WDMCS community education

2020 Community Needs Assessment

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Preparation of Report

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For More Information

For more information about the 2020 community needs assessment, visit the WDMCS Community Education website at https://commed.wdmcs.org/community/advisory-council/needs-assessment.

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Introduction

The mission of West Des Moines Community Schools (WDMCS) Community Education is to serve the needs of the community by connecting people, ideas, and resources. One strategy to achieve this mission is the coordination of a comprehensive community needs assessment every five years.

The needs assessment provides valuable insights into the strengths and emerging needs of the community it serves. The results of the needs assessment are used to guide and prioritize the work of WDMCS Community Education. They are also shared with other stakeholders and organizations who have a vested interest in the well-being of the community and its citizens.

For the purpose of this needs assessment, the community is defined as the geographical area served by the West Des Moines Community School district, which includes sections of Clive, Urbandale, West Des Moines, and Windsor Heights. School is defined as the West Des Moines Community School district, unless otherwise specified.

Method

A series of focus groups was coordinated by the Community Education Advisory Council (CEAC) to gather the input of students, parents, and community members over the course of eight weeks during February and March of 2020. In addition to the general groups of high school students, K-12 parents, and professionals in the community, there were four targeted focus groups to ensure representation of a variety of perspectives. The targeted focus groups included English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students, Spanish-speaking parents, Hakha Chin/Burmese-speaking parents, low income families, and school-based professionals.

Each focus group included 6-10 participants and was 75-90 minutes in length. Participants were identified and invited to participate in the focus groups based on recommendations from the CEAC and district staff members. This approach helped to ensure broad and diverse representation from the communities within the WDMCS boundaries.

Participants were asked the same central questions:

- – What makes our community a great place to live/go to school?
- – How welcoming and inclusive is our community?
- – What challenges or barriers do students/parents/people in our community experience?
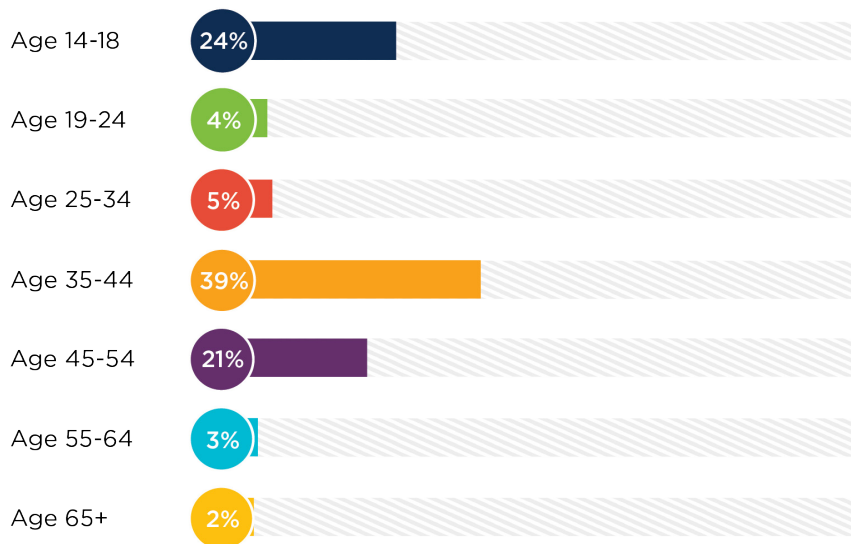- – What ideas/suggestions do you have to improve our community?

It should be noted that these focus groups were concluded immediately before the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic and prior to the death of George Floyd and subsequent growth of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Participant Demographics

The graphs on the following pages highlight the demographic information collected in the focus groups conducted for the community needs assessment. A total of 94 individuals participated; see below for notes regarding how recruitment processes may have impacted demographic data.

- Students, parents, and professionals were recruited to participate, which is reflected in the age demographics.
- While recruitment of was roughly balanced between genders, women participated at a much higher rate than men, especially within the different parent groups, which were almost entirely women.
- People of color are overrepresented compared to population demographics based on the decision to seek input from Burmese/Hakha Chin and Spanish speakers, as well as students in the English Speakers of Other Languages program.
- Most of the participants reside in the communities of the West Des Moines Community School District and the remaining 15% live outside of the District, but work in or serve these communities in their professional roles.
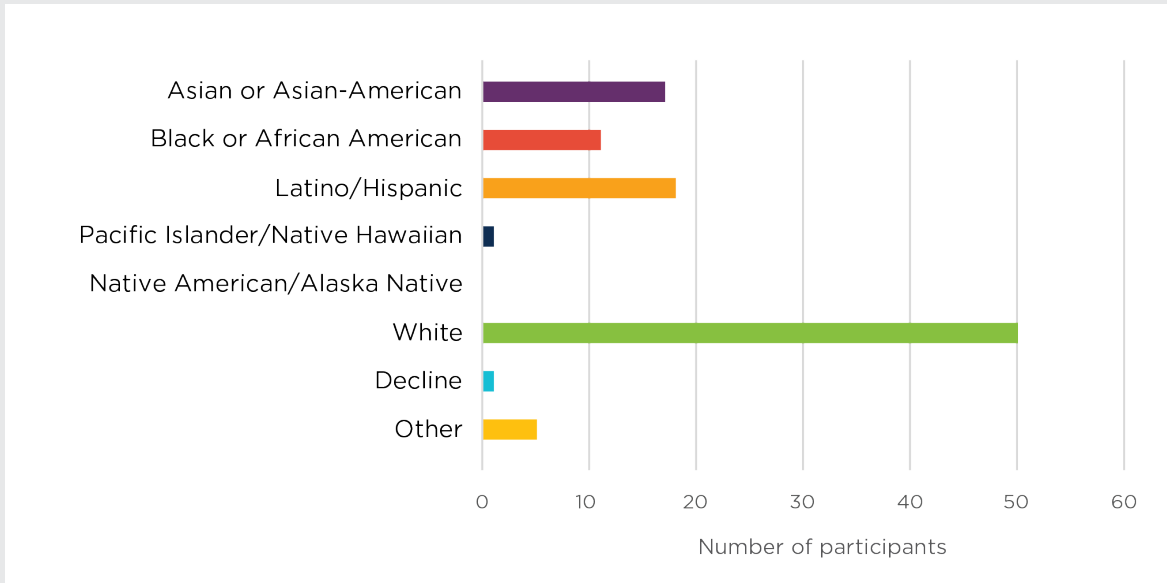
Participant Age

Age 14-18	24%
Age 19-24	4%
Age 25-34	5%
Age 35-44	39%
Age 45-54	21%
Age 55-64	3%
Age 65+	2%

Gender

Women	Men
75.5%	24.5%

Participant Race/Ethnicity

(Participants selected all that applied)

Category	Number of participants
Asian or Asian-American	~17
Black or African American	~11
Latino/Hispanic	~18
Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian	~1
Native American/Alaska Native	0
White	~50
Decline	~1
Other	~5

Number of participants: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60

Language Spoken at Home

(Participants selected all that applied)

English

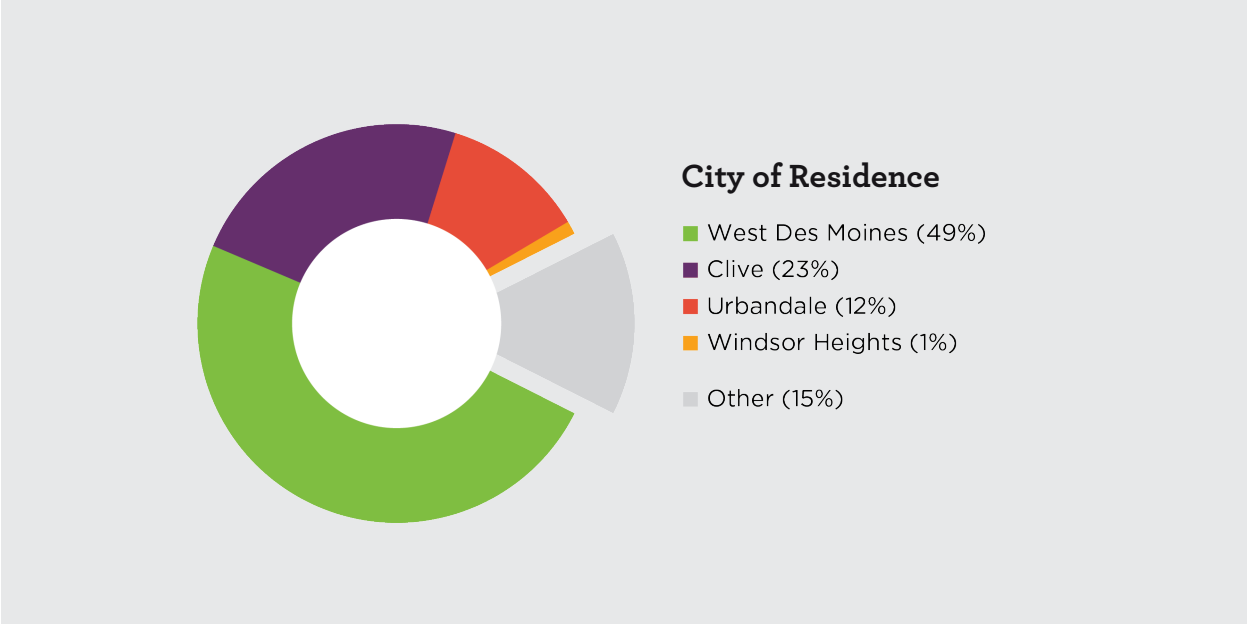Spanish

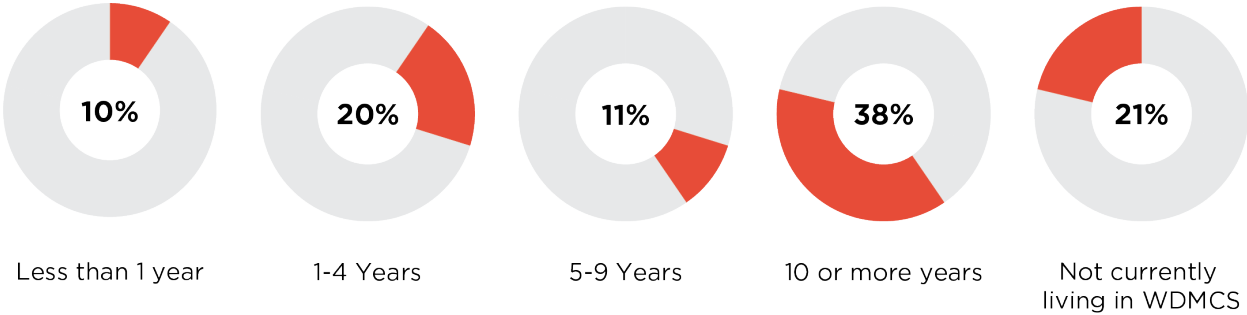Hahka Chin

Burmese

Arabic

Swahili

Hindi
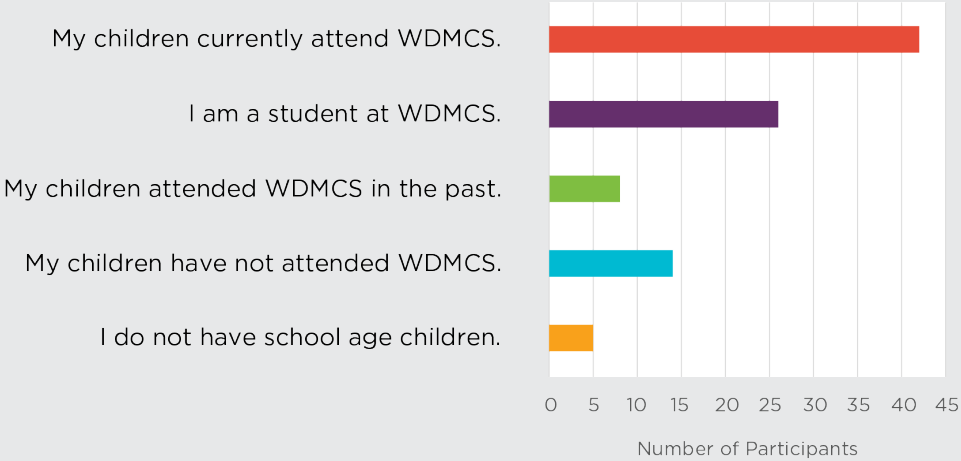
Nepali

Falam Chin

Other languages (compiled)

= 1 participant

City of Residence

- West Des Moines (49%)
- Clive (23%)
- Urbandale (12%)
- Windsor Heights (1%)
- Other (15%)

Length of Residence in West Des Moines Community School District

10% — Less than 1 year

20% — 1-4 Years

11% — 5-9 Years

38% — 10 or more years

21% — Not currently living in WDMCS

Participants' Relationship to West Des Moines Community Schools

- My children currently attend WDMCS.
- I am a student at WDMCS.
- My children attended WDMCS in the past.
- My children have not attended WDMCS.
- I do not have school age children.

