



**ONWARD: LESSONS AND
CELEBRATIONS OF THE
DPS COMMUNITY DURING THE
2020-2021 SCHOOL YEAR**

A B C



Durham Public Schools
Durham Public Schools Foundation
Office on Youth
Student U
Village of Wisdom



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Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis disrupted everyday life and institutions across every sector, but especially education. Since March 13, 2020, the Durham community has responded and supported one another, while attempting to navigate life and learning in a pandemic. We have seen many big and small occasions where the Durham community has rallied around our students and families, especially those most in need during this time. The structural inequities that have long existed in education have been further exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.



We've also seen the resurgence of conversations around institutional inequities and disparities faced by those in Black, Latinx, and other historically marginalized communities. Issues of language access, decreasing enrollment among Black and White students, and access to living wage and quality housing all affect our schools and the resources available to them. As the COVID-19 crisis continues, the Durham community has and will need to continue to think creatively on how to overcome them.

The disruptions to preK-12 education created by this crisis create an opportunity for our community to embrace new ways of imagining the public-school experience for Durham students. This paper is a partnership of Student U, Village of Wisdom, Durham Public Schools, Durham Public Schools Foundation, the Office on Youth, and other community partners. In January of 2021, these organizations came together to understand the experiences of students, families, teachers, staff, and administrators and the innovative ways our schools and broader community navigated the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe these disruptions and innovations can help our schools and community partners reimagine the public-school experience for DPS students.

Our collective hope is that our public schools and the many stakeholders and partners who support them will emerge from this pandemic with greater knowledge and compassion, as well as a vision for how we can continue building strong, equitable public schools where all students can thrive. This paper aims to advance this hope by:

- a. Documenting the challenges and lessons learned by parents, students, teachers, staff, and administrators through direct questions about their experiences.¹
- b. Outlining ways Durham Public Schools and partners are already responding to needs that emerged or evolved during the pandemic and embracing new approaches that are informed by adaptations made during the pandemic.

¹ This paper provides some new research but primarily brings together research and findings from many community partners and identifies and lifts key themes found across them.

- c. Identifying and recommending innovative practices and adaptations that the district, city and county, and community organizations can implement to address the experiences identified by various DPS stakeholders.

This paper reflects a broad array of community partners. Leadership from Durham Public Schools, Durham Public Schools Foundation, the Office on Youth, Student U, and Village of Wisdom served on the advisory council for this paper and offered their expertise and wisdom. We also relied on other community partners for data and thank them for their partnership on this work:

Book Harvest

Durham Children's Initiative

City of Durham

Durham County

Made in Durham

A special acknowledgement also goes to the research and project leads for this paper, Brianna Kennedy (Director of Programs & Partnerships, DPS Foundation) and Radhika Deshmukh-McDiarmid (Director of Evaluations and Strategic Initiatives, Student U). We also thank Elizabeth Fields and Logan Barcus who provided significant support to the research, data collection, and writing of this paper.

Through this robust collaboration, we hope to highlight the ways our students, families, and educators experienced and navigated the pandemic and lift promising practices that can inform district, county, and community partners, as we strive together for strong, equitable public schools where all our students can thrive.



Executive Summary

In January 2021, the Durham Public Schools Foundation and Student U identified the need to document community experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, including compiling and synthesizing the work of numerous community organizations that reflects the experiences of students, families, and educators during this crisis. An advisory council convened, composed of community partners intimately knowledgeable of the student/youth, parent, and educator experience. The Office on Youth, Village of Wisdom, Durham Public Schools Foundation, Student U, and Durham Public Schools were all represented on the council and met monthly to identify the scope of the paper and ways to best engage various DPS stakeholders.

After considering the potential for future iterations of this work, and wanting to provide timely recommendations that focused on the greatest areas of need, the council decided to focus this paper on the following aspects of the school experience:

- Social-emotional wellbeing of educators and students across the 19/20 and 20/21 school years
- Communication and engagement between home and school
- Use of other non-academic school-based supports

This study includes the experiences of DPS students, parents, and educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, innovative practices, and bright spots based on community data received. Data was collected through analysis of reports submitted by community organizations and a survey for DPS students, parents, teachers and school staff, and administrators.



Major Takeaways

Regarding the social-emotional wellbeing of students and educators, community partners and survey respondents all indicated an increase in negative feelings and emotions during the 2020/2021 school year, much of which was attributed to the abrupt shut down of school and extended period of remote learning. To combat these challenges, the district and various other outlets deployed multiple resources, such as Wellness Wednesdays, which many respondents hoped would continue and be a bit more robust, so it is beneficial for students and educators alike.

Engagement between school and home requires inclusive two-way communication. During the last school year, all stakeholders indicated an increase in communication between school and home. This increase in contact came in multiple forms, like phone calls and text messages. Some school communities relied on Hustle and Talking Points applications to allow for two-way communication in different languages. However, some barriers still existed because of a lack of access to timely, translated materials and the availability of physical copies of resources.

Schools often provide non-academic-related resources that are critical to student success such as mental health counseling, food pantries, extra-curricular sports, and clubs. The last year shed light on pre-existing issues related to accessing these services and caused community-wide conversations and shifts to ensure that all students continued to have access to them. Still, many families and educators relied on their schools, the district, and other outlets for resources such as rental/utility assistance, healthcare services, and access to stable broadband.

We've distilled six recommendations for the school district, county, and community partners to act on and support:

1. Improve availability of mental health services for youth
2. Create more affirming environments
3. Improve engagement with DPS
4. Streamline communication
5. Ensure all have access to a living wage

We have committed to allowing this work to live and breathe throughout the community as we continue to learn more about the past year and how our community has and will continue to change. We hope to continue to work with DPS leadership, county and city leaders, and community partners on future iterations of this paper.



Durham Community Data: Takeaways & Recommendations

These themes emerged repeatedly in the community data and are highlighted below.

Social-Emotional Community Findings:

Community Organizations have emphasized the need for stakeholders to better and more equitably support the social-emotional learning needs of all DPS students. Three themes emerged from the community data provided to DPSF.



