), and employers must work collaboratively to establish a strategic plan that provides D.C. students with fast, flexible, affordable, and first-rate postsecondary options close to home. This plan should implement the following recommendations by 2026:

I. Focus on academic excellence, starting with improving student attendance.

II. Implement flexible graduation requirements.

III. Adopt financial literacy standards.

IV. Expand state-level financial aid offerings.

V. Scale dual enrollment and early college opportunities and make them more accessible.

VI. Strengthen the University of the District of Columbia (UDC).

VII. Collect and publicly share data on D.C. student outcomes.

VIII. Help D.C. residents reenroll into college and persist.

With fidelity of implementation, D.C. policymakers will ensure the majority of D.C. students who graduate will earn a postsecondary credential, certificate, or degree within a high-demand, high-wage career within five years. As a result, D.C. youth will have the knowledge, skills, and experience needed for college and career success, regardless of their background, school, or ZIP code. More importantly, they will thrive and, in turn, the District of Columbia will, too.

Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

SECTION ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF D.C.'S EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE OUTCOMES

From pre-kindergarten through postsecondary, D.C.'s public education system is uniquely structured as well as heavily resourced financially and institutionally. Rather than a single central school district, D.C. has 70 LEAs, serving 94,575 PreK through 12th-grade students and adult learners in 251 District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools. Approximately 83% of D.C. students are students of color, 64% Black and 19% Latino.[7] Forty-five percent are students designated as "at-risk,"[8] 12% are English learners, 5% are experiencing homelessness, and 15% are students with disabilities. Many students, of course, span multiple subgroups and the challenges associated with them. In PreK-12, D.C. spends $13,046 per pupil, with education receiving the second-largest expenditure in the District of Columbia's FY 2024 Budget and Fiscal Plan.

Additionally, D.C. has a large adult student population. According to national data, 47% of adult students attend publicly funded schools that offer high school diplomas and workforce development programs that take learners through a set program to earn an industry-recognized credential.[9]

D.C. has one of the highest percentages of college students enrolled per capita, compared to other states,[10] thanks to many higher education institutions and more than 40 out-of-state satellite institutions with a physical presence in the District.[11] Thus, D.C. has immense potential for systemic change that can allow every student to access postsecondary education and achieve economic mobility.

With a wealth of resources and opportunities in what was once known as "Chocolate City," one would think D.C.'s Black and Latino students would have a leg up. However, that is too often not the case. D.C. suffers from deeply entrenched racial inequities that permeate its entire education system and affect outcomes for young adults.

Negative Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was devastating for all students and families in the District but catastrophic for Black students. During the pandemic, public school buildings were closed for a portion or all of two years, forcing students to learn at home. Consequently, students missed out on the social fabrics and support provided inside the school building. However, students with access to a working device, strong internet connection, and additional support had an easier time adjusting to virtual learning than students without a suitable home learning environment. Compounding learning losses, Black students in low-income neighborhoods faced traumatic losses of caregivers and loved ones at much higher rates than White students due to COVID-19-related illnesses and death.

When school leaders reopened school buildings, it was not a smooth process, understandably. COVID-19-related quarantines and shutdowns continued to interrupt individual students' learning and the school day. Consequently, academic achievement by most standards decreased, and racial disparities were exacerbated - even with nearly $1 billion dollars of federal stimulus funds to support the recovery and restoration of public education.[12] Students' attendance, statewide annual assessment exam scores, and rates of college enrollment, and completion all worsened.

Student Mental Well-Being on the Decline

Students experiencing declines in mental well-being have difficulty learning. They struggle to meet social and emotional demands for making friends and behaving according to school rules, norms, and expectations. They are also less active throughout the day.[13] Multiple studies have found that students across the nation and in D.C. public schools are suffering from declines in mental well-being made worse by the pandemic. For example, the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Study[14] revealed that 36% of D.C. students reported feeling so sad or hopeless for as long as two weeks that they stopped doing some usual activities, up from 31% in 2019.[15] Additionally, EmpowerK12's Student and Educator Wellbeing Survey in 2022 found that roughly 1 in 10 elementary school students experienced a significant well-being challenge during the fall term of the 2021-2022 school year. In middle school, the rate was higher – one in eight students.[16]

> "
> **Executive functioning is crucial for learning but takes a backseat to our brain's basic survival instincts, like managing emotions during times of stress.** Emotional regulation is a precursor for higher-order thinking, and disruptions like COVID-19 can shift students' focus from learning to survival, due to heightened stress, trauma, and anxiety."
>
> **Dr. Rabiatu Barrie**
> Licensed Clinical Psychologist

Rising Chronic Absenteeism Rates

Chronic absenteeism has many negative effects on students. It prevents elementary students from reaching early learning milestones, increases the likelihood of students dropping out of school, and is connected with poor outcomes in adulthood, such as poverty, diminished health, and criminal justice system involvement.[17] D.C. students have one of the highest rates of chronic absenteeism in the country – before and after the pandemic.[18]

