Students' Voices:
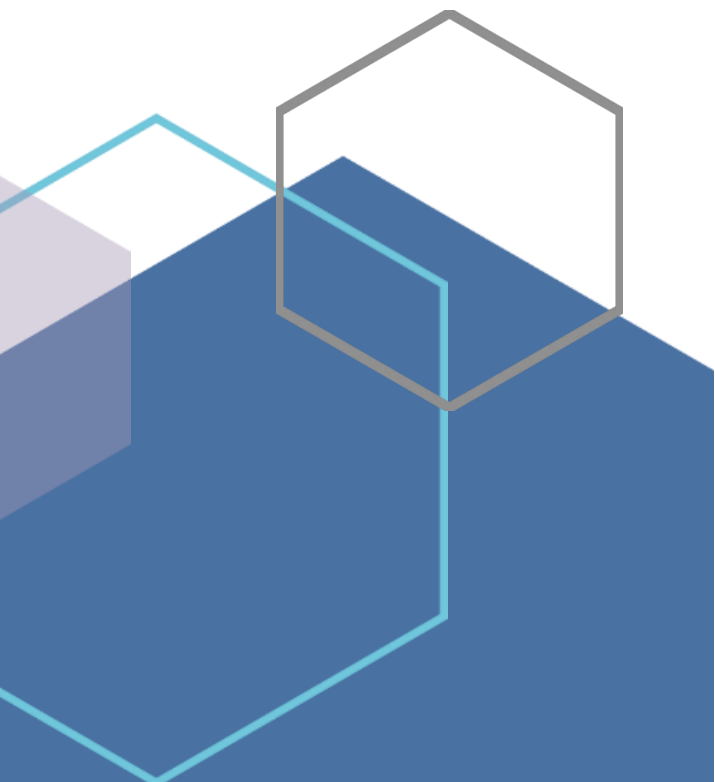# Their Perspectives on How Schools Are and Should Be

A Memorandum to the Massachusetts Safe and Supportive Schools Commission

June 2019

Education Law Clinic
of Harvard Law School

and

Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative
of Massachusetts Advocates for Children
and Harvard Law School

Students' Voices:
Their Perspectives on How Schools Are and Should Be

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INTRODUCTION

Decision makers throughout the education system, from individual classrooms to state and federal governments, are increasingly coming to appreciate the importance of safety, connection and belongingness as important precursors to the academic engagement, behavioral self-regulation and social-emotional competence that are the goals of a 21st century education. And yet, adults rarely stop to ask students what their schools are like, what is working and not working for them, and what their schools could do differently to support them in their learning and growth.

To help remedy this gap, Massachusetts Advocates for Children (MAC), through its Education Law Clinic at Harvard Law School[1], partnered with the Department of Public Health (DPH) Primary Violence Prevention and Youth-At-Risk Grant Program[2] to host eight Listening and Learning Sessions with young people who attend secondary schools in urban settings across Massachusetts.[3] The purpose of these sessions, which were conducted in February and March 2019, was to hear from young people about what they need to do well in school, what their schools might do differently to help them do well, and how their schools should be assessed. This memorandum distills the discussions that took place in these Listening and Learning Sessions. It is not a formal research study; rather, the goal is simply to share the viewpoints and voices of approximately 73 high school and middle school students across Massachusetts. Going

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[1] The Harvard Education Law Clinic is part of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, which is a joint program of Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School. Supervisors in the clinic are Susan Cole, Michael Gregory, and Anne Eisner. Law students who organized and facilitated the Listening and Learning Sessions and co-authored this memorandum are Yurui Chen, Pantea Faed, Mariah Lewis, Sarah Lu, Sara Mooney, Robyn Parkinson, and Breanna Williams. We are grateful to MAC staff who provided feedback on a draft of this memorandum and especially to Lisa Brown, Project Director of the Racial Equity and Access Project at MAC, for her insightful review and careful edits.

[2] The DPH Primary Violence Prevention and Youth at Risk Grant Program seeks to address significant public health issues which may increase a young person's risk for violence. Lurena Lee is the director of this program who, in partnership with MAC, facilitated the Listening and Learning Sessions across the state.

[3] In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, specific names, demographics, and school locations are not disclosed in this report.

forward, we hope to build on this initial set of discussions and work with others to deepen our understanding of young people's perspectives and provide meaningful avenues for their voices to inform and influence education policy.

We present this memorandum to the Massachusetts Safe and Supportive Schools Commission in an effort to assist with the goal articulated in its 2019 work plan to "seek opportunities for students to give their input and feedback on what Safe and Supportive Schools should look like, based on their experience and that of their peers."[4] We share the Commission's hope that student voices will become a permanent component of the information it gathers as part of its ongoing statutory charge to "investigate and make recommendations to the Board [of Elementary and Secondary Education] on updating, improving and refining the [Safe and Supportive Schools] framework and … self-assessment tool." MGL c. 69 § 1P (g)(i). In addition, the Commission established the particular priority for 2019 to obtain student input on Recommendation 4 of its 4th Annual Report, which calls for the Commonwealth to "continu[e] to provide opportunities to encourage, incentivize, and recognize Safe and Supportive Schools," including "review[ing] the accountability system to consider ways to increasingly include and incentivize methods of promoting safe and supportive schools." Our hope is that the student voices reflected in this memorandum will positively influence the ongoing refinement of the Safe and Supportive Schools Framework and Self-Reflection tool and spark further discussion and debate about how the Commonwealth's accountability system can be refined to focus on what students say they need in order to do well at school.

We are deeply grateful to the students who took the time to share their experiences and opinions with us. Students are uniquely positioned to give feedback on their school environments, learning experiences, and how the broader accountability structure impacts their success. They are truly the experts on their own school experiences, and we were humbled and inspired by the depth of knowledge and insight they shared throughout this process. The Commonwealth's effort to improve our schools is notable. Yet, our students are still facing challenges. We hope this report will encourage policymakers and other education stakeholders to ask tough questions about how aspects of the current system can be improved, and in some cases redesigned, so that our public schools can better serve the needs of all youth.

