

Atlanta Public Schools Equity Audit Findings – At a Glance

Across 13 focus groups, we found the following themes:

(Note: main themes are in bold font)

- **Theme 1: Discussing Race**
 - **Appreciation for discussions of race in school settings**
 - **Call for more discussions of race in school settings**
 - Experiences with discussions of race addressing hardships and atrocities
 - Experiences with race being covered in a positive way
 - Request for more support from broader district, system
 - Uneven, disparate coverage of races (discussions of race focus on only certain racial groups)
- **Theme 2: Student Connections**
 - **Student-staff connections are present in APS**
 - **Student-staff connections are missing in APS**
 - Relationships are inconsistent and there is wide variation in quality
 - Promising practices around relationships and connections
 - The importance of leadership in student-staff connections
- **Theme 3: High Expectations**
 - **Inconsistent and low expectations exist**
 - High expectations exist
 - A persistence of low expectations over time and across the district
- **Theme 4: Efforts to Improve Equity**
 - **Allocating and using resources equitably**
 - **Training & clear expectations for staff**
 - Sharpen the focus on students
 - Importance of leadership
 - Clarity and commitment
- **Theme 5: District Commitment to Equity**
 - **Messages stakeholders would like to hear**
 - **A lack of action or concrete elements**
 - Absence of messages
 - Messages heard
- **Theme 6: Resources**
 - Evidence of resources within APS
 - Resources disparities in APS
 - Wishes for expenditures or ideas for solutions
 - Resource allocation is not strategic
- **Theme 7: Stakeholders' Involvement in Decisions about Resources**
 - A multitude of voices are involved in decisions about resources
 - Stakeholders are not involved (or involved enough) in decisions about resources
 - Wishes for and ideas about stakeholders' involvement in resource decisions

Atlanta Public Schools Equity Audit Findings

Report prepared by The Leadership Academy

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Introduction

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) in collaboration with [The Leadership Academy](#) conducted an equity audit, outlining the current state of equity within the district. The equity audit would first collect broad input on the current state of equity within APS in order to engage stakeholders in collaborative action planning and shared development of metrics for tracking process. Upon receipt of this report, the Atlanta Public Schools equity committee will use this data to continue building the collaborative action plan.

In keeping with the APS commitment to equity, this equity audit follows and builds upon work spurred by a 2014 equity audit. That 2014 equity audit, conducted by external partners, “compiled data from a variety of sources including the U.S. Census Bureau, administrative data on schools, principals, teachers, and students across the Atlanta Public Schools (APS) system, recent APS reports, and financial reporting data.” The audit’s resulting report determined, “There exist substantial variations across schools in the APS system in all of the areas where equity was examined. These include differences in indicators of teacher quality, academic programming, financial resources (particularly represented by PTA and foundation funds), playgrounds, student academic achievement, and classroom instruction.”

In desire to understand the *current* equity landscape and develop an *action plan* to address inequities, the partnership with The Leadership Academy determined the focus of this 2021 equity audit would be on Cultural Competence and Collective Action (with a focus on Resource Equity). These focus areas are key areas that the APS leaders selected from the Leadership Academy’s *Equity at Work*, a strategic planning guide designed to help system leaders target their efforts in creating a more equitable education system. Cultural competence within that guide is defined as the state in which culturally responsive teachers and staff members ensure all students have access to learning experiences that are relevant, respectful of difference, rich and engaging. Within *Equity at Work*, Collective Action and Resource Equity is defined as a commitment to solving problems with collective, rather than isolated action.

To begin our work together, Dr. Tauheedah Baker-Jones, Chief Equity and Social Justice Officer, served as chair of a cross functional team of internal stakeholders that helped to inform the audit process. Also, throughout the process various other internal and external stakeholders were consulted to assess the current state of Atlanta Public Schools and work collaboratively on the equity audit and action planning, including:

- Equity and Social Justice Division
- Performance Division
- Academics Division
- Schools Division
- Atlanta Board of Education
- Senior District Leaders
- School Leaders
- Teachers
- Students
- Parent Representatives
- Superintendent’s Community Advisory Task Force

The Atlanta Public Schools internal stakeholder team met beginning in April 2021 to identify data, develop questions to collect stakeholder perspectives, and determine key district artifacts. Representatives from the groups listed above will continue to meet with The Leadership Academy through October 2021 to engage in the action planning process that will help inform next steps for Atlanta Public Schools.

Supporting Research for Equity Audits

Over the last four decades, the U.S. public school student population has become more ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse (Ming & Dukes, 2006; Minkos et al., 2017). At the same time, the U.S. public education system has remained rooted in middle-class, Euro-Centric values, leading many schools to ignore or downplay the strengths of diverse students and their families (Bazron, Osher, & Fleishman, 2005). This cultural disconnect has led to a history of racial and ethnic disparities in educational access, participation, and attainment. For example, students of color and economically disadvantaged students are more likely to have inexperienced teachers, attend under-funded schools and face lower expectations as evidenced by less challenging curriculums (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015). Black and Latinx students are less likely to attend schools where advanced courses are offered, and when they do, they are less likely to be enrolled in those courses (Patrick, Socol & Morgan, 2020).

Policies that require leaders to address these disparities have not been sufficient (Khalifa et al., 2016). Educational equity requires a look at the underlying systemic contributors that underlie and perpetuate the inequities present in the learning opportunities of students (O'Day & Smith, 2016). Equity audits offer a practical process for developing a more comprehensive, insightful understanding of the inequities that exist in districts and school (Skrla et al., 2004).

Audit Findings

Theme 1: Discussing Race

As referenced in The Leadership Academy’s research-based Equity At Work framework, culturally responsive teachers and staff members ensure all students have access to learning experiences that are relevant, respectful of difference, rich and engaging. One important element of such learning experiences is having curriculum and conversations that recognize and include the experiences and backgrounds of all the students in the classroom and community. When students’ experiences are reflected in instructional materials, the material is more meaningful, more easily learned, and leads to a rise in student achievement. Also, when students learn about a diversity of cultures and perspectives, their negative attitudes about people of different races and backgrounds tend to diminish. As part of this equity audit, the APS team sought to understand the current state of discussing race in Atlanta schools. Below are the main themes that emerged when stakeholders were asked how often race and identity are discussed in classrooms or covered in curriculum materials within Atlanta Public Schools. Themes are presented with the most commonly mentioned ideas first. Quotes are provided that help to illuminate the theme and stakeholders’ perspectives.

Appreciation for discussions of race in school settings

Of the 13 focus groups, 9 (69%) expressed a desire for race and racism to be covered in schools, indicating that it is appropriate to be covered with students and amongst staff.



In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Students:

- *“I have a great teacher who talks about things and Black Lives Matter. My teacher is very supportive about Black Lives Matter.”*

Families:

- *“My daughter’s school has 90% Black students and the white kids are there as Allies. Her teacher (kindergarten) was really cool about presenting information about race.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“We do need to have more open discussions, regarding the complexity of race and it should be something that we are okay with discussing. But also understanding that it is okay to feel uncomfortable. As long as we take it with an open heart and try to come at it from a place of love and kindness.”*

School Board Members:

- *“With a lot of public schools being majority African-American, and with the opportunities we have to teach about race in a city that has such a strong history of civil rights. When I look at another school district that I was able to visit, and the way they were able to do that working with the different colleges to help develop that curriculum. And so this opportunity to implement a curriculum that teachers about race, it’s past time that we do that and train our educators to do that. We need to be pushing on it now more than ever, and we should have been doing it before.”*

Supporting Artifact Data: The APS Strategic Plan 2020-2025 outlines 11 equity commitments. The eleventh commitment, ‘Ensuring equitable learning environments’, indicates that APS commits “to providing safe, welcoming, and engaging learning environments for all students.”





Call for more discussions of race in school settings

Nearly 70% (69%; n=9) of focus groups not only appreciated any current coverage of race, but called for even more coverage of race in classrooms and among staff.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Students:

- *“In school we never talk about and we don’t do anything for Black History. I asked my principal and teachers about Black History month and was told we learn American History.”*
- *“I have some teachers who talk about race and one that doesn’t because she says it causes problems.”*
- *“We don’t talk about race unless it’s in Social Studies, but most of the time it’s outside of school.”*
- *“In my experience, we have conversation about race but not related to our school. We don’t address the racial issues and our divide. Blacks hang with Blacks and whites hang with whites.”*

Families:

- *“When it comes to race being discussed in APS as a grandparent and volunteer, race is not discussed. We don’t get credit for what we’ve done. We should be able to give our children the truths in all races.”*

Support Staff:

- *“When they come back there needs to be an open and intentional conversation about race and identity, because we don’t know what’s been going on at home, what they’ve been seeing on television.”*

District Leaders:

- *“What I’ve observed in curriculum implementation is only around what standards called for in what schools are using – not see it consistently outside of curriculum – always been a kind of walking on eggshells when it comes to specific conversations around race and identify.”*

School Board Members:

- *“The curriculum and what they’re bringing home, it doesn’t contain a lot of the African-American struggle in the United States. They touch on it here and there. And then we see events, and I don’t know how those are discussed authentically in the classroom. I think a lot of times it’s watered down.”*
- *“I think we do a less good job of having meaningful, significant conversations about the impact of race and racism in our daily lives. We have had some incidents in some of our schools where students have said or posted or done inappropriate or offensive things related to race, and I’m not sure we do as good a job of having those meaningful conversations that help our kids hash out what’s important and how to respond. We do some of that as part of our SEL initiatives, but I think we need to find a way to have more robust and honest conversations in our classrooms, particularly in high school and middle school.”*

Experiences with discussions of race addressing hardships and atrocities

Nearly half (46%, n=6) of focus groups indicated that district discussions of race included coverage of injustices, including atrocities, such as slavery, that have happened in the past, and current day events.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Families:

- *“It seems to come out as inequities from race to race. My daughter was in a discussion about how students get placed in classes. One student, the lighter/mixed race was placed in advanced level classes, while the one who was clearly African-American got placed in grade level, even though they came from same school. They got together and did something about it. “*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *“When I’ve seen race come up in diverse populations, the negative comes from concerns about social justice being brought up.”*
- *“I think there’s still work to be done around adults understanding diversity and seeing it as positive and not a negative.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“Feels primarily when something happens in the news. Often from an oppressive standpoint versus uplifting.”*

Experiences with race being covered in a positive way

According to 38% of the focus groups (n=5), when race is discussed, it is not just in negative connotations or in discussions of hardships. Rather, discussions of race include positive coverage, such as contributions to society by people of color, inclusion of cultures, etc.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Students:

- *“Well since my school is majority Black. We are pro Black. They are also trying to do things to uplift and help us.”*

Instructional Staff:

- *“[we discuss it] daily while watching CCN 10, then we discuss it during our units. It’s very positive, we are diverse school.”*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *“Most of the schools were majority Black so when they discussed race they had real-talk conversations without worrying about offending anyone. They were positive conversations related to the pride of being Black.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“Race and other identifiers of people are brought up all the time. And I think part of that is because of our IB curriculum. From a curricular and teaching perspective, it’s been an integral part of what’s happening in many of our classes, if not all of our classes.”*

School Board Members:

- *“I’ve been pleasantly surprised about some of the authors that are being studied and read about span across the African diaspora. So, I think conversations about race are intentional and circumstantial, and are about both contributions and challenges.”*

Request for more support from broader district, system

Nearly 40% (38%; n=5) of focus groups wished that more system-wide supports or more consistency existed across the district to engage in discussions around race. System-wide support would be appreciated in helping to implement promising practices, structure cross-departmental discussion, initiate trainings, etc.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“My teachers need support and training in how to discuss [race].”*
- *“Unless we equip them [students] with the mental health pieces to manage this information, it will be weighing down on them. Our conversations can be very heavy and limiting, I think. As far as curriculum from a district’s perspective, it’s a lot of it feels dated and I’m not blaming the district for it but I looked particularly at the Georgia Studies curriculum, for example, that it’s rooted in white supremacy, and it’s*

rooted in systemic racism. So, our teachers were as they're able to get to where the kids are and meet them where they need for those discussions, however, the curriculum is not very supportive."

- *"I do feel that the professional development for teachers is missing with how you discuss race, differences, and biases, etc. So, I would say, we still need a lot of work."*
- *"We have to figure out how do we provide professional development for teachers and our communities so that we can include all students and realize that it is no longer a time where school can be 'one way', when there is a multitude of students there! We want all of our students to feel included, their history, and what is happening to them in 'their community'."*

District Leaders:

- *"When district is given opportunity to vet certain tools, race and identity didn't come into play selecting materials."*
- *"I don't see convo of race and identity happening at leadership level; as an org getting comfortable in that space might help support teachers get comfortable in that space to lead in the classroom."*
- *"Something that I've noticed in this district in particular convo of race and identity are off the table in leadership level."*

School Board Members:

- *"It depends on the school and the teacher. It's not part of the curriculum as far as having culturally responsive curriculum. I don't think many or any school districts in GA have that curriculum. I'd love to be one of the first or the first to do that. ... but also, not all our teachers have had anti-bias training or culturally responsive pedagogy training, so it's not like their practiced in having those conversations either."*
- *"As a district, I think we've pushed and created a space for teachers to feel that it's okay for them to have those conversations. What I worry about is the knowledge base and training for them to feel empowered to teacher those subjects."*

Supporting Artifact Data: Examinations of district artifacts, including the district's Strategic Plan, 2020-25 and professional learning documents suggest that the district is currently looking to implement more robust support for staff to engage in discussions around race and equitable practice.



- One Strategic Priority named in the Strategic Plan, 2020-25 is to equip and empower leaders and staff to “create a cohesive coalition of support for each student, investing in his/her/their success.” To reach that objective, the plan outlines the district’s commitment to “promote adult mindsets that positively impact the pursuit of equity and fairness.”
- Upon review of several professional learning documents made available by APS staff, staff have varied opportunities to engage in race dialogues and to discuss equity, cultural awareness, and social-emotional learning.
 - Professional learning sessions offered to members of the Office of Safety & Security include courses on implicit bias, social emotional intelligence and learning, cultural awareness, and cultural competency.
 - Professional learning sessions offered to school leaders, school leadership team members, and other staff members include sessions on how to identify and address inequities in schools and the connections and alignment of SEL, trauma-informed care, and positive behavior supports through a culturally responsive lens. Professional learning offered to staff also provide opportunities for staff to engage in race dialogues within and across racial affinity, and to reflect on their social identities and gain awareness of their biases.

Uneven, disparate coverage of races

A few focus groups (31%; n=4) noted a trend that discussions about race generally were focused on certain racial or ethnic groups such as Black/African American and white, while other groups were not discussed as much. Participants suggested there is room for more coverage about other races, or coverage of discussions among a more diverse group of students or staff.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Instructional Staff:

- *"Racism is limited to Black & White versus other students."*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *"Seems to mostly be my African-American teachers discussing versus my white or Latino teachers. My school is predominantly African American. My 'a-ha' in the last year was that we do have an increased amount of ESOL population, Hispanic students. We have forgotten about them and how to educate them from their perspective. And adding to their culture."*
- *"It seemed anything outside of what was happening in the African-American community, we were not knowledgeable enough to include all of our students."*

District Leaders:

- *"Teachers haven't felt comfortable depending on where they teach – they enter into the curriculum and provide info based on who they are serving; in certain parts of town approached differently; only spoken to certain aspects."*
- *"I've noticed conversations in classroom in certain areas of the district not consistent through the district; occurs more in communities that are black and brown communities and less in the white communities."*

Artifact Data: The 2014 Audit did not address teachers' ability to have culturally responsive discussions about race. The most closely related data point shared were results from a student survey from the 2012-2013 school year that found that "students in the East and South Regions (of Atlanta) indicated the highest levels of Differentiated Instruction and the most Challenging Learning Environments among the APS school regions" (APS Equity Audit, 2014, p. 40). High expectations for all students and relevant, inclusive learning environments are critical components of culturally responsive instruction (Hammond, 2015). The East and South Regions also had higher ratings from students for Positive Learning Environment, according the 2014 audit.



