

Special Education in the School District of Philadelphia: Understanding the Landscape, 2018-19

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Summary of Key Findings

As of October 1, 2018, there were 215 District schools serving 126,994 students. About 15% of these students (19,245 students) had an IEP classified by at least one disability.

In this brief, we used the primary disability identified in each IEP to examine the demographic composition of each group. We found:

- The most common primary IEP classification was *Specific Learning Disability* (40% of IEPs).
- 47% of the students with IEPs had more than one disability.
- Male students with IEPs outnumbered female students with IEPs by two to one (68% male students vs. 32% female students).
- The distribution of IEP classifications varied by race and ethnicity: 48% of Hispanic/Latino students with IEPs had the classification *specific learning disability* (compared to the District average of 40%), and 26% of Asian students with IEPs had the classification *autism* (compared to the District average of 15%).

This brief provides a descriptive summary of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) classifications of students in the School District of Philadelphia during the 2018-19 school year.¹ Charter school students and District students with a gifted IEP without a disability are not included in this analysis.

Guiding Questions

1. What are the IEP classifications of students in the School District of Philadelphia? How do these classifications vary by student demographic characteristics? By grade spans?
2. How do attendance and suspension outcomes of students with IEPs compare to the District average?

Methods

To understand the descriptive landscape of the District's special education population, we used the October 1, 2018 enrollment snapshot to conduct a descriptive summary of the classifications. We used primary classifications to categorize IEPs, then used 2018-19 District attendance and suspension records to answer the second guiding question.

¹ This brief was inspired by the format and research questions of a brief written by Cheri Fancsali and published by the Research Alliance for New York City Schools in August 2019, entitled [Special Education in New York City: Understanding the Landscape](#).

In This Brief

Summary of Key Findings	1
Guiding Questions	1
Methods	1
Descriptive Findings of IEP Classifications, 2018-19	3
About 15% of District students had an IEP classified by at least one disability in 2018-19.	3
The most common primary IEP classification in 2018-19 was <i>specific learning disability</i> (40% of IEP classifications).....	3
Overall, about 47% of IEPs in 2018-19 (n=8,988) included a secondary disability.....	4
The percentage of students with IEPs in 2018-19 varied by grade level.....	5
IEP classifications were unevenly distributed by race/ethnicity in 2018-19.....	5
The racial/ethnic composition of students with IEPs in 2018-19 varied according to grade band, suggesting that IEP classification timing may vary by race/ethnicity.....	6
In 2018-19, twice as many male students as female students had IEPs.	7
The distribution of IEP classifications in 2018-19 varied for female and male students.	8
The distribution of IEP classifications varied between racial/ethnic subgroups in 2018-19.....	9
The percentage of students with IEPs, as well as their primary classifications, varied across schools in 2018-19.....	10
Attendance and Suspension Patterns among Students with IEPs in 2018-19.....	12
Average Daily Attendance (ADA) rates in 2018-19 varied by IEP classification.	12
The percentage of students with zero out-of-school suspensions varied by IEP classification in 2018-19.	13
Conclusion	14
Appendix.....	15

Descriptive Findings of IEP Classifications, 2018-19

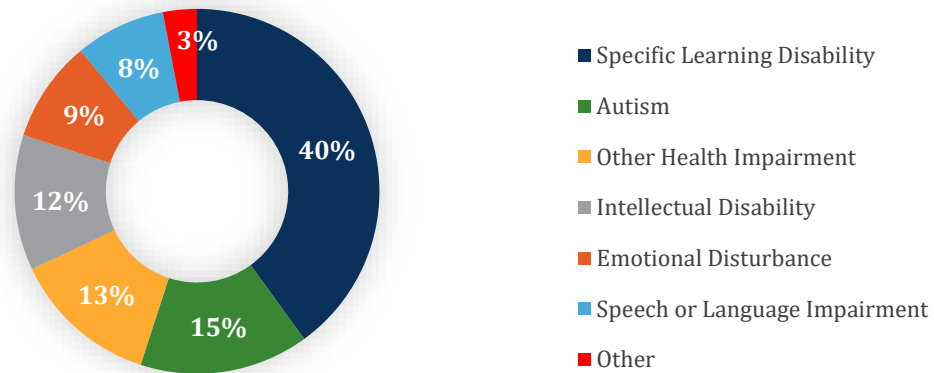
About 15% of District students had an IEP classified by at least one disability in 2018-19.²

As of October 1, 2018, there were 215 District schools³ serving 126,994 students. At that time, about 15% (or 19,425) of District students had an IEP classified by at least one disability. There are 12 possible disability categories⁴ for IEP classifications, and up to two specific disability categories may be included in each.

The most common primary IEP classification in 2018-19 was *specific learning disability* (40% of IEP classifications).

The most common primary IEP classification for K-12 District students in 2018-19 was *specific learning disability* (40% of classifications). This was followed by *autism* (15% of classifications), *other health impairment* (13% of classifications), and *intellectual disability* (12% of classifications). *Emotional disturbance* (9%) and *speech or language impairment* (8%) each comprised slightly less than 10% of IEPs (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Primary IEP classifications of K-12 District students, 2018-19
(Number of students with IEP classification = 19,245)



Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018 enrollment snapshot.

Notes: *Other* includes students with the following primary IEP classifications: developmental delay, hearing impaired including deafness, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and multiple disability with no specified primary disability. The number of students in each primary IEP classification is provided in Table A1 in the Appendix.

² Gifted students without disability are not included in the definition. Gifted students with disability are included in the definition.

