



School Climate in Boston's High Schools

What Students Say



Boston Plan for
EXCELLENCE
IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**Based on the action research of
Student Researchers for
High School Renewal,
with funding from the
Carnegie Corporation**

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆
April 2004



Table of Contents

Background	3
Preface	4
Main Findings	5
SECTION I	
Methodology	6
Demographics of SRHSR Survey Population	7
SECTION II	
Findings for Student-Teacher Relationships	8
SECTION III	
Findings for Student-Student Relationships	14
SECTION IV	
Findings for School Environment	18
Conclusion	24
Acknowledgments	25
Student Voice Resource List	26



The Boston Plan for Excellence is a local education foundation working in close partnership with the Boston Public Schools to refine professional development for all teachers and principals-headmasters and to improve instruction in all classrooms.

Boston Plan for Excellence
6 Beacon Street, #615, Boston MA 02108
617. 227.8055 • www.bpe.org

Background

The High School Renewal (HSR) initiative, funded in part by a five-year grant from the Carnegie Corporation in 2001 as part of the *Schools for a New Society* (SNS) initiative, is an effort to transform the way Boston educates its high school students. Originally, there were four HSR partners—Boston Public Schools, Boston Plan for Excellence, Boston Private Industry Council, and Jobs for the Future—who oversaw the work of this grant. In June 2003, Boston received a \$13 million grant from the Gates Foundation to create new small schools, and the Center for Collaborative Education was included as a fifth partner.

There are two main objectives of the HSR initiative: to improve instruction so that students' literacy skills enable them to do high-level high school work; and to reduce student alienation. This report is about one of the efforts to reduce student alienation through training high school students as youth researchers, called Student Researchers for High School Renewal (SRHSR). The purpose of SRHSR is to increase student voice at the school and district levels on issues that affect high school students. To meet this objective, students were trained to design and conduct a research project in their high schools.

Student Researchers for High School Renewal (SRHSR)

SRHSR comprised students from seven district high schools and one pilot high school who were trained to gather information that would increase the voice of Boston Public Schools (BPS) students. The training provided them an opportunity to directly examine issues that affect them and gave them a role in addressing students' needs. Forty-five students were interviewed and 11 students were selected; they represented Boston's diverse student population. Beginning in November 2002, SRHSR members met weekly for two hours to create and complete a research project in Boston's high schools.

The experience of youth involved in research projects should go beyond just the 'work' of research and evaluation. Youth members stressed that there is a real and long-lasting value in developing close relationships with peers and adults.

— Harvard Family Research Project

The focus of the SRHSR research project was school climate, specifically the following issues:

- student-teacher relationships
- student-student relationships
- school environment (culture of academic achievement, college preparation, school facilities, school pride, school rules, behavior, safety)

In March 2003, 1,538 students at 12 district high schools and one pilot high school participated in the student survey. Data collected and analyzed made clear that all high schools have aspects of school climate that are in need of improvement. On June 4, 2003, SRHSR made a presentation of their general findings to the superintendent and individuals from the broader school community. This report represents the culmination of their year-long efforts and hard work.

Preface

Meaningful and sustained school reform must have at its core the involvement and engagement of students. Student voice can be a powerful mechanism for building school morale, improving school climate, and creating demand for high-quality instruction. Our hope is that this report serves as a catalyst for adults, students, and the broader school communities—within and outside of Boston—to take action against the factors that prohibit a positive school climate.



The student researchers who completed this study were invested and committed throughout the entire year. They had many ideas for the type of research questions they wanted to address in their study and used the following to guide their work:

- Q. What would a favorable school climate look like?
- Q. What actions by students, teachers, and administrators affect school climate?

The research study did not focus on the role students *themselves* play in creating negative relationships with teachers and with each other and in their lack of respect and care for their school environment and property. However, students in our focus groups were candid about how their own actions and behavior influence and create a negative school climate. This project has demonstrated that students really want the opportunity to make a positive difference in their schools. SRHSR hopes that school communities learn from the experiences of these students and provide other students a mechanism for voicing their concerns and perspectives on their education.



I hope to see a lot of schools change. I want to see change for those kids coming out of middle school, because I have a little brother. I want to see things get better. I want students to write a petition and tell them what's really going on in the school, tell them what students dislike and what students want to happen in the school.

— SRHSR Member

MAIN FINDINGS

Student-Teacher Relationships

Survey findings reveal that...

- Although the majority of students feel respected by their teachers, most do not feel comfortable talking to teachers.
- Students feel that many of their teachers believe all students can learn if they try, but that teachers do not give students academically challenging work.
- There are distinct differences in the perception of student-teacher relationships among students of different racial groups.
- Students in earlier grades (9 and 10) report having more support from adults in their school than students in older grades (11 and 12).
- There is little communication between teachers and parents.
- Students in bilingual programs report more favorable perceptions of their relationships with teachers.

Peer Relationships

Survey findings reveal that...

- There is little respect among peers.
- There are negative verbal interactions among students, particularly along racial, ethnic, and cultural lines.
- Females report more instances of hearing rude comments and arguments than do males.
- Students in bilingual programs report less disrespect among peers; however, they report hearing more rude comments based on English language skills.
- Students at small schools report fewer instances of arguments among students and less disrespect in their schools.

School Environment

Survey findings reveal that...

- There is a range of perceptions among students about the culture of academic achievement across both large and small schools.
- Students in earlier grades (9 and 10) report stronger feelings of a positive academic culture than do students in higher grades (11 and 12).
- A higher percentage of students in bilingual programs report that they have received help with activities related to the college awareness and application process.
- School facilities are not well maintained.
- School pride is lagging in most schools.
- School rules are not enforced consistently.
- Physical fighting and misbehaving in class are prevalent in schools.
- Students feel least safe in places outside of their school complex.

Section I: Methodology

SRHSR Student Survey

To research the topic of school climate, SRHSR members created a 45-question survey about three critical factors:

1. Student-Teacher Relationships
2. Student-Student Relationships
3. School Environment

The SRHSR survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete and was administered in classrooms across the district. SRHSR members enlisted the support of School-to-Career coordinators (STCs) in each high school to administer the survey. STCs agreed to ask teachers for their participation and classroom time to administer the survey to students, which took place over the course of four days in March 2003. In schools without an SRHSR member, STCs and headmasters made special arrangements to have students take the survey. The selection of classrooms to participate was based on strategies used by STCs (and/or headmasters) to recruit teachers who would agree to the administration of the survey. This selection process may have resulted in some bias in those teachers who were selected and agreed to participate in the study. Once surveys were collected, SRHSR members entered the survey data in a database developed by technical staff at the Boston Plan for Excellence.

Student-Led Focus Groups

SRHSR members also conducted focus groups with students from Boston high schools who participated in the survey at their school. Focus groups were also held with Boston high school students at a youth conference at Harvard Graduate School of Education in April 2003.

Survey Question Analysis

SRHSR members attended data analysis sessions in April and May to review, discuss, and analyze data. SRHSR was assisted by various adults representing the broad school community (see Acknowledgments) in the data analysis sessions to provide support throughout this challenging process.

How the Data Were Calculated

Calculations of students' responses to the survey questions were averaged based on the total number of respondents who *completed a survey*. The findings are reported as *percentages of the total number of respondents*. In some cases where there was a high number of students who did NOT respond to a question or who answered incorrectly (Q35 and Q38), data were analyzed by EXCLUDING the group of "non-respondents/respondents not following directions" from the population reported.

To make comparisons between and among the findings, we calculated the data by the following:

- school size: large high schools compared to small high schools
- by subgroup: grade level, race, gender, school size, academic program

This report does not present findings to all 45 survey questions, but instead highlights critical findings from each of the three sections of the report.

The SRHSR survey contained the following types of response options.

All/Most/Some/Few/None: To determine the quantity of students' perceptions to the survey question

Strongly agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly disagree/Don't know: To determine the magnitude of students' feelings and/or attitudes to the survey question

Often/Sometimes/Rarely/Never: To determine the frequency of students' experiences to the survey question

NOTE: A category of "no response" was designated for each survey question.

Demographics of TOTAL SRHSR Survey Population

Note: All responses are self-reported

Date of survey March 2003

of completed surveys from BPS high school students 1,538

% of students surveyed from the total student populations in participating schools 15%

of students in BPS high schools 18,300

of participating BPS high schools 13 (out of 19)

Whom Did We Survey? Students in Large Schools

	<u>Enrolled</u>	<u>Surveyed</u>
Brighton	1154	193 (17%)
Burke	810	183 (23%)
Charlestown	1199	193 (16%)
Dorchester	911	95 (10%)
East Boston	1430	193 (14%)
English	1192	133 (11%)
Hyde Park	1147	140 (12%)
West Roxbury	<u>1255</u>	<u>166 (13%)</u>
	9,098	1,296 (14%)

Madison Park did not participate because they were already participating in a student researcher project.

