

What are DCPS students' perceptions on the impact of geography on school choice and equity?

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“Location, Location, Location: How Zip Codes Influence Equity in Education”

What would be the possible outcome or social, educational, and economical impact in Washington DC, if students of color and other socially disadvantaged groups get access to equal educational opportunities? Currently, based on media representation, most students, teachers, administrators, and parents perceive that schools east of the Anacostia River, specifically Wards 7 and 8, tend to be more marginalized and lack the means to help socially and economically disadvantaged students maximize their learning potential, hence contributing to the achievement gap in the District. Therefore, there is a need to find solutions to remove geographic barriers that separate students. In addition, there is a need to improve low performing schools in Wards 7 and 8, so that they can be fully resourced to give students the opportunity to reach their full potential and assure educational equity.

This research presents updated literature review and new findings from a mixed method research study that focuses on the perceptions of the educational experiences of high school students in different Wards. The research will highlight reasons students choose schools outside of their designated communities and reveal the need for equity in school location that seem to be less desirable choices for students. The results presented from this investigation is an extension of a 2017 research study.

Rationale

The aphorism, *Education is the key to success* has become a cliché. Unfortunately, many people still believe in it even if they cannot access it. Most people would agree that access and equity in education is about location. Of all the factors one may explore to explain the disparity between achievement of different schools in the District, demography and geography are definitely top of the list and contribute largely to the achievement gap, especially among students of color. This pre-existing factor, categorically places some students east of the Anacostia River at an educational disadvantage versus those attending most schools in northeast and northwest. It is no secret and research has found that most schools east of the Anacostia River perform more poorly because of issues of poverty (US News and DCPS Data Center). Additionally, a recent investigative report done by Alvarez and Marsal surrounding allegations of grade inflation, places schools east of the river on the list of having the highest percentage of students being victims of a polarized school system.

Communities in Southeast have some of the more impoverished neighborhoods in the district, leading to marginal schools and poor student outcome. Students in high poverty neighborhoods such as Ward 7 and 8, spend nine to twelve years of their lives attending struggling neighborhood schools from elementary through to high school, which jeopardizes their ability to perform as well as other students who attend schools outside of that geographic location such as Wards 1, 2, and 3. Resident students attend these marginal schools with limited resources and lack access to well trained teachers and various educational opportunities. The schools suffer from the inequitable distribution of resources across the District. In addition, students have to deal with living in challenging neighborhoods and disadvantaged backgrounds. Their first strike is poverty.

The Final Report of the District of Columbia Public Schools Audit and Investigation by Alvarez and Marsal (2018), recently reported that high schools such as Ballou and Anacostia recorded increase in their graduation rates in the past 3 years and though the increase was minimal, it was botched by graduating failing students. The large number of schools closed in Wards 7 and 8 in 2016 and the constant budget cuts to schools shows how little thought is given to schools east of the river and the limited opportunity for students to succeed. This validates Yvette Alexander,

Ward 7 Council Member comments, “If our schools in Ward 7 are under-enrolled, it is because they are under-funded and under-programmed” (Boomer, 2016). The question then is why would parents enroll their children in marginal underfunded schools? Closing these schools does not close the achievement gaps. Because of this pervasive issue, most families from Wards 6 to 8 neighborhoods, who are aware of the option to send their children across the river to a “good” school have done so. Even if there are schools in their neighborhood that have adequate resource and a decent track record like Eastern High School, it is bypassed, because of the stigma of geographic location.

Literature Review

The District of Columbia Public Schools currently serves 48,144 students across eight wards in 115 schools K-12. The city is divided into two by the Anacostia River, separating Wards 7 and 8, considered as Southeast from Northeast (Wards 3 and 4), Northwest (Wards 1 and 2) and Southwest (Ward 6). The geographical construction of the District has sparked many uneasy discussions over the years, especially in education because Wards 7 and 8, according to OSSE, has demonstrate the highest ranks in poverty and is home to almost fifty percent of the lowest performing schools in the district. Meanwhile, in Wards 2 and 3, less than two percent of schools were categorized as low performing. Consequently, schools in Wards 7 and 8 are typically under staffed, lack adequate learning tools and resources, proper infrastructure, and well-trained teachers. This disparity is also a great determining factor on student’s academic achievement. Due to issues like these, back when the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted, it allowed students attending failing schools to attend non-failing schools that were not in their community if they were in a district where their school was receiving federal Title I funding. Further research reveals that if school choice was not an option, school assignment would merely be placement in community schools. However, parents who place a high value on education are prepared to leave their residential neighborhoods to get it (Hastings, et al, 2006). Pettinga, et al, (2015) corroborated this by expressing that many families are exercising their option to seek and send their children to schools outside of their geographic location now that they have the opportunity to do so. These choices are demonstrative of the fact that location matters in educational equity.

The correlation between educational equity and geography has often times been overlooked and is evident by the minimal updated research studies available on the subject. In his book titled *Concepts of Equity, Fairness and Justice in the Geographical Studies*, author Alan M. Hay (1995) made reference to several geographical literature, which emphasized theoretical perspectives on equity, fairness and justice, and the historical correlation between equity and geography. He noted that the pervasive social injustices created by geography needs to be eradicated, rather than to increase (pg. 500). Studies also show that geography is a major factor in student achievement. Students who attend schools with less diverse student populations tend to perform less than those who attend schools with a more diverse population. Urban schools tend to have a larger Black or minority population and located in poorer communities (Darling-Hammond, 2015) juxtaposed with schools in affluent neighborhoods that have an either diverse population or larger Caucasian presence. Hence, Black and minority students suffer from the disadvantages of poverty due to inequality (Skiba, 2015). The population of minority students in DCPS is eighty percent with sixty percent being Black. Schools in Ward 7 and 8 make up the largest percentage of Black students and the school neighborhoods are the least diverse in the District, leading to lower academic achievement, poor teacher quality, and inadequate funding (Bouck, 2004).

