



Albemarle County Public Schools

Instructional Practices Audit

Report #1: Holistic Experiences of Students of Color

Spring 2023

A photograph of a man and a young child sitting at a table, both focused on drawing. The man is on the left, leaning over the table, and the child is on the right, also leaning over. They are both holding pencils and appear to be in the middle of a creative activity. The background is slightly blurred, showing what might be a classroom or a workshop setting. The entire image has a semi-transparent purple overlay.

Holistic Experiences of Students of Color

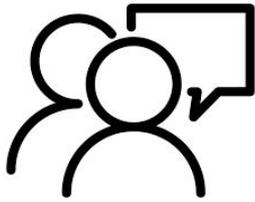
Context for this report

- [Albemarle County Public Schools](#) (ACPS) serves nearly 14,000 students in grades PK-12th, 28% of whom are Black or Hispanic and 31% of whom are economically disadvantaged
- The mission of ACPS is to end the predictive value of race, class, gender, and special capacities for our children’s success through high-quality teaching and learning for all
- In 2021 ACPS launched its current strategic plan—Learning for All—focusing on three primary goals, including a goal to eliminate opportunity, access and achievement gaps
- With this context in mind, the Division partnered with [Bellwether](#) to conduct an instructional practices audit to answer an essential question:
 - Why are pass rates for ACPS students of color on the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) for K-5 reading, K-5 math, and high school Algebra 1 lower than the averages for other students of color in the state and lower than their peers in other demographic groups in ACPS?
- Over a span of 16 weeks in the spring of 2023, a team from Bellwether visited 11 schools, spoke with over 350 stakeholders, and analyzed data and artifacts from the Division
- The findings from this work are synthesized into four reports that describe key themes and learnings, elevate primary root causes to persistent achievement gaps, and outline a set of recommendations to address each root cause moving forward

The following questions informed the research and analysis included in this report

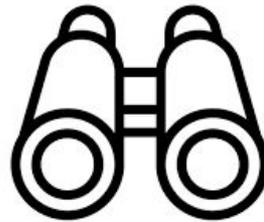
- How would students of color and their families like to experience ACPS in general and their school in particular?
- What are specific examples of when/where they are having the desired experience today and when/where are they not?
- In what ways are students of color succeeding and by what measures?
- How do students of color describe their aspirations and successes?
- How do students of color describe their relationships with adults in their school?
- To what programs, coursework and supplemental learning opportunities do students of color have access across the K-12 continuum?

The information synthesized in this report comes from three primary sources of data...



Qualitative Data

From interviews and focus groups with over 260 stakeholders from across ACPS



Observation Data

From visits to 61 elementary classes, 20 middle school classes, and 8 high school classes



Quantitative Data

From both publicly available datasets and internal datasets provided by ACPS

...and is organized around five key themes that surfaced from conversations and data review

- 1 Student Goals & Aspirations.** Most students and their families expressed a desire for academic success and demonstrated an understanding of the value of school for their future aspirations. However, Black and Latinx students are overrepresented in ACPS' career and technical education programs, and underrepresented in college-aligned pathways, specifically middle school Algebra 1, which raises questions about whether students of color are getting equal access to the coursework that will help them reach the goals they have for themselves.
- 2 School Climate.** Most students, especially in elementary school, have positive relationships with adults and peers; however, evidence suggests these positive relationships are not translating into a culture of high expectations. Students of color, and Black students in particular, describe feeling overly scrutinized and disproportionately disciplined, a perception supported by data in some schools.
- 3 Accessing Tailored Supports.** Many parents described challenges convincing schools to provide their students with Rtl supports to help them when they experienced challenges with daily instruction; however, once students received tiered services, parents found the supports available to be beneficial.
- 4 Emerging Culture of Inclusion.** ACPS schools have taken steps to build a culture of inclusion that shows an appreciation of different cultures and histories; however, Black and Latinx students still describe experiencing frequent microaggressions from their peers and teachers. Additionally, all students' cultures are not consistently represented, how students' cultures impact their experience in school is not always considered, students do not feel comfortable talking about issues of race in school, and, based on classroom observations, students' engagement in culturally relevant materials is limited.
- 5 Family & School Interactions.** Although schools have made an effort to go out into the community and coach teachers on family engagement, families would like more information on what their students are doing in school and how they can support students at home; additionally, some families distrust the school division, especially families of color who are not confident their students are getting access to the best resources.



Students and caregivers expressed a strong desire for academic success, and many have their sights on college

Students value & strive for academic success....

- **"I feel successful when I get a good grade on an assignment**, especially when we've been working on it for a long time, like my Algebra project." (Student, MS)
- **"I felt successful when I passed my SOL test**; I'm very good at math." (Student, ES)
- **"I felt really successful on one of my tests**. My teacher showed me how many I got right and **I basically got everything right**, and I felt really proud." (Student, ES)

...and understand the value of school to achieving their career goals

- **"My #1 goal is to keep my grades up** and stay ready. Even though I want to be a professional athlete, I also need a back-up plan." (Student, MS)
- **"When I get to college, my main subject is going to be math** because I am already good at it." (Student, ES)
- **"My goal is to become a nurse**; AVID helps me with that because it **helps me get ready** to apply to college." (Student, HS)

