

## LOCAL EDUCATION

# D.C. school enrollment boom helped by rise in adult learners

School leaders credit the surge to students' economic struggles and an expansion of virtual learning options



Naima Jabil, center, talks with Leticia Justo, right, in their ESL class at Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School on May 3. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)



By [Lauren Lumpkin](#)

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When Araceli Orozco Muniz, 28, arrived at Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, she wanted only to improve her English. Still relatively new

to the United States, she needed a better handle on the language so she could continue working and sending money to her family in Mexico.

"Carlos Rosario changed my mind," she said on a recent afternoon in a library on the school's Northeast Washington campus. After taking some English classes, her teachers encouraged her to enroll in the certified nursing assistant program. It's a common progression for students, officials said, many of whom come to learn English, then discover a career.

"I was afraid about studying in a high level or in a university or something like that. I was like, 'Oh, no, the English is too much for me,'" said Orozco Muniz, who takes classes in the morning, then works as a cashier. "Then the teachers and the student services [staff] pushed me to, 'No, you can, you can!'"

She already has plans to start classes at the University of the District of Columbia and become a registered nurse.

After a pandemic-induced slump, programs for adult learners have helped fuel an enrollment surge in D.C. About 2,600 additional students enrolled in the fall in public programs from pre-K through adult, resulting in the [highest enrollment recorded](#) in 15 years and making D.C.'s schools the only ones in the region to regain some of their students.

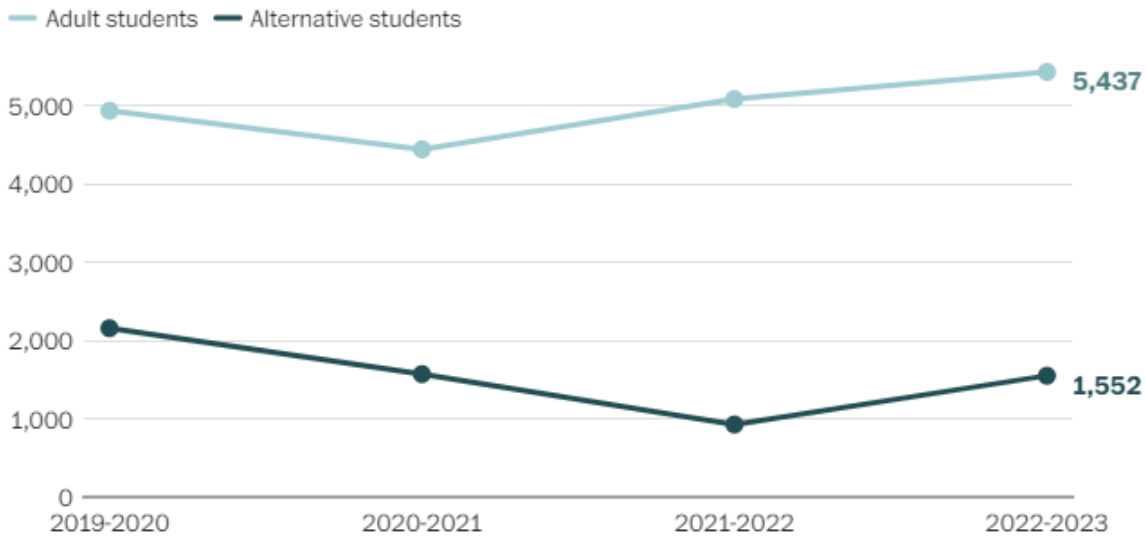
Most of those students entered prekindergarten, elementary, middle and high school classrooms. But a sizable chunk — more than one-third — were adult and alternative students, according to an analysis from the D.C. Policy Center, a think tank. Enrollment among those learners grew from 6,018 during the 2021-2022 school year to 6,989 this year, data from D.C.'s Office of the State Superintendent of Education shows, a boost that has renewed calls for increased funding.

School leaders attribute much of the spike to the expansion of virtual options. D.C. Public Schools offer a virtual alternative school for students, typically between the ages of 16 and 22, who struggle in traditional classrooms. The city's adult education options, offered largely in charter schools and open to adults of any age, have permanently adopted hybrid learning.

There are also economic factors, officials said. "When you start to see a downturn in the economy, you will traditionally see adult enrollment increases," said Leicester Johnson, chief executive of Academy of Hope Adult Public Charter School. Adults who were let go from their jobs during the early years of the pandemic are hoping to steel themselves against the next economic slowdown by earning high school credentials or learning new skills in workforce training programs.

## D.C. sees growth in adult and alternative education programs

School leaders credit the surge to students' economic struggles and an expansion of virtual learning options.



