
Empowering students to combat inequity

Practically and covertly teaching students that their education can matter for them in the moment and in the future.

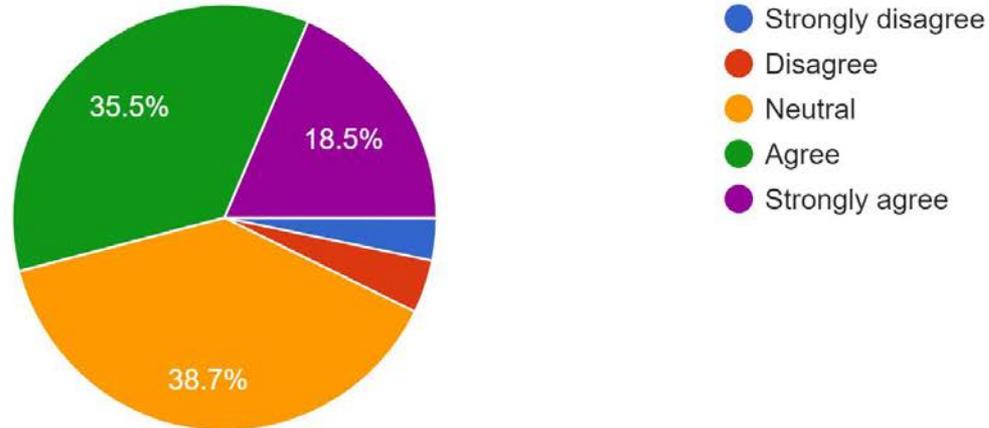
Building Bridges to Equity through CPAR
Educator Research Project

2018-2019

What do you see? What do you think it means? What questions do you have?

Agree or disagree: I often understand how my school work relates to my life outside of school.

124 responses



What is equity? Inequity?



The Cambridge Project

Between June 2018 and May 2019, 24 educators from the Cambridge Public Schools engaged in a set of CPAR studies, each of which examined root causes of inequality in the district. Educators were chosen through an extensive recruitment & application process, and included:

- Researchers from 8 elementary schools, all 5 Upper Schools, and CRLS;
- School-day and Out-of-School-Time educators;
- Over 50% educators of color.

These educators were supported by two members of the Building Equity Bridges Grant Working Team, as well as two researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Additional support was provided by two Researchers who joined the Support Team (shared leadership team).

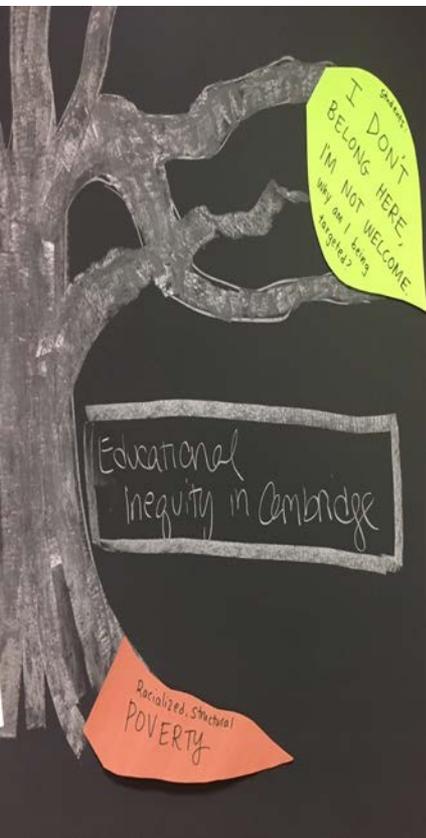


Symptoms of inequity

Voices from the CPS community:

- *"I don't want to be here" "This [school] doesn't matter" - students*
- *"This isn't relevant or interesting to me" - students*
- *Boys (and some girls) of color are the vast majority of students in the hall during class*
- *Disproportionate disciplinary action*
- *Black students perform academically lower than white/Asian students*

Summary: Inequity looks like a system that punishes different kids differently for the same issue: disengagement.

