

REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

Opportunities to Heal and Thrive in Des Moines Public Schools

We can begin to heal and thrive when we come together to imagine new possibilities.

The shooting and student death outside of East High School in March 2022 is a tragic example of the many ways in which our students and community are experiencing trauma. Violence and trauma are both created by, and impact, the conditions in which we live. These issues are complex and require investment and response from multiple people and entities.

Following the East High tragedy, Des Moines Public Schools (DMPS) initiated community conversations in April and May to better understand the role it could play in ensuring student safety and well-being. Community conversations at each of the five high schools, along with a survey, offered students, families, staff, and the public an opportunity to begin to heal together and consider solutions that could prevent and mitigate the impact of trauma in the future.

These discussions centered students by elevating what they said they need to thrive. Prior to community conversations, students emphasized that they need safety, belonging, health and well-being, and family and community engagement in their schools. Staff, families, and the broader community had a chance to hear how students defined each of these four areas and then brainstorm how to create environments that promoted these key elements.

This report shares Iowa ACEs 360's analysis from reviewing information gathered from all conversations and the survey and provides guidance for next steps the district and the community can take.

This report represents one piece of an ongoing dialogue already happening in the community and the work of many individuals and partners to support students and their families. More conversations are desired and needed, and greater action must be taken to address trauma. School Advisory Councils at each high school are one way that DMPS is continuing to engage the community in identifying strategies and implementing solutions to create safety and well-being for students.

By being in conversation and working together, we can remove barriers and increase access to the things we know everyone needs to be healthy and well. Together we can create the conditions for people to heal and thrive in our schools and our communities.

ABOUT IOWA ACES 360

DMPS asked Iowa ACEs 360 to guide the process of hosting these conversations and to analyze the information collected. Iowa ACEs 360 approached these discussions and this report in partnership with the community and DMPS administration and staff.

Iowa ACEs 360 is a statewide nonprofit focused on preventing and mitigating the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) so that all people thrive in compassionate communities that support lifelong healthy development. Iowa ACEs 360 focuses on three main strategies: 1) cultivate a network that advocates for policy and system changes, 2) support leaders and providers in learning and applying policy and practice changes, and 3) fuel innovation in prevention and healing through pilot projects and collaborations.

Research shows that most Iowans have experienced at least one ACE growing up among 10 types of household trauma and that the more trauma someone experiences, the greater their risk for a wide range of poor physical and mental health outcomes. Trauma occurs within communities and can be created and exacerbated by harmful conditions, including living in poverty and experiencing racism.

Understanding that trauma is occurring within communities and is a part of our history means we need collective healing. While individuals who have experienced trauma need support, we also must address the conditions that cause trauma. **Healing-Centered Engagement**¹ is an approach that seeks to prevent and respond to trauma in a way that is holistic and involves honoring identities and culture, promoting civic action, building meaningful relationships, and aspiring to new possibilities. Those who have experienced trauma are agents in creating their own, and collective, well-being.

Iowa ACEs 360 approaches its work with research-based knowledge of trauma and a healing-centered engagement framework. Through relationships and partnerships with organizations and individuals working within communities most impacted by trauma, Iowa ACEs 360 strives to elevate ideas and advocate for system and community changes that improve well-being.

THANK YOU

Many people contributed to this report:

Thank you to DMPS students who told us what they need and offered ideas for how to get there.

Thank you to the more than 1,500 students, school personnel, family members, and community members who attended one of the conversations or completed the survey, offering your input on how we can create the environments students are asking for.

Thank you to many community partners who helped lead and guide this experience and continue to listen to students and families and provide critical support.

Thank you to many facilitators among DMPS staff, community- and faith-based organizations, and students for leading these conversations in a way that promoted understanding and community.

¹ Ginwright, S. (n.d.). *The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement*. Retrieved from: <https://ginwright.medium.com/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>

Thank you to the DMPS Bilingual Family Liaisons who spoke up honestly to advocate for families.

Thank you to the Community School Coordinators for your time, energy, and engagement in making the roundtable events possible.

Thank you to United Way of Central Iowa for providing funding for the dinners served at the community roundtables.

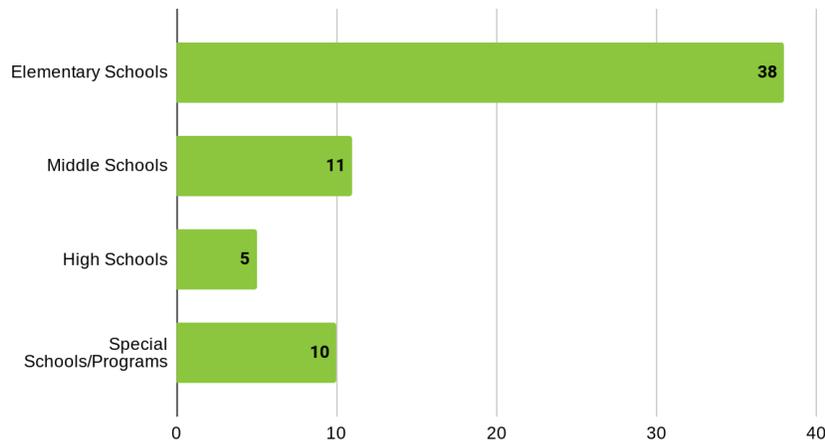
Thank you to DMPS for hosting these conversations and recognizing the importance of community engagement in solutions.

