



DEPARTMENT OF
**COMMUNITY &
HUMAN SERVICES**



ALEXANDRIA YOUTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT 2025

The 2025 Youth Needs Assessment, developed by the City of Alexandria and Alexandria City Public Schools, centers youth voices to identify key needs, service gaps, and priorities.

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Youth Needs Assessment 2025

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Purpose

The Youth Needs Assessment (YNA) was developed to gain a comprehensive understanding of what Alexandria's young people need to thrive, based directly on their perspectives. By uplifting youth voices, this report identifies critical service gaps, emerging priorities, and opportunities to strengthen policies and programs that support their development. The findings will guide the next iteration of the Children and Youth Community Plan (CYCP).

Recognizing that effective youth support requires collaboration, the 2025 YNA was conducted through a partnership between the City of Alexandria's Department of Community and Human Services and Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). This joint approach reflects a shared commitment to centering youth voices in public planning and advancing collective strategies to address their most pressing challenges.

Approach

To inform CYCP priorities, the YNA used a mixed-methods approach that combined data with storytelling to capture the lived experiences of Alexandria's youth:

- Quantitative: A Youth Issues Survey asked students to rate the importance of 12 issue areas.
- Qualitative: Facilitated "Youth Listening Sessions" invited youth to reflect on their "ideal" community and compare it to their current reality through group discussion and interactive exercises.

Nearly 4,000 responses – or units of qualitative data - from over 1,140 youth were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Quantitative and qualitative insights were triangulated to identify top priorities and recurring themes.

Key Findings

Alexandria's youth are clear about what they need and what's missing. Across listening sessions, surveys, and a Youth Speak Up event, young people were consistent in describing what they want their ideal community to look like; they want a community where their basic needs are met, their mental health is supported, and they have access to equitable education, safety, and meaningful opportunities to thrive.

Highlights include:

- **Basic Needs and Relevant Resources:** Youth report food insecurity, housing instability, and inconsistent access to transportation, healthcare, and city services, especially among immigrant youth, students with disabilities, and families with lower incomes.
- **Educational Equity:** Students call for equitable learning environments, culturally relevant curriculum, and multiple postsecondary pathways. Concerns include school lunches, transportation, and poor communication with school leadership.
- **Physical, Mental, and Behavioral Health:** Young people want expanded access to mental health services, peer support, and education about substance use, birth control, and healthy relationships. Many described anxiety, depression, and peer pressure as major stressors.
- **Social Connection and Afterschool Support:** Teens value spaces to build friendships, find mentors, and participate in safe, inclusive activities. Sports, clubs, and out-of-school programs were frequently mentioned as protective factors.
- **Physical and Psychological Safety:** Safety concerns, particularly around bullying, school-based violence, gun violence, community crime, and school security measures, were top of mind. Youth asked for more trusted adults and inclusive, trauma-informed safety strategies.
- **Pathways to College and Careers:** The cost of college is a major barrier. Students seek stronger guidance, more real-world experiences, and equitable access to scholarships, vocational training, and job readiness programs.
- **Youth Agency and Leadership:** Many youth feel unheard by adults and school leaders, citing poor communication and a lack of follow-through. They want more opportunities to be involved in shaping decisions that impact their lives.

Youth want to be seen, supported, and engaged as full partners in building a better Alexandria.

Next Steps and Timeline

- **Summer 2025 - Stakeholder Dissemination**
 - Share findings with the Children, Youth, & Families Collaborative Commission, ACPS, City Council, and other decision-makers to build shared understanding and commitment.

- **Fall 2025-Winter 2026 - Collaborative Planning with Ongoing Youth Engagement**
 - Use findings to shape the next CYCP. Form cross-sector workgroups to translate findings into policy recommendations and strategic priorities.
 - Continue working with ACPS teachers and youth groups to ensure students remain central to planning and implementation.
 - Build accountability through follow-up listening sessions, surveys, and performance tracking.
- **Spring 2026 – Submit Plan through City’s Approval Process**
- **Summer 2026 - Design, Publish, & Promote Plan**

By addressing these priorities through coordinated, inclusive, and youth-driven strategies, Alexandria can close the gap between current challenges and the hopeful, equitable future envisioned by its young people.

Introduction and Background

Alexandria is committed to ensuring all children and youth thrive, regardless of race, income, or ability. The 2025 Youth Needs Assessment tells the story of Alexandria's young people and uses data to inform decisions that create more equitable, youth-centered systems.

Data from this assessment will guide the next Children and Youth Community Plan (CYCP), just as previous data helped shape the 2014 Children and Youth Master Plan and the CYCP 2025. These findings are essential for identifying gaps, amplifying youth voices, and informing policy and practice that improve outcomes for children and families.

Historical Context

In 2011, City Council created the Children, Youth, and Families Collaborative Commission (CYFCC) to advise on policies affecting young people. The CYFCC launched Alexandria's first Children and Youth Master Plan in 2014 and a refreshed version, CYCP 2025, in 2021. That plan was built with input from over 2,100 community members, including youth who led the "Build Your Legacy" workshop, envisioning a more equitable future for all Alexandria youth.

Purpose and Goals of the Needs Assessment

The Youth Needs Assessment aims to better understand the experiences of Alexandria's youth and guide coordinated action across systems. Key goals include:

- Describing the youth population and their families.
- Identifying top concerns voiced by youth.
- Exploring root causes of disparities.
- Informing priorities for the next CYCP.

Data Sources and Demographic Context

This report draws from both quantitative sources (e.g., Census, ACPS, YRBS, Resident Survey) and qualitative engagement (youth listening sessions, surveys, and Youth Speak Up). More than 1,140 students shared their insights on what youth need to thrive.

Youth in Alexandria are diverse. Over 29% of residents are under age 25, and ACPS data show that nearly two-thirds of students are Black or Hispanic, with over 30% identifying as multilingual learners. These demographics highlight the need for inclusive, culturally responsive strategies that reflect the lived realities of Alexandria's youth.

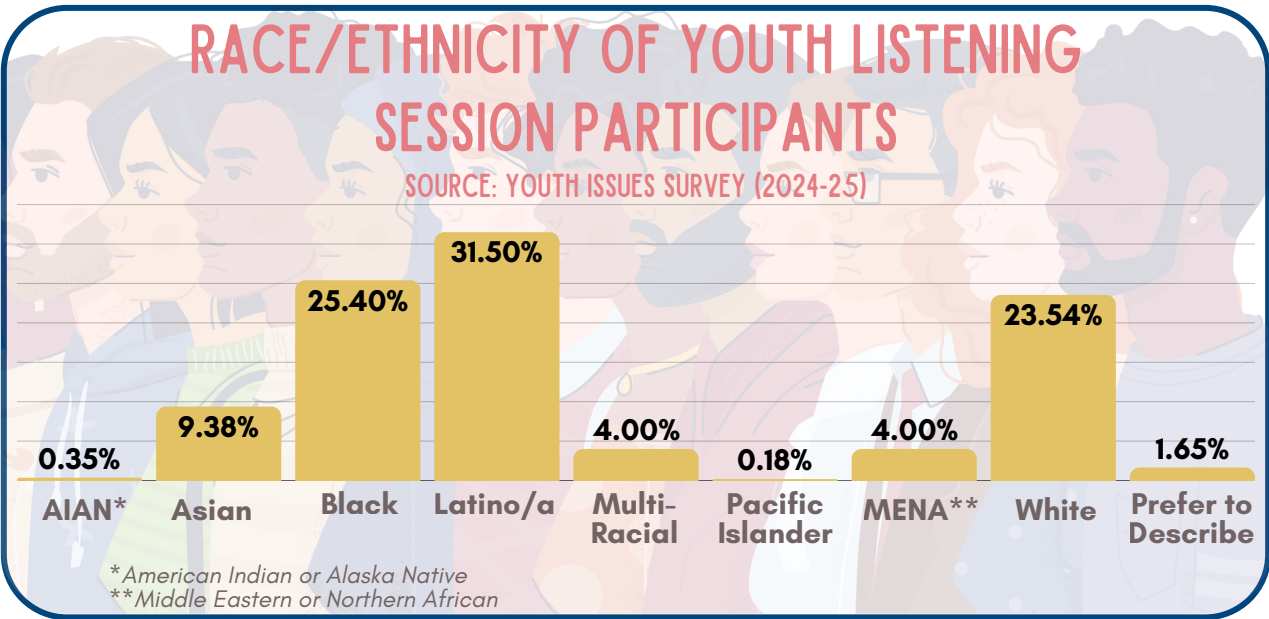
Data Sources and Methodology

The 2025 Youth Needs Assessment used a mixed-methods approach to capture a multidimensional understanding of the experiences, needs, and aspirations of Alexandria’s youth. Grounded in principles of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), the assessment prioritized youth voice while also drawing on secondary data sources to contextualize and validate findings. The methodology was designed to reflect both what young people experience directly and what existing data trends reveal across systems.

Data Sources

To ensure a comprehensive assessment, data were gathered from a variety of quantitative and qualitative sources:

- **Youth Listening Sessions (Qualitative):** A total of 94 listening sessions were conducted across Alexandria City Public Schools and one private school¹, engaging 1,144 middle and high school students in Round 1 and 500 high school students in Round 2. Sessions were co-facilitated by a trained team of 33 youth and 30 adults, using structured activities to explore youth perspectives on their “ideal” versus current community realities. Student mentions from Round 1 – which totaled 3,825 - were transcribed and thematically coded using a detailed codebook. These data were analyzed for frequency and salience across themes.



¹ Saint Stephens, Saint Agnes

- **Youth Issues Survey (Quantitative):** During the Youth Listening Sessions, students completed a voluntary and anonymous survey rating their level of concern across 12 youth-related issues. Mentions of the theme that emerged were analyzed to identify priority areas and triangulate with qualitative themes.
- **Listening Session with Caregivers (Qualitative):** In addition to youth perspectives, a listening session with 41 parents and caregivers was hosted in August 2024. The session, organized by the Children, Youth, and Families Collaborative Commission in partnership with the Youth in Progress (YIP) program, captured feedback from predominantly Hispanic families with students attending Alexandria City High School. Their insights helped validate, expand, and contextualize youth findings, particularly around safety, mental health, afterschool access, and family-school partnership.
- **Secondary Quantitative Data:** To ground student feedback in broader trends, the assessment incorporated publicly available and administrative datasets, including:
 - Alexandria Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2014, 2016, 2019, & 2023)
 - Search Institute's Developmental Assets Survey (2013, 2016, 2019, 2022, & 2025)
 - U.S. Census Bureau and American Community Survey (2018–2023)
 - Virginia Department of Education (school years 2022, 2023, & 2024)
 - Alexandria City Public School
- **Secondary Qualitative Data: Youth Speak Up Event:** In addition to the school-based Youth Listening Sessions, a youth-led community event called Youth Speak Up was held at the Patrick Henry Rec Center in April 2025. Hosted by community-based partners, this event brought together 110 Alexandria youth to share their experiences, ideas, and priorities for change. While separate from the Youth Listening Sessions, the themes raised at Youth Speak Up powerfully echoed and affirmed what was shared by students in the earlier Listening Sessions. Findings from this community event are integrated throughout this report to further validate key issues and demonstrate that youth concerns are consistent across different settings. Youth Speak Up serves as an important data point for triangulation, illustrating that the priorities voiced by youth are deeply rooted and widely shared, regardless of location or facilitation method.
- **Existing Reports and Community Assessments:** Over a dozen recent reports and studies were reviewed to add depth and context to the findings. These include the Community Health Assessment (2025), Alexandria Food Insecurity Report (2024), Youth Support Network Landscape Study (2023), Alexandria Resident Surveys (2016–2024), and others (see Annotated Bibliography in the Appendix).

Data Analysis

Data collected from the 94 Youth Listening Sessions were coded by a small team made up of one adult and three Young Adult Peer Advocates using a transparent and consistent framework (see Codebook in Appendix). Two members of the team were ACPS graduates. Mentions, or student responses – of which there were 3,835 – were grouped by major themes and subthemes, and frequency counts were used to identify areas of high concern or consistent mention. After independently coding the data, the team met to assess the level of agreement in their coding decisions. This enhanced the reliability of the analysis.

Student quotes were selected to illustrate both the breadth and depth of mentions within each category. Where appropriate, survey data and administrative indicators were used to validate, reinforce, or contrast with youth perspectives.

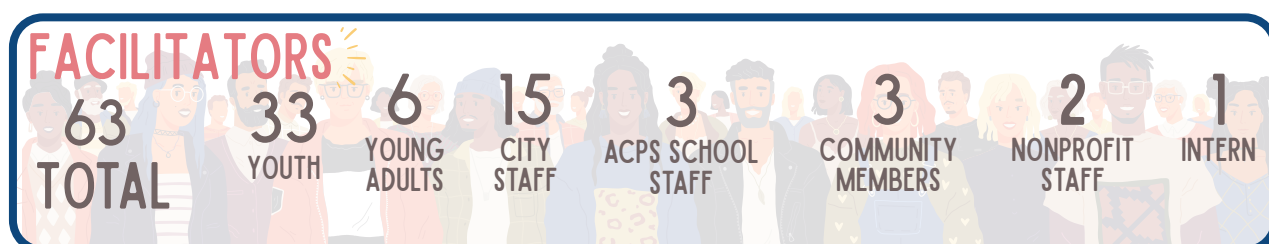
Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively to highlight trends over time, disparities across groups, and progress or stagnation in key indicators. Where possible, statistical significance and historical context were considered to frame the findings appropriately.

Integration and Triangulation

The findings presented in this report reflect the integration of multiple data types - student voice, system-level indicators, and community-level trends. This triangulated approach strengthens the credibility and utility of the assessment by combining lived experience with empirical evidence. It also allows for more nuanced interpretation of themes such as educational equity, mental health, and economic stability, where youth insights and data trends converge.

Youth-Centered and Collaborative Process

Throughout the process, youth were collaborators. From helping facilitate sessions to analyzing and validating findings in Round 2, youth played an active role in shaping the assessment. Cross-sector collaboration was also central. The City of Alexandria's Department of Community and Human Services, Alexandria City Public Schools, Alexandria Health Department, the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria, and the Children, Youth, and Families Collaborative Commission worked to align data collection with other local planning processes, including the Community Health Assessment and the updated ACPS Equity for All Strategic Plan.



Limitations

This section outlines the limitations of the Youth Needs Assessment, including constraints related to data collection, representation, scope, timeline, and analysis.

Data Limitations

Most of the quantitative data used in this assessment are sourced from self-reported surveys administered in Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). These surveys may not capture underlying differences between participants and those who are eligible but choose not to participate.

Approximately half of students either opted out or were absent on the day of survey administration, which introduces potential response bias. Additionally, students are not asked to disclose disability status, so it is unknown to what extent students with disabilities are represented in the results. The surveys and listening session materials were administered in English only, which may have posed accessibility barriers for English learners and non-native speakers.

Representation Limitations

This assessment primarily reflects the voices of youth in public schools. While one listening session was conducted at a private school, only nine students participated. Youth who are homeschooled, in alternative education settings, or not currently enrolled in school are not represented. Similarly, engagement of parents, caregivers, and service providers was limited. Despite outreach efforts by the Children, Youth, and Families Collaborative Commission to nonprofit organizations, only one listening session with caregivers was facilitated, which included 41 participants.

Scope and Focus

The focus of this Needs Assessment is on identifying strengths, gaps, and opportunities that the City of Alexandria and community partners can address to improve youth health and wellbeing. It does not provide a comprehensive review of academic performance, curriculum quality, or instructional strategies. Rather, it seeks to elevate youth perspectives on the community conditions and systems that affect their everyday lives and long-term success.

Timeline and Coordination Constraints

Several timeline constraints emerged due to efforts to align this assessment with other major citywide planning processes. Specifically, the Youth Needs Assessment was designed to inform both the Community Health Assessment (CHA) and the updated ACPS Equity for All Strategic Plan, both of which are set to be completed in 2025. To ensure coordination, the Department of Community and Human Services and the Children, Youth, and Families Collaborative Commission worked alongside the Health Department, ACPS, and the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria as part of a Unified Planning Team. To be impactful and timely, the Youth Needs Assessment needed to be completed and approved in advance of these efforts, which limited the time available for deeper engagement and iterative feedback loops.

Qualitative Coding and Interpretation

While this assessment uses a consistent and transparent coding framework to analyze student quotes, multiple valid interpretations are possible. Many quotes are brief, repeated, or touch on multiple dimensions (e.g., a quote about phone use may relate to both mental health and student agency). The analysis reflects one consistent approach, but alternative coding schemes could yield different insights.

Follow-Up Validation and Facilitation Differences

To validate and refine findings, 19 follow-up listening sessions were conducted with 500 high school students. However, these sessions focused only on the six most frequently mentioned themes from the first round of listening sessions. Due to time and capacity constraints, middle school students did not participate in a second round of sessions. In public middle schools, 33 trained youth co-facilitated listening sessions with adults, which likely contributed to more robust and relatable feedback. In contrast, the private middle school session was facilitated solely by an adult, which may have affected the quality and quantity of student-mentions.

Supplemental Data Use

To help offset some of the representation and participation gaps, findings from the 2025 Community Health Assessment and Youth Speak Up event were integrated into this report. The Community Health Assessment surveyed 175 young people under the age of 25 and 585 households with children 18 and younger. The Youth Speak Up event engaged 110 youth and young adults. Both data sources offer broader community input to complement the youth-driven qualitative data.

Literature Review and Community Context

Literature Review: Existing Studies and Reports

This section highlights recent studies and data that provide context for understanding the experiences and priorities of Alexandria's youth. Together, these findings illuminate structural barriers and opportunities across safety, well-being, education, and equity.

Key Findings from Existing Reports

Resident Survey Insights (2024)

Residents emphasized needs in pedestrian safety, crime prevention, affordable housing, childcare, K–12 education, and stormwater management. These priorities reflect concerns about cost of living, safety, and quality public services.

Developmental Supports and Risk Behaviors

Developmental Assets (2013–2025)

ACPS students showed small gains in average assets, with many reporting strong internal values like integrity and responsibility. However, fewer than 35% report having caring school climates or positive community engagement. Low levels of self-esteem and personal power indicate gaps in both external support and internal resilience.

Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2019–2023)

Anxiety is rising, especially among girls and LGBTQ+ youth. While substance use has declined, students experiencing verbal abuse from a romantic partner, missing school due to feeling unsafe at school, and reporting the presence of gang members at their school or in their neighborhood have all increased.

Mental Health & Protective Factors

Shape of Youth Mental Health (2023)

The Shape of Youth Mental Health report (2023) found that nearly half of local students feel persistently sad or hopeless, driven by stress, lack of sleep, and digital overload. Trusted adults and balanced routines emerged as key protective factors.

Youth Safety and Resilience Initiative (2023)

Youth focus groups emphasized the need for safe, inclusive spaces and adult allies. Over-policing and inequitable access to enrichment opportunities were common concerns.

Out-of-School Time and Engagement

Youth Support Network Landscape Study (2023)

Less than 35% of Alexandria youth regularly participate in OST programs. Barriers include cost, language, scheduling, and cultural exclusion, particularly among Amharic-speaking, MENA, and youth with disabilities. Recommendations include centralized info hubs, DEI training, and youth-led programming.

Resident Survey Trends (2016–2024)

Satisfaction with youth programming and K–12 education has declined. In 2024, just 28% of residents rated public education positively; only 47% were satisfied with out-of-school activities.

Social Determinants of Health and Equity

Dying Too Soon: A Health Equity Brief – Alexandria (2023)

This report highlights stark health disparities in Alexandria, where Black residents experience premature death at more than twice the rate of White residents (VCU Center on Society and Health, 2023). It underscores how social and economic inequities, like income, housing, and access to care, drive avoidable deaths and reinforce the systemic challenges youth identified in listening sessions.

Community Health Assessment (2025)

Surveyed youth and caregivers identified top issues as substance use, mental health, and crime. Strengths included diversity, public transit, and youth-friendly spaces, but concerns around housing, jobs, and healthcare access were widespread.

Youth Speak Up Event (2025)

Over 110 youth voiced concerns that echoed listening session themes: cost of living, mental health, safety, and the need for leadership opportunities and adult partnership. Their ideas affirmed the consistency and urgency of youth needs citywide.

Food Insecurity Report (2024)

44% of food-insecure residents are ineligible for assistance due to income. Barriers include language, transportation, and cultural stigma, especially for immigrants, Latino/a/e residents, and unhoused individuals.

Community Needs Assessment (2023)

The Economic Opportunities Commission report spotlighted West End and Arlandria disparities. Key findings included:

- Childcare averaging \$2,444/month
- 34% of residents classified as ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed)
- 8,000+ eviction filings (2021–2023)

Conclusion and Cross-Cutting Recommendations

Taken together, the reports reviewed in this section offer a multidimensional view of the challenges and opportunities facing Alexandria's youth. They reveal significant disparities and a community that is actively working to create change. Across studies, several themes consistently emerge:

- Mental health is a growing concern, particularly for girls, LGBTQIA+ youth, and students of color.
- Disparities by race, income, and geography persist, especially for Hispanic and Black youth and for families living in the West End and Arlandria.
- Youth are eager for deeper engagement, stronger relationships, safer environments, and access to programs and services that reflect their needs, culture, and voice.
- The structures that shape opportunity, such as housing, education, food security, employment, and health, remain deeply inequitable, with ZIP code and identity continuing to predict access to safety, services, and life expectancy.

The following cross-cutting recommendations reflect themes that surfaced across local and regional reports. They point to the types of systemic investments and coordination necessary to meet youth where they are and help them thrive.

1. Prioritize Youth Mental Health

- Expand access to culturally responsive, youth-centered mental health services in schools and communities.
- Normalize mental health conversations and reduce stigma in youth spaces.
- Strengthen daily connections between youth and trusted, caring adults (teachers, mentors, coaches, program leaders, etc.).

2. Invest in Out-of-School Time and Enrichment

- Increase funding for equitable, inclusive out-of-school programs, especially for middle and high school youth.
- Build a centralized youth program locator and increase outreach through schools and peer networks.
- Reduce access barriers, such as transportation, cost, scheduling, and cultural exclusion.
- Co-design afterschool and summer programs with youth to ensure offerings match their interests and needs. Embed equitable and targeted universal design practices to ensure full participation by youth with disabilities, multilingual learners, and historically marginalized groups.

