



March 2022

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CHARTER SCHOOLS

DC Public Charter School Board Should Include All Required Elements in Its Annual Report

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105226](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Almost one-half of DC's public school students were enrolled in 128 charter schools during school year 2020-21, according to PCSB. The School Reform Act requires PCSB—DC's sole chartering authority—to approve charters, monitor schools, and submit annual reports on its work.

The District of Columbia Appropriations Act of 2005, as amended, included a provision for GAO to review DC's chartering authorities every 5 years. This report describes how PCSB reviews applications, monitors charter schools and takes corrective actions, and examines the extent to which PCSB complies with its annual reporting requirements, among other objectives.

GAO reviewed PCSB policies and procedures, including the 2021 Charter Application Guidelines, 2020-21 Charter Review and Charter Renewal guidelines, and PCSB's 2021-2024 strategic plan, known as the Strategic Roadmap. GAO also compared PCSB's 2021 Annual Report to School Reform Act requirements and interviewed PCSB's board chair and staff and DC government officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends PCSB include all required reporting elements in its annual report and, as appropriate, provide links to additional information on its website. PCSB agreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-22-105226](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

March 2022

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CHARTER SCHOOLS

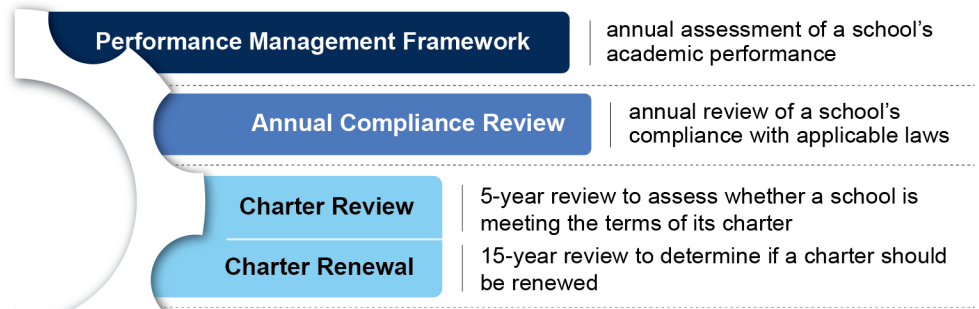
DC Public Charter School Board Should Include All Required Elements in Its Annual Report

What GAO Found

The District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995, as amended, (School Reform Act) authorizes the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) to review and approve applications to establish charter schools. Using a multi-step process, including interviews and public hearings, PCSB requires applicants to demonstrate that a school was needed in the proposed location and would be able to recruit and retain students. However, in line with a revised application process stemming from its 2021-2024 strategic plan, beginning in 2023 PCSB plans to approve or deny new applications, in part, based on a school's ability to fill a need not already met by a traditional public school or charter school elsewhere in the district. PCSB staff said they plan to assess the district's need for charter schools by conducting an annual needs assessment and collaborating closely with DC government. Staff said PCSB is not accepting new applications until 2023.

PCSB uses several mechanisms to monitor charter schools' academic performance and compliance with applicable legal requirements (see figure). PCSB is revising one of these mechanisms—its performance management framework—to incorporate equity measures and address concerns that top-rated schools are not meeting the needs of all their students. For example, rather than reporting performance measures for all students as a single group, PCSB plans to begin reporting this information by student subgroups, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and disability status. PCSB uses an escalating system of actions to encourage schools to correct issues identified through monitoring.

DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) Monitoring Mechanisms



Source: GAO summary of PCSB policies. | [GAO-22-105226](#)

PCSB's 2021 Annual Report fully included 12 of the 15 elements required by the School Reform Act. Staff gave a range of reasons for excluding parts of three required elements. For example, staff said that much of the excluded information is available on PCSB's website and is more comprehensive than could be presented in the Annual Report; however, the Annual Report does not include web addresses that link to the information. By including all elements in its annual report and providing links to information on its website, as appropriate, PCSB can meet its reporting requirements while providing parents and stakeholders with access to comprehensive information on DC's charter schools.

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Abbreviations

DC	District of Columbia
Education	U.S. Department of Education
Framework	Performance Management Framework
OSSE	Office of the State Superintendent of Education
PCSB	DC Public Charter School Board
School Reform Act	District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995

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March 21, 2022

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen
Chair
The Honorable Cindy Hyde-Smith
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Quigley
Chair
The Honorable Steve Womack
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Almost one-half of public school students in the District of Columbia (DC) were enrolled in a charter school during school year 2020-21, according to the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB). Charter schools are public schools typically run by a nonprofit group or organization under a contract—or charter—with a state or other entity and are granted increased flexibility in school management in exchange for meeting the accountability standards in their charters. The District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995, as amended, (School Reform Act) established PCSB to approve, oversee, renew, and revoke school charters.¹ PCSB carries out its responsibilities as DC’s sole chartering authority by monitoring charter schools’ performance, operations, and compliance with applicable laws. PCSB is primarily funded through administrative fees collected from charter schools.

The District of Columbia Appropriations Act of 2005, as amended, includes a provision for GAO to conduct a management review of DC’s

¹Pub. L. No. 104-134, tit. II, § 2214, 110 Stat. 1321, codified at D.C. Code §§ 38-1800.01 to 38-1809.01. PCSB is an independent government agency with a seven-member board and, as of the end of January 2022, 44 staff. For the purposes of this report, “PCSB” refers to the organization as a whole. Where relevant, we distinguish between the actions of PCSB’s board members and the staff.

chartering authorities every 5 years.² This report addresses the following questions: (1) What were PCSB's revenues and expenditures for fiscal years 2016-2020? (2) How does PCSB review charter school applications? (3) How does PCSB monitor charter schools and take corrective actions? (4) To what extent has PCSB complied with its annual reporting requirements?

To describe PCSB's revenues and expenditures for fiscal years 2016 through 2020, we analyzed data provided by PCSB that had been validated by DC Government's Office of the Chief Financial Officer. We determined the reliability of the data by interviewing PCSB staff to understand how PCSB categorizes its revenue and expenditure accounts and how those accounts have changed from fiscal year 2016 through fiscal year 2020 (the most recent years of data available at the time of our analysis). We also reviewed relevant financial documentation, including PCSB's financial procedures. We found these data to be sufficiently reliable for the purpose of reporting PCSB's annual revenues and expenditures. We also reviewed PCSB's administrative fee policy to understand how the fees are calculated and collected from schools.

To describe how PCSB reviews charter school applications, we reviewed PCSB's 2021 Charter Application Guidelines and PCSB's 2021-2024 Strategic Roadmap, which outlines forthcoming changes to the charter application process. We interviewed PCSB's board chair and staff to discuss the current application review process, process modifications made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and changes it is implementing as part of its 2021-2024 Strategic Roadmap.

To describe how PCSB monitors charter schools and takes corrective actions, we reviewed PCSB's policies and procedures, including its Performance Management Framework (Framework)—which is used to annually assess schools' performance across a range of indicators—and the 2020-21 Charter Review and Charter Renewal Guidelines. In addition, we reviewed PCSB's COVID-19 Impact Policy, which outlines how its monitoring procedures changed in response to the pandemic. We also reviewed PCSB's 2021-2024 Strategic Roadmap, which outlines monitoring goals over the next 3 years. We asked PCSB's board chair and staff how PCSB monitors the extent to which schools meet their charter goals, determines the corrective actions PCSB will take, and

²Pub. L. No. 108-335 § 346, 118 Stat. 1322, 1352 (2004), as amended by Pub. L. No. 112-74, Div. C. Title VIII, § 816, 125 Stat. 786, 943 (2011).

provides assistance to schools. We interviewed officials at the following DC government agencies to obtain their perspectives on how COVID-19 affected PCSB's ability to monitor charter schools: Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, the DC State Board of Education, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, DC Public Schools, and the Office of the Chief Financial Officer.

Additionally, we interviewed DC's main charter school advocacy organization to gather its perspectives on PCSB's revisions to its Framework, how PCSB has monitored charter schools during the pandemic, and how community stakeholders engaged in the revised application process and development of the Strategic Roadmap. We also reviewed results from PCSB's 2021 survey to parents, community members, and school leaders, which asked questions about how the Framework is currently used and how it can be improved.