Social-emotional needs increased, but existed before the pandemic:

The Emily K Center and Student U surveyed families throughout the school year and found that families experienced increased stress, depression, and anxiety throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Emily K Families reported average stress and mental health impacts ranging 6.4 - 6.9 out of 10 from April to December 2020. Additionally, Village of Wisdom (VOW) and the Durham Office on Youth (OOY) have found that many young people -- Black young people, in particular -- did not feel safe and affirmed in Durham

Public Schools even before the pandemic. Teachers shared with VOW that racism is systematic in schools and can result in harm for Black students. The Office on Youth Listening Project found that many youths have not had enough positive interactions with adults in schools and do not feel that teachers, SROs, and administrators are caring or can be trusted. These findings demonstrate that enhanced social-emotional support, as well as discussions around racial equity, are necessary and urgent.

DPS and community partners should increase Mental Health Support:

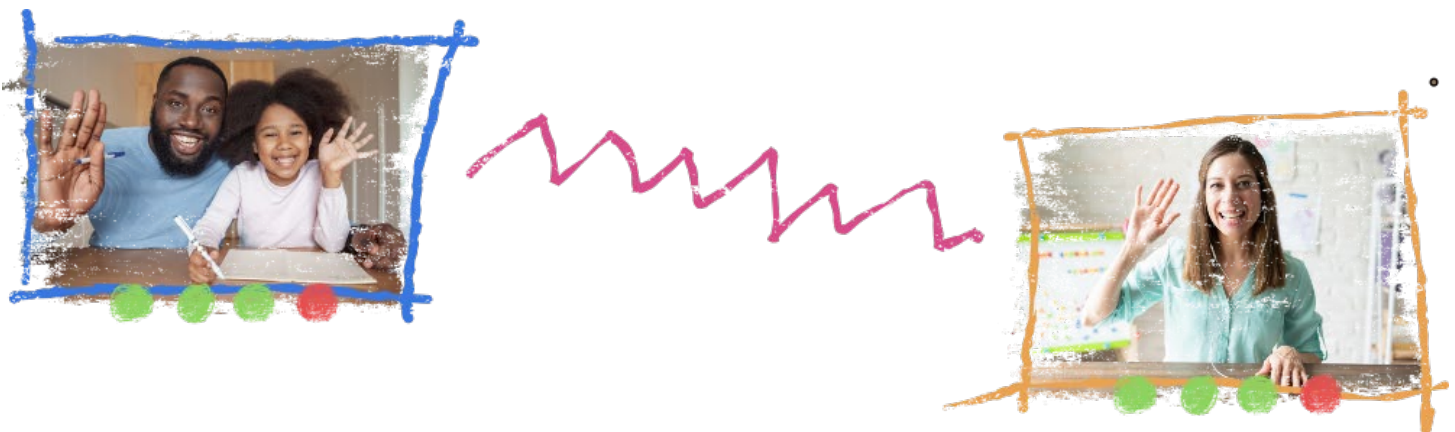
Community Partners emphasize the urgent need for improved social-emotional and mental health support for students. Responses to the 2020 Durham Resident Survey related a need for mental health services, school counselors, and social workers to enable Durham youth to reach their fullest potential. Additionally, the Office on Youth Listening Project found that young people in Durham lack access to needed mental health support. Available resources are difficult to access, unaffordable, and lack culturally diverse and affirming providers. Made in Durham and the Office on Youth recommend increasing the number of counselors and mental health professionals available to students as well as increasing social-emotional and wellness practices for all students.

Support should be equitable and culturally affirming:

Partners believe that time and resources should be allotted for teachers to increase their cultural competence. Village of Wisdom recommends resources for school personnel, such as anti-racism training and accountability mechanisms, to promote and support culturally affirming learning environments. The Office on Youth recommends training for adult leaders and mental health professionals to improve their work with diverse populations. The youth listening sessions, along with the work of Made in Durham, also made it clear that the presence of School Resource Officers (SROs) have a negative effect on students feeling culturally affirmed, and Made in Durham recommends a Mental Health Equity Commission to ensure equitable practices for all groups.

Family Engagement Community Findings:

Community partners gathered communication and representation data among students, parents, and teachers in the district. Students and families of color expressed concerns about exclusion from decision-making processes, even before COVID. Now that families could no longer depend on in-person opportunities to engage with schools and the district, many saw an increase in communication, but the same can't be said for adequate means of engagement.



Establishing and Cultivating Communication:

Community groups noted an increase in communication between families and teachers during the pandemic, and Village of Wisdom found that parents and teachers appreciated the more consistent connection. Parents could more effectively track their children's progress, and teachers were able to see Black parents' involvement and appreciate them more.

However, Village of Wisdom reported that parents felt excluded from district decision-making before and during COVID. Participants felt that districts² made decisions with little input from students, parents, and teachers, and districts did not respond to the needs of Black families specifically. Parents believe the district has not created adequate opportunities for them to directly improve their children's education.

² Parents represented in their work have students in Durham and Orange County.

The Office on Youth found that youth generally lack leadership opportunities in Durham, which they perceive stems from adults not being willing to share decision-making power with youth. Student U found that less than 7% of families are not receiving regular communication from their child's school.

Cultivating communication extends beyond parent emails and leadership roles. Translation services are also necessary to improve connections and promote language justice. The Office on Youth suggests that translated documents be available alongside English information to promote inclusivity. The Emily K Center found that Spanish-speaking families were especially reliant on schools, and the Emily K Center for information regarding COVID-19 highlighted the importance of providing basic Spanish-language communication to these families.



Creating Relationships:

Partners offered some recommendations for improving the home-school connection within DPS. The Durham Children's Initiative (DCI) believes direct relationships with advocates can eliminate communication barriers between families and schools. After working directly with a DCI Family Advocate, more than 90% of 385 families agreed they were more comfortable communicating with teachers regarding their child's educational needs, progress, and challenges. The Emily K Center recommends the district facilitate open conversations and active engagement with families to understand conditions and characteristics associated with better and worse performance during the pandemic. The Office on Youth recommends the Board of Education create an elected student seat to increase student engagement in district-level decision-making.

Why does this matter? Over the last five years, district enrollment trends have fluctuated -- and most recently decreased.³ In the 2016-2017 school year, enrollment in the first month of school was 33,151. In 2019-2020, enrollment was 32,928, and in 2020-2021 that number had decreased to 31,603. The two largest groups contributing to this decrease are Black and White families opting for the numerous charter and private schools in the area, as well as homeschooling. Families opting out of DPS impacts not only enrollment but also the dollars needed to fund schools. Along with other factors such as gentrification and increased housing costs, the loss of enrollment has led to our schools no longer reflecting the demographics of our city. In our schools, Black and Latinx students make up 74% of the student body, while White students make up 19%. However, when looking at Durham County demographics, 54% of the residents of Durham County are White, 36% are Black, and 13% are Latinx.⁴ Through innovative efforts like Ignite! Online Academy, some of these families have re-enrolled. We have an opportunity now, through other engagement efforts, to continue to increase enrollment among Black, Latinx, and White families who have left the district, as well as families new to the area.

