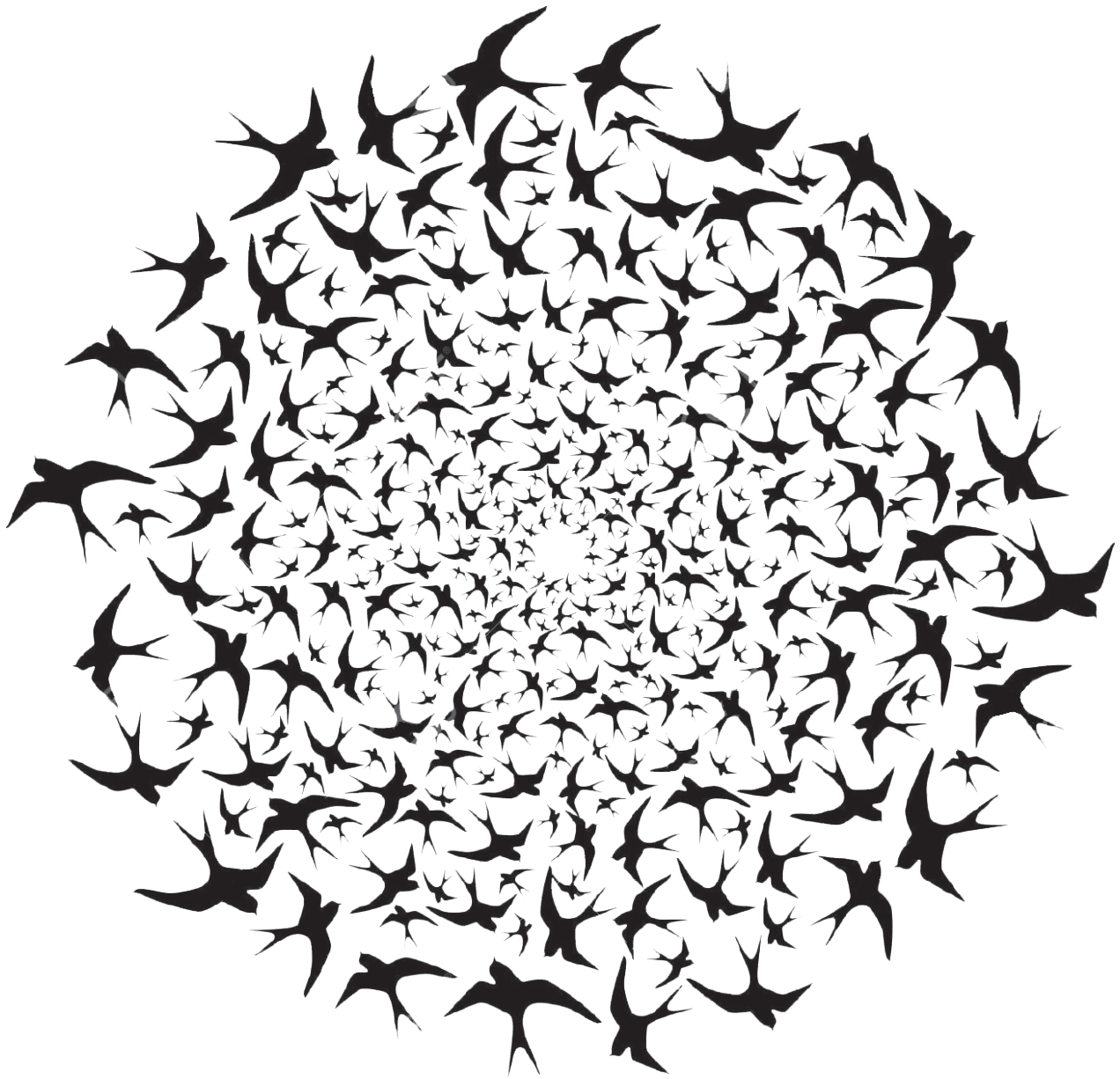


Baltimore City Schools: A Case For Bridge Building

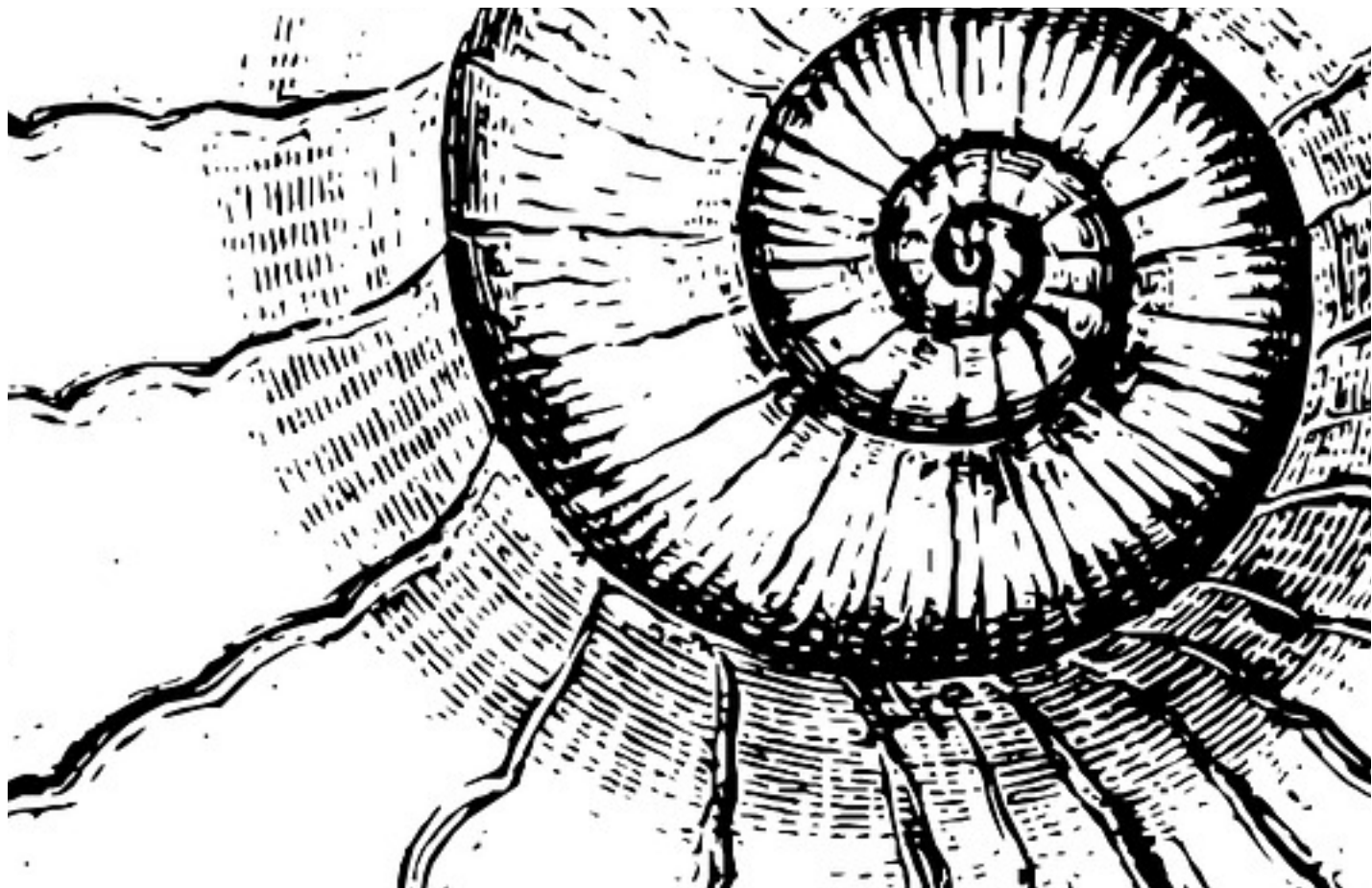


A Teachers' Democracy Project Study



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Executive Summary

“Ms. Thompson is a parent of 3 teenage children. When we sat down to talk, she had a lot to say and it appeared she was frustrated and needed someone to just listen to her.... One issue we discussed was that she feels “they let the kids do what they want and they push them through when they know they [sic] not ready, giving fake grades just to get rid of the kids.” This is a huge concern ...Ms. Thompson also mentioned that there is a lot that the children aren’t learning because some need extra attention. She and I spoke about the children who might need IEP’s or 504 plans. She also stated that parents speak out on issues, but they feel like nothing is changed. By the end of the conversation, Ms. Thompson appeared a lot less frustrated and she said that she would like to be more involved in school.”

Interviewed by Kenyarda Ross, Parent

In the following report we summarize findings from 659 interviews with parents (356), teachers/other school staff (138), community members (133), teachers who are also parents (16), and students (16) about their experiences in Baltimore City Schools. The interviews were conducted and summarized by 25 Teachers’ Democracy Project (TDP) parent and teacher fellows in the Summer of 2018. They were then coded and analyzed by TDP staff.

Findings fell into 7 significant categories.

- **Feeling Safe**
- **Race and cultural competence: Feeling understood**
- **Students feeling engaged**
- **Parent engagement in school**
- **Support for teachers**
- Funding, facilities, and resource issues
- Curriculum and testing issues

Though the largest single concern shared by all was the issue of a lack of resources, five of the concerns in the list related to school culture and the quality of relationships. We noticed that among these 5 categories--unlike the sentiments expressed when talking about facilities and resources--parents and teachers, expressed their concerns differently and demonstrated different understandings about the root cause of problems. We found there was often implied blame embedded in their concerns and some revealing contradictions and differences in perspective. These differences have proved to be the most illuminating finding of the study.

Difference 1:

Stakeholders agree parent “engagement” is essential

yet many parents don’t feel comfortable engaging. For schools engagement means parents being responsive and preparing their kids for school while parents want to engage and know what’s happening at school but feel unwelcome, judged or alienated. The expectation of participation does not acknowledge how parents define engagement themselves nor what they may need in order to engage.

