

Special Education and School Choice in Washington, D.C.

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education has long focused on making school choice work. We have found that parents of children with disabilities face greater barriers to choosing schools for their children.

This brief is the first installment in a series of reports examining how parents of children with disabilities experience the process of choosing schools. Our goal is to identify barriers and help school system leaders develop interventions that can guide parents to overcome them.

Washington, D.C., has systems in place to improve the school choice process for families—most notably the collaboration among stakeholders. Many of the challenges we identify are known to the parent support organizations; stakeholders are working to make progress in these areas.

Background

Washington, D.C., is one of the fastest-improving, fastest-growing urban school systems in the country. D.C. is unique with its two parallel oversight strategies: it has consistent strategic leadership of DC Public Schools (DCPS) under mayoral control, and it is home to one of the largest and most well-regarded charter school sectors in the country, overseen by an independent authorizer, the DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB). Both DCPS and DC PCSB are committed to providing high-quality, good-fit school options for families. D.C. remains a locale that other high-choice cities can look to, especially when it comes to cross-sector collaboration and supports for families navigating the public school choice process. As such, many organizations in D.C. are committed to working together toward the common goal of providing high-quality, equitable school options for all students.

For D.C. parents of children with disabilities, however, the school choice process is still fraught with inherent challenges. What is an already complicated system is even more so for these families, with parents trying hard to find the information they need to determine a best-fit school that can effectively serve their child's needs. The challenge is not unique to D.C.: throughout the country, many parents of children with disabilities choose a school they feel will meet their needs only to find that the supports or programs are unavailable for their children. For some, this means starting over again—moving their child to another school.

How We Gathered the Information

To understand how families are dealing with these challenges and what support they need, we studied two “high-choice” cities: Washington, D.C., and New Orleans. We interviewed families who were either in the process of choosing schools or who had recently gone through the school choice process. D.C. parent focus groups were held in late April 2019. In addition to parent focus group interviews, we conducted a landscape analysis of the special education school choice supports that are available to families. This brief provides a summary of the special education choice landscape in Washington, D.C., based on data collected through parent focus groups and interviews with D.C. parent advocacy and support organizations, government officials, and community leaders. We offer recommendations for further steps that could be taken to strengthen the city’s support structure for parents of children with disabilities. It is important to note that, although we took care to interview parents with backgrounds similar to the broader D.C. parent population, we are not suggesting that their views are fully representative. More details about the research study methodology can be found [here](#).

Strength: Community Collaboration

Though there are challenges, D.C. has much to be proud of in the field of special education, most profoundly the fact that many organizations in D.C. have banded together to improve family experiences in the school choice process and to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. One example is the Special Education Advocacy Coalition, an alliance of organizations working on issues that are important to parents of children with disabilities. The Coalition was informally created to help pass legislation a few years ago but has kept going because the collaboration was helpful. The Coalition currently collaborates on any changes in special education legislation or regulations and on any citywide challenges that impact special education.

During interviews with D.C. parent advocacy and support organizations, it was clear that many parent support organizations are deeply committed to improving outcomes for students with disabilities. All organization representatives we spoke with had an understanding of which initiatives related to school choice and special education were underway and knew what role each person played in this work.

Many D.C. nonprofits have taken it upon themselves to address family needs. For example, much of the information families obtain comes from contacting and visiting schools, which not all families can do. To help families with this time-intensive process, [Advocates for Justice and Education \(AJE\)](#) created a resource called *Effective Questions for Parents to Ask... when looking for a school for your child with special needs*, which can help parents target their questions to schools.

[D.C. School Reform Now \(DCSRN\)](#) has created [virtual tours](#) for many of the area’s public schools. Although these virtual tours do not touch on special education, they are a resource to parents who are looking to whittle down their school choices, and they may eliminate the need for families to visit so many schools in person. Parents in our focus groups found these virtual tours helpful but reported they would like to see more focus on special education. This could be accomplished by adding a special education component to each school’s virtual tour or by creating special education-specific videos.

Several organizations directly or indirectly support families in D.C. by offering special education-specific training, advocacy, and support, including [AJE](#), [DCSRN](#), [Parents Amplifying Voices in Education DC \(PAVE DC\)](#), [Children’s Law Center](#), and [Quality Trust for Individuals with Disabilities](#). These support organizations provide a range of services from individual advocacy support, legal representation, Individualized Education Program (IEP) representation in

schools, and advocacy during post-secondary transition years, to helping parents navigate the school choice process and identify the right programs.

When [MySchoolDC](#) first launched their new enrollment system, AJE offered training to parents of children with disabilities about the process. AJE continues to offer special education trainings for parents and many are offered as webinars. Although none of the current trainings are specific to school choice, AJE shared with us that families have told them they felt more confident in leveraging school choice once they became more familiar with their special education rights. AJE offers training focused on the transition from Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C to Part B, and indicated that this training has helped many parents develop strategies to maneuver this difficult time of transition and choose an appropriate elementary school.