This value is reinforced by their families

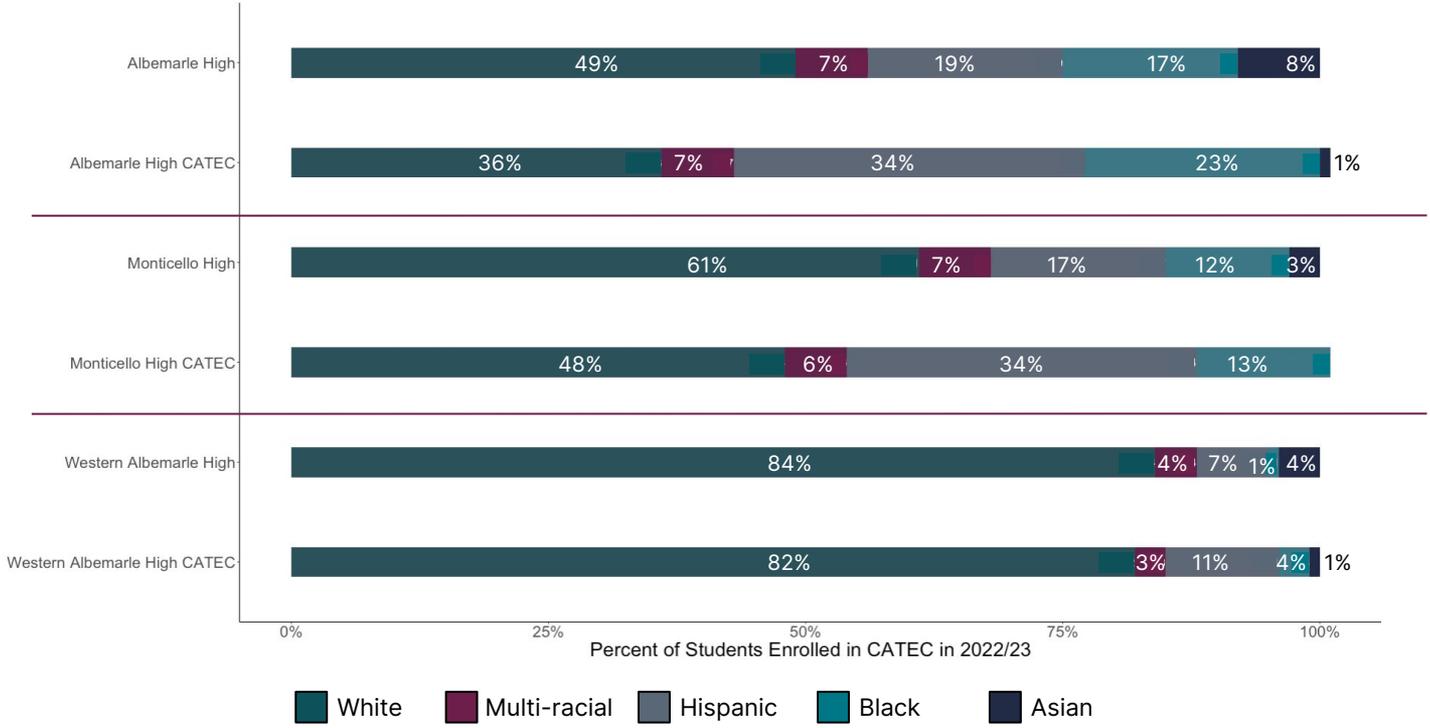
- **"My mom always tells me if I do well in school, I can go to college** at an HBCU." (Student, ES)
- **"My dream is to graduate from UVA like all of my sisters**. Then we would all be college graduates." (Student, ES)
- **"I want to be able to pay for my family to visit El Salvador**, where we are from. So my plan is to go to college and then **get a job that pays a lot of money**." (Student, MS)



... and yet a disproportionate number of Black and Latinx students are enrolled in non-college track courses....

When asked about postsecondary plans, only Black and Latinx students mentioned CATEC as a pathway

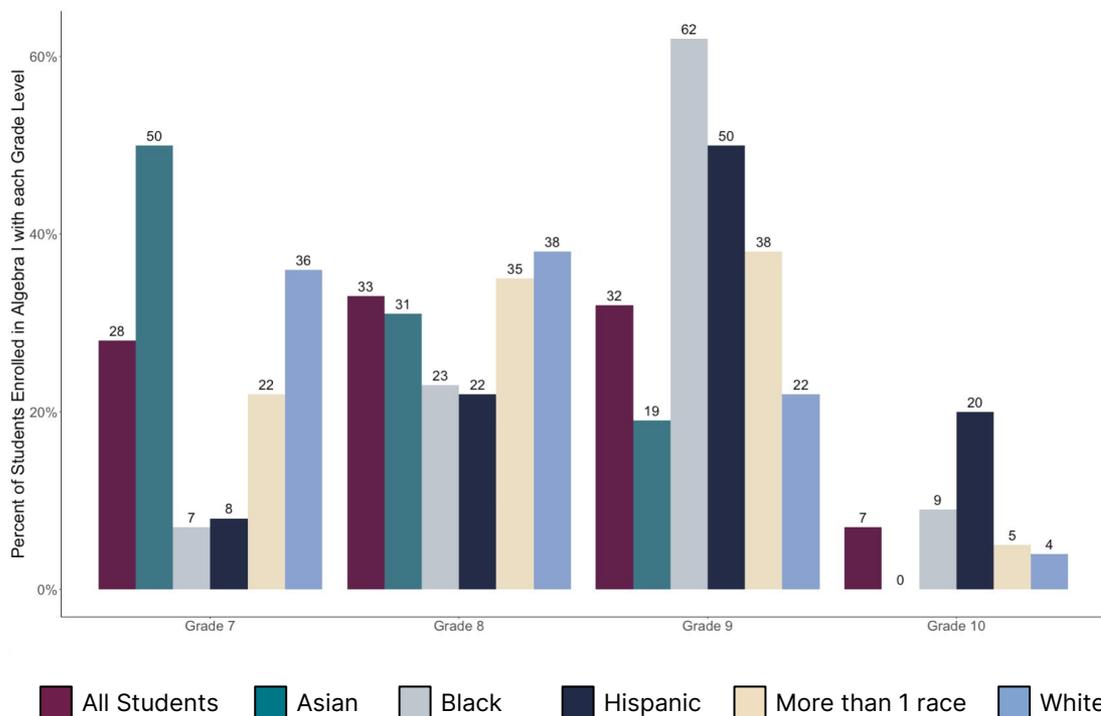
- “My goal is to **go to CATEC, because that is where all my family went**, and then become an NFL player.” (Student, ES)
- “Next year I plan to go to **CATEC to study cosmetology**.” (Student, HS)
- “I have been **taking classes at CATEC during my senior year** studying electrical. Now, I’m waiting to hear about my apprenticeship placement.” (Student, HS)





...and Black and Latinx students are underrepresented in more academically rigorous courses

Percent of Students Enrolled in Algebra I by Grade and Race/Ethnicity
Current 11th Graders, SY22-23



Trends in Algebra I enrollment are an example of this pattern

- **Fewer than 1 in 3 Black and Hispanic** students enroll in Algebra 1 before 9th Grade
- **1 in 5 Hispanic students takes Algebra I in 10th grade**, more than twice the rate of all other students
- **The majority of White (74%) and Asian students (81%)** have taken Algebra 1 prior to 9th grade





Black and Latinx students explained they were not encouraged to take rigorous classes, unless pushed by their parents

Some students were not aware of the opportunity to take advanced classes....

