

# UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITIES: SERVICES THAT HELP POOR CHILDREN SUCCEED IN THE CLASSROOM

## Part 8: Recommendations

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Poverty affects children in a number of ways that make it hard to succeed in school. Low-income children are more likely than other children to show up to school hungry or malnourished; exposed to trauma, stress and violence; affected by family or neighborhood instability; or coping with severe health problems. Addressing the impacts of poverty is thus key to unlocking opportunities and closing the achievement gap in DC.

Fortunately, services provided through schools can alleviate poverty's impact and contribute to improved educational outcomes. From increasing attendance to raising grades and test scores to decreasing discipline and behavior problems, supports that go beyond classroom instruction can remove the barriers to learning that low-income children face.

School is an ideal location to deliver services. Children and families are more likely to take advantage of health and other services when they are located in a school, and staff delivering health and other services can work directly with teachers to let them know where to refer students and to offer advice on addressing problem behaviors in their classroom.

The District offers a number of programs that help low-income students succeed in the classroom, but there are still large gaps. The number of homeless students is rising, but federal funding is low and falling. Approximately 5,000 DC children don't have access to needed mental health services. And some school nurses, social workers and psychologists have caseloads well beyond industry standards.

The District has a unique opportunity to expand non-instructional services for low-income students through the addition of an at-risk weight to the school funding formula. With \$2,000 of additional funds per at-risk student, both DC public schools and public charter schools have new resources to help low-income students succeed.

This brief lays steps DC can take to improve services for low-income children in DC. It is the final brief in a series, *Unlocking Opportunities*, which explores the impacts of poverty on education, and what DC schools are doing — and should be doing — to address them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The complete series can be found here: <http://www.dcfpi.org/unlocking-opportunities-services-that-help-poor-children-succeed-in-the-classroom-3>

## Improving Services for Low-Income Students

**Improve Services for Students who are Homeless.** DC should provide additional support for school-based staff who help homeless students and should expand outreach to make sure students and families who become homeless know of assistance that is available to them. A system-wide assessment is needed to identify gaps in services so that DC can develop comprehensive tools to remove educational barriers for homeless children. Lastly, the District should focus on homelessness prevention programs that help families with school-age children avoid the trauma and disruption of homelessness.

**Improve and Expand Services for Students with Mental Health Needs.** The District should expand key mental health programs such as the School Mental Health Program and Primary Project to help the estimated 5,000 children in need of mental health services. DC should also increase the number of social workers and psychologists at schools so that these key front-line mental health professionals are available to assist students. Lastly, all schools should adopt systems to reinforce positive behavior and make school staff sensitive to the needs of traumatized children.

**Promote Access to Quality Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs.** The District's financial support of afterschool programs is modest and declining. The District should enhance the capacity of quality expanded learning programs to ensure that all low-income students have access to meaningful activities after school and in the summer, when low-income students lose ground. The District should improve data collection and evaluation of programs to ensure that funding supports high-quality services, and the city should work to streamline funding and reporting requirements across multiple government agencies to make it easier for providers to access needed funding.

**Scale-Up the Community Schools Model in DC.** Community Schools turn public schools into hubs for students and the larger community by developing partnerships with community organizations and bringing services into the school, such as health care or adult literacy. There are currently six grantees (at 11 schools) operating Community School partnerships in the District, but the model should be expanded to all high-poverty schools. The District should increase funding, explore hiring an organization to coordinate services, and prioritize data collection and evaluation of the model as it grows.

**Expand Parent Engagement Efforts.** DC is currently making progress to engage parents in their child's education through privately funded parent-teacher home visits and other strategies that give families information to support their children's learning at home. DC Public Schools also

offers teachers a year-long professional learning community focused on family engagement. The District should continue to evaluate work being done and help more high-poverty schools become participate in these effective parent engagement models.

**Improve and Expand Health and Nutrition Services for Students.** DC should increase the number of School-Based Health Centers and school nurses to help students to access primary care services that can help reduce barriers to learning. In addition, DC should expand the number of schools that use innovative options for serving school breakfast to increase the number of students who start the day off fed and well-nourished. Examining barriers to participation in key health programs can help DC develop a plan to increase participation in services like the Oral Health Program. Lastly, DC should add an indicator to its school ranking report card that easily tells parents, teachers, and other stakeholders how well a school is supporting healthy behavior.

## Recommendations on Funding

**Monitor the use of at-risk weight in the school funding formula for both school sectors.** With the addition of a new at-risk weight in the school funding formula, it will be important to track how both DCPS and public charter schools spend these resources, which amounts to more than \$2,000 additional funds per qualifying student. In addition to instructional supports geared towards at-risk children, these resources should be used to enhance programs like quality expanded learning and summer programs, robust parent engagement services, services for homeless students, and integrated student supports such as those provided through Community Schools partnerships.

**Continue to fund physical health and mental health-related services through local agencies outside of the school formula.** This means the DCPS system and individual charter schools should have access to funds for these types of necessary services, but the resources should not pass through the local school funding formula. The city should be responsible for allocating adequate resources through the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), Department of Health (DOH), and other agencies whose staff are best equipped to make these types of allocation decisions.

## Recommendations on Management of Services for Low-Income Students

**Create a new senior liaison role between the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) and Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services (DMHHS) to focus on non-instructional supports for low-income children and youth.** Many of the services for low-income children and youth that are provided in the school are run by agencies outside of the education cluster. For example, the School Mental Health program operates in both DC Public Schools and DC public charter

schools and is run and managed by the Department of Behavioral Health. Communication, coordination and planning of the education and human services agencies is therefore critical. The senior liaison would be responsible for identifying common needs of low-income children and youth across schools, what services are available, and how to plan for and address gaps in services.

**Collect and share uniform data for both school sectors and across key service areas.** It remains difficult to collect school-level data for all DC charter schools<sup>2</sup> making it hard to pinpoint where gaps in services may be found across the city. With almost half of District students attending these schools, it is critical that consistent data be collected and made public across both DC public schools and public charter schools to gauge where services and funding are still needed. For example, information should be collected on the expanded learning programs that schools offer, how many social workers, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals are employed at each school, and what kinds of parent engagement programs the schools offer.

**Share critical information appropriately across agencies.** It is important that DC government agencies share data with one another on the children and families they are serving. Children with socio-emotional needs and their families often receive services from multiple District agencies, but a lack of information sharing across agencies can mean that efforts are duplicated, unnecessarily re-started, and problems facing the child and family not fully understood by the various agencies working with them.

Having a process in place to ensure necessary information is properly shared among agencies can help to avoid these problems, as was recommended in District's report on the interactions that Relisha Rudd and her family had with the District government. The senior liaison between the Deputy Mayors for Education and Health and Human Services could lead efforts to facilitate data sharing among the two clusters. It is critical though that the confidentiality of families still be protected.

**Make data and program evaluation part of key non-instructional services for low-income children at schools to ensure dollars go toward effective services.** Comprehensive data collection and consistent program evaluation will help DC allocate limited resources effectively and spot problems with programs that need to be addressed. For example, the District should be tracking data on several key models - school-based health centers, Turnaround for Children, positive behavior interventions and supports, and Community Schools - to find out what the strengths and weaknesses are among the various programs.

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<sup>2</sup> DCFPI requested information on services at DC public charter schools through an online survey, but the response rate was not sufficient for inclusion in this series of papers.