



ANALYSIS: SLEP STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSION GROUPS

Prepared for Alexandria City Public Schools

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PROJECT OBJECTIVE

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) seeks to explore the perceptions of the district's stakeholders around safety, security, and policing in schools. Specifically, ACPS wants to:



- ✓ Understand what processes or policies impact safety and security in schools.



- ✓ Identify how experiences with school safety differ among stakeholder groups.

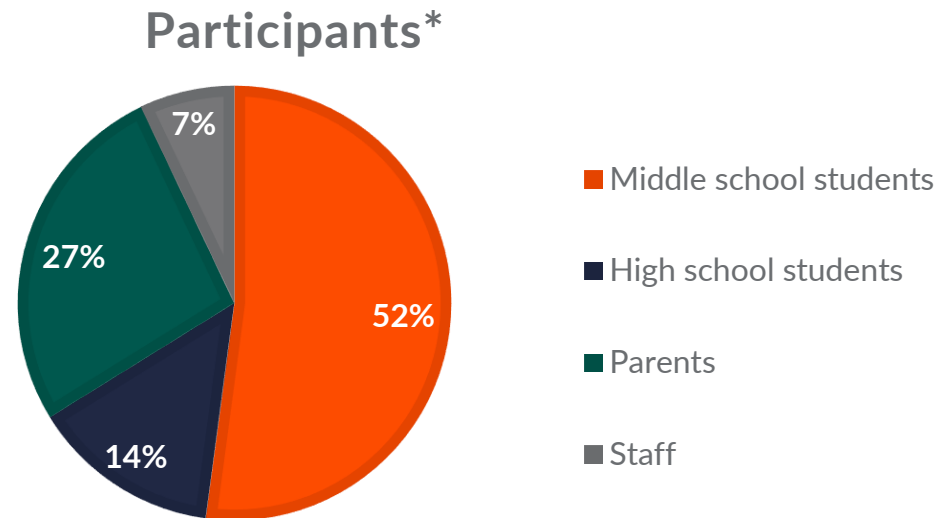


- ✓ Clarify how stakeholders feel about policing in their schools.

METHODOLOGY (1/2)



Hanover conducted **18** focus groups with **142** middle and high school students, parents, and staff.



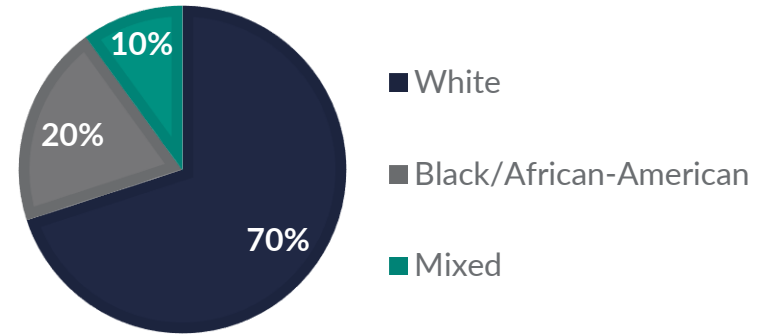
*See Appendix for a full breakdown of groups

Note: Qualitative research is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.

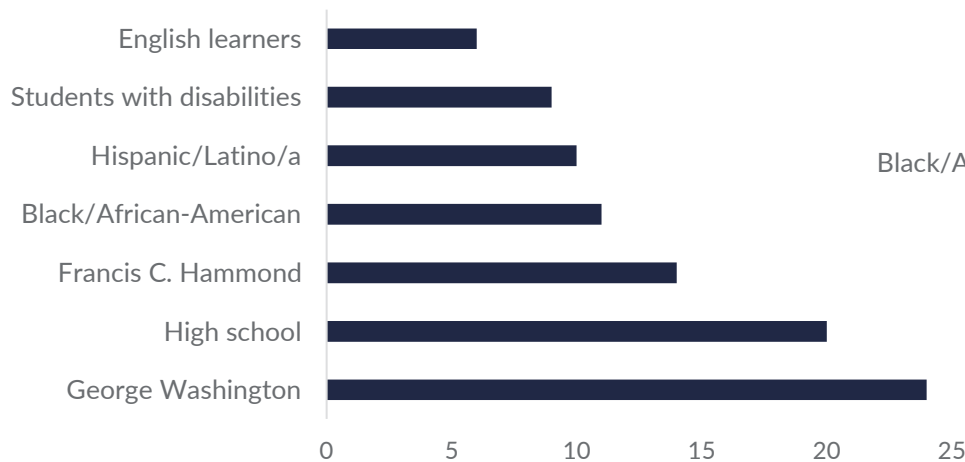
METHODOLOGY (2/2): PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

Hanover conducted **one** administrator discussion group, **two** staff groups, **five** parent groups, and **10** student groups.

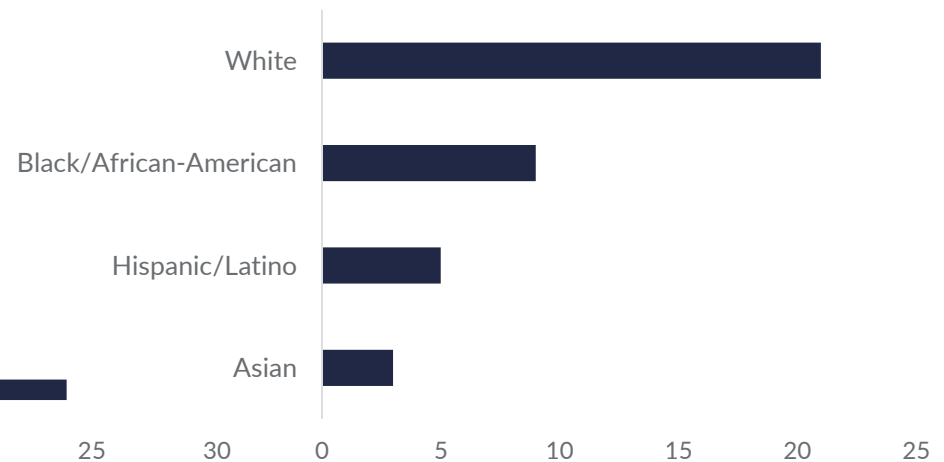
Staff Demographics




Student Groups




Parent Demographics





KEY FINDINGS (1/2)


 Although external threats are a source of anxiety for parents, students identify **fighting and drug use as their primary sources of concern**. Participants in all discussion groups highlight fights as a substantial factor negatively impacting school safety. Students cite fights as the primary element undermining their safety while at school; however, they also express substantial discomfort with drug sales and use in bathrooms. Several parents mention being disturbed when their children show them social media videos of massive fights. Staff express concern about a perceived lack of follow-up actions to address student violence.

