



# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

## PANDEMIC LEARNING & RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN SOUTH KING COUNTY

---

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

## PANDEMIC LEARNING & RETURNING TO SCHOOL IN SOUTH KING COUNTY

In 2020, Puget Sound Educational Services District invited local leaders to join a Wisdom Council to elevate voices, expertise, and partnership opportunities for our Communities of Color across school districts in South King County (“the Road Map region”). In Spring and Summer 2021, the council launched an ongoing process of community conversations with Youth, Community Leaders, Parents, and Educators of Color. The first round of conversations focused on learning during a pandemic and returning to school in-person. Forty-four community members representing all 7 Road Map school districts engaged in over 35 hours of conversations with trusted peers. Community members engaged in collaborative meaning-making, developed recommendations, and shaped reporting and communication strategies.

Here we center Youth of Color voices (23 conversations), and then share perspectives of parents (9 conversations), community leaders (7 conversations) and educators (5 conversations). We are excited for you to hear what we have to say and ask that our perspectives inform school and classroom decisions for the coming year. We also encourage you to ask questions of your own students, families, and communities impacted by the pandemic AND systemic racial inequities and adapt your responsive decisions in partnership. Together we can return to school in ways that value and cultivate the well-being of our Youth, Families, and Educators of Color.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### ii Introduction

#### Conversations with Youth of Color

- 1 *"It just feels like a much safer environment for me to be learning."*  
How Will Schools Build on the Benefits of Virtual Learning?
- 3 *"We are not robots. Schools need to offer multiple, human ways of learning that fit our individual differences."*  
How Will Schools Address Challenges of Virtual Learning?
- 5 *"You don't know what anybody is going through."*  
How Will Schools Be Mindful of Trauma & Isolation?
- 7 *"They're still doing that same racist stuff, it's not being applied anywhere, so we need to find a way to make sure that all this antiracist professional development training is actually being applied."*  
How Will Schools Respond to Racial Harm?
- 9 *"Myself and other students are still super nervous about being in person and stuff because of COVID. It's not like this stuff has disappeared. I'm still nervous about bringing stuff into my household and like endangering my family."*  
How Will Schools Act on Mixed Feelings About Returning?
- 11 *"Everyone talked all the talk about race and equity and ethnic studies and 'we can't go back to normal'. And here we are, about to go back to normal."*  
How Will In-Person School Be Different, NOW?

#### 13 Other Youth Stories of Pandemic Learning & Returning to School

#### 14 Conversations with Parents, Educators & CBO Leaders of Color

#### 20 Appendix: What did conversations look like & how did they happen?



---

# INTRODUCTION

## South King County Wisdom Council

In 2020, Puget Sound Educational Services District invited local leaders to join a Wisdom Council to elevate voices, expertise, and partnership opportunities of our Communities of Color across school districts in South King County. In a little over a year, the council has grown from three core community members to a group of 15 Youth, Community-Based Organization Leaders, Parents, and Educators of Color representing 6 school districts. In the last year, the council developed and organized around three goals:

#1: Continue to build and strengthen a Wisdom Council that reflects South King County Communities of Color, that elevates community voices and community connections across districts, and that fosters loving and trusting relationships in the service of supporting our Black, Indigenous, Latino/a and Other Students of Color to thrive in school.

#2: Create a sustainable path for listening to and better acting on behalf of our South King County Communities of Color through ongoing [community conversations](#) with youth, community leaders, parents, and educators.

#3: Identify, expand, and model opportunities for Puget Sound Educational Services District and South King County School Districts to work together with our Communities of Color in partnerships and collaboratives that serve our youth.

## Why Community Conversations?

The Wisdom Council began the community conversations project as a way to improve racially equitable collaborations and to build relationships and trusting partnerships between school systems and Youth and Families of Color most harmed and underserved by a white-centered educational system.

For us, [a critical first step towards this goal requires finding better ways to honor, elevate, feel, and act upon the emotions, lived experiences, and educational aspirations of Youth and Families of Color](#). Traditional approaches, like surveying and focus groups, often serve to 'extract' information from respondents, and in doing so can reinforce power dynamics and distrust<sup>[1]</sup>. Questions regarding the common practices associated with these approaches -- Who is invited to respond? Who does respond? What questions are asked? What language is used? Whose responses are valued? Who interprets the responses? Who makes what decisions based on conclusions drawn? -- highlight vulnerabilities for reinforcing inequalities. Our approach begins with conversations among trusted peers guided by topics and questions created by our Wisdom Council that are rooted in the experiences, concerns, and aspirations of our Communities of Color. Our community conversation approach engages our youth and families as partners in the meaning-making, in the implications, and communication. We will also pursue opportunities to partner in decision-making that responds to these insights.

Here we illustrate the voices, themes, and recommendations that come from our first round of community conversations. We plan to improve upon and continue this practice again later this year. Through ongoing community conversations we see opportunities to foster continuing dialogue, strengthen relationships, and sustain school-community partnerships that value and cultivate wellbeing for our region's Youth and Families of Color.<sup>[2]</sup>

## CONVERSATION THEMES AT A GLANCE

home is a psychologically safer place  
increased self-confidence  
more racial equity work sickness depression depression stress  
navigate schedule of school?  
time for goal-setting  
disconnected from teachers  
jumping through hoops  
time to reflect on ourselves  
socially disconnected  
responsive physical and mental health trauma basic cultural competencies  
grief fear isolation  
flexibility and resilience  
loss of employment  
not come back to school as normal  
give ourselves grace  
materials that worked for us benefits and challenges of virtual learning see our friends!  
teacher flexibility and grace  
financial hardship time for other interests increased anxiety racial harm  
anxiety illness job loss safety communication challenges  
no rigid and busy schedule increased personal responsibility stronger partnerships  
communication  
anxiety  
we are not robots  
death a more human experience  
come back to school as normal fewer distractions death racial harm  
we don't see or feel change  
navigating others and our own trauma opportunity to do different take safety seriously?  
inauthentic racial equity training  
struggled with time management and organization our voice matters and leads to change improved computer literacy  
couldn't bring our full selves  
will schools respond? non-existent communication involved in key decisions that impact us had to make difficult choices  
relearn ways of being social being social again?  
inflicting and harming our families? disengaged from school socialize! proactive  
powerful sense of independence and agency





**"I feel students of color are just not feeling necessarily safe in school, like having a lot of micro-aggressions daily. So I feel like at home, it just feels like a much safer environment for me to be learning."**

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH OF COLOR

# HOW WILL SCHOOLS BUILD ON THE BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL LEARNING?

There were personal and social benefits to learning from home. As Youth of Color who often experience racism at school, [learning from home could be a psychologically safer place](#). The lack of a rigid and busy schedule helped many of us better manage our time. There were [fewer distractions](#). We were able to use phones, rooms, and materials that worked for us. Many of us spent more time and developed [stronger bonds with family](#). For some of us, it also meant having more time to spend on other interests. We also had more time to step back and reflect on ourselves. For some of us that meant [giving ourselves grace](#) to take it slow in the moment. For others, it meant planning more for our long-term personal goals. A greater sense of personal responsibility encouraged self-organization, but was also motivating. [Teacher flexibility and grace](#) was appreciated more than ever. For those of us who felt this way, it contributed to a greater sense of [independence and agency](#). This was powerful.