2014 APS Equity Audit Findings

Theme 2: Student Connections

In addition to talking about race, another core element of a culturally competent school environment is strong relationships between students and staff. Student-staff relationships have implications for culturally responsive instruction, sense of belonging, and more restorative discipline practices in schools. In culturally responsive schools, each student has a strong relationship with at least one adult in their building and they feel cared for and loved. Below are the main themes that emerged when stakeholders were asked how well Atlanta Public Schools staff know their students. Themes are presented with the most commonly mentioned ideas first. Quotes are provided that help to illuminate the theme and stakeholders' perspectives.

Student-staff connections are present in APS

Nearly all (85%; n=11) focus groups indicated that some students have clear avenues for connecting with staff. There is evidence that some students have a relationship with at least one staff member. As indicated in [Equity at Work](#), research suggests that student-teacher relationships can promote student success.



In Focus Group Participants' words:

Students:

- *“Whenever I feel like down, I feel the counselors at ___ and teachers are very supportive. If something is wrong, they will support you. They are always there to bring you up if you are feeling down.”*
- *“Teachers know the students because there is a great relationship. When a student isn’t acting like themselves, teachers will ask if everything is okay.”*

Families:

- *“My children feel comfortable going to talk to adults at school if they know them, and all the staff is good to them and friendly.”*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *“I agree, in some ways, it's easier if students look like you to connect with the students.”*
- *“I tell my students I can’t teach you if I don’t know you.”*

Support Staff:

- *“From cafeteria we get to know all of the kids, I know a generation of kids. I have principal ask me questions about kids because I know so many of them. I guess when you have that connection and kids it's important.”*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *“Our staff is really connected to our students. A lot of time is spent on relationships. Adults have learned how to connect with kids in a way they haven’t before through SEL.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *At every school I been in, it has been critical to get to know the whole child and the families.*
- *Our adults and our kids know each other well. It is not only critical to their well-being but to their success.*

Supporting Artifact Data: Examinations of the Georgia Health Survey results from 2021 indicates that students feel comfortable reaching out to staff in their school. Of the 19,080 students responding to this survey, 74% agreed with the statement “I know an adult at school I can talk with if I need help.”

The APS Strategic Plan 2020-2025 outlines 11 equity commitments. The eighth commitment, ‘Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Practices’ states that APS commits “to a comprehensive approach to addressing students’ social, emotional, and academic development in order to meet the various needs of all students.”



Student-staff connections are missing in APS

While 85% of focus groups indicated some students had connections with staff, nearly just as many (77%; n=10) focus groups indicated that some students are not connected to staff. Some students do not feel known by or seen by staff members, or do not feel comfortable reaching out to staff.



In Focus Group Participants' words:

Students:

- *"There has been only a few teachers that I want to connect to and there are some I would not want to connect with. Some I do not feel comfortable."*
- *"I have never had a teacher that I felt comfortable with. I personally feel that they don't really care. A lot of students have a great relationship with teachers. But I think there is a disconnect with the administrators; especially the Black students; there is a disconnect with student/administrators."*

Families:

- *"No, I don't think [my children] feel comfortable with speaking to adults. I can speak from in person and virtual. I was at the school often. My 4th grader transitioned from one school to another as a rising 4th grader and in the middle of a pandemic. Entering into this "platform" was very challenging. I had to go the extra mile, I had to speak with his therapist, because it was so new for him. I experienced her frustrations, I had to get the Principal and VP to make sure my child was accommodated properly. I had to assert myself: email, documenting, etc. Knowing that a child transferred from one school to another, I would think that counselors, etc. would communicate to best support that student. No counselor, no teacher, no one called. I even wanted to meet the teacher, and that wasn't available."*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *"If you have students of different races, I'm not sure the connection has been as tight or as intentional."*
- *"If I go back to when I was a teacher, we try our best to get to know our students. We are inundated by students that have a lot of problems, so it becomes difficult. Most do try to get to know the students, some just go through the motions."*
- *"There are teachers who don't care to know their students and they need to find new work."*

Instructional Staff:

- *"Lots of teachers try to get to know their students. But there is a difference between knowing and trying to identify with them. The reciprocal relationship is limited."*
- *"Many teachers have good intentions, but the teachers don't know how to engage around their needs and the socio-emotional aspects of students."*
- *"Some teachers have assumptions, opinions, or feelings about students that they cannot personally identify with and they don't always work to improve those."*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *"I think across the board I think our teachers and staff don't know our students like we think we do."*
- *"I think it's hard to serve students effectively if you don't know the families. It's easier to not know, where I am, because you don't have to, they (teachers) feel like because they are high achieving/performing students they don't need to. Although this school has had a higher level of suicide ideation than I have ever seen at any school I've worked at."*
- *"Sometimes we talk about those hidden biases and whether or not we truly believe that our children can learn. ... So, I need for teachers to be sensitive in the moment and understand that we first have to address the child before we can address the academics."*

School Board Members:

- *"What I tend to think and hear, knowing the story of our children, it's just like 'oh well. I teach, I provide the services that I can, and once they leave my classroom, I can't control anything. I try my best, but I can't invest after that experience.'"*

Relationships are inconsistent and there is wide variation in quality

Over half (54%; n=7) of focus groups called out variations in relationship quality from school to school, teacher to teacher, grade to grade, student to student.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Families:

- *"[There is] inconsistency in teacher responses, especially in a virtual platform."*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *"In HS, relationships are built, maintained, and flourished because of the high level of engagement from a scholastic and extracurricular basis. High school is never really closed. Within that you see deeper relationships that are almost anomalies, and then there are some that are not engaged as much. As students start to express themselves about what's happening in the world, teachers are starting to realize how well they might know their students. It's an opportunity to get to know them better."*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *"A little harder at the high school level to get to know families."*
- *"Because I want our children to interact with all adults regardless of race. I do not want them to be afraid. Sometimes they are afraid of other races and sometimes I see them being like shrinking violets on the wall around other races. And those are some things that we have to deal with as well because of the race barrier that may intimidate them from interacting with teachers of other races."*

District Leaders:

- *"Seems that students who are outgoing and high performing can identify advocate more quickly and solidify relationship with adults in our schools; from perspective of student lead group, they feel students who are not widely accepted or high performing are marginalized and find it hard to connect to adult, limit forming successful relationship."*

School Board Members:

- *"It shouldn't be left up to just one individual – it's a partnership with all the adults in the building to make sure all the children in the building are covered. It's a team effort to make sure every child has an adult in the building who knows them."*
- *"One thing when you talk about our schools, the mobility rates are just killer. How are you transitioning an understanding of those needs from school to school. And I don't think that's the case. It's one of the things that really worries me."*

Promising practices around relationships and connections

Several focus groups (54%; n=7) offered insights into initiatives or efforts that have worked or are showing promise, or ideas that could be implemented. They also offered factors that make a big difference in the forming of relationships. (Note: one main factor that influences relationships, leadership, is mentioned as the next finding. Please see the next sub-theme for more details on leadership.)

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Families:

- *"I am so glad how the school staff greets the children in the morning. I love it!"*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *"If you don't show up for school, she has a designated monitor who will show up at your door to find out why you're not in school."*

Support Staff:

- *“When schools don't have high turnover of teachers, it helps because students see adults as someone they can be comfortable and count on. Pretty high turnover, meaning kids have to get connected again.”*
- *“For Elem, middle, HS, I pick up in the same neighborhood so we (me and families) have a really good relationship. Really proud of transportation of doing a good job with keeping busses in the same neighborhood so you could service same people and keep a positive working relationship.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“We decided to drive around and take a look at our students’ neighborhoods. We’ve also decided to do pop-ups (hand out breakfast, etc.) to allow our students to see us in the neighborhood. We have work to do.”*
- *“We also have staff living in the neighborhood that helps building a connection with families.”*
- *“We have a default system where an issue is referred to the proper support (social worker, etc.). Our security offices do home visits. Everyone is trained to dig deeper and identify where the support can go.”*
- *“Because I moved with my same group of students (looped) over the years, I was able to support teachers in understanding who their students were.”*
- *“Looping was critical for us knowing our families.”*
- *“Sometimes it is better for teachers to see where the students actually live and because we do home visits here at my school at the beginning of the year we go around to the neighborhoods, we put this on our schedule. We take a tour so the teachers can actually see where the students are coming from. Because I think you're right. We forget.”*
- *“At my school, we have relationships with our students and staff. The big part of that is because we are a small school. One of the things that I think has really helped us.”*

District Leaders:

- *“I think there is an opportunity there how we are as schools looking at data points and surveys, there’s opportunity in that space to measure how well staff know their students.”*

School Board Members:

- *“I don’t know if you’ve talked to the CREATE teacher residency program, but the way the train their teachers is really big on preparing teachers to understand students’ needs and be aware of their biases, and listen differently.”*

Supporting Artifact Data: In reviewing the Georgia Department of Education’s Comprehensive Needs Assessment report for Atlanta Public Schools 2020 – 2021, the district has acknowledged that community relations must be improved and has outlined actions to build stronger relationships between the district and those they serve.

- *“APS has a history of poor community relations. Over the past several years, a great deal of work has been done to restore our relationship with families, community members, and all stakeholders and to build relationships with immigrant and English Learner (EL) families. APS has a Family Engagement Department that works to increase family/community/alumni engagement through the Academic Parent-Teacher Teams (APTT) program, home visits, and removing barriers. APS needs to continue to work toward having a positive relationship with all stakeholders so that they feel welcomed and are engaged in supporting our district, schools and are helping to raise student achievement.” (pg. 30)*

The importance of leadership in student-staff connections

Nearly half (46%; n=6) of focus groups spotlighted the role of leaders in shaping a culture in which teachers and staff build relationships with their students.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Families:

- *"They have known my daughter since kindergarten, and the principal knows her and that makes me trust them."*
- *"I know that the teachers in the ___ cluster know the students because leadership mandates that teachers know the students. Not only do they know my children, they know all the children."*
- *"The principal says, 'You need the love those kids!' cause if you do, they will know and do better."*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *"It all depends on the school and the leadership in the school. For example, in one school a principal has made it her business to make sure all the teachers know the students. She posted for teaching position and clearly said, 'if you don't know what loving our children is about, you need not apply.'"*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *"We have to be intentional about making sure that everyone feels comfortable and that starts here with leadership. However, this begins with addressing hidden biases within our staff."*
- *"Leaders who really believe in the importance of building relationships in schools and one of the questions I always ask my staff at the beginning of the year is, 'do you know me well enough to teach me?' And so that started that conversation not just for the teachers but the paraprofessional as well. We really work on building relationships with students getting to know them and going to their homes. I keep a jar of peppermint and jolly ranchers on my desk so the kids can stop by my office so they can talk to me. In order to get to relationship building, it has to be a leadership focus."*

School Board Members:

- *"I've been in some schools where principals know every student by their first names, and some don't. I look at that as part of leadership. If you were really engaged, you would know your students, their parents, the issues they're facing, their environment."*

Artifact Data: The closest connection to student/adult relationships in APS' 2014 equity audit are the "classroom environment ratings". In addition to the data shared above, female high school students' responses were specifically broken out and there were differences across schools. For the 2012-2013 school year, girls at the Washington Banking and Washington Early College high schools rated their classroom environments most highly. In that same academic year, high school females at Therrell LG&PP and Therrell STEMS rated their classroom experiences the lowest (APS Equity Audit, 2014, p. 62).



2014 APS Equity
Audit Findings

Theme 3: High Expectations

A culturally competent school system holds consistently high expectations for students' learning, reflecting a belief that children can learn and perform at high levels. When students are clear that their teachers have high expectations for their learning, they feel a part of a supportive, inclusive, and equitable school culture. In such cultures, honors and advanced placement courses are reflective of the district's overall demographics. Below are the main themes that emerged when stakeholders were asked the degree to which Atlanta schools and teachers hold high expectations for all students and operate schools and classrooms in a way that holds students to those expectations. Themes are presented

with the most commonly mentioned ideas first. Quotes are provided that help to illuminate the theme and stakeholders' perspectives.

Inconsistent and low expectations exist

All but one focus group (92%; n=12) indicated that some APS staff have low expectations for some students. They called out variations across student groups, specific schools, etc.



In Focus Group Participants' words:

Students:

- *"The bar is set high for me but not for all students."*
- *"I think that students who complete their work are held to a higher standard than those who don't."*
- *"I am in a lot of AP classes. A lot of my classes include white kids. I am considered an 'acceptable Black student.' They talk to me about other Black kids ('non-acceptable') and how I will excel. I have heard other teachers talk about African American students. They won't help them with college applications. I think it is an issue because some of the teachers feel that the white students will excel more than the Black students."*

Families:

- *"Students with disabilities being treated differently than students without disabilities. A teacher said: 'I don't know why they gave you this, you are never going to learn that.' While I understand why he may have said it, but, knowing that it could be learned if provided in a different way versus telling a child you could never learn something. Odd part is that he passed the class and passed with an A. I saw that this teacher assisted the white child more than he did the Black [child]."*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *"There is an inequity in our district with respect to students at schools that are low performing. There is a serious lack for those students. What happens as a result is that it widens the gap between the haves and the have nots. There's a gap in rigorous curriculum, the types of opportunities to help advance students. We're not doing a good job of matching students where they're at."*

Support Staff:

- *"Child (7th grader) with extensive vocabulary, so smart so brilliant. One day teacher mentioned to me that he was reading on a second-grade level. I asked what are we going to do, teacher said: We just steer him towards trade school. I cried."*
- *"The notion in ____ is that 'these are ours and anyone else not ready, we are just going to get them out of here.' An admin told me to back date write ups so they could get them put out."*
- *"'The Truth' of what's going on in APS: Teachers tend to focus on the ones that make their teaching skills look incredible or make the test scores better."*

Instructional Staff:

- *"The expectations are very low."*
- *"We sacrifice high expectations for results: It may take longer for one student to reach your expectations."*
- *"In my experience we give lip service to high expectations, but the representation on the ground is very different - I don't see the trust and the push to challenge students. With high expectations comes struggle and challenge."*
- *"We don't open it up to them to explore their world and thinking, forming an understanding. They are going to do it anyway, but we try to spoon feed rather than allow them to explore."*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *"At a district level, we need to make sure those advanced programs are not only available on one side of town."*

