

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES: POTENTIAL STEPS TO REDUCING THE RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN MADISON, WISCONSIN



PICK UP THE MIC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

As a social determinant of health, education promotes health by increasing income, employment opportunities, and social support (What Works for Health, n.d.). Although education can lead to health, education opportunity and achievement are not distributed equitably across Wisconsin students, especially between non-Hispanic white students and Black or African American students. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Wisconsin has one of the greatest racial achievement gaps in the nation (Flanders, 2020). The state trends are also reflected in the Madison Metropolitan School District, where white students were more likely to graduate within four years (87.8%) compared to African American students (65.6%) in the 2018–2019 school year. Although racial achievement and opportunity gaps persist in Madison, the Madison Metropolitan School District's renewed shift in equity focus provides a unique opportunity to directly engage with African American students and facilitate meaningful change.

To elevate new voices in the conversation about eliminating racial disparities in education, Lussier Community Education Center and UW–Madison School of Medicine and Public Health interviewed 14 African American students from the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD). The students participated in Zoom interviews between December 2020 and March 2021, where they discussed topics including the achievement gap, standardized testing, diverse teachers in school, code switching, their school experiences, and potential solutions to addressing the achievement gap. The interviews were used in two ways: First, they were promoted in the *Pick Up the Mic Podcast*, which elevates student voices, identifies key issues related to the achievement gap, and discusses potential solutions. Second, key themes in the interviews were retrieved using MAXQDA and combined with potential evidence-based solutions. The purpose of this report is to highlight the key interview themes and complement the themes with research about the achievement gap. In turn, the report can elevate African American student voices and explore potential student-identified solutions to addressing the racial achievement and opportunity gaps in the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD). Limitations of the study include a small sample size, selection effects from Zoom interviews, having only one coder, and non-standardized interview questions. All activities outlined in this report were funded through the Minority Health Grant, which supports nonprofit organizations that serve communities of color to eliminate health disparities, achieve health equity and improve health across the lifespan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Findings

The findings reflect key themes identified through conversations with students and proposed strategies to address the racial achievement gap in Madison. When describing the racial achievement gap, the students framed differences in graduation rates between white students and African American students as a problem of inequitable access to opportunities and resources that emerges over the course of a student's academic career. Respondents also critiqued the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), noting that the district does have an adequate focus on the achievement and opportunity gaps.

When discussing positive experiences that may buffer against the achievement gap, students highlighted teacher characteristics including an understanding of African American student backgrounds, supporting passion for a subject, checking in regularly with struggling students, and facilitating a welcoming environment. When discussing negative experiences that may relate to the achievement gap, students mentioned both teacher and student interactions. Students reported negative teacher interactions including not helping students who struggle in school, misusing disciplinary practices, and feeling uncomfortable in discussions about African American history. Peer-related negative experiences included being pushed to act "more white" or "more Black" and discussing race in class. These negative experiences have important implications about how African American students build positive identities in school and engage in class, which can lead to achievement outcomes.

Students highlighted four potential strategies to addressing the achievement gap, including:

1. Provide ongoing diversity training and support for teachers to maximize positive relationships with African American students.
2. Develop innovative models to recruit and retain teachers of color.
3. Provide teen-centric safe spaces for African American teens
4. Include and represent students that would be most impacted by changes in the district, including students of color and students that are struggling in school.

For any proposed strategies that the district may incorporate, consistent evaluation to monitor progress is essential. Evaluation of programs should start early and involve all youth that are impacted by the program, especially struggling students. The community and district can collaborate on ways to involve youth in future evaluation efforts.

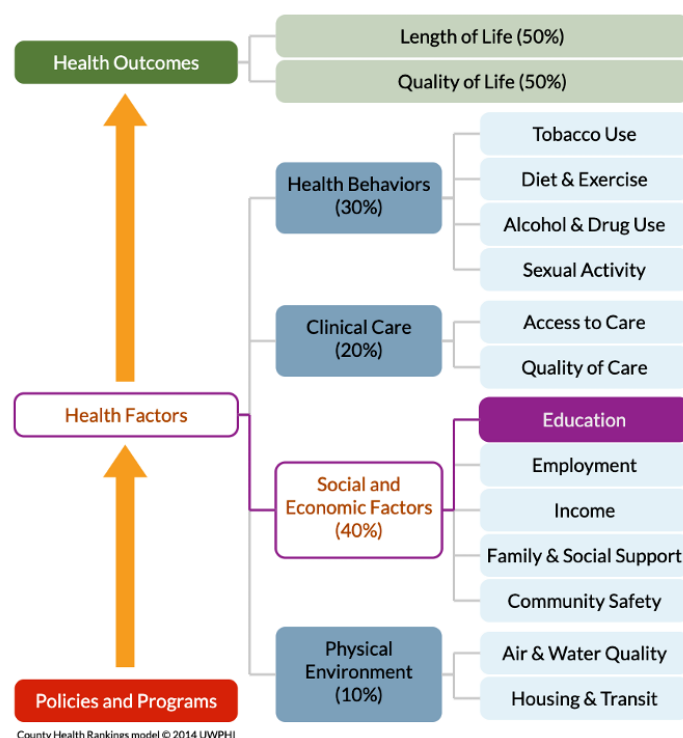
BACKGROUND

Education and Health

School systems are important touchstones for building healthy youth and families. Schools provide students opportunities for socio-emotional development, learning, and future job success (What Works for Health, n.d.). As shown in the County Rankings Model in **Figure 1**, education is an important social and economic factor that contributes to health outcomes. Education relates to health in multiple direct and indirect ways. First, education can directly build student knowledge about health. School curriculum can also encourage kids to become health literate, where they can consume health information outside of the health class. Additionally, education can facilitate healthy choices by bolstering other health-related factors including increasing income, employment opportunities, health insurance opportunities, and social support (What Works for Health, n.d.). Education may even impact healthcare costs. For example, the American Academy of Family Physicians (2015), found a strong correlation between reducing spending in education and increased spending in healthcare costs. Finally, the benefits of education for parents have a positive influence on kids. Parents who are more educated have healthier and better educated children (What Works for Health, n.d.). School systems provide important opportunities to influence student and family health.

Figure 1. *County Health Rankings Model*

Note. The figure highlights social determinants of health including education as major contributors to health outcomes.



