The Advancing Early Education Collaborative in Washington, DC

Year 1 Summary

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Early childhood educators are key to the academic, socio-emotional, and physical development of children. Despite this, many early learning educators are underpaid and lack professional development opportunities, which ultimately leads to disparities in pay and expertise (McLean et al. 2021). This is also an issue of equity, as most early childhood education workers are women and women of color.

In January 2022, through the support of JPMorgan Chase's AdvancingCities initiative,[1] a partnership of local community support organizations and universities in Washington, DC, began creating a more robust career pathways program in early education. The partnership's efforts are focused on Wards 7 and 8, a region of the district with a long history of underinvestment and lack of community services, whose residents are predominantly Black or Latinx and include many of DC's families with children. These organizations came together to address the lack of equitable opportunities for early childhood educators and the quality of early child care and childhood education in DC.

It was around these shared concerns that the partners formed the Advancing Early Education Collaborative (AEEC), with the goals of enhancing early education career pathways for Black and Latina women in Wards 7 and 8 and improving the overall quality of early education in Washington, DC. This brief covers the AEEC's efforts and achievements during the first year of a three-year AdvancingCities grant provided by JPMorgan Chase. Beginning with an overview of the project and its early accomplishments, this brief highlights findings from a focus group with program participants from American University and concludes with reflections on the AEEC's successes and challenges thus far, including opportunities to incorporate lessons learned into the collaborative's activities in year two.

Project Background

In a 2018 study covering early educator compensation in the Washington region (which includes Alexandria County, the City of Alexandria, and Fairfax County in Virginia; Prince George's County and Montgomery County in Maryland; and the District of Columbia), Isaacs, Adelstein, and Kuehn found that early educators in DC had the lowest average annual earnings, at just $16,442, among all jurisdictions; this amount was also below the regional annual average of $17,771. Wage disparities were also evident along racial lines: Black and Hispanic early educators, who make up three-quarters of the early educators in the District, earned $2.80 and $4.50 less in hourly wages, respectively, than white early educators in the region. Furthermore, the vast majority of early educators in the region—94 percent—were women. In other words, early educators in DC, who are very likely to be Black or Latina women, are low paid, even when compared with their white colleagues or early educators elsewhere in the region.

These low wages are a result of child care facilities having to bear large administrative and overhead costs, parents' inability to pay the level of wages that staff need and deserve, and society's general undervaluing of the early education profession. Furthermore, because of the ongoing impacts of a long history of structural racism, women of color—who make up a large share of workers in early learning settings—are subject to pay inequities and resource constraints such as personal debt and caretaking burdens (Lloyd et al. 2021).

Systemic challenges are also present in postsecondary education settings, as these institutions have not always been accessible to people of color and have often made it difficult to transfer credits between institutions. For example, the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential[2] is a widely recognized certification for early childhood educators, but most colleges and universities will not accept a CDA for credit, meaning that a student may have to repeat coursework they already completed in the CDA if they enroll in an early education degree program.[3] These are particularly pressing challenges, as a new DC child care regulation will require an associate degree for early childhood educators and a CDA for assistant teachers in licensed child care facilities by December 2023.[4]
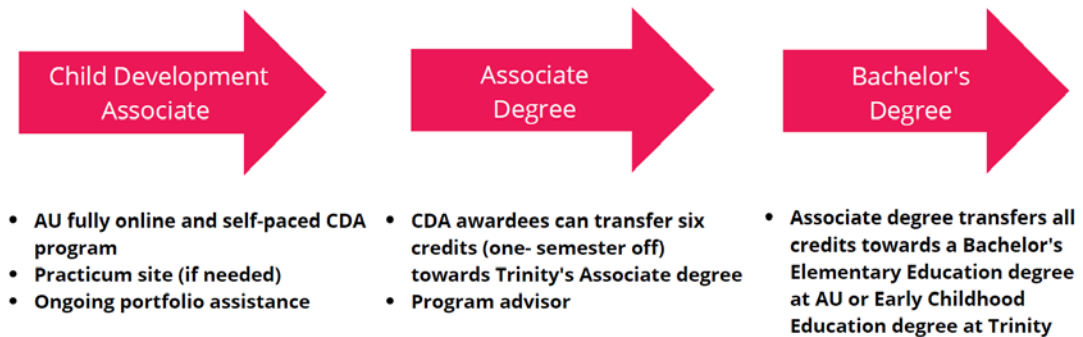
The conditions described above discourage people from entering the early education field and investing time and resources into professional development. They also inhibit the ability of Black and Latina women in particular to obtain higher-paying teaching positions in early education, particularly those that require advanced degrees (Greenberg and Luetmer 2022).