Whom Did We Survey? Students by Academic Program*

Of the 1,538 students surveyed ...

- 193 (13%)..... said they were above grade level or in an AP/Honors class
- 926 (60%)..... said they were on grade level (regular education)
- 76 (5%)..... said they were below grade level or in a special education program
- 100 (7%)..... said they were in a bilingual program
- 1 (<1%) said they were in a vocational program
- 114 (7%) said they were in more than one program
- 128 (8%)..... did not answer question

* Most of the students' core academic courses (science, math, English, social studies/history) are taken in these programs.

Whom Did We Survey? Students in Small Schools

	<u>Enrolled</u>	<u>Surveyed</u>
Excel	266	73 (27%)
G. Egleston	102	17 (17%)
Monument	277	25 (9%)
Odyssey	260	79 (30%)
Snowden	<u>421</u>	<u>48 (11%)</u>
	1,326	242 (18%)

Whom Did We Survey? Students by Grade Level

Of the 1,538 students surveyed ...

- 346 (23%)..... were in grade 9
- 465 (30%)..... were in grade 10
- 304 (20%)..... were in grade 11
- 370 (24%)..... were in grade 12
- 53 (3%)..... did not answer question

Whom Did We Survey? Students by Gender

Of the 1,538 students surveyed ...

- 707 (46%)..... were male
- 748 (49%)..... were female
- 83 (5%)..... did not answer question

Whom Did We Survey? Students by Race

Of the 1,538 students surveyed ...

- 676 (44%)..... said they were Black
- 388 (25%)..... said they were Hispanic
- 145 (9%)..... said they were Multiracial
- 125 (8%)..... said they were White
- 105 (7%)..... said they were Asian
- 10 (1%)..... said they were Native American
- 89 (6%)..... did not answer question

- "Black" also includes students who self-identified as Cape Verdean, Haitian, Jamaican, or Somali
- "Hispanic" also includes students who self-identified as Cuban
- "Asian" also includes students who self-identified as Pacific Islander or Samoan
- "White" also includes students who self-identified as Kurdish, Italian, Greek, Arab, Brazilian, or Albanian
- "Multicultural" also includes students who self-identified as two or more races

Section II: Student-Teacher Relationships

We learned from conversations with students during focus groups that for many adolescents their personal relationships with teachers are of paramount importance but do not necessarily derive from their academic relationships with their teachers or their teachers' attitudes towards them as learners. Rather, personal relationships are established from what teachers do—showing interest in students' lives outside school, attending or participating in school functions with students, and being an advocate and supporter of students.

Despite relatively favorable responses regarding teachers' respect toward them, students do not feel similarly when asked about the extent to which teachers teach enthusiastically.

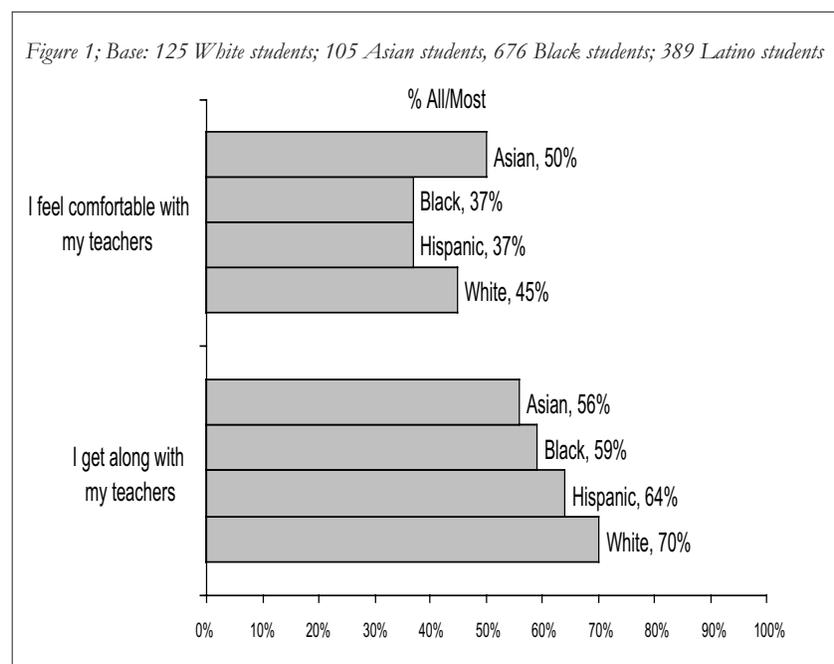
- ▶ 64% of students feel respected by “all/most” of their teachers, but only 39% report that their teachers teach with enthusiasm.

Students do not feel as comfortable talking with adults about personal issues as they do talking about academic issues.

Studies have shown students are less likely to feel alienated if there is *at least* one adult in the school who knows them well and to whom they can turn when there is a difficult situation. Although most students indicated having an adult in the school they felt comfortable talking to about *academic* issues, nearly two out of five students reported they had “no one” they felt comfortable talking to about *personal* issues. Though research indicates that student-teacher relationships are more positive in small schools than large schools (Capps & Maxwell, 1999), surprisingly, in our study, the percentage of students at small schools (44%) who feel they have “no one” to talk to about personal issues is greater than the percentage at large schools (38%).

There are distinct differences among racial/ethnic groups regarding comfort level with teachers.

Only 38% of all respondents overall reported feeling comfortable talking to “all/most” of their teachers; however, as seen in Figure 1, 45% of White students and 50% of Asian students reported feeling this way.



Students responded favorably when asked whether they get along well with their teachers. Figure 1 illustrates that approximately 61% of all students overall reported getting along well with “all/most” of their teachers, with White students responding most favorably at 70%, and Asian students responding least favorably at 56%.

Students had positive responses about their teachers' attitudes toward them as learners.

Three out of four students surveyed report that “all/most” of their teachers believe all students can learn if they try, and 62% feel that “all/most” of their teachers encourage them to participate in classroom lessons.

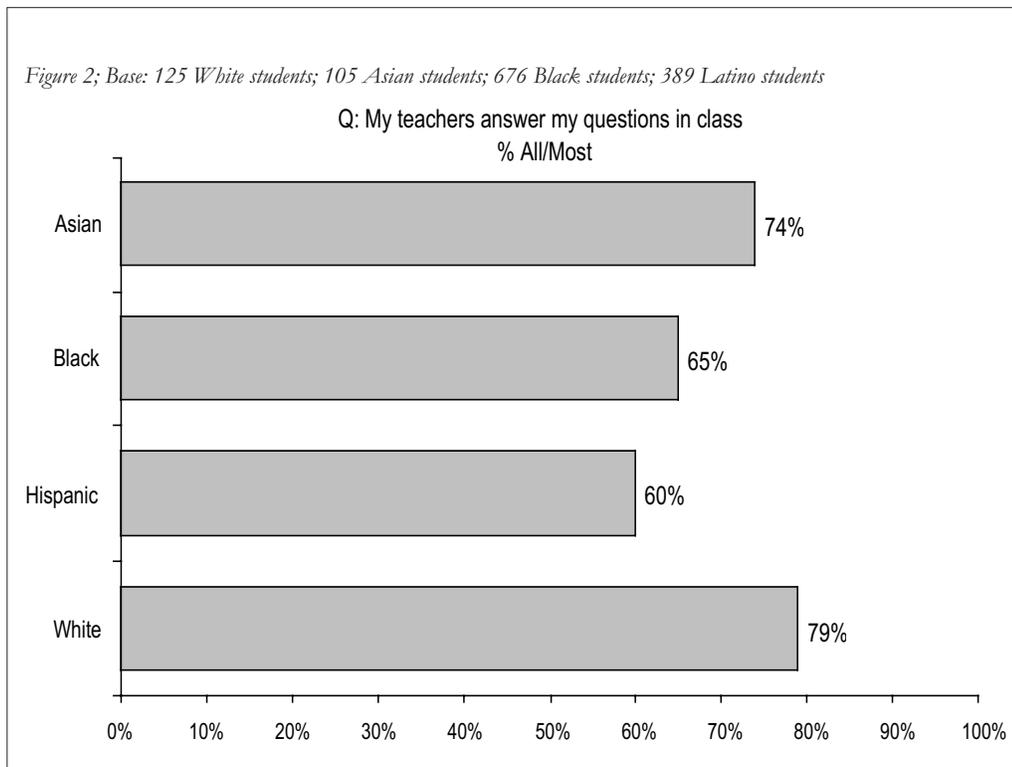


Students were less positive about their teachers' instructional approaches.

In stark contrast, students' responses to questions concerning teachers' approach to instruction and support towards them regarding academics are troublesome. Fewer than 39% of students report that “all/most” of their teachers use a variety of teaching methods, and only 28% report that “all/most” of their teachers have given or offered to give them extra academic help. Fewer students in small schools reported that “all/most” of their teachers use a variety of teaching methods to help them learn (33%) while this was more true for students in large schools (40%).

