



December 2021 – July 2022

King County Middle School Youth Share Their Experiences  
and Perspectives on Emotional Safety and Well-being at  
School

# Acknowledgements

This work is made possible by funding from the Conrad N. Hilton foundation through our partners at Seattle Children's Research Institute.

Thank you to our partners: Empowering Youth and Families Outreach, Communities in Schools Federal Way-Highline, and Cardea, and to all youth who shared their experiences.



How did  
we do it?

PHSKC partnered with **Empowering Youth and Families Outreach, Communities in Schools Federal Way – Highline, and Cardea** to hold conversations with middle school youth to learn:

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1. What do supportive emotional health and well-being look like for young people at school?
2. What makes young people feel connected to an adult at school?
3. How does the school environment impact youth emotional health and well-being?

# Why this project?

This project was designed to hear directly from youth who identify with groups who are disproportionately impacted by systemic racism and gender-based oppression to provide meaningful and actionable feedback on young people's needs and opportunities to improve support.

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## **GOALS:**

- **Document** how the school environment impacts young people to help move towards systems accountability.
- **Explore existing strengths and unmet needs** in supports and programs for middle school youth.
- **Elevate recommendations** directly from middle school youth about how support can be improved.

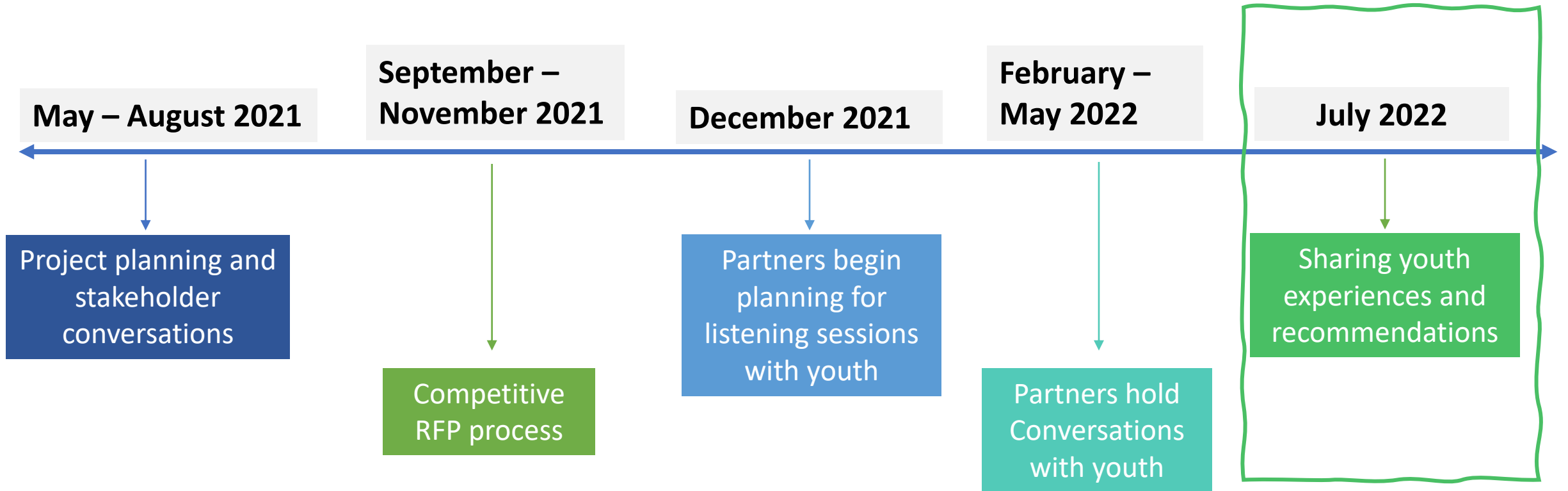
# Who participated?

**67 middle school students** participated in  
conversations

**Participants included young people who attend middle schools in King County and identify as:**

- Transgender or gender diverse (21 students)
- Black or African American (25 students)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (6 students)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (15 students)

# Project Timeline



# Successes and Limitations

## Successes

- Elevating voices of BIPOC and gender diverse middle school youth.
- Partners were able to tailor how they conducted youth conversations to the specific needs of each group.

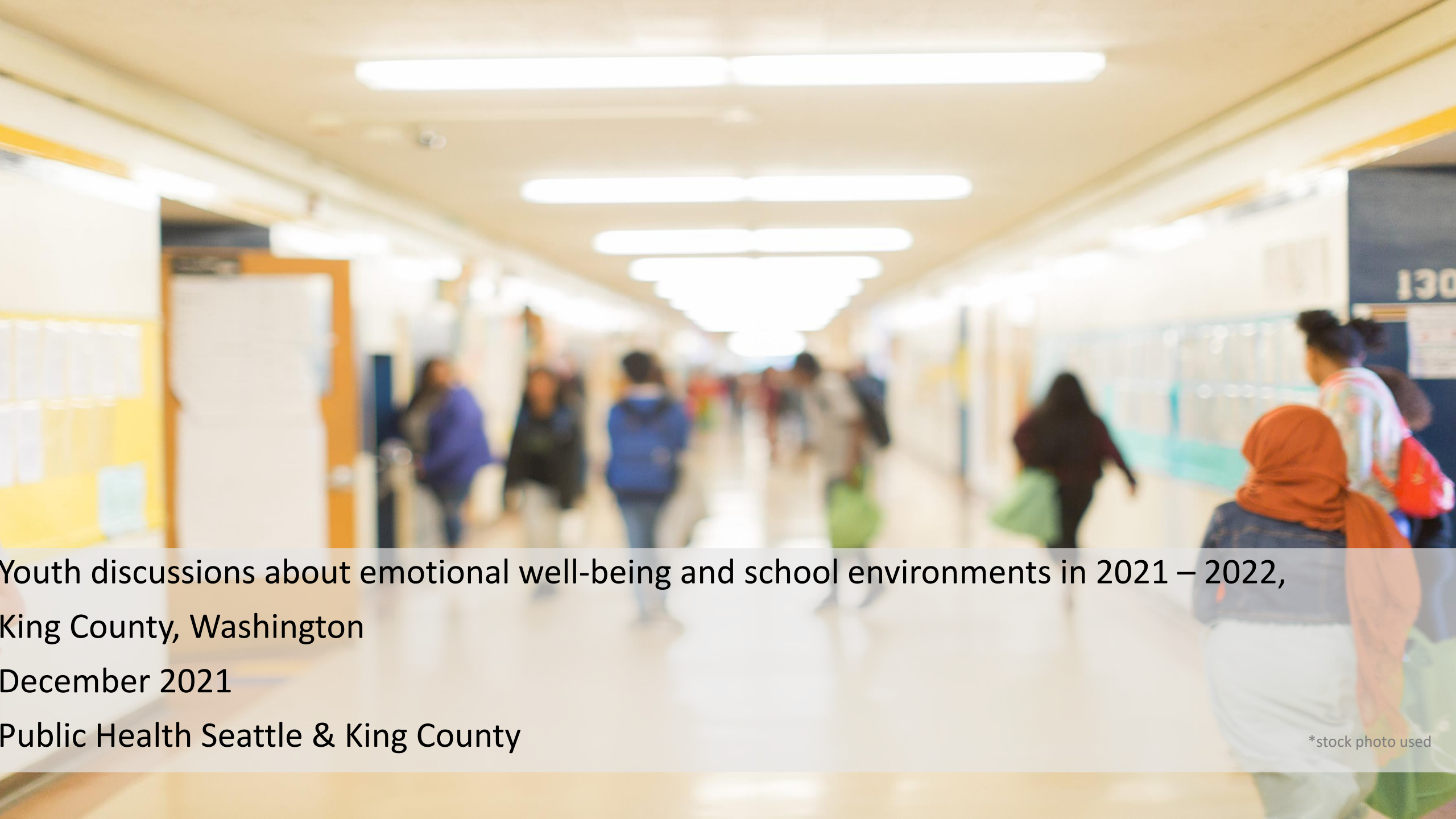
## Limitations

- This project does not represent experiences or perspectives of all King County middle school youth who identify with these groups.
- Young people and partner capacity continues to be impacted by the pandemic.
- All activities had to be completed during the 2021-2022 school year.



# Youth Experiences: Partner Presentations



A blurred photograph of a school hallway. The hallway is brightly lit with long, rectangular fluorescent lights on the ceiling. The floor is a light-colored, polished surface. On the left, there are several doors, some with bulletin boards. On the right, there are lockers and a sign with the number '130'. In the foreground, a student wearing a red hijab and a grey jacket is walking away from the camera. Other students are visible in the background, some walking and some standing. The overall scene is a busy school environment.

Youth discussions about emotional well-being and school environments in 2021 – 2022,  
King County, Washington  
December 2021  
Public Health Seattle & King County

\*stock photo used

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

- This report provides relevant and sensitive information about the emotional well-being and school environments for Middle School students in the King County area.
- The results come from the Communities in School of Federal Way – Highline transgender/gender diverse, as well as Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian students. These students come from a collection of Middle Schools throughout the Federal Way area.
- The students participated in these conversations via one on one conversations with the School Outreach Coordinator at their schools, or in a group setting with their peers. This choice was based on the comfort levels of the students.



