

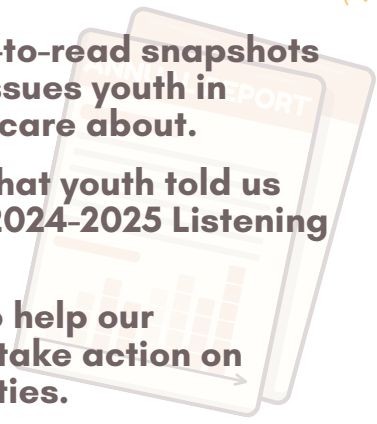
Youth Issue Briefs

What They Are & Why They Matter



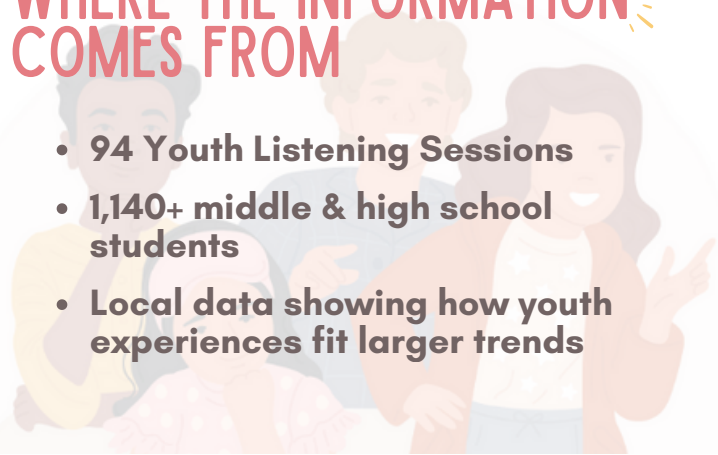
WHAT ARE THESE BRIEFS?

- Short, easy-to-read snapshots of the top issues youth in Alexandria care about.
- Based on what youth told us during the 2024-2025 Listening Sessions.
- Designed to help our community take action on youth priorities.



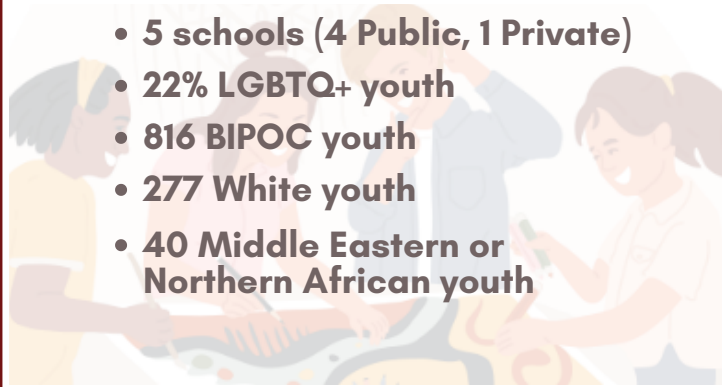
WHERE THE INFORMATION COMES FROM

- 94 Youth Listening Sessions
- 1,140+ middle & high school students
- Local data showing how youth experiences fit larger trends



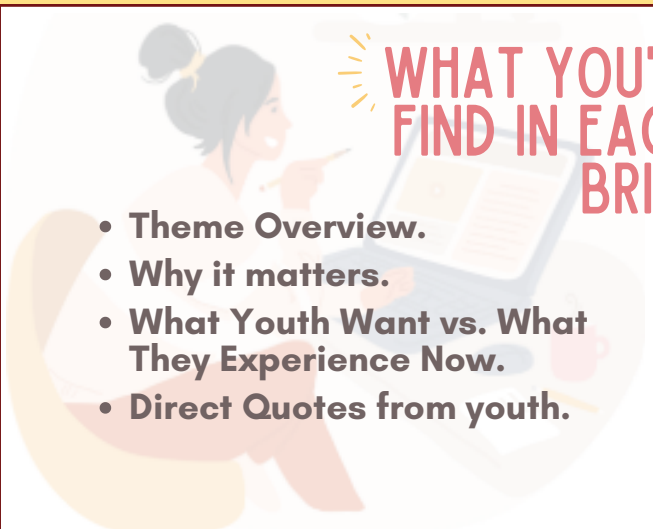
WHO PARTICIPATED

- 5 schools (4 Public, 1 Private)
- 22% LGBTQ+ youth
- 816 BIPOC youth
- 277 White youth
- 40 Middle Eastern or Northern African youth



WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN EACH BRIEF

- Theme Overview.
- Why it matters.
- What Youth Want vs. What They Experience Now.
- Direct Quotes from youth.



WHY IT MATTERS

- Youth are experts in their own experiences.
- Listening builds trust and leads to better programs and policies.
- Acting on this feedback can help all youth thrive.



HOW TO USE THESE BRIEFS

- Shape programs, policies, and funding to reflect youth priorities.
- Share with colleagues, partners, and decision-makers.
- Start conversations with youth about solutions that work for them.