Difference 2:

Teachers and parents understand family and community challenges differently. Teachers often express their understanding of student challenges through a trauma lens while parents don’t call what they go through trauma and instead focus on wanting their lives to be understood. The lens of trauma, places the onus on the individual child or family to heal while parents are not brought into the framework at all.

Difference 3:

There are different perspectives on managing student struggles in the classroom. Parents feel that teachers’ are unable to connect with struggling students. Teachers don’t feel they have time or resources to deal with whatever the child is going through. They both agree that student needs are not getting met but parents put the onus on teachers to connect better while teachers feel more outside supports are needed.

Difference 4:

School safety problems are perceived differently. Parents expect schools to keep their children safe no matter the source of the danger while teachers see the source of violence as beginning in communities and feel it’s a lot to expect schools to provide adequate protection. Parents again put the onus on school



staff while teachers, though expressed sympathetically, place the onus on families and on the community as a whole. School staff often see the solution in terms of having more adults to help deal with safety in the hallways and cafeterias.

Difference 5:

The sentiments expressed generally represent a divide across race and class lines. Parents see teachers as not caring enough. They want more Black teachers and teachers who understand their children and them as parents. Teachers express deep care for students though many come to recognize that they need more training to understand more about where their students come from.

Despite some agreement that race matters, there seems to be a lack of deep understanding of historic racist systems and how they function as the underlying cause for parent (and student) alienation and stress.

In general, parents are deeply concerned about what they perceive as a lack of caring and connection from teachers. Teachers and school staff, on the other hand, for the most part, tend to express deep care for students but experience a lack of support and training to be able to handle the harsh realities that students bring with them to school.

Misunderstandings and a lack of agreement on who or what is to blame for problems is a symptom of people having not listened to each others perspectives and stories. This makes it difficult to understand the root cause of a problem and ultimately to solve it. Our study indicates that this gap in understanding and the lack of trusting relationships may itself be a significant root cause for many of the challenges facing schools. Despite disagreements, one prominent conclusion is that the quality of trust and relationships in schools is of great concern to all stakeholder groups.

The data shows there are some concrete things that could and ought to be done to

make schools more responsive to student needs. However, it was the building of relationships across stakeholder groups that emerged as one of the most immediately viable potential solutions. An unexpected outcome we found was that the process of doing the interviews and listening to people's stories was itself part of a healing process and a way to build trust that addressed some of the concerns that participants were unearthing. We hope the district, schools, parent groups and community partners will consider a set of strategies that include focused, guided opportunities for people from different stakeholder groups in schools and at the district level to build relationships, talk and listen to each other and collectively problem solve the most significant issues they face.

The following recommendations are what we believe could help:

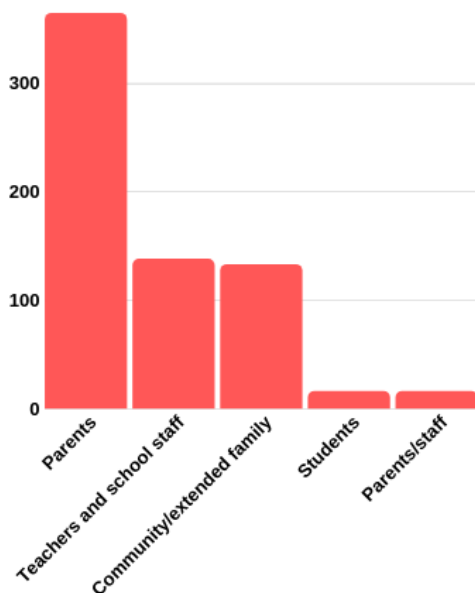
- Supporting teachers in having proactive one-on-one conversations with parents
- Fostering authentic and significant ways for parents to be involved in school through better activating parent involvement in School Family Councils and the community schools strategy
- Offering training to parents in de-escalation, restorative practices and trauma-informed care so they are brought into the frameworks that guide school staff
- Creating cross-stakeholder climate teams to collaboratively identify the safety challenges in the school and come up with restorative strategies together
- Addressing race and class divides though providing opportunities for teachers and parents to hear each others stories through dialogue circles, offering coursework about Baltimore to help teachers and parents both to understand the history and present of systemic racism as well as providing more robust training in culturally responsive pedagogy for teachers.
- Convening schools, neighborhood groups and partners to explore the root causes of the larger safety issues that children face in the neighborhoods that surround schools.

It is our conviction that with a shared understanding of the problems that exist and a space for collective problem solving that all stakeholders might blame each other less and fight together to end the underlying systemic causes of alienation, stress, misbehavior and trauma.

Methodology

Who We Interviewed

In the Summer of 2018, Teachers' Democracy Project worked with 25 parent and teacher fellows who were tasked with conducting 25 one-on-one conversations with people on what issues they most cared about in Baltimore City Schools. The fellows completed and typed up a total of 659 interviews. Of these, 356 (55%) were with parents of current City Schools students; 133 (20%) were community members, or part of the extended family of students; 138 (21%) were school staff (mostly teachers); 16 (2.5%) were students; and 16 (2.5%) were both parents and members of a school staff.



How and why the interviews were conducted

The interviews were part of an effort to raise awareness around education issues, find people willing to join in education advocacy efforts, and increase parent and teacher involvement at the school or district level. Our only request of interviewees was that if they wanted to get involved we invited them to a series of 6 events designed to provide information on some key education issues we previously identified as critical: School funding and budgets, the state of Black teachers, curriculum, why schools can't go back to the way they were, discipline and bullying, and parent power.

The advantage of this study was that parents and teachers were the interviewers asking open ended questions of interviewees. As a result, the data provides

a view of what matters most to people without one central researcher and their bias focusing a conversation.

Fellows also attended a training where they were taught how to have "one-on-ones". These are conversations that are used by organizers to find out what a person is most concerned with and to see if they are willing to join a cause. Since we did not have a specific cause we wanted people to sign onto, these one-on-ones were about building relationships, gathering information and inviting people who seemed interested to come to one of our summer events. After each one-on-one, fellows were asked to record participants comments and collect information such as their role, the school(s) they were associated with, and the ages of their children (where applicable) and contact information if they wanted to be added to our outreach database. The actual interviews varied in length and depth, as did the summary write ups.

Our goal in writing this report is not to contribute to a condemning or sensationalization of City Schools' problems, because we firmly believe that there are far too many people in the state, in the media, and in the state legislature who place undue blame on our district when the reality is that the district has suffered from decades of neglect, injurious accountability measures and underfunding. Our goal is rather to assist in the effort to improve our schools by understanding existing challenges (and what to do about them) through the eyes of parents and teachers.



Data Analysis

We had not originally intended to do any formal data analysis on the interviews (as we first saw them as an organizing tool only) and therefore did not have parameters on how to write up the conversations to make them best suited for data analysis purposes. What we realized, however, when we collected the typed up interview summaries, was that we had compiled an interesting and diverse set of comment summaries that were unrestricted by leading questions or survey categories, and that many of these summaries contained rich and nuanced experiences and thoughts. Open Society Institute (OSI) generously offered a grant to support the work of reading through, coding, and analyzing these summaries. This work was done over the months from October 2018 to July 2019.

Our data analysis team consisted of three TDP staff members. Our first step was to code each interview summary with one or more codes. We then grouped these codes under 7 themes.

There are few things to note about how we have analyzed the data. Our approach to coding was to use participants words and expressions to name the codes. Some interviewees' comments were assigned more than

one code if they talked about multiple topics.

Coding

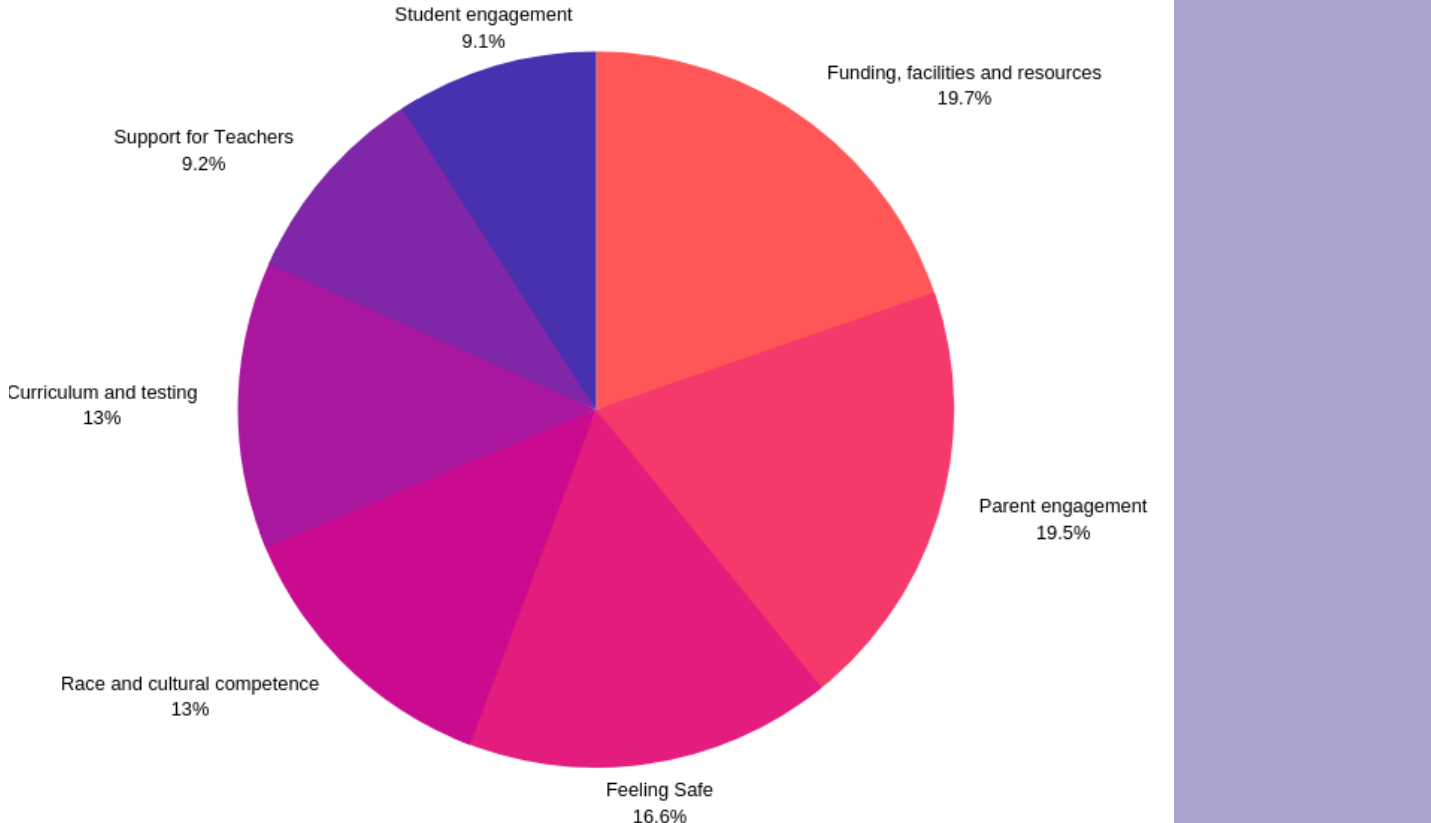
The data resulted in 60 codes. The codes are listed in Appendix A in order of frequency. We recognize that representing the frequency of comments has some value, however, because the data is disproportionately representative of parents, some issues might not be weighted as high because of the lack of teacher perspectives, rather than because of lack of importance.

