



NCSE | National Center for School Engagement

**“Teach from the Heart”:  
What Juniper County Youth Want from Their Schools**

**National Center for School Engagement**

**August 2012**

An initiative of The Partnership for Families & Children  
450 Lincoln Avenue, Suite 100 Denver, CO 80203  
303/837-8466  
[www.schoolengagement.org](http://www.schoolengagement.org)

# “Teach from the Heart”: What Juniper County Youth Want from Their Schools

---

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Snapshot of Participating Schools .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Methodology.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Home Context .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Most parents encourage graduation .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Many family members and friends have dropped out.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The special role of siblings.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Some students get little support.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Proving unsupportive adults wrong.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Being the first.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>School Context .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Transitions.....</b>	<b>11</b>
Transitions into middle school and high school.....	11
Transitions within schools.....	12
Personal transitions as students mature .....	13
The special case of middle school students.....	13
<b>Relations with other students .....</b>	<b>14</b>
Friends .....	14
Bullying and fighting .....	14
Racial tensions.....	18
<b>School discipline policies.....</b>	<b>19</b>
Dress code.....	19
Suspensions.....	20
Fairness.....	22
Race and gender disparity .....	23
Racism among teachers.....	24
Police presence on campus.....	25
<b>Relationships with administrators.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>School attendance policies.....</b>	<b>26</b>
Tardiness.....	26
IDs.....	27
Attendance, tracking, and calls home .....	28
<b>Grading policies.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Finances.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Lunches.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Extracurricular activities.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Classroom Context.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Caring adults .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Teachers who do not meet students’ needs .....</b>	<b>34</b>

Favoritism.....	35
Disrespecting students.....	35
Ineffective teaching .....	36
It's all about the paycheck .....	37
Classroom management.....	37
Teacher observation days: .....	38
<b>Best classes .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Teachers' expectations about school success.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Opinions and Choices .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Attendance.....</b>	<b>42</b>
How students perceive their own attendance .....	42
Reasons students give for missing class .....	42
Students' views of skipping school .....	45
<b>Behavior.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Regrets.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Dropping out.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Students say there is nothing the school can do.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Advice.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Three Likes and Dislikes .....</b>	<b>51</b>
Common Likes .....	51
Common Dislikes .....	51
<b>Insights .....</b>	<b>52</b>
Home environments.....	52
School boundaries.....	52
Police presence.....	52
Discipline .....	52
Academic achievement.....	53
Student motivation .....	53
<b>Options.....</b>	<b>55</b>
Do not withhold learning as a punishment.....	55
Address the root causes of disciplinary infractions through restorative justice practices. ....	55
Require effective classroom management training for all teachers. ....	55
Increase the frequency of unscheduled classroom observations by principals and master teachers.....	55
<b>Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Appendix B: Three Likes and Three Dislikes .....</b>	<b>59</b>
Middle Schools.....	59
High Schools .....	65

## Introduction

Juniper County covers a large metropolitan area that is home to well over one million people, approximately 370,000 of whom are of school age. It encompasses a large number of school districts that jointly operate hundreds of schools, many of which struggle in their mission to educate a largely low-income and minority population. A number of schools combat poor attendance rates and high dropout rates. Concerned community actors have launched a host of initiatives in an effort to improve school achievement levels, including an active relationship with Communities in Schools, a Truancy Intervention Program and many others. As part of these efforts, the Juniper County Government contracted the National Center for School Engagement to conduct focus groups with students at one middle and one high school in each of three school districts. The purpose was to hear in the children's words how they describe their experiences in school, what they have to say about their relationships with classmates and adults, and how they feel about attending their schools. This report presents the findings from that study in the hope that it will help school administrators and teachers put themselves in students' shoes in ways that will lead them to make meaningful improvements in school climate and keep students more actively engaged in school.

"Juniper County," like all other names in this document, is fictitious. However, the place and people are real. Their experiences are poignant and are unlikely to be unique to these schools or school districts.

Students in each focus group talked freely about what they like at school, and did not hold back as they shared what they do *not* like. Some of their statements are heartwarming, others shocking. Some show maturity beyond their years, while others indicate a lack of judgment more typical of teens. One may be sure that in some cases the students' views of the events recounted here differ from those of the teachers and administrators involved. Were that not the case, this research would be unnecessary. The authors have made no effort to corroborate students' presentation of facts; such investigation is beyond the scope of this work and would miss the point, which is not to criticize or mete out justice, but to explain how the students *feel* about their school experiences and what they perceive to be truth.

The authors would like to thank the Juniper County Government for funding this research, particularly Steve Johnson, who pushed it through when all seemed lost; the schools and school districts for their courage in supporting the project, providing space for the focus groups to meet, and release time and incentives for student participants; and the invaluable assistance of the vice principals who organized the focus groups. Mostly, we would like to thank the students who gave of their time and their hearts in the hopes that what they cherish about their

schools will be preserved and what they find hurtful will change. As one participant said, “I just hope this group thing does something.”

The following sections comprise the report: *Snapshot* provides background data on participating schools; *Methodology* describes how students were selected for focus groups and the process by which their comments were synthesized into this report; *Home, School and Classroom Context* lay out students’ views of the environment in which they make their daily decisions to attend or sometimes skip a class, do their homework diligently or perhaps not at all, and in which they choose their friends and occasionally enemies. *Opinions and Choices* presents students’ views of their own attendance and disciplinary behavior, the effort they put into school and whether they anticipate that they will graduate or drop out. *Conclusion* discusses the implications of what students have to say, and *Options* makes suggestions about changes that administrators might consider based on the findings of this study.

## Snapshot of Participating Schools

The following tables present demographic and academic information about participating schools. Table 1 lists participating schools along with their enrollment and their state-assigned accountability rating based on 2011 data. All data were taken from the state department of education website, although citations have been deleted to protect the anonymity of the schools. Since Winston Middle School was in its first year of operation in 2011/12, no rating is available. Ratings are Exemplary, Recognized, Academically Acceptable, Academically Unacceptable or Not Rated. Only one school, Larkspur High School, was rated as Acceptable; no school was given one of the higher two ratings.

Table 1: Enrollment and Accountability Rating of Study Schools		
District and School	Enrollment	Academic Rating Based on 2011 Data
Shreveport School District		
Lowry Middle	695	Academically Unacceptable
Riverview High	2,783	Academically Unacceptable
Morgantown School District		
Prairie Vista Middle	786	Academically Unacceptable
Larkspur High	1,245	Academically Acceptable
Springwater School District		
Winston Middle	910	Opened August 2012
Montgomery High	1,366	Academically Unacceptable

All the high schools selected for this study have high dropout rates. Table 2 shows that class sizes are progressively smaller with each year of advancement.

While population growth may account for some of this change, it can account for nowhere near all of it. Students in the state must attend school until they are 18, although they may drop out at 17 with parental consent. How, then, could class sizes shrink so quickly, long before students reach the age of 18? Dropping out of school is the culmination of a long process that begins with skipping and failing classes. Students who do not earn enough credits in their freshman year of high school to be considered sophomores remain, on the books, in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The same is true for other years. This process results in students who are overage-for-grade and who reach the age of 18 before they graduate.

<b>Table 2: Enrollment By Grade</b>			
	<b>High School</b>		
	<b>Montgomery High</b>	<b>Larkspur High</b>	<b>Riverview High</b>
9 <sup>th</sup> grade	458	410	898
10 <sup>th</sup> grade	352	353	734
11 <sup>th</sup> grade	295	250	592
12 <sup>th</sup> grade	261	232	559

Table 3 shows the ethnic breakdown of students in most of the participating schools. Montgomery High and Larkspur High are more than 50% black and also educate a large proportion of Hispanic students. White and Asian students are small minorities. Lowry Middle and Riverview High, in Shreveport, are more diverse, with a fairly equal distribution of white and Hispanic students, a sizeable minority of black students, and few Asians. The racial composition of Riverview High has changed recently, with an influx of Hispanic and black students; students discussed these changes in the focus groups.

<b>Table 3: Enrollment by Ethnicity</b>						
	<b>Springwater School District</b>		<b>Morgantown School District</b>		<b>Shreveport School District</b>	
	<b>Winston Middle</b>	<b>Montgomery High</b>	<b>Prairie Vista Middle</b>	<b>Larkspur High</b>	<b>Lowry Middle</b>	<b>Riverview High</b>
% American Indian		n/a		n/a		n/a
% Asian		2%		2%	4%	6%
% Hispanic		33%		38%	42%	33%
% Black		59%		53%	14%	26%
% White		6%		7%	40%	35%

Table 4 shows enrollment by free lunch status. More than half of students qualify for free lunch at Montgomery High, Larkspur High and Lowry Middle. Riverview High has only a slightly smaller proportion of students who qualify for assistance.

<b>Lunch Status</b>	<b>Springwater School District</b>		<b>Morgantown School District</b>		<b>Shreveport School District</b>	
	<b>Winston Middle</b>	<b>Montgomery High</b>	<b>Prairie Vista Middle</b>	<b>Larkspur High</b>	<b>Lowry Middle</b>	<b>Riverview High</b>
Free		55%		61%	51%	38%
Reduced		5%		12%	4%	5%

## **Methodology**

The list of participating schools was drawn up by a community coalition dedicated to improving attendance and graduation rates in Juniper County. Schools were chosen because they are struggling with the two issues, and based on their willingness to participate. Three high schools in three different districts, and one feeder middle school for each of the high schools made up the sample. Three focus groups were conducted in each school. Since the purpose of the study was to examine school climate and engagement generally, students were selected in such a way as to arrive at what was hopefully a representative sample of typical students. NCSE requested that schools provide a list of students that fit three categories: students with some attendance challenges; students with minor (but no major) disciplinary infractions; and students who are, or were, behind in credits due to class failure. In most cases, focus groups were segregated according to these characteristics. Schools were specifically asked to exclude several types of students - the highest achieving, honor society-type students; students with serious behavior issues at risk of expulsion; and students who were so behind in credits as to be unlikely to graduate on time. Schools were also asked to include students from each grade, both boys and girls, and students of varying ethnicities. The final lists were selected randomly from among the names in each group, keeping in mind grade, sex and ethnic diversity. The NCSE focus group facilitators were not told which group was which until after all the groups had been conducted.

NCSE sent the final lists of eight first-round students, plus some alternates for each group to the local coordinators. The coordinators contacted each student personally and delivered a letter introducing the project. Students under 18 years of age were required to have a parent or guardian sign a permission form prior to participation. Local coordinators collected permission forms, arranged for a private space in which students could speak without fear of being overheard, and ordered food delivered to students during the focus groups. Regrettably, most students had to miss a class in order to participate in the focus group. In some cases they were difficult classes of the kind students reported they would never skip. Some of these students at least, lead very busy lives. At the end of an afternoon focus group, one participant said, "I still have to do my grocery list and shop for my kids."

One NCSE researcher facilitated all the middle school focus groups and another facilitated all the high school focus groups. Discussions ran about an hour and a half, at the end of which each student was permitted to choose a CD from a box as a token of thanks. The focus groups were held just prior to Mother's Day, and focus group leaders overheard several students saying they planned to give the CDs to their mothers for gifts. In general, the focus groups went as planned, although there was a scheduling mix-up at Montgomery High resulting in a mixture of the three groups. At Winston Middle, not enough parent permission forms were turned in to achieve the ideal number of participants, so the groups were combined. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and students were quoted as accurately as possible.

Questions asked of the students focused on their relationships with adults at school, what their parents say to them about the importance of school attendance and graduation, the characteristics of excellent teachers and classes in their opinions, and their own attendance and the reasons they might miss classes. The focus group protocol is included in Appendix A. However, conversations sometimes strayed from these topics. As long as the comments were relevant to school engagement, students were allowed to follow their train of thought, and sometimes facilitators asked follow-up questions to the student-initiated topics. These student-initiated topics invariably included wise insights into the maturation process of teens, and less lofty discussions about the horrors of school lunches. The last focus group question asked students to write down in their own words three things they like about their school and three things they do not like. The complete list of their responses is included in Appendix B.

Facilitators conducted all three focus groups in a school on the same day. While one visited the high school, the other visited the associated middle school. Grouping the visits prevented a single dramatic event from influencing the comments of one of the student groups – attendance, discipline, or low-achieving – more than another.

A notable finding is how little student comments differed among groups within the same school. In most cases the facilitators were unable to guess which group was which until we were told. Comments from seniors about almost not being able to graduate were clues to the low-achieving group at Montgomery High. And comments about the in-school-suspension program gave a clue at Lowry Middle School. Groups identified by poor attendance did not have students who described their attendance as "excellent" or "perfect," but they did have students who described their attendance as "good." Students in all groups seemed familiar with suspension policy and the experience of in-school suspension, and students in all groups admitted to skipping classes. (However, there were some individual students, including high school students, who said they never skip classes.) There were differences between middle and high schools as would be expected. High school students were more likely to say they skipped classes, and of course only high school students discussed losing credits for failing or

being at risk of not graduating. There were also differences between schools of the same level in the different districts. The racial composition of the focus groups was markedly different in Morgantown School District, where there were several white students in each focus group.

The authors have attempted to include at least one student quote to substantiate each point in the report. The quotes attempt to capture students' words verbatim and to reproduce their actual speech. The only exception to that rule is that all individual names were replaced with pseudonyms. The result is a lengthy document, but hopefully one that is rich in flavor and true to students' ideas.

## Home Context

Although we have no hard data, it is likely that many students in all the participating schools come from single parent families. A Larkspur High School student described living in a single parent family like this:

*We had to sign a paper that was like, how many of you have both parents in the house, and I can say nine out of ten didn't. And that puts a real effect on somebody. There's a blank spot where somebody should be. Like, what's left? Like, there's nothing there, its empty, not balanced at all, not a completion to your life, so it's like, something missing and you trying to fill the void with something else, but it just don't work like that.*

### Most parents encourage graduation

Students receive their first, and arguably most important messages about the importance of education and school attendance at home, from parents and other adults in their families. Most students reported that their parents are serious and strict about high school graduation. A few girls volunteered that their parents also caution them against early pregnancy. Several students said their parents do not talk about high school graduation, but it is not clear whether that is because the parents do not consider it important or whether high school graduation is simply taken for granted and so obviously essential it need not be discussed.

A Lowry Middle School student said, "My dad always tells me, 'You keep doing good in school. Don't quit. Go to college, get a good job,' and he encourages me and my brother and my sister on our dreams and what we want to do and what we can do."

My mom, I do it to keep her proud, but I do it more to be proud of myself. And I do a lot of stuff, like take AP classes, and I'm doing good, and all A's and stuff.

Several students, both in middle and high school said their parents made it clear that if they did not graduate they would not be allowed to live at home. "My mama told me if I dropped out, I'm not going to live with her." "Mine, they say if you get dropped out, you'll get kicked outta the house, because that is not ok."

Many parents also have high expectations regarding grades and talk about college. A Riverview High School student said his father is really strict about grades, and if they fall, "My dad takes away my basketball, he takes away my shoes, he takes away my phone...yeah my dad's real strict on like, education." Another Riverview High School student chimed in, "My mom, dad make me get A's and B's. My dad wants me to try my best but my mom expects me to get A's and B's."

A Larkspur High School student said that his mother is involved and requires him to keep his grades up albeit with an unusual sanction for poor academic performance. “I smoke weed with my momma, but like, if I don’t do good in school, she don’t allow it at all, like ... for that whole six weeks I won’t be able to smoke at all, but if, when I bring my grades back up then she’ll let me again, it’s like a privilege. It’s not like a corrupt family; she has order in our house too.”

### **Many family members and friends have dropped out**

Students were asked whether they had family members or friends who had dropped out of school. Every student in every school could name someone. Often it was a family member, although in Morgantown School District students were less likely to name family members and more likely to name other students from the same school.

