

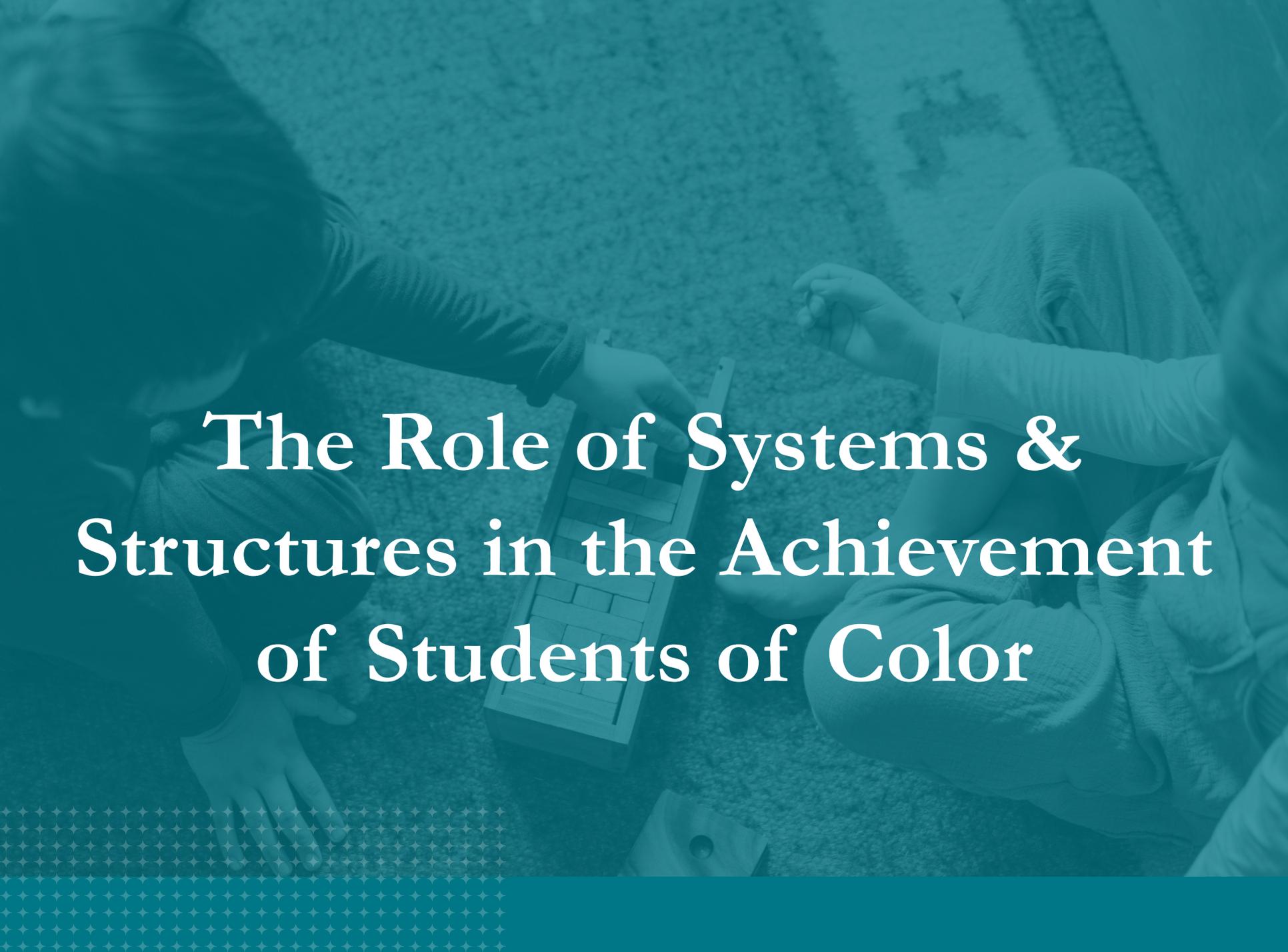


Albemarle County Public Schools

Instructional Practices Audit

Report #3: The Role of Systems & Structures in the Achievement of Students of Color

Spring 2023

A photograph of children sitting on a carpeted floor, playing with wooden blocks. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent teal filter. The text is centered over the image.

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

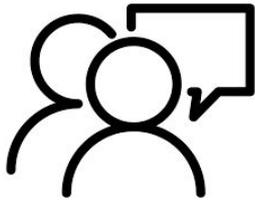
Context for this report

- [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

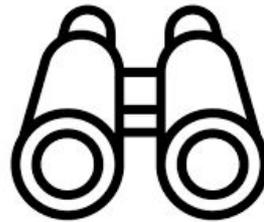
- What systems provide ongoing support to school leaders and staff for continuous learning and improvement?
- What data is readily accessible and processes in place to regularly assess and respond to it?
- To what extent are the tools and supports provided by central office aligned to the district's investments in curriculum and instruction, informed by school-based expressions of need, and disproportionately allocated to schools serving the highest need students?
- What does each department within the district believe its role to be in closing achievement gaps and how do departmental goals, annual plans and budgets reflect these beliefs?
- What local policies (e.g., student assignment, human resources, access to advanced coursework, etc.) potentially serve as barriers to accessing high quality programs and instruction for students of color?

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 Equality vs. equity.** Stakeholders across ACPS described an ongoing shift within the Division toward a more equity-based approach to decision-making and resource allocation; some see a need to go even further to ensure schools and students who need the most support receive what they need to be successful.
- 2 Fidelity vs. autonomy.** Recent moves to standardize elements of ACPS' approach to learning and push for fidelity in implementation across schools can support more rigorous and consistent instruction; however, there are differing opinions from school leaders on what the Division should hold "tight" versus "loose".
- 3 Inclusive decision-making.** ACPS has developed some structures for collecting feedback from students, families, staff, and other stakeholders; however, there are gaps in how the Division gathers feedback and input from key constituencies to inform decisions before they are made, and then communicate the rationale for decisions once made.
- 4 Talent systems.** ACPS benefits from talented, deeply committed teachers, support staff, and leaders; however, many staff do not feel supported in their professional learning, and ACPS struggles to attract and retain staff that more closely reflect the demographics of the Division's student population.
- 5 Collaboration and alignment.** School-based adults report strong, collaborative relationships within school walls; however, inter-school and inter-team collaboration is not as strong, and many stakeholders described tensions between school-based staff and central office staff.



ACPS is a relatively resource-rich division compared to other school districts in Virginia

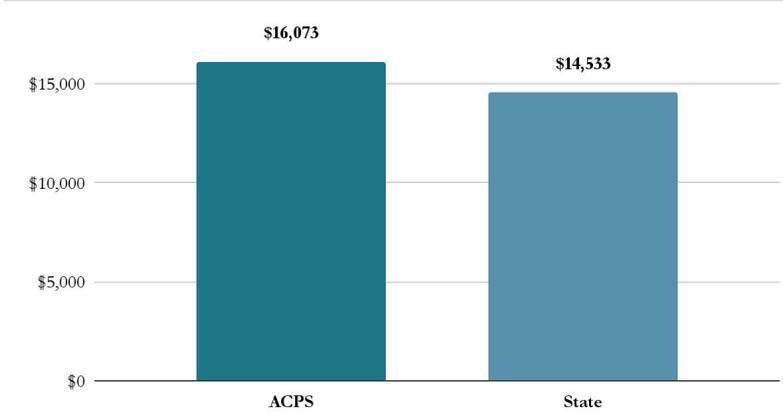
Many stakeholders expressed they have ample resources...