OVERVIEW

The Des Moines Public Schools exist so that graduates possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be successful at the next stage of their life.

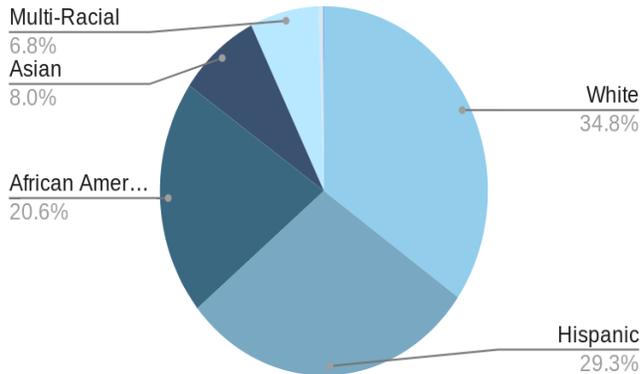
DMPS is the largest and most diverse public school district in Iowa with more than 31,000 students born in 103 different nations who speak more than 83 languages².

Number of Schools

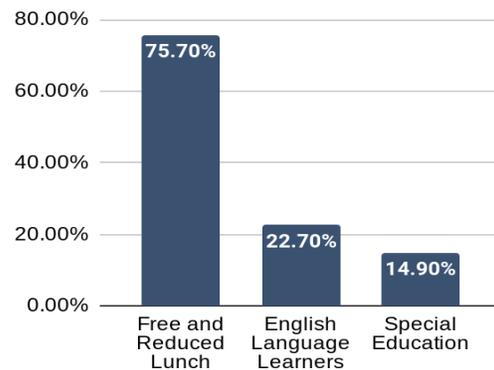


² Des Moines Public Schools. *Facts & Figures*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dmschools.org/about/facts-figures/>

Demographics



Programs



The diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and languages spoken in DMPS is unparalleled to any other school in Iowa and provides a tremendous benefit to our state. This diversity creates a rich learning environment, leading to greater personal and cultural understanding and a broader global perspective. This diversity presents both an opportunity for community building and educational experiences and a challenge to ensure that all students get what they need to thrive as resources must go further to meet the unique needs of students. Intentional focus and investment are required to adequately appreciate, nurture, and absorb the richness diversity offers and, ultimately, support the student population.

The diversity of people within the school district and its surrounding communities also reinforces the need for a healing-centered engagement approach when responding to trauma. The roundtables aimed to honor that 1) sharing cultural and personal experiences can lead to greater understanding and developing plans that meet the needs of a diverse community; 2) families and community members were already mobilizing to discuss student safety and well-being and these conversations needed to acknowledge and build upon those discussions, 3) exploring root causes of traumatic incidences is important; and 4) we need timely co-creation of solutions for students' safety and well-being now.

With this understanding, Iowa ACEs 360 partnered to develop a transparent, semi-structured, community-guided model with the following components:

- The Talking Wall, which centered students as the people most impacted by school violence and trauma.
- A broad invitation for people to participate with multiple ways to provide input.
- Roundtable events that included several ways of sharing perspectives and ideas.
- This report to share the findings as openly as possible.

PROCESS

Talking Wall

In order to create the environments in which all students feel safe and supported, students must be engaged in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of solutions as they are most impacted by school violence and trauma—yet have the least amount of traditional decision-making power. Students must play an active role in exploring the problems that exist within their school and identifying the solutions needed to respond to those problems. Empowering students to respond to the trauma they experience promotes healing-centered engagement that builds on people’s strengths, provides agency (a sense of control over their lives), and aligns with adolescent brain research, which indicates that the brain can rewire itself from trauma through positive experiences.

In preparation for the roundtables and community survey, Iowa ACEs 360 partnered with students to better understand what they need. The conversations focused on themes developed by the School Advisory Councils—family-led teams that work to improve communication and relationships between schools, families and the community. The Councils identified these themes as being important: safety, belonging, health and well-being, and community and family engagement.

In March, Community School Coordinators at each of the high schools identified and invited students to participate in conversations with Iowa ACEs 360 over lunch. During these meetings, Iowa ACEs 360 placed four posters, also known as “Talking Walls,” around the room with the prompting questions:

1. What does **safety** in school actually mean?
2. What does **belonging** in school actually mean?
3. What does **health and well-being** in school actually mean?
4. What does **community and family engagement** in school actually mean?

Students used sticky notes to brainstorm and respond to each of these questions. After students placed sticky notes on the walls, Iowa ACEs 360 staff and volunteers facilitated conversations to better understand the ideas students shared in each area. ACEs 360 synthesized the responses to create definitions. A total of **59 students participated** in this part of the planning process.



