

Background and Introduction

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC), housed within the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at UW-Madison, is pleased to submit this mid-year report to Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and Milwaukee Succeeds as one component of a broader set of district initiatives related to student voice. Specifically, this report summarizes key themes from student focus groups held at seven MPS high schools and one MPS middle school during spring (February-April) 2022. The overall goal of the focus groups was to hear students' perceptions about school culture, discipline, and underlying causes of high suspension rates.

Data Sources/Methodology/Limitations

To prepare for the focus groups, WEC researchers worked with MPS staff to create and finalize the focus group protocol (see Appendix A). Focus groups were then facilitated by an MPS staff member at each of the eight schools who participated in a short training session facilitated by WEC. After the focus groups were conducted, WEC researchers received notes as recorded by MPS facilitators and analyzed the notes for common themes. Themes were categorized both by individual school and across schools. This report includes themes across schools.

Before presenting findings, we note the following caveats and limitations that are inherent to at least some degree in the focus group data:

- *Anonymity*: The focus group notes were recorded by an MPS staff member who facilitated the groups with students. We have no indication that students were reluctant to voice their opinions, although it is useful to keep in mind that students' willingness to be completely candid may be impacted to some degree by having a school staff member (e.g., an adult authority figure) present. We recommend that these groups are facilitated by non-school staff and that no school staff members attend the group with the students.
- *Generalizability*: There is no way to assess the extent to which the information provided by students during the focus groups is representative of all students (either in specific schools or in the district overall), and there may be some degree of selection bias inherent in who participates in the groups.
- *Data Quality*: We did not have access to verbatim transcripts of the groups due to privacy restrictions; therefore, the focus group notes rely on the facilitators' ability to accurately capture student quotes. Most of the notes appeared to be thorough and were easily interpreted. However, we note that to better analyze focus group notes, it is helpful for facilitators to indicate speakers by assigning a number to each student. This allows researchers to capture the relative frequency of each topic (i.e., whether it is one student who brings up a concern multiple times, or whether it is multiple students bringing up the issue). In this report, we use quotation marks around text that was taken directly from the focus group notes; the quotation marks do not necessarily indicate a direct student quote.

Findings: Across-School Themes

Below, findings are displayed across all eight participating schools, including emerging themes, the relative frequency of how many schools discussed the theme, and representative voices from the schools' student focus groups. The representative student voices are in quotation marks to indicate the text was lifted directly from the focus group notes.

The most frequently mentioned theme that was brought up in all eight schools was students' **relationships with teachers and staff members**. Students appreciate when school staff take the time to build relationships with them and care about them as people but reported that is not always the case with all staff members.

- "I wish more teachers would pull more students aside to check-in with them and see what is going on."
- "Having a personal connection between student and teacher. Teacher makes me feel welcomed, she talks to me. Other classes I just have to sit there and do the work."
- "Relationship with teacher. A teacher jokes, connects with us and we get a lot of work done."
- "Most teachers don't take time to bond and make a relationship and ensure student is excited to come to class. They don't take the time out of their day to focus on individual students."
- "Teachers need to understand us. We are all humans. They are too. Don't brush someone's feelings off. Need to understand."
- "Have more diverse teachers. In race, sexuality, etc. So, students can see representation everywhere. Would help a lot of students not be scared."
- "Teachers more open with us about the work. More detail. Stop getting mad when we ask for help. 'We are just kids.'"

Related to students' opportunities, seven out of eight focus groups expressed an interest in **more course offerings** as well as **more extracurricular opportunities** to increase student engagement. Students in five groups also reported that **more engaging lessons** and **less computer work** during class would be helpful to their learning experience.

- "More opportunities for students to do what they came here to do. [I] haven't done any of the trade classes and that's why [I] came to the school"
- "We have had parents stop our Black Student Union and ethnic studies class."
- "More activities would make it more interesting and make us want to come to school. I be dreading coming here. Having activities would help."
- "Clubs help students get to know each other. Girl scouts, pottery clubs, baking, sewing, boxing"
- "I have to decide, do I want to run track or have a job? Can we have opportunities in school? I understand sports have to be after school. Having clubs, activities during school."
- "More hands-on learning. Mostly are still just on laptops and computer programs. No real interaction with other students or the teachers."
- "Engage us hands on, connect it to the real world."

Students in five schools shared what makes a positive school climate, including **student diversity**, **positive peer-to-peer relationships**, and **supportive teachers and staff members**.

- "Diversity is amazing."
- "Racial groups hang out together."

- “I grew a bond with a teacher over a shared interest (music).”
- “Diverse, everyone is pretty warm to welcome each other. Conflict now and then.”
- “We appreciate teachers who talk to us, encourage us to do better.”
- “There is a lot of love here. A lot of people really have a lot of love for others who come here.”

Further related to students’ overall school experience, student groups reported wanting increased **mental health supports for students** (5 schools); better **communication between the school and students** (3 schools); **adequate staffing** (2 schools); and an opportunity to see **change based on student voices** (2 schools).