- **“Our Algebra 1 classes are small and we we have a good adult to student ratio, which makes a huge difference.”** (Teacher, HS)
- **“We have plenty of resources, so that is not the issue.”** (School Leader, ES)
- **“We’re pretty well staffed, our class sizes are low, if we have a need we can typically address it. I don’t feel resource constrained at all.”** (School Leader, ES)
- **“I have a great budget. I have plenty of resources to bring in people.”** (Leader, Central Office)

...which is borne out by comparisons to state averages

- Most schools within ACPS have a **lower student-to-teacher ratio than the Virginia state average (14.4)**
- ACPS’s 2021-22 **per-pupil spending was 10% higher than state average**

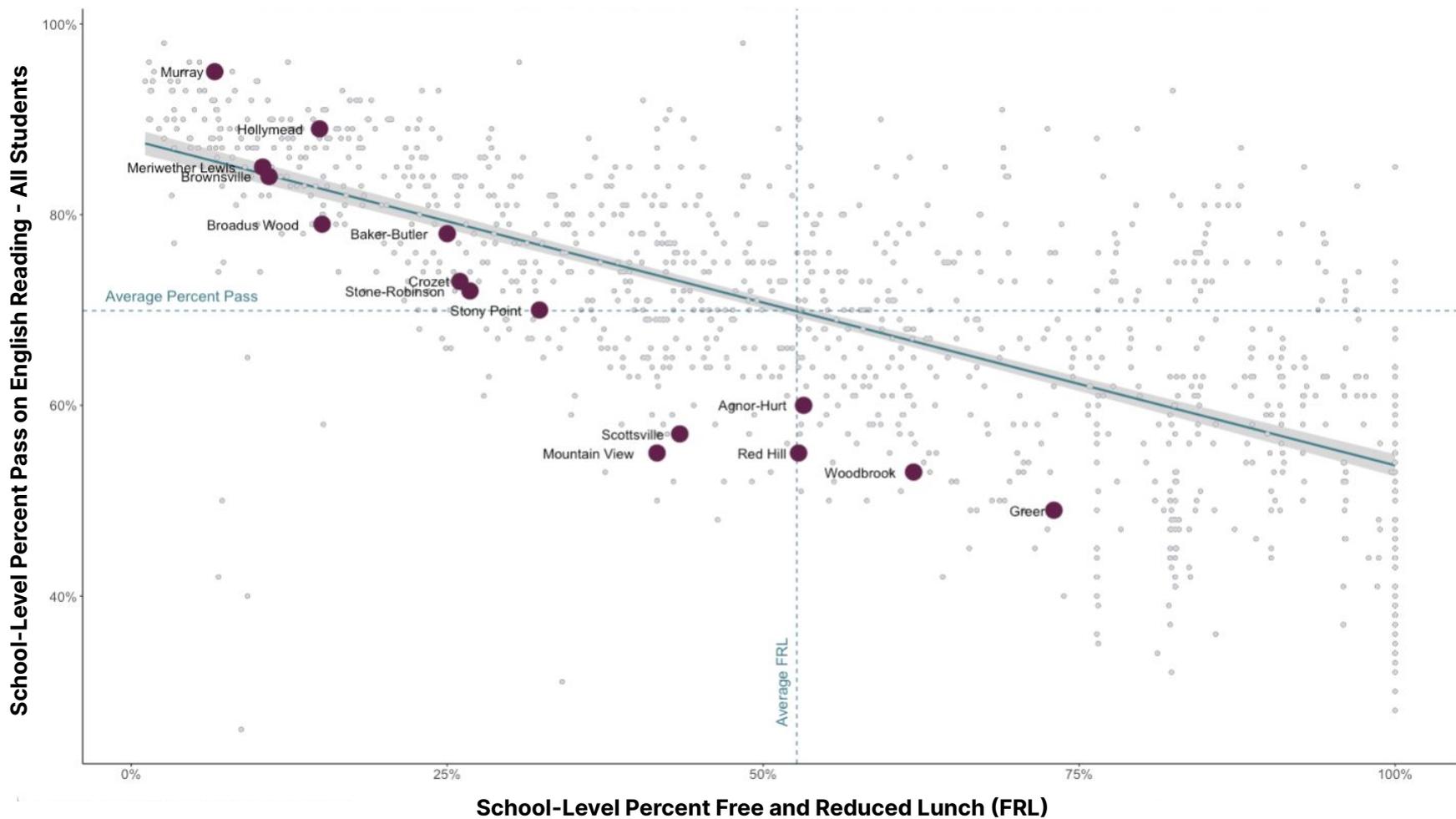
Per-Pupil Spending
2021-2022





However, most ACPS schools are performing worse than similar schools based on the percent of FRL eligible students

Percent Pass on Elementary School English Reading for All Students, ACPS Schools compared to all Virginia Public Schools 2021-2022