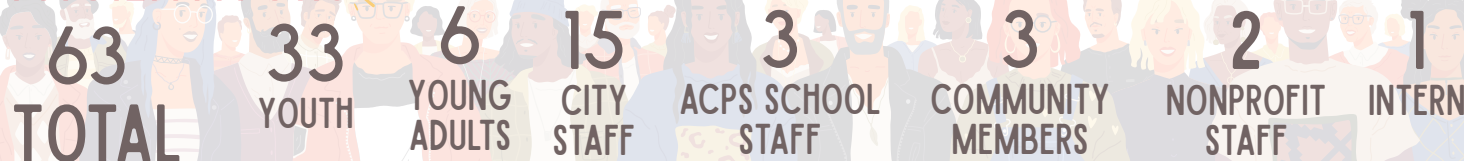


Youth Listening Sessions

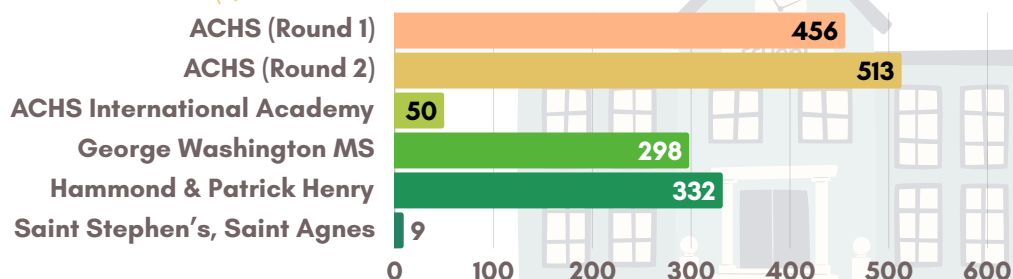
Who Participated



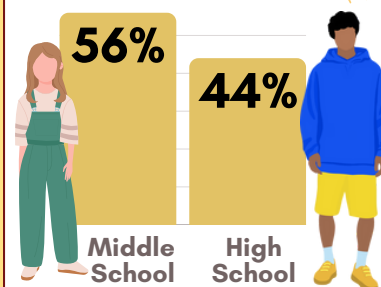
FACILITATORS



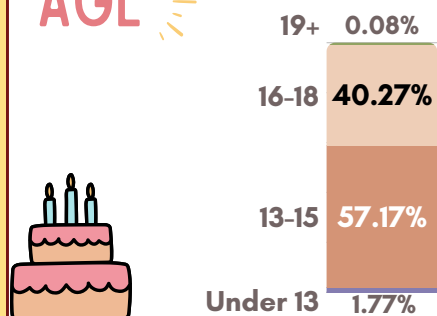
SCHOOLS



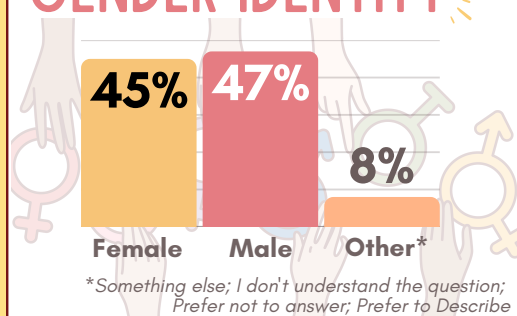
GRADE LEVEL



AGE



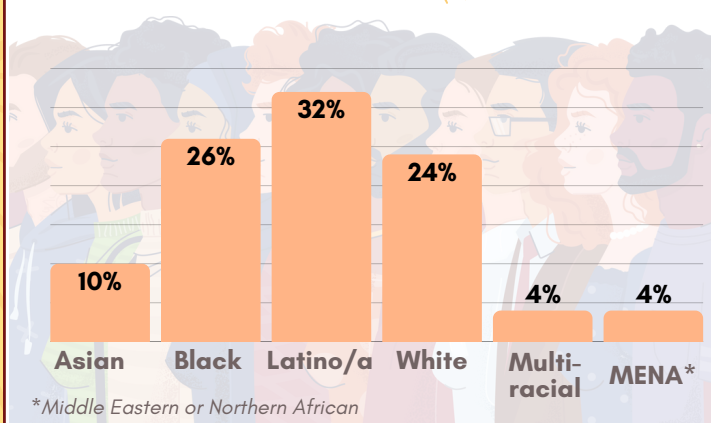
GENDER IDENTITY



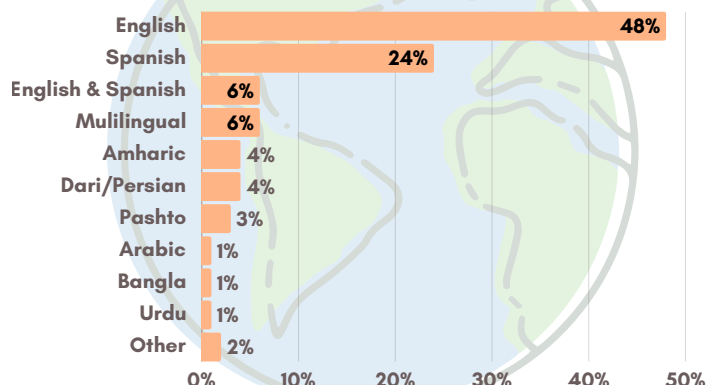
LGBTQ+



RACE/ETHNICITY



PREFERRED LANGUAGE



Youth Issue Briefs

Click on the topic you want to explore.

Click on the City seal
to return to this page.



COST OF LIVING



**TRANSPORTATION
& MOBILITY**



**ACADEMIC SUCCESS &
ENVIRONMENTS**



**SCHOOL
CONDITIONS**



**SCHOOL LEADERSHIP
& STUDENT
ENGAGEMENT**



**STUDENT WELLBEING
& SUPPORT SERVICES**



**PHYSICAL, MENTAL, &
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH**



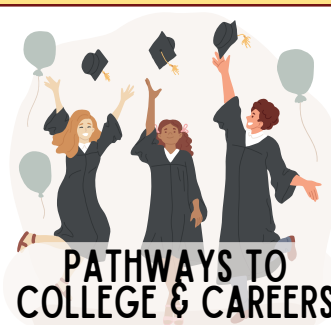
**ENVIRONMENTAL
PROTECTION**



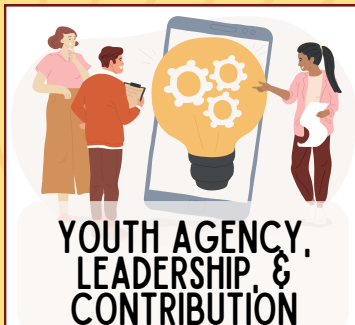
**SOCIAL
CONNECTEDNESS
& BELONGING**



**VIOLENCE
PREVENTION**



**PATHWAYS TO
COLLEGE & CAREERS**



**YOUTH AGENCY,
LEADERSHIP, &
CONTRIBUTION**



YOUTH EMPLOYMENT



**RESPONSIVE & JUST
GOVERNMENT**

Youth Issue Briefs

Issues at a glance.

BASIC NEEDS & RELEVANT RESOURCES

- **82%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **Multiracial students**, followed closely by **White students**.
- Emerged **670+ times** during listening sessions

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

- **80%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) students**, followed closely by **Multiracial students**.
- Emerged **1,200+ times** during listening sessions

PHYSICAL, MENTAL, & BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

- **81%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **White students**.
- Emerged **325+ times** during listening sessions

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION & CLIMATE CHANGE

- **72%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **Asian and White students**.
- Emerged **185+ times** during listening sessions

PHYSICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

- **78%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **Asian students**.
- Emerged **675+ times** during listening sessions

PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE & CAREERS

- **80%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **Asian students**.
- Emerged **85+ times** during listening sessions

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS & BELONGING

- **69%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **Asian students**.
- Emerged **350+ times** during listening sessions

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

- **77%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **Asian students**.
- Emerged **30+ times** during listening sessions

RESPONSIVE & JUST GOVERNMENT

- **80%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **Multiracial students**.
- Emerged **245+ times** during listening sessions

YOUTH AGENCY, LEADERSHIP, & CONTRIBUTION

- **70%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important.
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **Asian students**.
- Emerged **25+ times** during listening sessions

SAFE DATING & HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS*

- **73%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **Multiracial students**.
- Emerged **20+ times** during listening sessions

