

Supportive & Responsive School Conditions Strategy Brief

What We Learned from Students: Experiences, Root Causes, and Ideas for Solutions

Students across campuses described bathrooms, cafeterias, hallways, schedules, and transportation as some of the most influential parts of their school experience. These conditions were seen as interconnected systems that shape how students feel, behave, and learn throughout the day.

Physical Conditions Signal Whether Students Are Valued

Students consistently raised concerns about the condition of shared spaces, particularly bathrooms and hallways.

Common concerns included:

- Dirty or locked bathrooms
- Broken fixtures and lack of basic supplies
- Overcrowded hallways and cafeterias
- Poor ventilation and inconsistent temperature control
- Aging or poorly maintained facilities

Students interpreted neglected spaces as a signal that students themselves are not prioritized, noting that basic infrastructure failures create ripple effects that impact punctuality, stress, and interactions with adults.

"Bathrooms were locked at King Street all the time last year. I always had to walk really far to get to the unlocked bathrooms; it made me late for class. And then I get yelled at a security guard."

"Every time I go to the bathroom, I feel uncomfortable... It smells, looks like it partially flooded in there. Trash everywhere."

Students also highlighted inequities between campuses, noting that inconsistent maintenance and access contribute to unequal experiences.

"Minnie Howard is always clean, stocked, and accessible... King is not."

Tight budgets make serving healthier, delicious foods challenging

Students spoke about the quality, variety, and healthfulness of school meals. Many described lunches as repetitive, heavily processed, limited in dietary options, nutrition, and cultural relevance, or unappetizing that reduce participation in mealtime and leave some students distracted or physically unwell during afternoon classes.

"Lunch is not good - it's near terrible some days."

"More dietary options and fresher food would help a lot."

"The food doesn't feel healthy to consume; even the grilled cheese is bad."

"Sometimes kids just get through the day without eating."

Students explained that when meals are low quality, the burden falls hardest on youth who rely on school as their primary food source, widening gaps in focus and energy between students.

Scheduling, Lunch, and Time Pressure Shape Stress and Focus

Students described time pressure as one of the most significant factors affecting learning and wellbeing. Although lunch and passing periods are technically built into the schedule, students explained that logistical barriers make it difficult to have enough time to eat.

Students described losing lunchtime to:

- Long walks or campus transitions
- Long food lines
- Security procedures, like scanning into cafeterias

Several students emphasized that short lunch periods disproportionately affect students who rely on school meals, leading some to skip eating altogether.

“The thing I would change about my school would be the time for lunch; sometimes people don’t eat cause they have a short time to eat.”

“Short lunch periods give me no time to eat, so hunger distracts me from learning.”

Tight schedules combined with large student populations also contribute to crowded hallways, rushed transitions, and increased stress.

“The hallways are stressful and we only get three minutes to get to class.”

Students expressed frustration with frequent changes, limited flexibility, and lack of explanation, noting that these conditions erode trust rather than improve safety.

“About trust — just because certain students can’t behave doesn’t mean new rules have to apply to all of us.”

“I feel like the admin and the security guards are working together in a way that is not really supportive. There have been times when the bell rings and we’re immediately yelled at by the security guards. I’ve had to miss Dr. appointments because they won’t let me leave. I feel like there’s no trust and they don’t really care about the students here.”

Transportation and Campus Logistics Create Daily Barriers

Transportation emerged as a major source of stress, lost instructional time, and inequity, particularly within the two-campus high school model.

Students described:

- Late, overcrowded, or unreliable buses
- Anxiety about being late or disciplined for factors beyond their control
- Disruptions to learning caused by campus switching

“I am always late because of school buses.”

“The campus switching is awful and takes so long.”

Students emphasized that transportation challenges are often treated as individual failures rather than system-level issues, compounding frustration and inequity.

Student Behavior Reflects Environmental Stress, Not Just Individual Choices

When asked what most affects their learning, many students pointed to disruptive behavior, fighting, bullying, and chaotic environments. Importantly, students framed these behaviors as responses to overcrowding, time pressure, lack of movement, and inconsistent adult responses, rather than simply individual misconduct.

“When it’s overcrowded and the security guards are yelling at you, you can’t be shocked there are fights.”

Rather than calling for harsher discipline, students suggested preventive and supportive approaches, including:

- More movement and breaks
- Calmer classroom environments
- Opportunities for recess or unstructured time
- Reduced yelling and collective punishment

“I think they should bring recess back as it was a time for us to take a chill pill from the rest of the day, and it was a nice mental break.”

“I would change the fact that we can't listen to music because music really does help some people focus.”

“It's easier to learn in quieter places like the library where it's quiet.”

Inconsistent Rules and Adult Relationships Shape Trust

One of the strongest themes across listening sessions was inconsistency across campuses, among adults.

Students described:

- Different rules at different campuses
- Uneven enforcement by security staff
- Policies changing without explanation
- Entire schools being punished for the actions of a few

Students emphasized that fairness, consistency, and explanation matter more than strictness.