³ Historical enrollment provided by Durham Public Schools. <https://www.dpsnc.net/site/Default.aspx?PageID=324>

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 2019. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/durhamcountynorthcarolina>

Family Engagement Case Study: Club Boulevard

Making Strides in Parent-Teacher Communication during COVID-19

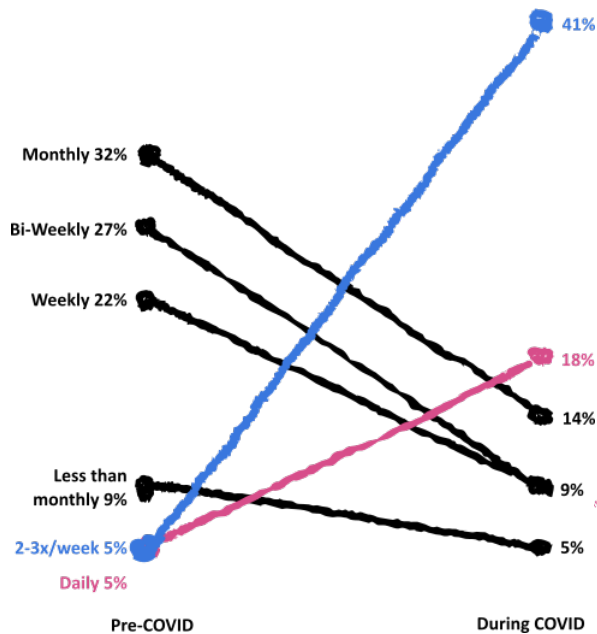
Club Boulevard Elementary, a member of the Bull City Community School Partnership, exemplified how a school could engage parents effectively amid remote learning. Club and its community partners improved parent-school relationships through a parent engagement strategy using digital infrastructure, increased communication, and language justice.

Building the Digital Infrastructure

In March 2020, Club devised new digital communication pathways through tools like Google Voice (for text and calls) and Bloomz (a social media platform designed for schools). School staff also assembled a master list of every Club family and assigned each staff member families to contact and ensure access to necessary technology.

Teachers Started Communicating More Frequency Once COVID Began

Over half (59%) now communicate more than once a week



Increasing Two-Way Communication with Parents

During the 2020-2021 school year, most Club teachers used digital communication tools to connect to parents more frequently than before COVID. Overall, **77% of teachers surveyed said they increased their communication** with parents.

61% of the teachers surveyed believed parents were more engaged in their child's learning than before COVID. One teacher described COVID as a catalyst for positive change. Instead of following the status quo of sending home one-way communication, teachers were nudged to use additional two-way communication tools to reach parents:

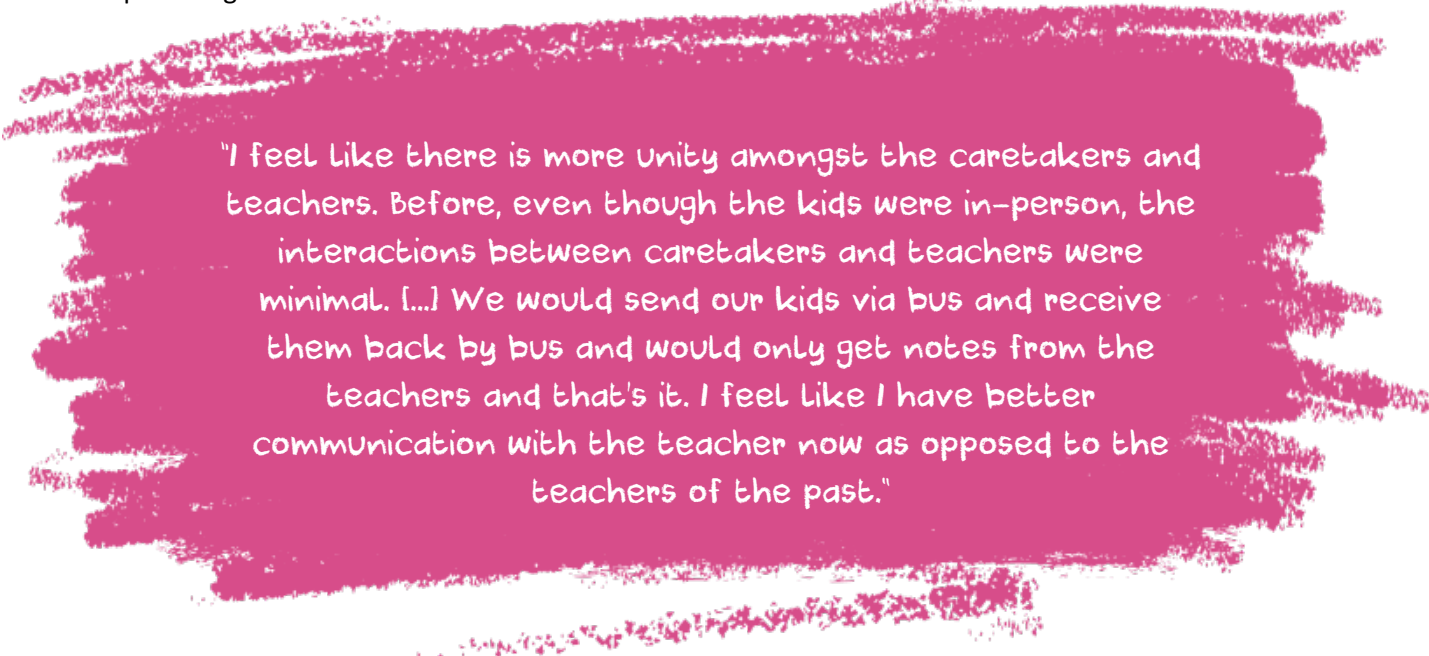
"I think COVID has been an opening to rethink our parent engagement and communication. We get stuck in patterns [...] and having to flip everything around has created an opportunity to utilize more texting with parents, which has felt more effective in reaching them."