- *“I think there’s an expectation disparity. One says they have high expectations and that’s why kids are failing their class. Another will say they have high expectations and that’s why so many kids are learning. I think we might have different definitions of what it means to have high expectations and what it translates to.”*
- *“One thing that stands out to me is that working at primarily Black schools with Black teachers, the pride is there, the love is there. I think that intrinsic bias is always there. It’s more socio-economic than it is just being Black. The status makes them get boxed in and teachers lower expectations instead of raising the bar. It yields unsuccessful results.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals (see text box on following pages)

District Leaders:

- *“From my experience as a former APS parent, my student went through high performing ___ school – very diverse but highly segregated – white kids extremely overrepresented in AP and advanced classes; It leads me to believe our students of color have not been supported and expected to achieve; It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.”*
- *“In communities largely black and brown, there are still low expectations – set the bar as ‘kids can’t, won’t do it’ – perpetuated across the district; there’s a sense of lower expectation based on where kids and their home life.”*
- *“Everybody will say all students should learn or receive equitable resources until you have to make a decision based on that; then people pivot based on individual desires, needs and wants – in trying to reopen schools based on highest need students, or closing achievement gaps between black and brown kids and white kids, when trying to make decisions based on that data, people shift; they continue to say one thing but the actions shift to something else.”*

School Board Members:

- *“It’s interesting that we want and value diversity in schools, but oftentimes our SES kids, many times students or color, are not in our higher-level classes in diverse schools. But you also find that they’re not offering the higher-level classes that they are in neighboring schools. For certain, it is one of the contributors to our inequity.”*
- *“Everybody I would think comes to the situation believing that everyone can learn, but the difficulty of making that happen is where the rubber meets the road. How are you able to build that and bring that into reality, when society and oftentimes parents are pushing hard against it.”*
- *“You hear the conversation ‘as long as I graduate that’s good enough.’ And if you don’t see better, you won’t do better. So if you don’t have the higher level class offerings, you don’t have anything to aim for or for teachers to push for them to do more. So the offerings play a role in having high expectations.”*
- *“The question is does APS have high expectations of all students. The answer is no, no they don’t. And it’s not just inequities among race – it’s class, ability, gender.”*
- *“The special ed lead teacher at my ES told me point blank that my son was not smart enough to go to school there. I’m at a public school in my neighborhood – how in the world is my child not smart enough to go to school there? ... How in the world do you tell me that just because he presents differently that he’s not a smart child? What gives you that right?”*

Principal #1 - *"I am just going to say it. This is one of the biggest growth areas for our system. I started my career in 1990 at a middle school on the southside of Atlanta. I still see pervasive judgment of children based on superficial criteria; race, poverty, language, and them not being seen as the ultimate success of the individual. I resent them not being seen as a person. I think this needs to change and change fast. I am going to give this example. And I will be quiet because this is so close to my heart. When I came to my school there was real academic segregation with students with access to advanced curriculum and I remember breaking that door down and telling teachers you were going to have kids in your advanced academic class who were not gifted and talented. I was afraid my tires would get slashed. The teachers stated that if they did not meet certain markers, they could not be in those classes. Five years later, I am happy to say that we have a staff and a culture where that is not a challenge like once before but I am still battling district people. Regarding placement of students in advanced content classes, I literally had a conversation with someone at the CLL arguing about a roadblock that puts children into advanced constant classes. So I am still having that argument in 2021 and that it still exists. It exists with staff members. We need professional development but I think it is also still pervasive as a district that we do not see the potential in each and every child. Regardless of who they are when they walk through that door."*

Principal #2 - *"I agree with you. I do not think that as a whole, the district does not have high expectations for students. As a whole, the district does not have high expectations for students. I have worked at three different schools, three different counties and I remember being a student in school and teachers had high expectations for students; administrators had high expectations for students. But it breaks my heart when I see some of the things that happen within the district. That we as leaders allow to happen in our schools at some point and sometimes the leaders put those things in place. Especially with our homeless students. Especially when the students are already a minority and even for schools with populations predominantly Black, how do we treat students who live in certain neighborhoods? I think the district is focused on adult behavior but not on the behavior that focuses on student learning. So I will say no, I do not think that the district has high expectations for our students."*

Principal #3 - *"I agree 100% I don't think they have high expectations for all students either. I still think there is some level of confusion on how to create classroom communities that are supportive of students from racially different backgrounds. Even though you may be from a racially different background, I still think that people have a tendency to look at a kid one way. They label this child is Hispanic, this child is Black, this child is white and they do not think about the child as an individual. I don't think we delve into that, we are not just one thing, we can be lots of different things whether that is from your gender, your sexuality, your race, your background, your social-economic, etc. But I also think that in our district sometimes the part of high expectations is throwing money at a situation without really thinking about whether or not that money is going to be worthwhile and going to affect some kind of positive change in the lives of children. Money is not the answer! The answer is the training that we put into our teachers and we still have teachers who don't necessarily know who they are. So, I do not think we have high expectations. I know we aspire to have, but it is not there yet."*

Continues on the following page...

Principal # 4 - *“I will go ahead and apologize now. I have dealt with this situation since I have walked on this campus. Because we are in the south area of town, close to a Black mall. My students call our school a little private school because we wear uniforms and they like the way they look. When I told the community of my plan to become an IB school, I had a parent tell me, “Why are you doing this, those kids don't go to college”. When I wanted to bring different sports to expose my students (Black people can play more than just basketball and football). When I wanted to bring a Lacrosse team to my school, I had a board member about seven years ago to tell me that Black children do not play Lacrosse. I had teachers say I do not think that “this child” needs to take an AP class. So I changed the rule, if a child in my school wants to take an AP class, they can! If they want to and if they believe they can do it, they can! And I agree with everyone, No we do not have high expectations, it begins at the top because if schools have to change then the central office has to change the way schools are supported. It is not just the schools that have to make the adjustments. Having low expectations in my school is the quickest way to get you out! Getting an education and our babies going to college is the quickest way out of poverty. We have first-generation high school graduates, can you imagine this? For these children to get a scholarship or go to college or a junior college. They have the ability to impact the next generation. So, to answer your question, No, we do not have high expectations for students.”*

Principal #5 – *“I agree with everyone. I think I am going to add that we need to change what success looks like for our kids. We all say, ‘they have to have a 3.5 and they have to have all As to be in AP classes. I am with the other principals, no they do not! If the kid comes to me in the 11th grade and has never had any exposure to AP classes and that’s what they want, it’s okay. I think we put things in place too often so that we say ‘no.’ We need to find opportunities to say ‘yes’ and we need to make sure that our parents understand. We need to remove the stereotype, the stereotypical behaviors that come with what an AP student looks like. What an AP student looks like to me is ANY STUDENT who wants to take AP classes. As a principal, it’s my responsibility. And if they are not successful, it is my job, it is our job to make them successful! We have to be okay with changing things. I understand that it’s not going to look like how it did in the 80s and 90s. I want us to meet all kids where they are!”*

Supporting Artifact Data: Examinations of the District Improvement Plan for 2020-21 and 2020 Advanced Placement data indicate that students are experiencing inconsistent expectations, particularly by race/ethnicity.

- The District Improvement Plan 2020-21 called out “Differing levels of what excellent teaching looks/feels like” and “Inconsistent implementation of the curriculum across the district” as root causes that need to be addressed (pg. 50).
- Reviewing the number of students who took an advanced placement test by race/ethnicity in the 2020 school year shows that the population of test takers was not representative of the student population within APS, except for Hispanic students. The first column of numbers in the table below reflect the number of students in the district per demographic group. The next column reflects the number of students who took an advanced placement test by the same student group. By examining the last column – the difference between the proportion of students in the student body compared to the proportion who took an AP test - we can see that white students made up a disproportionately higher percent of AP test takers and Black students were disproportionately underrepresented.

2020 Advanced Placement Data, by Student Group			
Student Group	Percent of Student Body	AP Test Taker	Discrepancy in Proportion
Black	72%	31%	-41%
White	16%	49%	33%
Hispanic	8%	9%	1%
Two or More Races	3%	11% (Other)	7%
Asian	1%		

Table Notes:

- *In response to COVID-19 in 2020, the Advanced Placement exams were amended. The multiple-choice sections of exams were dropped and only free-response was used to test students. All exams were delivered digitally. Thus, students were tested at home.*
- *The data available for AP test takers by race/ethnicity reported the number of students who identify as Asian and multiracial who took an exam in the same category, labeled “Other.”*

High expectations exist

Almost half of the focus groups (46%; n=6) also provided evidence of APS staff holding high expectations for students, with clear messaging and actions that provided access to learning opportunities that challenge students.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Students:

- *“They [the teachers] check-in instead of ‘here is the work’ and not care whether we complete it or not.”*
- *“My teachers tell us to persevere and tell us we can make it. They give us tutorial and keep positive thoughts going through out heads. They want us to give our best efforts.”*
- *“Teachers went slower and wanted is to succeed this year. At my school it’s like majority Black; few whites, Hispanics and other minorities. The school is about high expectations (administrators/counselors), it doesn’t matter the skin that they are in. If the students are not doing well, the teachers, administrators will try to help them meet the expectations.”*
- *“At [my school], expectations are high from all students. I am part of the small Hispanic population at my school. Teachers want me to do well, if I am not, they will ask if I need help. They will also reach out to us if there is an attendance issue. Staff is really caring for students.”*

Families:

- *“They have the same expectations for everyone. I see more expectations at school and that the support given to parents is good, and even though the language is difficult for us, we try to get involved.”*
- *“I think the expectations are the same for all of them and I see more help for parents, so that they are more informed.”*
- *“Her principal was a counselor and she always say we are looking of greatness in our children. She tells my daughter you have to be great because of your (name).”*

District Leaders:

- *“As a parent, had 2 Black children experience Atlanta schools, one who is gifted and one who is on 504 plan – had 4 schools over past 7 years – experience has been all over the place – teachers with high expectations of both races; had teachers of both races with very low expectations with them; a lot of variability within individual schools based on human; all bring different perspectives to the table; would say overall district has high expectations; varies by teachers, teachers are sometimes hit or miss.”*

School Board Members:

- *“There are some schools, particularly those where there are predominantly Black students who attend the school, some of those schools have a culture about them that is high expectations and an energy to drive students to perform their best. And there is a distinct focus on Black children performing up to higher expectations. That is not as readily apparent in schools that are mixed and more diverse.”*

Supporting Artifact Data:

- The district’s Strategic Plan, 2020-25, communicates a commitment to high expectations. For example, the district mission states that “every student will graduate ready for college, career, and life.” Furthermore, three of the 11 equity commitments reflect aspects of education related to high expectations and high-quality learning for all students:
 - “Increasing Access to Effective Leaders and Teachers: We commit to ensuring all students have access to high-quality leaders and teachers, with a priority on the students with the greatest need.”
 - “Increasing Access to Advanced Coursework: We commit to increasing access to advanced coursework for historically disadvantaged student groups.”
 - “Improving Access to High-Quality Instructional Programming and Materials: We commit to using effective instructional materials in all classrooms so that all students have access to high-quality curricula and robust signature programming.”
- In the Georgia Department of Education’s Comprehensive Needs Assessment report for Atlanta Public Schools 2020 – 2021, it describes three domains that the district improvement plan focuses on, including: “Rigorous and Supportive Learning Environment: Our schools have safe, trusting and collaborative environments conducive to learning, where all students have equitable access to rigor and intervention, are challenged to achieve, take ownership of their academic journey and are deeply and joyfully engaged in learning. All students have equitable access to rigorous and relevant content; instruction is standards-based, culturally responsive and rigorous.” (pg. 24)
- Examination of the *Georgia Health Survey* results from 2021 indicate that students believe their teachers and leaders hold high expectations for their learning. Of the 19080 students responding to this survey, 80% were in agreement with the statement “I feel my school has high standards for achievement.”



A persistence of low expectations over time and across the district

A few focus groups (31%; n=4) indicated that low expectations has been a problem that APS has been battling for years. Leaders have seen it manifested throughout their career, parents have experienced it over the span of all their children’s years in APS, etc. Participants also noted the persistence of low expectations district, with roots at the central office level.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *“On the school level, yes there are individual schools and teachers that have high expectations. On the district level I think it became so much of, I guess, the everyday cycle. We talked about it but were not doing it. In policy and budget. We are quick to offer excuses. That’s adults offering excuses for children. We concentrate on high achievers, don’t help the low achievers, and the kids in the middle are just stuck. System wide we have some challenges.”*

School Board Members:

- *“Historically, I’ve heard stories that the expectations are lower for Black kids in those schools [the more diverse schools] than schools that are 95-100 percent African-American.”*

- *“My overarching answer is that we’ve come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. That was the root of the cheating scandal over a decade ago. We had teachers who swore in depositions that they had to cheat because their students weren’t capable of learning. That they had to change those answers because their kids ‘are too dumb to learn it.’”*
- *“The cheating happened when a teacher decided that their students couldn’t learn. ... And I don’t know how we fix that. ... Let me say if we can figure out the answer to that one, it’ll help a lot.”*
- *“We want to be a high-performing district, a state-of-the-art school system, and to do that, we have state of the art expectations, of course regardless of all of the categories listed that can hinder or make it harder for students to learn. I think our wraparound focus, our whole child focus, or equity focus are about this issue. They’re about mitigated external factors that make it harder for students to have success. Almost all of the work we do is getting at that.”*
- *“I think we’re moving toward having the resources to provide that for students, but we’re not there yet. We’re seeing incremental gains, but I think the intention is that we want the best for the our students and highest expectations for our students, but we’re not there yet.”*

Artifact Data: The 2014 Audit found that students experienced differing levels of rigor in different school settings and different regions of the city. Some of the specific findings include:



2014 APS Equity Audit Findings

- Almost 20% of all students in the East and North regions are classified as gifted, while less than 10% are classified as gifted in the South, West and Charter schools. (2014 APS Equity Audit, p. 45)
- Rates of students receiving special education in the Alternative Programs (18%) was twice that of the North, East, South, west and charter schools in the city. (2014 APS Equity Audit, p. 45)
- Students in schools in the East and North as well as in charter schools experienced remedial instruction 6.3% of the time while students in the South and West regions of the city experienced remediation more than 10% of the time. (2014 APS Equity Audit, p. 47)
- “Male students spend a minimal amount of time in advanced curriculum education courses across elementary schools in the district.” (2014 APS Equity Audit, p. 58)

The 2014 equity audit also indicated data from assessments that pointed to both variable and low levels of achievement across the city, which is indicative of low levels of rigor in student instruction.

- Nearly half of the students in grades 3-12 across the city earned a score of “not proficient” on one or more state exams in 2012-2013. (2014 APS Equity Audit, p. 45)
- On standardized assessments, charter school students performed the best, followed by students in traditional schools in each region. The lowest performance was for students in Alternative schools. (2014 APS Equity Audit, p. 49)

Theme 4: Efforts to Improve Equity

As APS works to create more culturally responsive schools, it is important to explore concrete actions that will improve the equity across the district. Specifically, stakeholders were asked what they believe Atlanta Public Schools should do to improve equity, including what knowledge or capacity staff may need to make improvements. Resulting themes and illustrative quotes are presented below.

Allocating and using resources equitably

According to 100% of focus groups, resources should be examined for equity in allocation, for the power associated with resources, and for the guidance that is given to schools and staff. According to the focus group, attention to resources will be one of the main pathways to equity in APS.