Definitions developed by students through the Talking Walls	
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • students are trusting of staff • adults are present, visible, and engaged with students • schools are worry-free, comfortable, and inclusive • consistent community support (not just after a disaster) • having secure entry/checkpoints so not just anyone can enter schools • accountability to address harm and why it occurred • transparent and consistent policies and procedures
Health & Well-Being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical and mental health without stigma • adults knowing students' names and asking how they're doing • having relationships with everyone within the school • promoting balance between school and life • education that reflects student experiences and identities • access to flexible support and resources when needed
Belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sense of community • feeling welcomed and included • staff and students knowing each other's names • being able to freely express your culture and identity • representation in staff, activities, and curriculum
Community & Family Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling supported by those outside of the school, unity • putting student voices first • being introduced to and a part of clubs and programs • meaningful opportunities for families to be involved • consistent communication that is translated into parent's preferred languages • access to translators so all families can be involved/engaged • shared decision making with the community

Roundtable Events

Following the Talking Wall exercise that defined priority areas, each of the five comprehensive high schools hosted a community roundtable. The roundtables set the stage for the community to create solutions together, acknowledging that the entire community has been impacted by trauma and that everyone has a role in healing. The goals of the community roundtables were to (1) review student definitions of safety, health and well-being, engagement, and belonging, and (2) discuss solutions that could be implemented within DMPS and the larger Des Moines community to achieve the environments students tell us they need to thrive.

Students, families, staff, and community members were all invited to participate in the events. DMPS sent event information to all district families from each feeder school via its communications portals (Infinite Campus, School CNXT, and newsletters), posted event information on the DMPS website, and coordinated with local news stations to share dates and locations for each event. To alleviate some barriers for participation and foster a sense of community among participants, DMPS offered childcare and a light dinner.

At the roundtables, participants were divided into smaller groups led by community leaders and DMPS staff—including Bilingual Family Liaisons (BFLs) who facilitated in languages preferred by participants. Each group of about 8-15 individuals first enjoyed a community-style meal to get to know one another. Then each group gathered in classrooms to engage in a facilitated discussion around the definitions and how to create the environments students defined.

Participants used sticky notes and conversation to convey their ideas, and notetakers in each room recorded what was discussed. Ideas were organized into solutions DMPS could implement and solutions for the larger community. Each group then selected its top 2-3 ideas to share in a large group report out at the end of the event. All the information—sticky notes, notetaker notes, and the report-out themes were gathered and analyzed.

In total, 305 individuals registered for the community roundtables and **264 participants attended**. At registration, participants were asked to indicate their connection to DMPS. Respondents could choose more than one role. Registrants selected these options:

- I am a DMPS student: 8 respondents
 - I am the parent/guardian of a DMPS student: 213 respondents
 - I am a DMPS staff member: 56 respondents
 - I am a member of the Des Moines community: 74 respondents
 - Other: 26 respondents
- Other responses included: grandparent of a student, retired staff member, DMPS alumni, state representative, community partner or religious organization, media, and DMPS school board member.

Each roundtable event also accepted walk-in participants.

Community Survey

To complement the in-person community roundtables, Iowa ACEs 360 and DMPS developed an electronic survey. Results from this survey were shared with Iowa ACEs 360 to include in its overall analysis.

The community survey, while electronic, followed the same question format as the in-person community roundtables. All questions allowed for open-ended responses. Respondents could choose to share their name in the survey or keep their response anonymous. First, the survey asked respondents to review the student definitions on safety, belonging, health and well-being, and engagement and indicate if they would add anything to these definitions. Respondents were then asked, “What can Des Moines Public Schools do to create the environments that students defined?” Next, respondents were asked, “What can the community do to create the environments students defined?” Finally, respondents were asked if they wanted to share anything else with survey organizers.

There were **1,276 responses to the community survey**. Survey participants were asked to indicate their connection to DMPS. Respondents could choose more than one role. This information was gathered:

- I am a DMPS student: 108 respondents
 - I am the parent/guardian of a DMPS student: 750 respondents
 - I am a DMPS staff member: 336 respondents
 - I am a member of the Des Moines community: 257 respondents
 - Other: 58 respondents
- Other responses included: stakeholder, community partner organization, coach, DMPS alumni, retired staff member, and extended family member of a student.

Limitations

As the process to provide input was developed, careful attention was paid to equity and inclusion to ensure all students, families, and community members could share their perspectives and ideas. Sometimes we fell short.

Barriers to participation included time, structure, and the context in which these conversations took place. For example, the speed at which these events had to come together limited time for building relationships and seeking additional perspectives in the planning process. Some participants also expressed wanting time and space to process what had happened before discussing solutions. We acknowledge the limitations of one-time, in-person events, both to allow this processing to occur and for more people to participate.

People who could attend these events (without transportation, scheduling, or other barriers) had the capacity to participate and did not represent the entire population. Caregivers and community members often work in the evenings or have other commitments and are not able to attend evening activities. Additionally, we heard from caregivers that not everyone feels welcome in the schools and some families have felt especially detached since COVID-19 restrictions meant to ensure health safety began.

Early on, many participants noted that the structure of the roundtables did not match the way their culture would typically approach these conversations. They also stated that not enough time was given to thoroughly discuss their concerns. Iowa ACEs 360 tried to address these issues by offering facilitators more flexibility in how they approached conversations to make it more culturally relevant. This is a learning opportunity for Iowa ACEs 360 to better recognize and include more perspectives in the planning process moving forward.