Language Justice Goes Digital

Nearly half of Club Boulevard's families speak Spanish. Before COVID, Club Boulevard tried to reach out to parents in their preferred and more comfortable language—an initiative known as "language justice."

During remote learning, language justice efforts went virtual. Spanish interpreters were invited to parent meetings on Zoom. School staff maintained a WhatsApp text messaging group designed for Spanish-speaking parents. Furthermore, the built-in translation software in digital tools like Bloomz and Google Voice made it easier for teachers to translate messages to parents.

Thanks to the influx of translated communication during COVID, some Latinx caretakers expressed feeling closer to their child's teacher. As one parent described, the increased communication during COVID helped bridge home and school:



"I feel like there is more unity amongst the caretakers and teachers. Before, even though the kids were in-person, the interactions between caretakers and teachers were minimal. [...] We would send our kids via bus and receive them back by bus and would only get notes from the teachers and that's it. I feel like I have better communication with the teacher now as opposed to the teachers of the past."

Key Takeaway

Club Boulevard demonstrated how a collective parent engagement strategy rooted in leveraging digital technologies, increasing levels of communication, and preserving language justice is a recipe for improving parent engagement practices.

You can review the full report [here](#).

Holistic Support Community Findings

Community partners across Durham offered DPS students and families affordable housing, food security, and healthcare during the pandemic.

Need for Support increased during the Pandemic:

Durham Public School students and families experienced significant financial stress during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis. The Emily K Center found that in April 2020, 64% of families had experienced adverse job or economic impacts; by December 2020 that percentage increased to 75%. Student U also found that 68% of families reported adverse job impacts due to the pandemic.

The Emily K Center reported that 29% of families struggled to afford basic needs during the pandemic, a 14% increase compared to before the COVID-19 crisis. Student U survey results showed that 24% of respondents needed help affording rent, 23% needed help affording groceries, and 25% needed help affording utilities and bills. Various community organizations, including the Emily K Center and Student U, offered emergency relief funds to help support families. The Emily K Center found that the percentage of respondents identifying food security as a major concern decreased from 25% to 17% between April and June. This decline may reflect the Durham community's effort to address food insecurity.

The Office on Youth found that even before the pandemic, many youths were aware that housing in Durham had become less affordable, and they feared eviction as a result. Durham County's 2020 resident survey revealed that 55% of residents (64% of Black residents) are dissatisfied with housing affordability in Durham. Residents ranked affordable housing as a spending priority for the county, second only to public school funding.

Community Partner Best Practices:

The Emily K Center has committed to building and updating informational databases for community members to access various support services. This method has proven effective in creating outlets of access for students and families in need. In the survey conducted by Student U, 58% of families were able to access basic needs resources from Student U, while 56% of families were able to access basic needs resources from other community organizations.



Summary of Community Partner Recommendations:

Organization

Social-Emotional Wellbeing Recommendations

Village of Wisdom

Develop a mechanism to identify and hold school personnel accountable for causing any harm that targets the racial identity of Black students. VOW offers anti-racism training as well as training on their Protecting Black Genius Framework which is available for DPS educators.

Dedicate time and resources to improve teachers' cultural competence and culturally affirming environments.

Office on Youth

Create a culture of safety, respect, and acceptance in DPS. Community-building and wellness practices should be improved and could include mindful breathing, check-ins, restorative practices, and creative expression.

Increase access to free or affordable mental health resources, especially in schools. Mental health providers should be trained to work with youth from diverse backgrounds and those who have experienced trauma and should be more prevalent in schools.

Require training for teachers and administrators about "adultism" and concerns of LGBTQ+ youth. Young people should evaluate the effectiveness of training.

Include offerings that celebrate and promote diverse cultures created by people from those cultures.

Made in Durham

Schools should increase the counselor to student ratio from about 1:500 to the ASCA recommended 1:250 ratio

Create a check-in structure to help students name, reflect on, and manage their emotions.

Adopt a school curriculum to teach social-emotional learning skills and create common practices for managing emotions.

Create a mental health commission with an equity lens to analyze mental health services in Durham.

Offer time in the school day for structured activities that help students build relationships with adults and each other.

Durham County

Durham County: Schools should provide community-centered conflict resolution and mental health support. Schools should focus on restorative justice and community-centered counseling.

Organization

Communication & Engagement Recommendations

Village of Wisdom

Continue to establish and cultivate communication pathways between the district, Black parents, and students.

Office on Youth

Create ongoing listening opportunities for district decision makers to hear from young people about their needs and dreams.

Create an elected student seat on the DPS Board of Education.

Hire young people as staff and consultants and support them in participating in decision-making processes at various levels in the district.

Emily K Center

Collaborate with families and students to understand what conditions led some students to thrive while other students struggled during periods of online learning.

Made in Durham

Map Relationships to systematically ensure that each student has one strong adult relationship.

Hire connectors to reach out to households in the community with absent students to impact school attendance.

Enable counselors to track students' academic progress and intervene proactively to provide support.



DPS Stakeholder Survey Findings

Summary and Methods

The survey included a total of 72 questions, grouped by DPS stakeholder status, and contained a mix of multiple-choice and open-response questions. Some demographic information was collected, but most questions were optional. The survey was sent to school principals, broadcast as a universal message through Canvas, heavily promoted on social media, and emailed through various community listservs and organizations. Participants were incentivized to complete the survey with a chance to win one of eight \$50 Visa gift cards. The survey was available for 6 weeks from April to June. All survey responses were anonymous unless a respondent opted into the gift card raffle.

Sample



241 participants completed the survey

- 39% parents
- 39% teachers/staff
- 15% students
- 7% administrators



Out of the 241 participants, 92 indicated their race or ethnicity:

- 62% identified as white
- 38% identified as people of color, with the majority identifying as Black (23%)



94 respondents shared student children grade level(s)

- 45.7% K-2
- 40.4% 3-5
- 34.0% 6-8
- 26.6% 9-12



Out of 92 responses

- 51.1% AIG
- 38.0% stated none of the above
- 14.1% shared that their child or children receive EC services
- 6.5% receive ESL
- 2.2% chose not to answer



Out of 92 responses

- 71.74% indicated their child does not
- 27.2% indicated their child receives free/reduced-price lunch
- 1.09% preferred not to answer

Changes in Social-Emotional Well-Being

The need for social distance created many challenges and opportunities for the school district and community. Early on, many stakeholders worried about the social-emotional well-being of students and offered training and various resources to help with the shift to full remote learning. We asked DPS stakeholders to describe noticeable changes in themselves and the students in their environments. We also asked them to share resources and strategies they used to combat some of the negative changes to their social-emotional well-being.

