



Where D.C. Has Failed on Adult Education, Charter Schools Fill the Void

An estimated 90,000 D.C. adults are functionally illiterate.

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In 1985, ninth grader Todd Campbell dropped out D.C.'s Cardozo High School to take care of his sick father. Though he planned to return later for his diploma, life kept getting in the way. Campbell's first daughter was born when he was just 18, and he needed to find work to support her. After taking up trucking for more than a decade, he eventually started his own garbage collection business in 2001, which he managed for seven years until the recession hit. The price of fuel skyrocketed, and Campbell's Curbside Disposal was forced into bankruptcy.



Students at Briya Public Charter School DARROW MONTGOMERY

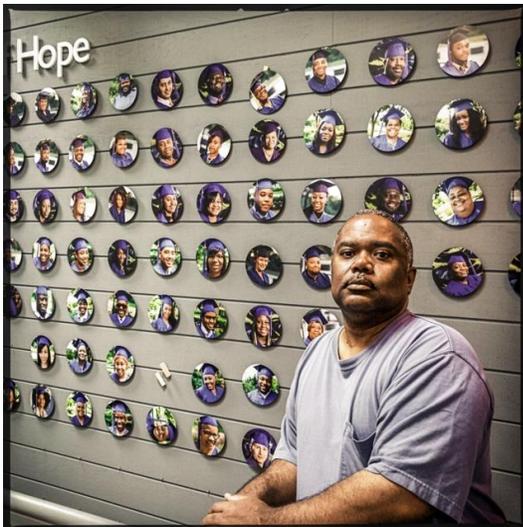
Just like his business, his marriage ended, and he struggled to find new work. Most companies preferred younger workers, or quickly screened out adults without a high school diploma. Dejected, Campbell moved back in with his mom and tried to figure out his options.

Now, at 50, Campbell is a student again. He's enrolled at Academy of Hope, an adult charter school in D.C.

“When I first came, I was kind of nervous and didn’t know what to expect, because I felt like you can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” he says. “But everyone here is just so nice and makes you feel like you’re more than just a statistic.”

After just one year at Academy of Hope, Campbell says he now has ambitions of completing a dual-enrollment program with the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) and getting his business degree, so that if he does start his own company again, he’ll be better prepared to protect it if the economy goes downhill.

“When I walked out from bankruptcy court, all I had was the clothes on my back and my pickup truck,” Campbell says. “As a person who was thrown into darkness from depression, this school is just a bright light of sunshine for me.”



Academy of Hope student Todd Campbell
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D.C. has a proud reputation as a “highly educated” city. The city offers universal pre-K to all 3- and 4-year-olds, and D.C. Public Schools—with rising test scores and graduation rates—has been characterized as the “fastest improving urban school district in the country.” D.C. also leads nationally when it comes to educational attainment—55 percent of adult residents have a four-year college degree or higher.

But those numbers can be misleading.

Graduation rates don’t reflect proficiency, and achievement gaps between rich and poor students in the District have widened over the past decade. In short, not everyone has reaped the benefits of D.C.’s education system. U.S. Census data show that nearly 60,000 D.C. adults lack a high school diploma or its equivalent and that 11,000 D.C. adults speak English less than “very well.” Worse, the Washington Literacy Center estimates that 13.4 percent of city residents—some 90,000 adults— are functionally illiterate, unable to read a newspaper, a map, or fill out job applications.

Lacking basic literacy, numeracy, and English-language skills comes at a high cost in a city like D.C. More than three-fifths of all local jobs already require at least a bachelor’s degree. By 2020, economists estimate that more than three-quarters of jobs in the capital will require some form of postsecondary education, more than anywhere else in the country.

Though improving, D.C. Public Schools continue to produce high rates of high school dropouts. The school district reports that 10,000 students ages 16-24 dropped out between 2008 and 2017—a demographic often characterized as “disconnected youth.” As adult opportunities for this population narrow, finding ways to help these thousands of residents across the city has taken on a new sense of urgency.

