DC Education Research Collaborative Research Agenda
December 2022

Washington, DC's public schools are lauded by many as a model for school systems looking to improve; the city has seen dramatic improvement over the past 15 years after historically being one of the nation's lowest-performing school systems. The headlines also belie challenges, both pervasive and new. Amid bright spots of joy as schools return to in-person learning, our students continue to navigate the academic, mental, and socioemotional turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic; educators face new challenges; and families struggle to access resources for their children in a city eager to continue the momentum of its past success. In short, the DC education community faces many urgent needs.

The DC Education Research Collaborative brings together the area's top research organizations to provide the evidence and answers that inform and empower families and caregivers, educators, policymakers, and community members to meet those urgent needs. The DC Collaborative—a research-practice partnership conceived before the pandemic—is a critical support for the DC public education community that seeks new approaches to the city's long-standing educational challenges and comes together to mitigate the pandemic's effects on student learning, student well-being, and equity.

This research agenda is a guide for how the Collaborative will focus its inquiries over the next five years. Developed jointly by educators, families, administrators, and researchers, our agenda is not an exhaustive list of the questions we will research but rather a statement of the goals DC's education community has for its students and what we must learn to get there. The Collaborative will create robust, meaningful, and actionable information to support decisions that improve outcomes and advance equity for DC's public education students. Throughout, we will center our values of collaboration, equity, independence, quality, relevance, and transparency.

The results of the research conducted under the agenda will inform the DC education community as decisions are made about policies, programs, and processes. These decisions may then guide and support practitioners in their work. Where necessary, we will adjust and adapt, consulting with school communities to ensure Collaborative projects are useful to those doing the work in DC's schools. The research agenda provides a frame for the Collaborative's work but does not prevent us from taking up new, urgent questions whose answers would help improve outcomes and direct more equitable investment and support to students who need it most.

How We Developed This Research Agenda

The Collaborative's Advisory Committee is a group of approximately two dozen members, including community members initially appointed by the DC mayor and the DC Council and representatives from DC's many education institutions, as laid out in the Collaborative's authorizing legislation.[1] The Research Council is composed of 15 organizations who make up the research arm of the research-practice partnership and will, along with practitioner partners, conduct the projects.

This research agenda was drafted by a working group consisting of five Advisory Committee members and four Research Council members.

To guide its work, the Research Agenda Working Group used feedback from Collaborative brainstorming sessions informed by previous public engagement. We used testimony and materials shared before the launch of the Collaborative, data from a survey fielded by Collaborative staff, and comments from a public listening session and four focus groups of key education stakeholders. The full Advisory Committee provided input throughout the development process.

The Collaborative believes that by including the people who will use the results of the research—practitioners, education leaders, and policymakers—in the agenda development process, our work will be meaningful, because it is based on practitioners' actual needs and work. It will be trustworthy because it centers the education community's voices, experiences, and expertise. And it will be actionable because it will ask and answer relevant, timely questions for an audience of practitioners and decisionmakers, not researchers.

How We Will Use This Research Agenda

This research agenda consists of seven focus areas. Each represents a goal our community agreed was important for education in DC over the next five years. Each focus area has guiding questions. These questions are ones the community identified as critical to working toward each goal.

On its own, each guiding question is too broad for a single research project to answer. Rather, questions are answered by the body of evidence carefully built by multiple projects, each with its own unique and specific research questions, methodology, and findings. In this way, the agenda focuses (but does not restrict) the projects researchers can undertake and allows for flexibility and creativity in the breadth of projects that can be conducted. Individual projects can also address multiple guiding questions or link two or more questions together.

The research agenda additionally allows the Collaborative to leverage existing research to answer DC-specific questions. And it gives researchers the opportunity to address community concerns—namely that their knowledge and experiences often go unheard because that knowledge is not communicated to decisionmakers in a methodological, systemic way. The evidence used to answer each

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[1] Code of the District of Columbia §38-785.02, Establishment of District of Columbia Education Research Practice Partnership.

guiding question will include rigorous new DC-specific projects undertaken by Collaborative research partners, prior rigorous research conducted in DC and elsewhere, and careful collection and understanding of the community's existing knowledge.