To help minimize counseling out, DC PCSB implemented a “[mystery shopper](#)” program to test schools’ responses to the potential enrollment of students with disabilities. In January and February, before the common lottery deadline, DC PCSB staff and consultants call every charter school posing as a student with a disability, or a parent, guardian, or advocate of a student with a disability or English learner. They ask questions about the enrollment process to ensure schools are not asking for any identifying information from families, and that they are not discouraging students with a disability from applying. DCPCSB publishes an annual report with the results. If a school fails, it can face school board action for not having open enrollment.

The [Special Education Cooperative](#) is a membership-driven nonprofit organization founded in 1998 by charter school leaders, teachers, special education experts, and charter authorities. The Co-op promotes collaboration among schools, increases each school’s special education capacity, and drives high-quality special education services.

Challenges: Effective Information, Disability-Specific Expertise, IEP Documentation

A [recent landscape analysis](#) published by D.C.’s Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) discusses the urgent need to build a shared understanding of how to best support students with disabilities in D.C. As the report states, the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers who are not disabled is vast and growing. In 2019, students with disabilities were five times less likely to be proficient than students without disabilities on the English Language Arts statewide assessment. Students with disabilities in the ninth grade are more likely than their peers to be chronically absent, disciplined, and retained. From 2007 to 2017, D.C. closed the gap for black students on NAEP against the national average, but outcomes for students with disabilities still lag behind their peers.

More and better performance data. Parents we spoke with reported an urgent need for more information on special education to inform the choice process. In particular, they want more information about how students with disabilities perform academically at each school, and more information about the student and parent experience, such as how students with disabilities—and their families—are treated at the school by other students and by adults.

Although OSSE’s online [school report card](#) now allows users to drill down to subgroups of students, most of the parents we interviewed did not know about it. Others knew about it, but felt it was still insufficient because it was either too difficult to use (a parent has to download a “cross-tabulated data file” and figure out how to navigate it) or didn’t provide the type of data they were looking for.

DCPCSB also recognized parents’ need for more special education data and, as a result, publishes data for families on their website. Parents can see a breakdown of enrollment by disability level, as well as the percentage of enrolled students with disabilities at a campus. It also includes equity metrics around attendance and discipline by disability level so parents can use that information when making decisions for their child.

Deeper information about the student experience, school expertise. In addition to performance data, parents we interviewed want specific information about a school’s areas of expertise in special education. Parents also told us

that they want to know about a school’s reputation with other families, and whether a school was following through with its commitments to families on how their children were being served. They want to know what makes a specific school or program compelling for certain students—they don’t want just the school’s sales pitch. As one parent stated:

“It really burns me up that charter schools don’t have to tell parents anything about their special education program beyond, ‘We will fulfill our legal obligation.’ Imagine if that was their selling point to typical kids. It really makes a parent feel like these schools don’t want to deal with special needs kids.”

The resolution to this legitimate family concern is not obvious. Under D.C. law, each charter school network has the same legal obligations to students with disabilities as DCPS. Charter school organizations struggle with how to talk with families about their areas of expertise in supporting students with disabilities. The common feeling is that many schools want to provide families with more information about the specialized programs and expertise they currently offer, but they are unclear how to do that while still clearly communicating that they are legally mandated to serve all students with disabilities per the IDEA. Offering better resources and supports to help schools understand how to share information with families without overstepping their legal obligations could have a positive impact on supporting student choice.

Families also fear that although the enrollment process guarantees them access to any school, not every school will be able to meet their child’s needs. Because of past experiences, parents worry that schools may not be able to offer the specialized programs they tout, or that a school’s vision of inclusion would not match the family’s vision. Families may have received the legally correct response of “we can do everything” to their initial inquiries at schools, only to be disappointed later when they encounter a different reality.

The MySchoolDC lottery system is blind to disability status, which eliminates the blatant discrimination of a student being rejected outright. One parent in our focus groups told us that she has had to help several families advocate for their children because services and supports dropped off after enrollment “count day” in October—a concern also brought up by parent advocacy organizations. School funding is determined by this October headcount; after that time schools sometimes find it necessary to reduce services and supports based on actual headcount. Additionally, families told us they fear—from past experience—that what they are told in the spring when they interview schools will not be what really happens; the school year will start strong but then drop off due to lack of funding and staffing.

Parents in our focus groups brainstormed about what a school lottery might look like if there was a weighted formula for students with disabilities (something that has been underutilized in helping to improve the enrollment of students with disabilities), similar to the weighted preference that increases students’ chances of enrolling at a school a sibling attends. One parent described the need, saying that, for instance, if a child needs a school with a functioning elevator and there are only five schools that have elevators, the lottery algorithm should be able to give preference for that child to be assigned to one of those five schools. The algorithm should be equitable, setting aside a certain number of seats for these situations.

Additionally, the parents of children with more severe needs expressed concern with the lack of quality inclusion options for their children, which has led them to give preference to more restrictive placement options, such as self-contained classrooms and specialized schools—Bridges or The Children’s Guild, for example. This decision-making process is counter to the presumption in favor of inclusive education and would likely look different if parents had more confidence that schools knew how to do inclusion well. Public placements in private schools is a school option in D.C., however, no parents from the focus groups mentioned it as an option they had considered.