- “I took math 8 last year and Algebra 1 this year; I **don’t know** how some **students took Algebra in 8th grade.**” (Student, HS)
- “I only remember a few kids taking Algebra 1 in 7th grade, like 8 or 9, and **I’m not sure how they got into that class.**” (Student, HS)
- “Now that I am a senior, **I wish I had taken more AP classes**, but I never even knew about them.” (Student, HS)

.... And take Algebra after 8th grade for a variety of reasons

- “I could have taken Algebra 1 in 8th grade but my teacher had COVID; so **I ended up in pre-Algebra, which was way too easy.**” (Student, HS)
- “I was in **Algebra in 8th grade, but I switched out.** I don’t think it was hard, but I also didn’t feel ready for it.” (Student, HS)
- “I am in **Algebra Functions Data Analysis, even though I took Algebra 1 last year** at my school in Honduras” (Student, HS)

Those who did enroll in advanced courses were pushed to do so by their parents

“I took Algebra 1 in 8th grade **because my mom is an educator** so she is always **encouraging me to challenge myself and take hard classes.**” (Student, HS)



Not being pushed to take rigorous courses in HS impacts Black and Latinx students' ability to enroll in selective colleges

“If a student is **taking Algebra 1 in high school they are already behind**. Their chances of **getting into an elite college are out the window** and even their chances of getting into a mid-level school is low.”

(Leader, Central Office)

Example: University of Virginia Admissions Requirements

Preparing for life at UVA as a high school student:

- 1. Take the best program available to you in your core subjects**

*Make sure that your class schedule **demonstrates that you are taking advantage of all that your school offers**. Talk to your counselor and parents to help determine the right program for you. Colleges will **want to see that you are pursuing a strong schedule**, but they will also want to see good grades.*

Distribution of high school units required and/or recommended (sample list)

| Subject | Units Required | Units Recommended |
|----------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| English | 4 | 4 |
| Mathematics | 4 | 4 |
| Science | 2 | 4 |



Students and teachers describe positive student-teacher relationships; students shared examples of holistic support

“We want to nurture relationships that are positive, built on trust and caring for both the child and families, combined with empathy, high expectations, and accountability.” (Teacher, MS)

Students appreciate teachers' support with academics....

- “I feel successful when **my math teacher shows me something, and I finally get it** after trying a lot.” (Student, ES)
- “I didn’t pass the Algebra 1 quiz, but I knew I could have done better. **My math teacher helped me study** and then allowed me to retake it.” (Student, HS)
- “My biology teacher is **like a second Mom**; she helps me with biology and work for other classes too.” (Student, HS)

...as well as support managing stress and navigating social emotional challenges

- “She is my favorite teacher because **when I am mad, she helps me calm down.**” (Student, ES)
- “My **algebra teacher is the adult I turn to in the building.** On days when I have mental health problems, she **offers me a hug.**” (Student, HS)
- “My favorite teacher used to teach my sister, and **when I’m stressed she lets me come to her room.**” (Student, MS)
- “My child is nonbinary. They felt **comfortable enough to reach out to their principal to talk about their restroom options**, because they didn't feel comfortable using either the boys or the girls restroom.” (Parent, MS)



Positive Relationships

Elementary Schools

- The majority of interactions between adults and students were positive and respectful
- Based on interviews, teachers enjoy working and collaborating with each other
- All students, specifically Black students, said they “liked” their teachers and felt respected

Middle Schools

- In 14 of 14 middle school sections that were observed, positive relationships existed among students and adults
- Even in informal interactions, students spoke to each other with respect
- However, there were missed opportunities for teachers to recognize the individuality of students as an engagement strategy

High Schools

- In 8 of the 8 high school sections observed, mutual respect between students and teachers was evident and widespread
- In 8 of the 8 high school sections observed, students were kind in their interactions with their fellow classmates
- However, in 7 of the 8 classrooms observed, the positive relationships between teachers and students did not lead to students being engaged in the lesson



In walkthroughs, we did not observe teachers consistently demonstrating high expectations for all students

In many classrooms teachers did most of the heavy lifting....

In some MS math classrooms we observed **teachers guiding students through problems and prompting them on the next steps**; and **only 4 -5 students responded** when the teacher asked for the answer

We observed two Black boys following along with the problem and steps, but did not respond when asked to give a choral response, raising questions about how the teacher will know each student's level of proficiency at the end of the lesson.

... And students were allowed to disengage

Students in a HS Algebra class were observed **on their phones and other devices without redirection** from the teacher

The class is quiet and compliant while teacher reviews test answers. Three students—two Black boys and 1 Latinx girl—were observed on their phones and Chromebook, respectively, without any redirection or acknowledgement from the teacher. During independent practice, a Black student was on his computer and again was not asked by the teacher to re-engage in the lesson.

But in some classrooms teachers had high expectations and strong student engagement