FIG. 1 | STUDENTS WHO MISSED AT LEAST 18 DAYS, OR 10% OR MORE OF THE ACADEMIC YEAR

2018-19
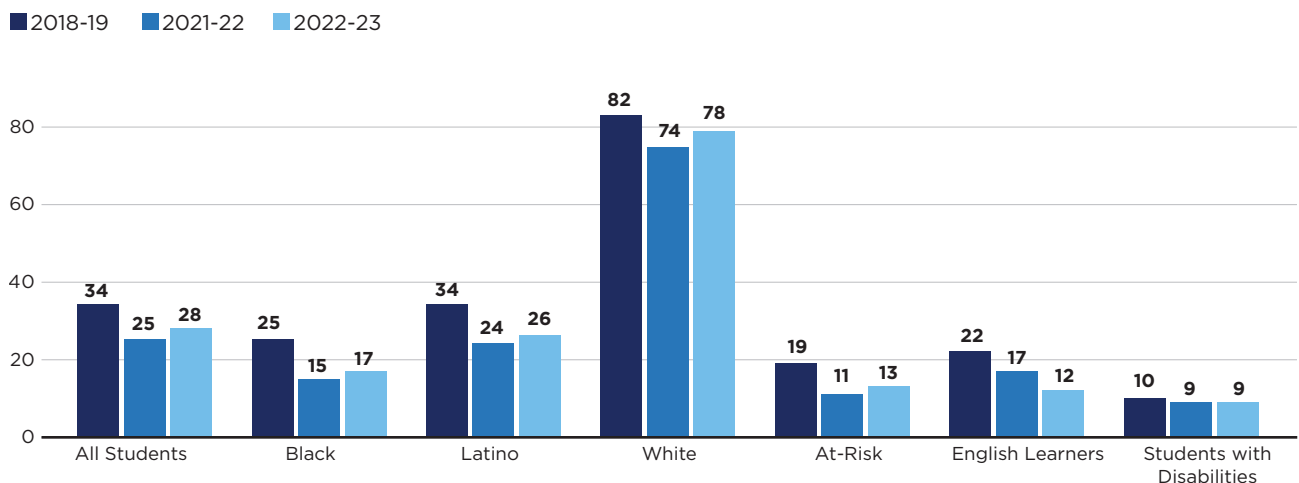**30% of D.C. Students**

2021-22
48% of D.C. Students
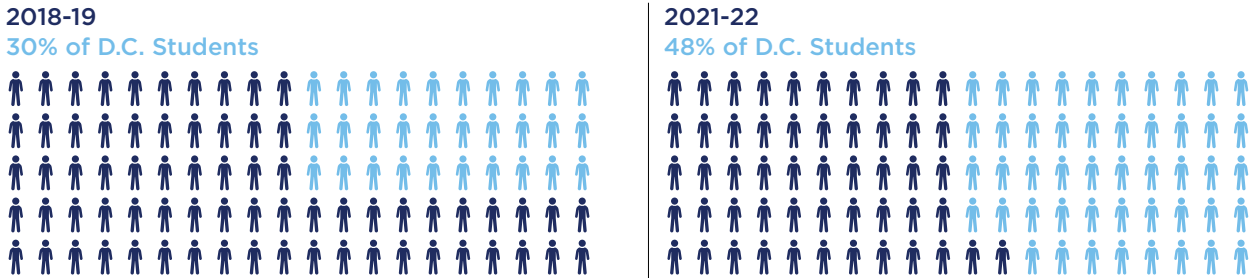
Source: Associated Press analysis of D.C. data

In the 2018-2019 school year, D.C.'s chronic absenteeism rate was 30% – the second highest in the country.[19] It rose to 48% in the 2021-2022 school year. Stated differently, one in two students missed at least 18 days, or 10% or more of the academic year.

Widening Racial Gaps on the PARCC Annual Assessment

Before the pandemic, students' scores on D.C.'s statewide annual assessment exam, or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC),[20] consistently grew across all major student groups from 2014-15 through 2018-19 in English Language Arts (ELA) and math. In the 2021-2022 school year, however, achievement declined when D.C. resumed administering PARCC following a pandemic-related hiatus, and roughly half of students took the exam for the first time. Overall, racial disparities in academic achievement on the PARCC exam widened, and academic achievement for students designated as at-risk and students with disabilities worsened.

FIG. 2 | STUDENTS MEETING OR EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS ON PARCC

■ 2018-19 ■ 2021-22 ■ 2022-23

|	All Students	Black	Latino	White	At-Risk	English Learners	Students with Disabilities
2018-19	34	25	34	82	19	22	10
2021-22	25	15	24	74	11	17	9
2022-23	28	17	26	78	13	12	9

Note: Figures are rounded. Source: D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education

More Students Are Graduating High School, but Fewer Are Enrolling Into Postsecondary Education and Completing

While other academic achievement indicators worsened, D.C.'s high school graduation rate continued to increase steadily during the pandemic. The four-year high school graduation rate rose from 68% in the school year 2018-2019 (pre-pandemic) to 75% in the school year 2021-2022 (post-pandemic). While all student groups experienced overall graduation rate increases, opportunity gaps remained evident.

FIG. 3 | FOUR-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES (BY STUDENT GROUP)

