What do MPS students say matters most?

Below are MPS student voices on school culture and discipline from Student Discipline Committee meetings at 24 middle and high schools, as well as 8 student focus groups. Notes were collected over the 2021-22 school year and analyzed for common themes.

This summary was created in partnership with Milwaukee Public Schools, Milwaukee Succeeds, & the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative.

Relationships with adults

Students appreciate school staff taking time to build relationships and care about them as people, but that is not always the case with all staff.

"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."

"Students expressed concerns about how teachers talk to students in a demeaning way."

"Have more diverse teachers. In race, sexuality, etc. So, students can see representation everywhere. Would help a lot of students not be scared."

Positive school climate

Student diversity, positive peer-to-peer relationships, and supportive teachers and staff members are very important.

"There is a lot of love here. A lot of people really have a lot of love for others who come here."

"I grew a bond with a teacher over a shared interest (music)."

"Establish a safe environment that is inclusive of all backgrounds…(there are)concerns with homophobia, colorism, and racial tension."
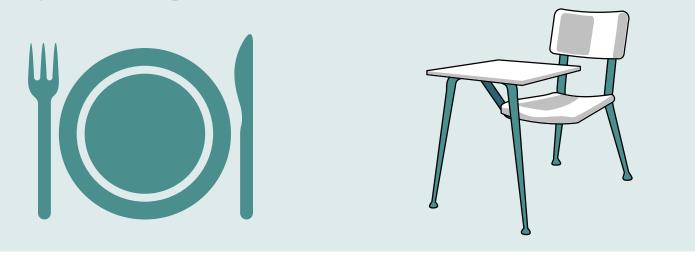
School policies and facilities

Students want better use of classroom space, and improved and cleaner school facilities. Students expressed frustration at locked bathroom policies and school lunch policies.

"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."

"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."

Learning options and environment

Students want more course offerings and extracurricular opportunities to increase engagement. Students want more engaging lessons and less computer work during class, and were concerned about staffing shortages and qualifications.

"More activities would make it more interesting and make us want to come to school. I be dreading coming here. Having activities would help."

"More hands-on learning. Mostly are still just on laptops and computer programs. No real interaction with other students or the teachers."

"Students are concerned that substitutes are not trained to teach content areas, and as a result education is not consistent."

Mental health supports

"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."

Safety, behavior, and discipline

Many students talked about concerns with fights, including with how social media makes things worse. Related to discipline, students were frustrated that all students are punished for a few students' actions. They also reported experiencing negative interactions with security and disliking punishments that remove them from the school or classroom.

"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."

"Right now, any student can do whatever they want really. With no discipline, students do what they want."

"Students have forgotten how to behave in school after being virtual for so long."

"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."

Please contact Jonathan Jagemann with questions: jagemaj@milwaukee.k12.wi.us