

# Defining a New Normal: Exploring Key Findings from Boston Public Schools' Family Climate Survey

July 2021

## Introduction

A year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Boston Public Schools (BPS) administered its annual climate survey in June 2021, to gauge families' perceptions of their children's educational experiences amidst the in-person and remote learning environments. Families were asked to describe the academic, cultural, and social-emotional needs of their children. Survey questions were designed to assist the district in identifying families' suggestions for enhancing students' learning experiences in BPS.

*Based on your experiences in BPS, especially this past year, we are looking for ideas for returning, recovering, and reimagining what school could be. What would you want to see for students in BPS moving forward?*

Overall, responses to this survey question suggest that more comprehensive social, economic, and pedagogical resources are needed to improve the educational experiences of Boston Public School students, and to establish a new and more equitable normal.

## Methods

**Sample.** The BPS family survey yielded a 12.5% response rate, with 4,904 families commenting on the experiences of their children during the past academic year and their vision of the future for BPS. Analyses of the ethnoracial background of survey respondents revealed an overrepresentation of families of white children compared to their representation in the district overall. Even though white students comprise only 15% of BPS enrollment, 26% of respondents were parents or guardians of white children. Conversely, Black and Latinx families who make up the majority of BPS enrollment were underrepresented in the survey results. Black and Latinx families together comprised half of survey respondents, despite these groups accounting for more than 70% of the BPS student population. Representation of families with English language learners (ELL) or with a child with an individualized education plan (IEP) was similar across survey respondents and BPS, overall.

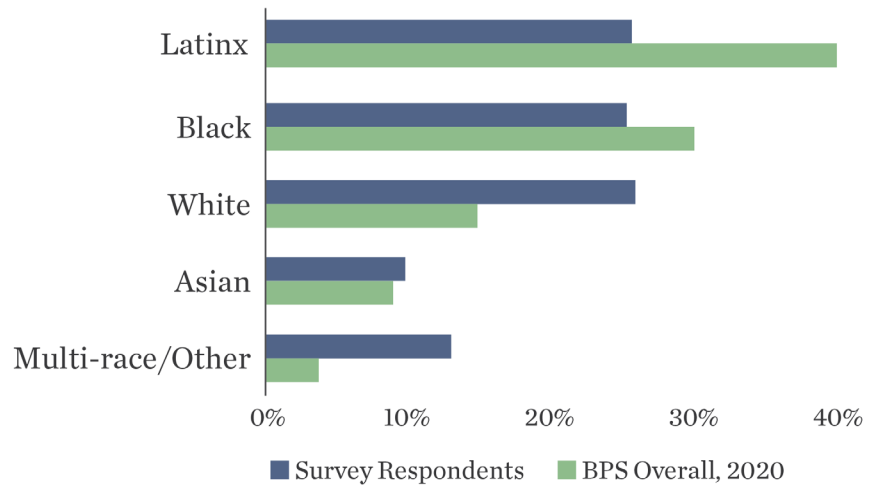
**Analytic approach.** In order to accurately and precisely analyze the responses provided by BPS families, we utilized a grounded approach to iteratively develop a set of 39 codes based upon a review of the survey responses. Among the responses received, 4,521 could be analyzed using our coding schema. The codes were then applied to the full data set and the prevalence of each code was determined by calculating their overall frequencies, followed by disaggregations by race/ethnicity, ELL and IEP status. This was done to ensure that the voice of no single subgroup overshadowed those of others in the results.

**Limitations.** The results of our analysis are limited not only by the underrepresentation of families of color in the survey sample, but also by item-level non-response, perhaps due to: (1) survey fatigue or respondents assuming that the open-ended question was optional; (2) some parents describing not only their vision, but also registering their lingering concerns after a difficult year; or (3) the possibility that families may not have felt comfortable sharing their hopes and desires.