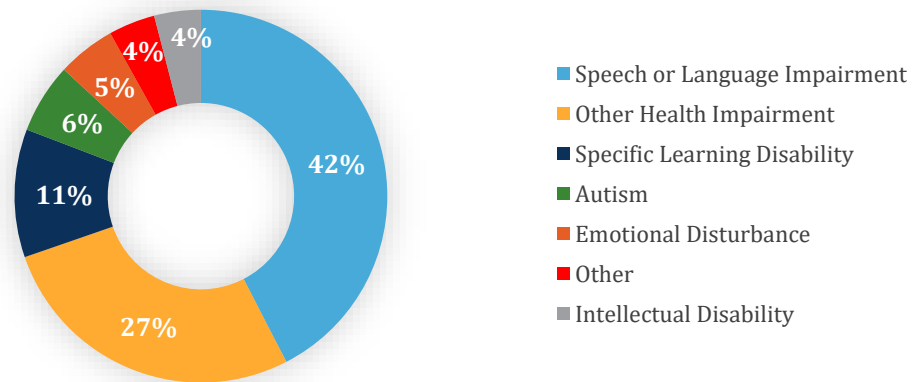
³ Charter schools, alternative schools, pre-kindergartens, and special education schools are not included in the count of District schools.

⁴ Categories that comprise less than 2% of the total primary classifications (unspecified multiple disabilities, hearing impairment, visual impairment, traumatic brain injury, orthopedic impairment, and developmental delay) are combined under *Other*.

Overall, about 47% of IEPs in 2018-19 (n=8,988) included a secondary disability.

The most common secondary IEP classification was *speech or language impairment* (42% of IEP classifications with a secondary disability; see Figure 2). This was followed by *other health impairment* (27% of classifications) and *specific learning disability* (11% of classifications).

Figure 2. Secondary IEP classifications of K-12 District students, 2018-19
(Number of students with IEPs with two identified disabilities = 8,988)



Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018 enrollment snapshot.

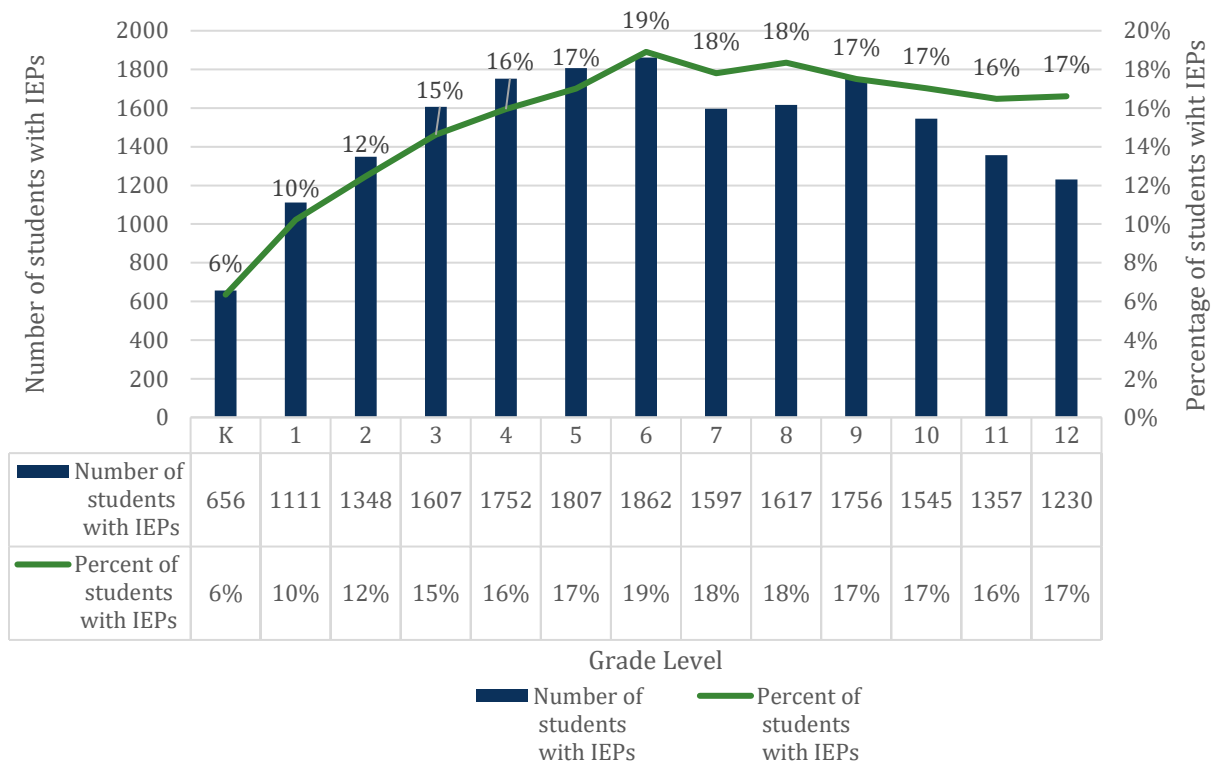
Notes: *Other* includes students with the following primary IEP classifications: developmental delay, hearing impaired including deafness, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and multiple disability with no specified primary disability. The number of students in each secondary IEP classification is provided in Table A1 in the Appendix.

IEPs with two disability classifications most commonly co-identified *autism* (primary disability) and *speech or language impairment* (secondary disability). About 79% of IEPs with a primary classification of *autism* included a secondary disability: 50% of the time, this was *speech or language impairment*.

The percentage of students with IEPs in 2018-19 varied by grade level.

District-wide, 15% of all enrolled students had IEPs in 2018-19⁵. However, this percentage varied by grade. For example, 6% of students in kindergarten had an IEP, compared to 19% of sixth graders (Figure 3). The total percentage of students with IEPs per grade stabilized in high school (16-17%).

Figure 3. Percentage of District students with IEPs, by grade level, 2018-19



Source: School District of Philadelphia Oct 1, 2018 enrollment snapshot.

