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

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.