



DISTRICTWIDE STRATEGIC PLAN TO DECREASE YOUTH DISENGAGEMENT FROM EDUCATION

2022-2026



Office of the State
Superintendent of Education

SUPERINTENDENT

The District of Columbia’s public and public charter school system is the educational home to approximately 95,000 students. These students, when equipped with the right amount of love, support, structure, instruction and encouragement, represent a bright and thriving future for DC. Our charge at the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) is not only to ensure the schools that students learn in each day are inviting, equitable and achievement-oriented, but also to ensure we establish and maintain systems of support, across government agencies, that are so tightly woven together that every need is met, and no child is left behind. OSSE’s mission is for every student to succeed. Given this mission, reengaging the 6,893 youth between the ages of 16 -24 who have disengaged (as of 2020) is a high priority within our agency.



Dr. Christina Grant, Superintendent

Over the past decade, communities all over the country have acknowledged that staggering numbers of disconnected youth represent a national crisis. OSSE conducted a root cause analysis, studied the relevant data sets and reviewed evidence gaps to uncover the “why” of disengagement in the District of Columbia. We also set out to identify what needed to be done to remove barriers and create supports to ensure that more of our youth could find their way back on track with school and in other aspects of their lives. In response to this work, as the state education agency, we created the DC ReEngagement Center (DC REC). Established in 2014, the DC REC represents OSSE’s efforts to support reengagement as a direct service to disengaged youth. More recently, especially on the heels of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, OSSE turned a critical lens to our reengagement efforts and began questioning our approach to supporting our youth, particularly in this environment. This critique led to the creation of a districtwide strategic plan aimed at providing a four-year blueprint for collaborating as a city to help our disengaged youth reengage with their education and prevent currently enrolled students from future disengagement.

In this plan, you will find a bold vision aimed at significantly decreasing youth disengagement in the District of Columbia. The plan includes goals and strategies that recognize the insights and importance of the REC but also acknowledge the REC’s limited capacity to do this work alone. Ultimately, the plan coalesces around a collaborative infrastructure, emphasizing collective impact across naturally aligned DC agencies and organizations, and embracing OSSE’s role as the executive agency.

In closing, the effective execution of this plan will positively shift the life trajectory of our most vulnerable scholars and quite possibly have a generational impact. To ensure successful implementation, we will need the support and active participation of District leaders, District government agencies, schools, and community-based organizations, as well as resource alignment, and executive support. Our youth deserve no less.

Dr. Christina Grant, Superintendent

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In 2014, the District established the DC Re-Engagement Center to serve as a “single-door” through which youth (ages 16-24) who left school early can reconnect to educational options and other critical services to support their attainment of a high school diploma or GED. The number of early leavers has been high for several years, though the high school graduation rates have been increasing. As of 2020, 6,893 youth (ages 16-24) reside in the District of Columbia who have previously disengaged from school prior to earning a high school diploma or credential and who have not yet re-enrolled in an educational program.

With this large and growing need, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and a desire to ensure that the District is fully capitalizing on the efforts and resources available to this target population, the DC REC recognized the need for a comprehensive strategic planning initiative. This effort incorporated fundamental research on the issues and opportunities facing the DC REC and the myriad of schools, government agencies and community-based organizations (CBOs) supporting disengaged youth and youth at-risk of disengaging. A strategic plan working group was established to tackle this task. The working group was comprised of approximately 25 participants including DC REC senior staff and other representatives from OSSE Leadership, DC Public Schools (DCPS), charter schools, CBOs and government agency partners that support the target populations.

The strategic plan working group started by developing the primary and secondary research questions that would drive the process:

- **Primary Research Question:** What does a more coordinated, systemic approach look like for decreasing disengagement in the District and which roles do the different partners/actors play in that coordinated system?
- **Secondary Research Question 1:** Are there policies, accountability structures, guidance or strategies that could be amended, developed and/or implemented to better support a coordinated effort to re-engage DC’s disengaged youth and support the continued engagement and persistence of re-engaged youth and youth at risk of disengaging?
- **Secondary Research Question 2:** What are the most common barriers to successful re-engagement or completion? What resources can be leveraged to address these barriers and why are the existing resources not accessed more often? Similarly, what are the most effective barrier-mitigation partnerships that can be replicated throughout the system?
- **Secondary Research Question 3:** As the District and the country recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, what needs and challenges will youth in the District face that are either new or more acute than before, and how can the District help mitigate these challenges during the COVID-19 recovery period?

Next, the strategic plan working group defined the target populations of this effort:

- **Disengaged youth:** Youth who have not yet completed a secondary credential but are not currently enrolled in an education program.
- **Reengaged youth:** Youth who disengaged at some point but have since re-enrolled at an education program and are working toward a secondary credential.
- **Youth at-risk of disengagement:** Youth who have a higher likelihood of disengaging from education or are feeling less connected from education but have not yet disengaged.

Led by consultants, the strategic planning work took a two-phased approach:

- **Phase I (July-September 2021)** consisted of information gathering and landscape analysis to understand more about the key challenges and opportunities for supporting disengaged youth and youth at-risk of disengaging in a coordinated manner moving forward. This included youth focus groups; online surveys of partners and stakeholders; small group discussions with key partners, and school/city leaders; and an examination of existing data.
- **Phase II (October-December 2021)** explored strategies for tackling the challenges and expanding the opportunities identified in Phase I. As needed, continued engagement of youth, educators, and other stakeholders occurred to deepen understanding of the challenges and opportunities.