In Focus Group Participants' words:

Students:

- *"I feel like students who do well have better opportunities and resources that other students have. If you take advanced classes you get more opportunities to rise to the top and have more resources."*

Families:

- *"Last Thursday at a Special Education meeting, they did not have an interpreter in Spanish and that is not equity. How many times have they sent you to breakout rooms with no interpreter? Make sure teachers are paid enough money in order to make sure that they have what they need at home in order to help our students."*
- *"Funding issues can tilt the metrics, I don't know why different schools have different resources and we need to work on that."*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *"Give the same level of resources, do the hard work of giving what they need almost on an individual level."*
- *"Increase funding for teachers, funding for students in high poverty schools."*
- *"I think every student deserves to feel there is one adult in the building that care for them. That doesn't cost us anything. Every teacher in the building should be there because they really want to be. They should not see students as broken."*

Support Staff:

- *"There were lots of activities after hours that students who were bussed didn't get to be a part of because there was no transportation for them. You had teachers willing to volunteer for support, but no busses for them, but busses for ____ [another school]."*
- *"Offer food and daycare, transportation (busses that stay late), Evening tutoring program."*
- *"The same dollars this district is willing to spend on football games should be used for getting students to tutoring and parents to meetings."*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *"The frustrating thing I've seen is we try to be as equitable as possible from the district finance side, but then we see the schools with a better fundraising budget because of their PTAs and they were buying even more supplies, PPE with their logos, thermometers. I don't know how to address that."*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *"Exposure. Our kids don't often have transportation so they don't have the ability to see other things. So offering ways to expose them to these things: like a healthy salad bar. Our cafeteria doesn't have that."*
- *"I think a lot of the responsibility of finding the need, the finding partners falls on the schools. I think we need more mentors and partners to help support our students, I think this would support our teachers."*

- *“I don’t have the resources to meet the expectations of supporting families. But it would be helpful to have the district to provide expectations, funds, and ideas upfront instead of sites having to go to the drawing board to try and address it as individual schools. This is where time is lost.”*
- *“We still have children in our building who still need support. The district offered training - it was ‘only’ provided to all Title I schools and we were a non-title school. If we are linking equity, we have to remember that there are students in every school regardless of their title status that need support and the district has to be mindful about that.”*
- *“My [title 1 student] population exceeds some schools’ entire population. I have at least 600 kids who are at least considered Title I students, they are Title I qualifiers. There are some children out here who are poor children are not treated equitable because they do not get the same resources as those kids in Title I schools who are in poverty, but again there are so many students at my school, 600 who are in poverty and they do not receive the funding like others poverty Title I schools. So I would really like to see them look at them all and every child of a certain criteria gets the same resources no matter the school.”*

District Leaders:

- *“We need to be able to equitably distribute power to equitably distribute resources.”*

School Board Members:

- *“When I look at schools with a high special ed population but there’s not a focus on special ed at the school, that worries me. We need to employ the resources where they need to go. How do you get down to the individual needs to each student?”*

Supporting Artifact Data: The Board of Education’s Equity Policy supports the notion that resources must be allocated equitably.

- The Board of Education’s Equity Policy, passed in April 2018 states: “The Atlanta Board of Education recognizes equity means the quality or ideal of being just and fair, regardless of economic, social, cultural, and human differences among and between persons. We believe that achieving equity requires strategic decision-making to remedy opportunity and learning gaps and create a barrier-free environment, which enables all students to graduate ready for college and career. The aim of equity is to provide students with additional and differentiated resources based on their educational needs. We must be bold and intentional if we are to design systems which are free from bias and favoritism and which truly affirm all the gifts and needs that make each of our students unique individuals.”

Training & clear expectations for staff

Training and professional development are needed for staff to examine their own biases, understand students’ needs and contexts, and be able to fulfill their role in a way that supports equity. Job expectations should be examined for staff, including accountability. (Indicated by 69% (n=9) of focus groups.)



In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Students:

- *“With my school, to make my school more equitable, they should hold our teachers accountable. When things are brought to the administrator, it is brushed over.”*

Families:

- *“This is from a training side, have clear metrics and training from the principal down. The teachers have the heart, but you want to line those things up. If you have a good supervisor people are able to get clear directions.”*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *“I think the teachers would need a change of heart to do that [not see students and families as broken]. Maybe some culturally sensitive, racial, training. Maybe training that leads to more understanding, get rid of stereotypes or biases. If you’ve been doing this a long time and you start to associate certain issues with it being related to sexual orientation, or a race.... you should get a reset so you stop thinking that way. Change minds and hearts.”*

Instructional Staff:

- *“I think it would have to be a change of mindset for some teachers. I don't know what would change a deep-rooted mindset that results in some of the issues in classrooms.”*
- *“Teachers need training on how to prepare and engage with students.”*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *“Lots of trainings and also include students and parents at the table. This is a holistic approach. I think we think we’re doing it (equity) but we really need all people involved for that.”*
- *“Some people know how and who to ask for things and then they get what they want. The training needs to happen at non-school-based level so we know how to help the schools.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“I do think that some kind of training for staff for dealing with their own trauma so that they don't make things worse for students.”*

School Board Members:

- *“They certainly need training, including anti-bias training and CR pedagogy training. That’s a must. And anti-racism training is key in that. And I think that goes for everybody, because we’re in a district that employs predominantly Black teachers, and oftentimes there can be a perception that Black people don’t need that type of training. And I don’t think that’s true, and I believe it’s something all of our teachers, all of our staff need.”*
- *“For the teachers and instructors and leaders of each school, that starts with changing the culture and training for a different approach. Every teacher who graduates from college has a different ideology for what teaching and learning looks like. We have to look at training for teachers in the capacity to do what we want them to do – look at students and meeting them where they are.”*
- *“I love the implicit bias education piece and should be a no-brainer (and should already be implemented).”*

Supporting Artifact Data: In reviewing the District Strategic Plan for 2020-25, there is a system-wide recognition that more training and professional development are needed for staff.



- Two strategic priorities reference a commitment to building staff capacity (pg. 12):
 - *“We are creating a system of support for schools: With a focus on capacity-building and growth, every staff member is given the training, support, coaching, and advocacy needed to build their skills and raise the bar for excellence. By providing staff with resources and autonomy, schools are better positioned to address the needs of their students and their community.”*
 - *“We are equipping and empowering leaders and staff: We are rallying teachers, staff, volunteers, families, and community members to create a cohesive coalition of support for each student, investing in his/her/their success.”*

Sharpen the focus on students

Over half (54%; n=7) of focus groups called for APS leaders and staff to hold a laser-like focus on students' needs, particularly the students who need support the most, and have the courage to stay focused on their needs rather than others' voices or pushes.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Students:

- *"We have AP and IB classes at my school and I don't think I should be in these classes because I had not been in these classes before. You are not taught how to excel in those classes. We don't focus on all of the students. We are pulled a part."*

Families:

- *"In my case, sometimes it is because of work, but if we know about appointments (meetings) in advance, we can ask for the day off at work. I ask for appointments (meetings) in the afternoon because that way I can pick up my children and be in the meetings. I was always at the school, and although my son was embarrassed that I went to the school so much, now he thanks me because I helped him graduate."*
- *"APS identifies only the top performing students and they support them. My children were treated very differently."*
- *"Admin and staff needs to focus on the children and learning not whatever the parents are going through."*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *"Once a decision is made about what's right to do for children, it needs to be stuck by. No matter what any other group might say or how uncomfortable they get. [everyone nods in agreement]."*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *"I think the problem is we need to ask our kids. What is it that you need? We continue to talk to adults and the adults make the decisions about students. Everyone at the secondary level, I think, (kids) are able to articulate what their needs are. I think we need to stop guessing because that is where we get into the trap of spending so much MONEY."*
- *"I think for a long time we have made decisions about what is good for adults and forgot about why we were here. We are truly here to serve children and to educate them. If we just change our mindset about why we are here. A lot of times what I see is that we are making decisions about pleasing adults and pleasing a certain section of parents. Is that really thinking about helping the kids?"*
- *"I still think that at the district level, they are almost afraid of some of these groups of parents and that in turn, makes me afraid."*

District Leaders:

- *"We can make sure to make plans to include voice that shows diverse voice in district; often kids participating in programs SGA have to have high academic standing; looking at requirements for participation and keeping equity in mind we can elevate diverse voice."*
- *"Looking at policies and practices – looking at what's in place and make recommendations and have courage to change the practices; identifying barriers to equity and being clear and drawing line in the sand on how we overcome barriers; as we've learned there comes sense of loss and understanding."*

School Board Members:

- *"Think they need more data into how our students are doing, which comes in the form of the universal screener which gives both academic and mental health data. And they need more on the feedback front – what are kids saying about their classrooms and schools, and then empower adults to use that data and make a change that's best for their school sites."*
- *"I feel like we do a lot of labeling to our students, instead of looking at the root cause and identifying things to help them through their learning process."*

- *“If we could create portfolio for every student, I think that would be great. If everyone could just understand every child’s story, allowing them to have a personality and voice, you’ll find equity there because you’ll be able to identify what those differences are.”*

Supporting Artifact Data: Two of the 2020-25 Strategic Plan’s 11 equity commitments relate to sharpening a focus on students. Specifically:



- *“Leveraging School Improvement to Advance Equity: We commit to integrating school improvement efforts with effective strategies and interventions to help ensure that all students can reach their full potential.”*
- *“Supporting Special Populations: We commit to implementing targeted strategies to prioritize support for special populations such as English learners, students with disabilities, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.”*

Importance of leadership

A few focus groups (31%; n=4) specifically pointed to the importance of leadership in setting the course for equitable actions, including the allocation of resources and creating an environment focused on equity. They also called out the importance of leadership to have the courage and backing needed to chart the equitable course and stay by it, which is a persistent topic within other themes as well.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“We have a specific administrator focused on managing these resources and services. I think APS should make sure every school should make sure each site has someone to focus on this. To have that component in every school would be amazing.”*
- *“As principals and leaders, we should challenge the status quo. By challenging the thinking in our schools. Just be mindful as principals, moving the cheese is the right thing to do. We need support and so does the community. So when those vocal groups come, remember to support the principals!”*
- *“It has taken me about three years and being comfortable in saying, ‘No!!’ to the parents in my community and I now say it more often than I ever did but they still challenge me. And sometimes I feel like I am being forced to say yes to something that I don’t believe in. So supporting the principals in those decisions, It’s super crucial.”*
- *“Everybody wants to tell you how to run the school but no one wants to sit in the seat. Just like everybody wants to go to heaven and nobody wants to die. If we are the ones doing the work, then support us!”*
- *“I am guilty for being slower to act on changes that I think need to be made because of certain groups in my community that will push back and I am afraid that I will not be supported on the district level. I have actually experienced that.”*

District Leaders:

- *“One commitment we can make from our seats [as leaders] is in standardizing professional development or curriculum; our expectations from school level that standardizes equitable approach; that more often teachers will respond to same instances in standardized way.”*
- *“We need to be transparent and have clearly documented and written - for how students are placed in accelerated math or gifted math, or standard operating procedures; we need to be honest and do power mapping – power is concentrated in certain identities, parts of the city, persons, need to be transparent about that if we are going to distribute resources equitably; who has power and who doesn’t; we don’t have*

honest conversations around communities or senior cabinet of who has power and who doesn't and be willing to address and correct it; that's the foundation and then you build from there."

Clarity & commitment

A few focus groups (31%; n=4) also recommended that, in order to improve equity in APS, stakeholders needed greater understanding of what equity means and can/should look like, and they needed greater commitment to equity. They noted that understanding and commitment are not currently consistent across APS. There needs to be some attention to building a shared understanding of what is meant by 'equity' and in the process of building shared understanding, also building shared commitment.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *"One thing we can agree on is the definition of equity will change. It can't be defined on a holistic matter but on an issue level."*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *"We need to clearly define equitable."*
- *"Not having a framework or plan around autonomy, that causes inequities like what was just said. This goes hand in hand with defining equity and equitable, what does that really look like? And how can we make sure everyone gets an opportunity to get there? Something that was supposed to be a solution has, for some schools has caused another issue."*
- *"When we talk equity, we talk about it in a silo. We need a deeper understanding of the influential factors of the history and current state of Atlanta. The disparities are important to note, not as an excuse but it's important for us to know so we can advocate for our students. We need to be keenly aware of what's happening to our students when they're outside of our schools, in the city of Atlanta."*
- *"This is a journey. If people think in the next 3-5 years we'll have equity down pat, they are sadly mistaken. There's a mindset shift. This is a marathon, not a sprint."*

District Leaders:

- *"Being clear with district and community on what equity is and is not; and how to overcome barriers we will get when you start to overcome."*
- *"Hedging against power imbalances and solving for them – if we want staff to act of equity focus, we all know there are communities of parents who will rise up against it because they feel it's a loss of power; we need to be ready to support staff while also meeting needs of community."*

School Board Members:

- *"What APS can do to be more equitable is to claim and fund it (through this work), and then see what we're doing with it. What does it look like? What are our outcomes? 'Input, output, outcomes' – what we're doing is a lot of input work, and the report will be the output, but what we do in two and five years are the outcomes. What are we going to look at?"*

Contradicting Artifact Data:

A review of district artifact data contradicts the perception that APS has not communicated a commitment to equity. In fact, both the Strategic Plan 2020-25 and District Equity Policy both state a commitment to equity and define what equity means in APS.



- The District's Strategic Plan 2020-25 states: "Equity, ethics, engagement and excellence will continue to guide our work moving forward, we will lead with an equity lens. The strategic plan will prioritize raising the achievement of all students while minimizing the gaps between different student groups, ensuring access to opportunity across race, gender, household income, and special education status.... Equity is at the core of the

2020- 2025 strategic plan and will guide our work as a school system. The Atlanta Board of Education recognizes equity means the quality or ideal of being just and fair, regardless of economic, social, cultural, and human differences among and between persons." The plan also explicitly names 11 Equity Commitments that "speak to several focus areas we believe are instrumental to creating a more equitable school system."

- The Atlanta Board of Education’s Equity Policy states: “The Atlanta Board of Education is committed to providing each student at every school with the full support and opportunity to fulfill their highest potential. The Board acknowledges the historic and current inequity, bias, and oppression existing at all levels of our society, including our schools. In Atlanta, we have experienced unique challenges which have divided neighborhoods, broken trust, and called integrity into question. We seek to understand, disrupt, and dismantle patterns and structures of institutional bias (conscious or unconscious) creating disparities and perpetuating achievement gaps among students. The Atlanta Board of Education recognizes equity means the quality or ideal of being just and fair, regardless of economic, social, cultural, and human differences among and between persons. We believe that achieving equity requires strategic decision-making to remedy opportunity and learning gaps and create a barrier-free environment, which enables all students to graduate ready for college and career. The aim of equity is to provide students with additional and differentiated resources based on their educational needs.”

Theme 5: District Commitment to Equity

An important part of the journey to creating and sustaining equity is having an approach of collective action. In a district steeped in collective action, adaptive problems are understood to be more effectively solves with collective, rather than isolated, action. Part of collective action is communicating a clear and cohesive commitment to equity to all stakeholders. This includes the overall vision for equity, as well as regularly communicating progress, successes, and challenges, and having clear ways that a focus on equity is woven into all district teams and work streams. Below are the main themes that emerged when stakeholders were what messages they have you heard from the district leadership about addressing the needs of all students, particularly students who are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and people of color. Themes are presented with the most commonly mentioned ideas first. Quotes are provided that help to illuminate the theme and stakeholders’ perspectives.