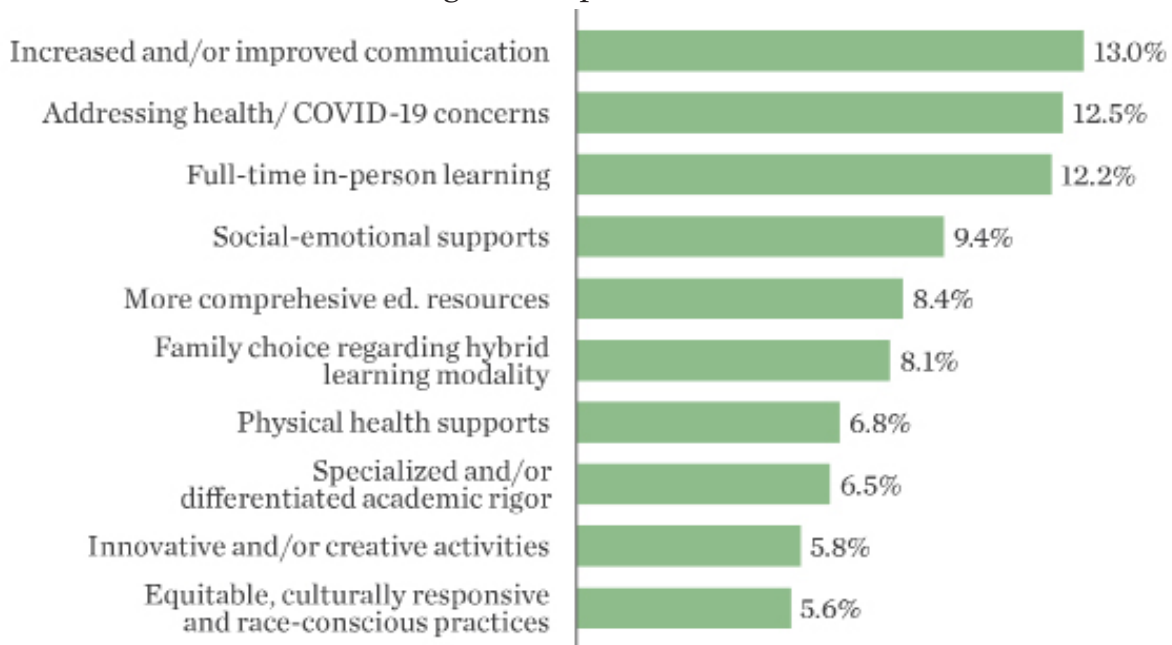
## Results

Ten key themes emerged as noted in **Figure 2**. Across these key themes, families indicated a desire for greater, better, and more flexible learning resources to enhance the social and educational experiences of their children in BPS. For the remainder of this report, we highlight the five most frequently mentioned requests for supporting BPS students.

**Figure 1: Demographic Comparison**



**Figure 2: Top Ten Themes**



## Communication

The top theme that emerged from this year’s survey was respondents’ concerns about the quality and frequency of communication with families, be it from the BPS administration or teachers. 13% of survey respondents expressed concerns about communication. Some respondents expressed a desire to stay informed regarding their child’s academic progress, while others identified a need for greater and more increased communication from school staff and principals. 4.3% of overall respondents voiced concerns regarding the limitations of information being distributed by the district. Additionally, 5.6% of respondents mentioned having issues with BPS’s communication style, especially regarding keeping families informed and dealing with concerns related to specific students. Sample responses include:

***“I’d like for there to be accountability from administrators and educators, both for students and teachers. More communication from teachers as problems arise and persist. Better plans and protocols set in place for students who are falling behind and failing.”***

- Parent/guardian of a Black student in 12th grade, with ELL, attending school in Dorchester

