



THEME B

Create safe, engaging and inclusive school environments

Research suggests that school culture is most effectively influenced when students and teachers are immersed in contextualized experiences that emphasize joy, identity, skills, intellect, and critical thinking (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Hammond, 2015; Howard, 2010; Muhammad, 2020; Muhammad, 2023). For instance, schools could implement project-based learning that allows students to explore subjects relevant to their cultural backgrounds, fostering a deeper connection to the material. Additionally, arts and music programs that celebrate diverse cultural expressions can help students develop a strong sense of identity and pride.

Input from Pittsburgh Public Schools stakeholders highlights a strong desire for schools to engage students and staff in experiences that not only celebrate students but also focus on intrinsic motivations. For example, incorporating student-led initiatives, like peer mentoring programs or student councils, can empower students to take ownership of their learning and school environment. Training staff to create communities of belonging is also crucial, as it equips them to recognize and nurture each student's unique strengths and contributions.

According to a recent survey, only **42% of students in grades 6-12 feel safe**. Safety and discipline are frequently cited as obstacles by students in focus groups, with 12% mentioning that these issues hinder their success. Additionally, 12% of student focus group responses highlight the need to address safety and discipline when asked about changes they would make for future students.