INTERVIEWING METHODOLOGY

In an effort to capture, represent authentically, and amplify the voices of as many students as possible in the limited time we had, we connected with organized afterschool programs that serve students in urban middle and high schools. The 73 students who shared their thoughts represented a diverse spectrum of learners, including college bound students, honors

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[4] Massachusetts Advocates for Children serves as a statutory member of the Safe and Supportive Schools Commission.

students, alternative school students, and students with disabilities and were primarily students of color. Once DPH obtained consent, interview questions developed by MAC were shared with the DPH Primary Violence and Youth-At-Risk Grant Manager and John Snow Institute Research Staff. The interview questions were formulated to be as neutral and open-ended as possible, so as not to prime participants to respond in any particular way.

We began each listening session with introductory activities to help each student feel comfortable, seen, and heard – regardless of their background or learning level. Additionally, we confirmed students' consent to participate and to be recorded. For each listening session, two team members served as the main facilitators. These facilitators explained to the participants that their words might be quoted in our notes and possibly in the report but that their individual identities would remain anonymous.[5] Our goal was to be transparent and to foster a space that encouraged open and honest dialogue. We made students aware that the findings from these groups would be summarized in a report that could be shared broadly, including with the Commission, the Legislature, and the Governor.

Given the diversity of interview participants and locations, we wanted to be sure that the data we gathered were as standardized as possible. Therefore, we implemented the following process. First, students independently completed a brainstorming worksheet intended to get them thinking about classrooms where they learn most effectively and other spaces in their schools where they feel comfortable and safe. (The worksheet is included in Appendix A.) Specifically, this worksheet included two questions:

1. What does a class that you learn a lot in look like, sound like, and feel like?
2. What do spaces at school where you feel comfortable and safe look like, sound like and feel like?

After spending a few minutes completing the worksheet, facilitators invited students to share their thoughts with the full group. We collected the "looks like, feels like" handouts at the end of each discussion, and we analyzed them to gain additional insights.

After the worksheet activity, we invited students to engage in a group conversation that focused on the following three questions. (A more detailed outline of our interview protocol is included in Appendix B.)

1.   What does your school currently do to help you do well?
2.   Is there anything that you need to do well at school that you are not getting?
3.   What would you want included on your school's report card?

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[5] Therefore, no names or other identifying information like schools or school districts will be used in this memorandum. Our convention for attributing quotes to students is to reference a "student" in general.

The Listening and Learning Sessions lasted approximately sixty minutes.[6] At the conclusion of each conversation, students completed anonymous feedback forms. (The feedback form is included as Appendix C.)

Digital recordings of each of the conversations were converted into written transcripts. At least three individuals on our team reviewed and analyzed each transcript. We then distilled the themes and connections that emerged between multiple conversations and synthesized them into this memorandum, incorporating direct quotes from students in most places.

Each section below highlights particular school characteristics that emerged as themes in the Listening and Learning Sessions. In order to constitute a "theme," an idea had to emerge independently in at least two groups and generate robust discussion. We organize these themes into two sections: 1) what students believe they need to do well (including both what students find helpful and what barriers may inhibit their learning) and 2) students' perspectives about school characteristics that should be assessed as part of the accountability system. A draft of this report was shared with the director of each participating afterschool program in order to solicit their feedback regarding accuracy and as a check to ensure anonymity.

FINDINGS

Section One
What Students Need to Do Well in School

In response to questions about what they need to do well, students expressed a variety of needs related to social, emotional, and academic concerns and their physical comfort in their learning environments. Generally, students stated that their best learning experiences occurred when teachers have positive, respectful relationships with them and create calm, safe, and comfortable classroom environments. They want strong academic scaffolding and learning environments where they feel safe and comfortable to ask questions and learn. Students also expressed a desire to have their teachers and administrators understand them and their needs.

Classroom Environment

Throughout the Listening and Learning Sessions, students stated that they learn best in comfortable and calm environments. These environments can be fun and also foster genuine learning and respectful peer and teacher relationships. To support this type of environment,

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[6] Due to varying time constraints, there were two outlier groups in terms of length. One lasted for approximately forty-five minutes and the other continued for approximately ninety minutes.

students noted the benefits of smaller classes and low student-to-teacher ratios. Some students also pointed out that teacher turnover impedes the formation of consistent relationships and support systems.

Comfortable, Respectful, Safe, and Calm

Calmness is central to feeling like actual learning is taking place. Students shared specific examples of classrooms where students and teachers are respectful and engaged. One student described a space where they learn well as follows:

> *"It's calm in the class. I'm learning everything...Everyone pays attention. We do our opener...he explains the notes. He gives us a problem...then if you're stuck, he'll go and do it on the board. It's easy, everybody learns stuff."*

Other students similarly seemed to value calmness. For example, a student in a different group described an effective class in this way:

> *"It looks like people just sitting down, not being distracted, not standing up too much, taking notes. It sounds like pencils writing, people talking but about the topic. It feels like you're understanding. That's not really a feeling, but you know how you feel like you get it?"*

This ideal of calmness was echoed again in another session:

> *"It feels calm and relaxing. The teacher—you can trust her and stuff, like to learn things...because it actually gives you time to get your mind thinking."*

In addition to calm environments, some students valued lively and energetic classrooms. One student put this simply: "It's not quiet, but we all focus on our work." Two other students elaborated on this basic idea, describing a class where they do well as follows:

> *"It looks very creative. All the students are smiling. It sounds like hearing kids in laughter, teachers having fun and the students are having fun. It was just an involving--It was fun just to be in the class. It feels intriguing because a lot of us, especially me and most of my friends would ask the questions that would add on to what we'd been learning about. Awesome."*

> *"It sounds friendly. A lot of teachers will be communicating with each other and laughing. Then it feels...fun, exciting. You're having fun. You're not really worried about feeling nervous or shy because you feel comfortable."*

Other students also associated positive learning experiences with energy and excitement. This student's words serve as an illustration:

> *"When I go in her class, then she has all this energy ready to teach and she actually gets into the books you read and sometimes she'll act stuff out. It really helps. I don't know about everybody else, but it really helps me get into it, get interested and know what we're talking about and discussing and learning about."*