A common refrain was that family members encourage them not to make the same mistakes they themselves had made. A Winston Middle School student said, “My mom told me just because she dropped out don’t mean I’m gonna drop out. She said I’m gonna have to keep staying in school ‘till I get to college and not make the bad choices she did.” A Lowry Middle School student said, “Since he dropped out of school, he tells me it’s very hard like trying to work and getting a job and stuff. So he tells me to try and go to college and be someone.”

In some cases, parents counsel students to take advantage of opportunities they did not waste, but never, in fact, had. This Lowry Middle School student appeared to be quite proud of his father.

*My dad always talks about finishing college and stuff because he grew up in Mexico so he never had stuff like I had .... He didn't go to high school or middle school 'cause he had to like get out of 4th grade because he had to work. .... So when he came over here he went back to school and now he has his own company, he has cars, he has houses in Mexico, he has houses everywhere.*

### **The special role of siblings**

Older siblings in large families also play a role in the formation of younger children’s values. Many students do not have the best role models when it comes to graduation. A Lowry Middle School girl said that, “None of my sisters graduated. They all got pregnant.” Others have siblings who have set good examples. A Montgomery High School student said, “I mean even I was bad because I got my mama and my sister, they was all bad, so – but then my sister, she started changing, and she graduated, she got a good job and all that. She has like two cars now. Since I was the only boy in the family, she always wanted me to like make something of myself.”

When asked whether parents talk to the students about graduation, many students volunteered that older siblings do so as well. This Larkspur High School student said, “My brother and my mom. My oldest brother, he’s 21, and he’s like

you should do better; if I could go back, I would do like everything different, and he just encourages me to do good. And like if I get good grades, he takes me out wherever I want and stuff like that.”

### Some students get little support

Most, but not all, students have supportive family members. This Montgomery High boy said his family did not expect him to fare any better than they had. “My family didn't think I could because nobody else graduated, like most of my family wasn't behind me because they were like, well, we didn't do it, or we didn't graduate, or they all dropped out. It's like nobody in my family has graduated high school.” This Larkspur High School student sounded resentful about her father's lack of interest. “My daddy, he never asked for my report card, never. Like I bet you now, he...how you doing in school, do you need some help, never. I do it all on my own...”

Some students have siblings stepping in. A Winston Middle School student said, “My mom's like, you should just get your GED and then my brother tells me to finish high school because he wants me to get a degree and stuff but my mom's just like, you might as well just drop out.” A Larkspur High School student said, “Yeah, me and my mama, we really don't talk when I'm at home. I just talk to my sister. She is like the only one that cares about me. She buys me clothes and shoes. ... And then she said she's gonna move to Virginia. She says she's gonna take me with her.” When asked how old the sister is, the student replied, “She's about to be 18.”

A Montgomery High School boy attributed his mother's lack of attention to school to long work hours. “I really didn't have anybody like motivate me because my mom, she works 24/7. She's an OB/GYN assistant, so I never see her. And it's like I never have anybody to motivate me, so I came to school, I skipped. I thought it was cool. And last year, it caught back up with me. It's really not cool to skip.”

### Proving unsupportive adults wrong

In some cases students respond to unsupportive parents with an angry effort to prove them wrong. A Lowry Middle School student said,

*My mom thinks I'm going to be a piece of shit and drop out of school and get pregnant. She thinks that. So I want to prove her wrong. Like last night we got into it really bad and she was like, 'I'm having another kid,' and all of this, and I was like, 'F you.' And she was like – she thinks I'm going to drop out and all of this and I'm not going to be anything. And I was like, 'F you.' And she was like that she don't need me and all of this. And I was like, 'F you.' And I was like, 'Guess what? When I'm something better, don't call my phone and don't say nothing to me.'*

However, proving unsupportive parents wrong is hard to do, and this boy's older sister was unsuccessful. "My dad be calling us dumb. And when my sister lived with us and he called her that, she'd be like, 'Watch. I'm going to prove you wrong,' and she'd yell at him. And then she turned out knocked up. And he told me, 'You're going to end up like your sisters.'"

### Being the first

Some students are strongly motivated by the possibility of being the first in their families to graduate, and several talked about wanting to set a good example for younger siblings. A Montgomery High School student explained that,

*I'll be the first one, that's really what motivated me and stuff, and so like – but I didn't always have their support because they were like, well, we didn't do it and we're just fine now. I'm like, but I don't want to be like that. So that motivated me to finish school. There was a time because of that, I was just like, you know what, because I wanted to drop out before, like two, I think probably two years ago, but then I was like no, because then I'll just be like everybody else, and I'm the oldest in my family, so I got three younger ones to look after, and I don't want them looking up at me, because they're all looking up at me, and I didn't want them to just be like the rest of the family, so I'm trying to set an example for them.*

A middle school student has her sights set on college for the same reason. "My brothers and my sister, none of them made it to college. And like if anything, I'd like to be the first one to go to college."

## School Context

What takes place in the classroom is of primary importance for a student's education. However, everything that takes place in a classroom happens in the larger context of a school building and is affected by the overall environment. Components of that environment that were discussed in the focus groups fall into several main categories: transitions; relations with other students; school discipline policies; relationships with administrators; school attendance policies; policies that affect grading; and the financial condition of the school. Each is addressed below.

### Transitions

Since transition years into middle and high school are recognized as important turning points for students, focus group facilitators asked how students felt about their school in the very beginning. However, throughout the conversation it became clear that some of the schools were going through their own transformations, and changing from year to year in ways that affect students' experiences. And of course, students mature as they get older. Although they were never asked about their own personal transformations over time, the subject came up frequently. Student views of these three transitions – into a new school, within a school over time, and as they mature – are presented here.

### Transitions into middle school and high school

Students were asked to recall how they felt about the school in their first days, regardless of whether they entered straight from the feeder school or transferred in later. Students provided this list of adjectives:

#### Middle school students said:

Unwanted  
Nerve-wracking  
Easy  
Better  
Scary  
Competitive  
Freedom

Cliques  
Hard to find classes  
Awesome!  
Too big  
Fun  
Boring

#### High school students said many of the same things and added:

Good  
More freedom  
No uniforms  
Like the block schedule  
Responsibility  
Ghetto  
Hard to find classes  
"I hate this school."  
Different

Some settled right in to their new school. "I knew a lot of people here already. I used to be neighbors with a bunch of them, I've been here a lot talking to teachers, it was really easy."

For most, though, the change was more difficult. A middle school student described the disconcerting feeling of being eyed at every turn. “It was scary. It was like when we first come, you’re walking to class and it’d be the wrong class and everybody would just start staring at you. And then we were late to class, everybody’s staring at you, and then when we get to lunch, it’s a whole lot of people staring at you.”

I like school!

Nonetheless, most students described becoming accustomed to the new environment. A Larkspur High School student said that things turned out to be better than he feared at first. “I thought I was gonna get beat up a lot. ... They’re trying to scare you because you’re a freshman. For me, none of that’s true because none of it happened.”

### Transitions within schools

A number of the schools are going through substantial changes that students notice and about which they shared opinions.

MONTGOMERY HIGH: According to the students in all three focus groups, a significant transformation began with the transfer of a principal from a feeder middle school to the high school starting in the fall of 2010. As one student put it, “We have new principals all the time. ... We had a different principal sophomore year; only this year and last year, I had the same principal. So it’s like everything changes.” Students’ descriptions of the school indicate that it has become both calmer and more rigorous. Although these are excellent and much-needed improvements, the change is not easy for the students. Even though they indicated an awareness of the need for change, the juniors and seniors who remember the school before the current principal arrived say that school used to be fun, but is no longer so. “They really doin’ too much at school, especially at our school ‘cause of the conditions ... more people dropping out, test scores bad.”

They described the school as academically lax. As a “... freshmen and sophomore, we didn’t really do nothing. They weren’t like you must do this, you must have this. They were more like give us our grades, but now they’re so strict, they’re like we got to learn, we don’t have no choice. You know what I’m saying? It was – when we was freshmen, it was more, okay, you aren’t coming to class. ... They just kind of passed us through it, but now it’s kind of hard.” They also said there used to be far more fights because “anybody could get in the school, like different students from [another school] in class, but now they can’t even do that, but my freshman year was crazy, fights every day.”

However, students perceive that the changes have had an exaggerated impact on how strict some teachers are because they are concerned about keeping their jobs. “Some people are going to get fired because they haven’t been strict enough so it’s like they’re trying to force ‘em and they’re trying to fit the

description too good, like they're being too good on everything. You can't do this, you can't do that. I can't do that. No. You get in trouble for everything when you're not doin' nothing. They barely want you to get a pass to the restroom.”

**LARKSPUR HIGH:** This school has experienced rapid growth that has been difficult to accommodate. A new wing was built not long ago to house only the freshman. The purpose was to ease the transition to a large school, build class unity, and make passing periods more manageable. However, the current freshman class was so big they have had to abandon the idea, and freshmen now have classes in other parts of the building as well.

Seniors at Larkspur High had a new principal when they arrived as freshmen and felt that “some of the teachers didn’t know what was happening, we had a new campus, and it was like, everything was confused, nothing was, like, in order, but it was required for us to be like, to shape up.”

### **Personal transitions as students mature**

Older students in several focus groups at both the high school and middle school level made comments about the lack of maturity among students in the incoming class. They sometimes attributed strict school policies to the need to keep younger students in control. A Lowry Middle School 8<sup>th</sup> grader said, “I guess the reason they have uniforms is because giving a ‘sevie’ a whole bunch of freedom is like giving a five-year-old a million dollars.” About plans for a pep rally, a high school upper classman commented, the principal is “... trying to have us organize a pep rally, but the stuff we got planned, I don't think it's gonna work for these freshmen because these freshmen, they're just way out of control.”

Noticing changing social circles, a high school student said, “... like friends back then, you're not gonna end up with them when you're a senior, and I seen that with a lot of people.” Another student continued in agreement and assessed the school's role in that maturation process.

*That's true. It happens all the time. People change. But that's just a part of growing up, you know, you just see what you like, and what other people like. I mean I feel like us in school right now, it's like training us to meet people out in the world. Like who is gonna be out there, like what kind of people are gonna be out there.*

### **The special case of middle school students**

Middle school is a time of huge transformation. Students are well aware of how changes in behavior impact the social climate at school. One put it this way. “Elementary school was better because in elementary school you run into people and they would get mad but then five minutes later you'd be all happy, and now at this school, if you don't have the right shoes, they start saying stuff about you or if you're shorter than somebody and start making fun of you and if you're taller than somebody then there's like, you can't fit in either way, if you're perfect or you're not, somebody will find something to say about you.” A girl noted that,

“when you go to middle school from elementary, some of the boys have hit puberty and they're whoa, whoa. Everything changes. You don't even talk to the people that's been your best friend since third grade type shit.”

Another student exhibited a keen awareness of her own volatility and expressed the opinion that teachers also need to be aware of middle school temperaments and do more to avoid inflaming them.

*“We are teenagers and we do have an attitude. And these two years of our lives are the biggest years. This is when we go from change to change to change. So when you come at me and say it to me like that I'm going to get an attitude. I am. And I even know how I am. So don't try to take advantage just because you are my teacher and you know I'm not supposed to say, ‘Shut up. You sit down,’ back. Don't try to say it and be rude to me.”*

### **Relations with other students**

A child's relationship with other students at school has a huge impact on that child's school experience. School is a place where friends congregate, but also a place where cliques can create an exclusive social environment. Focus group participants were specifically asked how they felt about other students in the school and about bullying in school. However, throughout the discussions they made additional comments that addressed peer relationships. Topics that surfaced frequently were friendships, fighting and bullying, and racial tensions.

### **Friends**

Most students said they have friends at school. A Prairie Vista Middle School student said that, “In this school right now, I have like, two best friends. Best best friends. But like, there's like, I'd do anything for 'em, cause I'm cool with them. Its like, I can go to 'em, talk to 'em about something.” And a Riverview High School student said, “I like coming to school and playing basketball, cause I have like, all my friends are in like, all my classes, so we do our work.” Students said that having friends who arrive at a new school together helps them fit in. A Larkspur High School student said, “I [fit in] because middle school everyone I grew up with basically they went to Larkspur High [Middle School] and I grew up with them.”

Another student said that not arriving with a group made finding friends challenging because she felt she had to pick a group and “when I was a freshman I was confused. I didn't know if I wanted to be with the cool people, be a nerd. I didn't know what sports I wanted to do.”

### **Bullying and fighting**

Students in every focus group talked about bullying and fighting. A few students in several schools did not perceive bullying to be common, but they were the exception. Most students, and particularly middle school students, talked about

common bullying. Students in both levels talked about frequent fighting. A middle school girl described an off-campus fight in which she participated:

*This girl – we really didn't fight. I just beat her with a tennis racquet. We was at the park and my little brother was fighting her little brother and they was on the floor rolling. She was going to hit my little brother because he was on top of her little brother. So then I snatched it out of her hand and I hit her up 'side the head with the tennis racquet and I started beating her legs. And then she had the nerve to get a tennis ball and try to throw it at me. So it went right here on my face, so I got it and I threw it right at her forehead. She had a knot right here.*

Every participant in one of the focus groups at Winston Middle had seen a physical fight at some point, although only one student admitted to having been in one himself. Lowry Middle School students had a lively discussion about why kids bully and fight. One student attributed the behaviors to the difficulty of students' lives saying, "they just take their anger out on other people because they think their life is all messed up and they think they can't handle everything."

Most students, though, attributed fighting to a need to make a public statement about their strength and courage in order to prevent others from taking advantage of them. This view was expressed in two of the Lowry Middle School groups. One student said, "I feel like it's everybody trying to fit in, everybody trying to fight everybody see that they all big and bad, but really they scared." In another group several students had this interchange:

*Student 1: Yeah. Back then if you get in an argument, they'd just leave it alone. But now you walk away, you're gonna get hit.*

*Student 2: Yeah, you're gonna hit. You just don't know. And it's like this. If I sit here and let this girl hit me in my face and I went back to class and I was like – even though she did get in trouble – now the whole school –*

*Student 3: The whole school goes, "Oh, she's scaredy."*

*Student 2: – so I'm scaredy. So now every time I get into an argument with a girl she's going to have the feeling that she can just hit me and I'm not going to do anything. That's how it is. People can say, "No, it's not," but that is how it is. So you're going to tell me to let this girl hit me in my face and everybody will think I'm weak so everybody will try to hit me in my face. And I'm not going to keep walking away.*

Verbal bullying was attributed mostly to girls at Lowry Middle, although one student pointed out the relationship between verbal harassment and physical fighting when she said that, “sometimes the talking bullying sometimes causes the fights, too.” The students also complained of verbal bullying from Riverview High School students. “Riverview High, we walk down that way, right, and they’re coming, they’re either leaving or coming back and they say words that, like, you shouldn’t say. They like, they go in, they’re going pretty fast and then they just scream it and you have to ignore it and just keep walking but it happens more than you would think...”

Cyber-bullying is also an issue. Lowry Middle School students recounted some incidents of cyber-bullying directed at a heavy girl who tried out for cheerleading. Although Prairie Vista Middle School students said there is not much bullying in the school, they said Facebook is the most common form of bullying that is used. A girl from Riverview High talked about the experience of being cyber-bullied.

*I have been personally bullied on Facebook and Twitter and when they had Formspring, that was one of the lowest points in my life. ... You could ask people questions anonymously, and they would ask things like “Why are you so big?” or I can’t even tell you what they would ask. I would end up crying every night, and my mother would beg me shut down that account, and I just couldn’t because I kept hoping that one day, maybe, someone would say something nice. And that website is still up, but no one uses it.*

Students at Riverview High also said that bullying had played a role in the tragic decision-making of a student who dropped out and later committed suicide. A friend of that child said in a resentful tone, “They saw it going on. They were around the table when it happened. And no one said nothing.” Another said, “They could have stood up for the student, but even then it depends on the bully, if they’re gonna stop or not.” “The dad said he went to the school board and they did nothing, they can’t make the student stop. No one can. Unless you make a ticket, you aren’t gonna get them to stop. And there’s no ticket.”