Messages stakeholders would like to hear

Numerous (70%; n=9) focus groups shared what they, as stakeholders, are eager to hear from district leadership with regards to equity in APS.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:



Students:

- *“I would like to hear something good about our test scores and how good we're doing.”*
- *“Would like to hear about how the district is closing the school gap, particularly in the elementary school. Some elementary schools have great PTA that supports the schools. I would like to hear work around how they are helping to support students who live in low-income areas with resources.”*

Families:

- *“I am waiting for an announcement and want to support equity from an equity standpoint. Especially for Asians, we are the silent group unless something comes up like last summer.”*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *“If we don’t put some systems in place based on what we learned last year [during the pandemic], that is a loss.”*

Support Staff:

- *“District leadership needs to get more diverse people into the room to have real and better insight on what you are discussing.”*

Instructional Staff:

- *“Increase in bilingual staff at NAHS, but we need many more resources: busses for afterschool events and supports.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“I hear race, gender, but I don't hear much about socio-economic issues being discussed.”*
- *“If you don't flash our growth and only flash our negative, it sends a message of subpar service. As we build transparency, share the backstory because it doesn't tell the whole story of what we are doing. And sometimes parents trust the district more than they trust the site because they think we are trying to hide things. Limited share of data can kill the culture.”*
- *“I am very curious to know what exactly the new center for Equity and Social Justice will do for us directly. With all the new people that have been hired in that role, I would think by now we would have specifics about what the work will be. ... What are the goals they are going to implement? And simply put, how are they going to implement it?”*
- *“What can we as principals expect at the end of the year to say this is working? Will there be something more visible in our schools? When are we going to mention something about budgets? I want to be clear about the expectations because this is what we are going to have to tell our community. They are going to need to be able to see the work.”*

School Board Members:

- *“But I think as we go down the line, we may get more specific. I think the cultural momentum we're trying to get to is inclusive and bringing everyone forward.”*
- *“Based on the way we've set our goals, there will have to be targeted efforts, so I'm excited to see what the next steps are.”*
- *“I do think that we need to recognize that the kinds of conversations that we have with different parts of our community need to be different, and I don't feel like we've done that yet. ... I understand that this admin and members of it are very conscious of communicating the same things to everybody – however there are times that while the content is the same, the message may need to be different. The wealthy white parents need a different message – they need to understand equity in a way that they can grasp. They need it a lot more basic. For many of them, it's highly politicized, and we need to teach them.”*
- *“I agree, but I also want to make sure the messaging isn't that different, because some people already feel that some districts are treated with a different type of glove.”*
- *“How can we articulate exactly what we're doing to create an equitable learning environment without making it seem like they're all siloed issues.”*

A lack of action or concrete elements

Several (62%; n=8) focus groups shared that, while some messages may have been expressed, there is little weight to them without clear actions or things that make the messages more concrete. A lack of action addressing inequities was raised repeatedly.



In Focus Group Participants' words:

Families:

- *“I have heard messages, all that is being said is fluff to me. I've been in these schools and I've seen teachers yelling at children.”*

Support Staff:

- *“But what’s the follow through? Be willing to make the changes quickly.”*
- *“You can all the check boxes, but if it’s not real, the kids will pick up on it.”*

Instructional Staff:

- *“The Superintendent message, but equity is in the work at the ground level, doing.”*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *“What we’ve heard in the community recently is, ‘So what do we do? What are you doing? Can you tell me the first step?’ This is nothing new, but we can’t just wait on it to build a plan.”*
- *“I don’t think we’re confused that we’re focused on equity but what I heard from principals is, ‘how do I do that?’ Some have issues even getting parents to the school to get to the open house. She had the idea to provide transportation but was told she couldn’t do that. So, are we doing what we can to remove the barriers? The action part is definitely what’s missing.”*
- *“So, we’re at the point where we need to walk the talk. We need to be clear with our employees about where we’re going from an equity stance.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“I’m hearing equity and expectations, programs being bought, but I’m not hearing how the action will take place. I see that district is invested, but what does it look like at the ground level. I feel that that is still disconnected.”*
- *“In terms of how will the work impact the day to day of our schools because that is what we need to know. I would just like to know more but I have not heard anything about how the district is going to address the needs of my school.”*

School Board Members:

- *“We’ve heard a lot from this current admin and this board, and certainly they’ve evidenced it by bringing this work and department together, but it’s important that we show evidence of it both reflectively, what happened with the last equity audit, and how this is going to be different from here on out.”*
- *“The admin talks a lot about this, but action speaks louder than words.”*

Absence of messages

Some stakeholders (54%; n=7) indicated that they have not heard the district speak of equity or voice a commitment to equity.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Students:

- *“I haven’t heard anything about Equity from our district.”*
- *“We don’t hear from our principal much, but when we do, it’s not about equity.”*
- *“I mean I haven’t heard any messages from the Superintendent. I just recently found out that we have a new Superintendent.”*

Families:

- *None. [notetaker comment: all participants in one of the family focus groups shook heads ‘no’ and had nothing more to contribute to this question.]*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *“Since COVID I haven’t heard anything. I’ve heard ‘all’ students but not in particular for marginalized students.”*

Support Staff:

- *“We haven't seen anything. The students say adults put them down. Focus on one child ‘they consider a problem.’”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“I guess I haven't really heard anything. Unless I missed something. I know about the office. I would like to know more about how they will do their work and how that will look for schools.”*

Contradicting Artifact Data:

As described in Theme 4: Efforts to Improve Equity above (under Clarity and Commitment) a review of district artifact data contradicts the perception that APS has not communicated a commitment to equity.

Messages heard

Roughly half (46%; n=6) of focus groups shared messages that they have heard in recent time about equity and the district's commitment to it.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *“I've heard the board create a policy for equity, I've seen the district commit financial resources, and heard the initial plans to create a plan to address inequity.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“I think there is no doubt that the commitment has been articulated to us, especially coming off the last three days of the retreat. I think the vision has been well set and I think it is one in which we have a clear understanding of. What we are aiming for so I think the new leadership has done a really good job of expressing that commitment.”*

District Leaders:

- *“What I do feel good about is the movement is beginning – beginning with standardization – standardizing intervention practices throughout district; in at least academic division there is work being done to standardize instructional practices; even beginning with where we are right now having these conversations, starting center for equity and social justice; feel good about direction this is going.”*
- *“Would say APS district leadership is committed, have board, funds, policy behind it and all those things are necessary to actually do it; the commitment is there but question about the will – question about power – are you willing to speak truth to power when it comes up and those are two different questions – commitment is definitely there and superintendent in there, she has the will, but she needs the support – one person can't go against power structure alone.”*
- *“Previous strategic plan had equity embedded in it; for my office we felt we had marching orders in funding formulas and how we think about how schools are spending dollars; concern is that leaders do take the work very seriously, it's the how to do the work – for instance, charter system model in beginning of last strategic plan had a focus on autonomy and flex so site leaders could make decisions for equity; now pendulum swinging back to standardization – its more about what steps do leaders take to realize equity in schools; how do we implement policies that equity commitments that leaders are committed to, are then enacted upon.”*

School Board Members:

- *“There's a lot of talk, but there's action too. It leads a good amount of our strategy, but the word ‘all’ is used too. There were sometimes when we may have wanted to be specific about identifying a particular subgroup, but pulled back so no one would feel left out.”*

Theme 6: Resources

Another foundational element of a school district steeped in collective action is the equitable allocation of resources. Equitable schools ensure that each student and educator has access to the resources and opportunities they need to fulfill their potential. One’s race, culture and other characteristics of their identity should not stand in the way of that access to resources or opportunities. Stakeholders in this equity audit were asked what messages they have heard from the APS district about the challenges of bringing funds and resources into schools such that students, particularly students of color, have what they need to succeed. Themes are presented with the most commonly mentioned ideas first. Quotes are provided that help to illuminate the theme and stakeholders’ perspectives.

Evidence of resources within APS

Over half (54%; n=7) of focus groups named that APS has many of resources and that resources are sufficient and not a source of problems.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Students:

- *“I believe our school has enough resources to get us by. I think the school and resources are good.”*
- *“I feel like at __ the teachers, facilities are good and the budget is being well spent (computers and teachers) for students.”*
- *“I think the budget is being managed well. We are a charter school so that may be why but there could be a little more help. Often times, the families have fundraisers because APS doesn’t give us a lot of help.”*

Families:

- *“I don’t think they have resource problems. When my children had a computer breakdown, they sent a technician to fix it, and my children have been awarded prizes for attendance and given school supplies. They have given them [my children] everything they need.”*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *“As far as the resources, I used to say, we had a \$1.2B budget - I see no reason why APS cannot fund what we need in the classroom. Having a game plan to bring monetary and non-monetary resources where we need them.”*
- *“Once the money does land in the budgets of the principals, I think APS does a good job of funding schools based on the students who attend. That could be staffing, but the principals have had the flexibility to help with those budgets.”*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *“On the general funds side, I’m proud of the way we fund our schools. It’s based on the demographics. The two biggest drivers are enrollment and poverty percentage.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“I have not heard of challenges, we have gotten lots of help from APS Partnership Office, but at the same time we get donations because someone wants to donate to the poor school, and the donations have strings or have resources and they don’t necessarily meet the needs of the school.”*

Supporting Artifact Data: One of the 2020-25 Strategic Plan’s 11 equity commitments relates to the distribution of resources across the district: “Ensuring Equitable Funding: We commit to ensuring available funds are distributed equitably and appropriately to provide high-quality programming for all students and close resource gaps.”



Resource disparities in APS

On the other hand, stakeholders in the same number of focus groups (54%; n=7) called out evidence of disparities in how resources are distributed among students, schools.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Students:

- *"My current school has the things it needs but my past school didn't have enough and I don't think they had enough things for us to succeed."*
- *"I believe ___ Elementary is significantly different from resources other school have."*
- *"At S. Atlanta, we apparently have a 9 million budget but we don't see it. If we do, it is probably going to Facilities or Payroll. We are the only school that haven't had a major update to the school. We have programs and students that should be invested. We get more money than N. Atlanta but they have a stronger PTA in which they have a lot more resources that can be used. I wish someone could explain to us how the money is being used."*
- *"At my elementary school, which was in Fayetteville, it was predominately white. I could see improvements and how the monies were spent. But at CSK, there are really great things in which the budget is being spent well but I can see that there were more expensive things at my old elementary school."*

Families:

- *"I heard that not all schools gave [students] computers or that in some they had to purchase insurance."*

Community Stakeholders & Alumni:

- *"Clear divide between north and south, has to do with the resources in the community to make up for what the district can't provide."*
- *"Inability to provide basic necessities of life. I keep paper towels, water, hats to support students on the bus."*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *"We do hear from schools that resources are not distributed equitably. I've had this conversation that it does appear that when you have a smaller dept and a number of schools, the one that speaks the loudest gets the attention."*
- *"It appears from my seat that some schools are better at getting companies to donate to them, compared to others. I don't know if that's a skill thing or what."*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *"Talent is particularly frustrating because I find candidates who have not been weeded for what the schools need. The safeguards are not helping to cull the talent. I shouldn't have to take the whole year to fill position. Then getting emails telling me I'm not meeting a timeline to fill my positions. Not vetting the pool tells me APS doesn't care about who I put in front of our students."*
- *"Some consideration should be taken for making sure that hiring is equitable and 'less desirable' schools don't suffer in the hiring process."*
- *"I know there is an office, a partnership office and my experience has been that a school like mine is often not included in some of the resources."*
- *"When it came to the food distribution during Covid/ Shelter in place, the entire north Atlanta community was left out. We had huge groups of families who had no access to food and God bless (district officials' name) for coming in after the fact working and getting the food to our Hispanic families. But I think that there is a concentration of where partnerships and resources go that miss the poor kids in the outer areas of the district."*

- “We don’t just have inequities with transportation but with academics and what one school may offer compared to another. It is interesting and I will agree regarding the partnership office, many times we are not included.”

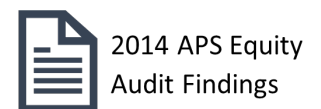
Supporting Artifact Data: According to the state’s 2020 district-level data, Atlanta Public Schools’ 50,954 students have an average per-pupil expenditure of \$16,269. Two artifacts in particular display variance in resources by school cluster.

- An Equity Audit conducted in 2014 found that specific clusters were receiving a “greater than average share of resources based on total per pupil spending amounts” in 2012-13. Those clusters included Carver, Jackson, and Washington (pg. 23).
- According to the FY20 Consolidated Budget General Fund School Allotment Summaries, the Carver, Douglass, and Washington Clusters received greater per pupil spending amounts than the other clusters (pg. 1)

Cluster	Sum of Budget Request	Projected Enrollment	Per Pupil
Grady	\$45,913,260	5,281	\$8,694
North Atlanta	\$71,177,437	8,108	\$8,779
Therrell	\$40,684,105	3,813	\$10,670
Jackson	\$49,923,580	4,543	\$10,989
Mays	\$45,067,878	3,974	\$11,341
South Atlanta	\$40,638,625	3,501	\$11,608
Washington	\$33,663,814	2,876	\$11,705
Carver	\$22,957,773	1,857	\$12,363
Douglass	\$50,507,610	4,061	\$12,437

Artifact data (publicly available revenues and expenditures for 2020) indicate variability in resources spent on instruction. With \$10,400 spent per student on average in Atlanta, 41 schools spend more, while 66 schools spend less than that average. Relatedly, only 10 schools spend more than the district’s average \$1040 per student on instructional support, while the remaining 98 schools spend less on instructional support.

In the 2014 audit, per pupil expenditure was examined and variability was also found (APS Equity Audit 2014, p. 23). Findings included:



- Charter schools spent the most, averaging \$15,000 per pupil.
- Alternative schools spent the least amount per pupil, of all school types.
- The South region spent more per pupil than any other region, followed next by the East. The West and North regions spent the least per pupil.

Looking at individual schools, the discrepancy is more stark. Some schools spent less than \$10,000 per pupil (e.g. Adamsville, Woodson) while others spent more than \$15,000 (e.g. Burgess-Peterson) (APS Equity Audit 2014, p. 72).

Similar trends were found in the types of spending with Charter schools spending the most on instruction and Alternative schools spending the least. Regional spending showed minimal variability in terms of funding for instruction (APS Equity Audit 2014, p. 73).

Additional artifact data reflects variability in the distribution of experienced teachers across the district. For example, data from 2020’s certified personnel data reflects the average PK-12 teacher in Atlanta has 11 years of experience. When examined by school, wide ranges surface from an average of 4 to 18 years. Over 30 schools have teachers who average less experience, with 13 schools having less than 7 years of experience, on average. (Those schools are: KIPP Soul Primary; Gideons Elementary School; Kipp WAYS Primary School; Kindezi; KIPP Strive Primary; KIPP Vision Primary; Wesley International; Academy Charter Facility; Kindezi Old 4th Ward; Westside Atlanta Charter School; Kipp Strive Academy; Woodson Park Academy; KIPP VISION; KIPP Atlanta Collegiate Academy). In contrast, of the 57 schools that have above average teachers’ tenure, there are 13 schools whose teachers have more than 14 years of teaching experience, on average. (Those schools are: Boyd Elementary School; Lin Elementary School; Morningside Elementary School; Rivers Elementary School; F. L. Stanton Elementary School; Burgess-Peterson Elementary School; Hutchinson Elementary School; Dobbs Elementary School; Jackson Elementary School; Beecher Hills Elementary School; Phoenix Academy; Crim High School; West Manor Elementary School).

