



FINDING: STUDENTS BELIEVE RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPACTED BY STUDENT IDENTITY, THE PRESENCE (OR LACK) OF TRUST, AND A PERCEIVED BELIEF GAP.

DESCRIPTION

Across YPE projects, youth have identified that in many MPS schools, students believe **a student's racial/ethnic and gender identity can negatively affect their relationships with staff and peers.**

Staff

For example, Andersen's YPE team administered a survey to both students and staff, and found that African American students were more likely than their peers to say staff treat them differently than other students. One staff member commented, "I think a lot of our African American students are addressed differently than other ethnicity groups based on lack of cultural understanding, identity, relationships and knowledge" ([Andersen 2019](#)). That same survey also found that staff are more biased towards boys than they are with girls, especially when it comes to behavioral problems. One staff member said, "We police what girls wear more than boys, for example, or call out behavior in girls that we let go by in boys" ([Andersen 2019](#)).

Peers

Keewaydin's YPE team explored the role of racial identity in peer relationships. Their research found Keewaydin students of color feel stereotyped, and therefore less comfortable, at school. Thirty six percent of students of color surveyed identified that they hear other students at their school make racist jokes or comments a lot ([Keewaydin 2019](#)). One student shared that these jokes make them "feel like I am not allowed here" ([Keewaydin 2019](#)). In contrast, White students reported feeling they have better relationships with staff and receive more positive attention from staff than their peers.

"People think that I am ghetto or don't know anything when they first see me due to my skin color." Keewaydin 2019

A Sanford student defined a positive student-teacher relationship: **"They need to respect each other's values, they need to foster the students' curiosity, the teacher needs to know how to engage students and wrangle them in, a balance of interest and discipline."** Sanford 2019

Youth have also found current relationships need improvement because of a **lack of trust**, or mistrust of MPS staff and peers. For example, Sanford's YPE team found that trust was a theme for both students and staff. Students mainly spoke about a lack of trust while teachers spoke about the need for trust. When asked what they believe are the elements of a positive student-teacher relationship, one teacher said, "Students know when teachers are authentic - the best teachers have unconditional positive regard for students" ([Sanford 2019](#)). When asked what they believe can strain a student-teacher relationship, one student stated, "Lack of effort from students, lack of help from teachers" ([Sanford 2019](#)).

At Anthony, students who identified as Black or More than One Race were more likely to feel as though they could not trust their teachers (or share personal information about themselves). One student stated, "I feel like if I am having trouble with my feelings I am too scared to tell them" ([Anthony 2019](#)).

Finally, YPE projects have contended that **students need to see that adults at their school are invested in them and their learning.** Edison's YPE team concluded that student-teacher relationships are affected by power dynamics and

outside influences. One student commented on the importance of relationships with teachers, "If you have a bad relationship, it is harder to ask for help when you need it. If you have a good relationship, you can get positive help and it impacts your grade for the positive. When students feel respected, they feel comfortable talking about anything" ([Edison 2019](#)). Their project also concluded that an obstacle to strong relationships is classes and/or content that is not connected to students' lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Informed by their research, YPE teams have provided the following recommendations to improve relationships throughout MPS:

1. Host community circles, or other ways for MPS students and staff to learn more about one another, build trust, and better communicate.
2. Provide staff with professional development opportunities that focus on better supporting the student population at their school, and specifically addressing discrimination based on identities. Students need staff to interrupt racist or sexist language and jokes that negatively affect the learning environment.
3. Revise school behavior policies to ensure that students and staff can restore a relationship after conflict. This process should not interfere with a student's learning.
4. Ensure school is connected to 'real life;' this includes making curriculum more relevant to students' lives, focusing on students' emotional needs before their academic needs, and teachers sharing more about themselves and their lives.
5. Hire more staff of color, and in particular teachers of color.