3. Advance Equity and Youth Voice in Systems

- Use disaggregated data and disparity ratios to monitor and address racial and economic gaps in youth outcomes, as modeled in the CYCP Progress Reports.
- Create mechanisms for authentic youth-adult partnerships in planning and decision-making, including co-leadership opportunities.
- Expand race and social equity trainings for staff and service providers across youth-serving sectors.
- Target outreach and program design toward youth who have been historically excluded, particularly Black, Hispanic, and immigrant youth.

4. Improve Access to Basic Needs and Stability

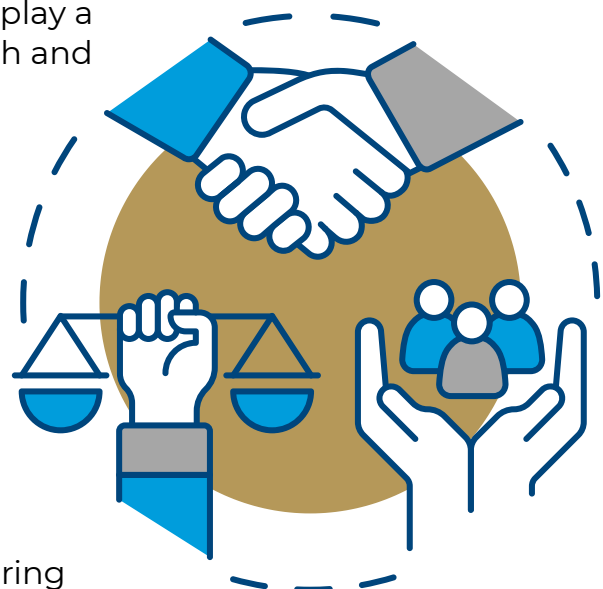
- Expand access to affordable housing, quality childcare, nutritious food, healthcare, and safe transportation.
- Embed wraparound supports, such as translation, case management, and flexible funding, into service delivery.
- Recognize economic instability, housing insecurity, and food access as youth development issues, not just adult ones.
- Address geographic and racial disparities in health outcomes by targeting investments in neighborhoods with high premature death rates and high need (as shown in the "Dying Too Soon" brief).

5. Foster Citywide Coordination

- Align youth development strategies across City agencies, ACPS, community organizations, and public health entities.
- Improve data sharing, outcomes tracking, and collaborative strategic planning across sectors.
- Build shared leadership structures that center youth and equity in decision-making and resourcing.
- Ensure youth-facing communications are clear, consistent, and available in multiple languages and formats.

6. Address Root Causes of Health and Opportunity Gaps

- Understand that the conditions children grow up in, like safe housing, quality schools, and access to care, play a powerful role in shaping their health and futures.
- Prioritize place-based investments in neighborhoods with high poverty, eviction risk, food insecurity, and premature mortality.
- Dismantle barriers rooted in systemic racism and proactively expand access to education, good jobs, transportation, and community safety.
- Invest in community healing and anti-racist systems reform by centering the lived experiences of Black, Brown, and immigrant youth.



Contextual Data: Demographic Trends and Historical Overview

Understanding the status of Alexandria's youth requires grounding in key demographic and socioeconomic trends. This section draws from U.S. Census data, Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS), and local reports to highlight the diversity, challenges, and disparities shaping young people's lives.

Youth Population and Diversity

Of Alexandria's estimated population of 156,788 residents, approximately 37,844 (nearly one in four) are children, youth, or young adults under age 24. This includes:

- Children under 5: 6.85% of the population (10,541)
- Youth ages 5–19: 12.6% of the population (20,094)
- Young adults ages 20–24: 4.6% of the population (7,209)

This youth population is diverse in racial, cultural, and linguistic identity. In ACPS, more than half of all students (55%) are multilingual learners², and 45% are identified as English Learners³. Students enrolled in ACPS were born in 113 different countries and speak 119 languages, most commonly Spanish, Dari, Amharic, and Arabic.

Immigration and Family Composition

Roughly 10% of Alexandria's children are immigrants, and nearly half live with at least one foreign-born parent. While most live with parents or guardians, a small portion live with grandparents (1.7%) or others. Of 251 grandparent-led households, nearly 40% are immigrants⁴.

Economic and Housing Conditions⁵

While the median family income for households with children is relatively high at \$125,658, significant disparities persist:

- 13% of children live below the poverty line
- 18.4% rely on public assistance (e.g., SSI, SNAP)
- 28% of families are single-parent households
- 58% of children under 18 live in rental housing
- 124 students were identified as experiencing homelessness in 2024–2025⁶

These indicators highlight the need for stable housing, income supports, affordable childcare and wraparound services.

² ACPS Office of English Learner Services, 2023

³ VA Department of Education, 2024

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 2019–2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, 2019–2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

⁶ VA Department of Education, 2024

School Enrollment and Educational Environment⁷

Of 22,149 children (ages 3–17), about 86% are enrolled in school (77% in public schools). ACPS serves 16,613 students, 68% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Chronic absenteeism remains a challenge, with 13% of students affected in 2023–2024. Disproportionate rates exist among:

- Hispanic students (52% of chronically absent; 18.2% chronic absence rate vs. 6.4% White peers)
- Students experiencing homelessness (1% of enrollment, 3% of chronic absences)
- Students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and economically disadvantaged youth

Thanks to stronger school-family partnerships, chronic absenteeism dropped 17% in one year, but disparities persist and demand systemic solutions.

Disability and Special Education Needs

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 2.8% of children under age 18 in Alexandria have a disability. However, within Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS), a significantly larger proportion; 11.6% of students (1,910 individuals) are formally identified as Students with Disabilities (SWD) and receive special education services under IDEA.

Recent performance and outcome data from the Virginia Department of Education highlight persistent disparities between SWD and their peers across multiple indicators:

- **Dropout Rate (2023–2024):** 13% of SWD dropped out, compared to just 9% of all students.
- **Chronic Absenteeism:** SWD have notably higher absenteeism rates - 32% in 2023–24, compared to 19% of all students.
- **Student Achievement:** Pass rates for SWD are significantly lower across all core SOL subjects:
 - **Science:** 20% (SWD) vs. 57% (non-SWD)
 - **History:** 25% vs. 70%
 - **Reading:** 40% vs. 68%
 - **Writing:** 29% vs. 79%
- **Postsecondary Enrollment:** Only 40% of SWD who graduated in 2020 enrolled in higher education within 16 months.

These gaps call for greater inclusion and support across education, recreation, and workforce pathways.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, 2019–2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Monitoring Youth Outcomes and Equity

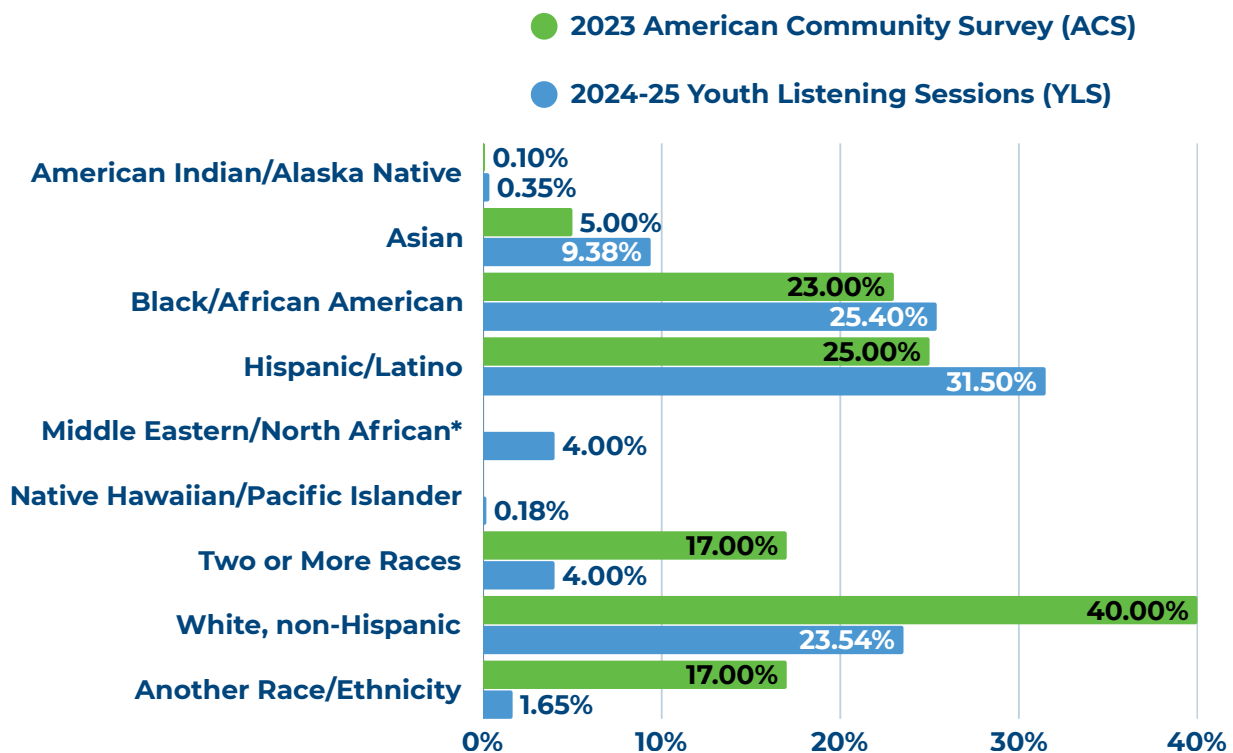
Since 2014, Alexandria has tracked progress through the Children & Youth Community Plan. The 2023 report shows:

- 58% of indicators are improving
- 44% of disparity ratios exceed 2.0, especially for Hispanic and Black youth
- Gaps are largest in academic achievement, out-of-school time participation, and economic and safety-related indicators

Framing the Listening Sessions

These demographic patterns reflect a landscape where youth face barriers tied to poverty, housing instability, and language access. The integration of CYCP indicators with youth input confirms that inequities are felt daily and must be addressed through equity-centered, youth-informed strategies.

Race/Ethnicity of Youth



*ACS does not capture this identity. It was added to the Youth Issues Survey to reflect Alexandria's population.

Key Findings

This section presents the core findings from Alexandria's 2024–2025 Youth Needs Assessment, offering a comprehensive view of what young people experience, envision, and recommend for their schools and communities. The findings are based on a mixed-methods approach that integrates existing data sources with extensive qualitative input from local youth.

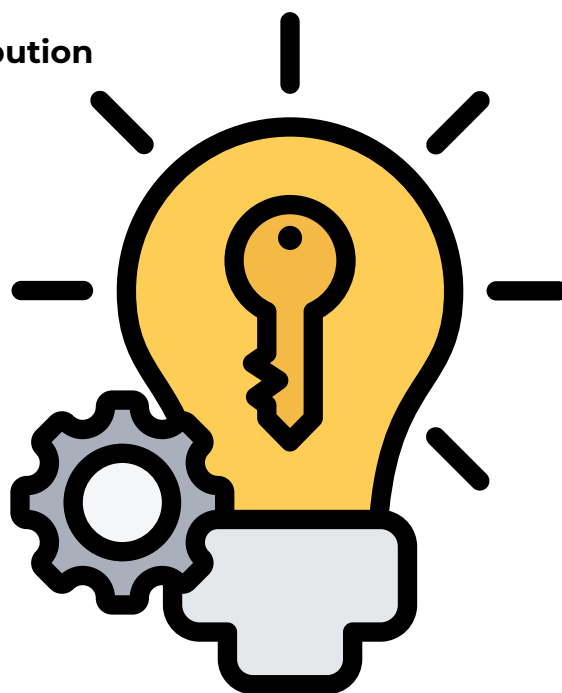
The themes explored here were intentionally selected based on the Children and Youth Community Plan (CYCP), which outlines priority areas and indicators used to monitor youth well-being in Alexandria. These topics were included in the Youth Issues Survey and used as a framework to organize and analyze the qualitative data collected through Listening Sessions. This structure ensures continuity with the City's strategic priorities while centering youth voices to assess how well those priorities align with lived experience.

Each theme begins with a brief overview of relevant local data and findings from existing reports and surveys. This is followed by a synthesis of what youth envision in an ideal community, what they currently experience, and, where applicable, recommendations for change based on Round 2 Listening Sessions. These "Recommended Pathways to the Ideal" reflect proposals from over 500 students at Alexandria City High School who reviewed preliminary findings, reflected on root causes, and co-developed practical solutions. A full version of the findings from Round 2 can be found in the Appendix.

The themes covered in this section include:

1. **Basic Needs and Relevant Resources**
2. **Educational Equity**
3. **Environmental Protection and Climate Change**
4. **Physical, Mental, and Behavioral Health**
5. **Physical and Psychological Safety**
6. **Pathways to College and Careers**
7. **Youth Agency, Leadership, and Contribution**
8. **Youth Employment**
9. **Responsive and Just Government**

These findings provide a window into the current reality facing Alexandria's youth and a roadmap for how the City and its partners can respond with greater equity and accountability.



Theme: Basic Needs and Relevant Resources

Overview

Basic Needs emerged as one of the highest-priority issues among young people in both the Youth Listening Sessions and the Youth Issues Survey. In fact, 82% of survey respondents rated Basic Needs as somewhat or extremely important - the top-rated issue overall. Below, we explore the key subthemes that surfaced most frequently in youth conversations, supported by local data and resident perceptions.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Reports and Surveys Tell Us

Cost of Living and Affordable Housing

Economic well-being remains one of Alexandria's most pressing challenges. Residents selected "Cost of Living" and "Affordable Housing" as economic well-being issues that the City should prioritize within the next two years. Only 16% of residents expressed satisfaction with Alexandria's cost of living while 23% of residents expressed satisfaction with available affordable housing (2024 Resident Survey), and 93% of low-income renters are considered cost-burdened (ACS). While 13% of children live below the federal poverty line, nearly 70% of ACPS students qualify for free- or reduced-priced meals, highlighting the true scope of financial strain. Children of color are disproportionately affected, impacting housing stability, stress levels, and opportunity access.

Food Access & Justice

Though 80% of residents rated access to healthy food positively, youth experiences tell a different story. Just 42% of Alexandria teens reported eating vegetables daily (2023 YRBS), signaling disparities in nutrition and access among lower-income families.

Community & Human Services

Only 33% of residents are satisfied with affordable, quality childcare (2024 Resident Survey), despite growing demand. Children under 5 now make up nearly 7% of the city's population, and while Pre-K enrollment has reached 84%, access remains uneven, especially for multilingual and low-income families.

Healthcare Access

More than 80% of residents are satisfied with healthcare and dental services. Among youth, access to a consistent source of care ("medical home") rose from 74% in 2021 to 77% in 2023 (YRBS), though access to mental and culturally responsive care remains a concern.

Transportation & Mobility

Most residents are satisfied with walkability (73%), metro access (71%), and bus service (70%), but fewer are satisfied with street and sidewalk conditions (41–51%). Youth cite public transit as a key barrier to afterschool programs, jobs, and community engagement due to safety concerns, delays, and limited routes.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth are Telling Us

Overview

This theme reflects youth concerns about meeting their fundamental needs for housing, food, healthcare, transportation, and other essential supports. Across listening sessions, students emphasized that when these basic needs are unmet, their ability to focus in school, participate in the community, and plan for the future is compromised. Their feedback highlights both structural challenges, such as affordability, service accessibility, and transportation barriers, and the stress of financial instability and unmet needs.

Despite these challenges, students expressed a strong collective vision grounded in care and equity. They imagine an Alexandria where every young person and family has consistent, stigma-free access to critical resources and can move safely and easily through their daily lives. Their insights underscore the interconnectedness of basic needs and youth wellbeing, and the importance of responsive systems that center dignity, access, and community support.

Why It Matters

When basic needs go unmet, such as food, housing, healthcare, and transportation, young people face significant challenges in learning, connecting, and planning for the future. Youth described how economic hardship and unreliable transportation create daily stressors that impact their well-being and development.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~670+ mentions

Subthemes with high mention frequency included:

- Cost of Living (500+ mentions)
- Transportation and Mobility (170+ mentions)

What Youth Want

- Affordable housing, healthcare, and food for all
- Safe, walkable neighborhoods and reliable, free public transit
- Services that are accessible, stigma-free, and equitably distributed

What Youth Experience

- Stress from high costs, limited services, and inequitable access
- Barriers to participation due to unreliable transportation
- Specific concerns about food insecurity, homelessness, and healthcare affordability

Reflections from the Youth Speak Up Event

Students expressed frustration with inconsistent access to city and school resources, especially for middle schoolers and youth not enrolled in ACPS. They called for clearer outreach (e.g., social media, school portals) and raised concerns about housing instability, transportation safety, and affordability of essentials like emergency contraception.

Findings by Subtheme

Subtheme 1: Cost of Living

Overview

Students described financial stress as a central concern affecting their families and peers. Rising prices, housing costs, healthcare inaccessibility, and visible poverty emerged as common themes. Youth highlighted a strong desire for a community where no one experiences homelessness or has to struggle to meet their basic needs.

What Youth Want

- Affordable or free access to housing, healthcare, food, and basic necessities
- Families able to meet basic needs without financial strain
- No one experiencing homelessness or poverty
- Resources distributed equitably across neighborhoods

Illustrative Quotes

- Economic Justice (~150 mentions)
 - “Lower taxes.”
 - “More free resources for youth.”
 - “Everyone has their basic needs met—no economic struggle.” / “Minimum wage increased to a living wage.” / “Universal Based Income.”
- Food Justice (~30+ mentions)
 - “Free food @ Bradlee for students”
 - “Healthy organic food that is affordable.”
- Healthcare Access & Well-being (~45+ mentions)
 - “Free healthcare.” / “More wellness centers.”
 - “Free Epi-pens.” / “Cheaper insulin.” / “Free feminine products.” / “Free hygiene products for all.”
- Housing for All (~55+ mentions)
 - “Affordable Housing”
 - “Lower rent for single mothers.”
- Social Services (~20 mentions)
 - “More community services for people”
 - “Giving young parents the knowledge to raise happy and healthy children”

What Youth Experience

- Economic Disparities (~90+ mentions)
- Food Insecurity (~15+ mentions)
- Healthcare Inaccessibility (~20+ mentions)
- Housing Instability (~50+ mentions)

Illustrative Quotes

- **Economic Disparities** (~90+ mentions)
 - *"It is very expensive just to live here." "A lot of people don't get paid much and can't afford a lot of things."*
- **Food Insecurity** (~15+ mentions)
 - *"The prices of food are very high." / "Not enough food."*
- **Healthcare Inaccessibility** (~25+ mentions)
 - *"Expensive healthcare." / "People don't have healthcare."*
- **Housing Instability** (~50+ mentions)
 - *"Rent is too high."*
 - *"High rates of people experiencing homelessness."*
 - *"Cost of living here is extremely high...this city is going to see a decline in its young population...I can't think of any young people planning on living here past high school."*

It is very expensive just to live here.

Subtheme 2: Transportation and Mobility

Overview

Youth imagine a transportation system that is safe, reliable, and equitable. Their ideal includes clean sidewalks, well-lit roads, reliable public transit, and walkable neighborhoods. In reality, however, they experience deteriorating infrastructure, unsafe traffic conditions, and unpredictable public transit - barriers that affect their daily routines.

What Youth Want

- Well-maintained roads, sidewalks, and bike lanes (~20+ mentions)
- Reliable, clean, and free public transit (~55+ mentions)
- Walkable neighborhoods and safer traffic patterns (~15+ mentions)

Illustrative Quotes

- *"Well-built roads, sidewalks, public parks, etc."*
- *"More parking at school and everywhere in Alexandria."*
- *"My ideal community has more bus drivers." / "More public transportation of people who don't have access to a car, most DASH buses are often very packed."*
- *"Driving safety programs."*
- *"Less traffic."*

What Youth Experience

- Deteriorating public infrastructure (~15+ mentions)
- Unreliable Public Transit (~50+ mentions)
- Unsafe traffic conditions (~10+ mentions)

Illustrative Quotes

“Broken sidewalks.”/ “When it is snowing, the sidewalk becomes icy for the people that wait for the bus.”

“My bus just doesn’t show up sometimes.” / “Not enough bus drivers.”

“Public transportation needs to be improved.”

“People not driving safely - on their phones.”

“Quaker/Braddock intersection is not safe.”

Analysis

Youth feedback highlights both strengths and areas for improvement in Alexandria’s efforts to meet basic needs. Many students expressed appreciation for resources like free DASH buses and local service hubs, but also noted that access can be uneven, particularly for middle school students, youth not enrolled in ACPS, and families facing financial hardship.

Concerns around transportation focused on reliability, safety, and maintenance of sidewalks and roads. While some students noted improvements or praised certain routes and intersections, others described specific locations that feel unsafe or hard to navigate. Communication gaps were also a recurring theme, with youth emphasizing the need for clearer, more youth-friendly outreach about available services, including those offered by the Teen Wellness Center.

Overall, the feedback suggests opportunities to build on existing strengths by improving service visibility, expanding access, and continuing to invest in infrastructure and systems that support all youth across the city.

Recommended Pathways to the Ideal

When asked to brainstorm potential solutions to address cost of living challenges in Alexandria, students proposed a mix of policy changes, direct support programs, and community-driven actions. Their ideas focused on making necessities more affordable, ensuring equitable access to resources, and engaging both policymakers and the community in solutions.

Reduce Cost Burdens

- Lower rent, utilities, and inflation to make Alexandria more affordable.
- Require companies to reduce prices on essential services.

Expand Financial Support

- Provide tax relief and direct assistance for low-income families.

Increase Access to Resources

- Make basic services like groceries more affordable or free for those in need.
- Improve outreach so more people know about and can access available resources.

Support Immigrants

- Ensure access to housing, jobs, and services for newcomers.