One of the students in a focus group at Larkspur High said that one of the things he appreciated about Larkspur High is that students support each other. Not all participants agreed with that assessment, however. A girl in a different focus group said, “When I first came here, which was my sophomore year, I expected everybody to be nice and polite because ... a smaller school everyone would be getting along, everybody was social. And when I first came here it was the total opposite. You would see somebody arguing down the hallway and somebody fighting on the other. Something was going on every time. And me, I’m the type of person, I hang out more with the guys than I do with the girls. Everybody was judgmental about that.”

In general, students felt that school responses to bullying and fighting are inadequate. They said that sometimes the bullying is difficult for adults to see. According to a Lowry Middle School student, "If they see it then they will do something about it. If they don't see it, like if the teacher does not see it or the principal or the staff member does not see it, then they sometimes they will look on the cameras but if they don't see it and they don't see who the kid was, like, if they don't know what was going on, like the talking bullying, they don't catch it a lot."

However, students at Winston Middle complained about teachers who simply ignore the conflicts when one said that one day there was a fight "... and the teacher did see. He was just standing there like he didn't see nothing, just looking around, and they were fighting and everybody was standing around them." Another student chimed in, "And he acted like he didn't see, he was like, oh, there's some nice weather out here today."

Students said that the staff sends repeat fighters to Turning Point, but they felt like when those students come back, they just start fighting again. One boy talked about a coach he likes who helps students take out their anger in a controlled way.

*He's funny, he makes you laugh and then like if you have problems with somebody you talk to him and you get the mats out and so you don't have to fight them, get your anger out at school, fight them, you get to wrestle them and it helps like 'cause I had trouble with this one guy today and I wouldn't fight him or anything, I just - we were having a disagreement, let's say that. We were having a disagreement and I was like, coach, I want to call this person out, right, and he said, okay, we'll get the mats out. And then during our period, we got the mats out and I fought him and then it was over after that.*

Students at Larkspur High said that bullying does go on, and that the school does little about it other than to put up signs unless someone actually gets hurt. In that case the bully is assigned to in-school suspension. However, members of sports teams said that if a team member is the one causing a problem, the administration tells the coach and the coach metes out discipline, generally in the form of push-ups or some extra physical activity. Larkspur High School students also reported that fights are less common than they were two years ago, when they occurred regularly.

Students occasionally talked about places and times that fights tend to occur. Winston Middle School students reported that "Fights happen mostly outside behind the cafeteria, and mostly before and after school," but another said that "Everybody always trying to fight each other in PE, all jumping on each other and fighting." A Larkspur High School student said they are more likely to happen on

half days or holidays, indicating that perhaps extra free time, in addition to a lack of supervision, is a contributing factor.

### Racial tensions

Students feel race matters from day one in school. A Lowry Middle School student said, “You get judged for the dumbest crap and it’s hard to be yourself because everyone’s being so judgmental ... like, oh, I don’t like you, you’re too light or you’re too dark.”

A Prairie Vista Middle School student said that cliques form along racial lines.

*The hardest part for me was like when you have a friend and then like, they turn on you cause they see this other group, oh they’re cool, they’re the cool crowd, but, that’s the hard part. Because everybody just got their own little group and like the groups are like, it’s just different cause the groups, the cliques are like, you have the Hispanic clique, the black clique, the white clique, it’s just crazy.*

While students are critical of racism, they do not necessarily recognize it in themselves. A black Lowry Middle School girl made this telling comment about a conversation with a white girl. “And then she was like, ‘They was calling me a Barbie.’ And I was like, ‘You not a good Barbie. You a fake Barbie. You had a little’ – we just went off on her. And she like go tell her little white friends – I’m not trying to be racist, but she went to tell her little white friends.”

Race seemed to matter less the better students knew each other. This interaction generated chuckles among the focus group participants at Larkspur High.

*White girl 1: And everybody goes like you know you’re in Larkspur High. Isn’t that full of black people?*

*Black boy 1: If you go to – in the classes right now, you’ll probably see about one or two white people.*

*Black boy 2: In my periods now, there’s no – like there’s no white people there. But my fourth period, there’s some white people in there, fifth period, some white people in there. My first period, there’s no white people in there.*

*Black boy 1: First period, no white people –*

*White girl 1: I’m in your first period!*

*Black boy 1: Oh, yeah. She kind of blends in. I don’t notice her. She don’t seem like white to me because I’ve been knowing her [for*

*so long]. And her and her sister, they hang around with a number of black folks...”*

### **School discipline policies**

Students in all the focus groups were asked to talk about school discipline. Those in groups selected for mild disciplinary issues had the most to say about suspension and disciplinary policies, but many students in other groups had experiences and opinions as well. Their responses, beyond those concerning bullying and fighting outlined above, included many comments about dress codes, suspensions, the effect of ID requirements, and complaints about instances in which suspensions were handed out unfairly. Each of those topics is treated separately below. In addition, middle school students were often asked what behaviors most frequently got students in trouble. They answered: arguing; talking at inappropriate times; PDA (physical displays of affection); cussing out teachers; and dress code violations.

### **Dress code**

All the schools have some sort of dress code, but how restrictive it is depends on the school. Riverview High and Montgomery High School students appeared to have the least restrictive regulations that dealt mostly with making sure girls are adequately covered and boys' pants are not sagging. By contrast, Larkspur High School students have a uniform-like code more similar to middle school dress codes.

The most positive comment about uniforms came from a Lowry Middle School student who said, “At the beginning of the year, I'm like, why do we have uniforms? That's so stupid. But now I understand it because people would be like competitive over what you wear....” Other comments were far more disapproving. Several students made comments similar to this Prairie Vista Middle School student who said, “Everybody come to school day lookin' the same, you know, there's no difference about what they wear, and there's like some way that you can show that you're unique, in a way, but they took that away from us.”

A Lowry Middle School student said the consequences of dress code violations are three days of on-campus suspension (OCS). He added, “I don't think we should have to go to OCS for dress code. I think you should just like, maybe get infractions or something.”

Students in all three Larkspur High focus groups generally feel the dress code is a distraction from the goal of learning. Comments were uniformly negative, except that students reported the requirements had eased a bit over the last year. The dress code requires collared shirts tucked in. A typical conversation went like this:

*Student 1: They worry about dress code more than they worry about teaching.*

*Student 2: They really do.*

*Student 3: They're more about discipline than work.*

*Student 1: And you wonder why half the kids are failing. Is your shirt tucked in?*

A student in another Larkspur High group said, "It's really stressful to have to know if you not gonna be able to graduate, so I mean, I act like I need to focus more trying to pass those tests, and less focus on dress code cause that's not gonna get us nowhere, if we can't pass our tests, cause you can't graduate. You can't pass your tests, you can't graduate."

Students not in conformity are either sent home or to in-school suspension. "It hasn't been a very colorful year. ... People mainly just wear like black." One student complained that the dress code meant that students were not allowed to dress up and paint themselves for pep rallies, taking the spirit out of them.

### Suspensions

All six schools have in-school suspension programs. High school students referred to them as ISS, which stands for in-school suspension, while middle school students referred to OCS, for on-campus suspension. In-school suspension is considered a better option than out-of-school suspension because children are kept safe and, in theory, kept working and learning. However, a Lowry Middle School student said that the principal is under pressure to suspend students out of school due to space restrictions. "She suspended this boy because he left trash on the table. But she says she's starting to suspend people because there's too many kids in OCS and Choices in school. We only got two temporaries. So when it gets full, what are you going to do? The kids sit on the floor? So she's just suspending people [out of school]."

ISS, it's basically you sittin' in there, it's like you sittin' there and basically failing.

The value of in-school over out-of-school suspension depends on what actually goes on in the suspension room. Students shared mixed views of the suspension room at Winston Middle. Some said that students receive assignments and that the teacher is good at helping students with their work. But a student from a different group said, "It's fun. ... We just play on the computer. One time, Mr. Hays, I was downloading music on my MP3 player, he didn't even care." Another added, "You still get grades but like after 35 minutes, he'll let you get on the computer and play video games. He really doesn't care, so that's what OCI's like."

Teachers are also available in the Lowry Middle School OCS room, which 8<sup>th</sup> graders said was more controlled this year. “I remember last year, some kids were saying that one of the teachers wasn’t very good at keeping them under control so they were like having a lot of fun, doing whatever they wanted to do. This year it is a lot different than last year.”

Montgomery High School students said the suspension room is quiet, but whether students are made to do schoolwork or not depends on who the attendant is that day.

Larkspur High School students talked about the effect of being suspended on their grades.

*If you get an attitude with the teacher and the teacher says something and you say something back you’ll get suspended for two days. When you come back you have to go to ISS for three days.” Another student added, “And you get behind on your work and you go back to that teacher and you tell her I got behind on my work because you wrote me up and I got suspended [and she says] ‘Well that’s not my problem.’ ”*

*A student at Larkspur High described the experience of ISS. “I got in trouble...stuff happened. It was the worst feeling ever. Especially for a student that like, ... really doesn’t get in trouble a lot, it’s gonna feel like the worst thing ever. Like I have classes that I’m not gonna pass if I’m not in there...and like Mrs. Brennan’s class you come back, you gotta catch up from like four days, even catching up on one day is hard, and it’s like you sit in there and do nothing, they give you a packet, and the packet is like nothing, you not learning anything. ISS, its basically you sittin’ in there, it’s like you sittin’ there and basically failing.” Another student added, “Teachers ain’t gonna bring you anything, we ask ‘em all the time, can you bring me my work?”*

Students in several groups commented that school officials do not do anything about problem behavior; they only suspend students. This quote from a Prairie Vista Middle School student indicates why students consider suspending students to be doing “nothing.”

*And it’s like it’s over and over, you not doing anything but suspending them, or telling them, like they had these forms, and I don’t get that at all because you not doing nothing, they not, these kids they don’t care about the white forms. You seen write up every day, my mom she puts a stack of white ones, they be gone in one day, you be writin ‘em up but they still doin’ the same thing.*

Another Prairie Vista Middle School student continued, saying that a lot of students at Prairie Vista Middle get suspended, but behavior does not improve.

*It's like over half of the kids, and like, they do crazy stuff like, they figured out how to turn the water thing, where like if the person comes up and they push it, all the water sprays on you, and like the janitor, like they do stuff like they write stuff on the walls, and do stuff like flood the toilets so the janitors will have to clean it up, and I think that is very disrespectful, but they still don't do a thing about it, all they do is suspend you. And then it's like, if I think that if it was discipline at the home, like, I feel a lot of kids they come, they gonna get suspended, and they talk to their momma like, ... if there was more discipline at home and discipline at the school then our kids would be better, and they'll be more graduates and all that stuff. They'll be doing good in school making good grades, cause our grades are bad, at this school.*

### Fairness

Many of the comments about whether discipline and suspensions were meted out fairly had to do with whether adults would allow accused students to tell their side of the story or not. A Winston Middle School student appreciated the fact that one of the principals in particular listens to his viewpoint. "When I go to any other principal they're just like, 'What did you do?' yellin' like. When I speak to Ms. Baker, she don't do that. She's like, 'Oh, what did you do today?' And she takes her time and takes a deep breath and all this stuff and just listens to what I have to say."

But students were more likely to say that adults do not listen to their side of the story. A Montgomery High School student said, "... you can't fight the teachers, what the teacher says, that's what it is. Teacher put on that and you get written up, you cannot sit your side of the story. Your side of the story don't even matter."

Another Montgomery High School student described an incident in which a prank for which he was falsely accused escalated to the point where the teacher was threatening to file a police report.

*Well, he had put sticky notes on her back, talking about her. They said I did it. I didn't do it. It wasn't even a freshman that did it. I got in trouble over it, so she accused me. Instead of me just trying to talk to her, I tried to talk to her – I tried to be a good person and say, Miss Monroe, I got to talk to you outside." [When she refused to listen] I got mad, and the next thing I know, she tried to write a police report on me over something I didn't do, and I had to do in-house for three days, and that messed up my grade.*

Some students complained that bystanders to fights often get implicated in the fight and suspended even if they do not get involved. For example, they said that if someone picks a fight with you, “Basically if it’s for fighting you’re going to get suspended whether you fight back or you don’t.” Another added, “So it doesn’t matter if you don’t fight back. It’s pointless.” A student said the same was true at Prairie Vista Middle School.

*... lets say you were bullying me, and I come to a principal, and I say ok she was bullying me, but, but they would suspend both of us, and that’s not fair. They suspend both of us but I’m the one who was a target. That’s what I don’t get about this school. We all get in trouble, instead of that one person.*

### **Race and gender disparity**

Group facilitators brought up the delicate issue of race relations, which in some cases students had already begun discussing in other contexts. They were informed about two studies, one national and one in Texas, both of which showed that black and Hispanic students were more likely to be suspended from school than white or Asian students, and that boys were more likely to be suspended than girls.<sup>1</sup>

There was disagreement among Lowry Middle School students as to whether black students are treated more harshly. One student said that, “Every time there’s a white kid fighting a black boy, she’s always blaming the black kid.” But another student chimed in, “I don’t know if she’s racist.” A white girl said, “... all of these kids in the class are wondering why I don’t get in trouble when they get in trouble. I know it’s because I act better in her class, but still they think she’s being racist by when I do something bad I don’t get an infraction.”

Students in every high school focus group agreed that the statement is true for their school, however most felt that it was a reflection of actual differences in behavior on the part of student groups rather than racial stereotyping on the part of adults. One Montgomery High boy said, “You ain’t never gonna see no white kid in a fight.”

However, Montgomery High School students felt that favoritism does influence outcomes for students. Larkspur High School students felt like once you get in trouble a couple times your behavior is more likely to provoke a punishment in the future. As one student put it, “Lets say she get in trouble all the time and I

---

<sup>1</sup> For the national data visit <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/new-data-us-department-education-highlights-educational-inequities-around-teache> . The website contains a press release describing findings from recent data from the US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. The Texas study is entitled *Breaking Schools’ Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement*, by Tony Fabelo et al, published in July 2011 by The Justice Center of The Council of State Governments and the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M.

don't. We could do the same thing but she's more likely to get suspended than me because, you know, she been in the office more. That's the only difference."

Another student at Larkspur High hypothesized that the statistic is exacerbated by unfair, yet not necessarily racist, suspension policies. On one hand, students agreed that whites and Asians tend not to fight. On the other, the student explained that the tendency of the administration to suspend students who are present, but not actually fighting, inflates the suspension rates of blacks and Hispanics. "It's because everybody has somebody that they hang with. So if he and I hang together, if I get in trouble, he gets in trouble, so we both get suspended. I think that's why that's true." The implication of the statement is that students generally 'hang' with others of their same racial group.

Some Larkspur High School students hastened to add that the conflicts that get students suspended are not racial in nature, and that students of different races get along well with each other.

### **Racism among teachers**

Even though students did not think teachers were necessarily quicker to suspend a black or Hispanic child, it does not mean students think teachers are color-blind. A student at Lowry Middle said that teachers often tell students where to sit based on race. Another explained her statement by saying, "they want the black people in the back because they want the white people to get a good education."

Students from Prairie Vista Middle are well aware of racial issues and reported some tensions between black and Hispanic students. A black girl said she feels like black students "get away with being racist" toward Hispanic students.

Students from several schools said that dress codes are enforced differently for girls of different races. This exchange took place at Lowry Middle School.