 Participants stress the importance of **integrating policing and related security work with mental health and emotional supports**. Participants across groups cite social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic as a contributor to student aggression. Staff note a severe regression of students' social and emotional regulation skills and a spike in mental health crises in recent years. Participants across groups link gang activity, vaping, drug sales, and drug use in school bathrooms to students' mental health challenges. Although some staff identify Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) as a useful resource, students dismiss it as a rote and forced activity, and other staff suggest that teachers have not been adequately trained to implement it effectively.

KEY FINDINGS (2/2)

 **Insufficient transparency has negatively impacted buy-in for policing.** Participants across groups highlight a lack of transparency on school safety and policing measures and outcomes. For example, high school students express frustration about a perceived lack of information-sharing concerning drug-related and violent incidents. Parents and staff mention the lack of sufficiently disaggregated and/or accessible data on arrest rates and criminal incidents on campuses. Participants across groups suggest that increased data-sharing and communication to explain safety and security policies and procedures could be useful to increase support for the presence of SROs.

 **Parent and staff participants seek additional security measures.** Participants mention the need for metal detectors and drug-sniffing dogs to reduce the risk of mass shootings and the prevalence of drug use on campuses. Parent participants express frustration with city government for pushing back on requests for additional security tools. They also evince surprise when presented with survey results indicating only moderate support for metal detectors among students, parents, and staff and low support among community members.

 **Most participants have experienced only limited interactions with SROs.** Some participants across groups describe SROs as distant and/or intimidating. Students with positive impressions of school officers typically mention occasions when an officer visited their class or engaged them in friendly conversation. Participants across groups, however, suggest that intimidation and opposition to SROs can be overcome through community-building activities such as classroom visits or athletic events.



PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY

FACTORS UNDERMINING SAFETY





I feel like we're hyper-focused on fights. But in preparation for this call, I asked my high schooler what did he feel was the biggest kind of issue security-wise or dangerous issue. And he mentioned drugs. And I don't hear any talk about drugs in our schools.”

–Parent (Black), King Street

EXTERNAL THREATS: A SOURCE OF ANXIETY

Parents and students express concern about school shootings. Parents and students describe fears of intrusions by individuals external to school communities. Several middle school students mention the Robb Elementary School massacre, and they identify active shooter drills as a source of comfort. Multiple parents cite ID-checks as reassuring, and both parents and students highlight the importance of locking doors at school entrances as a measure that enhances their feelings of security.



*“My 12th grader feels very safe here. She is **most worried about outside coming in** and how would she find safety being on the second and third floor **in a shooter situation**. She doesn't have any anxiety about what happens in the building day to day.”*

–Parent (White), King Street

*“Lockdown **drills make us feel more comfortable**. Also, teachers who have doors to the outside, they make sure they're closed. I definitely have seen **teachers who have their doors locked** during the day. If you go to the bathroom, and you come back, you just knock, and they open the door. That **makes me feel a little bit safer**.”*

–Student (Hispanic), George Washington



*“The **locked doors and check-ins seem effective**. I like the idea of the **electronic IDs and having the 100% ID-check** thing. I don't know how that's being executed or how effective it is, but it just seemed like a **good kind of extra measure to take**.”*

–Parent (Black), Minnie Howard

FIGHTS: A PRIMARY SAFETY CONCERN

Participants in all groups highlight fights as a substantial factor negatively impacting school safety. Students cite fights as the primary element undermining their safety while at school. However, many students indicate that they have become inured to large-scale fights and simply seek to avoid becoming entangled in violent conflicts.

Several parents mention being disturbed when their children show them social media videos of massive fights. One parent partly attributes their decision to remove their child from ACPS to student fights.

Staff also express concern about a perceived lack of follow-up to address student violence.

"I feel safe from outside threats. But within our hallways, we have a lot of fights that break out randomly throughout the day, and I just don't want to be caught up in that."

-Student (Black), Minnie Howard

*"My daughter doesn't feel safe there because the amount of violence, the fact that **there are fights every day**. Recently when she was on her field trip, they were asked to leave because a student tased another student in the genitals. That is one of the reasons why **we're pulling our daughter from the school, just because we're concerned for her safety.**"*

-Parent (Black), Minnie Howard

*"There's been a lot of altercations at the school, and when something happens, students could be right back in the classroom, whereas the **parents haven't been notified**, the **students haven't really been dealt with** or even asked what happened. Last year, some **teachers were attacked after they were trying to break up a fight.**"*

-Staff, George Washington

COVID IMPACTING STUDENT BEHAVIOR

Social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic is cited as a contributor to student aggression. Some parents express the view that widespread fighting in schools reflects post-pandemic violence in the wider world.

Staff similarly mention the regression of students' social and emotional regulation skills and a spike in mental health crises following the pandemic.

Several high school students also express agreement with the above-mentioned views, noting that they observed an increase in school fights following the return to in-person learning.

“Everybody was feral. People on planes were flipping out. It was really like a movie. Everyone was losing it. Right? We forgot how to interact with people.”

–Parent (White), George Washington

“Something about the fights that I noticed, they got so much worse because of COVID and how people weren't able to physically be next to each other. And that's where the fights got worse. I feel like their emotions were heightened somehow. And that's why they were way more aggressive in some way.”

–Student (Hispanic), King Street

“There were a lot of concerns about our rising sixth grade because they were coming after off a year of COVID. They just didn't really know what to do when they got to the school. So last year was a total new learning experience for them. These are nice kids. They may not know how to behave all the time. They may not know how to settle an argument or to disagree with each other and not have it be in a way that's socially acceptable and also productive.”

–Staff, Hammond

VAPING AND DRUG USE: RISING CONCERNS

Participants across groups identify drug use as a pervasive problem. Students particularly highlight middle and high school bathrooms as unsafe places due to high levels of vaping, drug sales, and drug use. Specifically, multiple students express discomfort at witnessing drug use and/or being offered drugs. Some parents and students also mention drug use at after-school events such as athletic games.