Categories

The 60 codes were clustered to make 7 categories (in order by frequency of mentions):

- Funding, facilities, and resource issues
- Parent engagement in school
- Feeling Safe
- Race and cultural competence: Feeling understood
- Curriculum and testing issues
- Support for teachers
- Students feeling engaged

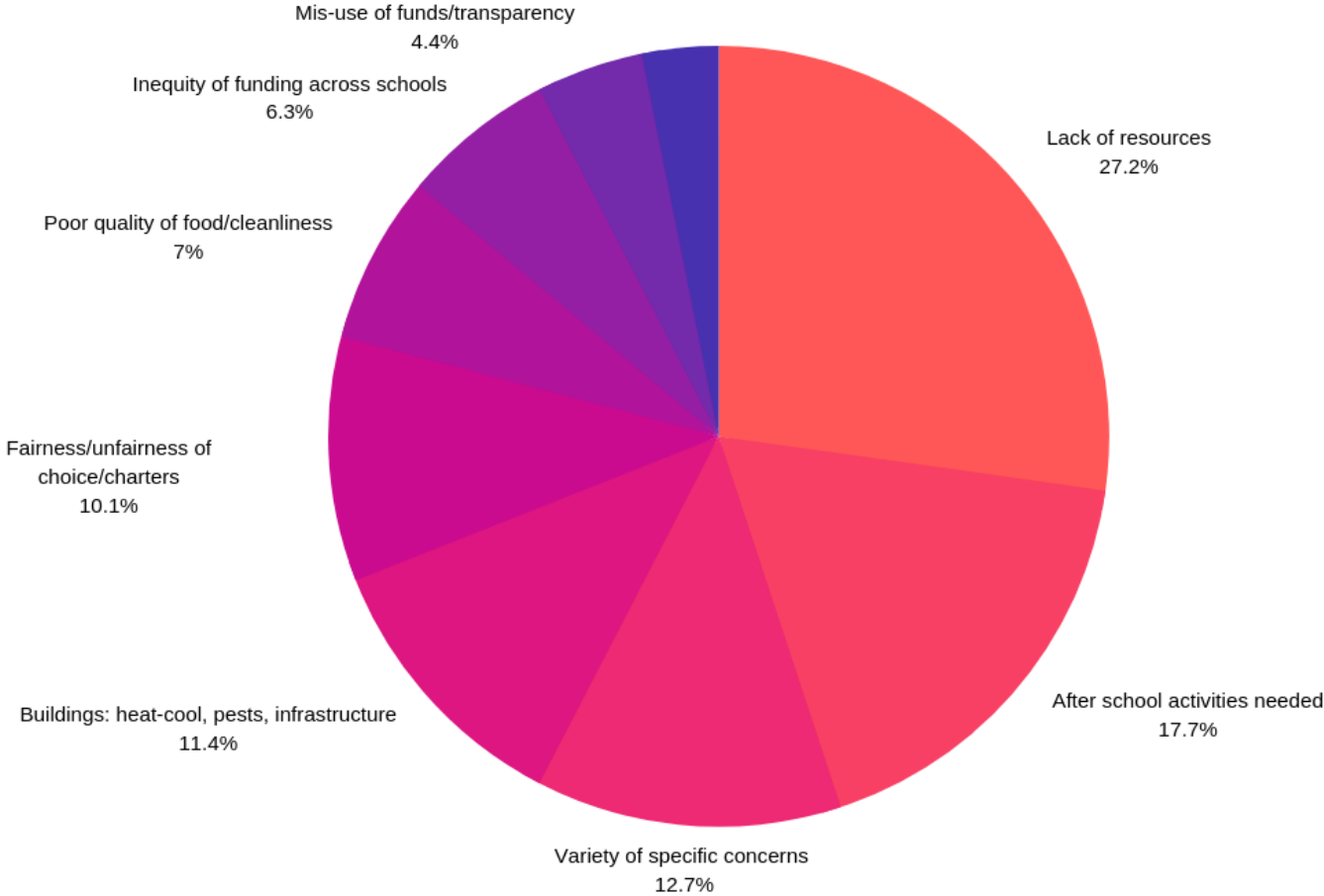
We also made a category called "General Comments." These were summaries that were either very general or undetailed. These comment categories are listed in Appendix B.



Results By Category

Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues

There were a total of 158 comments about funding, school facilities and the need for more resources. The issue of inadequate funding was in the top five concerns overall. (43 comments). All stakeholder groups expressed concerns around: inadequate resources, lack of after school opportunities, failing infrastructure, inequity of funding across schools, large class sizes/overcrowding, and the competition between schools over enrollment (captured under fairness/unfairness of school choice).

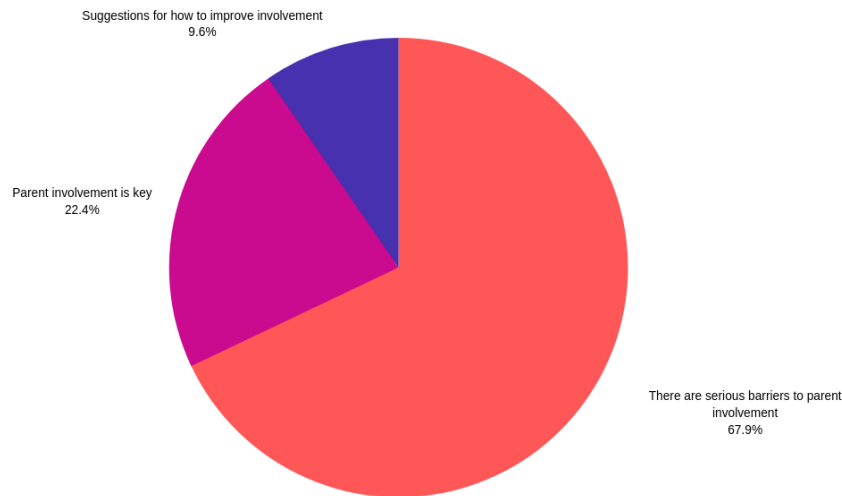


Parent Engagement in School

This section describes how our interviewees perceive parents’ relationship to schools and school staff members. There were a total of 156 comments under this theme. 106 (68%) of the 156 comments about parent involvement had to do with barriers that parents encounter in terms of showing up, being empowered and feeling welcome in schools. 35 (25%) of the comments expressed that it is critical for parents to show up and be a part of the school; that no improvements will happen until parents are included. 15 (10%) of the comments included suggestions for how to improve parent involvement such as: having more experienced parents reach out to and partner with timid parents to bring them to meetings, or making sure that interpreters are available for non-English speaking families.



Parent Engagement Comments



The largest group of comments (28; 30%) expressed a variety of impediments to attending meetings and/or being more involved. Parents said they had a hard time taking off work; that meetings were always held at times they could not come; and that schools seemed oblivious, sometimes, to the special circumstances faced by homeless families and families with language barriers who feel judged.

