

Your draft agenda is beautiful. I think it covers everything. I am looking forward to seeing the ideas and strategies you uncover that will address the nuance of each focus area, the overlap between them, behavioral change and the forces outside of education which impact the potential for success of educational solutions.

-- Karla

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1. On research questions #6 & 7 related to workforce and supporting families: it would be nice if someone looked at the impact of growing class sizes (there are HS classes with 35+ students) on teacher retention/recruitment, learning outcomes, and responsiveness to families -- it's hard to work when you're always overwhelmed, also hard for teachers to improve student performance when they have zero time to interact individually with students and caregivers/families.
  2. Given the clear issue with student wellness/mental health across the country, it would be nice to look at interventions in DCPS that are working to support students and what more can be done. (And obviously supporting student mental wellness helps learning and helps teachers trying to teach).
  3. On the question of equity that pervades this document, one point that has largely been ignored is the overwhelming majority minority schools and why DCPS spends no time trying to diversify enrollment across all DCPS schools. If we agree that retaining Jackson Reed's diversity in student body is a good thing for students across the board (which I do), why doesn't that hold true for other schools and what tools could encourage more by right families to access these schools - some of which are under-enrolled?
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Focus area 1: What changes to existing structures (if applicable) are needed to ensure education in DC reflects, respects, and serves all communities, races, and ethnicities? What coordination is needed beyond education to close opportunity gaps?

Focus area 2: Be careful that you do not define a "high-quality school" as one serving predominantly affluent children. + To what extent does uncontrolled opening of new schools (charter + DCPS) reduce available resources for children in existing schools? +To what extent are LEAs using their resources on students versus spending on other agencies, putting taxpayer dollars in the bank, paying CEOs and founders, etc.?

Focus area 3: To be clear, it's possible that DC gained achievement levels b/c low-achieving districts "gaining" is a common phenomenon observed in education research, similar to students with lower test scores experiencing bigger test score gains. But even so, we should focus on things known to improve student learning, and the details really matter here.

Don't forget about science, social studies, arts, etc. High test scores in math and literacy make schools look good, but in isolation, don't set up kids for success in the long run.

Focus area 4: Ask OSSE to give you post-secondary data they already have for federal reporting purposes. I would like to hear from students about which opportunities they think might be useful.

Focus area 5: Don't forget to ask students about what they think they need. Also, let's not limit ourselves to factors within schools. What factors in DC need to change to improve student well-being?

You may not be able to bring about solutions in all cases, but if you don't ask the question, you're not even trying to name the thing.

Focus area 6: Strongly suggest you talk to teachers in underserved schools for this area.

Focus area 7: Beware of the one size fits all here and everywhere.

-- Betsy Wolf, DC parent

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As a parent and native Washingtonian, I am so thankful for this collaborative mission. I have 1 question, and one suggestion. My question is within the 1st tier of the anti-racist initiative, is the curriculum going to allow truth to the history that isn't encouraged or supported by the system? Many of the challenges I believe are happening in our schools is because our children are more clever and deep thinkers than we give credit. Many of our scholars do not see themselves prior to slavery, the civil rights movement, and oppression within academia. This focus as currently written has some truth yet is not historically accurate. Our scholars recognize the materials they retain is missing valuable information. Neither does the material truly represent them, their ancestry, or 21st century connectivity. I can recall my sophomore year in my u.s government class we learned about the electoral college. After that class I lost the hope in the process and reason to vote. It showed my voice is beneath those in position. In addition, this misagenda of the "woke/anti-woke" and "abar curriculum" movements going on right now only further deflects, disconnects, and distracts the adults, and scholars from a valuable education and real communication. How will this research look at issues as mentioned? If so, what can be the result of real change in these areas? My suggestion, more real professional relative trauma-informed wrap around services (social workers, case management, and mental health services) for parents available within the schools during school hours their children attend. Creating safe, continuing educational spaces for parents in schools while innovating self-employment for low income families/students through trade programs in school and beyond. I believe if scholars can see their parents more active, present, and utilizing their school environments for self, career, and community advancement we will see a change in respect for their enviroments. If parents who need help for any challenges they are facing can utilize the same space their children use to advance, perhaps the percentage of parent involvement will increase as well. Lastly, an accountability committee who is made up of parents, guardians, caretakers, etc., who ensure these programs are true to their budget, resource distributions, and mission statement. They are recognized when they do yet penalized, and held responsible/accountable when they don't. Too many organizations are allowed to misrepresent and fly under the radar using unethical practices, but take advantage of the resources allocated to the community. It has to stop.

