



# The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog  
[www.dcfpi.org](http://www.dcfpi.org)

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## Helping DC Students Facing Health and Nutrition Challenges

By Jenny Reed

Low-income children are more likely to come to school hungry or to suffer from a serious illness that impacts their ability to learn. Improving [school health and nutrition services](#) reduces missed school days and helps ensure students come to school ready to learn, making it an important part of improving educational outcomes in the District.

Children in DC rank worse than the national average on many health outcomes including asthma, obesity, and food insecurity. This is partly because child poverty in DC is higher than in the nation as a whole.

Schools are a great place to help students with health and nutrition needs. Students who eat school breakfast, for example, have higher test scores and fewer absences. Access to school health centers and school nurses makes it more likely that children will seek care, which reduces absences and increases the likelihood that students stay in school.



By woodleywonderworks, at:  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/wwworks/2458666314/>

The District provides a number of [health and nutrition services](#) for students, and performs well in a number of ways. Yet there are gaps that could be addressed in the following ways:

- **Increase the number of school-based health centers.** Bringing primary care services directly into the school increases student access to care, reduces health-care costs and improves academic outcomes. School-based health centers currently exist at only six DC high schools in school year 2014-15.
- **Increase the number of school nurses.** Ten DC schools have student-to-nurse ratios that were well above industry standards. Also, one of 10 DC public schools, and more than one of seven public charter schools, has only a part-time nurse.
- **Increase participation in key health programs.** Just over two thirds of students use school health centers, and just 19 schools have requested oral care services.
- **Increase the number of schools that use innovative school breakfast practices.** The District offers free breakfast for all students in all schools. While participation has grown since

the mid-2000s, it has declined in recent years in some DC public schools. Increasing the use of innovative serving practices, like grab-and-go breakfasts, can help DC get back on track to boost participation in school breakfast.

- **Add a ‘Healthy School’ indicator on school ratings.** DC schools are assessed on various academic measures, but not health and nutrition outcomes. Schools in Chicago, Colorado and Illinois report on health and nutrition standards, which prompts schools to be more engaged in how they could make their schools healthier.

You can read more about what DC schools can be doing to help low-income children succeed [here](#).

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