# WHAT QUESTIONS DID WE ANSWER?

- When you think about emotional health or mental health, what comes to mind?
- What makes you feel emotionally safe at school?
- Do you think emotional safety at school and a person's racial or ethnic identity are related? / Do you think emotional safety at school and a person's gender identity are related?
- What makes you feel connected to adults at school?
- How can adults at school better support emotional health and well-being for youth?
- How could emotional health and well-being supports be better designed to meet the needs of young people?

# WHO PARTICIPATED IN CONVERSEATIONS AND HOW?

- 26 middle school students participated in the conversations.
  - 59% identify as gender diverse, 9% identify as transgender, and 32% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.
- The conversations were in the form of an in-person discussion with the School Outreach Coordinator at the student's school. A one-on-one conversation or a group conversation was available to the participant based on comfort level.
- There were 17 discussions held, and each discussion was held for roughly 10 – 30 minutes.
- We offered each participant a \$50 thank you gift card to Amazon or Safeway.

# A FEW NOTES ABOUT THIS REPORT

- Some of the topics discussed were sensitive for middle school students. We acknowledge this sensitivity by respecting their boundaries when it comes to certain questions.
- We use the terms transgender and gender diverse separately due to the classifications of the individuals participating, but it is helpful to understand that gender diverse is an umbrella term used to describe anyone who identifies as a non-cisgender, which may include transgender or nonbinary identities.





# Overall feelings about Emotional Well-being and School Environments During the 2021 – 2022 School Year

\*stock photo used

# SUMMARY: EXPERIENCES OF TRANSGENDER AND GENDER DIVERSE STUDENTS

- There is a strong fear about safe spaces not being safe. Where things being told in confidence to teachers or counselors are being shared with others without consent, or before the student is ready.
- Students spoke often about the lack of diversity between the staff members, having no one that relates to them.
- Students feel they are “living a double life” when they are not able to be themselves outside of school and this causes a lot of stress.

“They [adults] could be nicer, and ask for my pronouns, and ask how our parents will react. They should stand up for us when other students disrespect our identity.” – *Gender diverse 6<sup>th</sup> grader*

“I don’t like when that people think I’m “confused”. It scares me to have to correct people sometimes, because you don’t know if they’ll get angry or not.” – *Gender diverse 6<sup>th</sup> grader*

# SUMMARY: EXPERIENCES OF NATIVE HAWAIIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDENTS

- Social media and gossiping make school feel unsafe and students felt that adults are not aware of these problems.
- Students spoke often about the lack of diversity between the staff members, having no one that relates to them.
- Students are excited to be at school but stressed due to situations at home.

“It took some time to get comfortable with adults in school. Last year during the pandemic, my teachers were really supportive over zoom but it was awkward. This year, there is a sense of “refreshness” to be able to see my teachers in person and meet with them one-on-one if needed. You [CIS staff] have been very supportive also in terms of being a person of color that can identify with similar experiences as myself.” – *Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 8<sup>th</sup> grader*

“When I am at school I feel more at home because my friends treat me like family.” – *Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 8<sup>th</sup> grader*



STUDENTS FELT THAT  
IDENTITY  
AFFIRMATION IS AN  
IMPORTANT PART OF  
EMOTIONAL SAFETY

***Do you think emotional safety at school and a person's gender identity/racial or ethnic identity are related?***

- “Yes because you have to be accepted for who you are in order to feel emotionally safe – being misgendered or called by my dead name. People laugh about misgendering me, and call it a joke which makes me feel unsafe. I don't like that people assume my gender because they're stereotyping...”  
*- Transgender 6<sup>th</sup> grader*
- “At times, students are targeted depending on their identities. Stereotypes have the biggest blame for this. There is lots of name calling among peers, and LGBTQ people are targeted the most.” – *Gender diverse 8<sup>th</sup> grader*
- “Yes, Staff should be treating everyone equally regardless” – *Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 8<sup>th</sup> grader*

## ***How does the school environment impact your emotional health and well-being?***

- “I feel comfortable at school because I have a good group of friends. But there are days when I don’t feel the most confident if say a few of my friends are out. I can over think situations that I am in at times and with social media being so prominent in schools, it can all be so overwhelming. What I have noticed at school now that we are back in person is more and more kids being bullied but not saying anything.” – *Gender diverse 8<sup>th</sup> grader*
- “Our school environment here can be toxic and adults do not see it. But because I have connections with students in each grade, I do not like I receive the same toxicity that others do. So much “tea” goes around, aka information, about students and there are even social media problems that make people feel uncomfortable.” – *Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 8<sup>th</sup> grader*
- “I get scared whenever someone from the school calls home because they could use the wrong name or pronoun and I could get in trouble” – *Gender diverse 6<sup>th</sup> grader*

**BULLYING, GOSSIP,  
and SOCIAL MEDIA  
IMPACT STUDENTS’  
WELL-BEING AT  
SCHOOL**

STUDENTS WANT  
MORE SUPPORT,  
CONNECTION, AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY FOR  
SCHOOL STAFF AND  
STUDENTS

## ***How could emotional health and well-being supports be better designed to meet the needs of young people?***

- “Teachers or counselors shouldn’t assume our gender. They should make it a habit to ask.” – *Gender diverse 6<sup>th</sup> grader*
- “Students should get in trouble for disrespecting my identity, calling me by the wrong name or using the wrong pronouns because that makes me feel unsafe. If nothing is done it makes those kids think it’s okay and it is not.” – *Gender diverse 8<sup>th</sup> grader*
- “Staff taking time to focus on students and do check-ins. With check-ins comes more staff involvement with students 1 on 1” – *Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 8<sup>th</sup> grader*
- “Staff treating everyone equally regardless if they are perceived as a “bad kid”” – *Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander 8<sup>th</sup> grader*
- “I wish someone could give me advice on how to ask my parents to respect me. None of the teachers are [gender diverse or transgender] so they don’t relate to me.” – *Gender diverse 6<sup>th</sup> grader*
- “Adults should be better trained in these issues and show that they really cared about students mental health.” – *Gender diverse 6<sup>th</sup> grader*

# What helps students feel connected to adults at school?

## **Gender diverse and Transgender students:**

- Being seen as a “whole person” and treated with kindness.
- Adults who have a deep understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and avoid microaggressions.
- When adults use students’ preferred name and pronouns.

## **Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students:**

- Connecting with BIPOC adults at school.
- Teachers/school staff who check in frequently, are consistently there, and make space for students to talk.
- Treating everyone fairly and trying to understand student experiences through a student lens.

# OVERALL TAKEAWAYS

## **Gender Diverse/Transgender Students:**

- While most students wish to feel more accepted by teachers and peers at school, they also mentioned that school was where they are able to be their most authentic selves.
- Students want more support around communicating with parents about their gender identity and worry about school staff using the wrong name or pronouns when contacting parents.
- Students also voiced their concerns about safe spaces being unavailable at schools, and hoped that there would be more of them in the future.

# OVERALL TAKEAWAYS


## **Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian students:**

- Students felt that they could be themselves at school but struggled with challenges at home which led to stress.
- The need for spaces to talk to an adult was present. They felt as though there was no one at school like them that they could relate to.
- The concern for the way they look to others was very important. Being seen as a gang, or a group of troublemakers by the school staff because they all hang out together really bothered them.

# CONTEXT AND LIMITATIONS

- We found that talking about their personal feelings towards school was very uncomfortable for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students. If we were able to have an adult from their community come in and ask these questions, we feel we could have gotten more information.
- We found that transgender and gender diverse students were very concerned about physical safety at school, and while these are students on our case load, it was very common for us to refer them to counseling and resources. Having a licensed professional or someone who is able to meet with students for additional supports after the conversations would have been helpful for these young people. This could mean a therapist or anyone that has the qualifications to give support and resources.
- Many students were emotional during our conversations, which leads us to believe that there is a general lack of support in schools for the mental health of students.



A photograph of a wall of red school lockers. The lockers are arranged in two rows. Each locker has a silver handle and a small rectangular slot at the top. The padlocks are in various colors: blue, purple, green, and silver. The lockers are set against a dark background.

Thank You!  
Questions?

\*stock photo used



# Emotional well-being at middle school – Key findings from discussions with gender diverse, American Indian and Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students in King County



# Acknowledgments

**We greatly appreciate everyone who made this work possible.**

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Our project partners, Na'ah Illahee Fund, Trans Families, and United Indians of All Tribes Foundation, who worked to connect us with young people, assisted in the facilitation of focus groups, and provided support for participants.

Public Health Seattle King County (PHSKC) who supported as thought partners and funders. This work was made possible by the King County Best Starts for Kids Levy and funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Seattle Children's Research Institute. Opinions contained in these materials reflect those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of King County or Seattle Children's Research Institute.