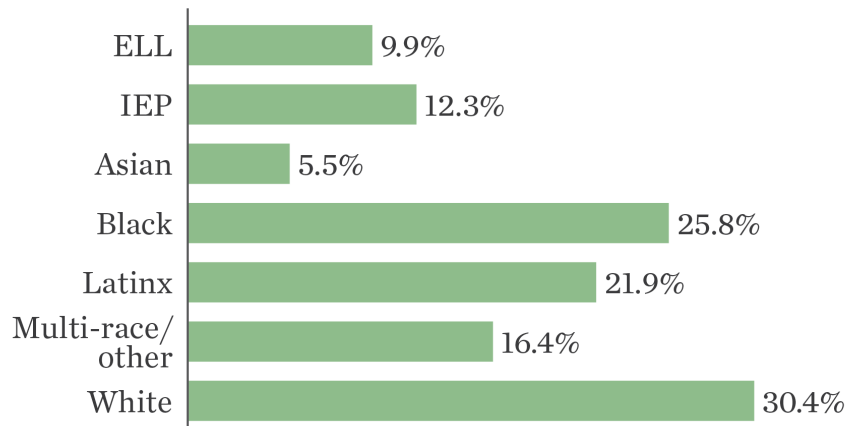
***“Better engagement of teachers. Some are not grading/reviewing in a timely fashion and if the progress is not satisfactory, children are not aware of it until it’s late... when other assignments have already been impacted... Clear communication of expectations to kids. Assignments should routinely be posted by 3-4 pm and never after that point. Explicit instructions should be included. Expectations have not been clearly communicated this year.”***

- Parent/guardian of White students in 7th & 8th grade, with an IEP, attending school in Longwood

## Health, safety, and COVID-19

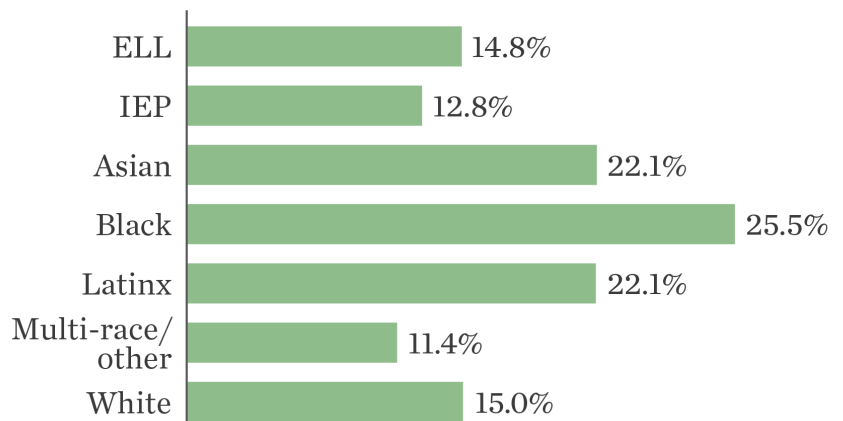
The second key theme relates to families’ concerns around general health, COVID-specific precautions, safety, and security of students. Respondents mentioned screening student health, hygiene, and safety protocols, and requiring vaccinations as key requests. Beyond COVID-19 concerns, families also expressed wanting more attentive personnel to monitor and support students. Responses included:

**Figure 3: Increased and/or Improved Communication**



Among survey respondents concerned about communication, 5.5% were Asian, 25.8% Black, 21.9% Latinx, 16.4% multi-racial, and 30.4% White. 9.9% have ELL students, while 12.3% of families have children with an IEP.

**Figure 4: Addressing Health/COVID-19 Concerns**



Among survey respondents concerned about health and COVID-19, 22.1% were Asian, 25.5% Black, 22.1% Latinx, 11.4% multi-racial, and 15% White. 14.8% have ELL students, and 12.8% of families have children using an IEP.