■ 2018-19 ■ 2019-20 ■ 2020-21 ■ 2021-22
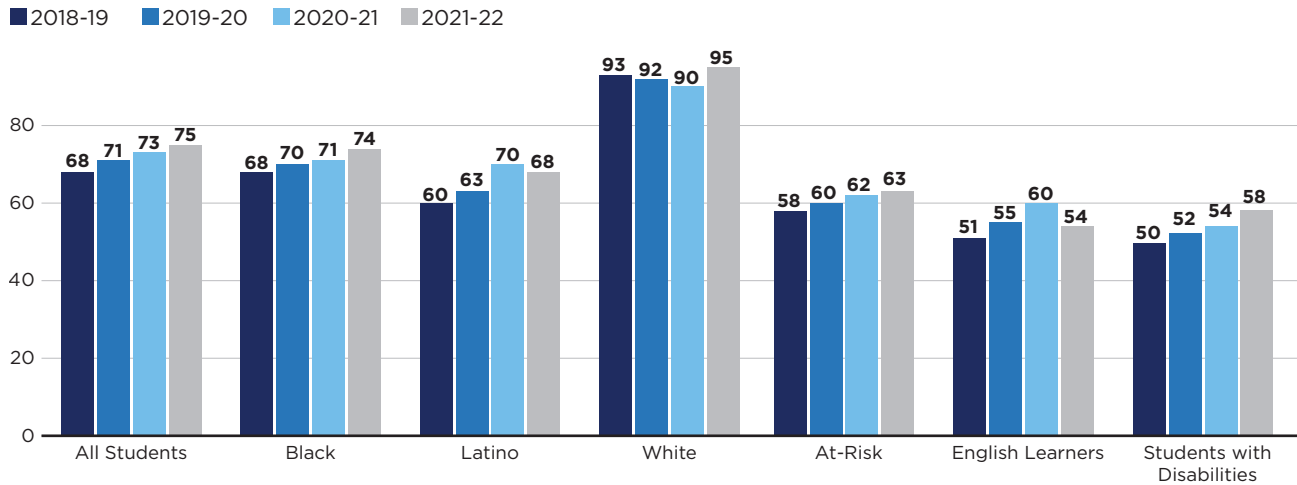
Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education

As D.C.'s high school completion rate rose, the percentage of graduates from the classes of 2020 and 2021 that enrolled in a postsecondary degree-granting institution within six months dropped from 53% to 51%, respectively.[21] To put into perspective, 62% of high school graduates nationwide enrolled in college.[22] Postsecondary enrollment decreased most for Black high school graduates, from 52% to 49%.[23] Latino students' enrollment within six months of graduation decreased slightly, from 44% to 43%.[24] However, White students went to college at higher rates, from 72% to 76%.[25] Other subgroups experienced increased college enrollment during the same timeframe; however, rates remained problematically low. Students with disabilities increased their college-going from 27% to 35%, and English learners 31% to 33%. College enrollment for students designated as "at-risk" stayed the same at 38%.[26]

As college matriculation of D.C. students decreased during this timeframe, college completion rates also dropped. In 2020, 14 out of a 9th-grade cohort of 100 students were expected to complete a postsecondary degree within six years. In 2021, only eight were.[27] These statistics show a steep dropoff in opportunity from the time a student graduates high school through postsecondary graduation. Notably, disaggregated college completion rates have not been publicly shared by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

■ 2020 ■ 2021
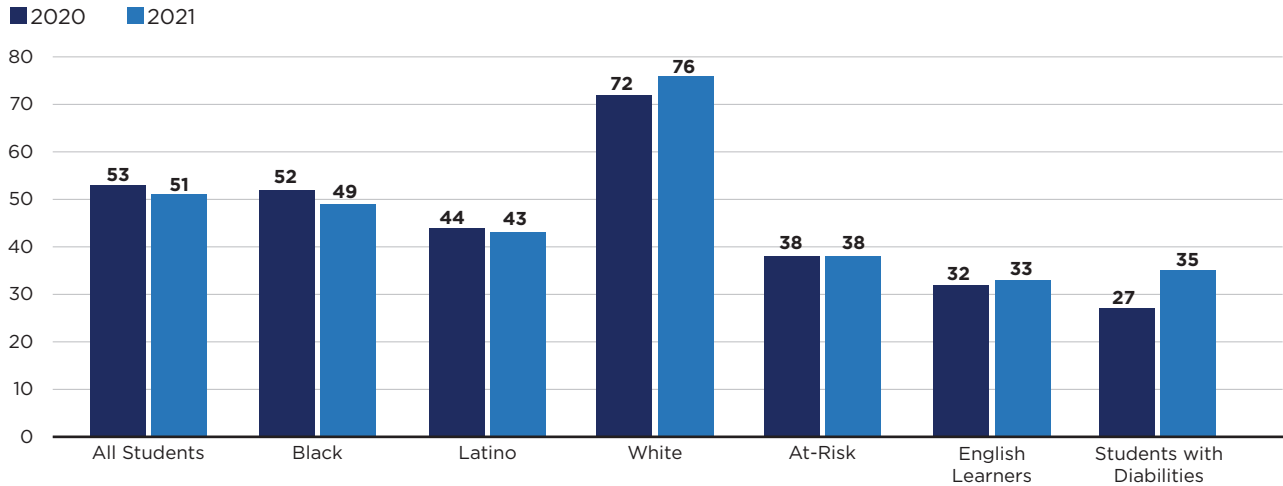
Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education

While there is not a lot of information available about where D.C. students attend college, we can examine available District of Columbia Tuition Assistance Grant (DCTAG)[28] data to get a better sense. According to the 2017 data, 40% of DCTAG recipients enrolled at Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs), and 48% chose to attend college in the DMV, although very few of these students attended college in the District of Columbia. 2021 DCTAG shows that about 10% of DCTAG recipients attend seven out of the eight major universities in the District. About 1,300 D.C. public school students attended the UDC.[29] Notably, UDC students are not eligible for DCTAG pursuant to congressional law.

FIG. 5 | NUMBER OF DCTAG RECIPIENTS ATTENDING PRIVATE D.C. UNIVERSITIES DURING THE 2021-2022 SCHOOL YEAR[30]

Trinity Washington University - 188

George Washington University - 79

Catholic University - 41

Howard University - 35

American University - 31

Georgetown University - 25
Gallaudet University - Fewer than 10

Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education

Low Early Employment Outcomes for Young Adults

An individual needs more than a high school diploma to live and thrive in the District of Columbia. In 2018, high school graduates without any postsecondary credentials earned an estimated $15,000 a year in their first years after high school.[31]

Only one in four young adults (ages 18-34) born and living in D.C have a degree, yet 58% of jobs require one.[32] Their average annual income of $31,658, a little more than half of the $58,548 earned by their peers living in D.C. but were born elsewhere.[33] These statistics underscore the harsh realities for D.C. natives who live and work here.

