

BUILDING BRIDGES

Integrating Education, Career Training, and Community for Adult Learners in Washington, D.C.



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Any errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the authors. We hope the insights shared here contribute to ongoing efforts to support adult learners and strengthen adult education programs.

Executive Summary

Adult education programs play a pivotal role in bolstering the U.S. economy and workforce. By providing adults with essential instruction and career training, these programs contribute to a more skilled workforce for high-demand jobs, fostering economic growth and stability (Fogg et al., 2024; Rothwell, 2020). This brief examines the adult education program model of the Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., which for more than 50 years has provided city residents with free English as a second language (ESL) instruction, preparation for the GED® high school equivalency exam, and career training education. The school offers academic instruction, career training, employability skills, support services, and opportunities for social connections and community integration. The school actively engages its alumni, offering them opportunities to stay connected and serve as role models in the community.

This brief presents findings from a qualitative implementation study of the Carlos Rosario School conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®). In summer 2024, AIR interviewed 28 staff members and conducted 12 focus groups with 68 students and alumni, representing the school's ESL, GED, and career training programs. The goal was to understand the school's program model, identify promising practices, and discover opportunities for growth. The findings may inform other programs seeking to strengthen adult student engagement, persistence, and long-term success. The brief highlights *Promising Practices in Action*—innovative practices that may be adaptable for different adult education contexts to enhance implementation of adult education programs.

Student Goals, Challenges, and Needs

The Carlos Rosario School became the first adult public charter school in the U.S. in 1998. In the 2022–23 school year, it served 2,736 D.C. residents. About 86% were enrolled in ESL, 8% in GED, and 8% in career training. Students represented more than 80 countries, with the largest groups from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Ethiopia. Seventy-one percent of students were employed, and 21% had children in D.C. public schools.

Students who participated in focus groups described enrolling at the school to improve their English, earn a GED, or pursue career training. Many shared motivations such as supporting their families, advancing in their jobs, or re-entering professions they held in their countries of origin. Some of their educational journeys were nonlinear, with periods of interruption followed by re-enrollment when circumstances allowed. The interviews and focus groups surfaced various challenges faced by students. Rising housing costs in Washington, D.C., have led some students to relocate outside the city, affecting their eligibility to attend the school. Evening classes pose difficulties for parents without access to childcare. Instructors and

students highlighted variation in students' prior educational experiences—from no formal schooling to postsecondary degrees—and noted that some students faced barriers related to credential recognition and licensure.

Program Model

The school's program model includes six key elements identified through interviews and focus groups.

Multiple Pathways. Staff described a program structure that allows multiple entry and exit points across ESL, GED, and career training programs. This flexibility enables students to personalize their learning journey and return to the school after life interruptions. According to enrollment data from fall 2019–spring 2023 shared by the school, seven of the 10 most common pathways involved ESL only; others included GED or career training. A small percentage of students transitioned from higher level ESL to career training.

Career Readiness Skills Development. Staff and students emphasized the integration of career readiness skills across programs.

- **Digital Literacy Support.** Instructors incorporate digital tools and platforms across ESL and career training programs. Students receive devices and multilingual onboarding support to help them navigate digital platforms used in instruction.
- **Soft Skills.** Time management, communication, and collaboration are taught through classroom activities and reinforced by attendance policies and assignment deadlines.
- **Employment Preparation.** Résumé writing and interview practice are embedded in ESL instruction, with additional support available from employment specialists.

Responsive Curriculum and Instruction. Staff described multiple instructional strategies and academic supports to meet students' varying learning needs and career goals.

- **Differentiated Instruction.** Instructors adapted instruction based on students' prior knowledge, goals, and skill levels.
- **Hands-On Learning.** Career training programs incorporated field trips, guest speakers, clinical rotations, and lab simulations to reinforce applied skills.
- **Industry-Aligned Curriculum.** Advisory committees of industry professionals consulted on curriculum updates and supported student recruitment and work-based learning for career training programs.

- **Professional Development.** Staff participated in peer learning and received guidance from in-house specialists to strengthen instructional practices.

Support Services. The school offers a broad range of support services to promote student persistence and success.

- **Academic Support.** The school provides tutoring services tailored to student needs. The school uses a tiered response-to-intervention model to provide academic support, including personalized multilingual tutoring and the Student Academic Resource Teacher (SART) program, which provides long-term, individualized support for students with persistent academic challenges.
- **Transition Services.** The school offers career counseling, job fairs, résumé workshops, job placement assistance, and postsecondary advising. Staff noted that the school offers scholarships to students pursuing a range of continuing educational opportunities, including traditional college degrees and vocational programs.
- **Economic and Personal Security.** Support services include transportation subsidies, mental health counseling, and referrals to external resources, including housing and legal aid services. Staff and students highlighted that mental health counselors can provide trauma-informed support in students' primary languages. The school connects students to transportation programs, including D.C.'s Adult Learner Transit Subsidy Program and Capital Bikeshare. In addition, the school provides assistance in applying for public benefits, on-site health screenings, and free clinic days.

Partnerships. Carlos Rosario collaborates with external partners to enhance its programming.

- **Employers and Industry Leaders.** Advisory committees, composed of industry professionals, consult with staff to align curriculum with workforce needs. Employers offer internships, practicums, and job placement support.
- **Service Providers.** Organizations such as the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center and D.C. Health Link provide legal and health-related services. The school also partners with DC Futures and New Futures to expand financial aid opportunities. Furthermore, a Marriott Foundation grant and a Google for Education grant support the school in equipping students with digital literacy skills.
- **Cultural and Advocacy Groups.** Partners like the Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs and La Clínica del Pueblo support specific student populations and help address broader community needs.

Building Community. Staff and students described community building as an important aspect of the school environment.

- **Cultural Celebrations and Clubs.** Students shared that events and clubs helped them build social connections and feel more connected to the school community.
- **Student Government.** Staff noted that student government provides a platform for advocacy, event planning, and community engagement.
- **Alumni Involvement.** Staff and alumni reported that graduates often return as tutors, staff, or guest speakers, contributing to a cycle of mentorship and leadership.

Promising Practices in Action

Staff described several instructional and student support strategies they consider particularly effective in helping students progress toward their goals.

- **Digital Literacy Integration.** Staff reported that technology is integrated across programs. For example, in ESL classes, students practice sending emails, navigating online platforms, and using learning management systems to help build English proficiency. Multilingual digital tutors assist students during the first weeks of class, helping them set up and navigate devices and applications like Zoom. Tutors help students create accounts for platforms such as Schoology and Google Docs, and provide one-on-one support throughout the term during scheduled office hours. In addition, the school offers stand-alone computer basics classes to prepare students for Northstar Digital Literacy certification, which staff said helps students without experience gain essential digital skills.
- **Goal Setting and Tracking.** Each student begins the term by setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely) goals, such as obtaining a job or furthering their education. These goals are documented in a Student Success Plan. Instructors track student progress using data such as assessment scores, with formal check-ins at the beginning, middle, and end of the term. At the end of the term, students update their plans with data such as test scores and reading assessments to reflect their progress. Staff viewed this approach as a way to keep instruction relevant and personalized, helping students stay motivated and monitor their own development. Staff reported that instruction is sometimes differentiated based on students' goals, as illustrated next.
- **Differentiated and Individualized Instruction.** Staff shared that instruction is tailored to meet the varying needs of adult learners. Instructors reported using a variety of strategies to accommodate different skill levels and learning styles within the same classroom. For example, one ESL instructor described using learning stations with reading, writing, and listening activities, allowing students to choose tasks that match their needs. One culinary

arts instructor described tailoring instruction for a student interested in starting a food truck and another student aiming to become an executive sous-chef, offering different types of guidance based on their goals. Staff emphasized that this flexible, student-centered approach helps ensure learners are supported and challenged appropriately.

