

THE 74

11K D.C. Students Expected to Enroll in Public Schools Haven't Completed the Process — a Data Point That, While Improving, Trails Last Year's Numbers



Kenard Brisbon, a second grader at Eagle Academy Public Charter School - Congress Heights in Washington, D.C., watches a math lesson in April while his younger brother sits at a toy desk. (Toni L. Sandys/The Washington Post via Getty Images)

More than 11,000 D.C students expected to attend the city’s public schools for the 2020-21 year haven’t completed the enrollment process as of Tuesday — a sizable jump from the week prior but still trailing last year’s counts.

Of the about 99,000 students who began the process, 87,609 have fully enrolled, Mayor Muriel Bowser said at a press conference Thursday. That number, which includes pre-K and adult learners, is about 4,500 fewer students than at this time last year.

It’s a marked jump, though, from the first Sept. 10 count, when 77,000 had enrolled. A student is considered officially enrolled when all school paperwork is in, the family’s residency is verified and the student has attended online classes, which widely began Aug. 31.

Parents nationwide have been mulling a slew of alternative schooling options since the pandemic began. But D.C. officials say it’s “too early” to make assumptions about the data, noting that parents and schools are navigating a largely virtual enrollment process that could slow submissions.

Still, some non-public school education options in D.C., such as homeschooling and private schools, have reported upticks in interest.

“What happens every year is that there’s a very quick ramp-up in enrollment after school starts,” a Deputy Mayor for Education spokesman told The 74. “Our message is that families need to connect with their schools to finish the enrollment process.”

Both charters and D.C. Public Schools rely on student enrollment for the vast majority of their funding — funding that those like education policy analyst Qubilah Huddleston say is especially crucial with more of the city’s students likely qualifying as “at-risk” following the pandemic and economic recession.

Beyond the funding, “Where are those students?” she asked. “Who are those students, and what initiatives are the city and also [local education agencies] going to have to undertake to re-engage those students?”

As of last week, the largest enrollment lags were in pre-K and adult education. Since then, data obtained by The 74 show the charter sector and DCPS with similar overall percent-increases in enrollment: 8.4 and 9.6 percent, respectively. DCPS saw its largest gains in pre-K and 10th grades; for charter schools, it was ninth grade and adult education.

Why is enrollment down?

City officials say the lag time this fall could be attributable to confusion around the virtual enrollment process.

D.C. families have to re-enroll their children every year. That requires paperwork such as residency verification — documents that parents in past years could conveniently submit at the school site during drop-offs or pick-ups. Now, virtual residency verification that involves scanning or taking pictures has brought an “added layer of complexity,” the Deputy Mayor for Education spokesman said.

He added that there may also be some delays with schools updating their enrollment numbers. The Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, for example, has had an “extremely laborious” enrollment process, a spokeswoman wrote in an email Wednesday. Staff have been “[conducting] one on one calls, phone placement tests (to assess level of English proficiency), navigating digital literacy barriers, and working on logistics to safely hold some in-person time for residency document verifications.”

The school, which serves adults, is about 200 students shy of its goal enrollment. “Some students may stop out due to juggling serving their children/family who are learning at home while also working,” she added.

While too early to discern whether the pandemic has spurred some D.C. public school parents to enroll their children elsewhere, nationwide, virtual learning has pressed families to rethink their kids’ education.

Some have kept young learners in child care. (Districts like L.A. Unified in California have seen thousands fewer kindergartners this fall.) Others, disillusioned with districts’ handling of online learning, have turned to homeschooling, pandemic pods or private schools.

Homeschooling in D.C., while representing only a small fraction of students, has seen a 26 percent bump in participation for 2020-21: 492 active homeschoolers versus 389 last year, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education confirmed Wednesday.

Amy McNamer, executive director of the Association of Independent Schools of Greater Washington, also reported anecdotally to The 74 that “what I am hearing from some of our schools is that there was increased interest in admissions and enrollment” into the summer.

She thinks that's due to these nonprofit private schools' ability to be more "nimble," with "probably every one" bringing students back to campus in some capacity, such as for new student orientation or socially distanced sports practices.

Maret School in Woodley Park, for example, told DCist in July that summer admission inquiries had doubled over last year's numbers.

Teachers union spokesman Joe Weedon told The 74 it's unclear what the protocol is when a kid who was on a school's roster last year disappears — even if the assumption is that they took advantage of D.C.'s school choice options and went elsewhere.

"I know a number of teachers who thought [certain students] were coming but who haven't shown up [on the roster]. ... Whose responsibility is it to track those families down?" he asked.

What's being done?

The Deputy Mayor for Education spokesman said there's an "all hands on deck effort to connect with families" and get students enrolled.

DCPS has been sending out robo-texts and emails, along with phone banking, which reached more than 3,000 families last week, he said. It also sent postcards to every family who had enrolled last year but hadn't finalized enrollment this year.

The district is planning "some in-person opportunities for families to complete that process" as well, the spokesman added. Enrollment numbers are "moving really fast," making it difficult to gauge need for those services.

"We're monitoring it every day," he said.

For large charter networks, enrollment holds steady

While school-by-school breakdowns aren't currently available for either DCPS or the charter sector, three of the district's largest charter networks — KIPP D.C., Friendship Public Charter School and Center City Public Charter Schools — told The 74 this week that their current enrollment is hitting original projections.

At Friendship, robust family engagement "through webinars, e-newsletters, surveys ... social media, Instagram morning meetings, one-on-one conversations, and our WeCare hotline" laid the groundwork for successful enrollment this fall, spokeswoman Candice Tolliver-Burns wrote in an email.

KIPP D.C., which had a 1-1 student device ratio in the spring, has also been “working in overdrive” with families to “download a scanner app on their phone and download all the appropriate paperwork” for enrollment, spokesman Adam Rupe said.

He noted that, “I would imagine DCPS, given their size, that’s very challenging.”