

**A RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIP FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

**Statement of  
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**before the  
Committee of the Whole & Committee on Education  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**PUBLIC HEARING ON BILL 22-776, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
EDUCATION RESEARCH ADVISORY BOARD AND COLLABORATIVE  
ESTABLISHMENT AMENDMENT ACT OF 2018**

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\*The views expressed are my own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and members of the Council, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about how independent, high-quality research can support the District's efforts to provide a high-quality education for all children.

I direct the Education Policy Program at the Urban Institute here in Washington, DC. My colleagues and I provide original data and analysis to support education policymaking from prekindergarten through postsecondary. I am also a parent of a DCPS student and a resident of Ward 6 deeply committed to helping the District offer all our students a high-quality education.

The Urban Institute is a nonprofit social and economic policy research organization with approximately 500 employees that is nearing its 50th anniversary here in the District. It is the trusted source for unbiased insights that inform consequential choices about the well-being of people and places across the United States. We have deep expertise in many of the issues that affect children, including health, housing, language and immigration, poverty, and the social safety net. These are issues that affect children's ability to gain access to and benefit from high-quality education and fulfill their potential. We believe decisions shaped by facts, rather than ideology, have the power to improve public policy and practice, strengthen communities, and transform people's lives for the better.

I am proud of the work we do at the Urban Institute, but I should emphasize that the views expressed in this testimony are my own and should not be attributed to any organization with which I am affiliated, its trustees, or its funders.

I am especially proud of the work my Urban colleagues and I have done on education in the District, including analyses that supported the drawing of new attendance zone boundaries in 2015, enrollment projections currently under way, research on early childhood absenteeism in DCPS, the first-ever study of the effects of the Opportunity Scholarship Program on college enrollment, and a study of student travel times to school.

Through this work, Urban researchers have been able to analyze multiple years of student-level data provided under data-sharing agreements with the city. But the project-by-project approach to data-sharing has a significant downside: it is inefficient for research and burdensome for our education agencies to respond piecemeal to data requests. And without established infrastructure, it is very difficult to provide insight in a timely way that can support and inform decisionmaking by policymakers at all levels.

Many cities have mitigated this problem by creating a research-practice partnership (RPP), and I am thrilled that the Council is interested in fostering such a research collaborative here in DC.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of my testimony is to draw on Urban's collective experience conducting research in the District and in other cities and states around the country to offer recommendations about how the Council can best foster a research collaborative focused on improving outcomes for DC students.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, <http://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org/>.

## Independence

Independence is what differentiates an RPP from work produced for school districts and other education agencies by their contractors. Independent researchers at an RPP bring the objectivity of a third party and have credibility with the wider community because they follow the data, wherever they may lead. For example, the Consortium on Chicago School Research is respected by the school district and the community because it shares both good news and bad, leading to headlines in the *Chicago Tribune* such as “Broad race-based disparities persist in CPS discipline” and “Percentage of CPS students who go straight to college up over last decade.”<sup>2</sup>

Empowering researchers with the independence to conduct rigorous research on important questions will be critical to a successful RPP in DC. Based on my experience as a researcher, this independence is best achieved by

- housing the RPP outside city government,
- staffing it with widely respected quantitative and qualitative researchers and a data science and research technology team that can support the data infrastructure,
- providing a mechanism by which other independent researchers can access the data for legitimate research purposes (if they meet appropriate standards including for the protection of data security and privacy),
- establishing a transparent mechanism to gather input on the research agenda so that the work pursued will address priority questions for key education policy decisionmakers and stakeholders, and
- pursuing funding from diverse sources to enable sustainability over time and ensure that the District, not funders, will set the research agenda.

## Data Quality

Research findings are only as good as the data on which they are based, and data quality is an area where DC has made significant progress but still trails many states.

DC’s citywide longitudinal data system has not been in place as long as systems in many other jurisdictions, and the availability and quality of DC’s data vary across sectors and over time. The proposed efforts to audit data quality and make recommendations for future data collection efforts are worthwhile, but they should be implemented separately from research.

The primary reason for separating research and data-quality functions is that researchers are primarily users of data, whereas government agencies are responsible for collecting and maintaining accurate data. RPPs certainly benefit from higher-quality data, can help identify data-quality issues that arise in their work, and may be able to acquire or produce new data on specific issues that can add insight. But city agencies such as the Office of the Auditor are in a much stronger position to work with the school system to assess the quality of data and recommend improvements.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://chicagotribune.com/news/ct-chicago-school-discipline-study-met-20150922-story.html> and <http://chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-met-chicago-schools-study-1010-story.html>.

## Collaboration

Without a strong working relationship between researchers and education agencies, an RPP will fail: you can't have a research-practice partnership without committed partners. Research may be conducted, but to have impact it should be responsive to the needs of local decisionmakers.

For an RPP to have the greatest impact on student learning, it's critical to build lasting relationships with administrators and practitioners at all levels of the education agencies, both to deepen researchers' knowledge about local context and to ensure that research findings inform those who are in the strongest position to act on them.

