

Youth Issue Briefs

What They Are & Why They Matter



WHAT ARE THESE BRIEFS?

- Short, easy-to-read snapshots of the top issues youth in Alexandria care about.
- Based on what youth told us during the 2024-2025 Listening Sessions.
- Designed to help our community take action on youth priorities.

WHERE THE INFORMATION COMES FROM

- 94 Youth Listening Sessions
- 1,140+ middle & high school students
- Local data showing how youth experiences fit larger trends

WHO PARTICIPATED

- 5 schools (4 Public, 1 Private)
- 22% LGBTQ+ youth
- 816 BIPOC youth
- 277 White youth
- 40 Middle Eastern or Northern African youth

WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN EACH BRIEF

- Theme Overview.
- Why it matters.
- What Youth Want vs. What They Experience Now.
- Direct Quotes from youth.

WHY IT MATTERS

- Youth are experts in their own experiences.
- Listening builds trust and leads to better programs and policies.
- Acting on this feedback can help all youth thrive.

HOW TO USE THESE BRIEFS

- Shape programs, policies, and funding to reflect youth priorities.
- Share with colleagues, partners, and decision-makers.
- Start conversations with youth about solutions that work for them.

Youth Listening Sessions

Who Participated



FACILITATORS

63
TOTAL

33
YOUTH

6
YOUNG
ADULTS

15
CITY
STAFF

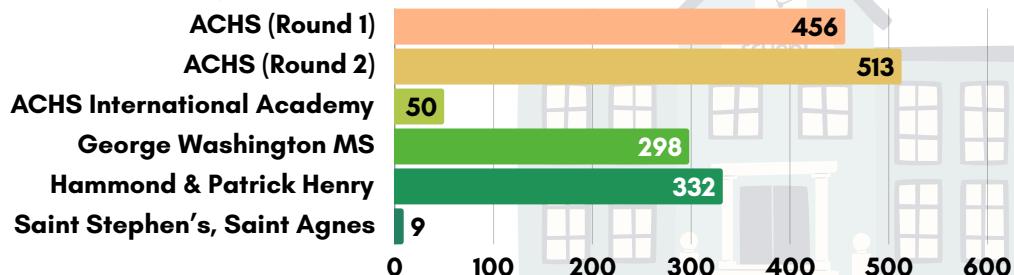
3
ACPS SCHOOL
STAFF

3
COMMUNITY
MEMBERS

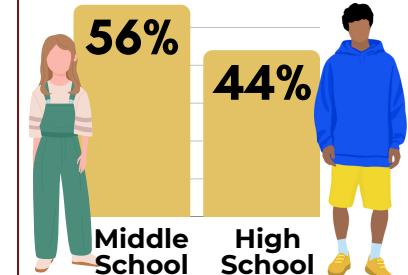