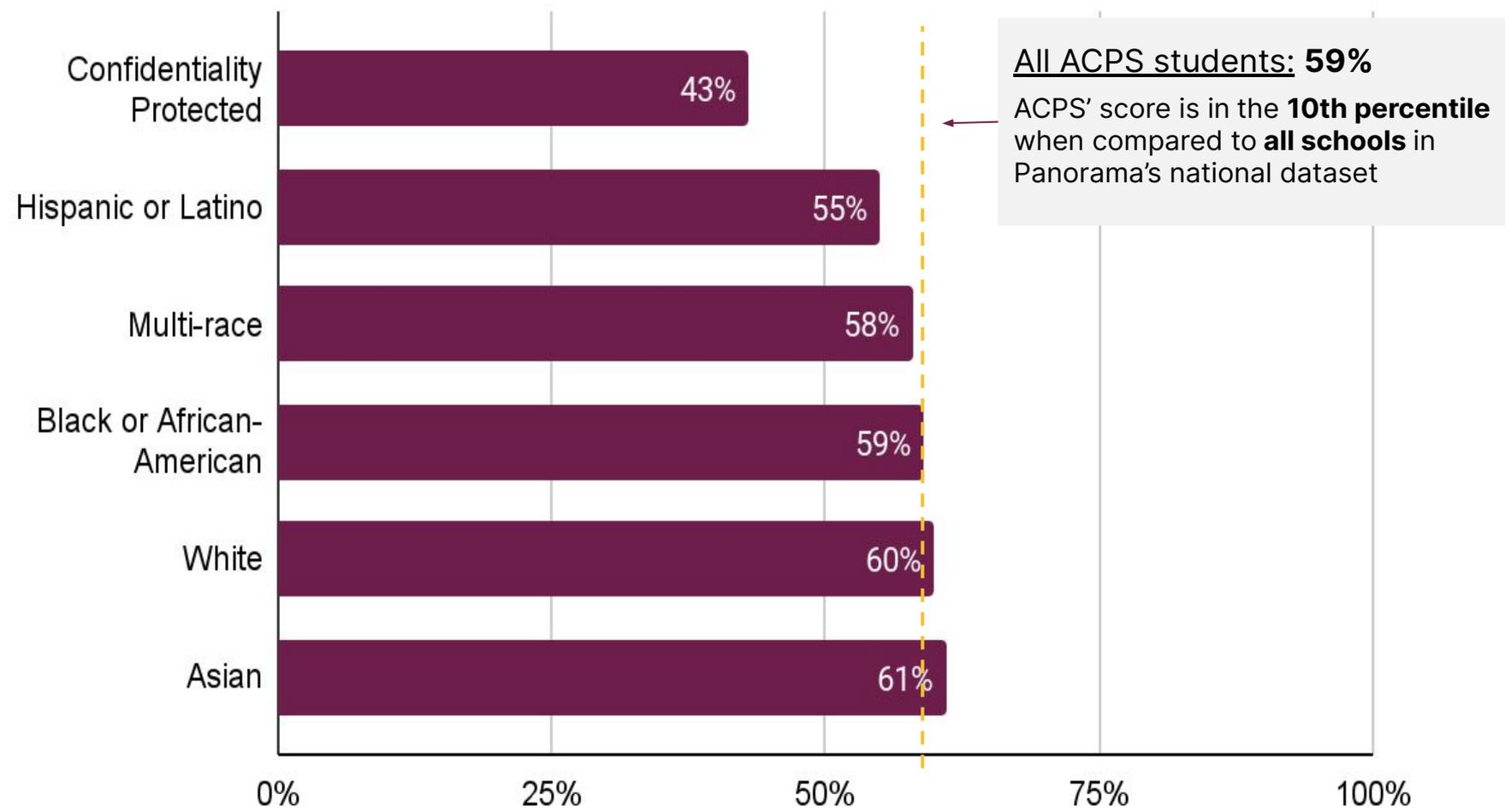
Students in a HS Algebra class were observed **having fun practicing equations the last period of the day**

Students were practicing algebraic equations by doing a gallery walk to different problems and using white boards to show their work. We observed the teacher setting a norm of high expectations and students joyfully rose to meet those expectations.



Panorama data indicates that 59% of 6th-12th grade students perceive teachers as having high expectations of them

Percent of students responding affirmatively to questions related to rigorous expectations
Fall 2022



Source: Panorama Survey Data, grades 6 - 12; Note: rigorous expectations defined here as the extent to which students feel that their teachers hold them to high expectations around effort, understanding, persistence, and performance in class.



Black and Latinx students describe being overly scrutinized and disproportionately disciplined for their behavior

Some students describe feeling more intensely surveilled than their peers

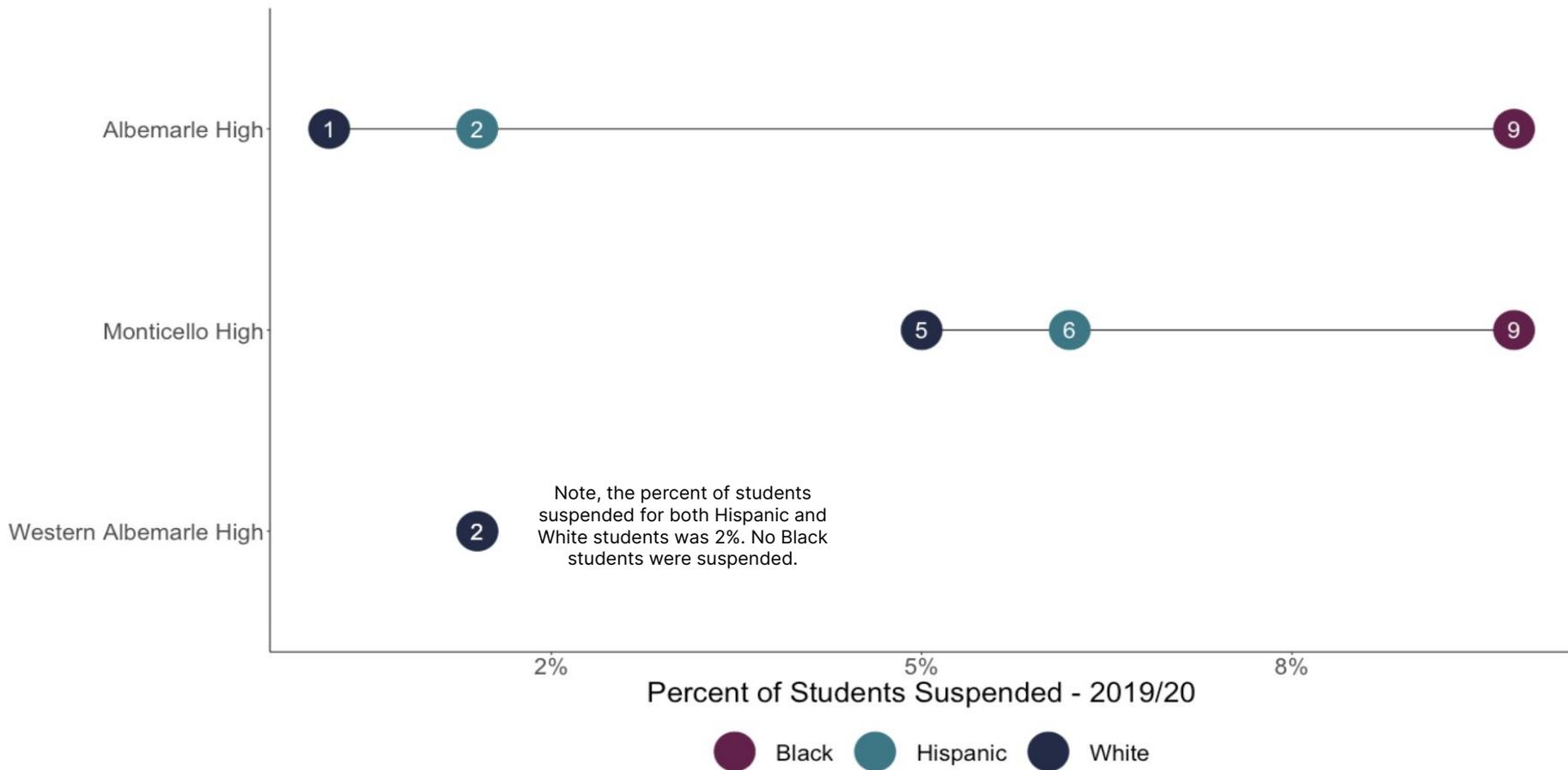
- “I think people at school – teachers, admin, **hold us [Black students] to a lower standard**; they expect you to be goofing off. They **don’t watch the white kids as much.**” (Student, HS)
- “They **see us [Black students] as the ‘problem children,’** because when we are groups we are loud. They come to the white friend group and say, ‘go to class.’ But with us it is, ‘Where are you supposed to be? Let me see your pass.’” (Student, HS)
- “Teachers always **expect the worst of us [Black students].**” (Student, HS)