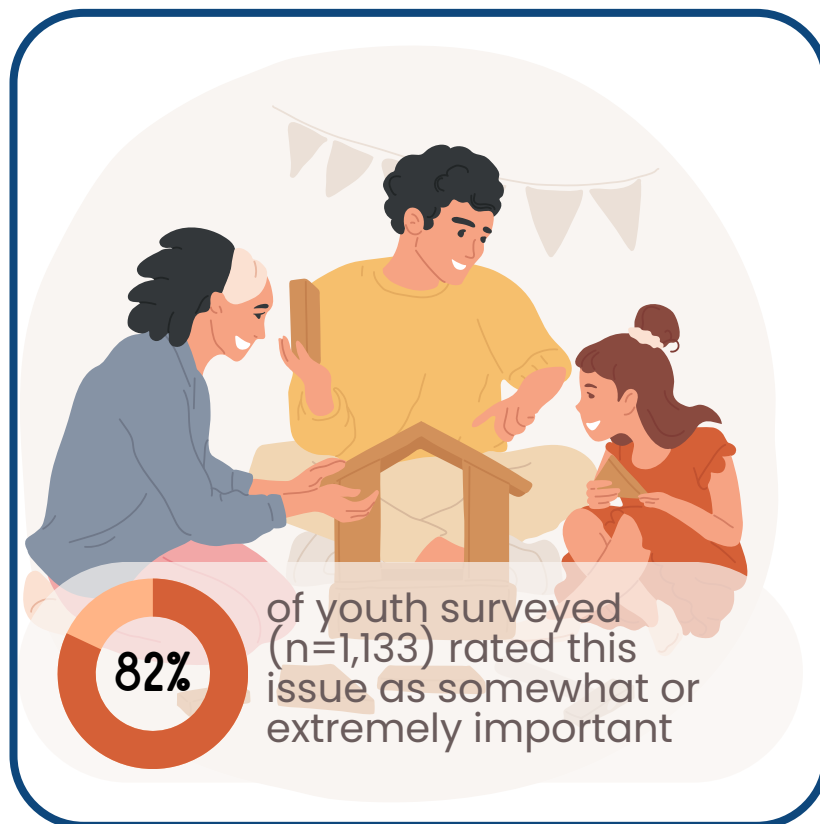
Engage the Community

- Ask those most affected about their needs and include them in decision-making.
- Encourage youth to advocate to leaders like the mayor.

Think Boldly

- Students voiced a desire for ambitious solutions, like major economic investment, to address inequality.

Students see policy reforms, community-driven action, advocacy efforts, and direct financial assistance as key to addressing the cost-of-living crisis.



Theme: Educational Equity

Educational equity is a top priority for Alexandria's youth. In the Youth Issues Survey, 80% of respondents rated it as somewhat or extremely important, and it was the most frequently mentioned theme in Youth Listening Sessions (1,200+ mentions). Youth define equity as supportive relationships, inclusive classrooms, responsive leadership, and environments where all students feel safe, seen, and capable of success.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Reports and Surveys Tell Us

Academic Environment & Success

Satisfaction with education was the lowest-rated area in the 2024 Resident Survey (28%), with Alexandria scoring well below national and regional averages. While graduation rates have improved (from 81% in 2018 to 87% in 2024), major equity gaps remain. Reading proficiency has stalled, with White students now twice as likely as Hispanic students to meet benchmarks. Although suspension rates and chronic absenteeism have declined, Black and Hispanic students and those experiencing homelessness remain disproportionately impacted.

School Leadership & Student Engagement

Students want leadership that listens and leads with care. Yet, some engagement indicators have been declining; 69% of students feel welcome at school (down 13 points since 2020), and 74% feel adults at ACPS care about them or provide needed help (down 7 points since 2020). These trends suggest many students don't experience school as a fully supportive environment.

Student Wellbeing & Support Service

Though perceptions of school climate have improved overall since 2010, disparities persist. Only 27% of Hispanic students feel supported at school, with no improvement since 2022. In contrast, Black and Asian students report gains.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth are Telling Us

Overview

Students shared a wide range of insights about their educational experiences, highlighting both strengths and challenges. While many praised passionate teachers and opportunities for academic growth, others pointed to inconsistencies in instruction, outdated facilities, limited voice in decision-making, and uneven access to supports. Feedback coalesced around four

major subthemes: Academic Environment & Success, School Facilities & Operations, Student Wellbeing & Support Services, and School Leadership & Student Engagement.

Why It Matters

Educational equity means ensuring every student has the support, relationships, and opportunities they need to thrive. When students experience inclusive, well-resourced schools that value their input and meet their diverse needs, they are more engaged, successful, and empowered to lead.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~1,201

- Academic Environment & Success (~230+ mentions)
- School Facilities & Operations (~455+ mentions)
- Student Wellbeing & Support Services (~275+ mentions)
- School Leadership & Student Engagement (~160+ mentions)

What Youth Want

Students envision an education system that is:

- Relevant and engaging, with real-world applications and experiential learning
- Balanced and flexible, with schedules and workloads that support wellness
- Inclusive and fair, where leadership listens and student voices are reflected in decisions
- Supported by well-maintained facilities, equitable resources, high-quality school lunches, and caring adults

What Youth Experience

- Schools that were often described as overstimulating, under-resourced, and inconsistent in meeting their academic and emotional needs.
- While some highlight strong relationships and supportive teachers, others feel unheard, overburdened, or disconnected from decisions that affect them.

Findings by Subtheme

Subtheme 1: Academic Environment & Success

Overview

This subtheme captures students' perspectives on the quality of their education, learning environments, and opportunities for academic success. Students envision schools that are both rigorous and responsive; places where education is engaging, inclusive, and supportive of diverse pathways to success. While many acknowledge areas of strength, such as access to tutoring and strong teacher relationships, they also highlight challenges such as inconsistent instruction, inflexible systems, and limited access to supports.

Why It Matters

Students' experiences in the classroom shape their academic confidence, motivation, and long-term success. When instruction is engaging and responsive, and when students feel seen and supported by educators, they are more likely to thrive. Youth insights suggest that more inclusive and adaptable learning environments, where students can explore, reflect, and grow, would benefit all learners.

What Youth Want

In their ideal schools, students envision:

- More hands-on, experiential learning (e.g., field trips, life skills, group projects)
- Academic support and encouragement through tutoring and meaningful teacher-student relationships. Passionate, well-supported educators who care about student success
- Fair, flexible assessment systems that prioritize growth over test scores
- Equitable access to academic opportunities, including support for students with different learning needs

Illustrative Quotes:

- **Student-Centered Learning and Engagement** (~60 mentions)
 - *"More field trips that actually help students understand more."*
 - *"Provides the knowledge and skills students will need for their future."*
- **Supportive Relationships and Academic Encouragement** (~60+ mentions)
 - *"An ideal school looks like everyone getting the help that they need for learning."*
 - *"More positive reinforcement from school staff."*
 - *"Students deserve to learn from passionate, involved teachers."*
- **Fair and Growth-Oriented Assessment** (~25 mentions)
 - *"Different ways of evaluating knowledge."/ "Less stress on grades/less importance over grades."*
- **Equity in Access and Opportunity** (~10 mentions)
 - *"Encouraging more minority students in college level/AP classes."*

What Youth Experience

- While many appreciate access to diverse classes and caring teachers, they also described instruction as overly rigid, disconnected from real life, and lacking in interactive opportunities.
- Disparities in support and opportunities, particularly for students in special education or youth of color in advanced courses
- Frustration over inconsistent grading and overreliance on testing.
- Teacher turnover and lack of one-on-one support were common concerns.

Illustrative Quotes:

- **Student-Centered Learning and Engagement** (~40 mentions)
 - *"No academic freedom." / "Haven't been on a field trip since 9th grade."*
 - *Positive mention: "Great variety of classes."*
- **Educational Disparities** (~15+ mentions)
 - *"Not everyone gets offered the same education."*
 - *"I just want to emphasize the importance of educational equity because I feel like it's still a huge issue within our school that is trying to be addressed but not really fulfilled completely."*
- **Supportive Relationships and Academic Encouragement** (~40+ mentions)
 - *"They give up on kids easy." / "Teachers don't care enough."*
 - *"Teacher retention – whatever we're doing, it isn't working."*
- **Fair and Growth-Oriented Assessment** (~5 mentions)
 - *"Too many tests."*



Great variety of classes.

Analysis

Across both their ideal visions and current realities, students express a desire for learning environments that are engaging, equitable, and responsive to their needs. They want an education that prepares them for life and see positive, caring relationships with teachers as essential to academic success. Youth notice when opportunities are uneven and call for a more inclusive approach to academic support. Finally, they favor assessments that reflect their learning styles and emphasize growth over time.

Recommended Pathways to the Ideal

Students proposed the following solutions to move us towards their ideal vision:

- **Build Stronger Teacher-Student Connections:** Suggestions include creating more free time during classes for students to interact with teachers.
- **Provide Enhanced Advising in Middle School:** By providing better guidance and more exposure to various academic pathways early on, schools could encourage a more diverse group of students to pursue advanced courses.
- **Focus Efforts on Equity:** Continue to ensure that advanced classes and academic support are promoted equitably across all demographics, addressing the systemic issues that leave Black and Hispanic students at a disadvantage.

- **Address Teacher Burnout:** Improving teacher retention through accountability measures and professional support may create a more consistent and passionate academic environment.
- **Create a Welcoming Environment:** Initiatives to make students feel more welcome and increase the percentage of students who feel valued are essential for long-term academic success.

By investing in experiential learning, teacher support, equity-driven practices, and student-centered assessments, Alexandria schools can better support all students on their path to success.

Subtheme 2: School Facilities & Operations

Overview

This subtheme, which emerged more than 455 times, reflects how students experience the physical conditions of their schools and the operational systems that structure the school day, including transportation, food services, scheduling, maintenance, and campus logistics. While some students appreciate improvements like newer buildings or organized spaces, many describe environments that feel overstimulating, inconvenient, or in need of attention. Their ideal vision centers on clean, safe, and well-resourced campuses that promote comfort, efficiency, and student well-being.

Why It Matters

Facilities and operations play a significant role in shaping how students feel and function at school. Clean spaces, accessible bathrooms, and nutritious meals with enough time to eat create the foundation for learning. When students are overstimulated due to crowded hallways, feeling rushed, or navigating logistical barriers, their ability to focus, connect, and succeed is hindered.

What Youth Want

Students envision school environments where:

- Classrooms, bathrooms, and shared spaces are clean, safe, and well-maintained
- School buildings that are spacious and meet the diverse needs of its students
- Campuses are unified or efficiently connected to reduce lost learning time
- School transportation is reliable and accessible
- Meals are nutritious, high-quality, culturally inclusive, and timed to allow for meaningful breaks

Illustrative Quotes:

- **Maintenance & Custodial Services** (~20+ mentions)
 - *“Bathrooms are always open and clean.” / “Recycling at school.”*

- **Physical Conditions & Infrastructure** (~50 mentions)
 - *"We need bigger hallways." / "Less crowded hallways."*
 - *"Free and accessible student parking."*
 - *"Gender neutral bathrooms."*
 - *"Handicap accessible facilities (elevators)."*
 - *"Having a separate room for prayer (Muslims)."*
- **School Bus Transit & Intercampus Transportation** (~20+ mentions)
 - *"Divide campuses into 9th/10th grade (at Minnie Howard) and 11th/12th grade (at Main Campus)." / "One connected campus—transportation issues solved." / "Better transportation and less switching campuses"*
 - *"Pedestrian walkway over King St/Braddock road/Quaker intersection."*
 - *"More busses to and from Minnie Howard campus."*
- **School Lunch Services** (~130+ mentions)
 - *"Longer lunches / Lunch n' Learn." / "Better school food." / "We need halal food in schools. Most Muslim students don't eat, and it can reflect their health and education."*

What Youth Experience

- While some praise newer buildings, many students described crowded hallways, limited space, uncomfortable furnishings, and inconsistent temperature control.
- Logistical challenges for students created by the two-campus high school model. Students shared that the back-and-forth between campuses can be disruptive.
- Poor food quality, limited choices, and 19-minutes to eat lunch after factoring in waiting in lines

Illustrative Quotes:

- **Physical Conditions & Infrastructure** (~40+ mentions)
 - *"The hallways are so packed in."*
 - *"The tables and chairs are not comfortable."*
 - *"Having to pay ~\$90 for parking."*
 - *Positive mention: "Nice building" (Minnie Howard).*
- **School Bus Transit & Intercampus Transportation** (~45+ mentions)
 - *"I am always late because of school buses."*
 - *"I can't describe how overcrowded the buses are."*
 - *"The campus switching is awful and takes so long. It's going to get even worse when the weather gets cold."*
 - *"It is easier for me to get fentanyl at school than to be on time taking the busses from Minnie to King St."*

- **School Lunch Services** (~95+ mentions)
 - *“Lunch is too short.” / “Lack of lunch and learn = lack of equity”*
 - *“School lunches need to change - the quality and taste.”*
 - *“Food poisoning: there have been multiple times where there has been expired or contaminated food served to students.”*
- **Maintenance & Custodial Services** (~45+ mentions)
 - *“No toilet paper, soap, or towels in school bathrooms.”*
 - *“Bathrooms are disgusting.”*

Analysis

Students want school environments that support their learning. They want schools that feel calm, clean, and comfortable. Restrooms that work and feel safe and school meals that are nutritious, delicious, and culturally relevant with enough time to eat them. By addressing maintenance issues, enhancing meal quality, and refining transportation and operations, schools can create a more welcoming, supportive, and equitable environment for all.

Recommended Pathways to the Ideal

Students offered a range of practical suggestions to bridge the gap between the “real” and the “ideal” environment:

- **Transportation and Scheduling Adjustments:**
 - Consolidating classes on one campus to minimize intercampus transportation issues.
 - Adding more buses and permitting walking between campuses when safe.
 - Restructuring the school day (e.g., shifting Titan Time to the lunch block) to allow longer less crowded lunch periods.
- **Facility Improvements:**
 - Unlocking or removing barriers in bathrooms and hallways.
 - Enhancing maintenance by ensuring that restrooms are regularly cleaned and stocked with necessary supplies (including feminine hygiene products).
 - Physical upgrades such as installing additional security features (like bulletproof glass where needed) and addressing overcrowding in critical areas.
- **Enhanced Communication and Engagement:**
 - Instituting clearer, more open lines of communication between students, teachers, and administrators so that issues are understood and addressed promptly.
 - Encouraging student input on facility-related concerns.

- **Funding and Policy Adjustments:**

- Advocating for more funding to improve school facilities and maintenance.
- Reevaluating policies that restrict student movement or exacerbate scheduling conflicts.

Subtheme 3: School Leadership & Student Engagement

Overview

This subtheme, which emerged around 175 times, explores how students experience school leadership, communication, and decision-making processes, as well as the policies and climate that shape daily life. Students express a clear desire to be seen, heard, and respected in school spaces. Their feedback highlights both positive relationships and areas where school culture could be more inclusive, responsive, and transparent.

Why It Matters

Leadership sets the tone for the entire school environment. When students feel that their voices matter, that rules are applied fairly, and that adults in power are listening and collaborating with them, a stronger sense of trust, engagement, and school belonging is built. Inconsistent policies and one-way communication, however, can erode students' confidence in school systems.

What Youth Want

Students envision schools where:

- Communication is transparent and two-way between students, staff, and administrators
- Student input is actively sought and meaningfully included in decision-making
- School policies are fair, clearly explained, and consistently applied
- The school climate fosters mutual respect, safety, and inclusivity for all identities
- Leadership values student voice and creates opportunities for shared responsibility

Illustrative Quotes:

- **Digital Access Policies & General Policy Clarity** (~35+ mentions)
 - *"Change the no phone policy." / "Cell phones should be allowed in school for safety."*
 - *"Unblock sites on Chromebook"*
- **Communication and Shared Decision-Making** (~30+ mentions)
 - *"Listen to students and do what they ask. Not say you listen and do the opposite."*

- *“Accountability in government and school office. Clear plans with timely follow-through are essential to have a successful school administration.”*
- *“School admin listens to students.” / “We deserve to get the chance to be taken seriously.”*
- *“More access points for student input.”*
- *“Better communication between school board and students and teachers.”*

What Youth Experience

- Frustration with restrictions around phone use and internet access.
- Policies that feel contradictory, inconsistently applied, or frequently changed without clear explanation.
- Feeling unheard, ignored, and dismissed by school leadership.
- Feeling disrespected by their peers or school staff. While others noted friendly interactions, concerns about favoritism, discrimination, and lack of student-adult trust were also raised.

Illustrative Quotes:

- **Technology and Digital Access Policies** (~25+ mentions)
 - *“Phone!! I don’t feel safe without my phone on me.”*
 - *“Restricts phones while making a system that depends on phones.”*
- **General Policy Consistency and Clarity** (~18+ mentions)
 - *“Everything changes every year.”*
 - *“Contradicting rules and regulations.”*
 - *“ACHS really restricts us and blocks us from entering school in several ways. Only lets us go to get lunch through one door and when I’m running late, I don’t even get to get lunch because I have to walk all the way around and then it’s over.”*
- **Communication and Shared Decision-Making** (~30+ mentions)
 - *“We need to address the issue of the administration of schools not listening to what students AND teachers have to say. Every time they implement a new policy, and everybody warns them that it won’t work, they ignore the concerns. Every time issues with new programs are brought up after they’re implemented, they ignore the concerns.”*
 - *“School doesn’t listen to students’ concerns.”*
 - *“I think the School Board and Central Office should communicate with both students and teachers more. I feel like they make many decisions without consulting the people who are affected by their decisions.”*
- **School Climate and Interpersonal Respect** (~35+ mentions)
 - “It is very friendly here, but also very toxic.”*
 - “Racism and discrimination against students.”*
 - “Disconnect between admin and teachers and students.”*

In Round 2 discussions, students emphasized that Hispanic youth in particular feel underrepresented in leadership engagement efforts. They recommended more opportunities for dialogue with school administrators, including student-led conferences, regular feedback loops, and inclusive engagement efforts that reflect the full diversity of the student body.

Analysis

Students' experiences underscore a desire for a more collaborative school culture, where leadership models transparency, consistency, and inclusion. Students want to understand the rationale behind rules and see them applied equitably. Involving youth in shaping and reviewing policies could increase trust. Students are asking for real-time updates, clarity around school-wide decisions, and honest, two-way conversations. Youth are eager to participate in shaping their school experience. Creating meaningful structures for student input can deepen engagement and ownership. Respect, safety, and fairness remain essential. While many students feel supported, others are still navigating environments where bias or exclusion persist.

Recommended Pathways to the Ideal

Students offered the following solutions:

- **Enhanced Communication:** Students called for establishing open, clear channels for communication, such as regular conferences or a dedicated forum where diverse student voices are heard and responded to by administration.
- **Inclusive Decision-Making:** Suggestions included creating opportunities for collective student voting on specific changes, electing student representatives, and forming leadership groups that reflect the school's diversity (including BIPOC and disabled students).
- **Accountability and Responsiveness:** Some proposals focus on holding administrators accountable for ignoring student input or lack of follow-up.
- **Structural Changes:** Ideas range from ensuring that leadership experiences what students do (like riding the bus or participating in lunch) to integrating younger school board members who might be more in tune with student concerns.
- **Culture of Engagement:** Overall, students envision a school culture where leadership is accessible and genuinely committed to building a positive, inclusive environment. They want their school to be a place where feedback leads to real, tangible changes.



Subtheme 4: Student Wellbeing & Support Services

Overview

This subtheme, which emerged about 305 times, explores how Alexandria's schools support students' mental health, emotional wellbeing, and ability to manage academic stress. Students shared insights about their experiences with counselors and mental health services, the structure and pace of the school day, and the availability of adults who care about them beyond academics. Their ideal vision centers on schools that promote holistic wellness where young people feel emotionally supported, mentally prepared, and personally valued.

Why It Matters

Mental and emotional health are closely tied to students' ability to learn, engage, and thrive in school. Supportive school environments that include trusted adults, accessible services, and time for rest and recovery can reduce stress, prevent burnout, and help students develop lifelong coping skills. When these supports are missing or hard to access, students may feel isolated, overwhelmed, or unsupported.

What Youth Want

In their ideal schools, students imagine:

- Easy access to confidential, culturally responsive mental health care
- Strong, trusting relationships with school counselors, social workers, and supportive adults
- School schedules that allow for meaningful breaks, time outdoors, and physical activity
- Balanced workloads and academic expectations that support both learning and wellbeing
- A school culture that normalizes mental health support and emotional care

Illustrative Quotes:

- **Mental Health and Emotional Support** (~30+ mentions)
 - "In-school therapy." / "More mental health support for students."
 - "More encouragement from counselors, teachers, and staff – some make students feel like failures."
 - "I would want the classrooms to be more decorated so it looks more welcoming."
- **Workload Balance and Restorative School Schedules** (~160+ mentions)
 - "Study time in school."
 - "Lighter workloads and extended due dates." / "No unnecessary homework."
 - "Shorter school days." / "Longer passing periods." / "A different school schedule."

- *“More free time or just a break period.” / “A nap class.” / “I think they should bring recess back as it was a time for us to take a chill pill from the rest of the day, and it was a nice mental break.”*

What Youth Experience

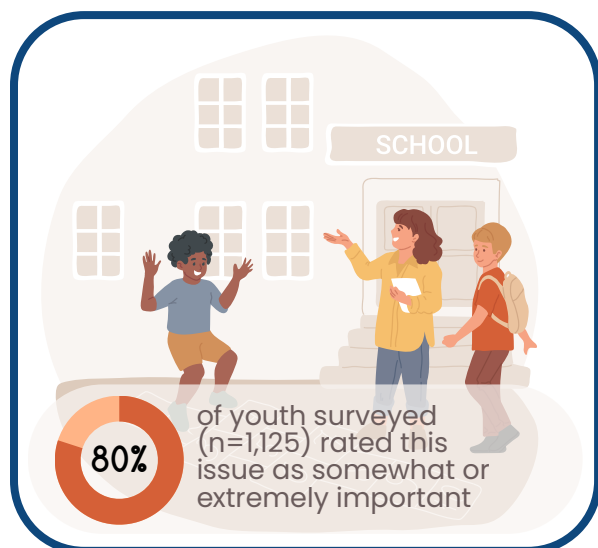
- Some students shared positive experiences with counselors or therapists. However, others reported difficulty making appointments, concerns about privacy, and a lack of consistent relationships with school-based mental health staff.
- Many students described feeling chronically overwhelmed, stressed, and fatigued by long school days, short passing periods, early start times, high expectations, and heavy homework loads.