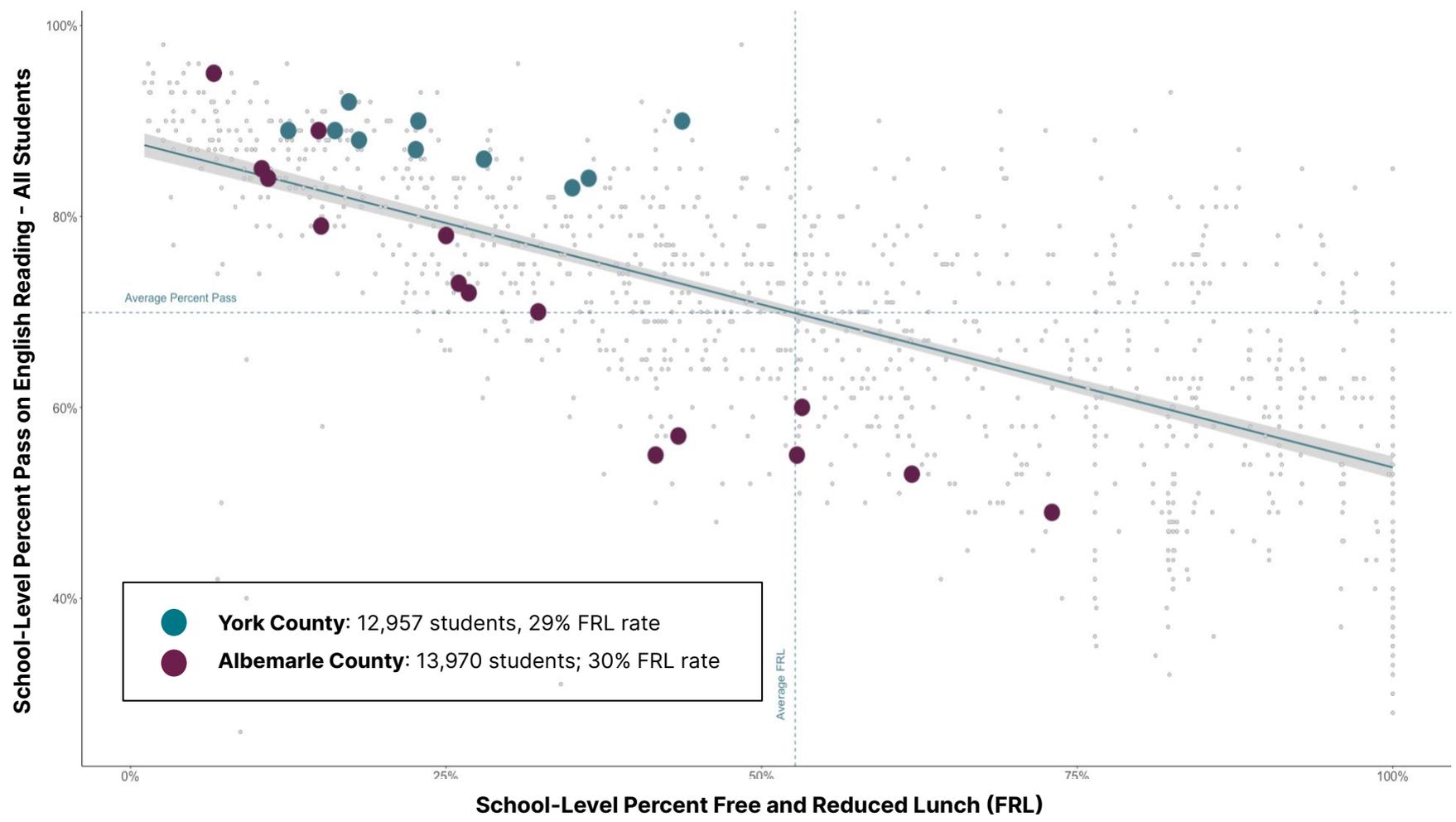


Source: Virginia Department of Education School Quality Profiles; data merged from "Assessments - English Reading" and "Lunch Participation" files.



Nearly all schools in a similar sized division with the same % of students eligible for FRL is performing above average

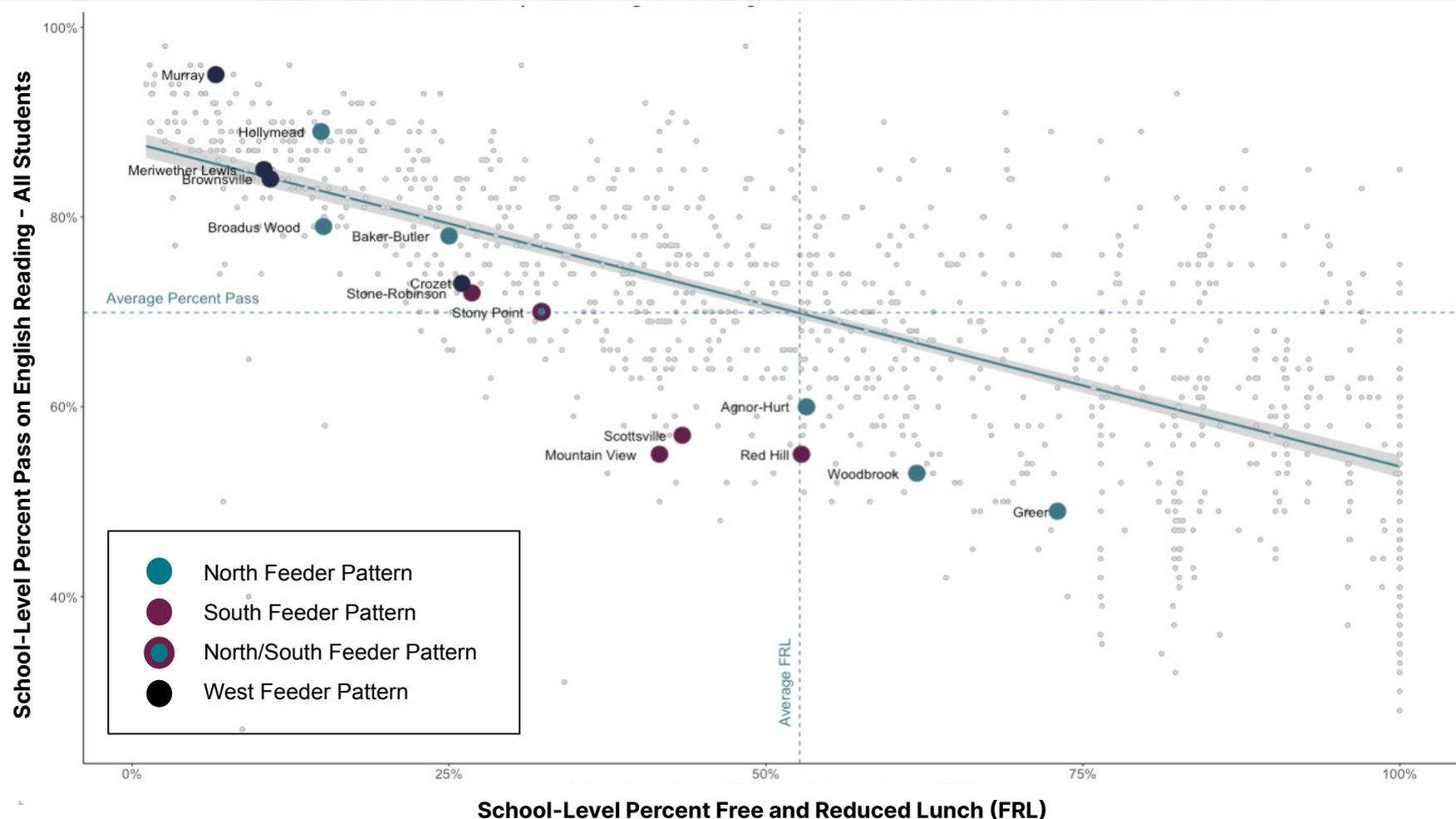
Percent Pass on Elementary School English Reading for All Students, ACPS Schools compared to York County Schools 2021-2022





Within ACPS schools in the North and South feeder patterns are faring worse than those in the West feeder pattern...