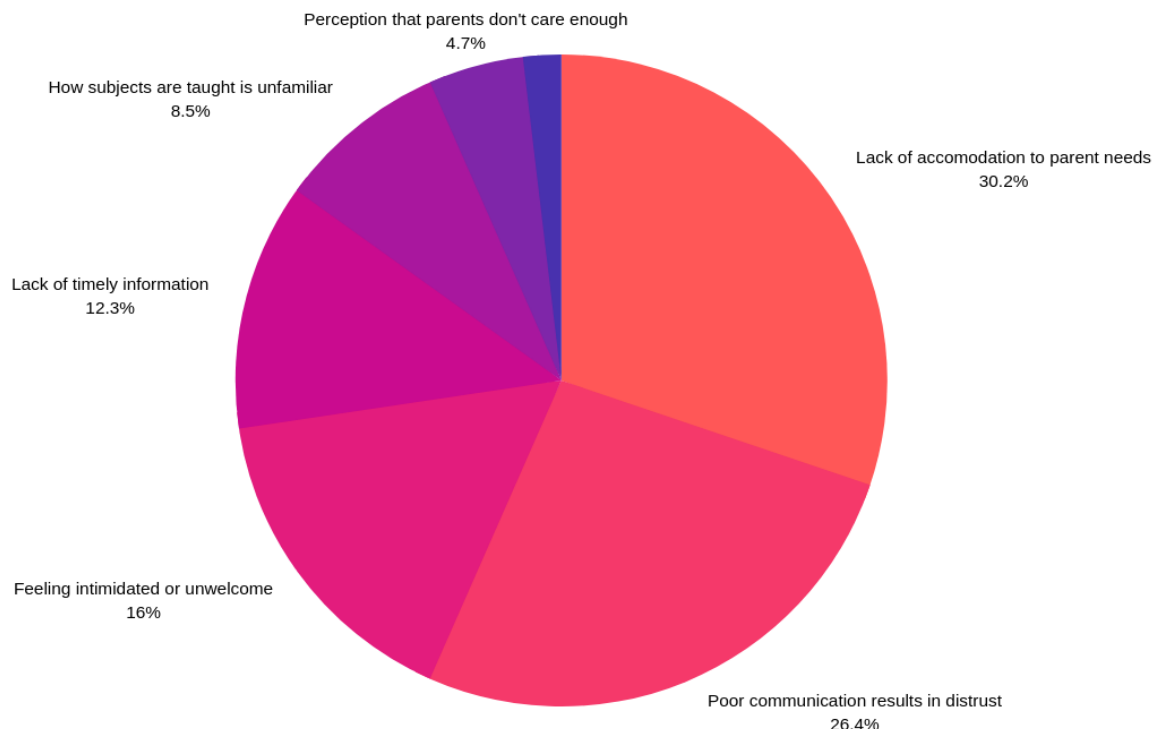
The next largest group (27; 31%) of comments about barriers to involvement related to a history of poor communication or misunderstanding between the parents and their child's teacher leading to a sense of distrust.

A related concern was shared 17 times (18%) and had to do with parents feeling intimidated and/or unwelcome, particularly when called to the school to deal with an incident of misbehavior. The sense of being made unwelcome related to how parents felt treated by the school office staff and the administration.

A smaller (10; 12%) but significant concern was the parents feeling that the way subjects are taught makes it a struggle for them to help with academics or homework. They feel unable to relate to either the content or the approach.

Teachers expressed a variety of sentiments about parents, some empathetic and some negative. The negative sentiments took the form of judging parents for not caring enough and not sending their children to school ready to participate.

The following chart breaks down the 106 comments about barriers to involvement cited by parents.



Feeling Safe

There were a total of 133 comments related to feeling unsafe in schools.

For many parents and caregivers, and some teachers (41 comments = 31% of the total 133 comments in this category), their primary concern was about their child’s exposure to danger while in school. The interviewees who volunteered this concern perceive that schools do not have the capacity, staff, or sometimes the willingness to protect children from one another, particularly in the case of bullying, which can often go undetected by adults.

“Ms. A’s concern was about the bullying going on in the school system. Bullying can cause some kids to not want to go to school anymore. Some kids also take their life because of bullying. It really needs to stop.”

In some cases it is teachers who worry about the dangers to students and to themselves.

“They do not feel safe as a staff person, and they do not feel that the students are safe! There are 1800 students enrolled in this school. There are 20 areas where students can and do enter this school with only 4 Adult Hall Monitors.”

Another common concern of parents and concerned neighbors (36; 27%) was the fact that the risk for

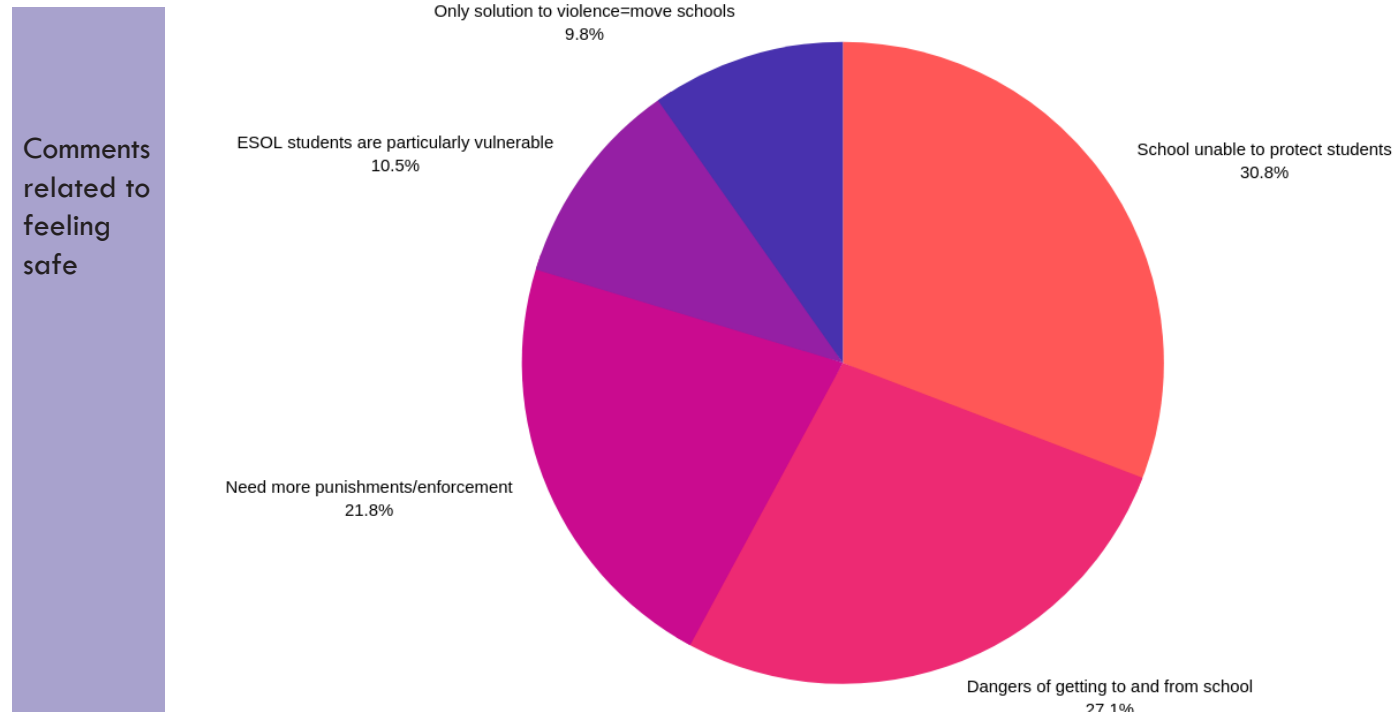
bullying and violence was greatest on the way to and from school, on school buses, in hallways/other spaces where there is little or no adult supervision, and when young people skip school.

“Ms. J feels that the staff in her children’s school do not care or are too afraid of many of the parents and students who attend this school. She has to walk her children to and from school everyday in order for the other children not to bully her children. “

29 participants (22% of the comments in this issue) across stakeholder groups felt that students who break the rules, and particularly those who are disruptive or violent or engage in bullying, should face more punishment than they currently do. A slightly smaller number of comments favored approaches that would deal on a more long term basis with conflict. (See “Student Engagement”)

The parents of ESOL children we interviewed (14; 11%) almost uniformly talked about safety and bullying, often while appreciating the efforts of staff at the school.

Some (13; 10%) parents described how they had to eventually move their child to a new school, despite the disruption this caused. This seemed to be as much about the perceived lack of concern at the school as it was about the original safety problem. Parents felt like serious issues were ignored or downplayed when they complained.



Race and Cultural Competence: Feeling Understood

104 interviewees specifically identified race, culture, or teachers' willingness to learn a different culture, as the root cause of the failure to adequately and appropriately respond to children's needs in school. These analyses took various forms, but shared a common thread that, on the whole, Black teachers, and/or non-Black teachers who have made the effort to become culturally competent, are best suited to teaching Black children. There was a resounding call for more Black teachers, and, in particular Black male teachers.

We should note here that there is some statistical truth behind this common perception about the relative absence of Black teachers. In our prior study of teacher demographics we found that the City has experienced a large shift from Black teachers making up 63% of the teaching force in 2003, down to 44% in School Year 2019. (<http://www.tdpbaltimore.org/teachers>)

To the extent that the need for more Black men was explained, comments included references to: being able to provide a sense of hope, one-on-one mentoring, activities that many young boys enjoy, and an authentic voice about the dangers of gang life. It is taken as a given by most interviewees that a Black man who grew up in Baltimore and who has the capacity to be a reliable adult in a school, is a treasure, largely because they understand how to keep boys safe and engaged in positive activities.

Interestingly, the need for more Black men is conflated, by some, with the need for more after school programs. The biggest concern for parents of Black boys is the danger of losing them to the streets and the desire for strong role models who keep them busy.

"Ms. W was speaking on why there should be more males in the school systems. They need to bring back the boys and girls club. They need more after school programs. She stated that she believes if there was more stuff for kids to do, she probably wouldn't have lost her teenage son to these streets."

Several comments also spoke to the difficulties faced by many Black men (who have a high likelihood of having their own spotty school histories--having themselves

been through an under-resourced school system) who would like to be teachers. They face particularly significant barriers, and are more often hired as "hall monitors" or in peripheral teaching roles.

"Mrs. G. states that she believes black males should be used more often in the school systems as educators and coaches instead of being present to address discipline issues."

There were 50 (44%) comments about needing more teachers who can relate to the children's culture. 23 of these were about the teachers' ability to relate to children's culture, home life, and community struggles. 27 talked specifically about teachers who are young, inexperienced, and/or White having unintended biases that cause them to lower their expectations for students. (We should note here that these comments contrast with those from teachers who expressed a great deal of concern for their students' well being.)

"Overall she [a parent] feels that the system is not working for African American children, and one reason is because there seems to be a breakdown in the expectations of Caucasian teachers and an inability to communicate with or understand our African American children's culture, lifestyle and various home and community environments."

Students' had thoughts about what it meant to have teachers who did and did not understand their background. They made a point of showing deep appreciation for teachers with whom they felt they could relate.