SEX ED FOR ALL*

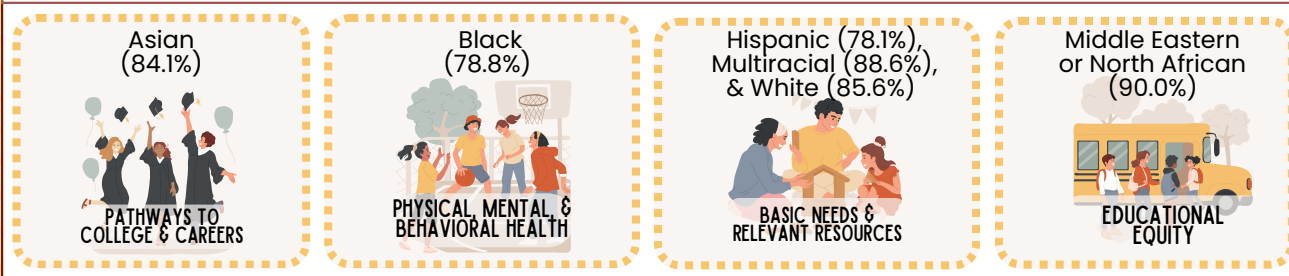
- **72%** of youth surveyed rated this issue as important
- The highest rating came from **MENA students**, followed closely by **Hispanic or Latino/a and Multiracial students**.
- Emerged **5+ times** during listening sessions

*When presenting the findings in the Youth Needs Assessment, Safe Dating & Healthy Relationships was folded into the Physical & Psychological Safety theme and Sex Ed for All was folded into the Physical, Mental, & Behavioral Health theme.

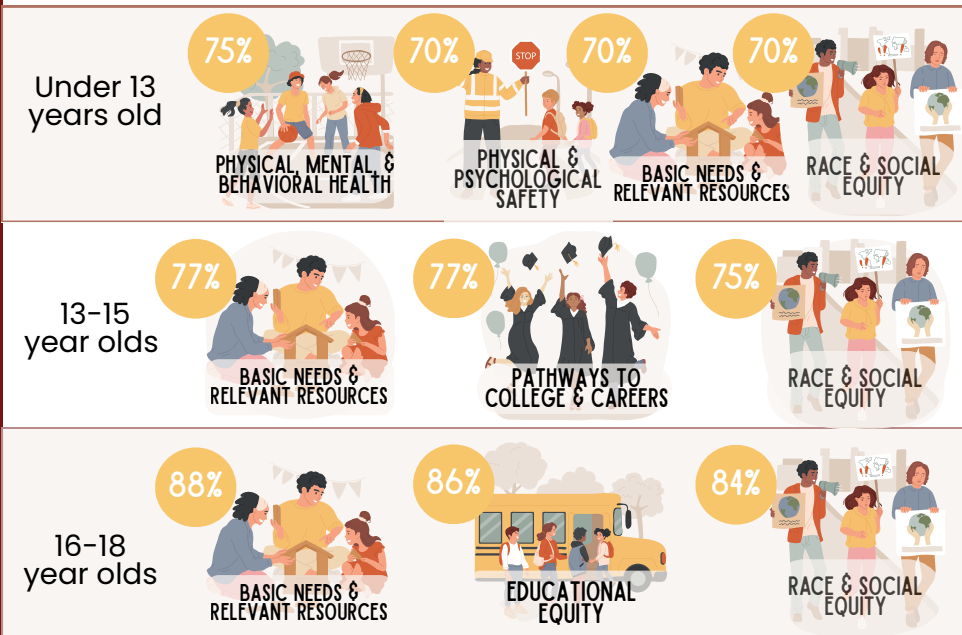
Youth Issue Briefs

Highest rated issues by subgroups.

HIGHEST RATED ISSUE BY RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY



HIGHEST RATED ISSUE BY AGE GROUP



HIGHEST RATED ISSUE BY LGBTQ+ STATUS

	PHYSICAL, MENTAL & BEHAVIORAL HEALTH	PHYSICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY	RACE & SOCIAL EQUITY
LGBTQ+	83%	83%	81%
Straight	80%	77%	78%
Unknown	81%	73%	78%

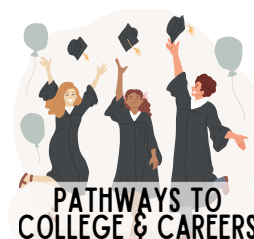
HIGHEST RATED ISSUE BY SCHOOL



Alexandria City High School & St. Stephens, St. Agnes



9th Graders & International Academy



Hammond, Patrick Henry, & George Washington

Youth Perspectives on:

Cost of Living



Overview

Cost of Living emerged over 500 times during 94 listening sessions with Alexandria students. 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.

82%

of youth surveyed (n=1,133) rated this issue as somewhat or extremely important

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.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Economic Conditions

Sources: 2024 Alexandria Resident Survey & VA Department of Education (2024)



WHAT YOUTH WANT

150+ mentions

Economic Justice

"A community in which everybody has access to the things they need."

A fairer economy where wealth and resources are distributed equitably and everyone gets their basic needs met and can thrive.

55+ mentions

Housing for All

"Housing for everyone (affordable housing)"

Housing costs are fair and everyone has access to safe, quality, and affordable housing/rent.

30+ mentions

Food Justice

"Healthy organic food that is affordable"

Everyone has access to healthy, affordable, and abundant food and no one goes hungry.

45+ mentions

Greater Healthcare Access & Well-being

"Access to great healthcare for free"

Everyone has access to high-quality, affordable, and compassionate healthcare and health and well-being are prioritized for all.

20+ mentions

More Social Services

"More free resources for youth."
"Help poor people."

Everyone has access to the support they need, including safe places to stay, help with basic needs, and programs that uplift low-income and unhoused individuals.

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

90+ mentions

Economic Disparities

"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."

Students point to rising prices and inflation, stagnant wages, the financial strain their families experience, and a heavy tax burden as stressors.

50+ mentions

Housing Instability

"Rent is too high."

"High rates of people experiencing homelessness."

Many young people see their community as struggling with unaffordable housing, rising homelessness, unsafe living conditions, and a cost of living that makes it hard for families and youth to stay and thrive.

15+ mentions

Food Insecurity

"The prices of food are very high."

"Not enough food."

Many students experience food insecurity due to high grocery prices and limited access to enough food, leaving families unable to meet basic nutritional needs.

25+ mentions

Healthcare Inaccessibility

"Expensive healthcare."

"People don't have healthcare."

"The Teen Wellness Center is not accessible and needs more funding."

While the Teen Wellness Center was named as a valuable resource, many youth in our community struggle to access affordable, reliable healthcare, leaving their physical and mental health needs unmet and putting their well-being at risk.



Youth Perspectives on: Transportation & Mobility



Overview

Transportation and Mobility emerged roughly 180 times during the 94 Listening Sessions. 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.