*“I hope that sanitation and environmental hygiene will be of utmost importance upon return to the building. Classrooms, bathrooms, and common eating areas need to be thoroughly and regularly cleaned throughout the day, and deep cleaned over the weekends. As the parent of a fully remote student, I’m extremely concerned about the cleanliness and regular sanitation of the school buildings, especially in light of this pandemic. My child was reluctant to use the school’s restrooms pre-pandemic, because of the consistent state of uncleanliness. Schools are naturally breeding grounds for germs and illness, however, I would love to see resources for disinfecting and sanitation like disinfectant wipes in classrooms, so that teachers and families won’t have to budget for these resources themselves. Please make this a priority upon return to the buildings this fall.”*

- Parent/guardian of Black Latinx student in 1st grade, attending school in Dorchester

*“To me the main thing at this moment is safety. I want to know it is safe for my child to return to school and continue her education in person.”*

- Parent/guardian of a Latinx student in 7th grade, ELL, attending school in Chinatown

### **Return to full-time, in-person learning**

The third most recurring theme was the request for students to return to in-person learning, full-time. Concerned by what they saw as a decline in students’ academic progress last year, some respondents hoped to see a complete end to virtual learning. Some families also cited students missing out on extracurricular activities or opportunities to socialize with their peers as a reason to return to in-person learning full-time. Exemplars of families’ responses are below:

*“In person learning & community building is critical for kids to thrive and for school communities to thrive. I am incredibly eager for kids to return to school full time in person for a year...6 weeks of in person [learning] in the last 15 months has been a profound social, learning and well being loss for my kids and our family.”*

- Parent/guardian of White students in 2nd, 4th, & 5th grade, attending school in Roxbury

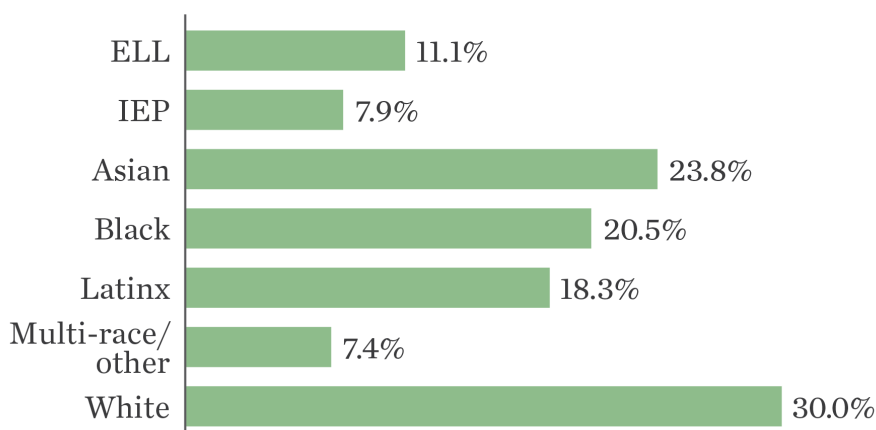
*“Moving forward I want to see ALL BPS students return to fully in person come the fall. Remote learning is hard for children with disabilities and even for children with no disabilities it’s tough to watch them struggle because they don’t understand the work and teachers aren’t always there to help over the computer. For the social interaction I feel it’s important for kids to be around other kids.”*

- Parent/guardian of White students in Kindergarten & 4th grade, attending school in South Boston

*“I want to see them back to the full schedule (no modification), back to full in person learning and fully engaged without limitations. I strongly believe that the modified class schedule [has] put these children behind in their academics and need to get back to the routine that is expected at [school].”*