Number of Participants

Overview of Strengths

There were eight main community strengths that emerged from the focus groups: Quality Schools, Opportunities, Safety, Small Town Atmosphere, Amenities, Collaboration, Diversity, and Human Services.

These themes are addressed in order based on the number of focus groups that identified them as a key strength of the community. Topics that only emerged in one or two focus groups are included in the respective focus groups summaries.

Quality Schools (7/8)

The high quality of WDMCS schools was a strength that emerged in nearly every focus group. Participants spoke of the positive reputation that the WDMCS District holds and the excellent education received by students. The racial and cultural diversity of the District was also highlighted as a strength.

Parents and community members recognized and valued the vast number of academic, extracurricular, and enrichment opportunities that are available to students. High school students appreciated the balance between academics, athletics, and the arts. Several specific programs and services were identified as especially strong, including alternative education, community education, English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), English classes for parents, family engagement coordinators, home school, and special education.

Opportunities (6/8)

Many focus groups spoke highly of the opportunities that are available in the community through the school district, parks and recreation, and other community organizations. Participants expressed that the number of opportunities they have access to in this community is far greater than the opportunities they would find elsewhere. Participants especially valued opportunities for youth in the areas of academics, athletics, enrichment, and recreation. There was also a shared sentiment that there is "something for everyone" in the community—that regardless of interest, there would be a place to fit and get involved.

Safety (5/8)

Safety was another theme that emerged in the majority of focus groups. It was often one of the first qualities that participants mentioned when they were asked what made the community a great place to live/go to school. Participants identified their schools, neighborhoods, and overall community as safe. A couple of the groups specifically tied their sense of safety to the presence of and positive relationships with law enforcement.

Small Town Atmosphere (4/8)

Half of the focus groups identified the small town atmosphere of the community as a strength. Participants valued feeling connected to and supported by their neighbors and other people within the community. They also enjoyed opportunities for community involvement and participating in community celebrations.

Finally, participants expressed appreciation that the community maintains a small town atmosphere, while offering the opportunities and amenities of a larger community.

Amenities (3/8)

Three of the focus groups spoke of the quality and accessibility of amenities in the community. They highlighted parks, trails, theaters, restaurants, libraries, and Valley Junction. Participants also appreciated having grocery stores, doctors, and pharmacies nearby. They spoke of the ease of being able to access various amenities due to their close proximity.

Collaboration (3/8)

The collaborative nature of the community surfaced as a strength among the community- and school-based professionals and student focus groups. People recognized and valued the working relationships that exist between the cities, schools, police departments, faith communities, business community, and community organizations. There was recognition that these entities work together for the betterment of others.

Diversity (3/8)

The racial and cultural diversity of the community was another positive attribute identified by the focus groups. Participants spoke of being attracted to the community or deciding to stay in the community because of this asset. Parents from multiple focus groups identified living in a diverse community as a positive experience and beneficial for their children.

Human Services (3/8)

Human service organizations in West Des Moines and Clive were elevated as key resources by the Burmese/Hakha Chin-speaking parents, low-income families, and school-based professionals. These organizations were seen as welcoming and supportive, and people expressed gratitude for the essential support that they provide for families.

Welcoming and Inclusion

Participants were specifically asked to rate how welcoming and inclusive they felt that the community/school was on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest. Overall, people rated the community and the school district on the higher end of the scale, recognizing that segments of the community are making intentional efforts to be very welcoming and inclusive. The focus groups identified schools, faith communities, human services, and ethnic-based community organizations as entities that were especially successful in their welcoming efforts. Many also acknowledged that welcoming and inclusion are still being done most effectively on an individual and organizational level, but that, systemically, there is a long way to go. As one participant declared, "Bureaucracy is not welcoming."

The lowest ratings occured in the focus groups that included school and community-based professionals. These participants were actively engaged in creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment, but their proximity also meant that they saw firsthand how much more work needed to be done, including more diverse representation in leadership roles.

These individuals also expressed frustration that many of the traditional systems existing in the community and schools are not welcoming and inclusive, though many individual people within these systems are.

The average rating among the parent groups ranged from 7.4 to 8.4. Many parents spoke of the positive experiences that they had feeling welcomed in the community or school, but some expressed concern that it might not be the same for everyone. Positive experiences with neighbors and schools had a large impact on the welcoming experience. Meanwhile, little to no interaction with neighbors and difficult school experiences had the opposite effect.

The average student ranking for welcoming and inclusion at the high school level was 7. Students stated that the high school environment was much better than that in junior high. They identified teachers and clubs who are very intentional in their efforts to be welcoming and inclusive. However, they also acknowledged that they frequently see students self-segregating by racial groups and also see students sitting alone at lunch. They were not sure if these were indicators of problems, or just choices students make.

The English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students gave the highest average rating of 9.5. These students spoke very positively about their experiences, including kind and helpful people and caring and supportive teachers. Most immigrant and refugee parents also spoke very highly of their experiences in the community and how welcoming and helpful people and organizations have been to them. However, they also identified times when they experienced prejudicial treatment based on their culture or language.

Compiled Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings
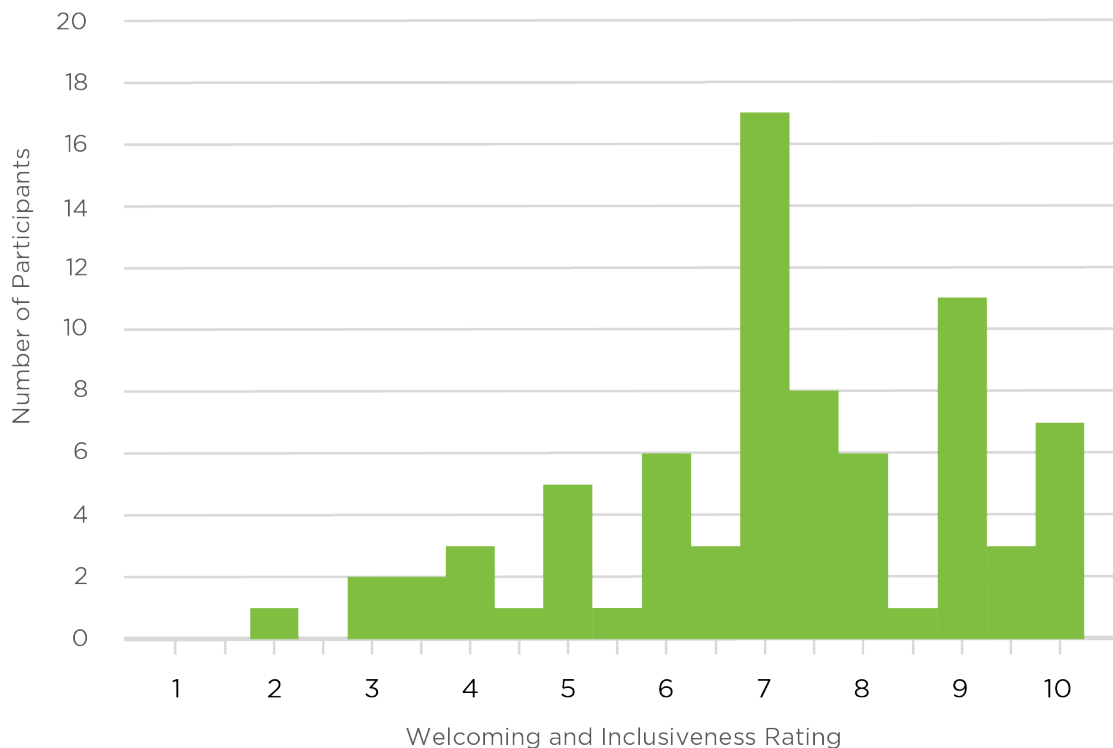
Overview of Challenges

There were seven main challenges or barriers that emerged from the focus groups: Access to Resources, Issues at School, Navigating Schools, Language and Cultural Barriers, Racism and Inequity, Financial Hardship, and Transportation. These themes are addressed in order based on the number of focus groups that identified them as a significant challenge or barrier for community members. Topics that only emerged in one or two focus groups are included in the respective focus groups summaries.

Access to Resources (6/8)

This theme emerged in most focus groups, although it was expressed slightly differently across groups. Participants identified a variety of resources, including programs and services, transportation, and physical resources, such as food and clothing. The key barriers to accessing resources were identified as awareness, time, and waiting lists.

Many expressed that the people most in need of resources are unaware of their availability. This was a particular concern for families with limited English proficiency. ESOL students also highlighted this information gap, specifically when it came to accessing college planning and scholarship information.

Participants also identified time constraints as a barrier to accessing resources, especially for low income families. These families might be required to take unpaid time off of work in order to access resources that are only available during standard business hours.

Finally, participants expressed concerns about waiting lists for critical services such as mental health care, housing, and respite care.

Issues At School (5/8)

Most of the focus groups identified concerns that were specific to the school environment. Participants identified a demand for schools to meet the increasing social/emotional needs of students, and the limited capacity of staff to do so. Several groups expressed concern about an increasing lack of order or discipline in the school and/or classroom. Bullying was another top concern identified by parents. They were worried about bullying behaviors specifically linked to race and socioeconomics, and were even more concerned about the lack of resolution from the school when incidents did occur.

The high school students spoke very passionately about their concerns regarding the school environment. They articulated both academic and social/emotional concerns that were specific to their experiences as students. Academic concerns were related to navigating opportunities, different learning styles, standards-based grading, and physical education. The social-emotional concerns included addressing difficult topics, student voice, mental health support, racism and inequity, lack of discipline, and the impact of social media.

Navigating Schools (4/8)

Navigating the school system was a challenge that emerged in half of the focus groups. Parents described several circumstances that were challenging, including having a new kindergarten student, being new to the community or District, dealing with language barriers, and having limited technology skills. Parents described feeling uninformed and overwhelmed in these situations. Students also expressed difficulty navigating the extensive academic opportunities that are available to them.

Language and Cultural Barriers (4/8)

Half of the focus groups identified language barriers as a challenge for many families, and it was a top concern identified by the language learners themselves. ESOL students and parents expressed the difficulty of learning a new language and how important communication is to them.

The dearth of interpreters, both within the school system and in the community at large, was also a concern, specifically when interacting with police and when kids were expected to interpret for their parents.

Participants also identified some cultural differences that can impact relationships with neighbors and the challenges that children can face when they engage in American culture at school and a different culture at home.

Racism and Inequity (4/8)

The topic of racism and/or inequity was discussed in half of the focus groups. Some of the participants from diverse linguistic backgrounds shared experiences of being confronted or treated rudely because of their limited English or for speaking another language. Students talked about racial incidents that have occurred at the high school and felt that the issues were not always addressed adequately. They also expressed that the teacher population should be more racially diverse and reflective of the student population. School-based staff also shared concerns about the underrepresentation of low-income and language-learner families and inequities that exist between school buildings.

Financial Hardship (3/8)

The theme of financial hardship was elevated in three of the focus groups, although different concepts were used to convey this issue. Some participants spoke of an increase in poverty among families, while others highlighted a lack of affordable housing, childcare, and youth activities. Lower-income participants discussed the challenges of not earning enough money to support their families, but earning too much to qualify for services.

Transportation (3/8)

Transportation was a concern that emerged in three of the focus groups. Parents identified transportation as a barrier to participation in youth activities. The Chin parents discussed how difficult it was to get a driver's license and to have access to a personal vehicle. While people acknowledged an overall improvement in public transportation, they also expressed concern in the availability and ease of use.