To examine the extent to which PCSB complied with its annual reporting requirements, we compared the information in PCSB's 2021 Annual Report with requirements in section 2211(d) of the School Reform Act.³ We reviewed documents on PCSB's website for information related to the School Reform Act's annual report requirements (e.g., application approval and denial letters) and interviewed PCSB staff about questions arising from our review.

We conducted this performance audit from May 2021 to March 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

DC Charter Schools

In DC, charter schools serve students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12, as well as adult students. Schools offer a range of programs and specialized curricula, such as foreign language immersion. Most charter school students apply through a lottery system called My School DC.

³See D.C. Code § 38-1802.11(d).

DC charter schools receive local and federal funds distributed by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), DC's state educational agency. Each school year, OSSE calculates the amount of local school funding and distributes it to charter schools using a per-student funding formula based, among other things, on student enrollment.⁴ OSSE also annually distributes federal grant funds to charter schools. In 2020 and 2021, these funds included federal emergency relief funds in response to COVID-19.⁵

DC Public Education Governance Structure

In DC, traditional public schools and charter schools operate differently and have different oversight structures. The Chancellor of DC Public Schools oversees the entire traditional public school system, which operates as one local educational agency. In contrast, each charter school or network of charter schools operates as its own local educational agency, and PCSB oversees all of them.⁶

Several DC government entities have direct authority or oversight responsibilities with respect to charter schools. For example, the mayor appoints PCSB's board members with the advice and consent of the DC Council.⁷ OSSE provides general oversight of federal program funding and reporting requirements, administers statewide assessments, and coordinates with PCSB on matters such as developing a uniform method for enrollment projections. Charter schools are generally exempt from some DC policies established for traditional public schools.⁸

DC Public Charter School Board

PCSB was established in 1996 and became DC's sole chartering authority in 2007. The board members serve 4-year terms and must be

⁴The DC Council appropriates the funds to be distributed to schools for each funding cycle, according to OSSE officials.

⁵The grants awarded were from: 1) the CARES Act Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER I), 2) the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER II), and 3) the American Rescue Plan Act Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER).

⁶See D.C. Code § 38-1802.11(a).

⁷D.C. Code § 38-1802.14(a)(2).

⁸See D.C. Code § 38-1802.04(c)(3)(B). However, charter schools are required to ensure that their facilities comply with applicable federal and local health and safety laws and regulations. According to OSSE officials, DC charter schools must also comply with some local reporting requirements (e.g., requirements related to attendance and truancy).

knowledgeable in areas such as DC’s educational, social, and economic development needs.⁹ PCSB’s staff—led by an executive director—implements the board’s policies and oversees charter schools. In school year 2020-21, PCSB oversaw 66 local educational agencies that included 128 charter schools.

Under the School Reform Act, PCSB’s general responsibilities are to:

- monitor the operations of all schools that it has chartered,
- monitor a school’s progress in meeting its stated student academic achievement goals,
- ensure that schools comply with applicable laws and their charter provisions, and
- ensure that schools comply with their annual reporting requirements, including submission of an audited financial statement.¹⁰

The School Reform Act also requires PCSB to submit an annual report to several DC government and federal entities by July 30 each year,¹¹ and authorizes PCSB to annually charge each charter school an administrative fee of up to 1 percent of the school’s annual budget.¹²

PCSB develops policies and guidelines for charter schools, such as annually-updated charter school application guidelines and a COVID-19 Impact Policy. In summer 2021, PCSB finalized and began implementing its 2021-2024 Strategic Roadmap—the organization’s first strategic plan. Among other things, the Strategic Roadmap includes changes to the Framework and the charter school application review process, and integrates PCSB’s work on race, equity, diversity, and inclusion in revised vision and mission statements. (See app. I for PCSB’s 2021-2024 Strategic Roadmap.)

⁹D.C. Code § 38-1802.14(2). Board members may serve one additional 4-year term.

¹⁰D.C. Code § 38-1802.11(a)(1).

¹¹D.C. Code § 38-1802.11(d). These entities are the DC Mayor, DC Council, DC Board of Education, Consensus Commission, Secretary of Education, and appropriate congressional committees.

¹²D.C. Code § 38-1802.11(b)(2).

DC Charter School Requirements

To establish a charter school in DC, an applicant must submit an application to PCSB.¹³ Charters are granted for a period of 15 years and may be renewed an unlimited number of times. After 15 years in operation, a school must submit an application if it wants to renew its charter for another 15-year term.¹⁴

DC charter schools must comply with applicable federal laws governing the education of children, and are accountable for their financial and academic performance. For example, schools must fulfill testing requirements under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended, and submit documents, such as audited financial statements, for PCSB's annual compliance review. The U.S. Department of Education (Education) waived the requirement to administer statewide assessment exams in all states and DC for school year 2019-20. Education also waived this requirement for DC for school year 2020-21.¹⁵

What Were the DC Public Charter School Board's Revenues and Expenditures for Fiscal Years 2016-2020?

Our analysis of PCSB's data for fiscal years 2016-2020 show that its revenue averaged \$9.2 million and its expenditures averaged \$8.4 million.¹⁶ (See table 1.) For these 5 fiscal years, PCSB's largest expenditures were generally for personnel, board operations, and outreach and school support. Personnel expenditures ranged from a low of approximately \$4.3 million in fiscal year 2016 to a high of approximately \$5.9 million in fiscal year 2020. Of the total fiscal year 2020 expenditures, 14 percent were for board operations, which included expenses related to board meetings and providing COVID-19 related emergency funds for health and safety consultants to assist schools; 11 percent were for outreach and school support, which included community events and development and maintenance of PCSB's website.

¹³See generally D.C. Code § 38-1802.01. An applicant may include a person, a private, public, or quasi-public entity, or an institution of higher education. D.C. Code § 38-1800.02(16).

¹⁴D.C. Code § 38-1802.12(a).

¹⁵OSSE officials stated that as of January 2022, they intend to administer the school year 2021-22 statewide assessment exams.

¹⁶PCSB's budget follows the federal fiscal year: October 1 to September 30.

Table 1: PCSB Revenues and Expenditures, Fiscal Years (FY) 2016-2020

	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020
Revenues					
Total	\$8,280,359	\$9,086,308	\$9,594,040	\$9,618,502	\$9,313,010
Administrative fees	\$7,934,351	\$8,267,213	\$8,316,366	\$8,877,679	\$9,124,237
Grants ^a	\$340,000	\$801,588	\$1,252,630	\$691,415	\$167,339
Other ^b	\$6,008	\$17,507	\$25,044	\$49,408	\$21,434
Expenditures					
Total	\$6,732,098	\$7,481,221	\$9,661,721	\$9,330,107	\$8,899,927
Board operations	\$806,102	\$796,075	\$934,425	\$1,109,563	\$1,221,353
Facilities	\$637,899	\$466,697	\$514,872	\$496,919	\$529,035
Personnel	\$4,332,145	\$4,796,641	\$5,327,964	\$5,848,772	\$5,886,031
Outreach and school support	\$478,691	\$1,043,925	\$2,382,297	\$1,462,465	\$975,280
School oversight and closure	\$352,603	\$374,880	\$502,163	\$412,388	\$288,227
Reserves	\$124,659	\$3,004	\$0	\$0	\$0

Source: GAO analysis of DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) data. | GAO-22-105226

Note: All figures are shown in real dollars and not adjusted for inflation.

^aIncludes state, local, and private grants. According to PCSB staff, PCSB did not receive any federal grants for fiscal years 2016-2020.

^bIncludes interest income and sponsorship income.