Illustrative Quotes:

- **Mental Health and Emotional Support** (~25+ mentions)
 - *“Lack of connection between students and counselors.”*
 - *“School doesn’t know how to help students who are in crisis.” / “Counselors are hard to meet with.” / “Counselors are not helpful.” / “Counselor making it seem like we are stupid.”*
- **Workload Balance and Restorative School Schedules** (~80+ mentions)
 - *“Not enough breaks in school.” / “Little to no ability to use the restroom.”*
 - *“Seven hours of school is just too much.” / “Extremely long classes.”*
 - *“A lot of time sitting in class instead of going outside.”*
 - *“There is too much pressure and expectation on students.”*
 - *“Too much homework.” / “Homework means that many people are always busy”*

Analysis

Students want mental health support that is easy to find, responsive, and built on trust and confidentiality. Relationships matter more to them than simple referrals. They also value academic challenge but are asking for a better balance between rigor and recovery. When there is no time for rest, movement, or connection, stress increases and learning suffers. Finally, students see well-being as a responsibility of everyone. They want every adult they encounter at school to contribute to a culture where emotional health is supported, normalized, and treated with compassion.



Theme: Physical, Mental, and Behavioral Health

Overview

Physical, mental, and behavioral health was rated the second-highest priority among youth in the Youth Issues Survey, with 81% of respondents identifying it as somewhat or extremely important. This strong consensus reflects a deep recognition among youth that health is foundational to their overall well-being, academic performance, and future success. In both quantitative data and youth feedback, issues such as access to mental health supports, inclusive school environments, substance use prevention, and reproductive healthcare emerged as key concerns.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Reports and Surveys Tell Us

This section highlights youth health trends in emotional well-being, substance use, physical activity, and access to care. The data reflect areas of progress, persistent disparities, and opportunities to strengthen youth-centered systems of support.

Access to Recreation & Healthy Lifestyles

While 60% of residents are satisfied with recreation center maintenance (2024 Resident Survey), fewer than half (47%) are satisfied with the availability of out-of-school time activities. Only 56% rated youth sports fields and programs positively, pointing to limited engagement opportunities during critical afterschool hours.

Youth physical activity has improved, with 38% now exercising five or more days per week, up from 31% a decade ago. However, racial gaps have widened: White youth are more than twice as likely to report regular exercise as Black youth.

Teen pregnancy rates have dropped over 60% since 2010, but Hispanic teens still face rates nearly three times higher than their White peers, indicating inequities in access to health education and care.

Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional distress remains high. For the past decade, about 1 in 3 students have reported feeling sad or hopeless for at least two weeks. In 2023, rates were significantly higher among female and LGBTQIA+ youth - nearly half of LGBTQIA+ students reported persistent distress. Although rates among LGBTQIA+ youth have declined slightly, large disparities remain, reinforcing the need for inclusive, identity-affirming mental health supports.

Substance Use

With the exception of vaping, which has increased from 5% to 11%, Alexandria has seen steady declines in youth substance use over the past decade. Cigarette use dropped from 9% to 6%, and alcohol use fell from 26% to 17%, with the largest declines among Hispanic youth (alcohol use down 41%). However, recent increases in smoking and high alcohol use among White youth (over twice the citywide average) signal a need for targeted prevention efforts.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth Tell Us

Overview

This theme explores how youth experience and envision their physical, emotional, and behavioral health. Students shared their perspectives on access to mental health care, opportunities for physical activity, prevention and intervention around substance use, and support for healthy relationships. Their responses reflect a desire for holistic, trauma-informed systems of care that prioritize emotional well-being alongside academic success. While youth appreciate existing supports, they emphasize the need for more equitable access, reduced stigma, and expanded community investment in their overall health.

Why It Matters

Mental health, physical activity, and healthy decision-making are interconnected components of adolescent development. When young people have access to safe environments, trusted adults, supportive services, and opportunities for recreation, they are more likely to thrive in school and in life. Conversely, unaddressed trauma, lack of movement, peer pressure, and limited access to services can contribute to disengagement and increased risk-taking behavior.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~310 mentions

- **Mental Health Access & Support** (60+ mentions)
- **Physical Activity & Recreation** (65+ mentions)
- **Substance Use Prevention** (165+ mentions)
- **Additional Risk Behaviors** (~20 mentions)

What Youth Want

In their ideal communities and schools, students envision:

- Free and confidential access to mental health professionals, both in and out of school
- Recreational spaces and sports programs that are inclusive, clean, and well-funded
- Comprehensive, mandatory sex education
- A drug- and alcohol-free environment supported by prevention, education, and treatment services

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Normalize mental health help/therapy"*
- *"100K for free rehab centers"*
- *"Free and inclusive youth sports"*
- *"A support group for troubled teens"*
- *"No drugs and vape pens"*

**Normalize mental
health help/therapy**

What Youth Experience

Students report a range of challenges that limit their access to critical health supports:

- Limited availability of mental health services, with ongoing stigma around seeking help
- Recreational facilities that are outdated, inaccessible, or cost-prohibitive
- High rates of vaping and marijuana use in schools
- Inconsistent or insufficient sexual health education

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Not enough therapy."*
- *"Kids vaping in the bathrooms." / "Our school has a major problem with locking all of the bathrooms to stop people vaping in them but instead it just makes it so that there's only one bathroom where everyone is vaping."*
- *"Rec centers are small."*



Findings by Subtheme

Subtheme 1: Mental Health Access & Support (~70 mentions)

Youth Want:

- Accessible, confidential therapy
- Destigmatized support systems rooted in trust and cultural responsiveness

Youth Experience:

- Difficulty accessing counselors
- Concerns about privacy and inconsistent support
- Desire for mental health to be normalized and prioritized

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Access to mental health professionals."*
- *"Counselors are hard to meet with."*
- *"People leading others to kill themselves."*
- *Positive mention: "Some mental health resources."*

Caregiver Reflections:

Parents advocated for in-school resources such as open offices where students could access therapy and speak with trusted adults confidentially. They emphasized the importance of emotional support systems beyond the family, especially for youth reluctant to share with caregivers.

Subtheme 2: Physical Activity & Recreation (~70 mentions)

Youth Want:

- Free or low-cost sports programs and updated recreational facilities
- Opportunities to move their bodies and connect with peers

Youth Experience:

- Limited access to recreation, especially for low-income youth
- Perceived inequity in funding across sports teams

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Equal sport team fundings."*
- *"Expensive sports."*
- *"Not enough pools/summer activities." / "There need to be more basketball camps."*
- *"Not a lot of sports available." / "There are not many sports fields." / "Unmaintained sport facilities."*
- *"Closer rec centers."*
- *"Boring programs at rec centers."*
- *Positive mention: "Good Sports – sports, in general."*

Subtheme 3: Substance Use Prevention (~170+ mentions)**Youth Want:**

- Substance-free school and community environments
- Stronger policies and prevention education

Youth Experience:

- Frequent vaping and drug use at school
- Limited intervention or accessible treatment for peers in need

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Lots of kids doing drugs."*
- *"Help with drug abuse."*
- *"More laws against children vaping."*



Help with drug abuse.

Subtheme 4: Relationships, Sexual Health, and Risk Behaviors

(~10+ mentions)

Youth Want:

- Inclusive, mandatory sex education that fosters autonomy and safety
- Greater support in navigating healthy relationships

Youth Experience:

- Inconsistent education about sexual health
- Concerns about dating violence and sexual harassment

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Mandatory sex ed."*
- *"Toxic relationships."*
- *"People are sexually assaulted in bathrooms and cannot report."*

Analysis

Youth feedback reflects a clear need for integrated supports that promote overall well-being. Many students described experiences with depression, anxiety, or trauma and called for mental health services that are responsive, confidential, and grounded in relationships. They also noted the normalization of vaping, marijuana use, and other risky behaviors in school, underscoring the importance of stronger prevention and intervention strategies. Recreation emerged as another priority, with students viewing physical activity as a protective factor but pointing out that opportunities are limited, particularly for youth in under-resourced communities. Underlying all these themes is a call for stronger relationships with trusted adults, more inclusive environments, and systems that respond proactively rather than reactively.

Recommended Pathways to the Ideal

Students suggested several actionable strategies:

- **Enhanced Mental Health Support:** Increase funding for mental health services, provide easier access to counselors, and institute regular check-ins (e.g., bi-weekly) by social workers or counselors.
- **Improved Physical Health Opportunities:** Offer free public gyms and better access to recreational facilities (fields, pools) that are especially accessible to minority groups.
- **Supportive School Policies:** Develop policies that allow students to take mental health days, reduce fear of retribution when seeking help, and foster a culture of trust between teachers and students.
- **Resource Allocation:** Redirect resources toward programs that focus on “correction and support rather than punitive measures” - this could include more mental health and behavior resources, as well as dedicated programs for stress management.
- **Community and Government Engagement:** Advocate for more government focus on youth mental health, greater community involvement, and clearer communication channels between all stakeholders.



Theme: Environmental Protection and Climate Change

Overview

Environmental issues are a priority for Alexandria youth; 72% of Youth Issues Survey respondents rated them as somewhat or extremely important. While this theme surfaced less frequently than others, students expressed strong concern about climate change, pollution, waste, green space access, and environmental justice. Their feedback called for bold city action to ensure a livable, sustainable future.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Reports and Surveys Tell Us

Climate Change and Pollution

Only 31% of residents are satisfied with stormwater management, making this one of the lowest-rated areas in the 2024 Resident Survey. This highlights the growing concerns about flooding and extreme weather. Just 55% felt positively about post-disaster recovery efforts. These figures point to a need for stronger infrastructure and community preparedness around climate risks.

Green Space Access & Nature

Access to nature is a local strength. About 75% of residents are satisfied with parks and green spaces, and 70% with the overall quality of the natural environment. Continued investment is needed to expand access, especially in underserved neighborhoods, and to support youth in having more safe, welcoming outdoor spaces.

Sustainable Energy and Waste Reduction

The city's waste diversion rate improved from 49% to 53% between 2022 and 2024, reflecting stronger sustainability efforts. However, many residents, particularly youth, want Alexandria to go further by advancing clean energy use, expanding climate education, and supporting school-based sustainability programs.

Walkability and Bike Infrastructure

Most residents feel safe walking (73%) and rate trails positively (72%), but only 52% feel safe biking. Youth want more protected bike lanes and traffic calming to support safer, greener, and more accessible transportation options for getting to school, work, and community spaces.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth Tell Us

Overview

This theme captures youth perspectives on the environmental conditions of their community and their aspirations for a more sustainable, climate-resilient Alexandria. While not the most frequently mentioned topic, environmental protection emerged as a passionate priority for many students. Their feedback emphasizes the importance of ecological health, green infrastructure, and shared responsibility for sustainability. Students expressed concern about pollution, limited access to nature, and inadequate waste management. They called for bold action to protect the environment for current and future generations.

Why It Matters

The environment plays an important role in shaping youth health, safety, and quality of life. Clean air, water, and public spaces are essential for well-being, while environmental degradation and climate change disproportionately impact vulnerable communities. Youth who grow up with access to green spaces and sustainable infrastructure are more likely to engage in physical activity, experience lower stress levels, and develop a lifelong ethic of stewardship.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~195+

Subthemes mentioned included:

- **Ecological Health of the City** (90+ mentions)
- **Waste Management** (105+ mentions)

What Youth Want

In their ideal communities, students envision:

- Clean air and water for all residents
- Abundant, well-maintained parks and open spaces
- Safe, walkable neighborhoods with protected bike lanes and green infrastructure
- Easy access to recycling and composting services
- A community culture that values sustainability and environmental care
- Climate resilience planning to prevent flooding and water overuse

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Better biking-accessible roads to promote biking."*
- *"More walkable access to everything."*
- *"There would be more ways to eliminate plastic and help the environment."*
- *"More open spaces like parks and gardens."*



What Youth Experience

Students describe environmental conditions that fall short of their vision:

- Dirty streets, polluted waterways, and limited green space access
- Inadequate infrastructure for biking, walking, and recycling
- Visible litter and limited municipal waste services
- Concerns about flooding and water management

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Trash everywhere."*
- *"Lack of bike lanes."*
- *"No recycling services (you have to do it yourself)."*

Lack of bike lanes.

Findings by Subtheme

Subtheme 1: Ecological Health of the City (~90 mentions)

Youth Want:

- Clean water, air, and green public spaces
- More trees, gardens, and nature-friendly areas
- Infrastructure that promotes walking and biking

Youth Experience:

- Concerns about poor water quality, dirty rivers, and limited green space
- Perceptions of insufficient attention to climate risks like flooding

Illustrative Quotes:

- “Bad water system.”
- “River is very dirty.”
- “Not enough open space.”

Subtheme 2: Waste Management (~105 mentions)

Youth Want:

- Clean streets, parks, and schools
- Accessible and well-publicized recycling services
- A culture of shared responsibility for keeping public spaces clean

Youth Experience:

- Frequent exposure to litter, especially in recreational areas
- Frustration with limited or confusing recycling options

Illustrative Quotes:

- “A lot of littering.” / “Trash tossed anywhere, overflowing trash cans.”
- “Pollution in schools/parks.”
- “No recycling services.”

Analysis

Students want their community to protect natural resources and plan responsibly for the future. They emphasize clean air and water, pollution prevention, and nature preservation as priorities, while also pointing to gaps in walkability, bike safety, and equitable access to green space. Litter and weak recycling systems remain ongoing frustrations. Looking ahead, youth call for proactive planning around flooding, extreme heat, and water conservation as climate change intensifies. They envision a community with clean neighborhoods, access to nature and sustainable infrastructure. Achieving this will require investment in sustainability, stronger waste management, and climate strategies shaped by youth voice.

Theme: Social Connection, Supportive Relationships, and Afterschool Programs

Overview

Young people consistently emphasized the need for supportive relationships, inclusive spaces, and engaging activities beyond the school day. In the Youth Issues Survey, 69% of students rated this issue as somewhat or extremely important. Youth want to feel connected to peers, caring adults, and welcoming spaces where they can belong and thrive.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Reports and Surveys Tell Us

Supportive Relationships and Adult Mentorship

Only 42% of youth report strong relationships with supportive non-parent adults; this has not improved since 2010. White youth are more than twice as likely as Hispanic youth to report such relationships. A similar pattern appears in perceptions of caring neighborhoods, where only 35% of youth overall, and disproportionately fewer youth of color, feel supported by their communities.

Constructive Use of Time

Opportunities for constructive use of time outside school show mixed trends and deep racial disparities. While residents reported high satisfaction with libraries (85%), museums (77%), and city events (75%), just 47% of residents are satisfied with out-of-school time offerings. Only 53% of youth participate in structured programs. White youth are two and half times more likely to participate in a youth program than Hispanic youth. Participation in creative activities has declined to just 16% overall, with no racial or ethnic group exceeding that average. Religious participation also differs significantly, with Black youth (60%) more involved than their White (38%) or multiracial (44%) peers.

Supportive Relationships and Environments

Supportive relationships remain a cornerstone of youth well-being in Alexandria, with 78% of students reporting strong family support in 2025, an encouraging increase from 67% in 2010. White students consistently report the highest levels of support across all indicators, including positive family communication (46%) and relationships with other adults (61%), while Hispanic students report the lowest - just 25% experience positive communication with their family, 26% report having a mentor, and only 23% feel they live in a caring

neighborhood. Although caring school climate improved modestly to 36% overall, fewer than a third of Hispanic and multiracial youth feel supported by their schools. These findings point to persistent racial inequities in the environments that surround and shape youth development.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth Told Us

Overview

This theme reflects the importance young people place on connection, belonging, and access to supportive relationships and meaningful activities. Youth consistently emphasized the need for low-barrier afterschool programs, safe spaces to unwind, and strong relationships with peers and trusted adults. These elements are foundational to emotional well-being, identity development, and a sense of safety and community.

Why It Matters

Opportunities to connect with others through recreation, mentorship, and shared experiences are key protective factors for youth. Supportive relationships and engaging out-of-school time activities help young people build self-esteem, develop social skills, and find purpose. When these opportunities are limited or inequitable, youth may feel isolated, misunderstood, or disconnected from their schools and communities.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~355+

Subthemes with high levels of mention included:

- **Constructive Use of Time** (140+ mentions)
- **Supportive Relationships and Environments** (210+ mentions)

What Youth Want

In their ideal communities, students envision:

- Free or low-cost afterschool programs, clubs, sports, and creative outlets that are widely available
- Neighborhood events that bring people together and foster connection, joy, and belonging
- Inclusive school and community environments that promote kindness and respect
- Access to consistent, trustworthy adults and mentors for emotional and academic support
- Safe, screen-free spaces where they can be themselves and build genuine relationships

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Somewhere I feel included."*

- *“Everyone gets along and supports each other.”*
- *“More coaches and mentors.”*

What Youth Experience

Despite positive mentions of existing rec centers and programs, students describe several persistent barriers:

- **Limited Access to Programming:** Financial constraints, limited transportation, and geographic disparities, especially between East and West Alexandria, make it difficult for many students to participate in afterschool activities.
- **Social Disconnection:** Many students experience their schools and neighborhoods as socially fragmented, describing dynamics of exclusion, judgment, and isolation.
- **Lack of Trusted Adults:** While youth value adult guidance, many report difficulty finding consistent mentors they can trust. Concerns around confidentiality, judgment, and inconsistency were common themes.

Illustrative Quotes:

- *“Not enough mentors/trusted adults at school.”*
- *“Communities are not united.”*
- *“Diverse but not connected.”*

Reflections from the Youth Speak Up Event

At the Youth Speak Up event, students underscored how essential relationships and social support are to their daily lives. They called for more structured opportunities to connect with peers and adults in ways that feel safe, inclusive, and fun. Participants also pointed out that cultural and language differences can create barriers to connection, so they emphasized the need for welcoming spaces where all youth feel respected and seen.

Caregiver Reflections

Nearly all parents in the Listening Session hosted by the CYFCC and YIP supported expanding afterschool opportunities. They stressed the need for structured, active programs, especially recreational options like soccer and trade-based activities that help teens build practical skills. Some caregivers advocated for vocational pathways that keep older teens engaged and prepare them for adulthood. They suggested that afterschool and summer programs focused on trades or real-world skills could provide purpose and reduce exposure to negative influences. Caregivers expressed that youth need team-based environments that foster belonging, discipline, and future-oriented thinking.

Findings by Subtheme

Subtheme 1: Constructive Use of Time (~140 mentions)

Youth Want:

- Free or low-cost activities after school, including sports, clubs, arts, and social events
- Opportunities in all neighborhoods, not just in East Alexandria
- Transportation and schedules that support participation

Youth Experience:

- Limited availability of engaging programs, especially west of the city
- Logistical and financial barriers to joining clubs or staying after school

Illustrative Quotes:

- *“Fun activities only occur in East Alexandria.”*
- *“Not enough after-school programming.”*
- *“Bus schedule leaves no time for after-school activities.”*
- *Positive mention: “My community is interesting and fun.” / “Lots of events.”*

Subtheme 2: Supportive Relationships and Social Environments

(~210 mentions)

Youth Want:

- Inclusive communities and schools where everyone feels welcome
- Environments that value kindness, diversity, and respect
- Peer relationships that are emotionally safe and authentic
- Consistent, caring, and competent adults who are available to listen and offer support

Illustrative Quotes:

“More safe community spaces for kids to hang out.”

“A community where disagreeing is okay with people in real life and on the internet.”

“In my dream middle school, I would want older students to teach younger students.”

Youth Experience:

- Feelings of exclusion, judgment, and social fragmentation
- Experiences of bias, slurs, and gossip that undermine connection
- A lack of accessible adult mentors at school

Illustrative Quotes:

- "I'm struggling making new friends."
- "Kids can't be themselves without getting judged."
- "Kids not having a safe space and not having someone to speak to."
- "There are almost no places for kids to hang out with friends."
- "Fahrenheit 451: people are dehumanizing each other through screens, social media, etc."
- "Many kids have depression due to not feeling like having a trusted adult."
- Positive Mention: "My community likes to be kind to people. They are honest with each other, and they like to dance and they really like enchiladas."

Analysis

Students crave social engagement, mentorship, and creative outlets, yet barriers such as cost, transportation, scheduling, and inequitable distribution of programs often stand in the way, especially for those in under-resourced areas. Many also report that their schools and communities do not feel emotionally safe, expressing a need for spaces where they can be authentic without fear of gossip, judgment, or exclusion. Underlying these concerns is a call for stronger support from trusted adults and greater investment in mentorship, inclusive programs, and safe spaces that foster joy, connection, and belonging.



Theme: Physical and Psychological Safety

Safety, both physical and emotional, is essential to youth well-being. In the Youth Issues Survey, 78% of students identified it as a top priority. Young people want to feel safe from harm, protected from bullying, and supported in inclusive environments. Their concerns span school safety, community violence, and the need for respectful peer and adult relationships.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Reports and Surveys Tell Us

School Safety and Bullying Prevention

Bullying on school property declined from 13% (2013) to 10% (2023), but disparities persist: White students report bullying at twice the rate of Hispanic peers. Overall perceptions of safety have dropped; only 39% of youth felt safe at school in 2025, down from nearly half in 2013. Since 2014, the rate of high school students reportedly missing school due to safety concerns at school has increased from 4.6% to 22.82% - that's almost a 400% increase.

While safety incidents in schools peaked in SY2023–24 and dipped slightly in SY2024–25, student arrests and police calls have declined, likely due to expanded use of restorative and trauma-informed approaches.

Community Violence and Safe Neighborhoods

One in five youth still report witnessing domestic violence, though rates have slightly declined for Black and Asian students. In contrast, 93% of adults feel safe in their neighborhoods during the day, revealing a gap in lived experiences. While police and fire services receive strong satisfaction ratings, only 40% of adults are satisfied with crime prevention efforts, highlighting a need for more proactive strategies.

Supportive and Inclusive School Climates

Despite fewer arrests and a move away from punitive discipline, many students still do not feel safe or valued. Racial disparities in safety perceptions remain, and overall feelings of school belonging have not improved. This signals the need for deeper investments in inclusivity, cultural humility, and strong student-adult relationships.

Safe Dating and Healthy Relationships

Reports of most forms of dating violence have declined, but verbal abuse in relationships rose from 11% (2016) to 21% (2023), especially among female students. Combined with persistent exposure to domestic violence, this underscores the need for relationship education and trauma-informed supports that promote emotional safety, consent, and conflict resolution.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth Told Us

Overview

This theme captures young people's lived experiences and concerns about safety across their schools, neighborhoods, and daily lives. Students shared that safety is not only about protection from violence, but also about being respected, included, and supported in their environments. While some students described feeling secure, many raised concerns about bullying, fights, harassment, gun violence, and inadequate adult responses to these issues.