Our Centering Themes

The agenda's seven focus areas reflect the DC education community's goals for its students and systems. The first two overarching focus areas—an antiracist system and resource equity—are foundational themes that undergird the other five goals. These two themes will be central to *all* Collaborative projects, regardless of the focus area they fall under and the specific research questions being asked. Antiracism and equity are presented as their own focus areas with distinct guiding questions that relate to each one, allowing the Collaborative to explicitly address these questions as a part of its research agenda and understand how racist systems and structures and their resulting racial disparities shape the distribution of resources and opportunities for students across the city. But every focus area, guiding question, and ensuing project under the remainder of the agenda is framed and motivated by the two fundamental goals of an antiracist and equitable system. The other five focus areas are presented in no particular order.

Our Research Agenda

Focus Area 1. An Antiracist System Where All Schools Are Places Where Students Flourish

In a diverse city like DC, the nation's history of racial discrimination—both institutionalized and informal—demands the dismantling of systemic racism and implicit bias. The city's educators have committed themselves to meeting this demand, and the Collaborative shares the vision of an antiracist system for all. We will work to provide unbiased, rigorous information and research on creating an antiracist education system (and on understanding how other systems and policies intersect with education), especially in a place with Washington, DC's demographics, history, policies, and structures.

- What are the sources of systemic racism and other forms of discrimination within DC's education system, how can the effects of those sources be mitigated, and what new policies and practices could promote equity in the future?
- How can the past and current effects of implicit bias be addressed and the effects of bias be minimized in the future?
- What policies, practices, and approaches are needed to ensure education in DC reflects, respects, and serves all communities, races, and ethnicities?

Focus Area 2. Adequate Access to and Equitable Distribution of Resources

DC is one of the most resource-rich areas in the nation, and city leaders have consistently demonstrated their commitment to public education funding through the local education budget. Yet, the city faces several challenges: the rising cost of education in the modern economy, increased demands on the public education system in response to the pandemic, shifting enrollment patterns, and resource and opportunity gaps across all schools and within individual ones. Research shows that student outcomes are linked not simply to how much is spent but where and on what and whom. What is not clear is how

to ensure DC's students have adequate and equitable access to the engaging, developmentally appropriate resources they need.

- How should funding for DC's schools be distributed so that all students have the resources they need to succeed and that opportunity gaps within and across schools are eliminated?
- What policies, procedures, and structures are needed so that all students can access a high-quality school?
- To what degree does resource equity exist in DC's public schools, how has this changed over time, what are the underlying causes of inequities, and how can they be addressed?

Focus Area 3. Equity in Learning Outcomes

Academic opportunity, achievement, and attainment are possible for every DC student, regardless of where they live and their race, ethnicity, family income, abilities, home language, or special education status. Education policy and practice should give all students and schools the opportunity to thrive. As society and student needs evolve, we have much to learn about the outcomes of myriad facets of learning, such as curriculum, assessment, instructional strategies, and learning models. Policies and practices implemented over the past two decades have reduced the opportunity and achievement gaps that exist in the city, but there is still room for progress and an urgency to find solutions. We will look for and learn from bright spots that positively affect student learning, increase growth, and close the gaps our community finds concerning. Understanding the underlying factors that generate variations in performance, growth, and outcomes in DC are key to learning and continuously improving a system that promotes success.

- What knowledge and skills do DC's students need to be successful in future grades, and how can they be supported in gaining them?
- How can we measure and report student learning and growth in a valid, reliable, and equitable way for all DC's student groups, and what data infrastructure is needed to do this?
- Given the disparities in learning outcomes that exist among student groups (both within schools and across DC), what strategies for increasing growth and closing opportunity gaps are effective in reducing these disparities?