During Phase I, five core themes were identified by stakeholders on student needs and barriers. These included:

- **Economic demands** – Many of the target youth have economic demands that make completing a traditional educational pathway difficult due to their need to earn an income.
- **Whole student supports** –Target youth have needs that go beyond academics including mental health counseling, housing, child care, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) access and barriers that need to be met for them to be successful in school.
- **Dedicated and caring adults** – Youth reported a need for dedicated and individualized support from caring adults that they felt was lacking in their experience.
- **Relevant program options** – More educational options that connect to the real world, are culturally relevant, and offer flexible scheduling and varied formats are needed.
- **Outreach and awareness** – Target youth have insufficient awareness of the services, resources and programs that are currently available to the target populations.

Phase II of the strategic planning work focused on identifying strategic goals and specific strategies that were aligned to one or more of the five themes that emerged in Phase I. The goals and specific strategies include:

OUTREACH AND AWARENESS

- A. Develop a plan implemented by the REC to ensure stakeholders are aware of the strategies for reducing disengagement outlined below and engage stakeholders in the implementation of the recommended strategies.
 - Facilitate a Districtwide consortium focused on decreasing disengagement comprised of key District agencies, school representatives and community partners that are associated with strategies outlined in this plan.
 - Connect with middle schools, high schools and community partners to share specifics about the strategic plan.
- B. Ensure the REC and alternative and adult programs are widely known.
 - Launch a coordinated, Districtwide marketing push sharing information about the REC, alternative programs and adult programs across multiple platforms.
 - Identify opportunities for youth to participate and lead outreach efforts.
 - Continue and expand efforts to share critical reengagement information (quarterly roundtables with key stakeholders, ongoing youth engagement events such as REC Live, ongoing resource workshops).

WHOLE STUDENT SUPPORTS

- A. Provide a deeper level of wraparound, whole student supports for re-engaging youth.
 - Develop/expand shared systems and informational materials as well as multi-entity partnerships to better collaborate across organizations, helping all partners to understand resources and service availability/eligibility among programs.
 - Co-locate wraparound services in school buildings, with a particular focus on housing and mental health services.
 - Expand access to mentoring opportunities, potentially including peer or near-peer mentoring, for youth choosing to re-engage.
- B. Build systems and structures to allow youth at risk of disengaging access to rapid and comprehensive supports.
 - Work with LEAs to help them pro-actively use student data to allow for earlier identification of youth with disengagement warning factors for the sole purpose of offering additional and targeted student supports.
- C. Name OSSE/REC to serve as a central point for organizations and agencies that support disengaged youth to be well-connected and understand the services each other provide.
 - Through a community of practice, facilitate knowledge sharing and coordinated data and practices to actively connect schools, LEAs, agencies and organizations supporting youth.
 - Develop guidance documents that identify replicable best and promising practices and partnerships from national and local research.

DEDICATED AND CARING ADULTS

- A. Ensure that every student has a caring adult that knows the student and will serve as the student's champion.
- Expand access to mentoring opportunities particularly for at-risk students, potentially including peer or near-peer mentoring.
 - Invest in a major expansion of multiple, trained Social and Emotional Learning professionals in every school (with a focus on schools with high numbers of at-risk students and/or track records of high disengagement) to better respond to student mental health and non-academic support needs.

ECONOMIC DEMANDS

- A. Ensure youth know about and can access existing opportunities to earn a living wage while completing a secondary credential.
- Explore ways to further promote existing opportunities to earn money while attending school.
 - Analyze whether existing earn-and-learn and work-based learning opportunities meet youth's needs.
- B. Reduce the potential conflict between earning a diploma or credential and needing to work by establishing appropriate flexibilities in how and when re-engaging youth attend school.
- Ensure programmatic opportunities include a diversity of options for attending – including synchronous, asynchronous, daytime and evening options as well as competency-based options that are not directly connected to seat-time requirements.

RELEVANT PROGRAM OPTIONS

- A. Provide additional work-based learning and other career-linked learning opportunities that feel exciting, motivating, and relevant to youth.
- Expand educational pathways to a high school diploma that incorporate work-based learning, apprenticeships, Career and Technical Education and/or individualized, portfolio opportunities as part of the requirements to complete a secondary credential.
- B. Balance rigorous graduation timelines and federal policy requirements with appropriate flexibility for youth facing specific barriers.
- Consider any flexibilities possible for students who may need to complete their degree on a longer time schedule, particularly for students new to the United States.
- C. Help organizations and agencies to better understand and serve target youth by more regularly sharing OSSE data about youth pathways, barriers, and types of programmatic options.
- Annually share data and information with partners about disengaged youth and youth at-risk of disengagement.
 - Collect and share information from and among LEAs about the number of youth pursuing flexible programming options and specific barrier mitigation services to inform the District about any observed trends.

In the full plan, the goals and strategies separately address preventing future disengagement of currently enrolled youth and re-engaging already disengaged youth. The strategies are also categorized as Districtwide or OSSE/REC-led strategies. Lastly, the full plan outlines additional implementation details, including additional steps, timing, and key partners associated with each goal and strategy.

For more information on this work contact Veronica Simmons, Director of the DC ReEngagement Center at Veronica.Simmons@dc.gov or (202) 698-3532.





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