Some students also felt unfairly disciplined

- “A dude [another student] **bumped into us and called me the N-word.** So, we followed him down the hall and asked him what he said. Then we were **accused of bullying and got ISS.**” (Student, HS)
- “A white student may say something, but **if I snap off then I am in the wrong.** It doesn’t matter what they said, it **always becomes about how I retaliated** and acted.” (Student, HS)



Data show Black and Latinx students receive a disproportionate number of suspensions





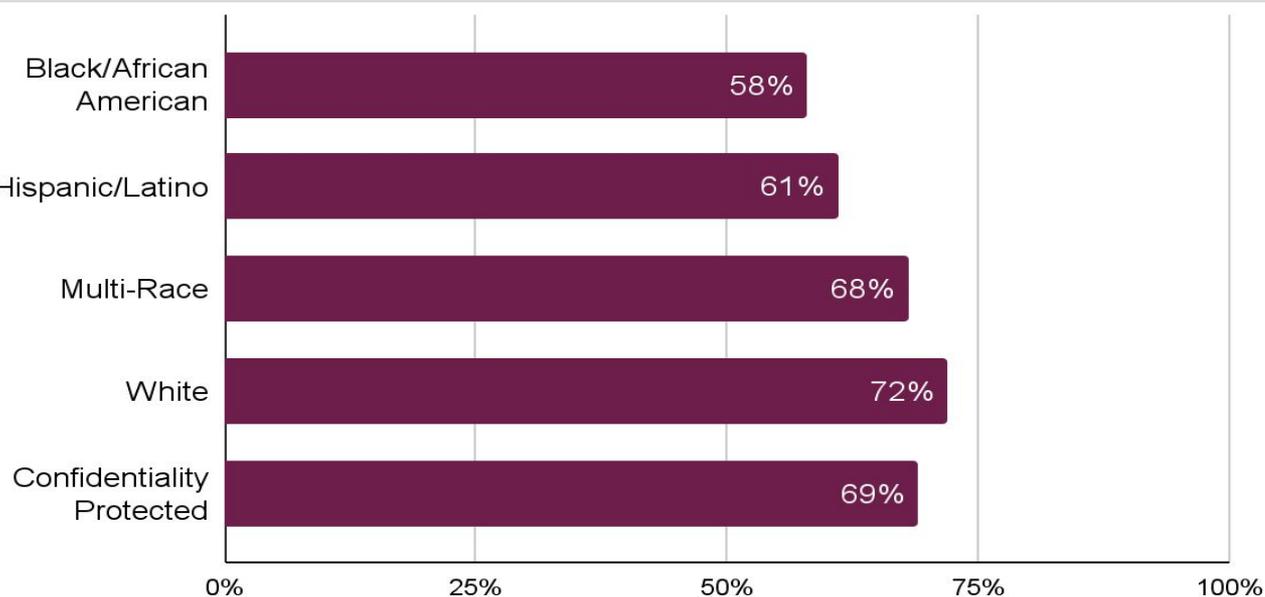
Students also expressed concerns about school safety; data shows Black and Latinx students feel less safe than their peers

What we heard....

- “I feel safe at school most of the time; but **it is scary when you see on the news** around the US kids are bringing guns to school.” (Student, MS)
- “The UVA **shooter worked at a community center** that many of our kids go to after school.” (School Leader, ES)
- “Kids who have hard lives **sometimes take it out on other kids**, and are mean.” (Student, ES)

Percent of students responding affirmatively to questions related to school safety

Fall 2022





Parents find it difficult to “unlock” access to additional supports to meet their students’ unique needs

Examples of tailored supports parents expect

- “I know teachers are doing a lot, but there needs to be more **support for students whose first language is not English.**” (Parent, ES)
- “My child has been **struggling with speech and reading**; but the school has not been able to **figure out what the baseline problem is.**” (Parent, ES)
- “I want my son to feel like **he is in a learning environment that is appropriate for him.** Not all of his teachers understand his type of brain and how he learns.” (Parent, ES)