-- Simone Scott, A Social Impact Entrepreneur

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Dear members of the DC Education Research Collaborative,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the founding research agenda for the DC Education Research Collaborative at the Urban Institute. Your work provides DC students, families, educators, and leaders with the opportunity to better understand and act upon the best practices and strategies that will prepare DC students for the life we envision for them.

As executive director of the DC Special Education Cooperative (the “Co-op”), a nonprofit organization that supports DC schools to elevate the quality of special education in DC schools, I’m particularly excited to see the DC Education Research Collaborative’s work come to fruition so that our leaders, from classroom teacher to agency head, can center teaching and learning decisions around the students who need the most support, including students with disabilities.

In reviewing the draft research agenda, I was inspired to see students with disabilities explicitly named as a priority student group, and want to offer the following pieces for consideration:

#### Focus Area 3: Equity in Learning Outcomes

This area is of critical importance for the Co-op and our city at large. I encourage the DC Education Research Collaborative to research and understand what potential root causes may exist for why DC students with disabilities have not demonstrated a rate of growth commensurate to nondisabled peers on the city’s standardized test. As you know, just 8 percent of students with disabilities performed at grade level in English language arts and only 6 percent did so in math on the PARCC assessment. Students with disabilities also lag their peers in both their four-year graduation rates (54 percent for students with disabilities and 74 percent among peers) and five-year graduation rates (60 percent for students with disabilities and 75 percent for among peers). DC is far below the national average in serving students with disabilities and behind similar cities including Miami, Boston, New York, and San Diego, who all have better outcomes for students with disabilities.

Learning outcomes are too low for DC students with disabilities, even those with the least amount of special education services. The Co-op believes that by centering students with disabilities in your equity-focused research, our city can begin to center conversations and policies around students with disabilities.

#### Focus area 1: An anti-racist system where all schools are places where students flourish

This is an excellent focus area and I would encourage the Collaborative to look into the aspects of DC’s special education system and how it might support systems of oppression systemically and for individual students and their families. Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are overidentified, but underserved for special education services. This is especially true for our Black students: One in four Black male students and one in eight Black female students are identified as students with disabilities in DC. DC would be well-served to understand systemic roadblocks that we must dismantle in order to better serve our students.

#### Focus area 4: Students who are prepared for success after high school

I am particularly encouraged to see the focus on how DC prepares students for life after high school. I encourage the Collaborative to research and understand what needs to be done differently for students with disabilities to be set up for success, while avoiding lowering expectations or tracking students to alternative learning paths.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the research agenda for DC Education Research Collaborative. I’m inspired by the vision you have laid out and look forward to learning alongside my colleagues what our city can act upon to better serve DC students.

Sincerely,

Julie Camerata

Executive Director, DC Special Education Cooperative

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A few thoughts:

Focus area 1 - love this!

1) I hope that this branch of research does things like looking at overcommitted relationships with particular publishers. Case in point, having huge curricula and assessment contracts with a publisher even though the curricula, in use for 15 years, has shown very little impact on students farthest from opportunity supports an inequitable system of instruction. The sheer size of the contract and historical relationship makes it hard to break the dysfunctional pattern and try something innovative and actually effective.

2) I hope that there is research looking at the students' educational experience across wards. It's distressing to see kids in higher SES neighborhoods having rich, developmentally appropriate, learning experiences that involve play and experimentation while kids in lower SES neighborhoods are being "intervened upon" with disengaging and inappropriate tools (that didn't work the first time around). Most of our schools are led by people with secondary school experience and the thinking that pushing "rigor" down into ECE and Kinder completely ignores what we know about how young children and children living with trauma learn!

Focus area 2

1) Will this extend to things like PTA fundraising? We have some schools raising millions and funding support staff salaries and others can't raise enough funds to buy books for the library.

Focus area 3

1) Not only what skills do kids know but what is the appropriate instructional methodology to help them develop and then practice and internalize those skills? We know the skills, we just don't know how to make learning engaging and relevant for students.

2) Explore the over-reliance on standardized assessment!!

Focus area 4 - YESS!!