FINDINGS

THEME ANALYSIS

Iowa ACEs 360 gathered and analyzed data from three sources (student Talking Walls, community roundtables, and community survey). Each piece of information was coded based on a rubric and the codes were then organized into themes.

This section shares the **five themes** that emerged to promote the environments students defined:

- Student well-being & belonging
- Communication and policy implementation
- Investment
- Relationships
- Security/Safety

Within each theme, we offer examples of the perspectives and solutions shared by participants using direct quotes. This document is meant to foster the co-creation of solutions by elevating many of the perspectives and ideas shared to then decide as a district and community which ones to implement and how to move forward together.

COMMUNITY THEME: Student Well-Being & Belonging

Themes: take a whole student approach³; listen to and center students; develop purpose and belonging; encourage school pride; be inclusive of language, identity, and culture

Respondents communicated a desire for students to feel comfortable being who they are, and overwhelmingly identified that students need support from both the community and schools to find their purpose and fulfillment in life and be recognized and celebrated for their identities.

There was also consistent reference to the schools' responsibility to teach skills beyond literacy and math and to focus instruction on topics like conflict resolution, civil discourse, and other abilities needed to be successful adults.

“Help kids find their purpose, fulfillment, and joy—explore lots of pathways.” –
Roundtable participant

³ A “whole child” education prioritizes the full scope of a child’s developmental needs as a way to advance educational equity and ensure that every child reaches their fullest potential. A whole child approach understands that students’ education and life outcomes are dependent upon their access to deeper learning opportunities in and out of school, as well as their school environment and relationships. Source: Learning Policy Institute (n.d.). *Whole Child Education*. Retrieved from: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/issue/whole-child-education>

“Figure out ways to teach students how to respond to situations when they disagree; how do you talk with someone you like; how do you resolve conflict. Give students practical skills on how to build relationships.” - Roundtable participant

Evident throughout responses was that students struggle to feel valued and included in the classroom. Respondents identified the need for intentional strategies to meet students where they are and engage students in a manner focused on mutual respect, restoration, and healing.

“Need to be realistic about what our students are going through. How do we teach kids to move forward when they are in pain? How do we help them build the skills to support themselves and others?” - Roundtable participant

“Address kids with respect and show that you care.” - Roundtable participant

“We want to feel connection.” - Student Talking Wall participant

Respondents called for specific actions to center student voices in all aspects of problem solving, planning, and creating solutions in schools, at the district level, and in the larger community.

“The community can put the voice of students first. If we are being told that this is the student’s experience it is our responsibility to listen, believe and amplify. I think it is too easy to dismiss student concerns because they are not adults. But I am nothing but impressed by this generation’s involvement and commitment with the world.” - Survey respondent

“These kids know what they need and are making their voices heard. Thank you for being a district that values and seeks out their thoughts and ideas about what *they* want school to be like. Thank you for centering their voices. Please continue to listen and please do more than listen; please work towards that better vision that they have given you to build.” - Survey respondent

Notably, commentary and participation during the student Talking Walls demonstrated students’ willingness to be a part of solutions.

“I wish we could do more things like this (the Talking Wall). To talk about the problems, give ideas, and actually be listened to. If voice mattered, we would say something.” - Student Talking Wall participant

COMMUNITY THEME: Communication and Policy Implementation

Themes: develop and improve district communication with increased transparency and consistency; foster accountability and consistency in policy and implementation

Increased transparency in communication and information sharing between DMPS and parents/guardians, as well as DMPS and the community was identified as an area of need. Respondents shared that at a district level, communication about policies and expectations could improve accountability in student behavior and attendance as parents/guardians could be

equipped to better support the relationship between school and home. Participants also noted concerns with lack of inclusion, accountability, consistency and effectiveness in discipline policy.

“Are suspensions really working [to address behavior]? Suspension is failing kids.” - Student Talking Wall participant

“Students do not obey the rules of the school, for example when they have 2 or 3 absences, and they are told they do not seem to care or do not take value from what the teachers tell them. Students take advantage of being able to have their own way because teachers can't stop them.” - Roundtable participant

“[Need] Open classroom discussions about mental health, and how words and actions matter. Addressing bullying before things occur. Being proactive in the expectations of classroom and in school conduct. [Include] team building exercises with their peers.” - Survey Respondent

Respondents acknowledged that communication at a district level about policies and expectations could also lead to more uniform practices and implementation of policies at each school.

“We need consistent behavior and attendance policies that are communicated to all staff AND PARENTS, and annual updates and training on these policies for all staff.” - Survey respondent

Further, respondents indicated a need for consistency and timeliness in receiving follow-up communication and closing communication loops with caregivers and stakeholders. Communication specific to student safety, policies, and school discipline issues were among the areas identified by respondents where DMPS could improve communication efforts.

“Schools should communicate when change happens.” - Student Talking Wall participant

“Teachers need to interact with parents and call parents. Not just when students are doing something ‘bad.’ Teachers also need TIME to call parents.” - Roundtable participant

“When a family presents itself with a concern in front of the staff of the school we expect to be given the value it deserves and a follow-up. We would like to know what is done when a complaint is received from parents.” - Roundtable participant

One example that emerged at the community roundtables was communication about the strategy developed following the removal of School Resource Officers (SROs) and the creation of safety and restoration positions. Participants expressed that they did not receive adequate information about the role of these new positions in enhancing student safety and what the relationship between DMPS and the Des Moines Police Department would look like after SROs were removed.