In contrast, students also recounted instances where they felt an environment was not safe for learning. For example, their peers sometimes make it difficult to ask for help:

> *"I don't know how to use appropriate words, so I'll just feel like there are those mean people that point out people that ask for help. 'You really need help with this?' That makes a lot of people uncomfortable…it makes it hard for them to learn."*

One student commented on how special education students can be treated disrespectfully by peers:

> *"because the special education children are usually the biggest target in the classroom…they're always usually left behind and laughed at for any type of thing they've done and stuff…[they need to] have a teacher that can be there to help them because it's not fair."*

Other students also described the lack of safety they feel in school:

> *"…feels like I am not safe. A lot of arguing and out of place…very depressing"*

> *"…if I am in school I don't feel safe at all."*

Smaller Classes, Lower Student-to-Teacher Ratios

Multiple students identified large class sizes as a barrier to creating calm, personalized learning environments and fostering personal attention that they crave. Two students specifically stated that, in a writing class where they learn a lot, the class sizes are smaller than normal; another student suggested that a class should have 25 students or less, and another student would limit the ideal class size to 20. One student explained that classes with more students tended to be "more hectic" than smaller classes, though other students noted that some teachers were able to overcome this obstacle. This comment exemplifies the students' concerns about class size:

"…we have 27-30 people in a classroom, and I feel like it's unfair, because the teacher can't get to every single person if they don't understand something…like we don't have enough teachers in this school."

Similarly, students also identified high student-to-teacher ratios as a barrier to the personalized academic support that would help them do well in school. For example, when one student stated that there should be opportunities for students who have done poorly on an exam to get additional help from the teacher so that, "they can catch up and not have a shaky foundation to learning," another responded that "some teachers can't even do that because there are a lot of students in some classes."

Students in one particular school with typical class sized of 27 to 30 students stated the frustration that has resulted due to lack of teachers, explaining that when a teacher is out, they have had as many as 50 or more students in a class with one substitute teacher. A student from the same school said that in one class there was no teacher for a month. Students from another group described how a class with 30 students became a "bunch of aggravation and confusion" when tutors were removed who had helped the teacher in the past.

Staff Turnover

Students in a school with very high staff turnover described the lack of consistency and stability in the school. One of them explained:

"it's really hard to find a consistent comfortable place around here. We have new teachers every single year…and that goes back to the support system, because sometimes we build connections with these teachers, and these teachers really help us, but then when those teachers get cut we have to meet all these new teachers, where [does] our support system go?"

Teacher absenteeism was a related issue in that several students felt they do not learn effectively from repeated substitutes.

Teachers

Relationships

Students in nearly every group said they want respectful relationships with teachers. One student explained how relationships with teachers can affect their engagement in a class:

"I feel like some classes would be more productive if the teacher…makes an effort to understand your side, and you feel comfortable talking to the teacher, class will go more easily. You won't be afraid to ask questions. Sometimes I feel like that's what students

struggle with, like they might be struggling in class, but they don't feel comfortable talking to the teacher so they just stay in the back, and then they might fail because of that."

Another student described the dilemma she felt upon receiving a poor grade from a teacher whom she did not comfortable approaching. She felt her choices were either to say nothing and continue to be confused about why she got the poor grade or to speak up and risk being punished for "talking back." Other students shared this sentiment, including worries that any differences of opinion expressed in class would be characterized as defiance.

On the other hand, strong relationships between teachers and students not only help students engage, but also make them feel comfortable. Describing comfortable classes, one student said that teachers in these classes "push you. They want you to succeed." Another student said classrooms would be more comfortable if teachers "try and be their friend," and "talk to [students]. Communicate with them. Ask them if they're okay."

Many students could name one person, a math teacher, a counselor, an English teacher with whom they felt allied and described strong relationships they currently have with adults. One student said:

"My English teacher, he has his number and email in the classroom. He said, 'If you ever need anything related to school or not, call me, email me.' He's always there."

Another student said:

"I talk to [the teacher] on personal stuff. He's like a mentor."

Students also expressed how important it is for their teachers to believe in them. One student described her ELA teacher as a "good teacher" because, "he looks for the best in all of us. If we're not doing well, he knows we can be great so he calls us out." Another student described a teacher who puts a question on the board with no right or wrong answers, to give people a chance to "see everyone's opinions." The student said, "you feel comfortable in [that] classroom."

Students like it when their teachers "specifically make time to be one-on-one with us" and "add more personality in terms of their teaching…just being real with students."

Similarly, another student also expressed a preference for classrooms and teachers that exude a lot of positive energy, stating:

"When [teachers are] really energetic, like my English teacher for example. She's the happiest person I know. It's like I love it because if I'm having a bad day, it's like her energy just comes and picks me up. It's just like, 'Oh,' because I love English. That's my favorite subject, favorite class, and favorite teacher.

One student at a school that was closing down appreciated a teacher who started the class by publically giving students an opportunity to talk about how frustrated they were as 11th graders missing opportunities for "scholarships and stuff that can benefit us for college." The student said the teacher will say: "Before I start, let me take a minute and just get [problems] out of the way, cause I know this is happening to everyone." According to the student, "he knows, you know, not everyone has someone they can talk to about it."

Understanding Students' Stressors

Students want their teachers to understand them as whole people, not just as academic students. They want their teachers to recognize that they have obligations both from other teachers and outside of school.

With respect to the many stressors inside and outside school students want their teachers to recognize, one student stated it this way:

"teachers sometimes give some kind of attitude to the student. They don't even know what you've been through that day."

One student shared that her school requires students to participate in unpaid internships, which interfered with her paid employment after school. She said "my family is low income," and she wanted her teachers to understand the burden of going two weeks without pay. Another student wanted teachers to proactively address the burdens of school work by coordinating assignments and quizzes with other teachers. Another spoke about the burden of homework and having difficulty "dealing with my own personal life issues and that's mainly because of the excessive amount of homework I have, and I think that the school should probably reduce homework." One student described a charter school they no longer attended in terms of the homework load:

"They crushed you like just so much homework to the point like most kids were depressed. Like they didn't want to do anything anymore."