Concerns about how supports are accessed

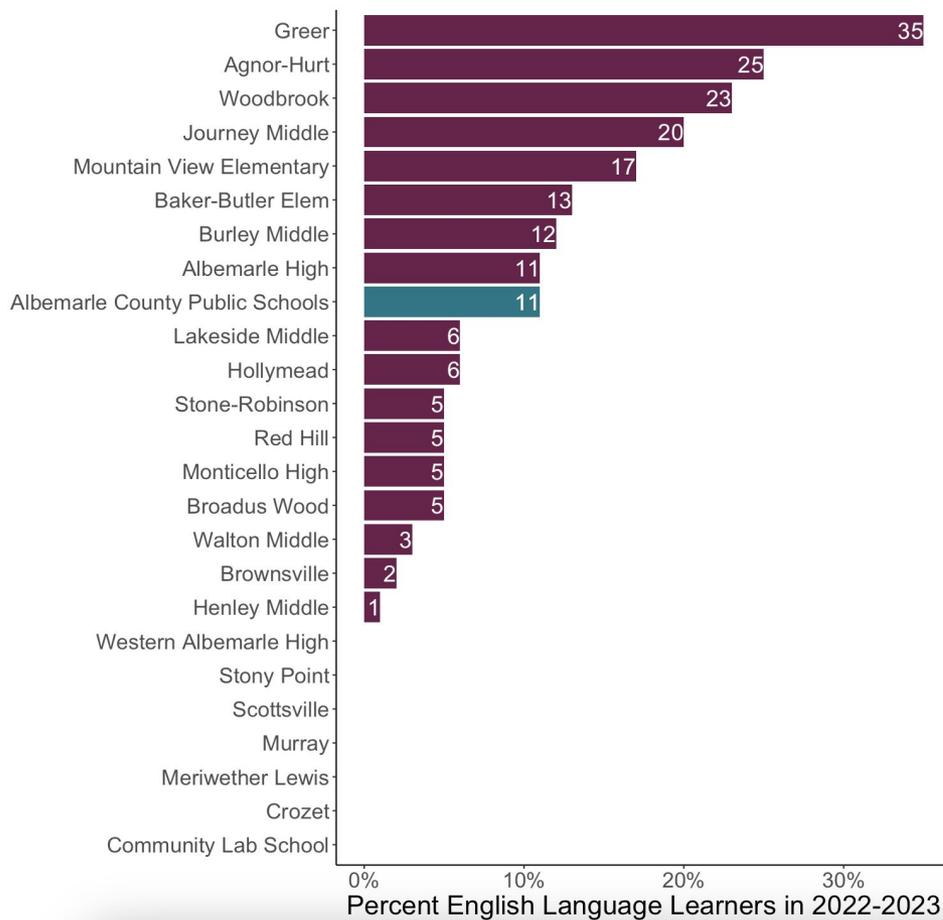
- “My daughter has been getting low grades; but **because she doesn’t have a behavioral problem I worry her needs get ignored.**” (Parent, ES)
- “If I didn’t work in a school, I wouldn’t know how to navigate the system. You have to **go in with some knowledge, otherwise you’ll be left in the dark.**” (Parent, ES)
- “If you say, ‘my child needs more support,’ nothing happens; but **if you say, ‘my child needs an IEP,’ the whole conversation shifts.**” (Parent, ES)
- “ACPS only has **one school with an alternative learning model**; it is accessed by a lottery and **preference is not given to students with greater needs.**” (Parent, ES)

Hurdles encountered when advocating for their students

- “I went to school during my lunch time, but **teachers acted busy and wouldn’t speak to me.**” (Parent, ES)
- “Teachers have been **slow to respond to my requests for more rigorous content.**” (Parent, ES)
- “My child’s IEP is a mile long. My partner and I feel equipped to advocate for her, but it’s **really challenging and time-consuming.**” (Parent, ES)



11% of ACPS students are English Language Learners, primarily in the Northern and Southern feeder patterns



Families and teachers believe ESOL and translation services are areas where more tailored supports are needed

- “If you are a student who has exited ESOL, but your family doesn't speak English, there is very little opportunity to have parent-teacher conferences because **access to interpretation services is limited.**” (Teacher, HS)
- “**My parents’ school experience was way different** than a typical white American kid. Other parents are used to how schools work; for my parents it is all new.” (Student, HS)

We observed **limited resources** for ESOL **students whose first language was not Spanish**

In a MS ESOL math class students were asked to write down what they had learned after a task. I sat next to a student who showed me her reflection form which had the prompts written in English, Spanish and Arabic. Although she speaks Arabic, she said she can't read it, so translation wasn't helpful to her.



Heard evidence that schools have made progress embracing the racial and cultural diversity of its students....

We heard several **examples of programs and practices designed to build a school culture that values and supports students with diverse identities** and cultural backgrounds

- “We do stuff for **Mexican Independence Day** and have **Black History Month events.**” (Teacher, HS)
- “I **don’t use the word assimilation**; our school embraces students for who they are. We want to understand every kid.” (Principal, HS)
- “The Spanish immersion program is a great **example of scaffolding learning for Hispanic/Latinx students and integrating that culture** into our school.” (Teacher, ES)
- “MOCHA and WOCHA are **partnerships with UVA that match young men and women of color with college mentors.** We also offer **AVID.**” (Principal, HS)
- “I think the admin do a good job of empowering students; **kids proposed the idea of celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month** and the admin agreed to it.” (Community Leader)



...but there is more that could be done to strengthen the culture of inclusion

Feedback from students and teachers also **highlights where these efforts have fallen short**, and in some instances, **even further marginalized students**

Students do not feel their cultures are celebrated

- “After the school-wide **morning meeting celebrating Black History month**, one of my Black students said that was the **first morning meeting where they understood everything** that was going on.” (Teacher, ES)
- “I don’t feel like black culture is celebrated – **no music we would listen to is played**, ever; we **don’t learn anything about Black history**; and all they did to celebrate Black History Month was put up a few posters.” (Student, HS)
- “Schools need to do a better job **celebrating Hispanic culture; not just as history, but the conditions and culture of the community** Hispanic students live in right now.” (Community Leader)

Experience instances of exclusion

- “School announcements are in English and Spanish, but that still **leaves out a lot of students**. Many **students have asked me for copies of the announcements in their language**.” (Teacher, HS)
- “As a Latino student and immigrant, **I don’t feel completely part of the school**. For example, I feel excluded at the prom, and felt uncomfortable trying out for sports teams.” (Student, HS)
- “Morning announcements are either in **English or Spanish**; so **half the time I don’t understand them**.” (Student, ES)



During our walkthroughs we observed very few examples of lessons that embedded culturally relevant content

- In elementary schools, we observed some teachers using supplementary resources that are culturally relevant, such as books students could choose from during independent reading
- Culturally relevant components were embedded in only 1 out of 15 middle school classrooms we visited
- Only 1 of the 8 high school classrooms we observed showed evidence of culturally relevant content being embedded in the lesson; this was observed in an Algebra 1 classroom where a culminating graphic design project was curated to make it more relevant for students



Evidence shows that there is still lingering racial bias within the district

ACPS has a history of systemic racism...

- “Yancey was one of four **equalization schools in the county**—one-story brick schools that were **built so that black students would not want to integrate the white public schools.**” (Community Leader)
- “Former superintendent **Paul H. Cale made it clear that he did not want to integrate schools; and his name was on one of the school buildings.** So there are a lot of old vestiges; a lot weeds.” (Parent, ES & Alumni)
- “I used to work in the Southern feeder pattern, and **some of the towns out there were considered sundown towns.** That type of history makes some people feel unsafe.” (Leader, central Office)

...which continues to influence mindsets in the present day...