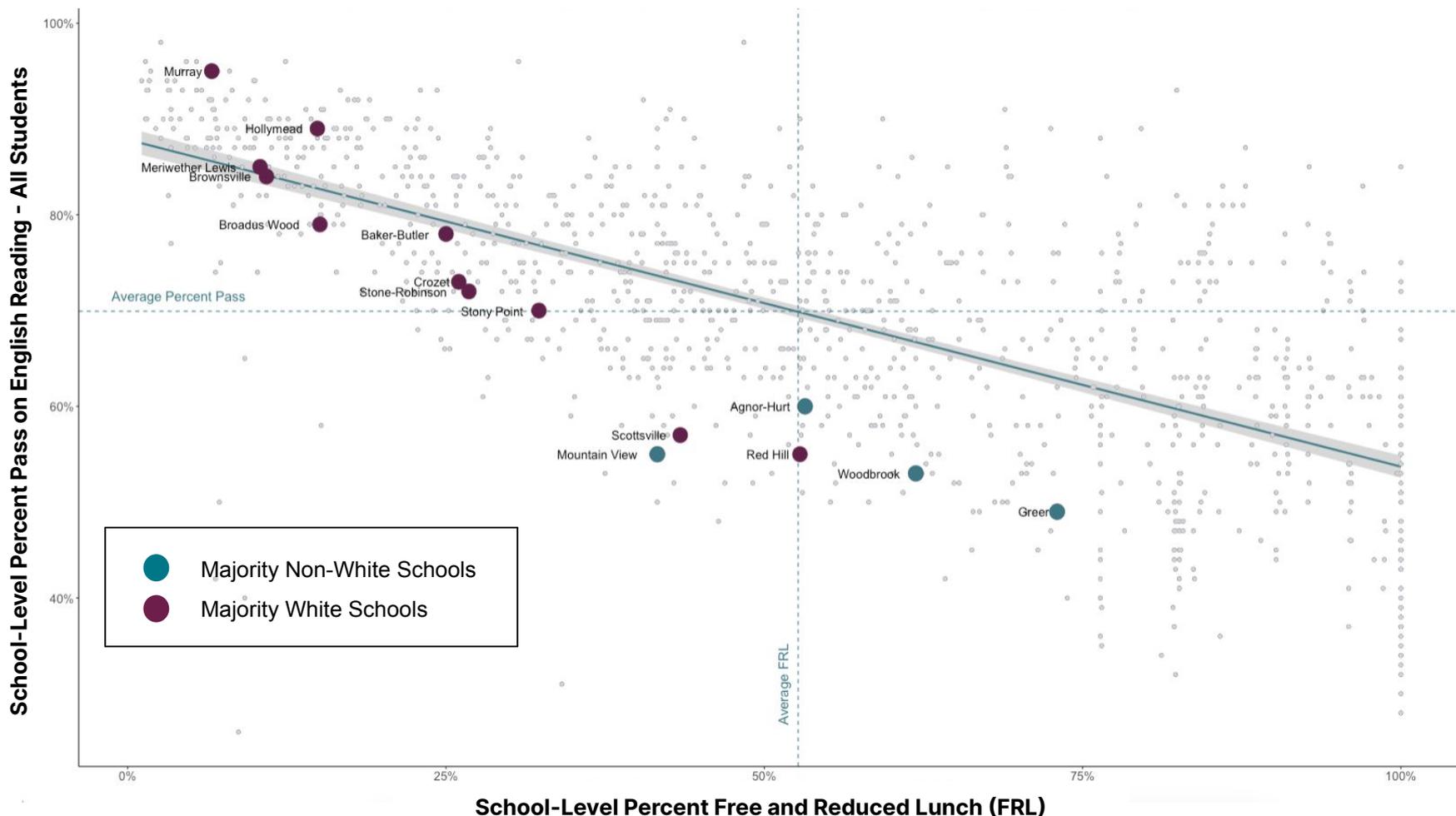
Percent Pass on Elementary School English Reading for All Students, ACPS Schools by Feeder Pattern 2021-2022





...and schools that are majority non-White are performing far worse than majority White schools

Percent Pass on Elementary School English Reading for All Students, ACPS Schools by Majority White/ Non-White 2021-2022





Staff see a need to align decisions about resource allocation with the Division's commitment to equity

Many staff feel the Division is not living up to its equity commitment...

- “Right now **the Division's approach feels more like equality—where everyone gets the same** level of resources and support—not equity.” (Teacher, ES)
- “**There is a veneer of equity in this division, but the system itself is not equitable**, and the systems are different in different schools.” (Teacher, MS)
- “I think we need to go back to the data and **give schools what they need, not what the formula says.**” (Teacher, MS)

...particularly when it comes to decisions about staffing

- “It's **crazy to me that we have the same number of administrators as other schools** with fewer students and less need.” (Teacher, MS)
- “Every school gets the same resources. For example, **we still base staffing decisions on categorical variables versus continuous variables.**” (School Leader, MS)
- “We should **make staffing decisions based on the needs and context of individual schools**, not just based on basic data points like overall enrollment.” (Teacher, ES)

“As a Division, I think **we are still in the early stages of transitioning from a model of equality to a model of equity.**” (School Leader, MS)



Stakeholders mentioned a few examples in which schools and students are not receiving the additional supports they need

- “It **should not come down to a student’s zip code or school attendance zone to determine whether they will be lucky enough to get the tiered support they need** and deserve- but that’s exactly what is happening.” (Parent)
- “The racial context of this district and **the ongoing segregation of our communities still impacts how resources that are allocated now.**” (Leader, Central Office)
- “Every school has a different configuration of specialists, and **quantity should change based need and data, not just ratios of students.**” (Leader, Central Office)
- “**Interventionist teaching positions are not allocated equitably** outside of Title 1.” (Leader, Central Office)
- “**Staffing allocations have assumptions built in that schools have far surpassed and schools then lack the resources they need to serve kids.** For example, elementary school allocations stop at 500 students, but we have schools of 800+; differentiated staffing stops at 50% economically disadvantaged, but some schools far exceed that.” (Leader, Central Office)
- “**We want to equitable, but right now it’s not even equal** right now.” (Leader, Central Office)



Several staff mentioned losing autonomy as ACPS pushes for more fidelity in program implementation

Some disagree with recent push for fidelity...

- **“The former superintendent was less tight on programs.** With the new superintendent, we’ve really swung.” (School Leader, MS)
- **“I think the focus on fidelity of implementation is an over-correction...** I’m worried that we are dumbing down the teaching profession a bit.” (School Leader, ES)
- **“There is a sweet spot we are trying to find between tight and loose, and I think we’ve over-corrected and push too hard on implementing with fidelity.”** (School Leader, ES)

...and worry about the loss of autonomy

- **“The selling point for some teachers and leaders to come to ACPS was complete autonomy, and now that is changing.”** (Leader, Central Office)
- **“Before this was named as a priority, teachers created all of their own curricula, pacing guides, maps, etc.—it was all over the place.”** (Leader, Central Office)
- **“For schools and teachers, it feels like their autotomy is being taken away,** and that ‘this is just something we’ve been told we had to do.’ They need more about the ‘why’ behind these decisions.” (Leader, Central Office)

