



Youth Perspectives on:

School Leadership & Student Engagement

Overview

This subtheme, emerging 175+ times during 94 Listening Sessions, 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.



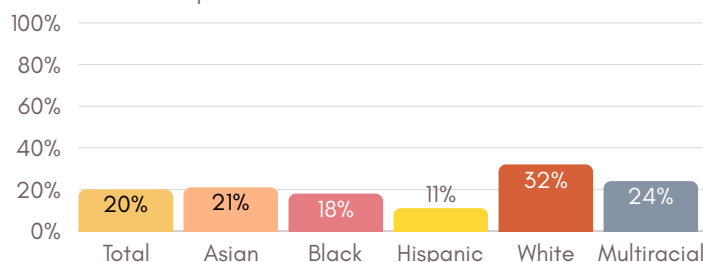
WHY IT MATTERS

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. Conversely, inconsistent policies and one-way communication can erode students' confidence in school systems.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Community Values Youth by Race/Ethnicity

Source: Developmental Assets: A Profile of Your Youth for ACPS



WHAT YOUTH WANT

40+ mentions

"School admin listens to students."

"More access points for student input."

"Better communication between school board and students and teachers."

Communication & Shared Decision-Making

- Communication is transparent and two-way between students, staff, and administrators
- Leadership values student voice
- Student input is actively sought and meaningfully included in decision-making

35+ mentions

"Transparency around changes in procedures/rules (lunch)."

Digital Access Policies & General Policy Clarity

School policies are fair, clearly explained, and consistently applied

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

60+ mentions

"School doesn't listen to students' concerns."

Communication & Decision-Making

Feeling unheard, ignored, and dismissed by school leadership

40+ mentions

"Alexandria City High School only lets us go to lunch through one door. 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."

School Policies

- Frustration with restrictions around phone use and internet access.
- Policies that feel contradictory, inconsistently applied, or frequently changed without clear explanation.

35+ mentions

"In my school, being a part of LGBTQIA is looked down upon."

"Some teachers straight up discriminate certain students"

School Climate

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.



Barriers to Improvement

Students identified several barriers that limit meaningful progress on strengthening school leadership and student engagement:

- **Leadership not listening:**
Students feel some administrators dismiss their concerns due to age, time pressures, or fear of losing control.
- **Lack of responsiveness:**
Teachers, counselors, and administrators often lack the time or staffing needed to address the volume of student issues.
- **Public Image:** Students believe leadership sometimes prioritizes maintaining a positive public image over addressing systemic concerns.



Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Improve Student Engagement

Students proposed practical strategies to strengthen trust, leadership, and collaboration.

Center Latino Youth Leadership

- Launch a Latino Student Leadership Council
- Provide bilingual leadership training
- Create leadership roles supporting Latino students
- Host a Latino Youth Conference

Expand Inclusive Leadership Opportunities

- Build BIPOC and culturally responsive student organizations
- Ensure leadership reflects diversity in race, gender, religion, and academic performance
- Elect or appoint student representatives to decision-making bodies

Strengthen Student Voice & Agency

- Hold regular forums and listening sessions
- Create systems where student feedback shapes policies
- Publicize how administrators respond to student concerns
- Make changes gradually to build trust

Build Trustworthy Relationships

- Train educators in patience, fairness, and equitable discipline
- Create unbiased student advisory groups to bridge students and administrators
- Provide direct communication channels to principals
- Encourage leadership to experience student realities (bus rides, lunchrooms)
- Include younger, culturally aware administrators
- Foster a school culture where leaders are accessible, responsive, and committed to inclusion