“I thought they were going to get therapists when they took out the SRO's. We thought that the money would be redistributed towards therapists when they no longer utilized SRO's.” - Roundtable participant

Respondents identified a desire for streamlined communications noting that current efforts to communicate about student progress, grades, and other general information are fragmented across multiple platforms.

“As a staff member the expectations around communication are overwhelming due to the number of apps/communication devices.” - Roundtable participant

“Develop a one-stop shop for communication—grades, information, communication—all in one place” - Roundtable participant

Respondents also noted that DMPS – and the community, including media – should go further in using communications channels to highlight positive, student-centered stories.

“Change the public narrative about DMPS and schools specifically. Show the good stuff.”
- Roundtable participant

Beyond forms of communication, participants discussed the desire for communication in their preferred and known language.

“Talking about inclusion, announcements and communications with students and families should be in different languages, DMPS has become diverse in population, and everyone should feel included and understand all the information provided by the school.” - Survey Respondent

“[I] don’t feel safe when I can’t understand anything. It’s hard to ask for help.” - Student Talking Wall participant’s comment on challenges with language barriers

COMMUNITY THEME: **Investment**

Themes: invest district and community funding in staff training; diversify staff; increase supports for students and parents to promote inclusivity and success through programs and events; invest in mental health resources; advocate for equitable funding structures and increased funding in public schools

Respondents called for redistributing and increasing funds to support current staff in the DMPS system with training in trauma-informed care and in engagement strategies that are supportive and compassionate.

Respondents also consistently acknowledged concern about students’ and staff’s mental health and the need for additional mental health counselors and social workers to meet with students at school and in the community.

“Teachers [should be] trained in trauma informed responses and approach behavior with a trauma informed lens.” - Survey respondent

“Have more services from therapists and psychologists available for students. Our students are not getting enough help with mental health. This year, especially, mental health is especially important.” - Roundtable participant

“Provide additional mental health services and academic support to help the schools. The community needs to embrace its role of defining what do we want from our public school system.” - Survey respondent

A need for hiring and retaining district staff that better reflects the demographic makeup of students was also highlighted. Specifically, respondents identified that more diverse staff would improve relationships and promote inclusion among students and staff, leading to improved feelings of safety and belonging.

“Hire more diverse staff (staff doesn’t reflect diversity of students). Grow students to want to come back—recruit them for positions.” - Roundtable participant

“School is hard for a lot of kids, especially if they struggle with differences from their peers. I would like to know that the school makes sure these kids really are comfortable with their environment/school so they can thrive.” - Survey respondent

“Having more bilingual personnel will be critical to addressing language barriers and improve communication between parents and school.” --Roundtable participant

Finally, respondents noted the important role of community members in advocating for increased funding and funding structures that invest in students and staff needs and create inclusive environments for diverse students.

“Push for funding for wraparound services.” Roundtable participant

“[We need] positive messaging from elected officials. Don’t undermine teachers/schools.” - Roundtable participant

“Support and elect legislators and policymakers who support inclusive, accurate teaching of challenging topics.” - Roundtable participant

COMMUNITY THEME: **Relationships**

Themes: foster relationships in the school; ensure parents and students feel connected to school and staff; include the community consistently; help families support student mental health

A desire for consistent opportunities to foster relationships was prominent in responses about the role of the district and community. Three variations of relationships emerged: students and community, students and staff members, and staff and families.

Students, community roundtable participants, and survey respondents collectively acknowledged the remarkable community response following the tragedy at East High and challenged that this type of intentional community building should occur more consistently at schools—not just when there is a problem. Respondents identified that relationships between community and school, and students and community, could be fostered through volunteering, mentoring, and college/career exploration opportunities. Respondents indicated that an

increased presence of community members at schools could help promote safety on campuses and support student belonging. Additionally, there was a sense that increased community member involvement would be mutually beneficial for both students and adults.

“The community can rally around our schools on a consistent basis, not just when a tragedy takes place. We need community groups to actively seek out ways they can engage with our students and commit to building up programs that lead towards that goal.” - Survey respondent

“Community needs to show up for events, games, fundraisers.” - Roundtable participant

Respondents valued the important relationship between students and staff members and had varying perspectives on the depth of the relationship needed. While some called for developing more personal relationships, others noted that simple acts, like knowing students’ names and speaking to them in the hallways, would go a long way towards fostering a safe and inclusive school environment.

“[Students need to] have to have at least one person or adult at school can talk to.” – Roundtable participant

“Teachers [need to] check in more with students about well-being.” – Roundtable participant

“Warm embrace—being greeted & acknowledged, remembering my name, talk to us in the hallway.” – Student Talking Wall participant

Respondents also amplified a desire for specific opportunities for parents and families to be invited, included, and welcomed at schools. Respondents identified that parents and family members could be better connected to schools through regular events held outside of the school day, like family nights. Other respondents noted that opportunities for family engagement could occur during the school day. Additionally, respondents indicated that increased parent and family involvement would not only improve connections with schools, but also build community among families.