Project Overview

The purpose of the AEEC is to address these challenges and provide a viable early child care and education career track for women from underserved communities. The AEEC approaches this through two key initiatives:

- **First, the AEEC aims to increase the supply of qualified and credentialed early educators by supporting Black and Latina women living or working in Wards 7 and 8 who wish to enter or advance in this field.** Working with university partners, the AEEC has developed seamless credit transfer policies, creating a set of "stackable" or easy-to-build-upon early education credentials for advanced degrees (figure 1). Students can move through this education pathway and progressively acquire new skills while also receiving credit for past work. The AEEC is also removing barriers that prevent women from continuing their education and transitioning to the workforce by providing scholarships and supportive services such as mentorship, child care vouchers, transportation stipends, groceries and clothing, and financial coaching for wealth creation paired with cash assistance.

FIGURE 1

AEEC Stackable Early Education Credential Pathway

Child Development Associate	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree
• AU fully online and self-paced CDA program • Practicum site (if needed) • Ongoing portfolio assistance	• CDA awardees can transfer six credits (one- semester off) towards Trinity's Associate degree • Program advisor	• Associate degree transfers all credits towards a Bachelor's Elementary Education degree at AU or Early Childhood Education degree at Trinity

Source: VPP+RDC.

- **Second, the AEEC strives to create and promote better business models for early child care and early education providers that will support higher wages and quality benefits for teachers and provide a continuum of shared operational services for child development facilities.** The new Shared Services Plus pilot—created in partnership with the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)—will support Ward 7 and Ward 8 early learning centers, particularly smaller entities such as home-based and single-site operations run by Black and Latina women. OSSE currently operates a shared services model in DC, but the AEEC will enhance the existing model by consolidating and centralizing access to resources such as human resources, financial and accounting support, and other operations. The Shared Services Plus pilot will also provide tailored capacity-building services to the organizations (box 1).

BOX 1

Goals of the Shared Services Plus Pilot

Over the course of the pilot, the Shared Services Plus model hopes to achieve the following goals:

- Reduce the costs of operating a child care center by centralizing back office supports (e.g., human resources, finance and accounting, operations, and reporting) to a third-party vendor.
- Provide or explore the provision of needed systems (such as automated payroll and benefits) to smaller early learning centers.
- Improve the quality and accuracy of back office supports and services.
- Lay the groundwork for aligning early learning assessments, such as the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, among the participating centers and track improvements.
- Provide needed supports to center directors to improve the operations of early learning centers.

Project Partnerships

To achieve the AEEC's ambitious goals, a diverse coalition of partners is coordinating the wraparound supports needed by early education students and addressing the complex systems-change work needed within educational institutions and early education centers. The collaborative is designed in a way that allows each partner to play an important role, while also ensuring a clear leadership structure for decisionmaking, accountability to funders, and general oversight of project activities.

The collaborative consists of five types of partners: the lead grantee organization (Martha's Table), university partners (American University and Trinity Washington University), support services partners (LIFT-DC and Martha's Table), backbone support partners (Venture Philanthropy Partners+Raise DC [VPP+RDC]), and the evaluation partner (Urban Institute). The partners' respective roles are described below and summarized in table 1.

The university partners are often the first point of contact for AEEC participants, as one of the main eligibility criteria is being a student enrolled in a designated early childhood training program at one of the two universities. For American University, these are the CDA credential and the bachelor's degree in elementary education (figure 1). For Trinity Washington University, the designated higher education programs are the associate and bachelor's degrees in early childhood education. The university partners are largely responsible for recruiting new students to the educational programs, but other AEEC partners are also working to refer potential new AEEC students to the universities. Students completing the educational programs are also encouraged to take teacher certification exams, with the AEEC covering their exam fees.