- **Personalized Multilingual Tutoring.** When a student is identified as struggling in class, the teacher first implements a Tier 1 intervention using in-class strategies. If those strategies prove insufficient after more than 2 weeks, the teacher refers the student to the tutoring service (Tier 2), which is usually 90 minutes per week. These sessions are often conducted in the student’s primary language by trained tutors who speak Spanish, French, Amharic, and other languages. Tutors work one-on-one or in small groups to address specific learning needs and set concrete goals, such as “write a three-paragraph essay with 70% accuracy.” Tutors use tools like interactive games, songs, and real-life materials and coordinate closely with classroom teachers to monitor progress. Tutoring is available in person and online. Each tutor typically supports 15–20 students per semester, and tutoring is intended as a short-term intervention lasting one to two semesters. Staff and students described tutoring as a way to help students catch up and build confidence through individualized support.
- **Student Academic Resource Teacher (SART).** For students facing significant academic challenges, the SART program provides intensive, individualized support (Tier 3). These students—often those who have repeated courses despite tutoring—receive 3 hours of weekly, one-on-one instruction from a SART teacher. According to staff, students are referred by their instructors, and the SART director reviews test scores and writing samples. SART teachers develop customized learning plans; offer weekly, one-on-one instruction; and coordinate with instructors and counselors to monitor progress and adjust strategies. SART teachers also help connect students to external services, such as speech therapy or the D.C. Rehabilitation Services Administration. Each SART teacher supports about 12 students and monitors progress toward individualized goals three times per semester. This long-term intervention continues until the student graduates or completes their program.
- **Postsecondary Transition Supports.** The Student Success team helps learners transition to college, apprenticeships, or advanced training. They provide information sessions on local colleges and universities, explain entrance requirements, and offer one-on-one advising for applications and financial aid, including FAFSA. The team organizes campus tours and invites college representatives to speak with students. The school’s Higher Education Scholarship Fund awards scholarships (ranging from \$490 to \$6,500) to help graduates cover tuition and book costs. The team also assists with credential evaluation by referring students to external validation services and hosting on-site sessions with local providers. Staff shared

that the school partners with colleges to ease entry requirements, including through agreements that may waive the Test of English as a Foreign Language.

- **Mental Health Services.** Staff shared that many students have experienced trauma, including war and displacement. In response, the school provides trauma-informed mental health services. On-site counselors who speak students' primary languages offer therapy sessions, crisis intervention, and classroom workshops to raise awareness about emotional well-being and available supports. Students can self-refer or be referred by staff. Staff emphasized that embedding mental health support into the educational experience helps address students' well-being and supports academic persistence.
- **Student Government and Leadership.** Staff described the school's Student Government Association (SGA) as a platform for students to develop leadership skills, engage with the school community, and advocate for their peers. Each campus has a nonelected, interest-based SGA with representatives from a range of programs and levels. Members are recruited through information tables staffed by current or former representatives as well as through flyers, announcements, and messages. The SGA meets biweekly and serves as a link between students and school administrators. Members advocate for student needs, organize volunteer activities and events, and collaborate with external organizations to support community engagement. Some students have spoken before the D.C. Council on adult education issues. Staff and students shared that participation in the SGA helped learners build skills in public speaking, teamwork, and leadership.

Introduction

Adult education programs play a pivotal role in bolstering the United States' economy and workforce. By providing essential instruction and career training to adults, these programs contribute to a more skilled workforce for high-demand jobs, thereby fostering economic growth and stability (Fogg et al., 2024; Rothwell, 2020). This brief examines the program model of one such adult education program—the Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., which has been providing free English as a second language (ESL) instruction, preparation for the GED® high school equivalency exam, and career training education to city residents for more than 50 years. The school offers academic instruction, career training, employability skills, support services, and opportunities for social connections and community integration. In addition, the school actively engages its alumni, offering them opportunities to stay connected and serve as role models within the community.

This brief is based on a qualitative implementation study conducted by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to understand the school's program model and identify best practices as well as opportunities for growth. In summer 2024, our team interviewed 28 school staff members, including 11 administrators, 10 instructors, and seven student services personnel. We also conducted 12 focus groups with 68 students and alumni of the school in English and Spanish and with Amharic translation. These students and alumni represented the school's ESL, GED preparation, and career training programs.

In the sections below, we discuss the school's model and how it helps students to achieve their goals—whether mastering English, advancing in their careers, or pursuing further education—ultimately supporting them to thrive and make meaningful contributions to their communities. Throughout the brief, we have highlighted “Promising Practices in Action.” We define Promising Practices in Action as practices that we found innovative and have the potential to be adapted across different adult education contexts to enhance the implementation of adult education programs. Although these practices are described within the context of the Carlos Rosario School, they offer valuable insights and inspirations for the broader adult education field.

Student Goals, Challenges, and Needs

The study team conducted focus groups with students enrolled in ESL courses, GED preparation courses, and career training programs. Findings from the focus groups suggest that students enroll at the Carlos Rosario School to improve their skills and career prospects. Some students, especially those new to the country, expressed their determination to succeed in the new environment of the United States and to be a good example for their children and peers.

Some students initially enrolled in the school to improve their English, which they saw as critical for integrating into society and the workplace. In a few cases, learning the language led students to find employment or get promoted at work. Other students discovered additional programs and services at the Carlos Rosario School that helped to expand their educational and career options, including transitioning to postsecondary education. Many students we interviewed discussed pursuing a career similar to the one they had in their country of origin. In one focus group, one student expressed, *“I’m a chef. ... I love my career, [and I want to be] able to do it in English.”*

While the GED students saw earning a high school diploma as a stepping stone for their career/academic goals, most students in the career training programs had a clear goal to gain employment in a specific industry or to secure a promotion at their current workplace. It is important to note that for some students, the path to their academic and career achievement was not always straightforward or continuous, but they knew that the school’s door was always open and came back when they were ready for another goal. One student described his journey:

“ *Carlos Rosario offered different programs, which is fantastic. I finished my [ESL class] level eight² in 2017, but then right after, I ... enrolled in the IT program with Carlos Rosario. I had gotten a promotion at work, and I was given a different role because my English had gotten so much better. I was adapting to that new role, and unfortunately, it got really busy, and I wasn’t able to continue my IT course because I needed to focus on my job. In 2019, I enrolled again to try to do my GED, to get my GED.”*

School History and Population Served

Originally established in Washington, D.C., as a program to teach English to newcomers from Latin America looking to better their lives, the Carlos Rosario School has a rich history of supporting adult learners. In 1998, the school became the first adult public charter school in the United States, marking a milestone in the field of adult education. Adult public charter schools in D.C. provide services to address the educational and employment training needs of adults of all ages outside of a high school setting (Coffin & Rubin, 2023). The Carlos Rosario School is primarily funded by the D.C. government and supplemented by private donations and grants. The school annually serves more than 2,500 Washington, D.C., residents across two campuses.

In the school year 2022–23, the school served 2,736 D.C. residents across ESL, GED, and career training programs. About 86% of these students enrolled in ESL courses, 8% enrolled in GED preparation courses, and 8% enrolled in career training programs.¹ The majority of students were employed (71%), and about one in five had dependents enrolled in D.C. public schools (21%). Students represented over 80 countries of origin, with the largest groups of students hailing from El Salvador (29%), Honduras (9%), Guatemala (8%), and Ethiopia (8%). Students also varied in their prior educational attainment. About 30% of students had only a high school diploma or GED credential, while the remainder were evenly split between students who had not completed high school (35%) and those who had participated in postsecondary education (35%).

¹ The sum of these percentages exceeds 100% because some students enrolled in more than one type of program.

² The Carlos Rosario School’s ESL class levels range from 1 to 8.

Student Challenges and Unique Needs

Adult learners balance multiple work and family responsibilities. Challenges such as parental status, prior educational attainment, naturalization status, and financial circumstances shape their learning experiences. These challenges become more complex when adults are establishing themselves in a new community. In the focus groups and interviews, Carlos Rosario School students and staff discussed some barriers and complex realities that students face.

Housing Affordability and Instability. Because the Carlos Rosario School is a public charter school, prospective students must establish D.C. residency to enroll. Given the high cost of living in Washington, D.C., housing affordability and housing insecurity were identified as barriers to living in D.C. and attending the school. Staff and instructors reported that rising rents forced some students to move outside the city, thereby losing eligibility to attend the school.