“I love when a school encourages families and students to have fun events. Then we can all meet everybody and not be strangers.” – Survey respondent

“More community building activities and social events.” – Roundtable participant

“Have family days on certain days of the week or some time during the month when parents can come and interact with the kids.” – Survey respondent

Finally, respondents acknowledged the importance of family and community roles in supporting student’s mental health.

“We need to better understand mental health supports.” – Roundtable participant

“Admitting and educating ourselves about the need for mental health support.” – Roundtable participant

“Help parents help their kids. Parents want prevention, not reaction and need resources so that they can help improve the health and well-being of their kids at home and how they can be stronger parents.” – Roundtable participant

COMMUNITY THEME: Security/Safety

Themes: have security staff, safety devices, and tools to monitor who and what comes into the building; address mental health and well-being of students and staff

Requests for an increase in security methods were discussed at length regarding the safety and well-being of students and staff while at school. Due to the amount of discussion surrounding this theme, responses were broken down into three categories: security staff, security devices and tools, and emotional safety.

Security staff are school-based personnel dedicated to the physical safety of the students and staff. Survey respondents and participants in roundtable talks brainstormed multiple methods of increasing or redistributing staff to ensure that someone is watching over students. Discussions included implementing hall monitors, which could include a combination of school staff and community volunteers to ensure students remain in class throughout the day, and to check IDs at the door. Participants further recommended that these staff be trained to utilize de-escalation tactics when students exhibit trauma symptoms. Discussions also included the presence of School Resource Officers (SROs) to forge relationships with students and be present if violent acts occur on campuses. While some respondents were favorable towards having SROs, others identified that the presence of armed law enforcement officers may contribute to students feeling unsafe at school.

“I feel this school needs more adults around for those blind spots that teachers can't go. The kids at this school would greatly benefit from more people watching over them, volunteers more staffing whatever it takes because this school seems to really struggle with controlling the kids and making sure they're safe. They deserve to feel safe at Brody, and if they feel safe then they might be trusting enough to open up more about problems they have at school.” – Survey respondent

“... There should be a presence of law enforcement in and around the school to deter gang and criminal activity that occurs around the school. There is currently nothing in place that keeps kids safe from thugs. Especially outside/ parking lots, etc. Consider bringing back SROs to deter fights and weapons from being brought or brandished on school property. No student should be in danger of gun violence in or out of school.” – Survey respondent

“SROs wouldn't have helped—they are going to shoot kids. They carry guns. They do nothing here, doesn't make it safe.” – Student Talking Wall participant

Respondents recommended DMPS install cameras in and around school buildings, put in metal detectors, and take other security measures to help promote safety at schools. They raised concerns about weapons and contraband entering school buildings without staff knowing. Additionally, respondents identified a need to enforce secured entry and controlled access to better manage individuals entering and exiting school buildings⁴.

⁴ Data can be found here: National Center for Education Statistics. School safety and security measures. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=334>

“Having a buzzer on the door so not just anyone can come into the school. Actually checking students IDs making sure they are a current student. Also having cameras inside/outside school all areas. Not allowing kids to smoke or vape in school or on property.” – Survey respondent

“Stop letting kids come and go as they please. Metal detectors are needed.” – Survey respondent

Emotional safety was brought up in response to the tragedy at East High and as a general concern. Students, roundtable participants, and survey respondents discussed recovery from ongoing stress and trauma. Additionally, bullying was noted as an issue many times throughout all measures of responses.

“[Creating] emotional and mental safety where school communities hold people accountable for bullying and cyberbullying.” – Survey respondent

“Kids shouldn’t be scared to come to school to get an education.” – Student Talking Wall participant

Recommendations and Guidance

The purpose of this report is to elevate the community’s ideas about how healing can occur after tragedy and how to create the conditions for young people to thrive in our schools. These ideas, coupled with assessment of current resources and additional research, are important elements in generating a path forward. The district and community can use the many ideas shared here to begin a deeper conversation about root causes of violence and trauma, while addressing immediate needs of students, staff, and families.

While not all widely discussed, many of the community-generated solutions closely align with the CDC’s strategies for preventing adverse childhood experiences⁵:

- Strengthen economic supports to families.
- Promote social norms that protect against violence and adversity.
- Ensure a strong start for children.
- Teach skills.
- Connect youth to caring adults and activities.
- Intervene to lessen immediate and long-term harms.

There is not one solution that will prevent every tragedy or meet the needs of all students. But with patience and additional community and district conversations and investment, we can build and support a school district where students and families are engaged and students are well, safe, and belong.

⁵ National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC. Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Leveraging the Best Available Evidence. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingACES.pdf>

The following recommendations were generated by the community and Iowa ACEs 360. Many recommendations are cross-cutting, meaning that the solutions may positively impact several themes identified. These recommendations may require additional information, research, and community and district discussion for thoughtful implementation. Where possible, additional context and research are provided.

FIRST STEPS

Invest in resources that can elevate the findings in this report and operationalize the School Advisory Councils.

School Advisory Councils (SACs) are a natural entity to continue to think about and share the ideas explored in this report. The SACs are currently being implemented to align to the new(er) strategic plan that DMPS adopted following Anti-Racist townhalls, the Collaborative Problem-Solving process, and community voice collected through a series of feedback strategies including surveys.