In addition to their respective credentialing and degree programs, the universities are responsible for ensuring that students receive the supports they need to successfully complete their programs of study. With funding from the AdvancingCities grant, they provide AEEC students with scholarships and

other financial supports—such as transportation vouchers, child care vouchers, and exam fees—and refer students to AEEC partners for other support services. University partners also play an integral role in supporting students who intend to matriculate across programs. For example, the university would provide guidance to a student who completed the CDA program and intended to transfer their CDA coursework credits and enroll in the associate degree in early childhood education at Trinity Washington University.

The support services partners—LIFT-DC and Martha's Table—are responsible for providing services to referred students such as financial coaching, emotional wellness supports, transportation vouchers, child care vouchers, or supports for basic needs such as groceries. These supports are geared toward removing barriers that students may encounter during their education journey and providing additional benefits that will further enhance their academic experience. LIFT-DC is part of the national LIFT network and provides integrated financial, education, and career coaching to build pathways to economic stability and mobility. LIFT-DC also provides periodic direct cash to students enrolled in their coaching program as an investment in families. Martha's Table is a well-established community-led organization in Washington, DC, that provides a wide range of educational, family, health and wellness, and community supports. It also offers a site-based work practicum in early education, which is a necessary component of earning the CDA credential. As noted above, university partners work with students to identify their needs and then refer students to service partners through an electronic referral form. Service requests are recorded in a database for continuous improvement and evaluation purposes.

Lastly, the project management partners (VPP+RDC and Martha's Table) and evaluation partner (Urban Institute) are responsible for managing the overall project deliverables, setting up the project infrastructure and processes, coordinating with the various evaluation partners, and reporting progress and outcomes to AEEC partners, participants, funders, and the broader community. VPP+RDC is also leading the work to develop the Shared Services Plus pilot.

TABLE 1
AEEC Partner Organizations and Roles

Type of Partner	Name of Organization	Role
Lead grantee	Martha's Table	Administer grants and manage project deliverables and outcomes; co-lead partner relationship development
University	American University	Recruit and enroll students; provide students with educational services, scholarships, and referrals to support services partners
	Trinity Washington University	
Support services	LIFT-DC	Provide services related to financial, education, career, and wellness support
	Martha's Table	
Shared Services Plus pilot	VPP+RDC	Manage development and implementation of the pilot
Project backbone	VPP+RDC	Manage project infrastructure and coordinate partners, which includes guiding the overarching vision and direction of the network; convening, facilitating, and aligning partners; and providing overarching communications, meeting, and functional support
Evaluation	Urban Institute	Collect quantitative and qualitative performance data; report progress and outcomes to AEEC partners, participants, and funders

Lessons Learned from Year 1

Setting up the project infrastructure was a critical step in the first year of the AEEC's AdvancingCities grant. In year 1, the AEEC began recruiting program participants, making referrals, and providing services to students enrolled in the university programs. AEEC partners met monthly to refine collaborative goals, build relationships, discuss approaches, review progress, and problem solve. Additional partner working meetings focused on creating strategies around program recruitment and eligibility, the referral process, credit transfer policies, and data collection and reporting.

By the end of the first year, 93 students were designated as AEEC participants, meaning that they were enrolled in one of the CDA, associate, or bachelor's degree programs at a partner university and received some form of grant-funded support from either a university or support services partner. Eligibility for the program was restricted to Black or Latina women who either live in Ward 7 or 8 or work in an early education center in Ward 7 or 8.

Partners mapped out the various potential pathways for eligible students to enter the AEEC program, designed referral and response processes around these pathways, and developed the necessary materials and products to facilitate this process. This groundwork also involved developing recruitment and informational materials and conducting outreach at various events to market the stackable credentials program as well as the wraparound services offered through the collaborative.

In addition to setting up the project processes, the AEEC created an articulation agreement model allowing the partner universities to work together to offer stackable credentials by outlining how the credential programs will work together. For example, students who complete the CDA program at American University can transfer six credits to Trinity Washington University's associate degree program in early childhood education, and students who complete the associate degree can transfer credits to the bachelor's degree in early childhood education at Trinity Washington or the bachelor's in elementary education at American. This important systems change will give students a range of opportunities to complete their early education credential and degree programs. The articulation agreement is in the final stage of the signature process, with full implementation expected in early 2023.

Additional key achievements of the AEEC in year 1 are highlighted below:

- American University's CDA program has grown steadily since May 2022. By the end of 2022, 36 AEEC students were enrolled across five CDA courses.