In contrast, one student expressed how one of her teachers helps students manage the stressors in their lives:

"She understands us. When we have problems, she talks to us. She gives us life lessons so that when we grow up we know what to do and we're not like deer in headlights or whatever. ... She actually listens to us, unlike other teachers that say, 'Oh, when you come into my class, you leave your problems outside. You do my work.' She's not like that."

Another dimension of caring relationships is a teacher's ability to know when a student needs help and offering that help without necessarily being asked. One student said about their teacher:

"She's just really helpful. Some teachers make you do it by yourself, but if it's really hard and she knows I'm struggling, she'll pull me to the side and help me. ... [S]he knows, with my emotions, how I look at the paper and how I feel, and she'll just come to me."

Another student said:

"At first, I would get a lot of anxiety, and they would know. My teachers, they know how I get before I have an anxiety attack or something. They do help me. They move me to a little classroom. They just tell me, 'Go take a walk. Come back when you feel better.'"

Understanding Race, Ethnicity and Culture

Students across the sessions discussed the impact of having school staff who do not share their backgrounds. The following dialogue took place regarding teachers:

Student X: I feel most of the teachers, they don't understand where we come from. Like they're not relatable to what we've been through as individuals.
Student Y: Realistically we have all White teachers.
Student X: White is the minority in {town}...
Student Y: So I feel like they force these old school learning techniques on us that don't work on us just because we came from different backgrounds.

Further, the lack of cultural understanding by some teaching staff has led to pedagogy that students feel is not differentiated or aligned to their own experiences, and as a result, is not relatable. One student stated:

"...they should learn how to teach different kids different, because we're not all the same."

Another student noted that:

"If you go to [X high school] and you compare that to [Y high school] there are two totally different people, two different types of mindsets."

One student stated that teaching strategies useful in schools that serve predominantly White and wealthy student populations may not be appropriate for schools that serve students from other racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Students called for teachers to note the cultural differences that exist among students and to develop strategies that are responsive to them. One strategy students felt would improve their performance in the classroom was developing culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, so that students would better relate to what they are learning.

Students had similar views regarding tutors, as expressed in the following comment:

"I think for most of the students who have relationships with someone like tutors at the school, it would come less from them being like their tutor and more so just because they can relate to them. I think that issue of [relatability] and the area that people come from, the areas they grew up in, the demographics or the racial makeup of the tutors should in some ways be representative of the student body."

Administration

Students identified a range of challenges posed by school leadership and policies. Many students wanted to feel like the administration respects them. To them, respect means not only relational compassion, similar to what they described for teachers, but also respect for their upbringing and racial and ethnic backgrounds. School policies, from discipline to academic offerings, were raised by the students.

Respect

Students in one group felt that administrators need to listen to students more. Many felt that some teachers pick on students and that it is almost impossible to feel taken seriously by the administrators. One student said:

"I feel like if you go to admin and you say these things, it's just kind of like because you're a teenager, you're a student and you're always like the person who's going to pop off or whatever, they don't really listen to you. If you argue back, then it's like the focus is on you. You get suspended. The teacher started it, so now what?"

Another student described attempting to get help from guidance for disagreements with teachers; the student said, "they'll always take the staff side and not mine." Mediation was of little help according to this student, as emotions can get triggered if there is a disagreement over the facts, and then "I'm just gonna want to hit things."

Another student described how important it is for administrators to approach students respectfully:

"Sometimes there's kids that are like mad, and you can tell when a kid's mad and will still be on them and on them and right when the kid pops off, they get suspended."

After this comment, a discussion ensued about how great it is that some school staff can tell when a student is angry and have them come talk and others disappointingly never seem to notice or ask.

Another group of students felt minimized by school staff. Two students described their feelings:

"I feel like they think, since we're teenagers, 'You're just a teenager. You're over dramatic. It's just your age. You'll get past it,' and this and that. I see it the same way with mental health in the school. We have social workers, but sometimes they don't really take it seriously, until something actually happens to somebody."

"I just feel like, sometimes administration thinks that someone is going through something as an act to be out of class, to not attend a class, to not just be in school at the moment, when, sometimes, something is really going on with the person. Fifth graders, sixth graders, seventh grade and even eighth graders don't know how to express themselves yet. So, even just hearing the administration saying, 'You're just pulling [a stunt],' builds up more on them than there needs to be."

Discipline

Students noted the need for a balanced and tempered approach to discipline policies and procedures. One student explained how the discipline system in a charter school system was too restrictive. Students got a demerit for crying in class or for not "asking permission to leave the room despite the student's mental state." On the other hand, at the student's new public school, "there aren't enough restrictions …two or three fights happen every week right in high school." This student stated:

"There needs to be some type of balance in a way where all students could focus and be able to achieve their standards."

Another student critiqued the suspension policy at his school and was affirmed by two others:

"People get suspended for just being late…[the more] they get de-merited, so the [teachers] send them out. A lot of people...get in-house suspension but not suspension. They should put [in-house suspensions] on there [the accountability system] too and count it."

A student in another session shared that when he disagreed with teachers he would get threatened to be sent to the office. This student described the counterproductive nature of suspensions, stating:

"When they suspend you, they don't really help you get your grades up...when I was suspended, I didn't get any work sent to me or anything like that."

One group also discussed that the administration at their school is all White and observed harsher punishment for students of color compared to White students:

"I think that the staff doesn't represent the students culturally. If we're the most diverse school in [town], why don't my teachers look like me? Why don't I feel represented? Especially the admin. You have kids of color being sent to the office and getting harsher consequences."

Tracking

Some students described frustration that teachers' responses to their requests for academic support seem to hinge on the teachers' expectations about their academic potential. In some schools, students felt these expectations were based on their academic level, or "track." This results in problems for students in both the high and the low tracks.