Hopefully, experiences like these can show that learning during COVID brought opportunities as well as challenges for us.

### OUR VOICES

"Definitely giving myself a break and trying to remember that it is ok to take it at my own pace, so just remembering to take my time. It's been a good way to get closer to my family. We have been eating together. More interactions - we have been bonding."

"I have been getting closer to my brother now. I've never really talked to my brother that often."

"I talk about my challenges and barriers with my family, too."

"It taught us a lot, it taught me a lot. I took it in a good way to learn more about myself and what I want to do in life, what I want to pursue, and to go full at it."

"Unlike school, I have been able to manage my work and setting aside time in my day to get things done."

"Teachers have been more flexible."

"I would say I definitely changed a lot in my patterns, my time management was really bad before COVID, I've definitely gotten better at that and also self-motivation I think has been really important over the pandemic because otherwise, why would you do anything?"

"Because being in school was actually kind of stressful for me, because I had all these classes to handle, all the classes and extra curriculars on top of that."

### "I feel overworked, but I also feel powerful."

"I have also learned more about myself, that I learned better when I am not with a group of people because I am very social."

"It's easier to look questions up on your phone so you don't have to ask the teacher and you can't pull out your phone in in-person class."

"Virtual Learning gives me so much time to improve myself as an athlete."

"I remember a lot during school the schedule was set for you, and this way I can manage my own time and gives me the space to manage my time."

"It made me more adaptable to situations, not to take anything for granted but at the same time just... if there's work to be done and you know you need to do it, you can do it if you just put your heart to it. You just have to believe in yourself."

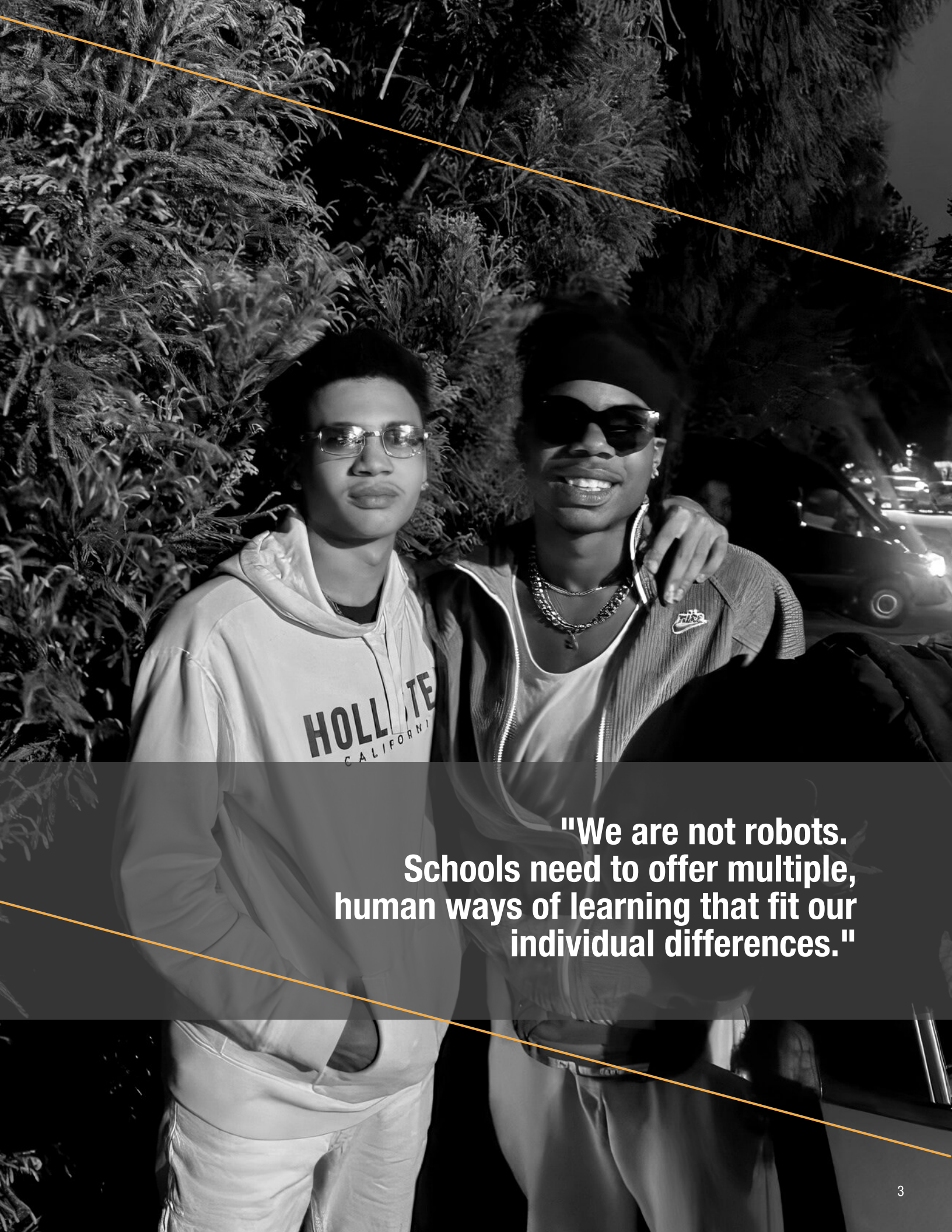
### As we return to in-person learning, please consider:

- Ensuring all spaces are safe for the [psychological well-being](#) of Youth of Color.
- Developing more opportunities and spaces for us to develop [stronger family connections](#) both in-person and virtually.
- Creating time and space for personal reflection, learning, and planning.
- [Creating spaces and opportunities](#) for us to develop and demonstrate our time management and self-organization skills.
- Giving us [opportunities to learn from challenges](#) and adapt, through activities and assignments.
- Creating more time and space for asynchronous learning and shared decision-making.
- Providing more [flexibility](#) and understanding around deadlines, opportunities to improve, and managing busy schedules while still holding high expectations and [holding us accountable](#).

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

- We have shared comments from our community conversations about the benefits of virtual learning. What did you hear from us?
- What will you do differently because of what you heard?