The Talking Wall and roundtable events made clear that students, caregivers, school staff, and community members desire more opportunities to share their perspectives and work towards solutions together. The SACs can continue to provide space for these opportunities. Importantly, the SACs can work collaboratively with district administration and school board to turn the ideas in this report into action. The SACs can also create a feedback loop between all stakeholders ensuring the community is informed about and involved in progress.

Immediately assess and address the mental health needs of school staff and students.

Respondents widely discussed mental health and the issue is evident in each of the themes described above. Student mental health is a growing concern nationwide. The pandemic, school and community violence, social and political unrest, and day-to-day stress have impacted everyone in ways that no one community resource or school district can manage alone

Adequately meeting the mental health needs of students requires investment from the district and beyond what the district can access or provide. As one participant noted, “We are in crisis; our kids are in crisis and our teachers are, too. We can’t just rely on internal solution.”

This is an immediate need to be addressed for the student body today and will impact future students in each school. Poor mental health impacts students’ academic success, social and peer relationships, physical health and decision making⁶. Addressing mental health is also an important strategy to address school safety.

Teachers and professionals within the school district are also facing significant primary and secondary traumatic stress, along with external social and political stressors. To prioritize

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Adolescent and School Health: Mental Health. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/>

mental health for students, teachers and other professionals need access to healing and support.

There are several ways to address the mental health needs of students and staff. Strategies range from making time to build meaningful relationships, creating opportunities for screening and check-ins, and carving out time during school for students to routinely talk with a full-time school therapist. These strategies, in concert, would promote collective healing among staff and students and provide targeted interventions and support to students when they need it.

Ideas for how to move forward include:

- **Seek additional resources to hire social workers and school-based mental health providers.** Participants cited the importance of having access to mental health services *during school* as transportation and work obligations can make it difficult to get to appointments after school hours. They also stressed the importance of having access to mental health services in each student's preferred language.

In at least one school, participants noted that the mental health counselor was only at the building for a half day each week and was not able to meet the student demand for services. School social work services or related mental health professionals should be provided at a ratio of one school social worker to each school building serving up to 250 general education students, or a ratio of 1:250 students. When a social worker is providing services to students with intensive needs, a lower ratio, such as 1:50, is suggested⁷.

- **Explore additional partnerships with community-based resources.** Iowa ACEs 360 acknowledges the current shortage of mental health practitioners and the importance of culturally appropriate and responsive services. In addition to talk therapies, connecting with additional therapeutic interventions found throughout the community should be considered.
- **Explore leveraging Medicaid reimbursement** to cover mental health services for any Medicaid-eligible student, not just those who had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- **Create a mental health screening and/or check-in for students⁸,** in partnership with students.
- **Ensure the protocol and process for responding to crisis and trauma are rooted in best practices.** Create a handbook or offer resources for how students, teachers, families, and parents can process traumatic events like lockdowns. The National Child

⁷ National Association of Social Workers: *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services*. Retrieved from: <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=1Ze4-9-Os7E%3D&portalid=0>

⁸ "Supporting universal screening practices. Widespread screening for children's behavioral health needs is recommended best practice. While schools have a unique opportunity to screen a high proportion of their students for behavioral health needs, less than 15 percent of schools have implemented a universal screening process. States are supporting schools by issuing recommendations for schools to increase mental health screening among students and guidance for funding for these services." Source: National Academy for State Health Policy. *State Approaches to Improve Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nashp.org/state-approaches-to-improve-comprehensive-school-mental-health-systems/>

Traumatic Stress Network has guides that could help, including one on “Supporting Trauma-Informed Schools to Keep Kids in the Classroom⁹.”

- **Teach social-emotional skills at an earlier age and throughout the school experience.**

Address safety concerns.

Concern for student safety was a driver for the community conversations and a theme widely identified by participants. Physical and emotional safety provides a foundation for learning and growth.

The solutions to address safety were varied and there was some disagreement about the best path forward. These recommendations uplift many of the solutions offered and offer some best practices the district and community can explore:

- All DMPS buildings have a system for controlled access (secured entry) with buzzers and cameras on the main door. Ensure protocols are in place and followed to connect with each person who enters a school building.
- Develop a system for monitoring external doors at school buildings to ensure individuals are not entering schools outside of the designated secured entry.
- Consider installing additional security cameras in and around school buildings and provide appropriate staffing to monitor and respond to activity in and around schools.

The district has been thinking about safety and working on more equitable and inclusive safety measures, including implementing restorative practices¹⁰. However, from the conversations at the roundtable events, people seem to have limited understanding of the plan DMPS is implementing. Additional steps can be taken to share the plan and outline how district will track progress and respond to challenges. The district should consider these steps:

- Provide regular communication to students, staff, and families about measures in place to support student safety, including additional conversations about the role of safety and restoration staff in ensuring student safety.
- Train ALL staff on restorative practices to fully implement new safety strategies DMPS has been focused on.
- Work with SACs to develop safety measures appropriate for each school.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

⁹ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. “Supporting Trauma-Informed Schools to Keep Kids in the Classroom.” Retrieved from: <https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/brief/supporting-trauma-informed-schools-to-keep-students-in-the-classroom-brief-1.pdf>

¹⁰ Des Moines Public Schools. *DMPS SRO Replacement Plan*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dmschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SRO-Replacement-Plan-2.9.21.pdf>

Foster belonging.