2
NONPROFIT
STAFF

1
INTERN
STAFF

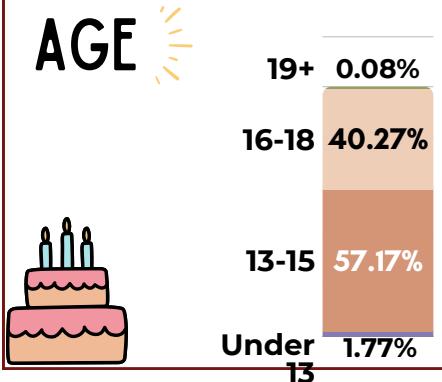
SCHOOLS



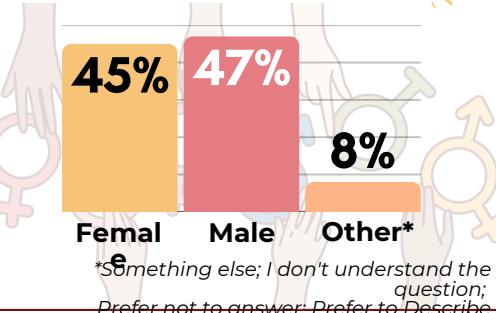
GRADE LEVEL



AGE



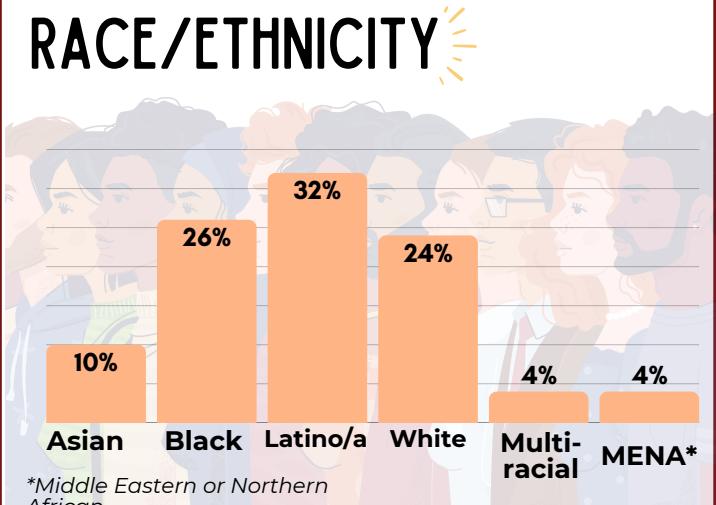
GENDER IDENTITY



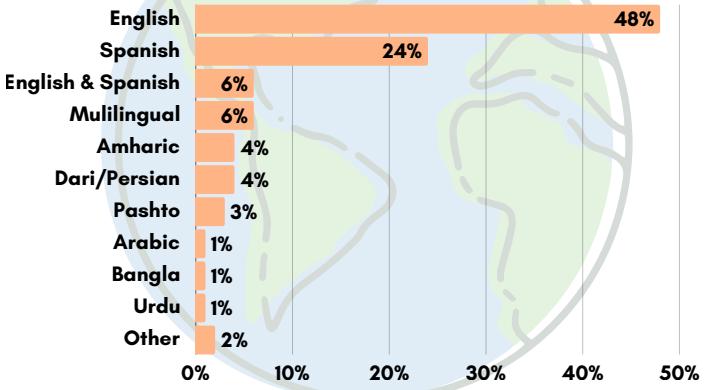
LGBTQ
+
22%

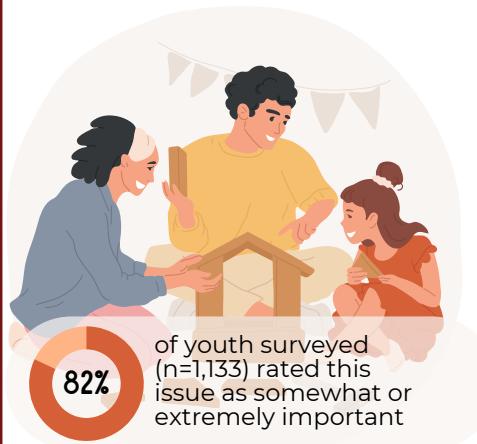


RACE/ETHNICITY



PREFERRED LANGUAGE





Youth Perspectives on: Cost of Living



Overview

Cost of Living emerged over 500 times during 94 listening sessions with Alexandria students. Students described financial stress as a central concern affecting their families and peers. Rising prices, housing costs, healthcare inaccessibility, and visible poverty emerged as common themes. Youth highlighted a strong desire for a community where no one experiences homelessness or has to struggle to meet their basic needs.

WHY IT MATTERS

When basic needs go unmet, such as food, housing, healthcare, and transportation, young people face significant challenges in learning, connecting, and planning for the future. Youth described how economic hardship and unreliable transportation create daily stressors that impact their well-being and development.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Economic Conditions

Sources: 2024 Alexandria Resident Survey & VA Department of Education (2024)



WHAT YOUTH WANT

150+ mentions

"A community in which everybody has access to the things they need."