82%

of youth surveyed (n=1,133) rated this issue as somewhat or extremely important

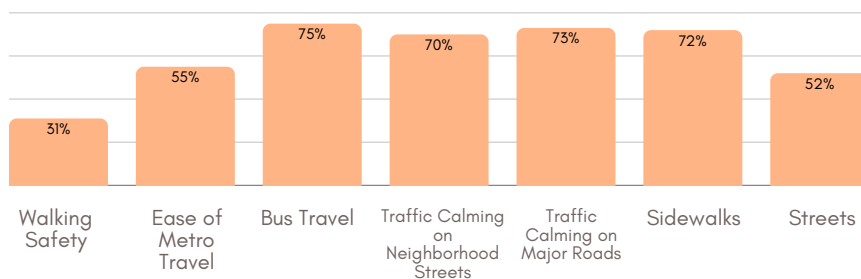
WHY IT MATTERS

Well-maintained public infrastructure and reliable public transportation are essential to youth health and development; they support safe, consistent access to school, jobs, services, and social connections. When transportation systems are dependable and environments are safe and accessible, young people are better able to maintain routines, engage in their communities, and build independence - key factors that contribute to their well-being.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Resident Satisfaction with Transportation Services in Alexandria

Source: 2024 Resident Survey



WHAT YOUTH WANT

20+ mentions

Condition of City Infrastructure & Built Environment

"Well-built roads, sidewalks, public parks, etc."

"More parking at school and everywhere in Alexandria."

Safe, well-maintained, and accessible streets, sidewalks, parking lots, and public spaces where all neighborhoods benefit from quality infrastructure.

55+ mentions

Public Transportation

"Free metro!"
"My ideal community has more bus drivers."

Clean, safe, reliable, and free or affordable public transportation where buses and trains are on time, accessible to all, and supported by enough drivers.

15+ mentions

Traffic Safety & Management

"Less traffic."
"People following driving rules."
"Driving safety programs."

Safe, responsible drivers and smooth-flowing traffic where people follow the rules of the road, streets are well-managed, and everyone can travel efficiently without congestion or danger.

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

15+ mentions

Condition of City Infrastructure & Built Environment

"Broken sidewalks."
"When it is snowing, the sidewalk becomes icy and slippery for the people that wait for the bus."
"Duke street crossing signal takes 3 minutes."

Unsafe and poorly maintained infrastructure, including cracked sidewalks, damaged roads, long signal waits, and limited parking, that makes it difficult to walk, commute, and stay safe in all weather conditions.

50+ mentions

Public Transportation

"My bus just doesn't show up sometimes."
"Better ways of getting home"

Unreliable, overcrowded, and limited public transportation, with safety concerns, long wait times, and inconsistent service making it hard to get where they need to go, especially for those without other options.

10+ mentions

Traffic Safety & Management

"People not driving safely (on their phones)."
"Quaker/Braddock intersection is not safe."

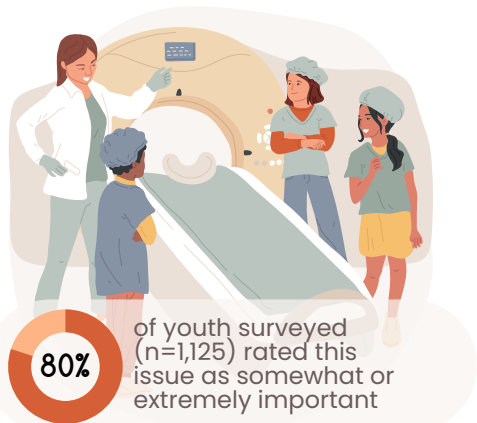
Unsafe and congested roads, with heavy traffic, distracted drivers, and dangerous intersections making travel stressful and risky.

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.

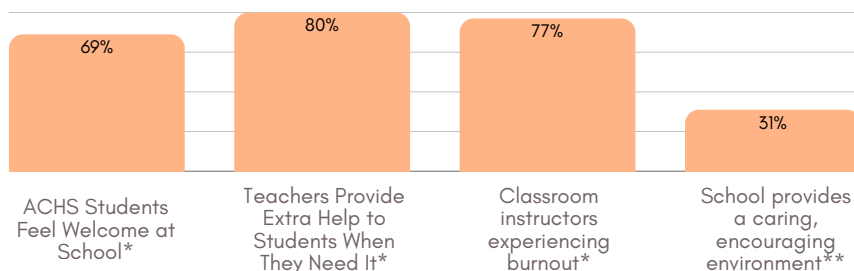
WHY IT MATTERS

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

Youth Perspectives on:

School Conditions that Support Student Wellbeing



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, lunch services, scheduling, maintenance, and campus logistics. While some students appreciate improvements like newer buildings, many describe environments that feel overstimulating, inconvenient, or in need of attention.

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 them create the foundation for learning. When students are uncomfortable, rushed, or navigating logistical barriers, their ability to focus, connect, and succeed is compromised.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Although students are allotted **30 minutes** for lunch, a 2024 *Theogony* article reported that cafeteria procedures, including scanning into the cafeteria with a Minga student ID, waiting in line for food, and the time it takes to walk to and from class, leave students with only **19 minutes** to actually eat.

WHAT YOUTH WANT

20+ mentions

Maintenance & Custodial Services

"Bathrooms are always open and clean."

"Recycling at school."

A school environment that is consistently clean, safe, and well-maintained, where bathrooms are sanitary, stocked, and accessible and classrooms and common areas are free of trash and pests.

50+ mentions

Physical Conditions & Infrastructure

"Less crowded hallways."

"Free and accessible student parking."

"Having a separate room for prayer (Muslims)."

A school environment that is spacious, clean, and welcoming, featuring inclusive spaces for all students, and enough affordable parking for students who drive.

20+ mentions

School Bus Transit & Intercampus Transportation

"One connected campus - transportation issues solved."

Reliable transportation where drivers are valued, campuses are connected safely and efficiently, and students don't lose learning time to long, late, or unnecessary commutes.

130+ mentions

School Lunch Services

"Longer lunches"

High-quality, nutritious, and culturally inclusive meals with adequate time to eat.

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

45+ mentions

Maintenance & Custodial Services

"Bathrooms are disgusting."

Concerns about cleanliness and upkeep, especially in restrooms. Missing supplies, closed bathrooms, and general maintenance issues were cited as everyday frustrations.

40+ mentions

Physical Conditions & Infrastructure

"It's super overwhelming and overstimulating. The hallways are so packed in."

Crowded hallways, limited space, uncomfortable furnishings, and inconsistent temperature control. While some praise newer buildings, many say current conditions can feel overwhelming and overstimulating.

45+ mentions

School Bus Transit & Intercampus Transportation

"The campus switching is awful and takes so long."

"I am always late because of school buses"

The two-campus high school model creates logistical challenges for students. The back-and-forth between campuses can be disruptive, especially for students with disabilities. Late, limited, or crowded buses contribute to missed instructional time and reduced opportunities for field trips.

95+ mentions

School Lunch Services

"Lack of lunch and learn = lack of equity"

Food quality, variety, and timing could be improved. Short lunch periods leave little time to eat, connect with teachers, or recharge.



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.