Some see tension between fidelity & differentiation

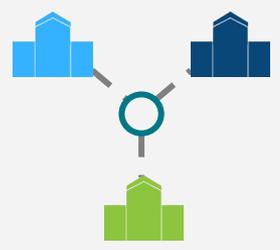
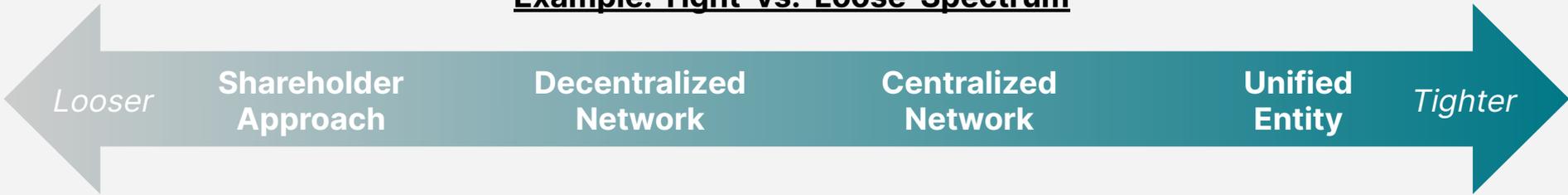
- **“The word ‘fidelity’ makes me so frustrated. I hear ‘just implement this program with fidelity’ and then in the same breath I’m told to differentiate, and I don’t know how to do both.** How do you do both of those things well?” (Teacher, ES)
- **“We feel a contradiction between implementing with fidelity and differentiating to meet student need.”** (School Leader, ES)
- **“The LEA demands fidelity to a program while also pushing the idea of cultural adaptation of evidence-based practices... it’s hard to do both.”** (Teacher, ES)



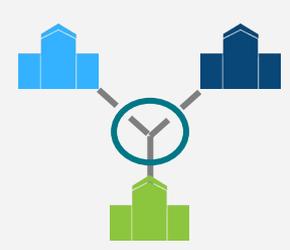
Interviews indicate there is a lack of clarity on what the Division will hold 'tight' versus 'loose' moving forward

"We're shifting, but **decision-rights are still murky.**"
(Leader, Central Office)

Example: 'Tight' vs. 'Loose' Spectrum



Resources only



Resources & services



Resources & services



Resources & services

Central office provides:

- Type of line indicates **whether resources/services are optional** (dotted) **vs. mandatory** (solid) for schools
- Size of circle indicates **extent to which the Central Office office owns decision rights** over the activity
- Color indicates **extent to which services/ activities are consistent** across schools



Some staff expressed concerns that the central office doesn't proactively seek input or act on feedback

Concerns that the Division doesn't seek input...

- “A lot of **people in APCS do not feel heard or listened to.**” (Teacher, ES)
- “**Stop making decisions without talking to teachers.**” (Teacher, MS)
- “**They say they include us, but they don't.** They get our input, but those meetings feel like they are not sincere in terms of gathering inputs.” (Teacher, ES)
- “**Teachers have no voice.**” (Teacher, MS)

...and doesn't act on feedback...

- “**We offer a lot of feedback, but not a lot is done with it.**” (Teacher, ES)
- “**Feels like we know what we want and need, but it is not heard by people that are making decisions.** Like, they look at the feedback and it doesn't feel like anything changes.” (Teacher, ES)
- “Division should trust that I know what we need. **I don't reach out for help a lot, so when I do I wish they would listen.**” (School Leader, MS)

...leaving some feeling disenfranchised

- “I just **don't think the superintendent likes feedback.**” (Leader, Central Office)
- “**People have learned to be quiet when they don't feel like they are being heard.**” (School Leader, ES)
- “I've been having lots of meetings with central office and **I don't feel like they are hearing me or feel an urgency around my needs.**” (School Leader, ES)



Interviews indicated concerns that changes to the course selection process may negatively affect students of color

Some teachers are concerned about changes to course selection...

- “Teachers used to make course recommendations for students, but that policy was eliminated- **students need more guidance in course selection.**” (Teacher, MS)
- “It is **extremely inequitable the way we’ve set up course selection.**” (Teacher, MS)
- “Students get to pick their classes. **I have a student who failed their 6th grade SOL and chose to be in 7th grade Algebra.** I’m expected to help them succeed, but they aren’t appropriately placed.” (Teacher, MS)

...and are worried about how changes may impact students of color

- “I think there is **a risk of there being inequities underneath how these decisions play out** in classrooms.” (Teacher, MS)
- “When we go to every-other-day, I **worry that we create barriers that will decrease the diversity of students in our advanced math classes.**” (Teacher, MS)
- “We **used to have Black and brown students in the advanced math class all the time...** now those 8th grade algebra classes look very different.” (Teacher, MS)



Interview data indicated there is an opportunity to improve processes around key decisions, such as every-other-day math

- “There was significant change to how math happens in middle school, and **teachers were upset because they didn’t have a say.**” (School Leader, MS)
- “For a county that is really into data, **I’m curious about the underlying rationale for switching to every-other-day math.**” (Teacher, MS)
- “**I don’t know what the motivation is** for every-other-day math.” (Teacher, MS)
- “**Can you show me the research** that supports the efficacy of every-other-day math?” (Teacher, HS)
- “**We want to see data behind decisions...** like every-other-day math: where is the data supporting that?” (Teacher, MS)
- “**We’ve asked about the research behind that decision,** and we never really got it.” (Teacher, MS)
- “The every-other-day language arts and math is ludicrous. **I’ve heard data referenced to support this change, but I’ve never seen it.** Feels like a trend that we are jumping on.” (Teacher, MS)

“Teachers don’t always see the rationale for decisions, and they experience decisions as being done to them as opposed to with them.”
(Leader, Central Office)

Reactions to the recent shift to every-other-day math in middle school is one example that may signal a **need for stronger communication and change management practices** across the Division



Staff interviews indicated the perception that the Division needs to be better at deciding where to focus

- “I feel like **we are always being asked to change or try a new thing.**” (Teacher, ES)
- “Feels like there is an investment in CRT and AVID, and then we are on to the next thing. **With deep programs, I’m not sure we go as deep as we need before our attention shifts.**” (Teacher, MS)
- “We do **tend to look at shiny new things.**” (School Leader, ES)
- “I feel like our **teachers and staff feel like we are always doing one more thing, and nothing is being taken off their plate.**” (Leader, Central Office)
- “**Everything feels like one more thing, and teachers already feel taxed,** and don’t feel their efforts or progress are acknowledged.” (Leader, Central Office)
- “Having too many new initiatives distracts from the work of closing achievement gaps—**Everything feels like a priority.**” (Leader, Central Office)
- “There is a **feeling that we invest in too many things- we add, but we don’t subtract.**” (Board Member)



Stakeholders across the Division see a need to attract and retain more teachers of color

Many see a need to hire more diverse staff...