There have been times when he lacks motivation, is very down, and extremely bored.
- DPS Parent

DPS administrators who participated in the study noticed an array of social-emotional changes in teachers during the crisis. These changes were mostly negative, though some administrators reported seeing positive changes such as staff members being more attentive.⁵



Teachers reported seeing similar changes in student social-emotional well-being, most seeing students being more withdrawn and stressed.⁶

Students noted overwhelmingly negative changes to their social-emotional wellbeing, and parents reinforced these observations.⁷ Parents also noted other changes in their children, including depression and suicidal ideation, boredom, and less attentiveness.⁸

When asked about social-emotional well-being resources, teachers reported students primarily used Wellness Wednesday or teacher-provided resources during the school year.⁹ School administrators reported students using strategies provided by educators and other sources more frequently than those provided directly by the district, such as Wellness Wednesday and DPS Embrace. It is not clear if some school administrators conflated teacher-provided resources with those from Wellness Wednesday.

Similar to observations from administrators and teachers, parents noted students' use of Wellness Wednesday resources. However, some parents shared concerns that these resources appeared to target teachers, while students spent the vast majority of this time on schoolwork.¹⁰ Students reported using Wellness Wednesday resources more frequently than the other options.

⁵ See Table 57 in Appendix B

⁶ See chart 22 in Appendix B

⁷ See chart 43 in Appendix B

⁸ See chart 8 in Appendix B

⁹ See chart 23 in Appendix B

¹⁰ See chart 9 in Appendix B

Communication and Engagement Preferences

Communication was crucial to navigating remote learning, and stakeholders used a variety of forms in a variety of frequencies. We asked respondents to indicate the most prevalent tools used for communication between school and home, as well as the tools that were most preferred. Most notable is that all stakeholders indicated an increase in communication. Teachers and administrators indicated email was used most frequently, and email was also the most preferred form of communication among study participants.^{11 12}

Communication tools between school and home will continue to be integral to building trust and relationships. Using multiple mediums to relay and accept messages will offer all DPS stakeholders an opportunity to be engaged with the school district.

Engagement between school and home requires inclusive two-way communication. By understanding which tools are better accessed and used, the district will be able to further its community engagement efforts. This is especially important as conversations continue about new schools zoning and names, school boundaries, as well as accessibility to magnet programs. To truly engage with DPS stakeholders, the need for accessible avenues of communication is important. During the last school year, it was clear that messages were being sent from the school and district, but that isn't a true indicator of engagement.

Limitation Note: This survey was heavily publicized using social media and e-mail and was not made available in print. We understand this as a limitation to the number and variety of responses we received. Knowing this, we believe that if we were to conduct this survey again, we would see a different response in which type of communication is preferred among parents.

Participating parents indicated that email was more preferred.

"As a hearing impaired, schools choosing to only use recorded messages cuts us off from school."
DPS Parent.

Holistic School Supports

Schools often provide non-academic resources that are critical to student success, such as mental health counseling, food pantries, extra-curricular sports, and clubs. The circumstances of last year revealed issues of access to these services and sparked community-wide conversations and systemic shifts to ensure all students continued to have access to these vital resources. During the summer of 2020, the community rallied to donate time, money, and other resources to prepare and deliver meals to families in need. The prevalence of meal relief in our community and across the nation prompted the USDA to offer waivers to child nutrition programs in order to create more flexibility in the ways that food was served.



¹¹ See chart 63 in Appendix B

¹² See chart 13 in Appendix B

Food relief is not the only non-academic resource sought by students and families during the last year. Rental assistance, utility assistance, and healthcare services were all needed and could oftentimes be found inside a DPS school. Many schools across DPS provide a food pantry for students and families to take advantage of and partner with organizations, like InterFaith Food Shuttle that provides produce and shelf-stable foods. Some of these resources are explicitly provided by schools after observing a need, while others come from federal, state, and local programming. Once schools closed, families were stuck needing these services at higher rates and experiencing insecurity with each of these services without their typical outlet. Many DPS educators and staff also experienced the same insecurities and vacancies in assistance.

Most families who replied to the survey relied on DPS-issued computers and hotspots. About 80% of families took advantage of some sort of resource.¹³

About half of teachers did not rely on any support offered by DPS, though some did take advantage of food drives, rent/mortgage assistance, and technology services.¹⁴

According to students, families heavily relied on DPS-issued computers and hotspots, but many student respondents' families did not rely on many additional resources provided to them.¹⁵

Administrators reported that teachers most frequently used DPS-issued technology and mental health services.¹⁶

Administrators reported that families took advantage of many different types of resources, including food distribution, rent/mortgage assistance, DPS-issued technology, and mental health services.¹⁷



¹³ See chart 15 in Appendix B

¹⁴ See chart 32 in Appendix B

¹⁵ See chart 50 in Appendix B

¹⁶ See chart 68 in Appendix B

¹⁷ See chart 70 in Appendix B

DPS Stakeholder Survey: Key Takeaways

We identified several takeaways from the survey in three key areas: **social-emotional wellbeing, holistic supports, and engagement and communication**. Responses to each key area varied based on the role of the survey participants: administrators/teachers/staff, parents and/or family members, and students. Regardless of the role of the participant, several general patterns emerged. Responses expressed a strong need for increased supports for students and families, including the hiring of additional support staff, such as social workers, and offering mental health resources. Additionally, responses express a desire for more frequent and consistent communication between schools and families. Participants stress the importance of incorporating more bilingual support, such as hiring Spanish-speaking staff and two-way communication platforms between students, families, and staff.

