

Limited School Funding Can Lead to the Misuse of Extra Resources for Low-Income Students: A Closer Look at 'At-Risk' Funds

By Marlana Wallace

Far too many DC students face enormous challenges—unhealthy environments, [housing instability](#), [food insecurity](#), care-giving responsibilities, and the [stress of living paycheck to paycheck](#). About half of DC students currently qualify for 'at-risk' funding because they are growing up in families struggling to make ends meet, or they are at risk of falling behind in the classroom.¹ Both DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools receive an additional \$2,334 per-student in local 'at-risk' dollars.² But the underfunding of schools often results in the misuse of these extra resources intended to support students facing the greatest barriers. The District needs a better blueprint for the resources required to staff every school and the resources needed to support low-income students in particular.

'At-risk' funds were designed to promote equity: to ensure that low-income students get the same kinds of enriching opportunities and services as their higher-income peers, and to ensure that students who are struggling academically get the targeted supports they need to succeed in the classroom. These funds are supposed to help schools provide *supplemental* resources and expand important services for the students who need them most.

But tight school budgets have led to the misuse of 'at-risk' funds. Schools struggling to maintain current staffing or otherwise meet necessary requirements are often forced to re-direct dollars for targeted services for the students who need them most and/or de-prioritize enriching arts and afterschool programs—never mind make needed improvements. In this way, inadequate school funding limits the ability of schools to change the large and troubling differences in academic outcomes between the District's low-income and higher-income students.

There are deeply distressing differences between the educational outcomes of economically disadvantaged students and their wealthier peers in the District. Less than a quarter of low-income DC high school students test college and career ready in English. Schools are also failing to prepare students of color for college and careers to the same degree as white students. In high school English, 87 percent of white students are considered college and career ready compared to only 21 percent of Black students (*Figure 1*, pg 2). In fact, racial disparities in student outcomes are *widening* in the District. Although the PARCC scores of all DC students and subgroups have improved overall, the scores of white students improved five percentage points more than Black students.³ Economic and racial injustice are distinct and yet intertwined, with particularly devastating consequences for low-income students of color. Addressing the injustice of these inequalities requires targeted resources, like 'at-risk' dollars.

Every dollar of 'at-risk' funding should be easily identifiable, because all the dollars should be supplemental. But information on the school-level allocation of 'at-risk' funds is not made readily accessible in real time, and actual spending of 'at-risk funds' at the DCPS school level is not tracked. Of the \$50.3 million that is supposed to follow DCPS students to their schools, only 59 percent (\$29.8 million) was allocated in 'at-risk

eligible ways,' according to Mary Levy's latest analysis (*Figure 2*).⁴ The allocation of the other 41 percent (\$20.5 million) of 'at-risk' funds could not be identified in the individual school budgets.⁵ It is likely that a large share of these unaccounted for 'at-risk' funds are once again being used for functions that are required at all schools as part of DCPS's staffing model, instead of supplemental services for the students who need them most. Even if every dollar of 'at-risk' money in the FY 2019 budget was allocated on targeted services as intended, these funds would remain far short of the levels recommended in the 2013 Adequacy Study.⁶

School level leaders in both DCPS and public charters, alongside teachers and families, should be able to leverage 'at-risk' funds to serve their students' specific needs in evidence-based ways. Whether school communities choose to use those funds on targeted supports or school-wide benefits, those resources should be supplemental.