Economic Justice

A fairer economy where wealth and resources are distributed equitably and everyone gets their basic needs met and can thrive.

55+ mentions

"Housing for everyone (affordable housing)"

Housing for All

Housing costs are fair and everyone has access to safe, quality, and affordable housing/rent.

30+ mentions

"Healthy organic food that is affordable"

Food Justice

Everyone has access to healthy, affordable, and abundant food and no one goes hungry.

45+ mentions

"Access to great healthcare for free"

Greater Healthcare Access & Well-being

Everyone has access to high-quality, affordable, and compassionate healthcare and health and well-being are prioritized for all.

20+ mentions

"More free resources for youth."

More Social Services

Everyone has access to the support they need, including safe places to stay, help with basic needs, and programs that uplift low-income and unhoused individuals.

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

90+ mentions

"It is very expensive just to live here."

"A lot of people don't get paid much and can't afford a lot of things."

50+ mentions

"Rent is too high."

"High rates of people experiencing homelessness."

15+ mentions

"The prices of food are very high."

"Not enough food."

25+ mentions

"Expensive healthcare."

"People don't have healthcare."

"The Teen Wellness Center is not accessible and needs more funding."

Economic Disparities

Students point to rising prices and inflation, stagnant wages, the financial strain their families experience, and a heavy tax burden as stressors.

Housing Instability

Many young people see their community as struggling with unaffordable housing, rising homelessness, unsafe living conditions, and a cost of living that makes it hard for families and youth to stay and thrive.

Food Insecurity

Many students experience food insecurity due to high grocery prices and limited access to enough food, leaving families unable to meet basic nutritional needs.

Healthcare Inaccessibility

While the Teen Wellness Center was named as a valuable resource, many youth in our community struggle to access affordable, reliable healthcare, leaving their physical and mental health needs unmet and putting their well-being at risk.

"Help poor people."



Barriers to Improvement

When asked about the challenges of addressing cost of living issues, students highlighted a range of systemic, economic, and political barriers that make meaningful change difficult.

Systemic and Economic Barriers

Low-Wage Jobs and Cost of Housing

Students noted that even when people are working, “jobs often don’t pay enough to support a family - especially with Alexandria’s high housing costs.” A significant portion of income goes toward rent or mortgages, leaving little for other necessities like food, healthcare, and childcare.

Cycle of Poverty

Many students emphasized that poverty is self-perpetuating - once people are struggling financially, it becomes increasingly difficult to break free without significant economic resources. One student put it simply: “Poverty is expensive and breeds more poverty. The only way to escape is with money.”

Rising Costs and Inflation

Students acknowledged the impact of “rising inflation and high property values,” which make it even harder for lower-income families to afford basic needs.

Political and Structural Challenges

Political Resistance and Corruption

Some students saw “political opinions and systemic corruption” as major obstacles to addressing cost of living issues.

Taxes and Government Policies

Students identified “high city taxes, low-paying jobs, and enforcement policies” as factors that contribute to the financial burden on residents.

Wealth Disparities and Structural Inequities

The Influence of the Wealthy

Some students pointed to “the rich” as a barrier, suggesting that those in positions of power benefit from maintaining the status quo.

Expensive Childcare and Healthcare

The rising costs of “childcare and healthcare” were also flagged as significant challenges for families trying to stay afloat financially.



Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to Address Cost of Living

When asked to brainstorm potential solutions to address cost of living challenges in Alexandria, students proposed a mix of policy changes, direct support programs, and community-driven actions.

Invest in Early Care and Educators

- Pay early educators fairly. Create a fund to raise salaries and keep great teachers.
- Grow the early learning workforce. Offer scholarships, paid training, and partnerships with local colleges.
- Make childcare affordable. Invest more city funds in childcare centers and home-based programs.
- Reflect every family's culture. Support diverse, culturally responsive teaching materials and training.

Make Early Learning Easy to Find and Access

- Create one easy application for all early learning programs.
- Focus funds where they're needed most, especially in underserved neighborhoods.
- Add more spaces for infants and toddlers by upgrading community centers or public buildings.
- Help families choose programs that fit their needs, schedules, and values.

