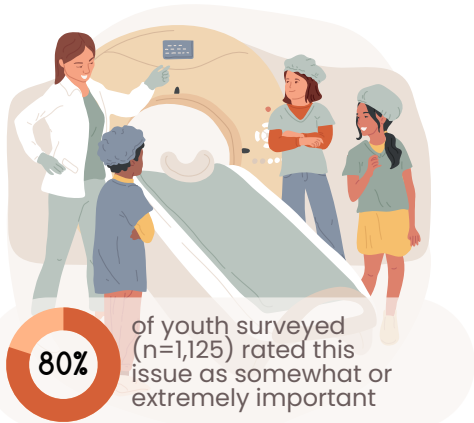


Youth Perspectives on:

Academic Success & Environments



Overview



Alexandria students expressed a strong desire for school environments that are equitable, engaging, and responsive to their individual needs. It came up roughly 230 times during the 94 Listening Sessions. While many youth noted positive experiences, such as access to tutoring and passionate teachers, they also identified persistent challenges like rigid instruction, inequitable opportunities, inconsistent grading, and high teacher turnover.

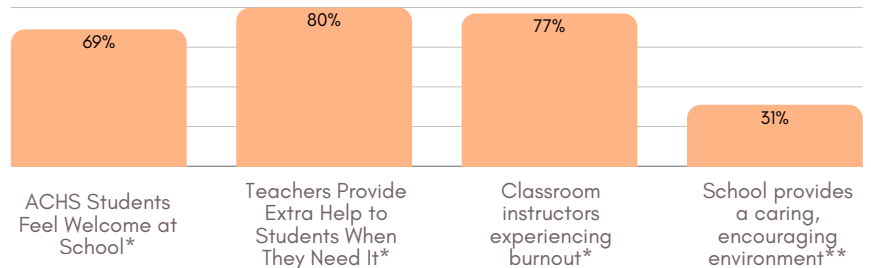
WHY IT MATTERS

Students' academic confidence and future success are directly shaped by how supported and engaged they feel at school. When learning environments are responsive, hands-on, and inclusive, youth are more likely to thrive. Their feedback highlights the importance of equity, relationships, and real-world relevance in academic settings.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Academic Environment

Source: ACPS Climate Survey (2024)* & Developmental Assets Survey (2025)**



WHAT YOUTH WANT

40+ mentions

Student-Centered Learning & Engagement

"More field trips that actually help students understand more."

More hands-on, experiential learning (e.g., field trips, life skills, group projects)

60+ mentions

Supportive Relationships & Academic Encouragement

"An ideal school looks like everyone getting the help that they need for learning."

- Personalized support through tutoring and meaningful teacher-student relationships
- Passionate, well-supported educators who care about student success

25+ mentions

Fair and Growth-Oriented Assessment

"Different ways of evaluating knowledge."

Fair, flexible assessment systems that prioritize growth over test scores

10+ mentions

Equity in Access & Opportunity

"Encouraging more minority students in college level/AP classes."

Equitable access to academic opportunities, including support for students with different learning needs

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

60+ mentions

Learning & Engagement

"Great variety of classes."

"Haven't been on a field trip since 9th grade."

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.

40+ mentions

Relationships & Academic Encouragement

"They give up on kids easy."

Teacher turnover and lack of one-on-one support were common concerns.

5+ mentions

Assessment

"Too many tests."

Frustration over inconsistent grading and overreliance on testing.

15+ mentions

Access & Opportunity

"Educational equity...not really fulfilled."

Disparities in support and opportunities, particularly for students in special education or youth of color in advanced courses



Barriers to Improvement

- **Lack of Support:** A major barrier that students cited is the lack of support from counselors and teachers, which contributes to educational disparities.
- **Teacher Burnout:** Teacher burnout, attributed to both overstaffing and a lack of genuine interest in subject matter, further exacerbates the problem.
- **Concerns over Safety:** Some responses also referenced a broader feeling of insecurity - such as a violent incident during a fire drill - that may impact students' willingness to engage academically.
- **Unaware of Academic Options:** Finally, a key challenge is that many students are unaware of all the academic options available to them. Without clear guidance in middle school, fewer students from underrepresented groups are funneled into advanced or challenging classes.



Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to create environments that support their academic success:

Build Stronger Teacher-Student Connections

- Suggestions include creating more free time during classes for students to interact with teachers and even allowing students to choose their preferred teachers when possible.

Enhance 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

- Efforts should be made 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 - such as targeted interventions to boost the SOL Success Rate and increase the percentage of students who feel valued - are essential for long-term academic success.