- Parent/guardian of White student in 9th grade, attending school in Longwood

**Figure 5: Full-Time In-Person Learning**



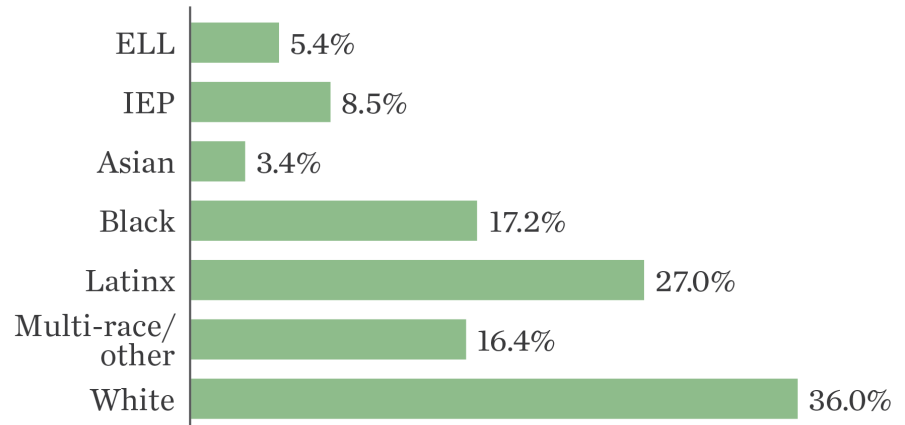
Among survey respondents seeking a full return to in-person learning, 23.8% were Asian, 20.5% Black, 18.3% Latinx, 7.4% multi-racial, and 30% White. 11.1% have ELL students, while 7.9% of families have children using an IEP.



## Opportunities for social-emotional progress

Families indicating a desire for social-emotional development was the fourth most prevalent theme. Responses included requests for increased opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions and more spaces for students to build relationships/friendships, particularly in light of the limited opportunities for social interactions due to COVID-19. Some families expressed a desire for resources that support social-emotional development, such as expanding the curriculum, creating additional social-emotional related programs, and addressing behavioural challenges among students, towards teachers, staff, and/or families.

Figure 6: Social-Emotional Supports



Among survey respondents seeking opportunities for social-emotional supports, 3.4% were Asian, 17.2% Black, 27% Latinx, 16.4% multi-racial, and 36% White. 5.4% have ELL students, and 8.5% of families have children using an IEP.

***“I think the focus on equity and lifting up and supporting Black and POC students is vital. Tending to the emotional wellbeing of all BPS students as they navigate this pandemic is critical as well. I hope to see BPS being flexible about testing or standards that run contrary to the social-emotional recovery of our students.”***

- Parent/guardian of White student in Kindergarten, attending school in Roxbury



***“[I] would love a continued and enhanced focus on social-emotional well-being. I think next year, the dust will begin to settle on the collective trauma of Covid on the students, families and our communities. Putting the focus... on having strong relationships with school staff and peers, and environments that are full of connection, engagement, joy and empowerment.”***

- Parent/guardian of White student in Kindergarten, attending school in Roslindale

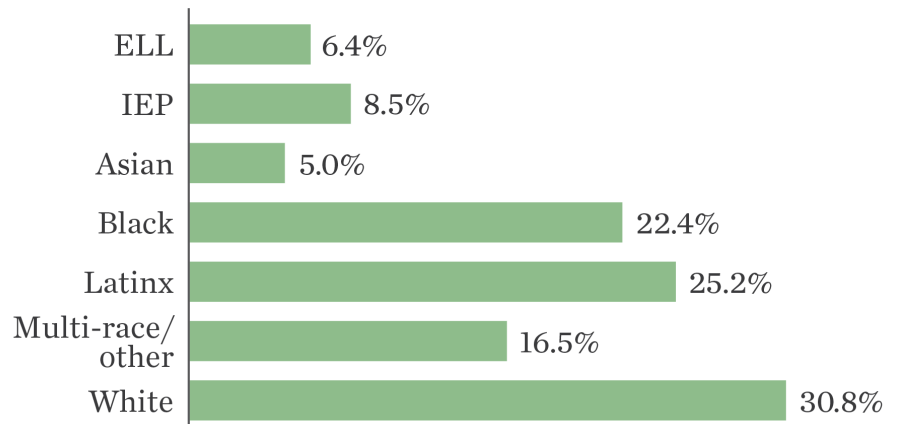
***“Prioritizing their social-emotional needs. Academics are important, but these children have been through something very traumatic. They need time to be kids and reconnect with social relationships. Many have spent so much time indoors in front of screens. Outdoor exploration and play is essential.”***