Over the decades, the motive for education finance reform has been disproportionate expenditure (Hansen, Chalk, Ladd, 1999), and unfair funding methods, which inhibit growth. It may be widely perceived that schools in low-income communities, such as Ward 7 and 8 receive more funding and additional resources due to their student demographic. On the contrary, the Department of Education reported that close to fifty percent of high-poverty schools received less state and local funding than was typical for other schools in their district (DOE, 2017). In order to address these challenges in the district, former D.C. School’s Chancellor, Kaya Henderson increased funding for all neighborhood high schools for SY 2016 to “promote robust and equitable programs across the city.” However, schools like Ballou HS in Ward 8 experienced a reduction in per student spending (based on change in funding formulas), because their expected enrolment was way over its projection, while schools like School Without Walls in Ward 2 benefitted from under-enrollment (Chandler, 2015)

Methodology

The mix method with a correlation design research including qualitative and quantitative data was the process used for collecting the data. The tool used to collect the data is a survey consisting of questions based on a Lykert scale of 1-5 where 1 demonstrates strongly agree and 4 strongly disagree. It also consisted of open-ended unstructured questions, which allowed the participants to provide responses base on their own perspectives, opinion, or life experiences.

Findings and Conclusions

Among the sixty students that were surveyed, the following data was collected in two categories: location and equity. The findings confirmed students' perception that location or zip codes are important and are a great determinant of educational success.

- The majority of students surveyed from both schools altogether either disagreed or strongly disagreed that there is equitable funding of schools across all Wards in the District.
- Students in the NW school choose to attend their school because they think schools in W1-4 have better opportunities and access and will better prepare them for college. The students in the SE school chose the school because they also think it will not only prepare them for college, but also because the school was in their community or it was their parent's choice.
- However, most students from both schools agreed they would go to schools outside their Wards because of funding, better opportunities and access, and that school location matters. The most favorable choices for students from South East was that they would have more choices for sports and academics and their parents concern for safety even though community violence was the lowest percentage.
- 100% of students when asked if they could go to school in any other ward, chose Wards 1 to 5 and no student chose Wards 6 to 8 even though almost one-third of the students surveyed lived in SE (Ward 7 and 8)
- Most students think that NW and NE need to have more funding and from the schools in South East, only a little over 35 percent of students think schools in SE should get more funding.
- An average of almost three quarters of the students determined that location matters and over 80 percent of students would not attend schools in Wards 7 and 8 with Ward 6 with a low percentage, but Wards 1 to 5 were the most favorable options.
- One student commented, "schools can be good anywhere", but students from both schools altogether agreed that location matters because of safety and funding opportunities. However, students from the SE schools added quality of teachers and education were also factors.
- Compared to last year's (2017) survey, most students still agree there is no equitable distribution of funds among schools in the District. Also, there is still a preference of school was in Wards 1-6 and again no student chose Ward 7 or 8 as favorable school choice even students who live in Wards 7 and 8.
- Approximately 90% of students in last year's survey agreed that location mattered and there is only a relatively small decrease in this year's survey.

Policy Recommendations

- **Teachers, students, and families:** Become not just advocates, but practitioners of social justice. Attend budget hearings, town hall meetings; write letters to local and state government and policy makers about students' challenges in education.
- Demand that the ESSA clearly outlines clauses that cater to the whole child.
- **School Leaders:**

- Have knowledge of the issues that impact your students and school community and know the platform of legislators and communicate educational issues on your school's behalf. Include a small team of students and teachers to help send the message at meetings.
 - Engage in political activism through membership in professional organizations and contact government officials and lobbyist on your students' behalf to influence policies on equitable and fair treatment of students and the equitable distribution of funding and resources.
 - Partner with community stakeholders and local businesses to seek funding for students' benefit.
 - Use your professional influence to effectively advocate for equitable and excellent education for your students (fight for your school).
- **Mayor and Chancellor:**
 - Allocate more funds and resources for struggling schools and “continue drive toward the five Capital Commitment goals we set in 2012: better student outcomes, improved student achievement in our 40 lowest-performing schools, increased graduation rates, improved student satisfaction, and rising student enrollment” (Antwan Wilson).
 - Visit schools and involve teacher, student and the community in designing a fair system of funding.
 - Develop think tanks in high poverty neighborhoods.
 - Invest in the modernization of school infrastructure and gentrification of poorly developed neighborhoods.
 - Use data-based research to revise the District's funding formula to accommodate the diversity of school needs

The survey illustrates the inequity that exists in the District based on geographic location of schools. However, there are several limitations to the research. If the survey sample would have been larger, it may have possibly yielded different responses to specific questions. Also, there needed to be a greater survey distribution of the student population across all wards. Recommendation for further research would be to include more school in the research to get multiple perspectives, survey parents and teachers, include a research question to determine the gender of the participant to compare and contrast gender perspectives. It is also recommended that further research be conducted to derive adequate data on the cause and effects of zip codes on student achievement in the District in order to expand educational opportunities for low-performing schools, especially in Wards 7 and 8. Pettinga, et al (2015) prescribes that “Public schools now need to know why families choose their school, why they stay, and why they leave.” Additionally, there should be thorough investigation on the social and emotional needs of students in under performing schools and from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and resources be provided inside and outside of school to support both students and parents alike.

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