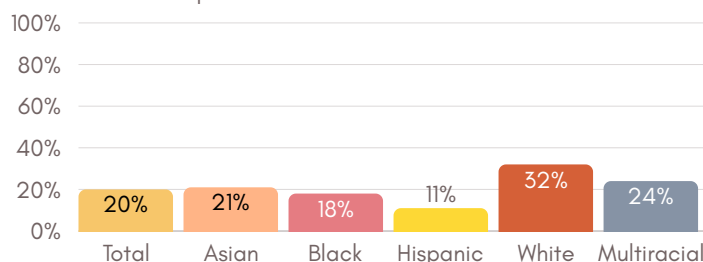
WHY IT MATTERS

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.

Youth Perspectives on:

Student Wellbeing & Support Services



Overview

This subtheme, emerging over 300 times during 94 listening sessions, 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.

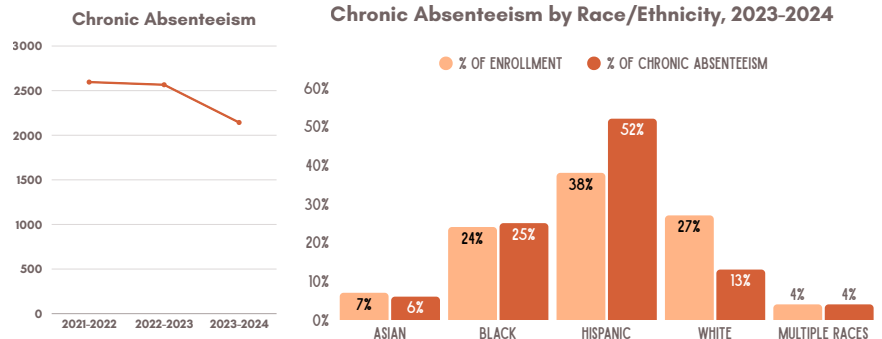
80%

of youth surveyed (n=1,125) rated this issue as somewhat or extremely important

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 THE DATA SAY



*Source: Virginia Department of Education, Alexandria City Public Schools Quality Profile

WHAT YOUTH WANT

30+ mentions

"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."

160+ mentions

"A nap class."

"Lighter workloads."

"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."

Mental Health and Emotional Support

- Easy access to confidential, culturally responsive mental health care
- A school culture that normalizes mental health support
- Strong, trusting relationships with school counselors, social workers, and supportive adults

Workload Balance & Restorative School Schedules

- School schedules that allow for meaningful breaks, time outdoors, and physical activity
- Balanced workloads and academic expectations that support both learning and wellbeing

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

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."

"Counselor making it seem like we are stupid."

Mental Health and Emotional Support

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.

80+ mentions

"Not enough breaks in school."

"A lot of time sitting in class instead of going outside."

"There is too much pressure and expectation on students."

Workload Balance & School Schedules

Feeling chronically overwhelmed, stressed, and fatigued by long school days, short passing periods, early start times, high expectations, and heavy homework loads.

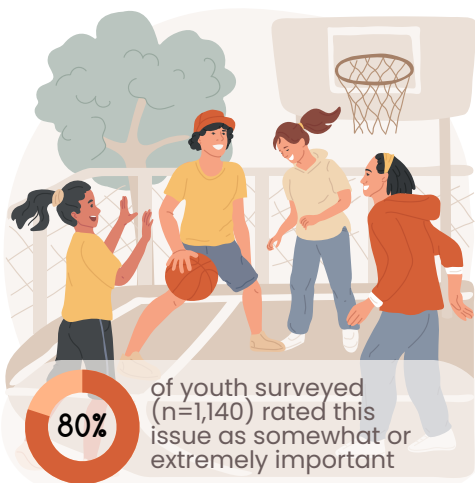


Youth Perspectives on:

Mental, Physical, & Behavioral Health

Overview

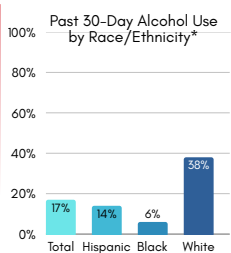
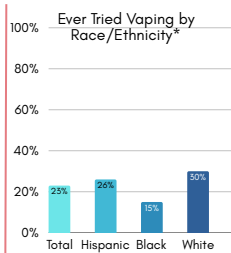
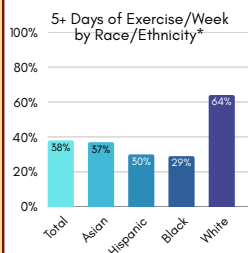
This theme explores how youth experience and envision their physical, emotional, and behavioral health. Students shared their perspectives on access to mental health care, opportunities for physical activity, prevention and intervention around substance use, and support for healthy relationships during 94 listening sessions. Their 325+ responses reflect a desire for holistic 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.



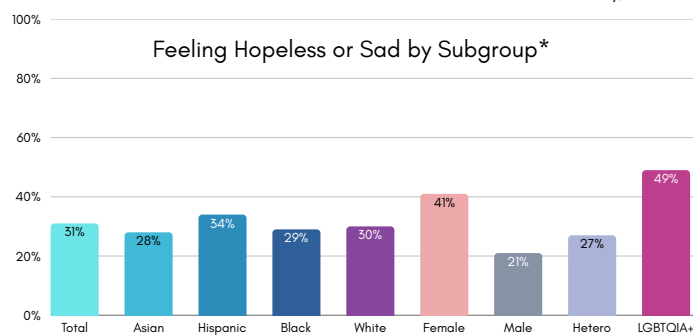
WHY IT MATTERS

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.

WHAT THE DATA SAY



*Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023



WHAT YOUTH WANT

30+ mentions

"Normalize mental health help/therapy"

Mental Health Access & Supports

Free and confidential access to mental health professionals, both in and out of school

20+ mentions

"Free and inclusive youth sports"

Physical Activity & Recreation

Recreational spaces and sports programs that are inclusive, clean, and well-funded

20+ mentions

"100K for free rehab centers"

Substance Use Prevention

A drug- and alcohol-free environment supported by prevention, education, and treatment services

"No drugs and vape pens"

130+ mentions

"A support group for troubled teens"

Relationships, Sexual Health, and Risk Behaviors

Comprehensive, mandatory sex education and greater support in navigating healthy relationships

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

40+ mentions

"Not enough therapy."

Mental Health Access & Supports

Limited availability of mental health services, with ongoing stigma around seeking help

50+ mentions

"Expensive sports."

Physical Activity & Recreation

Recreational facilities that are outdated, inaccessible, or cost-prohibitive

45+ mentions

"Kids vaping in the bathrooms."

Substance Use

High rates of vaping and marijuana use in schools

95+ mentions

"Mandatory sex ed."