PCSB is authorized to charge each charter school an administrative fee of up to 1 percent of the school’s annual budget.¹⁷ Staff said PCSB was able to discount the fee due to cost management efforts, such as hiring fewer new personnel and reducing expenditures on legal and consulting services. Since fiscal year 2018, the fee rate of 1 percent has been discounted to 0.9 percent. In November 2021, PCSB notified charter schools that the discounted fee will increase to 0.95 percent in fiscal year 2023. In addition, the board voted to exclude from the administrative fee calculation the emergency relief funds schools received during the pandemic.¹⁸ Staff said that, as a result of the exclusion, PCSB will forgo approximately \$5.8 million in administrative fees it would have collected

¹⁷D.C. Code § 38-1802.11(b)(2).

¹⁸The emergency relief funds will be excluded from administrative fee calculations retroactive to fiscal year 2020. The federal emergency relief funds primarily come from the Paycheck Protection Program and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, both of which were authorized under the 2020 CARES Act.

between fiscal years 2020 and 2024 so that schools can use the funds for the direct benefit of students, such as for COVID-19 testing.

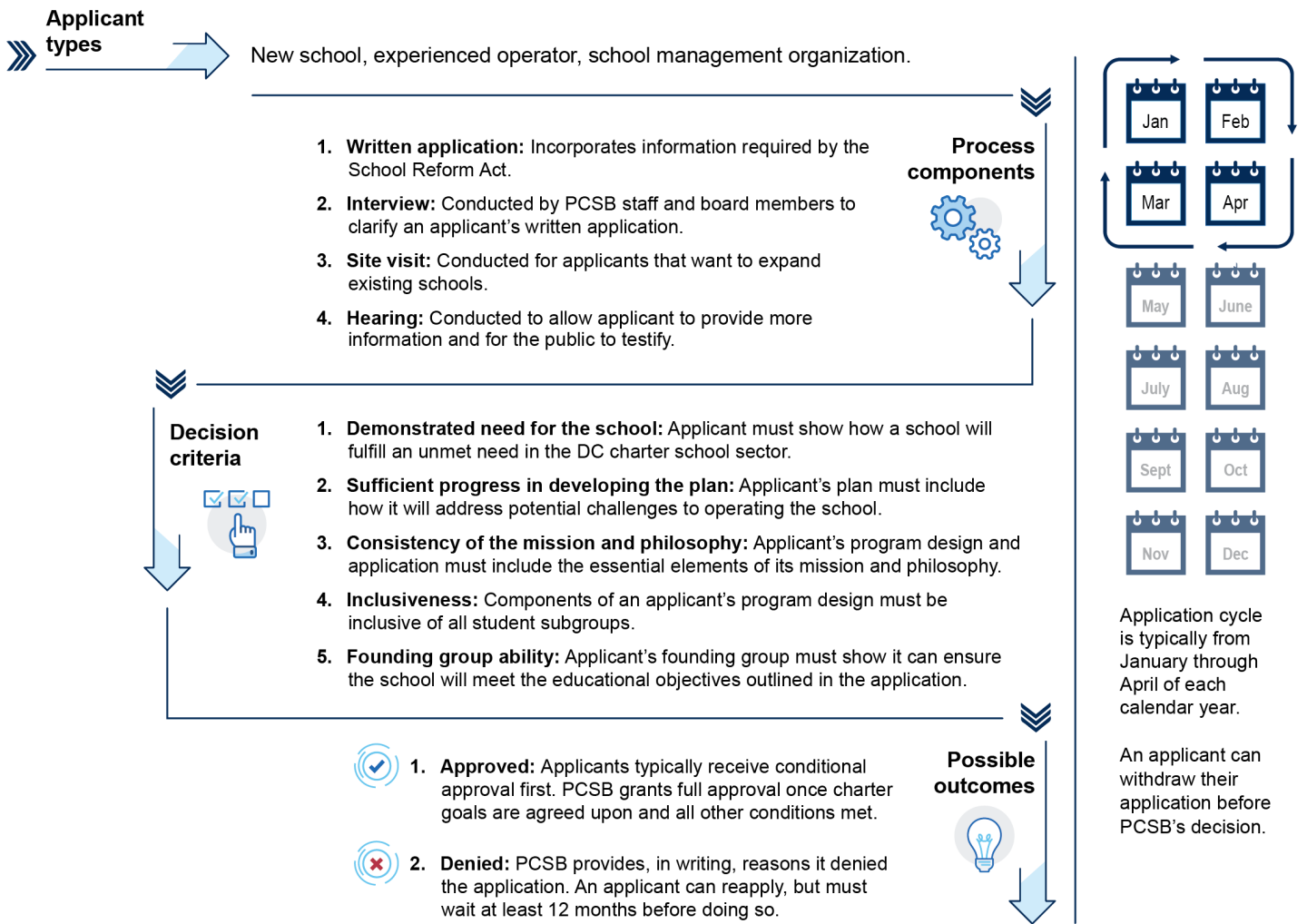
How Does the DC Public Charter School Board Review Charter School Applications?

Staff said a panel of at least seven PCSB staff and board members review charter school applications using a multi-step process, which is outlined in PCSB's annually-updated guidelines (see fig. 1). First, a founding group—the prospective school's leaders—must submit a written application that addresses all elements in the application guidelines, which include 17 requirements detailed in the School Reform Act.¹⁹ Second, PCSB interviews the founding group to clarify information in its application and understand how the group may respond to common challenges in the DC charter school sector. Third, if an applicant is seeking to expand an existing school, PCSB conducts a site visit to observe how the school's current model aligns with application information on the proposed school. Last, PCSB conducts a public hearing at which the public can testify and the founding group can provide additional information and answer questions from the board on its application. Prior to the hearing PCSB opens the application for public comment. The review panel evaluates each application using five criteria, including a demonstrated need for the school (i.e., that the school will fulfill an unmet need in the DC charter school sector). The review panel then makes a recommendation to the board to fully approve, conditionally approve, or deny the application. The board makes its decision at a public meeting.²⁰

¹⁹D.C. Code § 38-1802.02.

²⁰See D.C. Code § 38.1802.03. During the pandemic, PCSB staff said they maintain all application review process components by conducting them virtually.

Figure 1: PCSB Charter School Application Process, as of September 2021



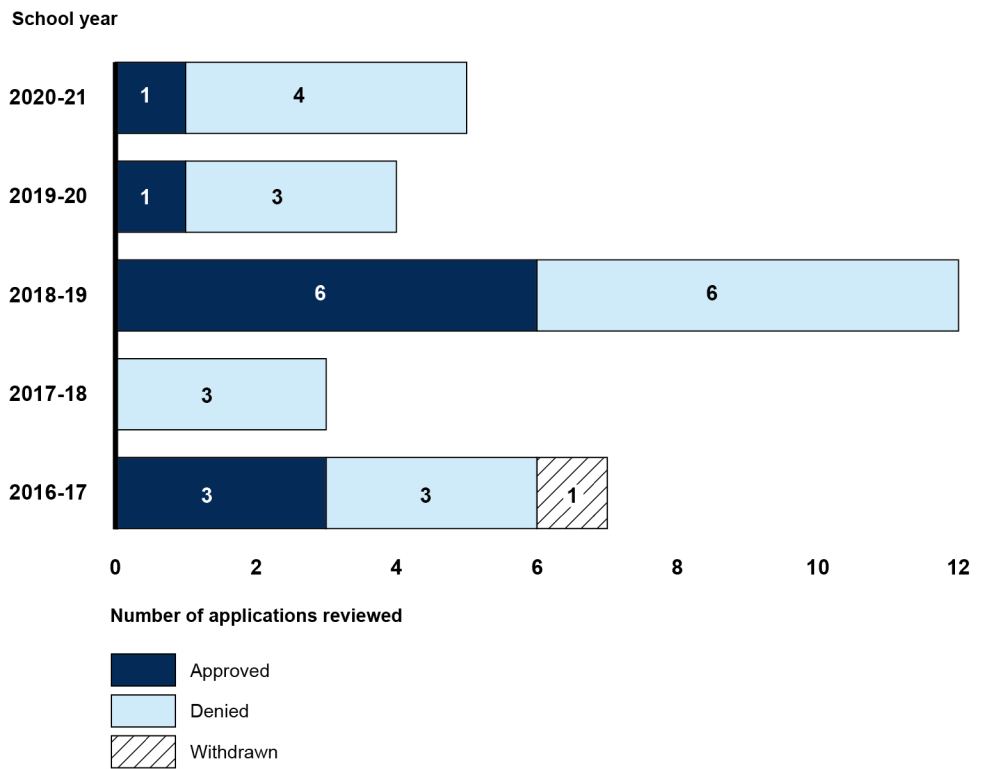
Source: GAO summary of DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) 2021 Charter Application Guidelines, interviews with PCSB staff, and the District of Columbia School Reform Act of 1995, as amended. | GAO-22-105226

Note: PCSB staff said they are revising the application review process and, in September 2021, announced that they will not accept any applications for new charter schools or expanding existing charter schools until the revised process is implemented, which is planned for 2023.