- “Someone on staff needs to step-up and **teach about the differences in Black culture**; I don’t know the culture of **colored people.**” (Teacher, ES)
- “I only teach two students of color; and both of them identify as mixed race, so it **feels funny to focus on just students of color when they are such a small section** of our kids.” (Teacher, ES)
- “I hear from students and teachers about the **classrooms disruptions that happen weekly or daily, including threats, racial slurs**; but nothing is done by the administration to address the behavior.” (Community Leader)
- “A lot of the **teachers judge students off their race and where they live**; like if they live in certain ‘low-income’ neighborhoods.” (Parent, ES)
- “I still face **battles everyday with mindsets**, like having to have a conversation with a **teacher when they use the N-word.**” (School Leader, MS)



Students’ racial identity, culture, and historical lens informs how they experience racial microaggressions

What we heard from....

Black Students

- “I feel like **racism is so ingrained in American culture and society** that it is a hard thing to get away from.” (Student, HS)
- “When I am the only Black student in class, I am **quiet and stay to myself** because the **white kids will correct how I speak.**” (Student, HS)
- “When you walk into a classroom and **you are the only Black student** in the class, **everyone just stares** at you.” (Student, HS)
- “I definitely feel like **people judge me because I am Black.** It goes all the way back to Jim Crow, so I’m not going to change it, why would I even try.” (Student, HS)

Latinx Students

- “I had one teacher tell me that if **Hispanic males wear snapbacks, they will think they are a gang member.** But the white kids can wear them.” (Student, HS)
- “When I started in August, **one teacher didn’t talk to a group of us because he doesn’t know how to speak Spanish.** So the assistant was the only one who spoke to our group. It made me feel excluded from the rest of the class.” (Student, HS)
- “My teacher thinks he is being funny **by not using the right word when he speaks Spanish.** But I find it **disrespectful,** and it makes me **uncomfortable.**” (Student, HS)

Immigrant Students

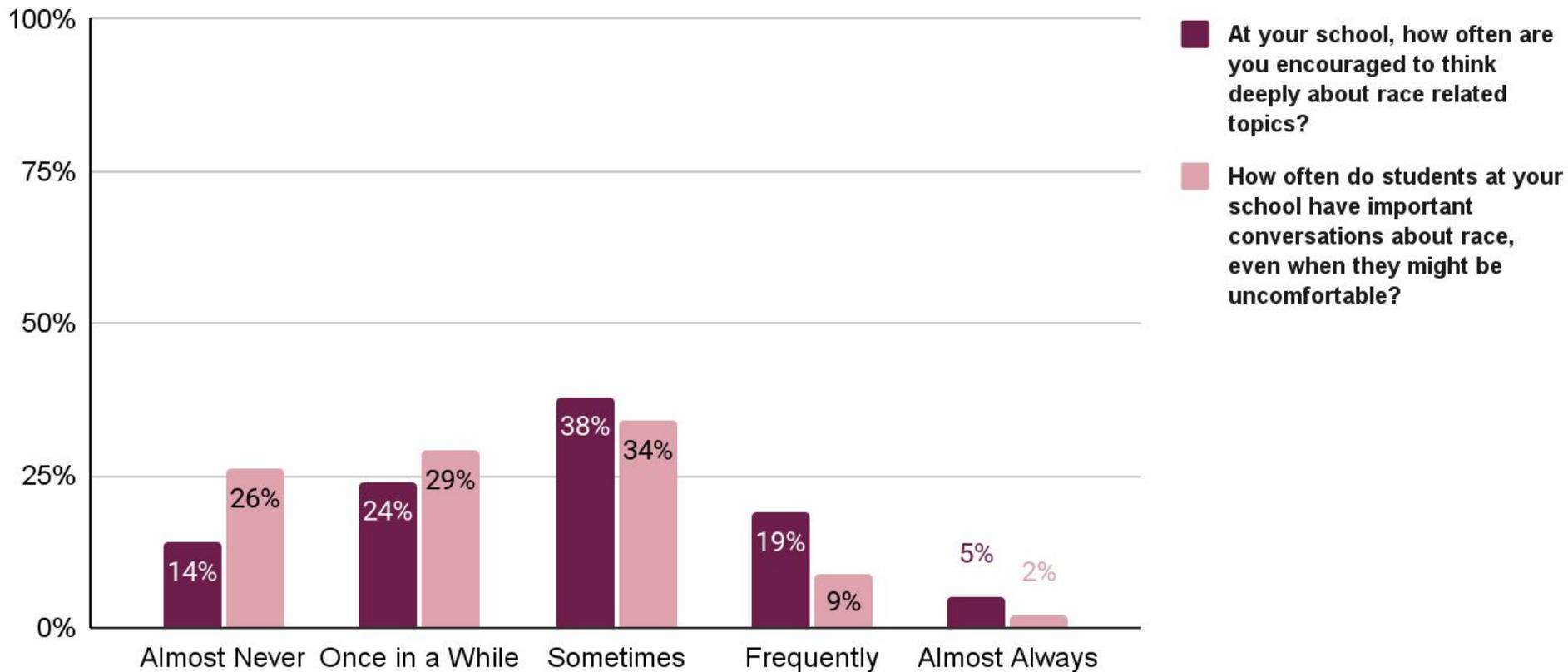
- “I **don’t have a lot of friends yet because of the language barrier.** The few friends I have are Afghani. It is hard for me to make American friendships.” (Student, HS)
- “I just came here this school year from Russia and I **don’t feel like this school is very inclusive.** The only people that talk to me are teachers.” (Student, HS)



Panorama data indicates that students do not feel comfortable talking about race-related topics at school (1 of 2)