There are distinct differences among racial/ethnic groups in reports from students when asked how many of their teachers answer their questions in class.

Overall, nearly 65% of students reported that “all/most” of their teachers answer their questions in class; however, Figure 2 illustrates that fewer Black and Hispanic students report feeling this way.



While some of these findings are positive, others are troubling and even unexpected. High school student focus group discussions reveal a variety of factors that contribute to or detract from positive interactions between students and teachers and may provide adults in schools with the insight needed to address the issues. The chart below lists factors identified in these focus groups:

Students' Focus Group Comments

Things that aid the development of positive student-teacher relationships in an academic setting:

1. Teachers create a comfortable space and time for students when they find ways to incorporate real-world experiences into classroom lessons and allow students to discuss these issues.
2. Teachers tell students that they care about their success.
3. Teachers “push” students to achieve.
4. Teachers encourage and build students' confidence when they tell them “you can do it!”

Students from schools with block scheduling spoke approvingly of it because it provides more time for student-teacher interactions.

Things that hinder the development of positive student-teacher relationships in an academic setting:

1. Teachers don't communicate that they support students.
2. Teachers don't know enough about the personal circumstances of students.
3. Teachers start with stereotypes about students without really knowing the student or make judgments about students because of the friends they hang out with.
4. Teachers have too many students that they have to worry about.

Source: Focus groups with students from many Boston high schools were conducted by SRHSR members and program advisors during SY2002-2003.

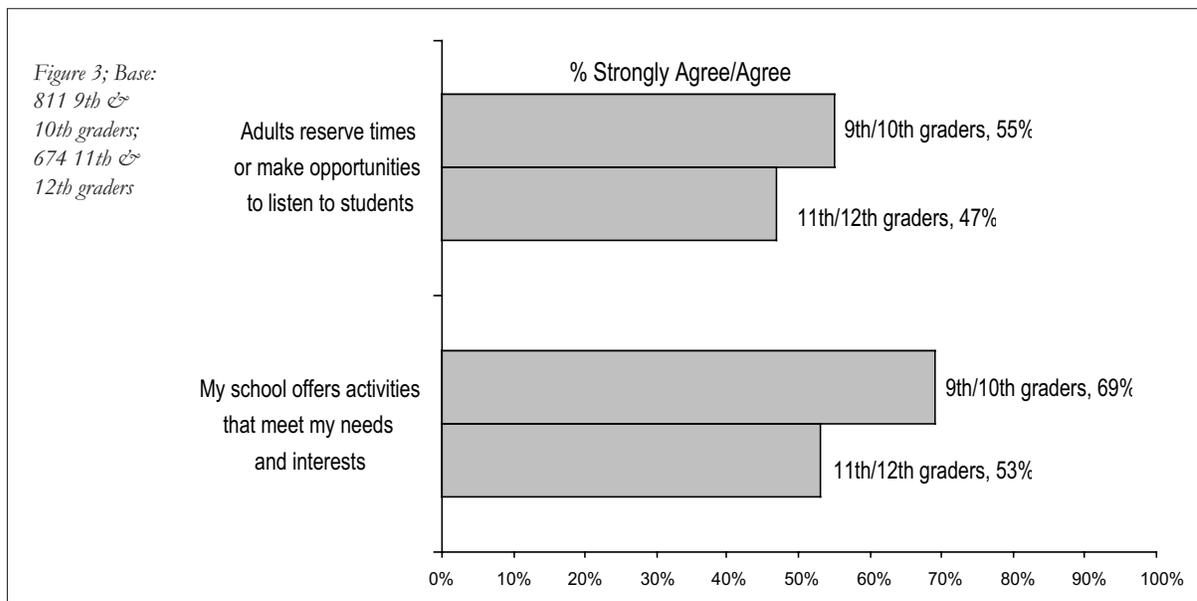
Student Support

Improving relationships between students and the adults in their school and increasing youth voice and engagement are both major goals of recent high school reform efforts. Consequently, districts across the country are using a variety of strategies such as student speak-outs and action forums, student-led research, student advisories, and full student membership on school improvement committees to accomplish these objectives. Among our survey respondents, the majority indicated that their school does provide some of these opportunities but not to an extent or scale that has significantly changed the way adults envision students' role in school reform efforts. The following data shows the extent to which students "strongly agree/agree" that these opportunities exist.



- ▶ 70%: "I have at least one adult who encourages me to take advantage of activities in the school or community that meet my needs and interests." *Students felt similarly on this topic across all grades, school sizes, and races.*
- ▶ 61%: "My high school offers activities that meet my needs and interests." *63% of students in large schools feel this way compared to 53% of students in small schools. Students felt similarly on this topic across all races.*
- ▶ 51%: "Adults at my school reserve regular times or make opportunities to listen to students." *Students felt similarly on this topic across all school sizes and races.*
- ▶ 35%: "Adults allow students' votes to count in decision-making for the school." *Students felt similarly on this topic across all grades, school sizes, and races.*

It is important that students across all grade levels feel supported by adults and that opportunities exist in their schools. Interestingly, Figure 3 shows that 9th and 10th graders report more favorable perceptions of adult support and opportunities compared to 11th and 12th graders.



Students report little communication between teachers and their parents.

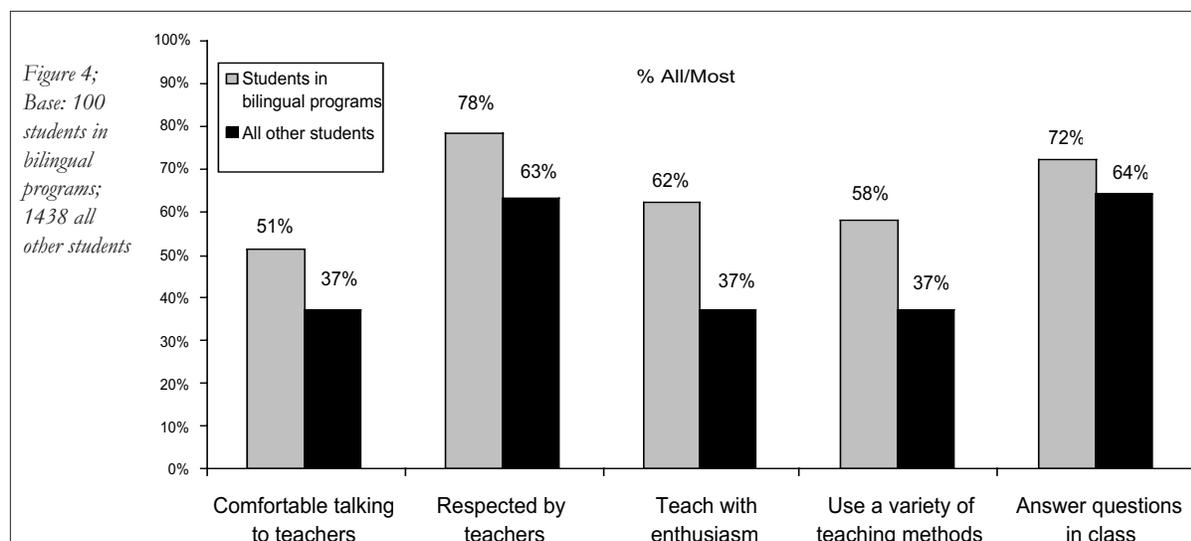
Once students reach high school, there is a marked decrease in communication between schools and parents and in parental involvement in school. However, research has found that positive relationships between teachers, students, and parents will lead to improved student performance (Henderson, A. & Mapp, K., 2000). The key is to communicate with parents on a regular basis and not only when there is a problem with their child. Our survey data indicate there is room for improvement in this area as only 10% of students report that “all/most” of their teachers have “called my house to talk to me or to my parents out of concern OR to tell my parents how I am doing.” This finding was fairly consistent across grade levels and school size.

My mom would like to talk to the teacher about so many things about my classes and education, but translation makes it difficult to get across the conversation. It [language barrier] slows down and creates obstacles to the conversation between teachers and parents.
 — BPS high school student in focus group

Students in bilingual programs report particularly positive relationships with their teachers.

As seen in Figure 4 below, there are distinct differences between the perceptions of students in bilingual programs and all other students across a range of questions about student-teacher relationships. As mentioned previously, though students overall felt respected by their teachers, many did not feel comfortable talking to teachers. In contrast, a higher percentage of students in bilingual programs report that they feel respected by *and* comfortable talking to “all/most” of their teachers, 78% and 51% respectively, which is significantly higher when compared to all other students. Figure 4 also illustrates that students in bilingual programs report more favorable responses to questions regarding teachers’ approach to instruction, such as enthusiastic teaching, variety of teaching methods, and whether they get their questions answered in class. Conversations with students in bilingual programs and teachers provide insight into factors that may contribute to these positive outcomes:

- Teachers and students in bilingual programs seek to create a family-oriented environment within the classroom
- Teachers and students in bilingual programs spend a sustained amount of time with one another
- Teachers and students in bilingual programs share common racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds



Students and teachers in bilingual programs say that these factors help them better understand and respect one another, thus allowing strong personal relationships to form. Throughout this report, other findings comparing students in bilingual programs to all other students will suggest that much can be gleaned from the positive effect that being in a small learning community in which culture, ethnicity, and language are acknowledged and celebrated, can have on students' behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of academic preparedness.

