

REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

Iowa ACEs 360 partnered with DMPS to develop a transparent, semi-structured, community-guided process to gather data from three sources:

The Talking Wall centered students as the people most impacted by school violence and trauma. These discussions elevated what students said they need to thrive. Students defined safety, belonging, health and well-being, and family and community engagement in their schools. *59 students participated.*

Roundtable events at each of the five high schools gave staff, families, and the broader community a chance to hear how students defined safety, belonging, health and well-being, and family and community engagement. Participants shared perspectives and ideas for how to create environments that promote these key elements. *264 participants attended.*

Community survey included perspectives and ideas from DMPS families, staff, and the broader community. The survey followed the same question format as the in-person community roundtables and was sent to all DMPS families. *1,276 participants responded.*

From these three sources, five themes emerged of where DMPS and the community should focus efforts to promote the environments students defined. The themes are:

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

COMMUNITY THEME: Student Well-Being & Belonging

Themes: take a whole student approach¹¹; listen to and center students; develop student 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.

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.

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.

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

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 with discipline policy.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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

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.

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.

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

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, as well as have additional benefits for both students and adults.

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.

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.

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

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 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.

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 buildings^[2].

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 needing to recover from ongoing stress and trauma. Additionally, bullying was noted as an issue many times throughout all measures of responses, impacting student safety and well-being.

Conclusion

The 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. The following Action Plan provides a summary of the recommendations, potential action steps, and DMPS efforts already in progress.

This project 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 community 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.

^[1] 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>

^[2] Data can be found here: National Center for Education Statistics. School safety and security measures. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=334>

ACTION PLAN

Recommendation	Action Steps	DMPS Action in Progress
<p>1. Invest in resources that elevate the findings in this report and operationalize the School Advisory Councils (SACs).</p> <p>Stakeholders uplifted the desire for continued and consistent conversations to connect with one another and develop solutions.</p>	<p>Steps could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite SACs to work with the district and school board to turn ideas into action. • Create a feedback loop of listening to SACs and sharing district progress on goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Advisory Councils (SAC) are operational at all high schools and developing at all schools across the district; all school-based SACs to be in place by January 1, 2023. • District Advisory Council will be established and in place by March 2023.
<p>2. Immediately assess and address mental health needs of school staff and students.</p> <p>Concern about student, teacher, and staff mental health was widely raised. Adequately meeting the mental health needs of students and staff requires investment from the district and beyond what the district can access or provide. Several strategies need to work together to promote collective healing and well being.</p>	<p>Steps could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek additional resources to hire social workers and school-based mental health providers. • Explore partnerships with community-based resources and Medicaid reimbursement for services. • Create a mental health screening and/or check-in for students in partnership with students. • Ensure the protocol and process for responding to crisis and trauma are rooted in best practices. • Continue to prioritize teaching social-emotional skills starting at an early age. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go Guardian-Beacon, a smart software aimed at catching self-harm indicators via student computers, to be implemented at all DMPS buildings by January 2023. • Health and Well-being teams are established at every school with a focus on immediate response to crisis and mental health literacy. • Recruitment of school-based therapists will continue. Through partnerships, 46 therapists are in buildings and actively working to fill vacancies. • Goal by June 2023 is to get 80% of staff trained in de-escalation

		<p>provided through Crisis Prevention and Intervention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All schools are implementing phase one of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), focusing on Adult SEL and system supports for implementing SEL in all schools. • School counselors K-12 will check in with every student at least two times per year on health and well-being.
<p>3. Address safety concerns.</p> <p>Many stakeholders shared a concern for student safety. Physical and emotional safety provides a foundation for learning and growth. The solutions to address safety were varied, abundant, and at times, contradictory.</p>	<p>Steps could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure physical safety measures are based on best practices and continue to discuss and evaluate the use of security staff and monitoring in and around buildings. • Steps for physical safety could include implementing tools and systems that better control and monitor who enters buildings and the activity around schools. • Consider providing regular communications about safety measures in place and the role of safety and restoration staff, as well as training all staff on restorative practices. • SACs develop safety measures for each school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to increase staffing with the addition of 12 campus monitors, allowing for two per middle school building. • Visitor management, badge access, and regular building checks are in place and will be supported by the District Operations Team to ensure effectiveness. • Regular communication regarding safety will be shared widely. • All Restoration and Safety Coordinators are trainers for restorative practices, with the goal to train staff within each school, starting July 2023 . • Public safety staff will increase from 11 to 16 people to meet security needs at all district facilities by January 2023. • Currently have over 2,000 camera views in and around buildings to monitor issues and develop responses. • Upgrading and expanding card access and physical security

		systems to better control access.
<p>4. Foster belonging.</p> <p>Stakeholders identified that many students do not feel a sense of belonging at school and many families reported not feeling welcome at school. Fostering belonging could help alleviate some of the mental health challenges students are facing and improve well-being.</p>	<p>Steps could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 extracurricular activities that meet the needs of ELL students. • Help students and families prepare for transitions to new schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Community School Coordinators will be trained by IGNITE () in January 2023 to support student transitions and develop peer mentoring programs at all high schools.
<p>5. Evaluate communications efforts</p> <p>Stakeholders uplifted a need for consistent information, especially about policies or individual student concerns.</p>	<p>Steps could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how to best communicate with families based on preferences and how to streamline communication, prioritizing the distribution of the most important information and limiting the number of platforms used. • Communicate clearly and often information about policies and strategic decisions, including why decisions are made and what they mean. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage SchoolCNX and DMPS communications team to ensure district information is communicated to families often. • Evaluate use of SchoolCNX platform, looking for gaps and missed demographics. • Work with building leadership to ensure communication to families is consistent and frequent at the school level.

<p>6. Make intentional investments.</p> <p>Meeting the needs of a diverse student body requires significant investment from the school and the community.</p>	<p>Steps could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjust resources, services, and support based on the needs and feedback provided by the community. • Work in partnership with the community to complement existing services and support to avoid duplication and maximize resources. • Foster community advocacy for more equitable funding structures and increased investment in public schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure every building has a Community School Coordinator who focuses on community and family engagement, out of school time programming, support services, and collaborative leadership with families. • Actively work to increase number of Bilingual Family Liaisons supporting students and families.
<p>7. Recruit and hire teachers and staff that reflect the diversity of the district.</p> <p>Stakeholders noted that an investment in diverse staff creates safety and belonging for all students. 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 outcomes.</p>	<p>Steps could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize hiring and promoting staff 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 healing-centered framework. • Hire more Bilingual Family Liaisons and bilingual teachers and staff. • Ensure current staff are supported to improve communication, relationships, and belonging. • Prioritize screening, training and support to ensure staff approaches are culturally competent and anti-racist. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Licensure requirements for Restoration and Safety Coordinators were removed to improve the diversity of those staff members.

<p>8. Continue to foster safe and intentional collaborations between schools and the community.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Steps could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make volunteer process/background checks more user friendly. • Create community guides for each school community • Increase engagement by making events more accessible (e.g., providing free admission to school events) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DMPS has a working relationship with Des Moines Police (DMPD) and Fire Departments and Polk County Emergency Management to collaborate and problem solve issues. • Work with the above agencies to establish and practice large scale disaster response and relocation. • Meet monthly with DMPD and building staff to increase communication and discuss current concerns and trends.
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