The 2014 Equity Audit found teacher experience to be widely variable. In the high schools alone the variability of the percent of inexperienced teachers ranged from almost none (Best High) to almost 50% (Carver Health) (APS Equity Audit 2014, p. 57). “Students in Alternative schools spent about 28% of their time in classrooms with inexperienced teachers in comparison to the Carver cluster where students had an inexperienced teacher about 36% of the school day” (APS Equity Audit 2014, p. 36).



2014 APS Equity Audit Findings

While years of experience are one indication of talent resources, they are not a comprehensive indicator. Another indicator is whether teachers have met state certification requirements. Data available from the Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) provides information on the professional qualifications in APS, disaggregated by high poverty, low poverty, and total schools on the percentage of: inexperienced teachers and/or school leaders; teachers with emergency or provisional credentials; and out-of-field teachers.

- Overall, in APS, 48% of teachers are considered inexperienced in terms of their professional qualifications. Among Atlanta’s schools that are considered ‘low poverty’, the percent rises to 55%, and for ‘high poverty’ schools, the percent rises further to 59% of staff that are considered inexperienced.
 - o The five schools with the *lowest* percent of inexperienced teachers are: Rivers Elementary School; Jackson Elementary School; Beecher Hills Elementary School; Smith Elementary School; West Manor Elementary School.
 - o The five schools with the *highest* percent of inexperienced teachers are: Woodson Park Academy; Gideons Elementary School; Harper-Archer Elementary School; John Lewis Invictus Academy; Kindezi Old 4th Ward.
- When examining the experience level of leaders, the district average for APS is 48% inexperienced administrators, which is similar to the rate of inexperienced teachers. The rate of inexperienced leaders in ‘low poverty’ schools rises to 59%, and then rises significantly to 88% for ‘high poverty’ schools.
 - o There are 21 APS schools that do not have any inexperienced leaders.
 - o There are 15 APS schools that have 100% of leaders that qualify as inexperienced, according to state certification standards.

Wishes for expenditures or ideas for solutions

Several (46%; n=6) focus groups expressed their wishes for how resources were allocated, or ideas for solutions to resource inequities.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Students:

- *"Something that could help are people who are advocating to support the students. Sometimes, the budget can get lost because the people may not know what we need."*

Support Staff:

- *"I haven't heard any messages, but, when you look around and see all of the buildings being built. I wonder where are your priorities? Why not use these funds to pay teachers better and offer better student support."*
- *"Use resources to get parents educated and trained to support their students."*

Instructional Staff:

- *"More training for teachers."*

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *"The one that speaks the loudest gets the attention. That's when data comes in to help track this. We need to know where the need is. We also need to know ROI. I don't like working reactively and I want this to matter."*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *"We would need leaders who have a talent to coach teachers in the classroom. Leaders that know how to coach their lead team which will move the needle the most at the elementary level."*
- *"The importance of professional development. Having a place where we could really do hands-on professional development for teachers and helping them deal with students of diverse backgrounds and giving them strategies. ... I remember a long time ago in Atlanta there ... was someone that I could call and say hey I need someone to participate in this professional development but there was a place for teachers to get 'true' Professional Development. I think we utilize the online resources too much and for some of our teachers, they need someone right there in front of them. I think this is the biggest thing that we do not have."*
- *"When you look at our community and the inequities inside and out, at some point APS is going to have to come out from behind the district and form a partnership with the city."*

School Board Members:

- *"I would like to see an equity audit for the partnerships department. That's something I'd like to see in the future."*

Resource allocation is not strategic

Some stakeholders (38% focus groups; n=5) indicated that APS is not being strategic about how resources are spent. They suggested that if the resources at hand were distributed or used in a different way, there would be better outcomes and greater equity.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Center for Learning & Leadership Staff:

- *"In the strategic plan there's mention of schools who are doing this right. Who are those schools and how is that happening? I'm hoping this gets rectified to ensure that schools that need it the most get it."*

- *“To me, Atlanta is resource rich. We're not strategic in how we use our funding. We don't let the data show us or support it. Sometimes we make decisions that have nothing to do with student growth. I've never seen so much funding before, but I know that funding goes back every year.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“Funding at my school is NOT the issue, what is the issue is how do we translate our good work and expectations to our community that may not be at the forefront for our students and our parents.”*
- *“I do agree that we do have a lot of resources. I just don't think that we are very strategic on how we use some of our resources and how we levy some of the resources that we have.”*
- *“I have never seen a challenge of resources. I don't see this as the biggest challenge I should say, to me, as I have seen it, the biggest challenge has been ineffective instructional practices for teachers and monitoring those instructional practices. So when we talk about equity at the school our biggest impact on that is increasing achievement and closing the gaps and that is done through effective instructional practices and strategies.”*

District Leaders:

- *“Student funding formula that allocates funds through poverty weights – main gap in district is we don't have training or PD for principals how to use those dollars to implement effective practices in building to target resources to those students.”*
- *“I don't know if those dollars are being spent on students where we intend them to be at the district level, in the school.”*
- *“Not sure at district level we have way to evaluate - we are building that work now but currently don't have infrastructure to see if we have return on investment towards targeted programming – need that to determine equitable resources.”*

School Board Members:

- *“We are investing more dollars in the clusters where the inequities that exist. The challenge that we often get is ‘what is the impact of those dollars?’ How is it that we're making the investment but we're still seeing this large gap. ... How are we making sure that they're making the most significant impact. And I don't think we can answer it. We get caught up in the specifics so much that it takes us away from the social impact of it. Do I want to scale it back? No, but make it count.”*

Contradicting Artifact Data: Several artifacts, including the Budget Primer for Fiscal Year 2021 and the FY22 School Allotment Guidelines contradict the notion that resources are not allocated strategically.

- The Budget Primer for Fiscal Year 2021, prepared by the district's Department of Budget Services, described the district's Turnaround Strategy, in which additional support is provided to the lowest performing schools: “The APS School Turnaround strategy was developed in 2014 to provide the additional critical support our lowest performing schools need and deserve. APS, with the support of the Boston Consulting Group, used community and educator input and external research to develop an aggressive, targeted, research-based strategy for turning around APS's lowest performing schools. The Turnaround Strategy is made up of 16 initiatives targeting high-quality instruction, additional time for student learning, building teacher and leader capacity, additional wrap-around support and potential school structure and operating changes. Approximately \$7.4 million has been invested in the FY2021 school year to provide additional services at these schools in support of their Turnaround Strategy. APS will continue to support the Turnaround Strategy in the Districts lowest performing schools.”
- The APS FY22 School Allotment Guidelines point to their funding approach, known as Student Success Funding. “Student Success Funding is the district's funding formula that will allocate funds based on the attributes of students (e.g. grade level, poverty, special education, English language learners).” The district moved to this approach with the goal to distribute resources equitably based on student need, in a clear and easily understood way, and to allow school leaders the flexibility to define the resources they need to drive student achievement.”

Theme 7: Stakeholders' Involvement in Decisions about Resources

In solving adaptive problems in a collective, rather than isolated, way, districts in collective action listen to stakeholders and make decisions with multiple stakeholders' input. Across focus groups, stakeholders were asked about their involvement in decision making regarding how resources are distributed equitably across the district. Themes and illustrative quotes are shared below. Please note: two focus groups did not cover this last question during their allotted time. Therefore, the percentages below reflect the number of focus groups that shared insights out of the 11 (rather than 13) focus groups that actually address the question.

A multitude of voices are involved in decisions about resources

Stakeholders (55% focus groups; n=6) referred to stakeholders being involved in decisions about resources. That involvement ranges from being involved in decision making about resources, referencing a time when a good balance of input was struck, or a promising way that was used to include voices.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Students:

- *"At my school (when I was in the 7th grade), they asked like did everyone have the computers and the things that they need to do the assignments. They found out that majority of us didn't. They set it up where we could get computers, that we could take home (but bring back). It helped us get our work done. It helped my classmates get there grades up (low grade C to low grade A)."*
- *"I had the opportunity last year to sit with N Atlanta and we were able to talk about the resources. That is why I said that I have a relationship with the new Superintendent. She shared the budget with us during a focus group and asked that we talk to our principals about it. This raised the issue about equity."*

Families:

- *"I believe that parents also have a say in things at school, parents' voices count if they want to express themselves."*
- *"I think that at our school they do ask us and listen to our opinion."*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *"It is almost like we have created an atmosphere where parents have the most power and decision-making. We have seen a few times in that decisions have been made whether we like them or not, a small group of parents have spoken out and that has created a sense of urgency to get more parents' Input and in some cases reversed decisions. However, at the same time, the principal's input was never sought. I think leadership needs to take ownership of decisions and we all want to work in a space where we get various inputs from stakeholders, students, and parents but right now, they are controlling the narrative. The parents, not the principals."*
- *"That's why you see dynamics of principals who will call their most vocal parents to speak on our behalf, but you tell the parent, 'Hey don't say it is me.' Because you know the voice of the parents is louder than your voice and it holds more weight."*

District Leaders:

- *"Plenty of opportunities for communities to weigh in via board meetings, budget/finance advisory meetings."*

School Board Members:

- *"We engage stakeholders at multiple levels, but I can't answer that question clearly. We have varying levels of engagement that all our stakeholders are a part of – advisory groups, our community meetings, our hearings, social media. But what I can't answer is how we do that about resources distributed equitably because the information they get is from finance."*

Supporting Artifact Data:

Two district artifacts demonstrate that multiple stakeholder groups are invited to give their input: The District Strategic Plan, 2020-25 and the Budget Primer Fiscal Year 2021.

- As stated on page 1 of the District Strategic Plan, 2020-25: “We want to thank the APS community for your engagement and feedback throughout the development of this strategic plan. This plan represents countless hours of feedback from stakeholders around our community. Over the past six months, students, families, teachers, staff, leaders, and community members shared their vision, their hopes, their concerns, and their ideas for the next five years. Your feedback, in all the ways the APS community came together to provide it, was invaluable in informing where we are, where we need to go, and what we need to get there.” According to the description of the engagement process, input was collected through 1,200 surveys, community conversations with 1,000 stakeholders, and an APS Table Talk for parent feedback.
- Additionally, the Strategic Plan includes this equity commitment: “Partnering with Families and Communities: We commit to partnering respectfully and collaboratively with families and communities to address the needs of all students.”
- One section of the Budget Primer Fiscal Year 2021 outlines the budget process, describing how stakeholders are involved in the budget process: “Prior to the final adoption, Budget Commission meetings are held to gain consensus on revenue assumptions, budget parameters and appropriation levels. In May, the Superintendent presents the tentative budget to the Board, the public and the media. The tentative budget provides a first glance of the investment plan for the upcoming school year. It evolves as the budget process advances and presents opportunities for input from key stakeholders including parents, students, citizens and staff. Also in May, the District holds four regional meetings with the community and staff regarding the tentative budget to receive additional input to be incorporated before the numbers are finalized. Subsequently, the Superintendent presents the recommended budget to the Board, public, and media. The Board conducts public hearings on the proposed budget and millage rate and then adopts the budget in the month of June.”



Stakeholders are not involved (or involved enough) in decisions about resources

Participants (64% of focus groups; n=7) reported that a variety of stakeholders are not involved in resource decisions (or they are not involved enough), and that decision making tends to be singularly made or without transparency. In some instances, stakeholders may have been asked their opinion, but did not feel their input was used or valued.

In Focus Group Participants’ words:

Students:

- “At my past school, we were asked, but they already had their mind made up. They just asked us to ask.”*
- “I have never been asked for input from APS and that is one of my biggest problems. They asked the parents.”*
- “I have never been asked. There should be student input because children are our future. I have never been I asked or included in those conversations.”*

Families:

- “My observation with the GO Team, is that the parents were only a few people. There were community members, teachers, etc., but not as many parents.”*

Support Staff:

- “Stakeholders aren't really everyone, but it's really 40-50 of the same people that have a lot of input with what the board does with resources. Like a singular group that has a lot of influence.”*
- “Not a lot of chance for voices. Families in the south, west, don't have the district engaging with them so they don't know, while in the north they network and work together.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“We like to think they are included but they really aren't. There is so much stigma about surveys and people's ability to find out who you are. I don't think the voices are necessarily heard.”*

District Leaders:

- *“A lot of engagement when we first transitioned funding formula to SSF from traditional – from both sides the engagement opportunities we've held have had less engagement from community.”*
- *“I feel it is the same group as always that weigh on budget – don't feel it reflects diverse community.”*
- *“If engaging digitally, still catering to information haves to have more power and privilege – how are we catering others on digital divide who don't have laptops.”*

Wishes for and ideas about stakeholders' involvement in resource decisions

Respondents (55% of focus groups; n=6) offered ideas and wishes for how decisions could be made with (or without) stakeholders, including processes to include stakeholders, who should be involved, and ideas around accountability.

In Focus Group Participants' words:

Students:

- *“I know we do have a new Equity Officer . . . I think we need to be a part of the conversations but not just president, vice president in our schools. It needs to be for other students to advocate. We don't really know about the board meeting but we need students to be more involved.”*
- *“Students and parents should have a survey about the budget, resources being used at the school. Parents should be more involved about the resources being used.”*
- *“I want to know who will be held accountable. Students are not responsible for how it should be spent but I feel like there should be a third party to help hold the schools accountable.”*

Families:

- *“We need to be involved up front as opposed to the back end.”*
- *“We need training for parents.”*

Principals & Assistant Principals:

- *“Even though we sent out information and surveys, families don't trust them ... We need a different way to engage parents. Online townhalls are limited by access.”*
- *“I don't know how we can engage when there are so many limitations on how resources are used. Some have so many requirements, that you are limited. Whereas places with funding with from parents is held by the parents.”*
- *“There should be a caveat that it be stated that surveys or stakeholder input must have a certain amount/percentage of response to be able to have an impact on a final decision. If it is for feedback, one thing, if it is to make a decision. If you want to use it to make a decision, we need to create systems that allow for equitable decisions to be made...the required percentages.”*
- *“Combining meetings and helping parents learn about unspoken rules. Help parents build the skillset of what advocacy looks like. Also we forget that people have multiple children and can't come to all of the things asked of them.”*
- *“I think sometimes we as educators give away our power. I enjoy having input from parent stakeholders but I also enjoy recognizing and understanding that we are professionals and sometimes we need to have a stronger input on how funds are spent and where they are spent because that is our career, that's what we do. You don't go to the doctor's office and tell them what you need, he or she is going to tell you what you need because that is his/her profession.”*

- *“The families want to publicly preach the importance of equity but privately do not necessarily want it. And privately they are doing what the other principal mentioned, they have the board members’ numbers. They reach out to these people so their kids can get what they need and the things that they want. I am in a community where the parents want everything. They want the orchestra, they want the band, they want advanced math classes for fourth and fifth grade, they want Spanish, etc. We get silenced because the communities’ voice seems to be bigger and their voice is more intimidating to the ones that are above us. So I think we have to get to a place where the PRINCIPAL 's voices are truly equal or equitable and as a principal, at the school if this is what I'm saying this is what we need that should be supported. The community does not always see the whole picture but they need to trust in the decision-making because we are not going to make a decision without really thinking it through and really applying all that we know to do the best for kids.”*
- *“We need that support from the powers that be and that will empower us to make those decisions and be confident in our decisions. And we will be comforted in knowing that we will not be overturned because of intimidating voices.”*

District Leaders:

- *“That intentional engagement over the last year we haven’t done – there is work we can do to be more intentional to get varied voice.”*
- *“Need to go back to community to reassess strategy to engage folks who typically won’t engage.”*

School Board Members:

- *“The thing is whose responsibility is it do to that? It isn’t on all stakeholders, it’s on us as a school district and the administration. Does that mean I don’t think it’s important to listen to stakeholders about all decisions, but when it comes to the accountability, that comes to a different level. This conversation has made clear what we already know – that this topic, equity and equitable distribution of resources, is complicated at best. To assure something along those lines, we want to have some level of accountability for that.”*

Artifact Data: The 2014 equity audit did not deeply examine family and stakeholder involvement; however, data was collected related to community involvement related to PTAs/foundations as it related to equitable resources. Findings included:



2014 APS Equity Audit Findings

- PTA membership in schools that responded had a range in their membership of between 2 and 800 members.
- 50% of schools shared that they had less than 100 members.
- Budgets ranged from \$30 - \$172,000 and 40% of the PTAs had budgets of \$1000 or less.
- Of the 8 schools that reported having their own foundations, their budgets ranged in size from \$550 to \$260,000.