Childcare. Childcare can be a significant challenge for many adult learners who are parents. One staff member highlighted the difficulty of securing childcare during evening hours, which poses a particular hardship for working students attending night classes. One student noted, *“It would be nice if the school could provide emergency childcare if we don’t have anyone to watch our kids; there were a few times I was not able to attend because I could not find childcare.”*

Prior Education and Navigating the Education Systems. Students’ needs can differ based on their prior education. For example, some students have interrupted education or no formal education and literacy development in their first language. Others come from an education system where the identification processes and support programs for learning (dis)abilities/differences differ from those of the United States. Even students with professional credentials or postsecondary degrees from their countries of origin can face setbacks by having to start a new career pathway, repeat educational milestones such as earning a high school diploma, restart the lengthy licensure process, or go through costly and cumbersome verification processes. Several students reported having professional experience and credentials in their home countries, including as teachers, computer technicians, lawyers, and chefs, as well as various roles in the medical field, such as dentists, nurses, doctors, and psychologists. One student poignantly described the challenge:

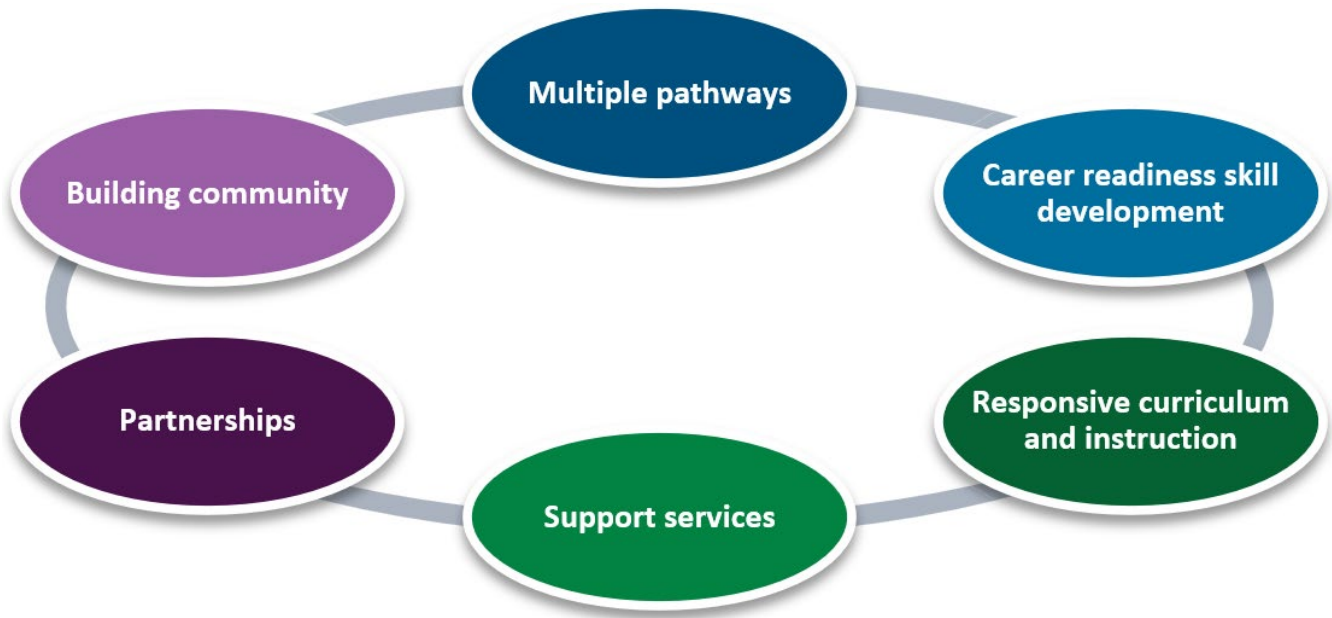
“ It is important for me to study at Carlos Rosario. ... Many of us have technical, technological, and professional degrees in our countries that we have not been able to [use]. ... By entering this school, perhaps we can take one step further to be able to access those opportunities that the market here in the United States offers. We already see that we are intelligent, capable people, but that language barrier is always preventing us from taking that step.”

Navigating the Naturalization Process. Some administrators discussed how students with refugee or asylum-seeker status must navigate complex legal systems, face work permit delays, and experience emotional distress. Such barriers can impact students’ ability to focus on their educational pursuits. However, one staff member shared that the school provides citizenship clinics on site at the school to help ease these barriers.

Program Model

In this section, we discuss key elements of the school’s program model that emerged from the experiences, perceptions, and feedback shared by students and staff in focus groups and interviews. These elements include multiple pathways, career readiness skills development, responsive curriculum and instruction, wraparound support services, partnerships, and building community. Exhibit 1 summarizes the key elements of the Carlos Rosario program model.

Exhibit 1. Key Elements of the Program Model



Multiple Pathways

The school structures its programs to create multiple entry and exit points involving ESL, GED, and career training courses. This approach supports students in reaching their English proficiency and employment goals while maintaining flexibility for students to create their own personalized pathway. As one staff member described, *“We have an intentional strategy to support students who are in that pathway of English to see those career training programs and get excited and motivated by them so that they continue on and enroll in those classes.”*

The ESL program integrates English language instruction with opportunities to build in-demand skills, such as digital literacy, resume writing, and teamwork. Students can progress through multiple levels of ESL instruction while simultaneously exploring other educational and career opportunities.

The GED program offers both English and Spanish language tracks, providing students who did not complete high school or are unable to obtain a verified credential from their country of origin an opportunity to earn a secondary credential in the United States. In addition, focus group discussions indicated that some students transition to the GED program from the ESL program, although it is not a common pathway. One student described their experience:

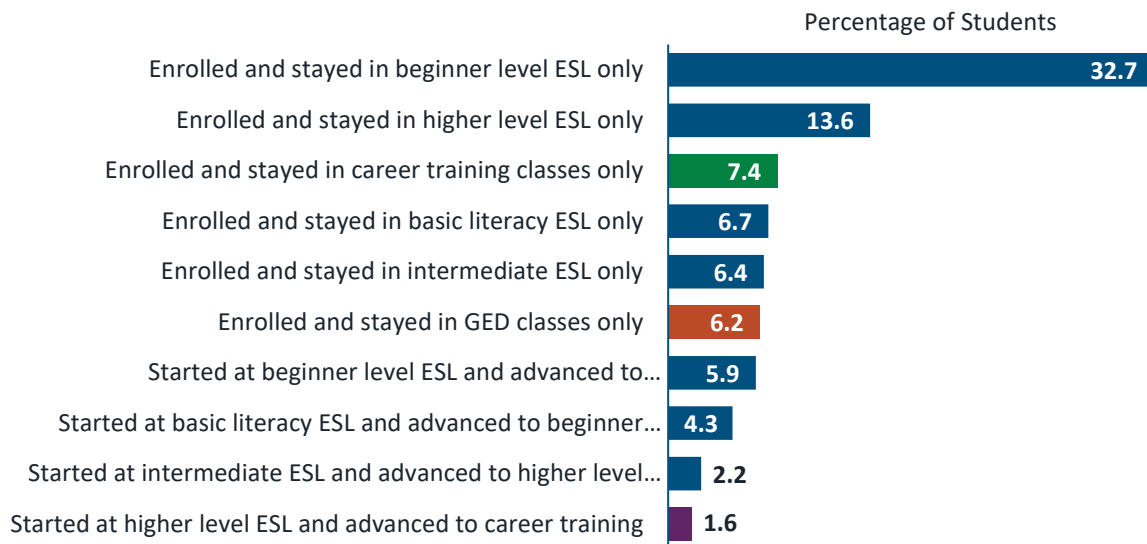
“*Personally, what interested me the most was English; that was what I needed to be able to get involved in society, at work. That was what caught my attention back then. But as one goes to school, one begins to discover other pathways that exist. In this case, the GED, which is a great program. I didn’t finish my studies in my country, and this is a good opportunity, that once I have obtained this diploma, it opens a path for me to be able to study other areas or go to university.*”

With respect to the career training programs, currently the school offers training programs in nursing assistant, culinary arts, information technology for CompTIA IT fundamentals, and bilingual teaching assistant certifications. Career training programs differ in their English proficiency requirements. Some programs require only intermediate English proficiency, thereby allowing students to enroll even if they have not completed all levels of ESL classes offered by the school. Each career training program requires an advisory session before enrollment to ensure that the learner is well informed about the career pathway and that the student’s goals are a good fit for the program.³

Exhibit 2 summarizes the 10 most common pathways taken by students enrolled in ESL, GED, and career training classes between fall 2019 and spring 2023. Seven of these 10 pathways solely involve ESL classes, which comprise the school’s largest program and are the entry point for the majority of students. These ESL pathways represent about 72% of students. Two pathways represent students who enrolled in the school to focus solely on GED preparation (6%) or career training (7%). Overall, these first nine pathways represent students who enrolled and stayed in only one type of program: ESL, GED, or career training. The 10th pathway represents students who first enrolled in higher level ESL classes and then transitioned to career training programs, but fewer than 2% of students took that pathway.