Ideas and Suggestions

As time allowed, participants were asked to share their ideas and suggestions to improve the community. Some of the ideas were shared through conversation, while others were submitted as written suggestions through a brainstorming activity. The ideas and suggestions were organized into the following categories:

Cultural and Community Events	Support for Parents	Systems and Infrastructure
Building Connections	Welcoming	Inclusion/Representations
Information Sharing	Out-of-School Time	Volunteerism
Recreation	Training	
Academic Support (students)	Social/Emotional Support (students)	

A more detailed list of the ideas and suggestions can be found in the third section of this report. The Community Education Advisory Council will analyze these suggestions, and form committees that will identify and implement project ideas through collaboration and community partnerships.

Conclusion

Participants value the quality of life they experience within the communities of the West Des Moines Community School district.

They expressed great appreciation for the high quality schools, safe environment, and extensive amenities and opportunities that are available.

Our community is making intentional efforts towards welcoming and inclusivity of diverse populations, though there is room for improvement on a systemic level.

The increasingly diversity of the community was identified as a positive attribute by residents. There appear to be segments of the community that are intentionally working to be welcoming to and inclusive of all community members. Most people could identify specific individuals and organizations that were very welcoming and inclusive. This is also an area for continued exploration and growth as participants could also readily identify concerns with the processes, systems, and unwritten rules that exist in the cities and schools and are not welcoming to newcomers.

Participants value high quality schools in WDMCS, but social/emotional concerns are increasing and navigating the system was a common challenge.

While high quality schools were the top strength that was identified among participants, parents and students also identified several social/emotional issues and concerns that often occur in school and may require additional resources, training, or partnerships to address. Additionally, navigating the school system was almost universally identified as a challenge by high school students, first-time parents, parents who moved from another school district, and families who came as immigrants or refugees. Many parents spoke of the value of having a knowledgeable friend or neighbor that could help them navigate the school years and multiple groups recommended a mentoring program to develop a support network for other parents.

While there are many available resources in the community, there are also barriers that prevent some residents from accessing those resources.

The community has many resources, services, and opportunities for students and families and these were highly valued among participants. However, there were a number of barriers that were shared that would prevent many residents from accessing these resources, including language barriers, time constraints, and transportation. One of the most significant barriers seemed to be an information gap between the organizations who have resources, services, and programs, and the people who could most benefit from them. Understanding and minimizing this information gap could be very beneficial to many residents.

Giving people a voice matters.

Participants in the focus groups expressed their sincere appreciation for being included in the needs assessment process and having the opportunity to share their perspectives, experiences, and concerns. Many people expressed, "We need to do more of this." That overwhelming sentiment reiterated the importance of giving people an opportunity to have a voice in our community and schools. It really matters to them. Engaging citizens in the process of identifying and addressing community needs and concerns has always been one of the cornerstones of community education, and today it seems even more essential than ever before.

Community-Based Professionals
Focus Group Summary

Description

This focus group included people who are engaged in the communities of the West Des Moines Community School District in a variety of professional or volunteer capacities, including health care, faith communities, human service organizations, law enforcement, and various non-profit and youth-serving organizations. Conversations were facilitated in four smaller focus groups of 8-10 people.

What makes our community a great place to live and work?

Amenities and Opportunities

Many people spoke of the great amenities in the community including parks, trails, playgrounds, theaters, and restaurants. People also identified a variety of community events and the Valley Junction area specifically. In addition to great amenities, participants valued the many opportunities that are provided through schools and community organizations.

> "Lots of great amenities"

> "Resources are plentiful, easy to access and affordable."

> "Lots of opportunities for the kids in the schools."

> "Experiences for different-abled are valued. Opportunities for whatever you are looking for."

Collaboration

The collaborative nature of the community was also highlighted by participants. They valued the positive working relationships between schools, organizations, law enforcement, faith communities, and cities.

> "We have relational connections and partnerships which work for the betterment of others."

> "West Des Moines police are involved in schools—programs, eating lunch with kids, positive connections, supervising football games, talking to kids."

> "Groups of all religions can work together to accomplish goals."

> "Entities who care and want to help people."

Diversity

Participants identified the increase in the diversity of residents as a positive attribute of the community.

> "Love the growth and diversity."

> "I have seen the increase in diversity as a great experience."

"When we moved here until now there is a huge difference in diversity in the district.

"More diverse communities—social, economic—people living together with diversity."

"Kids embrace the diversity and don't even think about it."

Forward Thinking

Participants also identified the community as being very intentional and thoughtful about planning and development efforts. They recognized their efforts to continually improve and remain relevant.

"Intentionality in the community—planning where things go."

"Positive intent in the work we are doing."

"Anything not being done is recognized and being improved, I think that's cool."

Quality Schools

Participants identified the positive reputation and high quality of schools as one of the factors that enhances the community.

"Families move from DMPS to WDM for schools. The education level is different and the resources are different."

"Schools—the commitment to education—staying on the forefront with the changing times."

"Excellent schools—top-tier district."

"Schools actually are phenomenal."

Safety

The overall safety of the community was also identified and valued by participants.

"WDM is safe overall. There is never an issue with kids walking to school, or kids walking in the dark."

"Neighborhoods are safe."

"Schools are safe."

Small Town Atmosphere

Participants spoke of the value of having all of the amenities of a larger community, while still having a small town atmosphere in regards to connectedness and people working together for the common good.

"Sense of connectedness in communities and neighborhoods"

"Small enough to raise a family with quality, but have large opportunities."

"West Des Moines has made an effort to preserve the small town feel."

"I'm amazed you can live in a big city and have the small town feel—you can run into someone you know everywhere."

"People come together, working to raise others up."

How welcoming and inclusive is our community?

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating, this group ranged from 2 to 9, with an average rating of 6.5. Participants could identify organizations in our community that are doing a very good job Including schools, faith organizations, human services, and ethnic based community organizations. Participants could also readily identify racially motivated incidents and acknowledged the community still has room for improvement.

> "It depends on the context. We do make significant efforts like ESL for non-English speakers, but we do not see diversity on community boards or in neighborhood associations."

> "Some schools are much better at building community than others."

> "Human rights is doing a great job pushing this idea along. We all need to be more intentional."

> "35 years ago, there was not much diversity in Clive. Now there are three black officers. Diversity in Clive is clicking along."

> "Systemically, we have a ways to go."

> "When we say welcoming as a resident, it's different for the low-income or newcomers. The bureaucracy is not welcoming. The assimilation is not welcoming."

> "If we could make it better for our African American community, I feel we could make it better for everyone."

Community Focus Group Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings

Welcoming and Inclusion Rating
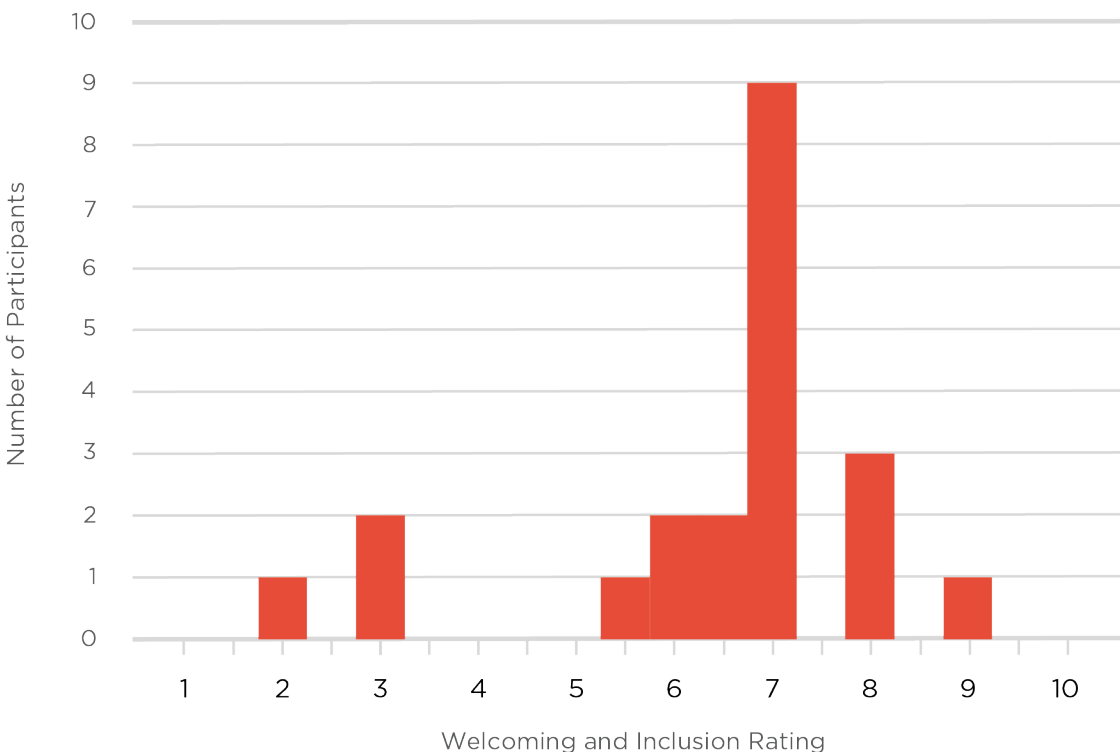
What challenges or barriers do people in our community face?

Access to Resources

The knowledge of and access to resources, by the people who need them most, was one concern identified by focus group participants.

> "There are a lot of great organizations out there, but they don't know of each other. The community doesn't know about them."

> "The people who need to know about you aren't the people who have internet at home and smartphones."

> "There is also nothing for mental health. We are good on [recruiting] business, but not human needs."

Financial Hardship

Participants identified a variety of issues related to low-socioeconomic status, including not receiving a livable wage, poverty, and the affordability of childcare, housing, and youth activities.

> "We have systemic barriers. We have a lack of affordable housing and we really haven't figured out what affordable means."

> "Workers are not paid a livable wage."

> "Childcare costs—assistance not available. It does not pay to work."

> "There are plenty of activities [for young people], but they cost too much money."

> "Economic diversity—rich vs. poor—lower income cannot keep up."

Image

Participants identified that some of the perceptions of West Des Moines and the western suburbs, while not accurate, are harmful to the community as a whole.

> "There's a perception that everyone in the suburbs is wealthy, but it's not true."

> "It's not all palm trees and BMWs"

> "WDM is usually defined by privilege with a lack of inclusivity."

> "Image of WDM as all white really hurts the district."

> "We are diverse and most people outside of WDM don't know that."

Lack of Connection

This idea surfaced in a variety of ways from the participants, including loneliness, isolation, and a lack of connection. Participants specifically acknowledged the negative impact on youth and the elderly population.

> "Loneliness is a problem for many, the elderly. There needs to be good places for people to really connect."

> "We have a lot going on, a lot to offer, but no one connects. There is plenty to do. It is awesome, but the disconnect is still there."

> "We have many school choices in our community...kids on the same street may go to different schools and don't really connect. They are all in their houses playing video games."

> "Isolation—older people, kids at home alone during summer."

Language and Cultural Barriers

Participants identified some of the unique challenges faced by the growing immigrant and refugee populations. Key challenges were related to language barriers and cultural differences.

"Language—need more interpreters in school and on patrol."

"Language barriers—that's becoming a bigger barrier in our community and I don't think we're prepared for that. "

"Kids have to interpret to conduct business."

"When I go to school, I spend 8 hours in American classroom. Then I go home and I'm expected to be Liberian. Kids struggle with that."

Navigating Cities and Schools

Learning how to navigate cities and schools was identified as a challenge for people who are less comfortable with technology, as well as for our immigrant and refugee populations.

"How do you navigate WDM? People are directed to a website for both city and school information. If you are not tech savvy, you struggle."

"Newcomer families to WDM and WDMCS high school struggle to even figure out how to get students into school."

"Initial contacts to navigate the system, [people] typically find "their own" and hope they had good advice."

"School was the last entity I felt comfortable engaging in. I didn't want to make a fool of myself."

"Everything is being put in the computer. Infinite campus, canvas. Parents don't know how to read and write. Think about that whole other layer...People who speak English already have a hard time."

Transportation

Transportation was a barrier that was identified for older adults and as an obstacle for youth participation in community activities.

"Transportation, that's a problem for older people. It's not all that friendly."

"A kid wants to participate, but they can't because they don't have transportation after school."

"Public transportation—it's getting better, but a long way to go."

School-Based Professionals
Focus Group Summary

Description

This focus group included professionals who directly serve the students and families of West Des Moines Community Schools in their roles as guidance counselors, behavior interventionists, family engagement coordinators or through the Youth Justice Initiative.

What makes our community a great place to live and work?

Opportunities

Participants identified many opportunities that students have in our community, offered through the schools, Community Education, and Parks and Recreation.