“D.C. has never really had a comprehensive or strategic approach to delivering adult education and related services to the majority of those who need them,” says Alex Donahue, deputy director for policy and research at the 21st Century School Fund and a former D.C. Public Schools principal. “It needs to do better.”



Adult education has been described as a “step-child issue” in the District for decades. Never a serious focus for city officials, under-resourced community-based organizations shouldered most of the heavy lifting, and the city’s minimal investment always rested precariously on the chopping block, framed as an ultimately unessential budget expenditure.

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“I remember first hearing about adult education when I got involved in school issues in the 1980s, because there was a fiscal crisis and the question was how can the school system cut expenses apart from raising class sizes,” recalls Mary Levy, a longtime independent budget analyst for the D.C. schools and a former DCPS parent. “One of the ideas on the table for the board of education was, ‘Well, maybe we should only offer instruction for those of compulsory school age.’”

One of the few adult schools that existed back then was Rosario Adult Education Center, which opened in the early 1970s and was later honored by the U.S. Department of Education as a national model for adult learning. Its longtime leader, Sonia Gutierrez, known as one of the most ardent Latino activists in D.C., wanted to create a school that could help immigrants find community and acclimate to life in the United States.

By 1996, amid immense fiscal stress and rapidly declining student enrollment in DCPS (down 45 percent from 1970 at that point), the school district decided to largely end its adult education offerings. Then-D.C. schools superintendent Franklin Smith justified the closures as necessary because adult education was not mandatory, reasoning that adults could attend classes in other city schools if they really wanted. Carlos Rosario,

which enrolled 2,000 students at the time, was one of the adult education centers closed that year.

“There was some talk that maybe UDC could take adult education over, but it couldn’t and it didn’t,” Levy says.



Carlos Rosario Public Charter School *DARROW MONTGOMERY*

What remained were three small alternative high schools—known as the STAY schools—but they weren’t providing basic adult education. Instead, they were places for younger dropouts to return for their diplomas. Today alternative DCPS high schools collectively serve 1,700 students, and while there are no formal rules prohibiting older adults from attending, school district officials say they try to make clear that these alternative schools are targeting the 10,000 D.C. dropouts under age 24. For the city’s tens of thousands of older adults in similar circumstances, DCPS had no good options.

Where the school district has relinquished its role, the charter system has stepped in to pick up the slack. There are currently nine adult charter schools operating across the city, and the D.C. Public Charter School Board recently approved a new one to open in the 2018-19 school year.

Carlos Rosario, which DCPS shuttered in 1996, reopened two years later as one of the nation’s first adult charters. Today it has two campuses—in Columbia Heights and Eckington—and serves 2,500 students annually, most of whom are immigrants and English-language learners. Other schools target different slices of the adult population. Briya, for example, serves 640 students across four campuses, educating both parents (or grandparents) and their children together. Founded originally in 1989 as a family literacy center for immigrant refugees, Briya transitioned into a charter school in 2006. There are some schools, like the Maya Angelou Young Adult Learning Center and the Latin American Youth Center Career Academy, that target the “disconnected youth” demographic. And then there are charters like Academy of Hope, the one Todd Campbell attends, which focus on older adults who lack basic literacy skills.

It's unusual for so many adults to attend charter schools. In some places, this isn't even possible—Florida's law, for example, says charters can only provide K-12 education. And within many states, community colleges act as the primary adult education service provider. But the District never even had a community college until 2009.

D.C.'s charter school law is uniquely broad. Jim Ford, then the staff director for the D.C. Council's education committee, pushed Congress to include adult charter schools in the 1995 School Reform Act. (It wasn't a very hard sell since charters are funded through local taxes, not federal dollars.) As a result, the D.C. law allows for charters that provide education below the college level for adults who "lack sufficient mastery of basic educational skills to enable them to function effectively in society," who have not graduated from high school or have not achieved an equivalent certificate, or who "have limited ability in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language and whose native language is a language other than English."