SECTION TWO

HOW TO MAKE D.C.'S POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM FAST, FLEXIBLE, AFFORDABLE, AND FIRST-RATE

Improve College and Career Preparation

Recommendation #1
Focus on academic excellence, starting with improving student attendance.

All D.C. policymakers must prioritize investments that will get students to school safely, consistently, and on time – every day. If D.C. students' chronic absenteeism is not immediately addressed, then no other evidence-based school investment to support academic achievement will be as effective as it needs to be – not new Pre-K math curriculum and educator bootcamps, not structured literacy training for educators, not high-impact tutoring, nor additional school-based mental health clinicians.

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) and OSSE can support student attendance across the District by consistently doing the following:

- **Using actionable data, building capacity for school staff and community partners to support attendance, and promoting shared accountability across agencies and sectors (education, health, housing, justice, employment, etc.).[34]**

- **Studying, elevating, and replicating the strategies of D.C. public and public charter schools that have improved student attendance since the pandemic.**

Recommendation #2
Implement flexible graduation requirements.

In 2019, one in five of the District's Black young adults who were 16-24 years old was neither in school nor working,[35] largely the result of unproductive educational pathways and lack of opportunities earlier in their lives. D.C. students must be able to pursue rewarding careers and get an early start in college while in high school. OSSE, the Department of Employment Services, the State Board of Education, and LEA leaders can help by making graduation requirements flexible so that students can attain a postsecondary degree and a career in high-demand, high-wage fields. They must work collaboratively with the Workforce Investment Council and employers on the following:

> OSSE recently issued LEA guidance on CTE course equivalency and is developing a new four-year State Plan for CTE programs.

- **Determine the skills, credentials, and certificates that students must possess in D.C.'s job market and which of those D.C. workers most commonly lack.**[36]

- **Provide accessible pathways to career and technical education (CTE) and work-based learning, no matter students' academic accomplishments or where they attend high school.** Currently, 21 states have established pathways to graduation or multiple diploma options, and D.C. is not one of them.[37]

- **Provide seamless learn-and-earn opportunities that connect to high-demand, high-wage careers, and publicly report data on opportunities, participation, and outcomes via the new Education through Employment database.** These opportunities should include apprenticeships and internships with transferable postsecondary credit. (D.C. agencies currently offer students internship or work opportunities, with separate applications for various age groups and purposes, while requiring students to complete 100 hours of volunteer community service before graduation. See Appendix A.)

- **Re-examine use of the Carnegie units for high school graduation and ways to make dual enrollment and early college more accessible for students.**

Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Adopt financial literacy standards.

OSSE and the State Board of Education should adopt new financial literacy education standards across all grade levels. Currently, D.C. does not require students to learn personal financial literacy skills and few schools offer a course. Personal financial literacy "applies the economic way of thinking to help individuals understand how to manage their scarce resources using a logical decision-making process of prioritization based on analysis of the costs and benefits of every choice."[38] Financial literacy concepts such as earning income, spending, saving, investing, managing credit, and managing risk are all essential concepts that D.C. students should learn to succeed in school, life, and career. Additionally, students should have the opportunity to learn about entrepreneurship and career pathways, labor market opportunities, and how to pay for postsecondary education. D.C. should also allow students to demonstrate competency in finding and applying for internships, apprenticeships, and jobs.

Provide Adequate Financial Aid and Support

National and local research shows that financial barriers are the number-one reason students do not enroll in and complete postsecondary education. According to 2023 research from the Lumina Foundation and Gallup, financial barriers are most frequently identified as primary reasons why adults are not currently enrolled in postsecondary education, including costs of programs (55%), inflation (45%) and the need to work (38%).[39] However, unenrolled Black and Latino adults are more likely than unenrolled White adults to name a range of other factors as barriers. These additional barriers include mental or physical health issues, caregiver responsibilities and inadequate preparation.[40] Additionally, "both associate and bachelor's degree students are more likely in 2022 than in 2021 to say their financial aid or scholarships and increases in personal income are very important to their ability to remain enrolled."[41]

CityWorks DC, an initiative that is working to establish a D.C. education-to-employment ecosystem, surveyed more than 200 high school graduates from DCPS and D.C. public charter schools who had either attended college and dropped out (also known as "stopped-out")[42] or never started college at all.[43] They found that the need for financial assistance was frequently cited as the number-one reason for not completing college. Moreover, CityWorks DC found that 50% of those who did not complete college stopped out before the beginning of the student's second year of college.[44]

> CityWorks DC supports ASU Local, a hybrid program at Arizona State University that offers online college classes with in-person coaches to create a high-support model that assists with academic and social barriers.

Furthermore, in 2021, OSSE's D.C. ReEngagement Center[45] convened a 2022-2026 strategic planning group comprising 47 organizations, agencies, and schools, and conducted five focus groups with 30 youth (ages 16-24).[46] During these sessions, OSSE identified several key challenges that youth experienced. Namely, youth expressed the need to:[47]

- Earn income, making completing a traditional educational pathway more challenging.

- Receive dedicated and whole-student support to be successful in school, such as mental health counseling, housing, child care, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

- Dedicated and individualized support from caring adults was lacking.

- Have more educational options that connect students to the real world, are culturally relevant, and offer flexible scheduling.

- Learn more about the services, resources, and programs that are currently available.

Photos by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Recommendation #4
Expand state-level financial aid offerings.