The interviewees were mixed between those who felt that teachers can learn to appreciate and respect students, and to understand the impact of trauma, no matter their background or race, and those who feel that there is no replacement for growing up Black in Baltimore as the basis for understanding our city's children.

"When people forget culture, they get lost and their children have nothing to hold onto."

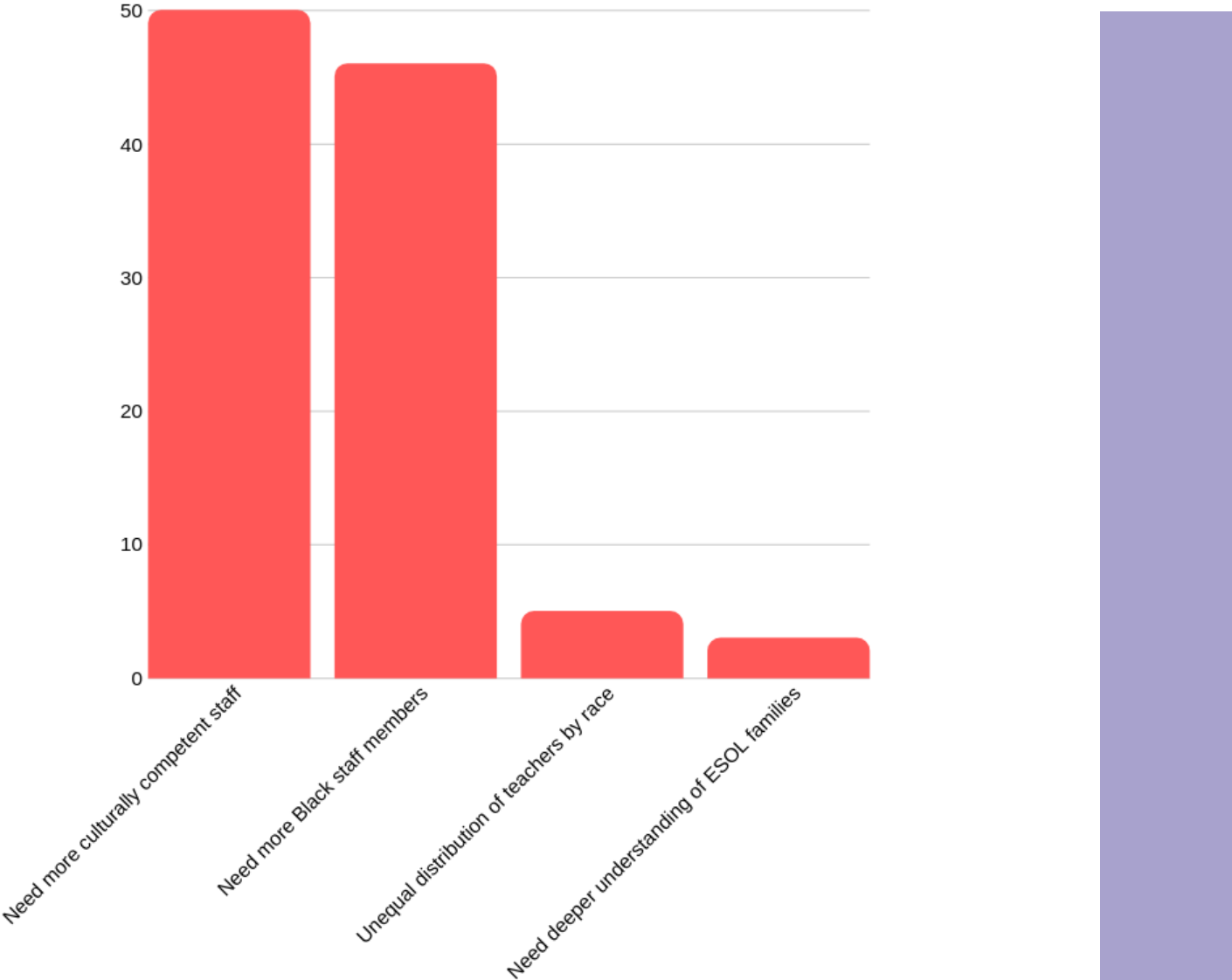
Interviewees spoke to the value of experienced teachers, "mature adults." One experienced teacher described how to respond to an angry child with patience and understanding. Teachers, he argued, need a great deal of support to achieve this type of understanding,

while also addressing the needs of a classroom as a whole.

“Teachers and everyone working with youth must be trained on how to work with children who have intergenerational trauma. We must be prepared to take on being a counselor. He has personally made a choice to (ignore whatever curse word that child calls him until the child begins to calm down and chill). As a mature adult he understands that this (child) is just expressing his or her hurt and pain the best way that they know how. As a teacher if you do not have any mental health experience then you have to review and learn this information on your own.”

A subset of our interviewees (14%) were ESOL parents and teachers. Of concern to these families was their own ability to interact meaningfully to advocate for their child. They could see how language and cultural barriers severely limited the interest shown by staff members in listening to them.

“I spoke with Ms. Z about her experience with BCPS and she says that her voice isn’t heard due to language barriers and uninterested staff members who avoid interacting with her or hearing her concerns. Ms. Z is a foreign parent who was very confused about how she reaches out for assistance with her son although the school lacks engagement in addressing her questions/issues.”



Curriculum Issues

There were a total of 104 comments about the district curriculum.

The largest group of comments in this category were a set of wishes that there could be more time spent on a particular subject area, including: African American literature and history, art, library time, recess, ESOL programming, and life skills.

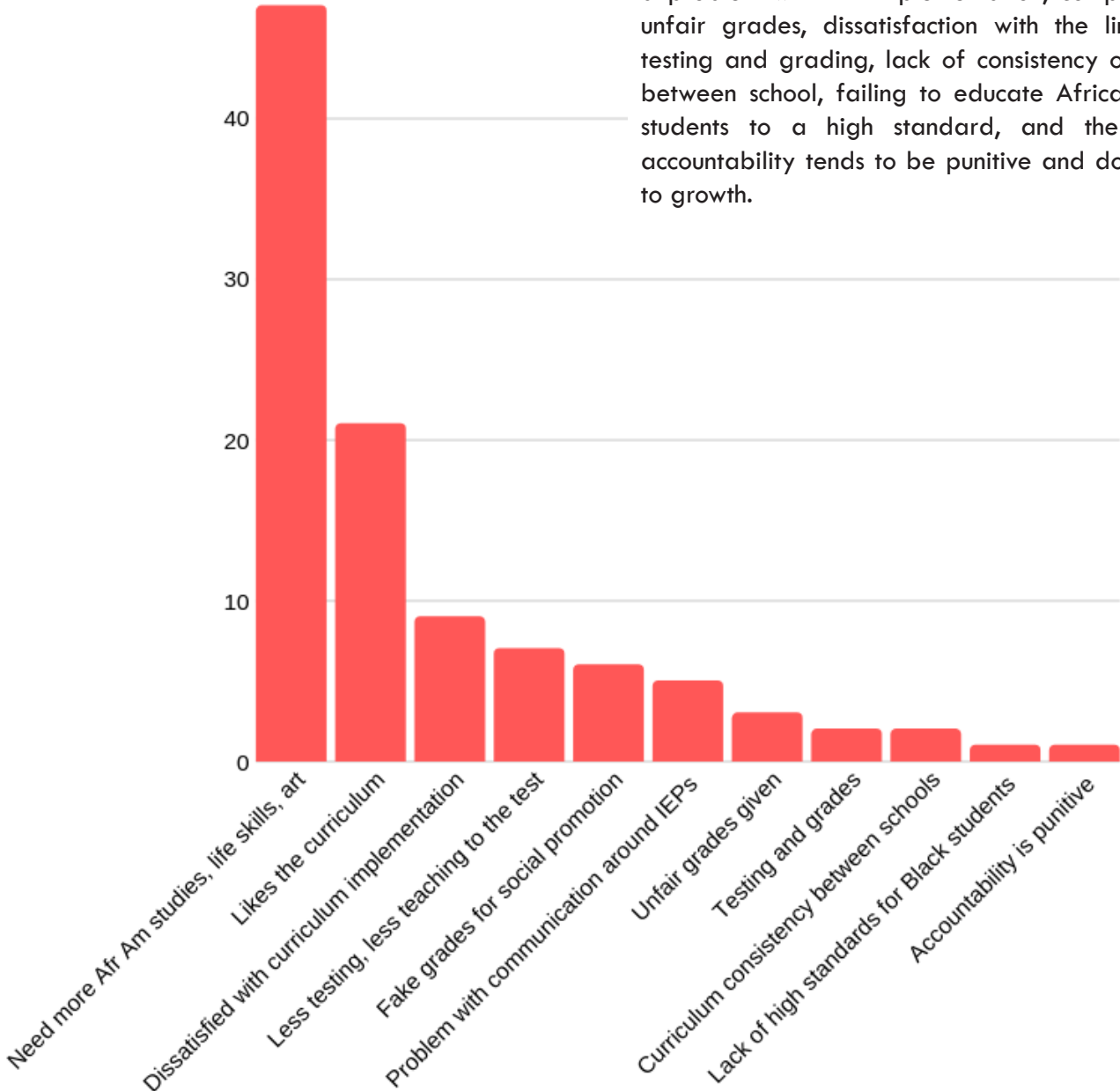
There was a significant number of comments (21; 20%) expressing satisfaction with the curriculum, mostly from parents. 9 of the 21 comments referenced specific charter schools.

9 (9%) of comments (mostly teachers) about the curriculum expressed a dissatisfaction with how curriculum is rolled out: not enough lead time, changes are too frequent, there is not enough time allowed for real mastery of the content, and teachers are not consulted about what their students need and/or would respond to best.

7 (7%) of the comments had to do with wanting more time spent on teaching and less on testing.

Some parents (6) discussed their sense that children who are struggling with content get pushed through, sending the wrong message, in the end, about the value of the assigned work.