BACKGROUND

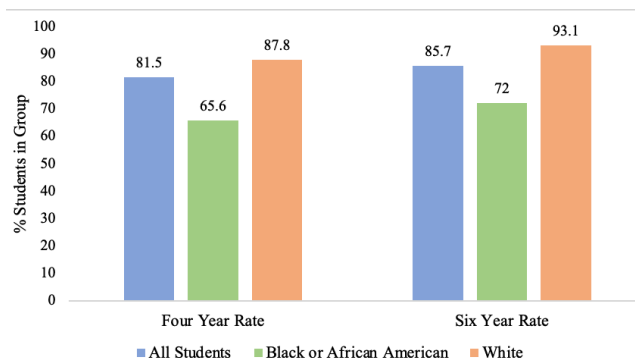
Achievement Gap in Madison

Although education is an important factor in promoting health, education is not distributed equitably across Wisconsin students. Academic achievement gaps exist across any difference in academic achievement between two groups of students, and exist across race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability status. Gaps in academic achievement between white students and African American students start at younger ages and persist across grade levels (The Nation's Report Card, 2020). The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2019) operationalizes achievement gaps through proficiency in English reading, proficiency in math, and graduation completion rates. Among the most prominent gap nationally is the difference in achievement between non-Hispanic white students and Black or African American students in Wisconsin, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Flanders, 2020). The differences persist through graduation rates, where African American students are more likely to not graduate from high school on time compared to any other race and ethnicity in Wisconsin (Kids Count, 2021).

The Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) is one example of a school district in Wisconsin that has a persistent racial achievement gap between African American students and white students, as shown through the District Report Card (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2019). For example, when considering English achievement for all grades across the district in the 2018–2019 school year, non-Hispanic white students were **4.3 times** more likely to score proficient compared to African American students and **16.0 times** more likely to score advanced in English. African American students were more likely to have below basic achievement compared to white students. White students were also more likely to be proficient and advanced in Math compared to African American students. Finally, as shown in **Figure 2**, white students in the district were more likely to graduate within four years compared to African American students in the district.

Figure 2. Madison Metropolitan School District Graduation Rates 2017–2018

Note. Data retrieved from the Madison Metropolitan School District's "Report Card" through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.



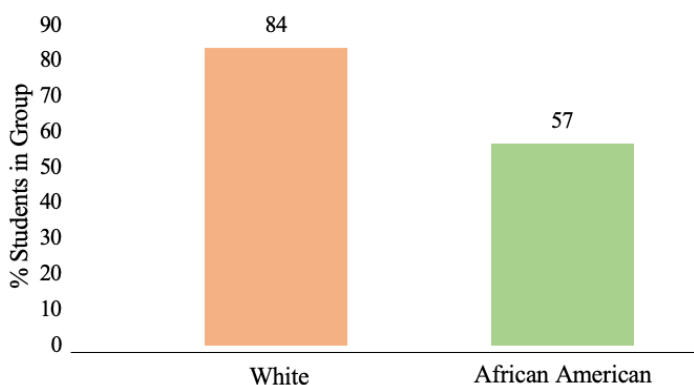
BACKGROUND

Opportunity Gaps and Efforts

Achievement gaps are the result of inequitably distributed opportunities and resources between students, also known as opportunity gaps. Similar to achievement, academic opportunities are not equitably distributed between white students and African American students. Differences in opportunities can include discipline policies, attendance rates (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, 2010), access to higher-level classes such as Honors or AP classes (Girard, 2019), and access to teachers of color (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2020). For example, as shown in **Figure 3**, white students in MMSD are more likely to attend at least 90% of classes compared to African American MMSD students.

Figure 3. *Percent of Students in Madison Metropolitan School District that Attended at least 90% of Classes in 2018-2019.*

Note. Data retrieved from MMSD's Strategic Plan Report



MMSD recognizes the connection between opportunity and achievement as shown in their recent shifts to incorporate racial equity in Madison schools. For example, in 2020 the district released a new strategic framework which highlights closing gaps, especially between white and African American students (Madison Metropolitan School District, 2020). They provide annual reports on achievement and opportunity gap measures, including participation in advanced coursework and graduation rates. To boost recruitment and retention of teachers of color, the district Board of Education passed an amendment to their layoff guidelines (Girard, 2021b). Finally, changes in leadership in the district provide opportunities for a renewed focus on equity in education. In 2020, Dr. Carlton Jenkins became the new Superintendent, with a commitment to promoting racial equity in the district. The School Board of Education also added two student representatives to involve student voices in decision making (Madison Metropolitan School District, n.d.). Although racial achievement and opportunity gaps persist in MMSD, the current context is a unique opportunity to facilitate meaningful change in the district.

BACKGROUND

Purpose

Shifts to promote equity in MMSD requires effective student engagement. However, MMSD African American student perspectives about the achievement gap and solutions have been limited. Seeing a need to elevate African American student voices, the Lussier Community Education Center and the UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health partnered to bring new voices into the conversation about how to eliminate racial disparities in education through student interviews. The student interviews are used in two ways: First, they provided content for the *Pick Up the Mic Podcast*, which discusses key issues related to the achievement gap and potential solutions by engaging students and community members. Second, the student interviews were used in a study which analyzed key themes using MAXQDA and combined with potential evidence-based solutions. The purpose of this report is to outline the findings from the analysis of the student interviews. Both the podcast and the study activities are funded through the Minority Health Grant, which supports nonprofit organizations that serve communities of color to eliminate health disparities, achieve health equity and improve health across the lifespan (Wisconsin Department of Health Services, 2021).



Alignment of Goals

The inclusion of African American student perspectives through the podcast and study aligns with the strategic framework goals of the district. First, the activities highlight how the experiences of African American youth may contribute to excelling in school, which complements the district's third strategic plan goal. Additionally, the student discussions explore ways to improve these experiences in African American MMSD youth. Finally, the podcast and study goals align with Black Excellence's call to center the voices, ideas, and experiences of African American youth (Black Excellence, 2019). Although the podcast and study activities occurred outside of the district, the efforts are related to the shifts seen in MMSD.

BACKGROUND

Study Questions

Given the context of the project, the purpose of this report is to outline the key themes from African American MMSD student interviews and explore potential student-identified solutions to addressing the achievement gap in Madison. The main questions of the study were:

- What may contribute to the racial achievement gap in Madison?
- What potential solutions may be available to address it?

More specifically, the study explored:

- **RQ1: How did African American MMSD students talk about the achievement gap?**
- **RQ2: What did the youth identify as positive aspects to their experiences? What exists in the district that is positive to their experiences?**
- **RQ3: What did the youth identify as challenges to their experiences? What currently exists in the district that takes away from their experiences?**
- **RQ4: What potential solutions were identified explicitly by the students?**

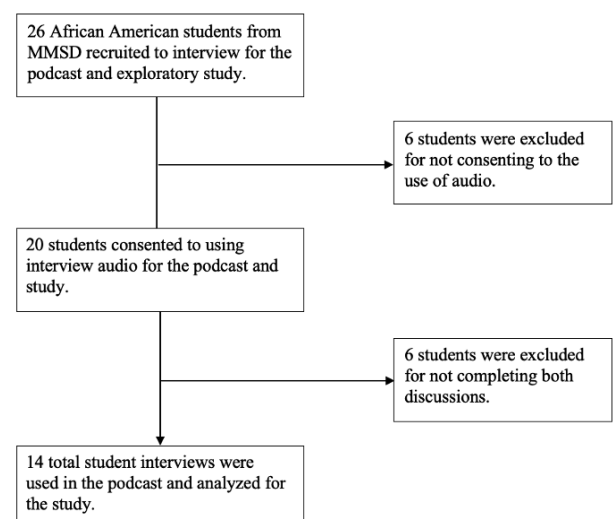
METHODS

Recruitment

High school juniors and seniors from Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) were interviewed to understand the African American student experiences in Madison and potential solutions to addressing the achievement gap. The students were recruited through distributing flyers in schools within MMSD and the local Black Chamber of Commerce. Twenty-six students were recruited, and fourteen students successfully submitted consent forms and completed the full interviews. **Figure 4** outlines the number of students excluded from each step in the interview process and reasons.

