

DC charters offer innovations in pandemic-era education

October 12 2020, by Ashraf Khalil



In this Friday, Sept. 18, 2020, photo students work in class at Meridien Public Charter School, in Washington. Several DC charter schools have been doing in-person teaching for small groups of students. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Returning to school in the nation's capital during the pandemic has

proven to be an ongoing experiment in learning—and not just for students.

Tall, three-sided partitions were set up at Meridian Charter School to protect students against COVID-19—until administrators learned that the enclosures wouldn't do much to prevent spread of the virus. Now the cardboard is optional, but more than half of the students still use them as personalized organizers—taping up calendars, decorations and schedules.

"It's all a [learning experience](#), and it's all playing out in real time," said Matt McCrea, Meridian's head of school.

While most of Washington's 52,000 public school kids are dealing with computer screens and Zoom rooms in a remote learning environment, about a dozen charter schools have essentially chosen to become medical-educational experiments, offering in-person instruction for select groups of students.

Smaller and more nimble than the D.C. Public Schools system, the charters have been able to adapt and modify practices on the fly, trading information and pushing the limits of pandemic-era education.

"This is our attempt to redesign school," said Myron Long, executive director of the Social Justice School, which is offering in-person instruction to about 15 of its 50 total students. "Our size is our best asset."



In this Friday, Sept. 18, 2020, photo fifth grade teacher Lauren Furst leads an online class at Meridien Public Charter School, in Washington. Several DC charter schools have been doing in-person teaching for small groups of students. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

It's a process that the D.C. Public Schools system has watched closely as it plans its own return to the classroom.

Mayor Muriel Bowser had planned to start the 2020 school year with a hybrid model combining distance learning with two days a week of in-school instruction. But the city was forced to abandon that plan at the last minute amid safety objections from the teachers union.

The city surveyed the charter experiments "to see what's working, what

are best practices, what we can learn from and what they can share with us," Bowser said. "We think we can learn from some of their experiences, but DCPS will have to make decisions that affect ... 60 buildings, 50,000 kids and over 4,000 employees."

The new DCPS reopening plan, announced Monday, seems to draw heavily from the charter schools' experiences. One option would offer direct in-class instruction to a select group of students with special-education needs, those learning English and students experiencing homelessness or otherwise deemed to be at-risk.



In this Friday, Sept. 18, 2020, photo students work in class at Meridien Public Charter School, in Washington. Several DC charter schools have been doing in-person teaching for small groups of students. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

That's essentially the same criteria that most D.C. charters used in selecting their own student groups for in-building instruction.

"We wanted (the spots) to go to students and families that had the greatest need," said Justin Lessek, executive director of the Sojourner Truth charter school, which is providing in-person instruction for 20 of its 93 students. "We knew we had families that wanted it and we wanted to be able to provide it as long as it could be done safely."

In some cases, spots were made available to the children of essential workers. Meridian was forced to turn away some parents, but Social Justice was able to accommodate every student whose parent expressed an interest.

"Some parents contacted us and just said, 'We have nowhere for them to go during the day,'" Long said.

Charter schools educate about 46% of Washington's public school students. Each charter is classified as an independent "local education agency," or LEA. Some larger LEAs run multiple schools in multiple buildings, but most are self-contained solo entities. DCPS is technically classified as its own massive LEA.



In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020, photo English Language Arts teacher Rebecca Ain, right, helps a student in her class at The Social Justice Public Charter School, in Washington. Although some students are attending class in-person, classes are still being conducted virtually. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

Each charter has been free to devise its own safety protocols, resulting in some distinct variations. At Meridian, every student and visitor receives a temperature check upon arrival. But at Social Justice School, in addition to the temperature check, visiting journalists were required to don full medical gowns, surgical gloves and face shields just to enter the building.

The process has been marked by ongoing experimentation, fueled by a slowly developing understanding of how the virus works.

"There's a tremendous amount of trial and error," said Shannon Hodge of the D.C. Charter School Alliance, a nonprofit that advocates for the charter system. "There are real innovations coming out of it."

Each of the three student "cohorts" at the Social Justice School are assigned a specific bathroom to use.



In this Friday, Sept. 18, 2020, photo a student works in class at Meridien Public Charter School, in Washington. Several DC charter schools have been doing in-person teaching for small groups of students. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

At both Meridian and Social Justice, hallway water fountains have been shut down. At Meridian, students have their own water bottles and can

fill them at specialized water dispensers.

The Social Justice School has never actually functioned under non-pandemic conditions. The school received its approval from the D.C. Public Charter School Board over the summer and opened its doors for the first time this fall.

Built around a specific ethos that emphasizes social and racial awareness—staff refer to the students as "scholar-activists"—the school seeks to build a tight-knit community around its 50 students and families. But it was nearly impossible for this new community to meet over the summer. Now administrators have started holding regular outdoor gatherings around the city on Wednesdays, when there are no classes, just so students, parents and staff can safely meet each other.



In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020, photo a tech problem is solved by a teacher as a student attends her English Language Arts class at The Social Justice Public Charter School, in Washington. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

The school has also introduced a novel spin on its in-person teaching model: The students who are attending in-person training are also on Zoom in the same virtual learning environment as those at home. Everyone in the classroom is on a laptop wearing headphones, and the teachers in the room are instructing all students together.

Long said the idea was partially born out of staffing issues. There weren't enough teachers at the small school to separately handle the in-person and distance students. But the communal arrangement also fits into the school's ethos of equality, he said.

"We wanted our students to have the same learning experience—both in school and at home," Long said.

Bowser's education administrators have been in regular contact to pick up tips on how the whole experiment is going.



In this Friday, Sept. 18, 2020, photo social distancing information and health warnings are posted on the window of the main door as a student arrives at Meridien Public Charter School, in Washington. Several DC charter schools have been doing in-person teaching for small groups of students. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)



In this Friday, Sept. 18, 2020, photo a father puts a mask on his son before school at Meridien Public Charter School, in Washington. Several DC charter schools have been doing in-person teaching for small groups of students. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)



In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020, photo Reginald Galloway, director of operations at The Social Justice Public Charter School, waves goodbye to fifth and sixth grade students after class, in Washington. Galloway dons full PPE in order to pass out lunches to take home to students who would like one. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)



In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2020, photo a student at The Social Justice Public Charter School raises two fingers in answer to a question as she attends her English Language Arts class at the school in Washington. Although some students are attending class in-person, classes are still being conducted virtually. At right is teacher Rebecca Ain. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

"We're talking to every single charter" that is conducting in-person instruction, Deputy Mayor for Education Paul Kihn told The Associated Press. "It's really crucial that we learn from all of these activities."

McCrea, the Meridian head of school, said he had personally reached out to Kihn's office with his own experiences and recommendations on how the larger school system could reopen safely. At the top of his list was that the [school](#) district acquire the necessary equipment to conduct daily

rapid testing on all students, teachers and staff—with results available within 15 minutes. The current testing offered by the city produces results in three to five days.

"The peace of mind that would bring to my students and staff would be huge," he said. "Three days for a result is a long time."

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Citation: DC charters offer innovations in pandemic-era education (2020, October 12) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-10-dc-charters-pandemic-era.html>

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