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

# Project Partners



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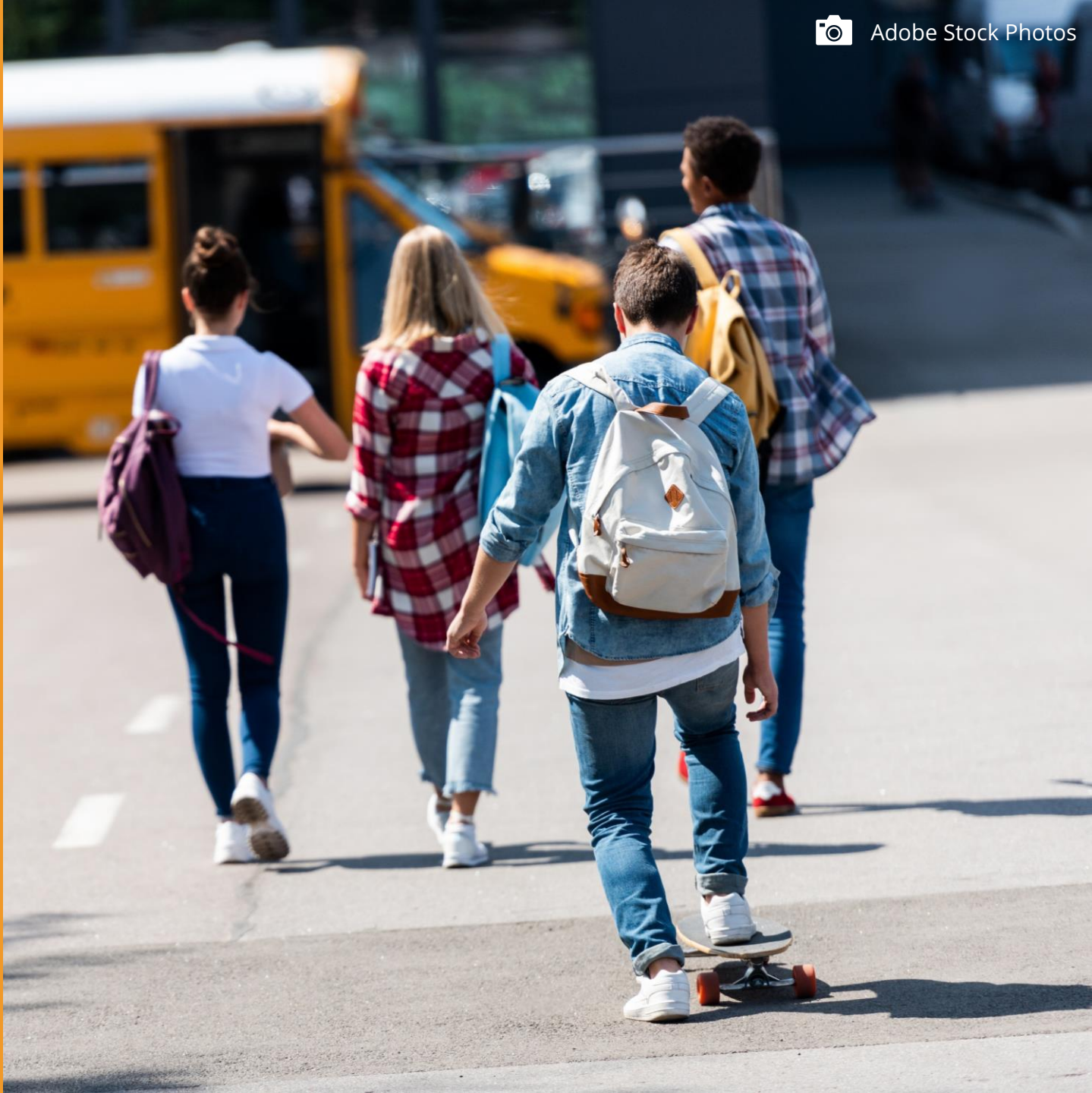
**3** Voices of Young People who are American Indian and Alaska Native

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# Background



# Project Background

Public Health Seattle & King County (PHSKC) and Cardea were interested in learning from middle school-aged young people about their perspectives on what a supportive emotional health and well-being environment looks like at school. The goal of this project is to inform school districts, program managers, and community-based organizations on ways to support young peoples' emotional health and well-being at school. PHSKC engaged Cardea to learn from young people who identify as transgender or gender-diverse, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander.

The purpose of these conversations was to hear young people's perspectives on their school environments to inform systems accountability and recommend improvements to inform school programs, especially for school districts that participate in School-Based Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Services (SBIRT). SBIRT, which started in 2018, is an intervention to connect young people with emotional and behavioral health supports. SBIRT key components include screening for strengths, substance use, and mental health concerns; brief semi-structured interviews with young people and their caregivers, both separate and together; and referral to community-based supports (i.e., counseling, mentoring, and leadership opportunities for young people).<sup>1</sup>

## **The project addressed key questions, including:**

- What makes young people feel emotionally safe at school?
- Do young people feel that emotional safety at school is impacted by racial/ethnic or gender identity?
- What makes young people feel more connected to adults at school?
- How can emotional health and well-being supports be better designed to meet the needs of young people?

# Approach

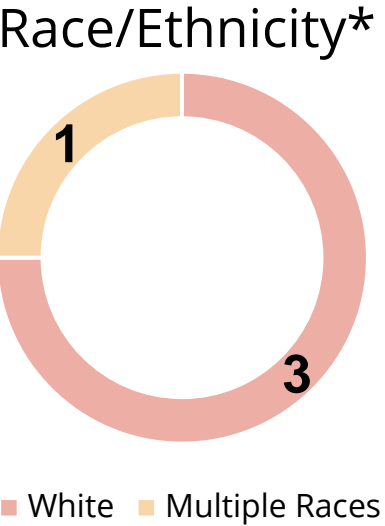
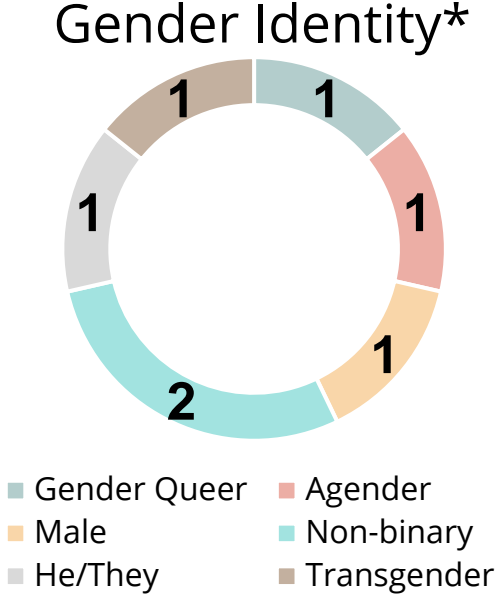
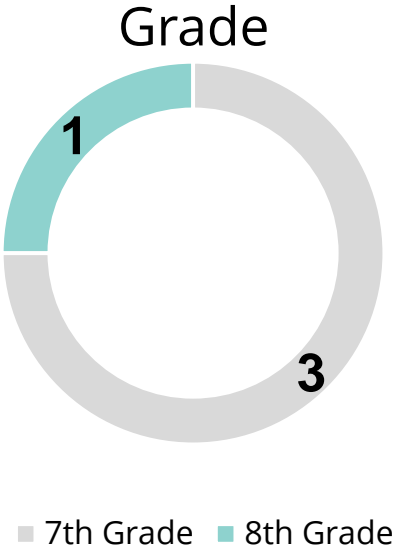
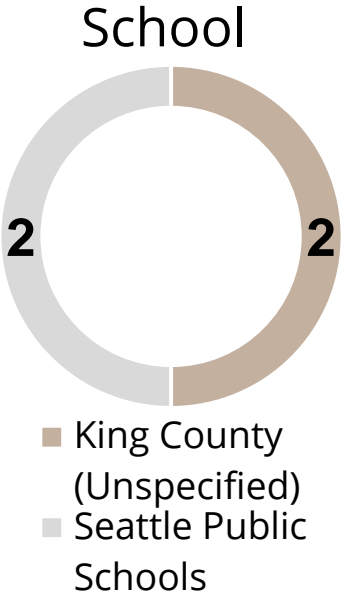
From March through May of 2022, Cardea partnered with community organizations and leaders to facilitate **six discussion sessions**, one in person and five virtual, with a total of **16 middle school students**. The in-person discussion was held at the Southwest Boys and Girls Club, which was selected to provide easy access for young people to attend the discussion session.

The sessions occurred on weekdays after school hours or on the weekend to accommodate school schedules. Partner organizations assisted with participant recruitment by reaching out to young people through existing organizational connections and through distribution of recruitment flyers. Partners also assisted in managing session logistics to ensure accessibility, attended most discussion sessions to provide young people with necessary supports, and co-facilitated three of the discussion sessions. Facilitators adapted the discussion groups to fit the needs of participants. Adaptations included pivoting from discussion groups to interview-style discussions for two sessions, using sticky notes on flipchart paper as an interactive way to answer discussion questions in one session, and splitting into two discussion groups to accommodate a larger participant turnout.

Prior to discussion groups, participants completed a demographic form including grade, school district, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. Cardea provided gift cards to participants and compensation to project partners for their time. Cardea analyzed discussion group and interview data using content analysis to pull out key themes and pertinent quotations, and demographic data using basic descriptive analysis. Project partners reviewed this summary report. Discussion participants will be given the opportunity to review the content of the report before findings are presented, due to timeline considerations.

# Participant Demographics: Transgender and Gender Diverse

Four transgender and gender diverse young people participated in discussion sessions. Two participants indicated that they attended schools in the Seattle Public Schools school district, while the other half did not specify which King County school district they attended. Three out of four participants were in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Three participants were white, with the remaining participant identifying as having multiple races. Participants selected all gender identities that described them, identifying themselves as gender queer, agender, male, non-binary, transgender, and he/they.