While many Black and Latino students may be eligible for federal student aid and local grants and scholarships, there is still a wide gap between the sticker cost[48] of postsecondary education and the financial aid that students receive. Currently, D.C. offers three grants with various restrictions and eligibility requirements (see Appendix B).

D.C will need to continue to improve and expand financial aid programs that allow students to afford to attend college.

- **The Mayor and D.C. Council must continue investing in the D.C. Futures Program.** Currently, the program is funded entirely by federal recovery funding, which will cease at the end of December 2024. Policymakers should expand the list of universities that students can attend with these funds and increase funding in Fiscal Year 2025 and beyond.

- **The Mayor and D.C. Council must increase investment in the Mayor's Scholars Program.** The program is locally funded and does not require citizenship, which allows undocumented students to receive financial aid, since they are ineligible for federal student aid.

- **The U.S. Congress should enhance DCTAG by decreasing the family income threshold, increasing grant amounts to at least $15,000 per academic year, and allowing students to spend the funding on more than tuition, to allow for the greatest flexibility for individual circumstances.**

- **OSSE and the State Board of Education must disaggregate Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)[49] completion rates and add this information to the D.C. School Report Card to ensure the public can monitor whether high schools are adequately preparing all students to apply for financial aid.** High school seniors who complete the FAFSA are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education.[50] For low-income students, FAFSA completion is associated with a 127% increase in immediate college enrollment.[51] As of June 2023, D.C.'s FAFSA completion rate was 69.6%,[52] the third-highest in the country.[53]

> "For the last 14 years, in an effort to meet the educational needs of an underserved population, **Trinity Washington University has reduced its tuition to one-third** of the original cost to attend. This effort, combined with funds from FAFSA, has made it possible for **more than 100 members of the Southeast, D.C. community to attend college for free**. Due to the limited earning potential of many residents of Wards 7 and 8, the opportunity of a college education would not be possible without the combined efforts of a reduced tuition initiative and federal student aid."
>
> **Cristina Lynch**
> Assistant Dean, School of Professional Studies and Graduate Studies
> Trinity Washington University

Improve Enrollment, Persistence, and Completion

After the United States Supreme Court dealt a major blow to students of color across the country by striking down race-conscious college admissions, and ruling against President Joe Biden's student loan forgiveness plan, colleges and universities, including ones in D.C., released vague statements about their commitment to diversity. D.C. colleges and universities can demonstrate a real commitment to diversity[54] by starting with the students of color close to home. The Mayor and D.C. Council must encourage D.C. universities to make their offerings fast, flexible, affordable, and first-rate for D.C. students, particularly those of color. D.C. colleges and universities can scale up and make accessible dual enrollment and early college opportunities, collect and publicly share data on D.C. student outcomes, and help D.C. residents re-enroll into their college and persist. Additionally, UDC can strengthen its education programming and provide students with greater support. If D.C.'s colleges and universities do not proactively commit to these student-centered actions by the end of 2023, then it is incumbent upon policymakers to act.

D.C. has eight major universities: American University, Catholic University of America, Gallaudet University, Georgetown University, George Washington University, Howard University, Trinity Washington University, and the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). These colleges and universities are exempt from property taxes[55] and receive millions of dollars from D.C. government contracts annually.[56] While it is commonly believed that the District of Columbia government cannot impose requirements on private universities, this is not true. The D.C. government, like other local governments, has the authority to impose conditions on funding for private entities, provided that these conditions are reasonable and do not violate the Constitution. For example, the District already restricts contractors from making certain campaign contributions, requires contractors to have "clean hands" (e.g. pay DC taxes owed), and requires grantees to comply with eligibility criteria, among other conditions.

Source: University of the District of Columbia

Scale dual enrollment and early college opportunities and make them more accessible.

Despite the wide body of evidence[57] that dual enrollment and early college improve postsecondary outcomes, very few students participate in D.C. In conversations with the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, it was shared that approximately 1,100, or 9%, of public high school students in D.C. accessed publicly funded, fee-free dual enrollment programs in the 2022-2023 school year. In reviewing other state-level data collection and reporting related to dual enrollment and national data sets, this very likely places D.C. in the bottom half of states in terms of dual enrollment access.

Dual enrollment[58] – college course enrollment during high school – leads to greater two-year and four-year college enrollment, degree attainment, and earnings six years after high school, with stronger effects for students who are traditionally underrepresented.[59]

There are several ways for students to participate in dual enrollment opportunities in the District of Columbia:

- **OSSE's Dual Enrollment Consortium:** In 2018, OSSE launched the Dual Enrollment Consortium, a formalized partnership with participating institutions of higher education (IHEs). Through the consortium, students at any public school are allowed to take courses. In 2022-2023, 393 students, or approximately 3% of age-eligible students, accessed dual enrollment through the consortium, up from 2% in the 2021-2022 school year.

- **Partnerships between individual LEAs and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs):** Some LEAs partner directly with IHEs to provide dual enrollment opportunities to students. In the 2022-2023 school year, 530 DCPS students enrolled in early college, and 221 enrolled in dual enrollment.

- **Dual enrollment through UDC:** UDC offers dual enrollment through the Community College and flagship program. In the 22-23 school year, UDC served 298 students.

- **Advanced Technical Center (ATC):** In Fall 2022, the Mayor's office launched the ATC through Trinity Washington University and UDC, which offers approximately 200 students up to 20 college courses, free of charge, in cybersecurity and general nursing over a two-year period.[60]

Overall, there are several faults with current dual enrollment opportunities in Washington, D.C., specifically:

- **A complicated application process and poor marketing of program benefits.**

- **Universities set their own eligibility criteria.**

- **In-person courses on the campuses of IHEs make it challenging for students to participate, particularly those who live far away.**

- **Students often do not receive high school credit while taking these courses for college credit through the District-wide program.**

- Dual enrollment courses are often not built into the high school day/academic program, which makes it challenging and inconvenient for students to participate.