Focus Area 4. Students Who Are Prepared for Success after High School

DC students need opportunities in and outside of the school environment that help prepare them for the choices they make after high school, whether that be studying in a postsecondary institution, entering the workforce, or enlisting in the armed services. Students also need exposure and access to 21st-century skills and tools to be successful and independent in adulthood, regardless of the path they choose. The District has an economy unlike any other in the country, ripe with opportunities for its students both during and after high school. Further, DC has made many efforts, and seen some success, in increasing its high school graduation and college matriculation rates, but these remain lower than the national average and stubbornly pervasive. There is also a lack of reliable data on graduates' early-career outcomes and how many acquire jobs with growth potential after high school. How can we develop a system in which all students have equitable opportunities to meet high expectations while in school and are prepared to succeed on the pathway of their choice?

- How can student success after high school be measured and predicted?

- What strategies, programs, and opportunities for DC students during PK3–12 improve student success after high school, and how can students across the city access these opportunities effectively and equitably?
- What are DC students' goals for themselves, how can they be involved in determining and attaining their path after high school, and what supports do they need to achieve success?

Focus Area 5. School Environments That Support Students' Social, Emotional, Physical, and Academic Well-Being

In addition to academic content, schools provide students critical foundational intrapersonal and interpersonal skills for their empowerment and wellness. They are also places for students to grow, learn, and thrive. DC educators and families recognize the critical role schools play in supporting students' social, emotional, and physical well-being, along with their academic and intellectual growth. The urgency of these issues increased during and after the pandemic, which underscored concerns about student mental health and the development of social and emotional skills.

- How are student well-being and school climate and culture defined and measured?
- What approaches, interventions, and supports improve student well-being and mental health, whole-child development, and school climate and culture?
- What factors outside of school affect DC students' well-being (especially with respect to students who are traditionally underserved or affected by structural or individual racism, other forms of discrimination, or trauma), and how can educational institutions address these challenges?
- What social, emotional, and academic skills do students need to acquire to achieve overall wellness and academic success, and how can schools ensure DC students attain these skills?

Focus Area 6. A High-Quality, Diverse Educator Workforce

Educators are unequivocally critical for student success, and an educator workforce that more closely resembles the demographic makeup of the student body is better positioned to meet the needs of *all* students. The District is well positioned to attract, retain, and strengthen a diverse pool of educators across various roles and areas of the city; the city attracts people from all different backgrounds and experiences and has a diverse student body who would be well positioned to establish careers as educators and an array of postsecondary options for initial training and later professional development. DC educators are also concerned about the burdens being placed on them and balancing their respective mental health and well-being. And while DC's educator workforce is one of the more diverse in the nation, it can still better reflect the District's students and families. Research in this focus area will address this need by looking at the pipeline and retention of teachers and others in the educator workforce and how those factors influence student outcomes.

- What are the gaps between the educator workforce needed in DC, the current workforce employed, and characteristics of future educators preparing to enter the workforce, inclusive of demographics, subject-matter expertise, and experience level?
- What training, professional learning opportunities, and supports are needed to prepare educators, improve effectiveness, and reduce turnover to support DC students' diverse needs, experiences, and backgrounds?
- What policies, practices, and programs attract and retain a highly effective, diverse educator workforce, especially those who are current District residents and future graduates of DC schools?

Focus Area 7. Schools That Are Responsive to Family, Caregiver, and Community Needs

Student learning extends past the school walls. Home life, family, peers, neighborhoods, and external opportunities influence our students, and each student's lived experience varies. Further, strong home-school and community partnerships can influence student success, and families who are welcomed and valued by schools are critical to building a school environment that meets all its learners' unique needs. And the recent shift toward digital communication presents an opportunity to understand and leverage new ways families can interact with schools. In the District, schools and school systems take several approaches, from simple information sharing and reporting to in-depth strategies for involving the community in creating sustained relationships and generating resources. Some of these strategies have been more effective than others, and both families and educators expressed to the Collaborative that they are eager to keep improving engagement, responsiveness, and the home-school partnership.

- How do local education agencies and schools assess the needs of the communities they serve?
- What are the most effective family and caregiver engagement practices that involve all families and lead to increased trust, support, and outcomes for students?
- How does the DC education system incorporate community needs and input into its decisionmaking, and how can this be improved?
- What information about students and schools do DC's families and caregivers and communities need to make decisions about and support their students' education, and what is the most effective way of communicating that information?