

Supporting Students with Health Conditions in District of Columbia Public Schools

Students with health conditions are at risk for poor education outcomes such as absenteeism and low academic performance. Racial/ethnic minority students and economically disadvantaged students might have more limited access to medical care and information than other students, making school support even more important for them. District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) partnered with the Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic to conduct a study aimed at understanding how the prevalence of health conditions differs by student characteristics, whether students are supported through a 504 plan or an individualized education program (IEP), and the relationship between health conditions and education outcomes. DCPS expects to use the findings of this study to inform an action plan for equitably supporting students who have a health condition. This study used descriptive methods to analyze data for the 2018/19 school year, including administrative records, standardized test data, and health conditions and treatment data. In addition to examining the prevalence of any reported health condition, analyses focused on a core set of three conditions that are likely to be chronic, highly prevalent, or associated with education outcomes: asthma, attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), and food allergies.

Key findings

- **More than a quarter of DCPS students in 2018/19 had a reported health condition, with higher prevalence among students who are male, who are Black/non-Hispanic, who are economically disadvantaged, or who attend school outside their ward of residence.** This study found lower prevalence rates than other data sources for the city, suggesting that health conditions might be underreported to DCPS schools or under-identified in data systems, especially for Black/non-Hispanic students. DCPS could consider working with service providers and other community partners to increase health condition screenings and develop data sharing agreements.
- **Asthma was the most prevalent health condition, reported by 16 percent of students in DCPS, which is double the national average.** To address this, DCPS could evaluate possible asthma triggers within school buildings; encourage schools to organize support groups for students and families; and provide resources, such as lists of asthma triggers, ways to avoid them at home and at school, and contact information for local services.
- **Student support through a 504 plan or an IEP was associated with student characteristics.** Among students with reported health conditions, those who are White and not economically disadvantaged were more likely to receive support through a 504 plan, whereas those who are Black and economically disadvantaged were more likely to receive support through an IEP. This study did not examine the specific supports that students received or whether the supports were associated with the severity of the health condition. DCPS could further investigate the types and quality of supports schools provide and whether differences are associated with student characteristics or the severity of the health condition.
- **Students with reported health conditions generally fared worse on education outcomes than students without health conditions.** Students with asthma or ADHD were less likely to be proficient in math and reading and more likely to be chronically absent and suspended than students without those health conditions. Students with food allergies fared better or the same as students without food allergies. Asthma was more common among economically disadvantaged students, and food allergies were more common among students who were not economically disadvantaged.