Overall, the responses from students about their relationships with adults inside and outside the school highlight the need for the school district to enlist other important individuals, such as parents and community members, in improving each student's high school experience. Students at all grade levels need guidance and support, as well as opportunities for academic and social growth. The responses from students in bilingual programs regarding their relationships with teachers demonstrate that it is possible for strong youth-adult relationships to form, but it will take concerted efforts from both groups to better understand their differences and experiences in order to create respectful communities inside and outside of the classroom. Importantly, as the debate over whether to retain bilingual education programs continues across the country, support and training for regular education teachers whose classes now contain significant numbers of English language learners will be critical in helping them address the cultural and linguistic differences in their classrooms.

Our data also revealed some disparities between racial/ethnic subgroups regarding their interactions with teachers. There is a strong likelihood that these experiences negatively affect student achievement and the gap that often exists between students of color and their White and Asian counterparts. Although our study does not yield conclusive explanations for these differences, there is research that links these behaviors with racial and social biases and stereotypes held by some teachers; consequently, teachers and other adults in schools will not only need to confront their biases, but also be trained in how to work effectively with racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse learners (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004).

Recommendations: Student-Teacher Relationships

- Do not betray students' expectations of confidentiality.
- Create a teacher-student committee to deal with issues of school climate. Activities include:
 - Within each SLC or small school, plan and hold orientation for students, teachers, and parents to establish a sense of community.
 - Create student advisories with substantial input from students .
- Provide school staff with youth development training to help them understand today's youth culture.
- Provide bilingual teachers opportunities to share their experiences and issues with school staff regarding relationship building with students
- Make use of community-based organizations and individual community members to increase teachers' understanding of their students' social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds so they can know their students' lives beyond school.

Questions to consider:

- How can schools capitalize on, maintain, and sustain the encouraging perceptions that ninth and tenth grade students have regarding adult support across grade levels?
- How can the school community improve teacher-parent communication?
- How can teachers increase their understanding of the academic and social needs of their students?

Section III: Student-Student Relationships

Peer relationships become much more complex when youth enter adolescence, and there are many factors that impact the quality of those relationships. During student-led focus groups, students discussed reasons for negative social interactions. They spoke passionately about the separateness that exists among students—racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically—and said their schools do not provide opportunities for students to talk to and get to know each other. The survey data is another window into student attitudes toward their peers and should motivate schools to address the issues that influence the quality of peer interactions.

Students stick with their own because they just feel more comfortable that way, but then it's negative because kids don't get to hang out with other students from different backgrounds.
— BPS high school student in focus group

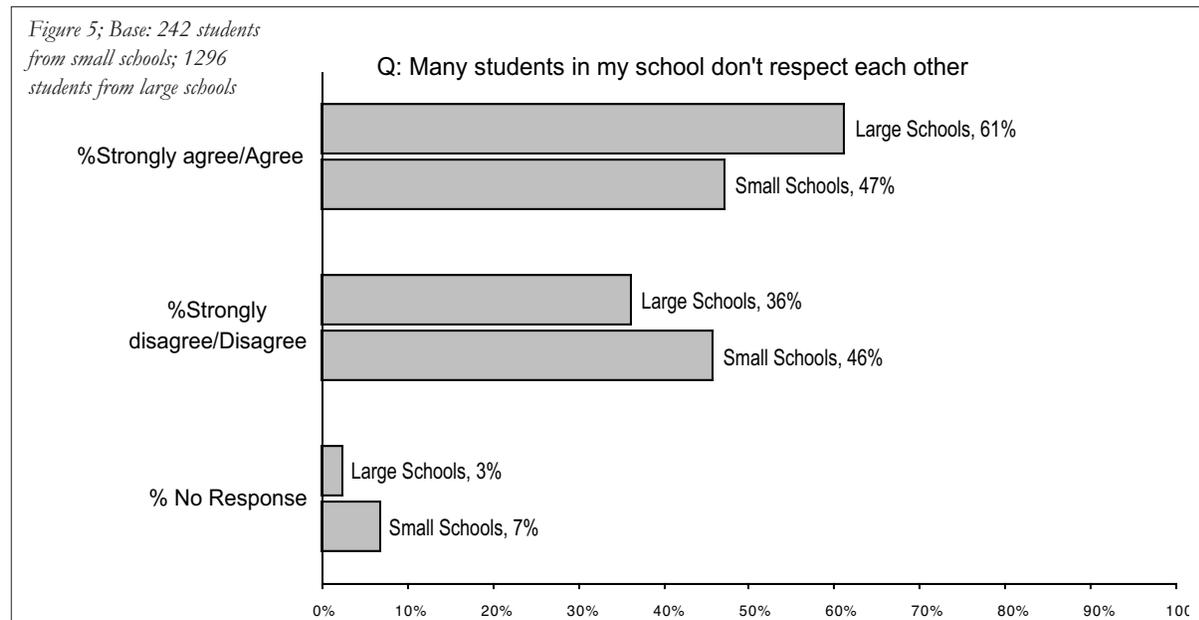
In my history class we just made flags of the different countries students were from, but never had a discussion of the different cultures. Just activities. Some kids don't take getting to know each other seriously.
— BPS high school student in focus group

Respect

Over half of students “strongly agree/agree” that their peers do not respect each other. Interestingly, lack of respect increases with grade level. Findings reveal that 12th graders are 11 percentage points more likely than 9th graders to “strongly agree/agree” that students don't respect each other.

Students in bilingual programs report less disrespect among peers.
▶ 47% “strongly agree/agree” that students don't respect each other; 59% of all other students feel this way.

Although school size did not appear to make a significant difference in the quality of student-teacher relationships, it did impact student-student relationships. As demonstrated in Figure 5, respondents in large schools are significantly *more* likely than students in small schools to “strongly agree/agree” that students do not respect each other. This finding is further supported by research which has shown that “small schools foster a greater sense of community among students and these students are more likely to bond with their teachers and peers” (Capps & Maxwell, 2001).



Verbal Interactions

Students were asked to identify the nature and frequency of rude comments among their peers, and students' responses indicate these occur often. Students report rude comments being made about students based on the following:

- ▶ 63% about race, ethnicity, or culture
- ▶ 58% about sexual orientation
- ▶ 52% about language



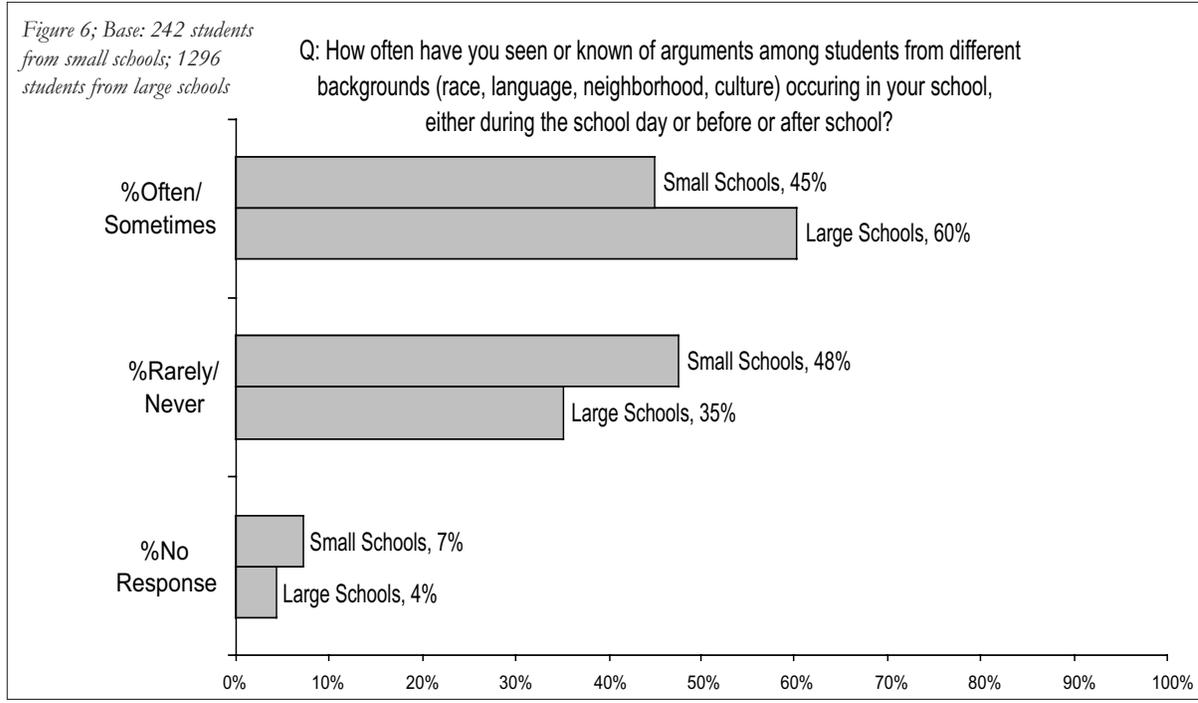
It is important to note that a higher percentage of students in bilingual programs (62%) reported that they “often/sometimes” hear rude comments based on language compared to 51% of all other students.

