

The role of school boundaries in the District of Columbia

Facts and findings on boundary participation, student representation, and facility utilization



D.C. POLICY CENTER
Education Policy Initiative

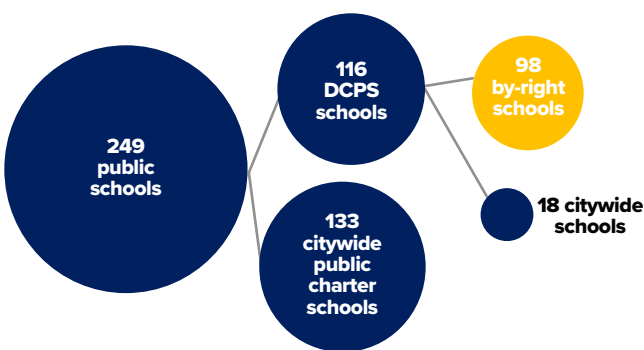
In 2023, the District of Columbia will undertake a review of address-based student assignments — known as boundary assignments. The review will focus on three elements: student assignments, capacity at by-right schools, and equitable access to high-quality schools. What do we already know about school boundaries in D.C. that might inform the city’s official review?

Most students in D.C. do not attend their by-right school.

Instead, 72% of D.C. students apply through the common lottery to attend a citywide DCPS school, another DCPS school as an out-of-boundary student, or a public charter school.

Fewer than half of D.C.’s public schools are by-right schools.

Out of 249 public schools in D.C., 98 are by-right schools: DCPS schools where students have a guaranteed seat based on their home address.



Younger students are more likely than their older peers to attend their by-right school.

Elementary grades have the highest boundary participation rates, at 31%. High schools have the lowest boundary participation rates, at 20%.

In general, by-right schools are not racially and ethnically representative of students citywide. This is, in part, because by-right schools tend to reflect neighborhood demographics, rather than citywide demographics.

D.C. has 104* by-right schools. At 53 of them, the share of Black students is at least 5 percentage points higher than the citywide average for the grade band (elementary, middle, or high school) that the school serves.

*98 by-right schools, when counted by separate campuses, is 104.

By-right schools in D.C. are not socioeconomically representative of students citywide either, though socioeconomic representation is stronger than racial or ethnic.

1 out of every 3 schools within 15 percentage points of the city average for at-risk students compared to one out of every five schools within 15 percentage points of the city average for Black students.

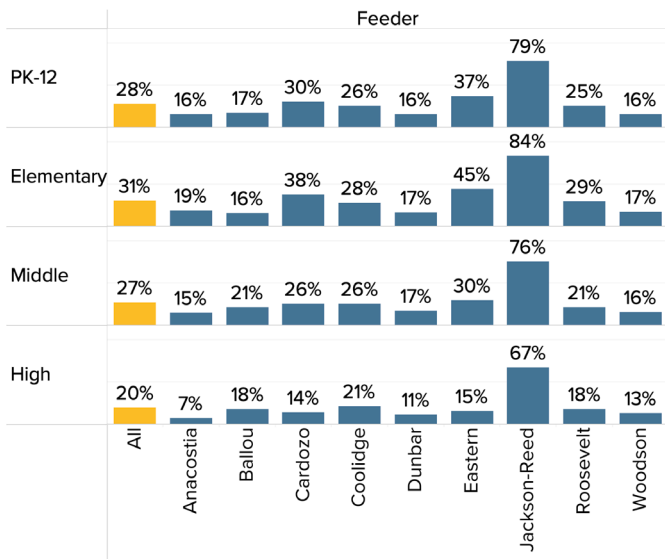
Facility utilization rates vary across the city and by grade band. There are some pockets of high utilization even where boundary participation may be low.

9 facilities are flagged as over-utilized, and 16 facilities are flagged as under-utilized.

Boundary participation rates vary greatly across the city.

Of the city's 9 feeder patterns, 1 (Jackson-Reed) has a boundary participation rate that is almost 3x greater than the city average. In contrast, 4 other feeder patterns have boundary participation rates of less than 20%.

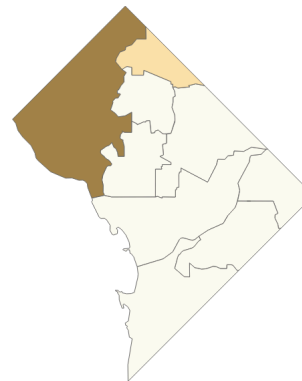
Boundary participation rate by grade band and feeder pattern, school year 2021-22



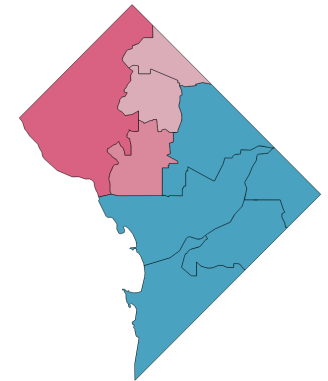
Jackson-Reed is the feeder pattern with the highest boundary participation. In it, Black students are under-represented and white students are over-represented.

Black students are under-represented and white students are over-represented by at least 30 percentage points.

Boundary participation rates at by-right high schools



Representation of Black students at by-right high schools



What does this mean for the city's 2023 boundary review process?



Shifting schools' geographic boundaries may not make a huge difference for enrollment at many by-right schools.

This is because only 28% of students attend their by-right school.



But in some areas of the city, redrawing boundaries could make more of a difference.

These are places where boundary participation is highest, diversity is low, and facility utilization is too high or too low.



In other areas, student assignment policies that are not related to residence could shift enrollment.

Read the full report: dcpolicycenter.org/publications/school-boundaries