Figure 4. Student Exclusion at Each Step in Study

Note: The figure describes how many students were removed from the study throughout recruitment, interview, and analysis.



METHODS

Interviews

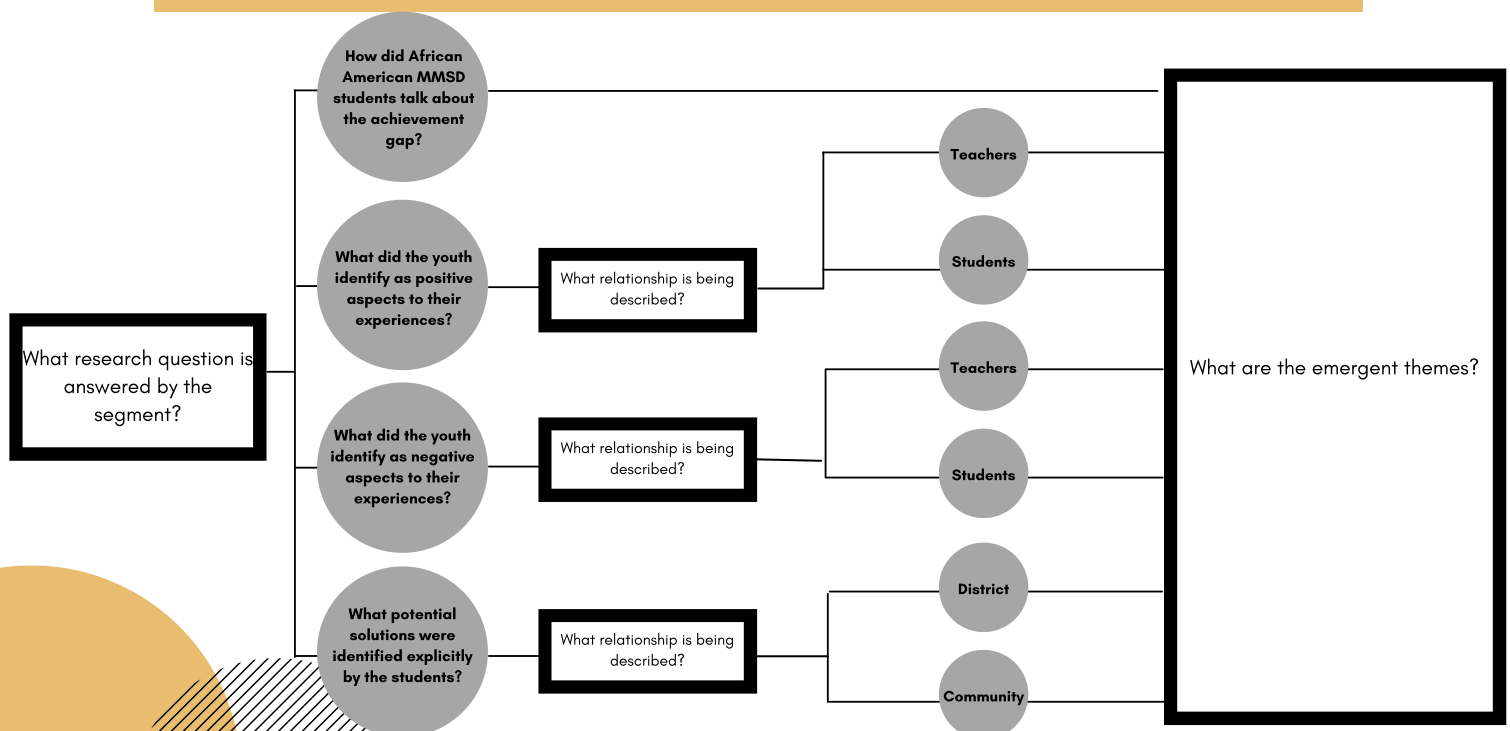
Students participated in two one-hour, semi-structured interviews over Zoom. Interviews were conducted between December 2020 and March 2021. The first interview discussed the student perception of the achievement gap, standardized testing, and the impact of having a teacher of color in school. The second interview asked questions about code switching, school experiences, and potential solutions to addressing the achievement gap in Madison. The students were paid for their full participation in the interviews.

Analysis

The full interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed by one coder using MAXQDA. The interviews were coded for emergent themes. **Figure 5** outlines the decision-making scheme to code segments. Segments were first categorized based on what research question was answered by the segment. If the segment highlighted how the students talked about the achievement gap generally (RQ1), then emergent themes were outlined. Otherwise, the segments were coded by relationships, then emergent themes. School relationships are essential to student experiences, including African American students (Briggs, 2018). Understanding the content of relationships that make an experience positive or negative may add insight into potential solutions in the district. In addition to relationship-specific coded themes, general topics that were discussed were coded.

Figure 5. *Coding Scheme for Qualitative Analysis*

Note: The figure describes how segments were coded in the interviews with 14 MMSD students.



RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Demographics

A total of 613 segments were coded in MAXQDA across 16 interviews. Fourteen African American juniors and seniors in MMSD participated in the study. **Table 1** outlines the number of students represented in each school in the Madison Metropolitan School District. **Table 2** outlines the number of students represented in each grade level. Madison East and Madison West were strongly represented compared to other schools in the district. The following sections are organized by the study research questions.

Table 1. *Participant Categories by School*

School	N	%
Capital High	0	0.0
LaFollete	2	14.3
Madison East	4	28.6
Madison West	6	42.9
Memorial High	0	0.0
Shabazz	1	7.1
Other	1	7.1
Total	14	100.0

Table 2. *Participant Categories by Grade*

Grade	N	%
Junior	7	50.0
Senior	7	50.0
Total	14	100.0

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

RQ1: Describing the Achievement Gap

About 8.3% of coded responses were general statements about the achievement gap. Three main themes emerged when the students discussed the racial achievement gap broadly. First, students framed the differences in graduation rates between white and African American students as a result of opportunity gaps. While some students explicitly stated they prefer the term “opportunity gap” compared to “achievement gap,” other students described a problem of inequitable access to opportunities and resources:

I feel like.. when we're not being offered resources that can help us succeed then it's not exactly an achievement gap. In the past we've always been a group that has been oppressed so we haven't been offered these resources that can potentially get us to the same point as white students in this case. So I feel like to me it's more of we haven't been offered these opportunities to be successful, whereas we've just..we call it an achievement gap now because it seems like we're offered the same opportunities, but I still feel like we're not.