Females report slightly higher instances of the following behaviors compared to males:

- ▶ hearing rude comments based on race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, and language
- ▶ seeing or knowing of arguments occurring in school among students from different backgrounds

Although students in small schools reported slightly more favorable responses regarding these types of rude comments, these findings are consistent across all schools and warrant further attention from the entire school community.

Nearly 60% of students also report that they “often/sometimes” see or know of arguments among students from different backgrounds (race, language, neighborhood, etc.). It is noteworthy that students at small schools are significantly less likely than students from large schools to report that they “often/sometimes” see arguments among students from different backgrounds (Figure 6).



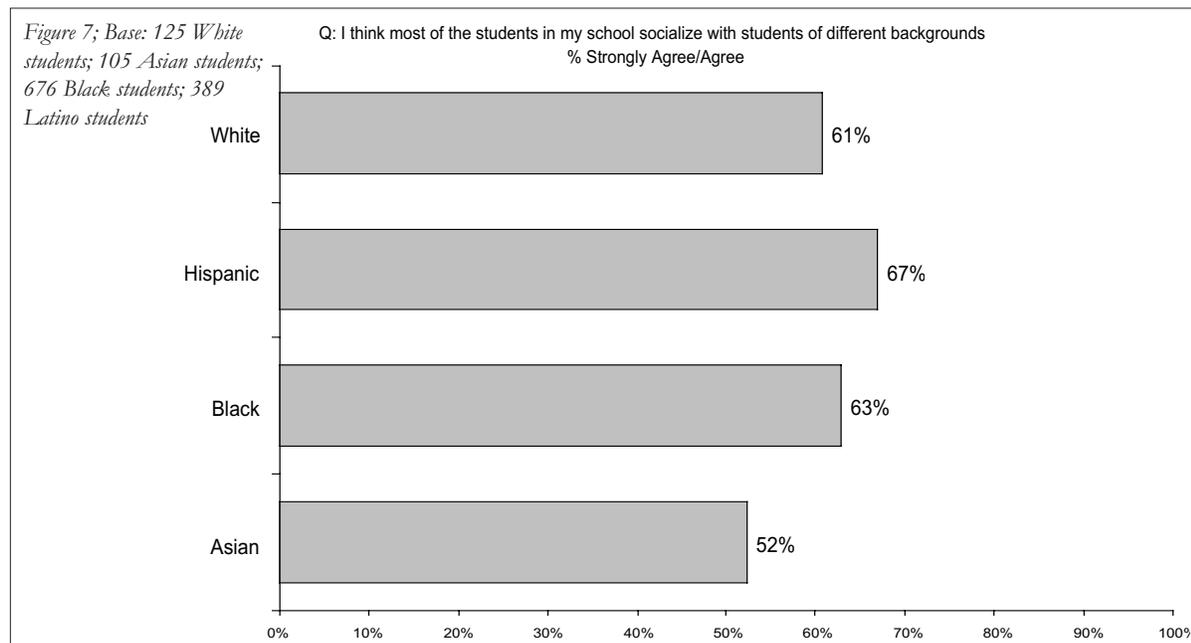
Social Interactions

Despite the frequency of derogatory comments made about students from different groups and arguments among students, the survey revealed that the majority of students are open to having more diversity in their friendships and are aware of events in their schools aimed at promoting positive peer relationships. The following indicates the extent to which all students “strongly agree/agree” to the statements about these perceptions:

- ▶ 52%: “My school has events that help students understand and respect groups that are different from them.”
- ▶ 56%: “I wish for friends (or more friends) who are different from me in (in terms of race, language, neighborhood, etc).”

Interestingly, there are some differences across racial/ethnic groups regarding friendships, as a higher percentage of Asian and Hispanic students report that they wish for friends who are different from them, 71% and 63% respectively. The percentages of Black and White students who feel this way are closer to the overall average response for this question.

The majority of students (62%) also “strongly agree/agree” that students in their school socialize with students of different backgrounds (by race, language, neighborhood, etc.). However, as seen in Figure 7, fewer Asian students report seeing socialization between and among diverse groups in their schools.



Survey findings also provide insight about the perception of students toward groupings among peers (by race, language, neighborhood, etc.), which is important to consider for the development of positive and healthy peer relationships across these differences. Overall, 42% of students “strongly agree/agree” with the statement that “students think it’s okay to interact only with students of similar groups (by race, language, neighborhood, etc).” Once again, there were differences across racial/ethnic lines, as more Asian and Black students perceive that their peers think it is okay to group themselves, 53% and 45% respectively; 39% of White students and 34% of Hispanic students report feeling this way.

However, students feel differently among each other about whether grouping in their school creates a negative school climate. While nearly 40% of students “strongly agree/agree” that grouping in their school (by race, language, neighborhood, etc.) contributes to a negative school climate, 56% of students also “strongly disagree/disagree” about this effect. Conversations with students in focus groups about these issues reveal that students feel strongly that negative peer interactions cannot be changed for the better, and most commonly say “well, that’s just the way it is.” Interestingly, though, the students we spoke with did mention that they did not have opportunities in school to more deeply understand and learn about the racial/ethnic, cultural, and linguistic experiences and backgrounds among their peers, which could help them respect and understand each other’s differences.

Some people may be afraid of stepping “outside the box” and getting to know other students and groups. They need help.
— BPS high school student in focus group

As the data show, students across all high schools are experiencing negative interactions with their peers on a fairly frequent basis. In many cases, students may feel they have to handle these situations themselves for fear of being ridiculed by their peers. In addition, they may also feel there is not an adult with whom they feel comfortable confiding in about the problem. It appears also that certain groups of students, particularly females and Asians, are more likely to report seeing negative peer interactions in their schools.

It is very difficult to know the “pulse” of a large student body. Creating small learning communities or small schools is a step in the right direction. However, small is essential but not sufficient. It is critical that adult staff in schools examine and address the effects that poor inter- and intra-ethnic communication and interactions have on the social climate of their schools. They must model and promote a school environment of trust and respect and not tolerate behaviors that are inappropriate and disrespectful (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). Some recommendations for possible next steps are the following:

Recommendations: Student-Student Relationships

- Give students more opportunity to talk with and learn about each other through student-led focus groups to discuss issues of race, ethnicity, culture, and language.
- Provide training for teachers and school staff to deal with negative verbal interactions, such as rude comments and arguments, among youth regarding issues of race, ethnicity, culture, and sexual orientation.
- Offer peer mediation programs.
- Hold a multicultural festival planned by students, teachers, and parents that connects to a curriculum unit or major focus for the entire school.

Questions to consider:

- How can schools partner with families and the broader community to create a school climate that is culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically competent?

Source: Focus groups with Boston high school students, SRHSR members, & educational research.