- Parent/guardian of multi-racial student in 2nd grade, with an IEP, attending school in Jamaica Plain

## Adequacy of educational resources

Among the responses, the need for additional academic resources was the fifth most frequent theme that emerged. Families conveyed a need for additional teachers or teaching assistants in the classroom—in some cases to facilitate smaller class sizes—as well as equipment for students such as additional desks, access to better technology for in-person and remote learning, language interpreters, and fairer, more equitable access to better rated schools.

Figure 7: More Comprehensive Educational Resources



Among survey respondents concerned with the adequacy of existing educational resources, 5% were Asian, 22.4% Black, 25.2% Latinx, 16.5% multi-racial, and 30.8% White. 6.4% have ELL students, and 8.5% of families have children using an IEP.

***“I think the limitations at BPS are primarily non-pandemic related issues: racially segregated schools, poor attention to IEPs and needs, and unequal resource distribution among the schools. Class sizes are also a problem: I don’t think 25 students should be the norm (especially in 1st grade). So going forward, I’d be happy if BPS continued to offer a hybrid option to keep classes manageable or found ways to better define cohorts of students and keep learning in small groups.... I think the priority should be on providing more options and better classroom environments for students.”***

- Parent/guardian of a Black student in 1st grade with an IEP, attending school in Roslindale

***“I would like to see BPS hire teachers that are genuinely invested in the academic growth of kids of color. Stop hiring people who have no connection to the community. A candidate who simply list[s] on their resume that they have experience working with at-risk youth is not always a good fit to work with kids of color. Focus more on boosting the quality of education provided to BPS students. Bring back foreign languages, art class, and music in BPS...”***

- Parent/guardian of Black student in 10th grade, attending school in Hyde Park

***“More substantial plan for substitutes and coverage for all the teachers that have been out. More hands on learning, science, computer science, field trips. More differentiation within subjects for students. (Was very little of that this last year). A second student teacher or part time teacher in all classrooms to help kids who fell farther behind this year, and push those that are ready to advance.”***

- Parent/guardian of student attending school in Roslindale

## Recommendations

Families offered rich and wide-ranging perspectives on the experiences of their children in Boston Public Schools and their visions for change in the district. Beyond the complications of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant, overarching concern was not only students’ academic progress, but their social-emotional wellbeing as well. In order to address families’ concerns and to mitigate inequities in student wellbeing and learning, Boston Public Schools should:



- Expand social worker and guidance counselor support throughout elementary, middle, and high schools.
  - Such support requires increasing the number of fully-funded social workers in BPS.
  - These social workers could lead restorative justice circles during school, and establish before- and after-school programs that encourage healthy peer-to-peer relationships.
- Emphasize and infuse social and emotional learning tools throughout school curriculum.
  - The Yale Center on Emotional Intelligence provides accessible, research-informed recommendations for teachers and school staff on managing emotions in times of uncertainty.
- Extend Boston Public Schools’ existing partnership with Boston Children’s Hospital for increased mental health resources in schools.
- Provide year-round trauma-informed pedagogical training for all BPS teachers, administrators and support staff.
- Formalize a digital equity and digital justice policy in lieu of ongoing virtual and hybrid education.
  - The increasing value of technology for the future of public education requires policies that can be implemented and evaluated across schools to ensure equity and fair access to remote learning.
  - In recent weeks, the New York City Department of Education officially launched a digital justice policy that may serve as a reference point for such a policy in Boston.

Our data and wider policy analyses show that the aforementioned recommendations are key areas for deepening Boston Public Schools’ commitment to racial equity--in ways that address the particular demands of families during COVID-19.

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