Opportunities and resources that the students felt were not equitably distributed included awareness of the availability of resources, having experiences that are represented in standardized tests, and money to use school resources:

Yeah [schools reaching out to families] is a big factor, like resources – a lot of times even though they are offered, Black students struggle to find ways to be able to pay for things that would help them succeed in school.. I know schools offer [tutoring], but oftentimes even students of color aren't aware or Black students aren't aware of these opportunities where they can apply to have a tutor or just things like that.

The second theme that emerged when describing the achievement gap is that the outcomes build over the course of a students’ academic career, starting in elementary school:

I think I've been hearing about [the achievement gap] on and off since kindergarten when they had the ‘No Child Left Behind’ Act and I remember a lot of the white students left the elementary school that I was in..so I think it's really interesting just to see how although it's supposed to not have people get left behind and this big education I don't know how much has really changed.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The students' observations are consistent with research that shows gaps in achievement as early as 4th grade (The Nation's Report Card, 2020). Understanding the achievement gap as something that builds over time is also related to the first theme, where the continued inequitable distribution of opportunities and resources compounds into achievement differences in high school:

I feel like when it keeps going it builds it up so by the time we got to high school it was already...bad because then stuff in high school goes even faster. Everything that wasn't learned or given special attention to in middle school you just don't have.

Finally, students expressed that the Madison Metropolitan School District does not have an adequate focus on the racial achievement and opportunity gaps. For example, one student noted that the achievement gap is “an issue that the district hasn't really been up to date with, they don't really talk about it as they should.” Specifically, students commented that the district is not receptive to strategies that would make their experiences more positive, including recruiting and retaining teachers of color. One student noted that community members “have been telling [the district] forever that's what they want, but it's not being reciprocated”. Another noted, “Will I see it? Probably not while I'm still in high school. Maybe in college?” Overall, the students prefer to look at achievement gaps not as individual phenomena, but as a symptom of differential access to opportunities. Additionally, they feel that the district could do more to address the achievement and opportunity gaps.

RQ2: Positive Experiences

About 10.6% of the coded segments highlighted positive experiences and resources in the Madison Metropolitan School District. Most coded positive experiences mentioned by students related to teacher-student relationships (67.7%). Multiple themes emerged that highlighted the important aspects of positive teacher-student relationships. Students reported having positive experiences with teachers who understood them and supported passion for a subject:

My first three years in English were super cool, I love my English class. I had three guy English teachers, they're really cool, they got us really engaged in the media part and the news part...

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

I took music classes consistently when I was at West and my music teacher.., he really got me through my years at West. He is the most amazing person, he really understood me....I would come into his class, and.. I told him "I can't today. I'm gonna go sit in the closet and I'm just gonna sit". And he was like "Totally got you, I completely understand" 'Cause I kind of explained to him and he was like "I'm just so sorry. I will mention that to somebody so that doesn't happen again". And I really really appreciated that, and he was just always there for me.

Students also identified positive experiences with teachers who checked in regularly with struggling students and facilitated a welcoming environment in the classroom:

With the way she teaches she made sure I was getting my missing work in and all that and she would email me if I didn't have my camera on or something like that. So she was very caring and she knew how to talk with students and I appreciate that.

Just going to her class I felt like I could say what I was feeling, like I could open up. She just made it such an open, safe place for me to say what I was feeling. And I have never met her in person but she has to be one of my favorite teachers.

When considering larger themes associated with positive teacher experiences, students emphasized the importance of understanding and in general conversations about having teachers of color. Many students noted that positive experiences were easier when the teacher was a teacher of color, because teachers of color are more likely to understand their background and empathize with them:

I feel far more comfortable in the class with teachers of color where I feel like they can relate to my experiences, and they can understand what I might be going through as a student and as a person in general when in class. 'Cause I know that you know teachers of color have been in our position and they know what happens in our schools.

I feel like when the teacher's Black you already have that cultural connection and you already relate and like I don't have to prove to you that I'm a smart Black kid, I just have to prove to you that I'm smart.

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The student responses are consistent with research that shows students are better engaged with teachers that are approachable, easy to relate to, and receptive to student needs. Having teachers of color increases the opportunity for those connections and engagement, which may translate to higher achievement for students of color (Briggs, 2018; Carver-Thomas, 2018).

Although there were not enough coded segments to develop content-related themes, students highlighted other factors that were important contributions to their positive experiences. These factors included positive relationships with other staff members, their friendships, school programs, and overall school climate. Future conversations with youth should learn about the factors in these relationships that drive positive experiences for African American students in MMSD to leverage in solutions to addressing the racial achievement gap.

RQ3: Negative Experiences

Negative experiences included about 24.7% of the coded segments. Since the negative experiences were more prevalent, a code interaction map was created to visualize the nuanced relationships between the negative teacher experiences, student experiences, and larger themes. The full map can be found in **Figure 6** on the next page.

Negative Teacher-Student Relationships

Similar to the positive experiences, students most often cited teacher-student relationships in their negative reflections (48.6% of segments) with an array of factors that made those relationships negative. First, students felt that struggling African American students are not getting the educational or emotional support they need from their teachers:

I feel like a lot of teachers don't know how to interact with Black students, especially a disengaged Black student who might have behavioral issues.

I don't think Black students are probably as well prepared. It's not even an equality thing, it's an equity thing. Some students need more support and teachers aren't willing to give that 'cause they think they might be robbing the other kids of other things.

It's really different to see not only how I'm treated as a student [in college preparation classes], but how much more they seem to care about how I'm doing, rather than if you fall behind then they start focusing on the other students.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Figure 6. MAXQDA Code Map of Negative Experiences and Larger Themes

Note. Size of circles indicates the number of segments in the theme. Distance between circles indicates overall association between codes. Blue indicates negative teacher-student relationships, green indicates negative student-student relationships, and orange represents larger themes identified in interviews. Line thickness indicates the frequency that two codes were associated together (minimum of 5 associations within 3 paragraphs). Some codes removed for clarity.



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As shown in **Figure 6**, the first theme that “Students who are struggling need help” was closely related to a second theme, which is the use of punishment in school. Students expressed that discipline in school was not helpful for addressing the underlying problems:

I would be late a lot, and I would miss a lot of periods and because of that I eventually got truancy and to a certain extent truancy becomes like "Oh well if you don't get better then we're going to take you to court and you might get a ticket" and it's just like OK well what is that going to help? I'm having trouble getting to school, you're not offering me anything to help me get to school on time. You're taking school way. You're threatening to suspend me or going to take me to court and give me a ticket. That's not going to help me get to school on time.