- Too often there is little data on programs' academic outcomes and successes.

- Dual enrollment courses are often treated as "add-ons," which are known as "random acts of college credit," rather than as stepping stones on pathways to degrees and credentials.

Students in early college[61] programs during high school are more likely than their peers to go on to college and earn a degree. Within six years after expected high school graduation, early college students were significantly more likely than control students to enroll in four-year college (84% vs. 77%) and to enroll in two-year colleges (66% vs. 47%.).

D.C. offers a number of early college programs, but there is a great need for more:[62]

- **Bard High School Early College DC:** In 2019, Bard DC opened as a partnership between Bard College and DCPS. Bard DC's student population is 94% Black. It has a brick-and-mortar campus in Ward 8 that provides students with an opportunity to graduate high school with an associate degree. Seventy percent of the Class of 2023 earned a Bard College Associate in Arts degree concurrent with their DCPS high school diploma.

- **Early College Academy at Coolidge High School:** Trinity Washington University provides Coolidge students an opportunity to earn their high school diploma and an associate degree. Students and families make a 4 year commitment, entering into the program in their 9th grade year of high school. In May 2023, 35 students who were part of the first cohort obtained their Associates Degree.

- **George Washington (GW) Early College Program:** Students at DCPS's selective School Without Walls can earn an associate of arts degree from GW's Columbian College of Arts and Sciences while completing high school tuition-free.

Dual enrollment gave me the opportunity to shadow other college students and figure out what I wanted to study in college. Additionally, many of my school pals have stated that they don't want to attend college because they can't afford the tuition, or they've become overwhelmed with the education system and prefer to focus on other endeavors that they may view as attainable/achievable for themselves. **If dual enrollment existed in more schools, I'm sure these perspectives would change drastically**."

Joshua Davis
Graduating Senior, Bard High School Early College

To improve students' experiences taking dual enrollment and early college classes in the District of Columbia. OSSE and Universities must, at a minimum:

- **Establish additional early college partnerships with public high schools in the District, for students to earn an associate degree.** For those with partnerships with high schools already, they should expand the number of seats available.

- **Ensure dual enrollment is free, easily accessible, and a core part of a student's sophomore through senior year by providing in-person, cohort-based dual enrollment courses at local education agencies, so students can earn a regular high school diploma at the same time they earn no less than 12 transferable, free college credits.** Programs should cover books, curriculum development and materials, faculty training, and ongoing support, and support for credit transfers.
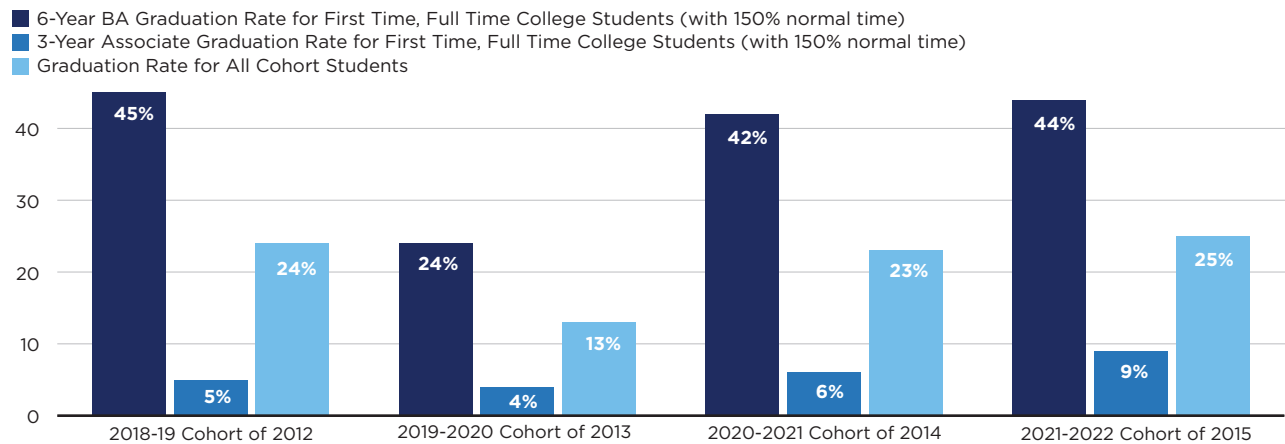

Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Recommendation #6
Strengthen the University of the District of Columbia.

UDC is really two institutions: UDC-Community College (UDC-CC), a two-year associate degree-granting institution established in 2009 to provide continuing education and workforce development, and (2) the UDC Flagship, a four-year bachelor's and graduate degree-granting institution. UDC enrollment is evenly divided among the two. Most UDC-CC students are part-time. Most UDC-Flagship students are full-time. In both cases, most students transfer from other institutions of higher education. Of the small number of students who first begin their postsecondary education at UDC, they overwhelmingly start at the community college but do not complete a degree. Of the small number that first begin their postsecondary education at the four-year Flagship, they too often do not graduate. If they do, their earnings relative to tuition costs and student debt are worse than if they had attended a nearby two-year college.