PCSB's application review process is part of its oversight responsibility and helps ensure that strong programs are approved, according to staff. Staff said charter schools receive conditional approval first to allow schools to work with PCSB to develop and finalize the schools' charter goals, such as those related to student subgroup performance, and to meet other conditions prior to opening. PCSB uses these charter goals to

assess a school’s performance during reviews and renewals. Each year from school years 2016-17 through 2020-21, PCSB approved half or fewer of the charter school applications it reviewed (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: Outcomes of PCSB’s Review of Charter School Applications, School Years 2016-17 through 2020-21



Source: GAO summary of DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) information. | GAO-22-105226

Note: All approved applications in this figure received conditional approval. PCSB staff said charter schools receive conditional approval first to allow schools to work with PCSB to develop and finalize the schools’ charter goals and to meet other conditions prior to opening. In addition, in school year 2016-17, one application was reviewed, but withdrawn before PCSB’s decision.

Staff said that since 2016, PCSB has commonly denied applications due to:

- incomplete or inconsistent financial or operational planning that raised concerns about the proposed school’s viability;
- insufficient evidence to demonstrate adequate demand for the program;

-
- limited experience or expertise among the founding group’s members in areas critical to charter school leadership; and
 - confusing or disjointed proposals for academic programs with limited or no research to demonstrate efficacy, particularly with respect to historically marginalized student groups.

According to PCSB’s 2021 Charter Application Guidelines, an applicant must meet PCSB’s standards of approval for several areas. For example, under the current process, applicants need to demonstrate that they can successfully recruit and retain students to show demand for the program in the applicants’ proposed location, according to staff. Furthermore, applicants need to show an understanding of the communities they are likely to serve. However, representatives from a DC charter school advocacy organization said the current application process does not consider community needs and they want to see the process continually reviewed to keep up with changes in the community. They said that the COVID-19 pandemic and the national discussion of race have brought to the forefront the issue of what ‘community need’ means.

As part of its new strategic plan, PCSB is revising its application process, including its application guidelines and criteria, to ensure overall community needs are met, according to staff. Under the revised process, PCSB plans to approve or deny new charter school applications based on criteria that, among other things, reflect the school’s ability to fill a need in the DC public school system overall—taking into consideration whether those needs are already being addressed by a traditional public school or charter school anywhere in the district. Staff also said PCSB plans to conduct a needs assessment by spring 2022 and annually thereafter and collaborate more closely with DC government to understand the district’s needs. They plan to obtain community input on the revised process before releasing the new guidelines in summer 2022. PCSB has stopped accepting applications to start new schools or expand existing schools until 2023, at which time it will begin reviewing new applications using the revised process, according to staff.

How Does the DC Public Charter School Board Monitor Charter Schools And Take Corrective Actions?

PCSB monitors charter schools' academic performance and compliance with applicable laws and takes corrective actions if schools do not address identified issues. PCSB monitors charter schools using several mechanisms: (1) the Performance Management Framework to annually assess and rate schools based on academic performance; (2) annual compliance reviews, which determine a school's compliance with applicable laws and requirements; and (3) charter reviews every 5 years to determine if a school is meeting its charter goals and complying with legal requirements and charter renewals every 15 years for schools that wish to renew their charters.

Monitoring

Performance Management Framework

Staff said PCSB originally created the Framework to oversee schools and help families and other stakeholders understand a charter school's academic performance. The current Framework annually assesses academic performance using indicators such as attendance, statewide assessment exam results, graduation rates, and college acceptance rates. Schools are then rated based on their performance.²¹ However, the PCSB board chair said there have been ongoing concerns that, under the current Framework, high-performing schools were not meeting the needs of all students at their schools.²² In addition, representatives of a DC charter school advocacy organization said they had concerns that the current Framework rewards schools that maintain students' high performance rather than schools that improve students' performance.

PCSB is revising the Framework as part of its 2021-2024 Strategic Roadmap and staff said they plan to fully implement the new Framework in school year 2023-24. PCSB staff said they consulted with researchers and stakeholder groups to inform revisions to the Framework. For example, staff worked with researchers to identify equity measures and learn about performance assessment models used by other districts that might be modified to fit PCSB's needs.

²¹In response to the pandemic, Education waived the requirement for all states and DC to administer statewide assessments for school year 2019-20. Education also waived this requirement for DC for school year 2020-21. Therefore, PCSB did not have statewide assessment exam data for those 2 years nor did it rate schools for those years.

²²PCSB's Framework rates schools as either high-performing, mid-performing, or low-performing based on the number of points the schools earn in multiple categories, such as performance on statewide assessments. See app. II for more information on the Framework.

Staff also engaged with school leaders and community members. Staff said that in spring 2021 they held 26 small group meetings with school leaders to obtain feedback on potential new measures. PCSB also created grade-based advisory groups, comprised of school staff and school support organizations, which began meeting in October 2021. Staff said the groups have discussed the advantages and disadvantages of potential new performance metrics and data reporting timelines, among other things.

In 2021, PCSB also surveyed community members and school leaders to gather stakeholder perspectives on how the Framework is currently used and which new measures they would like to see added.²³ For example, some parents, guardians, and community members who completed the survey commented that the revised Framework should track equity measures, such as support and services for English learners and students with disabilities and the diversity of school teaching staff. Some school leaders who completed the survey commented that the revised Framework should track academic growth by different student subgroups to more accurately reflect student performance.

As a result of the information they gathered and the feedback they received, PCSB staff said they proposed several changes to the Framework. For example, rather than calculating measures (e.g., statewide assessment exam performance) for all students at a school as a single group, the revised Framework is expected to calculate measures for student subgroups: race/ethnicity, gender, disability status, English learner status, and at-risk status.²⁴ (See app. II for a comparison of PCSB's current Framework and proposed revisions, as of September 2021.)

Annual Compliance Reviews

As part of its responsibilities, PCSB conducts annual compliance reviews by collecting data and documents from schools to assess their compliance with applicable laws and requirements.²⁵ For example, each charter school must annually submit an audited financial statement and

²³According to PCSB staff, they used one survey instrument for charter school leaders and another instrument for parents, guardians, and community members and the surveys were conducted online from April 2021 through May 2021. PCSB received 28 responses to the school leader survey and 90 responses to the community survey.

²⁴"At-risk" includes students that are homeless or in the district's foster care system, among other factors. D.C. Code § 38-2901(2)(a).

²⁵PCSB uses the term annual compliance review to describe its process of ensuring that charter schools comply with applicable laws and reporting requirements each year.