On one hand, students in the higher tiers of the tracking system find it difficult to get additional support to meet their teachers' high academic expectations because of an assumption that students at their level "should already know [the answers]." On the other hand, students in the lower track feel they are held back by low expectations, even though they work hard and try to learn. A student who had taken some classes in the lowest track said:

"It's not really the students. It's teachers. They look at you like you are dumb. They just expect less of you. They don't push you up. They don't communicate with the kids..."

An honors student found it upsetting that teachers sometimes publicly disparage the students in their lower tracked classes. He stated:

"*The way some teachers just talk about their [lower track] classes…They're just kind of disrespectful to the [lower tracked] kids.*"

Another honors student stated:

"*I feel for the [lowest track] classes with the teachers, it's like they see what they want to see. You want to see something bad, then you see something bad. That reflects on the students, in the students' grades and in the classes. Of course they're going to fail because the teacher wants to see them fail.*"

Students felt these low expectations can become a reason to disengage from school out of a desire to avoid "the sense of feeling lost."

One student who had been placed in an alternative school stated, "They give you easy work…I don't really feel like it's a school school. I'm not learning to my potential." The student stated that teachers "treat people the way they are." On one hand, this motivated the student to work harder in school stating, "If I do good, they'll put me in good positions." The student explained, however, that negative expectations from teachers "give the student a reason to give up." This student expressed concern that once students have been categorized as having behavioral problems, they will be denied opportunities and there will be little they can do to change the perceptions of their teachers.

On the other hand, one student found it difficult to be in the same class with different learning styles, stating, "different people have different ways they learn stuff, so I think schools should have different classes for those people that take longer to do this than other people."

Lack of Understanding of Race, Ethnicity and Culture

Weaving through many school policies and practices, students noted that administrators and school staff do not seem to understand their backgrounds nor validate their experiences as students of color. In two groups, students expressed a desire for tutors who could relate to students' lived experience, ethnicity, or race. Students also expressed a desire for a more relevant and representative curriculum, including courses on topics like African American history and economic empowerment. One student stated that these courses are offered at a highly tracked school with mostly White students, but not at a school with mostly students of color.

A student in a different group described how "cool" it is that he was offered a tutor of color in math, noting that the school understood the importance of forming a connection with a tutor based on shared cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

Getting to School and Start Times

There was discussion in one session about the struggle of getting to school on time with such early start times. One student talked about how hard it is to get up at "five in the morning…like it is to the point that when I hear my alarm I start crying."

Another student described how hard it is to get there "if you live far…or the days when it snows and they don't close the school…and the buses be 30 minutes late." Another student responded, "It's not your fault because we don't drive the bus."

Curriculum

Relevant and Representative Curriculum

Students want their schools to teach them life skills. They want their education to help them transition to adult life. One student explained:

> *"We really don't have too many classes that teach to our lives. I think last year at the beginning of ninth grade, we did like two days of learning about taxes and interest and then we haven't learned about anything like that since. One of the things that I feel like they can change doing things more that we can connect to and that we're going through. It's like in 10th grade we're 10th graders looking to get a job, looking for their permit and do other things like that."*

One participant, who was a recent high school graduate, explained how a school could help students transition to college:

> *"When you get out of high school, some people don't have people to help them get into a college or apply for this financial aid. That's one reason why they just work. I always felt like if people, a lot of these kids had those opportunities to know how to do these things, their lives would be easier. I always thought those should be classes that should be the first thing because by 16 everybody here should have a permit because that's the age you're supposed to get it."*

Other students noted a desire for greater representation in the school curriculum:

> *"One other thing I feel like the school systems could add, especially with the [Black]communities, is an Afro studies class."*

"I was going to say Black ownership…. Black people don't really own anything. When they get out of school they don't really get to know how to run things, how to do things ourselves. Classes about that is where we missed it."

Students continued this conversation, wanting to have the curriculum focus on things "…that they'll need after school… [such as classes] about taxes and mortgage and stuff like that." One student also vocalized the need for more arts programs.

As examples of things their schools are doing well, students mentioned courses and programs like college preparation and career orientation. One student described such a school program:

"In ninth grade, it's teaching us what a GPA is and what student loans look like and things like that. The sophomore year is having people from different careers come in and also résumé building. In our junior year, we get two weeks off to go to internships… Senior year, it's obviously helping out with submitting college applications and things like that, which is pretty helpful."

Arts, Athletics and Experiential Learning

Students from multiple groups wanted schools to offer more courses related to arts and athletics, and offer more visual and hands-on learning projects. One student explained how arts courses can benefit students:

"A lot of the times the arts are what help kids push through school. A lot of the times, a lot of the arts, they don't get recognition for doing anything good. In a way, I feel like if they got recognition it motivates the kids. At least I'm doing good in some area, so that motivates them to maybe push through in another area. It's like more academic because it's like if they're doing good in this then maybe they might get some recognition for that too."

Another student wanted more resources in athletics; the student was unhappy that their school had outdated athletic uniforms and unsuccessful coaches. There was also discussion about disparate treatment of the female versus male swim team and the lack of resources such as diving blocks.

In addition to arts and organized athletics, one group of students also talked about the importance of activities like field day and field trips. One student lamented, "Last year they cancelled field day. We didn't even get to have a field day." Another shared, "This year … the whole eighth grade hasn't even been on a field trip yet."

Genuine Learning

Students want to engage in genuine learning. Students in all the groups expressed a desire to feel engaged and empowered to be a part of their own learning. As discussed in more detail below, a student spoke for many when he said schools should be graded on "do [students] actually learn or do [they] just try to pass?"

Students mentioned electives as examples of classes where students tend to be engaged. One student stated: "I feel like I learn more in electives than I learn in an actual class" and it seems like peers in these classes "actually want to learn…[and] apply themselves or try."

Facilities and Equipment

Students discussed how improvements with facilities and access to equipment at their schools would help them feel more comfortable in their environment and improve their academic success.

Cleanliness

Students stated that basic levels of cleanliness would help them feel more comfortable in their school environment. One student described his school as follows:

"[My school]'s really old. … They don't do anything. The paint is peeling. … There's dust in the corners. You move the door, you go behind the door, there's dust in the corners. It's bad."

