

2023

# PUBLIC EDUCATION COMMUNITY SURVEY

FALL 2023

This fall EmpowerEd set out to hear from YOU, those with the most at-stake in DC education. We collected responses from 450 individuals: students, educators, parents and community members across all eight wards, DCPS and charter. Our participants include **200 students+**, 120+ school staff members including **14 school leaders**, and **100+ parents/caregivers**. **38%** of respondents live in wards 5, 7, or 8, with an even distribution of school communities across wards. **56%** of survey-takers identify as Black, **12%** as Hispanic/Latino/a, and **5%** as AAPI, compared to citywide demographics of 45%, 12%, and 4% respectively.

## AT A GLANCE:

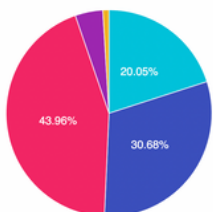
**TOP ranked** | Safety Improvement:   
Mental Health Supports

**LOWEST ranked** | Safety Improvement:   
Increase Police

## Top measures of school quality:

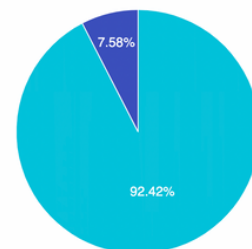


1. *Feeling safe at school*
2. *Positive school climate*
3. *Strong programming*
4. *Equitable resource access*
5. *Staff and leadership stability*
6. *Educator quality*



**50.7%**  
*believe students are overtested; only 5.3% believe students are not tested enough*

**92.4%**  
*of students feel safe while at school*



## WHAT ELEMENTS DO YOU THINK ARE MOST IMPORTANT IN MEASURING AND DEFINING SCHOOL QUALITY?

**“A great school prioritizes the social-emotional health of students and staff, welcomes families, listens and applies staff, student, and family feedback, respects teachers through autonomy and time, prioritizes joy and critical thinking, [and] advocates for anti-racist changes.”**

*- DCPS Teacher, Ward 1*

**“A school is a great school when it encompasses... opportunities for growth beyond academics, not only for students but for the teachers as well.”**

*- Charter Teacher, Ward 7*

### Survey Ranking:

*What qualities make a great school?  
How should we measure school quality?*

1. Feeling safe at school
2. Positive school climate
3. Strong programming  
(academics and co-curricular)
4. Adequate & equitable resources
5. Staff & leadership stability
6. Educator quality (experience, qualification...)
7. Challenging & interesting curriculum
8. Student, family & staff satisfaction
9. Modern & healthy facilities
10. Student attendance
11. Standardized test scores

When asked **what their child deserves but lacks school access to**, **Ward 7 & 8** respondents overwhelmingly say **field trips and mental health resources**.

Our survey participants were clear: **a good school is a good community**. Open responses emphasize mutual respect between teachers, students, school leaders, and caregivers. Common themes in defining a “great” school were **strong academics** in combination with **social-emotional learning, relationships, belonging** and **autonomy**.

#### Among parent/family respondents:

*school quality measures, ranked*

1. Educator quality (diversity, experience, qualification, retention)
2. Strong programming (arts, science, language)
3. Students feel safe at school
4. Staff & leadership stability
5. Adequate & equitable resources

#### Among Wards 7 & 8 respondents:

*school quality measures, ranked*

1. Strong programming (arts, science, language)
2. Staff & leadership stability
3. Adequate & equitable resources
4. Positive school climate
5. Students feeling safe.

**“[A great school] can empower students to take hold of their futures.”**

*- DCPS student, Ward 8*

# WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL SAFE?

Across the district, the top-ranked investment to bolster school safety is **increasing mental health supports**. A surprise trend in the data? **Increasing the number of armed police assigned to schools is ranked last**. This trend holds true across categories. Among responses from **school leaders** and **parents/families, increasing police ranks last**. Interestingly, Ward 3 residents were the only to rank increasing police above 6.0/10. Out of 14 school leaders surveyed, increasing police presence was also ranked last. This data directly contradicts the narrative that increasing police in schools is a top safety priority for both school leaders and parents. It is important to remember that **this survey is anonymous, unlike other engagement with school leaders on the topic of police in schools**.