Charter Reviews and
Renewals

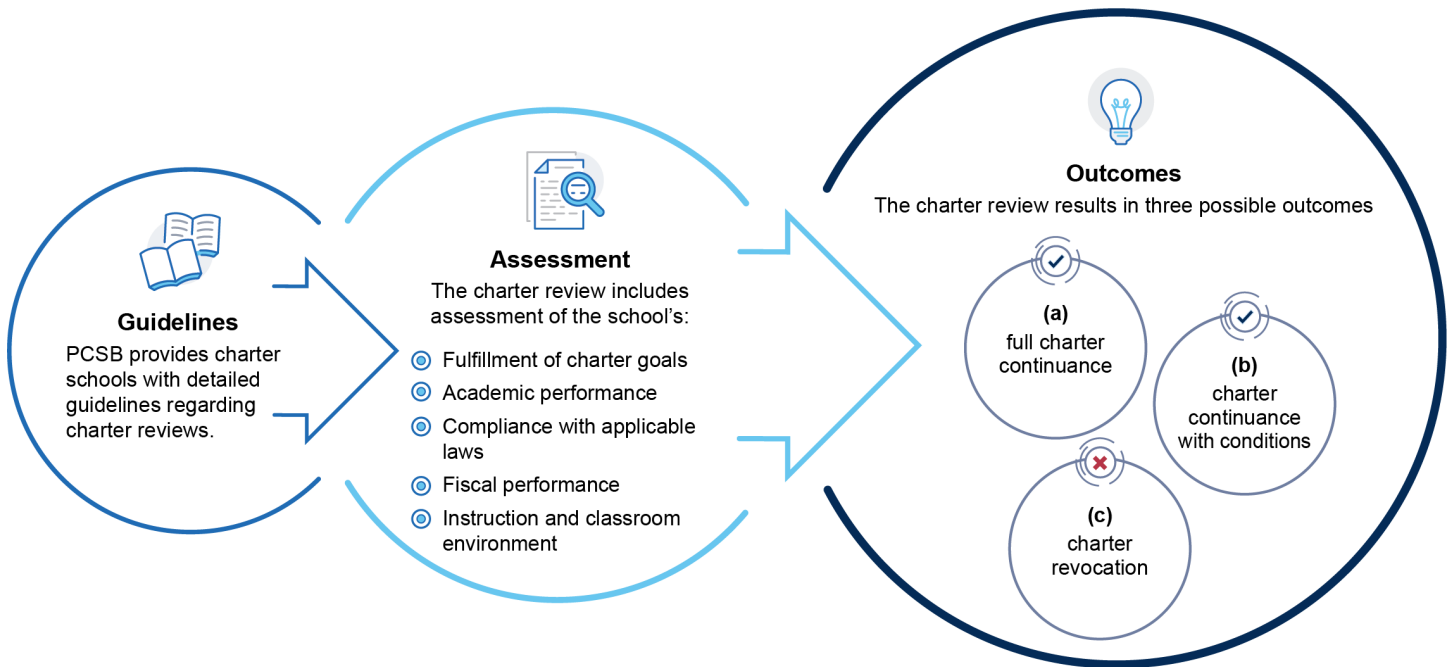
health and safety documents. If a school is not in compliance with any of the applicable laws and requirements, the school may be subject to a board action, such as a Notice of Concern, and may have to provide a specific plan to PCSB detailing how the school will correct any identified deficiencies, according to staff.

The School Reform Act also requires PCSB to determine at least every 5 years whether a school is meeting the terms of its charter through a charter review.²⁶ These reviews include an assessment of each school's legal compliance and academic and fiscal performance. For example, PCSB reviews a school's annual compliance review results and its progress in attaining its charter goals over the 5-year review period.²⁷ For each school, PCSB staff also conduct site reviews, which include meetings with school leadership, unannounced school visits, and observations of classroom instruction. (See fig. 3 for a summary of PCSB's charter review process and outcomes.)

²⁶D.C. Code § 38-1802.12.

²⁷PCSB staff said that during the initial charter review, PCSB reviews 4 years of fiscal, academic performance, and compliance data, as available. At subsequent reviews, PCSB reviews 5 years of fiscal, academic performance, and compliance data, as available.

Figure 3: PCSB Charter Review Process and Outcomes



Source: GAO summary of DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) 2020-21 Charter Review Guidelines and Qualitative Site Review Protocol for DC Public Charter Schools. | GAO-22-105226

Note: According to PCSB's 2020-21 Charter Review Guidelines, the board has discretion over the actions it takes in response to the findings of the review (except in cases specified by the School Reform Act). The board may, but is not required to, revoke a charter if the school has not met its goals, not met its academic performance expectations, materially not complied with its charter, and/or materially violated applicable law. PCSB staff said that during the initial charter review, PCSB reviews 4 years of fiscal, academic performance, and compliance data, as available. At subsequent reviews, PCSB reviews 5 years of fiscal, academic performance, and compliance data, as available.

According to PCSB's 2020-21 Charter Review Guidelines, the board has discretion over the actions it takes in response to the findings of a charter review, except in cases specified by the School Reform Act. For example, PCSB may impose certain conditions that a school must meet to continue operating or risk having its charter revoked if PCSB determines that a school has not met its charter goals or academic performance expectations, not complied with its charter, and/or has violated applicable law. PCSB may also conduct more frequent site reviews and charter reviews. PCSB uses the additional site reviews to gather more information about school performance and to identify areas for improvement. PCSB may conduct additional charter reviews for the

lowest-performing schools or for schools not meeting conditions of previous charter reviews.²⁸

The School Reform Act allows a school to apply to renew its charter every 15 years. Unlike the 5-year reviews, which are automatic, the charter school's board must submit a request for charter renewal.²⁹ Like charter reviews, the renewal process has several components, including a site review and an assessment of the school's legal compliance and academic and fiscal performance.³⁰ PCSB board members then vote whether to approve the school's updated charter. If a school is determined to have materially violated any laws or any of its charter procedures, or failed to meet its charter goals, PCSB must deny the school's request to renew its charter.³¹

Corrective Actions

PCSB uses an escalating system of actions to encourage schools to correct the issues PCSB has identified through its annual monitoring, charter reviews, and charter renewals (see fig. 4).

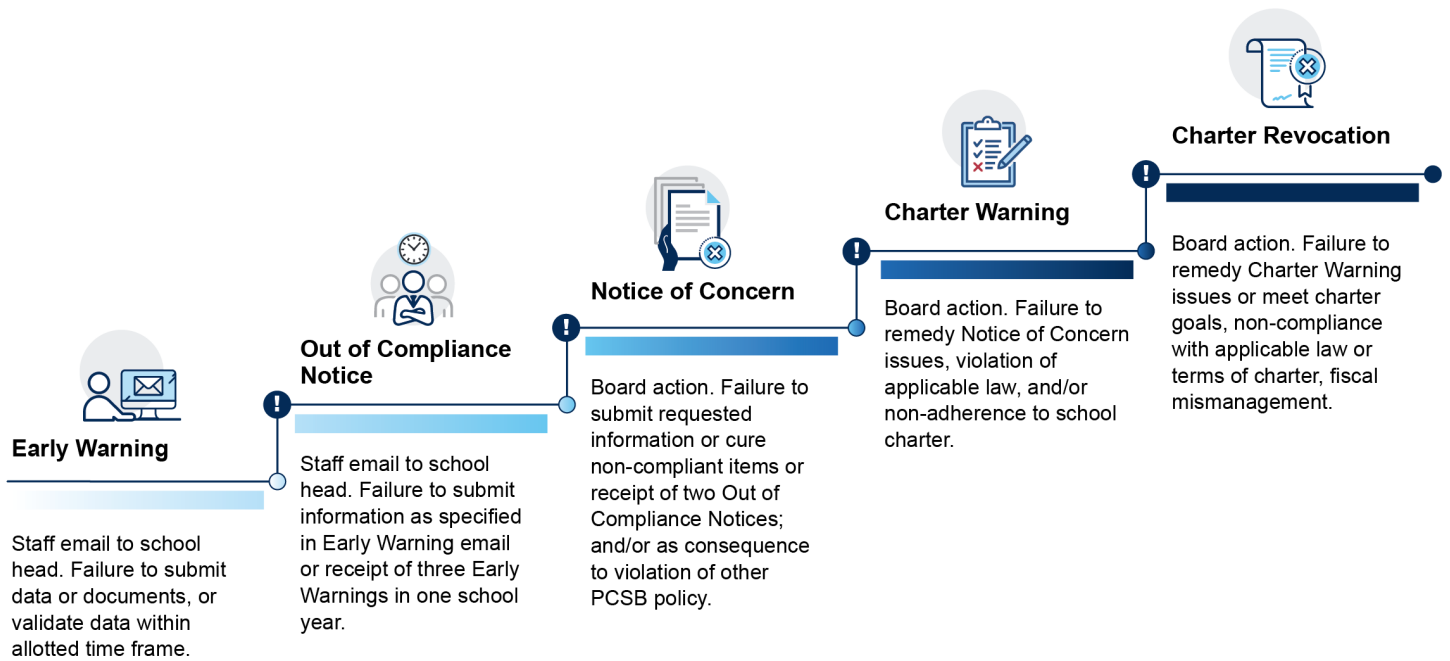
²⁸Staff said for school years 2016-17 through 2020-21, they conducted two additional reviews as a condition to retain a charter.