Other comments (with 5 or fewer in the code) included: a problem with IEP implementation, complaints about unfair grades, dissatisfaction with the link between testing and grading, lack of consistency of curriculum between school, failing to educate African American students to a high standard, and the idea that accountability tends to be punitive and does not lead to growth.



Support for Teachers

This chart shows how our interviewees talk about teachers' stressful working conditions and about the need for more support and training, particularly with reference to the need for principals to be more supportive and for training in understanding trauma. There were a total of 74 comments under this theme.

All stakeholder groups made a total of 25 (34%) comments about problems associated with principals who are unsupportive or somehow inadequate in their support. 9 of these were from teachers, some of whom have left the district because they felt the principal did not do enough to deal with discipline issues and supports for teachers.

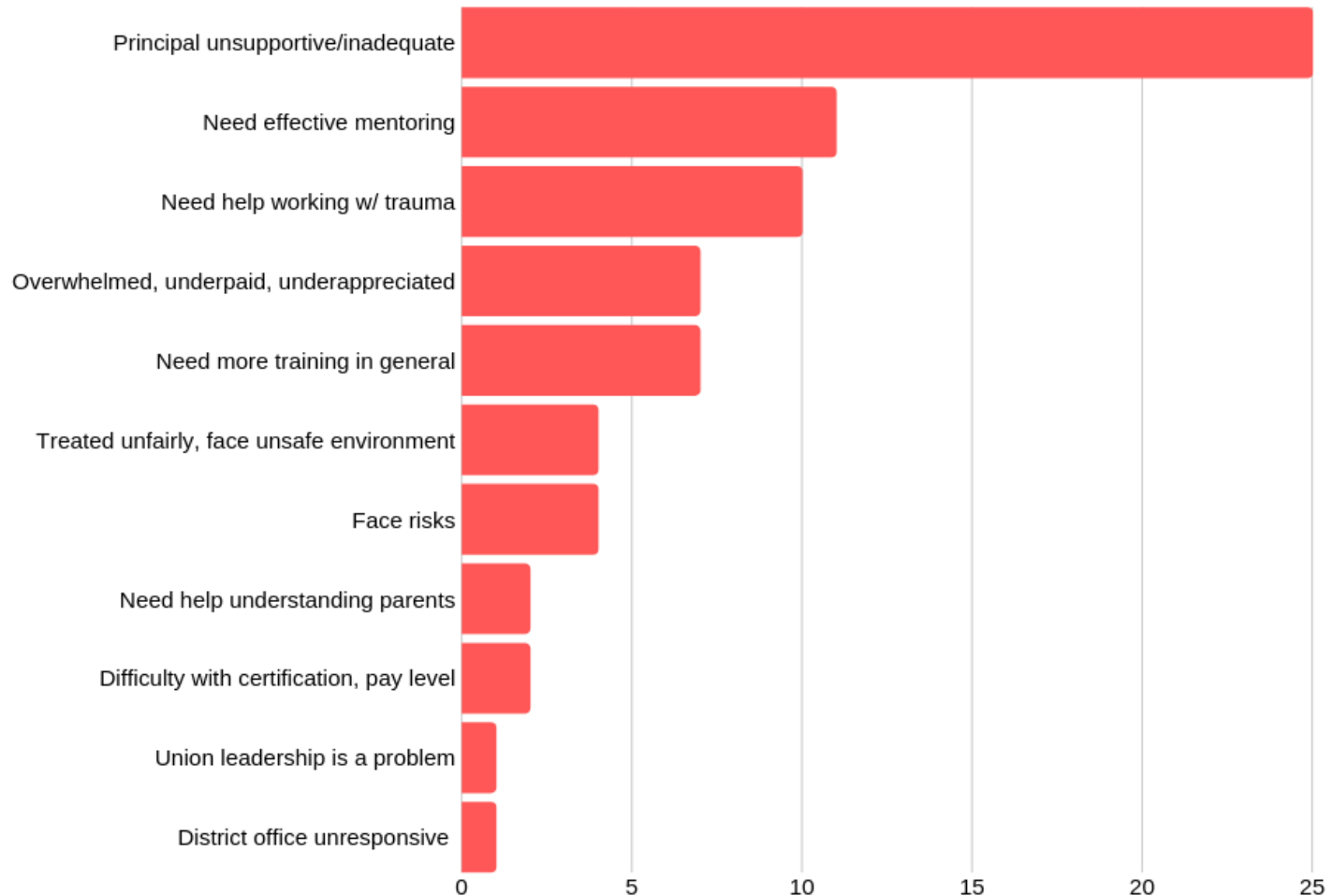
11 (15% of comments under this issue) teachers, parents and community members commented on the need to support teachers to become good teachers through mentoring and/or the opportunity to observe other classrooms.

"She [a teacher] brought up the need for new and experienced teachers to be able to go and observe experienced, veteran, or successful teachers as a way to grow and improve--some sort of teacher exchange."

10 (14%) of the comments were about the need to support teacher and other school staff members in improving the quality of relationships and understanding between schools and families, specifically by helping them understand the impact of generational trauma.

"Staff does not know how to respond to parents that are not educated enough to properly manage their affairs and are insensitive [when] helping them or offering resources to help them and the student. They [parents] have been talked down to and feel no one addresses the problems." -Grandparent

In some cases, they argue that schools need specialized training and/or a dedicated staff member to understand and deal with the concerns that families are bringing to school.



“We need a special school counselor to provide trauma-informed care for refugee students.”

7 (10%) of the comments were about how teachers are overwhelmed, underpaid, and/or underappreciated.

7 (10%) were about teachers needing more training in general.

The remainder of the comments (with 5 or less in the code) had to do with teachers facing risks, being treated unfairly, not having enough support with certification, not getting support from the union, and finding the district office unresponsive.

The low numbers on these last codes are not necessarily representative of importance. We do know from the Baltimore City Schools teacher satisfaction survey that there are more nuanced needs that teachers have. (See the Black Teacher Recruitment and Retention Working Group Report for preliminary information).



Students Feeling Engaged

This theme shows how our interviewees talk about teachers and their efforts to engage all students. There were a total of 73 comments.

There were 20 comments (27%) mostly from parents about how teachers tend to pay a disproportionate amount of attention to students who demand attention. These comments tended to be from parents with children whose needs, they felt, were going unmet because there were so many interruptions and distractions.

“Mr. D feels the teacher did not do all she could to keep his son engaged in the classroom. He stated his son is easily distracted and needs extra help.”

There were similar concerns (18; 18%) about students for whom, according to the teacher or parent/caregiver, the work is not challenging or engaging enough.

“She [a student] expressed that there isn’t enough differentiation in classrooms, and that many students are expected to fit into one mold in order to succeed. She feels that education isn’t specialized enough for students to grow and be challenged and empowered. She wants to be successful but has found through her entire education experience that teachers often seem too overwhelmed to focus on her and help her with her needs.”

16 (22%) of the comments expressed the sentiment that there should be more focus on students’ socio-emotional needs. Participants called for greater emphasis on restorative practices and student supports as the essential answer to getting students and adults to work through misunderstandings. In this section, which is focused on student needs, we see this need framed as a focus on SEL. A similar idea surfaced in the section about support for teachers where we see this framed as a need for teachers to understand trauma.

13 (13% of comments under this theme) were parents expressing that teachers misjudge the “misbehavior;” they misread cues from students. Some of them are prone to overreact with arbitrary rules or decisions. This makes the child feel that their interests and desire to learn are being thwarted.

“In her grandson’s class, the teacher who is (Caucasian) was reading to the class of 5th graders. Her grandson raised his hand and asked why was she reading to them? He went on to inform her that the students in his class could read and that they were 5th graders and they did not need her to read a story to them. Instead of allowing the child to read the teacher complained to the Principal alleging that the child was disrespectful.”

Or, in other cases, the teacher may underreact to misbehavior, and thus tolerate situations in which student engagement and learning cannot happen.

“Z had concerns about the students’ behavior and the role of the teacher in trying to control this bad behaviors. She said, “My daughter always told me about daily problems in the classroom and how much time they lost from each class. The students were cursing each other daily, but nowadays the situation has escalated.”

Discussion

Underlying 5 of the 7 categories--Feeling Safe, Parent Engagement in School, Race and Cultural Competence: Feeling Understood, Support for Teachers and Students Feeling Engaged--is the idea that the quality of trust and relationships in schools is of great concern to all stakeholder groups. This leads us to believe that a breakdown or lack of relationships is a root cause of many problems. One way that this shows up in the data is that stakeholders often place blame on one another for various problems.

Five areas involving blame

The following are the key places where stakeholder perspectives are at odds or where there is implied blame.

Parent engagement is key but parents feel judged and alienated

Teachers, students, community members and parents all think parents are key to student success, yet parents express that they feel alienated from schools--not welcome, unable to attend meetings, misunderstood, and often judged, particularly when they are called about their child's misbehavior.

Most teachers do not explicitly blame parents for lack of involvement but they do make statements about wanting more support from them. They make comments about parents and grandparents getting so much younger, or about how parents need more parenting skills. Teachers argue that while they do get trained in how to deal with families, the families also need training: they are in crisis. Some feel that parents need to do a better job of preparing their children for school and college; that this should not be exclusively left up to the school staff.

Our takeaway is that this sense of alienation is most often related to a lack of connection across race and class lines. It seems to parents that they are judged for their parenting and that, given the prevalence of calls we heard for hiring more Black teachers, this pattern of judging is more likely to happen across racial lines (Black parent, White teacher). This alienation was a widespread sentiment and came up in various ways in the interviews. Most significantly it was expressed as complaints about a litany of barriers that prevent greater parent engagement, but was also implied by the level of blame parents assign to teachers, and other

school staff for their child's frustration, lack of success and/or sense of safety in school. Finally, parents' fears were in some ways confirmed in comments by school staff members about parents not knowing how to handle their own children. If parental engagement is as key as people agree it is, there are some serious historical and present day barriers to address.