Make Housing Affordable and Secure

- Build and keep affordable homes. Follow through on the Housing 2040 Plan and make sure new developments include affordable units.
- Use public land wisely. Partner with nonprofits and builders to create mixed-income housing.
- Protect renters. Limit huge rent hikes and support rent stabilization.
- Prioritize families most in need. Invest where housing costs hit hardest.

Make Living Costs Fair and Manageable:

- Help families with direct aid like rental support or guaranteed income programs.
- Raise wages so people can afford to live where they work.
- Offer affordable essentials, like childcare, healthcare, and job training co-located at community hubs.
- Lower financial pressure by freezing or reducing property taxes and condo fees for low-income residents.

Ensure Access to Basic Needs:

- Expand free school meals and provide healthy snacks during the day.
- Grow community food options through gardens, food banks, and neighborhood grocery stores.
- Make healthcare affordable. Help more people get insurance and reduce medical costs.
- Create youth discount programs for fresh produce and healthy foods.

Inform the Community:

- Educate renters and residents about their rights and available resources.
- Spread the word. Work with schools, churches, and nonprofits to reach families.
- Listen to those most affected. Keep asking for feedback through surveys and community meetings.
- Be welcoming to all. Make Alexandria a place where immigrants and newcomers feel supported.

Take Action Together:

- Vote for leaders who care about fairness and affordability.
- Advocate for strong housing and cost-of-living policies.
- Involve youth in decision-making. Encourage them to attend meetings and share their ideas.
- Keep listening. Use student and resident surveys to shape city priorities.

Commissioner Discussion Guide: Cost of Living

As we prepare for the next CYCP, we're asking Commissioners to reflect on what is influencing affordability, how it affects youth outcomes, and to identify system-level opportunities to make Alexandria a more affordable place to live and raise children. Please use the Youth Issue Brief as a reference as you move through the following questions.

Part 1: Understanding Youth & Family Experiences (5 minutes)

1. Based on the Youth Issue Brief, what stands out to you about how rising costs are affecting young people and their families?
2. What trade-offs do you see families making around housing, food, transportation, childcare, or healthcare and how do these trade-offs show up in young people's daily lives?
3. How do you interpret the connection between financial stress and outcomes like attendance, engagement, well-being, and academic success?

Part 2: Examining Root Causes (5 minutes)

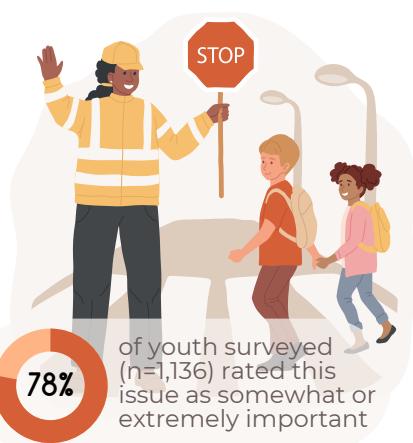
1. Which recommendations (such as expanded affordable housing, rental supports, food access programs, reduced-cost or free transportation) seem most feasible or impactful?
2. What additional strategies should the Commission explore to reduce cost-of-living pressures or buffer their impacts on youth (e.g., income supports, community partnerships, transportation programs, school-based resources)?
3. How might the Commission play a meaningful role in raising awareness, advocating for affordability solutions, or informing policy design?

Part 3: Identifying Solutions (5 minutes)

1. What systemic factors contribute to Alexandria's high cost of living (i.e., regional housing dynamics, zoning, wage levels, transportation costs, availability of affordable units, inflation)?
2. How do affordability challenges intersect with other youth issues such as mental health, transportation barriers, out-of-school time access, school mobility, or chronic absenteeism?
3. Where might existing policies or systems be unintentionally creating or worsening financial strain for families?

