

INTRODUCTION

Public Policy Associates Inc. (PPA), manages the Student Voice Project for the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). Student Voice, part of MDE's African American Student Initiative, has collected data through focus groups with African-American male and female students in public schools throughout the state. The goal is to help Michigan schools narrow the opportunity and access gaps between African-American and White students by listening to these students speak about their experiences.

Focus groups are used to solicit the perspectives of students to help examine the current culture and climate in public school buildings. Insights are shared with school building leaders and MDE to help create safe, nurturing learning environments and support systems that benefit all students.

Between 2013 and 2018, more than 800 African-American students have participated in a Student Voice focus group. During this same period, a total of 56 public school buildings have been engaged in Student Voice and they fall into four categories:

- ▶ Majority African-American student population in Detroit, a predominantly Black community.
- ▶ Minority African-American student population in predominately White Detroit suburban communities.
- ▶ Majority African-American student population in predominately White suburban communities.
- ▶ Majority African-American student populations in areas outside of metropolitan Detroit.

This action plan provides several findings and culturally responsive actions that should be considered by policymakers and school building leaders to improve the educational outcomes of African-American students. Three key insights have emerged from the focus groups.

Community context matters in educational outcomes.

Where students live and attend school makes a difference in how they are treated in their neighborhoods and whether race and/or racial incidents are a significant part of their lives and their educational outcomes.

Authentic, positive relationships with teachers are essential to student success.

The quality of relationships between teachers and students often dictates how students view themselves, education, and school, all of which affect their academic effort and performance. Effective teachers are a critical ingredient in students' success. When teachers fail to challenge, stimulate, and support both African-American male and female students, their academic performance may be greatly diminished. Students say many teachers don't believe in them and expect them to fail. In some cases, teachers fear them.

Racism plays a role, but it looks different than it has in the past.

Race and ethnicity play a role in how students are treated and in their relationships or lack of authentic relationships with teachers. Students experience bias from White students and school staff, and sometimes from other African-American students and staff. Historically, racism was overt at the interpersonal and institutional levels. Students report ongoing racism, but it is sometimes more subtle, shown through micro-aggressions, attitudes, and beliefs of school staff and fellow students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION



- Create building-level pilots to establish effective practice for improving teacher-student relationships. Effective pilots should be documented and replicated.
- Increase the number of teachers of color in school buildings.
- Work with building leaders to establish and administer consistent school disciplinary policy and decision-making processes.
- Provide professional training on cultural proficiency to teachers and other building staff to support positive interactions with students.
- Build awareness among a broad spectrum of community members about student concerns and the effect of bias on student success. Engage the community in the process of developing improvement strategies with schools.