FIG. 6 | UDC GRADUATION RATES

■ 6-Year BA Graduation Rate for First Time, Full Time College Students (with 150% normal time)
■ 3-Year Associate Graduation Rate for First Time, Full Time College Students (with 150% normal time)
■ Graduation Rate for All Cohort Students

Source: UDC 2023 Performance Oversight Response[63]

Without substantial improvements to UDC, it will be highly unlikely for D.C. to meet its postsecondary goals and for the community college to be a driver of economic mobility for D.C. residents. Therefore, the Mayor, D.C. Council, and UDC must implement the following recommendations:

- **Launch a support model to incentivize on-time degree completion.** The District and UDC, separately, should further partner with community-based organizations (CBOs) whereby CBO caseworkers are linked directly with a cohort of UDC students to provide individualized assistance with academic planning, making use of on-campus tutoring and student support services, and, most critically, accessing public social services not provided by the college (e.g. food aid, housing assistance, and tax benefit filing assistance). D.C. should adopt model programs like Fort Worth, Texas's Stay the Course initiative, which partners with Catholic Charities, or the ASAP initiative employed in New York and Ohio. Independent studies published by the National Bureau of Economic Research[64] and MRDC have shown these programs have doubled completion rates.[65]

- **Provide grant-based aid sufficient to move part-time students to full-time status.** All other things being equal, full-time students graduate at three times the rate of part-

time students.[66] UDC should encourage part-time students to shift to full-time status by meeting 100% of their financial need, including expenses for living, food, and child care, supported solely with additional grant aid. Degree attainment is the surest ticket to the middle class.

• **Provide student advising services that include fully utilizing early warning systems to target supports to students at risk of getting off track.** This will necessitate investments in staff that can support retention efforts.

• **Reduce student debt by eliminating loans for first-year students.** The most disturbing higher education statistic we have seen in the last decade is the student loan default rate of Black borrowers. The doubling of student loan debt in recent decades is widely known, and there is much reporting in the media about five- and six-figure debt levels of individual undergraduates. Most relevant and troubling is the default rate for Black borrowers nationally: Half (49%) will default on their student loans over the typical 12-year repayment period, according to a series of studies.[67] For most borrowers who default, the amount they owe is less than $10,000. In fact, for half of federal student loan defaulters, the amount they owe is less than $5,000. Regardless of the amount, the outcome for a borrower who defaults is often a financial calamity. Therefore, the District of Columbia, if not UDC, should eliminate student loans for first-year students and provide grants instead.

• **Establish articulation agreements within the University (Workforce Development & Lifelong Learning to associate to bachelor's) and between the Community College and other local universities, so that students can transfer their credits and earn a bachelor's degree or credential.** An agreement with OSSE is needed so that CTE credits in high school can transfer to UDC.

• **Provide free corequisite courses with wraparound support.** Generally, more than one-third of all first-year college students take some type of developmental (a.k.a. "remedial") coursework. For historically underserved students, this number can be much higher.[68] At UDC, this rate is much, much higher. Ninety-eight percent of UDC students will need to take developmental coursework.[69] While developmental education strives to help students attain the skills to succeed in college, it can deter completion by adding to the cost and time necessary to earn a degree. Corequisite coursework allows students to take developmental courses at the same time as college-level coursework so they do not become discouraged and drop out because they have to pay for an additional year of college.

• **Immediately end the practice of withholding student records and transcripts.** According to UDC's website, students with a "hold" on their student record will not have their transcript processed until the reason for the hold has been resolved.[70] Eleven states currently ban this practice, which depresses student mobility and college completion.[71] Students who do not have access to their transcripts are not able to transfer to another school or graduate from their college. Some call this "stranded credits." Recently, the Biden Administration proposed rules that would limit transcript withholding by colleges.

Collect and publicly share data on D.C. student outcomes.

Improving data collection on postsecondary outcomes is crucial for D.C. policymakers to be able to make informed decisions, tailor support services to students' needs, and track the effectiveness of various interventions aimed at improving educational and workforce outcomes. While some of this information may be in the National Student Clearinghouse, most progress metrics for D.C. alumni are not tracked, published, or centrally located.

MISSING STATE-LEVEL DATA POINTS	
Progress and Completion Data	Data on retention after the first year of college is important to assess how well students are transitioning to higher education. Additionally, the college completion rate within six years provides insights into the effectiveness of postsecondary institutions and support systems.
Academic Data	Information on the institutions attended, majors chosen, courses completed, grade point averages, and degrees earned are essential for evaluating academic performance and understanding students' educational paths.
Financial Aid Data	Understanding students' access to financial aid, such as student loans and Pell Grants, is crucial in assessing their financial well-being during their postsecondary journey and providing support.
Workforce Data	Collecting information on industry credentials earned, access to career supports, work-study participation, and internships can provide insights into students' readiness for the job market and their career trajectories. This information could be housed in the Education to Employment database.
Advanced Coursework	Publishing data on how students are accessing, enrolling, and performing in advanced coursework (Advanced Placement, IB, Dual Enrollment, CTE) would help OSSE understand and improve support for college preparation. Kentucky provides a good example of a state publishing significant data on this information.[72]

Source: D.C. Policy Center[73]

In FY2024, Mayor Bowser invested $1.6M to launch D.C.'s Education to Employment P-20W data project. This project will build on D.C.'s understanding of how our education programming is setting D.C. students up for success in their careers 5-10 years after high school graduation.

As the fiscal picture in the District gets tighter, the D.C. Council must not eliminate this vitally important system.

To achieve these improvements, the Mayor and D.C. Council will need to:

- **Continue making long-term investments in data infrastructure and technology.** Upgrading data collection systems and ensuring data security and privacy would be essential components of this effort.

- **Provide LEAs with support and guidance in collecting and sharing data effectively.** This may involve providing training to school staff, streamlining data reporting processes, and ensuring data quality and accuracy.