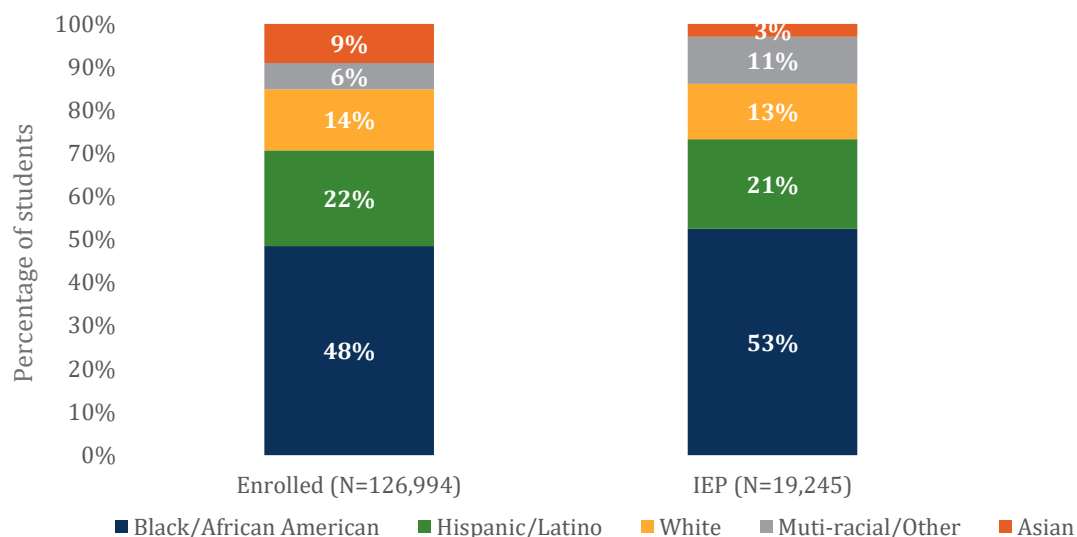
Note: The total number of enrolled students and total number of students with IEPs for each grade level are included in Table A3 in the Appendix.

IEP classifications were unevenly distributed by race/ethnicity in 2018-19.

Racial/ethnic groups were not equally represented in the IEP classifications (Figure 4). Black/African American students were disproportionately overrepresented overall; they represented 48% of District-wide enrollment but 53% of District-wide students with IEPs. Multi-Racial/Other students were also disproportionately overrepresented (6% of enrollment and 11% of students with IEPs), while the percentages of Hispanic/Latino and White students with IEPs were relatively comparable to their overall demographic representation. Asian students were disproportionately underrepresented among students with IEPs (9% of enrollment and 3% of students with IEPs).

⁵ Charter schools, alternative schools, pre-kindergartens, and special education schools are not included in the count of District schools. Gifted students without disability are not included in the definition. Gifted students with disability are included in the definition.

Figure 4. Racial/ethnic distribution of District enrollment and students with IEPs, 2018-19



Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018 enrollment snapshot.

Note: Students who are American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander comprise less than 1% of the total student enrollment and are not shown above.

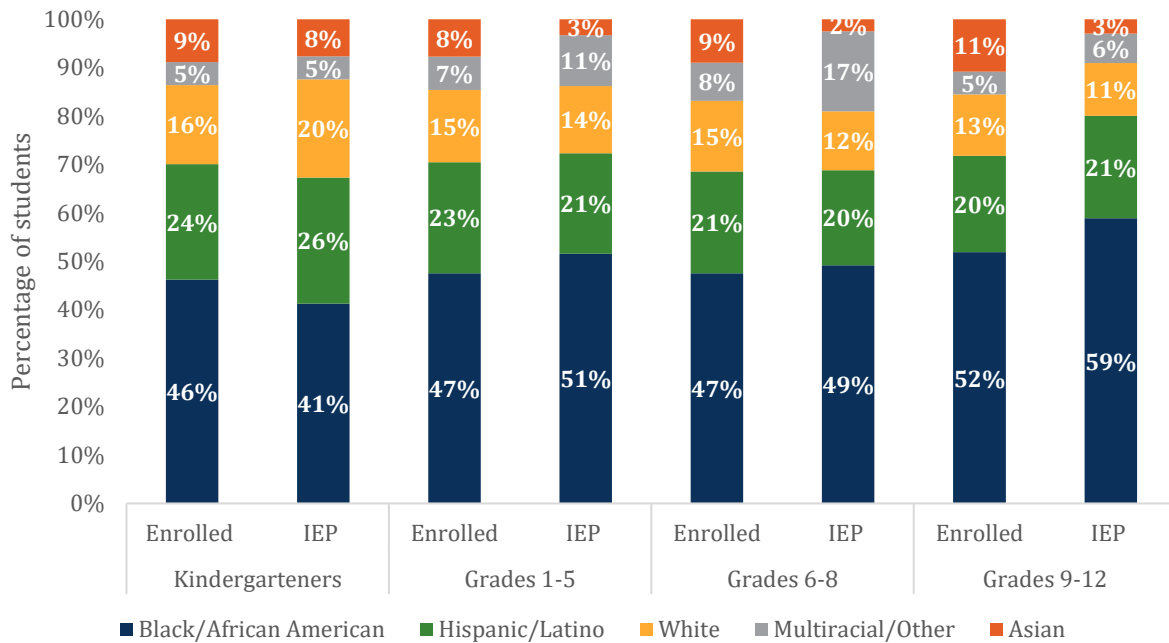
How to read this figure: The first bar represents the percentage of each racial/ethnic student group enrolled in grades K-12 in 2018-19. The second bar represents the percentage of each racial/ethnic group with IEPs in 2018-19. For example, 48% of K-12 students enrolled in District schools were Black/African American in 2018-19, and 53% of K-12 students with IEPs were Black/African American.

The racial/ethnic composition of students with IEPs in 2018-19 varied according to grade band, suggesting that IEP classification timing may vary by race/ethnicity.

Black/African American students, who were overrepresented in the total percentage of students with IEPs (Figure 4), were in fact *underrepresented* among kindergarteners with IEPs: they comprised 46% of District-wide kindergarteners but 41% of District-wide kindergarteners with IEPs (Figure 5). However, Black/African students were disproportionately *overrepresented* among high school students with IEPs (52% of enrolled high school students but 59% of high school students with IEPs).