- Trinity Washington University held 10 recruitment initiatives and supported 57 new and continuing AEEC students with scholarships, transportation stipends, child care stipends, and exam fees.

- VPP+RDC, as the backbone partner, led the effort to (1) create a shared definition of a program participant/prospect; (2) create a shared referral process to deliver services to AEEC students; and (3) develop and implement a student recruitment plan, which included developing a flyer that universities shared with their students.

- Martha's Table recruited lead teachers with a minimum of a bachelor's degree and several years of lead teaching experience to serve as mentors, developed a rubric to assess student performance, and led marketing and outreach campaigns to increase awareness of and enrollment into the program.

- LIFT-DC hired an additional paid, part-time coach to help process its AEEC member referrals and manage the delivery of its economic mobility coaching program.

- VPP+RDC worked closely with OSSE and seven early learning center directors in DC to obtain input on the Shared Services Plus design through multiple design sessions during fall 2022. They identified and prioritized the core competency areas most needed by center directors and identified a provider to offer the Shared Services Plus programming. The pilot will launch in early 2023, with a goal of engaging three to six early learning center directors as program participants.

- Urban focused on confirming the reporting infrastructure for the national evaluation team (Abt Associates), setting up the local evaluation consent process, developing individualized partner data reporting templates, and hosting a focus group discussion with AEEC students (see below). Urban also conducted a survey of AEEC partners in December 2022 to gauge how well partners felt they were working as a collaborative.

As expected with any new and complex endeavor, the AEEC has also experienced some challenges in the first year. For example, although setting up an effective project infrastructure is critical, this process took much more time than anticipated, which delayed the recruitment and enrollment processes and the project overall. Further, while the partners have referred 28 students to the various support services and have reached out to and followed up with the referred students, relatively few have taken up the services thus far. Partners have heard anecdotally, however, that students appreciate knowing where to access services in the future. The collaborative is refining the referral process to best meet the needs of students in upcoming months, which also includes refining messaging around program offerings, and will continue to track progress on this part of the initiative and make improvements going forward.

Other key lessons from the first year pertained to the relationship building that goes into setting up a successful collaborative. Before this project, the partners had never collaborated formally. VPP+RDC, as the backbone partner, realized early on that beyond setting up a project infrastructure and processes, the group needed to learn how to collaborate. To do this, VPP+RDC is continuously working with partners to secure buy-in on processes, take ownership over the work, and often ask people to work differently or outside of their normal day-to-day activities. Without the focus on relationship building, the project processes may have fallen flat. Instead, AEEC partners have engaged readily with new processes and even made changes to their existing workflows to accommodate and meet the needs of the project.

To help inform the AEEC's continuous improvement and learning around collaboration, Urban conducted a partner survey at the end of year 1 with questions that touched on processes, communication, leadership, capacity, and the goals of the AEEC. The survey revealed that partners felt positively about many aspects of the AEEC's joint work, such as the processes that have been put in place and collective skills of the group. But the survey also revealed areas for improvement. For example, while the group felt that roles are clearly defined, there was less clarity on the decisionmaking process as a group and room for improvement in communication within the group and from leadership. There were also mixed views about the feasibility of the goals set by the project, as well as questions about whether the group has adequate funding and "people power" to achieve them. It will be important for the AEEC to take these insights forward into year 2 and determine how best to improve their collaboration and effectively deliver services to students and early learning centers. Urban will repeat the partner survey in year 2 to measure the partnership's progress toward these goals.

Focus Groups

To gain a better understanding of the needs of participants in the AEEC program, Urban conducted a focus group with AEEC students from the CDA program at American University. We reached out to a total of 31 students, and 7 were able to participate in this first focus group. The focus group was held over Zoom in January 2023 and was co-facilitated by an Urban staff researcher and a trained community researcher. The community researcher, a member of the Urban-Greater DC team recruited from Wards 7 and 8, was hired based on the understanding that participants may feel more connected to and potentially more comfortable sharing their thoughts with someone from their own community, enabling a more informative conversation with the focus group participants. A second focus group is planned for Trinity Washington University students in early 2023.

Summary of Findings

We asked focus group participants about their professional and personal experiences in early education, challenges related to career advancement in early education, and aspirations for the future. We also asked about specific supports that would help them pursue their educational and professional goals and any interactions they may have had with AEEC partners.

