



**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

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.