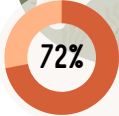
Relationships, Sexual Health, & Risk Behaviors

Inconsistent or insufficient sexual health education

Youth Perspectives on: Environmental Protection & Climate Change



Overview



72% of youth surveyed (n=1,125) rated this issue as somewhat or extremely important

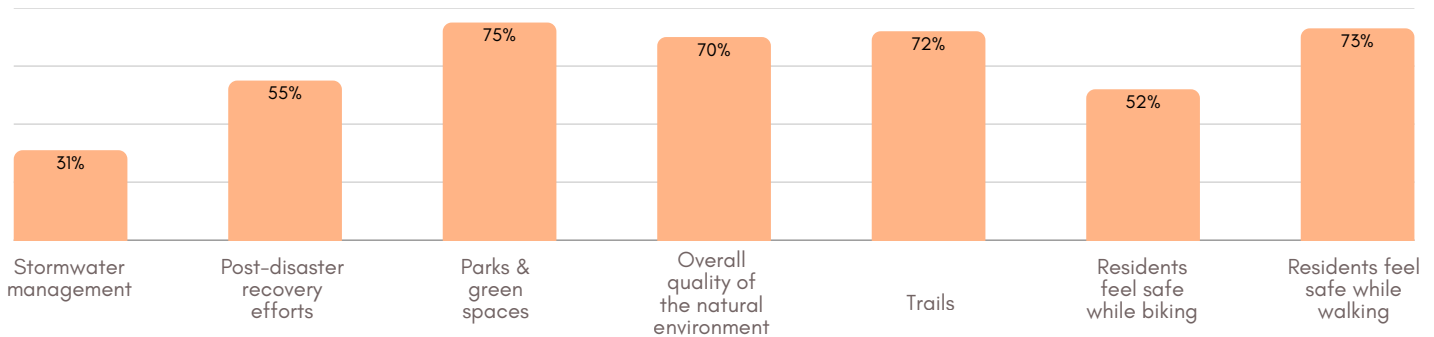
This theme, emerging 195 times, captures youth aspirations for a more sustainable, climate-resilient Alexandria. Student feedback emphasizes the importance of ecological health, green infrastructure, and shared responsibility for sustainability. They expressed concern about pollution, limited access 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 a critical 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.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Resident Satisfaction with Public Spaces in Alexandria
Source: 2024 Resident Survey



WHAT YOUTH WANT

75+ mentions

Ecological Health of the City

"Better biking-accessible roads to promote biking."
"More walkable access to everything."
"More open spaces like parks and gardens."

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

55+ mentions

Waste Management

"Clean, stop littering."
"People clean up after themselves."
"Recycling."

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

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

15+ mentions

Ecological Health of the City

"Lack of bike lanes."
"Water quality is bad."
"Not enough open space."
"The climate is very, very important to me."

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

45+ mentions

Waste Management

"Trash everywhere."
"No recycling services (you have to do it yourself)."

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



Youth Perspectives on:

Social Connectedness & Belonging



Overview

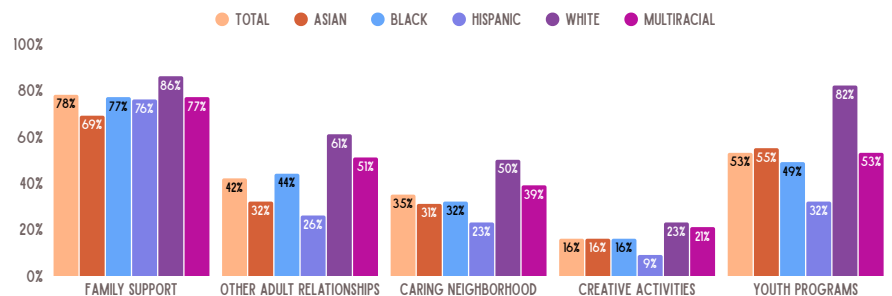
This theme emerged 355+ times during listening sessions and reflects the importance young people place on connection, belonging, and access to supportive relationships and meaningful activities. Youth consistently emphasized the need for low-barrier afterschool programs, safe spaces to unwind, and strong 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.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Supportive Relationships & Constructive Use of Time Assets, 2025



*Source: Developmental Assets Profile at Alexandria City Public Schools, 2025

WHAT YOUTH WANT

85+ mentions

Constructive Use of Time

"Somewhere I feel included."
 "A lot of community events."
 "Have free time to play sports or spend time with friends."
 "Free school activities."

- 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

120+ mentions

Supportive Relationships & Environments

"More coaches and mentors."
 "More safe community spaces for kids to hang out."
 "A community where disagreeing is okay with people in real life and on the internet."

- 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

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

55+ mentions

Constructive Use of Time

"Fun activities only occur in East Alexandria."
 "Not enough after-school programming."
 "Bus schedule leaves no time for after-school activities."

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

90+ mentions

Relationships & Environments

"I'm struggling making new friends."
 "Kids can't be themselves without getting judged."
 "There are almost no places for kids to hang out with friends."
 "Many kids have depression due to not feeling like having a trusted adult."

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

Youth Perspectives on:

Physical & Psychological Safety



Overview

This theme captures young people's lived experiences and concerns about safety across their schools, neighborhoods, and daily lives. Students shared over 675 times 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.

78%

of youth surveyed (n=1,136) rated this issue as somewhat or extremely important

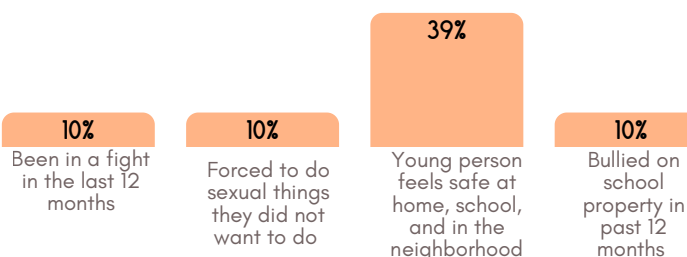
WHY IT MATTERS

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 more than rules and protocols; it requires responsive relationships, equitable systems, and environments that affirm the dignity and humanity of every young person.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Youth Safety Measures

Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Alexandria, 2023



WHAT YOUTH WANT

30+ mentions

Bullying Prevention

"My ideal Alexandria is for bullying to be more of a concern so kids feel safer going to school."

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

115+ mentions

Safe & Walkable Neighborhoods

"No crime."

"Safer crosswalks."

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

75+ mentions

Interpersonal & School-Based Violence Prevention

"More afterschool clubs so kids can be in a community and have a safe space."

"More safe spaces for queer/trans youth."

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

55+ mentions

School Safety & Security

"Security guards fighting with students."

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

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

65+ mentions

Bullying

"Bullying isn't taken seriously."

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

90+ mentions

Neighborhood Safety

"Kids are afraid to go outside (especially at night)."

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

150+ mentions

Interpersonal & School-Based Violence

"People are sexually assaulted in bathrooms and cannot report."

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

80+ mentions

School Safety & Security

"Security guards fighting with students."

"Only one entrance for lunch makes me late and miss food."

