

MI Student Voice Perception Survey – What Contributes to Welcoming School Environments?

Basis Policy Research

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A welcoming school environment is a multi-dimensional construct comprised of characteristics, norms, and values that impact students’ learning and social development (Ross et al., 2020). Factors associated with a welcoming environment include the school’s physical environment and safety, interpersonal relationships between students and educators, and behaviors and social norms, among others (Hanover Research, 2022). Research has demonstrated welcoming school environments enhance students’ sense of belonging and positively contributes to behavioral engagement and improved academic performance (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Niehaus et al., 2012).

Given the demonstrated impact of the school environment on students’ perceptions of belonging and academic outcomes, the MI Student Voice survey includes environment-focused questions. The questions gauge students’ (a) sense of belonging among peers and staff, (b) perceptions of how fairly peers and faculty treat students from different races and ethnicities, and (c) perceptions of the learning environment. The Kent Intermediate School District, through a grant funded from the Michigan Health Endowment Fund, contracted with Basis Policy Research to analyze survey results and produce three research briefs covering topics of interest to Kent ISD¹. The current brief explores factors associated with welcoming school environments.

About The Survey

This executive summary draws on data from the spring 2023 administration of the MI Student Voice perception survey. Fifty-five districts in Michigan participated in the survey. At the conclusion of the survey window, 33,233 students in grades 5 through 12 completed the survey. The sample is restricted to 26,990 students with complete survey data.

Methods

Basis researchers sought to understand the (a) factors associated with welcoming school environments and (b) common features of schools identified as having the most welcoming school environments. For the purposes of this brief, we focus the analysis on factors contributing to a welcoming school environment based on the grouping of items from the MI Student Voice survey validation report. The four factors derived from the validation report and used in this brief include: the learning environment, peer connectedness, social awareness, and fair and inclusive environment (see “Key Terms” on the next page for definitions). Finally, we rated schools on the four welcoming factors. To do so, we calculated the percentage of students responding with the top two answer choices on the five-point survey scales. Selecting the top two answer choices is treated as “positive responses”. We then averaged positive responses across factors to create an overall welcomeness rating. Basis researchers subsequently classified the five elementary, middle, and high schools with the highest overall ratings as the most welcoming schools in the sample.

Research Questions

1

To what extent do students’ perceptions of welcoming school environments vary by race and ethnicity?

2

What features are common to schools with the most welcoming environments?

¹ Kent ISD, developed and administered the Mi Student Voice survey. Basis did not contribute to the development or administration of the survey. We were contracted to independently analyze survey data following the spring 2023 administration.

Key Findings

Less than half of students feel people in their schools understand them as a person.

- Forty-six percent of students responded favorably to items related to peer connectedness. This implies students are less likely to report feeling connected to other students, how well peers understand them, and how strongly students feel like they belong in school.
- Conversely, between 71 and 80 percent of students responded positively to social awareness, fair and inclusive environment, and learning environment items. This suggests students are more likely to indicate they care about others' feelings and acknowledge how their actions impact others.

Asian or Asian American and White students responded more favorably to welcoming environment factors than other racial and ethnic groups.

- Between 85 and 86 percent of Asian or Asian American (henceforth titled "Asian") and White students responded positively to questions about social awareness, whereas between 74 and 77 percent of Black or African American (henceforth titled "Black"), multiracial, or Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin (henceforth titled "Hispanic") students responded positively.
- The largest gap between racial and ethnic groups is a fourteen percentage point difference between Multiracial and Asian students regarding positive perceptions of learning environments.
- The factor with the least amount of variation between subgroups was peer connectedness, which had a range of eleven percentage points between Black (41 percent) and White students (52 percent).

A larger share of students in the most welcoming schools report feeling like they belong as compared to students in other Michigan schools.

- The share of students in the most welcoming schools responding positively to the learning environment and peer connectedness factors are between 13 to 14 percentage points larger. This implies students in the most welcoming schools are more likely to report feeling a sense of belonging within the school environment and hold perceptions that teachers treat students with respect and encouragement.
- The share of students in the most welcoming schools feeling like they belong is 14 percentage points larger than other Michigan schools.
- The share of students with positive responses to items associated with a fair and inclusive environment are between 11 to 13 percentage points larger in the most welcoming schools as compared to all other Michigan schools in the sample.

Recommendations

- Leverage resources in the Kent ISD [Student Perception Planning Guide](#) to support local districts and schools in creating more welcoming atmospheres for all students.
- Support the implementation of belonging and peer connectedness efforts in local districts and schools.
- Support the implementation of diversity and inclusion efforts in location districts and schools.

Key Terms

Learning environment. Items address teachers' respect towards students, teachers' encouragement of students, and adequacy of resources school provide.

Peer Connectedness. Items inquire about how connected students feel to other students and how well peers understand them.

Social awareness. Items include how much students care about other people's feelings and how much respect students have of the views of those who disagree with them.

Fair and Inclusive Environment. The two items inquire about whether adults and students fairly treat people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures.

Historically Marginalized Groups. Includes students identifying as Black of African American, Hispanic or Latinx, or Multiracial.

Upper Elementary. Students in grades five to six.

Middle School. Students in grades seven to eight.

High School. Students in grades 9 to 12.