



A top D.C. charter school educates few at-risk students. Should it be opening a second campus?

By **Perry Stein**

August 4, 2019 at 4:11 p.m. EDT

The standardized test scores at Washington Latin Public Charter School are among the best in the District. The waiting list of families clamoring to enroll in the middle and high school clocks in at more than 1,500 students. And the school, which educates about 700 children and boasts a rigorous classical curriculum, sends its graduates to the nation's most prestigious universities.

But when Washington Latin sought permission from the city to double in size and open a second campus, it was not a slam-dunk decision.

Two of seven members on the D.C. Public Charter School Board — the oversight panel that decides which charters open and close — voted against the school's application. Other board members expressed their reluctance. And while the board voted in July to allow Washington Latin to establish a second campus for the 2020-2021 academic year, board members made school leaders agree to more than a half-dozen conditions.

The reason: Washington Latin educates a smaller percentage of children from disadvantaged families than that of almost any school in the District. In a city with one of the largest achievement gaps between students from low-income families and their more affluent peers, critics argue the school is not doing its part to help close that divide.

In the District, about 46 percent of students are considered at-risk, which means they are homeless or in foster care, their families qualify for public assistance, or they have been held back more than a year in high school.

At Washington Latin, just 7 percent of middle school students are considered at-risk, and 16 percent of high school students meet the definition.

At-risk students at Washington Latin are three times as likely to be suspended than their classmates are. They are also more likely to be suspended than are at-risk students at other city schools, although school leaders say that is because there are so few students from disadvantaged families on campus that incidence percentages are easily skewed.

“It gets exhausting to see the highest-ranked academic schools in the city consistently have among the lowest at-risk populations,” said Steve Bumbaugh, a member of the D.C. Public Charter School Board who voted against Washington Latin’s application and spoke at a public meeting in June.

The conundrum at Washington Latin — it’s a well-regarded school whose demographics do not reflect the city it is serving — mirrors the challenges that exist on campuses across the city as more white and affluent families enroll their children in the District’s traditional public and charter schools.

AD

Those families tend to concentrate in a relatively small number of schools, and those schools typically yield better test scores and are considered high-performing.

Students of color from low-income families are concentrated in other schools, with many of those campuses considered low-performing.

Mundo Verde Bilingual Public Charter School and Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School, two popular language-immersion campuses with relatively low populations of at-risk students, also received permission in recent years to open second campuses.

Even the District's school lottery placement system — which is supposed to give every student an equal chance at enrolling in a top-performing school — cannot reverse this trend. Of the city's 30 or so traditional public, charter and application high schools, only six have a population of white children that exceeds 2 percent.

AD

Though Washington Latin is racially diverse, its student body does not reflect the District's public school demographics: The student body is 40 percent white — far higher than the average of 6 percent in the District's charter schools, which are privately operated but publicly funded. At Latin, 45 percent of students are black, 9 percent are Hispanic, 3 percent are Asian, and 3 percent identify as multiracial.

School leaders said they plan to aggressively recruit applicants for Latin's new campus.

"We, too, would like a larger population of at-risk students," said Diana Smith, Washington Latin's principal. "We didn't get into this to create a good public school that looks like a private school."

AD

In 2006, Washington Latin opened to middle-schoolers in a church basement in upper Northwest, a largely wealthy swath of the city. At the time, few white families considered the city's burgeoning charter sector, and the school wanted to attract those families to create a racially diverse school.

Peter Anderson, Latin's head of school, said that as its reputation has grown, more white students are staying on beyond middle school, creating a student body whose families are even more affluent. Latin, which starts in fifth grade and now has its campus in Brightwood Park, said the application pool for upper grades is more socioeconomically diverse.

Anderson said applications to the school in recent years have increased from families in Wards 7 and 8, the corner of the city with the highest concentration of poverty. But the number of white and affluent families applying to the school has also increased, and the school cannot control who is admitted through the lottery.

AD

The lottery's sibling preference — which gives priority to applicants who have a brother or sister at the school — has been potent at Latin, leaving little room for other students.

That's why a second campus that will open with a fifth and sixth grade — where, by definition, there can be no sibling preference that first year — may give Latin its best shot at diversifying the student body, Anderson said. School leaders do not know the location of the second campus but said they are seeking a Metro-accessible property that would attract at-risk students.

Anderson said the school would continue to provide private buses so students from different neighborhoods can easily attend.

While a wide performance gap exists between at-risk students and their classmates at the school, the at-risk students at Latin perform better on standardized tests than their at-risk peers citywide.

“With a new campus, where there is no cross-campus sibling preference, we can start anew,” Anderson said.

Scott Pearson, director of the charter school board, said he wants the city to adopt a lottery preference that enables schools to give priority to at-risk students. In 2014, Pearson said he opposed such a preference because he did not believe it had been rigorously analyzed.

“If we are really serious about equity and if we are serious about making sure that our least advantaged families have the ability to go to our high-performing schools, we need to do more,” Pearson said in a recent interview. “And my own view is that doing more includes adding a preference for those kids in the lottery.”

Washington Latin says it supports an at-risk preference, which the D.C. Council would need to approve.

The administration of Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) has not taken a stance on the preference. Paul Kihn, deputy mayor for education, said the District has not finished studying it.

In 2018, a city-funded study determined that an at-risk preference would not have a significant impact unless it supersedes sibling preference in the algorithm used by the lottery. Kihn said the city is exploring options for how the preference could be implemented and its potential effects on city schools.

“Before we do it, we want to make sure the trade-off is the right trade-off,” Kihn said. “Lottery preferences always include winners and losers.”

As part of its conditions to open, the school agreed to update its discipline policy to reduce suspensions and train teachers on how to work with students who have faced trauma. Washington Latin said it would also consider allowing children to enroll in slots that became vacant after ninth grade — something it does not currently permit.

The decision to expand Latin came less than two months after the charter board approved the opening of five new campuses amid warnings from city leaders that the District had ample empty seats in existing schools and did not need additional schools.

Advocates of the traditional public school system fear that more charter and application schools could pull students and resources away from neighborhood schools.

“When existing schools lose students, they see shrinking budgets,” Suzanne Wells, the founder of the Capitol Hill Public Schools Parent Association, testified at a public charter meeting. “The continual opening and closing of schools is particularly difficult for students and families.”

But Yolandra Plummer Diallo, whose son is in middle school at Washington Latin, said she is impressed with the “richness of our son’s education” and believes more students should have access to the quality education.

“There needs to be more equitable access to choice,” Diallo said during a public charter school meeting. “The expansion of Washington Latin Public Charter School will help expand this access.”