> "There are a lot of opportunities for kids....clubs, things to do, a place to fit."

> "Throughout the summer there are many different enrichment opportunities and activities that are offered for kids."

Quality Schools

Participants identified that teachers and staff in WDMCS are very dedicated and strive to build positive relationships and serve the increasing needs of their students. Specific program areas that were mentioned included special education, alternative education, and family engagement coordinators.

> "The caliber of teachers here is excellent...The people are great and willing to go above and beyond for their students and colleagues."

> "We see a need and we really care. People support each other. The human element is strong."

> "We are very intentional about it [building relationships]. And our surveys show that our students believe that there is a caring adult at school for them.

> "The special needs programming in WDM is very strong. Families will open enroll, transfer, or move to be part of it."

Collaboration

Participants spoke of the collaborative nature of our community, including the schools, police departments, Youth Justice Initiative (YJI), churches, and human service organizations working together to meet the needs of students and their families.

> "There is a lot of collaboration between YJI and the schools. That is a really neat part of working in this community."

> "The schools and community support YJI and help us be more effective."

> "Hillside [Elementary School] relocated to Lutheran Church of Hope when there was a mold issue. They accommodated 600 students for over three months."

Human Services

Participants acknowledged the value of the human service organizations and faith communities that support our students and their families with essential resources.

"West Des Moines Human Services and Clive Community Services are excellent resources."

"Booster Pak is fabulous for our students."

"We also have a strong faith-based community and our churches are partners and provide a lot for our families."

How welcoming and inclusive is our community?

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating, this group ranged from 3.5 to 6 for the overall community, with an average rating of 4.5. They also rated the school district independently, with a range of 5 to 7, with an average ranking of 6.

Even though participants gave the school district a higher rating than the overall community, they were disappointed with the result. Participants expressed the following:
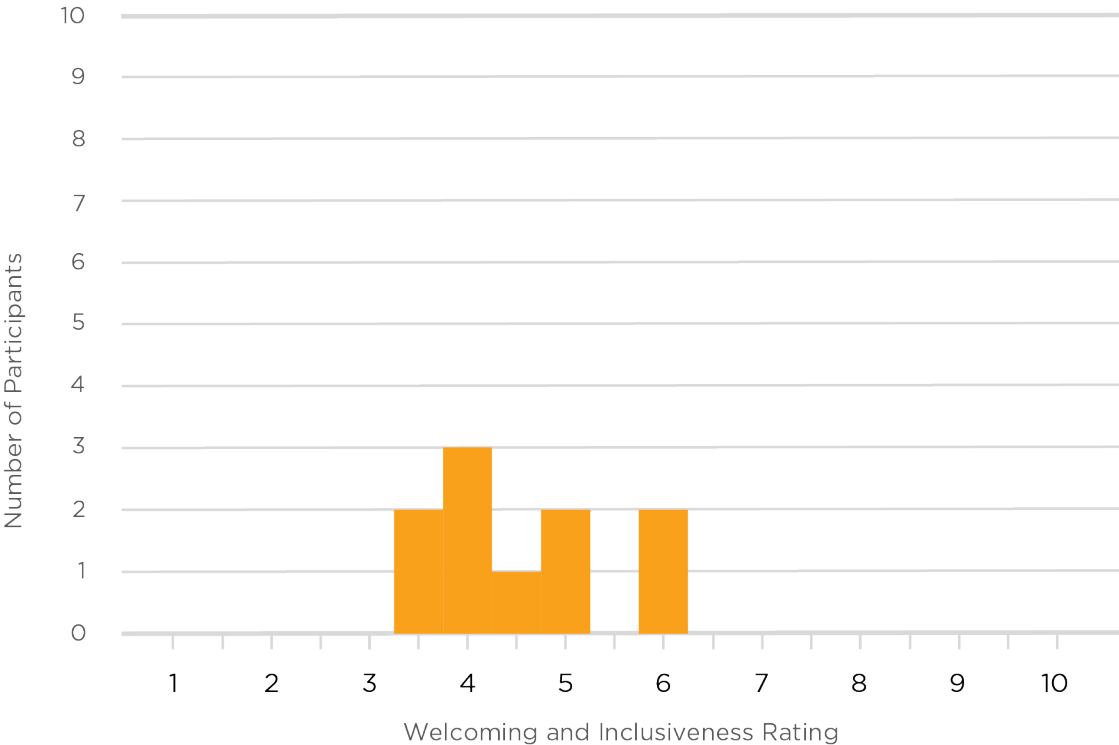
"And [the fact that we're rating it so low] sucks, because we work really hard on this."

"That's true, but addressing it from a system lens is really tough."

"On an individual level we are very welcoming, but when we look at the system, it's not."

School-Based Professionals Focus Group Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings

Ratings for the Overall Community

X-axis: Welcoming and Inclusiveness Rating
Y-axis: Number of Participants

School-Based Professionals Focus Group
Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings

Ratings for the WDMCS District
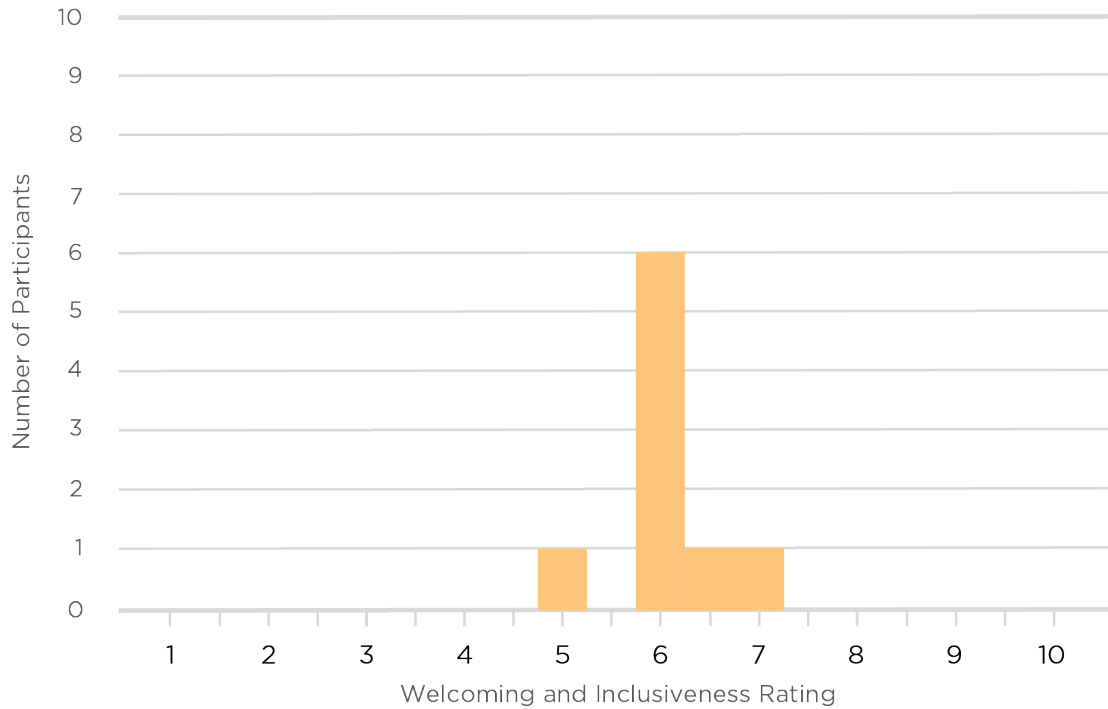
What challenges or barriers do people in our community face?

Access to Resources/Financial Hardship

Poverty and mental health were identified as significant challenges faced by families in the WDMCS district. Participants also expressed concern about the availability and timeliness of services that these families desperately need.

> "Poverty and mental health are huge. People are on waiting lists and need those supports."

> "Some community resources—housing, respite, therapists, have extensive waiting lists."

> "Poverty is a huge factor for most families I serve. Many homeless this year. And mental health."

Issues At School

As school-based professionals, participants shared a number of concerns specific to West Des Moines Community Schools. Concerns were related to limited staffing to serve the increasing needs of students and their families, and issues of equity.

Capacity to Meet Increasing Needs

> "We are all stretched pretty thin and putting out fires."

> "We need more counselors, therapists, behavior interventionists, and family engagement coordinators to meet the needs of our families."

Inequity

"WDMCS needs to look at equity across buildings. It isn't fair across buildings with resources… Parent groups and fundraising—it's great that parents do it, but it's not equitable."

"The people with money and means make the most noise, but our other families don't advocate for themselves."

"The squeaky wheel gets the oil in this District. It's a concern."

"The voice that is most underrepresented are the ones who are transient, and that is many of our ESOL families."

"When home-based buildings are full, they [students] get shipped somewhere else. It impacts our most needy families the most."

Parent Focus Group Summary

Description

This focus group consisted of parents of students in West Des Moines Community Schools (WDMCS). The parents represented a diverse range of ages and racial and ethnic backgrounds. Collectively, their children spanned a range of grade levels and attended many different schools within WDMCS, including the home school program.

What makes our community a great place to live and work?

Quality Schools

Parents identified several factors that impressed them about the West Des Moines Community School district. Diversity was something that attracted focus group participants to WDMCS, and they felt that it benefited their children. They were also impressed with the breadth and quality of extracurricular and enrichment programs, as well as the different avenues for learning that are available. The welcoming and caring nature of the staff was also highlighted.

Diversity

"We were impressed by how diverse (our son went to Crestview) the district is…"

"…the diversity in the WDM area, culturally, artistically, and personally my son does go to Hillside and the school does a great job with inclusivity. They include everyone and my son has grown up to respect other people."

"…because of the diversity in the district, we thought it would be better to stay here."

Opportunities

"We were impressed by… how rich the arts program was." (discussing the orchestra program)

"Summer program—Kids West is wonderful, it makes it easy to be a parent."

"The home school program is phenomenal."

"I chose to move into the district…because I saw all the opportunities at the high school… You can find something no matter your interests."

Welcoming

"I always felt like they care about parents having the resources we need to be great parents. That caring, the teachers care, the love and friendly vibes going on."

"When the opportunity came for us to move, it was so welcoming right away. We were so happy to move into the school district.

Small Town Atmosphere

Focus group participants described the atmosphere of the community as friendly and welcoming. They appreciated having parks and other amenities close by and indicated that this is the type of community that they want to live in.

> "Every time I walk out of my house, everyone comes over and is like, 'hi!' We felt very welcomed…I got used to it. Coming from where we were before, I had no idea what community meant."

> "We're now encouraging our friends to move to West Des Moines and Clive, this is what a city should feel like, at least for us. Everything is close by, there are parks, there are places to meet people. It makes people more friendly and welcoming"

> "We love that everything we need is really close by. If we want something fun, it's really close by. We can walk or bike. We feel more invested now because there's so many opportunities. That feeling of being in an urban environment, but everything is so close by, so it feels like a small town as well."

Opportunities

Participants valued the amount of activities, events, and opportunities that are available to kids and families through the schools and communities at-large.

> "I just feel like you can't turn around without finding something to get involved in. I just feel like there are so many avenues, whether the school district or the city, there are a lot of resources to be as involved as you want to be."

> "I think that it makes me feel welcome because there are a lot of different kinds of things to do, at the library, city events for families, Valley Junction has super diverse events that run the gamut of things to do…"

> "The other things that have been a blessing are other programs, summer, things to keep them busy outside of school."

On a scale of 1-10, how welcoming and inclusive is our community?

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating, this group ranged from 5 to 9, with an average rating of 8. Participants felt positively about their own experiences in the community, but they were concerned that the community may not feel welcoming to everyone. Many could identify intentional efforts by their neighbors to be welcoming and inclusive.

> "I'd definitely say a 9, but maybe the people who don't feel this way are not represented for this question."

> "We have pockets where we do really, really well, but they're just pockets, but it's not a whole systemic thing. I don't think the recognition is there that we need to make a systemic change."

> "When we moved into our house, people left a map that showed where all the neighbors were by name."

> "I feel like when I am acknowledged and even like, someone noticed me, it makes a huge difference in feeling like I'm part of a community."