- **“We need more teachers of color**—Black, Asian, Latino—to help all students, but particularly students of color.” (Teacher, ES)
- **“We do need more teachers that look like our students.”** (Teacher, ES)
- **“We struggle to hire people in schools who have a frame of reference that allows them to support Black and Latinx students.”** (Leader, Central Office)
- **“We know we need a more diverse teaching staff** that is reflective of our student population.” (School Leader, MS)

...but view talent pipelines as a key barrier

- “We recently interviewed 60 people and maybe 1 of those was a teacher of color. **I want to diversify my staff, and I try so hard, but the pool is really shallow.** It’s hard for me when folks say ‘there’s that school that didn’t try hard enough to hire teachers of color’ - we’ve tried really hard.” (School Leader, ES)
- “Our staff is not from the same backgrounds as our students, but **you can’t hire what’s not there.**” (School Leader, ES)
- **“What are we actually doing to attract and retain leaders of color?** UVA is not producing a diverse candidate pool.” (Teacher, MS)

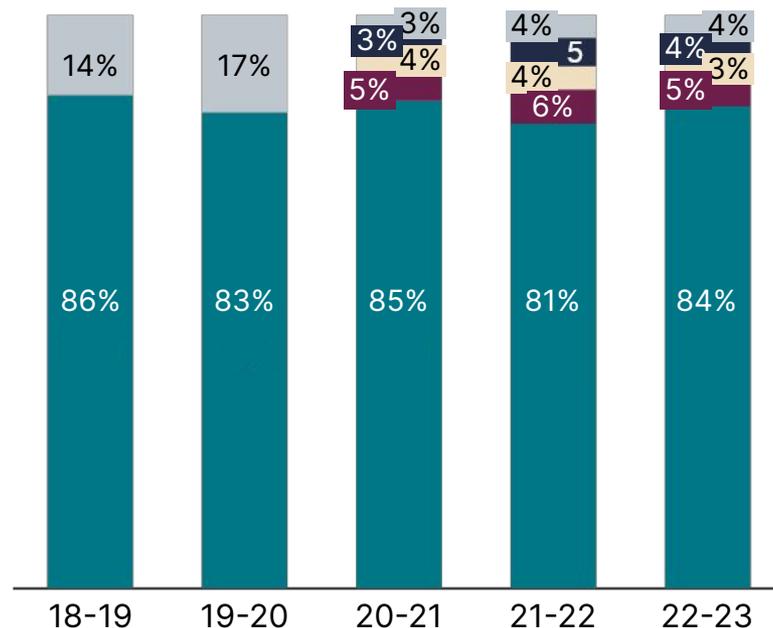
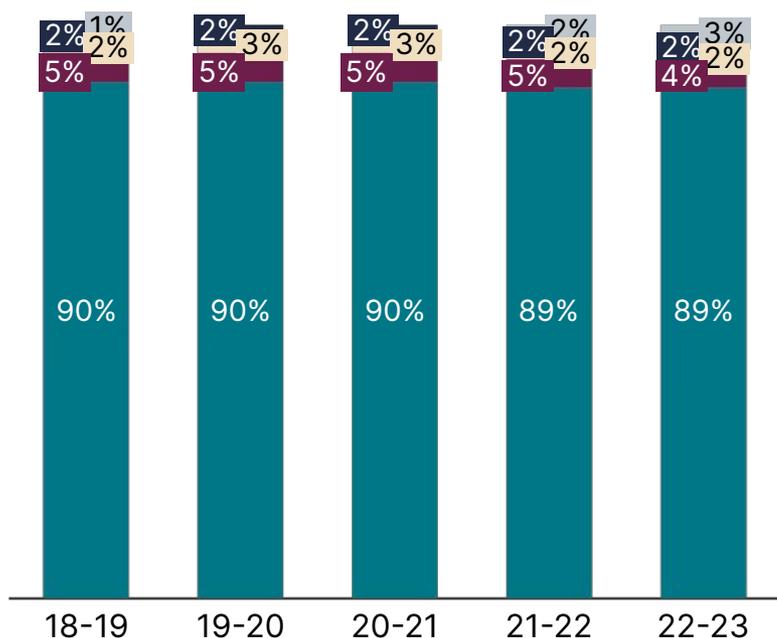


The share of non-white teachers hovers near 10%, while the share of new teachers who are non-white is closer to 16%

ACPS Total Teachers by Race & Ethnicity
2018-19 through 2022-23

ACPS New Teachers by Race & Ethnicity
2018-19 through 2022-23

White Black or African American Hispanic or Latino Two or More Races All Other

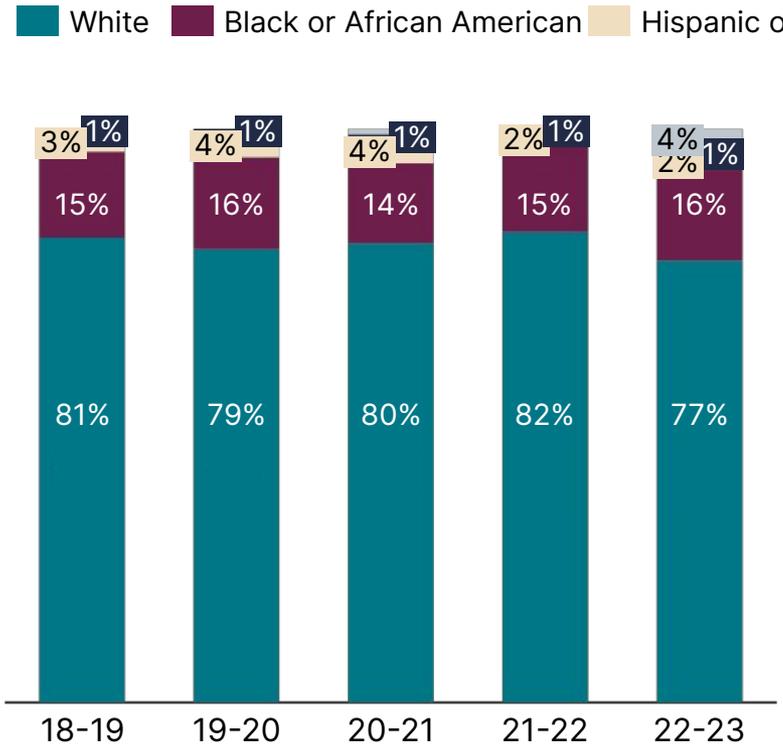




ACPS has had more success hiring diverse administrators across the Division

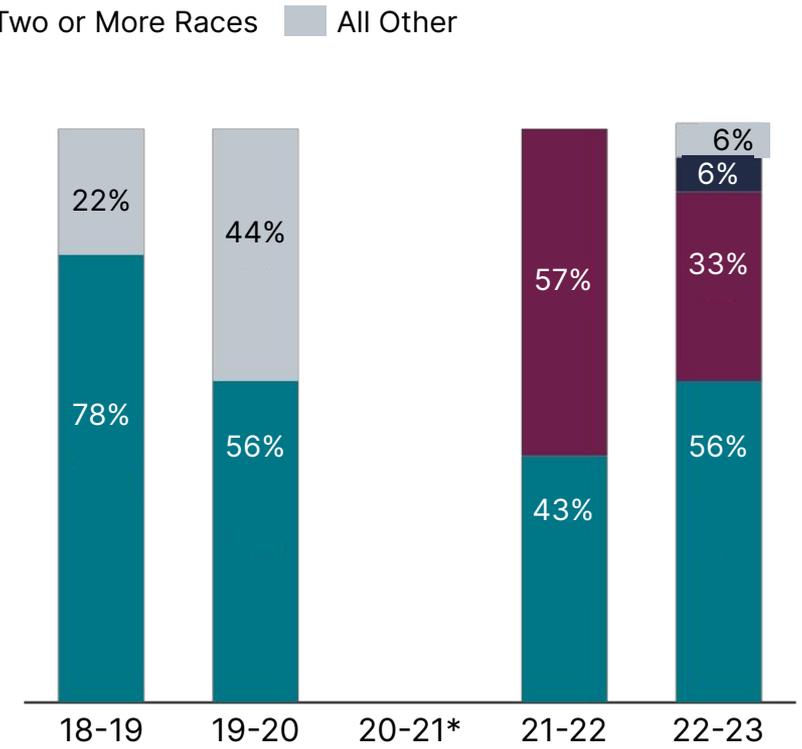
ACPS Total Administrators by Race & Ethnicity