(APS Equity Audit 2014, p. 32). Please be advised that data was not provided by all schools.

Overview of Action Planning Process

The Atlanta Public Schools equity audit committee convened over the course of six meetings to engage with the findings from the equity audit report. The report listed seven key topic areas and presented patterns and findings within these key topics. The committee first engaged with the report to understand the findings and stories that emerged from the data. Then, the committee used a root cause analysis protocol to further understand why these patterns and trends emerged in Atlanta. Committee members listed systems/structures and mental models that they identified as connected to these patterns and trends. The committee members then created a problem statement, using the Lens of Systemic Oppression framework from The National Equity Project, to identify a problem statement that includes structural, interpersonal, and individual factors.¹

Once a problem statement was identified, committee members then created a desired outcome based on the problem statement that included the necessary shifts in individuals, interpersonal interactions, and structures and policies needed to reach this desired outcome. These shifts to reach the desired outcome were then used as a springboard to brainstorm safe-to-fail experiments. Safe-to-fail experiments are small-scale experiments that approach issues in small and safe ways that allow possible solutions to the larger problem to emerge. Given the complexity of tackling inequities within a school system, safe-to-fail experiments can help leaders quickly try out possible strategies for moving toward equity and learn what modifications work for their system.

Once the committee generated a list of safe-to-fail experiments, members then selected two experiments to further action plan. This action planning process includes planning on how to implement a safe-to-fail experiment. Elements of the action plan include:

- Actions that need to be taken for the experiment
- Names of individuals who will be involved in these actions
- Recommended timeframe for the experiment
- Identification of the individuals who will be responsible for executing and overseeing the experiment
- A list of questions that will help guide the learning for the team

The committee completed this action planning for two safe-to-fail experiments. Further experiments can be tested as well, depending on the capacity of those implementing the experiments. Next steps in this work would pick up from this point using the thinking and documentation from this process as a guide to continue addressing inequities within Atlanta Public Schools.

¹ Source: <https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/lens-of-systemic-oppression>

Action Planning for Equity Audit Committee Results

The equity audit committee worked primarily on Theme 3: High Expectations, Theme 4: Efforts to Improve Equity, and Theme 6: Resources as starting places for the work in root cause analysis and developing a theory of change regarding these equity areas. This theory of change identifies the desired outcome that is directly linked to the problem statement developed by the root cause analysis. Additionally, the committee outlined key shifts in individual, interpersonal, and system beliefs, behaviors, and policies needed to bring about the desired outcome. Below are the draft desired outcomes and shifts in behavior for themes 3, 4, and 6:

Theme 3: High Expectations

Desired Outcomes: Explicitly having schools share how they want families to feel welcomed (space, communication, atmosphere, greeting/ tone/ expectations of front office). Making our families feel welcome. Representation of/ for our families matter. Share both grows and glows of our scholars- not only negative things. Make a space for students to voice, and be exposed to opportunities of leadership and forward thinking. Consistently including families.

Exposing our students to opportunities to explore above and beyond what they are used to seeing; Ask students “Why not?” encourage them to explore beyond expectations that may be assigned to them or their zip code. Examine why some students in the district are exposed to more opportunities than others. Acknowledge that our individual journey may look different, but we’re all capable of success. Call parents to share when their students had a great day at school. Pull families into the promise of their students. Operate like they want to be engaged instead of another narrative. Emphasize partnership!

Shifts in Behavior:

Individual: What are the shifts in belief systems and individual behaviors? (How does this look differently for leadership, if at all?)	Interpersonal: What are the shifts in how people interact with each other?	Systemic: What are the needed structural/policy changes?
<p>Assume goodwill; operate like ALL families DO CARE and WANT WHAT’S BEST FOR THEIR STUDENTS.</p> <p>Prepare families earlier and support them as their students navigate school transitions to manage expectations. (e.g., ES to MS, MS to</p>	<p>Pull families in early and often, engage them in the supports that they may need to help their students.</p> <p>Share the GLOWS and the grows.</p> <p>Ask “Why not?”... when students may not embrace their full potential.</p>	<p>Set an expectation for how often ALL schools should engage families.</p> <p>Provide templates that school leaders and staff can leverage in engaging families. (e.g., Infinite Campus, email correspondence, alternate ways, etc.)</p> <p>Provide dedicated time and resources to</p>

<p>HS, HS to post-secondary, etc.)</p> <p>Adopt a new belief about scheduling; meet families where they are and innovate how we connect.</p> <p>Fully share course/program expectations with ALL students to more equitably expose students/families to opportunities that we/they may not think fits their students.</p>	<p>Identify fun innovative ways and times to connect with students and families that best fit their needs. Humanize school touchpoints. (e.g., parent night, cluster bash events, Douglass HS “Nightmare on Holmes Street” haunted schoolhouse, trunk or treat, etc.)</p>	<p>support teachers and staff in managing family engagement. (e.g., academic updates, fun events, priorities, etc.)</p>
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Theme 4: Efforts to Improve Equity

Desired Outcomes:

- Departments, Divisions, Individuals with the power to make equitable decisions for students
- Equitable decisions should be made independent of the impact of the external structures
- Training, equity commitments, and dispositions can support all employees to withstand to impact of the external structures

Shifts in Behavior:

<p>Individual: What are the shifts in belief systems and individual behaviors? (How does this look differently for leadership, if at all?)</p>	<p>Interpersonal: What are the shifts in how people interact with each other?</p>	<p>Systemic: What are the needed structural/policy changes?</p>
<p>Engage “decision makers/influencers” in continuous training to unpack biases prior to “decision-making” season</p>	<p>-Story- Corp type Storytelling/Sharing</p> <p>Divisions/departments should begin all collaborations/meetings with the following question: -What problem are we trying to solve? For who? Why?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit/review what the structure is intended to serve • Key Question – who/what is this practice/structure/policy intended to serve? • Is it equitable

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grounding the meeting in a lens of equity • Shifting power (trust) • destabilize power hoarding • Creating trust by remembering your purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protocol – policy/structures from the lens of commitments and dispositions review • Checks and balances on decision-making by a task force/more minds than one (needs to be an equity/accountability arm) • District needs to shift and share accountability
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Theme 6: Resources

Desired Outcomes:

- Resources are purchased based on previous evaluations (ROI)
- Curriculums that represent the voices of many stakeholders
- Students can utilize the resources of multiple schools

Shifts in Behavior:

Individual: What are the shifts in belief systems and individual behaviors? (How does this look differently for leadership, if at all?)	Interpersonal: What are the shifts in how people interact with each other?	Systemic: What are the needed structural/policy changes?
Willingness to seek help Leaders willing to share promising practices/resources Shifting deficit mindsets which impact spending	Including stakeholder (specifically student, family, community) voice Coordinating/Collaborating amongst various departments & schools	System to evaluating the return on investment Data leveraged to support and not used punitively

Once the committee developed a theory of change for the three themes, they brainstormed safe-to-fail experiments that could potentially bring about the shifts they identified in the theory of change. Below are the safe-to-fail experiment brainstorms developed by the committee:

Theme 3: High Expectations

Individual	Interpersonal	Systemic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start with the Man/Women in the Mirror: Check our bias on referring to some APS schools as “better” than others. Operate with higher expectations for ALL schools and students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • #2 - Student Surveys/Evaluation Pilot: Did this teacher have high expectations for students? Get data from the students whom we serve. State level questions don’t drill down deep enough. Reconnect to your WHY! Exit slips, actionable data. Incorporate High Expectations in TKES/LKES/EPAT Employee Evaluation; Explore the ways to enhance existing performance evaluation tools to assess High Expectations for students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • #1 - Implicit Bias Training & Peer Accountability Circles: Revisit unfinished work on Implicit Bias; Restart professional learning opportunities that were historically started to train staff in recognizing bias; More than awareness (dig deeper); Work through those biases that emerge. Explore a way to create peer to peer support system; Practice using tools and have an accountability peer group internally that monitors progress and areas of growth, in a manner that is safe. • #3 – Hiring & Job Fairs: Strengthen the pool; Decisionmakers often make what they think are “convenient” “easy” decisions that don’t serve APS well; Decide to stop the “Dancing of the Lemons” systemically (e.g., custodian example) Standardize APS hiring procedures. Hire earlier versus later in the cycle when choice candidates are already recruited into other districts. Vet

		<p>candidates for APS fit more and demand High Expectations for all students as a prerequisite. Hiring looks different across the district sometimes based on relationships vs. capability and what you bring to the school. (e.g., watch out for red and pink flags) Job Fairs: Some school leaders feel they don't have top choice candidates to recruit from. Consider best practices for attracting and employing top talent in areas within APS that don't traditionally don't experience a ton of candidate interest and a strong talent pipeline.</p>
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Theme 4: Efforts to Improve Equity

Individual	Interpersonal	Systemic
<p>Mandatory Bias and Decision Making Training (anyone categorized as a decision maker)</p> <p>Professional Learning/Guidance for Stakeholders</p> <p>Engaging external stakeholders in equity work in becoming external equity champions</p>	<p>Protocol for agenda meetings (W3 Protocol - What is the problem we are trying to solve? For whom? Why?)</p> <p>Monthly Equity Champion Recognition (external/partners)</p>	<p>Systemwide policy review through an equity lens (Stroud's work)</p> <p>Create an equity accountability task force to review board/district decisions through an equity lens</p> <p>Check and balances think tank</p> <p>Cross functional Equitable Decision-Making Engagement Team (EDMET) with rubric or review guidelines</p>

Theme 6: Resources

Individual	Interpersonal	Systemic
<p>-Opportunities to create ideal school budgets for principals and teachers.</p> <p>-Leadership newsletter that speaks about sharing of resources.</p> <p>-Self-reflection exercise on shifting their expectations for students.</p>	<p>Guided Critical friendship / thought partner groups across clusters which focuses on reorienting deficit mindsets</p> <p>-Pedagogy Partners – Teachers connecting around best practices in their building / across clusters</p> <p>-Lunch and Learn with budmybaget, accounting, procurement, and equity teams</p> <p>-Family Think Tank Event around needed resources.</p>	<p>Resource Gallery Walk Event</p> <p>-Virtual Elective Courses for schools lacking certain opportunities</p> <p>-Pipeline for innovative positions</p> <p>-Group planning workshops with CLL staff and school leaders around resources</p> <p>Prioritizing partnerships across geographic regions.</p>

After brainstorming the safe-to-fail experiments, the committee strategically identified one safe-to-fail experiment for each theme to develop an action plan for. The experiment was selected based on several factors, including existing district resources, current initiatives underway, and their potential to create deeper and broader impact. These action plans (and others strategically chosen based on the equity audit results) will continue to be built out, and will be included in the upcoming Atlanta Public Schools equity strategic framework.

Leadership Academy Recommended Resources

Based on the equity audit findings and discussions with the equity audit committee, the Leadership Academy recommends that Atlanta Public Schools review the following resources to address inequities identified in the audit. This is not a comprehensive list of resources, but can serve as a starting point for continued work and discussions across the district:

- UnboundEd’s toolkit, “[Disrupting Inequity: Having Brave Conversations About Bias](#)” which “contains everything educators need to facilitate conversations about bias, prejudice, and race and includes materials and resources to guide you each step of the way.”²
- NYU Steinhardt’s “[Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard Toolkit](#)”, which “provides key questions that Scorecard facilitators (and those accountable for moving classrooms and schools toward cultural responsiveness) should address as they prepare for their next steps. The questions are designed to encourage a critical reflection on the process of scoring, identifying systemic barriers, opportunities, and supports for CRE curriculum, considerations for getting to CRE curriculum, and planning next steps.”³
- Chalkbeat article on “[How bias happens: teaching struggling students can affect observation scores](#)” provides brief coverage of a study that indicates patterns of bias in teacher evaluations.⁴
- The Leadership Academy has [equity leadership dispositions](#) that are the foundation for being a culturally responsive leader within the district.⁵
- The [National Museum of African-American History and Culture](#) curated resources for talking about race.⁶
- The [Building Equitable Learning Environments Framework](#) provides districts areas and suggestions to focus on in becoming antiracist.⁷
- [The Continuum of Becoming an Antiracist Multicultural Organization](#) is a quick scale that can be used as a self-assessment.⁸
- The Leadership Academy’s [Equity At Work Guide](#) provides recommendations districts can take to improve pedagogy.⁹
- The Leadership Academy’s [Portrait of a Culturally Responsive School](#) provides framing for the key indicators of culturally responsive practice at a school level.¹⁰
- The Leadership Academy’s [Portrait of a Culturally Responsive School System](#) provides framing for the key indicators of culturally responsive practice at the district level.¹¹

² <https://blog.unbounded.org/bias-toolkit/>

³ <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/ejroc/culturally-responsive-curriculum-scorecards>

⁴ <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2018/6/20/21105414/how-bias-happens-teaching-struggling-students-can-affect-observation-scores-study-finds>

⁵ <https://www.leadershipacademy.org/resources/equity-leadership-dispositions-2/>

⁶ <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race>

⁷ <https://belenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-BELE-Framework.pdf>

⁸ https://www.aesa.us/conferences/2013_ac_presentations/Continuum_AntiRacist.pdf

⁹ <https://www.nycladershipacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Equity-at-Work.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.leadershipacademy.org/resources/portrait-of-a-culturally-responsive-school-2/>

¹¹ <https://www.leadershipacademy.org/resources/portrait-of-a-culturally-responsive-school-system-2/>

Leadership Academy Recommended Next Steps

Identifying, disrupting, and dismantling inequities within school systems is an ongoing process for culturally responsive leaders. We at the Leadership Academy believe this equity audit was an important milestone in Atlanta's continued efforts to ensure every student across the district has access to culturally responsive classrooms and schools. We want to thank the equity audit committee for ensuring that the data within this report is used to create actionable and meaningful change by creating safe-to-fail experiments that will allow leaders within Atlanta to learn and grow as they continue this equity journey. This work is by no means complete and finished. We offer the following recommendations as a guide to continue building off the thinking from the equity audit committee and to ensure the wider Atlanta community are equipped to tackle inequities from their standpoint.