- “More mental health resources. We do have support staff, but they can’t help everyone. Most students don’t know them. Need more resources for students.”
- “Promote how we can talk to [social worker] and counselors and psychologists. We just don’t know. Make it more aware how to get to them.”
- “Sometimes students need a break but can’t get a break.”
- “Oftentimes can’t hear announcements.”
- “Teachers need more teacher aides. One teacher can’t do it all. There was a fight in a class, and one teacher couldn’t do anything about it alone.”
- “Web design. Graphic design. Lots of rooms that are not used anymore because we don’t have a teacher.”
- “Take our information and won’t do anything with it. Pointless to share this information. Shared stuff last year and we still the same. People come in to listen and do nothing about it.”

Student groups also discussed school policies and school facilities. Students wanted better use of **classroom space in the school** (4 schools) and improved and cleaner **school facilities** (3 schools). Students discussed disliking the **locked bathroom policy** (4 schools) and discussed **school lunch** policies (4 schools).

- “More flexible seating options, not just old desks. More comfortable than the hard wood/metal desks and chairs. Sitting all day can be a lot.”
- “Why do we have that big outside area if we don’t use it? Use the outside area.”
- “Maintenance check- bubblers, ceiling, floors, mold, all kinds of stuff broken.”
- “It’s hot. No windows, no A/C. Gets cold in winter, hot in summer.”
- “Often don’t even get a chance to use the bathrooms. Locked at all times. Often a staff won’t come around to unlock it. Have to look and look for a bathroom and someone to open it.”
- “Sometimes lunch is not what is listed, they run out and we get leftovers of whatever is around. It’s just chicken or peanut butter sandwiches. Told they run out.”
- “Lunch starts at 9:50 for some.”

Safety and student behavior concerns reported by student groups included **fighting** (5 schools); **social media** (3 schools); **overcrowding and overcrowded hallways** (2 schools); and **bullying** (1 schools).

- “Fighting can be seen as an accomplishment in peer circles. Social media pages post fights, etc.”
- “Right now, any student can do whatever they want really. With no discipline, students do what they want.”
- “Drama comes out of thin air. Comes from nowhere. Not always through social media. But when it goes through social media there is more to it and gets worse.”

- “Rumors - people bringing it up constantly and joking about it (you don’t think it’s funny).”
- “Lots of issues people rubbing into you in the hallways. Can lead to fights.”

Related to discipline enforcement, students in six schools discussed that they were frustrated by **all students being punished** due to a few students’ actions. Student groups also reported experiencing negative **interactions with security** (4 schools); disliking **punishments that remove them from the school or classroom** (4 schools); and noticing **inconsistent discipline based on students’ gender, race, or status** (3 schools). Student groups reported that they would like to experience **more remediation and de-escalation** (2 schools) and also wish the school would **communicate discipline issues with parents more effectively** (2 schools).

- “It don’t matter who started the fight, both get suspended. Should work to see both sides. Not fair if you are defending yourself and get suspended. Trying to see what happened, things might get solved.”
- “Sometimes it is hard to determine who did it, so all students lose the privilege.”
- “At metal detectors I get to pass through, and they say nothing. Black, Hispanic students will have to take off belts, etc., everything to pass through. I get away with more being White.”
- “Security don’t enforce the rules, trying to be friends, security suggest to admin who gets a 3-day suspension, security has favorites, no consistency on how they treat students”
- “Security is the biggest issue. Security talks rude to students calls them stupid.”
- “Students kicked out and mom isn’t called. Students call their mom themselves. Staff doesn’t inform family.”
- “Get mad at students for skipping school but then also kick students out of school all the time without telling anyone.”
- “Used to do mediation, rarely do that now. Now is just a suspension. Is always a 3 day. Drama continues. Suspensions are viewed as a vacation to students.”

Appendix A: Student Focus Group Protocol

For use in 30-minute focus groups with 8-10 students in MPS schools.

Topic: *Student perceptions about school culture, discipline, and addressing high suspension rates in MPS schools.*

Over-Arching Research Question: *What are student perceptions about the causes for behaviors that lead to suspensions?*

Introduction: "Thanks for joining us today. We are interested in learning more about school culture and discipline in MPS schools. We'd like you to share your opinions. The information we learn here today will be used to help MPS better build positive school climates and develop more fair and equitable discipline policies. These discussions are confidential—this is a safe space. Nothing that is discussed here today should leave this room. Do you have any questions about this group interview?"

My name is _____ and assisting me today is/are _____. I'd like to start by going around the room and having each of you tell me your first name and something you're looking forward to this spring.

Focus Group Questions:

1. Introduce yourself with your name and what is your favorite thing about school?
2. How would you describe your school climate? (*If needed, probe for respect from peers/adults, equity/fairness, safety, respect for your cultural identity/community*)
3. How do students get along with each other? With staff? What could be done to improve how people get along?
4. What would encourage more engagement from you in school and your learning?
5. What are the biggest issues or challenges at school? (*If needed, probe for behavior, safety, culture/climate, discipline*)
6. What could be done to make this school a better, safer learning environment?