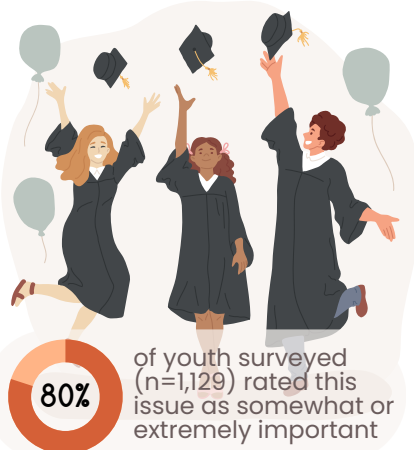
- Mixed feedback on safety protocols; some feel protected, others feel restricted or surveilled
- Frustration with facility issues and single-entry access policies
- Reports of uneven treatment from school security personnel

Youth Perspectives on:

Pathways to College & Careers



Overview



This theme, which emerged roughly 85 times during youth listening sessions, 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.

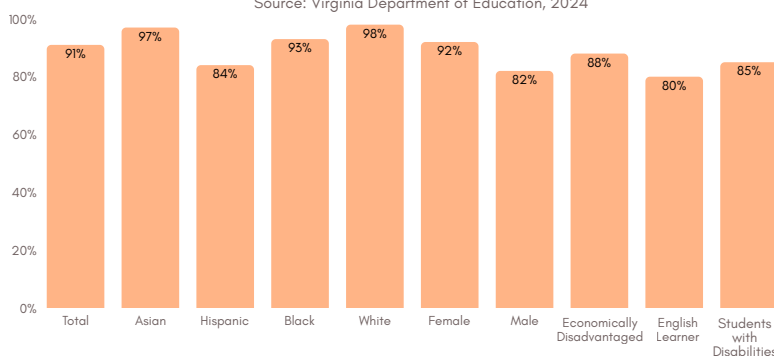
WHY IT MATTERS

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.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Graduation Rates by Subgroups, 2024

Source: Virginia Department of Education, 2024



WHAT YOUTH WANT

50+ mentions

"Make college free; not a lot of people can get into college because of money."

"More chances of scholarships as long as you're passing."

Equity, Access, & Affordability

- Affordable or free college options and robust scholarship access
- Equal opportunity regardless of income, background, or immigration status

10+ mentions

"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."

Guidance & Counseling

- More hands-on support from college and career counselors
- Culturally responsive guidance for first-generation students
- Broader definitions of success
- Exposure to real-world experiences like internships, apprenticeships, and job training

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

20+ mentions

"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."

Financial Barriers

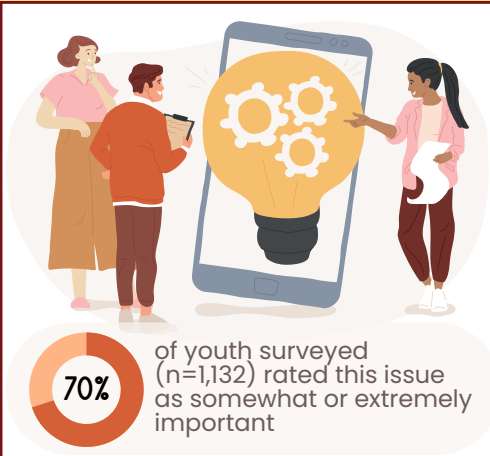
Concerns about the cost of college, limited scholarship access, and a belief that higher education is out of reach without major financial sacrifices.

90+ mentions

"Another important issue is students not being aware of the many resources that we do have. For instance, there are so many certifications available that can help so many different career pathways yet not enough students know about them."

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. They also feel there is a dominant narrative that equates success with college admission, which can stigmatize other valuable career paths.



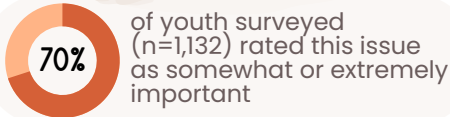
Youth Perspectives on:

Youth Agency, Leadership, & Contribution



Overview

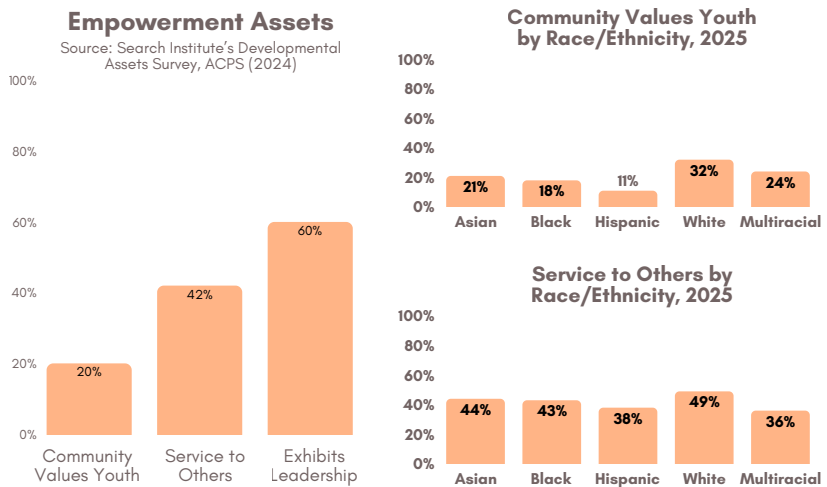
This theme emerged 30 times during youth listening sessions and explores how young people perceive their roles as changemakers and decision-makers in their schools and communities. While students expressed a strong desire to lead, share ideas, and contribute meaningfully, many also described barriers, such as not feeling heard, limited follow-through, and a lack of opportunities to participate in civic life.



WHY IT MATTERS

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.

WHAT THE DATA SAY



WHAT YOUTH WANT

15+ mentions

"More chances for teens to have a voice in the community."
"I wish there was more channels for youth to speak about their opinions."
"Everyone feels like they matter."

Not Feeling Valued or Heard

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

5+ mentions

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

Volunteer or Service Opportunities

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

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

Not Feeling Valued or Heard

- 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.

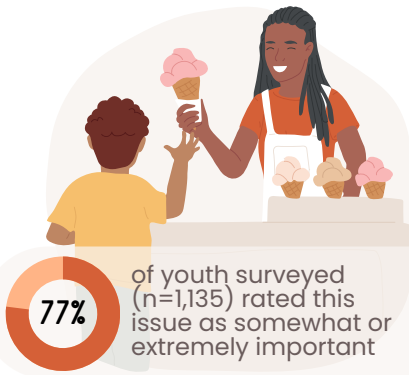
10+ mentions

"We are looked down on."
"Lack of respect from adults."
"We don't have enough power."
"Youth don't feel like they matter."
"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."

Youth Perspectives on: Youth Employment



Overview



Employment came up just over 30 times during listening sessions with youth. 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.