Parent Focus Group Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings*
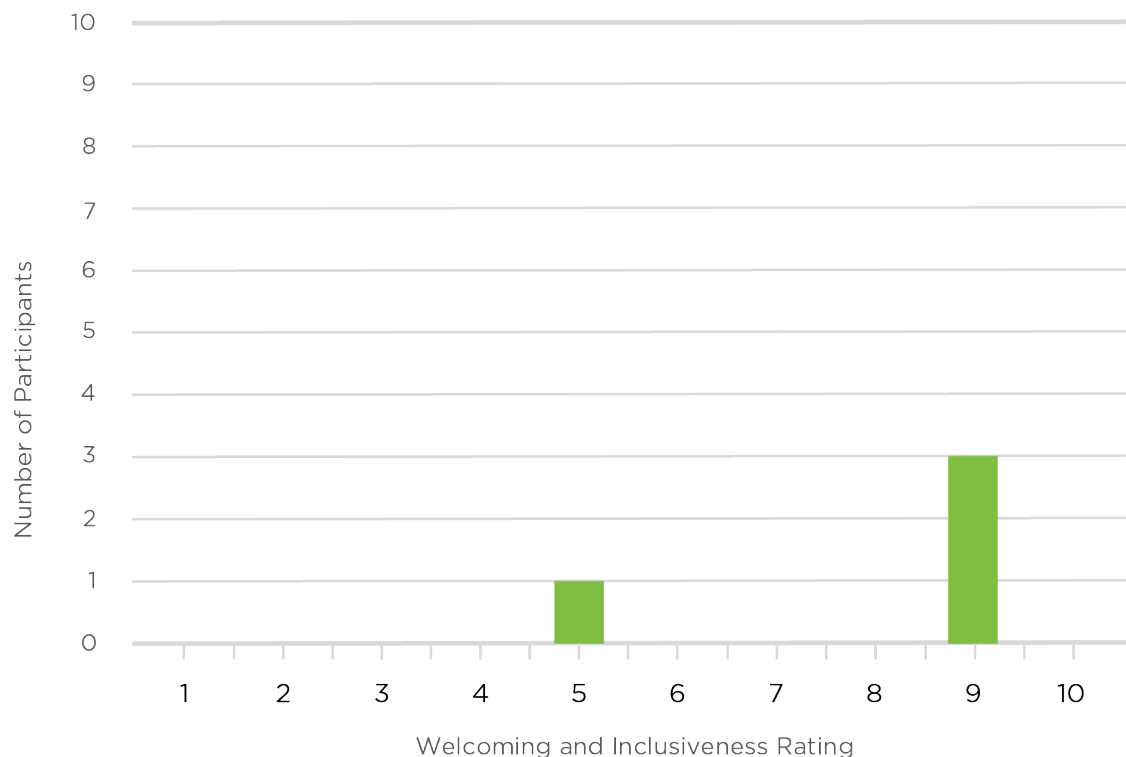
*Not all focus group participants responded with a numbered rating.

What challenges or barriers do people in our community face?

Transportation

The discussion about transportation revolved around the challenges of finding transportation for participants' children and/or students. Focus group participants were concerned that students miss out on before- or after-school and summer activities due to lack of transportation.

> "There isn't any coordination for transporting kids."

> "There's not transportation out to DMACC. If there was a way to connect those key places, I think there would be more involvement."

> "I've always looked for those programs that are almost full day, but then you still need to pick them up."

> "There's a lot of opportunities for orchestra or band, [and] in elementary that happens before or after school [so kids might not be able to attend without transportation]."

Navigating Schools

Participants in the focus group shared that navigating WDMCS could be frustrating, especially for parents who are new to the district and those who are new to the country. They expressed that communication about events and resources can sometimes be lacking. Technology was another point of difficulty, as some parents struggled to use the district's online systems.

> "There's still an element of 'everyone knows how this works'...People expect you to just know this stuff."

> "I don't have many mom friends [in Iowa]. I didn't know how to start my kid in kindergarten."

> "I'm technologically challenged. The district is so high tech that sometimes we lose touch. The technology is a challenge."

> "There's a lot of people who are from other cultures who might not seek that communication, they might not know how to navigate the system. I know to fight for my kid's success."

> "There's a huge community of African immigrants in the community, and I feel like it's hard for them to know what's next...There's a huge emphasis on Spanish, and that's great...but there are other communities that feel like they're outside looking in."

Hakha Chin/Burmese-Speakers Focus Group Summary

Description

This focus group included Hakha Chin- and Burmese-speaking parents from Crestview School of Inquiry, plus two interpreters from West Des Moines Community Schools. Most of the participants were relatively new to the community, ranging from less than one year to four years. Many of the quotes included in the summary below were expressed through the interpreters.

What makes our community a great place to live and work?

Quality Schools

For this group, Crestview School of Inquiry (Crestview) plays a central role in the way they experience the community, and they spoke very positively about the way the school has made them feel welcomed. It is where they send their children to school, but it is also where they go for programming, resources, and to connect with other members of the Chin community.

> "When we don't speak [English] at the school they try to find an interpreter…"

Opportunities

Participants expressed a strong desire to continue programming for linguistically and culturally diverse families at Crestview.

> "A very, very good program that we have here—the ESL program, the learning program— for parents."

> "…they would like to continue to have this ESL program here every Thursday."

Human Services

After Crestview, Clive Community Services was mentioned the most frequently as a place where Chin- and Burmese-speaking parents felt welcome and went for resources. Other places that were mentioned included the library and the food stamp office.

> "Clive Community is really good here because they have a lot of resources to get free"

> "The community is very helpful though we don't speak the language, they say, you can go here, you can get help, you can get the resources."

Small Town Atmosphere

There is a concentration of people from the Chin community living in the area served by Crestview, and the focus group participants spoke positively about being so geographically close to others from the same cultural background.

> "This area, the good things are a lot of Chin community, we don't speak English we can talk to each other and ask each other, and the park, we don't have to drive."

> "…[a] community who speaks the same language and has each other."

How welcoming and inclusive is our community?

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating, this group ranged from 7 to 10 for the overall community, with an average ranking of 8.3. Their school (Crestview) was mentioned multiple times as a place that does a "good job of making you feel welcome." Also mentioned were Clive Community Services, the food stamp offices, their church, and the public library.

Hakha Chin/Burmese-Speakers Focus Group
Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings
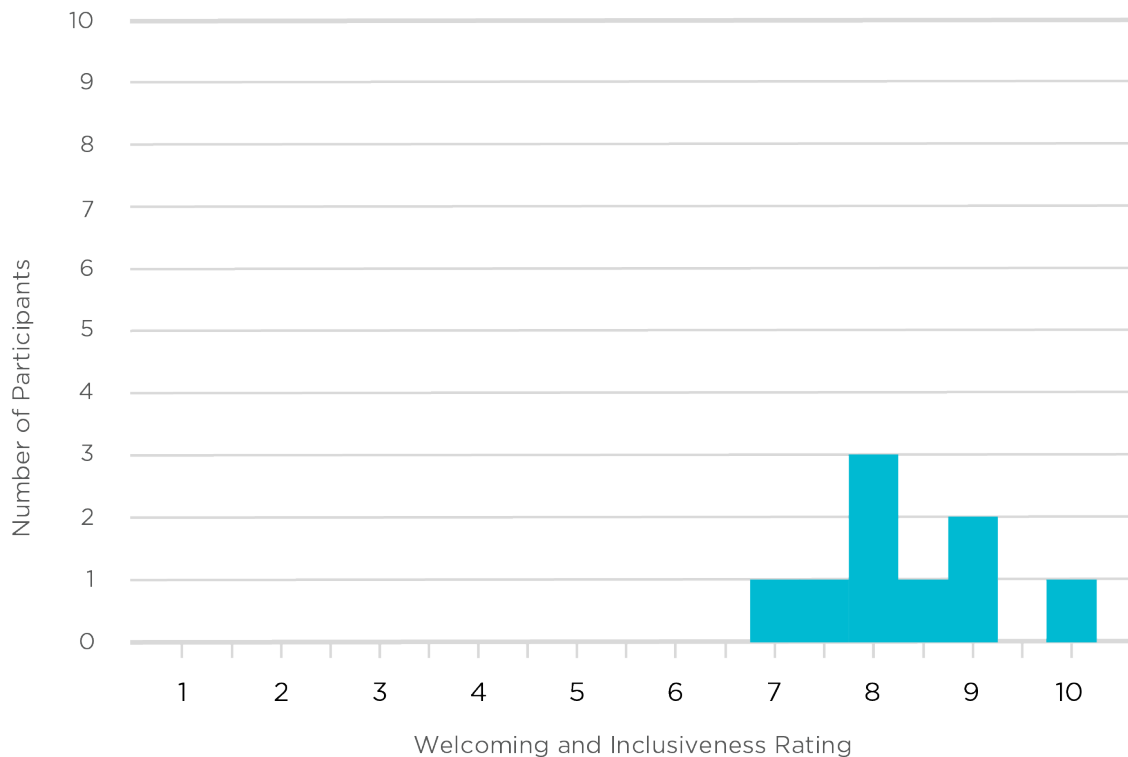
What challenges or barriers do people in our community face?

Language Barriers

The language barrier was mentioned multiple times in conversation as a challenge this group faces. Participants were frustrated by difficulties in communicating with the police, in particular, when an interpreter was not available. Likewise, receiving written communications posed a challenge because families would need to find time and transportation to visit an interpreter.

> "Sometimes very difficult, when they try to reach the police, sometimes they don't have an interpreter."

> "The first thing is the letter, new to the language, they have to go to the interpreter, it's difficult to go to the interpreter every time we get a letter."

Transportation

Focus group participants mentioned the process of getting a learner's permit and driver's license as a particular challenge. It seemed that navigating the system, and having access to a vehicle, were the primary issues, versus the act of driving itself.

"We're talking about the learner's permit—driving."

"The first time, driving is very difficult, very challenging…"

"When we have only one car, the husband will take it."

"There's a time with learner's permit, it's difficult…"

Racism

While the word "racism" wasn't specifically used, focus group participants discussed situations where they encountered negative attitudes or treatment, especially in response to language struggles. Participants mentioned being talked down to by staff members at offices or organizations they needed to visit.

"Some places, like the clinic, the nurse or secretary, sometimes they just show up with a bad mood."

"She saying that when they go to fingerprints that the office at USCIS when sometimes the security, they're crazy because they try to communicate and they can't communicate very well, they say badly in a very negative way, 'Tell your family,' 'Tell your children.' It's rude, it's a very negative way of react."

"We were there last time, and my aunt didn't cover her mouth, and the security said 'Cover your mouth, you'll give people your germs. Cover your mouth, you learn it in preschool.'"

Access to Programs

Focus group participants wanted more enrichment programming options for their children at school.

"Sometimes they send the letter, do you want your child in after school program, but now it seems like there's no after school program."

Issues At School

Focus group participants were concerned about the physical safety of their children at school, specifically in regards to behavior in the parking lot and near the road. They expressed a desire to see the school do more to encourage caution. Participants were also concerned about students waiting outside in the cold before the school doors opened for the day.

"She wants to have a security here, somebody…Sometimes the kids, after school when school gets dismissed, the kids are running, it's not safe, if there was security here, kids might be more cautious."

"…they used to wait in the vestibule until the bell rang, but now they have to wait outside, and it's a long time to wait in the cold even if it's only a couple minutes."

Descriptions

This focus group included Spanish-speaking parents of students in the WDMCS district and two family liaisons. Most of the participants in the group were bilingual and had lived in the community for many years.

What makes our community a great place to live and work?

Safety

The word "safe" came up many times in the conversation, and it was the first descriptor that participants used to describe the community. They also spoke about positive interactions with law enforcement.

> "I feel really safe here. I leave my car unlocked sometimes."

> "I feel that we are lucky to have an understanding police department."

> "I work in a daycare, one if the kids' dads works in the police department. He is very nice and always says we are welcome and we can call and don't need to be afraid."

> "When it comes to the police, they are more understanding when it comes to the Hispanic community."

Quality Schools

Participants spoke of West Des Moines Community Schools, in general, as a community asset. Specific schools and programs within the schools or school system were spoken of in greater detail, as strong positives. The programs discussed were those specific to English Language Learners: ESL programs, sheltered classrooms, and the newcomer program at certain schools.

> "...I won't move my kids from West Des Moines Schools. I had really good experiences with the schools for my kids and as a kid in school myself....I'm grateful for the ESL teachers because they changed my life."

> "...the newcomer program is just great. They go to Valley Southwoods for ESL and Lang and Lit, it's a sheltered class, the ESL teacher is in the classroom, all students are at the same level so it's friendlier."