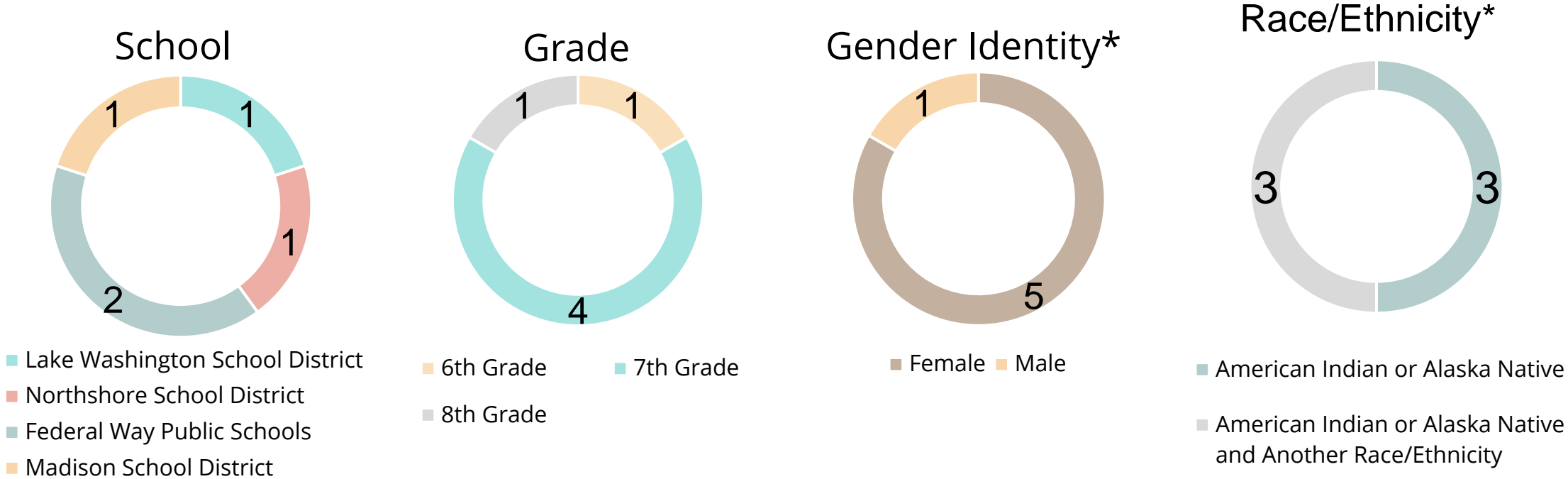
\*For questions about race/ethnicity and gender identity, participants could select more than one identity. Therefore, counts may not add up to the number of participants.





# Participant Demographics: American Indian and Alaska Native

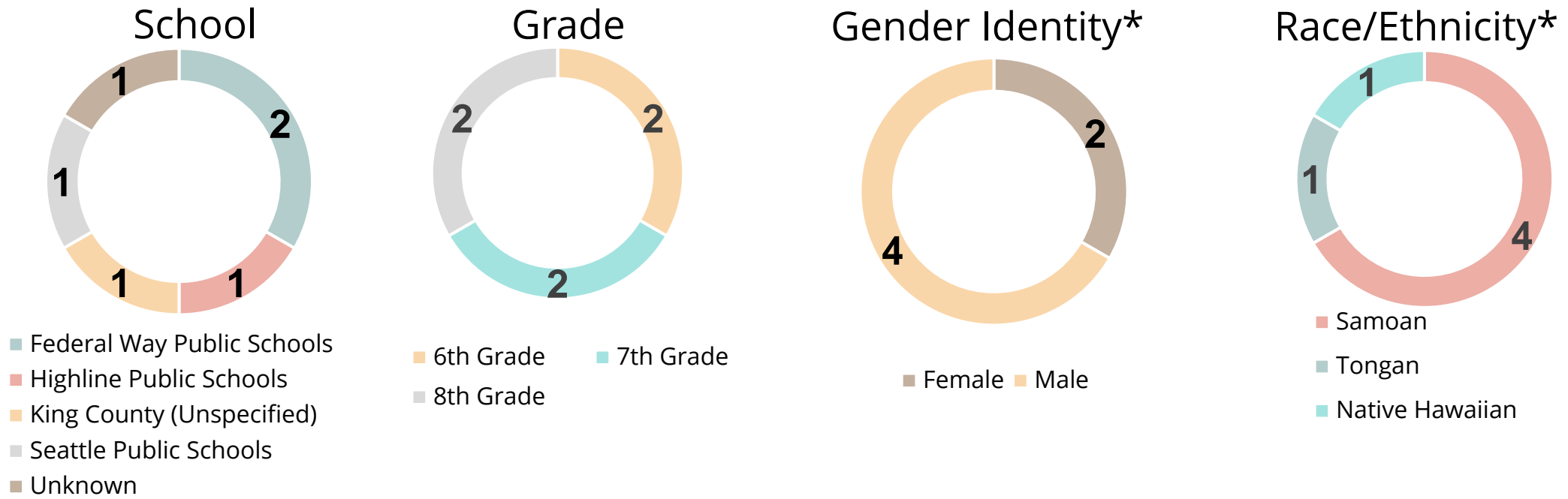
Six American Indian and Alaska Native young people participated in discussion sessions. Two participants attended Federal Way Public Schools and four participants were in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Five participants identified as female. Three participants identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, and three participants identified as both American Indian or Alaska Native and another race or ethnicity.



\*For questions about race/ethnicity and gender identity, participants could select more than one identity. Therefore, counts may not add up to the number of participants.

# Participant Demographics: Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander

Six Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander young people participated in discussion sessions. Two of the six participants attended Federal Way Public Schools and two participants each were in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Four participants identified as female. Participants identified as Native Hawaiian, Samoan, and Tongan.



\*For questions about race/ethnicity and gender identity, participants could select more than one identity. Therefore, counts may not add up to the number of participants.

# Context and Limitations

As with all listening sessions, the results of this project should be considered within the context of the limitations of in-depth, qualitative work. Limitations for this work include response bias and sample size, COVID-19, time of year, and community trust.

**Response bias and selection bias:** Young people who choose to participate in listening sessions may be different from those who do not. Given the relatively small sample of young people who chose to participate in listening sessions and the recruitment approach through community-based organizations, young people who participated in these listening sessions may be more involved in supportive programs and groups compared with middle school students who did not participate, leading to potential selection bias. There are also cultural differences in what is appropriate to share in a group setting. Young people's responses must be considered within the context of this limitation.

**COVID-19:** The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted the number of participants in this project. As young people and organizations that serve young people continue to navigate the ongoing implications of the pandemic, it was difficult to reach interested participants. Additional participants would have enriched the findings from this work.

**Time of year:** The end of the school year can be a very busy time for young people. Hosting discussions in April and May could have been a barrier to recruitment as young people navigated many competing priorities.

**Trust:** Trust with discussion group participants is key. While our partner organizations participated in discussion groups to provide community-level support, Cardea understands that trust takes time and the painful history of unethical research conducted among Indigenous, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, transgender, and queer communities may have impacted young people's openness and therefore the data we gathered.



**Voices of young  
people who are  
transgender and  
gender diverse**

Adults can support transgender and gender diverse young people in feeling safer at school through physical cues in classrooms and increasing access to all-gender bathrooms and private changing areas

- Physical cues in classrooms and around the school campus, such as pride flags or posters communicating inclusion and acceptance of all identities, help to build trust and contribute to a sense of safety among transgender and gender diverse young people.

*"One of my teachers just has, like on their wall, just posters. Like we support every background, race and...whatever you identify as, and this is a safe space for [you] to be who you are with no judgment...That kind of makes you feel good, that they've dedicated like an entire space of the classroom just showing they support who you are no matter who you are."*

*"Quite a few of my teachers have [inclusive posters up] and that can like always just make people feel more accepted into that space because they're like specifically saying, 'You're welcome here and we support who you are. Even if they don't actually like say it out loud, they're still saying it with their areas and their decorating skills.'"*

- Bathrooms and locker rooms are a big source of stress for transgender and gender diverse students. If school administrators expanded access to all-gender bathrooms and private changing areas at school, then students would feel safer and more supported.

*"The bathrooms are super gendered, and so I just go to the nurse's office, which is pretty far away sometimes, and there's only like two stalls and it's like the only gender-neutral bathroom in the building. So that sucks."*

*"There was the girls locker room and the boys locker room and you had to change into your gym uniform thing, and yet there was no privacy at all. So that wasn't fun and no one felt comfortable with that at all."*



Adults can support transgender and gender diverse young people in feeling safer at school by advocating for them across school forums

- Young people shared that adults openly advocating for transgender and gender diverse students in classrooms, school assemblies at the beginning of the year, and across various media platforms would help students feel more accepted at school and more comfortable advocating for themselves.

