Qualitative Report Overview
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School culture

"Some schools do equity work better than others" and that "it really depends on the leadership of the building"

One professional noted that a helpful approach in improving school culture would be to really embrace that "all of our students are Cambridge students, but that they are learning in different buildings" to really get a sense of where equity issues show up. This professional stated, for example, if we really "embraced that each student is a Cambridge student, then we would want to put in place things that make them successful, no matter which building they are learning in."

Some teachers who "only want to teach content but really don't seem to care about us as students or as people." When asked what type of teacher they believe would be a successful teacher at CRLS, students answered, "teachers who really like to do their job" and "teachers who challenge you – not just give you the answer – but let you struggle and try to figure out the answer yourself" and "teachers who really keep the class engaged in learning."

Race and racism

"The teacher never calls on the kids who are Black in our class."

"I hate that I have to give my child particular advice about being Black at school. I have to tell him to not draw attention to himself. I have to tell him to not make any waves, not make any noise, and not give them any reason to notice you. I hate that. I hate that I even have to tell him that. It's not fair, but I think that's the only way he's going to get through this school."

"I remember there was a crazy statistic, it was like 90% of honors classes were white kids. I don't know if you can chalk that up to administrative neglect."

Experiences of teachers and staff related to racial diversity

"We need to think about things for our teachers of color. There was no like platform for like how you then do that. How do I meet people (of color) in different buildings? How do I see who else works here? I've worked in this district for years, and I've only met one person in this room before today. Like how does that make any sense? And everyone's been here for many years or about the same time as me. Where's Cambridge helping us to do that?"

"I firmly believe as a person and professional that (scattering) is intentional. That's the way the institution has worked for many, many centuries. And the system has worked that way for many, right?"

“Yeah, I have this issue because, again, I'm one of the only people of color. And I feel that it's one of my responsibilities to stand for culture equity work or to have some good representation. It's affecting me because, like, I have family, I have kids and I have to take all this burden on me at work and try to manage my own personal life. But I think if I'm not doing this equity work then I'm harming my population and my students. I want them to have a better representation at our school and a better understanding of their needs.”

Culturally relevant curriculum

“When will we change the narrative that our story as Black people began when we were enslaved? When, in their Cambridge educational experience, are they going to learn about the richness of our history, our leadership, and our contributions to society?”

Participants also noted that the decisions to provide culturally-responsive and relevant curriculum often falls on the individual teacher as opposed to a school wide expectation. Therefore, a child or family can “get lucky” by being in a particular teacher’s class who has committed to educating about cultural diversity or miss out if they get a teacher who does not commit to the work.

Time and structures to engage in equity work

“If we focus on professional development around issues of equity, then what do we have to give up or re-prioritize?”

“Wait, I sometimes wonder if this is just *my* expectation for educators in the district or not. If it is just my expectation, I don’t really have the power to hold people accountable.”

“If this is the curriculum we have decided that is important and relevant, and we know that students can benefit from it, then what do we do when individuals decide not to engage in this curriculum or ineffectively teach it?’

Communication and advocacy

Different experiences within schools. Some comments included, “Oh, I get way too many emails from our school” while another parent/caregiver at the same school articulated, “Really? I don’t get any.”

Some parents and caregivers stated that their leaders in their schools were very helpful while others felt they had to “fend for themselves” with little or no support.

“What message does that send to me as the parent of a Black boy? It sends me the message that you are more frustrated with his behavior than you are by his academics sliding. Of course, I am

concerned about my child's behavior, but when you call me only because of behavior, then I get a sense of what you actually think my Black child should be focusing on."

Community and sense of belonging

Often, professionals of color feel as if they are the "only ones" in the building and therefore lack opportunities to share identity-based affinity experiences.

Families, particularly families of children of color, noted that the distance between their homes and their schools can be quite far, thereby creating a physical barrier to developing relationships and building community.

Voice and feedback

Students in the focus groups articulated a growing frustration with their desire to learn and experiences with teachers who "did not challenge them" or who "did not seem to even like teaching anymore." Students believed that their voices were an important component in selecting teachers (or providing feedback about teachers). They also stated that being a part of the process for hiring teachers could give candidates a better understanding of what it meant to be a student in the district, and the ways in which they hope their teachers engage them.

"You know, we do have active parents. I know that I need to be active to be heard. We do have parents (of color) who go to school board meetings, who go to school council meetings, who write letters to teachers, who write letters to principals, who write letters to athletic directors. So, I'm like, 'Where's the lever? Where's the lever that actually makes something get changed?' And I can't figure out where that lever is."

"But you know, I think that I would love to have the district center voices of color and voices of lower income families or voices of immigrants like at the center. Like start conversations there, start with that, people who traditionally are marginalized, start with women and people of color and your transgender families. Start with those voices and then have these public processes that build out because I think public processes are inherently, and the research shows, they're inherently designed to empower people with more money, who own their own homes, who are more deeply financially invested in their community. Public processes are racist, right? They're a way to amplify and say, 'Well we listen to people, the doors are open to everyone.'"

Impact of relationship on student engagement

"As OST programs, we have time and liberty and space that some in-school teachers don't have time to do in terms of building relationships."

"it's not that I believe classroom teachers don't want to build relationships in this way, I think it's that, given the other demands, they just can't."

“They have high expectations of us at CRLS, but I don’t think they are doing things to help me achieve them.”

“Teachers just aren’t comfortable with addressing certain topics like racism and sexism and graffiti (X-block type topics) and such -- fix that and we’d see an improvement.”

Discipline

“Half the class really wants to learn, and the other half of the class is not engaged at all.”

“Some act out because it’s the most attention they’ve received all day.”
Experiences related to new immigrants (less than 5 years) in Cambridge

“I was expressing that I was anxious, particularly about school, and then I got a brochure – another thing to read – when I was already feeling overwhelmed.” Students note that the counselors are dealing with a large population of students and simply cannot meet the needs of every CRLS student; therefore, the students in the focus group were advocating for greater mental health support.

“My child is in elementary school, but I honestly feel like some of the white teachers treat him like he’s a teenager. And, then when they forget to treat him like he’s a child, he really internalizes that. I hate having these conversations with my Black son about this because why can’t he just be a kid? He’s ten years old.”

Experiences related to new immigrants (less than 5 years) in Cambridge

“As an immigrant, … we are not used to readings, but we hear lots of story. When we come here, last 2, 3 years, there is no homework. They start giving only reading – they tell the children to go home and read. But, because we are not growing up every day reading, some parent does not know how to read, because they are new and the book their child brings home is in English. They’re new, they don’t know the language, they don’t know when you read, they have also lot of emotion. But some cultures don't know, reading is just reading. That is also different.”

“We may not necessarily know the value or have the level of education or whatever have you, but I feel like there can be more of that in the Cambridge Public Schools, using more of that strength-based approach. And really looking into, what are immigrant families already doing, as opposed to what are they not doing. Because there are a lot of things we are doing with our children that aren’t being valued or that’s not being recognized. I wonder about stuff like that, as well.”

“Majority of us that are sitting around this table are immigrants, right? Because as immigrants, we do give a lot of our rights to the schools and the teachers. We trust everything they say. We put our full trust into them.”