In one group, students discussed issues with pests in the spaces they occupy. One student shared:

"In my fourth period, yesterday, they found a roach on the floor. My sophomore year, I opened the door because I was going up the stairs, after school, to get my stuff because my locker was on that side. I opened the door. It was dead quiet, and a mouse ran over my shoe."

In another group, several students discussed bathroom cleanliness: One student stated, "I can't even feel comfortable in the bathroom. Another added, "the bathroom's like mad dirty. I refuse to use any bathroom or go near it."

Food Quality

One student complained about the lack of a cafeteria at school and described the food as "prison food." Another student responded that "DYS food is better than that." Other comments included, "they used to give us expired milk" and "they'd be giving us mac and cheese with no cheese."

Access to Technology Resources

In multiple sessions, students shared how their schools either lacked technology resources or required updates.

> *"Yes, if they could give us better internet, that'd be really nice because I'm tired of trying to go on one of the MacBooks out there, and I'm sitting at the little pinwheel of death for almost an hour before I can turn in my essay, when my essay was due 30 minutes ago, and I'm still there trying in the classroom to get to my essay. I'm like, 'my essay is late. never mind.'"*

Students also discussed how the lack of technology impedes their ability to do their homework, which in turn can impact students' grades in their classes:

> *Student A: "I don't think schools should be having online work, because someone like me, I'm not able to go online...and neither my phone or computer can process the program, so it's really hard, and then I failed in math because I can't do the work. So, I don't think schools should do online work."*

> *Student B: "I agree with her. There's this thing in my school called the Khan Academy. It's like math online. I did it in school, but the teacher, she gave me a C because she says it only counts if you do it at home, so I got mad."*

The students shared similar situations in which teachers required students to complete homework assignments online, but they lacked access to the technology to do so. One suggestion from a student was to provide alternative ways to complete the same assignment.

Athletic Equipment

Students discussed the need for more funding for athletic equipment. As one student stated:

> *"I used to be a cheerleader. We didn't even have uniforms. ... I know the basketball team has been having the same musty [uniforms] for the longest time. With the football team, ...I can already see that they look so old that they stink."*

In another conversation, a student discussed how the old equipment deters students from wanting to participate in athletics:

"I feel like, personally, we need more funds for our sports because a lot of kids don't enjoy sports, or they don't play because they see that they still have the old helmets and the old pads and everything. I just feel like, if we got more funds for the sports, more kids would want to be in a sport, other than in the streets."

Supports and Resources

Supports Students Find Helpful

Many students in the various sessions said they are benefitting or would benefit from programs and tools that support their mental health and social needs, as well as additional academic support. A student attending a school that provides health, wellness and counseling support described how that service helps with emotions:

"They always check in, making sure if anything is happening with [students] personally, we're able to ask the teacher for a pass to health and wellness and do our work with the health and wellness, just to have our time to gather ourselves."

Students at other schools also appreciated social workers and guidance counselors. One student stated: "My guidance is cool. I mean she's like legit. She helped me with, like my grades."

At all the sessions students explained how meaningful their afterschool programs are. One student expressed how important it is that the afterschool staff respect him and allowed him to join a field trip even though he had been suspended. Another stated:

"Thank God I [started the after school program]. I used to go to school, go home, go—I hated that…. helped a lot because I started poetry, and [staff] keeps pushing me to keep doing more. I would have given up a long time ago. They push you forward education-wise too…like she really wants me to graduate."

Students at one session said their school has lots of resources like these but does not advertise; students have to search for them.

Students also described peer mediation and individual counseling programs as helpful "if you have anger issues, if you've got something going on at home." Similarly, some students found mentors to be very helpful. One student stated, "I've got a mentor. … When I'm mad, I'll

walk out. Sometimes I've got to go to her. She talks to me and I'll calm down and go back to class."

Students also want programs that address their academic needs in addition to their social and emotional needs. They specifically brought up extra writing instruction, tutoring, and more comprehensive study guides. One student explained the need for personalized help:

"Imagine I take a test and I fail the test. Then we move on, but the grade that I got on the test, it shows me that I don't know that topic, but now we move on. It starts a snowball effect. If I just keep failing or if whatever I'm learning is based on what was on that test, then I won't succeed anymore. I feel like kids that didn't do as well on that test should get it all and the teacher works with them so they can catch up and not have a shaky base to learning."

There were also several other types of supports students described ashelpful to their academic learning. One student appreciated a teacher who had students practice writing using old MCAS essay prompts, which the student felt led to a high score on the test. Another liked that her high school offers tutoring both during and after the school day. One student appreciated a class where there were "study guides for when [they] have quizzes and tests coming up." A student in an advanced math class that meets once a week said, "we have a test on what we learned but before we took the test, we reviewed everything and then took the test. I found that really helpful."

Finally, in addition to supportive services, programs, approaches to instruction, some of the students also said they benefit from access to objects that can "help them focus better," such as stress toys, earphones and squishy balls.

Resource Constraints

Students at one particular session expressed concern about how funding decisions can impact the resources and supports that are important for their learning. One student stated:

"I'm not going to be able to reach my graduation requirements because they keep cutting things. I took Latin my first year. Then they cut Latin out. Now I'm taking French. They're about to cut French out. So, the only language is going to be Spanish. So, my whole entire senior year, I have to be taking Spanish. I don't think that's right because I have other requirements to meet."

Another student noted:

"They're cutting wages and stuff, and they're making it so that a lot of teachers leave. They're trying to expand different departments that don't need to be expanded. It's kind of stressful for me because I graduate next year."

Physical Safety

Several students expressed the importance of physical safety to their school experience. A student in one session who attends an alternative school was glad students get wanded down there every day because of a worry about the other students carrying weapons. In another session, students wanted an increased focus on security. At several schools in this particular district students were very worried about the presence of guns and knives in school. One student explained:

"There's schools, like in one class, you probably find 10 people with guns and knives and all of that."

There was discussion about the need for metal detectors, but also the need to keep all doors with outside access locked so that students will not be able avoid the metal detectors and bring weapons into the school through a side entrance. Similarly, students felt there should be security at all the doors. Students said that if there was a gun fight and a lockdown they had plans to make a run.