The reverse held true for Asian students. While Asian students represented a small percentage (2-3%) of the total number of students with IEPs in grades 1-12, they comprised 8% of kindergarteners with IEPs.

Figure 5. Percentage of students with IEPs in each grade span, by race



Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018, enrollment snapshot.

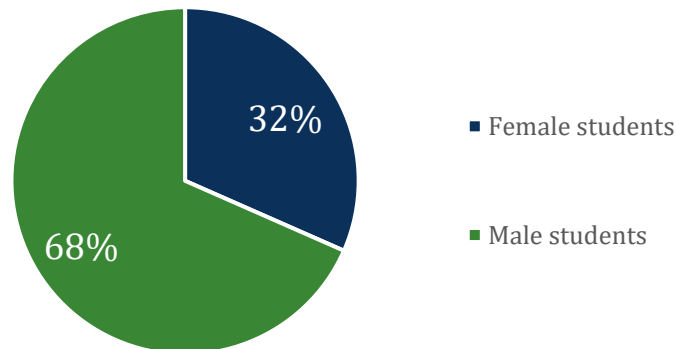
Notes: Students who are American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander comprise less than 1% of the total student enrollment and are not shown above. The total number of enrolled students and students with IEPs for each grade(s) is included in Tables A5 in the Appendix.

How to read this figure: The first bar within each grade span represents the percentage of enrolled students from each racial/ethnic group. The second bar in each grade span represents the percentage of students with IEPs from each racial/ethnic group. For example, 46% of District kindergarteners were Black/African American, but only 41% of District kindergarteners with IEPs were Black/African American.

In 2018-19, twice as many male students as female students had IEPs.

Male students with IEPs outnumbered female students with IEPs by two to one (Figure 6). Thirty-two percent of SDP students with IEPs were female, and 68% were male.

Figure 6. Students with IEPs in District schools, 2018-19 (n=19,245), by gender

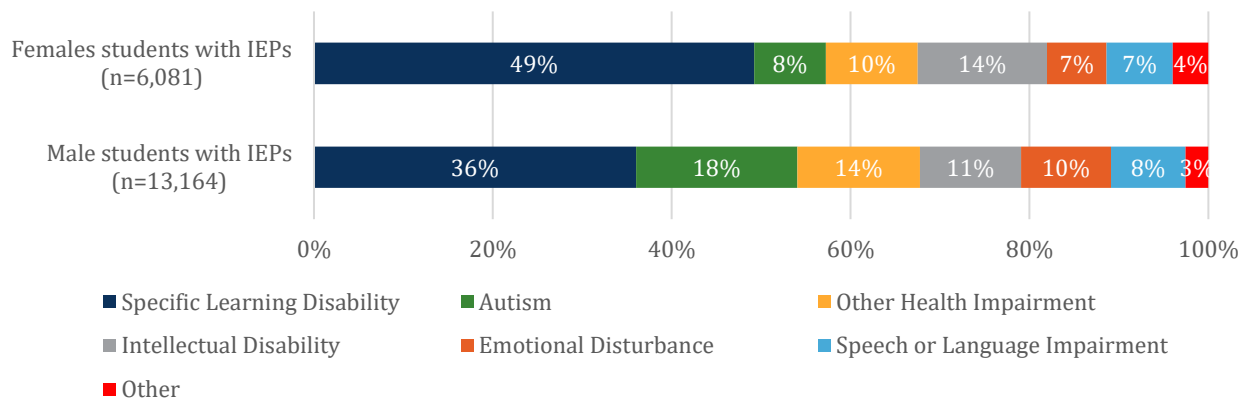


Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018, enrollment snapshot.

The distribution of IEP classifications in 2018-19 varied for female and male students.

While *specific learning disability* was the most common primary classification for all students, it was more common among female students than male students (49% of female students with IEPs compared to 36% of male students with IEPs). On the other hand, *autism* was more commonly classified among male students compared to female students (18% compared to 8%; see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Primary IEP classifications in the School District of Philadelphia, by gender



Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018, enrollment snapshot.

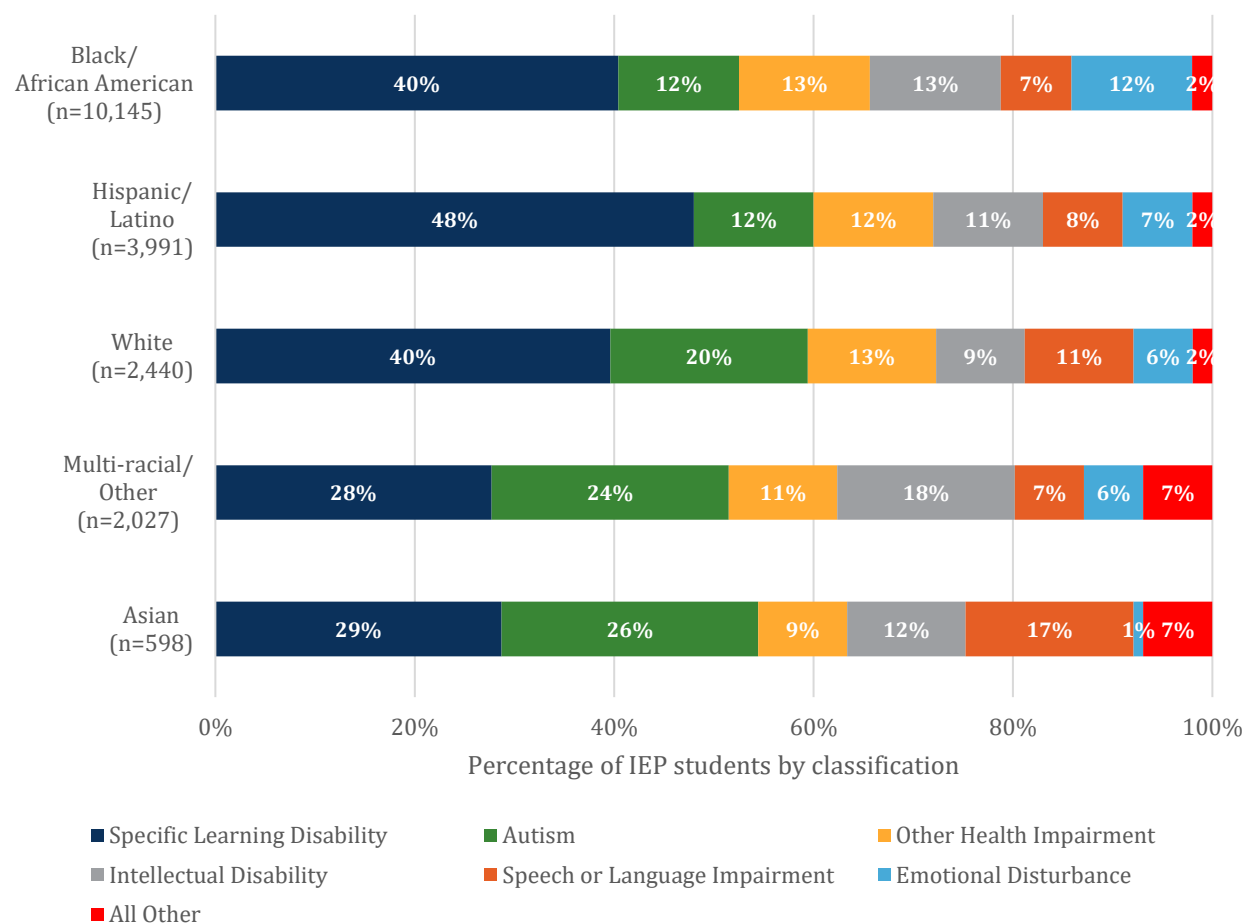
Note: *Other* includes students with the following primary IEP classifications: developmental delay, hearing impaired including deafness, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and multiple disability with no specified primary disability.