Even so, back in 1995 Mary Levy says nobody expected charter schools would one day take on the bulk of adult schooling in D.C. Though it was clear at the time that there was a great need—Levy recalls many packed community meetings organized to discuss adult education—there was also so much ongoing turmoil. With the city's terrible fiscal crisis, its beleaguered schools, and its surging homicide rate, the thought of where the adult charter sector might go in a decade or two just wasn't much considered.

Yet given all the difficulties adult learners faced, the charter model ended up being a good match. One key advantage of adult charters is the per-pupil funding guarantee. There is simply far more money available to educate adults through charter schools in D.C. than any other alternative. Base per-pupil funding during the 2014-15 school year in D.C. for adult charters was \$8,448 per student, compared to, at most, \$800 per adult student at a community-based organization (funded primarily through federal grants).

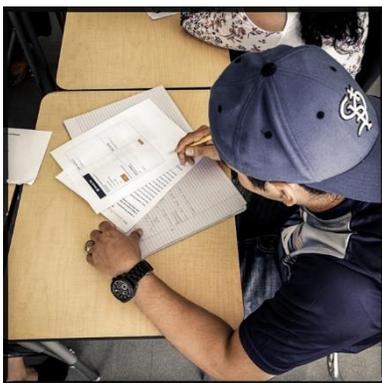
"Those [federal] grants are not sufficient. They are woefully inadequate, to be very candid," says Allison Kokkoros, the CEO at Carlos Rosario.

Academy of Hope, which Church of the Saviour volunteers first formed as a local nonprofit in 1985, transitioned into a charter in 2014, precisely to tap into this more stable, generous funding stream. Leicester Johnson, the school's executive director since 2006, recalls how difficult it was back then for the school to function, constantly scrambling for money, having to make tough financial tradeoffs all the time. Now, what would have taken Academy of Hope a year to fundraise, it automatically receives from the city as its first quarter budget funding.

“For the first time in my almost 10 years at Academy of Hope, we can buy classroom materials, hire teachers, and provide the wraparound services that our learners need,” Johnson wrote in 2015 in an online forum for adult education practitioners. “Prior to the transition to charter, we were operating on less than \$2,000 per student, and we were very dependent upon volunteers to staff our classes.” Switching to the charter model, Johnson said, allowed her school to hire full-time teachers, offer competitive salaries, revise the curriculum and instructional methods, and hire all sorts of additional staff like a special education coordinator, a college and career specialist, and a case manager.

Other factors hastening Academy of Hope’s decision to transition to charter included sharply increasing pressure on all adult education providers to include more college and career preparation into their program models and accommodating imminent changes to the GED. Beginning in 2014, passing the exam to obtain the national high school equivalency credential became significantly more difficult, as it now aligns with the K-12 Common Core standards.

Even before the revamped GED, D.C. was already trailing behind other states when it came to adult education. Adult learners in the District were more likely to leave their programs early compared to students elsewhere, and in 2013 just 64 percent of D.C. candidates passed their GED exams, compared to many states that boasted pass rates well over 80 percent. So some leaders of local community-based organizations, like Leicester Johnson, recognized they needed significantly more funding if they were ever to help their students reach these new, more rigorous standards.



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Although things are looking up for D.C.’s adult charters—and many of the students they enroll—there are still some problems ahead. Perhaps the most unexpected threat is coming from within the charter sector itself.

The explicit bargain behind the charter movement is that schools earn more autonomy in exchange for increased accountability. A charter operator can run a school independently of many DCPS rules and regulations if they can demonstrate that their students are meeting certain pre-defined benchmarks, standards, and expectations.

But accountability in adult education isn't easy to define or measure. Compared to K-12, designing meaningful metrics to evaluate adult learners is an inherently more challenging task, and little research has been invested into doing so. Most studies have examined educational strategies for traditional public school students, the findings of which adult education providers often must awkwardly borrow from.

“Let's say we're talking about a 55-year-old woman who worked full-time her whole life, has three grandchildren, but doesn't have her high school degree,” says Sasha Lotas, the research coordinator at Academy of Hope. “Maybe she's technically testing on a fifth-grade reading level according to CASAS [a national assessment for adult learners], but she is not a fifth grader.”