*"[Adults need to] meet [student] needs in a way that's not going to make them like feel bad or like in a way that's gonna like make them feel like they're a burden...this needs to be like a thing that's at the beginning of the year where say like 'it's ok to do these things... like put it in their brains so that they aren't like scared later on to say something...It would be best to share this across as many platforms as possible like in an email, on a bulletin and then have it in the classrooms, and have it in assemblies...I wouldn't say one-on-one because that can be kind of overwhelming or make you feel like 'oh why are you telling just me this,' but anywhere where it's not singling out specific people."*

*"For LGBTQ stuff [schools should] have stricter rules because like a lot of times people will just be like 'yeah, I don't say people's pronouns' and there will be excuses about it, but they need to like drill it into kids' brains...we kind of need to just destroy like all social constructs of gender because gender is like not really a real thing...and I just feel like it could be a lot easier without it. We should be taught that we don't have to fit into those roles or stereotypes or stuff like that."*

*"A lot of times [peers] will like say stuff that is so wrong like you can't say that kind of stuff...like they will make jokes about like sexual assault and stuff like that and it's not cool you know, and I try to tell them to my best of abilities, but I can't put it in their brains as much as like a teacher would"*

*"I've been called like slurs at school before and if that happens then I just tell the counselor and then she talks to [the student]. She doesn't bring me up in it, just like 'hey, by the way, just as a reminder, like you can't say this stuff' that kind of thing and I feel like that's kind of good"*

Relationships with peers who have similar lived experiences and adults who are open about their queer identity make transgender and gender diverse young people feel safer at school

- Young people said they feel safe when spending time with their friends who are also transgender or gender diverse because they can be themselves and their friends understand their experiences.

*"I enjoyed being with my friends, because they make school less miserable. If I'm ever struggling like they can like listen and...I will always listen to them if they if they're struggling... Most of my friends are queer...It's so nice to be able to talk to people without like having to like explain things to people...Because they're queer, like I can talk to them about something shady that happened, and they will like understand it."*

*"[A GSA club is] important because it gives people like a break from... like having to perform... it takes down a couple walls at least...it's a lot easier to talk to like people that are similar to me, or like queer people, so it's like nice to have that kind of place, too,*

- Young people said having a teacher who is open about their queer identity creates a sense of safety in the classroom because they feel like they can talk about a wider range of topics and feel less pressure to hide parts of their own identity.

*"It feels easier to be around [my teacher who is queer] than like people that aren't...it's not like a huge difference, but like sometimes it's just like I don't have to like, I don't have to like not talk about things."*

Teachers intentionally incorporating more lessons about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people into all subjects would make transgender and gender diverse students feel more supported at school

- Young people said some teachers contributed to their emotional safety at school by demonstrating they care about LGBTQ people through including LGBTQ history in their lessons, but wished this practice was more common and engaging. Teachers intentionally including and celebrating LGBTQ people in all subjects would make transgender and gender diverse students feel supported at school because the lessons may facilitate greater understanding among other students and teachers, while acknowledging student identities.

*"I feel like it would be better if like teachers and classes like covered more stuff relating to like gender identity and sexuality and stuff because that's something like a lot of people experience, but they don't ever really talk about it in a way that's helpful...Make it part of the curriculum...you could definitely put something in like history or science."*

*"[To make school better], I would probably try and incorporate a little bit like more like background on like LGBTQ in like history or also like the FLASH unit...I'd try to like get it to where we make sure that everybody there [is] supportive and helpful and will be there if you need [them]... Make sure, like the teachers are nice and are here to support whoever asks for help, whether or not they're part of LGBTQ community."*

*"I was pretty lucky. I got like a lot of really good teachers that are just like really supportive, like my science teacher. He's awesome...tries hard to make sure that everyone can do well in his class...During our FLASH unit...he focused a lot more on like people's rights and things that weren't equal than actually just like the scientific parts...It [meant] a lot to me just because I feel like everyone should have an equal opportunity in life, so to have a teacher like acknowledge that and make it part of the curriculum [felt good.]"*

*"For LGBTQ stuff they need to do a lot better job...and my school is pretty ok-ish because they do touch on the topic a lot... but they are teaching it in kind of the wrong way. They're not making it interesting for people who want to learn it...they're just like spewing out like random facts and stuff like that and I think they need to have a better way of like having it be more engaging."*



Adult recognition of the intersection between gender diversity and neurodiversity, and respecting individual student needs, would support student well-being

- Gender diverse young people shared that there can be a disconnect between adults and students when it comes to recognizing and supporting individual student needs, especially for students who are neurodiverse. Teachers openly addressing and respecting the individual needs of students in the classroom setting would support all students, including those who are gender and/or neurodiverse.

*"As long as everybody is at the same spot at the end of the day then that's good...to do that you kind of have to maneuver around and make exceptions for people to like be ok...if I say I need to go to [the counselor] then it's ok but if another student does that, [teachers] sort of question it...if everybody had that same thing then nobody would get singled out."*

*"Let's say you have like [Autism Spectrum Disorder] or something and maybe you have like sensory issues and a lot of times in school I'll notice I'm getting extremely overwhelmed by like too many things going on at once, and I think what schools could do is maybe explain that to kids like that they can't be super loud all the time especially around some people. I feel like they could do a better job of educating that like not everyone is the same."*

*"School can be overwhelming because a lot of the times they don't have very open spaces for neurodiverse people who need certain things and whose needs need to be met more than like neurotypical people....they need to stop assuming people's situations."*

*"Reassurance [from adults] that 'I'm here to help you' like 'you're not a problem, I get this all the time, I relate to you' [would be supportive]"*

Adults who misgender students, do not listen, and fail to act when students report bullying contribute to student disconnection with adults at school

- Students shared that adults must use correct pronouns to build trust and suggested that adults need more training in this area to avoid misgendering students.

*"Well, I feel like in general on a lot of issues, we could do a better job of teaching people about stuff...Most teachers like misgender me a lot, even though they know my pronouns...and that feels really shitty...I even wear [pronoun] pins and stuff...It feels first of all like you're being stepped on and also like nobody's listening to me because I'm like very trying to express it and nobody's noticing, and it feels so like hopeless and stupid."*

- Students shared that they lost trust in adults at their school when they failed to listen to students' concerns and take disciplinary action when students reported bullying by another student.

*"I don't really like to talk to adults because I don't trust them very much. I don't feel safe...I don't feel like I can go and ask for help, because like I don't feel good around [adults]... the school counselors, for example, like definitely, I don't like to talk to them, like they kind of freak me out...Just in general, like talking to adults about actual things is really hard because I also feel like they don't look at me as another human being, they looked at me as a child...so it just feels like there's like less like respect or like listening to what I say, so it feels pointless, almost."*

*"I was getting bullied in one of my classes and I told the teacher and they told me to talk to the person who is bullying me about it, and when I did, it didn't change anything. And I told the counselor and they, none of the teachers did anything until my parents came to the school."*

Transgender and gender diverse students want to connect with LGBTQ adults who have overcome mental health challenges

- Facilitating connections to thriving LGBTQ adults outside of school would also support emotional well-being among transgender and gender diverse students as it's helpful to see adults who have navigated the mental health challenges of living in heteronormative and transphobic spaces.

*"I know a lot of people are struggling with like mental health problems for sure and like identity stuff ties into that, too...I feel like seeing people that have succeeded or like made it out...is really helpful because...I know a lot of people, and like myself...it feels so hopeless, like it feels like there's no place for me [but] seeing someone who like is succeeding, or is like even still alive, because, like so many people are like super suicidal and like there's so many things like if someone who was that way like is still alive like still around and like succeeding, like, I think that would be really good."*



# Voices of young people who are American Indian and Alaska Native



Adults can support young people who are American Indian and Alaska Native in feeling safe and supported at school by creating a space where students feel free and comfortable to be themselves

- Young people shared that the adults who make them feel safe at school create an environment that makes them more open to talking. This includes starting conversations with young people that might be considered hard or uncomfortable.

*"[I feel emotionally supported] with the teachers who are willing to ask the hard questions pushing us to learn and are willing to have the tough/uncomfortable conversations. They also know we are teenagers and there are going to be days where it is hard, and they pivot and adjust the way they are teaching us to make sure we can learn."*

*"[I feel safe] being with friendly teachers... I can ask them anything freely."*

*"My teachers mostly only like students who do the work and are on time better than other students and they give them more attention. I would suggest that teachers should try to go closer to the kid. Making the kids feel someone is closer and ready to hear from them will make them feel safe."*

*"Teachers being willing to share about themselves and their lives allows a connection between us which allows us to have trust."*

*"Teachers asking 'how was your day' or 'how was your trip' makes you realize that someone actually cares."*

*"Getting high fives helps us strike up conversations with teachers too."*

American Indian and Alaska Native young people do not want to be burdened with the responsibility of educating their school on how to be culturally sensitive

- Young people shared that it is important for schools to carry the burden of educating students on how to be culturally responsive because it relieves American Indian and Alaska Native young students from being tokenized to represent their whole communities and cultures, which can be overwhelming. This includes providing accurate textbooks on the history of American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

*"Something where if people find out that we are Native now it seems like we represent that whole community...almost like we are on for show...like I need to know about this Tribe so I'm going to ask them because they are from that Tribe."*

*"[There are] some things in textbooks that are very rude. [We were] learning about the Washington Government and assigned to read pages. There was this big colored section titled 'The New Buffalo.' It was talking about Casinos and Native Americans...School-wise it starts with educating that we're still here. This is something that needs to be clear. We're still here...Have supportive groups for kids who are Native where we can talk. It's [not] our job to educate people [on topics like] 'do I say Native American, what's the right term.' People aren't educated in the terminology per se. Supporting Native students starts with education right from textbooks. Allow Tribes here to have a voice in how we teach this in schools. This takes pressures off of students to represent us. I'm proud to represent us, but there is burden being the teacher which takes away from being a student – if Tribes have input on how to educate students now, it supports students."*



American Indian and Alaska Native young people would feel better supported if they had more opportunities to connect with their school counselors and with each other

- Students shared that schools should create an environment where they are able to engage and connect with each other using the support and direction of the school counselor or support groups to be able to feel closer to each other.

