

2021-22

State of D.C. Schools

Student Priorities



D.C. POLICY CENTER

Education Policy Initiative

State of D.C. Schools is an annual systemwide overview of public education in the District of Columbia. The D.C. Policy Center shared the findings from this year's report with a group of D.C. public high school students. Reflecting on their lived experiences, students ranked the findings by importance. Four themes emerged:

#1: School safety and community violence

Students wanted to feel safe in their communities, at school, and during their commutes—but they did not.

FINDINGS

39% of female students reported unwanted interactions during their commute.

19% of male students reported the same.

Feelings of safety impacted student attendance.

8% of high school students reported not going to school because of safety concerns at school or on their commutes.

Community violence rose during the school year, and occurred disproportionately in Wards 7 and 8.

The year saw a 13% increase in homicides citywide.

**STUDENTS DESCRIBED THE
2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR AS**

Stressful • Chaotic • Intense •
Overwhelming • Disorganized • Exciting

#2: Mental health

As they returned to in-person class after a year of virtual learning, the stress and shock of the transition back took a toll on students' mental health. Many students continued navigating household responsibilities they had shouldered during virtual learning. Others returned to the unfamiliar surroundings of different school buildings than where they had attended before the pandemic.

FINDINGS

36% of high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless

This is an uptick from 33% two years ago.

Schools increased resources in response.

Many schools added more social-emotional learning into lessons and connected students to mental health professionals and resources.

Students reported that these increased mental health resources still weren't enough.

The share of high school students who reported feeling sad, empty, hopeless, or anxious and received help they needed *dropped* to 23% in school year 2021-22, from 25% in 2019-20.

#3: Equitable resource distribution and access to opportunity

Students who live in Wards 7 and 8 have less access to some resources. They face greater challenges when navigating their neighborhoods, and in accessing educational opportunities.

FINDINGS

Fewer Advanced Placement (AP) classes.

Across DCPS and public charter schools, Wards 6, 7, and 8 have fewer AP classes, on average, per high school student.

More teacher vacancies.

Wards 6, 7, and 8 saw the highest percentage of teacher vacancies in 2020-21. Teacher vacancies contribute to larger class sizes.

Longer commutes to class.

Students who live in Wards 7 and 8 travel further to attend school. Across all grade levels, students from Wards 7 and 8 travel, on average, over 3 miles to get to school—a mile more than other students.

More community violence.

Homicides are disproportionately concentrated in Wards 7 and 8, accounting for 63% of the city's total. Research suggests exposure to community violence negatively impacts students' mental health.

#4: Academic performance

Academic performance was negatively impacted by virtual learning, returning to in-person, and COVID-19 quarantines. Challenges such as loss of family, lack of social interaction, community violence, and poor mental health contributed to the decline in academic performance.

FINDINGS

Since the pandemic started, academic performance has declined.

- State assessment scores show a decrease in the share of students meeting expectations in ELA (37 to 31%) and math (31 to 19%).
- Students who are designated as at-risk saw a particularly sharp drop in their scores, with fewer meeting expectations in both ELA (21 to 15%) and math (16 to 6%).
- The score gap between white students and Black and Latino students also increased.

More students have been chronically absent.

The percentage of students who were chronically absent increased. Almost half of all students missed at least 10% of all school days. These numbers were even higher for students designated as at-risk and students with disabilities, at 66% and 58% respectively.

Where to make investments

The students we spoke to want to see:

More and safer school transportation.

Students asked for more city-provided transportation to school. They also want Safe Passage—a program that places trusted adults from the community along specific student commute routes—expanded.

More quality mental health supports.

Including mental health days for students who are struggling.

More teachers to lessen teacher burden.

Students want to see more teachers hired, to help lessen teacher burnout and decrease the need for virtual instructors.

More access to creative curriculum in all 8 wards of the city.

Students requested more universal access to a broader range of curriculums, including trade-based, technology-focused, artistic, and specialty curricula.