While Allison Kokkoros, the head of Carlos Rosario, welcomes the greater accountability demands that come with running a charter—like demonstrating a school's GED pass rate, whether students in career training ultimately got their certification, and whether students found employment and stayed employed—she acknowledges there are some tensions.

“Showing job placement rates and job retention rates are fine, and one part of the story, but we teach the working poor. They're working multiple jobs and are still below the poverty line ... so [employment] is not really the question,” she says. “We're happy to report those things for accountability purposes, and we will, but for me, it's not really capturing the deeper story of what we're actually trying to do.”

Which touches on another complicating factor for accountability in adult education: Often, the students' end goals are too practical and pragmatic to be easily captured by a standardized test or statistical measure. Some attendees aren't trying to go to college, or aren't even focused on getting a specific job. They're trying to learn basic skills to help with their daily lives.

“Sometimes their kids have outpaced them in school and they want to be able to help with their homework, and we try really hard to recognize that that's just as valid as wanting the high school diploma to go back into the workforce,” says Jamie Kamlet Fragale, director of advocacy and communications at Academy of Hope. “Making that case can be a little difficult sometimes.”

D.C.'s charter school movement, at times fixated on boosting its accountability measures as high as possible, has had trouble accepting these realities of adult education.

While each charter school used to negotiate its own accountability goals with the D.C. charter board, the city more recently transitioned to a more unified accountability

system so that all local charters could be more easily compared to one another. The charter board developed measures for early childhood education, for K-12, and for adult schools.

Naomi DeVeaux, deputy director of the D.C. charter board, says it was far more difficult to develop accountability measures for adult charters than for K-12 and early childhood because adult schools all target such different populations of students. Still, she describes the framework they ultimately created as “powerful” and adds that the D.C. charter board annually reflects on their measures, making changes to ensure their system remains applicable and appropriate.

But the conflict between accountability-oriented thinking and adult education has persisted, blowing into view this past spring when the D.C. charter board began to consider closing the Latin American Youth Center Career Academy.

The Career Academy opened in 2012 and targets students under age 24—those who have dropped out of high school and those who might have their diplomas but need help getting on track for college or career training. The typical student is significantly disadvantaged, likely having been homeless, formerly incarcerated, living in poverty, or experienced some other form of serious trauma.

This year marked the school’s five-year evaluation, and the charter board announced in January that it was strongly considering revoking the Career Academy’s charter, given the school’s low academic performance and its failure to meet its contractual goals. Board officials said, among other things, that the majority of students who enrolled in the school since 2012 were not on track to earn a GED or receive college or career training. Though the charter board regularly closes schools for low performance, those are mostly K-12 institutions, where plenty of educational alternatives exist. The Career Academy’s staff challenged the board’s conclusions, and months-long fights about data and measuring academic progress ensued.

Before January “there was no indication that we were at risk of closure,” says Lori Kaplan, the president and CEO of the Latin American Youth Center. “We were very caught off guard.” She adds that the charter board had even recently upgraded the Career Academy to a “Tier 2” school, from its former designation as a “Tier 3” one, indicating clear improvement.

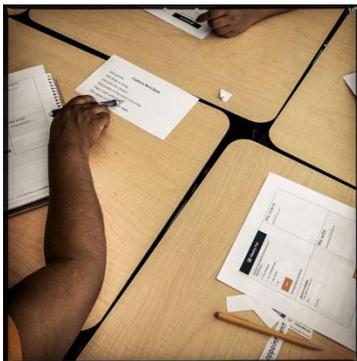
Shuttering the Academy, advocates pleaded at charter board hearings during the spring, would further deprive vulnerable D.C. residents of already scarce resources and support. The school receives more than \$2 million a year from the city to educate disconnected

youth, and closure wouldn't necessarily redirect those funds to other adult service providers. Instead, a funding stream would simply cease to exist. When a K-12 charter closes, its students transfer to other schools, but if an adult charter closes, students are more likely to abandon their education altogether.