Closing Reflection (5 minutes)

If the City could expand or create one new resource or support to ease cost-of-living pressures for youth and families, what would you prioritize and why?



Youth Perspectives on: Physical & Psychological Safety

Overview



This theme captures young people's lived experiences and concerns about safety across their schools, neighborhoods, and daily lives. Students shared over 675 times that safety is not only about protection from violence, but also about being respected, included, and supported in their environments. While some students described feeling secure, many raised concerns about bullying, fights, harassment, gun violence, and inadequate adult responses to these issues.

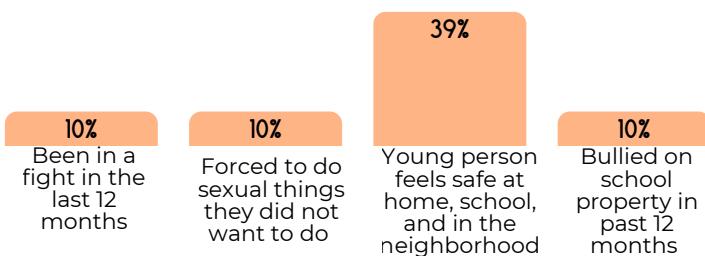
WHY IT MATTERS

A safe environment is foundational to youth development, learning, and well-being. When students feel unsafe, whether due to physical violence, emotional neglect, or systemic inequities, their ability to concentrate, connect with others, and engage meaningfully in their communities is diminished. Creating physically and psychologically safe spaces requires more than rules and protocols; it requires responsive relationships, equitable systems, and environments that affirm the dignity and humanity of every young person.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Youth Safety Measures

Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Alexandria, 2023



WHAT YOUTH WANT

30+ mentions

"My ideal Alexandria is for bullying to be more of a concern so kids feel safer going to school."

115+ mentions

"No crime."

"Safer crosswalks."

75+ mentions

"More afterschool clubs so kids can be in a community and have a safe space."

"More safe spaces for queer/trans youth."

55+ mentions

"Security guards fighting with students."

Bullying Prevention

- Bully-free environments with clear, consistent responses from adults
- Peer cultures rooted in dignity, inclusion, and kindness

Safe & Walkable Neighborhoods

- Neighborhoods that feel safe to walk through, with good lighting and infrastructure
- Less exposure to crime and greater investment in safe public spaces

Interpersonal & School-Based Violence Prevention

- Reduced exposure to gun and gang violence, abuse, and school fights
- Trusted systems for reporting and responding to violence and harassment

School Safety & Security

- School safety strategies that are effective, fair, and student-centered
- Trusting relationships with school security and staff

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

65+ mentions

"Bullying isn't taken seriously."

Bullying

- Persistent bullying, often unaddressed or inconsistently handled
- Cyberbullying, name-calling, and social exclusion

90+ mentions

"Kids are afraid to go outside (especially at night)."

Neighborhood Safety

- Fear of walking alone, especially at night
- Concerns about theft, vandalism, and poorly maintained public areas

150+ mentions

"People are sexually assaulted in bathrooms and cannot report."

Interpersonal & School-Based Violence

- Firstrhand accounts of violence in school and community
- Concerns about intimate partner and sexual violence
- Desire for help but uncertainty about where to turn

80+ mentions

"Security guards fighting with students."

"Only one entrance for lunch makes me late and miss food."

School Safety & Security

- Mixed feedback on safety protocols; some feel protected, others feel restricted or surveilled
- Frustration with facility issues and single-entry access policies
- Reports of uneven treatment from school security personnel



Barriers to Improvement

Students shared several challenges that make it harder to feel safe at school

Communication and Trust

- Many students said it's hard to be heard. They feel that some school leaders and staff don't listen when students raise concerns or seem more focused on the school's reputation than on fixing problems.

Security That Doesn't Always Work

- Students worry that security measures aren't used in the right way. Some security staff don't feel approachable, metal detectors don't always work well, and safety rules aren't clear or consistent.