“More consistent enforcement of policies at both MH and KS – way more lenient at KS than MH.”

“We need more transparency. We don't know what's going on, which makes us think that they don't know what's going on.”

“Teachers and students aren't told anything. Communication and transparency is a really bad issue.”

How adults interact with students was described as equally important. Many students reported feeling yelled at, dismissed, or unsupported, while noting that respectful, communicative adults make a meaningful difference.

“No respect for administration from students because we don’t like how they treat us.”

“Teachers yell at students for no reason.”

“My teachers feel like everything is okay for me, so they’re not paying attention to me.”

How Students Frame the Problem

From students’ perspectives, school condition challenges stem from:

- Overcrowded campuses and aging infrastructure
- Scheduling and time pressures that leave students rushed, hungry, and overstimulated
- Reactive, one-size-fits-all discipline approaches
- Inconsistent enforcement and unclear authority
- Limited student voice in decision-making
- Communication breakdowns between adults, departments, and systems

Drafted CYCP Strategy Directions for School Conditions

These strategic directions draw from Youth Needs Assessment listening sessions and have been updated to incorporate recommendations developed by ACHS students through 2025–26 Civic Action Projects.

Improve the Physical Environment of Schools

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Ensure school buildings, bathrooms, cafeterias, and shared spaces are clean, functional, and welcoming.	Students consistently described physical conditions as a daily stressor that affects dignity, health, and focus.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Improve bathroom cleanliness, access, maintenance, and availability of basic supplies	
b) Create an easy way for students to report bathroom/facility problems and needed repairs	
c) Address broken fixtures, ventilation, and temperature control	
d) Invest in routine maintenance and facility improvements	
e) Explore ways to reduce overcrowding in cafeterias and other shared spaces	

Reform the Lunch Block

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Create a healthy, inclusive, and student-centered lunch experience that gives students adequate time to get and eat their meals and provides food options that meet students' needs.	Students described long lines, limited usable eating time, food quality and variety, and dietary and cultural needs as barriers to eating at school. Some students reported skipping meals altogether, affecting their focus and learning.
Recommended Actions from Students	

a) Ensure students have adequate time to get and eat lunch, including exploring scheduling and operational changes that reduce lines and lost eating time
b) Improve the quality, freshness, variety, and nutritional value of school meals
a. Expand culturally, religiously, and medically appropriate food options and provide clear information about ingredients and allergens
c) Create regular opportunities for students to provide input on menus and the lunch experience, such as a Student Menu Advisory Group
d) Involve students in exploring solutions to lunch scheduling, cafeteria operations, and meal participation

Address Overcrowding Through Operational and Space Solutions

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Explore operational, scheduling, enrollment, and space-use strategies to reduce overcrowding	Students linked overcrowding to learning disruptions, safety concerns, and negative school climate.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Explore alternative schedules, lunch models, and space use	
b) Balance enrollment across campuses	
c) Create quieter or alternative learning spaces	
d) Use existing facilities more flexibly during the school day	

Strengthen Consistency, Fairness, and Transparency in School Policies

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Ensure school rules are applied consistently, fairly, and with clear communication.	Students said inconsistent enforcement undermines trust more than strict rules themselves.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Align policies across campuses where possible	
b) Provide clear explanations for rule changes	
c) Avoid collective punishment	
d) Ensure equitable enforcement by security and staff	

Build Stronger Adult-Student Relationships

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Create school environments where students feel respected, heard, and supported by adults.	Students emphasized that relationships with teachers, administrators, and security staff shape their sense of safety and belonging.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Provide ongoing training and support for staff and security personnel in trauma-informed, relationship-centered, and youth-development approaches	
b) Reduce reliance on yelling or punitive interactions	
c) Encourage instructional practices that engage students	
d) Support teachers with time, training, and resources	

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| e) Create opportunities for students to provide feedback about their interactions with adults and security staff |
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Increase Student Voice, Feedback, and Shared Decision-Making

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Embed student input into school operations, policies, and culture.	Students repeatedly said they want to help improve their schools.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Create regular, accessible opportunities for students to raise concerns and propose solutions	
b) Strengthen student advisory groups and other structures that allow students to participate in school decisions	
c) Engage students directly in addressing school operations and conditions that affect their daily experience	
d) Close the feedback loop by telling students what was heard, what action will be taken, what cannot be changed, and why	

Improve Communication and Coordination Across Systems

Strategic Direction	Rationale
Ensure students, families, and staff receive timely, clear, and consistent information.	Students described confusion and anxiety when information is limited or inconsistent.
Recommended Actions from Students	
a) Provide timely, clear communication about safety incidents, schedule changes, policies, and procedures	
b) Coordinate messaging across administrators, teachers, security staff, and campuses	
c) Explain the purpose behind policies and changes that affect students	
d) Communicate in accessible, student-friendly language	