"We [ask] that ... the public charter school board take into account the full landscape of options, or lack thereof, [for] our most vulnerable young people," Maggie Riden, executive director of D.C. Alliance of Youth Advocates, testified in April. "In the District of Columbia, with a graduation rate that has yet to top 70 percent, in a city with over 8,000 disconnected youth yet fewer than 3,000 alternative education seats, to remove an opportunity for success and long-term engagement in the workforce and our community is wrong. If for no other reason than these young people have made a very active choice to commit to their education. ... I strongly encourage you to [recognize] ... we lack capacity to meet an already existing, intense, and extreme need."

The hours of hearings and testimony between January and May made clear that the charter board was uncomfortable with the idea of evaluating a school by standards other than traditional academic and economic outcomes. The board did not seem prepared to evaluate the charter's success in filling a practical role as a well-resourced welfare support to a deprived population.

On May 9, at a special board meeting meant to decide the fate of the academy, the charter board ultimately voted to reverse its decision and keep the school open, under a new set of accountability conditions. (The board could still decide to shutter the school next year.) D.C. charter board member Sara Mead remarked near the hearing's end that while it's clear there is "tremendous need" for adult education services throughout the city, the academy closure process had illustrated some ways in which meeting that need "does not fit naturally and well" with various aspects of the charter school model. She urged her fellow board members to "think very carefully" about approving similar applications in the future.



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Another problem dogging D.C.'s current approach to adult education is the lack of centralization. Rather than develop a comprehensive strategy to ensure that all adult needs are met and that the broader system has the capacity to comply with federal standards, D.C. has little resembling city-wide

strategic planning. As a result, adult education suffers from coordination issues, as nonprofits, higher ed institutions, DCPS, welfare agencies, the D.C. Council, and charters all fill overlapping, disjointed roles.

To some extent, coordination troubles reflect broader difficulties with D.C. governance. In addition to the routine battles between the federal government and local city officials, D.C. also lacks some of the basic planning structures that many states have. Leaders of local institutions often make decisions, and in effect, set D.C. policy for themselves. Rather than DCPS and the charter sector agreeing to develop a joint approach to most efficiently serve the city's 89,000 students, for example, the charter sector—which fiercely defends its legal independence —generally resists such efforts.

“A citywide conversation about how many schools do we need, and how do we get to the right number of schools, as opposed to continuing to allow as many schools to proliferate as possible, is probably a necessary conversation to have at some point,” then-DCPS schools chancellor Kaya Henderson said in 2014, in response to news that a new science-oriented charter would be opening up across the street from a science-oriented DCPS school that teaches the same grades. While the city has since established a task force charged with improving policy coordination between DCPS and charters, leaders say that real progress on these kinds of issues has yet to seriously begin.

Still, the grassroots constituencies that advocate for adult learners across the city have grown more organized and effective over the past few years. In 2015, the D.C. Adult and Family Literacy Coalition successfully lobbied for city-issued high school diplomas for all individuals who pass the new, more difficult GED, and this year advocates convinced the city council to subsidize the transportation costs for adult learners to get to school. But there remains a general lack of strategic leadership among government officials for how best to meet the needs of adults who lack basic skills and credentials across the city.



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As policy experts, government leaders, and community activists keep wrestling with these questions, the few thousand existing adult education seats will, for now, continue to serve as a real lifeline for the city's most disadvantaged.

In 2014, Jeannette Millimono, then a 21-year-old single mom, was working at Target. She had graduated from high school and even attended some college, but had to drop

out when she had her daughter and couldn't afford to pay the tuition to return. When a co-worker told her about the free medical assistant career pathway the Latin American Youth Center Career Academy offered, she decided to enroll and graduated a year later with her MA certification. Today she owns her own apartment in Maryland, works as a medical assistant, and plans to go back to school again next year to become a certified nursing assistant.

“I feel so fortunate that I was able to go to the Career Academy without a penny, without me having to take out a loan, and I was able to grow so much in such a short time,” says Millimono. “It was really challenging, a lot of work, and I had my daughter to care for, but because of the motivation my teachers gave, I was able to get it done.”

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