*“My son has told me about drugs, **active drug activity**. People **in the bathroom selling**, what, like pills or vapes and weed pens and stuff. Yeah. And **he's just kind of taken aback by that.**”*

–Parent (Black), Minnie Howard

*“It's kind of been frequent that **whenever I go to the bathroom, I always see a group of people huddled in the big bathroom, in the big stall, and either they're doing weed or they're doing something to the toilets that it just smells. It makes me really uncomfortable.**”*

–Student (Black), King Street

*“**Vaping is really big right now** in the middle schools and the high school. And I mean really big. I hear a lot from parents about **whether or not the school is doing enough to interdict drug use and tobacco use.**”*

–Staff, District-wide

GANG ACTIVITY: STUDENT LENS

The issue of gang activity emerged both organically and through a discussion of survey results. For example, when asked to characterize their school, one EL student (Hammond) described it as “ghetto” because “There's a lot of gangs.” However, other students reacted unfavorably to survey results indicating that community members expressed stronger concerns about gangs vs. students, parents, and staff. These students attribute the perception of a gang presence to media coverage:

*“I think a lot of **people are seeing these headlines** like a student was stabbed or the school is on lockdown. But at the same time, you have to understand that **this is the same school that's producing Harvard students**. it just seems kind of **biased** because they see these headlines that only say bad things. **You never see anything good about our school**. So I think that kind of **leads into why so many people think there is violence problems.**”*

–Student (White), King Street

Other students suggest that student gang activity is driven by larger sociological issues in their communities:

*“When you're **looking from the outside in**, you don't come from a neighborhood with, quote-unquote, gangs or gang violence, then you're like, ‘Oh my gosh. This is horrible. This is scary.’ But **when you come from those areas** and you come from those experiences, **you understand that everything is not a gang problem**. Well, to me, it's an actual **security problem**. It's a **funding problem**. It's a **mental health problem**. It's a **school-to-prison pipeline problem.**”*

–Student (Black), King Street

GANG ACTIVITY: STAFF LENS

A few staff participants highlight the gang presence in ACPS as a substantial concern:

*"We, for sure, have gang problems in our school. The child that I'm most concerned about this year that I work closely with has **death threats against him from MS-13, him and his entire family, credible to the point that he was pulled out of the district last year and moved to a complete other part of the state to try to get him away from them, to try to get things to calm down, to try to get some semblance of control over the situation.**"*

-Staff, Minnie Howard

Other staff laud the city's gang intervention programs for reducing gang activity in schools:

*"I have been in the district 15 years. I am not seeing as much gang-related types of activities as I used to. I credit a lot of the work for our gang intervention that's happening through the program sponsored by the city where they really were **aggressively reaching out and trying to address it within the community.**"*

-Staff, Hammond

However, some staff express frustration at the lack of policies to restrict gang expressions in ACPS:

*"There's absolutely **no restrictions on apparel in the buildings.** I'm seeing kids walking around in bandanas now, which is usually a gang indicator. I'm seeing kids starting to wear **MS-13 gear**, that we know that gear is associated with that group. And **there's nothing that I see being done about that at all as it concerns as a security issue.** Because **if we let them advertise it, then they'll proliferate.**"*

-Staff, District-wide

GANGS AND CREWS: RACIALIZED CONNOTATIONS

Questions concerning the distinction between crews and gangs emerged during the parent and staff discussion groups. Several staff highlight the distinction between gangs, which they associate with Latino students, and crews, which they link to African-American students.

“The majority of the students are not gang involved. The only two established gangs in the city or at the school are the Latino gangs. The African-American kids might be mixed in. That's changed over the years. The Black kids are usually in crews. They might call themselves ‘47th Street’, but it's really not an organized gang. So I think that the adults are confused about what the difference is between a crew and a gang and how those things operate because gangs are way more dangerous than a crew.”

–Staff, District-wide

However, one student questioned their school's response to gang activity, suggesting that security lapses were exacerbating the problem.

“If we're going to say that the gangs that we have are mostly Latino, why would you put all the Latino students in one hallway then? If you see a party of 30 walking out of the door, and we don't have security at the bottom of the stairwell where we have 20 exits, then that's not a gang problem. That's a security not being at the door problem.”

–Student (Black), King Street

VIEWS OF SAFETY MEASURES





I think everybody being on board and everyone supporting the whole mission, and kids understanding helps. Kids feel like it's a hassle to come in with their ID. But when you talk to kids and explain that we're just trying to make sure that you're safe and everybody feels good about coming here, they get it."

–Administrator, King Street

UNCLEAR DISCIPLINARY POLICIES

Participants across parent and staff groups emphasize a lack of cohesive and consistent behavioral and disciplinary systems. Staff assert that policies vary across schools, and parents and staff suggest that existing policies are undermined by unclear expectations and uneven enforcement.



Some staff point to a lack of personnel dedicated to developing and implementing disciplinary measures. These participants particularly highlight the removal of deans and crisis resource teachers from high schools as a factor that has negatively impacted student behaviors, with corresponding effects on safety.

“We are, to my knowledge, the only urban school district with such large schools that has **no building staff dedicated to discipline**. The APs [Assistant Principals] cannot manage discipline and teachers and everything else at the same time. **We had deans for 11 years** at the high school. And before we had deans, **we had crisis resource teachers**. So there was **always someone on the school responsible** for discipline. And **now, they have no one**. All of that work falls on the APs.”

–Staff, District-wide

“There seems to be **a lack of understanding of what the discipline procedures are**. It feels like **there are not consequences** for behaviors. There **doesn't seem to be a coordinated understanding** among teachers of what the policies are, what they're supposed to do with the **different tiers of behaviors**, and then how they're being addressed. I just think that the entire **community really needs to understand what the expectations are**. I think that would **help everybody feel more safe and secure**.”

–Parent (White), George Washington, King Street

STAGGERED DISMISSALS ARE APPRECIATED



Some parents and staff cite staggered dismissal procedures as a useful crowd-control measure.

Participants note that prior to the implementation of this measure, staff were vastly outnumbered by students. As they explain, students were typically standing idle as they awaited their buses, which resulted in a substantial number of violent incidents among students.

However, one staff member warns that staggered dismissal alone is not sufficient to eliminate student fights.

“The staggered release time seems to at least help with the crowd leaving en masse.”

–Parent (White), King Street

*“Staggered dismissal was **the smartest thing they could do** because the administrators were outnumbered. We had **a lot of fights going on**, and you could tell they were planned fights. The staggered dismissal means **less children outside** or not dismissing them until their buses arrive so **they're not just standing around and can engage in negative activity**. That has gone super well.”*

–Staff, Francis Hammond

*“Staggered dismissal is a useful tool, but it definitely **does not stop those kids that want to fight** from planning a fight and waiting outside to fight. It just **eases the number of kids hitting the egress at one time**.”*

–Staff, District-wide

CELL PHONE POLICIES: DEBATED AND UNEVEN

Participants express varying views of policies prohibiting cell phone use. Some staff participants cite cell phone policies as being effective for reducing opportunities for students to collaborate in planning or broadcasting negative behaviors such as drug use in bathrooms or after-school fights. However, other staff and some parents highlight the lack of enforcement provisions. Some student and parent participants, for example, assert that they feel safer when students can access their phones in emergency situations.