**"We are not robots.  
Schools need to offer multiple,  
human ways of learning that fit our  
individual differences."**

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH OF COLOR

# HOW WILL SCHOOLS ADDRESS CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL LEARNING?

Virtual learning magnified challenges we often face in school. Many of us felt like we were often jumping through hoops, not really learning. We **couldn't bring our full selves**, whether through class activities, assignments or through our relationships with teachers. We **struggled with time management and organization** and in the end we had to make difficult choices about what was doable and worthwhile.

Please keep in mind that for many of us, this was our experience last year. Also, whether we return to virtual or in-person learning this year, these are challenges that many of us continue to face.

### As we return to in-person learning, please consider:

- Creating **safe and welcoming spaces** for students to speak up and advocate for their learning needs.
- Creating **inclusive, culturally responsive curriculum**.
- Clearly stating goals for students, and clearly connecting them to activities and assignments.
- More **consistent scheduling** and guidance and more clear alignment between in-person and virtual learning to support our personal organization and time management.
- Giving **multiple options** for completing activities and assignments that support our strengths, preferences, and styles.

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

- We have shared comments from our community conversations about the challenges of virtual learning. What did you hear from us?
- What will you do differently because of what you heard?



"School overall is... moving further from my priorities. School as in academics and going through hoops and taking tests, and going over assignments or whatever. Not learning."

"The first two weeks, I was up every day, right on time. I was like, I got this. Then that third week hit, I was waking up in the middle of fourth period and homework wasn't really... I'm a visual learner, so it was like... I couldn't really learn through the virtual learning. They would be sitting there talking, and I'd be like 'I'm going to fall asleep' most of the time."

"One challenge that I had was definitely connecting with the teachers because I feel like when you're in in-person school it's a lot easier to build that connection with your teachers and since you have that connection it makes it a lot better of a learning environment."

"Just nurture every kid in the classroom in any way possible and don't just be a robot teacher and just teach the subject, but get to know the kid and reach out the impact at large, not just educationally but mentally, spiritually, physically, you know? Try to have a bond, because when people have bonds, that's when they start to open up and actually learn because you know who they are."

**"I wasn't that engaged, I didn't like being online anymore. Not that I didn't like being online anymore, I just didn't like school anymore. And it was more of just a hoop than anything."**

"On certain assignments where I was falling behind because I didn't do my work on time and it was one of those ongoing assignments where you have to build on your work and it's a set timeline, and then once you fall behind it's just a game of catch-up for a long time."

"One of my friends who was like 'Oh, hey we were wondering if we could just hop off Zoom when we're done and do our own thing' and he took the suggestion into account, but it didn't really come into play until the last two weeks of school."

"Honestly I just had to balance what I needed to finish vs. what I knew wasn't really worth the stress. And I just had to come to terms with what I had to do to make it through."

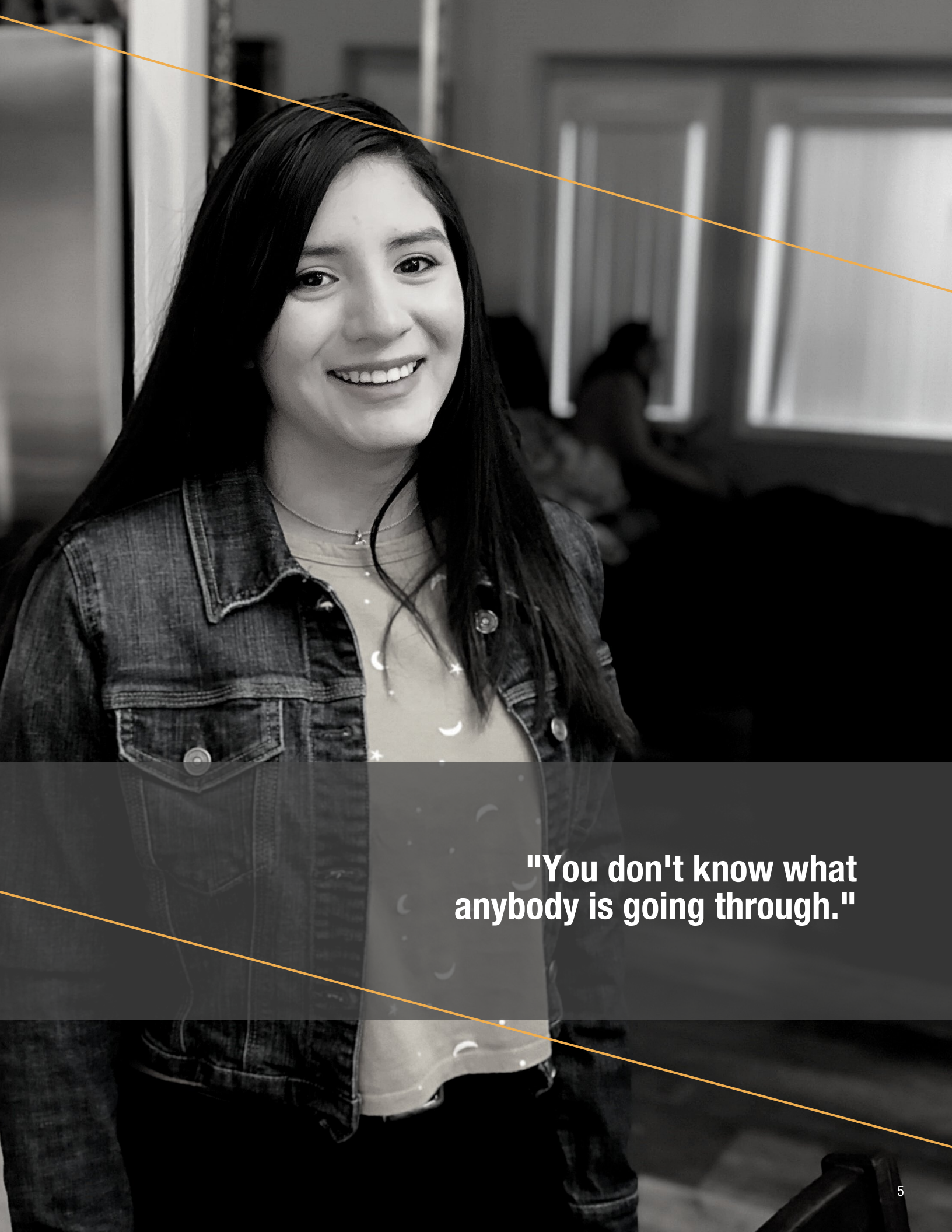
"One teacher just didn't really teach, more of just like how to sit on Zoom for an hour and a half. And I felt like it was really a waste of my time because I had other things to go do and we were kind of just expected to sit there until the class period ended and it didn't benefit us in any way."

**"I just stopped turning in assignments that I didn't think were worth it."**

"I think definitely a better understanding of kids who learn differently. Like, giving them a big opportunity because the kids who are able to learn in any type of way and adapt really well, I feel like, they're really overlooked. It's like 'Ok, you guys can go, that's good, we'll put you guys here.' And then for the kids who can't adapt so well, it's always like, one or two options, and they're forced to pick between them."