Focus Area 6

1) Hope we can look at the impact of having such different hiring and licensing requirements across charters and DCPS. Shouldn't the definition of a good teacher be standardized? Do teacher licenses actually ensure better instruction? If so, why don't charters need them? If not, why does DCPS? If we were all rowing in the same direction, we could have power in numbers that would allow us to create "grown your own" pipelines, DC sponsored visas for international teachers, equitable testing requirements, etc.

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Research has already been conducted on many aspects of education that DCPS is not following. Let's research what happens when we implement these changes! Take librarians for example. Research (see

Lance & Kachel, 2018, Why school librarians matter: What years of research tells us) has shown that having a librarian in every school matters. Yet every school year DC schools and parents are fighting to keep their school librarians. We fought to pass the Students' Right to Read Amendment, but yet it doesn't seem to be happening (25 schools did not have a full or part-time librarian). This law needs to be followed and would be a wonderful place for research that goes across focus areas.

Area #1: Systemic racism can be seen when schools without librarians tend to fall in Ward 7 and 8. Research has already shown "benefits associated with good library programs are strongest for the most vulnerable and at-risk learners, including students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities."

Area #2: To address resource equity it should not matter how big or small a school is, if we are truly trying to help students and improve schools then provide ALL students with a well-resourced library staffed with a full-time highly-qualified librarian.

Area #3: "Reading and writing scores tend to be higher for all students who have a full-time certified librarian, and when it comes to reading, students in at-risk subgroups tend to benefit more than all students combined."

Area #4: "Graduation rates and test scores in reading and math were significantly higher in schools with high-quality libraries and certified librarians, even after controlling for school size and poverty."

Area #5: Student-well being and school cultures thrive with full funded libraries (ex: K.C. Boyd Jefferson Middle School)

So please, let's focus research on how quickly our schools could improve across these areas by providing a well-resourced library staffed with a full-time highly-qualified librarian. #DCPSNeedsLibraians

Another area ripe for research that goes across threads could be exploring how meeting students' basic needs improves learning outcomes. ALL students should have access to a safe building (e.g, no roofs leaking, no rodents, doors with locks) that has clean drinkable water, and HVAC systems that work.

<https://kappanonline.org/lance-kachel-school-librarians-matter-years-research/#:~:text=Graduation%20rates%20and%20test%20scores,for%20school%20size%20and%20poverty.>

<https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/education/dc-public-schools-librarians-pushing-permanently-fund-positions-council-bill/65-c84d37d4-0d9b-44d5-a191-eeeace8b86a4>

-- Dana Grosser-Clarkson, DC Parent/UMD Educator

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The agenda is extraordinarily comprehensive. It thoroughly accounts for breadth and depth of DC Educational needs. I'm not certain if the following areas are already specifically accounted for in the intent behind the focus areas - is there a benefit for the following to be included in the agenda:

1) Students With Learning Disabilities need more from DC. Can there be a study of a systemic way to provide the tailored support they need in every school they attend. Miami and Boston are proof points for the capacity of SWD to succeed as Gen Ed population does.

2) Low income non-white boys need more from DC. Can there be a study on the systemic way for educators to be prepared to prioritize the support they need.

3) Safety is a concern. Could there be a study of a systemic way to create a preanticipated citywide massive response to each event of compromised school safety - from gun violence to school-route incidents. To show the adults in the city are a force of support for children. Something the press would cover.

4) School resource officers can be elevated as positive valued adults - are there studies of cities that show the benefits of the value of their presence when done well.

4) Teaching could to be elevated- are there studies of citywide supports for showing a city values them - parking space signs for them, practice of having them jump ahead in lines at businesses, some kind of discount for them, city based efficiencies for them such as DMV or Metro passes for them, pre-access to DC events for them- are there practices that have been researched to establish public recognition of their value.

5) For parents- could there be a study revealing practices to show parents at BOYear a standard way to consider the difference between grades in report cards -vs- growth on teacher provided MAP tests, vs end of year tests like PARCC and NAEP. Studies nationally show a disconnect when grades indicate student on track but proficiency may not be on pace. Could research focus on a systemic practice of informing parents of student performance in a standard way yield more intensity or more quick interruption when students start falling behind or have shown growth below proficiency even when grades may indicate As/Bs.

-- Beth Gamba Steel, Executive Director, Gamba Family Foundation

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I believe #5 should move up to at least #3 as it summarizes primary responsibilities of what should do and the others #3, 4, 6 and 7 still support that goal.