*“We originally did have a phone policy. It went away when we returned from the pandemic. That really fueled chaos. Just a lot of issues, a lot of **students out of place**, a lot of **students hyping, social media**—‘Let’s gather. Let’s fight after school. Let’s fight in the bathroom. Let’s exchange or vape or whatever in the bathroom.’ **All of that was aided by the use of cell phones. Now, we’re back to a policy, and that has deterred** a lot. That’s made a big difference.”*

–Staff, Francis Hammond



*“I feel safer when I can use my phone because I can just text my mom at any moment. They say they could call your mom, but that takes longer in emergency. **I could just press a few buttons and just talk to her.**”*

–Student (Latino/a), Francis Hammond

*“The **phone rules are just so hit or miss** because it relies on the teacher being able to enforce it. They might have **distractions or other priorities than being the phone cop.** It’s a nice idea, but I’d be **curious to know how well it works in practice** from classroom to classroom.”*

–Parent (White), George Washington

FRANCIS HAMMOND: LOCKER POLICIES

Parents and students affiliated with Francis Hammond Middle School highlight a recent rule requiring students to store their backpacks in lockers. Although this policy is generally unpopular among students, several participants specifically cite it as a factor enhancing their sense of safety. Some parents similarly mention delays arriving to class caused by having to travel to lockers between classes; however, others emphasize that the inconvenience is worthwhile.

*“I would say that they're trying their best and **implementing ways to try to keep them safe**. I'm not sure if this is the reason why they have **standard times to go to their locker** and they're **unable to wear their backpacks** so they **won't conceal weapons**, and maybe to **prevent from loitering** in the halls. I appreciate that. It's **just a little bit of inconvenience**. But if that is the reason, to increase safety and reduce any violence, I **appreciate that**.”*

–Parent (Black), Francis Hammond

*“I think that **the locker rule is good** because **people who have knives** can put their stuff in the locker **instead of having them out**.”*

–Student (Hispanic), Francis Hammond

“

*“I know [the locker rule] is for a safety issue or something, but I don't like it. I **just like having my backpack around** so I can hold my stuff and know that **if I ever need anything, then I have it on me** to use it.”*

–Student (Asian), Francis Hammond

PERCEIVED GAPS IN SECURITY

Several staff and parent participants stress the need for more stringent security measures. These participants particularly mention the need for metal detectors and drug-sniffing dogs to reduce the risk of mass shootings and the prevalence of drug use on campuses. Parent participants express frustration with city government for pushing back on requests for additional security tools. They also evince surprise when presented with survey results indicating only moderate support for metal detectors among students, parents, and staff and low support among community members. Several parents highlight the possibility that community members “don't want to pay” for such measures as ironic given their negative survey responses concerning school safety.

*“I think security and safety is **out of touch with the reality of this generation** of children and the challenges they present when it comes to managing **illegal contraband, drugs, weapons, and violence** in general towards each other. The lack of an acceptance for the reality of this generation of high school with 4,000 students that **doesn't have metal detectors, that refuses to bring drug dogs through the school, even on the weekend, and that anybody would think removing police from makes any sense.**”*

–Staff, District-wide

*“They're **bringing Tasers to school and they're doing vaping** and everything else. I think they need to have a **metal detector, clear bags**, something. I don't understand **how the kids are getting the stuff into the school.**”*

–Parent (Black, Minnie Howard)

*“**It's the 800-pound gorilla in the room.** Every time it's mentioned, there's all kinds of, ‘Well, **metal detectors don't prevent people from coming in the window.** They don't prevent people from stabbing somebody.’ But **there are 67 mass shootings this year in schools.**”*

–Parent (White), George Washington, King Street

A collection of hanging light bulbs, some lit and some unlit, against a dark background. The bulbs are arranged in a grid-like pattern, with some in the foreground and others in the background. The lighting is dim, with a few bulbs glowing. A dark green horizontal bar is overlaid on the image, containing the title text.

PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY AND POLICING

STUDENT LENS



STUDENT WORD ASSOCIATION: SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS



332 responses

STUDENT VIEWPOINTS: OVERVIEW

Student participants' views on SROs and security guards can be divided into four main categories:

- **Strongly Positive:** A substantial minority of student participants emphasize the role of school safety and security personnel in maintaining safety against both internal and external threats. They typically recount positive interactions with SROs and/or security guards.
- **Neutral-to-Lukewarm:** The bulk of participants offer little input on school safety and security personnel. They recount limited-to-no interactions with officers, whom they describe as being “distant,” “scarce,” or “just present.”
- **Ambivalent:** A substantial number of participants offer both positive and negative comments on safety officers. Some describe punitive or other unpleasant interactions with security guards or SROs, or they express frustration at a perceived lack of action to address student violence or drug use. However, they also emphasize that the officers' presence makes them feel “safe” and “comforted” against external threats.
- **Strongly negative:** A small number of student participants highlight only negative interactions with security guards and police officers.

Notably, the above perspectives can be found across racial and ethnic groups. Student participants are unanimous that school safety and security personnel have demonstrated no evidence of racial, ethnic, or linguistic bias.

POSITIVE VIEWS OF SCHOOL OFFICERS

A substantial number of student participants describe SROs and security guards as an important safety measure.

In several cases, the topic of SROs and security guards organically emerged during student discussion groups. These students cite safety and security personnel as the main reason they feel safe at school. Other students emphasize the role of school police in protecting them from external threats as well as peers with weapons. Although many student participants conflate security guards and SROs, others make a clear distinction.

*“They have **a lot of security**, and when students go out from their class, there are **securities that will tell you to go back to a class**. They will not let you go out of school or any places.”*

–Student (White, EL), International Academy, King Street

*“The **police officers** at the school are **what make me feel safe**. They’re **here to protect us from the shooters**, people with **guns**, people like **terrorists**.”*

–Student (Hispanic, EL), Francis Hammond

*“We have a bunch of all the officers, but **we have one that's the actual police**. When I see him, I **definitely feel safer**. Also, just he's very nice. So it's like, ‘Oh, hi’, and, ‘You're here’, and you can see that **they are around**, and **they're watching**, and they're making sure that everyone is **safe enough for their education to thrive**.”*

–Student (White), George Washington

NEGATIVE VIEWS OF SCHOOL OFFICERS

Among participants, students with disabilities (SWD) and high school students who identify as persons of color (POC) are more likely to express negative views of SROs.

One SWD describes feelings of apprehension when he sees the SRO due to a perception that the officer is targeting him. Another SWD recounts a situation in which they perceive that an officer misinterpreted his hypersensitive reactions as aggressiveness.

Some POC high school students highlight feelings of discomfort around SROs. These students claim they felt safer when SROs were absent from schools.

“Whenever he sees me in the cafeteria or outside, he puts his hand like this [mimes positioning hand near the waist]. It’s like he’s going to grab his gun and shoot me.”