*Black girl 1: I don't know why I feel – because this might be racist but white girls walk around with little short shorts. But if a black girl walk around with shorts, they like –*

*Black girl 2: Yeah, they make us change.*

*Black girl 1: Yeah, they make us take them off.*

Riverview High School students have the same impression. A white girl in the group that has had attendance problems said the following pointing to the shorts she had on at the time:

*White girl 1: These shorts are absolutely not code acceptable. I've worn these once a week for the past six months and nobody has*

*ever said anything. They're just glad I'm here. But if she (pointing to a black girl) wore these they'd be like no, no, no, you go change.*

*White girl 2: The other day I wore a dress that was like up to here because it didn't look that short when I left the house, but it ended up being that short. And I walked into school and I said hello to Officer \_\_\_\_\_. And I respect the man. With every fiber of my being I respect law enforcement and our military and all of that. I was trying to get somebody to stop me because I was seeking that reassurance that it wasn't just ....*

At that point, everybody chimed simultaneously into a lively discussion on the topic.

### **Police presence on campus**

Students feel that discipline has improved at both Larkspur High and at Eastern High over the last two years, mainly in terms of the number of fights that take place on or near campus. There appears to be a significant police presence on all the campuses, both high school and middle school. Focus group participants frequently talked about students who received tickets as a result of in-school behavior. These are legal tickets, issued by police officers, requiring them to go to court. One high school participant said he had received three such tickets while still in middle school.

### **Relationships with administrators**

In general, students do not have extensive relationships with administrators. When they do, those relationships are mixed. It is common for schools to have separate principals responsible for different grades, so there are multiple principals at any individual school.

A Lowry Middle School student said of her grade-level principal, "We have the best principal. I pretty sure that everybody would say our principal is awesome." Larkspur High School students expressed appreciation for an assistant principal who is willing to listen to their side of the story, "Mr. Brady is always on the kids' side. You can always go to him and let him know what's going on .... He'll always help you if he knows you're right."

However, at Riverview High, students have the impression that the freshman principal does not like freshmen. "He would tell us he didn't like our class." Another said when you sit in his office facing his desk you see a sign; "He has a sign in his room saying he don't like freshmen." Another added that, "The reason why he says it is because he says freshmen, they are still little kids, they're still immature and haven't grown up yet, stuff like that." An upper classmen said, "It made me feel grouped, like I'm in that selection, you know. Maybe people like freshmen before made you feel like that. So it kind of made me offended, but I just rolled with it. I got over it." When asked, a freshman said, "It doesn't really bother me. I mean because I really don't see him every day."

Larkspur High School students complained that they have no contact with the principal. “Our principal, like she doesn't like interact with us at all. She stays in her office wherever her office is. I don't even know where her office is.” Another said, “You won't see her nowhere. I haven't seen her this whole year, except like at our assemblies. Or if she's in her office, and you're like, oh, can I talk to Ms. Henderson? She's busy right now. What is she doing? Well, she's in her office eating lunch.” The conversation continued, “I don't get it. We can never talk to the principal. Whenever it's something serious like the bullying that happened, I wanted to talk to the principal, just tell her. I thought it was an anti-bully school, you know, and they said, no you can't talk to her because she's busy, or she's not here right now. That's the first thing they tell me, she's not here. And I hear Ms. Henderson right there.” Another student added, “I don't think she talks to any students besides like her little National Honor Society girls.” Concerning the focus group, a senior asked, “I'd be glad to hear about [some change], you know, but why are they sending other people? Why can't the principal come in here and sit there?”

Some students said they would appreciate more recognition when they do well. A student who assists in a high school office said, “...and then the school up here they don't recognize the stuff that the good students do. ... I was doing the books for referral, we went two weeks without having a referral, anybody, any class. Why don't they have that on the announcements? You know, I'm proud of everyone for not getting referrals.” He went on:

*That's one thing that I wish they did more, like, recognize the whole student body. When you build students up, to me, it makes students better. You know, if you tell me, ah you're doing good, I'm gonna work hard to make sure I'm doing even better. Like I've noticed that once you build someone up, it's gonna push 'em to do more.*

## School attendance policies

### Tardiness

At Montgomery High and Larkspur High, if students are not on time for class they are not permitted to enter; rather, they are sent to “lockout.” At Montgomery High, students are locked out for the rest of the period. At Larkspur High, they are locked out for the rest of the day. Students had many complaints about the policy, which they said is enforced to an extreme extent. A Montgomery High School student said,

*Students are trying to learn and all that, they're telling us we got to stay in class, we've got to learn, but they lock us out. ... They're talking about suspending us if we don't ... get to class but they're not going to let us in.*

At Larkspur High, students explained how the dress code policy interacts with the tardy lockout policy. While talking about the requirement to have your shirts tucked a student said, "...or if you're late going to a class. You're running down the hall, they'll stop you completely. Your class is on the other side of the school, and they'll stop you completely and tell you to tuck in your shirt. Really? You're in front of the door [when the bell rings] and they won't let you in."

When asked about their own attendance, a Larkspur High School student said,

*Mine is good until you get to the tardies, which is really unnecessary, like you want to keep your kids in class, but then like they're tardy, so you send them to ISS. ... You don't get none of your work until like the last hour of school because the teacher finally reads their email. And you're sitting in there, got to go back to class the next day, and you don't even know what you're doing, and the teacher's like, well, you shouldn't have got in trouble. You should have been in class.*

Another student had a suggestion for a policy revision.

*I think, like, you should have like – maybe like five tardies a semester or something, and like you get in the classroom, and once you go over your limit, then you go to ISS. Then you go to ISS, not send you if you're late to a class period. You've got five minutes to get from over there to over here, and then you have freshmen coming this way, freshmen going this way, and like they don't understand like you got to walk on one side of the hallway, and everybody wants to be with their groups and like all group up, and stand in the middle of the hallway, and then you're late to class."*

Students complained that some teachers follow the letter of the law, locking students out even if they arrive at the door just when the bell rings. "Darnell is in there right now. ... It was unnecessary. He was right in front of her. She should have let him in."

## **IDs**

Montgomery High School students had the most complaints about the ID requirement. They explained that if they are not wearing their IDs they are not permitted to enter their classrooms. They must get a temporary ID for which they pay one dollar. The process makes students late for class, so they are locked out. The ID is simply a laminated piece of paper, so if the string on which it hangs around their necks tears off they must get another. "They go crazy. It's crazy - if you've got it, you can still get locked out. If it ain't visible." They go to "lockdown" for that period where they are required to do nothing productive, but they are not marked absent. Since the school operates on a block schedule, they miss an hour and thirty minutes of instructional time. "Monday, there was a

house full of kids. I mean, everybody, like the whole school.” Other students said,

*Student 1: They complain about us not coming to class and stuff, and not learning, but they put us in lock down and we don't do –*

*Student 2: Anything. I hate lock down. That'll be the thing that I hate the worst of this year, lock down.*

Students said that the administration implemented the ID policy because last year young people who were not students were coming on campus starting fights. They acknowledged that the problem has not recurred this year.

At Riverview High, IDs are color-coded by grade. If students do not bring their IDs to school they get lunch detention, but do not get locked out of classes.

### **Attendance, tracking, and calls home**

Teachers at all the schools take attendance regularly. If a student misses a class, the teacher notes it in an on-line attendance and grade reporting system, and the student's parent or guardian receives a computerized telephone call informing them of the absences. Students complain that sometimes the calls are inaccurate.

A Montgomery High School student said, “I know they wrong because like, ... last month, I was - it's just been ringing constantly, and for the same periods. And it's so stupid, it's so stupid, they say you miss lunch. You really think you're going to miss lunch? That's stupid. No lunch.” Another said, “Yeah, like because sometimes - I'm in all of my classes almost and there's days that my mom - I walk in the door and my mom's like, where were you this period and that period? But I was in the class.”

Students at Riverview High School said that sometimes teachers get the attendance wrong because “if you sit in a different seat it's hard to notice.”

Students at Larkspur High discussed the extensive reporting required to get absences excused such as newspaper clippings about funerals of family members, and hospital records. One student complained that he had turned in all the documents but that office staff misplaced them so the absences remained unexcused. Another said that absences due to a surgery were unexcused because of lack of proper documentation even though she had a surgical scar on her leg.

Some of the student complaints, however, seem unjustified. A student at Larkspur High said, “Matter of fact, this was two weeks ago, I didn't go to one of my periods, and I was at work. Matter of fact, my mom, she texted me. She said why weren't you at school today? I said I was at school. She said, why did the school call and say you missed a class period? I said I didn't go to that class.

That's all I did, so they counted me absent really. I just didn't go to that class, but I really wasn't skipping, I just wasn't in that class."

### **Grading policies**

After students have missed class often enough, they automatically fail the class and can regain credit only by attending Saturday school. At Montgomery High School student complained that you get...

*No credit, no credit. You can have 100 in that class but if you've got over four absences, you don't get credit for the class. ... There's only like two Saturday schools out of the month. It's like about six days, two Saturday schools. And sometimes, some Saturday schools only for a semester. And if you don't go to that Saturday school for that semester, that's it. ... Last year you could stay with your teacher for like an hour after school and make up one attendance but you can't do that now.*

Students also complained of difficulties getting access to their grades. Although there is an online grade and attendance posting system students are not permitted to get logins. Only parents get accounts, but many of them do not have computers and never log on. Students only get to look if their parents give them the login information. Montgomery High School students who have logins say that the system is often down and that teachers are not good about updating it. Without access to the website, students must depend on teachers to tell them their grades in between progress reports.

Students at both Larkspur High and Montgomery High reported that sometimes when they ask teachers to see their grades the teachers respond, "I can't give you your grade because [then I would] have to give everyone else their grade." Students in both schools also said that teachers fail to update the online system routinely. When asked why the teacher would not want to give students their grades, a Montgomery High School student replied, "They don't want to be bothered."

Failing grades, whether due to failure to master content or too many absences, put students at risk of not graduating. A student at Larkspur High said that the principal is trying to achieve a 100% graduation rate for the senior class, even if that means encouraging some students to drop out. "My best friend went here and she got kicked out because she got too many F's, and Ms. Pace said she wanted 100 percent graduation and she withdrew her from school. So now she had to go to Zion to graduate." Another student added, "She wants on record to have 100 percent seniors graduate, so she'll do whatever it takes whether you're taking kids out and withdrawing them or getting them to step up."

### **Finances**

High school students in particular are aware of the ways in which budgetary issues affect them. Seniors at Montgomery High complained about the lack of

pre-graduation festivities. One said, “Like if I say where our senior trip is right now, you’re gonna be like, what? ... “It’s on the football field. ... Is it even a field? It’s just dirt.”

A student in another group said, “I was at the freshman meeting thing. The whole school got a \$60 million grant to spend on this school and like half of it’s already gone and this school hasn’t changed one bit.”

### Lunches

The quality and timing of school lunches came up in every focus group without exception, even though focus group facilitators never brought the subject up. Montgomery High School students have 30 minutes for lunch which students said was not long enough.

*There ain't no way, no way you can eat in 30 minutes because either the line is long, you either go to Taco Bell, McDonald's, everywhere, the line's long. It wouldn't be enough time to eat, that don't make no sense.*

The same students reported that when the bus is late in the morning they do not get time for breakfast, either.

Nor did students like the quality of their lunches. “They don’t have any good food.” “The school’s pizza. It’s like the same thing every day.” At multiple schools, students who eat lunch during the last period complained of cold, leftover lunches.

What adults may view as improvements are not always appreciated by students. “We got wheat bread with our food. ... We like the white bread, we don’t want the wheat bread.” “We lost all the junk food, man. We used to have ice cream, like an ice cream machine. Took that out of there. Used to have a Coke machine, took that out of there.”

At Larkspur High, students are allowed to bring lunch from home, but cannot share any with friends. They say that ‘they’ll literally, they’ll sit there and watch you to make you sure you don’t give food to nobody. ... If they see you handing it out to somebody, they’ll like take your lunch – you shouldn’t have been handing it out, you should have been eating it yourself.’ Larkspur High School students also said that they used to have an open campus so students could leave for lunch, but they had a problem of kids skipping the period or periods after lunch, so now the campus is closed.

### Extracurricular activities

It seemed that the schools have few extracurricular activities. Sports teams are popular, but are considered a class. Choir and instrumental music options also exist, but are classes. Students said that there are no afterschool clubs at Montgomery High.

At Larkspur High, students who are passing all their classes traditionally go on a field trip at the end of the year. Each grade has their own day. However, students said that the principal was talking about cancelling this year's trips. Seniors complained of a lack of pre-graduation festivities too, saying that Senior Slam week has been shortened from five to three days. Seniors got t-shirts that say Seniors 2012, which they wanted to be able to wear to school. However, the shirts do not have a collar and thus do not conform to the dress code.

*I'm not gonna remember my senior year. I don't even want to remember it because it's so lame. I mean we couldn't even wear our senior shirts – like when my friend – like the other week, you know, for senior week or whatever, told her not to wear it at all.*

Students in one of the Riverview High focus groups talked about the lack of school spirit, particularly as indicated by poor attendance at pep rallies. The subject of school spirit came up in the context of the changing demographics that have caused tensions within the student body. They expressed a wish for more school spirit, but did not know what to do to create it.

*It affects the school. What I think would make the school better is having more school spirit. When it came to football - I play football - we always lost against the other school because that other school had school spirit. They're always closer together. They're all friends together, and over here we have cliques. Little different separate groups.*

## Classroom Context

Students were asked whether they had at least one adult in the school with whom they had a personal relationship and who they felt cared about them. Students in every focus group gave strikingly similar responses, discussed at length below. High school students were also asked to think about the best class they had ever taken at their current school, “best” being defined as a class they enjoyed and in which they had learned a lot. When students talked about their “best classes” they said little about the subject matter, but a great deal about the way in which the classes were taught. It was not the subject, but the teaching, that mattered.

### Caring adults

Students in each school, at every grade level, used the same words to describe the characteristics of caring adults at school.

**Shoulder to cry on**  
**Don't judge you**  
**High expectations**  
**Can tell them anything**  
**Maintain confidentiality**  
**Nice**  
**Treat you well**  
**Help you**

**Tell you the truth**  
**“Talk to us like grown-ups”**  
**“Tell you what you need to do and how”**  
**Motivate you**  
**Knows students' names**  
**Open-minded**

The large majority of students at every school said they had a personal relationship with a teacher who cared about them. However, almost every focus group had one student who said that no one at school really knew them or cared about them. If the one-out-of-eight ratio is representative of the rest of the students in these schools, then almost 1,000 students at these six schools do not feel cared for by any school adult.

This is what one student said about the lack of support he feels from teachers.

*... some kids, we have parents, but we don't have them. Like I have people that I call my parents, but, they're not there. I do everything pretty much myself. I mean, and it hurts, like you think...you know, I actually been proud of myself. At home, no one cares but myself. And like, it hurts to come and do your best at school, and no one cares. To know the people at school, they don't care either. They feel like, you doin' it just to be out there. And sometimes you're doing it just because you want something, and hoping that somebody'll care.*

Here are some excerpts of how students described their caring adult:

- ❖ All my teachers feel, since I don't have a mom, it is like they feel like my mom to me.
- ❖ My mom is not there. She's my mom, but she's not like, she's not there, that's why I love my teacher here, because like, I feel like she *is* my mom, like I can say, that's what I love about her.
- ❖ Well, for example, my teacher had seen my tonsils were swollen and she saw that and helped me and she goes, 'Can I see your tonsils?' And I said 'Sure.' And she goes 'Hey, they are bummers.' So she has like always cared about me, and asking how I am.
- ❖ He's real cool and chilled out, but then there'd be a point to where you can't play no more, you have to do your work.
- ❖ I mean Ms. \_\_\_ would get real frustrated, and you know, in my face, but then it showed me that she really did care. We all threw her a big party because she did deserve it...
- ❖ Everyone thinks he's mean, but I think he's nice. ... I learned a lot from him with help like chess and I actually won a game finally and it was against a person who kept winning and I beat them in the last one.