Section IV: School Environment

The final portion of the report examines student perceptions about seven aspects of the school environment:

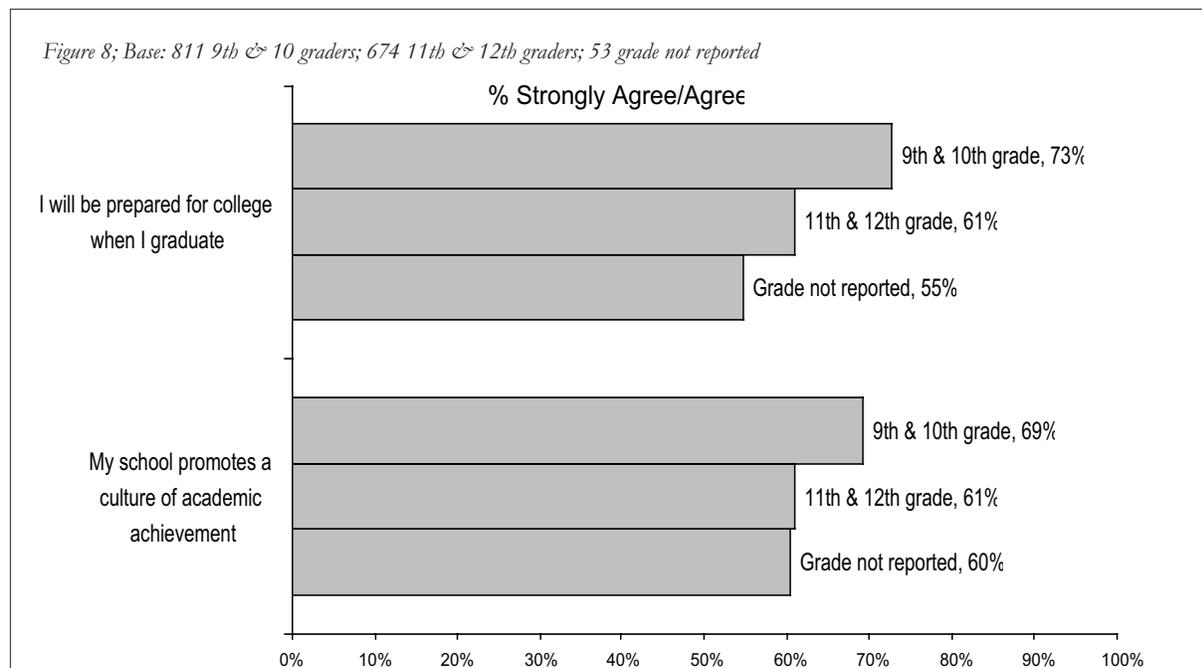
- Culture of high academic achievement
- College preparation
- School facilities
- School pride
- Student behavior
- Safety inside and outside of the school building

A higher percentage of students in bilingual programs (72%) “strongly agree/agree” that they will be prepared for college compared to 62% of all other students.

There is sufficient evidence from research that these factors can and often do influence student achievement (Lyons, 2001). The information that follows will give a clearer picture of how students feel about these aspects of their school environment.

Culture of High Academic Achievement

Sixty-five percent of students “strongly agree/agree” that their school promotes a culture of high academic achievement, while a similar percentage feels academically prepared to go to college (67%). Both questions yielded a range of responses from individual schools, from as low as 49% to as high as 83% and there were no differences among subgroups. Interestingly, Figure 8 shows that 9th and 10th graders are slightly more likely to “strongly agree/agree” that 1) their school promotes a culture of high academic achievement and 2) they will be academically prepared for college when they graduate, compared to responses from 11th and 12th graders. However, in stark contrast to the majority of students feeling prepared for college, only 40% of students indicate that “all/most” of their teachers give them academically challenging work; there were no grade-level differences.



College Preparation

Related to the culture of academic achievement is the extent to which students are actively engaged in the college preparation process. Students' reports indicate that they are not being prepared for college to the fullest extent. Students reported "yes" when asked whether they have received, completed, or done any of the following activities:

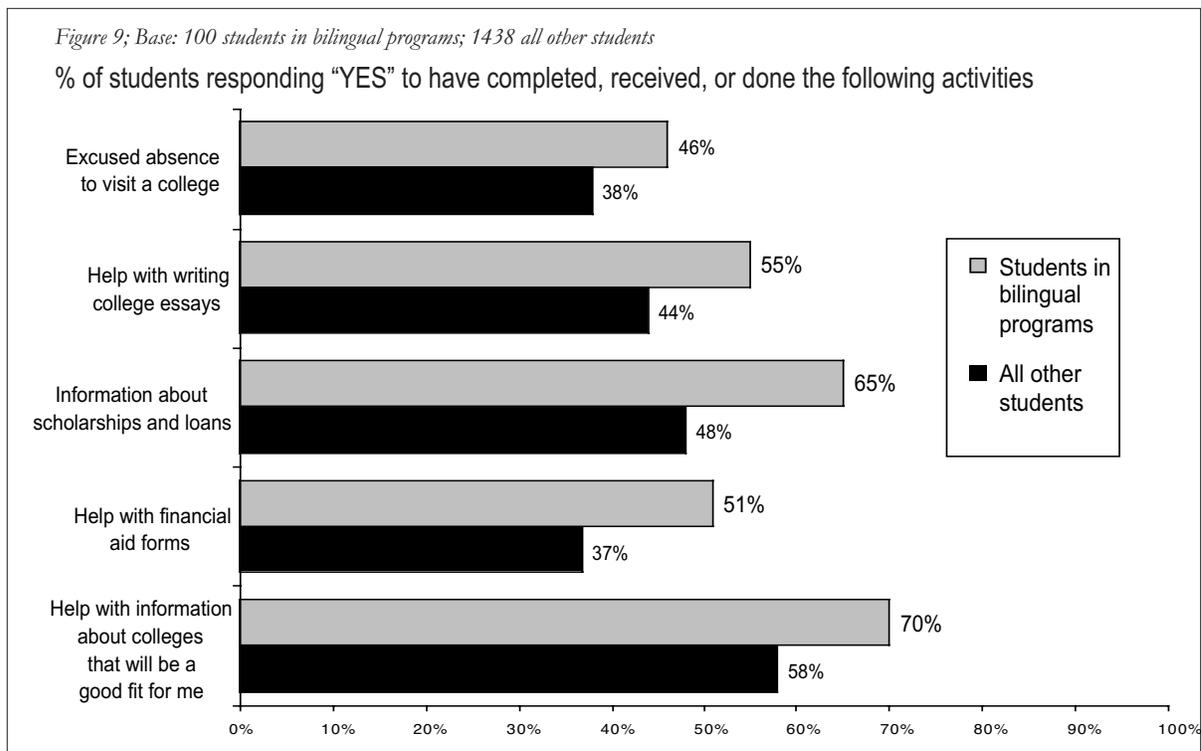
- ▶ 59%: help with information about colleges or universities that will be a good fit for me
- ▶ 49%: information about scholarships and loans that will help me afford college
- ▶ 45%: help with writing essays for college applications

However, only 38% of students reported "yes" to:

- ▶ an excused absence to visit a college or university
- ▶ help with financial aid forms for college

Though there were no significant differences between large and small schools regarding these questions, not surprisingly, 12th graders reported receiving the most college preparation compared to students in other grades. However, these fairly low percentages regarding college preparation do not complement the perceptions of academic culture and college readiness expressed, in particular, by younger students. It is important that students are informed about and guided through college preparation activities to realize college attainment.

Interestingly, Figure 9 shows that a higher percentage of students in bilingual programs are more likely to report that they have received, completed, or done college preparation activities. Of the types of preparation activities surveyed, as seen in Figure 9, a significantly higher percentage of students in bilingual programs reports receiving information about colleges, financial aid, scholarships, and loans than do all other students.



School Facilities

Research supports the notion that sub-par school facilities affect students' education and academic achievement (Lyons, 2001). When school facilities are well planned and maintained, students, teachers, and the larger school community all benefit. Students' responses to questions about school facilities indicate their general dissatisfaction with the cleanliness and condition of their school complex:

- ▶ 51% report that bathrooms are "rarely/never" clean
- ▶ 50% report that repairs are "rarely/never" done in a timely manner
- ▶ 48% report that trash cans are "rarely/never" in the hallways

Facility condition may have a stronger effect on student performance than the combined influences of family background, socioeconomic status, school attendance, and behavior.
— Council of Educational Facility Planners

Students in focus groups named a variety of reasons for the lack of cleanliness of school facilities.

- ▶ Students put graffiti on the walls.
- ▶ Students keep destroying flowers and plants in the school bathrooms.
- ▶ No one monitors the hallways.
- ▶ The building is old and scary.
- ▶ The building looks like a factory and has dull lighting.
- ▶ Janitors are isolated from students.

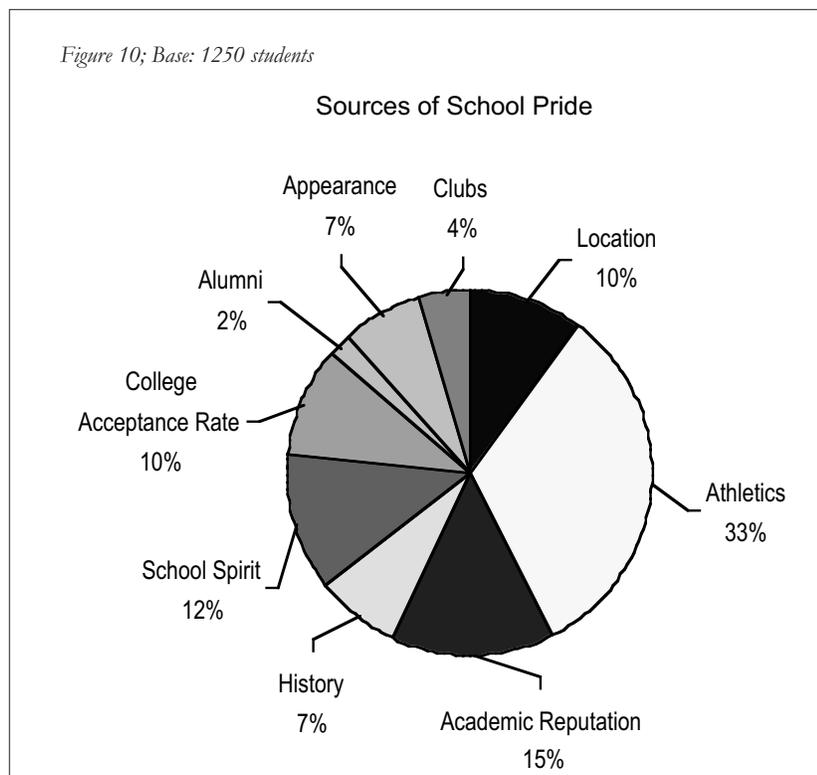
Encouragingly, these concerns about facilities are issues that could be resolved with the support of the entire school community. It is noteworthy that the majority of students responded that classrooms and hallways are kept clean most of the time, which provides a foundation for beginning the conversation among students and adults about how to keep other school areas clean as well.