–Student (Asian, SWD), Francis Hammond

I only noticed [the SROs were gone] because their presence made me uncomfortable when they were there. So I noticed that they were gone. It made me feel uneasy that they were there. So, I felt a little bit better when they weren’t.”

–Student (Black), King Street

“I wrote ‘mayhem’ and ‘problem’ because I get really nervous and upset when there’s a lot of noise or fights, like in the cafeteria or when they’re letting us out of school. One time, I freaked out a little bit, I started yelling, and the officer yelled at me. I just wish he could be more calm.”

–Student (Black, SWD), Francis Hammond

ROLES IN DE-ESCALATION

Students express varying views concerning the role of security guards and SROs in de-escalating fights. Several students suggest that security guards do little to intervene to stop student-on-student aggression:

*“All the **security guards are scattered around all the doors** making sure that we don't leave. I rarely see any security guards not at a door, and **it's just sort of embarrassing** because usually, the **security guards are supposed to break up fights.**”*

–Student (undisclosed), George Washington

Multiple students advocate for school security and resource officers to relieve teachers and administrators of the burden of breaking up fights in the hallways:

*“I feel like the **teachers shouldn't break up fights** because it's not their job, but at the same time, a lot of them feel responsible for it because they're like, 'I'm an adult in the situation and I have to do something.' But I think in general, I feel like **it should be like a resource officer's job** because the **teachers are there to teach.**”*

–Student (White), King Street

In contrast, several students recount occasions outdoors when SROs were actively involved in dispersing outdoor fights:

*“The police, I remember **there was a fight outside, and they were doing everything in the power to break it up, and it broke up very quickly because they were there.** A lot of police officer officers came there very quickly to **de-escalate and find out what happened** to make sure it doesn't happen again.”*

–Student (Black), King Street

SCHOOL OFFICERS AS COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Student participants' views on school officers as community members vary according to the level and quality of their interactions. Most students describe distant interactions with SROs and security guards. However, students who emphasize the value of school officers also recount occasions when an officer visited their class, helped them when they were lost, or engaged them in friendly conversation. Multiple students differentiate between officers who they perceive as speaking to them disrespectfully and those who evince a positive demeanor and interest in their wellbeing.

"I don't really talk to them that much, but every time I come across them, they have a kind of aggressive-ish tone."

-Student (Black), King Street

"I think they're part of the community. Last year, for PE, he showed us why he's here, the police officer. Why he's here and then what he's going to do."

-Student (Latino/a), Francis Hammond

"I've had some that were very helpful. If you ask them a question, they'll show you. So there are times where they're very helpful, they're very kind, and I'm thankful for those guards who are just helpful."

-Student (Black), King Street

"I've spoken to a few of the security officers, and I'm thinking about two ladies in particular who I happen to pass in the hallways a lot, and I think that they're good people and they're very kind. I feel like it's nice to see that there's someone else there. I'm not the only one alone in the hallway. I think that does make me feel a little bit more comforted just because I know, like, 'Hey, there's someone else here.' And to know that if anything ever did happen, at least there's someone who's supposed to help. In my experience, if you're nice to them, then they'll be nice to you."

-Student (White) King Street

PARENT LENS



PARENT VIEWPOINTS: OVERVIEW

Parent participants' views on SROs and security guards can be divided into three main categories:

- **Strongly Positive:** A substantial proportion of participants emphasize the role of school safety and security personnel in maintaining safety against external threats. They largely refer to fears of intruders, gang activity, and students with weapons.
- **Ambivalent:** A substantial number of participants offer nuanced comments on safety officers. Some express frustration at a perceived lack of transparency and accountability, as well as the diversion of resources to address students' disciplinary, mental health and social-emotional problems. However, they also point to the importance of officers as a “necessary evil” to protect students.
- **Strongly negative:** A small number of parent participants express complete opposition to the presence of SROs in schools. These parents decry a perceived emphasis on punitive measures. Some participants also recount discomfort with the fact that SROs are armed and cite past alleged misconduct involving SROs.

Notably, the above perspectives can be found across racial and ethnic groups.

SRO ADVOCACY: PARENTS (1/2)

Some parent participants highlight the need for SROs to ensure students' safety from both peers and external threats. Some of these parents cite precious incidents of students found with weapons on campuses.

Others mention the large student populations in the middle and high schools, which they suggest is conducive to chaos. A few parents suggest that fights and other violent incidents have decreased since SROs have returned to their children's schools.



"I am a proponent of having school resource officers on campus, particularly in the large schools like the high school. There are just so many students that I think it's helpful. I think it is important to have them there."

-Parent (Black), King Street

"I stand very firm in my belief that we need SROs in schools. We expect all these kids in a small space to get along after COVID. I'm here to sort of hear more about what SLEP is doing too. Because I feel like the goal might be to get rid of the SROs ultimately. And that really worries me. I'm involved because there was a kid arrested with a loaded 9mm 20 feet from my daughter's classroom. And we all know that school shootings happen."

-Parent (White), King Street



"My daughter has the perception that when police returned, the fights went down. It felt safer. She does not have any interactions with the SROs, but she said when the police are there, it feels like there's less fighting."

-Parent (White), King Street

SRO OPPOSITION: PARENTS

Several parent participants express fervent opposition to the idea of having SROs in schools. These parents describe placing police in schools as a “reactionary measure” that “institutionalizes” schools and makes students feel intimidated and uncomfortable. Other parents explain that they simply do not perceive any benefit to having police in schools due to the persistence of student violence.

“The SRO at the safety forum came with the, ‘Oh, kids come up and fist bump me and hug me.’ And I’m like, ‘I would too. You’ve got like a gun. If you put it up, I’m not going to ignore you.’”

–Parent (White), George Washington

“This is our first experience where my daughter is at a school where cops are required to be present. Based off of my research, I don’t see the benefit from them. What is the purpose of the officers being present or their involvement when there’s still just as much fighting?”

–Parent (Black), King Street

“I think it’s a reactionary measure. I don’t think it’s a safety measure. My son has interaction with the SRO sitting at lunch. He does not feel comfortable with an armed guard in a cafeteria where he’s trying to eat lunch.”

–Parent (White), George Washington

“They don’t make me feel safe. They don’t make my daughter feel safe here. She’s a high-flyer, so she doesn’t generally see them, but when she does, she gets as far away from them as she can. She doesn’t like a gun in the building, no matter who’s got it.”

–Parent (White), King Street

ACCOUNTABILITY AND ROLE CLARITY

A substantial number of parent participants raise questions about SRO accountability. These participants cite incidents of alleged misconduct or weapons discharges and express concern that SROs can act with impunity.

Parents also express uncertainty concerning whether SROs or administrators hold the ultimate authority to determine whether student behavior will be criminalized.