I see the habit of white teachers not wanting to deal with the behavior of Black kids, so they just send them out the classroom, so that's another big reason why you don't see our grades as big...You're asking [white students] "Oh what's wrong? What's going on?" On the other hand, you're talking to a Black kid, and you just literally just send them out of the class, don't even try to work with them, just 'cause you might think they're being difficult.

In some cases, students noted blatant negative assumptions or bias made by teachers in school, which may interrelate with needing support and misapplication of discipline:

I had a teacher tell me I wasn't going to graduate because I didn't want to go to a class for a test. I hadn't been at school the whole week and I came to school. We had a test and I didn't want to go to the class and she pulled me in her office to have a conversation with me, and told me that I'm not going to graduate because I didn't want to go to one test.

I did notice if there was a kid that..might have got in trouble or they particularly get in trouble, the staff members, everybody in the hallways pays attention to them more...They already picked out the kids they know that might have something they shouldn't have in the first place. But sometimes it just feels like they're hasslin' them in the first place 'cause most of the time they be cool, they be tryin', they don't really be doing stuff, but they get targeted, and they might have something in that book bag that they're not supposed to have. So that's a big thing that I see a lot.

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The students' observations about the misuse of discipline are not surprising when considering research on the application of discipline policies in school. African American students are more likely to receive disciplinary action that removes them from the classroom compared to white students (Gregory et al., 2010). Additionally, these differences in disciplinary actions may be related to overall racial bias (Riddle and Sinclair, 2019). The sentiments are also consistent with how the students talked about the achievement gap. The students understand the achievement gap as dependent on opportunities in school, and report experiencing differential access to those opportunities in part from how teachers interpret and react to disengagement in class or tardiness.

Figure 6 highlights a close relationship between students that are struggling not getting help, use of punishment, and a larger themes of "Pressure to perform" and "White teachers needing to understand African American students". The students expressed how in addition to being disciplined rather than receiving support for the underlying causes of disengagement, they are expected to do well in school:

A lot of us have a lot going on.. it's more common in African American homes where we have to do a lot more than just go to school and do our homework. A lot of us have to help pay bills, a lot of us have to help provide, a lot of us have to simply provide for ourselves because our parents can't. And so when we have the stress of at home stuff, and we have with stress real world stuff, and then we also have the stress of school, it kind of makes it hard to be a straight-A student, always engaged and in class and focused when you have 1000 different things going through your head.

[S]tuff changes for a lot of students. Things at home get harder, things at school get harder, like she said there's real world problems that you have to worry about now, and stuff is just no longer the same. So while trying to get used to all of these changes, you then have to go to school and worry about if you're gonna get jumped on at lunch, teachers gonna accept your assignment a few minutes late 'cause you're still writing your last sentence, things like that. And then you have adults in school that tell you like "Oh it's not as hard as you make it, if you just do the work, if you just do it you'll help yourself"... I feel like school is very underrated for as bad as it can get. It pushes depression and all type of other things that you don't have any support from. And it's just way harder than people make it seem.

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So it all comes down to understanding what type of person they are and if you don't understand what type of person they are then you really can't help 'em and you probably aren't gonna do much good for them if you just kick them out of the class. So I just feel like it needs to be a better understanding of what type of kids we are before you dismiss us from whatever connotation you might have before.

Overall, when considering the dynamics between teachers and African American students in MMSD, the students reported that (1) They are not receiving enough academic or emotional support, (2) In situations where students are disengaged or struggling, they are more likely to be disciplined instead of supported, (3) which may come from teachers misunderstanding or personal bias, and (4) Students feel additional pressure to perform well despite feeling unsupported.

The feeling of misunderstanding between white teachers and African American students is also highlighted in the final theme, which is learning about African American history. Students reported feeling uncomfortable when discussing race in class, and that their teachers did not elaborate enough on African American history and culture:

The curriculum is not built for us. Going to school, every year you learn something new about white culture. You learn a different part of time, whether it's a different holiday that was made, this is something that has happened. You always learn about something different, but every year we learn about the same small piece of Black history.

I think white teachers..when they're talking about events in Black culture, they need to research not just what you learned in school, not what you learned in college. You need to go and do the research, because there are oftentimes a lot of facts that are buried or misconstrued. So.. it's not even that they're not taking the effort to do it, it's just that they're unaware that it exists, unaware that there is more to this issue than it seems.

The students' comments are consistent with MMSD's student climate survey in 2018, where African American high schoolers were less likely to report feeling their history and culture were reflected in school (39%) compared to white teens (49%) (Madison Metropolitan School District, 2019). One student even noted that **"the most awkward thing about being a Black student having these conversations is when you know more than the teacher on the subject"**.

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In addition to expressing mild discomfort, students talked about how conversations about African American history or racial discourse in the classroom can be harmful, and teachers are not always receptive to their impact:

I think white teachers need to be more compassionate to Black trauma... In one of my history classes, they showed Emmett Till in the casket 'cause they're like "I want you guys to see how serious this was" because you know like kids you know sit there and they make jokes in class. But [the teacher] wants you guys to see how serious it was. And I understand why you're showing those white kids who you're probably making racially insensitive jokes, but for the two Black people that are in the room, it's just like..this is the one place I thought I could get away from this. I think in the heat of the moment they don't think about these things.

My teacher, I really liked her, but I just don't think she was thinking when she did this, and I don't think she meant to make me feel bad, but..we were talking about slavery...I was only Black kid in that whole class, only person of color, and when she started talking about it, everyone in the class turned to look at me like I was gonna know, have personal experience in that or I was gonna feel some type of way. And it made me feel worse that everyone was looking at me, and I think she noticed that, and she started giving this speech about how if you are African American or Black or a person of color or a minority that you should be proud of who you are...and I know she was trying to make me feel better but it didn't make me feel better at all.

Understanding the unintentional impact of discussing race and African American history in class is important for building positive relationships between teachers and students. The negative relationships highlight a disconnect between white teachers and African American students, that are intermixed with curriculum, discipline policies, and academic support. Overall, teachers were a primary relationship discussed in negative experiences and closely interrelated with each other. Acknowledging how teachers currently engage with African American students, especially disengaged or struggling students, may lead to insights on addressing the achievement gap in Madison.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Negative Student-Student Relationships

While experiences with teachers was the primary relationship discussed, students also mentioned how student-student relationships contribute to their negative experiences at school (15.8%). Similar to the teacher-student interactions, many negative peer experiences with occurred when discussing racial topics in the classroom. These experiences happened in predominantly white spaces, where students felt that they needed to speak for the African American community:

I'm mixed so I'm half Black and so I was asked "Well if you're only half Black does that mean you can say it?" or like "What if you're only a quarter Black does that mean?" It's like, I don't have the answers.

