

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-165](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

D.C. charter schools served about 45 percent of D.C.'s public school students in the 2015-16 school year. The District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995 established PCSB to authorize and oversee charter schools. PCSB also oversees charter schools' use of suspensions and expulsions.

The District of Columbia Appropriations Act, 2005, as amended, included a provision for GAO to conduct a periodic management evaluation of PCSB. This report examines (1) what is known about suspensions and expulsions in D.C. charter schools, and (2) to what extent PCSB oversees charter schools' use of suspensions and expulsions. GAO analyzed the most recent national federal data (school years 2011-12 and 2013-14) and D.C. data (school year 2015-16) on suspensions and expulsions; reviewed relevant laws, regulations, and agency policies and documentation; and interviewed officials at PCSB and other D.C. agencies, as well as other stakeholders selected to provide a range of perspectives. GAO also visited three charter schools that had high discipline rates.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations, including that D.C. education agencies collaborate on a plan to further reduce discipline rates and make explicit agency roles, responsibilities, and authorities regarding charter school discipline. The agencies did not explicitly agree or disagree with our recommendations and indicated they could deepen their collaboration.

View [GAO-17-165](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickj@gao.gov.

February 2017

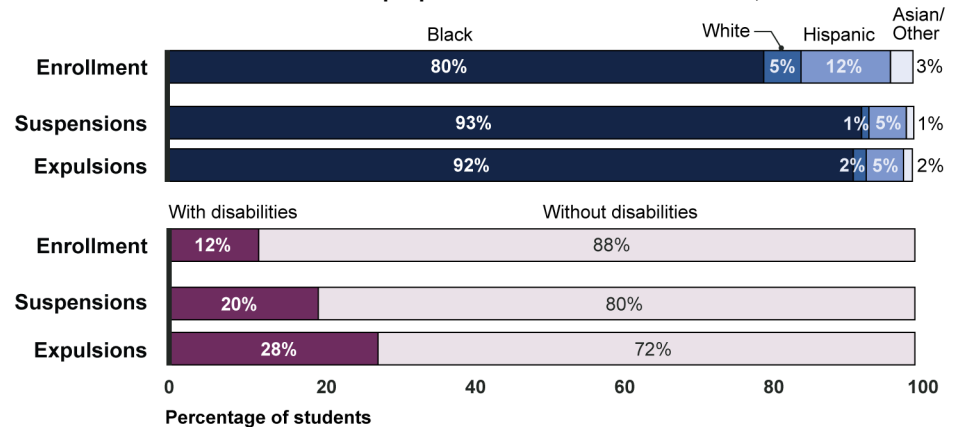
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CHARTER SCHOOLS

Multi-Agency Plan Needed to Continue Progress Addressing High and Disproportionate Discipline Rates

What GAO Found

Discipline rates (out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates) at District of Columbia (D.C.) charter schools dropped from school years 2011-12 through 2013-14 (the most recent years of national Department of Education data available). However, these rates remained about double the rates of charter schools nationally and slightly higher than D.C. traditional public schools and were also disproportionately high for some student groups and schools. Specifically, during this period, suspension rates in D.C. charter schools dropped from about 16 percent of all students to about 13 percent, and expulsions, which were relatively rare, went down by about a half percent, according to GAO's analysis. However, D.C. Black students and students with disabilities were disproportionately suspended and expelled. For example, Black students represented 80 percent of students in D.C. charter schools, but 93 percent of those suspended and 92 percent of those expelled. Further, 16 of D.C.'s 105 charter schools suspended over a fifth of their students over the course of school year 2015-16, according to D.C. data.

Suspensions and Expulsions of Black Students and Students with Disabilities in District of Columbia Charter Schools Were Disproportionate Relative to Enrollment, School Year 2013-14



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection. | GAO-17-165

Note: Numbers may not add to 100 due to rounding.

The Public Charter School Board (PCSB) regularly uses several mechanisms to oversee charter schools' use of suspensions and expulsions. For example, PCSB reviews school-level data and schools' discipline policies to encourage schools to reduce reliance on suspensions and expulsions to manage student behavior. Several D.C. agencies have roles in overseeing charter schools and reported collaborating on other issues, but we observed a lack of consensus around roles and responsibilities regarding charter school discipline. Further, a plan to issue regulations addressing discipline disparities among D.C. public schools was unsuccessful because the D.C. agency that planned to issue the regulations was unsure of its authority to do so. Absent a coordinated plan to continue progress in reducing discipline rates in charter schools, as well as clarified roles, responsibilities, and authorities of D.C. agencies with respect to oversight of discipline in charter schools, continued progress may be slowed.