“My understanding is that the SROs report up through the police department and not through the school administration. One of the concerns that I have is who's in charge. If the principal and the SRO have different opinions about how to handle a matter, who gets to make that call? If we're concerned about students unnecessarily being kind of pushed into the legal process as far as whatever's happening, then it seems to me that there needs to be really clear guidelines on when the SROs get to make the calls and when the principals get to make the call on how behavior is going to be managed.”

–Parent (Black), George Washington

“I'm rather ambivalent on the SRO issue. I have a lot of mistrust for the SRO situation at the high school. That second [SRO] removal was because they were sexting. That was in the newspaper articles. They were sexting with teenagers. So obviously, there's a level of complacency when it came with their power over the students.”

–Parent (White), King Street

“There's nobody in charge of them in the building. For example, when a gun went off at GW from the SRO officer. And there's this general perception that the SRO officers are accosting people. I called the police department six months after, and they just said, ‘We're investigating.’ So, I have this picture of Barney Fife sitting in his office spinning his gun.”

–Parent (White), King Street

SRO EMBEDDEDNESS

Participants who express ambivalence about SROs suggest that their presence should be largely restricted to school entrances.

These parents emphasize that SROs are a “necessary evil” whose presence reassures them that students will not be victimized by weapons. They question the ability of the SROs to build positive relationships with students.

However, other parents highlight that previous SROs were trained community members who leveraged their relationships for violence prevention. They encourage other parents to be patient as newer SROs build ties with students and parents.

*“I think the **police should be there at the doors** and in order to review students’ backpacks to see if they’re bringing weapons. Once they review all of the stuff, **I don’t think there is a need for police inside the schools** because students always are going to think that they’re trying to put them in danger.”*

–Parent (Latino/a), Francis Hammond

*“**It’s a necessary evil** because, of course, **if there’s an active shooter, I want the police to be right there** and familiar with the school and be able to try to mitigate that situation. But on a day-to-day basis, **what are they really doing to build positive community with the students?** That part I’m not sure of.”*

–Parent (Black), Minnie Howard

*“I think **it’s hard to evaluate the SRO program where it is right now** because there was a program with specifically trained officers who were there for many years. Now, **we have new SROs who are establishing their relationships** with students. I think it’s not really about the policing as much as it’s knowing that you have the officers there. **When something is percolating in the community, they’re aware of it.**”*

–Parent (White), George Washington, King Street

STAFF LENS



STAFF VIEWPOINTS: OVERVIEW

Staff participants can be classified into two broad categories:

- Most staff express unequivocal support for the presence of SROs in ACPS. These participants emphasize concerns about student violence and gangs as well as the role of SROs as community members.
- Two staff participants actively oppose the presence of SROs in ACPS. These participants highlight disproportionate negative outcomes among Black and Brown students.

However, across these groups, staff reached a consensus on the importance of strong partnerships between SROs and school leaders as well as therapists, social workers, and other staff who can assist in preventative interventions.

SRO SUPPORT: SAFETY LIAISONS

Staff participants who value SROs stress their role in maintaining order and protecting against external threats. These staff note that they have built relationships with SROs, which reassures them during lockdowns. Staff also stress their lack of authority to physically restrain students or search their lockers for weapons or drugs, which makes them feel more secure and supported.



"It's reassuring to the students, staff, myself, and the families to know that there's a liaison to community safety. If something is going on—if there's a lockdown in the community, which we know we're getting alerts all the time—to have someone who's on the radio monitoring what's going on in the community, is ready to act with calm and measure. That means a lot."

—Staff, Hammond

"The student resource officer has certain law enforcement powers that teachers and staff do not have. I've seen a disruptive student in our hallway last year. Teachers and staff cannot lay hands on a student, but the officer had to physically pick the child up and carry him to the office because he refused to comply. He had no reverence or fear of authority. I felt very happy that he was there to enforce the law. Having the SRO there makes me feel comfortable that at least there is one person that can enforce the law in the building and ensure our safety."

—Staff, Hammond



"This is my 11th year with the district. The SROs that I've worked with have been top-notch. I've seen the videos. Everybody's seen the videos of the school resource officer's body slamming kids and all of that. But I think you need to look at it school by school and come in and meet our SROs. They're just some of the nicest guys. I still keep in contact with SROs that used to work here."

—Staff (Administrator), King Street

SRO OPPOSITION: SURVEILLING AND CRIMINALIZATION

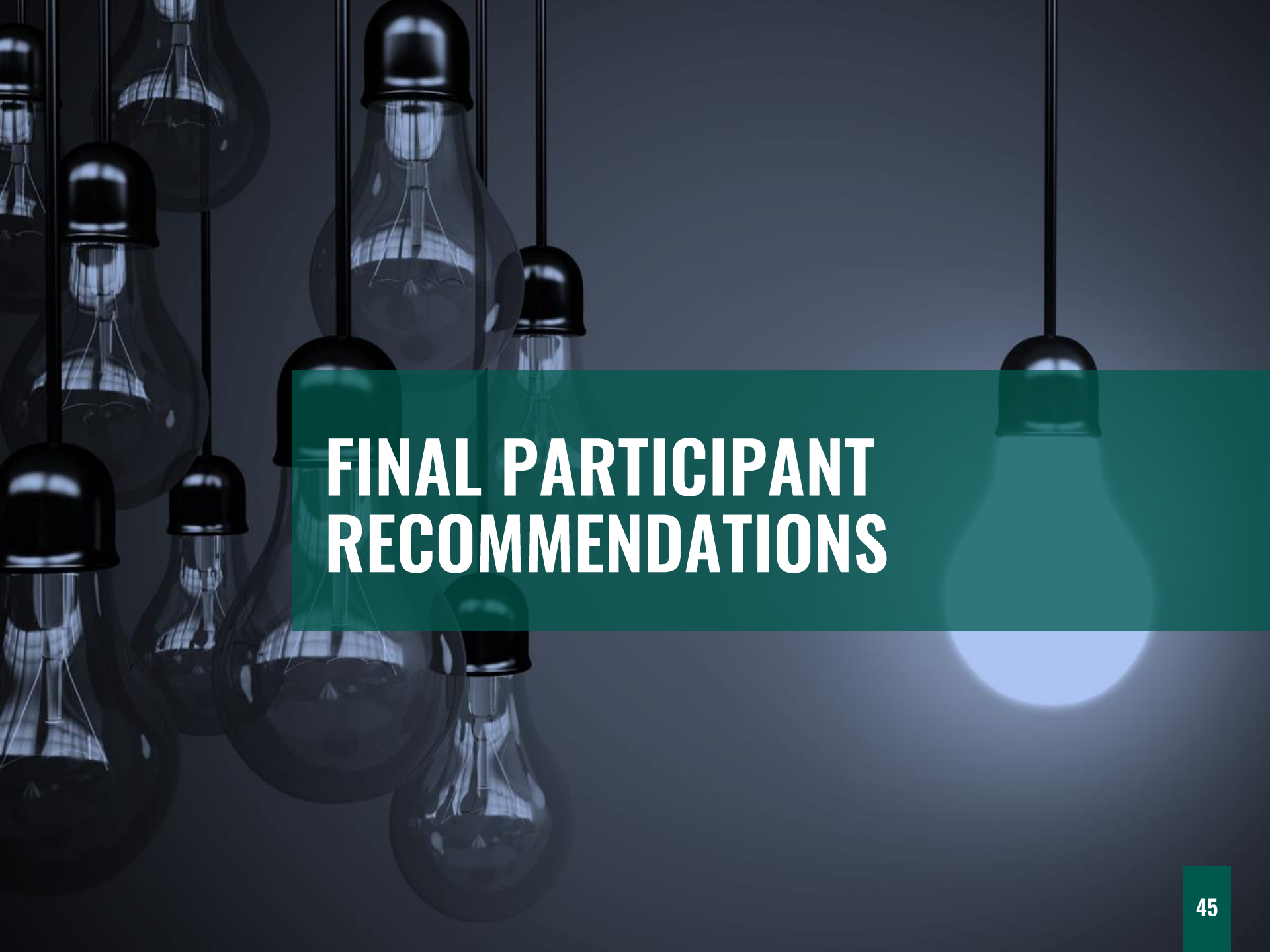
Participants who oppose the presence of SROs in ACPS decry what they describe as a diversion of funds away from violence prevention and crisis de-escalation. They express the view that police represent surveilling, policing, and criminalizing youth behaviors. These participants work in high school settings, and they explain that they have heard complains from students of color who feel unsafe with police in their buildings. In addition, these staff mention personal feelings of discomfort in the presence of police officers.