How to read this figure: The bars show the distribution by gender of primary classifications assigned to students with IEPs. For example, 6,081 female students had IEPs in 2018-19. Of those, 49% had specific learning disability as their primary disability, compared to 36% of the 13,164 male students with IEPs.

The distribution of IEP classifications varied between racial/ethnic subgroups in 2018-19.

The distribution of IEP classifications varied between each racial/ethnic subgroup (Figure 8). For example, while *specific learning disability* was the most commonly classified disability across all groups, the percentage of Hispanic/Latino students with this classification (48%) was higher than in other groups. Similarly, *autism* was more commonly classified among Asian students (26%), and *emotional disturbance* was more commonly classified among Black/African American students (12%).

Figure 8. Primary disability classifications among District students with IEPs, by race/ethnicity



Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018 enrollment snapshot.

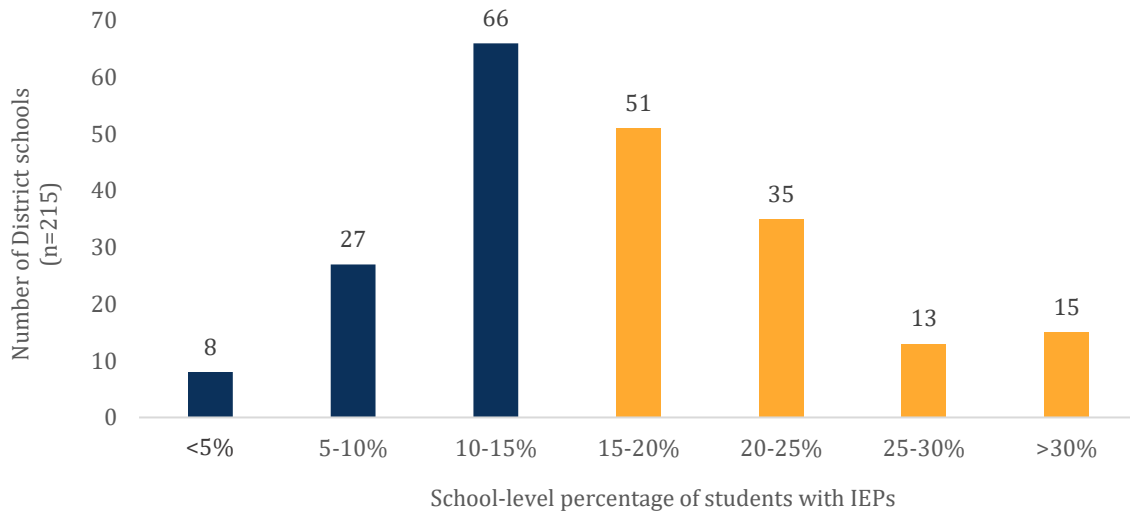
Note: *All other* includes students with the following primary IEP classifications: developmental delay, hearing impaired including deafness, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and multiple disability with no specified primary disability.

How to read this figure: The bars show the racial/ethnic demographic distribution of primary classifications assigned to students with IEPs. For example, of Black/African American students with IEPs, 40% had specific learning disability as their primary disability.

The percentage of students with IEPs, as well as their primary classifications, varied across schools in 2018-19.

District-wide, 15% of all enrolled students had IEPs.⁶ However, the percentage of students with IEPs varied across schools (Figure 9). In some cases, the percentage of students with IEPs at a school was higher than the district average because the school housed one or more programs for students with IEPs such as autistic support, emotional support, or life skills support.