- **Require all colleges and universities located in the District of Columbia to transparently share the number of D.C. students that are:** recruited, apply to, matriculate, receive financial aid, enroll with credits, require remediation, participate in dual enrollment or early college, qualify as legacy applicants,[74] and complete. Additionally, information on how much they receive in financial aid from the college or university and the major or program studied would also be extremely helpful. Surprisingly, very little is known about the admission practices of D.C. colleges and universities and their academic support for D.C. students, which is concerning.

Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Recommendation #8
Help D.C. residents reenroll into college and persist.

D.C. colleges and universities will continue to have individuals who enroll but cannot complete their credentials for various reasons. This should be expected and planned for. As of 2020, there are currently 36,575 individuals living in the District of Columbia who have some college but no credentials.[75]

The Mayor and D.C. Council should launch a permanent initiative to help D.C. residents with some college but no degree reenroll, and persist in completing a postsecondary credential. This program must be well-marketed to D.C. residents, rely on community organizations to provide wrap-around support, provide state-level financial aid, be easily accessible, and collect data on outcomes. The support might include the following: free application fee waivers, help with college enrollment, student record retrieval, mental health counseling, subsidized housing, identifying affordable and high-quality child care, and finding employment in high-demand, high-wage careers.

States across the country have implemented similar programs.[76] For example:

- **MassReconnect provides community colleges with $100,000 to set up a program targeted at individuals 25 years and older who enroll in at least six credits in an approved associates degree program.** The program covers the full cost of tuition and fees and provides an allowance for books and supplies.[77]

- **Maryland's One Step Away program funds institutions to identify, engage, and reenroll near completers.**

- **The Tennessee Reconnect program leverages a simplified intake form.**

- **Indiana's Next Level Jobs Initiative uses a streamlined intake form to direct adult students to appropriate postsecondary opportunities.**

- **North Carolina's Finish Line Grant program provides emergency funding for students who have completed 50% of their degree or credential.**

> 66
> Washington D.C. has the highest bachelor attainment rate in the nation by almost 20 percentage points, but that impressive number hides a deeply troubling fact. While 92% of white D.C. residents over 25 have earned at least a bachelor's, just 53% of Hispanic residents and 29% of Black residents have. This disparity should appall us all. There is much work to do, but re-engaging adult learners with stranded credits is a smart move to start closing income and opportunity gaps in the District.
>
> **James Murphy**
> Deputy Director of Higher Ed Policy
> Education Reform Now

CONCLUSION

Washington, D.C., presents as somewhat of a paradox. On the surface, it's a hub for the highly educated. However, this masks a deeper, more troubling reality. While D.C. attracts individuals with multiple degrees, many D.C. natives face a completely different reality. The contrast is severe and unsettling. Only eight out of 100 9th-grade cohort students will complete a postsecondary degree within six years of graduating high school. For the remaining 92 students, the path to a postsecondary degree is fraught with challenges. Consequently, D.C. students' likelihood of self-sufficiency and prosperity greatly diminishes, and the economic and societal consequences for the District are wide-ranging.

To unlock the full potential of D.C.'s youth, D.C. policymakers must employ a multi-faceted approach. The focus must be on academic excellence by addressing students' chronic absenteeism and committing to making D.C.'s postsecondary education system fast, flexible, affordable, and first-rate. D.C. leaders across industries, government, and higher education institutions must commit to substantial investments and change policy, program, and practice for local government and higher education institutions. It will also necessitate changes in mindsets — the belief that our Black and Latino young people born, raised, living, and working here — can contribute to their city and lead it in the 21st century.

APPENDIX A

EXAMPLES OF D.C'S INTERNSHIP AND WORK-BASED OPPORTUNITIES					
INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITY	AGENCY	AGE OF ELIGIBILITY	TIME COMMITMENT	POSTSECONDARY CREDIT?	PAID?
Mayor Marion S. Barry's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP)	Department of Employment Services (DOES)	14-24	Up to 30 hours/ week, 6 weeks during the summer	No	Yes
DC Career Connections	DOES	20-24 (for those who are out of work, not in school)	40 hours/week, Up to 9 months	No	Yes
School Year Internship	DOES	14-21	Up to 8 hours/ week, Academic year after school (4:30p)	No	Yes
Career Ready Internship	DCPS, but connected to DOES' SYEP program	15-21	6 weeks during the summer	No	Yes
Career Bridge	DCPS Opportunity Academies	Graduating High School seniors	Up to 10 hours/ week, 8 weeks	No	Yes
Career and Technical Education Advanced Internship Program	OSSE	Seniors in high school	Up to 12 hours/ week, 8 weeks	Yes	Yes

APPENDIX B

D.C.'S SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS		
SCHOLARSHIP	**AMOUNT**	**ELIGIBILITY**
DCTAG	Up to $10,000 annually for public colleges and universities (except UDC) Up to $2,500 annually for private colleges in D.C. and private HBCUs nationwide	FAFSA required Up to 26 years old Family income less than $500,000 Can only be applied toward tuition
D.C. Futures	Associate degree: Up to $8,000/year for four years Bachelor's degree: Up to $8,000/year for six years	FAFSA required Seeking first associate or bachelor's degree Family income $100,000 or less for up to three individuals Eligible institution Pursuing degree in a high-demand field
Mayor's Scholars	Associate degree: Up to $4,000/year for four years Bachelor's degree: Up to $4,000/year for four years Spring/summer cycle: up to $2,000	FAFSA required Seeking first associate or bachelor's degree Family income less than $70,000 for up to three individuals Eligible institution
GEAR UP grant (awarded Oct. 2023)	$11,000/year for the first two years of postsecondary education	Provides coaching, workshops, and scholarships for Ward 7 and 8 middle school students attending select DCPS and D.C. public charter schools

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