Students also expressed feeling unsafe when adults seem unresponsive to physical aggression between fellow students. One student commented:

"In my school ... [t]hey'll be getting in fights and the teachers just stand there and watch a boy just hit a girl, just body slam her. ... They just watch. ...They only do something when the whole thing is done. Somebody could just die right then, and they'll just wait until the person just goes away and just be like, 'What happened?'"

Section Two
How Students Want Schools to Be Assessed

The Current Landscape

MCAS

There was great concern throughout all the sessions that the MCAS examination is not an effective means of measuring what students have learned. Relatedly, participants felt that MCAS performance should not prohibit otherwise good students who do their work and have good attendance from graduating.

Several students stated that they believe too much time is spent on MCAS preparation. As one of them explained:

"They'll literally take the first quarter of the entire year, for a freshman will be how to pass the MCAS...it's not just learning the curriculum, but it's also like they literally force you to pass because [our school] doesn't have good MCAS scores. They don't want us to be good. They want to make it look good."

Students also shared that the MCAS "stresses [them] out." For example, one student shared:

"It's just a lot for me and under pressure, I get stressed a lot and then I just shut down and I'm like whatever."

Another student said, "I feel like they need to change MCAS." This student had previously attended a private school that did not use the MCAS and felt that it would be better for schools to focus on the SAT and good grades.

In many of the sessions there was active dialogue on the issue of MCAS as a graduation requirement. One student's comment represents a common sentiment:

"I feel it [graduation] should go off of grades, not MCAS scores. Kids do really good in class, but they just do really bad on tests. Tests aren't everyone's thing, so I feel like MCAS scores aren't good for kids to even make it any further than a high school degree."

Similarly, a student in another session highlighted how unfair it is that a "kid could be doing well in every subject, and then they can't graduate unless they pass the MCAS…regardless of whether you have a mental illness or not, I think it's just an overall stressful thing, and it's not

fair. Not just me. I know people who have had outright nervous breakdowns because of it." The student was dreading taking it again, saying, "I already just don't want to show up to school ever again."

A different student expressed concern about MCAS scores being used as the main focus of the accountability system:

"I don't think they should judge a school based on students' MCAS scores because a lot of people that I know, myself included, can do really well in a subject with classwork and stuff, but tests we don't do as well. I mean personally, I don't do well on tests at all. They give me a lot of anxiety and I usually flunked."

At one session where many of the students were seniors about to graduate, there was a concern about test scores (on MCAS and the SAT) affecting not just graduation, but also college acceptance. As one student shared:

"I don't know. That's how I feel when I get a rejection like, 'Your grades are good. Your GPA is high. You're involved in all these sports but just because your test score wasn't high we can't accept you.' It's just like why does my future have to be dependent on a number? I don't know. I don't know. It's just like I'm so much more than that. It's just like I feel like they don't look at it like that."

Attendance

Assessing schools using their attendance rates is not desirable, according to some students. Several students worried that measuring schools by attendance will cause them to establish and enforce harsh attendance policies. Students said they already know of certain schools that penalize students for absences without regard to their needs outside of school, such as familial obligations or other circumstances that students do not feel safe or comfortable sharing with the school. At one school, students receive an "E" [59] grade after three unexcused absences. There is a review process but, according to students, it is very hard to access this process because not enough staff resources are assigned to it. Students believe the school could better accommodate their needs with respect to absences, as reflected in the following interchange:

Student X: "Sometimes kids don't bring their problem to school so they're out for multiple days with no reason, but they're not going to tell the school…"
Student Y: "If you're going to be out of school for a long time there should be a way that the school could help you set up something so that you get the work done."

Discipline

As noted in the "discipline" section above, one student proposed that disciplinary actions be factored into the way schools are assessed:

> *"People get suspended for just being late…[the more] they get de-merited, so the more they [teachers] send them out. A lot of people...get in-house suspension but not suspension. They should put that [in-house suspension] on there [the accountability system] too and count it. They probably do that to make it look better."*

The Ideal Landscape Includes Student Input

Holistic Accountability

The students wanted to be sure that, however the accountability system is designed, their voices are included in in a meaningful way. One student summed up the conversation for many students:

> *"…just ask us questions, like how we're learning, how do we feel, are we comfortable?"*

Another student stated:

> *"...the students should be grading the school. If you don't go to the school, who are you to say what the school is like and if the school is OK?"*

One student suggested "hav[ing] a ranking system where it's like do you have over this number of counselors or over this number of arts or different languages." Another student felt that assigning schools a "social grade" would be a way to help parents decide whether to send their student to a particular school:

> *"I think having a Social Grade for the school would help. By that I mean looking at the different factors that play into the social atmosphere of the school, whether that's…teacher-student ratios, the amount of support that is offered students, whether that means counselors, specific types of classes and other things like that. [So for a parent asking] 'where should I send my student? This school has really high test scores…and have high graduation rates, but they don't really support students or they historically have not supported students who have mental health issues…..oh, I probably don't want to send my child there because I know that this is something that they struggle with or they are dealing with now and the school probably wouldn't be a good fit for them outside of academics.'"*

Another student shared:

> *"I feel like schools should be graded on how they're assisting students with their mental health and supporting them specifically. Yeah, how is the school helping students get better mentally?"*

When asked what it would take for a school to get an "A" grade on a report card, one student summarized many of the themes that recurred across the sessions:

> *"Be clean, teach their students, have healthy food, care about their students, actually care adequately about their mental health and basically be behind their students and support their students, no matter what, instead of just saying, 'You're here to be here because you have to be here. Go learn,' and not even teach them."*

Students at two of the sessions stated that they would like to model off the college system where students can express their opinions on what they feel are the strengths and weaknesses of each course and each professor. At one school, the students said they take surveys at the end of the year about the school but they felt staff did not take the students' responses seriously or produce any meaningful changes as a result of the survey.