Figure 9. Number of District schools by percentage of enrolled students with IEPs, 2018-19



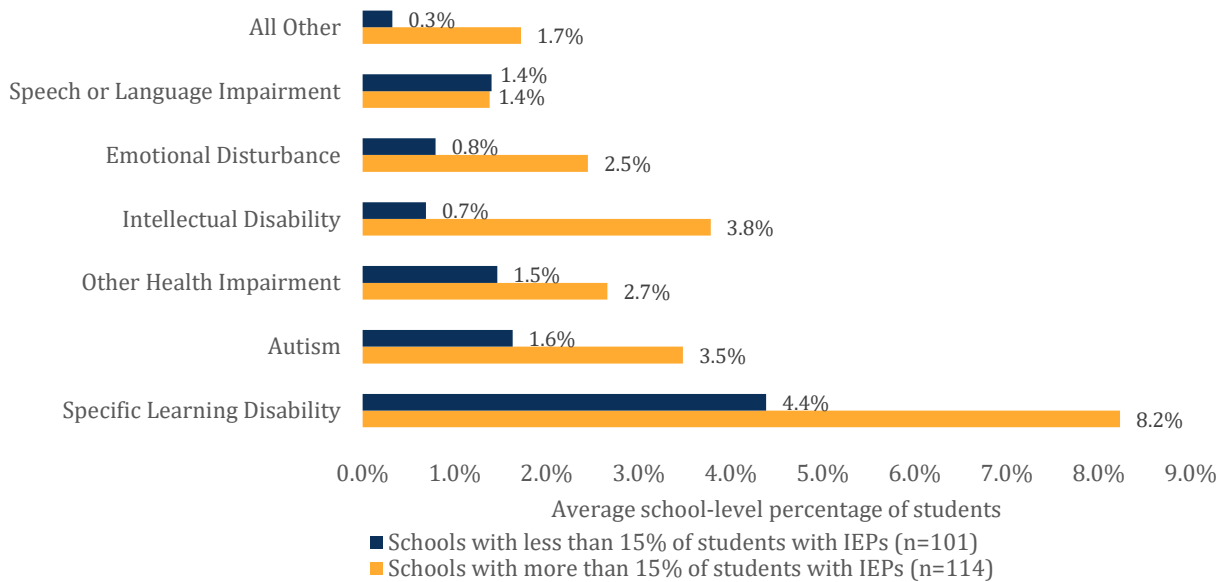
Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018 enrollment snapshot.

How to read this figure: Yellow bars represent schools where **more** than 15% of the student body was comprised of students with IEPs in 2018-19, and dark blue bars represent schools where **less** than 15% of the student body was comprised of student with IEPs in 2018-19.

We found variations in the distribution of specific disabilities between schools with greater than 15% and less than 15% IEP enrollment (the difference between the yellow and blue bars in Figure 9). On average, the percentage of students with a primary classification of *specific learning disability* was almost twice as high at schools with a higher-than-District-average population of students with IEPs (8.2% compared to 4.4%). Schools with a higher-than-District-average IEP population also served more students with IEPs for *emotional disturbance* (2.5% vs. 0.8%), *intellectual disability* (3.8% vs. 0.7%), *other health impairment* (2.7% vs. 1.5%), and *autism* (3.5% vs. 1.6%). The percentages were only similar for the classification *speech or language impairment* (1.4% of total enrollment at schools where the percentage of students with IEPs was both above and below the District average).

⁶ Charter schools, alternative schools, pre-kindergartens, and special education schools are not included in the count of District schools. Gifted students without disability are not included in the definition. Gifted students with disability are included in the definition.

Figure 10. Average percentage of enrolled students with each primary IEP classification at schools above and below the District average of 15% IEP enrollment, 2018-19.



Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018, enrollment snapshot.

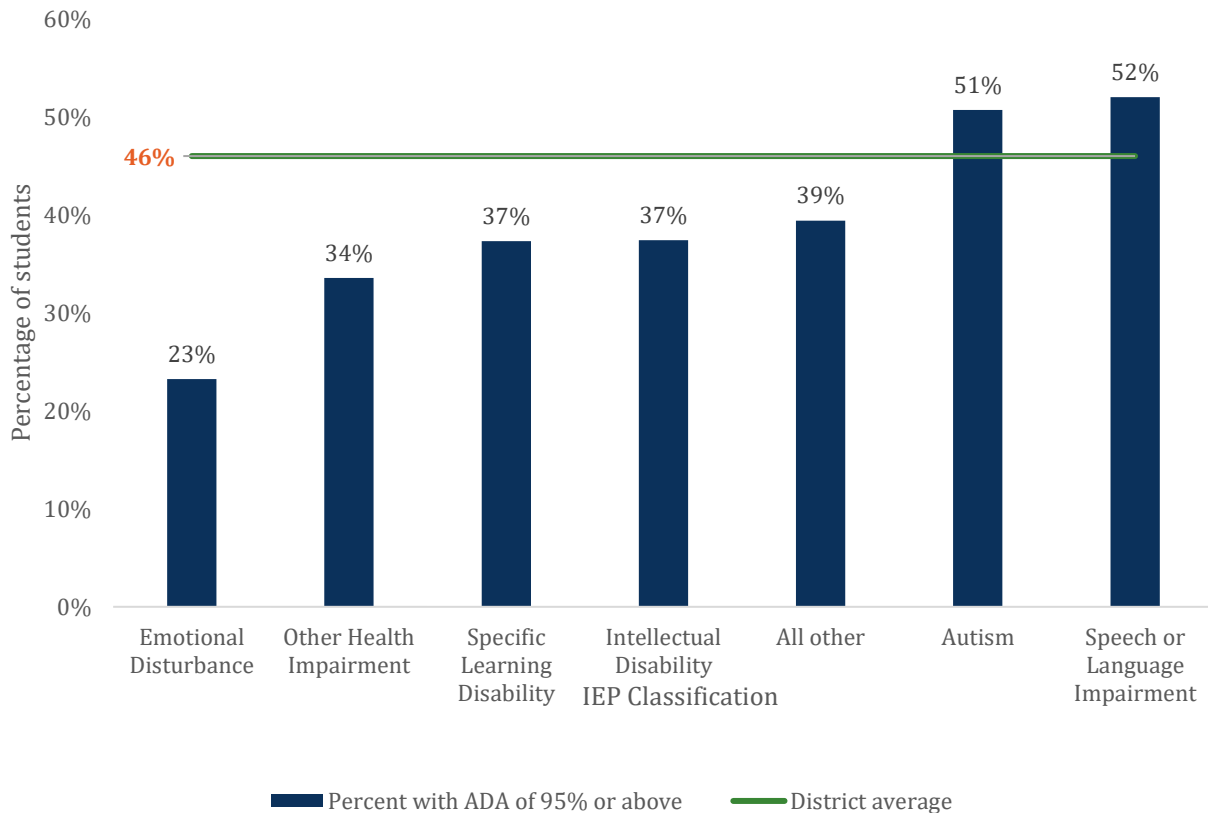
How to read this figure: Yellow bars represent schools where **more** than 15% of the student body was comprised of students with IEPs in 2018-19, and dark blue bars represent schools where **less** than 15% of the student body was comprised of student with IEPs in 2018-19.

