

ACPS Equity Audit Community Feedback

Parent Focus Group – October 7, 2021

On October 7, 2021, the Intercultural Development Research Association facilitated a voluntary focus group with Alexandria City Public School (ACPS) Parents about equity in ACPS schools. We hosted two different conversations, one in English and one in Spanish. In the English language presentation, parents were able to choose an affinity group and all of the parents indicated that they were parents of students of color. We covered the following topics with the following questions.

Questions

Discipline

- Do you believe the rules at your child's school are fair? Why, why not? (If not, which rules are unfair?)
- Do you think that the rules are applied fairly at your school? Why or why not? If not, which groups receive unfair treatment under the rules?
- Are there any specific rules or student expectations you think should be changed?

Grading, Coursework & Curriculum

- Do you believe that your child's school provides every learner the best opportunity to maximize their academic success? Why/Why not?
- Do you think that the way that your child is graded and the grades that they receive are fair? Why/Why not?
- Can your child access all of the courses that they want to take? Why or why not?
- In what ways does your child's learning and curriculum reflect the things that are important to them? Their culture? Their hopes for the future?
- What changes would you like to see to make grading, curriculum, and course access better and more equitable?

Culture and Climate

- In what ways have you or your child been treated differently based on your race, religion, gender, nationality, or any other marginalized identity?
- What policies or rules would you change to improve this treatment?

Other Recommendations

- What changes that we haven't discussed would make your child's school more equitable and fairer?
- What changes would give your child a heightened sense of belonging?

Themes and Responses

Discipline

Fair Rules, Unfair Application

Overall, parents in both the English and Spanish meetings remarked that they felt disciplinary rules were fair across the district. However, parents expressed concern about the lack of uniformity in application of those rules when it came to their children. One of the parents of color shared that her child in elementary school had the police called for an incident and school officials cited that the rules required that response. The parent relayed that the officials could not point to, nor could the parents find anything in the Code of Conduct that required this course of action.

One parent in our Spanish language group relayed a concern that teachers who are often responsible for immediately responding to discipline incidents do not always seek support when students bring them issues. The parent relayed a story of their child whose mother passed away that got into a fight with another student that insulted the child's mother. The child had gone to the teacher before about the comments, but the incident wasn't reported, and the student was not referred to a counselor or school leaders. After the fight, the parent's child was suspended for five days, and he did not think that was a fair application. The parent acknowledged that teachers are responsible for application of the rules, but that they should be just as responsible for prevention as responding to incidents.

Variable Communication

Some parents mentioned that they had concerns about schools' communication after incidents take place. One parent expressed that she did not receive sufficient notice after someone brought a weapon to school. This parent also expressed concerns about the results of discipline with other children. Her child was involved in an incident with another child, but she was never informed of the outcome of what happened with the other student.

Other parents praised the level of communication from the schools. One of the parents in the parents of color group noted having constant communication from the schools via calls and texts from different people in their child's school. One of the parents in our Spanish language group also praised the district for having people at her child's school that not only spoke Spanish but were dedicated and "wouldn't stop helping until you are satisfied with everything that you need" (translated from Spanish).

Lack of School Resource Officers

Several parents mentioned the lack of school resource officers as a challenge for discipline in the schools. When asked about other interventions and strategies used in the schools, the parents were less aware, indicating a breakdown in communication about what the district is using as alternatives to resource officer involvement.

Grading, Coursework & Curriculum

Lack of Diversity in Celebrations

Several parents of students of color in the English language focus group referenced a need for schools to embrace all of the racial and cultural identities of their students via celebrations. One parent relayed that their child attended a school that was 90% Hispanic, and the school had many celebrations to celebrate the cultural heritage of those children but not one during Black History Month.

Variable Diversity in Teaching and Leadership

Parents also mentioned a lack of diversity, specifically Black teachers and school leaders. However, a parent in the Spanish language group indicated that there were many Hispanic teachers.

Culturally Competent Curriculum

Several of the parents in the English language group referenced a need for the curriculum to be examined for cultural competence. They relayed that there were still books in use with racial slurs in them, books with racial imagery, black face or other examples that could be harmful to students from certain racial groups.

Culture & Climate

Separation by Race

Parents in both English and Spanish language groups referenced a separation between Black and Latino or Hispanic students in their schools. One parent in the Spanish language group referenced that outside of the people designated to support them, Hispanic students did not receive support from other officials like teachers and administrators. Parents also expressed concern that students selecting small groups may self-segregate and not develop close relationships with students of other races.

Culture of Care

Parents also responded that a more caring attitude on the part of school leaders could be utilized to improve school climate. One of the parents from the English speaking group relayed a story of a vice principal yelling at her student for being late. The parent felt that these actions embarrassed the child, particularly being a student of color.

Recommendations for Equity Improvement

Open Communication

Several parents wanted an increased opportunity to relay equity related concerns with school personnel. They recommended a hotline or regular meetings about this specific topic so that their concerns could be heard and addressed.

Training and Modeling

Several of the parents also recommended that additional training could be completed with school leaders on how to specifically address equity concerns. They relayed that several principals in their schools were doing fantastic jobs and recommended connecting those leaders with other school leaders around the district to model and provide examples of how to collectively improve climate and equity.

Student Focus Groups – October 8, 2021

On October 8, 2021, the Intercultural Development Research Association facilitated a voluntary focus group with Alexandria City Public School (ACPS) students about equity in ACPS schools. We hosted two different conversations, one for middle schoolers (Grades 5-8) and one for high schoolers (Grades 9-12). We covered the following topics with the following questions.