*"There should be counselors in school."*

*"Having counselors from our community would be great."*

*"I agree having support groups."*

*"Provide mental health classes or therapy classes for the students."*

*"[We should have] group discussions at school."*

- Young people also shared that schools should offer additional extracurricular activities to make students feel more connected with each other and their teachers.

*"Teachers should attend extracurricular activities with their students so that they can feel closer to the students."*

*"Promoting more sports activities in school [would support connection]."*

*"Schools should organize fun days and activities outside of class."*

## Adult inaction when American Indian and Alaska Native students experience racism and bullying contributes to disconnect between students and adults at school

- Young people shared that they would like schools to provide space to have conversations related to race, racism, and bullying, especially for students who identify as American Indian and Alaska Native. Additionally, young people shared that schools should stand against racism and bullying, especially when students report these issues to their teachers.

*"Racism can be so common that we don't acknowledge it. [I] have known people for more than two years that assume my race. When I tell my race to people sometimes people seem surprised. [They] will say 'you're not Indian enough,' 'you don't look like that,' 'you're very exotic.' [We need to] educate students...racism has become embedded in our society. The society that we have has been built on race and racism. [We need to] be teaching kids it's up to us about how we pivot [society]."*

*"[There are] slurs between ethnic groups [and] slurs used towards each other. I can't tell you what and what not to say but there is still a part of it that's like do we understand why this is a slur and why it's not ok to say it. [Teach people that] when you say it, this is the reason why it's considered a slur...just giving people those tools...knowing we can't control what people say but educating people how we don't think twice about something and it's a norm...it's not meant to be a norm it's just an unfortunate accident."*

*"Fight racism in school. Don't encourage it and teachers should stand up against racism."*

*"Do not encourage bullying and have sessions against bullying."*



American Indian and Alaska Native young people would feel more comfortable if adults ensured that schools were clean and created access to services and spaces at school that support student physical and emotional wellbeing

- Young people shared that lack of access to a clean physical environment, such as bathrooms, can be a major stress for students. Ensuring that students have a clean space would make them feel safer and more supported at school.

*"[For] a healthier environment, talk about being respectful and cleanliness in the cafeteria, classrooms, and especially school bathrooms. I know how weird that sounds but it is needed unfortunately."*

*"Don't have all the bathrooms closed. Only one is not closed and you have to wait in line to use the bathroom."*



# Voices of young people who are Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander

Adults can support  
Native Hawaiian and  
Pacific Islander young  
people in feeling safe at  
school by being kind,  
non-judgmental, and  
getting to know their  
students in meaningful  
ways

- Young people shared that the adults who they trust at school tend to be people who are kind, straightforward, listen to them, and check on them to make sure they are okay.

*"The only person I talk to and the one I trust is the security guard because he is like different than my teachers. They just like judge a lot. He does not judge. He actually like pays attention when you're talking. If you're talking to a teacher she's like gazing off to a different student. With him if there's like two people, he will say go one at a time and if it's my turn he will pay attention to me and then he will go to the other student."*

*"When I'm quiet in class, some teachers will check in on me. It feels good. It shows they really care about me."*

- Students also shared that it's important for young people to get to know their teachers, and for teachers to get to know their students. This could prevent misunderstandings between students and teachers.

*"[My] history teacher is cool because she's like straightforward. She keeps it real with you. If you're like slacking off, she'll get on you like works not that hard. [I thought she] was mean in the beginning of the year, but I got to know her...Sometimes I'll stay in [her classroom] for lunch if I'm working."*

*"There was this one kid who yelled at the teacher then the teacher yelled so loud. Everyone got mad at [the teacher] for yelling so loud. I didn't care it just really hurt my ears. The other teachers came to the classroom to tell him to stop yelling at the kid because he was autistic."*

School administrators can support Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander young people in feeling safer at school by allowing them to have more autonomy with decisions and personal time

- Young people expressed that having more opportunities to make their own decisions regarding classes may help them to feel safer at school, allowing them to change situations that are not working well for them. For instance, one student mentioned that switching classes may help them at school. However, another student mentioned that they tried switching classes, but their situation did not improve.

*"I switched classes. I got another bad teacher. Then I couldn't change the class anymore...I tried to change my PE because the teacher was kind of rude and stuff but it didn't work out and I could only change it one time."*

- Students shared that personal time between classes is also important for both physical and emotional safety, and that extending the number of minutes between classes would be helpful for reducing stress and discomfort.

*"[There is] no time in between classes. We have four minutes between periods. I have been late before because I had to use the bathroom. Then they called my mom."*

When schools provide opportunities for students to connect with peers and be active throughout the day, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students feel more supported at school and connected to peers

- Students shared that they feel most connected to their peers at school when they get to work with other students in class, play sports together, or socialize through field days or at lunch time. Students mentioned that they would appreciate more opportunities to connect with peers in classroom settings. Young people also expressed that it can be hard to sit still throughout the day and be quiet for so long.

*"We're not allowed to talk to [peers] until after class because [teachers say that] talking makes us unfocused. We don't do a lot of group work...maybe once a month. I would like more group work time in class."*

*"Lunch is good. I don't have classes with any of my homies, so [lunch is the] only time I see my friends."*

*"I have a lot of energy. I like sports because movement is good and I get time with friends."*

*"[Classes are] two hours of sitting down in a seat. If we get up to get sanitizer, they get mad at you. Well, me, not the other kids."*

- When asked whether race, ethnicity or other aspects of their identity impacted their connection with peers, students said no at first, but mentioned that there were not many other students at their schools with similar cultural identities.

*"At my school there's no people that are Samoan. There's a lot of white kids, some Black kids, I'm the first of one like us at our school...I'm the only Samoan kid there. I get along with a lot of Black kids over there."*



Adult assumptions about students, untrustworthy actions, and use of non-interactive activities in the classroom contribute to Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander young people feeling disconnected with adults at school

- Students expressed frustration with some adults at school, sharing that adults can be difficult to trust because they make assumptions about students or fail to keep their commitments to young people.

*"I can't trust the school counselor. I don't go to her...I don't trust her. She says that I'm not in trouble when I go talk to her but when I leave after I talk to her I get in trouble...and I tell the principal 'why am I in trouble' and then they just make up something...That's why I don't talk to her anymore. I feel like she's my bad luck."*

*"Sometimes my teachers assume a lot of stuff about me and that's why I don't talk to them. Only when they call on me...I don't trust none of the teachers at my school. I think they are pretty judgey"*

- Students shared that there can also be a disconnect between the assignments that teachers provide to students during class and what is most helpful for students. In general, students agreed that their least favorite moments are when they have independent reading or work time.

*"I hate ELA [English/Language Arts] because we read for twenty minutes...it's boring."*

*"We do mindful minutes and stuff for a minute where we put our heads down and then she just tells the class stuff and then she tells us to put our heads up and it makes us even more tired. Some people like they stay down sleeping."*

- Students also mentioned that teachers do not necessarily reflect their students in terms of race or ethnicity and are not always fair across all students.

*"There are not a lot of people of color among teachers."*

*"I don't feel like teachers are always fair...I feel like ageism could be something to do with it. Or like their families some could have grown up in a way that made them hate another race I'm not sure."*



The top priorities for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander young people are improving relationships with teachers, increasing collaboration with peers, and improving class schedules

- When asked what they would change if they could change one thing about school, young people prioritized teacher attitudes, including ensuring that teachers are fair, non-judgmental, and listen more closely to their students.

*"Have teachers listen more to their students."*

*"Have teachers not be so judgmental."*

- Students also emphasized increased collaboration in the classroom and updates to the school day schedule to support their well-being by reducing stress/anxiety. Specifically, they would prefer being able to start the school day later in the morning, have shorter periods of class time, and have fewer class periods per day, although all participants had different school schedules.

*"I would change the hours. [I have school from] 9 am to like 2 pm. I wake up at 7:45 am and end school at like 3:05."*

*"I wake up at 6 in the morning and have to wait til like 7:50 am to go to school and it end at 3:45 pm. I would prefer a later start and to end at 2:45 pm."*

*"Four class periods a day would be better than seven."*

- One student shared a note that stopping racism and having a safe environment was a top priority, but they did not provide additional details.



# Suggested Future Directions & References

# Cross-Cutting Discussion Themes

Across discussions with transgender or gender-diverse, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander young people, there were notable cross-cutting discussion themes, including their desire for...



Connection with **adults** who **share their identities**



Connection with **peers** who **share their identities**



Adult **action** against bullying and discrimination, as inaction leads to **lack of trust** among young people

# Suggested Future Directions

Based on the themes from discussions with young people, future directions for this work could continue to explore how schools across King County...