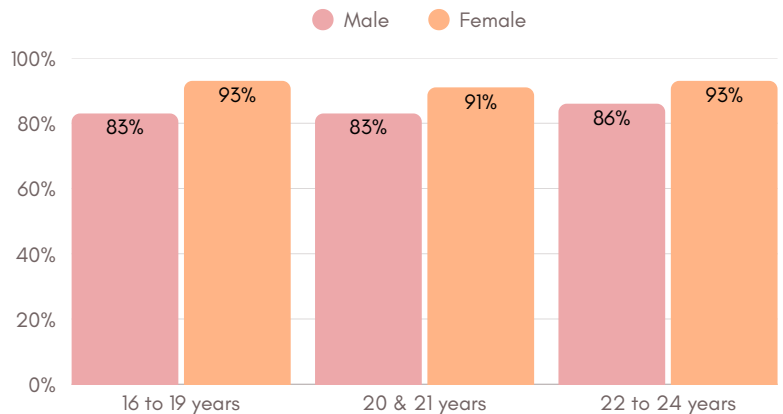
WHY IT MATTERS

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.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

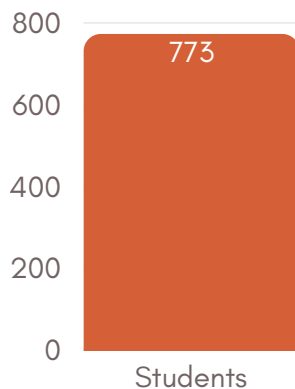
Employment Rate among Labor Force Participants by Gender and Age (16-24)

Source: American Community Survey, 2022 5-Year Estimates



ACPS Students Earning One or More Career & Technical Education Credential

Source: VA Department of Education, 2023-2024



WHAT YOUTH WANT

20+ mentions

Access & Opportunities

"There needs to be way way more job opportunities and more jobs for kids 13+."

- Access to jobs that are welcoming to teens
- 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
- Opportunities that prepare them for long-term career success

2 mentions

Quality & Pay

"Better pay for students."

- Fair wages that reflect the value of youth labor

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

5+ mentions

Access & Opportunities

"Less jobs for 14- and 15-year-olds."

"Not getting job opportunities due to lack of history or experience."

- Limited access due to limited experience and age-based restrictions that exclude motivated younger teens.
- Not knowing how to get started or where to find available positions.

1 mention

Quality & Pay

"Not a lot of high paying jobs for kids."

- Low compensation – even when jobs are available, youth often feel wages are too low to make a meaningful impact.

Youth Perspectives on:

Responsive & Just Government



Overview

This theme captures students' desire for a government and school system that is fair, transparent, and accountable. Youth expressed over 245 times during listening sessions the need for equitable investment across communities, more diverse and inclusive representation, and institutions that take real action to address discrimination and systemic injustice.

80% of youth surveyed (n=1,127) rated this issue as somewhat or extremely important

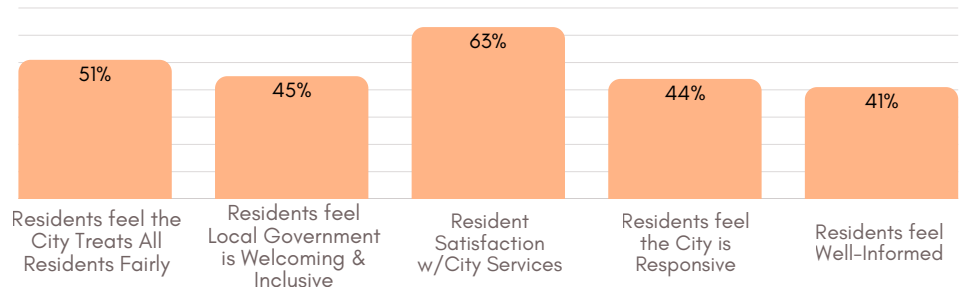
WHY IT MATTERS

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

Resident Satisfaction with Government Services in Alexandria

Source: 2024 Resident Survey



WHAT YOUTH WANT

25+ mentions

Responsive & Effective Government

"Better relationship between community and officials"

- Equitable investment in schools, parks, transportation, and public services across all neighborhoods
- A local government that listens to youth and takes visible action based on feedback
- Strong protections for the civil rights of all people

15+ mentions

Economic Growth & Development

"More entertainment facilities"

- More local businesses, entertainment, modern amenities, and spaces that bring communities together

100+ mentions

Race & Social Equity

"My 'perfect' community is a community where everyone is treated equally and has a equal opportunity in almost everything"

- Systems that actively work to eliminate discrimination, prejudice, and systemic inequities
- Accessible, youth-friendly communities

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

10+ mentions

Government Responsiveness & Efficiency

"Not enough public-school funding."

- Investment is uneven, with some neighborhoods, particularly in West Alexandria, feeling underfunded or overlooked
- Trust in institutions is low, with concerns about fairness, transparency, and follow-through

5+ mentions

Economic Growth & Development

"Not enough renovation and new buildings."

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

85+ mentions

Discrimination, Prejudice, & Systemic Inequities

"I have experienced people being racist to me and it's not fun."

- Discrimination is common, with students reporting personal and systemic experiences of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia
- Representation is lacking, with youth feeling excluded from leadership and decision-making spaces

Resources youth are in need of

During 94 "Listening Sessions," over 1,140 youth in Alexandria were asked to describe their "ideal" community. The following items were included in their responses:



FOOD

- "Free food" (repeated many times)
- "Cheaper groceries"
- "Free snacks (during class)"
- "Free food @ Bradlee for students"
- "Culturally inclusive foods (Halal)"



FEMININE & HYGIENE PRODUCTS

- "Feminine products in the bathrooms"
- "Free feminine products"
- "Free hygiene products for all"
- "More access to hygiene stuff"
- "...some stuff for the girls like pads in the bathroom or perfume or lotion."



SPORTS & RECREATION

- "Free sports equipment"
- "Easier access to sports equipment"
- "More basketballs in the rec"
- "I would want to have a big soccer field to play soccer"
- "Free and inclusive youth sports"



CLOTHING & SHOES

- "Accessible clothing"
- "Clothing"
- "Free shoes" (mentioned multiple times)
- "More resources for people in lower income households, such as food and clothing"



SCHOOL SUPPLIES

- "Free student supplies"
- "Give us school supplies for free"
- "Free supplies"
- "More updated books"



TECHNOLOGY & LEARNING TOOLS

- "Good connection for studying (wifi)"
- "Nicer school laptops"
- "Better school equipment"
- "Free scooters for student use"



DONATION IDEAS

- **Clothing:** new or gently used clothes, shoes, coats
- **Hygiene products:** pads, tampons, deodorant, soap, shampoo, toothpaste, lotion
- **Food:** non-perishable groceries, snacks, culturally inclusive foods (e.g., Halal options)
- **School supplies:** notebooks, pencils, backpacks, calculators, art supplies, books
- **Sports & recreation:** soccer balls, basketballs, cleats, general sports gear
- **Technology:** laptops, tablets, Wi-Fi hotspots, calculators, chargers