## Survey Ranking:

*What would make the greatest improvement in school safety?*

- 1. Increasing mental health supports
- 2. Increasing Out of School Time programs
- 3. Implementing peer support groups
- 4. Building out restorative justice programs
- 5. Quality school of right close to home
- 6. Increasing traffic safety
- 7. Hiring school safety directors
- 8. Increasing building hours through community partnerships
- 9. Increasing number of armed police

## BREAK IT DOWN: TOP 3 RANKED SAFETY INVESTMENTS BY GROUP

|                                  |  |   |  |
|----------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Among parent/family respondents: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Increasing mental health support</li><li>2. Increasing Out of School Time (OST) programming</li><li>3. Hiring school safety directors</li></ul>   | Among school leaders:   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Increasing mental health support</li><li>2. Increasing Restorative Justice training</li><li>3. Implementing peer support groups</li></ul> |
| Among Student respondents:       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Increasing mental health support</li><li>2. Increasing Out of School Time (OST) programming</li><li>3. Implementing peer support groups</li></ul> | <p>Across individual groups, data shows <b>consistent trends towards a holistic approach</b>. School safety begins with student wellbeing, particularly mental health and wraparound services to empower students. The top 3 rankings for Wards 7 &amp; 8 respondents and student responses were identical.</p> |  |
| Among Wards 7 & 8 respondents:   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Increasing mental health support</li><li>2. Increasing Out of School Time (OST) programming</li><li>3. Implementing peer support groups</li></ul> |   |  |

# STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON SAFETY

**“The bond of the school  
[makes me feel safe].”**

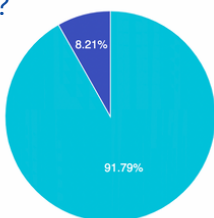
*- DCPS student, Ward 7*

District-wide, over 120 students (of 135-137 respondents) reported feeling **generally safe** in school and in their commute. The question of safety in school or commute was **only asked of student respondents**. Of the student respondents, 74, or **the majority of responses, were from Wards 7 & 8**. In this group, 93.2% felt safe while in school, and 91.8% reported feeling safe on their commute. The lowest percentages came from Ward 1, where 82.4% of students felt safe on their commute or in school. When disaggregated, our sample size from this ward was relatively small; still, this data stands in stark contrast to the general consensus on community danger. To investigate more, we examined our **qualitative responses to glean trends about student perceptions of safety**.

In qualitative responses regarding school commutes, students **expressed concern about danger across the city**. For example, a student from Ward 2 responded to the question of whether they feel safe commuting, “Yes, I feel kinda safe but it’s a lot of violence”; likewise, a Ward 7 student affirmed, **“I do encounter some potentially threatening situations.”** Responses suggest students felt safer **if traveling with friends or family, by car, or by bus rather than by metro**. A student from Ward 7 responded, “I feel like crime happens a lot in the metro”; others expressed similar sentiments. **Visible security**, presumably Safe Passage workers, were also frequently mentioned as factors which made students feel safer on their commutes.

When asked if they felt safe *inside* school, students again reported yes, but **qualitative data paints a more nuanced picture**. As a Ward 5 student put it, **“Anything can happen in school.”** Among those students who did feel safe in school buildings, respondents credited a **strong sense**

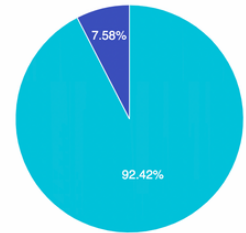
Do you generally feel safe getting to/from school?



● Yes ● No 135 respondents

**of community, which engendered feelings of safety amongst peers**. Students mentioned friends, teachers, and staff who helped them feel safe in the building. In the words of a Ward 1 student, **“No one in this school holds any animosity.”** Students also made 20 positive mentions of security, vs. 2 mentions of police. This suggests **students find security guards better integrated into the community than police**, and perhaps better able to protect the school.

Do you generally feel safe while in school?



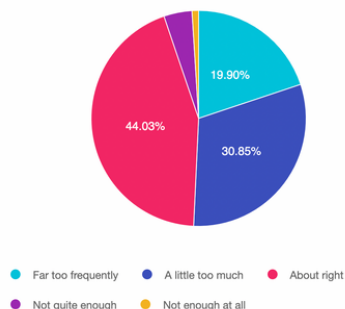
● Yes ● No 137 respondents

**“We have staff that looks out for students.”**

*- Charter student, Ward 8*

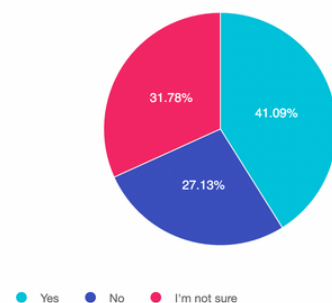
# THE TESTING CONUNDRUM:

Students in my school are tested/assessed (standardized and classroom assessments):



“Students should do more and have more experiences, not test all the time.”  
- DCPS leader, Ward 8

About half of respondents feel students are over-tested, while just 5.2% believe students are under-tested. Only 41% of respondents believed these assessments promoted student growth. This question did not differentiate between classroom and state or standardized tests; however, on the whole, **teachers and school leaders felt cynical about standardized tests.** Multiple parent responses indicated communication breakdowns, or failed to see the value in testing young children. Students feel used to the testing pace, but also expressed stress. They see testing as helpful *if* they receive feedback, but not necessarily as accurate measures.