Teachers and parents understand family and community challenges differently

Teachers almost all expressed how much they care, but how stressful and pressured they feel the job has become, particularly when they are under scrutiny. They express the need for more adult support and outside services to help them respond adequately to their students. To describe this challenge, teachers tend to use professional, mental health-related terms such as "low self esteem," "Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome," and "Trauma" to describe their students. For example: "If students are experiencing trauma outside of school, they're bringing it to school with them, and if we don't take the time to deal with it in some way we're doing a disservice to these students." They also see students' entering skill level as a problem.

Parents comments did not include the language of "trauma," which is typically a mental health type of framing. They may have heard the word, but it is not





generally a term they use about their own lives. Parents say: I am just doing the best I can, and I need teachers and the school to understand all that I am dealing with without judging me. I also need for the school to do a better job at engaging my child and keeping him or her safe. Teachers are coming from a more middle class place, with possibly more distance from trauma, and more tendency to name it, clinically. Teachers are also under pressure to teach the prescribed curriculum and produce test scores and they feel under-supported in their efforts. The way that students present in classrooms leads teachers to say, “A large issue my school faces is dealing with trauma/mental illness/mental health. We often lack the resources we need to help.”

Perception of student behavior depends on role, understanding student frustration

The same student behavior is perceived differently depending on the person’s role. One set of parents thinks teachers do not understand or cannot accurately read behavioral cues from students, that they fail to identify the source of student frustration, and do not fully understand their home and community circumstances. Another subset thinks teachers fail to appropriately divide their attention between students, giving too much attention to students who act out, and, again failing to identify the source of student frustration. Teachers, according to parents, seem to make classroom decisions based largely on how to avoid interruptions to the flow of a lesson, rather than on a full understanding of children’s needs. Parents’ see the fact that students struggle with content and the lack relatability of the

teacher as part of the same issue. In other words, parents see a teacher’s ability to engage students as intertwined with who the teacher is, and their level of caring about a struggling student. This ability is more important to parents than what is being taught--though, there were also comments about the need for more African American centered curriculum. This critique by parents is sometimes brought up in the form of teachers “lacking qualifications,” “being too young,” “not knowing the community,” “not caring,” “over/under reacting to disruptive behavior” or just “not being able to manage a classroom.”

Many teachers’ comments about the classroom, by contrast, show how they urgently want to meet all the needs they see in their classroom. Teachers say that the job, as a whole, is so overwhelming that the added stress of coping with misunderstandings and/or being underappreciated adds a difficult emotional component to their work.

From this contrast in perspectives we take away that there is little shared narrative or language about the problem of teaching students to a high standard and keeping them safe.

The source of school safety problems

Finally, with regard to the issue of basic safety needs, parents have both practical and relational concerns. Their practical concerns are about how their children are getting to and from school, and how bullying and other forms of violence are handled within school. Interestingly, the implication in many of the comments about school climate and safety was that schools and the MTA or school bus companies, and even neighborhood residents have a shared responsibility for safety that goes beyond the four walls of the classroom and beyond the school doors. Comments about how people get into school without being checked for ID were also frequently mentioned as a part of other concerns. Parents see the process of sending their children to school holistically. It is risky and this risk extends from the time the child leaves the house to when they return.

The relational concerns have to do with how they and/or their children are treated by staff at their child’s school when discipline issues arise--regardless of whether their child is identified as the aggressor or the victim. Parents who already feel disenfranchised by schools, face additional challenges in responding to

calls home about their child's behavior. Moments that might be used as a way to repair relationships, often lead to more disconnectedness.

Teachers are also concerned, to some extent, about safety. Sometimes they are concerned about student safety and to some degree their own. They see the difficulties that students face as coming mostly from outside school. They also tend to identify the problem in terms of time pressures that they feel in trying to both teach the content and address student needs as they perceive them in the classroom. Some teachers worry primarily about the "good" students who get bullied.

Both groups agree safety issues are bigger than what happens within the four walls of a classroom. But the source of the safety issue as perceived by parents versus school staff is slightly different. Parents see risks and dangers that threaten their children extending all the way from bus stops, to the classroom, hallways, and the cafeteria. They put the onus on adults having a responsibility to protect. School staff, on the other hand, often see conflict as carried into the school by students who bring their trauma and their troubles in with them. The difference in perspectives is subtle, but profound because at the core is an appeal by parents that all students be embraced and understood, rather than sorted or judged.

Again, the problem of disconnectedness between perspectives, extends in both directions. The sense on the part of parents is that their child's actions are being misread or unfairly dealt with, based on the level of caring or the race of the school staff members. The feeling on the part of the teacher is that students have



more needs and conflicts than they can meet or resolve, and they in some way judge these needs and conflicts as being outside the realm of their control.

Perspectives on race, class and cultural competence

Parents see race and a lack of shared culture as the root cause for teachers' failure to adequately relate to and engage young people. Parents overwhelmingly feel that Black teachers, and Black men in particular, bring an understanding of a child's home circumstances to schools, and serve as much needed role models to students. By the same token, as discussed above, some current and retired teachers and community members are outright distrustful of parents who send children to school "unready to learn."

Parents, and some teachers, also express that the district fails to provide school staff the kind of training and support they would need to gain the cultural competence required to teach effectively in City Schools.

Our analysis is that teachers, particularly inexperienced and/or young teachers (who represent a large proportion of the teaching force) who are encountering significant racial and/or socioeconomic struggles for the first time, and who are at the same time trying to learn the basics of how to teach, are at a disadvantage when it comes to really seeing their students and imagining and reacting appropriately to both the positive and negative influences in their students' lives. It takes time for teachers to grow into this work and therefore teacher turnover, with the resulting discontinuities, is a significant problem. Parents, on the other hand have a tendency, perhaps in many cases based on their own experience of school, to approach school encounters with fears and preconceptions. They falsely (for the most part) misread teachers and school staff as "uncaring."

Clearly, there is some overlap between this conclusion and the ones regarding parent alienation, and the perception of trauma. In this case, the root cause has to do with a history of distrust based on race, a shift in the demographics of the teaching force, and an inability to hire, grow and retain culturally competent teachers. Solutions that specifically address this expression of root cause have to do with hiring, training and retention practices for both teachers and principals. But beyond this, there is also the need, outlined above, for school staff to interact in constructive and supported conversations with the families they serve.

Areas of agreement

Whether the root cause is more aptly described as student trauma, lack of adequate support staff, students' entering skill levels, or a need for cultural competence, it is clear that many parents, community members, students, and teachers agree that meeting student needs is difficult, and more needs to happen to support the students.

What parents and teachers also agree upon is that problems experienced at school are fueled and exacerbated by a drastic lack of resources--resulting in large class sizes, a lack of adequate support for staff, inadequate facilities and a lack of supplies. There is unanimity around the additional stress that the lack of resources causes whether it is cold or hot classrooms, lack of staff to ensure safety, inadequate transportation, or the absence of after school programs. The call for an increase in resources was one of the top areas of concern.



Conclusion: A framework for solutions

The problems identified in these interviews could be analyzed down to a set of recommendations that relate to what one or another district department, or one group of stakeholders could do differently, and/or where resources could be better spent. There are some concrete fixes implied by these interviews such as: more oversight of buses carrying ESOL students to school; fewer changes to curriculum to allow for more mastery; better communication systems; a greater focus on principals' support for new teachers; upgrading

all facilities; more widely accessible after-school programs; a focus on hiring more Black teachers more emphasis on training for cultural competence; and better ways to reach out to and include all parents, particularly those who are disenfranchised. And we consider these concrete fixes essential.

However, if we emerge with only this kind of concrete and departmental change, we would not be addressing the most compelling conclusion of this study: that the act of being thoroughly listened to (as evidenced in our interviews) provides an essential space for teachers, students, and parents to process and think through the challenges of schooling. If we divorce solutions from this connecting conversation, we lose the main implication of what we heard: beyond the need for any practical and procedural improvements is the need to create bridges to address a widespread feeling of disconnection, discouragement, and a lack of trust between stakeholders. It is clear that within the various complaints and comments collected that many tend to assign blame for the problems to someone else--most often, teachers blame parents, students or community; while parents blame teachers or the school administration. Our analysis focused on working to understand what lies underneath the blame. We emerged with the sense that blaming happens when there is a deep-seated systemic history of distrust, a gap in resources, and when important stakeholder groups have not had the opportunity to listen to, and understand one another. Opportunities for collaborative problem solving usually come up during some kind of behavior crisis, but this is not usually the best time for competing narratives to usefully come together. There is a need for supports, training and time for proactive relationship-building between teachers and parents, and a space for building a shared narrative about the challenges that exist in schools. We also need more proactive, co-created solutions where stakeholder groups' perspectives are shared from an equal footing.

We conclude that if the system embraced this kind of collaboration as well as a commitment to understanding systemic racism and its effect on schools, all stakeholders might blame each other less and fight together to end the underlying systemic causes of stress, alienation, and trauma.



Recommendations

To address the alienation that parents feel, we need one-on-one conversations with parents. Ideally, these conversations would happen each summer, before the school year begins, and would be done by a child's teachers or by a class parent or other parent or school leaders. The main goals would be to: build a relationship, find out about parent hopes and concerns about school, perhaps learn what their own experience of school was, and what might make them feel comfortable at school (parent-buddy system, get-to-know-you events, training etc.) so that parents feel welcome and understood. Once a parent/teacher relationship is built, problem solving around challenges is much more likely to be effective.

We can foster authentic ways for parents to be involved in school. School Family Councils and community schools are supposed to be ways for parents to drive the agenda of schools. Far too often these entities gain cursory consent from families without genuine engagement that would allow parents to know enough and feel confident enough to be able to drive agendas and for schools to be hubs for community life.