³ The school also offers a fee-based small-business and entrepreneurship program for D.C. residents interested in starting or growing a business. This program was not included in our study.

Exhibit 2. Students' 10 Most Common Class Enrollment Pathways (Fall 2019–Spring 2023)



Note. Between fall 2019 and spring 2023, a total of 6,600 students enrolled in ESL, GED, or career training classes. The pathways reported in this exhibit represent about 87 percent of those students. Blue bars represent students who enrolled and stayed in ESL classes for the duration of their study at the school. The green bar represents students who enrolled and stayed in career training. The orange bar represents students who enrolled and stayed in GED classes. The purple bar represents students who transitioned from higher level ESL classes to career training.

Career Readiness Skills Development

The school integrates career readiness skills development into its programs, focusing on employability skills and specific job attainment skills. This approach aims to ensure that students develop the technical and soft skills needed for workplace success.



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Digital Literacy Integration

Digital literacy is a key employability skill emphasized across programs at the Carlos Rosario School and aligned with the College and Career Readiness Standards and English Language Proficiency Standards for Adult Education. From ESL to career training, the curriculum is designed to engage students with technology in practical ways. For example, ESL courses integrate language development with digital tools, such as emailing for workplace communication. One administrator explained, *"We have to prepare our students for the future and the workforce; that is our basic mission; we can't do that without technology."* A student in a career training program shared how technology skills are critical in their learning: *"Our quizzes and exams are mostly online. We used Kahoot in class for review."*

Stand-alone computer courses. The school offers stand-alone computer basics classes that focus on fundamental computer skills, office productivity software (Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint), internet safety, and media literacy. These computer basics classes lead to Northstar Digital Literacy certifications, which provide tangible recognition of students' skill sets. These classes are open to the broader D.C. community, including native English speakers and those preparing to enter the IT training career pathway.



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Digital Literacy Integration

Tailored digital literacy support. Classroom learning is supplemented by digital literacy support and tutoring. At the start of the term, the school distributes Chromebooks and internet hotspots, and provides tutoring support in a central location, such as the cafeteria, staffed by full-time multilingual digital literacy tutors who speak French, Spanish, and Amharic. All tutors have a background in technology (e.g., completion of the school's Internet Core Competency class (IC3), IT Fundamentals class, or other coursework at the college level). As students receive their laptops, they are asked, *"Do you know how to use your devices? If not, head to the cafeteria."*

In the first few weeks of each term, digital literacy tutors help students in their classrooms set up their school-issued devices and application accounts and help them become comfortable using technology for learning. Tutors assist students in navigating online platforms essential for learning, including the school's learning management system (Schoology), video conferencing tools like Zoom, and productivity applications such as Google Docs. One student highlighted this support: *"In the first levels, there are tutors on systems, how to use Zoom. And that's supportive, they help a lot because not everyone has the skills to navigate these virtual applications."* This scaffolded support is intended to help all students fully participate in their hybrid coursework while developing critical 21st century skills.

Once the onboarding period ends, tutors offer in their dedicated office space one-on-one support designed to be flexible and responsive, often taking place before, during, or after class based on student availability and need. Tutors are available between 9:00 a.m. and 11:30 a.m., Monday through Friday, and between 6:00 p.m. and 8:30 p.m., Monday through Thursday. Teachers can refer individual students who need additional help using digital tools, ensuring ongoing, personalized support throughout the semester. As one administrator mentioned,

“ So the [digital] onboarding tends to be whole class, and then later on, as students have different challenges, for example, some students just still struggle to connect to their Zoom classes. And so even after we started doing virtual days of instruction, some of those students still continue to meet with the digital literacy tutors one-on-one to help them with that, or they struggle to share documents. Sometimes teachers will say, “Create a Google Doc, share with me so I can see your work on this activity.” And some students can create the document, but they don't remember how to share or something like that. So, that's how the tutors are able to support them. Most recently this year, we've piloted something new called office hours, so students are able to during class go to the digital literacy suite and get support. So if they're having trouble connecting, if they've forgotten [their] login, whatever issue they have, they can go straight to the digital literacy suite for support. Which is also a great help for teachers because then they don't have to spend an extensive amount of time supporting one student, and then the rest of the lesson is delayed. The student can just go to the help desk for support.”

Students work on building communication and collaboration skills through various classroom activities and assignments. Students practice written communication through email writing exercises, essays, and research papers. The school has integrated real-world skills, such as resume writing and interview practice, into its ESL curriculum, and employment specialists on staff are available to provide more dedicated support with these activities. Students frequently participate in group projects and discussions, which provide opportunities to practice teamwork and collaboration skills essential for the workplace.

The school aims to teach time management and professional conduct through clear attendance policies and assignment deadlines. While understanding and accommodating the complex responsibilities many adult learners juggle, instructors help students develop these soft skills. One staff member shared,

“ I would say that again, depending on each specific program, [soft skills are] really embedded in the instruction that they’re receiving from everything like the importance of being on time and communicating if you are running late or if you have to be absent, all of those things.”



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Goal Setting and Tracking

Across all programs, instructors work with students to establish SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely) goals at the beginning of each term. Examples of student goals include obtaining a job, furthering their education, or improving their conversational English. Students revisit these goals periodically throughout the term to check in on their progress and make updates as needed. Instructors and advisors aim to use students’ goals to differentiate instruction and provide tailored support and advice. Although the goal-setting process varies slightly between programs, this quote from a career training program instructor describes how their students develop a student success plan to create and monitor their goals:

“ So we have a template that kind of walks them through a goal- setting process, and then I do a workshop about SMART criteria, and then the student success plan has space for action steps. After the workshop, they draft their plan independently, we do a one-on-one coaching session, and I give them input on how they could make their goal smarter in terms of the SMART criteria, more specific, more measurable, etc. And then they adapt their plan. The template also has space for some student data. So in my course, we track their practice test scores for the ParaPro certification, and then we track their reading level, their Lexile reading level, using a platform called Achieve3000. So they have three different touch points, beginning of semester, middle of semester, end of semester. So in the middle of the semester, they update their plan with their data. And if a student is struggling or their practice test scores or their reading skills aren’t developing with my expectations, then I would do another coaching session with them at that point in the middle of the semester. And then the final touch point for those student success plans is at the end. So, they would input their final data, including whether or not they actually graduated from the program. And then we would have a final one-on-one session where we reflect on whether or not they’ve accomplished their goals and any adjustments they need to make.”

Responsive Curriculum and Instruction

Recognizing that students come from varied backgrounds and have unique goals and aspirations, the school employs differentiated and individualized instruction as well as industry-aligned curricula with active and hands-on learning approaches. In addition, staff and faculty receive training on effective strategies and practices for adapting their instructional and support approaches.

“Differentiated Instruction (DI) is fundamentally the attempt to teach differently to different students, rather than maintain a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction.”

– Stanford University Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.

Differentiated and Individualized Instruction

The Carlos Rosario School's differentiated instructional approaches aim to meet the needs of the students as students' backgrounds, prior knowledge, and goals vary significantly. Noting the importance of recognizing students' prior knowledge and addressing their learning goals, one ESL instructor states that adaptability and flexibility are critical, and teachers must be willing to personalize instruction based on what works for different students and be open to learning from student feedback.