"Don't teach from the book, teach from the heart."

"You can tell when a teacher, like, is putting effort into teaching."

Students' comments indicated that anyone can be a caring adult at school, not just regular classroom teachers.

An assistant principal:

*Whenever you do something wrong he doesn't judge you for it. He doesn't tell you that you did it wrong. He likes to get your part of the story first before he says what he's going to do. And if you have a problem - you don't have to be scared. You can tell him like you wouldn't with the other teachers because he's open. He'll open the doors to help you out."*

An in-school suspension teacher:

Students also spoke highly of the in-school-suspension teacher who was described as “awesome.” “She’ll help you out with anything you need.” Two students said they go to the ISS room voluntarily to get their work done. “I feel like she’s easy to talk to, to me and I’m a Christian now. She’ll pray for me when I need it or if something’s going on I can know she can talk to me and give me some good advice. She’s a teacher I can go to and she’ll help me with my work. We’ll go into the ISS room not because I’m in trouble but ... she’ll help me do it and stuff.”

A substitute teacher:

Students reported having a lot of substitute teachers, and they described most substitute-led classes as “chaotic.” However, even a substitute teacher can play a meaningful role and provide continuity. Montgomery High School students talked about a teacher who has been a substitute in the district since they were in elementary school.

*She always – every time you see her in the hallway, you speak to her, she’ll be like, come here. ... And she be like always – you know, I want to see you doing something with yourself, like when you get out of high school, you know, got to college or something. She always tells me that every time she sees me, I want to see you go to college.*

### **Advice from students on how be a caring teacher:**

**“Care!”**

**“Give every child a chance, give ‘em a chance, don’t write ‘em off, give ‘em a chance. And don’t just do it cause you get a check, do it ‘cause you care, and you wanna do it.”**

### **Teachers who do not meet students’ needs**

A Montgomery High School student said that for the most part “the teacher will help you if you help them, by coming to class, you know, do what you got to do.” None of the students in that focus group disagreed with him, but nevertheless, students could easily identify the characteristics of teachers who fall short of their expectations. Characteristics that came up most often were favoritism, disrespect of students, ineffective teaching, little interest in the students beyond a paycheck, and an inability to maintain order in their classrooms. Students also had some opinions about how classroom observations are conducted.

## Favoritism

Students in a majority of schools talked about teachers who display favoritism, particularly with regard to disciplinary issues, but also in other contexts. Some, but certainly not all, of the discussions involved athletic coaches. One middle school student said,

*Like in our athletics period, third period, if you are not one of the coach's favorites, you have to run. Today we were doing sprints and then some girls that are the coach's favorites, they just went to grab a kite and they were running around with the kite while we were doing sprints. The coaches didn't do anything and we're like, okay. And then sometimes they let 'em even ride in those little golf carts.*

A high school student indicated that the effects of favoritism can be serious when he said, "If they like you they're going to pressure you into doing your work and getting things done and if they don't they're not going to talk to you about it."

## Disrespecting students

Students raised the topic of respect frequently. They clearly articulated the fact that respect goes two ways and they are not prepared to respect a teacher who they feel does not respect them. A middle school student said, "We're supposed to respect our elders. I'm not going to respect you if you do not respect me. So I'm sorry."

"...a teacher, what they say really does have an affect on us..."

There are several ways in which teachers fail to show respect. Students feel like some teachers never give them a chance. A Larkspur High School student said, "Right, but they don't give us a chance, like, you come into the school, they don't give you a chance, they already think that you a kid that doesn't care." In a similar vein, another Larkspur High School student said, "I don't like whenever teachers talk about everyone in general as if everyone is doing the same thing. He's one of those teachers if most of the kids in class are failing he'll say you all do the same thing."

Students expect that teachers should learn their names, and complain that some do not. Montgomery High School students in particular talked about teachers who have a student take roll every day and never bother to learn their names.

A high school student with a mild speech impediment said she felt like a teacher made fun of her difficulty by asking her to repeat everything in an exaggerated manner. Whether or not the teacher really was making fun of her is secondary to the fact that she *felt* like the teacher was making fun of her.

Students also find breaking a confidentiality disrespectful, even when the teacher's intentions might be good. A Prairie Vista Middle School student

explained that she used to go to a particular teacher in confidence, but the teacher would take her issue to other faculty members on “the team.” The student ceased discussing issues with her.

Students had a number of complaints about the language that teachers use with them. Some middle school students say their teachers sometimes tell them to “shut up,” and one said she overheard a principal calling another student a bitch.

High school students had more complaints in this regard than did middle schoolers. Many students at Montgomery High reported that teachers swear at them, and one reported that a teacher raised his middle finger to her. Another stated a teacher said to him, “Boy, you ain’t shit.” A Riverview High School student got frustrated with a teacher who kept yelling at misbehaving students, saying “... he yells at certain people, over and over, and I’m like, ‘No why are you yelling at them if they are gonna keep doing it?’ and he’s like “shut the fuck up.”

A Riverview High swimmer said, “My coach hates me. ... We don’t have swimming anymore, ... we have study hall for an hour and a half. And he sits there at his desk, and calls me annoying and you’re a screw up, and like he doesn’t even tell me I need to do better, he just calls me a screw up and all this other crap. I told him to his face he’s not a good coach, and he told me I’m not a good student.”

One middle school student felt, however, that student behavior, rather than teacher behavior, is often the underlying cause of the problem when she said, “they think that the teachers are being all rude with them but they don’t do their work. They start talking back and the teachers haven’t even said nothing. And then they start talking back, I don’t want to do my work. You’re not the boss of me, you’re not my mom and then they don’t do it, they end up failing it and they blame it on the teacher.”

### **Ineffective teaching**

A middle school student complained about teachers who get frustrated if students do not understand. “Our teacher, every time I’m like, I don’t understand, she just gets so frustrated and mad because you don’t understand.” Similarly, a student in the group struggling with attendance at Montgomery High said that teachers are not always sympathetic to students’ efforts to catch up. One said they will make appointments with you if you “...catch them in a good mood. Some will be like, well, you should have came to class.”

Students at Montgomery High also complained about substitute teachers. They said the school put a history teacher into the Spanish class because the Spanish teacher is on maternity leave. However, the history teacher does not speak Spanish.

Students in a number of schools complained that, “Teachers hand out packets and then send texts on their phone.”

### It's all about the paycheck

Some students said that teachers make them feel like “you’re just a student, you’re just a paycheck.” Students are offended when teachers say things like “regardless of whether you come to class or not I still get paid,” which students in several schools said they have heard repeatedly. A Prairie Vista Middle School student also said he feels some teachers are just “in it for the money.”

Talking about how it makes him feel to hear statements like that, a high school student said, “Ok, we can sit there and pretend like we don’t care, but that hurts a student, you just sit around basically tellin’ us, the only reason I’m in here is cause I’m getting money.”

### Classroom management

The many comments that students made about effective and ineffective classroom management indicated how critical the issue is for them. Students were clear that the classes they appreciate most are those in which the teacher can maintain control over the group while allowing a modicum of fun and without yelling. Students identified two main ways to go wrong in classroom management: excessive, but ineffective “yelling” and excessive leniency, both of which get in the way of teaching.

A Riverview High School student said, “I have a perfect example of a teacher, Mr. Barns, that yells, and you can hear him all the way down the hallway. He yells everyday all day, same people, every day.”

Students complained about both the students who misbehave and the teachers who cannot control those students. About ill-behaved classmates, a Montgomery High School student said, “... most of the time teachers just like yell at them and tell them to sit down and then they keep doing it. Sometimes they don't send 'em out and it makes it kind of hard in class. And then when they do send them out, it's like already the end of class almost, so it didn't really matter.”

In contrast, Larkspur High School students talked about teachers who get bullied by their students.

*I feel bad for [that teacher] though, because they just pick on him, and my cousin said they just pick on him. They won't listen to him. He says guys, be quiet; guys, be quiet. Because sometimes if you say something to like the wrong student, like there's some crazy people here. There's some straight-up thugs that go here.*

“Strict teachers know what they’re doing.”

Of another teacher, students said,

*Student 1: We have classes where the kids like, run her, like they make her give them grades, literally make her give them grades. I've heard the stories personally from students.*

*Student 2: She's not ready, I don't feel like she's ready for high school yet, but she has the heart for it, like she wants to be here, she wants to help students, but she can't, she's just not ready for it yet.*

When asked what kind of teachers do *not* get bullied, a student said it was those who “maintain order in their classes.”

When students were asked to talk about what made the best class they had ever taken at the school so good, a Larkspur High School student said this about a math class:

*The way she teaches, like, everybody in the class has to understand for us to accomplish anything. She gonna call our parents, she gonna involve everybody till you can get up to where you need to be. And if you don't ask questions that mean you don't wanna learn, and she puts her foot down, like, that's a scary teacher. Like, a kid rarely gets kicked outta her class, she usually deals with that herself. Cause she can handle it, she's one of the teachers that put her foot down.*

This student, like most, did not talk much about the content of the class, but about the way in which it was taught. It is notable that the teacher was able to deal with disciplinary issues on her own, without making referrals, and while maintaining high expectations of learning.

#### **Teacher observation days:**

When teachers are going to be formally observed in the classroom, they are aware ahead of time and according to students take protective measures. As several Eastern High School students put it, “They try to have negotiations. They promise rewards in exchange for good behavior.”

Students at Larkspur High questioned the wisdom of scheduled versus surprise observations. “Well they would know the principal's coming around. All the teachers all of a sudden are the best teachers in the world. Why are you telling them that you're going to pop up in the class?”

#### **Best classes**

Students were asked to take a moment and think about the best class they ever took in their current school. The facilitator defined “best class” as one that they

student had enjoyed *and* in which the student had learned a lot. Then they were asked what it was about the class that made it so good.

Many students chose a class that had been taught by the same instructor with whom they feel they have a personal relationship. Students uniformly talked much more about the way in which the class was taught than about any content matter. Nonetheless, several students did make comments indicating the subject matter had played a role in their decision-making. Students appreciated these things about their best class:

- ❖ Lots of projects
- ❖ “There’s no such thing as a stupid question.”
- ❖ Strict teacher
- ❖ Challenging material
- ❖ Teacher stays on topic
- ❖ Teacher knows everyone’s name

A middle school student liked a project-oriented class. “[The teacher] actually...instead of having us just read the book, she actually like makes us do things and Power Points, fun stuff.” Two enthusiastic Lowry Middle School students said, “It’s like hard to decide because I like all my classes and all my teachers.

This high school student valued a class that was both rigorous and relevant.

*I can say economics this year, my first semester, like Miss \_\_\_\_\_, she can come off as – like she is the type of woman, like she’s all about her work. It’s never like a day in class where you’re just sitting and not doing anything. Like if I was messing around doing this, she’d be like, what are you doing? You need to do something. But her being strict like that, I’ve learned a lot, like so much in her class, so I’d have to say this year, that would have to be my favorite class because it’s stuff I can use on the outside world as I get older...*

One student appreciated a class due to the personal transformation that came about as a result. “Speech class: I got him now. I ain’t never did – I was like nervous when I got in there because I was shy already, since he helped me out with that, so now I’m not shy no more.”

Another student appreciated a class in which she was able to master content with which she had previously struggled.

*For me it was my sophomore year – last year. It was geometry with Ms. Summers. She actually – I actually learned in her class and she was there to lead me through the steps I needed. She would*

*always give us – at the end of the week she would give us a test on what we learned. And if you failed it she pulled you out – she pulled you aside – it was a day she would pull you out for the next week and she would let everybody go past. She would help people she knew needed help and catch you up on what you needed and because of her for the first time I passed my math classes.*

Of the same teacher another student said,

*... she's the type of person that while she's talking you're not talking and if you have a question you raise your hand. If she's asking you to participate in something you participate .... People – they're not sleeping in her class because there's always something to do and she's always talking but she's going along with what she's teaching. She doesn't get off subject.*

When asked about classes that students would never skip, many students said, "The hard ones." This student went on.

*The hard ones. You learn something in Frankel. I mean, he's a hard teacher, he teaches, he cares, no matter what he says, every time he cuts you out, you know, he cares, he cares about students. Like my college stuff, he's helped me more than my councilor, and me and my councilor have a good relationship, but he, he just there, Frankel cares, I mean he's the emotional teacher who gets all...he's hard, and he's right to the point, but he cares, he teaches, he actually cares. He came to do work, not just to get paid. He even come on Saturdays.*

By way of contrast, students also talked about some classes in which they had not learned much.

*It's because like he's so easy-going. ... I don't know, I did my work because he gives you the answers, which is something he shouldn't really do, but he just gives us the answers on the board, except for our tests sometimes. But I don't know, like he's not a bad person. ... He's fun, but it's like you don't learn anything, which is why they want him to leave because I haven't learned anything in there. I've been having him for freshman – I had him all the time, but I haven't learned anything because he gives you the answers....*

### **Teachers' expectations about school success**

Students were asked whether most teachers expected that the students would graduate from high school. Lowry Middle School students said that teachers talk to the students about graduating from high school and students report that most teachers have high expectations for school success. They have an Avid program

in which students did a college research project. They selected a college, researched it and presented a PowerPoint to the rest of the class. Prairie Vista Middle School students were not as enthusiastic about their teachers' support. One student complained that in Springwater they are getting students ready for college, while in Larkspur High they are preparing us to be "garbage collectors and meat-flippers."

When asked whether teachers expected them to graduate, students at Larkspur High had mixed feelings. The seniors said "yes," but the freshmen said "not really." Students in all grades agreed that the teachers with whom they had relationships encouraged them to graduate. "It's just favoritism. From freshmen to seniors it's always favoritism. If they like you they're going to pressure you into doing your work and getting things done and if they don't they're not going to talk to you about it." When asked whether teachers at Riverview High expect students to graduate, they said no and, "they don't even like really care ...."

A black student at Larkspur High felt like black teachers expected more of him than white teachers. "I don't wanna bring race into it, but it's like, this is a majority black, Mexican school, and it's like, the white teachers, they hear you, but the black teachers are the ones that push you."

## Opinions and Choices

Within these circles – home, school and classroom – students make daily choices about whether they will attend classes, complete homework, put effort into a test, pick a fight or walk away from one. Students discussed the ways in which they respond to various aspects of these environments in terms of attendance, behavior, and academic achievement.

### Attendance

#### How students perceive their own attendance

It was not easy to distinguish the attendance groups from the disciplinary and low-achieving groups based solely on self-reports of attendance patterns because so many students in all three groups admitted to mediocre attendance or skipping classes without what the schools would consider a valid excuse. While students in the attendance groups did not describe their attendance as excellent, (several students in other groups did,) some did say their attendance was good or improving.

#### Reasons students give for missing class

Illness	School is boring
Asthma	To avoid conflict
Lack of sleep	Doctor and dentist appointments
Suspension	Haircuts
Go to Mexico to visit ill grandparent	Selling drugs
Skipping OCS	When homework is not done
School bus is late	Avoid bullying
Play sick	

#### Home influences

A number of middle school students talked either explicitly or implicitly about the role home life plays in attendance decisions. A Lowry Middle School student talked about why she thought some students skip classes.

*Like because they have so much stuff. One of my friends actually told me they don't like school because she has so much stuff at home and that she can't do her homework because she has to take care of so much. So she has like no time to do her homework. I mean that stuff. So she doesn't do her homework and sometimes she skips...*

A Winston Middle School student said of her own attendance that, "It was good in 2011, but now I've been getting allergies, you can see my nose, but I keep getting allergies and I always get allergies from early on in March and the summer, so pretty much I don't miss every day but sometimes. But I get out sometimes for doctor, dentist, haircuts – (laughter) - how's that funny?" These school-day haircuts are likely sanctioned, and even organized, by a parent or other adult in the child's family.