Social- Emotional Wellbeing

Administrators

- Continue to monitor and develop solutions after the COVID crisis has ended
- Use funds to provide mental health counselors and SEL coaches
- Re-develop SEL wellness activities and provide additional planning time for staff built into the master schedule

Teachers

- Fund/Allot additional student support providers in schools (e.g., more social workers, counselors, nurses, mental health services), especially bilingual
- Partner with organizations that provide services that include the entire family, group therapy
- Continue Wellness Wednesday

Parents

- Provide additional outreach and resources that are culturally and socio-economically sensitive and appropriate
- Hire more full-time social workers and mental health service providers
- Address concerns due to the lack of social engagement
- Include opportunities for meaningful social-

Students

- Provide additional mental health support and resources
- Continue Wellness Wednesdays, but understand that students can't participate if they have too much time-intensive work to complete

Family Engagement Findings

- Invest and engage in community relationship building (e.g., providing events for families and community members at schools)
- Include parenting support and guidance, especially for parents with demanding work schedules
- emotional curriculum once in-person school returns
- Recognize the readjustment to in-person will take time and effort -- this past year was hard
- Address students' anxiety, loneliness, and withdrawal from school
- Create structured social-emotional support systems for students and families
- Initiate two-way texting tool for parents (such as Hustle)
- Support DPS social workers with DSS educational neglect
- Consolidate communication methods
- Refrain from defaulting to technology sign-ups
- Prioritize hiring Spanish-speaking staff
- Utilize automatic enrollment to a central site providing essential information for staff, parents, AND students to prevent barriers to parental awareness?
- Connect through home visits with families, group meetings in local communities, or town halls for larger gatherings
- Contract with interpreters and hire more Spanish-speaking staff members and educators
- Provide more individual outreach to students and families
- Offer anonymous/discrete opportunities for parents to share needs
- Use consistent communication across various platforms that parents opt into based on personal preference or pick ONE tool and use it consistently
- Ensure every family has stable Wi-Fi -- every student needs a hotspot
- Find a way to directly contact students as well as parents
- Communicate consistently across available outlets to ensure information arrives in a timely manner.

Holistic Supports

- Provide summer school for any student that requests support/enrichment
- Re-evaluate curriculum implementation
- Emphasize the arts and physical activities
- Partner with Durham Parks and Rec and other groups to get kids outside during the summer
- Continue providing resources to families that were available during the pandemic, especially food distribution
- Create resources to bridge the digital literacy divide
- Ensure all DPS information is simultaneously available in Spanish and English
- Hire full-time Spanish-speaking liaisons for each school
- Use consistent, targeted messaging
- Require parents to update contact information more frequently (quarterly, ideally)
- Record messages in a centralized location in chronological order
- Maintain consistent expectations and baseline minimums for how teachers communicate with parents
- Create additional encouragement and support resources for students and families
- Decrease amount of unhelpful pressure on academics that impacts social-emotional health
- When back in person, less screen time for students, but having Chromebooks provided to students was essential and appreciated this year
- Continue to provide resources and supports used during the pandemic response (e.g., food distribution - electronic and hard copy)

Recommendations

Below are six recommendations that Durham Public Schools, the county, and community partners could follow. These recommendations are based on common findings and takeaways from our community partners and what we've heard from participants in our study.

1. Improve availability of mental health services for youth
 - a. Increase the number of counselors and social workers in schools until ratios meet national recommendations (1:250)
 - b. Ensure that mental health providers are equipped to work with Black and Latinx youth
2. Create more affirming environments
 - a. Train school staff to create trauma-informed environments
 - b. Develop multiple opportunities (in-person and virtual) to build strong relationships
3. Improve engagement with DPS
 - a. Increase or standardize teacher/parent communication
 - b. Receive regular input from a representative group of stakeholders
 - c. Improve Language Justice in DPS
4. Streamline communication
 - a. Personalize communication methods for parents
 - b. Improve systems for updating parent information
5. Ensure all have access to a living wage

The table below explains each recommendation in-depth, including the rationale for the recommendation, some actions that DPS has already taken for each recommendation, and future steps DPS, Durham County, or Community Partners could take toward implementation.

Social-Emotional Wellbeing Recommendations

- I. Increase the availability and accessibility of mental health services for youth
 - Ia. Increase the number of counselors and social workers in schools until ratios meet national recommendations (1:250)

Rationale: DPS families and Durham residents overwhelmingly expressed the need for more mental health support in DPS. Currently, DPS has a counselor-to-student ratio of 1:317 and a social worker-to-student ratio of 1:902. The American School Counselor Association and the National Association of Social Workers recommend ratios of 1:250.

- DPS Actions
- DPS BOE Equity Policy includes a commitment to work towards appropriate ratios of counselors and social workers in DPS.
 - BOE proposed budget includes funds for 2 additional school counselors ~10 additional social workers 2021-22.

- The budget would bring the ratio from 1:902 to 1:702 and the ratio of school counselors to students to 1:267.

Future Action Needed	DPS	Durham County	Community Partners
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allocate ~\$7.7 million for 8 more school counselors and 81 more school social workers to meet the nationally recommended ratio. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fully fund DPS budget requests for more mental health support staff or co-locate DSS staff at Durham Public Schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish relationships with individual schools to familiarize staff, students, and families with services and ways to access them.

1b. Ensure that mental health providers are equipped to work with Black and Latino youth

Rationale: The Office on Youth listening sessions and Made in Durham demonstrated a need for equitable, accessible, and culturally affirming mental health support for students.

DPS Actions The DPS strategic plan prioritizes professional development that supports the implementation of cultural frameworks. Teachers will be trained in restorative practices, social-emotional learning, de-escalation, crisis prevention/intervention, culturally affirming teaching, and reducing implicit bias and racial inequities by 2023.

Future Action Needed	DPS	Durham County	Community Partners
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create goals to recruit and retain counselors and social workers that reflect the demographic diversity of DPS students. ● Prioritize hiring mental health providers who reflect the cultural and language backgrounds of DPS students. ● Ensure all mental health providers are trained in culturally responsive practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create a mental health commission with an equity lens led by youth and adults to analyze mental health services in Durham, make recommendations to the county and school board, and hold proper stakeholders accountable. This work can be similar to the newly created Community Safety & Wellness Task Force, but should be independent of this task force and be made permanent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work with organizations like <u>El Futuro</u> to understand best practices when working with Black and Latinx youth ● Apply strategies to the programming of youth, educators, and family-serving organizations

What specific partnership can be made to support direct services to youth? How can community-based groups with verifiable experiences in Black and Latinx communities work within schools to provide these direct services?

2. Create more affirming environments.

2a. Train school staff to create trauma-informed environments:

Rationale: Community and survey data demonstrate that students and families experienced trauma this year, whether due to increased stress, loneliness, loss, or financial hardship.

DPS Actions DPS has signed an MOU with the Center for Child and Family Health to train 70 staff members at 10 elementary schools to offer trauma-informed leadership in 2021-2022.