*“My opinion is that **cops have no place in our schools**. The whole point of teaching and learning is to feel safe. What I keep coming back to is about exhausting **all of these other options that don't involve a criminalization connection or anything like that** before we resort to that. That should definitely be a last resort. I will say I do appreciate that at King Street, **I don't see the cops just walking around the hallways**. That would make me feel really unsafe, and **I already feel unsafe.**”*

–Staff, King Street

*“It frustrates me that we have someone who is **paid to spend time surveilling and policing our youth** when we could be spending that money on something that we really need, which is a **crisis de-escalator or a violence prevention person**. The way that that job is oriented is **not to de-escalate or to make our students feel safe**, especially, frankly, most of our **Black and Brown students**. That's who I've heard from, who said that **having the officer in the building makes them feel unsafe.**”*

–Staff, Minnie Howard



FINAL PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS



There was nothing about what are they doing? Who are they interacting with? Who are they arresting? Who are they stopping? Right now, there is aggregated data. It is not disaggregated effectively to know which students are having interactions with police and the SROs and which are not. At least what was delivered publicly to the City Council.”

–Parent (White), King Street

TRANSPARENCY: ESSENTIAL FOR TRUST

Participants suggest that increased data-sharing could be useful to increase support for the presence of SROs.

Participants across groups highlight a lack of transparency on school safety and policing. For example, high school students express frustration about a perceived lack of information-sharing concerning drug-related and violent incidents.

Parent and staff participants who evince opposition or ambivalence about the presence of SROs mention the lack of sufficiently disaggregated and/or accessible data on arrest rates and criminal incidents on campuses. They state that providing more accessible student criminal and arrest data will provide more clarity and engender greater public support.

“They're still not very transparent with students. For example, about the drug issue this year and for the bathrooms, there hasn't been any information going out to students, going out to parents, or teachers. That is one of the biggest issues I have sometimes with the school.”

–Student (White), King Street

“I imagine there might be more support for putting some SROs in schools if you can articulate clearly what they're supposed to be doing and who's a part of that. And what's the risk? None of that information is out there. Just like, ‘Well, we have proof of crews. So we need police.’ I would love to want the officers in the schools. But they're not selling it.”

–Parent (White), George Washington

“One of the problems that occurred when the SROs' agreement was canceled was that there was not good data to substantiate their roles. There is now a process to collect some of that data and make a report about what the value is or what are opportunities for improving. I think the availability of data and making reports could go a long way towards improving the situation.”

–Staff, King Street

MANY WANT MORE SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS

Multiple participants across demographic groups suggest increasing the number of SROs per building. These participants highlight the large populations of the middle and high schools and express concern that the ratio of SROs to students is too low for officers to effectively manage crisis situations such as active shooters. In addition, some parents advocate for SROs to protect elementary school entrances.

"I feel like we need more police in this school. I guess I don't feel like one police officer is going to be enough like, for a whole big school like this."

-Student (EL, Asian), Francis Hammond

"So they have two SROs in that huge school? That's not enough for all those students. I mean, to be honest with you. Something's wrong with that."

-Parent (Black), Minnie Howard

"The shooting in Uvalde was [at] an elementary school. There's lots of other elementary schools that have had attacks as well. I know there's different thoughts on school resource officers and whether they should be armed or unarmed. My personal take is I would feel better if there was an armed security capability at primary schools."

-Parent (White), Mt. Vernon

"I'd like to see them add more SROs, depending on the capacity of your building, because you got one man running around a campus that's the size of a high school, although we are in middle school, with 1,500 kids, and we have about four floors. He can't be at every strategic place. I don't even know how he does it. I think we need more, not less."

-Staff, Francis Hammond

RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Participants across groups recommend that SROs continue building relationships with students. Participants suggest that intimidation and opposition to SROs can be overcome through community-building events. Some participants advocate for stronger links between community police and SROs to enhance trust and thereby contribute to violence prevention.

“I feel like they should focus on making the students feel comfortable—making the students trust them and having trust for the students so that they can have a good relationship with the students, which in turn make it more easier for everyone.”

–Student (Black), Francis Hammond

“I do think it would be a good thing for them to be engaging not only when something negative is happening. I feel like what they should be as role models and maybe even mentors or a true resource, not just there to break up a fight or to stop violence.”

–Parent (Black), Minnie Howard

“I really like that idea of connecting community police to SROs. I think that's a great idea. I would love to see a rotation between community officers coming into the school, then going back on a community beat. Coming into the school, of course, with the proper training. I think that makes a lot of sense. I think that would make them more effective in what they do.”

–Staff, District-wide

“We can have more activities after or during school with police. There was a school I used to go in Arlington where the police used to come and talk to the students and tell them about what they do and why they do it. Because some students may judge why there's police, why we need them, to explain why they're there, and to explain that they care about us.”