Attendance and Suspension Patterns among Students with IEPs in 2018-19

Average Daily Attendance (ADA) rates in 2018-19 varied by IEP classification.

In general, the percentage of students with IEPs who met the District's goal of 95% average daily attendance (ADA) was lower than the District average (Figure 11). For example, the percentage of students with a primary IEP classification of *emotional disturbance* who met the 95% attendance goal was half the District average (23% vs. 46%). However, higher percentages of students with primary IEP classifications of *autism* (51%) and *speech or language impairment* (52%) met the 95% ADA goal compared to the District average (46%).

Figure 11. Percentage of SDP students with IEPs who met the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) goal of 95% or more in 2018-19, by primary IEP classification



Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018 enrollment snapshot, Qlik Climate App, and Total Student Enrollment Yearly table from Qlik Report Library (retrieved October 2019).

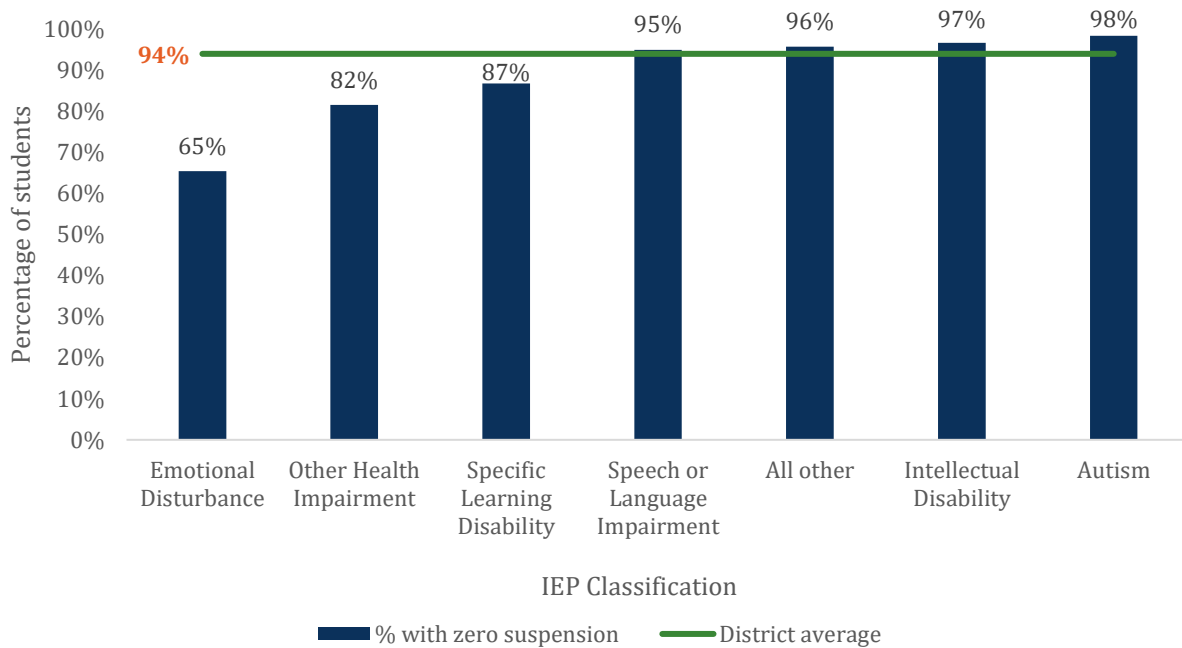
Note: *All other* includes students with the following primary IEP classifications: developmental delay, hearing impaired including deafness, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and multiple disability with no specified primary disability.

How to read this figure: The bars show the percentage of students in each primary IEP classification who met the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) goal of 95% or above. The green line denotes the District average. For example, 23% of students with IEPs who had a primary disability classification of emotional disturbance met the ADA goal of 95% or above, and this was below the District average of 46%.

The percentage of students with zero out-of-school suspensions varied by IEP classification in 2018-19.

The percentage of students with IEPs primarily classified by *autism*, *intellectual disability*, or *speech or language impairment* who received zero out-of-school suspensions was similar to or higher than the District average of 94% (Figure 12). However, the percentage of students with IEPs for *emotional disturbance* (65%), *other health impairment* (82%), and *specific learning disability* (87%) who received zero out-of-school suspensions was lower than the District average (94%).

Figure 12. Percentage of SDP students with IEPs who received zero out-of-school suspensions in 2018-19, by primary IEP classification



Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018 enrollment snapshot, Qlik Climate App, and Student Suspension Yearly table from Qlik Report Library (retrieved October 2019).

Note: *All other* includes students with the following primary IEP classifications: developmental delay, hearing impaired including deafness, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and multiple disability with no specified primary disability.

How to read this figure: The bars show the percentage of students in each primary IEP classification who received zero out-of-school suspensions in 2018-19. The green line denotes the District average. For example, 65% of students with IEPs who had a primary disability classification of emotional disturbance received zero out-of-school suspensions, and this was below the District average of 94%.

Conclusion

As of October 1, 2018, there were 215 District schools serving 126,994 students. About 15% of these students (19,245 students) had an IEP classified by at least one disability.

In 2018-19, *specific learning disability* was the most common IEP classification in the District (representing 40% of total IEP classifications), followed by *autism* (15% of total IEP classifications). Almost half (47%) of student IEPs included a secondary classification, of which *speech or language impairment* was the most common.