2018-19 through 2022-23



ACPS New Administrators by Race & Ethnicity

2018-19 through 2022-23



Source: [ACPS Human Resources Report 2022-2023](#). Note that data on new hires not disaggregated by subgroup before 2020-21. *No new admin hired in 20-21



Stakeholders shared other talent-related challenges facing the Division

We heard about staff shortages in some subjects

- “My school is not fully staffed. **We are short ESOL, we are short SPED teachers.** I need support from HR to make sure we have the right people.” (School Leader, MS)
- “We need a serious recruitment plan. **It is going to be very hard to close gaps if we don’t have the right people in place.**” (School Leader, MS)
- “**This county has 1 SPED coordinator for all of secondary. That’s crazy—that’s too big of a job for one person.** I only get 15min per week to talk to her.” (Teacher, MS)

...and attrition / burnout are issues in some schools

- “**People are constantly leaving** because the work in this school is so hard compared to other schools.” (Teacher, ES)
- “Other teachers leave their school at 3pm and feel like they completed their work—not here. **I work more hours than I ever have, even more than in my first year as a teacher.**” (Teacher, ES)
- “My heart is heavy, and **I’m tired.**” (School Leader, ES)

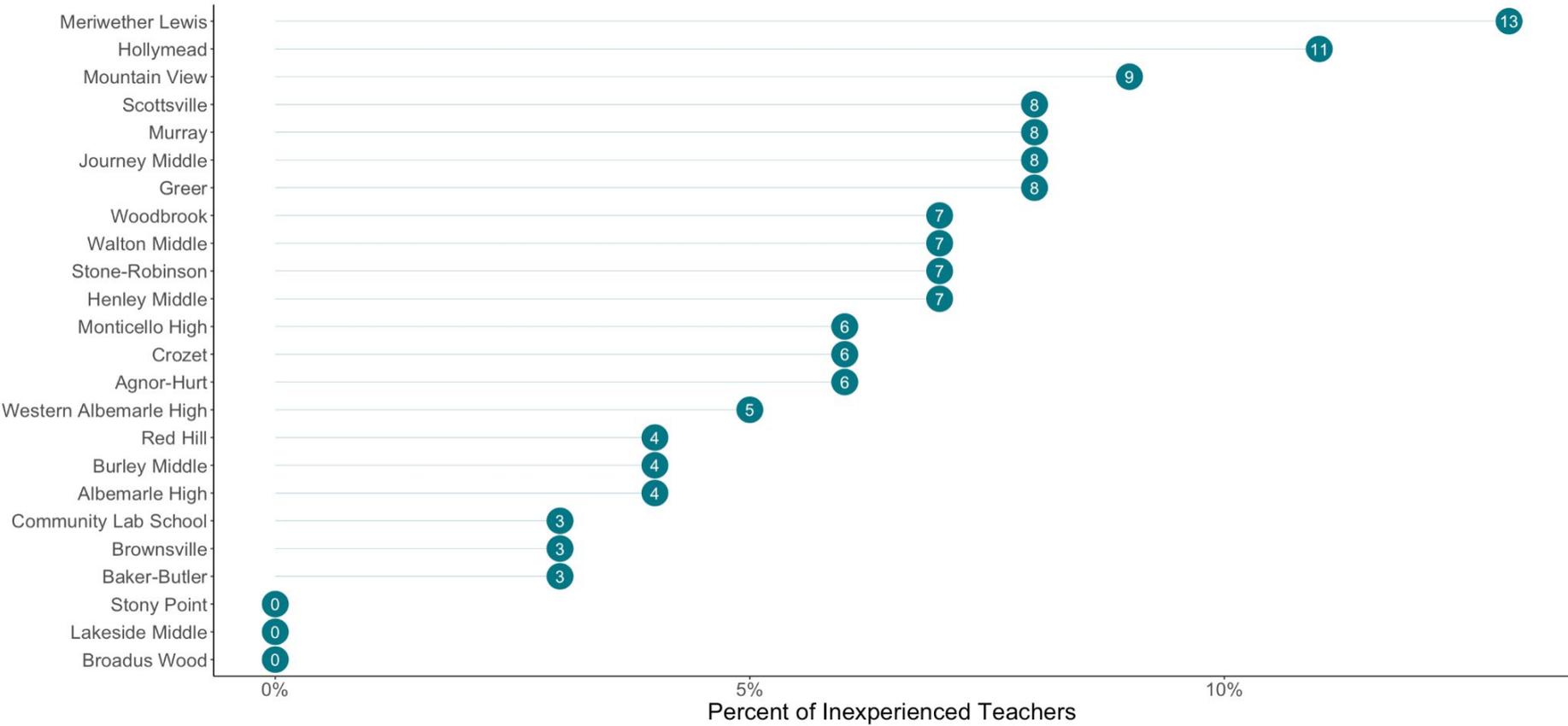
We also heard experience levels vary across schools

- “We have the **least experienced teachers in schools teaching the hardest population.**” (Teacher, HS)
- [see next slide for data on teacher experience levels across schools]