"Now, it's been a challenge to balance my schedule. I wasn't ready for the change. The system I developed didn't have longevity, I was not prepared for months of digital work. I feel like at low battery, and that I have only had short charges. The source of this is anxiety..."





**"You don't know what  
anybody is going through."**

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH OF COLOR

# HOW WILL SCHOOLS BE MINDFUL OF TRAUMA & ISOLATION?

The last 18 months of school have not been about virtual learning for many of us. It has been about trying to do school, virtually, in a Pandemic World. **Sickness, death, racial harm, loss of employment, financial hardship, isolation** have been amplified in our families and communities. The mental health consequences of **trauma, grief, anxiety, stress, and depression** have emerged alongside the realities and even the possibilities of these things happening to us and our loved ones. We have also been **isolated and socially disconnected**. For many of us, school without our in-person relationships is HARDER. For some of us, we had never been to the school we attend until now. Some of the apprehension for those of us returning to school in-person comes from knowing we will have to **relearn some ways of being social!**

Please keep in mind that for many of us, this was our experience last year. Also, whether we return to virtual or in-person learning this year, this is the world in which we are trying to do school.

### OUR VOICES

"It really affected our work because you know we house keep and people didn't really want strangers in their household."

"I know the majority of my teachers did account a lot for mental health, so that was really important to me and that made me feel pretty supported."

"Hey, your mental health is invalid and you should be doing my work over your mental health."

"My father did struggle to find work." "We had a death in the family." "My mom is really stressed all the time."

"In the beginning there was unemployment but things are going alright right now."

"I think my school itself is a little bit...they're pretty focused on mental health, I would say. So they have reached out and made sure the students are ready and they're doing ok, and they're doing ok at home."

**"I feel like I've lost touch with being able to be so comfortable with everybody or wanting to talk with people. Because before, I was really social and outgoing, but now, it just doesn't feel like I need to be social. I think it's definitely because I just haven't been seeing people, I haven't been putting myself around people. It's sort of just been a lone grind, so it's weird when you switch out of it."**

"Every now and then they face layoff stuff because of COVID." "I have to share a room with my sisters now so I lost my privacy."

"Include everybody, even the ones that don't want to be doing anything. Because in this pandemic, it's caused a lot of people to...to not reach out to anyone, to keep to themselves. I've experienced people who've done that and just kept away, and they were going through some hard times. So I would say is have that emotional support. Even if you don't know them, say hi or what's up, you know, have more of a group effort to where it's included, not excluded."

"Mentally I was impacted by everything with the pandemic because I wasn't going out as much. Just the thought of only having school was the thing stressing me out the most."

"It can be hard. You don't really have people, except for your family, being there with you, so it's different."

"I've literally never stepped in the building."

"Virtual learning has taking a toll my social emotional by creating a fear or becoming insecure on how to start a conversation, things like that. My social skills are just not good anymore."


### As we return to in-person learning, please consider:

- Leading with grace, empathy, flexibility, and LOVE
- Showing us that **you understand or seek to understand our worlds** outside of school.
- Mindfulness of the ways racial injustice causes and adds to existing anxiety, stress, grief, and trauma.
- Creating **spaces for healing, connection, safety, and inclusion**
- Providing opportunities and outlets for staff and families to express how we are feeling about navigating all the changes.
- Creating **ongoing, intentional spaces** for student social connection and reconnection.
- **Acknowledging student's lives** and experiences **outside the classroom**
- Dedicating extra time to fostering **teacher-student relationships** and classroom communities.

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

- We have shared comments from our community conversations about amplified social stress and trauma. What did you hear from us?
- What will you do differently because of what you heard?





**"They're still doing that same racist stuff, it's not being applied anywhere, so we need to find a way to make sure that all this antiracist professional development training is actually being applied."**

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH OF COLOR

# HOW WILL SCHOOLS RESPOND TO RACIAL HARM?

In many of our schools we see **increased attention to antiracism and to racial equity training**. But this often feels inauthentic. We don't see or feel the change from these efforts as racial harm is still common.



### As we return to in-person learning, please consider:

- Making racial equity training **student-focused**.
- Ensuring training is not “just check the box.” It must be **ongoing and engaging**.
- Including the **lived experiences** of the community in these trainings.
- Ensure that those providing the training have strong qualifications.
- Make sure there is space for **youth and family partnerships** to navigate these issues together.
- Developing ways to ensure training is **resulting in action** and change.
- Finding ways to **recruit and retain** more Educators of Color.

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

- We have shared comments from our community conversations about school responses to racial harm. What did you hear from us?
- What will you do differently because of what you heard?

"There are a lot of teachers and administration in our school that recently they've been posting a lot about anti-racism and they, like the principal, will be quoting quotes and posting a lot of things like that. And it's all very performative, if you like. There's not a lot of actual action or tangible action behind it. And whenever you're in charge of the school, there should be a lot a more tangible way to address this and to fix what's actually happening in the school, instead of a lot of it being just swept under the rug and having students of color punished for saying like 'that doesn't make me feel safe'."


"I called out my bad English teacher for an egregious unit of racism."

"Literally yesterday, I heard from a student that one of our vice principals said something regarding the n-word. But she's white, she doesn't have a say in that, and it was just very shocking because our school does have racial equity training, but I guess it's not effective."

"They're still doing that same racist stuff, it's not being applied anywhere, so we need to find a way to make sure that all this antiracist professional development training is actually being applied."

"It's the second high school class I've ever taken that's taught by a person of color. My teacher is an amazing teacher, I actually feel like I'm learning things in her class, she actually cares about the students and wants them to succeed and sees us as individual people."





**"Myself and other students are still super nervous about being in person and stuff because of COVID. It's not like this stuff has disappeared. I'm still nervous about bringing stuff into my household and like endangering my family."**

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH OF COLOR

# HOW WILL SCHOOLS ACT ON MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT RETURNING?

Many of us are looking forward to going back in-person to see our friends, to socialize, and to feel more **connected and motivated** to do school. At the same time we are nervous about having to be social again and having to **navigate the rigid schedule at school**. Many of us are also worried about increased racial tensions, about getting COVID, about infecting and harming our families, about whether others will take safety seriously, and how our schools will **respond and communicate** about all of this.



### As we return to in-person learning, please consider:

- Leadership should be conscious of the influence of public opinion and social media, look to the experts for advice about COVID and for **creating safe learning environments**.
- Soliciting student, parent, and staff input on a plan to ensure safety.
- If a plan is in place, **gather input on implementation** if possible (at regular intervals) and using processes that make sharing of input or feedback easy.
- Ensuring safety protocols, messages, and support resources are in **multiple languages** to support communication and clarity.
- That while Critical Race Theory is being framed as a political issue in many of our schools and school boards, the consequences of racial harm for our safety and for our learning **are real, ongoing, and must be addressed**.