*Because like my dog had puppies last week and my mom didn't know what to do so she wanted me to stay home because they were just born, 'cause they were using their nose and I was scared they were going to fall off of my bed because she gave birth on my bed. And like so I had to make sure they didn't fall off my bed and then I had to keep checking on her so she wouldn't get up and leave them. And then some other times were because I didn't feel good or I was doing something. And I would always make up my work and stuff.*

Yet, some students reported that they go to school precisely to get away from difficulties at home. “And there are some people who like to skip school and some people that want to go to school. And then there are some people that go to school to get away from what they have to deal with at home. Whenever I come to school, I love being in school. I hate not being at school.”

### **School influences**

Some students talked about wanting to stay home to avoid problems. In some cases the problem was bullying, which students in almost all focus groups judged to be a significant problem in their schools. A student at Riverview High said that the year before she had skipped school “all the time” to avoid people that picked on her.

Student descriptions of fighting on and nearby campuses are indicative of common difficulties with anger management. A number of high school students and a couple middle school students said that there are just days that they do not want to come to school because of their emotional state. They explained that if they will likely have conflicts – arguments or fights that could result in multi-day suspensions or even a police ticket – they would rather stay home. A Larkspur High School student put it this way:

*There might be days where you might just wake up and be like I'm not feeling like going to school. You just don't feel like going to school. You're coming to school and you know you're going to get an attitude and you're going to get in trouble for something and it's one of those days you just don't want to come.*

The high school cafeteria at Montgomery High was plastered with signs about an attendance competition in which students with perfect attendance could enter their names in a drawing for a new car. The competition was open to a number of schools, not just Montgomery High. In addition to asking students in the last focus group about the competition, the focus group facilitator talked to a number of students at random in the cafeteria. Most of them knew about the competition, but there was confusion about the definition of perfect attendance, and no student claimed to be motivated to attend school by the slim possibility of winning the car. In the focus group one student laughed and said, “ain't nobody gonna

win it.” A Montgomery High junior who was at risk of not graduating but was committed to good attendance for the upcoming year said the automobile had nothing to do with his commitment. “No, because I think I’ll get a car of my own. I don’t need the school’s help. I just want to focus on my grades, you know, make sure I just want to get out of high school, walk across the stage with my diploma, yeah, show people that don’t care about their life, I care about mine.”

### **Classroom influences**

Students, particularly at the high school level, report that they skip –

- boring classes.: “Most of our teachers just give us packets. ... like for biology and world geography, they just give us packets.
- classes taught by substitute teachers
- classes taught by teachers the students do not like: “I don’t like Pedersen, I skip his class and go to another class and do his work.”

Students said they are less likely to skip if they feel they cannot get away with it. The automated calls that go to parents did not seem to dissuade students from skipping, but they were reticent to skip a class if they thought the teacher might call a parent himself. A Montgomery High School student said he would never skip a particular teacher’s class “... because she has my mom's - my mom's - my dad's phone number and my step dad and my step mom. Like either way, all she has to do is just text my dad, your son didn't come to school. She's got all contact with my parents.”

A Larkspur High School student said that he skips classes when opportunity and motivation coincide.

*I live right there, I live like right in there, you can see the school from the backyard, so I can just sneak into school at any time and there’s nobody to watch you comin’ to school, so we can just leave, come back, leave come back, I mean. ... It’s not a reason for skipping unless you just don’t wanna be at school, which is the main reason why I don’t sometimes come to first period. Because first period is Spanish, and that teacher shows favoritism for real. Like, going there he doesn’t even acknowledge you. He sits with the same group of girls and talks to them the whole period but doesn’t interact with us.”*

When students feel like teachers insult them or put them down, their response might be to skip the class and avoid the interaction. One student said, “It makes me not want to go to school.” Students in several focus groups said that teachers “say stuff like, they be like, look at your grades, how do you expect to go somewhere in life?” While it may be true that the student has bad grades, the reality is painful and the students do care about their grades and about graduating.

### **Peer influences**

Despite the fact that a number of juniors and seniors expressed regrets about having skipped classes during their freshman and sophomore years, they do not pass that message on to underclassmen in effective ways. A freshman said she had a number of upper classmen as friends but that they gave her nothing by way of attendance advice. In fact, she said she skipped classes *with* those juniors and seniors. "I skipped because all of my friends were like ... seniors and juniors, so it's like they're always gone, so it's like I want to go, too, so I was always gone." When asked why they did not give better advice to freshmen, a senior said, "Okay, but look, see, this had – this is what it is. When you tell them something, they don't listen."

Peer influences can be positive as well. As one student put it,

*When you skip school, what are you doing? You're waiting for the bell to ring for your friends to get out of school. So I don't understand what's the point of skipping school if all your friends are in school. You're just sitting at home watching TV waiting for them to get out to do what you're going to do anyway.*

### **Students' views of skipping school**

Most students in the focus groups were well aware that skipping classes puts them at risk of failing classes, and that not graduating from high school will limit their options in the future. Both middle and high school students talked about education as a pathway to a better financial future and skipping as a barrier to education. A Lowry Middle School student said, "you're going to want to make good money and you're going to have to get like a good education. If you like skip more and more, then you're not going to get that education you need to get in life."

A Winston Middle School student said,

*They always want to skip school but they don't know - they always say what they want to do with their lives, I want to be an NBA star, I want to be a WW wrestler, I want to be a football player. And I keep tellin' them, if ya'll want to be a football player or WW super star or a basketball player, you have to go through middle school and high school and then there's college. So what's the point of skipping school if you don't get your - what's the point of skipping school if you just know it's going to rot your brain.*

A Montgomery High School student gave some insight into the disconnect between the knowledge that skipping is a bad idea and the skipping behavior when he said,

*Well, I didn't know how severe it was gonna be because I was like I know what skipping does, I know – like I didn't know how bad the*

*consequences were gonna be, like them saying – because it's different like if you're a freshman, it may say you might not graduate because at that point, I feel like, no I got time, or I don't care right now, but when you're a senior and it's coming up like really soon, then you start getting serious and like oh.*

Students' definitions of good attendance do not necessarily match those of school personnel. For example, they do not always view tardiness as an attendance problem. One middle school student said, “[My attendance is] perfect. I'm a little late, but I'm still perfect.” Some teachers reinforce that view by not marking students, or at least some students, late. “If you're late, some teachers, like if they like you a lot, they don't even give you the tardy or anything because you're their favorite.”

A Riverview High School student that sometimes she is late because she forgets to do her homework at night and tries to get it done in the morning. She may view the consequences of skipping class as less onerous than the consequences of not turning homework in on time.

### **Behavior**

Several students credit individual teachers with helping them to improve their behavior. About the teacher this Larkspur High boy identified as his ‘caring adult,’ he said, “she gave me an uplift, for real. Cause like if she wasn't there, I mean, I was a problem child in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I got so much better, huge improvement, and she was a major part of that improvement.” A bright Prairie Vista Middle School student said that he used to behave badly and get in trouble out of boredom because the level of instruction was too slow, but that a teacher had taken him aside and explained that good grades were not enough to get into college, and that colleges take disciplinary records into consideration, too. Since then he claims he has been doing better.

However, many students talked about the ways in which they believe the disciplinary policies perpetuate or compound the problem of bad behavior rather than solve it. Students in several schools said that it is difficult for a student who has gotten in trouble a couple times to stay out of trouble after that because, “Once you break one rule, you end up breaking more 'cause like they mad and push the issue with that situation.” The favoritism that students talked about means that “good students” can get away with things while it is difficult for repeat offenders to clean their slate.

Students described suspension as doing “nothing” because they perceive it does not help students learn to behave better. Not one student in any focus group said that they had learned to improve their behavior as a result of being suspended or as a result of anything they did during suspension time. They did say that they do not like suspension, and in fact one boy described it as “the worst feeling ever.” If disliking suspension motivates students to behave better,

extensive suspension should have a measureable effect on behavioral issues school-wide. However, disciplinary issues remain salient in all the schools.

One middle school student talked about the increased difficulty of behaving well following suspensions.

*I'm saying we have too many kids right now that keep getting put in OCS and Turning Point and all of that. When they come back to school, they have to get back into the swing of things. It's too late in the school year and they're going to fail the year and have to keep coming back until they can be successful and not get in trouble at all. But it's hard to do. The other kids at school keep doing stuff to them and they keep having to go back and forth.*

Some disciplinary strategies appear to have unintended consequences. Students at Montgomery High are, not surprisingly, not allowed to have their phones out during class. If teachers see phones during class they may confiscate them for the day. At the end of the day, students must pay a \$15 fine to get them back. Many of the students are low-income, and paying \$15 is not an option. However, if they refuse to turn over the phone they may get sent to in-school suspension for the rest of the day, but they will not need to pay \$15 dollars. So in students' minds it is a choice: miss the rest of your classes and keep your \$15 or pay \$15 to stay in the classes that they might perceive to be boring or irrelevant anyway. Students said that sometimes they choose suspension. Larkspur High has the same telephone policy and \$15 fee, but students did not say that anyone preferred to spend the day in ISS rather than pay the fine.

### Regrets

Students expressed many regrets about not having worked harder during their first years in school. These comments were most frequent among students in the low-achieving group who had gotten behind in credits. "If I could go back and not play around like I did, I would have." Another student added, "I would be the perfect student at this school." "I wish I could go back, I could change a lot of stuff, like I should have done different. [I would have done] my work, get my GPA high – higher than it is, and not drop all my AP classes."

Even middle school students who had gotten behind expressed regrets. One said, "If you come back and do it, even if it's late, they'll give the credit, but it's so hard, once you're behind, you're behind, and it takes forever and it's a pain."

### Dropping out

A small minority of students does not see the relevance of school. One student described it as "... 12 some years of your life in school when you could be out there working and doing something." However, even among the students who were not sure they would graduate, this opinion did not predominate. The focus group students did not view dropping out as a good option. Every student with

whom we spoke wanted to graduate. Students gave a variety of reasons for why:

- “Nobody ain't gonna want to hire you if you ain't got no diploma and stuff, you know.”
- “I'm going on into the military, I have to have a high school diploma.”
- “I just want to graduate to say I did it because nobody in my family graduated.”
- “Either I graduate and move out of my house or I don't graduate and I'm stuck with my dad. I just got out of foster care, I'm on the court papers, until I walk across that stage, I can't leave his custody, don't matter what age I am.”
- “I'm the big sister of five kids, so I have to make an example.”

All students know family members and classmates who have dropped out and do not envy them. A Larkspur High School student said, “Like I've seen so many people drop out, it's ridiculous. And then you see them and they're like doing nothing ...” Montgomery High School students say that older students who have dropped out come back and hang around the school. Even students who are tired of school want to stick it out to the end. “I'll tell the truth, I'm just ready to get out of school period. I just don't want to drop out, I want go all the way through. I just don't like school.” One student who stated he was not going to drop out posed this question: “I mean, if you go through eight or nine years of school and you've only got two or three more left, why are you going to drop out?”

Why indeed?

When students get behind, they reported feeling hopeless and temped to drop out. A student who missed several weeks while in the hospital said, “My mom was like you've got to go because you can catch up, but to me it was like you might as well quit this. All this stuff you worked hard for ... so that's why I stopped and then I started again. Now I'm back on track.”

A girl at Larkspur High said her boyfriend dropped out because he is undocumented and has no hope of attending college.

*Girl 1: My boyfriend, he dropped out. At first, he said that – well, he's an immigrant – he says there's no college for him. He said even if I get married, he has to go all the way over there to get his green card for ten years.*

*Boy 1: A lot of [undocumented] people do things like that, like I've been here this long, and then like I'm not even gonna be able to go to college, so what's the point of continuing my high school career, if I can go out and start working.*

She went on to say that she feels his behavior influenced other students to drop out as well.

*Girl 1: He started working. He started getting \$600.00 per week. He said it's much better than going to school, and I said it wasn't. ... I told him, you know, you affected the whole school. And he's like, what do you mean? It's like you affected the other people. Some people dropped out because of you.*

Students in several focus groups said they think students drop out when “they got no hope, no hope at all.”

A new graduation requirement is being phased in: students will be required to pass state exams. The tests will exert pressure on schools to enhance the rigor of their classes, but in the meantime may have a dampening effect on graduation rates. Students took a practice test this year, and many failed. A student who earlier in the discussion reported having a 100% in his math class failed the state test. A student at Larkspur High said, “I feel sorry for the freshman, cause we took a practice test, we took a practice test, and the practice test was hard. I mean ... AP class, like all of us AP students, it was hard for us, like we didn't understand it.” A student from a different focus group at Larkspur High said, “they said only 12 percent passed it – the benchmark. Yeah, because when we took the practice test, half of the stuff, we didn't know because we haven't got like that far this year.”

### **Students say there is nothing the school can do**

All the students in all the focus groups agreed that teachers and administrators have advised them to stay in school, and most of them have been advised to go to college. Seniors said their schools had provided assistance in the college application process as well. However, in the final analysis, most students feel like schools can do little to keep students enrolled if they want to drop out. “Somebody that don't want to be there, can't force them to be educated. That's their problem, their fault.”

Another said that, “Some kids just don't even go to college, they want to be in the streets. That's they right, if that's how they want to do it. What are you doing to do? Go give them advice, they make the choice, take it or leave it.”

Not all students agreed, however. A Larkspur High School student said, “That happened to my brother and he's older than me but he's a sophomore and nobody really talked to him about getting him back – yeah I know he's off track but either way there's a lot that they can do and they just don't do it.” He felt that there were other academic options that school staff could have presented to his brother but did not.

Some students said that schools do make an effort to recover at least some of their dropouts. A Larkspur High School student said, “I heard one kid, he dropped out, and he was really smart. I think – I’m not sure..., but the principal went up there and said you need to come back to school, and that’s it. And that’s only one kid out of the whole 300 kids. There was one kid, she went to his house and said come back, and he never came back.”

## Advice

Older students offered quite a bit of advice for younger ones during the course of the focus group discussions. Most of that advice was valuable. Seniors are aware of the importance of making a good start in freshman year.

*The way you start is the way it gonna end. I can tell you honestly, the way it starts is the way it gonna end. ... you gonna get that senioritis, you not gonna wanna do nothing, that’s when that GPA is startin’ dropping, and you gotta be high enough for it to drop, or you just gotta keep working. But it’s hard, you gonna get tired.*

Another said,

*That’s what I tell my brother. My brother’s a sophomore. I tell him not to skip and do all that because junior year it’s gonna catch back up with you, so like for all the freshmen and sophomores, you really don’t want to mess up .... It’s not worth the crap you’ve got to go through with your junior year, trying to get back up with attendance, classes you fell back freshman year, because they will come back. They won’t come back your sophomore year, but they will come back junior and senior year.*

One participant counseled students to take the initiative in building relationships with teachers. They said that getting credit for late work can depend on whether you have a relationship with the teacher or not. They gave this advice on being a favorite, “It’s really your relationship. That’s the big thing about ... you gotta come and get a relationship with teachers. Cause you gonna need ‘em.”

Not all their advice was equally sound. An eighth grade student said that some kids “always get in trouble because they’re dumb enough to go to first, second, third, fourth period, skip fifth and sixth period and come back seventh period. If you gonna skip, skip the whole day. Unfortunately, this is the idea of skipping that she will take with her to high school.