Train adults in schools and build/maintain environments to support gender diverse, American Indian and Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander middle school students



Increase opportunities to build peer relationships



Incorporate lessons about cultural responsiveness and LGBTQ into curricula



Create more **safe spaces** for kids to be themselves



Support teachers in **advocating** for their students' needs



Support the well-being of young people with **Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)** and/or with neurodiversity

# References

1. *School-Based SBIRT Process Evaluation Final Report*. King County, 2020

[https://kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/community-human-services/best-starts-kids/documents/technical-evaluation-reports/Full\\_Report\\_-\\_SBIRT.ashx?la=en](https://kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/community-human-services/best-starts-kids/documents/technical-evaluation-reports/Full_Report_-_SBIRT.ashx?la=en)





**Thank you!**

# BARRIERS AND ONRAMPS TO EMOTIONAL SAFETY FOR BLACK YOUTH



**King County**

For middle school Black youth in King County schools



## ABOUT THIS REPORT

- This work was made possible by the King County Best Starts for Kids Levy and funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Seattle Children's Research Institute. Opinions contained in these materials reflect those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of King County or Seattle Children's Research Institute.
- Empowering Youth and Families was contracted by King County to collect data on the emotional safety of Black youth at school in King County, WA.
- All youth participated willingly.
- Empowering Youth and Families Outreach reports no conflicts of interest.

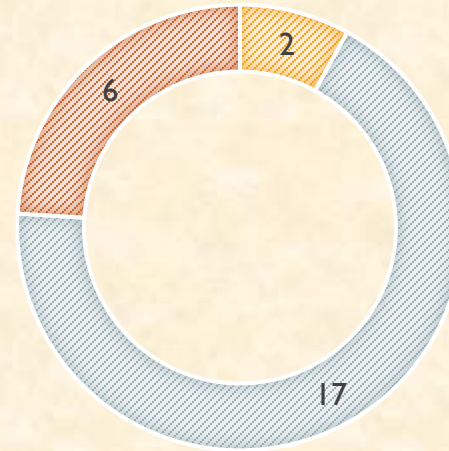
## BRIEF METHODS

- We facilitated three sessions, for 25 students
- We recruited students via our internal networks and social media by posting on Facebook, making announcements during programming and texting parents of past participants
- Students participated for 90 minutes and were compensated with a \$50 gift card for participation
- Youth were asked for consent to record
- Youth were informed of confidentiality
- Sessions were facilitated by Charissa Bass, ESA-certified school counselor
- Notes were taken by Ashleigh Shoecraft through Latitude Grant Writing, LLC.

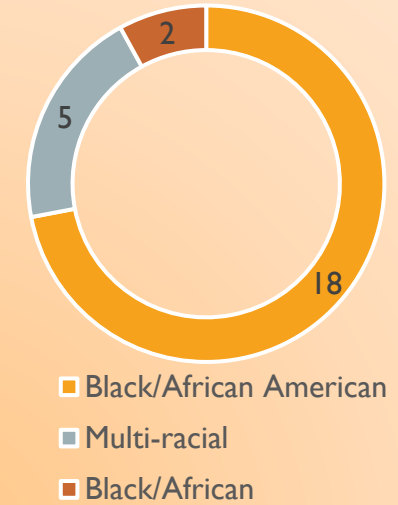
25 KING COUNTY YOUTH PARTICIPATED

## GENDERS PRESENT

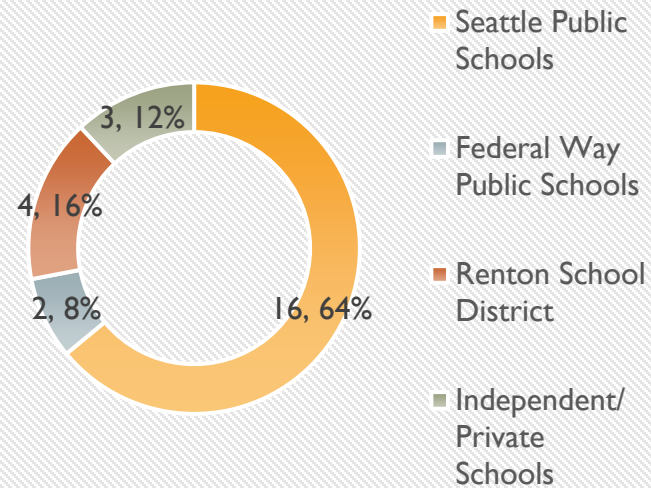
Non-Binary Female Male



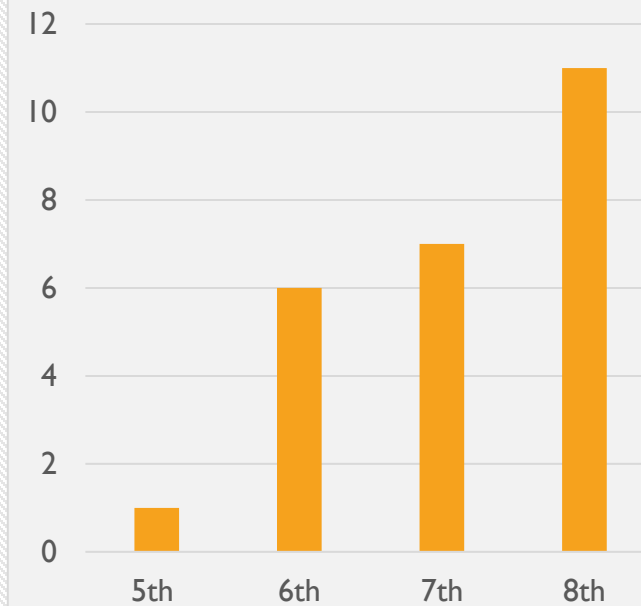
## Racial Breakdown



## School District Representation



## Grade Levels





# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## **School Environment and Safety**

- Do you feel emotionally safe at school? How so?
- What are some things that make you feel more safe? Less safe?
- Let's work together to design a school that felt 100 percent safe. What are some things that school would have?

## **Connection with Adults at School**

- Do you have adults at your school you feel connected to at school? What makes you feel connected to adults at school?
- Connection with Adults at School: What can adults do better/ what do you need from them to feel supported in your emotional health and well-being? Is there anything adults should stop doing or that makes you feel disconnected from them?

## **Safety and Race**

- Do you think emotional safety at school and being Black are related? How so?

## **Resources and Support**

- Does your school have resources available help with your emotional health and well-being? What are they?
- If your school has resources, do you/ your peers use those resources? What do you think stops young people from using the resources? What encourages you to use the resources?
- Are there resources you wish your school had that they don't? What are they? Why do you think these would be helpful?

## HOW STUDENTS DEFINE EMOTIONAL SAFETY

- “Emotional safety means that you feel like **you can express your feelings** around others **without feeling judged.**”
- “Emotional safety means **to feel like you can be yourself** and not have to worry like you’re in danger.”
- “Emotional safety means they want you to **feel safe** emotionally”
- “Feeling safe and being **able to talk about your emotions**”

...in their own words

# WHAT HELPS STUDENTS FEEL EMOTIONALLY SAFE AT SCHOOL?

Connection with adults at school

- Anti-racist curriculum
- Diverse student body
- Having friends/ peer support
- A secure school building
- Proximity to people students can relate to based on shared identity (Black teachers/ Black adults)
- People with good energy
- Empathy
- Maintained confidentiality
- Check-ins
- Grace
- Positive affirmations
- Equitable and consistent discipline practices

*Students had varying levels of emotional safety. Sense of safety was largely dependent on the types of relationships student had with adults in the building and peers. Sense of psychological safety was expressed more by students who went to predominantly Black schools.*

# WHAT CAN ADULTS DO TO HELP STUDENTS FEEL EMOTIONALLY SAFE AT SCHOOL?

- Be more open minded (not a fixed mindset)
- Be more empathetic—put themselves in student’s shoes
- Have more grace
- Help students problem solve, rather than shaming them
- “Loosen up”
- Communicate respectfully
- Let students speak in class
- Listen to all sides of the story
- Provide help when needed
- Communicate care to students (especially beyond what occurs at school)
- Express enthusiasm and interest in students lives and wellbeing
- Honor student boundaries

## Examples given...

- Security guards
- Librarians
- Principals
- Teachers

There was a theme of time. Safe adults make time for students’ problems.

# STUDENTS FEEL SAFE WHEN SCHOOL STAFF...

- **Care** for student mental health
- **Give space** when needed
- Are **approachable**
- Are **responsive**
- Are funny
- Are **available** to check-in with students
- Are **relatable**
- Don't overlook microaggressions, but **always intervene**
- Have **equitable** incentive and consequence policies
- Respect student privacy
- Express **excitement** when they see students
- Are **gracious** and extend deadlines
- Encourage peer support
- **Let students talk**
- Are **flexible**
- Are **engaging**



## EXAMPLES OF CONTRIBUTORS TO EMOTIONAL SAFETY IN THE CLASSROOM

“I feel anxious when they call on me to answer the question on the board and I don’t really know—I try to hide and ask my partner to help me—it makes me feel really good to have that person to support me.”

“I wasn’t at school for a long time and when I came back my teacher was so excited, like ‘you’re back,’ like they were happy to see me.”

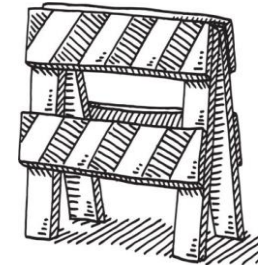
...in their own words

## STUDENT IDENTIFIED BARRIERS TO EMOTIONAL SAFETY

“For me emotional safety is that you feel like you can express yourself without feeling judged, but at school, I feel that if you were to start crying, people would laugh at you or be like, ‘look at -----, she’s crying.’”