**Are these assessments helping students improve?**

## SCHOOL IMPROVEMENTS

- Invest in community: engage authentically with families and students
- Build out a school's offerings-- make it unique! Add clubs, sports and afterschool options. Find a curriculum niche
- Accessibility: better and safer transportation options
- Connected and community schools model: medical facilities onsite, family programming
- Safety initiatives: mental health focus and restorative justice
- Student voice: let students promote their own school
- Teacher voice: attract teachers with meaningful incentives and staff culture
- Career focus schools: career track pathways
- Coordinate city services in the neighborhood
- Move beyond a “scores” focus

**FUNDING: equitable reinvestment**

Our survey asked participants, what strategies would improve underenrollment? What can the city do to support “low-performing” schools?

*Here are some of the responses.*



# WHAT NEXT?

## OSSE:

- **Expand rich programming** by launching Experiential Learning Micro-Grants
- **Invest in educator retention: Fund Educator Wellness Grants**
- **Expand Community Schools incentive**
- **School Report Card:** Most prominently display data suggested by families (test scores ranked last)
- **Rightsize frequency** of in-school and citywide assessments

As you finalize the 2024 School Report Cards, include the elements parents value most. **Not doing so would be to ignore the voices of those the report card is designed for.** Our holistic survey **reached 3.75x more stakeholders than OSSE's** School Report Card Survey. Even in OSSE data, the low ranking of a summative score, and **the high valuation of academic growth, offerings, climate and teacher retention**, aligns with our data from parent respondents. Parents want strong, diverse programming that supports their student's growth, quality educators, and basic student safety. They want **an end to overtesting**.

## COUNCIL:

- **Pass the Child Tax Credit**
- **Fully fund Educator Wellness & Flexible Scheduling**
- **Expand OST offerings**
- **Fund Expanded Community School Model**

Focus on improving student achievement by reducing and ending poverty, promoting educator retention and expanding student enrichment programming. We must commit to make education a **budget priority**. To that end, we can support schools with **increased at-risk funding** and wraparound services.

## STATE BOARD:

This report details the **elements families value most in a quality school**-- make sure these measures end up on the School Report Card! You have the ability to **ensure OSSE proposals reflect constituent values**. Veto any report card proposal with a summative score on the front page, that neglects teacher data, deemphasizes school offerings, or ignores student safety.

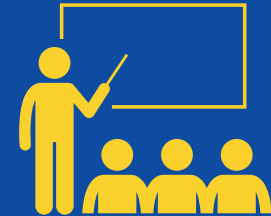
## DCPS:

Our report uncovers community ideas to improve school quality and under-enrollment. Four clear actions DCPS can take: first, you can **expand specialty programming, like dual language, Montessori, STEM, etc... equitably across the city**. Second, you can make schools into community hubs by **expanding the connected schools model** district-wide. Third, you can improve educator retention by expanding flexible scheduling, prioritizing mental health, reforming educator support & evaluation. Fourth, DCPS can better advertise its schools and specialized programs, especially in targeted, community-based ways.

# 2024 AGENDA

- *Educator Wellness Technical Assistance Grants*
- *Fully Fund Educator Retention for Student Success Act*
- *Fund Demand for Flexible Scheduling*
- *Strengthen Teacher Induction Programs*
- *Permanent Substitutes in Every School*
- *Fund Student Loan Relief for Educators Act*

## EDUCATOR INVESTMENTS



## STUDENT EXPERIENCE



- *Build 60+ Outdoor Learning Labs Within 4 Years*
- *Establish City-Wide Experiential Learning Micro-Grant Fund*
- *Expand Out of School Time Programming*
- *Equitable Dual-Language Program Access*
- *Expand Safe Passage*
- *School Safety Director for All High Schools*
- *Implement Conflict Resolution Curriculum*

- *Pass and Fund the Child Tax Credit*
- *Increase At-Risk Per Pupil Funding*
- *Historic Divestment Educational Opportunity Grant*
- *Invest and Expand Community School Incentive Initiative, DCPS Connected Schools Program*
- *Pass and Fund Universal Free School Meals*

## ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES