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Differentiated and Individualized Instruction

Instructors employ differentiated and individualized instruction practices in their classrooms to maximize the relevance and impact of their instruction. By tailoring instructional strategies and providing personalized guidance, instructors aim to create a supportive learning environment that meets the students' needs.

One ESL instructor shared how she provides activity choices through “learning stations” to encourage learner autonomy and to support students' individual needs. Students are provided with a choice from three or four stations, such as reading, writing, and listening. Other instructors considered students' prior educational experiences when planning instructional activities. For example, a GED teacher used an engaging activity of calculating the average height of students in the class when teaching a measurement unit to help ease students' math anxiety. An ESL instructor explained how she altered her explanation of English grammar and sentence structure depending on students' educational backgrounds: *“I would say most of my students do not have prior education ... [so, to explain parts of speech,] I don't say noun, verb ... but if they do have a formal education, then I can explain that.”*

In addition, one career training instructor described how they provide personalized guidance tailored to individual student goals. The culinary arts instructor explained,



[Instructional content and approaches are] just going to be based on a one-to-one basis of that student and what their goals are and seeing where they are currently, what skills they have currently, and what skills they would need to have to reach that goal. For instance, a student ... starting his own food truck, I've had more discussions with him in class and out of class on where the process is for him to be able to get to that point of opening his own business. ... So that's going to be obviously a different conversation than I'm going to have with the student who is a sous-chef who wants to be the executive sous-chef. Then that student, I'm going to be talking more about, how are we going to improve this skill for ordering food ... [how] we differentiate between those students and making sure that they can reach that goal is going to be different depending on each student.”

Hands-On Experiences and Opportunities

The career training programs at the Carlos Rosario School provide students with hands-on experiences and opportunities to work with industry mentors through established industry partnerships. For example, the nurse aide training program includes hospital tours and clinical experiences at nursing homes or local hospitals, such as MedStar Washington Hospital Center or Sibley Memorial Hospital. In these clinical experiences, students shadow professionals, apply the theoretical knowledge they learned in the classroom and gain critical skills such as patient care and teamwork. The bilingual teaching assistant program offers practicum experiences in local K–12 schools, and students partner with a mentor teacher.

Students in the information technology (IT) program experience lab simulations through TestOut, an online IT training courseware, as well as additional lab hours to enhance mastery of skills. One IT instructor mentioned that these hands-on lab sessions involving hardware components like switches, routers, and cables contributed to the 100% certification pass rate in the last four semesters. Furthermore, the IT program invites industry professionals as guest speakers towards the end of their program.

In addition, the school's career training programs emphasize skill mastery through hands-on practice and formative assessments. Instructors use structured evaluations, such as weekly assessments across multiple categories, or checklists for specific tasks, to provide students with opportunities to develop proficiency and mastery. By encouraging repetition and reinforcing the idea that success comes with practice, educators intend to instill perseverance and help students build the technical and professional skills essential for their fields. A culinary arts instructor explained:

Students in the culinary arts program take field trips such as the one to Pizza University and Culinary Arts Center, a Maryland-based training facility for skilled pizza makers and culinary professionals, and benefit from guest speaker visits that include chefs, restaurateurs, food photographers, and pastry chefs. According to one of the culinary instructors, these collaborative events have also been used to showcase students' skills and network with potential employers, helping build students' social capital.

“ *We have a huge list of exit skills, and they get graded in six different categories each and every week for everything from the hospitality, front of the house skills ... to their knife skills and their cooking skills, their managerial skills and their planning skills, and then just their punctuality and their success skills, we call those.”*

Another instructor in the nurse aide training program described the following:

“ *For example, taking blood pressure. We have a checklist. If they're not hundred percent with the checklist, I don't let them go. They will go again and practice. After today, for example, they performed, maybe 75% of the checklist was met. Then, they go to their tables, they practice again, and we redo again. We recheck and recheck. I think with that, I always tell them that you don't succeed the first time. You have to practice and practice and practice because this is a skill. You have to learn how to do the skills firsthand. With practice, I think they're able to do it.”*

Many students and staff (instructors, career counselors, and administrators) consider hands-on learning essential for providing real-world experiences. By integrating real-world experiences, rigorous skill assessments, and mentorship, the school aims to foster a learning environment that bridges the gap between classroom education and workplace demands, preparing students for success in their chosen fields.

Industry-Aligned Curriculum for Career Training Programs

The Carlos Rosario School has established advisory committees for career training programs, which comprise industry professionals to advise on current industry practices, curriculum changes, and support for student recruitment and work-based learning.

These efforts to maintain industry partnerships are intended to ensure that the Carlos Rosario School's career training programs are responsive to industry demands, equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and professional connections needed to succeed in their chosen fields. Dedicated staff from the student services office work to maintain the connections with employers.

The advisory committees help the school build connections and keep up with changing industry landscapes. They consult with school staff regularly to review and make recommendations for curriculum updates and program design. For example, in the IT program, the advisory committee meets twice a year to discuss technology trends and runs an IT series to bring industry insights to students. The school hires experienced professionals with connections in their field as instructors.

Investing in Staff: Professional Development Opportunities

The school invests in professional development (PD) for support staff and teaching staff, including tutors. To enhance the staff's ability to support the student population, the school offers a few mechanisms to provide just-in-time training based on staff needs and the school's priorities.

The school has in-house PD specialists and instructional coaches who support faculty's needs and coordinate training activities. One instructor shared that the PD specialist's guidance was invaluable when she sought help for improving differentiation in her class. In addition, some instructors take the initiative to create peer learning opportunities. One instructor explained how "learning walks" work:

External experts have been invited to provide PD in response to staff needs on topics such as trauma-informed approaches, dyslexia training, and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol® to develop staff's content and pedagogical knowledge. Several staff members expressed their appreciation for the recent schoolwide training on trauma-informed approaches during their interviews. One counselor highlighted the relevance of the training, as many of the student populations can have elevated levels of trauma exposure.

“ So what we do is, certain teachers volunteer themselves to have other teachers in their class and observe them for like five, 15 minutes and get more ideas on how we can do warm-up activities, differentiate a little bit more or how to approach different types of lessons. So, we learn from each other doing those learning walks at Carlos Rosario.”

These efforts collectively highlight the school's commitment to fostering a culture of continuous learning and collaboration among its staff. The goal is to ensure that staff are well equipped to address the varied needs of their student population.

Support Services

The Carlos Rosario School addresses students' basic needs by providing wraparound support services to help learners overcome barriers to persisting in their courses. Support services at Carlos Rosario fall into three main categories: academic support, including tutoring services and the student academic resource teacher (SART) program; transition services that involve career counseling, employer connections, and support for postsecondary education transitions; and economic and personal security. The third category includes transportation services, mental health counseling, and resources for families, among other forms of assistance. Recognizing that many students may be unfamiliar with navigating support systems in their new community, the school regularly promotes and communicates about available services to ensure students know they can access these services whenever they need them. Student services staff present information about these services during student orientation and make regular classroom visits to speak more in-depth about specific service offerings. The school regularly shares information and updates about available services through online channels such as [Schoology](#) and [Remind](#).

Instructors may refer students to services as needed, and students are able to drop in or make an appointment with student services staff. Services are available in multiple languages to support the student population. As one mental health counselor explained, *"We have a part-time licensed clinician who is Amharic speaking, and then I speak French and Spanish."*

Academic Support

The school provides additional academic support through two main channels: tutoring services and the SART program. Tutoring is available across multiple subject areas, including ESL, GED preparation, and digital literacy, as previously described. Tutoring services vary based on student needs. The school offers bilingual tutoring at the Harvard Street campus, which houses the lower level ESL classes. As part of its specialized student services and key strategies to address varied learning needs, the Carlos Rosario School uses a tiered response-to-intervention (RTI) model to provide academic support, including personalized one-to-one or small-group tutoring.