Why It Matters

A safe environment is foundational to youth development, learning, and well-being. When students feel unsafe, whether due to physical violence, emotional neglect, or systemic inequities, their ability to concentrate, connect with others, and engage meaningfully in their communities is diminished. Creating physically and psychologically safe spaces requires responsive relationships, equitable systems, and environments that affirm the dignity and humanity of every young person.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~675+

Subthemes mentioned included:

- **Bullying Prevention** (100+ mentions)
- **Community Violence and Safe Neighborhoods** (210+ mentions)
- **School Safety and Security** (140+ mentions)
- **Violence and Abuse Prevention** (225+ mentions)

What Youth Want

In their ideal communities, students imagine:

- Schools free of bullying, harassment, and judgment
- Peaceful neighborhoods with well-lit streets, safe crosswalks, and walkable infrastructure
- Prevention of violence through proactive systems, not just after-the-fact discipline
- Emergency protocols that protect safety while preserving student dignity
- Caring adults who listen, believe them, and respond consistently

Illustrative Quotes

- "Less prison-like."
- "My ideal Alexandria is for school shootings and bullying to be more of a concern to schools so kids feel safer going to school."
- "More afterschool clubs so kids can be in a community and have a safe space."
- "There's a strict no bullying policy at school."
- "More safe spaces for queer/trans youth."

What Youth Experience

Many students described experiences marked by fear, isolation, or a lack of trust in adult support. Key concerns included:

- **Bullying and Harassment:** Harmful behaviors, including cyberbullying and discrimination, are often seen as unaddressed or inconsistently handled by school staff.
- **Community Safety:** Students noted feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods due to poorly lit streets, vandalism, theft, and a lack of pedestrian infrastructure.
- **Exposure to Violence:** Youth described witnessing or fearing gun violence, fights, intimate partner violence, and sexual assault in both school and community settings.
- **Mixed Feelings About School Safety Measures:** While some students appreciated safety protocols, others felt school security measures, such as metal detectors, locked doors, or security personnel, were excessive or applied unevenly, making students feel surveilled or restricted rather than protected.

Illustrative Quotes:

- “Bullying isn’t taken seriously.”
- “My school and community is so bad; this is not a safe place!” / “My school community is like a prison.”
- “Glass walls - what about active shooter?” / “Students feel there’s no way they’ll be able to escape.”
- “Many kids go to an abusive and toxic home.”
- “Sexual harassment in school such as looking over bathroom stalls and groping people.”

Reflections from the Youth Speak Up Event

At the Youth Speak Up event, students emphasized that physical and psychological safety go hand in hand. They expressed a desire for school environments that are trauma-informed, inclusive, and grounded in trust. Several youth described feeling unheard when they report concerns and called for stronger accountability systems and training for staff. They also underscored the importance of respectful treatment, fair discipline, and student involvement in safety planning.

Caregiver Reflections

Caregivers echoed students’ concerns about school safety, particularly around drug use and unsupervised behavior. Several noted that children avoided bathrooms due to the presence of marijuana smoke and feared being pressured or harmed by peers. Others raised concern about students loitering off-campus in areas with no adult presence or security.

Findings by Subtheme

Subtheme 1: Bullying Prevention (~100 mentions)

Youth Want:

- Bully-free environments with clear, consistent responses from adults
- Peer cultures rooted in dignity, inclusion, and kindness

Youth Experience:

- Persistent bullying, often unaddressed or inconsistently handled
- Cyberbullying, name-calling, and social exclusion

Illustrative Quote:

- “Teachers (especially elementary school teachers) need to be taught how to recognize and combat bullying. I was severely bullied, which resulted in extreme social and mental health issues that have affected me for years. When I had initially spoken up about it, the teachers and staff didn't believe me and even went so far as to accuse me of lying. The disrespect that I experienced in elementary school has stuck with me my whole life. Teachers should undergo training on how to assist students dealing with anxiety, depression, and social harassment to create a safer environment for everyone.”

Subtheme 2: Safe and Walkable Neighborhoods (~215 mentions)

Youth Want:

- Neighborhoods that feel safe to walk through, with good lighting and infrastructure
- Less exposure to crime and greater investment in safe public spaces

Youth Experience:

- Fear of walking alone, especially at night
- Concerns about theft, vandalism, and poorly maintained public areas

Illustrative Quotes:

- “Not enough crosswalks.”
- “Kids are afraid to go outside (especially at night).”
- “In reality, our community is not safe enough. Our parents don't allow us to spend time with our friends at rec or places around the community by themselves.”

Subtheme 3: Interpersonal and School-Based Violence Prevention

(225+ mentions)

Youth Want:

- Reduced exposure to gun and gang violence, abuse, and school fights
- Trusted systems for reporting and responding to violence and harassment

Youth Experience:

- Firsthand accounts of violence in school and community
- Concerns about intimate partner and sexual violence
- Desire for help but uncertainty about where to turn

Illustrative Quotes:

- *“Gun or gang violence.”*
- *“There are fights, especially at school.”*
- *“People are sexually assaulted in bathrooms and cannot report.”*

Subtheme 4: School Safety and Security (~140 mentions)**Youth Want:**

- School safety strategies that are effective, fair, and student-centered
- Trusting relationships with school security and staff

Youth Experience:

- Mixed feedback on safety protocols; some feel protected, others feel restricted or surveilled
- Frustration with facility issues and single-entry access policies
- Reports of uneven treatment from school security personnel

Illustrative Quotes:

- *“Security guards fighting with students.” / “I don’t like that security guards try to boss us around. All they do is yell at students and ruin their day. They have clear favorites in school and it’s unfair when a problem occurs.”*
- *“Metal detectors don’t work.”*
- *“Only one entrance for lunch makes me late and miss food.”*
- *“Sometimes I don’t feel safe at school.”*
- *“Needs more security.” / “The school is fine but needs more security.” / “Too little security.”*

Analysis

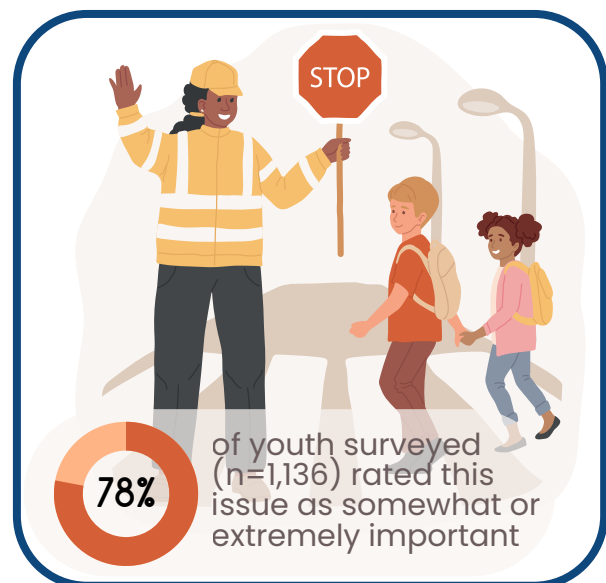
Students’ feedback reflects a complex set of challenges related to safety, with many feeling inadequately protected or supported in both their physical environments and interpersonal experiences. Bullying and harassment remain persistent concerns, and youth call for responses that are consistent and shaped by student input. They also emphasize that neighborhood safety depends on infrastructure, lighting, and community investment, and they want public spaces that are safer and more accessible. When it comes to violence, students urge approaches that are proactive and restorative rather than solely reactive and punitive. Finally, they stressed that emotional safety matters just as much as school safety. Youth want to feel seen, respected, and heard within their schools.

Recommended Pathways to the Ideal

Students offered a range of ideas aimed at moving the school toward a safer, more secure environment:

- **Enhanced Security and Training:** Suggestions included hiring stronger resource officers, providing better security training (with an emphasis on relationship-building rather than just enforcement), and even installing improved metal detectors that truly deter contraband.
- **Improved Infrastructure and Protocols:** Ideas ranged from installing bulletproof glass in key areas to rethinking the design of entryways and evacuation routes. Some students advocated for clearer, more effective security procedures developed in consultation with students
- **Greater Student-Staff Communication:** Many stressed the importance of involving students in safety discussions, creating feedback channels so that students can report issues and contribute ideas.
- **Balanced Policies:** Some proposed that while safety is paramount, the school environment should not feel restrictive or “prison-like.” Instead, measures should enhance security without impinging on student freedom.
- **Community and Administrative Engagement:** Additional proposals included increased police presence where necessary, but with an emphasis on building trust, as well as more direct communication from administration regarding security policies.

Feedback consistently points to the need for improved communication between administrators, security staff, and students, as well as a balanced approach that ensures safety without creating an oppressive atmosphere. Students advocate for better training, more effective infrastructure, and policies that are developed in partnership with students.



Theme: Pathways to College and Careers

Pathways to College and Careers is a top priority for Alexandria youth. In the Youth Issues Survey, 80% of respondents rated it as somewhat or extremely important, tying it with Educational Equity as the third highest concern. Students want to graduate feeling prepared for life after high school.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Reports and Surveys Tell Us

College Access and First-Gen Support

On-time graduation rates rose from 81% in 2018 to 87% in 2024. However, gaps remain: White and Asian students consistently graduate above 95%, while Hispanic students, despite gains, graduate at 78%. English Learners have seen sharp declines, from 91% in 2021 to 71% in 2024, pointing to unmet support needs.

Postsecondary attainment also reveals gender gaps. Young women are nearly twice as likely as young men to earn a bachelor's degree. Meanwhile, 1 in 5 young men lack a high school diploma, four times the rate of their female peers. These patterns highlight the need for targeted college readiness efforts, especially for first-generation, multilingual, and male students.

Equitable Academic Opportunities

Despite overall progress, equity gaps persist by race, gender, and language status. Students need early, culturally responsive support, including rigorous coursework, academic advising, and college and career planning, to navigate future pathways. Equitable access to opportunity remains key to ensuring all youth can succeed after high school.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth Told Us

Overview

This theme explores how students envision and experience support for their postsecondary goals, whether college, career, or other life paths. While many students acknowledged existing supports like the College and Career Center and helpful counselors, they also described significant barriers: the high cost of college, inequitable access to guidance and opportunities, and a narrow definition of success that often excludes alternative pathways.

Why It Matters

Young people's ability to imagine and prepare for their futures is deeply tied to

the opportunities and supports they encounter in high school. Equitable access to college and career planning, especially for first-generation students and those from low-income backgrounds, is critical for advancing long-term well-being and economic mobility. When guidance is limited, affordability is a barrier, or certain pathways are undervalued, students are more likely to feel disoriented or excluded from success.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~85+

Subthemes mentioned frequently included:

- Equity, Access, & Affordability (70+ mentions)
- Guidance & Counseling (10+ mentions)

What Youth Want

Students envision a future where all young people can pursue their goals, whether college, trade school, or direct-to-career, without being held back by cost, pressure, or lack of support. Their ideal community includes:

- Affordable or free college options and robust scholarship access
- Equal opportunity regardless of income, background, or immigration status
- More hands-on support from college and career counselors
- Culturally responsive guidance for first-generation students
- Broader definitions of success, including trades, certifications, and creative careers
- Exposure to real-world experiences like internships, apprenticeships, and job training

Illustrative Quotes:

- “Make college free; not a lot of people can get into college because of money.”
- “More career readiness – welding, 3-D modeling.”
- “Less pressure to go to college (more ways to be successful).”
- “Everyone should have their own personal college advisor.”

What Youth Experience

Students described a mix of appreciation and frustration when it comes to postsecondary preparation. While some praised counselors and resources, others described:

- **Financial Barriers:** Concerns about the cost of college, limited scholarship access, and a belief that higher education is out of reach without major financial sacrifices.
- **Inconsistent Support:** Not all students feel adequately guided, especially those pursuing alternatives to four-year colleges or who are the first in their families to navigate the system.
- **Narrow Messaging:** Youth feel there is a dominant narrative that equates success with college admission, which can exclude or stigmatize other valuable career paths.

Illustrative Quotes:

- *“College is way too expensive.”*

These realities reveal gaps between what students hope for and the systems currently in place to support them.

Findings by Subtheme**Subtheme 1: Equity, Access, and Affordability** (~70 mentions)**Youth Want:**

- Lower-cost or free higher education
- Greater scholarship access and financial aid awareness
- Postsecondary opportunities that aren't limited by socioeconomic status

Illustrative Quotes:

- *“More chances of scholarships as long as you're passing.”*
- *“Free college, or at least slightly more affordable or cheap college.”*

Youth Experience:

- Financial barriers such as the high cost of tuition, lack of scholarships, and limited free higher education options leave some students discouraged or resigned to stopping their education after high school.

Illustrative Quotes

- *“Make college less expensive.”*
- *“People have to pay A LOT OF MONEY for college causing people to end school at 12th grade.”*
- *“Not everyone gets to go to college.”*
- *“Lack of scholarship access.”*
- *Positive mention: “The scholarship fund of Alexandria is super helpful.”*

Subtheme 2: Guidance and Counseling (~10 mentions)**Youth Want:**

- More accessible and personalized college and career guidance
- Support that is inclusive of non-traditional paths and early career exposure
- Advisors who understand the needs of first-generation students

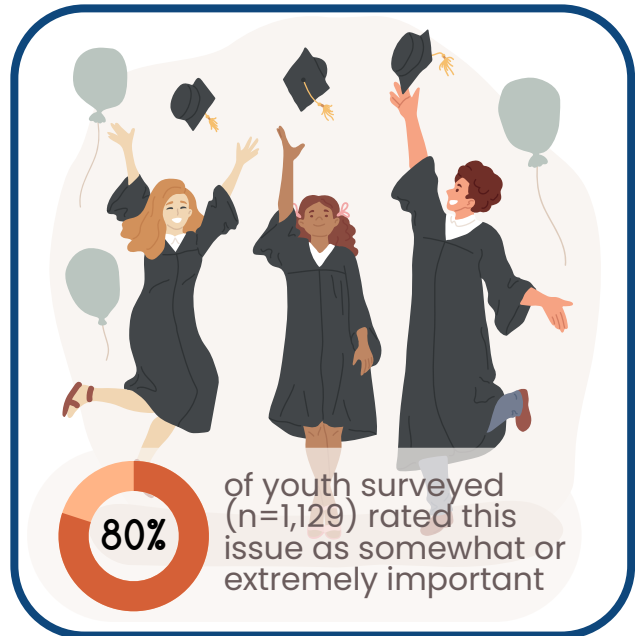
Illustrative Quotes:

- *“Everyone should have their own personal college advisor.”*
- *“Better resources for first-generation college students.”*
- *“Support minority groups in planning for life projects (such as school).”*
- *“More help with college applications and scholarships. Some teachers don't really explain how to apply because some of us don't know how to. They always assume everyone knows what they are doing.”*

- *“I think another important issue is students not being aware of the many resources that we do have. There are so many certifications available, yet not enough students know about them.”*

Analysis

Due to systemic and structural barriers that limit access to postsecondary success, students are becoming increasingly anxious about their futures. Cost remains the dominant challenge, with many viewing college as unaffordable and calling for expanded financial aid, scholarships, and debt-free pathways. Youth also describe uneven access to guidance, stressing the need for more consistent and individualized support that begins earlier in high school, especially for those unfamiliar with the process. At the same time, they want to be shown alternative pathways such as trade careers, technical programs, and other non-college options. Their definitions of success are diverse, and they want institutions to value and support these choices equally. Ensuring access to equitable and inclusive college and career pathways is essential for building a community where every young person has the tools, confidence, and opportunity to pursue their dreams.



Theme: Youth Agency, Leadership, and Contribution

Young people want to be heard and have a say in shaping Alexandria's future. In the Youth Issues Survey, 70% of students rated this issue as somewhat or extremely important. Across Listening Sessions, students expressed a strong desire to lead. They are also frustrated with systems that overlook them. Many, especially Hispanic youth, feel excluded from decision-making and disconnected from civic life.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Report and Surveys Tell Us

Feeling Valued by the Community

Since 2010, only 17–20% of students have said they feel valued by their community. In 2025, White youth were nearly three times more likely to feel valued (32%) than Hispanic youth (11%), with the gap growing in recent years.

Youth as Resources

Just 25% of students feel they are seen as resources in their families, schools, or communities, a figure that has remained flat for over a decade. Again, Hispanic youth reported the lowest levels (11%), while White youth reported the highest (32%).

Service to Others

Youth engagement in community service has declined from a peak of 46% in 2013 to 38% in 2022. In 2025, White youth reported the highest rates of participation (49%), compared to just 38% of Hispanic youth.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth Told Us

Overview

This theme explores how young people perceive their roles as changemakers and decision-makers in their schools and communities. While students expressed a strong desire to lead, share ideas, and contribute meaningfully, many also described barriers, such as not feeling heard, limited follow-through, and a lack of opportunities to participate in civic life.

Why It Matters

When young people have opportunities to lead and influence the systems around them, they build confidence, strengthen civic skills, and deepen their connection to community. Meaningful youth engagement improves outcomes not only for youth but for the institutions that serve them. Failing to include

youth voice can result in programs, policies, and environments that feel disconnected or ineffective, contributing to frustration, apathy, and missed opportunities for innovation.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~30+

Subthemes included:

- **Youth Voice & Feeling Valued** (25+ mentions)
- **Volunteer or Service Opportunities** (7+ mentions)

What Youth Want

Students want:

- Adults to take youth ideas seriously and respond with action
- Structures for youth leadership in schools, government, and community spaces
- Inclusive civic engagement opportunities, including volunteering and service projects
- Ongoing conversations with decision-makers where youth are respected and understood
- More events like Youth Speak Up that prioritize student voice

Illustrative Quotes

- “Lower voting age.”
- “The youth is heard.”
- “Kids and Teachers have equal power.”
- “More chances for teens to have a voice in the community.”

What Youth Experience

Despite strong interest in leadership and contribution, many students say they don't feel heard or respected in decision-making spaces. They report:

- **Dismissal of Youth Input:** Students feel adults often ignore or downplay their perspectives, particularly in school settings.
- **Lack of Follow-Through:** When youth do speak up, they rarely see their ideas acted on, leading to disillusionment or disengagement.
- **Few Civic Opportunities:** Students mentioned limited access to volunteer programs or service-learning experiences where they can make a difference.

Illustrative Quotes:

- “Don't feel heard, teachers don't hear you out or let you speak. We're spoken at instead of with.”
- “Adults listen to other adults more than they listen to kids.”
- “Some students don't feel they have a say or that anything will change. Ideal community is impossible.”
- Positive mention: “My community listens to my opinions”

Reflections from the Youth Speak Up Event

At the Youth Speak Up event, participants echoed these sentiments, calling for better communication between youth and adults, more spaces where student voices are prioritized, and tangible follow-up to their feedback. Many noted that adult allies and trusted school staff make a difference but described these relationships as inconsistent or absent. They want mutual respect and shared ownership in building solutions.

Findings by Subtheme

Subtheme 1: Not Feeling Valued or Heard (~20+ mentions)

Youth Want:

- To be taken seriously by adults in schools and community settings
- Authentic opportunities to shape the programs and decisions that impact their lives

Illustrative Quotes:

- “I wish there was more channels for youth to speak about their opinions.”
- “Everyone feels like they matter.”
- “Representatives for minors.”

Youth Experience

- Not feeling heard, valued, or taken seriously, particularly in school settings.
- Feeling excluded from important decisions that directly affect them.
- Frustration with the adult-centric systems that silence them.

Illustrative Quote

- “We are looked down on.” / “Lack of respect from adults.”
- “We don’t have enough power.”
- “Youth don’t feel like they matter.”
- Positive Mention: “My community listens to my opinions.”

Subtheme 2: Volunteering and Service Opportunities (~5+ mentions)

Youth Want:

- Access to meaningful civic and service activities
- Opportunities to give back to their communities through structured, supported programs

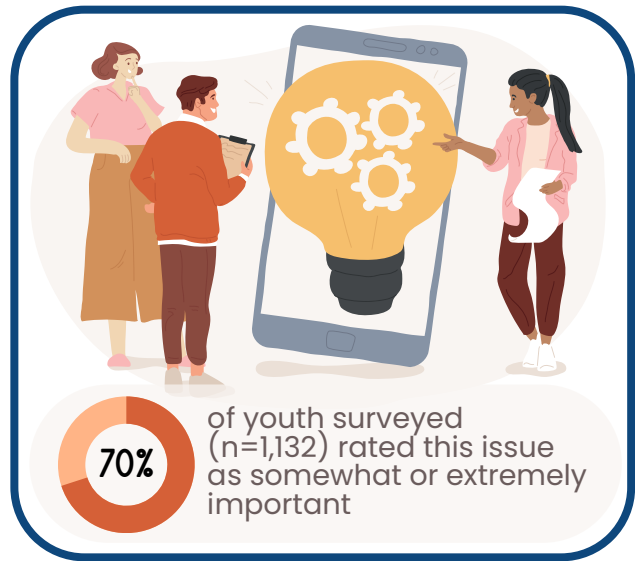
Illustrative Quote:

- “More opportunities for teens (mostly middle schoolers) to volunteer in programs outside of school. Like volunteering in a library or helping out in hospitals”

Analysis

Students want meaningful opportunities to lead but too often encounter dismissal, gatekeeping, or symbolic opportunities that fail to create real change. They are asking to be treated as partners rather than passive participants, with expanded pathways for authentic and lasting civic engagement. Many are ready to contribute, but they need adults and systems that genuinely welcome their ideas, invest in their leadership, and follow through on their input.

Elevating youth voice requires listening and acting on what is heard. By building consistent and inclusive structures for decision-making and service, the city can nurture a generation of leaders who are connected to their communities and prepared to shape the future.



Theme: Youth Employment

In the Youth Issues Survey, 77% rated this issue as somewhat or extremely important. For many, employment offers confidence, independence, and a pathway to future success.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Reports and Surveys Tell Us

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

CTE credentialing dropped from 1,257 students in 2022–23 to 689 in 2023–24, though it remains above 2021–22 levels. Key areas like workplace readiness saw sharp declines, and ACPS continues to trail state averages, pointing to a need for expanded access and support for workforce pathways.