-- Raymond Weeden, Executive Director

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#### DC Education Research Collaborative Research Agenda Comments

Summary: I have itemized comments for each area below, but generally, I ask the research collaborative to apply the guiding goals of anti-racism and equity to research questions about the construction and makeup of the school system(s) itself. How do racist systems and structures and their resulting racial disparities shape the distribution of resources and opportunities for students across the city?

Area 1: We need take up anti-racism not just within system, but also to the system and its broader context. How does racism and resulting racial disparities intersect with the education system? Within the system — IMPACT and standardized testing need to be part of this analysis. Included here or in area 5, attention needs to be given to intersections of racism with discrimination on other bases including gender and sexuality.

Area 2: Again, we have to zoom out to see broader inequities that students experience outside of school and how those disadvantages and inequities are distributed/concentrated within schools — and the implications for what schools need to serve their students. We also have to look at how at-risk funds are used and if they are in fact providing extra resources and services to the students who need them.

Area 3: I agree that all students can learn and achieve, but addressing income inequities and related housing, food, and health insecurity can support academic achievement and this project should not ignore this nor excuse a lack of a broader, holistic policy response.

I urge the collaborative to be clear and explicit about definitions — if “opportunity and achievement gaps” means racial disparities in test scores, then say that. That will also free us up to talk more clearly about opportunity gaps in broader terms — course offerings, extracurricular offerings, field trips, etc. I suggest you revise the second bulleted question to: “What are anti-racist ways to measure student learning and growth that are valid, reliable, and equitable for all of DC’s student groups?” Do we have an adequate data infrastructure to measure and monitor (DC Auditor’s reports would suggest that we do not)?

Area 4: Preparation for post-secondary education and/or employment is vitally important, but so are other life skills, and it is probably worth naming literacy as one of them, among others. I strongly support the third question, “What are DC students’ goals for themselves...?”

Area 5: I strongly agree with the need to address overall student well-being inside and outside of school. I understand the focus on what educational institutions can do to address these issues, but every effort should be made to take what might be learned about outside of school factors to inform policy outside of school.

Area 6: I again state the need to address the racist teacher evaluation system. I would also ask if OSSE has the data infrastructure to track these important measures on an ongoing basis.

Area 7: I think enough schools have implemented home visits that we can learn something about its effectiveness.

-- Robert Henderson

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The research agenda nicely lays out areas of focus for research and school improvement in DC over the next five years. As it notes, the guiding questions are too big to be addressed in individual research projects. It’s unclear what the Collaborative is actually going to research. That said, this framework could encourage researchers to situate their research in service of one of the identified goals. Is there a yearly plan that is situated within the agenda? Are there studies planned that would span across the five years of the agenda? How will studies or groups of studies be identified to be part of the execution of this agenda? Will there be reports that summarize what we’ve learned over the course of a specific period of time (5 years, 1 year)?

It seems like most of the guiding questions will require a DC LEA (or several or the SEA) to actually implement policies and /or practices to understand better how they are working or which features of the policies and practices are most important to reaching the stated goals. How will this research agenda link to the priorities (and actions) of DCPS and other LEAs?

As they are, the guiding questions seem to call for descriptive responses. Will the DC Education Research Collaborative focus on descriptive research? Are there opportunities or incentives for experimental research designs? Should the agenda include a statement of the importance of high-quality education data in DC?

The research agenda mentions leveraging existing and research happening outside of DC. Are there plans to replicate existing studies to identify the similarities and differences within the DC context?

-- Nancy Waymack

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Focus area 4: Students who are prepared for success after high school -

- 1.) How can we offer free two-year college education and/or stackable credentialing to students in DC?
- 2.) What are ways we can scaffold dual enrollment opportunities so that more DC (DMV) Universities accept and provide credits to DC students?
- 3.) What does a state-wide scholarship look like for students to stay in DC? Ex. Hope Scholarship for GA; Life Scholarship for DC. We should be examining this question so we can grow a high-quality, diverse workforce in DC in education, and overall.