Note: Enrollment totals reflect students included in D.C.'s per-pupil funding formula.

Source: D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education

LAUREN LUMPKIN / THE WASHINGTON POST

Aja Anderson, a 41-year-old mother, is among them. Academy of Hope grew from 540 to 652 students this year, a 21 percent increase. Anderson was out of work before the pandemic started and is looking to start the next phase of her career.

"I wanted to get back in the workforce and thought, 'Maybe I should do something I like and would let me grow,'" Anderson, who previously worked in human resources, remembers thinking before she enrolled in the fall. So she chose computing, beginning with a class that would teach her the basics of information technology. She hopes to land a job in cloud computing or cybersecurity eventually.

D.C.'s adult education programs — as all other public schools — are free, filling an often-overlooked gap between high school and college. Many students who enter do not have high school diplomas and need the credential to get better jobs. Others are high school graduates who want career training but are not yet prepared for college.

[Too few D.C. students finish college. This program aims to change that.](#)

"The idea of heading into a community college is a really intimidating proposition," said HollyAnn Freso-Moore, chief academic officer at Carlos Rosario. "Adult schools serve this space where we welcome learners where they are. We structure their education with their very specific needs, and we support them all along the way in a way that community college is not designed to do. That's what makes us really, really unique."

And as traditional schools continue to recover from the pandemic, adult education programs may also emerge as a solution for students who suffered the worst academically, Freso-Moore added.

"Education is in a real point of transition," she said. "It's at a point where students who are exiting at this time may not be exiting with the same skill sets we were seeing that were there for them pre-pandemic, and that is the space that adult education is filling right now."

D.C. has 13 schools — three traditional public campuses and 10 charters — that serve adult and alternative students. Each has a unique student population.

At Carlos Rosario, for example, nearly every student is an immigrant, said Freso-Moore. Among them is Oswaldo Pereira, 53, a Venezuelan who enrolled to improve his English, then entered the school's culinary arts program. "Sometimes it's very difficult for us because you are from another country," Pereira said. "Carlos Rosario is important because you have to gain some skills. Then you can use it for possibly improving your life and also contributing to the economy."

Briya Public Charter School, which has campuses across the city and is one of the city's largest adult programs, is a multigenerational school that serves parents and their children up to age 5. Most of the students enrolled are women, are native Spanish speakers and have less than an eighth-grade education, said Ashley Simpson Baird, the school's director of research and policy.

"They want to improve their English, they want a high school diploma, and they want a job that will support their family," she said. "It's really just about making their lives better, making conditions better for their kids." The school educates 37 students from [motels](#) where migrant families who arrived in buses from Texas and Arizona have been living since last year.

[\*Migrants find no space in crowded hotels leased by D.C., council members say\*](#)

At Academy of Hope, roughly three-quarters of students who enroll do not have a high school credential, Johnson said. The majority of those learners enter reading at or below the sixth-grade level and doing math at or below the fourth-grade level.

"Our job is to help get those skills up to a level so they are ready to take the GED or participate in the National External Diploma Program," Johnson said, referring to an alternative to the GED that is designed for adults who have developed high-school-level skills through life experience. Twenty-three students earned diplomas last year through these programs.

As with other programs, the switch to virtual learning has contributed to the enrollment surge, she added. The school has also harnessed technology to make it easier to attend — for example, rather than asking new students to prove their residency in person with physical paperwork, they can do so online.

"We knew prior to the pandemic that was tough for people to do," Johnson said. Students have other priorities, such as jobs and families. "Offering this virtual option created the kind of flexibility that people needed to fully participate."

This was also the case for Luke C. Moore High School, an alternative campus in D.C.'s traditional public school system. Enrollment leaped from 140 to 210 students between this school year and last, said Rodney Wormsley, the school's principal.

Enrollment had tapered off as students and families expressed concerns about the [coronavirus](#) and getting sick at school during the pandemic, Wormsley said. There were also concerns about physical safety — many students have been worried about "being involved in some type of melee or some type of violent experience" on long commutes riding public transportation to school, he added.

"We were able to design a school — a virtual high school, essentially — that helped us out tremendously," Wormsley said. About a quarter of Wormsley's students take classes online.

As these programs grow, so have calls to boost funding. Students in adult programs receive a smaller portion of the city's per-pupil funding formula than children in the K-12 grades and do not get "at-risk" funding, dollars that support a broad category of students that include those who are homeless and in low-income households. Their schools were also ineligible for the same amount of federal pandemic recovery dollars as other schools. "Yet we know that our students have many of the same needs as pre-K through 12 students," Simpson Baird said.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/05/06/dc-schools-enrollment-adult-education/>