

For immediate release

Contact: Diane.Shinn@dc.gov, 202-727-8991

D.C. Parents Support Choice and Investments in Neighborhood Schools

Auditor's new survey shows how educational decisions are made

WASHINGTON, July 10, 2018 – Parents in the District of Columbia have a smorgasbord of educational choices for their children, and while they're sometimes choosing charter and specialty schools, they'd prefer the District invest in neighborhood public schools rather than increasing options for kids to attend out-of-boundary schools, according to new opinion research released today by the Office of the D.C. Auditor (ODCA).

The D.C. Council has requested and provided funding for an audit of enrollment in D.C. public schools by ODCA, including projections of enrollment in five and 10 years, and a model for projecting enrollment over time. To help the District understand how parents make decisions on enrollment in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), the Auditor contracted with the survey research firm Belden Russonello Strategists, LLC, to survey parents and guardians of school-aged children.

"It's not enough to look at the number of children who could enter DCPS in the coming years, but we also need to get a handle on what kinds of educational options today's parents are looking for," said D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson. "The ultimate goal is to provide parents with choices that will encourage them to continue to choose public schools."

The report, a quantitative survey of 600 parents and guardians of children in PK4 to 11th grade, looked at how families see the existing system and their educational options. Some of the key findings include:

Traditional neighborhood vs. charter schools. Most parents and guardians in the study say charter schools are doing a better job of educating children than are the public schools, and identified charter schools when asked where they "are likely to send" their children. However, the pro-charter position coexists with the prevailing view that it would be preferable to invest in neighborhood public schools rather than working to increase the chances for students to opt out of those neighborhood schools.

The potential draw of special emphasis schools. When asked about the likelihood of trying to send their children to a variety of special emphasis schools, those with a math and science focus are the most popular among the respondents. Other programs with strong appeal are those offering an international baccalaureate degree, a focus on arts and music; foreign language immersion and community schools that include health care, community centers, and recreational facilities for families.

Understanding the choices. It appears that the large majority of parents does not fully understand how school choice operates in D.C. That is, few recognize both the need to apply through the D.C. lottery for children to secure a spot in a PK3 or PK4 program and the availability of a neighborhood public school for all K-12 students.

What is important in a school. The quality of the educators and academic rigor are tops with D.C. parents, the survey says. Physical characteristics such as the building and safety of the surrounding neighborhood are also important considerations; the availability of support services is slightly less so. Class size and test scores, two qualities often promoted by schools trying to appeal to parents, follow.

Satisfaction and changing schools. One thing is clear: Parents no longer expect to send their children to the same neighborhood schools from kindergarten through high school. While most respondents express satisfaction with the education their children are receiving in D.C. schools, a positive view is strongest among white parents and guardians. Four in 10 say they have moved a child and one-quarter are contemplating moving a child prior to finishing all the grades in a school.

Experience with the lottery. My School DC, the public school lottery, was employed in the last few months by half of the parents and guardians in the survey. Most say their children were given a space in at least one of their top three choices, especially white parents and guardians. In general, the parents and guardians in the survey call the lottery fair, but their endorsement is lukewarm.

The report includes key findings and detailed analysis pulling in differences among subgroups and is illustrated with graphs based on the survey data. The survey questionnaire is included, along with tables of each question cross tabulated by subgroups, and full cross tabulations.

ODCA's audit of enrollment in DCPS will be completed this fall. The opinion research data, which will be used in that enrollment project, have been made available to the Deputy Mayor for Education and the team developing a new Master Facilities Plan, and are available in a report on the ODCA website, www.dcauditor.org.

###

The mission of the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor (ODCA) is to support the Council of the District of Columbia by making sound recommendations that improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of the District government. Learn more at www.dcauditor.org.