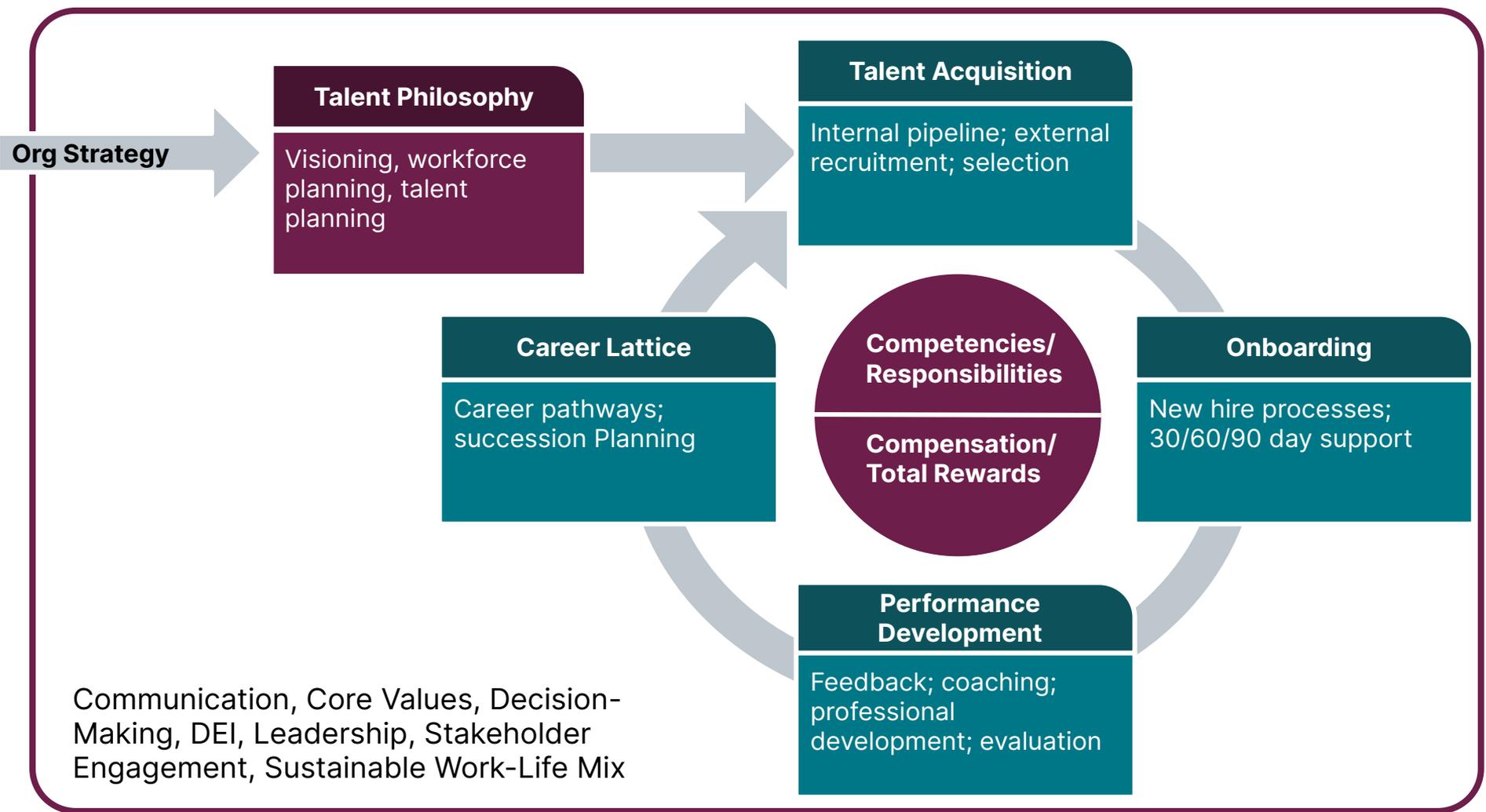
Some schools have a much higher share of inexperienced teachers than other schools within ACPS

Percent of Inexperienced Teachers by School
2021-2022



Source: Virginia School Quality Profiles; "inexperienced" defined here as having less than one year of classroom experience

ACPS staff described challenges within various stages of the the typical “talent lifecycle” (1 of 2)





ACPS staff described challenges within various stages of the the typical “talent lifecycle” (2 of 2)

Stage of Talent Life Cycle	Description
 <p data-bbox="349 448 678 486">Talent Philosophy</p>	<p data-bbox="1136 368 1514 401">Bold= challenges we heard</p> <ul data-bbox="726 429 1818 508" style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining clear school and school-support roles • Articulating a philosophy for attracting and retaining talent
 <p data-bbox="349 644 678 682">Talent Acquisition</p>	<ul data-bbox="726 605 1779 726" style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting leadership candidates • Recruiting a team that is reflective of the student body • Diversifying recruitment pipelines
 <p data-bbox="349 819 595 901">Performance Development</p>	<ul data-bbox="726 801 1812 922" style="list-style-type: none"> • Training, coaching, and supporting leaders and teachers • Developing inexperienced teachers and providing growth opportunities for experienced teachers
 <p data-bbox="349 1038 610 1076">Career Lattice</p>	<ul data-bbox="726 999 1785 1120" style="list-style-type: none"> • Retaining talented teachers both in the classroom and in administrative positions • Creating career pathways for paras and support staff
 <p data-bbox="349 1215 678 1296">Responsibilities & Total Rewards</p>	<ul data-bbox="726 1196 1740 1318" style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarifying roles, goals, and accountability systems • Setting a compensation ladder reflective of org values • Tying responsibilities to compensation



There is strong collaboration within many school teams; the partnership between schools and central office is less strong

Many staff value the support they get at school...

- **“The most helpful collaboration I get is from within our school team.** I think we have stronger resources at the school-level than the division-level.” (Teacher, MS)
- **“The professional development at this school is amazing...** I don’t think that looks the same at every school.” (Teacher, ES)
- **“I think the biggest support I get is from within our four walls.** I don’t feel that same support from above.” (Teacher, MS)

...and value their community and colleagues

- **“I enjoy working here, I enjoy the community.** Every staff member in this building is on the same mission.” (Teacher, MS)
- **“Our school leaders are amazing**—I really feel like they do an incredible job supporting us and building a healthy adult culture.” (Teacher, ES)
- Across 11 school visits, the Bellwether team consistently noted **strong adult-to-adult relationships, and strong adult-to-student relationships**

Fewer school staff expressed trust in the central office

- **“We don’t often see central office staff at the school,** and when they do come, they usually stay in the office.” (Teacher, ES)
- **“I don’t think central office understands what is going on in schools every day**—the awareness doesn’t seem to be there, and schools are a lot different than they were five years ago.” (Teacher, ES)
- **“Everyone knows that the central office only cares about test scores.** You can do whatever you want in your class as long as your test scores are good.” (Teacher, HS)



Stakeholders also see a need for great collaboration within Central Office, and more alignment across the Division

Leaders across the Division see work happening in silos...

- **“There are lots of silos within the central office...** I can’t think of any department that doesn’t exist within a silo.” (Leader, Central Office)
- **“We don’t collaborate... structurally, it is difficult to collaborate and at times we feel intentionally siloed.”** (Leader, Central Office)
- **“Collaboration across teams is inconsistent** and reliant on personal relationships.” (Leader, Central Office)
- **“The theme I’m hearing myself say is that we are all in silos.”** (School Leader, ES)

...which has resulted in a lack of alignment between some programs

- **“Programs the Division has rolled out do not speak to one another** and are not integrated.” (School Leader, ES)
- **“We need to bring the Office of Instruction and the Equity Office together** so that there is a cohesive framework for professional learning.” (School Leader, MS)
- **“We need more of a throughline from Every Student Thrives to CRT to Instruction to PD/Professional Learning—**we need a systems thinker.” (School Leader, ES)
- **“We need more alignment between** equity, instruction, curriculum, practices and then have the right PD and support.” (Leader, Central Office)

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



**Holistic Experiences of
Students of Color**



**Classroom Level Experiences of
Students of Color**



**Root Causes and
Recommendations**