School Pride

School pride is lagging in most schools as only 58% of students "strongly agree/agree" that they feel proud of their school, and only three schools report percentages over 70%. Interestingly, 9th graders report feeling the most pride in their school, while 11th graders are least proud.

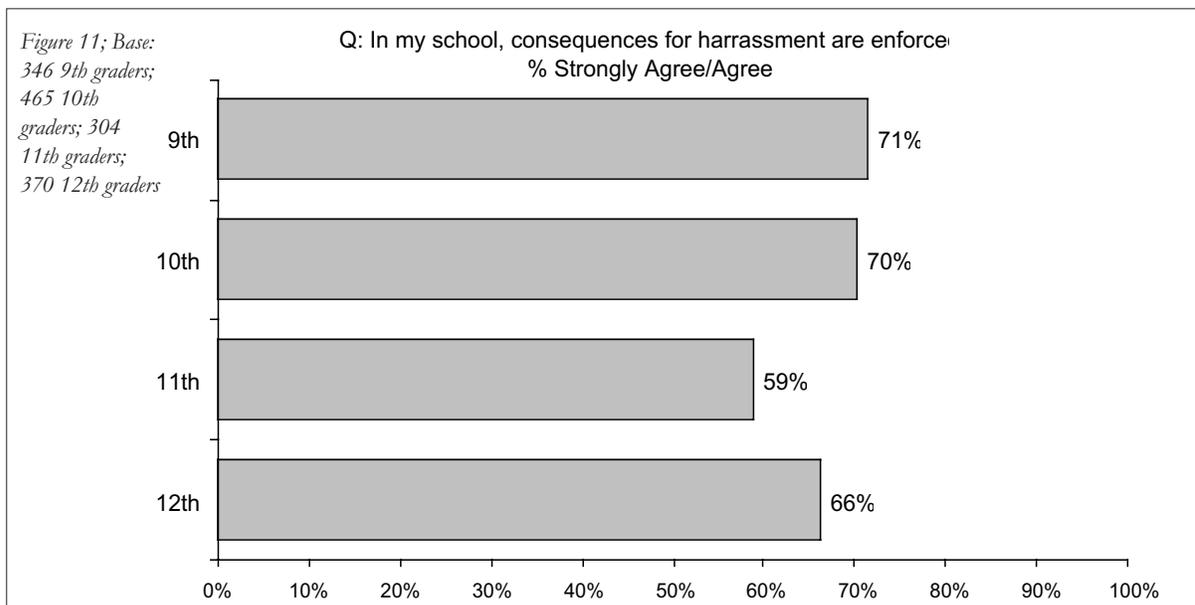
Figure 10 shows that the greatest sources of school pride for students are athletics (33%) and academic reputation (15%).

Figure 10; Base: 1250 students



School Rules

When adults deliberately involve students in discussions and decisions regarding school-based rules and policies, increased ownership, efficacy, and accountability among students and adults should follow. Unfortunately, when this type of collaboration and agreement between students and adults is not present, there is often inconsistency in enforcement and adherence to rules and policies. This may explain why 37% of students in our survey report that rules about respecting school property are “rarely/never” enforced. While it is encouraging that 67% of students “strongly agree/agree” that consequences for harassment are enforced, it is worth noting that the individual school percentages range from a low of 57% to a high of 81%, and there are no noticeable differences between large schools and small schools. Interestingly, Figure 11 shows that a higher percentage of students in lower grades (9 and 10) “strongly agree/agree” that consequences for harassment are enforced compared to students in upper grades (11 and 12).



Student Behavior

At most schools, students reported that disruptive behaviors are prevalent. Seventy percent of students reported that they “often/sometimes” see students physically fighting; however, there were distinct differences between reports from students at large and small schools. Nearly 74% of students at large schools reported physical fighting compared to only 46% from students in small schools. In two of the five small schools, only 17%-18% of students “often/sometimes” reported that they see students physically fighting.

Misbehaving in class was another type of disruptive behavior surveyed, as 85% of students report that they “often/sometimes” see students misbehaving in class. Though reports of misbehaving are high across schools, students from large schools reported this behavior slightly more frequently (87%) than students in small schools (79%). There were no differences in grade level regarding the frequency of physical fighting or misbehavior.

Females report slightly higher instances of “often/sometimes” seeing or knowing of physical fighting and misbehaving than do males:

- ▶ Physical fighting: 72% females; 67% males
- ▶ Misbehaving in class: 89% females; 83% males

School Safety

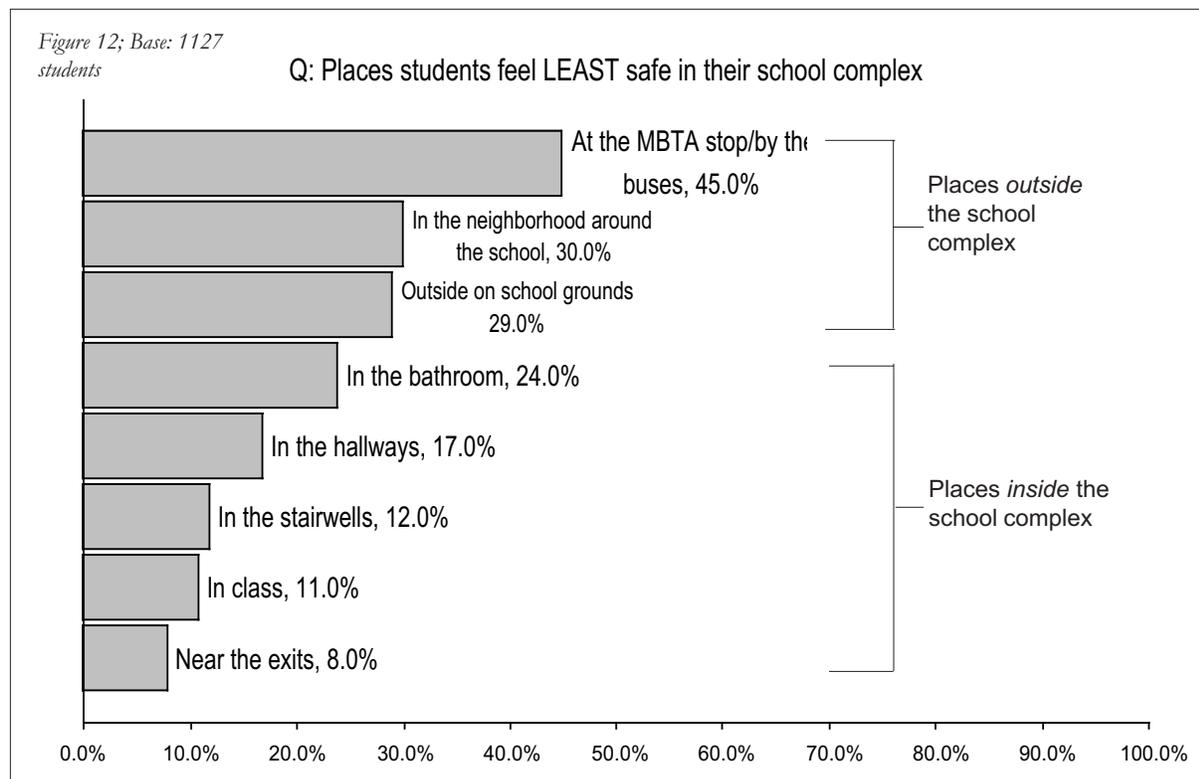
Safety both inside and outside of schools is of significant concern to students. Though the majority of students (60%) “strongly agree/agree” to feeling physically safe inside their school complex, the following information provides insight into some specific areas of concern inside school buildings:

- ▶ 24% of students identified the bathrooms and 17% of students identified the hallways as the least safe places inside their school
- ▶ 19% of students from large schools identified the bathrooms as the least safe place compared to only 9% of students from small schools

Students feel least safe in places outside their school complex.