Most focus group participants already had some level of experience in early education, either as an assistant, instructor, or a teacher. When asked about their decision to pursue a CDA, some participants shared that they enrolled in the program because they felt credentials were a necessary step to advance in an early education career. One woman mentioned, "As far as even trying to just get into the school system, they want you to have…some type of credential," while another added, "In the education of young kids…it's a lot of credentials and a lot of things that you need." But participants also expressed a genuine interest in improving their skills as teachers, sharing that they had "a passion for child care" and "just want to be better with it."

With a lot of things, as far as even trying to get into the school system, they want you to have, you know, some type of credential based around kids, even to be a receptionist in a school or substitute in a school in a daycare even to get your hours…they still want to see that you're working towards getting your credential to be here permanently or if you're going to advance somewhere else.

—Focus group participant

The conversation also provided insight into participants' awareness of and engagement with the support services partners within the AEEC collaborative. Five participants had heard of Martha's Table, referencing food and clothing drives hosted by the organization at their children's schools, and two had recently been referred by the university to receive additional services. Only one participant shared that they had previous experience with LIFT-DC, but four participants learned about the organization as result of the AEEC referral process.

The discussion also focused on challenges faced by participants in completing their credentialing. A common barrier that participants expressed was transportation, with one participant anticipating the logistical challenges of working early hours in an early childhood center while also having to transport their own children to school. Other challenges included students having to balance school with other commitments, such as work and family, and the technological burden of pursuing credentials. Participants highlighted several supports they had not yet received which would help address these challenges, including SmarTrip cards,[5] rideshare services, or carpools to help with transportation and laptops to support working from home. Several participants also agreed that they would benefit from networking opportunities or support groups with fellow students, with whom they may otherwise not interact because of remote learning.

The focus group concluded with participants sharing their career aspirations and goals related to their progress in the program. Three participants said that their short-term goal was to be employed as an early childhood education teacher, although responses about long-term goals were more varied. While some have plans to run their own child care centers and organizations or serve in project management roles, others expressed uncertainty at what exact roles they hoped to obtain. Participants shared similar personal goals, however, such as financial stability for themselves and their families and homeownership.

This initial focus group discussion with CDA students included several notable takeaways for AEEC partners to consider as they work to support participants both in and outside of the classroom. First, the focus group affirmed that participants view CDA credentials as valuable to their professional growth in terms of helping them build skills and find new jobs. Whether AEEC participants are able to secure quality, permanent early education jobs after earning their CDAs, however, will need to be tracked over the course of the project.

Regarding supportive services, some participants learned about Martha's Table and LIFT-DC for the first time through outreach emails, indicating that the AEEC is having some preliminary success in connecting students with services they may not have been previously aware of. Nevertheless, most participants were unfamiliar with LIFT-DC's role in the collaborative compared with the better-known Martha's Table, highlighting further opportunities to inform students about the range of services available.

Finally, the participants' need for support with transportation, remote learning, and networking suggests areas for the AEEC to potentially strengthen or expand its services, as well as better highlight the services for students that already exist. For example, transportation vouchers are available to AEEC

students for travel to and from their CDA practicum site. However, none of the focus group participants mentioned the vouchers when they spoke about their transportation challenges, and their transportation needs seem to be broader than just within the CDA program. It may be that students were not aware that transportation vouchers were available, or that they did not indicate transportation as a need in their initial intake survey. In addition, the technological support offered through the AEEC requires students to travel to a specific site and use the technology there, rather than offering access to an at-home laptop, which the students would prefer. Lastly, students expressed an interest in opportunities for peer support and connection, which the program does not currently offer. These insights will be invaluable as the AEEC considers adjustments to the program in its second year.

Conclusion

The AEEC has set ambitious goals to both improve the ability of Black and Latina women in DC's Wards 7 and 8 to have successful careers in early education and improve their economic outcomes. As with any new project of this size and scope, the AEEC faced challenges and learned valuable lessons; as the evaluation partner, the Urban Institute's role is to capture and report on these challenges and focus group findings to improve efforts moving forward. We highlight the major takeaways from year 1 below, as well as reflections on how the collaborative can incorporate them into the project as we enter year 2.