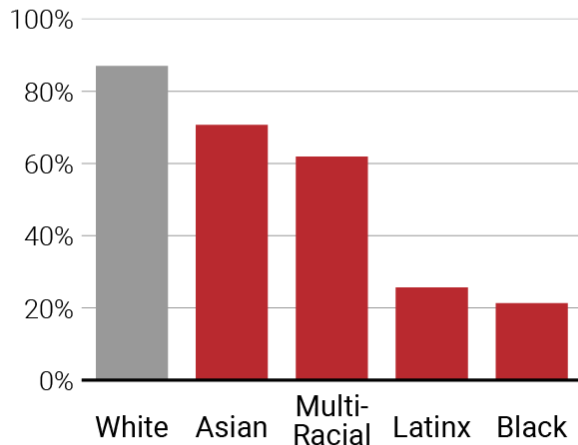
Schools must be adequately funded so that basic needs are met, without having to tap 'at-risk' funds. Budget increases for DCPS and public charter schools in recent years have been arbitrary, and not connected to what it really costs to provide quality education. Five years have passed since the [2013 Adequacy Study](#), and yet we still have not reached the level of resources it recommended, once adjusted for inflation— let alone the level needed to keep up with all of our system's changing needs. DC Council should allocate enough money in FY 2019 to revise the 2013 Adequacy Study and update our understanding of investments needed to support every school and ensure that we are meeting the needs of low-income students.

Read more about DCFPI's FY 2019 education budget recommendations [here](#).

FIGURE 1.

Differences in Tested Preparation for College and Career Reflects Racial Inequities in and out of DC Schools

Share of high school students scoring at Level 4 or higher on English Language Arts in 2017, which is considered "college and career" ready

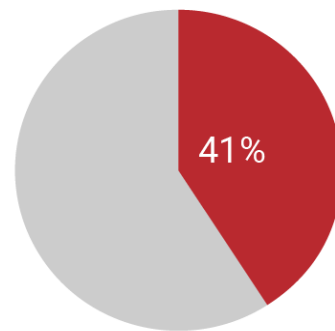


Note: Score refers to 2016-17 PARCC Scores. The performance of students who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native or Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian is not depicted here, as calculations for subgroups smaller than 25 are suppressed. Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

FIGURE 2.

Only 59 Percent of DCPS 'At-Risk' Funds Allocated to Supplemental Programming in FY 2019

- Unaccounted For, Likely 'Supplanting' Core School Function
- Budgeted to Support Supplemental Staff and Targeted Programs



Note: By law, 90 percent of 'at-risk' funds must follow students to their DCPS schools. Of that \$50.3 million in at-risk funds, only \$29.8 million was allocated to support positions in addition to those guaranteed in the Comprehensive School Staffing Model. All school level 'at-risk' funds should be budgeted and spent in ways that are identifiably supplemental. It is likely that a large share of these unaccounted for 'at-risk' funds are once again paying for core staff, instead of supplemental services. Source: Analysis of DCPS' initial budget allocations for FY 2019 by Mary Levy, April 2018.

¹ A projected 44,496 students in DC qualify for ‘at-risk’ funding in the 2018-2019 school year because they are a foster care student, experiencing homelessness, overage for their grade, or participate in SNAP or TANF, ([DCPS FY 2019 Budget Chapter](#); [PCS FY 2019 Budget Chapter](#))

² In the District’s proposed Fiscal Year 2019 budget, there are \$103.9 million ‘at-risk’ dollars for both DCPS and public charters overall.

³ These are scores in English Language Arts, ([2016-17 PARCC Scores](#)).

⁴ This is actually a conservative estimate. It assumes that ‘at-risk’ funds are being used to support every staff person beyond those positions guaranteed to every school by the Comprehensive Staffing Model, when most schools should also have other pots to draw from, like Title I.

⁵ [DCPS FY19 Initial School Budget Allocations](#)

⁶ With a weight of 0.37 as recommended in the 2013 Adequacy Study, qualifying students would have \$3,943 in additional ‘at-risk’ funds, or \$175.5 million total (based off of a projected ‘at-risk’ subpopulation of 44,496). That is \$71.6 million more. If the ‘at-risk weight’ were increased as recommended, and all else remained the same, schools would have \$71.6 million more ‘at-risk’ dollars (or \$1,609 more per-student) to invest in supplemental services for students overall, than the current \$103.9 million total in at-risk funds, ([2013 Adequacy Study](#)).