I started to feel uncomfortable throughout like Sophomore year 'cause I was the only Black person in the class. I remember this incident Sophomore..it was in English Honors and they were reading a book, reading *The Color Purple* and they just said something.. about slavery and everyone shifted and looked at me. I was like, what do you want, what do you want me to do?...I just felt so uncomfortable.

As shown in **Figure 6**, talking about racial topics in class is closely related to situations where students expressed navigating white fragility or tokenism. The association between these themes may both reflect the general pressure for African American students to represent the African American community while feeling pressure to make white teachers and peers comfortable. Another factor that contributed to negative peer relationships is when participants felt they were “too white” or “too Black” in different spaces:

If you talk a certain way then people would be like "Oh why are you acting white? You're acting white" Or if you're like "I'm gonna hang out with this one kid who just happens to be white" they're like "Oh you're hanging out with the white kids? Like why are you hanging out with the white kids?"...Either way it's a lose-lose if you're in that situation.

In schools either white counterparts or sometimes even Black counterparts would call you whitewashed if you were smart or if you knew things that they didn't know or something like that.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Being pushed to act a certain way is closely related to another troubling theme, where student responses indicate that the perception of what it means to “act Black” tends to be associated negatively compared to “acting white”:

I think every Black person has heard that phrase before. "You're acting white". So like it's as if being "white" means you're smart and you have good grades and you're well educated. And that being Black you're expected to be stupid or, you know?

I would always get called an Oreo and people would be like "Oh my God you're so white" and it's just like, I'm just being myself. And the funny thing was, it was always Black students callin' me that. It was making me question my Blackness and like should I be making good grades? Or should I be acting like this?

Being yourself is considered unprofessional, not as professional as when you're trying to code switch and sound professional to be more appealing to your boss or whoever you want to appear up here, better.

Figure 6 highlights a close association between students reporting being pushed to act more white or African American, negative associations with being or acting African American, and a larger theme of building identity. Research shows that a positive self-identity can help students engage better in school, which may lead to academic success (Leath, Mathews, Harrison, and Chavous, 2019; Wright, 2011). However, in school, African American students are challenged to navigate their identities as smart African American students.:

I feel like it's like me subconsciously wanting to make white teachers more comfortable and it shouldn't be that way, but I feel like a lot of these white teachers say they're scared of Black kids. And it's almost like I have to show you that I'm not one of those Black kids that you should be afraid of.

MMSD African American students seem to face unique barriers to building a positive identity, and therefore potentially greater challenges to academic achievement. Indeed, the students remarked feeling deterred from being in high-achieving classes because of their experiences:

I would skip that class, not because I couldn't do the work or anything like that, it was just because I felt uncomfortable in that classroom... I felt exactly like I was. I was the only Black kid in the class..and it just wasn't an open environment.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

I remember this incident Sophomore..it was in English honor and they were reading a book, reading The Color Purple and they just said something.. about slavery and everyone shifted and looked at me. I was like, what do you want, what do you want me to do?...I just felt so uncomfortable and I just started thinking maybe I shouldn't even take these honors classes just because I don't wanna feel uncomfortable anymore.

When considering the negative experiences, African American students reported feeling challenged to achieve in spaces that they do not feel supported in, do not feel understood in, do not feel comfortable in, and do not feel represented in. In turn, these experiences may contribute to building positive African American identities and accessing high-achieving spaces.

Other themes that were less emphasized from the students included pressure from parents, witnessing teacher dynamics between white teachers and teachers of color, and the notion that white people do not realize that these problems occur. These experiences from students highlight the unique challenges for African American students that should be addressed by MMSD in future equity-promoting efforts.

Limitations

There are multiple limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, recruitment and participation in the study relied on internet connection and school social connections. Therefore, students that participated may not reflect the general African American student population in MMSD. Second, the sample size for the study was 14 students across six schools, which may not generalize to all MMSD students, students of color, and African American students. Third, the interview questions were not standardized across all participants because important themes in the conversations changed. For example, code switching was not included in the original set of questions but became a prominent theme in subsequent interviews. Finally, there was only one formal coder that conducted the analysis, which may impact the interpretation of data. Future explorations of the racial achievement gap should incorporate more people that would be most impacted by the achievement gap including disengaged students, other students of color, teachers, and parents. Future explorations should also use multiple coders to analyze data, standardize questions, and talk with more students to get a holistic view of their experiences and potential solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Background

The purpose of this study is to center African American student voices and highlight potential strategies that can be incorporated into existing district efforts. The experiences outlined in the results reflect a need to maximize positive student experiences and minimize negative experiences that may contribute to the achievement and opportunity gaps. About 17.1% of coded segments were student-identified potential solutions to addressing the achievement gap. The student-identified recommendations align with research about the achievement gap and previous reports, including the Intercultural Development Association's (2021) policy brief and Black Excellence's (2019) recommendations to the school board. Solutions that were less emphasized by the students included parents and students attending spaces for change and focusing on programs across grade levels.

1. Provide ongoing diversity training and support for teachers to increase positive relationships with African American students.

"When there's situations in the media that can be traumatizing to students of color, we need to be sensitive. We need to allow them time to recover from those things. 'Cause white students, they can see these things and continue on with their day... But students of color, these are things that affect them and this can be reasons as to why students of color wouldn't do as well in classes or as well during school academically, because they have all this stress on their plate because they're thinking about things that happened...I have seen a couple of teachers..give like a day to just kind of relax and take a breather for a sec. I understand not all classes can do it because there's such a tight schedule, but I feel like more classes should have that in their schedule to be able to do it...It happens so often that you kinda have to just build in time for that."

The importance of teacher relationships with African American students was a prominent theme in the results. Characteristics that highlighted positive teacher experiences included understanding student background, supporting passion for a subject, checking in regularly with struggling students, and facilitating a welcoming environment in the classroom. Students expressed feeling misunderstood by white teachers and uncomfortable in spaces where they discussed race in the classroom. Consistent with discussing experiences, potential student-identified solutions emphasized the importance of building trust and understanding between white teachers and African American students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One way that teachers can build positive relationships with African American students is through ongoing learning and commitment to increasing equity in the classroom. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work can apply broadly and continuously, in contrast to the traditional one-session approach to diversity trainings. Using universities as a model, the most successful DEI trainings are integrated into the organization and focus both on awareness of personal bias and making plans for behavioral change. Trainings are also more effective when they are integrated into the organizational structure (Charleston, Pollack, and Sheirdan, 2021; Wentling, 2004).

Ongoing, continuous diversity-related support can include building culturally responsive curriculum, academic and career counseling, facilitating class discussions in all classes, and informal interactions with students and coworkers of color. Identifying individual racial bias should be complemented with identifying resources in the community and making a concrete plan for behavioral change. However, to effectively integrate ongoing DEI work, teachers need to be involved in program planning (Valenzuela, 2021). Providing resources and supports for teachers to increase positive engagement with African American students is one potential next step the district can take in addressing the achievement gap.