Outside Pressures

- Students also pointed to issues that start beyond the classroom, things like social media drama, peer pressure, and sometimes even gang activity that can spill over into school and lead to fights or bullying.

School Culture and Stereotypes

- Some students said that stereotypes, cliques, and a lack of community support make things worse. When people don't feel accepted or understood, conflict and unsafe behavior can grow.





Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students School Safety & Security

When asked to brainstorm potential solutions to improve school safety and security at ACPS, students proposed the following strategies.

Listen to Student Voices

- Ask students what's working and what's not through regular surveys and listening sessions.
- Create anonymous ways to report safety concerns or share ideas for improvement.
- Hold student-led safety committees that help plan and review policies.
- Make it easier to talk to school leaders and ensure students get real answers, not just promises.
- Include families in conversations about safety and mental health.

Build a Positive School Culture

- Get rid of rules that feel unfair or don't make sense, like locked bathrooms or strict ID checks.
- Balance structure and freedom: rules should keep us safe, not make us feel controlled.
- Train teachers and staff on how to build trust and respect in classrooms.
- Support student-led projects and clubs that promote kindness, belonging, and inclusion.

Work Together as a Community

- Keep strong partnerships between schools, the Alexandria Police Department, and the School & Law Enforcement Partnership (SLEP) but make sure student voices help shape those relationships.
- Involve parents, guardians, and local groups in safety and wellness efforts.
- Partner with nonprofits and mental health organizations to bring more support and training into schools.

Make Our Schools Physically Safe

- Add more cameras and staff at main entrances to keep everyone safe when coming and going.
- Fix and maintain doors, stairways, and other parts of school buildings so they're sturdy and safe.
- Use better metal detectors and alarms to prevent unsafe items from entering the building.
- Make sure all doors can be used to exit quickly during emergencies.
- Add more trained safety officers in hallways and common spaces so students feel protected and supported, not policed.

Prevent Bullying and Violence Before It Happens

- Start peer mediation programs so students can solve conflicts peacefully.
- Run kindness and anti-bullying campaigns to build a more respectful school culture.
- Focus on helping students learn from mistakes and improve behavior, not just punishing them.
- Recognize and reward positive behavior to encourage respect and accountability.

Be Ready for Any Emergency

- Hold regular safety drills and make sure students understand why they matter.
- Train teachers and staff every year so everyone knows what to do in an emergency.
- Use clear, easy-to-understand safety alerts across phones, intercoms, and emails.
- Create short safety lessons for students to build awareness without causing fear.

Support Mental Health and Well-Being

- Hire more counselors and make it easy for students to reach them when they need help.
- Offer virtual counseling (like Hazel Health) and advertise it widely so everyone knows it's available.
- Create safe spaces in school — quiet rooms or wellness centers where students can take a break and talk to someone they trust.
- Make sure safety and mental health are talked about together

Commissioner Discussion Guide: Violence Prevention

As we prepare for the next CYCP, we're asking Commissioners to reflect on what young people are experiencing and to identify system-level opportunities to support safer, more caring environments across schools and the community. Please use the Youth Issue Brief as a reference as you move through the following questions.

Part 1: Understanding Youth Experiences (5 minutes)

- Where are students encountering or witnessing violence (in schools, online spaces, neighborhoods, or homes)? What patterns or trends stand out to you?
- How do you interpret the ways conflict shows up for youth (peer conflict, group dynamics, online harassment, racial or identity-based harm, etc.)?
- What do you see as the most significant impact on youth sense of safety, readiness to learn, engagement, or belonging?

Part 2: Examining Root Causes (5 minutes)

- What contributing factors do you see behind youth conflict and violence (stress, unmet needs, online dynamics, inequities, family pressures, neighborhood conditions, relationships with adults, etc.)?
- How do school or community policies, discipline practices, or response protocols help address these issues, and where might they unintentionally escalate or overlook underlying needs?
- Where do gaps exist in coordination between ACPS, City agencies, community partners, and families that may be contributing to inconsistent or ineffective responses?