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

- We have shared comments from our community conversations about our mixed feelings regarding returning to school. What did you hear from us?
- What will you do differently because of what you heard?

"I'm ready to go back to see my friends it been such a long time, but I'm scared I'll get the virus."

"I get to see my friends. But I'm scared to get COVID or that someone will get it and doesn't say anything."

**"Over the pandemic period when we were all quarantined, a lot of peoples' true colors showed, and it makes me a little wary of going back to school because there a lot of people who, like...they've showed that they don't really like me or people who look like me, or any other people. Just, like, it's just very scary. Because you're going to school with those people."**

"I feel like there are going to be those people that are not gonna care about wearing masks and they are gonna ruin it for everyone. They might get exposed to COVID and boom, everything happens all over again. You have to go back to quarantine and it just sucks for everybody."

"They did send something out in the mail that's a mental health thing in, like, a little envelope, that's like, all these nice things. And I think that's really helped and will help ease the transition back."

"There are so many people who, in my district, in my school, who aren't going to get vaccinated and will never. And, like, not knowing what my district is going to do about that, and the mask mandate, is also just really nerve-wracking."

"I'm just not ready for in person school. But on the other hand I feel like I will be able to learn better and be more motivated to do stuff I guess. I'm kind of over online meeting. But the in-person aspect will be good, I just don't know where it's going to go. There's a lot of unknown still."

"There is that fear of like getting sick, or getting other people sick."

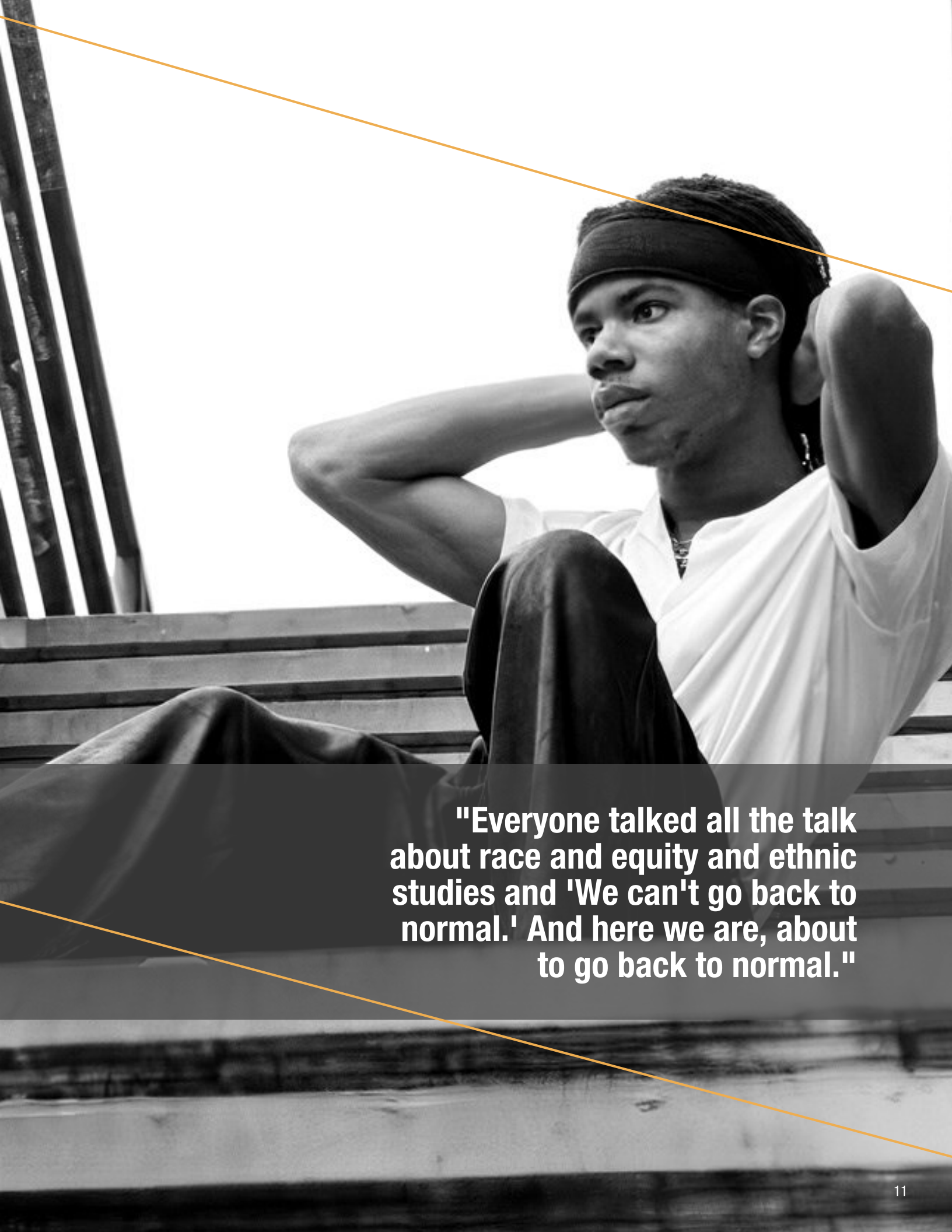
"I feel like something I was saying to lots of teachers is that I wasn't really ready to have the same stringent schedule and workload and expectations."

"I have family members to worry about."

"I am definitely not ready to adjust to being around a bunch of new strangers and interacting with them at any given moment and I'm also not ready for is how harsh the school schedule was before COVID."

"Myself and other students are still super nervous about being in person and stuff because of COVID. It's not like this stuff has disappeared. I'm still nervous about bringing stuff into my household and like endangering my family and also my social skills are just not good anymore."





**"Everyone talked all the talk about race and equity and ethnic studies and 'We can't go back to normal.' And here we are, about to go back to normal."**

## COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH OF COLOR

# HOW WILL IN-PERSON SCHOOL BE DIFFERENT, NOW?

When COVID started, many of our teachers and school leaders talked about how we had the **opportunity to think differently** and to not come back to school 'as normal'. Many of us are worried now that we are about to return to school 'as normal'. We hope that **we can see and feel real changes**. For us this means a more human experience, a safe experience, and an experience where **we are involved in key decisions that impact us**, where our voice matters and leads to change.



### As we return to in-person learning, please consider:

- Ensuring Youth and Families of Color are involved as partners in key school and district decisions and communications impacting youth and families.
- Ensuring that feedback and input is collected often, that the process is valued and easy, and that our **entire school community is held accountable** for creating a safe, inclusive, and human school experience for all.
- That when engaging youth and family voices, we also need to know how it has been or will be acted upon.
- **Following through** on promises to make change, take action, and **communicating** with us and our families.