Future Action Needed	DPS	Durham County	Community Partners
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expand the CCFH program (if successful) to include middle and high schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Designate American Rescue Plan Act funds for use by DPS to expand the training already identified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Offer free, low-cost, or sliding scale trauma-informed training for DPS staff (if possible) ● Act as support for teachers and students alike navigating and processing the last school year.

2b. Develop multiple opportunities and practices (in-person and virtual) to build strong relationships

Rationale: Intentionally building strong relationships with students and families will allow them to seamlessly transition back into school environments and to re-engage in academic work. Mentorship programs -- with appropriate investment and training -- have a proven track record, especially for students transitioning into middle and high school. The Office on Youth found that many DPS students lack positive adult relationships at school.

DPS Actions In December 2020, Hillside High School created a student-driven mentorship program for Latinx students through funds provided by the DPSF Accelerating Digital Equity School Grant. Latinx 11th and 12th-grade mentors, comfortable with virtual learning and well-versed in the school culture, worked with 9th-grade mentees weekly to provide social-emotional and technical support.

Future Action Needed	DPS	Durham County	Community Partners
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Map relationships to ensure every DPS student has at least one positive adult relationship at school. ● Expand student-to-student and student-to-adult mentorship opportunities for students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide opportunities for youth to build positive connections with adults outside of schools through Durham Parks and Recreation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide mentors for students identified during the district's relationship mapping project.

The Harvard Making Caring Common Project includes a toolkit to map relationships and create mentorship opportunities for students.

Success should be measured by not only a student's academic gains but also their personal well-being, and increased access to mentors is a proven way to improve both areas. In 2014, MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership found that students with mentors are more likely to see an increase in other positive behaviors, such as participation in sports and extracurriculars, and hold leadership roles in school. Durham is home to multiple mentorship programs, including the NC affiliate for MENTOR. With adequate support and networking, these organizations can fill the need for positive adult relationships.

2c. Train school staff to create culturally affirming environments

Rationale: The Office on Youth and Village of Wisdom found that many Black students and students of color do not feel affirmed by or emotionally safe with adults in DPS. Both organizations recommend training and accountability for school personnel to improve students' experiences.

DPS Action

- The DPS strategic plan prioritizes professional development that supports the implementation of cultural frameworks. Teachers will be trained in restorative practices, social-emotional learning, de-escalation, and crisis prevention/intervention, culturally responsive teaching, and reducing implicit bias and racial inequities by 2023.
- The 2021-22 budget also includes an additional position in the office of Equity Affairs.

Future Action Needed

DPS

- Prioritize culturally affirming teaching and reduce implicit bias in future professional development plans.
- Collaborate with an outside firm to create an appropriate and adequate measurement tool to monitor progress.

Community Partners

- Community partners with capacity can partner with DPS to provide anti-racism and inclusion training such as we are.

Village of Wisdom's Culturally Affirming Climate Survey has been used in various classrooms across the school district.

Engagement / Communication Recommendations

3. Improve engagement with DPS

3a. Increase or standardize teacher/parent communication:

Rationale: Because of the many varied tools used over the past year to engage families, it is difficult to know which channel/tool to use for accurate and up-to-date information. Having a standard tool for communicating between district, school, and home will help with families receiving messages on time and trusting it to be accurate.

DPS Actions: Most community data revealed that parent-teacher communication increased during the pandemic. Parents overwhelmingly appreciated the increased communication from teachers. However, DPSF survey results revealed that many parents felt that some teachers were still hard to reach.

Future Action Needed

DPS

- Require principals to standardize and simplify teacher/parent communication.
- Hold teachers accountable for lack of availability

Durham County

Community Partners

Durham County and Community Partners: What success have you found during the COVID-19 crisis in communicating with service recipients and partners? How can these be replicated within the school district?

3b. Receive regular input from a representative group of stakeholders

Rationale: The Office on Youth listening sessions and DPSF survey results revealed that teachers, students, and parents do not feel they have enough input at the district level. It proved challenging to obtain a representative group of participants with a survey, a fact demonstrated by the lack of representation in the DPSF survey and recent surveys that DPS has completed.

DPS Actions Priority 4 of the DPS Strategic Plan contains the following strategies that DPS has committed to:

1. Establish formal relationships and collaborative structures to engage stakeholders.
2. Facilitate open dialogue with stakeholders about challenges and solutions
3. Engage parents and the larger community in ongoing dialogue about the changes needed to prepare more students for success.
4. Regularly survey students, families, and school communities.
5. Build a culture of collaboration and shared decision-making.

Future Action Needed

DPS

- Ensure participation in surveys and dialogue is representative of all members of the DPS community
- Continue hosting various superintendent town halls/the creation of new forums for parents to build community and action plans alongside district leadership
- Consider ways to engage young people in decision-making
- Develop a concrete, accessible process to partner with students to ensure engagement from idea generation to implementation

Community Partners

- Use available resources to create or improve lines of communication between underrepresented groups through surveys, dialogues, and other strategies

As part of future actions for the district, there's a need to answer, "How can young people have power in decisions that impact them?" DPS can and should develop a concrete and accessible process in partnership with students which will ensure they are being engaged, because they are part of the process, beginning to end.

3c. Improve Language Justice in DPS

Rationale: Almost 10,000 students in DPS speak a language other than English. However, DPS only has 7 interpreters/liaisons servicing DPS elementary and middle schools. The lack of availability of translation services proved challenging for teachers and families during the pandemic.

DPS Action The 2021-2022 Budget includes \$500,000 for additional ELL teachers and one additional staff member in the Multilingual Resource Center (MRC).

Future Action Needed

DPS

- Hire more translators
- Implement district or school-wide use of technology that includes real-time text-based translation services (Bloomz, Talking Points).

Durham County

- Acknowledge individuals within the school district as essential workers, and therefore eligible for premium pay through the ARPA funds

Community Partners

- Consider staffing availability for translation services for special events (i.e., parent-teacher conferences, open houses, award ceremonies)

- Invest in internal translators for departments outside of the MRC, so any updates and communication can be simultaneously provided in English and Spanish.
- Use ARPA funds to provide supplemental pay for current translators and interpreters, while also funding these much-needed positions.
- Use newly-hired translators both within the county government and the school district to fill service gaps in service that impact our schools and community.