Part 3: Identifying Solutions (5 minutes)

- Which recommendations in the Youth Issue Brief seem most promising for improving safety and sense of belonging?
- What system-level strategies could help prevent violence or reduce harm inside schools, online, and in neighborhoods (i.e. restorative practices, early intervention, early childhood education and care, mental health supports, staff training, transportation, support from caring adults, OSTP programming)?
- What roles can after-school programs, community organizations, and youth-serving agencies play in creating safe and inclusive environments?
- How can young people be meaningfully involved in designing, leading, and sustaining safety and violence-prevention efforts?

Closing Reflection (5 minutes)

- If one idea could be implemented tomorrow, which one would you prioritize and why?



Youth Perspectives on:

School Conditions that Support Student Wellbeing



Overview

This subtheme, which emerged more than 455 times, reflects how students experience the physical conditions of their schools and the operational systems that structure the school day, including transportation, lunch services, scheduling, maintenance, and campus logistics. While some students appreciate improvements like newer buildings, many describe environments that feel overstimulating, inconvenient, or in need of attention.

WHY IT MATTERS

Facilities and operations play a significant role in shaping how students feel and function at school. Clean spaces, accessible bathrooms, and nutritious meals with enough time to eat them create the foundation for learning. When students are uncomfortable, rushed, or navigating logistical barriers, their ability to focus, connect, and succeed is compromised.

WHAT THE DATA SAY

Although students are allotted **30 minutes** for lunch, a 2024 *Theogony* article reported that cafeteria procedures, including scanning into the cafeteria with a Minga student ID, waiting in line for food, and the time it takes to walk to and from class, leave students with only **19 minutes** to actually eat.

WHAT YOUTH WANT

20+ mentions

"Bathrooms are always open and clean."

"Recycling at school."

Maintenance & Custodial Services

A school environment that is consistently clean, safe, and well-maintained, where bathrooms are sanitary, stocked, and accessible and classrooms and common areas are free of trash and pests.

50+ mentions

"Less crowded hallways."

"Free and accessible student parking."

"Having a separate room for prayer (Muslims)."

Physical Conditions & Infrastructure

A school environment that is spacious, clean, and welcoming, featuring inclusive spaces for all students, and enough affordable parking for students who drive.

20+ mentions

"One connected campus - transportation issues solved."

School Bus Transit & Intercampus Transportation

Reliable transportation where drivers are valued, campuses are connected safely and efficiently, and students don't lose learning time to long, late, or unnecessary commutes.

130+ mentions

"Longer lunches"

School Lunch Services

High-quality, nutritious, and culturally inclusive meals with adequate time to eat.

WHAT YOUTH EXPERIENCE

45+ mentions

"Bathrooms are disgusting."

Maintenance & Custodial Services

Concerns about cleanliness and upkeep, especially in restrooms. Missing supplies, closed bathrooms, and general maintenance issues were cited as everyday frustrations.

40+ mentions

"It's super overwhelming and overstimulating. The hallways are so packed in."

Physical Conditions & Infrastructure

Crowded hallways, limited space, uncomfortable furnishings, and inconsistent temperature control. While some praise newer buildings, many say current conditions can feel overwhelming and overstimulating.

45+ mentions

"The campus switching is awful and takes so long."

"I am always late because of school buses"

School Bus Transit & Intercampus Transportation

The two-campus high school model creates logistical challenges for students. The back-and-forth between campuses can be disruptive, especially for students with disabilities. Late, limited, or crowded buses contribute to missed instructional time and reduced opportunities for field trips.

95+ mentions

"Lack of lunch and learn = lack of equity"

School Lunch Services

Food quality, variety, and timing could be improved. Short lunch periods leave little time to eat, connect with teachers, or recharge.



Barriers to Improvement

Students identified several obstacles that might prevent progress on improving school facilities and operations

Administrative and Communication Issues

- A recurring theme was that school administrators are perceived as unresponsive or dismissive of student concerns.