Diversity

Participants appreciated the racial and cultural diversity of the community. One participant expressed that this is part of the reason they continue to live in the area. Others said they enjoy the opportunity to connect with people from other cultures.

> "Diversity was a big thing for me....it was like a huge thing, that's the reason we've stayed."

> "My new neighbors are straight from Africa, you hear the accent and see the clothes, and it's really cool to see another culture."

> "I think when you talk to someone from another county, it's like you have a connection"

Opportunities

Participants identified that there are many opportunities available to them and their families.

"What I love is that we get a lot of opportunities, you just have to know the resources..."

"My kids have more opportunities here. Now I see why my parents brought me here."

On a scale of 1-10, how welcoming and inclusive is our community?

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating, this group ranged from 6 to 10, with an average rating of 8.4. While participants provided positive ratings overall, they described both positive and negative experiences in the community.

"People in West Des Moines are very nice people, very approachable."

"When I came here, I didn't know anyone. I was 13. I didn't know English. The teachers were great when I started school, some of the kids were great, some weren't even though they were Spanish. They used to make fun of the fact that I had a thick accent."

"I don't know the difference between married to a Latino or being married to an American—you maybe understand the culture more because you have it at home. This is my husband's culture, his family, his community, and he feels the same way about mine. It's amazing for both of us, we have the best of the best."

"She was told that people in that neighborhood tend to welcome new neighbors, but that hasn't really happened in the two years they've lived there."

"With us being outsiders, there's always going to be the question of 'would they do that to anyone, or is it just because of me?' It's always a question."

Spanish-Speakers Focus Group Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings*
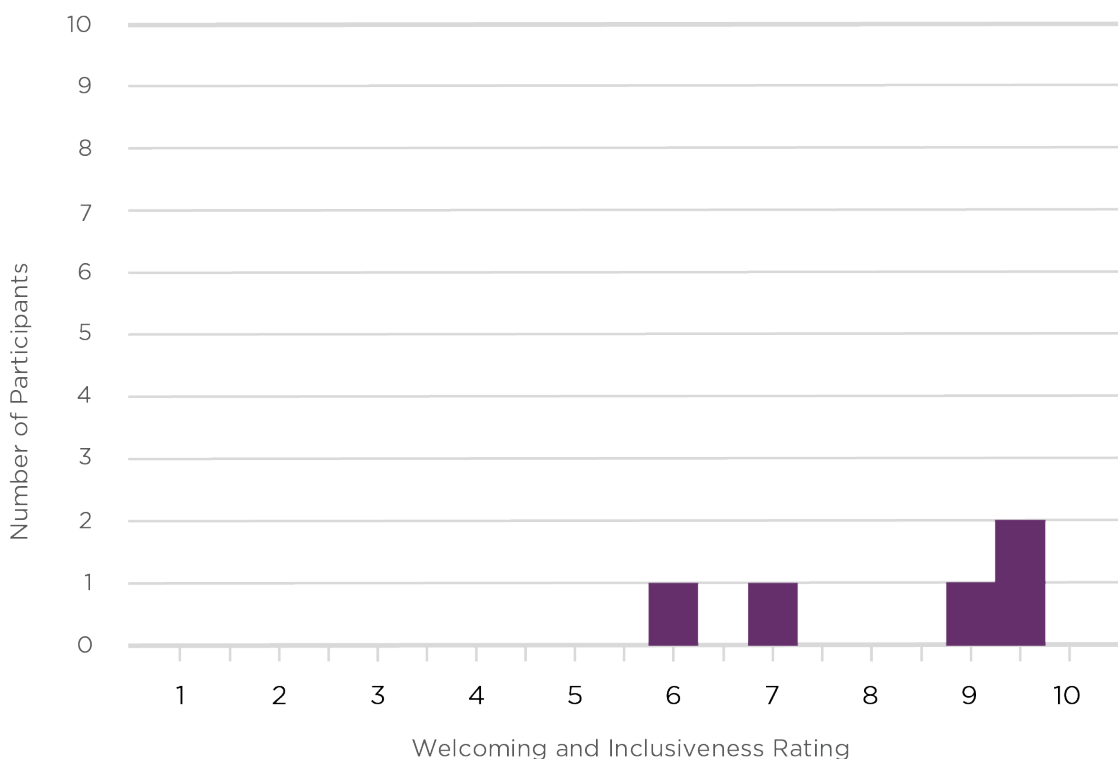
*Not all focus group participants responded with a numbered rating.

What challenges or barriers do you or your families face?

Racism

The subject of racism was the most frequently discussed challenge in the focus group. Participants spoke of experiencing racism or prejudice on a situational level, as a common experience that would be part of living in any community. Participants also discussed racism and prejudice in the context of the political climate.

> "...sometimes I have issues depending on the part I have lived in when it comes to racism. I've had both good and bad neighbors."

> Participant 1: "I've had bad experiences as well, being Latina." Participant 2: "You're going to find people like that everywhere."

> "I don't want to say everything is about racism, but it's real."

> "I don't want to bring up politics, but... the minute the president was elected, I've never felt like I feel now. I'm afraid to speak [in Spanish] in the store because I'm worried about confrontation in the store, that my kids will be there and see and feel ashamed."

> "I have a few issues now with my kids, like when the new president came, it kind of affected them, especially my oldest."

Language and Cultural Barriers

Participants shared some of the challenges that they and their children have experienced as a result of cultural differences and learning/speaking different languages.

> "When I got here, I didn't speak the language, didn't know anything about the culture until someone taught me about the rules."

> "We struggled a lot in the community, we lived in an apartment, our neighbors didn't like it because we were loud, it was just the way we are in our culture."

> "I'm a Latino living in the United States. It can be hard to combine cultures, but I think the neighborhood where I live, the kids and families are very nice people."

> "We have a lot of families where the kids don't speak any Spanish. They speak English to the mom who doesn't speak English, and the mom speaks Spanish to them, even though they can't speak Spanish."

> "[My child says,] 'I don't need Spanish, mom, I live in the US.'"

Access to Resources

While participants spoke positively about the resources available in the community, they said these resources can be difficult to access, especially for those who do not speak fluent English. Participants expressed concern that those who need the resources might not know those resources exist, and therefore, do not ask for them.

> "A lot of times [resources are] there. A lot of times our community (Latinos) don't always know where or how to find them."

> "I volunteer at Jordan Creek school and everyone loves our community, but they really don't know how to use those resources. They'll ask me, I say we have this and this and this, and they have no idea... It's always the same, they really have no idea what's out there for them."

> "You can't ask a question if you don't know it's a possibility."

Issues in Schools

Participants shared a few challenges related specifically to the school environment. They expressed concerns about bullying behaviors and the lack of communication and resolution when incidents occured. They also worried about a lack of order in classrooms and a disrupted learning environment for their children. Finally, they shared challenges related to school-based communication and the language barrier.

Bullying

"My oldest was bullied in first grade. I talked to the teacher and principal. They said they would look into it, but nothing ever happened."

"I said to my kids, if you need to fight back, you're not going to get into trouble at home, because the teachers aren't doing anything."

"Improvement of safety inside the school would help us as parents. When things like [bullying] happen, you question whether your kids are safe."

Lack of Order

"It's like they're losing it, teachers and/or parents don't know how to control."

"It's almost like the kids are in control of the teachers."

"The class has to go out in the middle of class because one kid was destroying the classroom. I've seen it. I don't want to go to this school anymore."

Communication and Support

"Translating isn't helpful, interpreting is helpful."

"There's a lot of vocabulary that parents don't understand. Sometimes kids don't give papers to the parents."

"They give us a lot of information in our own languages, but we don't understand what it means."

"As a parent, having kids in school, it's hard to have the right information about how to help your kid. When they send the homework home, what I learned to teaching them now, it's a whole different thing. At conferences, I wonder how can I help my kid—I feel like it's hard even though I know the language. With the oldest, everything is on the computer, and I don't know. I say, tell your teacher I tried to help you."

Low-Income Focus Group Summary

Description

This focus group was made up of individuals invited by the staff at West Des Moines Human Services. All of the individuals utilized the resources offered by WDM Human Services, and all were parents or guardians of students in West Des Moines Community Schools. The group included both new and long-term residents.

What makes our community a great place to live and work?

Amenities/Convenience

Focus group participants identified many amenities and free opportunities that they value. They also emphasized the convenience of these amenities and the ability to get around as significant positives of living in the West Des Moines area. They are able to get most of their needs met by businesses, organizations, or activities within the community, which are accessible via a short drive or even walking.

> "I like everything, really. Especially the Valley Junction, there's a lot of things to do, walk around. There's a school close to us, the shopping. I don't have a car. I can walk to the Hy-Vee, the Walgreens, the Fareway."

> "Doctors, everything we need. Specialists. We can stay in West Des Moines."

> "I always try to find the free activities. Illumafest, trick or treating at the community center, free fishing weekend…I feel like there are a lot of free activities."

Small Town Atmosphere

This focus group spoke very positively about the community at large. They appreciated opportunities for involvement, the preservation of Valley Junction, and that the community does not encounter the depth of issues that larger cities may experience.

> "The community, they like community involvement. There's things for everybody. They have activities and different celebrations, different supports for every age, every background, every gender."

> "It's a nice balance and mix of the old and the new. The historic sites and Valley Junction and people preserving those sites, then you have Valley Junction and the new."

> "When you compare it to cities like, raising kids, there's violence, domestic violence, gun shootings, here, everyone is like one family. People see each other like a family. New to Iowa also. Unique environment."

> "I believe that West Des Moines is blessed because even though it's part of Polk County, it's still West Des Moines, so there's more of a handle on things."

Human Services

West Des Moines Human Services was discussed as an excellent community resource and a key support in the lives of these focus group participants.

> "…if not for this community and WDM Human Services, I wouldn't be able to keep the [grand] kids with me."

> "I ended up fostering three grandchildren unexpectedly, so I've really seen the support from WDM and WDM Human Services."

> "I was separated from my family coming from Bosnia. I came here and talked to WDM Human Services and they gave me opportunities. I can't thank them a lot."

How welcoming and inclusive is our community?

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating, this group ranged from 5 to 10, with an average rating of 7.4.

> "when I was arrived here, I was Catholic, I went to Sacred Heart—everyone was Black African, they even wanted to give me accommodation, provided school for our children…People are so welcoming, from little bit, always giving me gift cards to go shopping. They were the ones to introduce me to WDM Community Services. It's a fabulous community, it's so welcoming."

> "I have such good neighbors and such good relationships with people…That's where they give me any love that I need. If I need any help, they give it. Very, very welcoming."

> "Like I expressed before, the whole fact of the school system, that's been a battle since the beginning…When we moved to WDM, we moved to an apartment complex, you'd think that living with more high-to-do families they would be more welcoming, but that's not true."

> "I want you to know, too, that I've overwhelmingly been welcomed in West Des Moines, but I worry about others."

Low Income Focus Group Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings
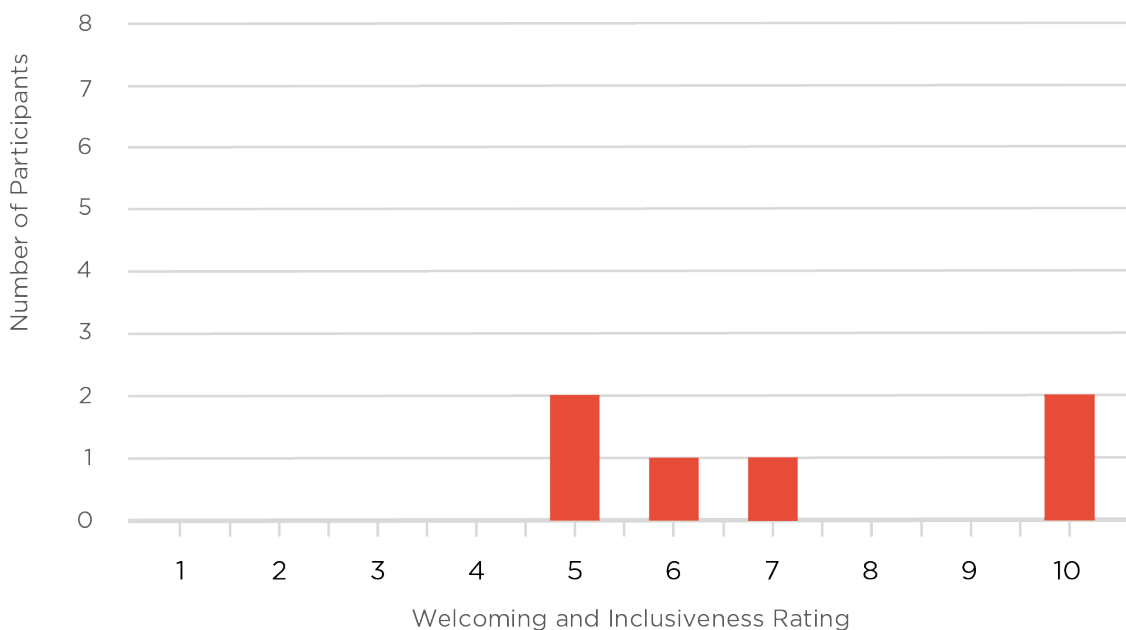
What challenges or barriers do you and/or your families face?