Although setting up an effective project infrastructure is critical to overall success, this step took much more time than originally anticipated. Additionally, the complexity of the project led to the prioritization of certain processes over others. A major focus for year 2 is refining the processes that have already been established, creating and enhancing processes and infrastructure for upcoming project needs, and ensuring that students continue to have a positive and seamless academic journey.

A major success of year 1 was negotiating the articulation agreement between universities and submitting it for final signature, which will allow students to incrementally pursue credential and degree programs at their own pace and receive support throughout the process. This represents a significant systems-level change in the higher education landscape in Washington, DC, but it will need to be evaluated further following its implementation in early 2023. For example, how many students will transfer from one program to another? How will the articulation agreement facilitate this process? Do any barriers remain that need to be addressed?

Messaging and recruitment efforts and improved engagement with students are also high priorities for year 2. To achieve its enrollment goals, the collaborative must continue to prioritize marketing, recruitment, and retention. Additionally, partners need to improve and increase the frequency of communication about services so that students are aware of what services are available to them. The AEEC should look for ways to center students throughout this iterative process, such as integrating ongoing feedback from students to strengthen processes and engagement, which in turn will improve and enhance their academic experience.

VPP+RDC has been spearheading development of the Shared Services Plus model, which aims to create a network of early childhood centers that can access a range of shared operational services as

well as establish standardized quality of care across all centers. The pilot program, anticipated to launch in early 2023, will be a key effort in year 2, with a focus on obtaining baseline information from the program participants. Each early learning center participant will receive specific capacity-building supports through a bespoke approach intended to meet their center's unique needs.

The AEEC partner survey revealed that there is room for improvement in how project leadership communicates with partners, which includes communicating about the collaborative's decisionmaking processes. The CDA student focus group discussion raised some potential areas for improvement, specifically around the student journey and ensuring that students are fully informed of the services available to them. Some approaches might include refining the onboarding process and adapting the partnership's communication strategy to be more engaging and hands on.

Drawing from the evidence and lessons learned in year 1, the evaluation team has highlighted several areas of opportunity to incorporate these findings into the next phase of work. The ultimate goals for year 2 will be improving the student journey throughout the program and creating a deeper connection and sense of community with program participants through efforts such as refining messaging and touch points to support recruitment, referral, and other processes. The evaluation team will continue to support AEEC partners as they pursue their work in the second year of the AdvancingCities grant (box 2).

BOX 2

Key AEEC Activities for Year 2

Below, we summarize the core activities to be carried out in year 2.

Collaborative activities:

- Develop a formal marketing and strategic enrollment management plan to support recruitment and retention efforts, with anticipated execution in March 2023.

- Increase student engagement with a focus on improving connection and soliciting more student input on program structure.

- Implement a dashboard and project management calendar to aid progress reporting and promote accountability among partners.

- Finalize program design and onboard an intermediary for the Shared Services Plus pilot; begin marketing and outreach efforts to Ward 7 and 8 centers owned and/or operated by Black and Latina women.

Evaluation activities:

- Conduct additional focus groups with AEEC participants.

- Interview AEEC partners to better understand successes and challenges in program implementation.

- Repeat the AEEC partner survey to track progress in building a strong collaboration.

Notes

[1] Launched in 2018, the Annual Challenge (formerly known as the AdvancingCities Challenge) is a yearly competition that supports promising ideas to advance equity and economic opportunity through effective leadership and community-driven solutions that foster collaboration and contribute to systemic, sustainable change. The challenge is part of a $500 million, five-year initiative to help drive inclusive, equitable growth and create greater economic opportunity in communities across the globe. See more at "AdvancingCities," JPMorgan Chase, accessed January 6, 2022, https://www.jpmorganchase.com/impact/communities/advancingcities.

[2] For more information on the CDA credential, see "Child Development Associate National Credentialing Program," Council for Professional Recognition, accessed January 16, 2022, https://www.cdacouncil.org/en/.

[3] An exception is if the college or university has a credit for prior learning program or a test-out/waiver program in place.

[4] For new DC educational requirements, see "New Educational Requirements," DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education, accessed January 16, 2022, https://osse.dc.gov/page/teacher.

[5] SmarTrip is a stored value payment card system managed by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA). It can be used to pay for WMATA bus and rail services and other public transportation services in the region.

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