

Conversations with King County Middle School Youth about Emotional Wellbeing, Safety & School Environments

Public Health - Seattle & King County partnered with Empowering Youth and Families Outreach, Communities in Schools of Federal Way-Highline, and Cardea to talk with young people who identify with groups who are disproportionately impacted by systemic racism and gender-based oppression about how school environments impact youth emotional wellbeing. Conversations were held with middle school students in King County during the 2021 - 2022 school year.



What did we hope to learn?

- What do supportive emotional health & wellbeing look like for youth?
- What makes young people feel more connected to adults at school?
- How does the school environment impact youth emotional health & wellbeing?



Who Participated?

- 25 Black and African American students
- 6 American Indian and Alaska Native students
- 15 Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students
- 21 Transgender and gender-diverse students



This project was funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation through our partners at Seattle Children's Research Institute. To learn more about our conversations with youth see our full report at: www.kingcounty.gov/MiddleSchoolProject.

Students feel supported by, value and want:



Adults at school to **proactively address** incidents of racism, discrimination, transphobia & bullying, & to follow-up with those who reported the incident



Confidentiality & transparent communication when seeking support from adults at school or using resources provided at school



Inclusive education that integrates histories of people of color and LGBTQ+ people, anti-racist principles, cultural responsiveness, & social justice



School environments with **racial/ethnic & gender-identity diversity & representation**



Physical spaces that support emotional wellbeing & health



Adults at school to build connections with young people by **taking time for listening, engaging, & relating** to them

Experiences of Black and African American Students



Students across multiple schools describe feeling unsafe at school, citing concerns about gun violence, substance use, threats & the ease of access strangers have to both students and the school building.

Students routinely experienced racism, bullying, discrimination, microaggressions, & inequitable disciplinary practices while at school, adding that often adults do not intervene, or intervene unfairly, when incidents happen, which contributes to feelings of isolation & lack of safety.



Students report that meaningful adult intervention to understand, address and halt racist, discriminatory and/or bullying behavior contributed to youth feeling seen, safe and supported.



"We get shooting threats like every month. We often have to shelter in place for over an hour."



"White teachers can't relate when you tell them about a racial incident; they don't know how to support you."



"In my art class a kid called another kid a racist word and my school handled it right away."

Experiences of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Students



Students shared that they feel most connected to their peers at school when they get to work with other students in class, play sports together, or socialize through field days or at lunch time. Young people would like more opportunities to connect with peers in classroom settings.



Adults can support Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students to feel safe by being kind, non-judgmental, and getting to know them in meaningful ways.



"We're not allowed to talk to [peers] until after class because [teachers say that] talking makes us unfocused. We don't do a lot of group work... maybe once a month. I would like more group work time in class."



"The only person I can talk to and trust is the security guard because he is like different than my teachers. They just like judge a lot. He does not judge. He actually pays attention when you're talking."

Experiences of American Indian and Alaska Native Students

Students shared that it is important for schools to carry the burden of educating students on how to be culturally responsive. This includes accurate textbooks on the history of American Indian and Alaska Native communities.



"It's [not] our job to educate people [on topics like] 'do I say Native American, what's the right term'... Supporting Native students starts with education right from textbooks... this takes pressure off students to represent us. I'm proud to represent us, but there is a burden... which takes away from being a student."



"...if people find out that we are Native now it seems like we represent that whole community...almost like we are on for show... like I need to know about this Tribe so I'm going to ask them because they are from that tribe."

Experiences of Transgender and Gender Diverse Students

Physical cues in classrooms, such as pride flags or posters communicating inclusion & acceptance of all identities, help to build trust & contribute to a sense of safety.



Increasing access to all-gender bathrooms & private changing areas can support students to feel safer at school.

Students report that using the correct pronouns, and having the tools for responding to mistakes without defensiveness, support emotional safety at school.



"One of my teachers just has... on their walls, just posters. Like, 'we support every background...' and that kind of makes you feel good, that they've dedicated... an entire space of the classroom just showing they support who you are no matter who you are."



"The bathrooms are super gendered, so I just go to the nurse's office, which is pretty far away sometimes and there's only like two stalls and it's the only gender-neutral bathroom in the building. So that sucks."



"Most teachers misgender me a lot, even though they know my pronouns... and that feels pretty shitty... I even wear [pronoun] pins and stuff... it feels first of all like you're being stepped on & also like nobody's listening to me... it feels so hopeless and stupid."