

For immediate release

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A Method in the Madness of Projecting School Enrollment

New research gives policymakers a best-practices methodology to project enrollment accurately, transparently, and efficiently

WASHINGTON, September 28, 2018 – Predicting how many D.C. children will be in which schools in which wards in what grades every year is a challenge, but next year the officials with the difficult job of estimating enrollment for D.C. public schools can use a new and transparent methodology based on a comprehensive study released today by the Office of the D.C. Auditor.

A Study of Enrollment Projections for D.C.’s Public Schools: Assuring Accuracy and Transparency, was requested and funded by the Council of the District of Columbia, at the initiation of D.C. Councilmember Mary Cheh. “With continued growth in enrollment expected over the next decade and local school funding based on enrollment projections, it is critical to have good data and a process that is transparent for parents and other stakeholders,” said D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson.

The research study found:

- D.C. public school enrollment is projected to grow between 12,000 and 17,000 students in the next 10 years.
- Current projection methods are least accurate for schools with high mobility rates.
- The District’s projection process can be made more accurate, transparent, and efficient

The researchers recommend that the District:

- Maintain a central repository of comprehensive historical data on students, schools and demand factors.
- Produce and share five- and 10-year baseline projections alongside the next year projection process annually.
- Calculate and share a student mobility index.
- Present school-level (DCPS) and charter LEA staff with baseline projections by school along with data used to justify preliminary adjustments.
- Conduct and share an annual review of enrollment projections compared with actual audited enrollments.

To conduct the study requested by the Council, the D.C. Auditor contracted last December with a trio of consultants led by Cooperative Strategies (CS), a national firm based in Ohio and California with extensive national experience projecting public school enrollment. CS was supported by the Urban Institute and the 21st Century School Fund, local firms with both local and national research and policy experience. The comprehensive report was released at a morning briefing for members of the D.C. Council followed by a Wilson Building press conference.

In addition to the study and appendices, ODCA is releasing a new interactive data tool that allows users to access comprehensive school-level data used in enrollment projections, including: total school enrollment, enrollment by subgroup, historical enrollment, and school mobility. This interactive tool adds transparency around key school enrollment indicators for the public to use, understand, and assess, and is housed on the ODCA website, www.dcauditor.org.

Applying best practice projection calculations on the birth and enrollment data available, the study team found that public school enrollment is expected to continue to rise in the coming decade, particularly in the high school grades. Reviewing levels of student movement into schools, out of schools, and staying in a school from one year to the next, the study team found that schools with highly mobile student populations tended to have the most inaccurate next year enrollment projections. Finally, from comparing next year projections by different units of analysis—district wide, sector, school, and school by grade—the study team worked to understand the current levels of accuracy of projections and propose the optimal method for accurate, transparent, and efficient development of projections.

Projecting future enrollment is an essential responsibility of school districts, which municipalities and districts rely on for planning, budgeting, and evaluation. The District uses next-year projections for annual education appropriations for District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and charter schools, and longer-term enrollment projections by city and for individual schools for educational facility capital planning. The Public Charter School Board references future enrollments when making authorizing decisions for enrollment ceilings and awarding new charters.

The audit team conducted a comprehensive review of public school enrollment in the District of Columbia, including enrollment projections over the last several years, both 5- and 10-year projections, and produced a methodology for use by policymakers and recommendations on a process to assure accuracy, transparency, and efficiency in the regular development and use of next year and multi-year enrollment projections.

The report's recommendations are built into an Enrollment Projections Development Process, a 15-step outline for the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education and Local Education Authorities, including opportunities for information exchange among local school stakeholders. The research team recommended that the District government—Mayor and D.C. Council—adopt the projection methodology and 15-step process to assure accuracy and transparency going forward.

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