²⁹See D.C. Code § 38-1802.12 for charter renewal requirements.

³⁰A school can also request a hearing to update its charter goals and academic performance expectations.

³¹D.C. Code § 38-1802.12(c).

Figure 4: PCSB’s Possible Actions in Response to Issues Identified through Monitoring



Source: GAO summary of DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) policies and interviews with PCSB staff. | GAO-22-105226

Note: At charter renewal, the charter is non-renewed rather than revoked.

For example, staff said PCSB cited one school for violating its Open Enrollment Policy, and issued a Notice of Concern in response. This same school was also placed under a Financial Corrective Action Plan to correct a fiscal mismanagement issue and received a second citation for failing to meet the goals of that plan. Ultimately, the school voluntarily relinquished its charter and closed. PCSB staff said that from school years 2016-17 through 2020-21, they issued five citations for fiscal mismanagement to three separate schools. Also, during this time frame, PCSB issued 13 Notices of Concern to 12 separate schools. If actions such as these fail to remediate an issue, PCSB may deny a school’s renewal request or revoke its charter. Staff said from school years 2016-17 through 2020-21, PCSB revoked or did not renew five charters.

If PCSB identifies deficiencies, staff said they can provide administrative support to schools. For example, in the case of the charter school that received a Notice of Concern for violating PCSB’s Open Enrollment Policy, PCSB directed the school to provide staff training on its policy. Given PCSB’s oversight role, staff said they do not directly provide technical assistance to schools to address academic performance issues,

but do provide opportunities for schools to share resources and best practices. For example, PCSB established two Professional Learning Communities for local educational agencies to share best practices on topics such as serving English learners and students with disabilities.

Monitoring Changes Due to COVID-19

In response to the pandemic, PCSB created a COVID-19 Impact Policy to outline how the Framework, charter reviews, and charter renewals would be applied in the absence of statewide assessment data. The policy, which was adopted in May 2020 and most recently updated in July 2021, remains in effect until the end of school year 2022-23, unless the board approves an extension. Elements of the COVID-19 Impact Policy include:

No Framework score. PCSB did not produce a Framework score or rate schools in school years 2019-20 and 2020-21 because it did not have statewide assessment data, which comprise a significant part of the Framework score.

Limited data for charter reviews and renewals. PCSB continued to conduct charter reviews and charter renewals, which are required by the School Reform Act. However, absent statewide assessment data for school years 2019-20 and 2020-21, PCSB decided not to consider these data in schools' charter reviews or charter renewals when evaluating charter goals and academic outcomes.

Virtual site reviews. PCSB said they postponed five in-person site reviews scheduled for school year 2019-20, after schools were closed due to the pandemic. According to staff, PCSB instead conducted 13 virtual site reviews in school year 2020-21 (including the five that were postponed). Virtual site visits included unannounced observations of remote instruction and reviews of student work samples. PCSB returned to in-person site reviews in school year 2021-22.

To What Extent Has the DC Public Charter School Board Complied with Its Annual Reporting Requirements?

PCSB submitted its 2021 Annual Report as required by the School Reform Act, but the report lacked full information on three of the 15

required elements (see app. III for the complete list of required annual report elements):³²

- Summary of reasons for denying applications PCSB received in the year covered by the report (part of requirement 4)
- Description of charters issued in the year covered by the report (requirement 5)
- The number of schools that did not submit their required annual audited financial statements in a timely manner (part of requirement 13)

Summary of application denials. Staff said they excluded the required summary of reasons for denying the four applications listed in the 2021 Annual Report because every formal application denial letter since 2011 is available on PCSB's website. Staff also said each letter provides a detailed explanation of PCSB's reasons for denying an application. We reviewed the denial letters on the website. While the letters included the reasons for denial, the annual report does not indicate where these letters are available, such as by including a web address that links to the location of the denial letters. As a result, parents and local, federal, and congressional stakeholders may not know about, nor know how to locate, those denial letters without a web address.

Description of charters issued. The 2021 Annual Report included the name of one approved charter school, but it did not include a school description, such as the program type or the grades served, as required. Staff said that descriptions of approved charter schools are available in three sections of PCSB's website: Charter Applications, School Planning, and School Profiles. When we reviewed the website in December 2021, however, we found it time consuming to find the description of the approved school because we had to navigate through three sections of the website and review lengthy documents. In addition, we found that PCSB's 2021 Annual Report lacked web addresses for all of these sections of the website. Consequently, parents or other stakeholders who want more information on the descriptions of approved charter schools than is provided in the annual report might not know that additional information is available on the website or where to find it.

Late financial statements. PCSB staff said the 2021 Annual Report did not include required information on the number of schools that submitted

³²See D.C. Code § 38-1802.11(d).

their annual audited financial statements late because the report focuses on the board's actions taken in response to late submissions, not on tracking late submissions themselves. Staff said they internally track the timely submission of required documents by schools and take several steps in response to the late submission of documents (e.g., Early Warning emails and Out of Compliance Notices) before board action is required. If the board takes action, it will be reported on the Summary of Board Actions page of the annual report. However, not reporting the number of schools that submit their financial statements late can decrease transparency regarding school compliance with policy requirements.

PCSB staff said they try to meet the spirit of the School Reform Act's annual report requirements, but that the 25-year-old requirements may be outdated given the growth in the number of charter schools, changes in PCSB's work and DC's education environment, and how parents—PCSB's primary audience—consume information today. DC's charter sector has grown to over 120 charter schools since the School Reform Act was passed, and as a result so have PCSB's oversight activities. Staff said it is not feasible to detail PCSB's oversight activities for all charter schools in what is meant to be a summary report. However, PCSB is required to report on the elements specified in the School Reform Act.

Staff also said that PCSB's activities go beyond the elements required in the School Reform Act, and that they typically highlight important aspects of their work in the annual report. For example, for the last 2 years PCSB used the annual report to communicate their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, staff said that PCSB's website can provide more comprehensive information than the annual report and parents are more likely to visit the website for information. PCSB could continue to include broader information in its annual report because the School Reform Act does not limit PCSB to reporting on only the 15 required elements.

Conclusions

In 2021, PCSB's annual report included most, but not all, of the 15 elements explicitly required in the School Reform Act. Due to an increasing number of charter schools, the level of detail PCSB can provide in the report is understandably limited. To its credit, PCSB has taken the initiative to provide considerable detail about charter schools on its website. While this is helpful for those who know how and where to find the information on the website, others may reasonably expect required information, such as descriptions of new schools and reasons applications for schools were denied, to be in the annual report. By using the report to address all of the requirements, and clearly indicating where

on its website supplemental information is provided, PCSB will be both complying with the School Reform Act and responsive to parents and stakeholders looking for comprehensive information.

Recommendation for Executive Action

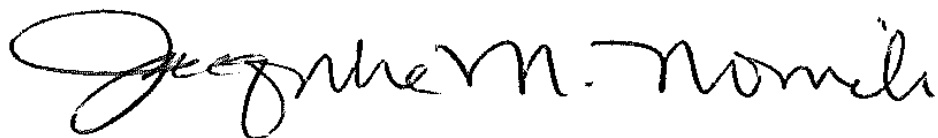
PCSB should provide information in its annual report on all elements required in the School Reform Act and, as appropriate, provide links to where additional information can be found on its website. (Recommendation 1)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Chair and Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board and the Executive Office of the Mayor of the District of Columbia for review and comment. In its comments, reproduced in appendix IV, PCSB concurred with our recommendation. The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education provided comments, which are reproduced in appendix V, on behalf of the Executive Office of the Mayor of the District of Columbia. In addition, PCSB and OSSE provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Chair and Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board, the Executive Office of the Mayor of the District of Columbia, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix VI.