### Questions for reflection and discussion:

- We have shared comments from our community conversations about feedback, accountability, and change. What did you hear from us?
- What will you do differently because of what you heard?

**"Our administration needs to stop policing students and just treat us like people as well. We're not things that need to be controlled, we're not robots. We're people, we have feelings, we're human. And I think the district really needs to hear that."**

"If something repeatedly happens with the staff members that is actually addressed and not just looked over, like even if it takes people who are a higher power, I would like teachers to be held accountable for their actions."

"The system in place to handle these complaints is entirely structured to be A.) inaccessible for people who may be filing the complaints and B.) a very difficult process that is slated against those who are filing for discrimination, things like harassment, intimidation and bullying, things like retaliation."

"Change in the school system isn't a bad thing, it doesn't have to take a really long time. This is the perfect opportunity to make big changes, and so I would say if you see any flaws, change them."

**"it's the district policing itself, so there's not a lot of--it's hard to see what's going on when you file a complaint. People don't necessarily know how to do it. No support system for those who do know how to file it. The change would be making it more accessible for families and to see the entire process."**

"It would be kind of disappointing to see nothing change after this year where it's literally the perfect opportunity to point some flaws out and change them."

"We never had that pause to really question the system and see how messed up it was. Because it really doesn't make any sense now that I look back on it, like...it was really harsh for growing teenagers, so I'm not ready to get back into that rigorous schedule of 8-4 and then go home and do more work and not get to spend any time with my family too, that's big."



---

## OTHER YOUTH STORIES

# OF PANDEMIC LEARNING & RETURNING TO SCHOOL

Our spring and summer 2021 conversations with Communities of Color in South King County brought together vibrant and distinctive voices of high school and middle school scholars, heard alongside viewpoints articulated by parents, educators, and community partners. Combined, these face-to-face conversations with trusted peers or adults deliver a fuller picture of youth learning and living in the time of COVID-19, representing experiences and perspectives of both the students and the adults who live in the same communities.

Themes identified and highlighted above by members of the South King County Wisdom Council echo findings in other student profiles<sup>[3]</sup>, large surveys, or policy recommendations published in the region<sup>[4]</sup>, in the state<sup>[5],[6]</sup> or nationally<sup>[7],[8]</sup> in years 2020 and 2021. Our participating scholars spoke about challenges faced such as feelings of mental stress related to academic worries, diminished social interactions, and family welfare concerns which are captured in other studies as the following quote demonstrates:

*"...some adults might think that 'we have nothing else to do' all day but this pandemic is taking a serious toll on our mental health. I can complete the schoolwork fine, but I don't feel like the schools are considering our personal wellbeing sometimes." A quote lifted from "In their Own Words: Young People Describe the Impact of COVID-19" (Yohalem, et. al (2020), p.10).*

At the same time, our scholars' themes also hearken to opportunities named such as increased time spent with family and adaptation to new ways of learning. The themes capture the nuanced ways that our students have appreciated and have responded to the challenges and opportunities<sup>[9]</sup> especially as they got ready for their return to school in fall 2021. This outlook is reflected in a quote taken from a local Seattle Times Education Lab article:

*"My classmates and I agree one of the more helpful aspects of virtual instruction is that learning isn't dependent on being based in a classroom. Recorded lectures and other supplemental materials make it easier to catch up on a missed class. Students don't have to be in a physical space to learn effectively." (A. Rajan, 9 May 2021)*

The perspectives of our Students, Parents, Educators, and Community Leaders of Color gathered in face-to-face conversations with trusted peers or adults offer a layer of depth to our understanding of the impact of the pandemic as they illuminate feelings and thoughts of students, families, educators, and community members whose voices can and do get missed in huge information-gathering endeavors. Our community conversations conducted by and with individuals who know and live or learn together in the same communities are a means of gathering and making sense of 'street data' that allow for "'reimagin[ing] our ways of knowing and learning' and 'center[ing] voices from the margins'".<sup>[2]</sup>



**"The pandemic, the environmental adjustment--whether it was social, economic, parents working from home, routines being interrupted, kids not waking up at the same time, interacting with friends...There was a cumulative toll on all of us--it wasn't happening in isolation."**



# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS OF COLOR

We saw our children experience a mixture of benefits and challenges during virtual learning. Benefits included a greater focus on learning, improved computer literacy, and **increased self-confidence**. On the other hand, some of our children disengaged from school and were disconnected from teachers. Some of us called out that curriculum and instruction **was not well adapted** to our children's culture and identities. Some of us appreciated being able to spend more time with our children, but we also witnessed our children disconnected from their friends, and instances of **increased anxiety and depression** with online learning.

We shared concerns that the Pandemic was taking a **cumulative toll on our children and our families**, some of us experiencing job loss, illness, and even death. At the same time, feelings of fear, anxiety and uncertainty have been commonplace.

Some of us experienced racial harm, through increased exclusion and feeling unwelcome, as a result of language and technical barriers. We applauded increased efforts to ensure racial equity is embedded in the work, but some expressed concerns that these efforts are falling short and that **basic cultural competencies needed to be developed**.

"Learning from home allowed my daughter to focus better and not be distracted."

**"My children are learning to use the computer, better than we do!"**

"He has learned that he can achieve more than he thought of himself."

"My son lost interest and lost learning." "Able to spend more time together."

"Depressed being in class online." "Anxiety."

**"Teachers were detached and did not connect with students well."**

"Lots of homework and no-one to explain it."

"The emotional damage [children] suffered from not letting them play with other children has been hard and traumatic."

**"Did not do a good job in making culturally relevant materials/fiction for their students."**

"A roller coaster of emotions, fears, and uncertainty as doctors didn't know whether or not we had COVID."

"As a single mom...it will be really hard if any of us get COVID."

**"These were difficult times."**

"I feel that because I don't speak English and I call and they don't have someone at that moment who speaks Spanish and that makes me feel frustrated."

"For me to get involved in school means to feel welcome."

**"It is hard to be seen as a person of color when in person and it is even harder to be seen on the screen."**

"More school districts and organizations coming on board to make sure that diversity equity and inclusion are part of their work."

**"Cultural competency is still lacking at a basic level."**

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH PARENTS OF COLOR

Themes of **communication** were amplified and top of mind for us during virtual learning - in both positive and challenging ways. For some of us, we felt school staff and our children's teachers were working overtime to connect with us in both **responsive and proactive ways**. For others, communications from schools was **lacking, felt inauthentic, or was non-existent**.



We have **mixed feelings about our children going back to school**. For many of us, our kids are excited to go back. We know it will be good for them to see their friends, but safety is top of mind. Many of us are **concerned** about how our districts and schools will be handling physical and mental health.