- 8<sup>th</sup> grade student, Federal Way Public Schools

- A lack of physical safety
- Absence of confidentiality
- Unsafe teachers
- A lack of help
- Peer substance abuse
- Inequitable discipline practices
- Insensitivity, teasing, judgement and bullying from peers
- People (adults and students) being disrespectful
- A lack of diversity



Many students did not feel safe at school and named teachers as a primary threat to their sense of safety. Others identified adults at school as safe, but felt like students threatened their sense of safety.

## STUDENTS FEEL UNSAFE WHEN SCHOOL STAFF...

- Yell at students/ are rude
- Use profanity towards students
- Disregard for student mental health
- Kick students out of class without asking what's going on
- Fail to believe/trust students, especially Black students
- Assign an overwhelming workload/ pre-tests based on what you haven't learned yet
- Are unable to hold space for expression of student emotions
- Shame/ put students down
- Make assumptions
- Overly hierarchical

*Students expressed a desire for neutral authority figures, like teachers. They want adults who are less intimidating and who are less policing of student behaviors—not threatening you with detention or that you would get suspended.*

*Students expressed fear of trouble if they are honest.*

## EXAMPLES OF WHAT MAKES STUDENTS FEEL UNSAFE IN THE CLASSROOM

“They make us feel like they’re way above us—they make us feel dumb and shame you when you admit a mistake, lecturing you by telling you shouldn’t have done it instead of helping you problem solve.”

“I don’t want to go to them because they have unrealistic expectations like they want you to be quiet for the whole period.”

“Sometimes teachers only listen to one side of the story—I get in trouble and they didn’t listen to my side of the story.”

“Teachers at school don’t care about their student’s mental health, they just want to get on with the lesson.”

“They’ll just kick you out, they won’t ask what you’re feeling or what’s going on.”

“A week before winter break, we had so many tests. I feel like they didn’t help us, the next day we watched a movie. They didn’t say we did a good job or acknowledge how hard we worked.”

*Many students  
felt unseen,  
unknown,  
unvalued, and  
unheard.*

...in their own words

# RACE AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY

**Students observed unique barriers to emotional safety for them because of their race.**

- “Your skin color can make it harder to feel safe.”
- “Some of the students at my school are racists and that makes a difference.”
- “White teachers can’t relate when you tell them about a racial incident; they don’t know how to support you.”
- “I feel more White people get better luck.”



...in their own words



# STUDENTS PERCEIVED A CLEAR CONNECTION BETWEEN RACE AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY

The majority of students identified a negative correlation between race and emotional safety at school.

One of the largest indicators of emotional unsafety was being a Black student in a predominantly white class or school. Students saw isolation as more of a threat than gun violence.

“I feel like a lot of racist stuff happens at our school, but the staff doesn’t acknowledge it, they just send them to the counselor, but no one does anything about it...It makes me mad because I feel like they don’t take it seriously... I feel like they should be made to apologize”

...in their own words

Microaggressions, cultural appropriation and being racially targeted made them feel unsafe.

Students felt unsafe when their concerns or reports of racism and microaggressions went unmet or when there was a lack of follow-up and communication.

# SAFETY FOR BLACK STUDENTS CAME FROM INTERVENTION

“In my art class a kid called another kid a racist word and my school handled it right away.”

Safety came from schools addressing reports of racism seriously.

“It’s relieving when an adult steps in.”

...in their own words

# WHAT DO YOUTH WANT?

Youth worked together to come up with a school that was 100 percent safe. They identified needs centered around the following categories...



Physical environment

Curriculum

School Staff

Student body

School Policies

Emotional Supports+

# CURRICULUM + INSTRUCTION DESIRES

## CURRICULUM

- Different class options
- Less/no tests and quizzes
- Non-traditional options for student learning outside of the class (i.e. tour leading, teacher assisting)
- No homework/ less homework/ not homework everyday
- Anti-racist/ inclusive teaching
- Curriculum that integrates Black history/ histories of people of color
- Curriculum that de-centers the comfort of white students (critical race theory)
- Substance abuse education

## INSTRUCTION

- Teachers are engaging and excited about their content area
- Slower instruction/ more time to grasp the material
- Teachers are high energy and not boring
- Teachers ask questions and don't make assumptions
- No homework/ less homework/ not homework everyday
- More breaks
- Partner work-time
- Acknowledge student effort and progress

*"They don't just teach us about past history; they teach us about social issues... We are reading Stamped at school and it's teaching us about history right now."*

## SCHOOL STAFF

### Students want:

- More counselors
- Diverse teachers (Black; BIPOC)
- Culturally competent teachers
- Qualified to teach content area
- More substitutes

## STUDENT BODY:

### Students want:

- Connection with more students of color
- Diverse teachers and students

“There’s mostly non-colored teachers in my school—the teachers of color teach honors, but I’m not in honors.”



# SCHOOL POLICIES

## **Students want:**

- Rules that prohibit the use of racial slurs, microaggressions, racist incidents, and cultural appropriation
- Transparent communication systems with students, especially around immediate threats to safety
- Equitable discipline practices—no double standard in consequences of students based on their race
- Consistent enforcement of drug and alcohol use policy
- Zero tolerance for weapons on campus, especially guns
- Diverse consequence options, for example rooms for mental breaks with calming pillows and fidget toys (to go to instead of being sent to the principal's office)

## PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

### **Students want:**

Clean desks and classrooms

Bullet proof windows

One building (limited public access/  
secure/ closed to intruders)

## EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS+

### **Students want:**

Space for rest

Recess

Extracurricular activities

Comfort

The option to eat in teacher's classrooms

Small classes/ quiet work spaces

Relationships with adults characterized by  
mutual respect

## STUDENTS IDENTIFIED THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES AVAILABLE AT SCHOOL

- Most students surveyed felt like their schools had adequate resources, but did not use them.
- Students expressed a general lack of trust around adults as resources.
- The most used resources met physical needs and/or fostered connection...
  - Resource closets (with hygiene items, hand sanitizer cleaning supplies, etc.)
  - Snacks
  - Fidget toys/ items for stress relief
  - Affinity clubs
  - Classrooms open during lunch

Additional resources students were aware of at their school...

- Suicide prevention posters
- School counselors
- Counselor's room
- Positive notes and hotline numbers written on bathroom stalls

## STUDENTS SHARED THE FOLLOWING BARRIERS TO USING RESOURCES

“I don’t feel like I need it.”

“I don’t like telling people my problems.”

“I’m not telling some random White man about my problems, he’s like a stranger.”

“Teachers, they gossip and then they tell you they’re not going to tell your parents, half the time they tell your parents anyway.”

“We don’t really use the resources because a lot of my peers don’t like opening up to people.”

“I just feel silly talking to a stranger about my problems.”

“I talk to friends.”

...in their own words

# RESOURCES STUDENTS WANT & WOULD USE

- A relaxing room/ a calming room
- Quiet work spaces
- More breaks
- Check-ins
- A place to clam down
- Fidget toys
- Resources specifically for Black students; Black staff (teachers, counselors)
- Information on clubs
- Restorative Justice policies- how can students repairing the harm caused instead of just being punished?
- Diverse consequence options





# KEY OBSERVATIONS

## **Physical Safety:**

- Most students did not feel physically safe, so it was hard for them to reflect on emotional safety or see it as a need.
- Threats to physical safety are over-normalized and meeting physical needs increases safety and provides an onramp to connection.

## **Relationships and Connection:**

- Many students did not have an adult they felt connected to and did not trust the adults at school.
- Relationship, trust, and connection are key to emotional safety for Black youth.

## **Trust:**

- Perceived violations of confidentiality were barriers to using resources.
- Students want to be heard, trusted and believed.

## **Identity:**

- Students are hyper-aware of their racial/ethnic identity, and it impacts their sense of emotional safety, especially when they observe, experience, or perceive inequities.

## **Teachers and School Staff:**

- How teachers react to students' emotional expression plays a huge role in students' sense of safety.

## **Resources and Supports:**

- Students expressed a desire to learn and expressed a need for resources to enhance their learning.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Communication and Relationships:**

- Build intentional relationships between adults and students
- Communicate and follow clear confidentiality guidelines
- Develop and implement peer mediation and emotional support training

## **Curriculum:**

- Integrate instruction on healthy relationships into curriculum
- Design curriculum with the identities of all students in mind, even if it causes discomfort

## **Physical Environment:**

- Prioritize physical safety of students in building design
- Focus on resources that meet basic student needs (i.e. hunger, hygiene)

## **School Policies:**

- Develop and consistently enforce policies around racist incidents

## **School Staff:**

- Diversify teaching and school staff workforce

# Overall, young people shared the following strengths of school environments:

Physical cues in classrooms (e.g. posters, signs) and inclusive curricula make young people feel accepted and help build trust.

Young people know about resources available at school, even though not all used those resources.

Connecting with students and adults with shared identities at school was seen as a contributor to safety and a sense of belonging.

Adults at school who build personal connections with young people help build trust and a sense of care.

# And expressed a need for:

Youth also expressed a need for physical spaces that support emotional well-being and health.

More opportunities for connection with youth and adults who share their identities.

Confidentiality when seeking support from adults at school or using resources provided at school.

Adults to proactively address incidents of racism and discrimination at school and follow-up with those who report the incident.

More inclusive education that integrates histories of people of color and LGBTQ+ people, anti-racist principles, and social justice.