Curriculum

When asked to make final comments about how schools should be assessed, one group emphasized curriculum. One student stated:

> *"Teach real world problems, like financing and stuff, mortgages, not like learning to balance equations. Focus on mental health because we spend half our time in school. School is like another…it's basically our house."*

Another student ended with a plea for "hands-on activities, I repeat, hands on activities."

Safety and Security

When asked how schools should be graded, one group focused on security and helping students feel safe. One particular student put it quite succinctly: "What makes a good school for me … I want to feel safe."

Teachers

Students wanted the opportunity to evaluate their teachers, including on reliability and consistency. One group of students was concerned about the loss of new energetic teachers due to the seniority system. They would like to have a say in who gets laid off. One student explained:

"I don't think that's how it should be...the students should rate the teacher. If the teacher has...a certain percentage, then he should stay...if you are [more] senior and you don't know how to teach, then what's the point of you being in school?"

One student expressed the idea that evaluation of teachers should be based on more than achievement scores of their students; it should also include the quality of their interaction with students:

"I feel like they should be graded on how they interact with students because some teachers could actually have [a] really high grade for statistics, but they interact with students so poorly, and it's really upsetting…"

Other students would like the option to choose their classes and their teachers, much like in college.

Genuine Learning

As described above, students stated they would like their schools to be assessed on whether students in the school are actually learning or just trying to pass the tests. Students in all the groups expressed a desire to feel engaged and an active part of their own learning, which is easier when their classmates are also active and engaged. One student proposed that schools could be evaluated using the following question: "do [students] actually learn or do [they] just try to pass?" As one student elaborated:

"I feel like graduation rates and test scores and stuff like that, they don't even matter…you can be cheating your whole way through high school and you'd still graduate. I feel like what really matters in school is if you're learning. I feel like in school I don't go to school to learn. That's actually ridiculous that I go to school every day to pass. I feel like the school should be graded on how the students are doing."

A student in another session suggested classroom observations to get a sense of how engaged students are ("literally going in the classrooms and sit there and watch") but then worried that teachers might change in positive ways when someone comes in to watch.

Understanding and Responsiveness

One student suggested that a school should be rated on understanding challenges faced by students. For example, "Is the student not doing their homework because they're unable to focus at home, because their home life sucks?"

Another student commented on the need for social workers to be understanding, in order to be helpful:

"I feel social workers should be assessed because, if the students are not in a correct mental state, it's going to be really hard for them to learn and act the way people think they should in class. It's going to be hard because they're not going to be able to focus on their work, if they're dealing with something at home or if they're dealing with something, like another altercation with a student. ... [This connects to] social workers because some of the social workers need to be able to handle situations like that. Some of them will see you upset in the social work office, and they're like, 'Go back to class. You're fine. You're fine. Go back to class.'"

Another student expressed similar concerns about unresponsive administrators:

"I feel like they need better deans because, even here, you can be going down to your dean with a serious issue, and they're just like, "Go back to class. I ain't got time for this. Go back to class." It's stressful because you're trying to explain something to them so that you don't get into a fight, but then they don't do anything. So, you end up getting into the fight, either way."

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSION

These interviews revealed consensus among participants on many important themes discussed in this report. MAC sees this as an opportunity to begin to identify priorities of students across the state in order to better inform policy decisions made on their behalf. We believe it would be helpful, as part of the process of creating a safe and supportive school, if adults would ask students the kind of open ended questions that could lead to actionable feedback at the local level. We also believe student comments should be carefully considered as accountability mechanisms, including the use of MCAS scores, are reviewed for assessing school effectiveness. MAC has offered preliminary recommendations to the Commission as it considers its recommendations for its Annual Report to the Governor and Legislature for discussion at the Safe and Supportive Commission meetings. These recommendations can be found at www.traumasensitiveschools.org

Name: _____

Reflection on School Culture

Directions: Take 2 minutes to silently, independently, answer the questions below.

1.   What does a class that you learn a lot in, look like, sound like, and feel like?

Looks like?	Sounds like?	Feels Like?

2.   What do spaces at school where you feel comfortable and safe look like, sound like, and feel like? Feel free to specify, if you feel comfortable, what space you're talking about.

Looks like?	Sounds like?	Feels Like?

Introduction – Explanation of who we are, why we're here, and what we're going to talk about

Ice Breaker
- First name, grade, age, gender pronouns, school, town
- Candy Confession (Skittles)
    RED: If you had to listen to one song for the rest of your life what would it be?
    YELLOW: If you could only eat one food for the rest of your life, what would you pick?
    ORANGE: If you could be an animal, which one would you choose?
    PURPLE: If you could have any superpower what would it be?
    GREEN: If you could live in a TV show, which one would you pick?

Thought Scaffolding
- Handout Activity
- Verbal shareout of what they write on the handout

Discussion
1. What does your school currently do to help you do well?
    - Feel free to think about "doing well" broadly. It could mean "doing well," in terms of your academics, physical health, mental health, emotions, anything you'd like.

2. Is there anything that you need to do well at school that you are not getting?
    - What might schools do differently to better serve students?

At this point, facilitators should take some time to synthesize any common threads or points of agreement that they have heard from students before transitioning to the next question.

3. What other general things do you want from your schools? How would you like for your schools to support you?
    - We'd like to hear about anything that you might want from your school in order to do well academically, socially, and emotionally.

Here, facilitators provide a brief explanation of how schools are evaluated through the accountability system, including the "report cards" that schools receive and what is included on the report cards.

4. What would you want included on schools' report cards?
    - What would you put on the list of the most important things for schools to be graded on?
    - What grade would you give your school and what would it take for a school to get an "A"?

Closing
- Thank the students for participating in the conversation
- Remind them that we will be reaching out again with updates
- Provide Reflection Form for them to fill out

Location: _____

Focus Group Feedback Form

Directions: Take 2 minutes to silently, independently, answer the questions below.

1. How would you describe your focus group experience today?

2. Were there parts that you enjoyed? If so, what were they?

3. Were there parts that you found unenjoyable or unclear? If so, what were they?

4. Anything else you'd like us to know about your focus group experience today?

5. Would you be interested in receiving updates about the advocacy process and the report?