## Three Likes and Dislikes

Students were given a half-sheet of paper on one side of which they were asked to write three things they like about their school and on the other side of which they were asked to write three things they do not like. Students in some focus groups did the exercise fairly quietly, writing their answers mostly independently. Students in other groups talked more about their answers, leading to more of a group process. Facilitators did not anticipate the extent to which students would write the names of specific individuals they either liked or disliked, but such responses were common. In all cases, individual names have been replaced with empty underlining. Other comments referenced job titles or roles and focused on ways in which jobs are performed rather than personality issues. Those comments complicated our mission of communicating students' opinions while being fair to the adults involved. The authors chose to leave comments that referred to principals or vice principals without naming them. Students' spelling and grammar were not corrected. In some cases, the handwritten comments were impossible to read.

### Common Likes

Teachers who care  
Friends and supportive students  
PE, sports, band, choir  
Freedom  
Learning, good classes  
Activities, clubs  
Block scheduling (high schools only)

### Common Dislikes

Dress code, uniforms  
Lunches  
Teachers - who don't listen, don't care, don't help  
Judgmental students, bullies, disruptive students  
Fighting, gangs  
Strict discipline policies  
Schedules, e.g. start time, lunch  
Lack of activities  
Closed campus (high school only)

## Insights

### Home environments

It was evident that many students come from home environments that dampen, rather than reinforce their motivation to strive for excellence in school. A minority of students does not receive parental encouragement, and many must take time to earn money or care for children of their own. That is time that might otherwise be spent on homework or other educational activities. For the students who have no close relationship with an adult, it is probable that no one in school is aware of their challenges. A student at Montgomery High said that his father had died this spring. Whether he told anyone at school and received any counseling is likely a function of his relationship with adults at school. A senior who faced challenges at home stated that he was proud of himself for all he had done, and rightly so. Readers might well reflect on whether they themselves could have accomplished the feat had they been dealt the same deck of cards.

### School boundaries

Students did not seem to make a distinction between on-campus and off-campus activities; the boundary between their campuses and surrounding areas appeared irrelevant. However, the challenge of maintaining discipline in these schools is compounded for administrators because behavior that goes on in nearby areas affects what goes on in the school, yet school officials have no authority beyond school property. For example, Riverview High School students claim that kids go to the parking lot outside the neighboring drug store and smoke “cigarettes and weed ... the police, he sits over there half the time and he just looks at them smoke.” They also said that kids go to the nearby church to smoke and fight because “over there you can’t get a ticket, they can just stop whenever they feel like it. Someone can be a lookout.”

### Police presence

The tickets that students so frequently mentioned are police tickets, perhaps for disturbing the peace. These tickets are the entrance to what is commonly known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” The pipeline begins with legal reactions to incidents that in decades gone by would have been dealt with by schools and families rather than police and courts. They serve to alienate students from school and steer youth away from the educational system into the criminal justice system. Students talked about getting tickets as if the event was regrettable, but not out the realm of the ordinary.

### Discipline

While some students were quick to say that ticketing and suspension are ineffective attempts to curb bad behavior, many bought into the notion that the only thing schools can do is exclude poorly behaved students. There were many complaints that teachers are too slow to throw students out of their classes. The only student to offer a suggestion about an inclusive way to improve behavior was a middle school student who suggested a buddy system.

*The one thing I think needs to happen is everybody just needs to have a place to go. There's that one teacher that you can go vent to. Everybody has to find their one person they can vent to. So in order – what if we just had little buddies? Eighth graders had a little seventh grade buddy. We could help them with their homework. Kids that get in trouble all the time, it's because something is disturbing them. Let them talk about it. Let them vent about it. That's it. And if everybody had a place to go to and talk, it would be just good.*

Most students also felt there is nothing a school staff can do to prevent an older student from making a bad choice. That might be true by the time a student is old enough to drop out. However, it does not mean there is nothing a school *system* can do to prevent students from reaching the point of desperation, but efforts should begin when children are still in elementary school.

Readers should not conclude that the students are correct in their assessment that schools are impotent to prevent disruptive behavior and dropout. Students were not asked to think about creative ways to solve these problems, nor would that have been possible in a brief focus group. Thoughtful educators will recognize that the most effective teachers are those who can manage behavior by creating buy-in among all students in the class, not those who deepen emotional barriers by exclusionary classroom management strategies.

### **Academic achievement**

The fact that AP students are failing state tests is a clear indication that students coming out of these schools are not up to par. They need more and better education, rather than less. However, several school policies actively push students out of classes rather than pull them in. It is laudable that the introduction of mandatory IDs has reduced on-campus fighting; that is an accomplishment about which school administrators should be proud. However, that achievement has been reached at the cost of many hours of missed instructional time among students who forget or lost their IDs. Likewise, although it is important to encourage students to be on time, locking them out, particularly when they are right at the door when the bell rings runs counter to the educational mission of schools.

### **Student motivation**

Some students in the focus groups seemed motivated to get good grades and proud when they did, such as a middle school student who said, “this year, I’ve had the best grades I’ve ever had. I’ve only had two Cs,” and a high school student who described his grades as, “all As and Bs and stuff.” However, many students talked simply about passing their classes as if achieving the minimum – earning credit and moving closer to graduation – is their only goal. Only one student talked about the fact that one must apply to colleges that decide which students to accept and which to reject based on high school grades and other accomplishments.

One student did not have any classes following the mid-day focus group and was staying to help clean up and rearrange tables. He explained he was only taking a partial load because he already had enough credits to graduate. When asked about classes students were likely to skip and those they would never skip, two seniors said they would skip an easy class they disliked because, "Like, if I don't get credit for that class, like it won't matter, I still got enough credit, uhh, credits to graduate, so it's like, it really doesn't matter." "We don't have to pass."

To some extent this is an outcome of the purposeful selection of students into the three focus group categories, specifically excluding the high achievers. However, a lack of self-motivation toward excellence undoubtedly plays a role in attendance decisions.

## Options

This study highlights the need to address both disciplinary and attendance issues in some new and hopefully more effective ways. The following suggestions are offered as a way to launch discussions about appropriate next steps.

### **Do not withhold learning as a punishment.**

Revisit school policies that run counter to the primary educational mission of the school. Such policies include locking students out of classes because they are missing IDs or do not have them properly displayed, or because they are late. Instead, devise sanctions that require *more* rather than *less* learning.

### **Address the root causes of disciplinary infractions through restorative justice practices.**

Student comments indicated that they often deal with high levels of stress, and that anger management is a widespread problem. Starting in the elementary years, schools can employ methods of discipline that are swift and intensive, yet help students correct their behavior. Many students complain that adults never listen to their side of the story. Restorative justice requires that offenders confront the damage done by their actions while giving them a chance to tell their side of the story. They are initially more time intensive than suspension, but in the long run will reduce disciplinary incidents and improve the learning (and teaching) environment school-wide.

### **Require effective classroom management training for all teachers.**

Student comments reveal that much educational time is lost to disruptive behavior, and that many teachers are perpetually unhappy about the behavior of students in their classes. Students clearly prefer classes in which teachers are in control. Classroom management is a skill that can be learned, but it is predicated on mutual respect between students and teachers. Both teachers and students will be happier if teachers can improve their skills in this area.

### **Increase the frequency of unscheduled classroom observations by principals and master teachers.**

Being evaluated is nerve-wracking. Students know this; they experience it every time they take a test, do a presentation or turn in an assignment. But the purpose of those assessments is to increase their level of competence. Classroom observations should be approached in the same supportive spirit. They should be unplanned so that consistently excellent teaching is encouraged, and when it occurs, can be rewarded.

## Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol

The following protocol acted as a guideline for the group discussions. However, the discussions were lively, and students often raised issues, for example school discipline and race, on their own, in some cases almost as soon as the focus group began. Since the purpose of the discussions was to hear about students' perceptions of their own experiences, they were allowed latitude to influence the course of the discussion as long as it remained useful to the purpose and not too far afield. In the end, each group discussed each major theme covered in the protocol, but sometimes out of order. Related topics that generated significant discussion included fighting, ID requirements, uniform requirements and school lunches.

---

### Juniper County Focus Group Protocol

#### TRANSITION

What was it like coming to \_\_\_\_\_ middle school from elementary school?

\_\_\_\_\_ high school from middle school?

How hard was it to get started here?

Did you feel comfortable right away, or was it hard to feel like you fit in?

Do you think you fit in now?

How do you feel about your teachers at this school? Counselors? Staff?

Do you feel like there is an adult here – it could be a teacher but it could be someone else – who is a friend and someone who is on your side?

What do they do, how do they act, that makes you feel this way?

What are the other students like?

Is bullying a problem here?

Do you see it going on?

Has it happened to you?

What about cyber-bullying, like on Facebook?

What does the school do about it?

*Middle school groups delved more deeply into bullying than high school groups.*

## DISCIPLINE

Do you have many discipline problems in this school?

If a kid creates a problem in a classroom what usually happens?

When there are issues, do you feel like the school handles things fairly?

Now, this is a tough question because it's about race, and nobody likes to talk about race because nobody wants to offend, but I want to talk about it anyway. There is some new research about suspensions and expulsions nationally, and there's another study about suspensions and expulsions in Texas. And both studies show that boys are way more likely to be suspended than girls and that minority kids – black and Hispanic kids – are way more likely to be suspended than white kids. What about your school? Have you ever felt like boys or minority kids are disciplined more harshly, or do you think it's fair?

## ATTENDANCE

Let's talk about attendance. How would you describe your own attendance?

If you miss class, what happens?

What about if you ditch a class when your parents think you're in school? Would your parents find out? What does the school do?

### IF KIDS ADMIT TO DITCHING, ELSE SKIP

When you don't come to school what are you doing instead?

When you ditch do you go with other people or by yourself?

Are there certain classes you skip more than others? Which ones?

Are there classes you never skip? What is it about those classes that makes you go?

*Students talked about missing class or not going to class in every group, so these questions were never skipped.*

## BARRIERS

Are there things that sometimes make it hard to come to school?

Like, Transportation

Taking care of younger brothers and sisters or a grandparent

Just not wanting to come

## TARDY

How about being late—is it hard to get here on time? Why?

Do you ever just decide not to come to school because you're going to be late anyway?

## GRADUATING

Are there times when you think about dropping out? What makes you say that?

*Count and say the numbers out loud so it will be on the recording!!!!*

*High  
school  
only*

Has anyone in your family dropped out of high school (siblings, parents, extended family)?

Does anyone in your family ever talk to you either about dropping out or staying in school?

Do you have friends who dropped out? Do you know why they made that choice?

Can you think of something that could have been done to prevent them from dropping out?

I want to take a thumb poll. With your thumb, will you show me how sure you are that you will graduate from high school.

UP = absolutely sure, 100% committed.

FLAT = pretty sure, but not completely.

DOWN = is you think you probably won't graduate.

*High  
school  
only*

## LIKES AND DISLIKES

I'd like you to think about the best class you have taken at this school. By best, I mean a combination of things. I want you to think of a class in which you *learned* a lot and that you *enjoyed* a lot. (Give them a minute to think.) What was it about that class that made you choose it?

On one side of these sheets it asks you to write three things that you *like* about this school, and on the other side it asks you to write three things that you do *not* like.

Thank you so much for taking this time with me today—you've given me so much valuable information! (Let kids choose CDs.)

## Appendix B: Three Likes and Three Dislikes

### Middle Schools

Table A1: Lowry Middle School – Shreveport School District	
Likes	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I like how teachers understand now on these day better, but aren't the same thing as friends</li> <li>I like how some teacher are nice and really think you can do the best out of you.</li> <li>Friends are the best, but you have to chose with caution who you want to hand out with</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All your teachers don't listen, something serious has to change, teachers have to have separate training or a session for better understanding of students.</li> <li>Uniform</li> <li>Take wannabe people. People should start trying to be their own person. Choose who you want to be, not who others choose to see.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some teachers</li> <li>Classes</li> <li>Principal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dress Code</li> <li>Some teachers</li> <li>School times</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mr. _____</li> <li>Mrs. _____</li> <li>Dress Code</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mrs. _____</li> <li>The uniform</li> <li>Bad Kids</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mrs. _____</li> <li>Mr. _____</li> <li>Mr. _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dress Code</li> <li>2. Mrs. _____</li> </ul>
Nothing listed on sheet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mrs. _____</li> <li>Uniform</li> <li>Mrs. _____</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Athletics</li> <li>Mrs. _____</li> <li>Principal _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mrs. _____</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some of my teachers</li> <li>That I get to learn something new everyday</li> <li>That I get to hang out with my friends at school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ms. _____</li> <li>Dresscode</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sports</li> <li>Coaches</li> <li>Mr. _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uniform</li> <li>Ms. _____</li> <li>Ms _____</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers</li> <li>All of the mess</li> </ul>

Table A1: Lowry Middle (Continued)	
Likes	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Lunch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uniforms</li> <li>• Some of the discipline</li> <li>• Not able to chew gum</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Vice principal</li> <li>• The favoritism</li> <li>• The judgmental people</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom</li> <li>• More choices</li> <li>• More friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uniforms</li> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• Need to have more sports choices</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vending Machines</li> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Basketball</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uniforms</li> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• Rules</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That people judge for not wearing a name brand</li> <li>• Teachers because they have favorites</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I like some of the teachers</li> <li>• I like the freedom</li> <li>• I like the responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The uniforms</li> <li>• Some of the classes</li> <li>• The lunches</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freewill</li> <li>• The area</li> <li>• The food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uniform</li> <li>• Rules</li> <li>• Distance</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Athletics</li> <li>• Math</li> <li>• Lunch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1.Lunch</li> <li>• 2. Athletics</li> <li>• 3. English</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Girls</li> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Avid</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clothes</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Passing period</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most of the teachers are outgoing with what they are teaching</li> <li>• Our principals seem fair</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't like how you have to tuck in your shirt with your uniforms.</li> <li>• Some of the teachers have favorites</li> <li>• How you get infractions for no reasons.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like choir</li> <li>• Like all my coaches</li> <li>• Like the Shack program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not like Ms. _____</li> <li>• Hate the dress code</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr. _____</li> <li>• Mr. _____</li> <li>• Band</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dress code</li> <li>• Ms. _____</li> </ul>

<b>Table A1: Lowry Middle (Continued)</b>	
<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avid</li> <li>• Athletics</li> <li>• Pre Ap Math</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Food</li> <li>• Hours of classes</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Classes</li> <li>• Teachers support &amp; help me</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bullies, especially if they are mean to teachers, my friends, other students &amp; staff members &amp; my family</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mrs. _____</li> <li>• Spanish 3 class</li> <li>• The dances</li> <li>• Athletics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Cafeteria food</li> <li>• That you need your ID</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The class teachers</li> <li>• The class projects</li> <li>• Class trips in Avid</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dress code</li> <li>• The lunch food menu</li> <li>• The strict teachers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choir</li> <li>• Athletics</li> <li>• 4th period teacher is awesome</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The food</li> <li>• Ms. _____</li> <li>• The dress code</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classes</li> <li>• Physical education</li> <li>• Clubs after school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some mean people</li> <li>• Fighting</li> <li>• Sometimes the Principal</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like my 4th period because he is an awesome teacher. He used to be in the army &amp; he tells us a lot of his funny stories.</li> <li>• Athletics</li> <li>• Like the way Mr. _____ treats us.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't like most of the food. It's processed &amp; fake.</li> <li>• Mrs. _____</li> <li>• Dress code</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ms. _____</li> <li>• Mr. _____</li> <li>• Mrs. _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mrs. _____</li> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Uniform</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dress code violation</li> <li>• It is just horrible</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love the performances that I perform in the choir</li> <li>• Like my friends here</li> <li>• I like some staff members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not like the dress code we have to wear</li> <li>• The food we have to eat or the cafeteria period</li> <li>• Don't like the way our classes work</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The staff</li> <li>• The principal</li> <li>• The A &amp; B block schedule</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dress code because you can't express yourself.</li> <li>• The bullying policy</li> <li>• The lock down middle schools have</li> </ul>