-- Jessica Giles, State Director

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By and large, both the topics that have been chosen and the reasoning behind these choices — the imperative to build a truly excellent, equitable education for all students demands that we attend to these topics — are compelling. I think it would be wise to call for study into the disparate outcomes of specific groups of students — Black students, students with disabilities, students deemed at-risk for academic failure, in particular. Those groups are often implied in the draft, but making them explicit would be helpful. The first focus area is well laid out. I would, however, be more direct in noting that to build an anti-racist education system will require dismantling and repairing the ongoing harms of systems \*outside\* of education (e.g., housing, labor market, medical care). The DC Education Research Collaborative cannot take on everything, but it will have to ask affiliated researchers to look at these areas as well. Finally, it would be very helpful if the draft could give examples of what specific research questions it will tackle. Variations in learning performance and outcomes (Focus area 3) could be a result of the use of different curricula. Given the variation in curricular choices in our decentralized system, might the Education Research Collaborative commission a study on the impact of different middle school math curricula? I am not actually proposing that it should do so; that is more an example of something I would like to see in the draft to make the focus areas more concrete and actionable.

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft DC Education Research Collaborative Research Agenda. This is an exciting opportunity to shine a light on the state of education in DC and inform what policies and practices can improve student experiences and outcomes.

One thing I would like to see a stronger focus on is out-of-school time (OST), which has strong connections to many of the other focus areas in the research agenda (e.g., focus areas 2, 4, 5, and 7). I see that focus area 5 will explore "what factors outside of school affect DC students' well-being" which I interpreted as (rightly) focusing on factors like access to stable housing, food insecurity, access to healthcare, etc. However, I would also like to see the Collaborative take a more expansive approach to defining the learning environment to OST programs given the measurable impacts of high-quality OST programs on students' experiences and outcomes and what we know about inequitable access to those programs across the District. If we are thinking about all of the inputs that shape student experience and the different contexts where students experience academic and social-emotional growth, this seems like an important place to focus and an approach that can ensure greater coherence in how we understand the education ecosystem.

-- Marisa Goldstein

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DC students need opportunities in and outside of the school environment that help prepare them for the choices they make for their life after high school, whether that be studying in a postsecondary institution, entering the workforce or enlisting in the armed services. They also need exposure and access to 21st century skills and tools in order 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.

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**Comments on**  
**DC Education Research Collaborative Research Agenda - November 7, 2022, Draft**

**Fritz Mulhauser**

November 23, 2022

The draft research agenda is another welcome milestone in developing a research-practice partnership (RPP) for the schools of Washington, D.C. I have followed the effort with interest since testifying to the Council years ago about research needs described in the National Academy study of D.C. schools 2009-13. Mark Simon, Ruth Wattenberg and I all spoke to underscore the urgency to develop improved data and ongoing research to inform policy here.<sup>1</sup>

The draft is broadly inclusive, with seven focus areas and 23 bullets of further questions. An army of researchers could be busy for years on them all.<sup>2</sup> Significant steps must now follow to decide more narrowly just what work to do and how, steps to try to assure that researchers who will enjoy special access to D.C. schools and to those making decisions about them will do the most impactful inquiry with the most appropriate methods.

I offer reflections on three areas that will arise next as broad topics are turned into a practical agenda to guide work that can yield the highest priority and most usable results. That is, the advisory committee must gather all sorts of new information that can help it to make crucial choices that will distinguish this collaborative's work from other ways of doing inquiry (such as faculty-guided university-based research or funder-specified contract studies). The further choices include:

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<sup>1</sup> The D.C. Council mandated a study of D.C. education as it passed the education governance changes in 2007 known as the Public Education Reform Amendments Act. The National Research Council expert panel that led the study grew intensely frustrated at the District's inadequate data and analytic capacity. See *An Evaluation of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia: Reform in a Changing Landscape*. Committee for the Five-Year (2009-2013) Summative Evaluation of the District of Columbia's Public Schools, Board on Testing and Assessment, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2015). Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/phkqzd7>. At a Council hearing on lessons from the report on June 22, 2015, I said "I endorse the report's encouragement that the District design a new organization so that ongoing independent data-gathering and analysis, done by staff with close relationships with the schools and the community, may enhance the capability of schools for steady, reflective action over time. Such an organization's research could, by effective stakeholder involvement, be directed to real problems such as identifying schools that are improving and why."

<sup>2</sup> Research priority setting was to have started long ago. Beginning in 2010, states that received federal Race To the Top (RTT) grants (\$75 million for D.C.) were required to do research planning work that now apparently is falling on the collaborative. The incomplete work was documented by the D.C. Auditor. "Despite the RTT funding allotted for these stated purposes ... OSSE has not: published a research agenda, engaged with District stakeholders about a research agenda, created data inventories or other metadata, or put together the raw data files into research-ready datasets." *Measuring What Matters: More and Better Data Needed to Improve D.C. Public Schools* (Office of the D.C. Auditor, 2021), p. 75. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2sezkzza>. The D.C. Council directed an audit of the data situation in anticipation of the establishment of the collaborative. D.C. Code § 38-831.01 Note.