In order to ensure that parents and teachers develop a shared framework for understanding community and behavior challenges trainings that are offered to teachers (de-escalation, restorative practices, trauma-informed care) could also include a method for offering the same information to parents. This could be through a facebook live event, a city-wide in person training, creating a video overview of a training and good printed materials to post online.

The different perspectives on school safety problems could be addressed by teachers, parents and other school staff coming together in a climate team to collaboratively identify the safety challenges in the school and come up with restorative strategies to address the needs. This could also include the creation of a district-wide climate policy where a collective definition of positive school culture is established.

To address the race and class divide, the district, teachers and parents would benefit from opportunities to hear each others stories through dialogue circles. The district also needs coursework about Baltimore to help teachers and parents both to understand the history and present of systemic racism. There is also need for teacher training in culturally responsive pedagogy.

When the district and community identify an issue that spans across a subset of schools or across the district, neighborhood groups and citywide task forces inclusive of various stakeholders should convene to explore the root cause of the problems and strategize together. An example of how this kind of interagency/inter-stakeholder work can be effective is the Black Teacher Recruitment and Retention Workgroup in Baltimore.



Appendix A: Complete list of codes

Code	Category	Tally
There are serious barriers to parent involvement	Parent Engagement in School	106
We need more culturally competent staff members	Race and Cultural Competence: Feeling Understood	50
Need more focus on some aspect of the curriculum such as African Am studies, life skills, art/music	Curriculum and Testing Issues	47
We need more Black staff members	Race and Cultural Competence: Feeling Understood	46
Concerned about lack of resources/funding	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	43
School is unable to protect students from violence	Feeling Safe	41
Dangers of getting to and from school	Feeling Safe	36
Parent involvement is key	Parent Engagement in School	35
Need more punishments or more enforcement	Feeling Safe	29
Need more after school activities	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	28
Principal is unsupportive and/or principal is not an adequate leader	Support for Teachers	25
Likes the curriculum	Curriculum and Testing Issues	21
Concerns about the state of the school district generally	General Concerns	21
Quiet student needs compete with demanding students	Students feeling engaged	20
Inadequate school building: heat-cool; infestations; infrastructure	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	18
Students are not engaged by curriculum or teacher's approach	Students feeling engaged	18
Comments about fairness/unfairness of charters and school choice	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	16
Need more focus on socio-emotional needs of students	Students feeling engaged	16
Negative feedback about one school	General Concerns	16
Suggestions for how to improve involvement	Parent Engagement in School	15
ESOL students are particularly vulnerable	Feeling Safe	14
Positive feedback about one school	General positive comments	14

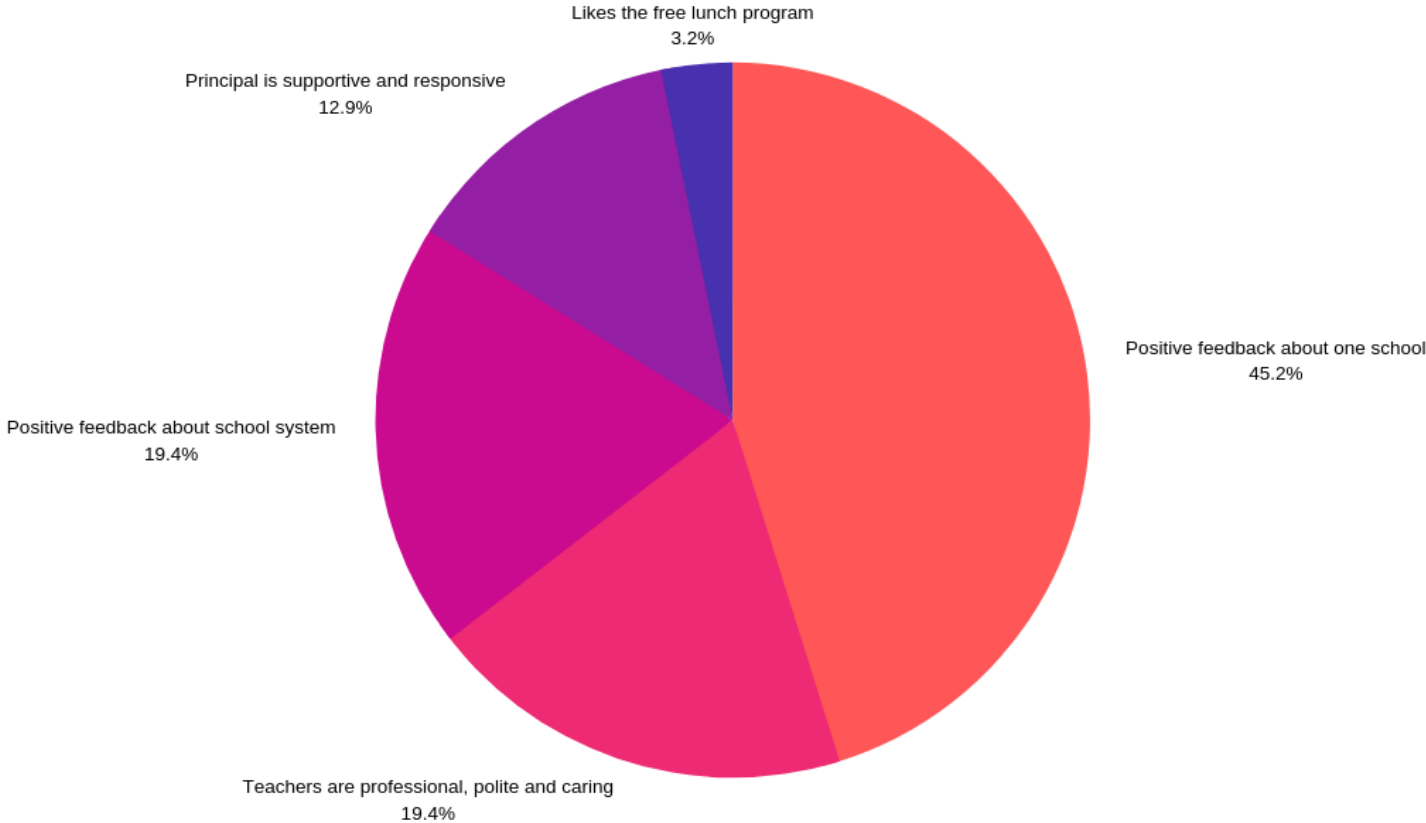
Teachers don't know how to read cues from students	Students feeling engaged	13
Felt that the only solution to bullying/violence was to move to a new school	Feeling Safe	13
Not happy with the quality of the food or cleanliness	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	11
Teachers need effective mentoring	Support for Teachers	11
Inequity of funding across schools	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	10
Teachers and staff need to understand how to work with generational trauma	Support for Teachers	10
Dissatisfied with curriculum implementation, timeline, frequent changes, lack of mastery, and opportunities for input	Curriculum and Testing Issues	9
Mis-use of funds by central office/transparency/charter funding	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	7
Teachers are overwhelmed, underpaid and/or underappreciated	Support for Teachers	7
Teachers need more training in general	Support for Teachers	7
Less testing, less teaching to the test, more teaching	Curriculum and Testing Issues	7
Parents feel students' needs are being met	Students feeling engaged	6
Fake grades for social promotion	Curriculum and Testing Issues	6
Teachers are professional, polite and caring	General positive comments	6
Positive feedback about school system	General positive comments	6
Concerned about individual school's budget, enrollment	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	5
Various comments about distribution of teachers by race	Race and Cultural Competence: Feeling Understood	5
Problem with communication and/or process around IEP initiation or implementation	Curriculum and Testing Issues	5
Room/physical space too small for the number of students	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	4
Parents and teachers having to buy student supplies for classrooms	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	4
Teachers are treated unfairly and/or face unsafe environment	Support for Teachers	4
Teachers face risks	Support for Teachers	4
Principal is supportive and responsive	General positive comments	4

Behavior problems in the cafeteria	General Concerns	4
Concerned about systemwide budget crisis (listening to nightly news)	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	3
Casino money	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	3
We need staff to have a deeper understanding of ESOL families	Race and Cultural Competence: Feeling Understood	3
Unfair grades given	Curriculum and Testing Issues	3
Male mentoring programs	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	2
Teachers and staff need to understand that for some parents school is frightening or embarrassing	Support for Teachers	2
Difficulty with certification process and/or pay level	Support for Teachers	2
Testing and grades	Curriculum and Testing Issues	2
Lack of consistency of curriculum between schools	Curriculum and Testing Issues	2
Concerns about Special Education	General Concerns	2
Too much responsibility on principals for budget	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	1
Full service community schools would help provide the special services many children need	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	1
Concerned about lack of funding and caring from city/state/feds around education	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	1
Inefficient use and distribution of technology	Funding, Facilities and Resource Issues	1
Union leadership is a problem	Support for Teachers	1
District office is unresponsive to needs of school staff	Support for Teachers	1
We fail to educate African American students to a high standard	Curriculum and Testing Issues	1
Accountability is punitive and does not lead to growth	Curriculum and Testing Issues	1
Likes the free lunch program	General positive comments	1
Homeschooling as the solution to meeting special needs	General Concerns	1
Need student input to teacher evaluations	General Concerns	1
Leadership turnover is a major problem	General Concerns	1

Appendix B: General Comments

Positive

Some comments (31 in total) were generally positive, but not very specific. The largest proportion (47%) of these comments were from parents who are pleased with their child's school. 20% of these comments mentioned that they appreciate their child's teacher, and an equal percentage appreciated the district as a whole. Finally, 4 (13%) comments from teachers and parents were about how they felt that their principal was supportive and responsive.



General Concerns

Some comments (46 in total) were generally negative, but not very specific. The largest proportion (46%) of these comments were from participants who were concerned about the district as a whole. 35% of these comments expressed a general dissatisfaction with their child's school. Other comments (with less than five in each code) included concerns about behavior in the cafeteria, Special Education, student input into teacher evaluations and leadership turnover.