Funding and Resource Constraints

- Low funding, high costs for maintaining large facilities, and regulatory issues (for example, food regulations that complicate menu changes) were seen as major barriers.

Infrastructure Limitations

- The current building layouts, insufficient staffing, and the design and access to facilities (e.g., a single universal staircase and locked bathrooms) were cited as impediments.

Behavioral Factors

- Some responses pointed to students' own behaviors (e.g., contributing to messy bathrooms) as a complicating factor.





Recommended Strategies from ACHS Students to improve School Conditions

When asked to brainstorm potential solutions to improve school school conditions at ACPS, students proposed the following strategies.

Better Transportation and Scheduling

- Keep students' classes on one campus whenever possible to cut down on stress and time traveling.
- Add more buses and routes to make intercampus travel faster and safer.
- If walking between campuses ever becomes an option again, use crossing guards and clear routes to keep students safe.
- Adjust the school schedule, for example, move Titan Time to the lunch block to make lunch periods longer, less crowded, and more relaxed.
- Use staggered lunch waves and shorter passing periods to give everyone enough time to eat and recharge.

Healthier, More Inclusive Meals

- Provide certified halal and gluten-free meals every day as regular options.
- Add clear allergy and ingredient labels for all foods.
- Make meal requests easy; no doctor's note needed for religious or dietary accommodations.
- Train cafeteria staff on food safety, allergies, and cultural sensitivity.
- Create a Student Menu Advisory Group so students can share feedback, test new meals, and help improve options.

Safer, Cleaner, and Well-Maintained Schools

- Keep bathrooms open and unlocked throughout the school day.
- Make sure restrooms are cleaned regularly and stocked with soap, paper, and feminine hygiene products.
- Improve plumbing, lighting, and ventilation, especially in older buildings.
- Add safety upgrades where needed, like better lighting, new staircases, or secure glass to make schools feel protected without feeling restrictive.
- Address overcrowding by improving building layouts and traffic flow.

Clear Communication and Student Voice

- Create open lines of communication between students, teachers, and administrators to quickly address concerns about schedules, lunch, or facilities.
- Regularly gather student input through surveys or meetings and follow up with visible changes.
- Give students real ways to participate in decisions, for example, through advisory groups or school improvement committees.

Funding and Policy Improvements

- Advocate for more funding to maintain and improve school buildings, facilities, and transportation systems.
- Review policies that make school life harder, like unnecessary restrictions on movement or scheduling that limits time for meals or transitions.
- Make decisions based on student experiences and input.

Commissioner Discussion Guide: School Conditions

As we prepare for the next CYCP, we're asking Commissioners to reflect on youth perspectives, examine root causes, and identify system-level opportunities to ensure that students learn in environments that are designed to support their learning and wellbeing. Please use the Youth Issue Brief as a reference as you move through the following questions.

Part 1: Understanding Youth Experiences (5 minutes)

- Based on what you've read in the Youth Issue Brief, which school environment issues stand out as the most consequential for students?
- How do you interpret the impact of these conditions (lunch periods, bathrooms, overcrowding, transportation, schedules, etc.) on student well-being and academic success?
- Where do you see alignment or disconnect between what students are experiencing and what adults may assume is happening?

Part 2: Examining Root Causes (5 minutes)

- What systemic or operational factors do you believe contribute to these issues persisting (e.g., budget limitations, facilities processes, staffing, communication, competing priorities, policy constraints)?
- Where might there be structural or organizational barriers preventing timely improvements?
- Which entities (ACPS, City agencies, School Board, families, students, etc.) have influence over these issues, and how clear is the accountability?

Part 3: Identifying Solutions (5 minutes)

- Which of the youth recommendations in the Issue Brief do you see as most feasible or impactful for improving school conditions?
- What additional strategies should the Commission explore to support healthier, more equitable school environments?
- What would a well-resourced, student-centered school environment look and feel like and what system-level changes would get us there?

Closing Reflection (5 minutes)

- If you were to describe the conditions of an ideal school environment in three words, what would they be and why?