Issues in schools

Participants in this focus group discussed their children's and grandchildren's experiences of bullying in the schools as a major challenge. They also discussed concerns about the capacity of the school system, saying that schools are overwhelmed and not able to keep students and teachers safe due to the lack of order. They expressed a desire for parents and teachers to work together to provide more discipline and a united front.

Bullying

"My biggest issue...has been the bullying in the schools in West Des Moines...and to have the school say that we'll do something next week...Well, "the next time.""

"That's the main reason why my daughter doesn't want to go to West Des Moines Schools, because she experienced bullying."

"My child already made the complaints and they've done nothing."

"...the bullying is there, and they have policy and procedure and they don't follow it."

Lack of order

"Schools are overwhelmed. The teachers are overwhelmed, the administrators are overwhelmed, there's not enough money, there's not enough support systems."

"The concern I hear, the physical and emotional safety of kids. And the teachers."

"I don't understand what's happened. It looks good, but what happened? Where did we lose our way? It's like we're scared of the kids."

Access to Resources

While participants valued the resources that are available in the community, they were concerned about the ability to access them, especially for low-income families and seniors. Awareness of programs, limited operating hours, and restrictive income guidelines were of particular concern.

"Access—access to information, access to programs. Whether it means transportation, programs. It's tough to work during the day. I don't have time at night to go to programs when I need them because of the hours that they're open."

"I think access is a huge issue for lower income people. I don't have PTO—if I have to take a day off, I have to budget those hours. Dealing with the schools, dealing with DHS...it's very limited, the hours during which you can access these programs. Access is huge for people. Access to information, access to services. How can you access what you don't know about?"

"If you make too much you get denied. If you get mandated to work overtime, you lose your food stamps. The seniors across the street, they're just a little bit over income. They need more resources for older people who are raising their grandkids, or single parents."

Image

Focus group participants talked about the image of the community as a potential barrier to addressing some of the challenges that exist. This concern about image was recogized as existing on both the individual and community levels.

"It takes a lot to walk into a place like this and say you need help. It's hard to say I've failed as a provider. A lot of people think it's embarrassing. But I'd rather eat than not be embarrassed."

"In the schools lately, they're having little pantries in the schools. I didn't know that was out there at the time. Why aren't we informing our people? Is it because of the stigma? Because we don't want to admit it's in the schools?

"We don't want to admit that we have these issues. We don't want to have a drug treatment facility or a mental health facility, we just try to push it out of our community… Maybe there's homelessness, but we're not going to talk about it. Different classes of people, different money… we're afraid. Crime doesn't happen in WDM, our police officers might not be as experienced or know how to deal with it…We're big enough, we should have mental health, homeless shelters, drug rehabilitation. We should have more because we have the money, the talent, the people. We can take care of our own people and branching out to people. I think there's fear and shame not only for using the services, fear, not understanding how it works. Or denial—it's not happening."

High School Student Focus Group Summary

Description

This focus group consisted of high school students from Valley High School and Valley Southwoods Freshman High School. Students represented all four grade levels, came from diverse backgrounds, and participated in a wide variety of activities and academic programs.

What makes this community a great place to live/go to school?

Quality Schools

Students identified several things that they specifically value about their school community, including the support of specific teachers, a wide variety of opportunities, and a nice balance between academics, athletics, and the arts.

Dedicated Teachers

"People are nice here. Expectations are high, that challenges us. They challenge you, don't let you slide."

"I feel like the staff in our community is very welcoming and open and if you need something, you can go to them."

"I really enjoy the openness of teachers."

Opportunities

"I really like WDMCS...there was a way for me to have more opportunities than other kids... other districts don't offer the opportunities we have."

"We have so many opportunities in West Des Moines, especially in athletics and academics."

"I have more opportunities. Very stimulating. I am taking AP classes that interest me."

"The academics are very inclusive and open."

"In school, anyone can find what they are wanting to do. If it's not there, you can start a club."

Balance

"Good balance. I'm involved in music, sports, and always time for my academics."

"There are so many talented students with many different talents. We care about athletes, and the arts, and incorporate all of those talents into our district."

"I've been to three districts. West Des Moines is my favorite. We balance things out. In some schools, athletics are over the arts. I don't see that here. I'm in sports and drama, very good balance."

Collaboration

Students also spoke to the collaboration between their school and the greater community and the importance of making connections and having learning opportunities outside of the school environment.

"The school really puts the community up high as a priority, gives back."

"It's really easy to build connections in West Des Moines, a teacher points you to a potential mentor or someone you run into at the mall."

"Connections that can take you far in life."

"When I need something, or need to talk to someone, the relationships in the neighborhoods and in the community is really strong."

Safety

Students identified their community as a safe place to live and go to school. Their perceptions of safety were often directly connected to the presence and demeanor of law enforcement.

"I love how safe it is, you don't have to worry about going for a walk alone."

"Every other corner you see a police officer. Makes you feel safe. A good ratio of people trained to protect us."

"For two years I'd walk from Indian Hills...There were police officers around before and after school, safety and supportiveness is incredible."

"You hear about school shootings. I worry about it, but I feel safe at our school."

"The police department location between the schools is great. During marching band season, I would always pass a cop. Going in the doors to schools, I see them, it seems to be this sense of order."

"I like how calm our officers are. Never see them extremely angry. They are calm when talking to you."

How welcoming and inclusive is our community (school)?

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating, students were very similar in their ratings with a range of 6 of 8 and an average rating of 7. They stated that students in high school are much more accepting than people were in middle school. They could identify intentional efforts to be welcoming, but also acknowledged students separating by race and students who sit alone in the cafeteria.

"In middle school, different story, but high school is great."

"My parents are immigrants from India. I love West Des Moines, because I never feel excluded, it's a good balance between not being made to feel different, but I still have my roots."

"People are more accepting. There's no forced segregation, but in hallways I notice there are people separated by race. I don't know if that's because people feel like they won't be included. I'm not sure if it's a preference or what."

"A lot of clubs at Valley work on welcoming and they talk about how Valley is one big family and they want everyone to be involved and be part of of a big family."

"I think Valley teachers are doing a really good job of being open and welcoming, but every time I walk by the cafeteria, I see people sitting alone and not having any friends."

"Staff is very welcoming...Downfall, it's a big school so it can be hard to find a place to fit."

Student Focus Group Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings*

Number of Participants (y-axis, 0 to 10)

Welcoming and Inclusiveness Rating (x-axis, 1 to 10)
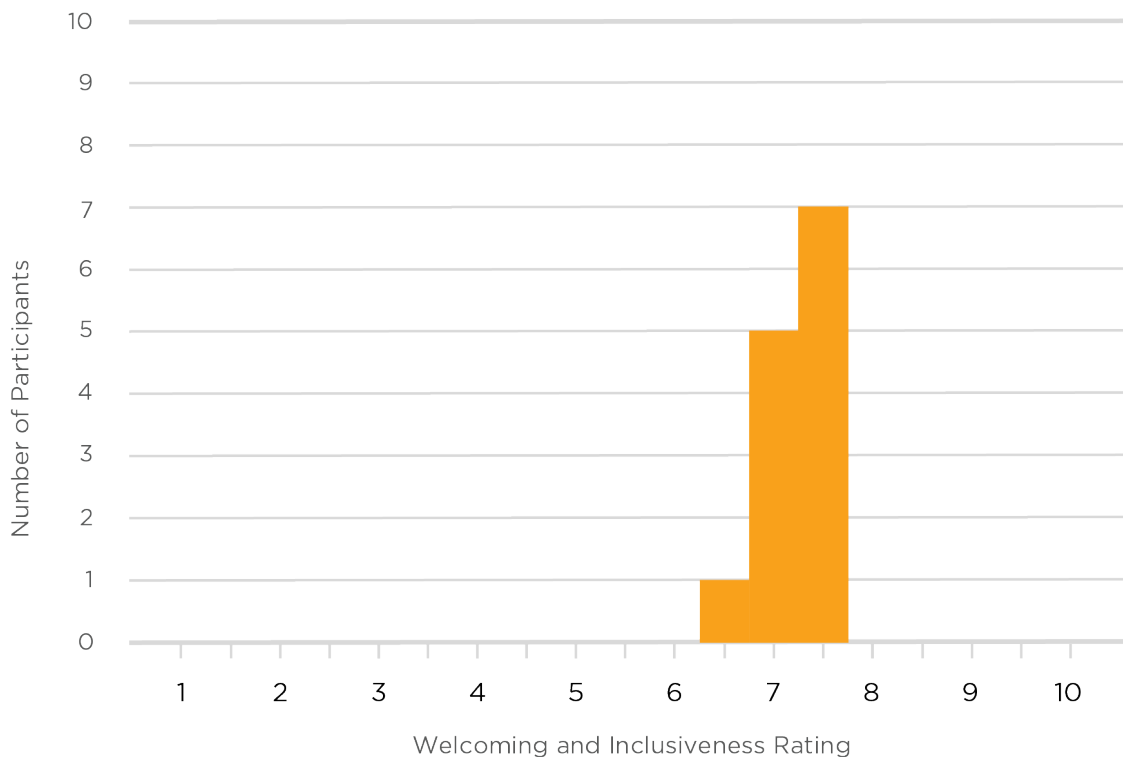
Where do you feel like you belong and what makes you feel that way?

Students identified their involvement in activities as a key to getting to know people and feeling a sense of belonging. They also spoke highly of individual teachers who make personal connections with them and know something about their outside interests. They also recognized that this could have the opposite effect if teachers only make connections with the students that they coach, for example.

> "Part of it is taking the step to be involved. Just knowing names and faces makes you feel more included."

> "Marching band. Felt like I was part of something. People called us nerds. So what. We don't care what other people thought of us."

> "Teachers making small connections with you."

> "Some teachers remember little details about me, saying happy birthday, not long conversations, but just acknowledging me."

> "I agree with everybody, with my skin color, I am the only black girl in my classes. I had a bunch of teachers who acknowledge me because they know that I'm not from here."

> "In class, you can tell a certain coach favors kids who are in sports. Most situations [when they talk to you about outside activities] it's good, but a few activities are negative."

What challenges or barriers do students and/or their families face?

School-Based Concerns

Students chose to speak specifically to the issues of concern that they and other students experience in the school environment. The shared concerns were divided into two categories outlined below—academic concerns and social/emotional concerns.

Academic Concerns

Students shared several concerns that were related to academic issues, including their ability to know about and navigate the many opportunities available to them, a lack of differentiated instruction, and concerns around standards-based grading and physical education.

Navigating Opportunities

> "There are too many opportunities...They give you a list and say 'Do it,' they don't talk you through it. It's overwhelming."

> "There are so many opportunities, but no one really shows you all of the opportunities. I never knew I could take AP classes. I thought there were pre-requisites. I went to CORE, that's where I learned about that...that's bad that I learned that from CORE and not from my counselors or teachers."

> "Trying to look at the other classes they offer, I felt like I have no clue what half of these are."

Different Learning Styles

> "Teachers teach like every kid is the same, but every kid is different, learn differently."

> "So I ask a lot of questions, I need them [teachers] to give me feedback. They told me to look on Canvas or say you learned that last semester."

> "I'm in a traditional path. There needs to be a mix of traditional and Project Based Learning classes."

> "Real world application is important, there was one math teacher who told us why it mattered. It motivated me."

Standards Based Grading

"Need to give it a couple of years before we know for sure."

"Even the teachers don't really know what they are doing."

"I feel a little experimented on."

"Now that my homework isn't graded, I'm less likely to do it."