2. Develop innovative models to recruit and retain teachers of color.

“Bring in more Black teachers. Obviously it's not as easy as that, because they have to actually go to school and get education before they can become a teacher. But just finding a way to bring in those Black teachers, those Black support systems that people can go to.”

Another way to potentially build positive relationships between African American students and teachers is hiring and retaining more teachers of color. In both general experiences and in identifying solutions, having teachers of color was a prominent theme. Students reported easier engagement with teachers of color compared to white teachers. Additionally, a diverse staff is beneficial for all students, increasing critical thinking and problem solving (Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Cobo, 2016). The student responses highlighted the importance of building positive identities through seeing representation in teachers. Although recruitment and retention of teachers of color is a system-level problem (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2020), the district can still promote strategies that benefit teachers of color. Potential strategies include hiring earlier in the year, partnering with local teacher preparation programs, and offer additional social support for teachers when they are hired (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Provide teen-centric safe spaces for African American high school students.

"I think it would be really nice to have a community space where people feel safe but where they can also get work done and be productive and learn things that they might not have been able to learn, especially if they have a home life where they're not able to do that home but they have community space where they could do that.. in hopes of making the achievement gap smaller rather than wider."

Another important theme that students identified as a potential strategy to addressing the achievement gap is providing “safe spaces” for teens of color. The idea of having a teen-centric space was closely related to the importance of culturally sensitive mental health providers, as shown in **Figure 7**. The need for safe spaces in the community is consistent with student reports of not feeling understood in white spaces in school. As one student noted:

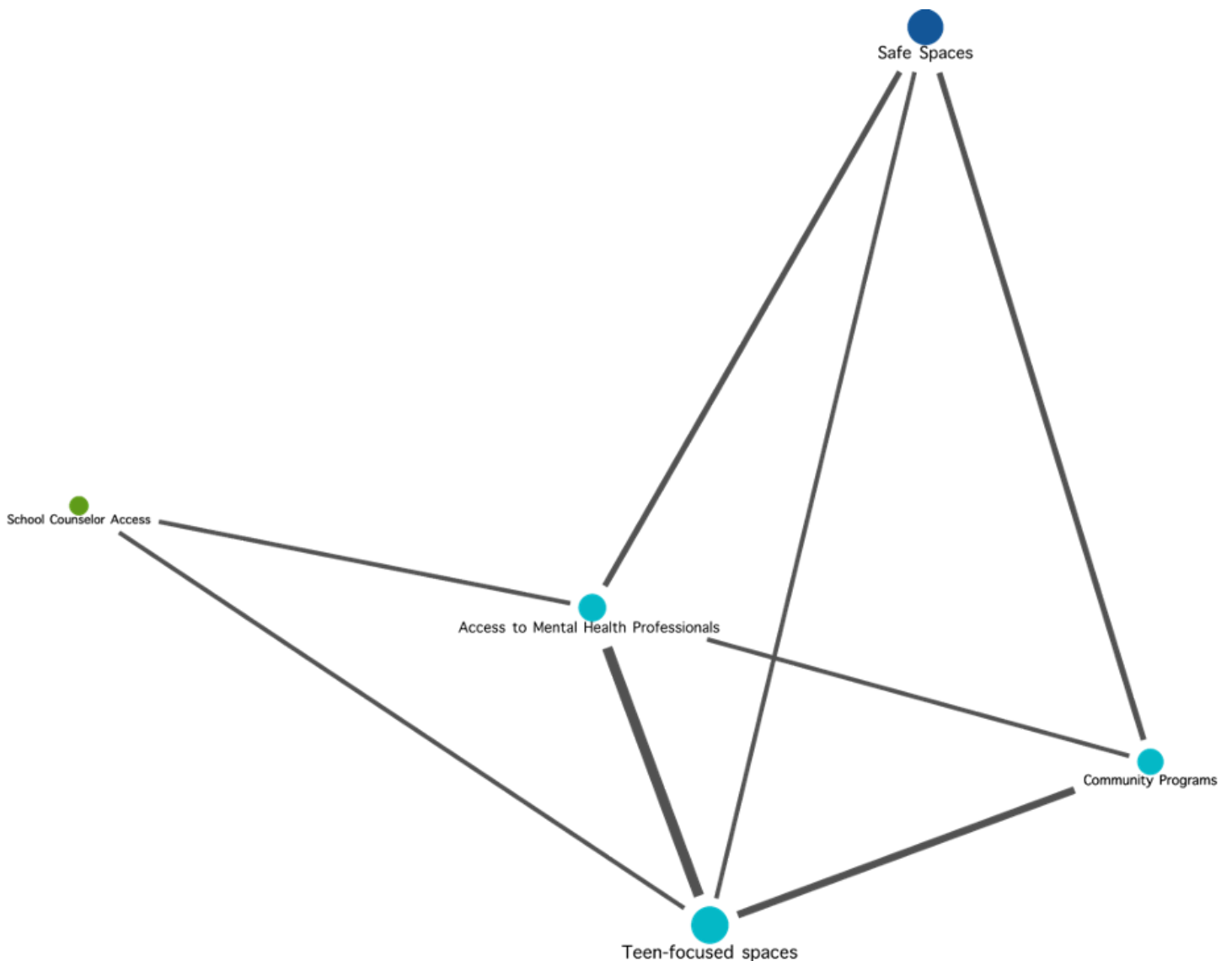
I think there should be a place where kids can go who are struggling with mental health issues. 'Cause I know there's a lot of like stuff out there about how important mental health is, but I feel like people don't talk about the mental health issues that specifically come with kids of color, high schools of color, because there's a lot of different stuff that we deal with and go through that really takes a toll on us that white people wouldn't understand.

There is evidence support for providing safe community spaces for teens of color. “Community schools” that provide mental health and academic resources for youth outside of traditional school spaces have some evidence of increasing academic achievement overall while reducing achievement and opportunity gaps (What Works for Health, 2019). There is even an initiative in Madison to create a teen-focused space in Fitchburg that can be supported by the district and broader community (Wethal, 2021; Chappell, 2020). The community and district can collaborate to provide safe alternative spaces for students of color to grow, learn, and play to boost positive experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Figure 7. MAXQDA Code Map of Mental Health and Access to Mental Health Spaces

Note. Size of circles indicates the number of segments in the theme. Distance between circles indicates overall association between codes. Line thickness indicates the frequency that two codes were associated together (minimum of 5 associations within 3 paragraphs).



RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Include and represent students that would be most impacted by changes in the district, including students of color and students that are struggling in school.

"I know that teachers like to look to me when it comes to asking about Black experiences because my grades are good and because I'm a good student in class. But I feel like it is important to acknowledge students who aren't doing so well in school, students who aren't necessarily always on time for classes and see what their experiences are and why they behave the way they do in classes."

"You can't push the kids of the future forward without using the kids in the future. Because we know what we need and what we want in our schools more than anybody else because we're the ones who are going to school."