- choosing outcomes where unsatisfactory performance is most urgent to address or student populations that are most vulnerable in the current system;
- specifying methods and data that seem likely to provide the most useful answers;
- planning how questions and methods will be divided among the many potential collaborators.

Other collaborations have worked through these issues. Informative guest speakers for the advisory committee could be arranged from other cities' research partnerships, or the state of Maryland which has done its statewide agenda.

## **I. Refining the agenda by clearer choice among outcomes and student populations**

The advisory committee, by law, establishes “the agenda.” But even if the legislation doesn't say so in so many words, it should be clear that doing so effectively will include pushing deeper into plans, beyond the enormous sweep of a five-year topic list. The vantage points of the advisory committee members in education and the District community were intended to bolster the legitimacy of the group's ultimate finer-grained priority-setting. Seeking funds for research, it will be enormously helpful to say, “These are the inquiries D.C. stakeholders believe are most necessary in the next few years.”

Options abound, so vigorous debate and data-based choices are needed to select 2-3 top targets for an early round of high-profile work that will begin to set public appreciation of the effort. For example:

- Is effective early-childhood learning a critical result we want to learn how to improve?
- Are school results for vulnerable groups such as at-risk youth, English learners, or special-needs children of particular interest?
- Is it urgent for the lifelong success of D.C. youth to improve upper-grade results to increase graduation along with success in all kinds of postsecondary education?

The point is to get specific. Clear focus can pay off. The well-known UChicago Consortium on School Research made one of its most dramatic impacts in more than three decades of collaboration with Chicago Public Schools by focusing on 9th grade. Research showed the die of high school success was cast there, and dramatic effects came from a deep dive of improvement efforts based on the research.<sup>3</sup>

## **Refining the agenda by thinking about study methods**

Researchers, on their own, choose methods of gathering and analyzing data they prefer. Criteria vary: cost, comfort (familiarity), clout (scientific persuasiveness), or credentials (techniques in vogue). The D.C. collaboration, in contrast, can prioritize methods that suit the problem and the decision-maker audience.

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<sup>3</sup> See the report tracing a decade of research and impact. *Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on the Ninth-Grade Year* (Chicago, 2014). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4xdwwa3h>.

So another way the agenda will take shape from the broad basket of possibilities is as the advisory committee learns about and makes recommendations among study design and method options such as:

- Exploiting existing published research -- through techniques such as meta-analysis since many topics on effective schooling and methods for improved equity and effectiveness have been studied for years; researchers' incentives may not be so great for work that reviews what's known, but the advisory committee can suggest a decision maker may be best served not by new data but a synthesis of what is reliably known already about comparable contexts.
- Using existing D.C. data? The advisory committee should proceed with great caution and serious, independent technical advice before encouraging any study relying on existing data. The D.C. Auditor's review showed many severe and persistent problems. That report, published only last year, concluded longstanding problems undermine research use.<sup>4</sup>
- Getting new data – but of what kind? Vivid stories and case studies may be needed to build consensus on a known problem by illustrating it. A regular survey done repeatedly allows comparisons of different cohorts.<sup>5</sup> Experiments allow the most robust inference about cause and effect, while longitudinal tracking of subjects over time reveals development pathways.

### **Refining the agenda by matching topics to research partners**

The third area of planning that lies ahead is thinking through who does what? With Urban Institute and 15 partners and unknown future funding for the research, it is challenging to link plans to action.

Once priority topics are identified and tentative study methods recommended, based on a judgment of what will best serve school decision-makers, decisions will be needed to resolve further questions such as:

- Are partners recruited for individual studies? Many research partnerships do the opposite, pairing a school system with a single university or other central organization—New Orleans and a Tulane center, and Chicago schools linked to the university consortium, for example. Synergy and common purpose can benefit if studies are clustered in a university department or independent applied research institute; would distributing projects among many diverse places, though all centered on D.C. schools, lose out on something valuable, a whole greater than the sum of parts?
- How are decisions on studies, performers, and funds linked? As Urban Institute is not funded to support the multiple studies envisioned, the search elsewhere for resources and their timing is another puzzle. Assigning a study could be according to who can get the funds to do it (which could mean established major players always prevail). Would a research team at a partner need to seek Urban and advisory committee approval first, or funds first? Funders often want to see project approvals in hand.
- Matching researcher skill sets with research project parameters (set in at least tentative advisory committee thinking) requires a more complex information exchange – adding to the familiar researcher-funder two-way courtship. In the novel environment of research designed from the start to help practitioners and policy makers, researcher communication and technical assistance skills will be important for the committee to consider, as well as other capabilities.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Measuring What Matters*, p. 1 (“The District’s education data lack integrity. . . Without valid data the District has limited ability to produce research needed to understand program impacts, drive continuous improvement efforts, or even maintain and report accurate basic administrative data.”). Based on the auditor’s findings, the D.C. Council directed OSSE to submit plans to remedy data problems. Sec. 4181 of FY 2022 Budget Support Act of 2021, Law 24-0045 (effective Nov. 13, 2021). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2wca346m>.

<sup>5</sup> Consistent surveys repeated over many years (of students, parents, teachers, principals, etc.) have been another major contribution of the Chicago Consortium, accumulating in a data bank used in many separate studies.

Subject: Public Feedback on Draft RPP Research Agenda

From: Mark Simon

Date: 11-16-2022

The DC Education Research Collaborative's draft Research Agenda, is called a "research agenda" but it is not. It is a broad vision statement that covers almost anything researchers might choose to study. The two things are very different. Nevertheless, I was glad to see the most recent iteration of the RPP vision statement correct for the conspicuous absence of any significant reference to racial disparities and outcomes in the previous draft. The new language on creating an anti-racist system and racial equities certainly makes up for that omission. But it is not a research agenda. Presumably the research agenda would include analyzing the disparities by race, racial opportunity gaps, racial learning outcome gaps beyond standardized test scores, racial disparities in post-graduation career and college attainment. But none of this or the research topics and questions underlying such an agenda appeared in what was advertised as a "research agenda."

The University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research's research agenda for 2021-2025 bares striking similarity to the DC RPP's draft document in its vision statement. However, it then includes a very specific and hard-hitting set of research topics and questions under six sub-sections:

1. Student Experiences
2. Curriculum and Instruction
3. School District Policies and Practices
4. Teacher Recruitment and Retention
5. School Accountability and Choice
6. Families, Communities and Schools as Partners

I would like to comment on one focus from Chicago's research agenda that is conspicuously absent from DC's, even as a broad vision document. It is one that is staring the city in the face and still seems to be absent as a concern or topic of interest in your broad vision statement: **The astronomically high rates of teacher and principal turnover.**

The District of Columbia Schools have one of the highest rates of teacher and principal turnover in the nation. Teacher turnover undoubtedly contributes to lower rates of student achievement and higher rates of poor teacher morale, but what makes it an important topic of study is that more than any other factor it is one that is within our control. Other factors, like family socio-economic background, or inequalities in access to health care, or access to internet connectivity, or family mobility, or even contributors to student social-emotional strength and stability are much harder to impact through government policy.

I hope that the lack of interest in this obvious focus for study isn't an implicit acceptance of high rates of turnover as being not such a bad thing on the part of the Research Practice Partnership and its advisory committee. There have been education leaders who felt that teacher turnover and even principal turnover are not in and of themselves problems. Occasionally chancellors or superintendents have

claimed that turnover can be a good thing. However, national research is quite clear that high rates of turnover provide a serious impediment to stable, high-quality schools with strong professional learning communities. The Learning Policy Institute has documented the costs of high turnover to a district. And the research is clear that it takes about ten years for teachers to hit their stride as competent educators, so a school or a district with high turnover will never be high quality. The seminal 2010 book from the Consortium on Chicago School Research, Organizing Schools for Improvement, Lessons from Chicago, argued that a well-established professional learning community among the teachers and with the administration in a school was one of the key factors that explained very different achievement rates for schools with comparable student socio-economic backgrounds. Two high poverty schools with very different student results differed primarily on their recognition of the importance of this issue.

If teachers or principals don't stick around, don't want to make teaching or leading a school their career, it is important to investigate why. If we understand the causes, then policy changes might be considered to reverse high rates of turnover.

There are two kinds of turnover: leaving the district or the profession and leaving a school for another school within the District. **Both are important for research.** If teachers leave a school in higher-than-average numbers, even if they stay in teaching or in the District, the pattern of not being able to retain teachers is an indicator of something in that school that warrants further investigation. At present, school turnover rates are not even recorded for public information.