<b>Table A2: Prairie Vista Middle School – Morgantown School District</b>	
<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The environment</li> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• New student council group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't like the teacher support</li> <li>• The food</li> <li>• The dress code</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports</li> <li>• Art</li> <li>• Computers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dress code</li> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• The way school is run</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• Projects</li> <li>• How classes are managed</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Students</li> <li>• Some classes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uniforms</li> <li>• How the teachers treat us like babies</li> <li>• Have to always be quiet</li> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Students</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mrs. _____</li> <li>• Athletics</li> <li>• Band</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rules</li> <li>• Sometimes lunch</li> <li>• Principal</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They have up and down elevators</li> <li>• There are co-teachers to help you in each class</li> <li>• There are afterschool tutorials to help you with your work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That they changed the dress code to wearing uniforms</li> <li>• If we're tardy to school we have to go to afterschool detention</li> <li>• We don't have student ID's at the school this year</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because it's new</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The uniform</li> <li>• The food</li> <li>• The A day and B day</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uniforms</li> <li>• Strictness</li> <li>• Food they give to us</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing listed on sheet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uniforms</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The teachers are willing to help you with things you need</li> <li>• Some of the teachers' personalities are great &amp; fun</li> <li>• The sports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gangs &amp; racism</li> <li>• Food</li> <li>• The kids are horrible</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food is not so good</li> <li>• Bad kids</li> <li>• Always interrupting my learning</li> </ul>

<b>Table A2: Prairie Vista Middle School (Continued)</b>	
<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The activities we do in class</li> <li>• Sports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The library doesn't have any books that kids are interested in</li> <li>• The uniforms</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers are nice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't like wearing uniforms</li> <li>• Some students don't let the whole class learn</li> <li>• Some teachers are too strict</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's a big school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The teachers</li> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Lunch food</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The sports here are really good</li> <li>• The technology here suites my needs</li> <li>• The library has a lot of books that I can read -</li> <li>• A lot of teachers actually believe I can do good</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How strict the dress code is</li> <li>• The lunch is horrible</li> <li>• We do not have as much freedom as I think we need</li> <li>• The librarian is really rude to students</li> <li>• They hired a mean teacher name Mr. _____</li> <li>• A lot of kids act bad &amp; we miss out on learning</li> <li>• Some teachers teach by discipline</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some of the teachers are good and teach so you can understand.</li> <li>• The schedule</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transportation</li> <li>• The discipline</li> <li>• Uniforms</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The food</li> <li>• The gym classes</li> <li>• The showers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• Bathrooms</li> <li>• Dress code</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coach _____ because I can talk to him</li> <li>• I like PE</li> <li>• I like math class because it's hands on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some of the teachers because they're always trippin</li> <li>• Some of the students because they are always talking stuff</li> <li>• Bullys</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The building</li> <li>• I have relatives here</li> <li>• Like being with my friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dress code</li> <li>• Don't like being able to be free such as going to lunch on our own</li> <li>• Don't like how the teachers &amp; staff treat the students</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dress code</li> <li>• The work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People</li> <li>• Dress code</li> </ul>

<b>Table A3: Winston Middle School – Springwater School District</b>	
<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing listed on sheet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The food</li> <li>• The dress code</li> <li>• The tardy policy</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Principal</li> <li>• The events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The fights</li> <li>• The teachers</li> <li>• The times</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher</li> <li>• People around me</li> <li>• Stuff learned in the class room</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fights</li> <li>• Class Room</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mrs. _____</li> <li>• Movies</li> <li>• The activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Being Quiet</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing listed on sheet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food because they the same thing every day</li> <li>• Teachers because the think the run the school</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch, I love food</li> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• The computers</li> <li>• My friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uniform</li> <li>• Sometimes, the people</li> <li>• The time we get out</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students</li> </ul>

## High Schools

Table A4: Riverview High School – Shreveport School District	
Likes	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing to be honest</li> <li>• This school needs so much help</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Asst. Principals</li> <li>• The lack of school spirit</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mrs. _____</li> <li>• Mrs. _____</li> <li>• The four queens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mr. _____</li> <li>• Counselors don't help at all</li> <li>• Block scheduling</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Block schedule</li> <li>• Off campus lunch</li> <li>• Student self serve</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory</li> <li>• Counselors not being that involved</li> <li>• Asst. Principal not enforcing all rules for everyone</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The fact that I can fit in</li> <li>• Pep rallies</li> <li>• The home games here</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students</li> <li>• The Asst. Principal</li> <li>• The lack of concern or care</li> <li>• The lunch food</li> <li>• The random drug tests when they search your things</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom at lunch for 10<sup>th</sup> &amp; 11<sup>th</sup></li> <li>• New add on building</li> <li>• Teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory</li> <li>• Student respect</li> <li>• Not enough good things to like</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing on sheet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lack of sprit</li> <li>• Lack of discipline</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Football</li> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Size of the school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory</li> <li>• Counselors</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A/B day scheduling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory period</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Learning new things</li> <li>• Social interaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Learning useless tings</li> <li>• Mornings</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The size</li> <li>• Freedom</li> <li>• Peers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not like the time that we have to be at school in the morning</li> <li>• Tardy sweeps</li> <li>• OCS</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My teachers</li> <li>• The work amount I some classes</li> <li>• The amount of freedom the give you</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some classes &amp; how the teachers are</li> <li>• The policies &amp; rules</li> <li>• Attitudes toward certain students</li> <li>• The times of classes</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like some of the classes</li> <li>• The help &amp; support I get from some teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lunch here</li> <li>• The way some of the teachers teach</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The freedom we get here</li> </ul>	
<b>Table A4: Riverview High School (Continued)</b>	
<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers are fund</li> <li>• Friends</li> <li>• Educational opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most teachers are boring</li> <li>• Stupid rules</li> <li>• Lunches</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No dress code</li> <li>• A &amp; B days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tardy sweep</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kids are generally cool &amp; nice</li> <li>• Wide variety of classes you can take</li> <li>• The long lunches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisor period</li> <li>• Administrators are too strict</li> <li>• Tardy sweeps</li> <li>• Following other schools by modernizing &amp; not staying original</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers listen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No teacher interaction</li> <li>• The stuff students get away with</li> <li>• Stricter dress code</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like a lot of my teachers</li> <li>• Like my core classes &amp; some elective classes</li> <li>• Like my track coach &amp; the boys basketball coach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers are mean &amp; cruel</li> <li>• Don't like that they are so strict</li> <li>• Some subjects are harder than others</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports</li> <li>• Kids</li> <li>• Some teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• Some Kids</li> <li>• Advisory</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The people/friends</li> <li>• A/P</li> <li>• The classes you can take to help (Plato)</li> <li>• A/B schedule</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some of the teachers</li> <li>• How the teachers don't have that much student/teacher interaction</li> <li>• School starts too early</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Block schedule</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch – how juniors &amp; seniors get an hour while freshman &amp; sophomores only get 40 minutes</li> <li>• Bullys</li> <li>• How teachers don't care about the students education</li> </ul>

<b>Table A5: Larkspur High School – Morgantown School District</b>	
<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mellow, calm (upscale from what it was No mess</li> <li>• Students care about each other</li> <li>• Principals are OK</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch food</li> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Education not made equal</li> <li>• Nobody cares</li> <li>• Bulldog academy</li> <li>• We need color</li> <li>• Less Strict</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have a good love for each other</li> <li>• This school teach you what to appreciate in life.</li> <li>• You can learn lessons</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers don't have a sense of humor.</li> <li>• We don't have enough electives (why don't we have ROTC?)</li> <li>• There are too many teachers that talk to students any kind of way.</li> <li>• Our uniforms need to be more extended</li> <li>• Our teachers need more faith in us</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students do come for each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch (let us leave for lunch or get better food)</li> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Bulldog class</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring group (LOD)</li> <li>• Students care about each other</li> <li>• Principles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code authority</li> <li>• Bulldog academy</li> <li>• Lunch</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students care about each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bulldog academy</li> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Dress code</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I like my teacher Ms. Dees she taught me a lot</li> <li>• I like the students were a family</li> <li>• I like the principals help us out and care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Teachers not caring &amp; being open with the kids</li> <li>• Bulldog Academy</li> <li>• Recognize the children that do great and are improving</li> <li>• Don't like that students can't know their grades before report cards.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some of the students that are your friends</li> <li>• The teachers that really care about the students</li> <li>• The assistant principal that does attendance recovery.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dress code</li> <li>• That teachers that don't teach &amp; help their students</li> <li>• The lunch. They need to serve better food.</li> <li>• The policy about discipline.</li> </ul>

<b>Table A5: Larkspur High School (Continued)</b>	
<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I like that the students caring about each other</li> <li>• I like that there are some teachers that actually care</li> <li>• I like that there no hate between races here</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't like that they put dress code before academics</li> <li>• Don't like how they talk about the bad things but not the good</li> <li>• I don't like that we really don't mentor the underclassmen anymore.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I see my friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That the staff focus more on dress code than teaching</li> <li>• No positive teachers</li> <li>• No activities, it make school boring</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• Privileges</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code – We should be able to wear any color shirt &amp; jeans</li> <li>• That time school should start</li> <li>• Discipline</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You can have personal relationships with some teachers</li> <li>• Sports</li> <li>• Teachers that care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch food</li> <li>• The teachers who don't want to be here</li> <li>• Students who couldn't care less &amp; just want attention</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good teachers (Dr. _____)</li> <li>• Certain classes</li> <li>• Sports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Bad teachers</li> <li>• Favoritism</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some of the teachers, staff &amp; students</li> <li>• Diversity</li> <li>• School Spirit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worrying about the dress code too much</li> <li>• Attitude problems with teachers, students &amp; principals</li> <li>• Bullying</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like that there are some teachers that actually care</li> <li>• I've never gotten picked on</li> <li>• I know mostly everyone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Teachers attitudes</li> <li>• School hours</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The football program</li> <li>• Some of the teachers are actually doing their jobs</li> <li>• That we are a recognized campus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is too much fighting</li> <li>• Selling drugs</li> <li>• Gangs such as the crypts &amp; bloods</li> </ul>

<b>Table A5: Larkspur High School (Continued)</b>	
<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They try their best to have fun in class</li> <li>• They try to have more fun teachers</li> <li>• Have good music</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dress code</li> <li>• Have no fun</li> <li>• Have free time</li> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• Restrooms</li> <li>• Lunches</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Sports</li> <li>• Church being open on Tues/Thurs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• The bathrooms</li> <li>• Favoritism</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take me back to my freshman year, more color, fund activities, etc.</li> <li>• Even if a change happened, I don' t want to hear it. I'm almost at June 7<sup>th</sup>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My 2 last years were ???, and I can't say I have pride.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The field trips</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• The air</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They don't have any money</li> <li>• All the computer are raggedy</li> <li>• The black people</li> <li>• No soap</li> <li>• The water is nasty</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The teachers</li> <li>• Some of the subjects</li> <li>• The sports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students behavior</li> <li>• The dress code</li> <li>• The attendance</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• It's so boring to be here. They do nothing to encourage you to come</li> <li>• Restrooms, lunch</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• Cold air</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• How to go to ISS if you are late</li> <li>• Restroom &amp; lunch food</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The teachers</li> <li>• Principals</li> <li>• Student body</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dress code</li> <li>• Tardy system</li> <li>• The principals don't let us have an opinion about things they decided on.</li> </ul>

Table A 6: Montgomery High School – Springwater School District	
Likes	Dislikes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some of the experiences</li> <li>• A small percent of people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lock out</li> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Discipline</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Taking stuff from kids (hats, music players)</li> <li>• Lockout</li> <li>• Can't go off campus</li> <li>• Teachers Principals</li> <li>• ID's</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• JROTC</li> <li>• Archery team</li> <li>• Work out room</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lock out</li> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• ID's</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Block schedule</li> <li>• Physical education</li> <li>• STEP/Extra Curricular Activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Star Test</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Ms. _____</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• JROTC</li> <li>• Sports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lockout</li> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Some teachers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not a dang thing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch</li> <li>• Lockout</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Principals</li> <li>• ID's</li> <li>• Mrs. _____</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher</li> <li>• Lunch</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Block schedule</li> <li>• Sports</li> <li>• Math/coaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food</li> <li>• Lockout</li> <li>• Discipline</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The art class</li> <li>• Soccer Team</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The rules are too high</li> <li>• The halls are too full</li> <li>• Teachers are too strict</li> <li>• Lockout</li> <li>• Cafeteria food</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some of the teachers will help in some subjects in class</li> <li>• Activities</li> <li>• Transportation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rude teachers</li> <li>• Students fight</li> <li>• Bad teachers</li> </ul>

<b>Table A 6: Montgomery High School (Continued)</b>	
<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1. I have mentors that truly care about me</li> <li>• 2. My math teacher is a cool learning teacher</li> <li>• 3. Some days we get to have a free day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1. Hate lock out</li> <li>• 2. We can't go off campus</li> <li>• 3. The ID</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plato</li> <li>• How we have no dress code</li> <li>• The way Hill is</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lockout rule</li> <li>• ID rule</li> <li>• Lunch break is short</li> <li>• The phone rule</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No dress code</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can't leave campus</li> <li>• The restrooms are nasty</li> <li>• Need longer lunch</li> <li>• Got to wear ID every day</li> <li>• Lockout</li> <li>• The rules</li> <li>• Can't use phone at lunch</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No dress code</li> <li>• Lunch off school campus</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch too short</li> <li>• ID cards</li> <li>• Some of the rules</li> <li>• Lockout</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No dress code policy</li> <li>• Can leave campus at lunch</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch too short</li> <li>• Kick us out for stupid stuff/suspension</li> <li>• Miss class because of ID</li> <li>• Lockout</li> <li>• Phone rule</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some teachers care</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rule enforcement</li> <li>• Teacher attitude</li> <li>• Lunch too Short</li> <li>• Foods are weird looking</li> <li>• Lock out</li> <li>• ID</li> <li>• Phone Rule</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My senior class</li> <li>• The center helpers</li> <li>• Off campus lunch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The disrespect from teachers</li> <li>• Seniors not doing anything/having fun</li> <li>• Security sucks</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal</li> <li>• Some teachers</li> <li>• Off campus lunch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch/cafeteria food</li> <li>• Kids</li> <li>• Disrespectfulness</li> </ul>

**Table A 6: Montgomery High School (Continued)**

<b>Likes</b>	<b>Dislikes</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I like football</li><li>• Good things we can do</li><li>• Some of the teachers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some of the teachers</li><li>• We can't do a lot</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sports</li><li>• Most teachers put effort into helping you</li><li>• I like the weight room</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don't like the food</li><li>• Don't like lockout</li><li>• The fact that you have to wear your ID everyday</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some of the teachers are actually considerate</li><li>• Seeing my friends</li><li>• Not a lot of people do their job</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The nurse doesn't do her job</li><li>• Teachers try to get to children's level</li><li>• Bullying is still an issue</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Activities</li><li>• Teachers/staff</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Respect (not having it)</li><li>• Understanding teachers</li></ul>

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) strives to build networks of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attachment and attendance promotes academic achievement and school success.



NCSE was established in 2003 by The Partnership for Families & Children (The Partnership) following more than a decade of research concerning youth out of the educational mainstream. NCSE is one of five centers within The Partnership. The impact of our work has been significant investments of state and federal funds to promote high school graduation and reduce suspensions, expulsions, truancy and dropout.

Our program experience and research have identified school attendance and engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

Author: Joanna Zorn Heilbrunn and Elizabeth Kummer

National Center for School Engagement  
c/o The Partnership for Families & Children  
450 Lincoln Street, Suite 100  
Denver, CO 80203  
(303) 837-8466  
[www.schoolengagement.org](http://www.schoolengagement.org)