Male students with IEPs outnumbered female students with IEPs by two to one. While *specific learning disability* was the most common disability classification for both genders (49% for female students with IEPs vs. 36% for male students with IEPs), *autism* was more represented among male students than female students (8% for female students with IEPs, 18% for male students with IEPs).

There were also some variations in IEP classifications among students of different races/ethnicities. For example, while Asian students only represented 2-3% of students with IEPs across the District, they represented 8% of kindergarteners with IEPs. The reverse was true for Black/African American students; they represented 41% of District kindergarteners with IEPs but 59% of District high school students with IEPs.

Some racial/ethnic groups were overrepresented in certain disability categories compared to other groups. For instance, 48% of Hispanic/Latino students with IEPs had the primary classification *specific learning disability*. Compared to other groups, *autism* and *speech or language impairment* were more commonly identified among Asian students (26% and 17% respectively), and *emotional disturbance* was more common among Black/African American students (12%).

Although students with IEPs represented about 15% of total District enrollment, more than half of District schools served higher percentages of students with IEPs. At 15 District schools, the percentage of students with IEPs was at least 30%.

Finally, our analyses of attendance and suspension patterns for students with IEPs revealed that students with IEPs for *emotional disturbance* and *other health impairments* had lower attendance and were more likely to receive suspensions compared to other groups.

Appendix

Table A1. Primary IEP classifications of K-12 District students, 2018-19

Primary classification	Number of students	Percentage of IEP students
Specific Learning Disability	7,733	40%
Autism	2,862	15%
Other Health Impairment	2,428	13%
Intellectual Disability	2,368	12%
Emotional Disturbance	1,726	9%
Speech or Language Impairment	1,550	8%
Other*	578	3%
Total number of District students with an IEP (2018-19)	19,245	100%

Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018, enrollment snapshot.

Note: Total may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding.

*Other includes students with the following primary IEP classifications: developmental delay, hearing impaired including deafness, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and multiple disability with no specified primary disability.

Table A2. Secondary IEP classifications of K-12 District students, 2018-19

Secondary classification	Number of students	Percentage of IEP students with a secondary disability
Speech or Language Impairment	3,796	42%
Other Health Impairment	2,452	27%
Specific Learning Disability	1,004	11%
Autism	567	6%
Emotional Disturbance	429	5%
Other*	374	4%
Intellectual Disability	366	4%
Total number of District students with a secondary disability (2018-19)	8,988	100%

Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018, enrollment snapshot.

Note: Total may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding.

*Other includes students with the following primary IEP classifications: developmental delay, hearing impaired including deafness, orthopedic impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and multiple disability with no specified primary disability.

Table A3. District students with IEPs by grade level, 2018-19

Grade	Total number of District students	Students without IEPs	Students with IEPs	Percentage of students in each grade with IEPs
K	10,331	9,675	656	6%
1	10,865	9,754	1,111	10%
2	10,807	9,459	1,348	12%
3	10,994	9,387	1,607	15%
4	10,990	9,238	1,752	16%
5	10,624	8,817	1,807	17%
6	9,848	7,986	1,862	19%
7	8,970	7,373	1,597	18%
8	8,813	7,196	1,617	18%
9	10,036	8,280	1,756	17%
10	9,077	7,532	1,545	17%
11	8,231	6,874	1,357	16%
12	7,408	6,178	1,230	17%

Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018, enrollment snapshot.

Table A4. District enrollment by race/ethnicity, 2018-19

Race/ethnicity	Number of students enrolled	Percentage of students enrolled	Number of students with IEPs	Percentage of students with IEPs
American Indian/Alaskan Native	255	0%	37	0%
Asian	11,322	9%	598	3%
Black/African American	61,585	48%	10,145	53%
Hispanic/Latino	27,565	22%	3,991	21%
Multi-racial/Other	8,008	6%	2,027	11%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific islander	100	0%	7	0%
White	18,159	14%	2,440	13%
Total	126,994	100%	19,245	100%

Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018, enrollment snapshot.

Note: Total may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Table A5. District enrollment and students with IEPs by race/ethnicity by grade-spans, 2018-19

Grade(s)	Race/ethnicity	Number of students enrolled	Percentage of enrolled students	Number of students with IEPs	Percentage of students with IEPs
K	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	23	0%	3	0%
	Asian	911	9%	50	8%
	Black/African American	4,762	46%	269	41%
	Hispanic/Latino	2,453	24%	170	26%
	Multi-racial/Other	488	5%	31	5%
	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific islander	11	0%	1	0%
	White	1,683	16%	132	20%
	Total (Grade K)	10,331	100%	656	100%
1-5	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	113	0%	13	0%
	Asian	4,186	8%	248	3%
	Black/African American	25,720	47%	3,925	51%
	Hispanic/Latino	12,417	23%	1,579	21%
	Multi-racial/Other	3,724	7%	801	11%
	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific islander	59	0%	4	0%
	White	8,061	15%	1,055	14%
	Total (Grades 1-5)	54,280	100%	7,625	100%
6-8	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	60	0%	9	0%
	Asian	2,471	9%	125	2%
	Black/African American	13,094	47%	2,492	49%
	Hispanic/Latino	5,800	21%	996	20%
	Multi-racial/Other	2,171	8%	840	17%
	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific islander	15	0%	1	0%
	White	4,020	15%	613	12%
	Total (Grades 6-8)	27,631	100%	5,076	100%
9-12	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	59	0%	12	0%
	Asian	3,754	11%	175	3%
	Black/African American	18,009	52%	3,459	59%
	Hispanic/Latino	6,895	20%	1,246	21%
	Multi-racial/Other	1,625	5%	355	6%
	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific islander	15	0%	1	0%
	White	4,395	13%	640	11%
	Total (Grades 9-12)	34,752	100%	5,888	100%

Source: School District of Philadelphia October 1, 2018, enrollment snapshot.