Addressing mental health and immediate safety should be first priorities. We must then begin to address the root issues that lead to violence and safety concerns. Belonging is linked to well-being. When students feel seen, heard, and valued, their sense of well-being improves¹¹. Fostering belonging could help address the mental health challenges students are facing.

Participants—especially students—said that many students, particularly English Language Learners (ELL) and “quieter” students do not feel a sense of belonging at school. Additionally, many families reported not feeling welcome at school or that their child’s culture was not respected.

While engaging every student every day with limited staff and resources can be difficult, every effort should be made to simply acknowledge every student by name, engage and encourage their participation, and celebrate their culture and identity. Ideas include:

- Check in with all students and staff weekly.
- Develop a plan to integrate healing-centered engagement and trauma-informed care into everyday practice.
- Continue to celebrate culture and ethnicity with events.
- Consider peer-to-peer mentoring programs
- Create additional extra-curricular activities that meet the needs of ELL students
- Build better connections to feeder schools and help students and families prepare for transitions to new schools.

In addition, any opportunities for in-person dialogue can help students and families feel more connected to the school and teachers. The increase in positive and inclusive interactions can also improve belonging.

Evaluate communications efforts.

While DMPS has many forms of communication, participants generally felt frustrated that they did not receive timely or consistent information or information at all, especially about policies or individual student concerns.

Communication must meet the needs of diverse students and families where they are, which can also lead to many communications channels and a significant investment of time and resources. The district and schools should consider how to best communicate with families based on preferences they indicate and how to streamline communications, prioritizing the distribution of the most important information and limiting the number of platforms used. Information about policies and strategic decisions, including why decisions are made and what they mean, should also be communicated clearly and messages reinforced with families.

¹¹ Roffey, Sue. *Inclusive and Exclusive Belonging – the Impact on Individual and Community Wellbeing*. *Educational & Child Psychology* Vol. 30 No. 1. Retrieved from: <https://www.sueroffey.com/wp-content/uploads/import/35-2013%20Inclusive%20and%20Exclusive%20belonging.pdf>

Make intentional investments.

Remain flexible with resources. Adjust resources, services, and supports based on the needs and feedback provided by the community. Work in partnership with the community to complement existing services and supports to avoid duplication and allow resources both in the district and in the community to be maximized.

Additionally, as stated in several areas, meeting the needs of a diverse student body requires additional resources. Several participants shared the importance of community members and family being involved in elections. Foster and support the community in advocating for more equitable funding structures and increased investment in public schools.

Recruit and hire teachers and staff that reflect the diversity of the district.

As suggested by many participants, the district can continue to invest in efforts that create safety and belonging for all students by building a workforce that represents the students it serves. Many studies show that when students had teachers of the same race, they felt more cared for, were more interested in their schoolwork, and were more confident in their teachers' abilities to communicate with them and have better academic outcomes¹².

DMPS should continue efforts already underway with recruitment and retention and expand initiatives that provide students a pathway to working in DMPS. Strategies include:

- Hire staff that reflect the school community.
- Prioritize hiring and promoting staff of color and from diverse identities and backgrounds—especially in leadership positions.
- Conduct an organizational assessment to ensure hiring policies and practices are guided by a trauma-informed and a healing-centered framework.
- Hire more Bilingual Family Liaisons (BFL's) and bilingual teachers and staff and ensure current staff are supported to improve communication, relationships and belonging.
- Prioritize trainings and screening to ensure cultural competency, anti-racist teaching practices, and equity are centered in staff approaches.
- Regularly communicate progress to the community and include data snapshots of staff and teacher training and diversity.

Continue to foster safe and intentional collaborations between schools and the community.

Caregivers and community members expressed interest in, and the importance of, creating connections with students and providing a sense of hope and safety, not just at school but also in the community. Ideas to consider:

¹² Rosen, Jill. "Black students who have one black teacher are more likely to go to college." HUB. Retrieved from: <https://hub.jhu.edu/2018/11/12/black-students-black-teachers-college-gap/>

Boisrond, Carl. "If Your Teacher Looks Like You, You May Do Better in School." NPR. Retrieved from: <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/09/29/552929074/if-your-teacher-looks-likes-you-you-may-do-better-in-school>

- Make volunteer process/background checks more user friendly.
- Create community guides for each area—for example, one specific for the “Southside.”
- Increase engagement by making events more accessible (e.g. providing free admission to school events)

Conclusion:

The Talking Walls, community roundtables, community survey responses, and other discussions reflected the anger, pain, frustration, and sadness collectively felt by students, staff, caregivers, and community members. But there was also hope, laughter, engagement, and generosity on display. Participants shared meals, made new connections, and heard each other’s experiences and ideas. This is collective healing in action.

We can prevent trauma and heal from trauma. With community and family collaboration, a well-trained diverse workforce, and additional resources in mental health, student and family engagement, communication, and safety, we can create the conditions for all students to thrive in our schools and communities.