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Personalized Multilingual Tutoring

When a student is identified as struggling in class, (e.g., repeating the same level for multiple semesters), the teacher first implements a Tier 1 intervention using in-class strategies. If those strategies prove insufficient after more than 2 weeks, the teacher refers the student to the tutoring service (Tier 2), which is usually 90 minutes per week. There are seven tutors across both campuses, and each typically serves between 15 and 20 students. Tier 2 tutoring is intended as a short-term intervention lasting for a semester or two. If the student needs to repeat the same level more than three times and has good attendance, the student may be referred to a Tier 3 intervention with a specialized academic resource teacher (see below for more information on SART).

An ESL student said, *“This year, which was more difficult for me, I have a tutor who helps me, too. ... I go with her, and we review what is most difficult for me, which is speaking.”*

Once a student is referred to the tutoring program, the assigned tutor uses a pretest and other diagnostic tools, such as in-session conversations, to determine the student’s needs and learning preferences. Tutors then help the student set personal goals that are aligned with the course objectives, such as “write a three-paragraph essay with 70% accuracy.”

Tutoring is offered both in person (Monday–Wednesday) and virtually (Thursday–Friday) in the morning and evening. Each session lasts for 45 minutes, and students receive tailored one-on-one or small-group learning support. Tutoring sessions begin before the morning and evening classes and go on during the class sessions. Some students come to school early, so they miss very little class time. Others choose to spend 45 minutes of their class time receiving 1:1 tutoring.

Trained tutors. Tutors receive training on the curriculum and learning objectives of the course(s) they tutor for. Tutors maintain close communication with teachers, documenting progress in Maestro, the school’s centralized student data system. Progress notes are logged after each session, and formal reports are shared midsemester and at the end. They receive professional development every semester to maintain and update their knowledge and skills relevant to the subject matter, instruction, and support. Tutors apply various strategies to support students’ learning needs. For example, an ESL tutor shared the multimedia tools and contemporary materials such as popular songs and interactive games he uses during his tutoring sessions:

“You need to scaffold the learning most of the time in tutoring until [students are] on zero support and they’re on their own. ... Okay, oh, I know this good video. ... I’m going to try this. Okay, I’m going to play some games, games online, games in the classroom, puzzles, songs. Everything works because people learn in different ways, and you cannot just stick to one thing.”

The SART program provides specialized support for students who may benefit from more comprehensive and individualized interventions and accommodations. Although both the tutoring and SART programs aim to support student learning, they cater to different levels of need. ***Tutoring is generally a short-term intervention provided on a semester-by-semester basis, whereas SART provides long-term support, continuing until the student graduates or completes their program.*** In contrast, students identified for the SART program are those who have repeated a course multiple times and/or have more serious learning challenges, like dyslexia, although many students do not have officially diagnosed disabilities. The SART program does not conduct learning disability screening.



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Student Academic Resource Teacher (SART)

Entry criteria. The school takes a holistic approach to evaluating students' learning needs to determine whether they are a good fit for the SART program. Students are typically referred to the program by their teacher. The SART program director then reviews the referral, along with the student's test scores and writing samples, and meets with the teacher and student to identify the most appropriate course of action. The SART program does not conduct official learning disability screening.

Exit criteria. The SART program aims to provide long-term support to students throughout their time at Carlos Rosario. This includes modified materials and accommodations to help them succeed. The exit criteria for the SART program are usually graduation or completion of the program. Each semester, students work with their SART teacher to set goals based on exit skills, for example, "By the end of the semester, the student will be able to write a three-paragraph essay with 70% accuracy." These goals are monitored three times a semester to measure whether the student is approaching or has met the goals. If a student has not completed the ESL program but is proficient enough in English to get a job, then they could be transitioned to a job training program. In addition, the school may refer students who have diagnosed disabilities to the D.C. Rehabilitation Services Administration for specialized employment services, although this is less common.

Services provided. SART teachers are expected to have experience working with students with special needs and preferably have a certification in special education. It is preferred that they are bilingual in Spanish or Amharic. Currently, the school has two SART teachers, with a caseload of around 12 students each. SART teachers provide the following services:

- *Individualized learning plans:* Each student receives a customized plan tailored to their unique needs and goals, which is regularly reviewed and adjusted as necessary.
- *One-on-one instruction:* SART teachers spend 180 minutes a week working with students in dedicated sessions to address specific academic challenges and build essential skills.
- *Collaborative support:* Regular meetings between SART teachers, instructors, counselors, and students are held to discuss progress, set new goals, and adjust strategies as needed.
- *Resource coordination:* SART teachers help students access additional resources and support services, such as occupational and speech and language therapy, mental health counseling, and the district's vocational rehabilitation services, which help students with disabilities obtain employment.

Transition Services

Transition services are intended to help students progress toward their educational and career goals and include career counseling, employer connections, and support for postsecondary education and other transitions such as starting a business or getting a promotion. Employment specialists provide career counseling and guidance, résumé development, interview preparation, and job placement assistance through employer partnerships. These services are available to all students, although options are more limited for those with limited English proficiency. The majority of employment specialists are located at the Sonia Guitierrez campus, where the higher level ESL and career training classes are located, as students at this campus tend to be more focused on seeking employment. The school hosts regular job fairs, where students can directly interact with potential employers. The career training programs have dedicated career coaches on staff who have deep knowledge of the relevant training industries and provide workshops and one-on-one coaching throughout the program.

The school supports students' transitions to postsecondary education by offering scholarship opportunities, credential validation referrals, and assistance with college and federal student aid applications. As one administrator described,

“ *We commit to raising funds for higher education scholarships for our learners, and it's really truly an access to education fund because the community that we serve, they tend not to be eligible for your standard scholarships. They've not graduated from high school in this country. They've aged out from all of the other major scholarship funds that exist and they're in the workforce.*



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Postsecondary Transition Supports

Carlos Rosario offers a variety of supports to help students transition to postsecondary education programs, including community colleges, universities, and vocational training. The school has a dedicated student success team, which is responsible for providing dedicated support to students who are interested in furthering their education. The student success team is located at the Sonia Gutierrez campus, which serves students in career training and higher level ESL courses. Students at the Harvard Street campus can meet virtually with the student success team or travel to the other campus if they desire. The student success team holds regular information sessions open to all students to understand the local landscape of educational opportunities and explain the application and financial aid processes. Students who are interested may schedule one-on-one sessions with student success staff to speak more in-depth about their continuing education goals.

Funding. Carlos Rosario's student success team helps students navigate the process of applying for financial aid, ensuring they have the necessary support to complete their applications. Staff are available to assist students in identifying and applying for scholarships, both within the school and through external funders. Staff are also available to assist eligible students with their Free Application for Federal Student Aid. In addition, the school awards approximately 50 new scholarships each year to students who are pursuing a range of continuing educational opportunities, including traditional college degrees and vocational programs. The application process involves submitting a personal statement, recommendation letter, financial worksheet, and proof of enrollment, and attending a one-on-one advising session.

The scholarship initiative receives its primary funding from charitable contributions made by individuals and organizational partners who are committed to helping adult students access higher education. Recipients can receive the scholarship funds either as reimbursements for academic expenses and materials or as direct deposits into their account. Scholarship amounts range from \$490 for short-term certification programs to \$6,500 for full-time degree programs. Scholarships are awarded for use between July 1 of the awarding year and June 30 of the following year. Students receive personalized advising and are invited to information sessions and school events to support their scholarship applications. Scholarships recipients sign a pledge to “pay it forward” to future Carlos Rosario School students, which can mean paying back into the fund or supporting the school in other ways, like returning to share their story.

Credential validation. Carlos Rosario hosts regular information sessions about credential validation requirements for higher education applications and refers students to external validation services. While these services are not free, the school partners with local validation providers to regularly offer appointments on-site at the school, making it more convenient for students with busy schedules.

Higher education partnerships. The school partners with local universities, such as the University of D.C., and the George Washington University clinic. Some of the school's hands-on career preparation training, such as nursing lab courses, are facilitated through partnerships with these institutions. In addition, working with local universities facilitates opportunities for students, including agreements that might ease entry requirements. Examples include collaborations with local universities for Test of English as a Foreign Language waivers. The school has a relationship with Montgomery College, a community college in Maryland, to aid students who want to pursue additional education. Other partnerships with continuing education providers include Per Scholas, which offers students interested in information technology the opportunity to continue obtaining industry-recognized credentials.