Youth Employment Trends

Among 16–24-year-olds, females have higher employment rates than males across all age groups. While employment increases with age, the gender gap suggests that younger males may face more barriers to securing jobs.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth Told Us

Overview

This theme highlights how youth view employment as a pathway to independence, skill development, and future success. While students expressed enthusiasm about working and earning money, many also described limited access to job opportunities, especially for younger teens and those without prior experience.

Why It Matters

Early employment plays a critical role in helping young people gain real-world experience, develop responsibility, and build financial literacy. Jobs can also boost confidence and serve as a protective factor against disengagement. When youth face barriers to employment, such as age restrictions, low pay, or limited job openings, they may miss out on opportunities to grow and prepare for adulthood.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~30+

Subthemes mentioned include:

- Access & Opportunities (30 mentions)
- Quality & Pay (3 mentions)

What Youth Want

In their ideal communities, students envision:

- Access to jobs that are welcoming to teens, including those under 16
- Paid internships and entry-level positions that offer skill-building and mentorship
- School and community programs that support workforce development and connect students to employers
- Fair wages that reflect the value of youth labor
- Opportunities that prepare them for long-term career success

Illustrative Quotes:

- *“There needs to be way way more job opportunities and more jobs for kids 13+.”*

What Youth Experience

In the current landscape, students report:

- **Limited Access:** Many jobs require experience or have age-based restrictions that exclude motivated younger teens.
- **Few Entry Points:** Students described not knowing how to get started or where to find available positions.
- **Low Compensation:** Even when jobs are available, youth often feel wages are too low to make a meaningful impact.

Illustrative Quotes:

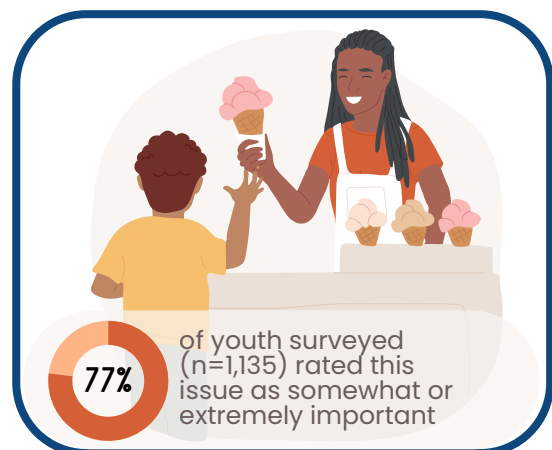
- *“Less jobs for 14- and 15-year-olds.”*
- *“Not getting job opportunities due to lack of history or experience.”*

Youth want to contribute, gain experience, and become more independent, but often feel overlooked or unsupported by existing systems.

Analysis

Among students who want to work, many face barriers that limit their ability to gain early job experience. Entry-level gaps and low wages leave them discouraged before their careers even begin. The lack of structured support, such as internships or school-to-work pipelines, is seen as a missed opportunity to prepare youth for the future.

Addressing these challenges will require schools, employers, and city partners to collaborate in building accessible and developmentally appropriate employment pathways. Expanding teen-friendly employment opportunities, building career-readiness programs, and advocating for fair wages would help young people gain experience, earn income, and step confidently into adulthood.



Theme: Responsive and Just Government

Alexandria youth want a government that is equitable, transparent, and accountable. In the Youth Issues Survey, 80% of students rated Race and Social Equity as somewhat or extremely important, placing it among the top three priorities. For many, this is about being respected, included, and represented.

Quantitative Findings: What Existing Reports and Surveys Tell Us

Equity, Fairness, and Representation

While 90% of residents are satisfied with the voting process, only 51% believe the City treats all residents fairly, and just 45% feel local government is welcoming and inclusive. These gaps mirror youth frustrations shared during Listening Sessions, where students called for more equitable leadership and meaningful youth participation in decisions.

Access to Services and Information

Overall satisfaction with City services is moderate (63%) but falls when it comes to personal interactions; only 44% feel the City is responsive, and just 41% feel well-informed. For youth and families, navigating siloed or unresponsive systems can be especially challenging.

Economic Growth and Development

When assessing importance in the 2024 Resident Survey, the second most important economic opportunity and well-being item residents selected for the City of Alexandria to emphasize was efforts to manage and plan for growth and development. It was also identified as a very high priority item for improvement in the survey. Just 39% of residents expressed satisfaction with the overall quality of new development in Alexandria. 85% of residents, however, are satisfied with Alexandria's dining options.

Qualitative Findings: What Youth Told Us

Overview

This theme captures students' desire for a government and school system that is fair, transparent, and accountable. Youth expressed the need for equitable investment across communities, more diverse and inclusive representation, and institutions that take real action to address discrimination and systemic injustice.

Why It Matters

A responsive and just government creates the conditions for trust, participation, and equity. When students see their communities reflected in public decision-making, and when resources are distributed fairly, it signals that all voices matter. When students experience discrimination or feel excluded from civic life, it reinforces cycles of disengagement and systemic harm.

Youth Listening Session Estimated Frequency of Mentions: ~245+

Subthemes mentioned included:

- **Responsive & Effective Government** (35+ mentions)
- **Economic Growth & Development** (20+ mentions)
- **Advancing Race & Social Equity** (190+ mentions)

What Youth Want

In their ideal communities, young people imagine:

- Equitable investment in schools, parks, transportation, and public services across all neighborhoods
- A local government that listens to youth and other marginalized voices, and takes visible action based on feedback
- Public systems that actively work to eliminate discrimination, prejudice, and systemic inequities
- Accessible, youth-friendly communities with vibrant local businesses and public gathering spaces
- Strong protections for the civil rights of all people, regardless of race, class, disability, gender identity, or religion

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"My 'perfect' community is a community where everyone is treated equally and has an equal opportunity in almost everything"*
- *"More entertainment facilities"*
- *"Better relationship between community and officials"*

What Youth Experience

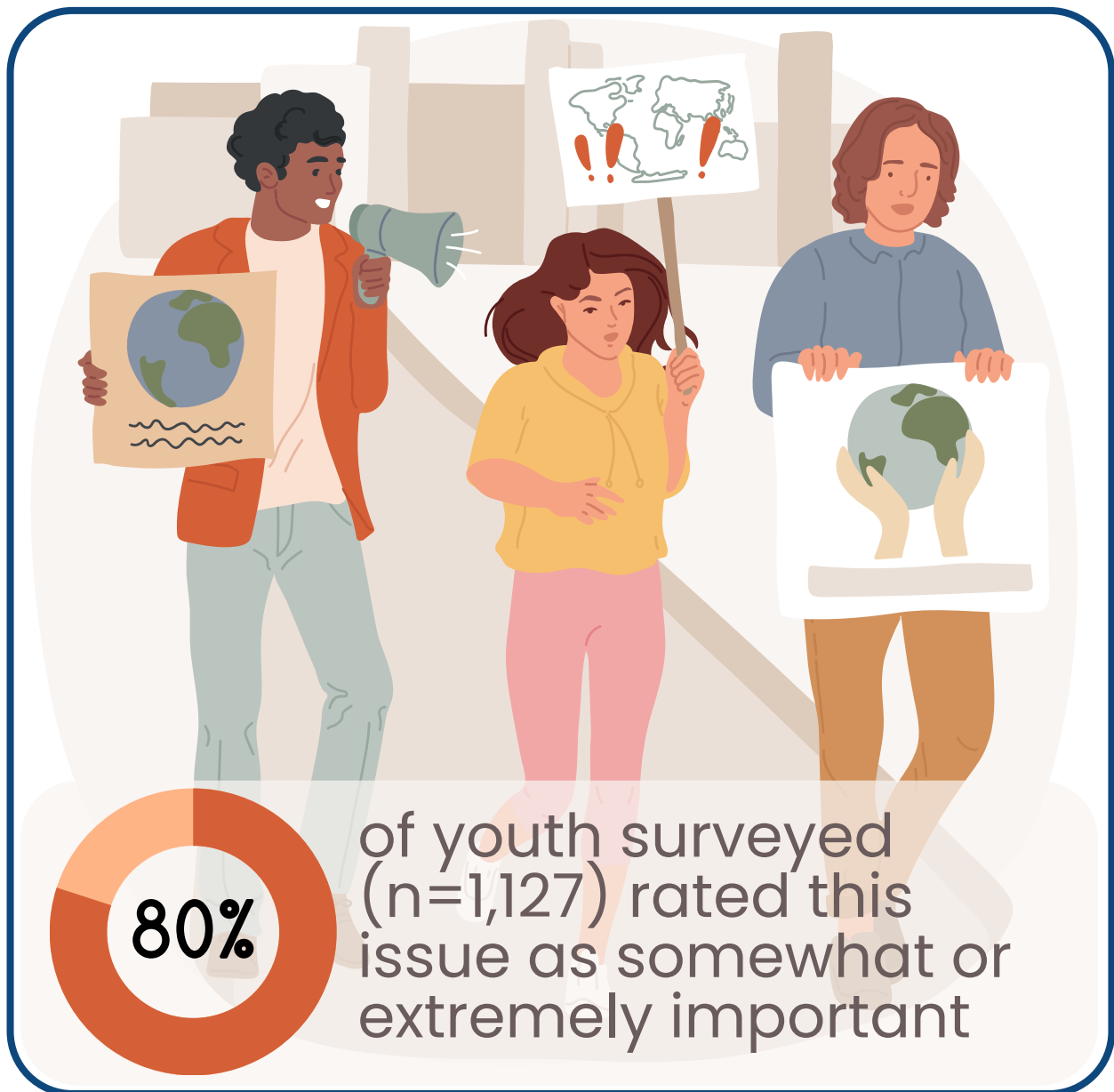
Despite their hopes, many students describe a current reality where:

- Investment is uneven, with some neighborhoods, particularly in West Alexandria
- Trust in institutions is low, with concerns about fairness, transparency, and follow-through
- Discrimination is common, with students reporting personal and systemic experiences of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia
- Representation is lacking, with youth and marginalized communities feeling excluded from leadership and decision-making spaces

Illustrative Quotes:

- “Not enough public-school funding.”
- “No representation for West Alexandria.”
- “Bigotry, racism, homophobia, sexism, etc.”
- “Minorities deserve protection.”

**No representation for
West Alexandria.**



Findings by Subtheme

Subtheme 1: Responsive & Effective Government (~35+ mentions)

Youth Want:

- Leadership that represents youth perspectives
- Transparent and accountable leadership

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Younger administration"*
- *"Better representation for minorities (and celebrations thereof)"*
- *"People who know what they're doing are in charge"*

Youth Experience:

- Lack of representation and feel excluded from the decision-making process
- Lack of accountability and transparency and declining trust in public institutions/government
- Low investment in the neighborhoods where they live

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"The government has too much power." / "Government is unfair"*
- *"Schools do not have as much funding as they should. The city government is spending an extra 2 million dollars on renovating city hall. This money could be spent on field trips or new teachers. I don't fully know the situation, but I do know that the city is spending more money than they need."*
- *"Changes only occur in East Alexandria"*

Subtheme 2: Economic Growth & Development (~20+ mentions)

Youth Want:

- More local businesses, entertainment, modern amenities, and spaces that bring communities together
- More "third places" where they can socialize and connect with others and their community

Illustrative Quotes:

- *"Needs more malls or shopping centers."*
- *"Could use more local businesses."*
- *"Benches and water fountains around town"*

Youth Experience:

- Limited access to entertainment, retail, and dining options, with few local businesses and amenities that reflect their interests or cultures.

Illustrative Quotes:

- *“Not enough renovation and new buildings.”*

Subtheme 3: Advancing Race & Social Equity (~190+ mentions)**Youth Want:**

- A community free of racism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice
- Strong protections for civil and human rights
- A community that supports immigrants and pathways to citizenship

Illustrative Quotes:

- “Children of all backgrounds are accepted by the community”
- “Respect of different religious beliefs and sexualities.”
- “Protecting civil rights and disability rights for all people.”
- “LGBTQIA+ Rights and Representation.”
- “Abortion and female reproduction rights.”

Youth Experience:

- Name-calling, race-based hatred and bullying, homophobia
- Political polarization and toxic social climate
- Witnessing discrimination and a loss of civil and human rights

Illustrative Quotes:

- “I have experienced people being racist to me and its not fun.”
- “At my school, I see the biggest problem is a lack of respect for the LGBTQ community.”
- “Protecting civil rights and disability rights. Republicans are suing to end 504 protections and end the requirement to provide accommodations, supports, and equal access to services, jobs, and education for those of us with disabilities. I am very concerned about that. We already have to fight so much for what we need, even with current protections under the law.”
- “Immigrants being able to apply for citizenship.” / “Safe to use public resources.” / “Help immigrants” / “No deportation/no fear of deportation”

Analysis

Many students do not feel equally seen, served, or protected by current systems of governance. Equity and investment are central concerns, particularly for those in historically under-resourced neighborhoods. Distrust in institutions often stems from perceived power imbalances, lack of transparency, and limited follow-through on commitments. Students also report discrimination, both through personal experiences and as evidence of broader systemic injustice. When government is viewed as unresponsive, youth disengage; when it is inclusive and accountable, they are more likely to believe in the possibility of positive change.

Summary of Findings

Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings presented in this section offer a nuanced and multidimensional picture of how young people in Alexandria are doing. Across themes, from basic needs and educational equity to mental health, civic engagement, and environmental sustainability, youth shared both concerns and aspirations, often reinforcing or adding depth to existing data trends. While there are clear areas of progress, such as increased school engagement and reduced substance use, many indicators remain flat or show signs of decline, particularly in the areas of safety, connectedness, and equitable access to opportunity.



Analysis and Discussion

The findings presented in this Youth Needs Assessment highlight community strengths and gaps in our systems. By combining quantitative trends with qualitative insights from caregivers and youth themselves, we're given a more complete picture of youth well-being in Alexandria.

1. Basic Needs and Cost-of-Living Pressures Are Undermining Stability

Youth and data alike point to an affordability crisis, particularly around housing, food access, and transportation. The child poverty rate has not changed in over a decade, and 93% of renter households are cost burdened. Students described financial stress effecting nearly every part of their lives, affecting their health, learning, and sense of safety. This theme cuts across income groups and is compounded for youth in immigrant families or those experiencing housing insecurity.

2. Engagement in School Is Growing, but Equity Gaps Remain

The increase in reported school engagement (from 48% to 80%) is a promising sign that students are connecting more deeply with their educational environments. However, other indicators paint a more complex picture. Grade 3 reading scores have remained flat. Student feedback revealed barriers such as inconsistent instruction, limited AP access for students of color, and challenges related to facility conditions, class schedules, and transportation.

3. Mental Health Needs Remain High, Despite Progress in Risk Behaviors

While cigarette and alcohol use declined significantly, and physical activity increased, the percentage of students feeling hopeless or sad remains stubbornly high. Youth shared that mental health support, while present in some schools, is often insufficient or hard to access. They asked for more trusted adults, less academic pressure, and time to rest and recover. Their feedback underscores the importance of investing in mental health infrastructure both in and outside of school.

4. Students Are Seeking Connection, Belonging, and Joy

A throughline across themes was a desire for stronger social connection, through relationships with adults, access to clubs and afterschool programs, safe gathering spaces, and opportunities for fun. Yet participation in afterschool programs, service activities, and mentorship has declined in recent years. Reinvesting in these community-based supports is key to fostering resilience. Parents expressed a desire for these connections to begin earlier in students' academic lives, starting in elementary school. Several reflected on how early intervention and consistent support could have changed their children's trajectories.

5. Youth Want to Lead and Expect to Be Heard

Across themes, students called for authentic opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them. They want more say in school policies, more access to government systems, and more visible follow-through on their feedback. Indicators like “Youth as Resources” and “Community Values Youth” remain low. But the interest, ideas, and leadership capacity among youth is strong yet underutilized. Systems that center youth voice will better reflect their needs as well as build civic and leadership capacity for the future.

6. Equity, Access, and Responsiveness Must Be Central to Systems Change

Whether discussing access to AP classes, affordable housing, job opportunities, or mental health care, students repeatedly pointed to disparities in who has access to resources and who feels heard. While Alexandria has made significant commitments to racial and social equity, young people are asking for these commitments to be fully embedded in everyday practices through equitable funding, inclusive representation, culturally competent services, and transparent decision-making.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This Youth Needs Assessment reflects the voices, experiences, and priorities of young people across Alexandria. Through data, dialogue, and community engagement, the findings illustrate both areas of meaningful progress and persistent challenges facing youth today. Young people are showing up, with clarity, creativity, and courage, to name what they need, where systems are falling short, and how their communities can do better.

Across every theme, students emphasized the importance of being heard, valued, and included. They are calling for responsive schools, equitable systems, safe environments, and real opportunities to lead, learn, and thrive. Their insights reinforce that addressing youth needs is not the responsibility of any single agency or institution; it is a shared commitment that requires cross-sector collaboration, bold policy, and deep relational work.

Next Steps

To move this work forward, we recommend the following next steps:

1. **Share the Findings Widely.** Disseminate this report with youth, families, schools, community partners, City leadership, and funders to ensure shared understanding and alignment around youth priorities.
2. **Create a Youth-Friendly Summary.** Develop a version of the report or a visual one-pager that communicates key findings and next steps in accessible, engaging language for young people.
3. **Engage Youth in the Response.** Reconvene youth contributors to review the findings and shape priorities for implementation. Create ongoing roles for youth to co-lead solutions.
4. **Use the Data to Guide the Next CYCP.** Integrate these findings into the planning and design of the next Children and Youth Community Plan (CYCP), ensuring that youth voice and equity remain at the center.
5. **Align Funding and Policy with Youth-Identified Needs.** Use this assessment to guide resource allocation, policy development, and program design that reflect what youth have said they need to thrive.
6. **Monitor Progress and Continue Listening.** Treat this assessment as a living document. Build in feedback loops, progress tracking, and opportunities to hear from youth on an ongoing basis.

By honoring and acting on what youth have shared, Alexandria can build a more just, supportive, and inclusive community for all young people. The work begins with trust, partnership, and a willingness to follow young people's lead.

Appendix: References – Existing Studies and Reports

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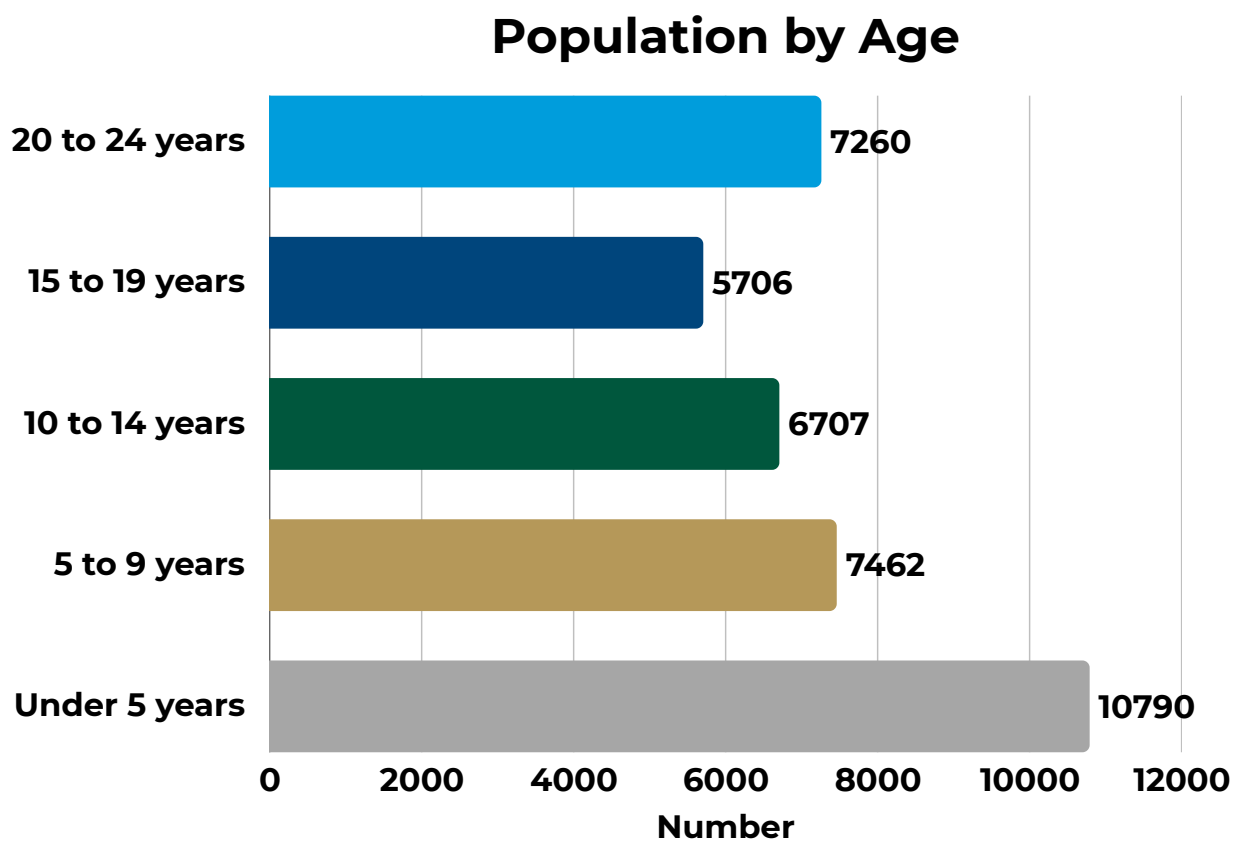
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Appendix: Characteristics of Alexandria's Children and Youth