"It doesn't get you prepared for life. No retakes in college, no retakes in life. It's taken out the motivation to do stuff right the first time."

"I wish they'd make the requirements for retakes the same across all subject matters."

"Back to tests, they give me bad anxiety...with the new grading system, all that matters is the test, not the other assignments."

Physical Education

"I wish the whole PE system could be different, more flexible."

"It was cold outside...Coach called me over and pointed to my jacket and said 'is that black or white or gray?' and I said it's cold, can't I wear it? And he said no."

"They make the PE waiver very secret."

"If they're going to force us to go to PE, I wish we had input into the activities."

Social Emotional Concerns

Students expressed a number of social/emotional concerns that were directly connected to their school experience. Those concerns included adults avoiding difficult topics, having a voice, a lack of mental health support, examples of racism and inequity, and student behavior concerns.

Avoiding Difficult Topics

"We need *adults* to get more comfortable [talking about hard subjects]."

"It's not the students having issues with race or sexuality, it's the teachers who aren't talking about it. We should hide the fact that I'm Hispanic, or black, or whatever, we should be talking about that. It's the students saying if you're gay you need to stand up for yourself, but teachers are saying "Don't talk about it. It's a tight subject." But we *need* to talk about it."

"There are a lot of teachers who are timid to talk about differences in general."

"I don't have any brown or black teachers - I only have white teachers. They don't talk about sexuality or race...they skip over it because they don't want to offend anyone."

Having a Voice

"When you're this age, you're stuck in the middle. If you speak up, you're shunned. If you're quiet, you're shunned...Most people say you're just kids, what do you know?"

"Teens get a bad rap. We are all grouped together...vaping, alcoholics, addicted to phone. We are called young adults for a reason...if we can make decisions for the rest of our lives, we have a right to have a voice in our school. I have opinions that matter."

"There's no way for students to stand up for themselves...I was so frustrated, so hurt, by what those teachers were telling me. There's no way for me to stand up for myself. You're stuck. You're going to get a detention or a bad grade [if you speak up]."

Lack of Mental Health Support

"I think there should be more discussions with students about mental health."

"I feel like we have so much advisory time that's just wasted, or encore. We could use that time to talk about mental health."

"One of things that my peers feel, counselors are just there for academic support, not other support."

"They don't have enough time to pay attention to your emotional [health]."

Racism and Inequity

"[There] was a racial incident, and it feels like we didn't give it enough attention at our school."

"I feel like we as a community tiptoe around that."

"I know we're talking about deep equity, but it doesn't seem like we've taken it far enough."

"I think [equity] needs more student conversations. I think a lot of times, we don't invite students into the conversations that we are having."

"I think the teacher population should reflect the student population, not just a bunch of caucasian teachers."

Student Behavior/Lack of Discipline

"I feel like you have to do something really loud or aggressive to get in trouble."

"It's kind of odd to me, I can't even fathom saying things like kids say to teachers."

"People will cuss out the teacher, and the teacher will ask them to sit down. I don't feel like that should be OK."

"It's distracting and takes time and energy from kids who are trying to learn."

"They're preparing you for after high school, but they're not really, because you could never do that in real life."

"It's more like the kids run the high school. If you get punished, it's a group punishment."

Impact of Social Media

Finally, students also identified social media as a medium that can be damaging to students by negatively influencing their behavior and through hurtful comments that people will post about others.

"With social media there's a sense that everyone's trying to grow up way too fast and do things that they shouldn't."

"I think it's really toxic."

"Toxic energy is putting people down."

"It's amazing what people will say behind a screen."

English Speakers of Other Languages Student Focus Group Summary

Description

This focus group consisted of high school students who participate in the English Speakers of Other Languages program. They came from diverse backgrounds and most had been living in the West Des Moines area for five months to two years.

What makes this community a great place to live/go to school?

Safety

The students identified safety as one of the factors that make the community a good place to live and to school.

Quality Schools

Students spoke specifically about their positive experiences in the English Students of Other Languages (ESOL) program. They valued their ESOL teachers and expressed feeling safe and comfortable surrounded by students with similar life experiences.

> "When I first got here, I didn't know how to speak English, but my ESOL teacher helped me a lot."

> "Teachers are so nice and helpful and safe area, you can demonstrate your personality."

> "...when I came here, it's different. If you ask a teacher, they'll help you with anything."

> "In my ESOL classes, everyone is more friendly, more comfortable, more okay, I know the person, everyone have difficult with something."

> "My teacher [says] 'You can do it! I'm so proud of you! You can do it!' She's very nice, she's always smiling and hopeful."

How welcoming and inclusive is our community?

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest rating, this group focused on their school experience which ranged from 9 to 10, with an average rating of 9.5. Students expressed feeling welcomed in their school environment for the following reasons:

"I feel comfortable, so nice people here, help so much here, I don't speak English so much and they help. They try to understand me."

"I have a friend who always help me, and be helping me so much. I don't want to make his grade go down. I want to do myself."

ESOL Student Focus Group Welcoming and Inclusiveness Ratings
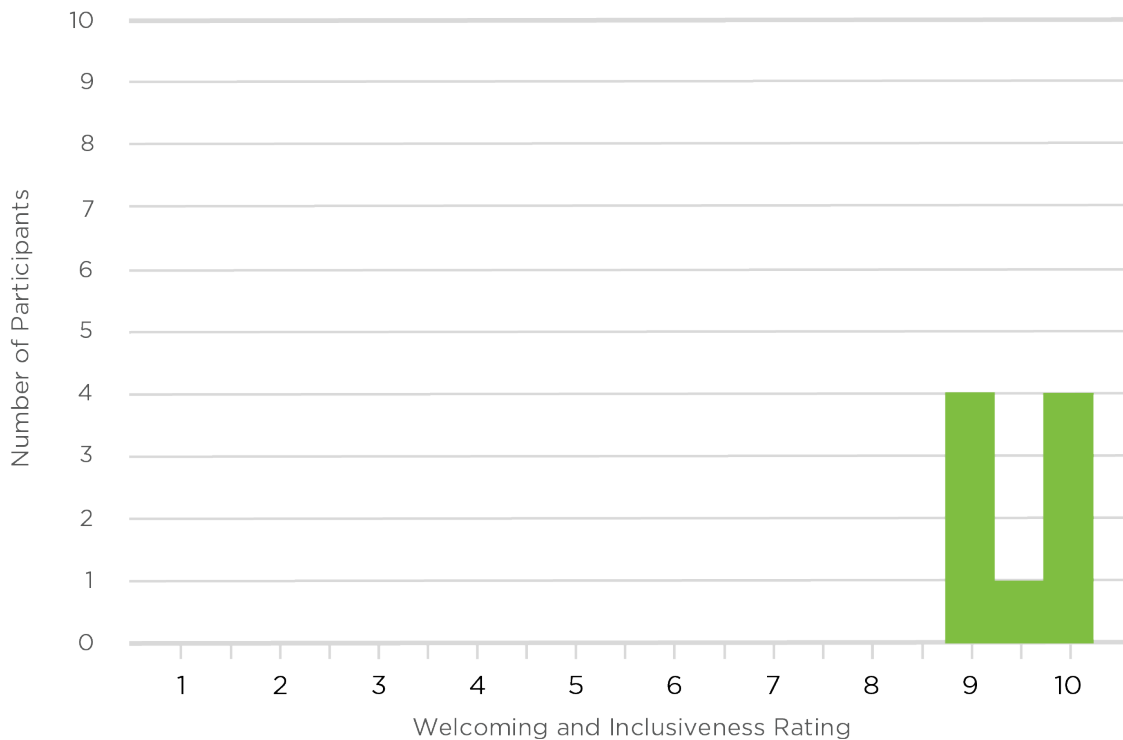
What challenges or barriers do you and/or your families face?

Language

Language was the overwhelming challenge identified by these students for themselves and their families.

"We speak a different language, and we learn a new language."

"Communication is so important here. You can't tell people or express because you don't know how to express. Everyone is different. Everyone interprets some words differently."

"In my house, no one speaks English but me. It's difficult sometimes when we go to the supermarket or make an appointment. I'm learning, I don't know everything, but I try."

"It's hard when you're the one who speaks English, they always go to you to fill out papers, go to appointments.

Separation From Family

This was a unique challenge shared by the ESOL students. They spoke of the challenges of living far away from their family members, friends, and home countries.

"I miss my family, my friends, my teachers."

"It's hard, because I was all the time with my family, and now I'm far away."

"I live here only with my mom. I miss my friends and my brother and sister."

"I live with my aunt and her family, and it's not the same as when I lived with my family. I need to learn everything in the school because that's what my mom and dad want."

Access to College

Students spoke of their desire to fulfill their dreams and attend college. They shared that the process is very different in the United States and they and their parents don't know how to access college and scholarships in this country.

"I'm sad because college is so expensive. Here, it feels more impossible. You need to try, but it's so difficult. Sometimes I think how can I do it? It's good, the education. We have lots of opportunities. Due to economics, it's difficult.

"They [my family] want something good for me in my life. I'm happy. I want to graduate and have a job. They want to see me in the future. I'm good at math and cooking. My mom says everything you want, you can do anything you want."

"I ask too much and the teacher helped me so much. Oh my gosh—where I go, I want to go, where I can go, how I can go, what university is good, how to save money for that."

"It's easier, there are scholarships in my country, but it's harder here."

"For me, for college my dad is not able to pay for college. I want to go. College cannot be expensive. I need more information about that.

What would you change to make our community/school a better place?

When asked this follow-up question, the students' responses were clear and powerful, centering around reuniting with their families and increased access to opportunities.

"I would bring my parents here."

"Bringing, reuniting families. My dad is in my country and it's just my mom and sister here."

"Maybe like more language, more interpreters."

"Need to accept people as they are."

"More vacation at Christmas every year."

"For school, scholarships for ESL students."

"More opportunities, maybe more for college."

Ideas and Suggestions

Cultural and Community Events:

Cultural events in the community/school to celebrate different groups (12)
Neighborhood events for building community (5)
Community entertainment: festivals and carnivals

Support for Parents:

Continue/expand English classes for parents (6)
Develop parent mentoring programs (5)
More parent training on canvas, supporting teens (4)
Paid liaisons from underrepresented communities to connect students and families to services
Earlier and more complete school communication

Systems and Infrastructure:

Systemic Changes: affordable housing, increased minimum wage, affordable childcare (5)
Increase bus routes and free transportation for underserved populations (5)
Wifi throughout the community (3)
Parent ride system for before/after school activities (2)
Donate certified pre-owned desktops/laptops to families that need them
4way stop at all school intersections
Citywide job fairs

Building Connections:

Build relationships and increase outreach to immigrant and refugee families (5)
Match older citizens with needs with students/families who can help (4)
More partnerships with faith organizations to support community events and needs (4)

Welcoming:

Create welcoming advocates and resources to connect with new residents (5)
Social worker in each school to welcome and orient new families.
Host new family orientations.

Inclusion/Representation:

Give voice to citizens including language learners, people without email, and students (4)
Encourage greater diversity of businesses (retail, services, faith institutions) (2)
Include diverse representation in promotional materials (2)
Diversify languages on signs, directions, publications (2)
Change all forms to be inclusive to LGBTQ community
Be intentional about hiring diverse staff
More interpreters

Information Sharing:

Centralized communication to access information, community calendar, find organizations (4)
Facilitate collaboration among social service providers serving WDMCS communities (2)
Create neighborhood "hubs" where people can access information/connect

Out-of-School Time:

Free open gyms at schools (3)
More after school opportunities
Teen center near a school
Continued library programs for kids
More summer programs for 13+

Volunteerism

More volunteer opportunities (3)

Recreation:

Maintain walkable community aspect and resources
Trail system with activities with restaurants alongside

Training:

Gender equality training for students
Equity, diversity and multiculturalism training for community members and school staff

Ideas and Suggestions from Students

Social/Emotional Support:

Discuss race in day-to-day conversation/lessons, provide training for teachers (6)
More emphasis on student teacher/counselor relationships (5)
More conversations around mental health (3)

Academic Support:

Provide more guidance on classes and schedule management (3)
Different types of classes for different types of learners
Coordinate tutors or study groups for additional student support

Unique to ESOL Students:

Reuniting with family
More interpreters
Increased access to and scholarships for college

Other:

More discipline to address student behaviors (2)
Treat Valley Southwoods like an actual high school (2)
Hire more teachers of color
Less restrictive dress code for girls