When communication with schools was challenging, we found some strength in parent communities for support navigating these challenging times.

## As we return to in-person learning, please consider:

- Ensuring **clarity & consistency in messages** -- e.g., what is happening; what is being asked of parents; who is contact; how to contact.
- Providing **multiple ways of communicating with parents** with particular attention to parent language and modality preference (e.g., text, phone, etc.) in addition to an online presence.
- Having **follow-up communication undertaken by school staff** who have relationships with students & parents. These follow-up should include recognizing and acknowledging parents' questions, concerns, help/support, and efforts.
- Soliciting and **listening to parent feedback**.

**"I have been able to communicate with the teachers, and if I have questions they are available."**

"I am thankful for one of my daughter's teachers, she called me and asked me how she could help me, because she was not turning in homework."

**"I have not had access to teachers and that is what makes it difficult."**

"They are always checking in to see if he has what he needs, they communicate well and keep us informed."

"The school always call back to me when I need."

**"During the pandemic, they called asking how they could support us. They also helped with counselors for my children, texts and emails from teachers to check on homework and my children's progress."**

"No one has reached out to ask how we are doing."

"I feel lost because I don't know who I'm going to email for help."

**"Our schools, because of the magnitude of the responsibility, get so caught up in the responsibility of running a school, get caught up in keeping kids safe and isolating themselves. When the message comes through, it doesn't always sound authentic."**

"It will help their [childrens'] emotional state by seeing their friends."


**"Kids are excited to go back to school, we as parents are holding our breath because we are not sure of how the district is handling the health of teachers and students."**

"We don't feel safe yet."

**"Parents had to rally around each for support after they felt the school was not listening to their needs, so they branched off on their own."**

"I had to make changes on the work schedules and get organized, understand how to handle the technology."



A black and white portrait of a man with long dreadlocks, wearing a dark fedora hat and a jacket. He is smiling warmly at the camera. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. Two thin orange diagonal lines cross the image, one from the top left to the middle right, and another from the middle left to the bottom right.

**"I address the change with love, patience  
and open arms because it doesn't matter  
what you do, the pandemic is here, and  
it's up to me how I face it."**

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION LEADERS & EDUCATORS OF COLOR

We identified **mixed benefits & challenges of virtual learning** for different kinds of students. We noticed some of our Students of Color doing better at home, particularly those who find the in-person in-school environment stressful.

We also recognized and empathized with the challenges families and schools face with communication. While clear communication about schedules and other updates, translated where needed, is essential, **it is insufficient without building relationships.**

Top of mind for us was trying to **respond simultaneously** to the needs of students, families and staff that were amplified by the Pandemic. Especially challenging for us was that staff are often navigating others' trauma as well as their own.

**Safety** is also a major issue for our Youth of Color.



"Some of our students of color were doing a lot better being home; students enjoy getting up a little bit later, and accessing work when they can."

"Special needs students, those needing 504 accommodations or are on IEP (Individualized Education Plan), since they didn't have the pressures of an in-school environment."

**"They did miss some level of social interaction."**

"Some of the parents just don't know what's going on with the school yet. So but I would say right now for the teachers and the school districts, it's very hard."

"Communicating the basics: schedules, important messages, connecting with families."

"Communication in their language will also help."

**"Family engagement is beyond language translation. Yes, the messages translated are important, but do not forget the relationship."**

"Volunteers and staff have had to pull double duty e.g. COVID testing & vaccine administration: 370, vaccinated through clinics & 7,000 in pop-up clinics in partnership with CBOs."

**"A lot of staff that are serving directly our students of color are also going through secondary trauma that we ourselves have to navigate. This is traumatic for us, staff of color."**

**"[Youth of Color] do not feel safe in a school environment (they're even afraid to run, lest school officials think they are doing something wrong). In a recent focus group they conducted, 70% of BIPOC 12-14 yr olds stated they 'will never call a cop.' They will deal with issues on their own; and feel their life has no value. That is the message they are receiving, which is carried over to the classroom. Feels like no one is addressing that issue."**



# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION LEADERS & EDUCATORS OF COLOR

For both Educators and Leaders of Color the Pandemic required **flexibility and resilience**.

**"I address the change with love, patience and open arms because it doesn't matter what you do, the pandemic is here, and it's up to me how I face it."**

"Some people adapted really well and found out that it is their strength as teachers, and others struggled and have had to reevaluate their profession, overall everyone learned from it."

**"Being able to navigate my own personal challenges, or almost trauma while still being able to support our staff."**

Flexibility and resilience encouraged many of us to **adapt our practices**. For some of us, it pushed us into galvanizing partnerships with schools and families. For others, we were able to challenge the traditional divides between social and emotional well-being and academic development towards a **whole-child approach**.

**"We went from silos to working collaboratively. We struggled to come to consensus at the beginning but learned to leverage and pool our resources."**

"[The Pandemic] has magnified the need for both, a healthy balance. We are so focused on academia. we really don't take the time to pause to make sure we make this a healthy space throughout the prek- 12 journey. I am on both sides: instructional sides and...supporting our counselors and the social emotional need from staff and students. The closer we can get in connecting the academic with real life experiences; our learning will become more relevant."

**As we come back this year, our Educators of Color and CBO Leaders ask you to please consider:**

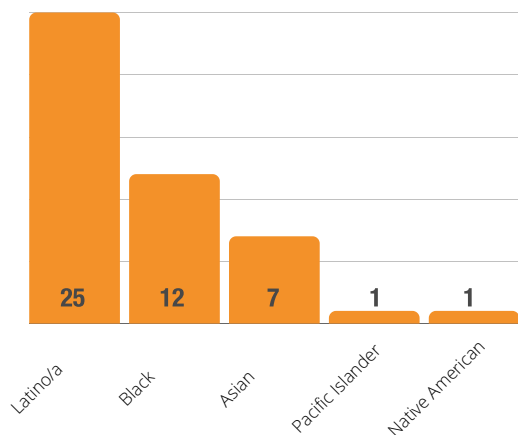
- Exploring and **co-creating** collaborative family, community and school **partnerships that center** the full academic and social needs of our Youth, Families, and Staff of Color.
- Discussing the instructional and social-emotional practices that emerged during the pandemic that should be amplified and spread back 'in school'.
- Intentionally build the time and space to cultivate relationships and **support the healing and well-being** of Youth, Families, and Staff of Color.