Smooth IEP transfers. Both parents and community leaders expressed strong concern that schools often do not receive IEPs and related documents for a newly enrolled student until right before school starts (a challenge not specific to D.C.). This, again, is in large part a function of the lottery process being blind to disability status and system challenges that result in slow sharing of information, leading to schools not knowing early about a child’s IEP status. When this situation occurs, families we talked to felt that more burden fell on them to advocate for services and supports and to help track down the necessary IEP files. Schools cannot effectively predict in advance what programs and supports their students will need, making it difficult for schools to plan and build out quality programs or hire

teachers with specialized expertise.

To help combat this known problem, OSSE developed an application that allows schools to preview critical information about newly enrolled students before the start of the school year so they can effectively plan for those new students. Although much progress has been made, families are torn about when the appropriate time is to share this information—often wanting to share IEP information with schools before the “preview.” Parents want to share the information early so they can start to talk about specific supports and services, but fear if they share the information too early they will be counseled out.

What Families Need

D.C. is a rapidly gentrifying city that has fast-improving district and charter schools. The city has emphasized and invested in equitable access to charter schools, and the school district operates as a safety net for families that want to stay with their neighborhood school. Both types of schools have high levels of support, with a growing number of nonprofit organizations that provide support to help low-income families navigating the choice process.

Despite this infrastructure, proficiency rates for students with special needs are shockingly low—on average in the single digits. And although schools are now more careful during the admissions process to say they accept all students, they say little more than that, leaving families on their own to assess special education program capacity and quality.

Parents clearly want more and better information about their options. They want schools to be aware of their child’s specialized needs and be prepared to serve those needs well in advance of the first day of school. But they also want their children to be welcomed and wanted. The legalities of fair access, in their view, should allow for schools to say why they would be a good fit for students with disabilities and should ensure that IEPs and other information reach the schools well before the start of the school year.

In addition, D.C.—as with most cities—must attend to the basics of quality specialized supports. High-quality schools do not always equate to high-quality special education. This is leading many families to choose more specialized programs, such as specialized schools or center-based options, when they might prefer a more inclusive environment. D.C. should consider creative ways to address hiring and retention of special education teachers, possibly by creating a citywide hiring pool that can be deployed across a voluntary network of schools as enrollment shifts. There should be a concerted effort to boost the ability of individual schools to provide high-quality inclusion. Findings from [CRPE’s in-depth study of special education in charter schools](#) can provide a roadmap for schools, but the path for encouraging and helping schools adopt those practices is unclear. One possibility is for DCPCSB to focus more attention on assessing that capacity during the application and renewal process. Better transportation support for students with disabilities could ease this tension in the short term by giving families more options farther from home. Another [CRPE paper](#) lays out a comprehensive framework for addressing this multipronged set of challenges.

To further ease the tension between asking every school to educate every student and providing more specialized expertise, D.C. should explore revising the enrollment system and funding formula to give parents of children with disabilities higher preference to specialized programs and to give schools more financial capacity to provide that specialized expertise. The current funding formula does give additional weight for students with disabilities, however, arguably it is not enough to provide the needed programs. The National Center on Special Education in Charter Schools is developing a proposal along these lines.

These efforts would be more effective if they were informed by special education audits or a research study to determine why students with disabilities achieve at starkly low rates compared to their peers.

Although OSSE and DCPCSB have made improvements to provide families better access to special education data, families continue to report a lack of information. OSSE recognizes that families are not currently using the special education data as intended and are looking for ways to make these data more usable. As such, OSSE is developing a guide for families to steer them on what questions to ask and where to find information for answers. OSSE, as part of the launch of the initiative to make special education data more accessible, held focus groups with families to

determine what data they require. Now that more data is available, OSSE should continue following up with families to ensure the data is relevant and accessible.

D.C. has seen a proliferation of nonprofits that support parents through the process of selecting schools and advocating for their children. These organizations would benefit from innovative funding models, such as EdNavigators in New Orleans, which partners with local employers to pay for advocates as employee benefits. These groups, along with system leaders, should also explore new ways for families to learn about the social environments of schools, such as a citywide cross-sector effort to help families share peer-to-peer experiences and knowledge about schools through churches, neighborhood groups, and other social networks.

Finally, all of the government agencies that oversee D.C.'s public schools have shown that they are committed to responding to problems and finding creative solutions. OSSE, as part of their five-year strategic plan, identified special education as an area of prioritization with the goal of closing the growing achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers. DC PCSB also has a continued focus on special education oversight and support to charter schools in addition to its mystery shopper program. Although there is a commitment to change, no immediate or comprehensive steps have been taken to execute on these promises. There is minimal commitment to truly listen to families and engage them in solutions. As D.C. continues to strive toward an education system that meets the needs of students with disabilities, coordination among DCPS, DC PSB, and public charter schools is imperative and the family voice must be at the center.

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.