

What Do Children Need to Succeed? Hint: It's More than Good Schools

By Ed Lazere

The DC budget is our best tool for supporting children, yet the proposed budget for fiscal year (FY) 2020 leaves gaps in many services that can make a difference in the life of a child: in schools, supports for infants and toddlers, housing stability for families, and school-based mental health. As the Council completes the FY 2020 budget, it should respond to the complexity of children's lives and needs by strengthening all of these supports that children need to thrive. Addressing just one area—such as schools—will not be enough.

Public investment in the healthy development DC's children is critical to our city's long-term success and to addressing the District's growing racial inequities. Children of color in low-income families face multiple barriers that start before birth—from limited access to maternal care to unstable housing to a lack of high-quality child care. Children need stable and healthy environments, starting from the earliest age, but poverty and other factors can make it hard to provide stable environments for children, leading to stresses (“adverse childhood experiences”) that [negatively affect brain development and health](#), with lifelong consequences.



The good news is that public investments can reduce these stresses and help children succeed. An FY 2020 budget focused on helping children thrive in school and beyond should focus not only on direct investments in schools, but also other supports that are critical to children's school success.

- **Early Education:** The period from birth to age three is the foundation on which all future learning rests. During this time, babies' brains grow to [85 percent of their adult size](#). Research shows that children in low-income families “often receive early care of such poor quality that it diminishes their potential” but that investments to improve the quality of care they receive has “[positive effects that can endure into the early adult years](#).”

The “Birth-to-Three for All DC” legislation adopted in 2018 takes a comprehensive approach to serving infants and toddlers, including high-quality early education, home visiting, and health supports. Yet the budget as it currently stands provides only \$7 million of the \$30 million needed to start implementing this legislation.

- **Housing Stability:** Some 19,000 DC children face housing instability that affects their ability to succeed in school, including 6,000 students who are experiencing the ultimate instability of homelessness. The extreme stresses that result from unstable and unhealthy housing can lead to lower [cognitive achievement test scores](#) and lower measures of [behavioral school readiness](#). Children

who move frequently often fall behind and [drop out of school](#). When children are in more stable housing, they do better in school.

The proposed budget supports families facing chronic homelessness but includes only 80 housing vouchers for the thousands of families with very low incomes that are burdened by the high cost of family-sized housing.

- **Mental health:** One in five children in DC have [experienced trauma or have a mental health disorder](#). Students accessing [school-based mental health](#) services see improvements in test scores, attendance and grade point averages, as well decreased behavioral problems and an improvement in social functioning.

The proposed budget includes \$6 million to add mental health professionals to over 60 schools. This is an important investment, but additional funding is needed to provide adequate staffing across schools. The budget also fails to fund The Student Fair Access to School Act passed in 2018, which aims to give schools resources to fully staff solutions that address the root causes of disruptive behavior, like Restorative Justice.

- **Schools:** Under the proposed budget, per-student funding would grow less than inflation and less than the average cost of a DCPS teacher, which means schools overall will face reduced purchasing power. More important, the DCPS budget includes [deep cuts to many schools in Wards 7 and 8](#), and continues to divert half of the funds intended for “at-risk” students, using them for core school functions, rather than supplemental services for students who need them most.

Investing in the success of DC’s children should be a top priority for the Council as they complete the FY 2020 budget. That means reversing cuts to schools but also making other important investments to support stability for children and their families.