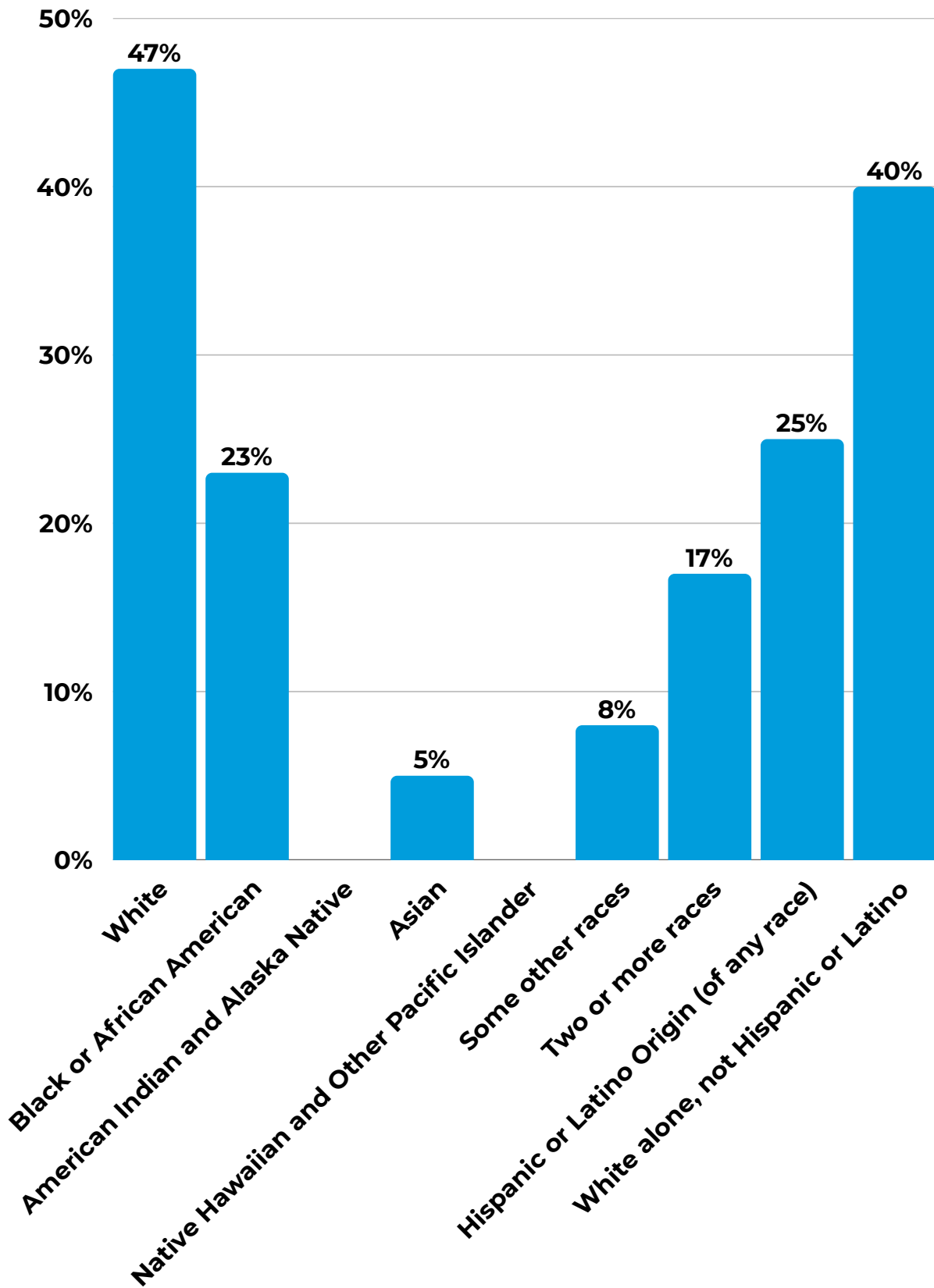
While examining the indicators tracked to measure success of the Children and Youth Community Plan, background information data on youth and their families in Alexandria is provided to give context to the City's overall population data on diversity, education and income. The following demographic data was collected from the US Census and Alexandria City Public Schools.

Population Age 0-24

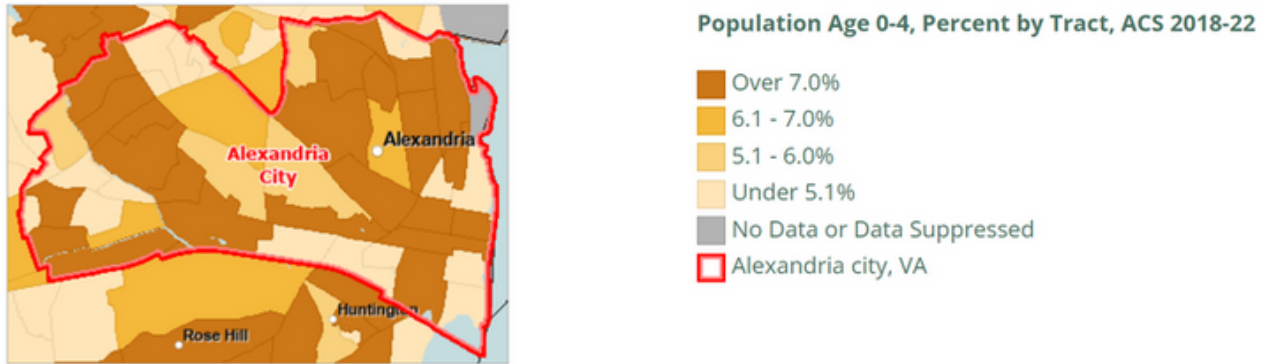


Of the estimated 157,594 total population in Alexandria, an estimated 37,925 are children, youth, and young adults under the age of 24 years old, representing 24% of the population. Children under the age of 5 represent 6.85% of the population. An estimated 19,875 persons are youth between the ages of 5 and 19, representing 12.6% of the population. Young adults, ages 20-24, represent 4.61% of the population. These data are based on the latest U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

Children under 18, by Race and Ethnicity

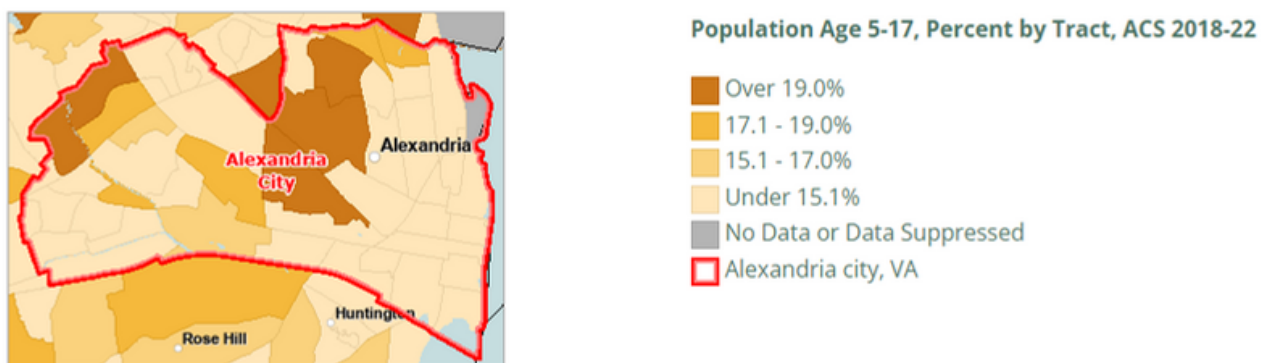


Where Children Live in Alexandria (Age 0-4)

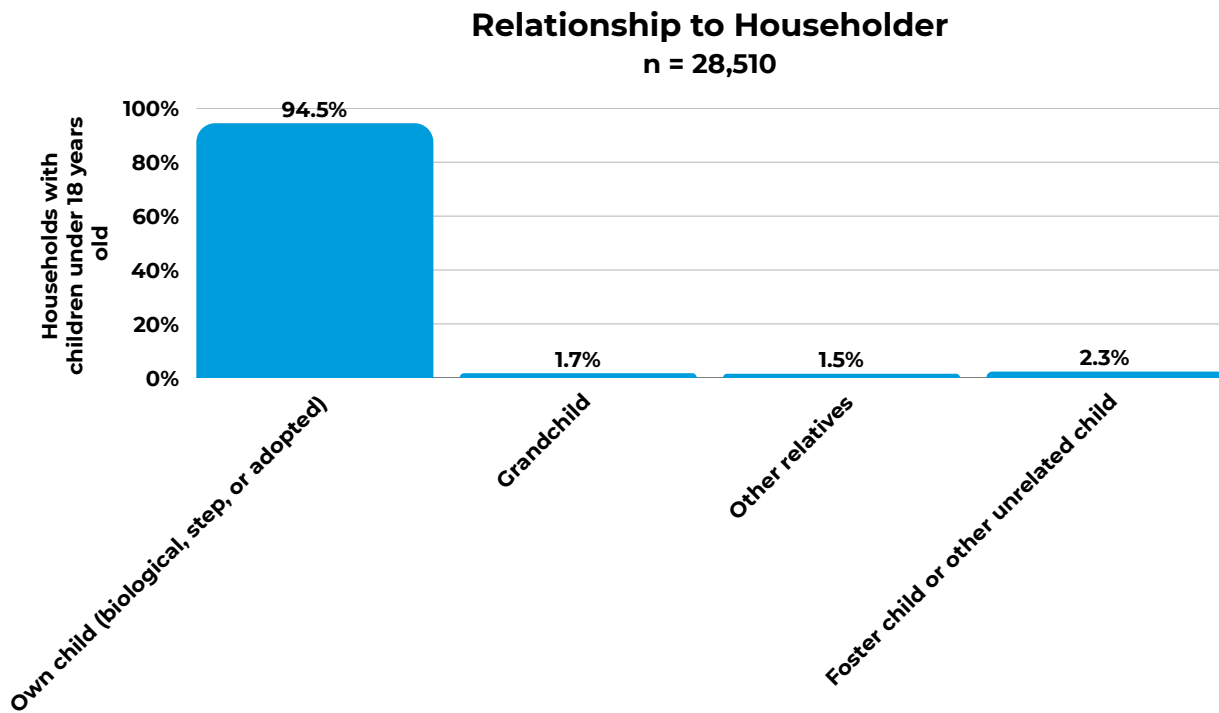


Data Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2018-22.

Where Youth Live in Alexandria (Age 5-17)



Data Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2018-22.

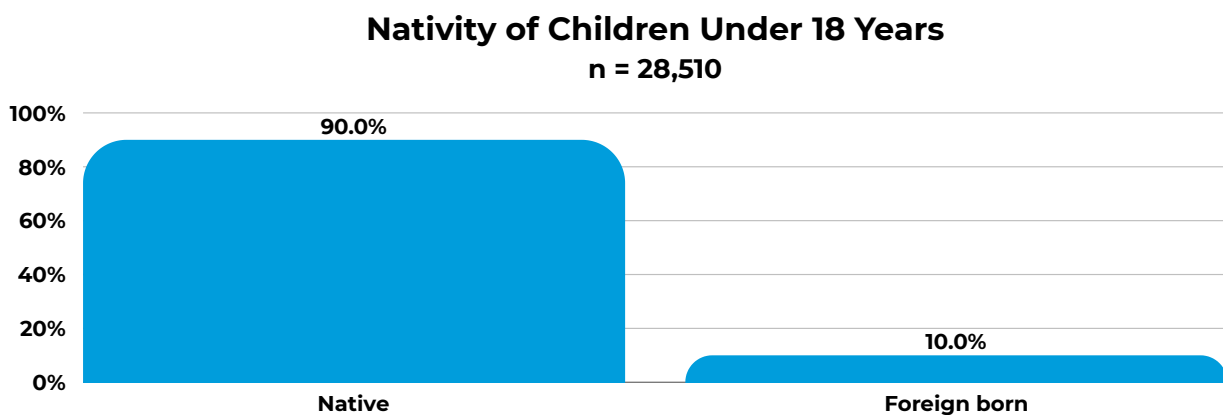


Data Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2018-22

Of the 28,510 children under 18 years old in Alexandria, the majority of children (95%) live with their biological, step, or adopted family. Approximately 485 children (1.7%) live with their grandparents and about 428 children (1.5%) live with other relatives. Approximately 655 children are in foster care or live with people who are not related to them (2.3%).

There are nearly 251 grandparents who are responsible for their grandchildren. It is estimated that 97 of those grandparents are immigrants.

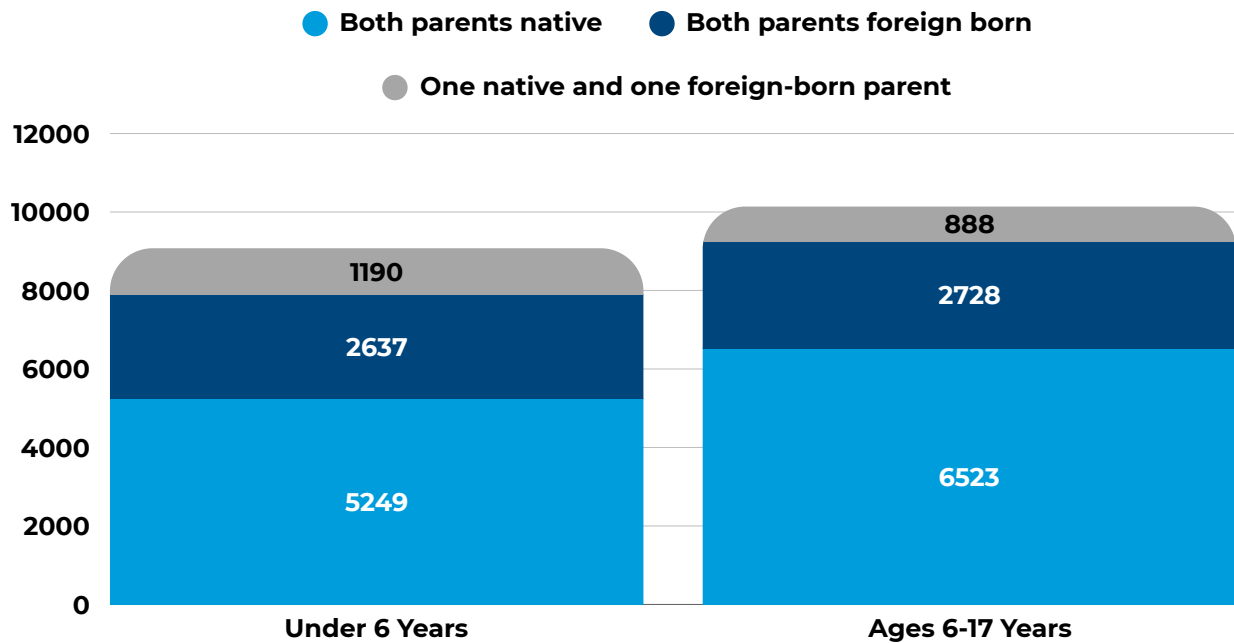
Children who are immigrants or live in immigrant families in Alexandria



Data Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2018-22

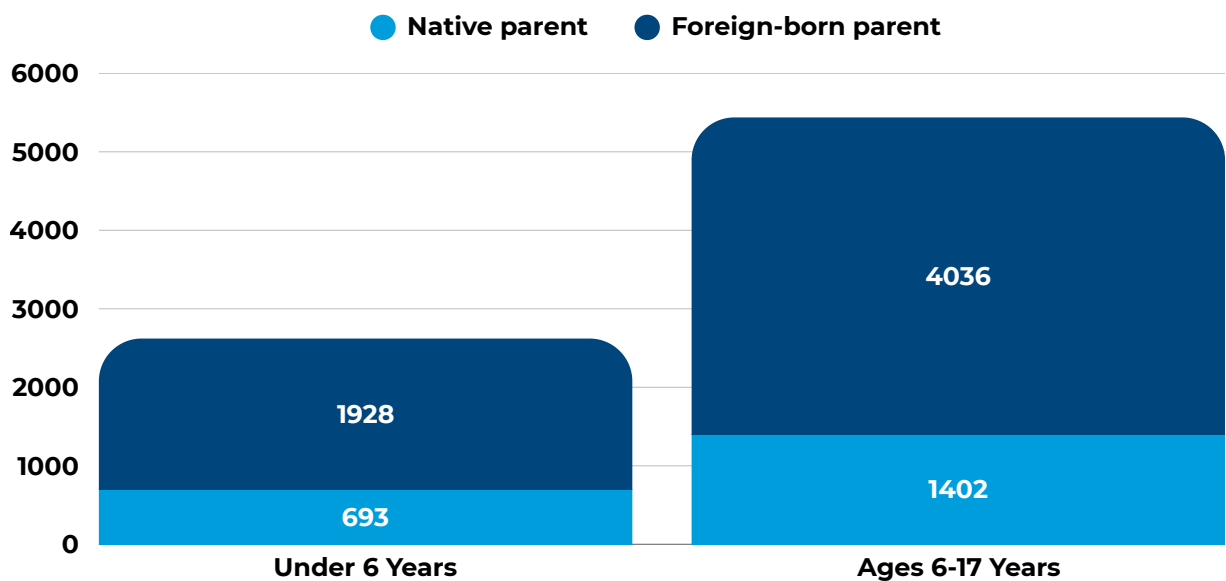
It is estimated that 2,822 children, or 10%, are immigrants. Approximately 12,881 children live in households where at least one parent is an immigrant.

Children Living with Two Parents



Data Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2018-22

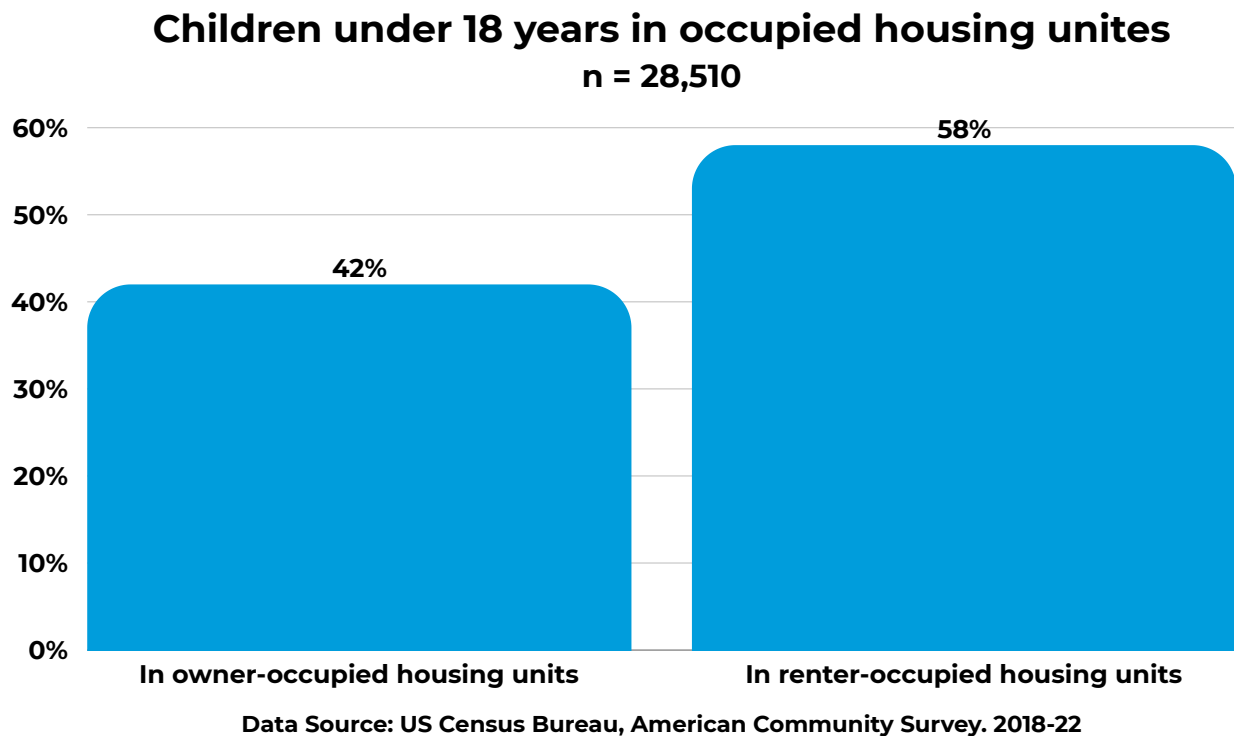
Children Living with One Parent



Data Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2018-22

Family Income

The median income for families with children is \$128,862. In Alexandria, 14.23% or 3,974 children under 18 years are living in households with income below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). 16.6% of children under 18 years live in households that receive public assistance, in the form of Supplemental Security Income (SSI), cash public assistance income, or Food Stamp/SNAP benefits. 1,753 households with children under 18 years received Food Stamps/SNAP in the past 12 months.



Housing

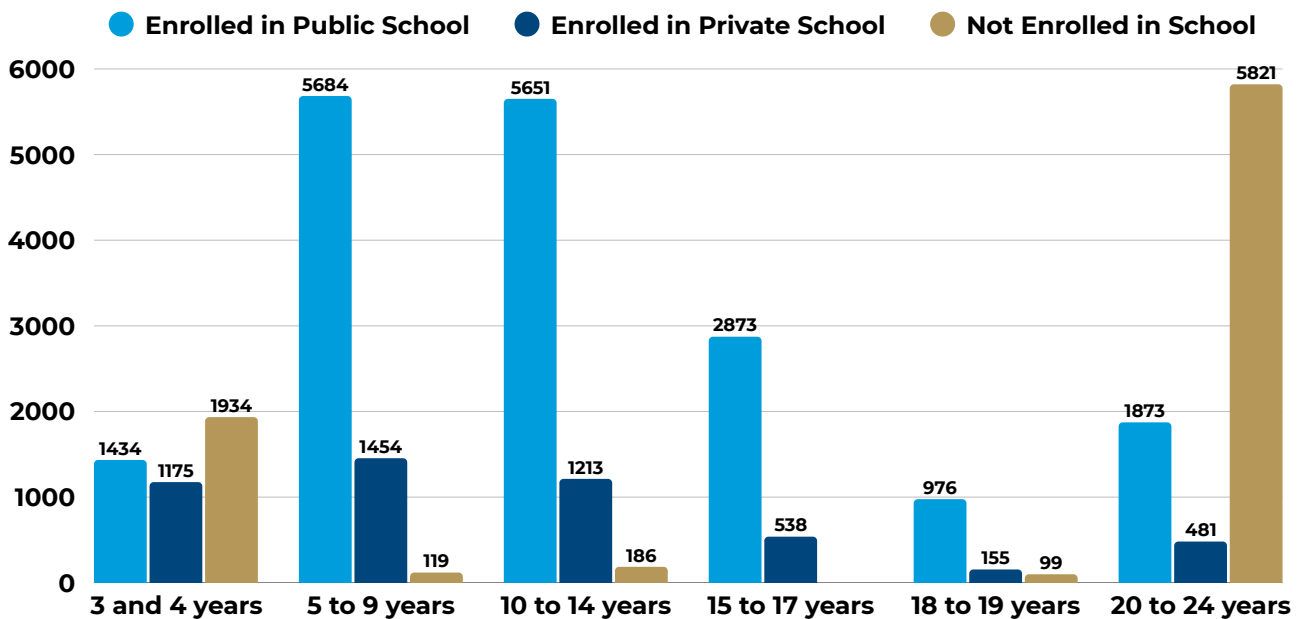
There are an estimated 15,557 households with children under 18 years, representing 21% of Alexandria's households. Among them, about 28.9% or 4,496 are single-parent households. About 57.9% of children under 18 years live in renter-occupied housing. 42.1% live in owner-occupied housing units. The number and share of public-school children who were ever homeless during the 2019-2020 school year was 164. Data Source: US Department of Education Local Education Agency data, SY 2019-20 (via EDFacts Homeless Students Enrolled). (Time period: School Year 2019-20)

Disability Status

The percentage of children under 18 years living with a disability is approximately 2.8%, or nearly 800 children

School Enrollment

School Enrollment, Ages 3-24 Years



Among the 22,319 children who are between the ages of 3 and 17 years, approximately 19,464, or 87.2%, are enrolled in school. Of those children, about 74.4% attend public schools and 25.6% attend private schools. During the 2023-2024 school year, 16,201 students were enrolled in Alexandria City Public Schools. It is estimated that 1,934 pre-school aged children (ages 3-4) are not enrolled in school; 305 school aged youth (ages 5-17) are not enrolled in school; and 5,920 young adults (ages 18-24) are not enrolled in school.