Economic and Personal Security

Economic and personal security services are designed to help students meet basic needs and overcome barriers to attendance and active engagement in their classes. The school offers a free shuttle between campuses, which students frequently praised in our focus groups. The school connects students to local transportation programs, including D.C.'s Adult Learner Transit Subsidy Program and Capital Bikeshare.⁴ Furthermore, to support students in all programs, the school has specific connections to industries in which students with limited English proficiency can start working immediately, although not necessarily in their preferred field. However, career services support staff discussed the challenges that students face in finding fulfilling careers that match their qualifications from their countries of origin. For example, some students come to the United States with advanced degrees but are unable to get jobs in their fields because of licensing requirements and/or limited English proficiency.

The school employs professional mental health counselors, who are available to provide counseling and support to students who may be struggling to adjust to life in a new country or dealing with past trauma. The school offers childcare referrals, parenting conversation circles, and assistance with enrolling children in local schools. In addition, the school provides housing referrals, assistance in applying for public benefits, on-site health screenings, free clinic days, and referrals to legal aid services.



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Mental Health Services

The integration of mental health is another standout feature. Some administrators and staff shared that many students arrive with a history of trauma, ranging from experiences of war and displacement to the stress of adjusting to life in a new country. In response, the school offers trauma-informed mental health services. Licensed, multilingual mental health counselors are available on-site and via Zoom to provide ongoing therapy, crisis intervention, and emotional support. One counselor shared, *"We have a part-time licensed clinician who is Amharic speaking, and then I speak French and Spanish."* This linguistic and cultural responsiveness is intended to make students feel safe seeking help.

Teachers, case managers, or support staff can refer students to mental health counseling. Counselors visit classrooms to raise awareness of available services. The counseling team is available to respond to students' immediate needs, such as accompanying students to the hospital or offering one-on-one sessions. One GED student explained, *"If you have personal problems, you share with the counselors. It is free, so it's nice."* Another alum noted, *"I was with the counselor from the beginning ... until the end. In the university or school, [they typically] don't teach how to manage your emotions, and it was really helpful."*

One student shared how he benefited from the school's services after being assaulted:



I remember going to student services and getting connected with a counselor and getting to talk to them. In that way, I was supported to help me go through that process after that situation had happened to me. Then they were very supportive. ... It was great that the school had that service available and that the teachers also were prepared so that they knew what to do or how to react when a student had gone through that situation like I was."

⁴ The D.C. Adult Learner Transit Subsidy Program is intended for adult education participants and provides a \$70 monthly public transit benefit. Capital Bikeshare is bicycle-sharing service in the D.C. metropolitan area that offers low-cost options for qualifying residents.



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Mental Health Services

Counselors work proactively to reduce stigma and build resilience through classroom workshops and presentations on topics like stress management, depression, and domestic violence. For instance, counselors taught coping strategies for test anxiety to GED students before exams.

Partnerships

The Carlos Rosario School has current partnerships with external entities and is working to expand this network. Interviewees discussed the importance of partnerships with employers and industry leaders, support service providers, and cultural and advocacy groups.

Employers and Industry Leaders

The career services office at the school has a large network of local employers. Staff have built lasting, mutually beneficial relationships with many of these employers. The school staff use multiple strategies to regularly engage employers. For example, they invite employers to school events, reach out to local employers through networking events such as with the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington, organize job fairs with local employers, and stay connected with alumni. Alumni sometimes recommend to their employers hiring students from the Carlos Rosario School or become employers who participate in school events and programs and hire other students.

Employers play a significant role at the school by providing essential support and opportunities for students. They are involved in various aspects of the educational programs, ensuring that the curriculum aligns with industry standards and that students are well prepared for the workforce. Employers contribute through partnerships and collaborations, offering practical experiences, such as internships and practicums. Students in career training programs often participate in these opportunities. These hands-on opportunities are crucial for students to gain real-world experience and enhance their learning. In addition, for all programs (ESL, GED, and career training), employers participate in job placement efforts, helping to match students with appropriate employment opportunities. This collaboration is vital for securing job placements and ensuring that students are ready for professional environments. Regular communication with employers helps address various concerns related to job placement and ensures that students are placed in suitable positions.

Overall, the involvement of employers is integral to the school's mission of preparing students for successful careers by providing practical training, industry insights, and job placement support. One student services staff member described the relationship with employers:



We definitely have a long list of employers where we refer students. Again, part of that is industry specific, for career training, and then just the student services department, the employment, the job developers have some longstanding relationships with employers, where we will host job fairs, and they will interview students on the spot and set up positions that way."

Support Service Providers

The school partners with outside providers for certain services at the school and to make referrals for services that they do not offer at the school. Partnerships with external entities like the D.C. Bar Pro Bono Center and D.C. Health Link provide crucial resources and support for the school. For example, D.C. Health Link provides health insurance and immunization support. The school also partners with DC Futures and New Futures, a local scholarship agency, to aid students in finding funding resources. Furthermore, a Marriott Foundation grant and a Google for Education grant support the school in equipping students with digital literacy skills.

Cultural and Advocacy Groups

The school partners with other adult charter schools in D.C. to advocate for their unique needs to the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. School leadership meets regularly with other adult charter school leaders to share resources, boost student recruitment, and advocate for budget needs.

The school also partners with groups serving special populations, including cultural groups. For example, the school has regular collaborative meetings with the Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs, which were described as "vital" by a staff member at the school. They partner with La Clínica del Pueblo, an organization for the Latino community that provides health services and encourages civic engagement. Part of La Clínica del Pueblo includes Entre Amigas, a support group community to women who have experienced domestic violence, and some of the school's students have participated in this community. Staff and students highlighted partnerships with entities like My School DC for providing student enrollment support and helping students with school selection and application processes. My School DC is the common application and public school lottery for participating public schools and public charter schools in D.C. that serve prekindergarten through Grade 12.

Building Community

Through its mission-driven work, the Carlos Rosario School aims to provide a holistic education that fosters a strong sense of community. Several students expressed their deep connection to the school, with some describing it as a second home. Students' comments such as *"I am alone and for me, the school is family,"* and *"[The staff] show you respect and show you kindness, they show you love, without discrimination"* were heard during the focus groups. Many students shared their positive experiences with their friends and family members, making word of mouth a successful recruitment method for the school. One student shared that his father was a graduate of the school and encouraged him to enroll.

Fostering Social Connections: Community Beyond the Classroom

For some students, one motivation for enrolling in the school was social interaction or community integration. Many students we interviewed discussed how they learned from their peers and gained valuable insights into different cultures and perspectives, enriching their educational experience. An alumna shared her experience:

“ [The school provided] the opportunity to ... meet different people. At the beginning, I came alone without family. ... And for me, I didn't know any people here in DC. ... I really met a lot of people [through the school]. Some of us are [still] friends. We continue keeping contact [even though] we are out of Carlos Rosario. And I think it's a holistic experience, not only education.

This sentiment was echoed by staff, who shared that the school serves as a “third location” between work and home, offering peer-to-peer support and opportunities to connect with others in similar situations.

Dedicated Staff and Faculty: Creating a Welcoming Environment

This sense of community is reflected in the faculty and staff who go above and beyond to support

students. Most staff we interviewed expressed their commitment to the school and its mission. As one staff member, who is an alumna, expressed, *“We have a beautiful mission that ... there is so much passion that we put in what we're doing, because us as immigrants, we feel very identified. ... When we see students, sometimes we see ourselves in them.”* Others spoke about the importance of providing a welcoming learning environment, which they believed led to high student engagement. For example, some instructors and staff members discussed numerous activities and events that foster a sense of community and belonging such as cultural celebrations (e.g., Hispanic Heritage, Black History, and Asian American and Pacific Islander heritage months) and social activities through individual classes (e.g., sharing meals, holding class parties) and student clubs. One instructor emphasized the importance of building students' confidence in their tangible skills and empowering them to embrace their identities, including their accents.