- Continue using this report to create theories of change and action plans, with particular attention on topic areas that the equity audit committee was unable to fully address. Because of the limited timeframe of the committee's work, some topics were not fully addressed by the committee.
- Convene district, school board, and school leaders to review the report, provide clarity on the safe-to-fail experiment process, determine any safe-to-fail experiments to implement across the district, and develop a feedback process to identify and measure what works.
- Ensure the equity work and safe-to-fail experiments are being monitored and assessed from a district level. It is important to have a systems lens when monitoring the safe-to-fail experiments underway concurrently in Atlanta. Assign someone responsible with a district lens for executing this work stream.
- Ask schools and other departments to develop equity teams. We believe the school and department equity teams could use this report alongside school- or department-level data to inform and conduct their own safe-to-fail experiments. The results of these experiments would be collected by the district equity team and team lead to monitor and support initiatives across the district.

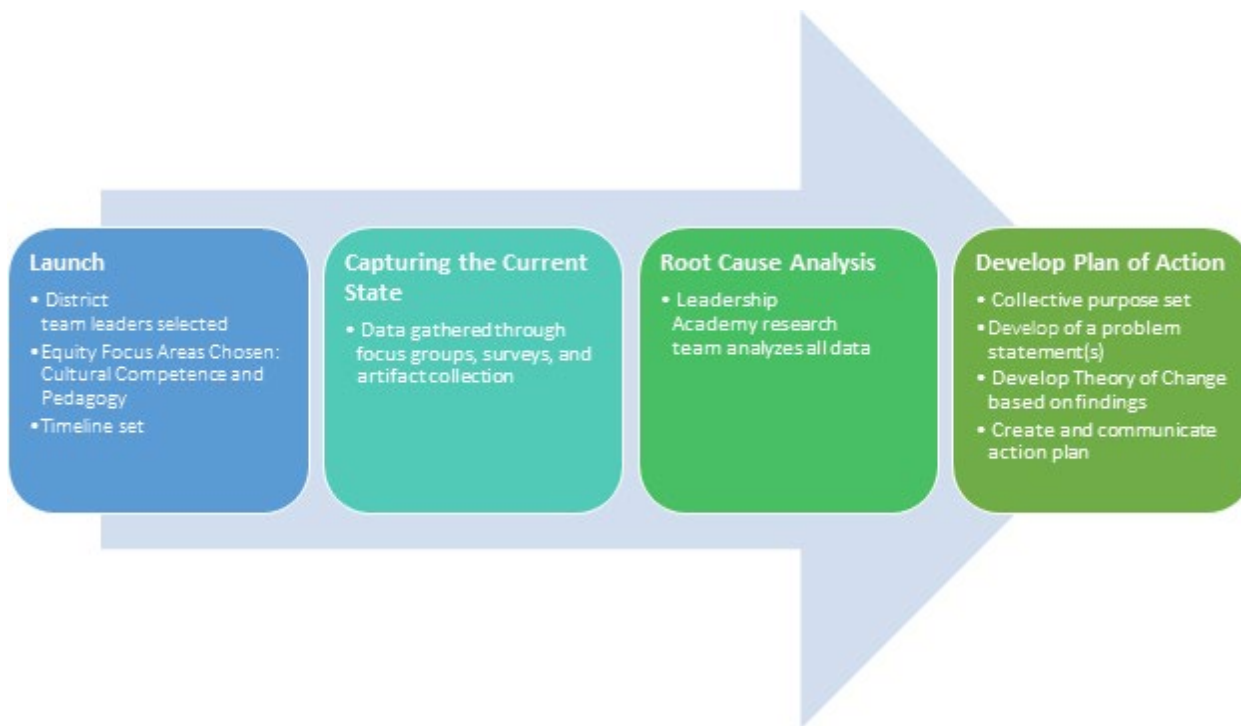
Timeline of Committee Work

Meeting Date	Agenda
April 2	Committee Meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee Introductions • Equity Audit & Committee Process Overview • Norms Development
April 23	Committee Meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Community • Centering Our Work in Equity • Focus Group Approach & Best Practices • Review Focus Group Questions • Plan for Surveying Stakeholders
May 5	Focus Group Training
May 25	Meeting with APS team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process check-in • Check in on focus group progress
June 25	Meeting with APS team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process check-in • Check in on focus group progress • Artifacts discussion
May - July	Conducted Focus Groups for students, parents, instructional and non-instructional staff, district leaders, administrators, central office staff, community partners, and board members
September – October	Action Planning Process: Root Cause & Safe-to-Fail Experiments

Appendix

Overview of Audit Process

The Leadership Academy’s equity audit process enables districts to diagnose their current state of equity and to identify focal points and recommended strategies for making improvements. The audit process is broken up into four distinct phases.



In the pre-launch, a committee representing a cross-section of internal and external stakeholders is formed to help lead the work. Leveraging the Leadership Academy’s *Equity at Work* tool, a research-based guide designed to help district leaders target their efforts in creating a more equitable education system, 2-3 focus areas for the audit are chosen. In the project launch, the equity committee contributes to shaping an equity goal and helps to identify data sources. Next, insights and feedback are collected from students, parents, staff, and community members through a series of focus groups and surveys, and the collection of district data and policies to help capture the district’s current state. Once the Leadership Academy’s Research & Evaluation team synthesizes all the data and feedback, the committee engages in a root cause analysis in order to ensure proposed strategies are aligned to the real challenges the district needs to address. Finally, through a cycle inquiry, the committee shapes shape strategies and action plans to address the inequities surfaced.

Sampling and Data Collection

To establish the current state of equity in the district, the Leadership Academy, with the cooperation and assistance of Atlanta Public Schools, collected data through focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders within the district. Focus group questions were created collaboratively between the Leadership Academy team and the Atlanta Public Schools Equity Audit Committee. A total of 13 focus groups were conducted and included the following stakeholders: students; parents; community members (alumni, partners); student support services staff; instructional staff; support staff (bus drivers, SROs, cafeteria staff, etc.); principals and assistant principals; district leaders; and school board members.

The Leadership Academy also analyzed artifact data to determine patterns in existing Atlanta Public Schools documents and data that support or contradict equity within the key areas identified for the audit. Artifacts examined included:

- Georgia Student Health Survey results 2019, 2021- The Georgia Student Health Survey is an anonymous, statewide survey instrument which identifies safety and health issues that have a negative impact on student achievement and school climate. The survey covers various topics such as school climate and safety, graduation, school dropouts, alcohol and drug use, bullying and harassment, suicide, nutrition, and sedentary behaviors.
- APS Strategic Plan 2020-25 - In 2020, the district introduced a new strategic plan outlining the district's goals and strategies for the next five years.
- APS Equity Policy – On April 8, 2019, the Board of Education formally adopted an equity policy.
- APS Advanced Placement Overview, 2020 – Each year, district staff publishes a preliminary AP brief from data made available by the College Board.
- Georgia DOE Comprehensive Needs Assessment 2020 - 2021 District Report - Georgia's Department of Education has developed a common improvement framework focused on the systems and structures that must be in place for sustained improvement in student outcomes. As part of this process, districts are asked engage stakeholders in the collection of information to identify patterns and trends that support the identification of instructional, leadership, professional capacity, family/community engagement, and learning environment needs
- APS District Improvement Plan, 2020-21 - To meet all Federal and State planning requirements, districts in Georgia draft annual improvement plans with the input of community stakeholders.
- APS 2014 Equity Audit Report - Equity report prepared in 2014 with the aim to convey information about the state of the system at the region, cluster, and school levels using a variety of indicators including, community characteristics, financial data, and the characteristics of schools.
- Budget Primer Fiscal Year 2021 - This document provides an overview of the FY21 budget and the state, federal, and local economic context that impacts the budgeted revenue projections. It also outlines the District strategic plan, guiding principles for revenue and expenditures, budget parameters for FY2021, funding model, consolidation of funds, and a timeline presenting a step-by-step process for the development of the FY2021 budget.
- FY20 Consolidated Budget General Fund School Allotment Summaries - This document includes budget information for each district cluster for FY20.
- School Allotment Guidelines - The School Allotment Guidelines (SAG) is a document that houses all of the formulas and guidelines used to develop the base budget for each school. Formulas for earned dollars for programs such as core teachers, extended core, special programs, school-based administration and support, and non-personnel allotments are all housed in this document. The SAG are reviewed yearly by Budget Services, Senior Cabinet, and program managers and are updated and edited based on principal feedback and new initiatives of the district.

- Professional Learning Documents – Professional learning documents included session descriptions for courses offered to staff on equity and cultural competence, as well as training descriptions for courses offered to the district’s police department.
- Certified Personnel Data 2020 - Teacher and school leader demographics and distribution across the district; Include a listing of teacher and school leader educational backgrounds (i.e. degree levels), as well as areas of certification or certification status, and placement (school, grade and/or subject area).
- GOSA Inexperienced Educators 2020 - Data from the Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) reflecting the certification of staff and leaders in district schools.
- Revenues and Expenditures 2020 - Data from the Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) for school expenditures per student across several budget categories, including instruction and instructional support.
- GOSA School PPE FY20 – Per pupil expenditures for FY2020 from the Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA).

The analysis examined evidence of support or contradiction of the themes and questions examined via the focus groups and surveys.

Data Analysis

Leadership Academy staff and APS staff took extensive notes during the focus groups. The Leadership Academy’s Research & Evaluation team coded these focus groups according to the discussion topic (e.g., focus group guide question), and the themes within each topic. The Leadership Academy’s *Equity at Work* served as a framework for the analysis. Themes that emerged repeatedly across focus groups serve as the findings. Artifact data were examined for patterns that supported or contradicted the themes determined by the focus groups and driving questions.

Focus Group Protocol

Topic 1: Cultural Competence – Discussing Race

- *Leaders & Instructional Staff:* As our first question, we’d like to hear how often race and identity are discussed in classrooms or covered in curriculum materials within Atlanta Public Schools. Specifically, when race is brought up, does it tend to be uncomfortable discussions and conversations about negative situations – or – does it tend to be discussions in terms of contributions and positive situations? How does the curriculum support – or not support – these conversations?
- *Non-Instructional Staff & Community Members:* As our first question, we’d like to hear how often students learning about and having conversations about race and identity in Atlanta Public Schools. From your perspective as staff/community members, do you feel these conversations are happening with the right frequency, do you think the conversations cover topics that are both positive and negative, and do you think the school should support these conversations differently?
- *Parents & Students:* As our first question, we’d like to hear how often race and identity are discussed in classrooms or covered in learning materials within Atlanta Public Schools. To your knowledge, when race is brought up, does it tend to be uncomfortable discussions and conversations about negative situations – or – does it tend to be discussions in terms of contributions and positive situations? How do you feel the school staff and the classroom materials support – or do not support – these conversations?

Topic 2: Cultural Competence – Student Connections

- *Leaders & Instructional Staff, Non-Instructional Staff, Family/Community Members:* How well do Atlanta Public Schools staff know their students? (If follow up needed: How connected do adults and students feel? Do students feel comfortable talk to adults if they have a problem?)
- *Students:* How connected do you feel to the adults in your school? Is there an adult you feel comfortable talking to when you have a problem?

Topic 3: Cultural Competence & Collective Action – High Expectations

- Now we’d like to hear your perspective on Atlanta schools and teachers holding high expectations for all students, regardless of differences in race, ethnicity, gender, language, etc. When we say high expectations, we mean believing that all students can perform on grade level and be successful in college and careers – and not just believing it, but operating schools and classrooms in a way that holds students to those expectations. What do you see or hear from the adults in APS/your school about having high expectations and supporting students of different races, ethnicities, and cultures?

Topic 4: Cultural Competence – Improve Equity

- *Leaders & Instructional Staff, Non-Instructional Staff:* This next question uses the term “equity”. When we say “equity”, we mean children and adults have what they need to succeed, regardless of race, ethnicity, language or other characteristics of their identity. What do you believe Atlanta Public Schools should do to improve

equity? And what knowledge or capacity do you think APS staff need to have in order to be able to create more equitable schools?

- *Family/Community Members*: This next question uses the term “equity”. When we say “equity”, we mean children and adults have what they need to succeed, regardless of race, ethnicity, language or other characteristics of their identity. How do you think school leaders, teachers, and staff should make schools more equitable? (*Prompt if needed: What should they do about what’s taught and how, or certain policies like discipline, or certain ways families are involved, or patterns of who’s in Honors/AP classes, etc.?*) And what knowledge or capacity do you think APS staff need to have in order to be able to create more equitable schools?
- *Students*: This next question uses the term “equity”. When we say “equity”, we mean children and adults have what they need to succeed, regardless of race, ethnicity, language or other characteristics of their identity. How do you think your school leaders, teachers, and staff should make your school more equitable? (*Prompt if needed: What should they do about what’s taught and how, or certain policies like discipline, or certain ways families are involved, or patterns of who’s in Honors/AP classes, etc.?*)

Topic 5: Collective Action – District Commitment to Equity

- *Leaders & Instructional Staff, Non-Instructional Staff, Family/Community Members*: Now we’d like to discuss the extent the district leadership is committed to creating more equitable learning opportunities for all students. What messages have you heard from the district leadership about addressing the needs of all students, particularly students who are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and people of color?
- *Students*: Do you hear any messages from APS leaders - like the superintendent or other district leaders - about how they are working to support the success of all students, especially students who are Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and people of color? If you have heard messages, what are they? What kinds of messages would you like to hear?

Topic 6: Collective Action – Resources

- *Leaders & Instructional Staff, Non-Instructional Staff, Family/Community Members*: What messages have you heard from the APS district about the challenges of bringing funds and resources into schools such that students, particularly students of color, have what they need to succeed? (By ‘funds and resources’, we mean finances, facilities, talent, etc.)
- *Students*: Do you feel like schools across the APS district have the resources (like condition of buildings, quality of teachers, budgets) they need to be successful – or do you think some schools have lots of resources while others struggle to have what they need? (*If differences are noted: What do you think makes those differences happen? Are they because of choices the district makes, or some other source of money to support schools?*)

Topic 7: Collective Action – Decisions re: Resources

- *Leaders & Instructional Staff, Non-Instructional Staff*: In what ways are APS stakeholders – like staff, families, community members, students – involved in decision making about how resources are distributed equitably across the district?

- *Family/Community Members*: How has APS involved you as families/community members in decisions about distributing resources across the district? Are there ways that you would like to be involved, or have APS gather input from other stakeholders?
- *Students*: School districts make a lot of decisions about resources – like how much money schools should get, which school buildings should be prioritized for being fixed, etc. Sometimes school districts ask the people in their community, like families and community members, for their opinion on how resources should be distributed across schools. Have you ever been asked for your opinion? If so, tell us how they reached out for your input and what you shared. If not, is this something you'd like to give your input on – and what might you like to share as your opinion?

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