4. Streamline Communication

4a. Personalize communication methods

Rationale: Parents reported feeling overwhelmed with district communication methods that relayed the same message multiple times through different avenues. DPS should continue to offer multiple communication channels but in a more personalized way.

DPS Actions DPS does an excellent job communicating via multiple, accessible channels: online websites, emails, text messages, phone calls. According to District policy, parents can opt-out of certain forms of communication, but this option does not seem to be user-friendly or well-publicized.

Future Action Needed

DPS

- Ensure families only receive relevant robocalls (i.e., virtual learners don't receive calls about transportation status)
- Streamline and publicize the offer for parents to opt-out of non-preferred communication methods

Durham County

- Designate ARPA funds to finance critical infrastructure investments, such as broadband, that would allow families to retain internet access at reduced rates.
- Expand internet availability to ensure educators and families alike have access to the internet and are able to use it to maintain communication.

Durham County and community orgs, do you have best practices from your work to help with maintaining accurate records for DPS families? Is there a possibility for data sharing that would provide appropriate and necessary confidentiality?

4b. Improve systems for updating parent information

Rationale: A limited number of people are able to change information in PowerSchool, making it challenging to notify multiple teachers when parents' contact information changes. Teachers reported difficulty finding current contact information during the pandemic.

DPS Actions DPS keeps all parent contact information in PowerSchool, and parents are asked to update contact information annually.

Future Action Needed

DPS

- Require parents update their contact information biannually in PowerSchool
- Create a platform (or school level Google Form / Qualtrics) where multiple people can update contact information simultaneously

Community Partners

- Offer assistance in updating contact information of any families within partner networks Community partners that have close relationships with families can also help update contact information.

Holistic Support Recommendations

5. Ensure all have access to a living wage

Rationale: Qualification for free/reduced-price lunch is typically used as an indicator of proximity to poverty. In DPS, 63% of students qualify for this need-based program, and the overwhelming majority of these are from Black and Latinx families. Increasing the minimum wage to at least \$15 will have a significant impact on these families, some seeing a yearly increase of \$3,300. Local and state leaders must work together to raise the minimum wage, so families will have more room in their budget to meet basic needs, including those for which they depend on schools to meet, such as weekend/holiday groceries, transportation, and even housing/utility costs.

DPS Actions: DPS has instituted a \$15 minimum wage for all support staff.

Future Action Needed

DPS

- Advocate for statewide minimum wage

Durham County

- Durham County has already instituted a \$15 minimum wage for county staff.

Community Partners

- Become members of the Living Wage Project
- Advocate for statewide minimum wage



Process Overview

In January 2021, the Durham Public Schools Foundation and Student U identified the need to document community experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, including compiling and synthesizing the work of numerous community organizations that reflects the experiences of students, families, and educators during this crisis. Through this work, an advisory council convened, composed of community partners intimately knowledgeable of the student/youth, parent, and educator experience. The Office on Youth, Village of Wisdom, Durham Public Schools Foundation, Student U, and Durham Public Schools were all represented on the council and met monthly to identify the scope of the paper and ways to best engage various DPS stakeholders.

This mixed-methods study includes the experiences of some DPS students, parents, and educators during the COVID-19 pandemic, innovative practices, and bright spots based on community data received. Community-driven recommendations follow for consideration by DPS and school board leadership, county and city leadership, and the community organizations who work closest with the identified groups.

Project Scope and Methods

After considering the potential for future iterations of this work, and wanting to provide timely recommendations that focused on the greatest areas of need, the council decided to focus this paper on the following aspects of the school experience:

- Social-emotional wellbeing of educators and students across the 19/20 and 20/21 school years
- Communication and engagement between home and school
- Use of other non-academic school-based supports

After viewing initial community and survey data, we also included how stakeholders spoke about school safety and culture, whether explicitly or implicitly, in their responses.

As part of the work, we asked the Durham community and various DPS stakeholders to be a part of the study in one, or more, of these ways.

1. Participate in interviews about policy and practice shifts during the 19/20 and 20/21 school years related to the COVID-19 crisis.
2. Submit organizational data collected during the crisis to be included in a meta-analysis.
3. Respond to a survey developed for DPS students, parents, teachers, staff, and administrators.

DPS Central Office and School-Based Staff Interviews

The interviews focused mainly on central office staff and school-based staff. We invited employees to discuss the focus areas (explained above), specifically the ease with which their office or school pivoted to accommodate student, family, and educator needs during the pandemic. After completing DPS's Research and Accountability approval process, we were able to interview three members of central office

staff, who did not provide enough information to be included in our analysis. The reader should note that the timing of these interviews coincided with the school board vote to resume in-person learning, and it was a difficult time for all DPS stakeholders and the community at large.

Community Data Collection

We asked community organizations that work directly with DPS students, parents/families, and educators to submit data they collected over the last year in order to conduct a meta-analysis of the findings and recommendations. We contacted over thirty Durham-based organizations to submit data. Of those, we received data from nine organizations, including Village of Wisdom, Durham Children’s Initiative, the Emily K Center, Durham’s Office on Youth, Book Harvest, the City of Durham and County Resident Surveys, Made in Durham, Student U, and Durham Pre-K. Once we collected data, our team summarized the reports and found many common themes and recommendations related to the scope of the work. Within these, we also found ideas for future research pertaining to COVID-19 recovery.

DPS Stakeholder Survey

While working to collect data from community partners, the council decided that we would need another source to corroborate the community data and replace the interviews with the central office and school-based staff. A survey was released in the Spring of 2021 to the DPS community, including students, parents/caregivers, teachers and school staff, and administrators. The survey, found in the appendix, related directly to the focus areas outlined above) and how these areas were perceived, understood, and shifted during the COVID-19 crisis. The survey received 200+ valid responses.

Limitations

The process to construct this paper required multiple pivots because of the many COVID-19-related shifts at the district and community levels. The need for social distancing, the return to in-person learning, and the closure of school buildings during the 2021 Spring semester limited our ability to communicate with the identified stakeholders. To cast a wide net, we relied heavily on email with community partners, listservs, and social media. These tools are not ideal to effectively spread information, but they did provide insight that we otherwise would not have had. After omitting invalid responses from the community survey, we concluded the responses did not mirror the demographic representation of the district as we hoped, but still contained useful information from the community. Given these limitations, we are eager to expand this work to cover other topics and hope to use methods that will reach wider audiences within our community.