One student highlighted the school's broader impact, stating, *“Not only to us as students, but the impact goes further, also to the families, to our neighbors. The school is not only like a school but like a source of support, a resource for the community.”* By cultivating a community-oriented atmosphere, the Carlos Rosario School strives to support its students and extend its influence to their families and neighborhoods, strengthening social ties across the broader community.

Empowering Alumni: Cultivating a Community of Mentorship and Leadership

Another notable aspect of the Carlos Rosario School's program model is that the school provides employment opportunities for alumni. Former students have returned to the school as tutors, staff

members, and faculty, eager to give back and support the new generation of students. Some career training programs directly hire graduates, such as IT staff and paraeducators.

A staff member shared the following success story of a student from the Dominican Republic who received the school's scholarship to pursue higher education and later returned to the school as a leader and advocate for the next generation of students:

“ *She's a graduate from our school. ... We supported her through our scholarship fund to get her business degree at [University of the District of Columbia]. ... She's in leadership in our school and just an amazing leader. ... She came and said ... [a] few years ago, 'We've just got more and more students who are coming who are facing housing issues or who are homeless, and they're going to get back on their feet, but for this month they don't have money to put food on the table or they lost their job.' ... We can't use our D.C. taxpayer dollars, but our fundraising dollars, those that are unrestricted. We absolutely can do that. And so we put in place criteria and a process, and that [student emergency fund] is growing, but now it's about \$15,000 annually.”*

Another student interviewee expressed their desire to return to the school to give back once they earn a degree:

“ *I would like to finish level eight of English [classes] here in Carlos Rosario. And then study whatever is necessary to be able to enter medical university to become a doctor and continue my studies. I would also like to continue being part of Carlos Rosario as a collaborator or in some area. I don't know, I would like to continue at school to help. How others have helped us.*

In addition, some instructors shared that they invite successful graduates back as guest speakers and role models, providing students with valuable insights on the career pathways. For example, one career training instructor said,

“ *For some of my lessons, I invite some of my [former] students. They become guest speakers in the class and they tell them about the experiences. They share whatever learnings they have as nurses, because now that they're nurses, they can share whatever they can share with the students. Yeah, I normally utilize the graduates that we have that are now nurses, and they're very willing to come and share whatever they can share about the topic or about their experiences, which is really good because then they can model, the students can model from them.*



PROMISING PRACTICE IN ACTION: Amplifying Student Voice Through Student Government

The Carlos Rosario School has a student government, which is designed to amplify students' voices, empower them to advocate for their needs, fundraise to provide support services, and foster leadership and civic engagement. Many students are new to democratic processes in the United States or community advocacy and volunteer programs. The student government provides opportunities for civic engagement in a familiar school environment and aims to help students develop valuable skills for their community integration and advocacy. For example, members of the student government engage with community organizations like the District of Columbia Board of Elections to educate students about their voting rights and civic responsibilities.

Student government at both Harvard and Sonia Gutierrez campuses is a nonelected, interest-based leadership body that serves as a vital link between students and school administrators. The school recruits members through information tables staffed by current or former representatives who share their experiences. Recruitment also occurs through flyers, announcements, Remind app messages, and school newsletters. Typically, Harvard's student government includes eight to 15 students from various levels and programs, while Sonia Gutierrez aims to recruit two students per class to ensure broad representation.

Student government activities. The group meets biweekly on-site, either after morning classes or before evening classes. The student government advocates for student needs, voicing concerns to the school administration and the D.C. Council. The student government also organizes fundraising activities, volunteer work and extracurricular events so that student interests are represented. School leadership uses student feedback to help improve school services. Some students who participated in the student government shared that these activities enhanced their educational experience and personal growth, helping them become active, engaged, and empowered members and leaders of their community. One staff member explained,



I think that right now when it comes to advocating for student needs, Carlos Rosario is excellent at taking students to the D.C. Council and voicing what their needs are. I think that that's something that has definitely worked with the student government. Just a great way of empowering our students and letting them know that they do have a voice and that they could really be changemakers."

The Carlos Rosario School's student government illustrates the institution's efforts to empower students as active participants in their education and broader community. Through advocacy, civic engagement, and leadership development, the student government is designed to equip students with the tools and confidence to navigate and contribute to democratic processes and community initiatives.

Potential Updates to Model

Throughout our interviews and focus groups, potential updates to the Carlos Rosario program model surfaced. Detailed next, these considerations include streamlining the enrollment process, improving cross-campus communication, hiring more staff, and increasing or changing available student services.

Streamline the Enrollment Process

Some students and staff shared frustration with the time-consuming enrollment process. Students reported waiting to enroll at the school for 4 hours or more. Some students even stated that they had to come back a second day to finish the enrollment process. When asked what could be improved, one

staff member said, *“How to mobilize the applicants faster so that they don’t stay that for [a] long period of time in order for them to enroll in the school. So that one is one of the biggest problems that we have.”*

Another staff member shared that *“the waiting times can take a long time. Sometimes applicants can wait 5 hours, and it compromises their work. It can compromise if they decide to follow through with the process.”*

Reviewing the enrollment process to increase efficiency and hiring additional intake staff to help process applications during the enrollment process are initiatives the school could undertake to reduce enrollment times.

Improve Cross-Campus Communication

The Carlos Rosario School is housed at two campuses, the Harvard Street campus and the Sonia Gutierrez campus. ESL and GED course offerings are held at the Harvard Street campus, and career training programs are held at the Sonia Gutierrez campus. Many staff reported a need for improved communication across the Harvard Street and Sonia Gutierrez campuses. Since the campuses serve different student programs, the instructor and student services staff experiences differ. Staff felt that increased communication could improve the instructor experience (e.g., sharing professional development opportunities). One staff member shared that *“...[there are] the difficulties, the challenges that we face in having the two campuses. There are still some persistent communication, coordination challenges, having people in two places.”*

Another staff member said, *“I think what needs to improve is ... I would say communication as a whole across campuses.”*

Establishing a staff member to serve as a cross-campus liaison is one way that the school could attempt to improve cross-campus communication.

Hire More Staff

Staff noted that more team members are needed to decrease demanding workloads. Some pointed to a specific need for additional tutors, counselors, and substitute instructors. Interviewees mentioned a large student to staff ratio in student services. Others described new roles that are needed, such as a student success advisor and general advising positions. One student services staff member stated, *“I think the workload that we as a department have, it’s a lot. And I think adding more manpower to the department, I think it will be more effective.”*

Another student services staff member shared the following:

“ We need to add a little more tools and also adding more manpower to not only to my department but also other departments, so that way the person doesn’t get overwhelmed, having so many students or pressure.”

Bringing on additional student services staff and substitute instructors would benefit the school’s current staffing team.

Update Student Services Portfolio

As described previously, the Carlos Rosario School provides numerous student support services. As more students enroll with credentials and different linguistic backgrounds, the school may need to update support services to meet the changing needs of students. For example, staff explained that some recently enrolled students speak languages for which the school cannot provide interpreters. One administrator said that *“cultural competency has been a huge focus for the last 2 years.”* It is an initiative to ensure that staff is prepared to interact with and serve the varied backgrounds of students. Continuing to review and adapt student support services is critical as the student population continues to grow and change.

Conclusion

The Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School provides a practical model for adult education in Washington, D.C. This qualitative study highlights the school’s approach, integrating academic instruction, career training, and support services to address the varying needs of adult learners. Key elements such as differentiated instruction, wraparound support services, and community-building initiatives are crucial in fostering student success and empowerment.

For adult education practitioners, the Carlos Rosario model offers actionable insights into effective strategies for engaging and supporting adult learners. Practices like digital literacy tutoring, SART, industry-aligned curricula, and amplifying student voice through student government can be adapted to various contexts to enhance program implementation and outcomes. Policymakers can use this model to inform decisions that support the expansion of adult education programs, ensuring they are equipped to meet the evolving needs of their communities.

By adopting and tailoring these practices, adult education providers can create supportive learning environments that empower adult learners to achieve their educational and career goals, ultimately contributing to their personal growth and community integration.

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