Free and Reduced Meal Eligibility: 2022-2023

63.4% of students enrolled in ACPS were eligible for free and reduced meals. 36.6% Non-Eligible Students

Multilingual Learner Student Population in ACPS

During the 2023-2024 school year, there were 8,916 Multilingual Learners (ML) enrolled in ACPS, representing 55% of the student population. During the same school year, 6,087 English Learners (EL) were enrolled in ACPS, representing 37.6% of the student population. Multilingual Learners enrolled in ACPS were born in 113 different countries and speak a total of 119 languages. The charts below show the top ten languages and countries of birth represented by the ML student population.

Top 10 Languages Represented by the Multilingual Student Population Total Number of Languages: 119		
Language	ML Total	ELs
Spanish	5,339	3,811
Dari	803	696
Amharic	783	394
Arabic	474	276
Pashto, Northern	349	286
Krio	101	46
Twi	95	44
Bengali	86	39
Urdu	83	58
Tigrinya	74	33
Total Top 10	8,187	5,683

Top 10 Countries of Birth Represented by the Multilingual Student Population Total Number of Countries: 113		
Country	ML Total	ELs
United States	4,870	2,857
Afghanistan	1,163	981
El Salvador	658	540
Honduras	641	586
Guatemala	334	312
Ethiopia	275	157
Bolivia	66	53
Pakistan	56	36
Nicaragua	48	46
Peru	43	36
Total Top 10	8,154	5,604

Data Source: Alexandria City Public Schools, Office of English Learner Services, School Year 2023-2024

Appendix X: Youth Listening Sessions – Detailed Methodology

The Youth Listening Sessions formed the heart of the 2025 Youth Needs Assessment, centering student voice as a primary source of insight. This appendix provides a detailed overview of the design, facilitation, recruitment, and analysis processes to support transparency and replicability.

Purpose and Design

The listening sessions were grounded in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) principles, with the goal of elevating young people’s lived experiences and perspectives in identifying community needs, barriers, and potential solutions. The sessions aimed to:

- Create safe, inclusive environments for youth to share honest feedback
- Explore students’ visions of an “ideal” community and compare that to their current realities
- Identify gaps in services, programs, and systems that impact youth well-being
- Generate youth-led ideas for change and inform the next Children and Youth Community Plan (CYCP)

Development and Facilitation Team

A total of 63 facilitators were recruited and trained to conduct the listening sessions, including:

- **30 adult facilitators:** City staff, nonprofit partners, teachers, and community members
- **33 youth facilitators:** High school students trained to co-lead conversations with peers

All facilitators participated in an hour-long training that covered facilitation techniques and the goals and structure of the sessions. Special attention was paid to creating affirming spaces for all students. All facilitators were also provided a copy of the slide decks and the exact same script and talking points for leading the sessions.

Session Format and Activities

Each session lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and followed a structured format with room for flexibility based on group size and setting. Core components included:

1. Opening and Grounding

- Brief introductions and purpose of the session
- Brief overview of the CYCP and the role of youth voice in shaping city priorities

2. Youth Issues Survey (Optional)

- Students scanned a QR code using Chromebooks to complete a short survey rating 12 youth-identified issues
- Mentions were anonymous and optional

3. Interactive Activities

- Students responded to two central prompts:
 - “What does your ideal school or community look like?”
 - “What does your real school or community look like?”
- Mentions were recorded on sticky notes and flip chart paper
- Group discussions followed to share ideas, validate experiences, and connect individual reflections to broader themes

4. Closing

- Students were informed of the next steps in the process:
 - “City staff are going to review everything that you shared with us today and look for themes. Then they will work with youth to identify priorities.”

Session Locations and Participation

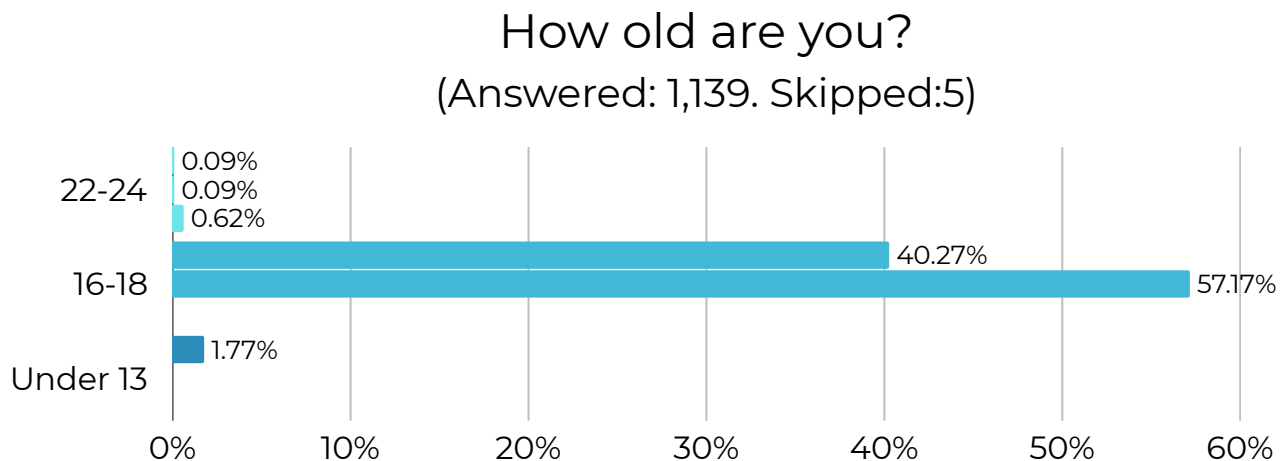
Listening Sessions were conducted across multiple ACPS campuses during the school day, ensuring high participation and geographic representation. The table below summarizes Round 1 and Round 2 engagement:

School	Session Dates	# Sessions	# Students Engaged
ACHS (US Gov't - R1)	Oct 10 & 11	25	417
GW Middle School (Civics - R1)	Dec 4 & 5	19	298
ACHS International Academy (Gov't - R1)	Nov 7 & 8	4	50
ACHS (9th Grade English - R1)	Nov 7 & 8	3	36
ACHS (Gov't - R2)	Jan 29 & 30	19	~513
Francis C. Hammond MS (Civics - R1)	Feb 13 & 14	20	332
Patrick Henry K–8 (Civics - R1)	Feb 14	3	Patrick Henry K–8 (Civics - R1)
Saint Stephen's, Saint Agnes	April 4	1	9
Total	Oct 2024 – Feb 2025	93	~1,144

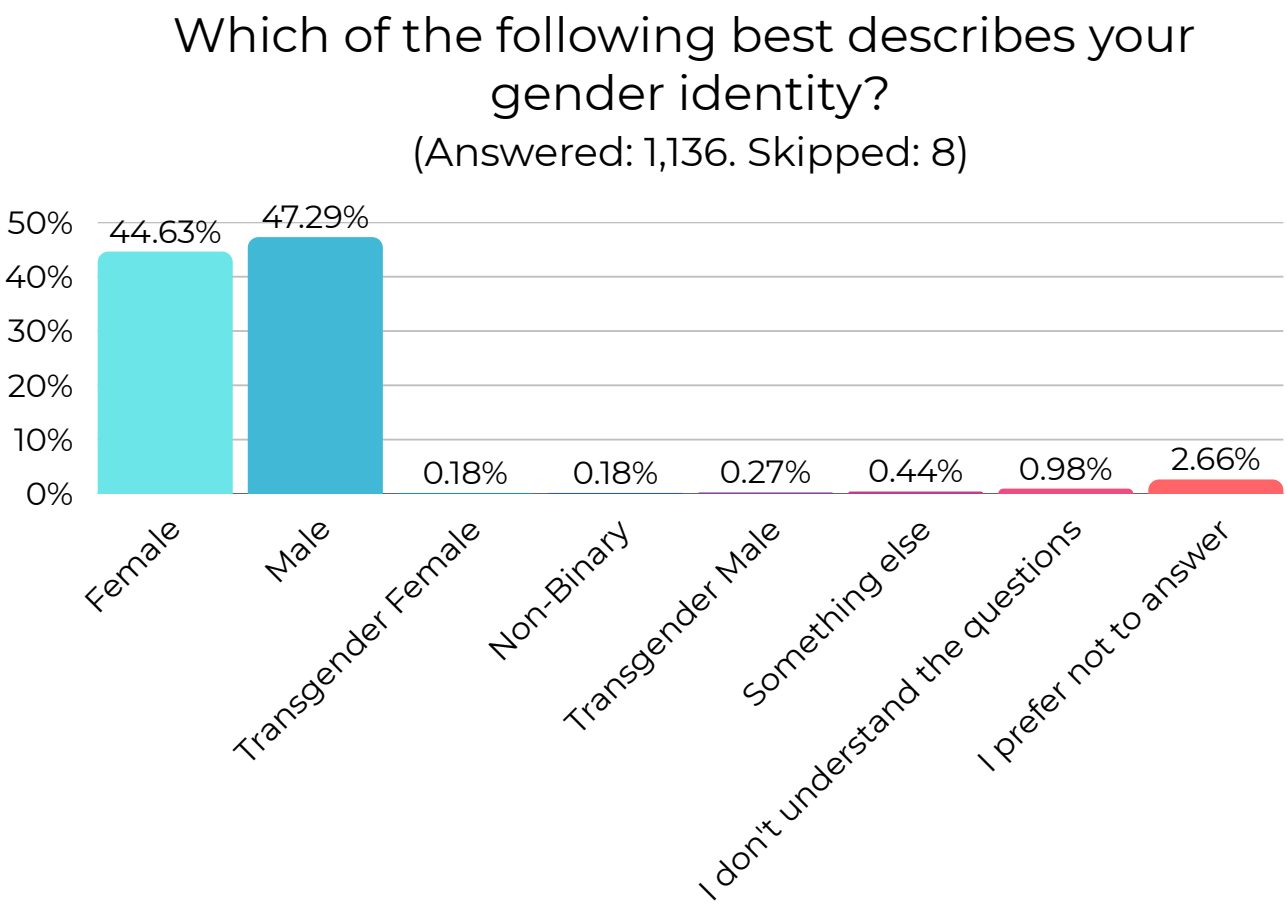
Demographics of participants

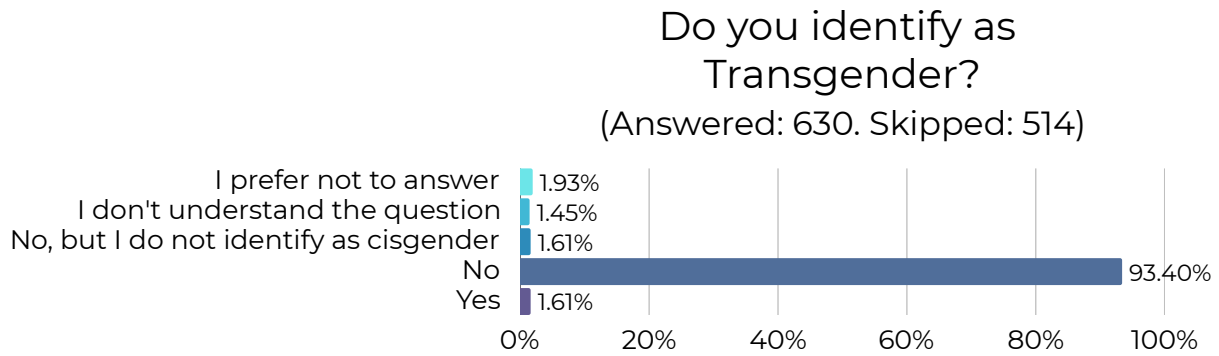
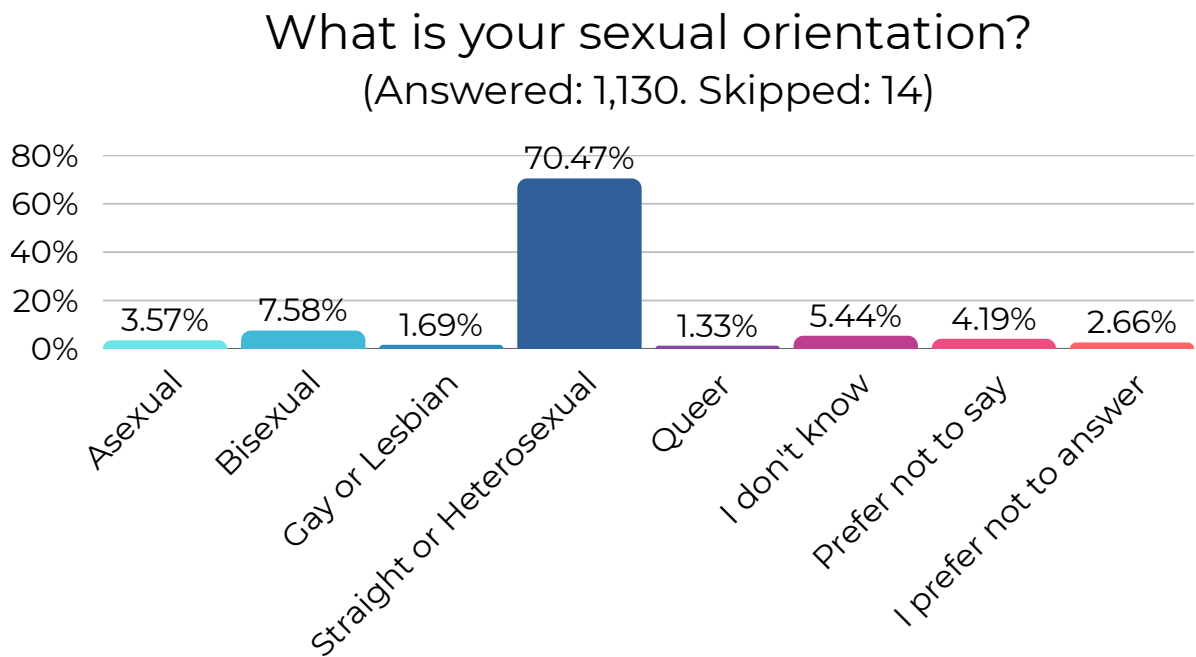
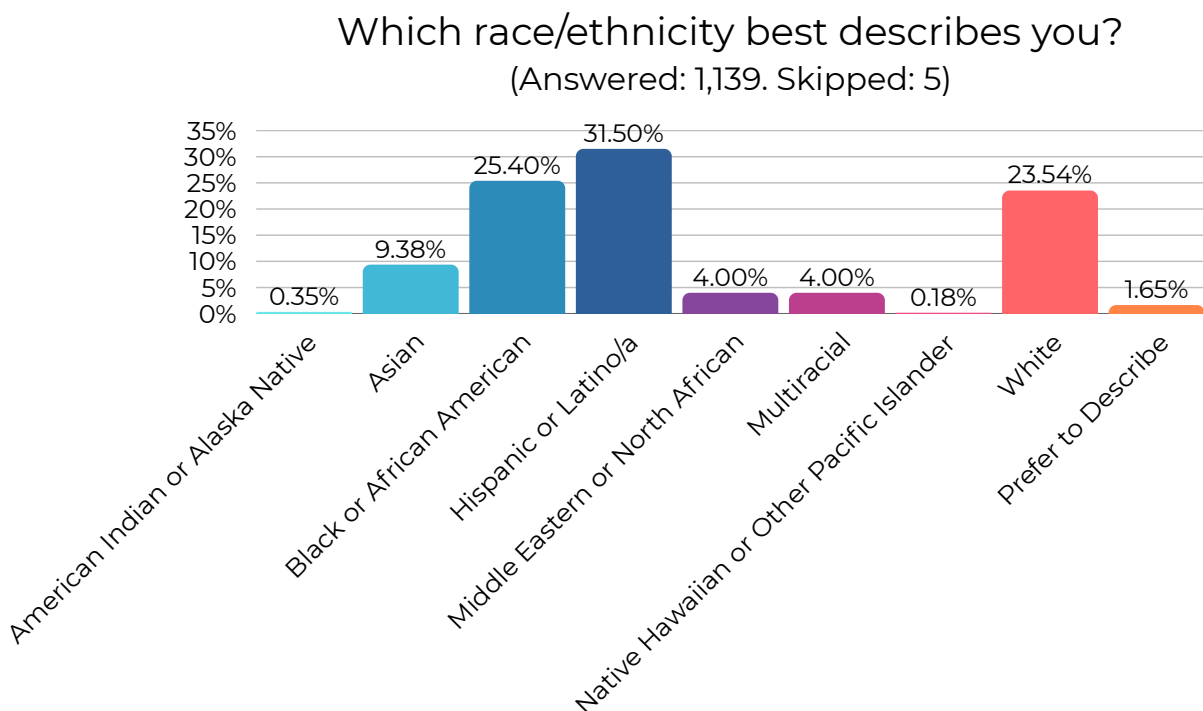
The following questions were asked via a survey that students were invited to take during the Listening Sessions. They accessed the electronic survey by scanning a QR code with their Chromebook. The facilitators first read aloud the instructions to the students, assuring them that their participation was voluntary, and mentions are anonymous. Then each of the following questions were read aloud:

Question 1:



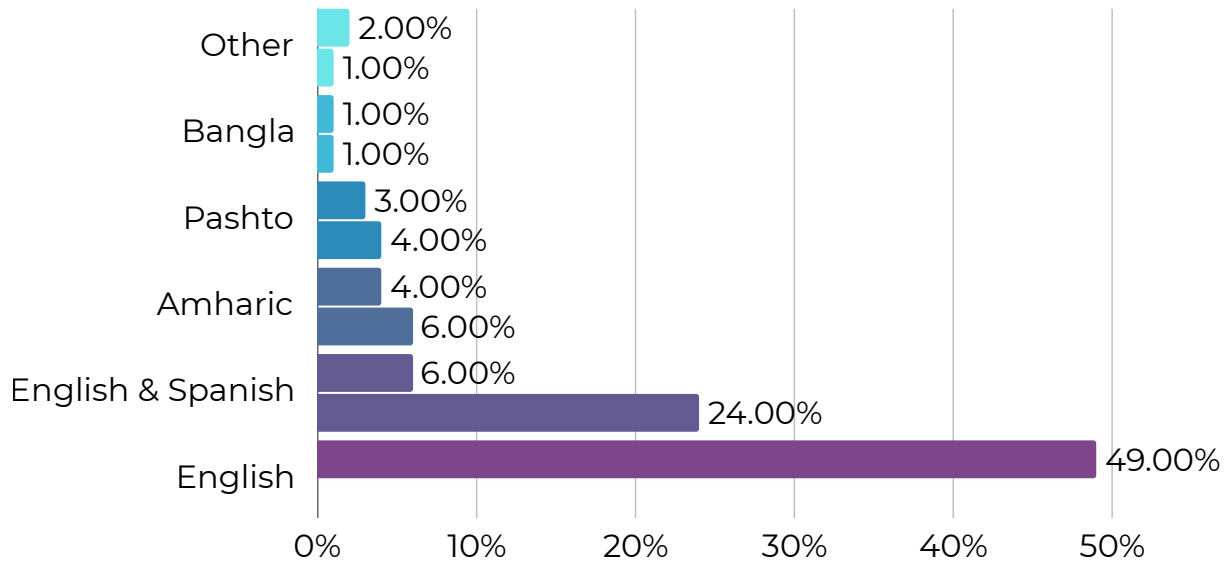
Question 2:



Question 3:**Question 4:****Question 5:**

Question 6:

What is the main language you speak at home?
(Answered: 1,016)

**Round 2: Deeper Engagement on Priority Themes**

In January 2025, a second round of sessions was held exclusively with high school students. These sessions were designed to:

- Validate findings from Round 1
- Review population-level data in small groups
- Revise and refine issue summaries
- Propose solutions and vote on priorities based on feasibility and impact

Facilitators used worksheets, prompts, and group activities to capture input. Feedback from these sessions shaped the final framing of key themes in the Youth Needs Assessment.

Data Management and Analysis

- All handwritten and digital mentions were transcribed into a centralized database
- Student quotes were de-identified to protect confidentiality
- A detailed codebook was developed based on inductive and deductive methods, informed by youth-identified themes and prior CYCP domains
- Coding was conducted by a trained team, including recent ACPS graduates, using thematic analysis
- Frequency counts were compiled by subtheme to identify patterns
- Triangulation with survey results and external datasets enhanced validity

Student Safeguards and Accessibility

- Participation was voluntary; students could opt out at any time
- Sessions were held in English, though efforts were made to ensure culturally affirming facilitation and inclusive language
- Facilitators were trained to respond appropriately to sensitive topics

Limitations

- Sessions were only conducted in English
- Most private schools, homeschooled, and out-of-school youth were not systematically engaged
- Caregivers and service providers were minimally represented (see Limitations section for more detail)