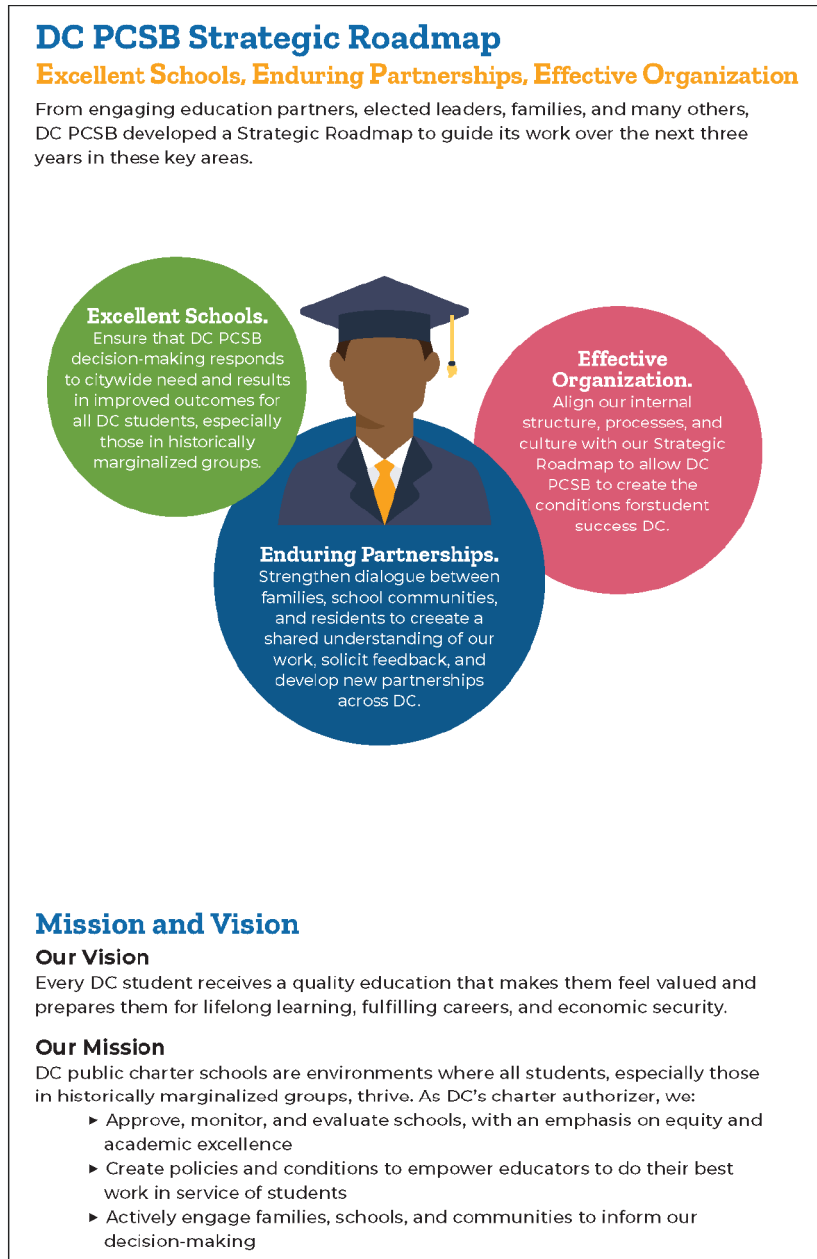


Jacqueline M. Nowicki, Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

Appendix I: PCSB'S 2021-2024 Strategic Roadmap

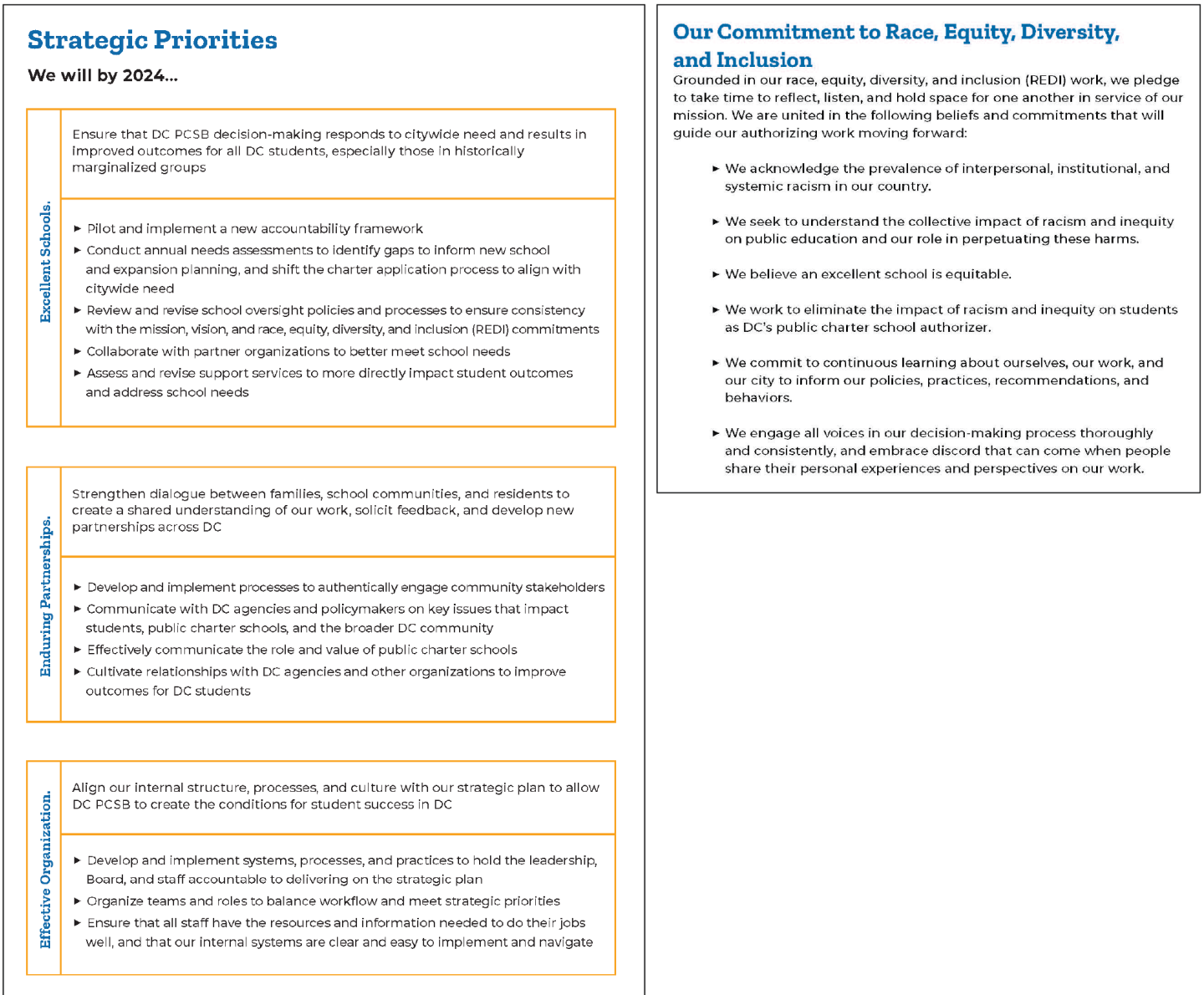
Published in June 2021, the DC Public Charter School Board's (PCSB) 2021-2024 Strategic Roadmap is the organization's first strategic plan (see figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5: PCSB's 2021-2024 Strategic Roadmap



Source: DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) document. | GAO-22-105226

Figure 6: PCSB's Strategic Priorities



Source: DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) document. | GAO-22-105226

Appendix II: Revisions to the DC Public Charter School Board's (PCSB) Performance Management Framework

Table 2: Comparison of PCSB's Current and Proposed Accountability Frameworks, as of September 2021