At the same time, it is very important to ensure that education agencies collaborate on research that raises hard questions and helps to find new solutions. This can be accomplished through various mechanisms, including robust stakeholder input into setting the research agenda (e.g., through advisory committees) and transparency in the research approval process. For example, a steering committee representing a wide variety of stakeholders works with the Chicago Consortium to develop its research agenda and provide feedback on research in progress.<sup>3</sup>

## Urban's Role

The success of RPPs in Chicago and other cities convinces me that this approach has significant potential to help improve educational opportunities in the District.

Last summer, my Urban colleagues and I began discussions with DCPS, PCSB, OSSE, and DME about the possibility of creating an RPP—several months before the Council proposed legislation with similar aims. I believe that Urban's strong bench of quantitative and qualitative researchers, coupled with our technology and data science team, could uniquely position us to launch a successful collaborative effort with our city's education agencies and other research institutions. And I want to emphasize that we are committed to ensuring that other research entities can access the information. We want to build a community of scholars and experts who will contribute to ensuring DC's students get the best possible evidence-informed education we can collectively provide.

But I should confess that my allegiances as a DCPS parent and Ward 6 resident are stronger than my ties to my employer and my role as a researcher, so I want to see a successful RPP for DC regardless of Urban's role.

That we are all at this hearing today represents significant progress for our city. I offer my support and assistance as the Council revises this legislation to give the District the best chances of finally getting an action-oriented, truly independent research collaborative off the ground.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/about/steering-committee>.

## Appendix: About the Urban Institute and Its Commitment to DC-Focused Research

The Urban Institute is the trusted source for unbiased, authoritative insights that inform consequential choices about the well-being of people and places in the United States. Our experts diagnose current challenges and look ahead to identify opportunities for change. And we don't stop there. We use our research findings to help stakeholders craft relevant solutions and strategies that address today's concerns and avert tomorrow's roadblocks. And we share our insights in real time with influencers eager to make smarter decisions.

Urban's Education Policy Program undertakes policy-relevant research on a wide range of issues from prekindergarten through postsecondary education, including research on universal prekindergarten programs, school choice, student transportation, school funding, college affordability, student loan debt, and personalized learning.

The Education Policy Program works closely with Urban's Office of Technology and Data Science and Statistical Methodology Group on projects that draw on large datasets, and fosters collaboration on both quantitative and qualitative research projects across Urban's policy centers.

### *Selected Urban Institute Research on District of Columbia Education Issues*

Urban has a long history of collaboration with local education agencies to inform policy and practice. Prior and ongoing education-focused projects include the following:

- Research on [early childhood absenteeism in DCPS](#) that identified a multifaceted and comprehensive set of strategies to address chronic absenteeism in the early grades, ranging from parent outreach to monitoring and early warning systems.
- The first-ever study of the [effects of DC's private school voucher program](#) on college enrollment; it found that private- and public-school students enrolled in college at similar rates.
- A study of student travel times to school, which provided [cross-city comparative data](#) and told [the stories of how DC students get to school](#) using three years of detailed, student-level administrative data shared by DCPS and PCSB.
- An analysis of [impacts of new attendance zone boundaries](#) to support the student assignment policy and DCPS school boundaries implemented in 2015. The analysis examined how proposed changes affected walkability, school quality, and school diversity.
- An analysis of [enrollment projections in DC schools](#) and development of processes and data-driven methods that improve transparency and accuracy. The study uses student-level data from DC to identify leading indicators of enrollment shifts.
- Evaluation partner for the DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative, recipient of a five-year U.S. Department of Education Promise Neighborhoods implementation grant. Urban designed and implemented a study to examine [individual success and well-being](#).
- Evaluation partner for DC-based Kindred, a nonprofit that offers dialogue groups for parents to tackle issues of racial and economic segregation in DC schools. Urban examined [Kindred's pilot program](#), which was implemented in Marie Reed Elementary School.

## *Selected Urban Institute Research on District of Columbia Policy Issues*

The Urban Institute has built [Urban–Greater DC](#), a multidisciplinary program of evidence and policy analysis focused on the District of Columbia and its region. This work draws from the breadth of Urban’s substantive expertise, including affordable housing, child well-being, crime prevention, education reform, foreclosure mitigation, health care, performance management and nonprofit management, the social safety net, and workforce development. We provide current and reliable data at multiple geographic levels (including city, ward, and neighborhood) to inform the decisions of nonprofits and city agencies.

Examples of our broader portfolio of work on DC include the following:

- [A Vision for an Equitable DC](#): This interactive feature visualizes what the nation’s capital could look like if it closed its stark racial disparities. The data visualization, which includes breakouts of ward-level data, allows users to view two scenarios: the real DC or a DC with racial equity.
- [Making Their Voices Heard](#): This web feature highlights the voices of DC residents who collaborated with Urban researchers to design the innovative Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety program in the Benning Terrace community.
- [Our Changing City](#): This interactive series explores changes in demographics, schools, housing, crime, and more in the District of Columbia.
- [Housing Insights](#): This tool puts better information in the hands of DC’s affordable housing decisionmakers and advocates by making it easier to browse a list of subsidized affordable housing and connect to relevant data on public transit, property tax assessments, and neighborhood characteristics.
- [Urban–Greater DC Data Explorer](#): This interactive map displays data related to education, jobs, basic needs, affordable housing, health, and more across the city and region.
- [Measure4Change](#): A partnership between the World Bank Group and the Urban Institute, this pilot program builds performance measurement and evaluation capacity among local nonprofits in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area.