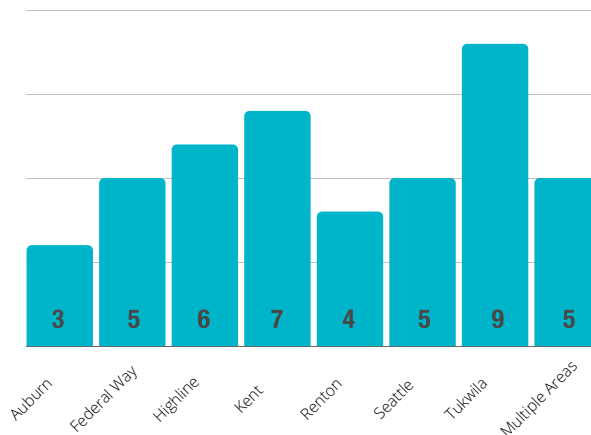
# APPENDIX

## WHAT DID CONVERSATIONS LOOK LIKE & HOW DID THEY HAPPEN?

### Racial Representation



### District Representation



35 hours of conversations with 44 community members (23 youth) representing all 7 South King County 'Road Map' Districts.

### Questions

This series of questions were developed by our Wisdom Council in order to launch conversations and capture the current pulse of where youth and their communities are now, and to identify themes that could be relevant to school districts to serve students of color better in the future.

1. How are things going for you and your family, and/or your organization and your community?
2. How have you adapted to virtual learning? Do you have any success stories to share--or challenges that you have faced? For example: Tell me about a time that you shined during virtual learning and a time that faced barriers/challenges? How did you celebrate your success? How did you address the challenge/barrier?
3. Tell me about one or two ways you may or may not be emotionally ready to return to class for in-person instruction. Why?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

### Recruitment & Conversation Strategy

In order to build on existing relationships and trust, we started by interviewing people with which we, the PSESD Wisdom Council, already had relationships. At the end of each interview, we asked our participants if they would like to conduct community conversations with people they had access to or knew. In doing so, we were strategically able to grow our Wisdom Council and grow the diversity of voices represented and recruit more youth that represent the Road Map region districts.

### Training

PSESD staff from the Strategy, Evaluation and Learning Department offered an in-depth training for everyone conducting a community conversation. Both the training and conversations were conducted in both Spanish and English, with translations from Spanish to English completed by PSESD staff. The focus of this training, as directed by the Wisdom Council, is to frame these interactions as conversations rather than interviews, in order to bring authenticity to these conversations with our community.

### Compensation

Compensation is provided for both the interviewer and interviewees who participate in community conversations. Interviewers received \$25 per hour stipends from PSESD, as they serve on our Wisdom Council. Interviewees received tokens of appreciation, and had the option of donating their token of appreciation towards a Community Based Organization serving people of color.

### Next steps

The Wisdom Council will soon begin to launch another round of community conversations rooted in the experiences, concerns, and aspirations of our communities of color. Before we do, we are developing our communication strategy for sharing out this round and future rounds of community conversation insights. So far this includes: sharing with all those who participated in providing their valuable input, providing to South King County and Puget Sound superintendents, sharing and discussing with our existing networks and communities, our partner community-based organizations, and our partner educator-leaders, disseminating to communication teams at our partner districts, and sharing through the PSESD website and social media. In addition, the Wisdom Council will invite community conversation participants to reflect together in order to improve the experience and impact going forward.



---

# Endnotes

- [1] Ishimaru, A. M. (2019). *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities*. Teachers College Press.
- [2] Safir, S. & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street Data: A Next generation Model of Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Publishing.
- [3] Seattle Times staff. (2021, June 13). Growing up in a pandemic: Washington children reveal what they learned during a turbulent year. *The Seattle Times*.  
<https://projects.seattletimes.com/2021/local/washington-children-reveal-learned-during-school-year-covid-coronavirus/>
- [4] Yohalem, N., Cooley, S., Guizar, M., Ocana, V., Meshnick, M. (2020, Fall). *In their Own Words: Young People Describe the Impact of COVID-19*. Seattle, WA: Community Center for Education Results.  
<https://roadmapproject.org/resources/in-their-own-words-young-people-describe-the-impact-of-covid-19/>
- [5] Furfaro, H. (2021, June 29). Most Washington high schoolers felt sad or depressed during the pandemic, state survey finds. *The Seattle Times Education Lab*.  
<https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/most-washington-high-schoolers-felt-sad-or-depressed-during-the-pandemic-state-survey-finds/>
- [6] Flores, M. & Rees, H. (2021, January). *Two Pandemics: Addressing the Experience of Racial Violence and the Covid-19 Pandemic for Students and Families of Color*. Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) for the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Instruction (OSPI).  
<https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/workgroups/eogoac/pubdocs/EOGOAC%202021%20Annual%20Report.pdf>
- [7] Flanagan, S.K., Margolius, M., Pileggi, M., Glaser, L., Burkander, K., Kincheloe, M., & Freeman, J. (2021, Summer). *Where do we go next? Youth insights on the High School experience during a year of historic upheaval*. America's Promise Alliance Center for Promise, GradNation, Research for Action.  
<https://www.americaspromise.org/wheredowegonext>
- [8] [YouthTruth-Students-Weigh-In-Part-III-Learning-and-Well-Being-During-COVID-19.pdf \(youthtruthsurvey.org\)](#)
- [9] Rajan, A. (2021, May 9). Virtual schooling has been a challenge. But that doesn't mean we can't learn anything from it. *The Seattle Times Education Lab*.  
<https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/virtual-schooling-has-been-a-challenge-but-that-doesnt-mean-we-cant-learn-anything-from-it/>

## GRATITUDE

We are so grateful for this incredible opportunity to hear from our Youth, Families, Communities, and Educators of Color. We cannot express enough our sincere gratitude to the amazing Wisdom Council for their leadership and hard work to make this community conversation project possible. This could not have been accomplished without their commitment and dedication to our Communities of Color.

Please note that the content is the reflection and compilation of the amazing insights of our participants. We would like to acknowledge all Youth, Parents, Community Leaders, and Educators of Color who initiated and engaged in conversations throughout the Road Map region. Your contributions were and are so valuable. We feel very fortunate to have connected.

And lastly, we would like to take this opportunity to express a deep sense of gratitude to our very own amazing Wisdom Council Team Members:

Angelica M. Alvarez ([PSESD](#)), Brad Brown ([PSESD](#)), Alfred Chol, Caden Crawford ([Senior, Tukwila School District](#)), Jadon Crawford ([Senior, Tukwila School District](#)), Leila Crist ([PSESD](#)), José García ([King County Library System](#)), Jonathan Joseph ([Tukwila Children's Foundation](#)), Adam Kay ([PSESD](#)), Trishaunie Lewis ([Senior, Renton School District](#)), Teresa Mawi ([UW, recent graduate, Renton School District](#)), Ayub Mirreh, Ken Nsimbi ([King County Housing Authority](#)), Melissa Nunez ([Junior, Kent School District](#)), Paméla Raya-Carton ([PSESD](#)), Anya Souza-Ponce ([Sophomore, Seattle School District](#)), and Lupita Torrez.