Questions

Discipline

- Do you believe that the rules at your school are fair? Why, why not? (If not, which rules aren't fair)
- Do you think that the rules are applied fairly at your school? Why or why not? If not, which groups receive unfair treatment under the rules?
- Are there any specific rules or expectations you think should be changed?

Grading, Coursework & Curriculum

- Do you believe that your school provides every learner the best opportunity to maximize their academic success? Why/Why not?
- Do you think that the way that you are graded and the grades that you receive are fair? Why/Why not?
- Can you access all of the courses that you want to take? Why or why not?
- In what ways does your learning and curriculum reflect the things that are important to you? Your culture? Your hopes for the future?
- What changes would you like to see to make grading, curriculum, and course access better and more equitable?

Culture and Climate

- In what ways have you or your peers been treated differently based on your race, religion, gender, nationality, or any other marginalized identity?
- What policies or rules would you change to improve this treatment?

Other Recommendations

- What changes that we haven't discussed would make your school more equitable and fairer?
- What changes would give your child a heightened sense of belonging?

Discipline

Dress Coding

By far the largest issue that students had related to the process for dress coding. In both middle and high school, the participants, particularly female participants noted disparities in both the rules that apply and the application of those rules. Female students in both groups described that under the rules of the dress code, male students are allowed to wear clothes that female students are not allowed to wear. Likewise, students also felt that these rules were applied differently according to race. Furthermore, students expressed that these incidents are embarrassing, humiliating and detrimental to the mental health of the students who are “dress coded”. They also expressed concern because these incidents are informal, and any adult is able to comment on the dress of a student in a public fashion.

“ Having to wear dresses and skirts makes me feel upset because sometimes I don’t like wearing them, sometimes I like to wear pants. It makes me feel left out”

- Female Student, Elementary/Middle School Group

“Being dress coded for the way my body was shaped, being sexualized at a young age, not only by my older family members, but then I come to school, and I'm sexualized, also, that was really detrimental to my mental health.”

- Female Student, High School Group

Unequal Application of the Rules

Both middle and high school students expressed frustration with the unfair application of school rules, often according to race. Furthermore, students expressed concern that students of color, particularly Black males, particularly athletes, are singled out for disciplinary intervention for conduct for which White students are not disciplined.

- “So, it's not so much that the rules aren't fair, it's that the people that they apply to and how harshly they apply to them are different.”

- Female Student, High School Group

Lack of teacher support

The elementary and middle school students spoke about how much they relied on their teachers to handle incidents when students would say or do things to them. Students expressed frustration when they would take issues to teachers (being called a racial name for example) and other students would not be disciplined, escalating future interactions between students.

Grading, Coursework & Curriculum

Exclusive Curriculum

Students in high school expressed disappointment that their core curriculum was exclusive to the contributions of Black and Hispanic individuals. They mentioned that they learn about these figures only

during heritage or history months, but they are not highlighted as part of core history education. They also critiqued the relative amount of time spent on the oppression of minority groups as compared to the resilience and contributions of these individuals.

“We spent the rest of the year learning about how we've been oppressed and how we face racism and how we magically overcame and how they won the war for us and how they took us out of slavery. What does that say about the curriculum and the success of black students and minority students as a whole? How can I sit in a classroom and be academically successful when all I'm learning about is how my ancestors were oppressed? Now I have to take a test on it, and now I have to take a quiz on what they were beat with and how were they hung, and when was this person hung, and how did that start a court case trial? How does that promote academic success”?

- Female Student, High School Group

Cultural Capabilities of Teachers

Another of the High School students referenced the fact that teachers, primarily White teachers, are not given the capability to discuss racial issues with their students of color. The student also remarked that some teachers express biased viewpoints and give biased assignments, but there is no sufficient mechanism for students to report this behavior and have their curriculum adjusted.

“I've had teachers who are trying to talk about slavery or racism, who are then racists, and they allow white students to laugh at pictures of hanging slaves in my sixth-grade classroom. That should not occur. And then I shouldn't have to jump through a thousand and one hoops and barriers in order for someone to say that should not occur.”

- Female Student, High School Group

Lack of Awareness of Curricular Options

One of the High School students referenced the difficulty in understanding and navigating advanced course options, particularly for students who have been disadvantaged. The student also indicated that the support provided for students who do end up in these classes may not be tailored for students who have particular challenges. Students reported that some teachers do provide support, but that it really depends on the teacher and the standard is not school or district wide.

“ This kind of tracking creates those barriers. And also, it's just like a legacy, because if you don't have any friends in these classes, if your neighbors didn't take these classes, if your parents can't read at home, so they can't help you with these things, how are you going to be successful in a class? How are you going to succeed in a class where you can't ask for help anywhere and your teacher's office hours are once a week the day you have to work?”

- Female Student, High School Group

Culture & Climate

Lack of Meaningful Relationships Between Students and Adults

The high school students referenced the fact that SROs being out of school buildings has led to fewer adults outside of classrooms that connect with students on a daily basis. They did not advocate for police presence; however, they did ask for more support staff and counselors, particularly staff of color that can come from similar backgrounds as the students of color.

Lack of Mechanisms to Report Discrimination

Students referenced the prevalence of discriminatory actions against their peers but explained that many students are unaware of ways to report these actions. This relates back to the theme above of lacking meaningful, trusting relationships to report incidents of discrimination that may occur. They also reported that students that do find the mechanisms to report discrimination feel disempowered by the lack of action for those perpetrating discriminatory acts.

“They need to start being harsh on that policy because when there's reports of racist incidents, but no one does anything about it, why do you think people aren't coming forward anymore? Because we feel like if they don't do it at that level, that's what leads to the violence. That's what lead to the verbal altercations because people don't feel like if they caught sight of that, anything would get resolved because this bureaucratic system of 1001 hoops doesn't empower them to do that.”