	Performance Management Framework (Current)	Performance Management Framework (Proposed)
Stated purpose/principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use as part of board decisions regarding school expansion and charter review or renewal decisions Inform school choice decision-making for families Hold schools serving similar grades to the same set of standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use to help make school oversight decisions and communicate school performance with communities Inform school choice decision-making for families Emphasize high performance and high levels of growth for all students Provide benchmarks to measure school performance Focus on performance and school climate outcomes
Scores	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100 point scale 3 tier system: Tier 1 (high performance), Tier 2 (mid performance), Tier 3 (low performance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To be determined
Format ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 frameworks: Early Childhood, Elementary School, and Middle School; High School; Adult Education; Alternative Accountability One summative score by school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 frameworks: Pre-Kindergarten-8; High School; Adult Education; Alternative Accountability Summative score by school and disaggregated scores by student group
Examples of measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statewide assessment performance In-seat attendance Re-enrollment Graduation rate SAT/ACT performance College acceptance rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statewide assessment performance Nationally normed assessments Mission specific goals Site reviews Teacher tenure Equity research based measures
Categories/Student groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Categories of measures vary by framework Measures calculated by a single "all" student group by school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same categories of measures across all frameworks: School Performance, School Environment, School Progress Measures calculated by student groups including: race/ethnicity, gender, disability status, English learner status, at-risk status

Source: DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) 2019-20 Performance Management Framework Policy & Technical Guide and PCSB documents. | GAO-22-105226

^aCharter schools that are approved for the Alternative Accountability Framework are neither scored nor tiered. In November 2021, PCSB staff said that they do not have plans to revise the Alternative Accountability Framework because they did so in 2020.

Appendix III: PCSB'S 2021 Annual Report Requirements

Each year the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) is required to submit a report by July 30 to several DC government and federal entities, including the DC Mayor, DC Council, DC Board of Education, Secretary of Education, and appropriate congressional committees, that addresses 15 items outlined in the School Reform Act.¹

Table 3: PCSB Annual Report Requirements from the School Reform Act of 1995, as Amended

(1) A list of the members of PCSB and the addresses of such members
(2) A list of the dates and places of each meeting of PCSB during the year preceding the report
(3) The number of petitions received by PCSB for the conversion of a DC public school or a private or independent school to a public charter school, and for the creation of a new school as a public charter school
(4) The number of petitions described in (3) that were approved and the number that were denied, as well as a summary of the reasons for which such petitions were denied
(5) A description of any new charters issued by PCSB during the year preceding the report
(6) A description of any charters renewed by PCSB during the year preceding the report
(7) A description of any charters revoked by PCSB during the year preceding the report
(8) A description of any charters refused renewal by PCSB during the year preceding the report
(9) Any recommendations PCSB has concerning ways to improve the administration of public charter schools
(10) Details of major Board actions
(11) Major findings from school reviews of academic, financial, and compliance with health and safety standards and the resulting Board action or recommendations
(12) Details of the fifth year review process and outcomes
(13) Summary of annual financial audits of all charter schools, including <ol style="list-style-type: none">the number of schools that failed to timely submit the audited financial statement required by that sectionthe number of schools whose audits revealed a failure to follow required accounting practices or other material deficiencies, andthe steps taken by PCSB to ensure that deficiencies found by the audits are rectified
(14) Number of schools which have required intervention by PCSB to address any academic or operational issue
(15) What recommendations PCSB has made to correct identified deficiencies

Source: GAO summary of D.C. Code § 38-1802.11(d). | GAO-22-105226

¹D.C. Code § 38-1802.11(d). D.C. Code stipulates that the annual report must also be submitted to the Consensus Commission.

Appendix IV: Comments from the DC Public Charter School Board



February 25, 2022

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Jacqueline M. Nowicki
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

RE: DC Public Charter School Board Comments on Draft Report GAO-22-105226

Dear Director Nowicki,

On behalf of the DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB), thank you for the opportunity to comment on draft report 22-105226 (the draft report) from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). We appreciate the GAO's thorough review of our authorizing work and the opportunity this draft report provides for continued improvement. We are pleased the GAO's review did not identify any recommendations for our work beyond adjusting the items included in our annual report, and we will implement this recommendation immediately.

As the draft report notes, DC PCSB generally uses our annual report to highlight important aspects of our work in a given year, such as the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the level of detail we can provide in the annual report is limited due to the number of public charter schools in operation. Accordingly, we share extensive information on our website, www.dcpsb.org. We appreciate that the draft report acknowledges DC PCSB "has taken the initiative to provide considerable detail about [public] charter schools on its website" (p. 21). Indeed, DC PCSB's website includes a profile page for each public charter school that contains information on school contacts, academic performance, student makeup, finances, administration and operation, and charter agreements and charter reviews. The website also includes a prominent Transparency Hub, <https://dcpsb.org/transparency-hub>, designed to make it easy for families, community members, and other stakeholders to find frequently requested information.

The draft report identifies three specific items not included in DC PCSB's 2020-21 annual report: 1) summary of reasons for denying charter applications received that year, 2) description of charters issued that year, and 3) number of schools that did not timely submit audited financial statements. For the

3333 14th Street, NW, Suite 210, Washington, DC 20010 • (202) 921-4644 • mwalkerdavis@dcpsb.org

**Appendix IV: Comments from the DC Public
Charter School Board**

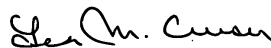
Page 2

first two items, all charter applications and DC PCSB's approval or denial letters may be found on our website at the following link: <https://dcpcsb.org/charter-applications-archive>. The approval or denial letters contain detailed information on each application's proposed school program and DC PCSB's specific reasons for approving or denying the application. For the third item, DC PCSB publishes each school's audited financial statements and other financial information every year on our website at the following link: <https://dcpcsb.org/school-finances>. This information is also available in the Transparency Hub. DC PCSB does not currently publish a separate list of untimely financial submissions.

After reviewing the draft report, we agree to include additional information in our annual report, supplemented with links to more comprehensive information on our website as appropriate. We will work to implement this recommendation in the next annual report due to release in July 2022 and ensure this information is as readily accessible for as many stakeholders as possible.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. We have also included as a separate document with this response a chart of technical comments and corrections on the draft report. If you have any questions regarding our response, we would be happy to answer them.

Sincerely,



Lea Crusey
Board Chair



Michelle J. Walker-Davis, Ed.D.
Executive Director

Appendix V: Comments from the District of Columbia Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education



Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education
John A. Wilson Building | 1350 Pennsylvania Ave, NW, Suite 307 | Washington, DC 20004

February 28, 2022

Jacqueline M. Nowicki
Director: Education, Workforce and Income Security Issues
Government Accountability Office
441 G St. NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Jacqueline,

Thank you for your work and partnership on the GAO Report: [DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CHARTER SCHOOLS: DC Public Charter School Board Should Include All Required Elements in Its Annual Report](#), which includes a review of the Public Charter School Board's (PCSB) revenues and expenditures, school application process, approach to accountability and oversight and compliance with its annual reporting requirements.

We appreciate the opportunity to engage with members of your team on key questions related to the role of government agencies who support our public school students, families and community members.

The District is committed to supporting a strong, robust public education system that ensures every student attends a high-quality school. The public charter sector has been a critical partner in achieving this mission. We work closely with DC Public Schools and PCSB to ensure we have clear processes and protocols to support school openings and that future decisions about new school campuses are driven by a comprehensive look at data. The DME and the Bowser Administration believe that decisions about future school openings must be guided by a detailed city-wide analysis that helps us identify and address the distinct, unmet needs for students and families within our city. We are supportive of the PCSB's new strategic plan and revised school application review process, which puts emphasis on this type of data driven decision making.

Please reach out to my Chief of Staff, Carlie Fisherow carlie.fisherow@dc.gov if you need anything else.

Sincerely,

Paul Kihn
Deputy Mayor for Education

Appendix VI: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Jacqueline M. Nowicki, (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Amy Anderson (Assistant Director), Swati Deo (Analyst-in-Charge), Jeanine Navarrete, Jean McSween, James Rebbe, Curtia Taylor, and Kathleen van Gelder made key contributions to this report. Lauren Gilbertson, Amber Gray, Kim McGatlin, and Barbara Steel also contributed to this report.

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