Student Survey Responses

Fall 2022

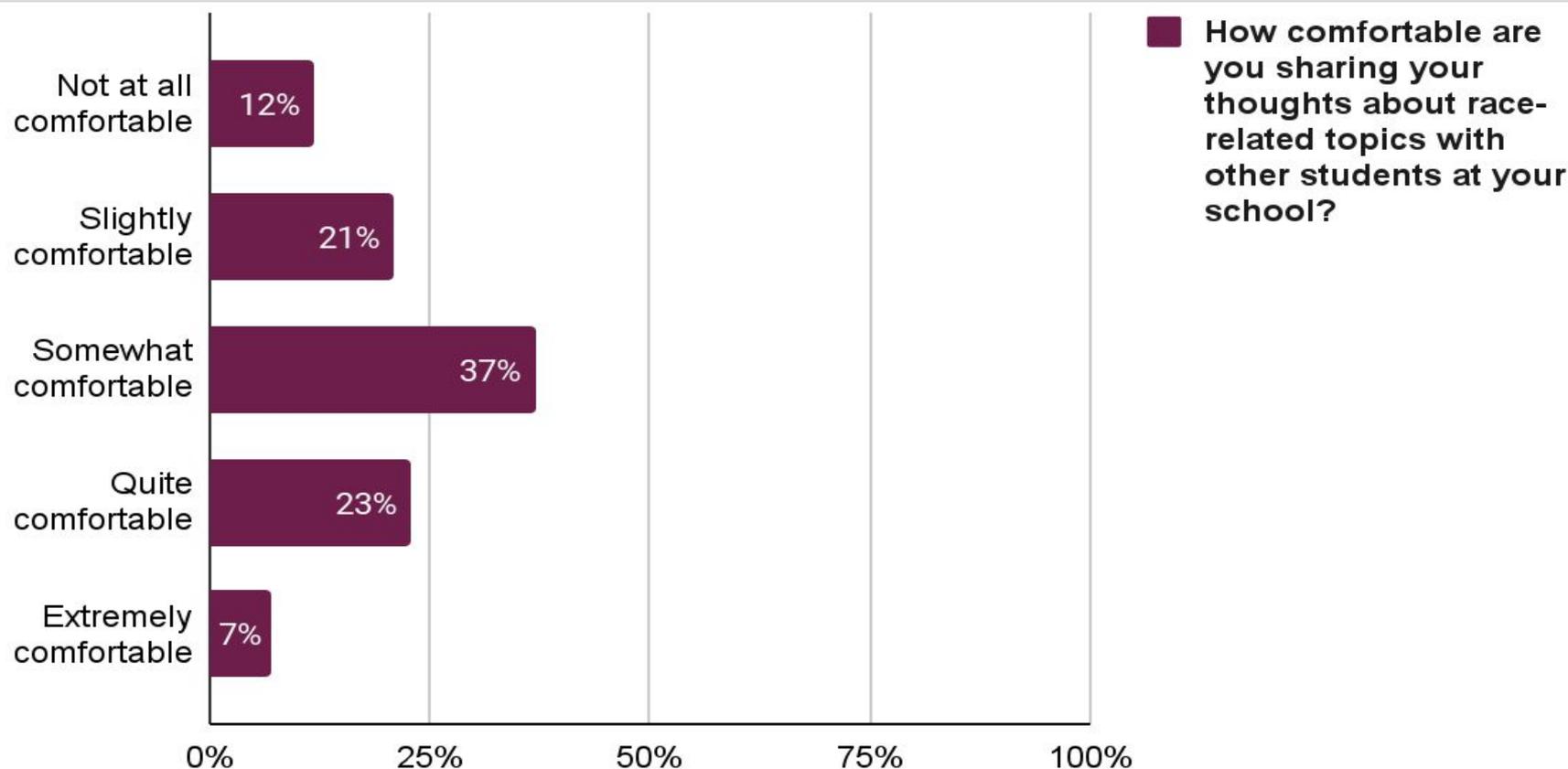




Panorama data indicates that students do not feel comfortable talking about race-related topics at school (2 of 2)

Student Survey Responses

Fall 2022





Families want better communication and transparency so they can support their students at home with academics...

Many families are eager to partner with teachers....

- “I’d like to see a **summary of what my son is learning and what techniques are being used in class**, so I can work on it with him at home” (Parent, ES)
- “Our daughters are in Kindergarten, **we came to this focus group to learn more about the school division**, so we can help them succeed.” (Parent, ES)
- “Our oldest daughter is 16 and we learned from our experience with her that **we have to do our part at home for her to succeed.**” (Parent, ES & HS)
- “During COVID it was great; I was able to **see exactly what he was learning in class and then have conversations with him about those topics.**” (Parent, ES)

....but don’t feel like they have the visibility and tools to do so

- “Unless I ask how he is doing, **I don’t get any feedback from the teacher.**” (Parent, ES)
- “There is **no homework going home, so I can’t help my child.**” (Parent, ES)
- “All the information is sent through emails or online portals; but there are **too many portals and I can’t navigate it.**” (Parent, ES)
- “When things are sent through **email, it gets lost in spam**; if it’s sent home in paper form, then I can just get it out of their backpack.” (Parent, ES)
- “Doing everything **online just doesn’t work for our families.** Many don’t have internet access or personal computers at home.” (Community Leader)
- “The community engagement office puts everything on the website. But **our parents get their information from Facebook and social media.**” (Community Leader)



... and hold ACPS accountable; families of color expressed particularly strong mistrust of the division

All comments on this page are specifically from Black and Latinx parents

Anxiety that students' race will impact the quality of education received in ACPS

- “My goal for my child is that he have access; we **know that access is still uneven for Black and Brown students.**” (Parent, ES & Alumni)
- “My children were often one of the very few students of color in honors classes. That makes me **worry about how Black and Latinx students matriculate through our system and whether they are able to access honors courses, medical academy, MESA math.**” (Parent, MS)
- “I want my daughter to get the best education possible and have the same opportunities as everyone else; but **I worry that she will be labeled and given fewer opportunities.** (Parent, ES)

Families expend significant effort navigating ACPS on behalf of their children

- “When **my first child started in ACPS I quit my job,** so I was able to **continually push to hold ACPS accountable** and make sure she was pushed and challenged academically. **I am exhausted.**” (Parent, ES & Alumni)
- “Maybe for all students, but particularly **for students of color, having somebody push for them, and advocate on their behalf makes a big difference** on their school experience.” (Parent, ES)
- “One of my friends decided to **give up her career to focus on her child's IEP.** I have to work, so I **rely on her so much for information** on how to get my child the appropriate supports.” (Parent, ES)

Reminder: this is one of four reports including in the instructional practices audit



Classroom Level Experiences of
Students of Color

A photograph of a classroom with students at desks, overlaid with a dark blue semi-transparent filter. The text is centered in white.



The Role of Systems &
Structures in the Achievement
of Students of Color

A photograph of students sitting on the floor, overlaid with a teal semi-transparent filter. The text is centered in white.



Root Causes and
Recommendations

A photograph of students sitting on the floor, overlaid with a dark red semi-transparent filter. The text is centered in white.