The beauty of putting teacher turnover, and principal turnover on your research agenda is that it has the potential to be a key to other issues of concern. Turnover rates vary tremendously from one school to another. Why? Is there any correlation between high rates of turnover and lack of progress in test measured markers of student achievement? If a particular school has high rates of turnover year after year, or experiences a new principal every year for four years in a row, is that an indication of other problems or is it a driver of those problems? Is teacher turnover an indicator of school quality? Or is there a natural correlation between teacher or principal turnover and the socio-economic background of students?

**A very interesting study of teacher turnover in Montgomery County Public School, led to surprising results and tremendous insights about school and school system improvement.** MCPS studied teacher turnover around 2005 and discovered some surprising results that exploded some widespread myths, even among policy makers in the County. The prevailing assumption was that turnover rates in more privileged school communities was low and higher in high poverty communities because teachers often start their careers in high-poverty schools with a goal of transferring to more privileged schools. So, the turnover rates were thought to be natural. That is not what they found. It's true that the turnover rate in high poverty schools was often, but not always, high. But the pattern was for teachers to transfer from high poverty schools, not to more privileged schools, but to schools with very similar socio-economic background kids. Teachers transferred into schools they perceived to be run better. Further, interviews with teachers demonstrated that their reasons for leaving the school had nothing to do with the students. Students more in need were not a driver of teacher departure. It had to do more with constraints on teaching and the narrowing of instruction that had been imposed on higher poverty, lower performing, schools. This came as a revelation to the school system and helped drive a focus on nurturing a deep professional learning community in all schools. It led to a re-thinking school quality and a focus on building professional learning communities capable of retaining teachers.

In short, high turnover is a potential goldmine of information waiting to be tapped. It just needs to be a focus of study. What's working leading to low turnover and what's not working leading to high turnover in schools with similar or comparable student demographics.

Given the astronomically high rates of teacher turnover in both DCPS and DC charter schools, the *effects* of teacher or principal turnover are also worth studying. What are the effects on students? On other teachers? Does teacher or principal turnover beget teacher turnover? Why?

Indeed, the University of Chicago's research agenda includes the following research questions:

Objectives and Potential Research Questions

**Objective 1:** Understand opportunities, factors, and incentives that improve teacher recruitment, particularly teachers of color.

- What are the promising pathways, including type of preparation program, student teaching, and others that have succeeded in recruiting strong teachers, including teachers of color?

**Objective 2:** Identify current factors and incentives that keep teachers in their schools, particularly teachers of color.

- Building on previous research, what policies, structures, and programs enhance teacher retention at the school level?

**Objective 3:** Building on prior research elsewhere, assess the benefits for students of being paired in classrooms with teachers of similar race and ethnicity.

- How do students perceive the supportive environment of the school (one of the Five Essential Supports) when they are paired or not with teachers of similar racial and ethnic background?

**Objective 4:** Examine the effects of teacher turnover, including teachers of color, on students.

- How do students perceive teachers leaving the school, and does this vary by whether students were paired with a (leaving) teacher of similar racial and ethnic background?

The DC Council is about to consider legislation in January that focuses on teacher turnover. Now is exactly the wrong time for the RPP and its advisory committee to turn a blind eye to the turnover issue.

There is also an obvious connection between teacher turnover and the teacher evaluation system, IMPACT. If research can begin to unpack some of the professional culture and morale issues in the District, perhaps it can begin to reveal a path to greater stability, professionalism, and a stronger learning culture in every school.

The words "reduce turnover" do appear under Focus area 6 in the second bullet on page 5 of your draft agenda. But it is simply listed as a possible outcome measure, like improving effectiveness, not as an issue to be studied. Let me urge you to reconsider this avoidance of the teacher turnover issue in your research agenda. It may be the most fruitful avenue for research to unpack.

Lastly, I would like to comment on the difference between the Advisory Committee being satisfied with a vision statement rather than demanding an actual set of clearly stated objectives and research questions. The devil is in the details. As you can see from the Chicago Consortium's research questions

above, their intent is to do the kind of research that finds out what is working and what isn't. They do that in each of the six broad research topics. The DC RPP's document runs the risk of simply restating DCPS' goals rather than identifying potential problems and showing the way toward different approaches. The goal should be to discover what's working *and what isn't*. I would urge the RPP and its advisory committee to keep working on the research agenda to be sure the actual research questions are the right ones.