As seen in Figure 12, students report unfavorable perceptions of safety outside of the school complex, particularly at the “MBTA* stop/by the buses.” These statistics are troubling and require further attention, given that many students who attend Boston’s schools depend on public transportation to get to school.

* Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority



The responses from students about questions regarding their school environment illustrate that there are distinct differences in the experiences of students by grade level, race, and gender. Younger students in particular appear to have more favorable perceptions about the academic culture in their schools, enforcement of rules, and school pride than older students do about these issues. Despite these differences, there are issues that concern all students such as the cleanliness of school facilities, college preparation activities, safety, and behavior. Building strong relationships and support among parents, students, adults, and members of the broader school community to address these issues is critical because they concern and affect everyone in the school environment. The data presented will be useful for beginning conversations among these constituencies about the issues, but the action taken to improve them will be most important toward establishing and maintaining a safe school environment. Some recommendations for possible next steps are the following:

Recommendations



Culture of High Academic Achievement

- Strengthen the communication of the school's mission of educational and social success and achievement for students within the school culture.
- Strengthen the quality of instruction and collaboration among teachers through professional development.
- Partner with organizations such as The Bottom Line, Boston Higher Education Partnership, and Higher Education Resource Center to supplement the support students receive from their guidance counselors.
- Partner with community-based organizations to organize tours of colleges and universities in the greater New England area.

School Pride

- Arrange activities, projects, and events that promote school pride and respect for school property.
- Enlist the support of the community around the school.
- Involve the student body in strategizing and problem-solving issues of vandalism and cleanliness.

Safety

- Provide school staff with methods for conflict resolution.
- Develop a school-wide disciplinary policy and implement it consistently.
- Study and address issues related to travel/transportation and start time.
- Enlist the support and assistance of parents and the broader community around the school.
- Strategize issues of safety with members of the community, such as the MBTA and the Boston Police and partner with the MBTA's STOPWATCH program.

Source: Focus groups with Boston high school students, SRHSR members, & educational research.

Conclusion

Overall, the survey data reveal that Boston Public Schools is faring better in some aspects of school climate than in others. It's likely that the district-level data is most positive in those areas such as improving relationships between teachers and students in grades nine and ten because schools have targeted fiscal and human resources to the needs of those students. To build on the strengths and address the areas of greatest challenge, individual schools will need to ask, "What have we done differently in those areas that are showing the most promise?" and "How can we use these best practices to move forward and improve in other areas?"

As Dr. Maryellen Donahue, Director of Research, Assessment, and Evaluation for the Boston Public Schools said, "We have the numbers, but *you* know what they mean." Schools will need to examine and discuss contextual information alongside their school climate data to answer the questions above and develop a plan of action. Teachers, students, administrators, parents, and others are all necessary and valuable sources of contextual information and ideas for how to change the status quo. To help schools in the process, SRHSR program advisors created an individual school climate report for each of the 13 schools that participated in the survey and also arranged individual meetings to discuss these reports at 10 of the 13 schools. Our goal is that our advocacy for student voice and engagement influence what happens between students and adults at schools. The SRHSR project and the resulting presentations and individual school reports have served as a catalyst for deep and honest discussions between students and the adults in their schools, although there have been varying degrees of follow up and action. Examples of action taken by individual schools include the following:

- A group of teachers at one school was so troubled by the data that they decided to create a "school climate" committee
- A school applied for and received a student research grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to support a group of students who will research issues of educational equity in their school
- A headmaster holds a bi-weekly "Lunch with the Headmaster" event to simply listen to students' concerns about their school
- Students and adults are engaged in dialogues with each other and revising school-based rules to reflect input from all stakeholders in the school community

These encouraging examples need to be shared with other schools. As this work continues, we hope all of Boston's high schools push themselves even farther along the continuum of meaningful student voice and engagement. Ultimately, if done well, these efforts will lead to students having greater influence on decisions that affect their academic and social success. ■

I guess I appreciate the Boston Public Schools more because I had the opportunity to see, in addition to what we're doing, how the school system was set up. I think that Boston is headed in the right direction in terms of including students in the decisions in schools and just even thinking about what students think about. That's important, and it's a big step to take.
— SRHSR member



Acknowledgments

SRHSR Program Advisors and authors of the report: Stephanie Sibley, BPE Director of High School Renewal & Veronica Garcia, High School Program Associate.

The authors of this report would like to acknowledge the following Boston high school students for their membership and participation in Student Researchers for High School Renewal (SRHSR) during SY02-03:

Jessica Almeida, 10th, Brighton HS
 Josh Lawrence, 9th, Burke HS
 Brenda Lau, 11th, Charlestown HS
 Gervase Jones, 11th, Charlestown HS
 Olga Nunez, 12th, Charlestown HS
 Gina Charles, 12th, Dorchester HS

Lidia Figueroa, 11th, English HS
 Julissa Rodriguez, 11th, East Boston HS
 Michael McNutt, 11th, East Boston HS
 Christian Stallworth, 11th, Greater Egleston
 Community HS
 Monifia Charles, 12th, Hyde Park HS

Special thanks to High School Headmasters & School-to-Career Coordinators at the thirteen district high schools for their cooperation and assistance.

Special thanks to the following adults for their support and assistance in the SRHSR research project:

Detris Adelabu, Professor, Wheelock College
 Lili Allen, Program Director, Jobs for the
 Future
 Christopher Coxon, BPS, Deputy
 Superintendent for Teaching & Learning
 Maryellen Donahue, BPS Director of
 Research and Evaluation
 Richard Gray, New York University, Institute
 for Education & Social Policy
 Daniel Mayer, Mathematica Policy Research,
 Inc.

Kathi Mullin, High School Renewal Office, BPS
 Susan Naimark, Boston School Committee
 member
 Rochelle Nicols-Soloman, Cross-City Campaign
 for Urban School Reform
 Pedro Noguera, Professor, Harvard Graduate
 School of Education
 Alethea Raynor, Annenberg Institute for School
 Reform
 Neil Sullivan, Executive Director, Boston Private
 Industry Council

Special thanks to *all* the staff at the Boston Plan for Excellence.

Student Voice Resource List

Articles/Tools

- Education Week article featuring Michelle Fine's Student Researcher Project in New York high schools: www.edweek.com from September 11, 2002.
- Gallagher, Carole J. (2002). Stories from the strays: What dropouts can teach us about school. *American Secondary Education*, 30 (3). Summer 2002.
- Kushman, J. (Ed). (1997). *Look Who's Talking Now: Student views of learning in restructuring schools*. Portland, OR: Northwest Educational Regional Laboratory. Student Research Toolkit and related articles on student voice also available at: <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/scc/studentvoices/index.html>
- Jefferson County Public Schools *Student-Led Conferences* booklet available at: http://www.prichardcommittee.org/pubs/cat/student-led_conferences.pdf
- John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University, Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) Handbook for Supporting Community Youth Researchers: <http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/wo/woyellhome.html>
- Romo, Harriet. (1997). Improving ethnic and racial relations in the schools. ERIC Digest. Available at: http://www.ericfacility.net/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed414113.html
- The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher 2002 available in the Education section at: <http://www.metlife.com>

References

- Capps, William R. and Mary Ellen Maxwell. "Where Everybody Knows Your Name: The Beauty of Small Schools," *American School Board Journal*, v. 186, n. 9, September 1999, pp. 35-36.
- Henderson, A., & Mapp, K. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

- Lyons, John B. "Do School Facilities Really Impact a Child's Education?" A Council of Educational Facilities Planners International Brief on Educational Facilities Issues, November 2001, p. 6.
- National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine. (2004). *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn*. Committee on Increasing High School Student Engagement and Motivation to Learn. Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Smith, Jennifer. C. "Pizza, Transportation, and Transformation: Youth Involvement in Evaluation and Research." *The Evaluation Exchange: Out-of-School Time Issue*, v9, n.2, Spring 2003. Also available at: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue17/html/promising1.html>

Websites

- Campaign for Meaningful Student Involvement: www.studentinvolvement.net
- Sacramento Public School District (Carnegie *Schools for a New Society* site), High School Improvement Office, youth information contact: e21@leed.org or <http://www.education2100.com/default.asp>
- What Kids Can Do: <http://www.whatkidscando.org>
- Youth Today Newspaper: <http://www.youthtoday.org>
- Teaching to Change LA's student researcher project: <http://www.teachingtochangeLA.org>
- Youth on Board: <http://www.youthonboard.org>
- The Freechild Project: <http://www.freechild.org/>
- Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia Washington, Student Involvement program: <http://www.k12.wa.us/integratedcurr/yes/>
- The Knowledge Loom—Culturally Responsive Teaching: <http://www.Theknowledgeloom.org/>
- Youth in Focus: <http://www.youthinfocus.net>