"I feel like we don't have enough people speaking for us student-wise. I feel like students don't have enough people that are speaking for them, that look like them."

While there is a push to center students of color in conversations about reducing the achievement gap in Madison, the respondents reported that students who are struggling are not readily engaged. Centering community members that are most impacted by potential programs is essential to bridging cultural gaps and increasing understanding of program success (American Public Health Association, 2004). Additionally, engaging a diverse set of students may reduce the feeling of tokenism for high-achieving students of color.

There are multiple models of youth participation that provide opportunities for any youth to participate. One evidence-based model to include youth within institution decision-making includes the Key Dimensions of Participation by Driskell and Neema (2009), which is used to involve students in program decisions for schools (Barros et al., 2020). To have effective student participation, all five organizational dimensions should be met, including normative, structural, operational, physical, and attitudinal. A table describing the Key Dimensions of Participation can be found in **Figure 8**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Figure 8. *Key Dimensions of Participation – Driskell & Neema (2009)*

Note. Table describing five dimensions of youth participation for organizational change.

	type	description	manifestations
Normative	conceptual	expression of values regarding young people's participation	organizational mission and goals; statements from the ED; etc.
Structural	tangible - bounded by normative space	gives form to normative space, through organizational structure; programming, staffing and budget priorities	dedicated staff positions for youth outreach; budget for youth-led programs; etc.
Operational	tangible + conceptual - bounded by normative and structural space	everyday processes/mechanisms by which young people participate in decision making and management	youth selection of representatives; youth facilitation of meetings; real weight given to youth input (or youth making decisions on their own)
Physical	tangible - bounded by all of the above	an actual space that young people can claim as their own	A youth meeting room; youth-run center; dedicated (formally or informally) youth hang-out area
Attitudinal	conceptual - unbound though shaped in part by all the above, and vice versa	Individual and group interactions between adults and youth, and between young people	A general culture of acceptance and support towards young people, and between young people; youth expectations regarding their participation

The district seems to already be building towards the framework and can continue to intentionally build capacity for students to participate. For example, the “14 Big Ideas” project that MMSD held last spring using COVID-19 funding (Girard, 2021a) and the addition of two student representatives to the Board of Education highlight the building towards the operational dimension. However, the district could provide continuous participation in development and implementation of programs to give African American youth more agency in building positive experiences, such as Milwaukee’s “Design Your Future” projects (Youth Forward MKE, n.d.). Additionally, the district can shift to incorporate other dimensions of participation for effective student engagement.

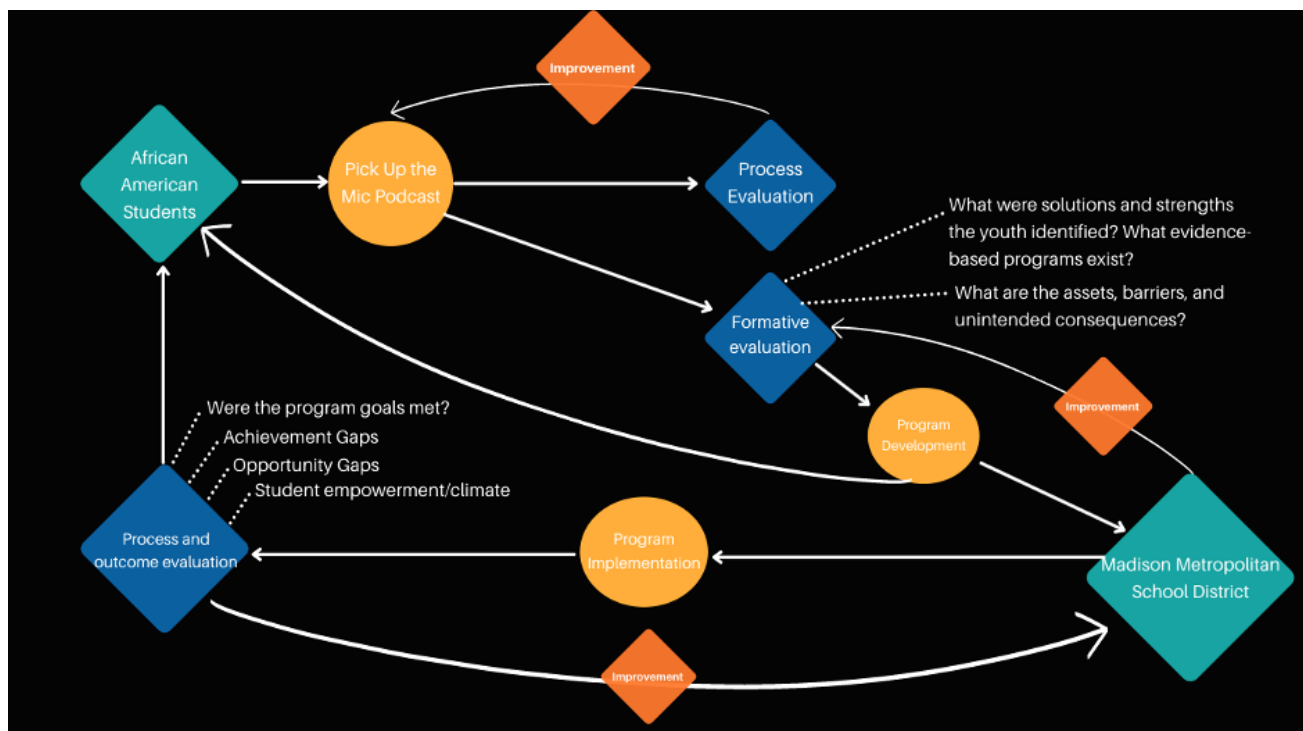
In addition to involving youth in decision-making spaces and evaluation, the students emphasized the need to engage students earlier than high school. As one student noted, “Start young, please start young.” Their sentiment is consistent with the theme that the achievement gap builds over time. Since opportunity is compounded throughout a student’s academic career, a potential strategy to monitor effectiveness could be to understand student climate in elementary school or middle school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective continuous evaluation can further be supported with collaboration between MMSD and the broader community. **Figure 9** outlines a potential program evaluation framework that could be used to engage African American students. The broad framework incorporates activities with the *Pick Up the Mic Podcast* and potential program development. Partners that could be involved in the evaluations include the MMSD Office of Assessment and Administration, MMSD Office of Strategic Partnerships, Black Excellence, and community organizations.

Figure 9. *Broad Evaluation Framework*

Note. Figure describes a potential framework that community members could be used to engage African American students incorporating activities from the *Pick Up the Mic Podcast*



CONCLUSION

The purpose of this report is to describe key themes from interviews with 14 African American students in the Madison Metropolitan School District. The themes centered around student experiences that may relate to the achievement gap and potential solutions. By identifying key themes from the interviews, the report strives to elevate African American student voices and explore potential evidence-based strategies to address the achievement gap.

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