–Student (Latino/a), King Street

SOCIAL AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS: STAFF VIEWS

Staff participants clarify that social-emotional and mental health supports can supplement SROs. Even participants who oppose the presence of SROs suggest that such resources cannot replace SROs. Some staff cite the potential of existing social-emotional learning, restorative practices, and outreach programs to strengthen students and families. However, several staff suggest that implementation needs improvement in order to be effective.

“Our school counselors implemented a program called Ruler for Social and Emotional Learning. And then they also have Restorative Practice where they do community circles to try to restore the relationships that are broken and rebuild trust. They have counselors that are contracted in Alexandria City that go into homes and work with those children. They actually have two counselors at Hammond that work with that group of students, who provide the support and resources to the children and families as well as our family liaison who works with families who are in need of resources or support for the social/emotional learning piece.”

–Staff, Hammond



“While I agree that SROs should not be here, you can't just take that away when they've been a part of the district without anything else there to replace the kind of roles that we were hoping that they would do. And we tried to do that with SEAL. But again, not adequately trained or prepared. I certainly do not trust all of my colleagues to lead SEAL lessons the way that we're hoping they are done. And it's been improved on this year as well. But just taking out an SRO and replacing that with a SEAL lesson is not adequate. That's not the same thing, and we were treating it that way.”

–Staff, King Street

SOCIAL AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS: PARENT VIEWS

Multiple parent participants express concerns with what they perceive as insufficient social and mental health supports in ACPS. Although some parents highlight social and emotional learning programming, others critique the lack of resources for crisis prevention and addressing mental health challenges. These participants link the lack of sufficient mental health supports to negative student behaviors, including gang activity, drug use and aggression. They advocate for more holistic measures to support whole child development.

*“I was hoping they’d have more resources available for the kids in the school. I think **they need more mental health awareness**. I have a friend that has a son that goes to Minnie Howard. But he got himself involved in a gang,. He has **bipolar and ADHD, and there's no resources**. Every time he gets in a fight, **all they keep doing is pushing them out of the school, send them to the office or expelling him**. He don't have no outlet. You don't have nobody. **He don't have nobody to talk to about his mental health.**”*

–Parent (Black), King Street



*“I think that **there's a lot of band-aid fixes happening without looking holistically at the big picture**. I'd like to see a plan that really addresses some of the fundamental problems of having **trained staff, having support staff, filling the needs these students have before they spiral out of control**. And these can be addressed by social workers, counselors, **people actually building relationship with these students so they don't feel the need to act out** either in school or at school activities.”*

–Parent (White), King Street

SOCIAL AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS: STUDENT VIEWS

High school participants agree with parents that more mental health resources are needed. Notably, most middle and high school students identify their teachers as primary sources of support rather than counselors. High school participants stress that SEAL lessons and counselors provide cursory, inadequate support. They advocate for more funds and programs to be devoted to addressing their mental health needs.

"I feel like there aren't enough supports. It's almost a joke. If you go to your counselor, all they're going to do is tell you to journal. And I think one of the main reasons is when we took the SROs out and we didn't see an improvement is because the funding that they said was going to go to mental health resources never went to those resources and it just disappeared into the abyss of budgets. Students really never saw the benefits of what that money could have done for them, which I think is one of the main issues."

-Student (undisclosed), King Street



"I did some outreach this summer, and I tried to connect with some of the mental health staff in the school. I interviewed some of my friends about it too, but they couldn't really understand where and when these resources were available. I feel like if students knew more about the resources, like the location they were available at, the time they are available to speak, where they are the building, it would be really impactful to have not only teachers to talk to, but other people and other adults that you feel comfortable with and just understand."

-Student (Black), King Street

ADDRESS BIAS CONCERNS

Several participants mention the disproportionate involvement of Black and Brown students in negative policing outcomes. Parents link such disparities to wider sociological issues; however, they question if police are guided by implicit bias when dealing with students of color. They seek more information on cultural-awareness training for SROs.

Several parents, for instance, cite an event at which police representatives addressed parents and discussed the presence of “crews” in the region. These parents express the view that such language is “coded” and highlights Black and Latino students as threats. They stress that criminal incidents involving White students have been less publicized.

*“I definitely would say my impression is that **the issues that we have in society are reflected in the situation with school. African American, Black and Brown students are probably policed a little bit more or watched a little bit more because of stereotypes. Like Hispanics. I'm sure there's some gang, just stereotypes, where you're looking at a kid and you're thinking one thing, and you might respond based on some of those biases that you have. So I'm just curious if the officers get cultural-awareness training, implicit bias training, do they get those types of training specifically for youth?**”*

–Parent (Black), King Street

*“I think there's too many **parts of our community who don't look like everybody in this room** who have a lot of other issues around policing. The other night, the fact **we're talking about crews is that it means that there are certain groups** of people you're talking about, certain groups of people you're not talking about. But the thing that you know with **the gun that was found outside, that was a white kid**. And when you've got AR-15s, those are white kids.”*

–Parent (White), King Street

AUGMENT AND LEVERAGE STUDENT VOICES

Participants across groups emphasize the critical importance of student voices. Participants seek more opportunities for students to share their views and provide input for decision-making. They suggest that surveys alone are insufficient because some students lack the patience or attention-span to faithfully complete them. Others note that many students feel coerced to complete surveys, and some uncomfortable sharing demographic information via surveys due to privacy concerns.

Middle and high school participants approve of student councils and advisory committees; however, they recommend that such opportunities be implemented in a timelier manner and broadened to encompass more voices. Several participants advise that ACPS continue to supplement polls or surveys with student-driven small group discussions.

“I think having small in-person groups would help, giving students enough space to talk without having to feel like they're in front of the entire school. I really am not a fan of the surveys simply because they can get all the information from us they want, but at the end of the day, the power is still solely in their hands on what they do, if they do anything with that information.”

–Student (Asian), King Street

“I feel like if students were able to have the choice to do the surveys or at least have these kind of seminars, they would participate more in these kind of events. I feel like if it's forced upon us, we just kind of do it halfheartedly and we don't think about it too much. But you guys aren't forcing us to come to these. You're giving us the option to come or discuss it on our own. I feel like they can stop stressing students to answer and give us a choice to answer.”

–Student (Black), King Street

APPENDIX



DISCUSSION GROUPS

Group	# of Participants	Group	# of Participants
English learners*	6	High school #4	5
Students with disabilities*	9	Parents #1: Black voices**	5
Black student voices*	11	Parents #2: General	6
Hispanic/Latino voices*	10	Parents #3: General	9
Francis Hammond	14	Parents #4: General	10
George Washington	24	Parents #5: General	9
High school #1	6	Staff #1	5
High school #2	5	Staff #2	3
High school #3	3	Administrators	2

*These groups only included middle school students

** One high school student participated with their mother in this group





Thank you.

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