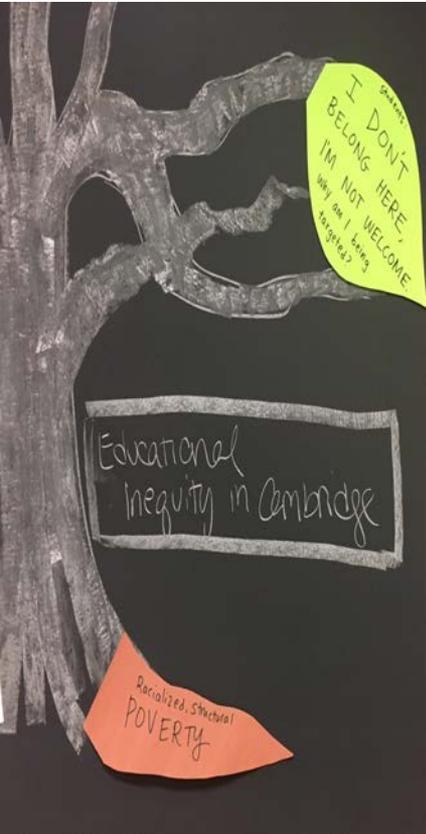


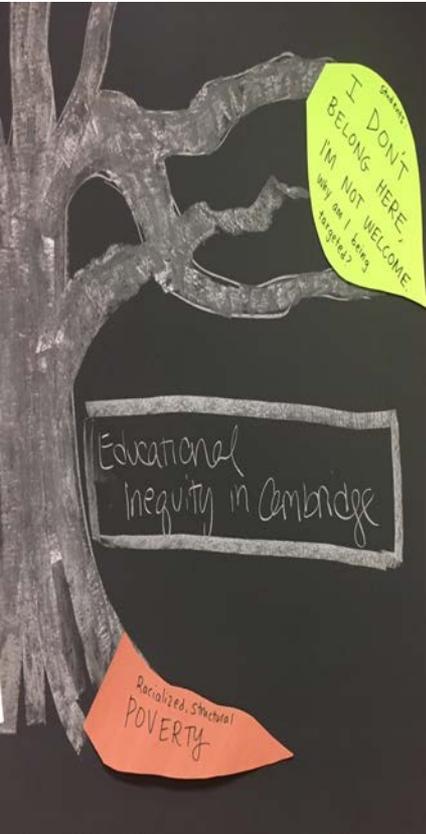
Roots of inequity

Summary: Inequity is caused by the misalignment and lack of transparency around the goals of schools. There is also too much emphasis on what is easy to see, track and measure; this flawed model is prejudicial in its views and generally inadequate in its goals.

Voices from the CPS community:

- *"I don't want my kid's learning/progress to be held back by those other kids"*
- *Disconnect between students' lives outside of school and inside*
- *We expect students to conform to our idea of what it means to be in school....we are INFLEXIBLE*
- *White supremacy - internalized ideas/assumptions/biases, interactions BETWEEN people, institutions, systems*
- *White supremacy culture: urgency, individualism*





With all of this in mind, equity looks like...

- Concretely define and collaboratively established goals
 - Space in the learning environment for flexibility and adaptation in the what and how of education
 - Exploration of the why of education in practical (rather than meta or theoretical) ways
-

**Inequity is a problem around the country, including in
Cambridge, MA.**

**How can I address it with my students in my
classroom?**

**How can we address inequity
together?**

Designing my equity study

My definition of equity led me to focus on **empowerment** as a way to address inequity. Because...

- Inequity looks like students from certain demographic groups getting punished for the same disengagement as their peers
 - ◆ Disengagement = Skipping class = Staying in class for the grade only
 - Instead of punishing anyone for this, acknowledge the disengagement, and work to have all students apply their learning in a way that is meaningful to them
 - I wanted to focus on the interpersonal roots of inequity that I could change rather than the institutional or systemic ones that, while important to note, are beyond my control
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My plan to address roots of inequity

- **Trust my hypothesis** - Teach students lessons that lift student voices and empower them to apply their knowledge in more authentic ways;
 - **Verify my hypothesis** - Survey students to see if we see disengagement similarly;
 - **Get community input** - Discuss findings from the process with students in small focus groups.
-



What I did

- Taught **7 lessons** with a focus on empowerment to approximately **115 students**;
 - Collected **survey** results from **44 students**;
 - Led a **focus group** discussion with **7 students**.
-

Additional notes about the data

- The research questions posed initially were not the same exact ones that were used by the end of the research -- as with many research projects, my questions shifted iteratively over time.
- The way that students are categorized by ASPEN (adults) and the way students categorize themselves often differed, causing some inconsistencies in comparing data.
- The data is incomplete, as is often the case. Although data was collected in a variety of ways, not all students were heard from, and ideally I would have collected the same data at multiple points throughout the year. Additionally, this data is limited by my views on what demographic details are most important collect data on. Finally, the students involved should have had the opportunity to contribute to the analysis.

**Who are my kids?
Who participated?**



Who are my kids?

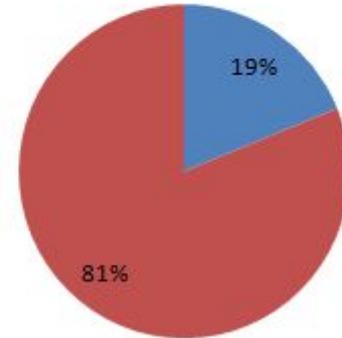
Besides being brilliant, creative, inspiring individuals, my students...

38% Students in my classes who have IEPs or 504s

117 Number of students I have at the moment

% of all my students chronically absent this year

■ TRUE ■ FALSE



Chronically absent - missing more than 10% of school days

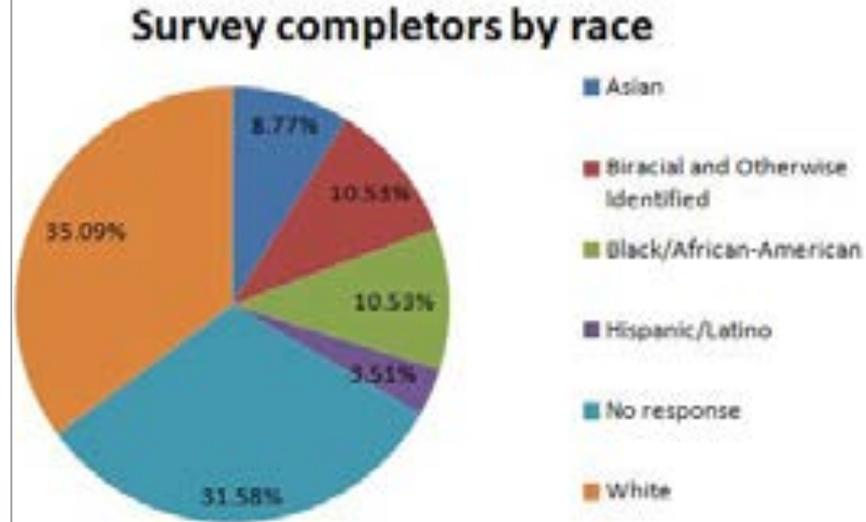
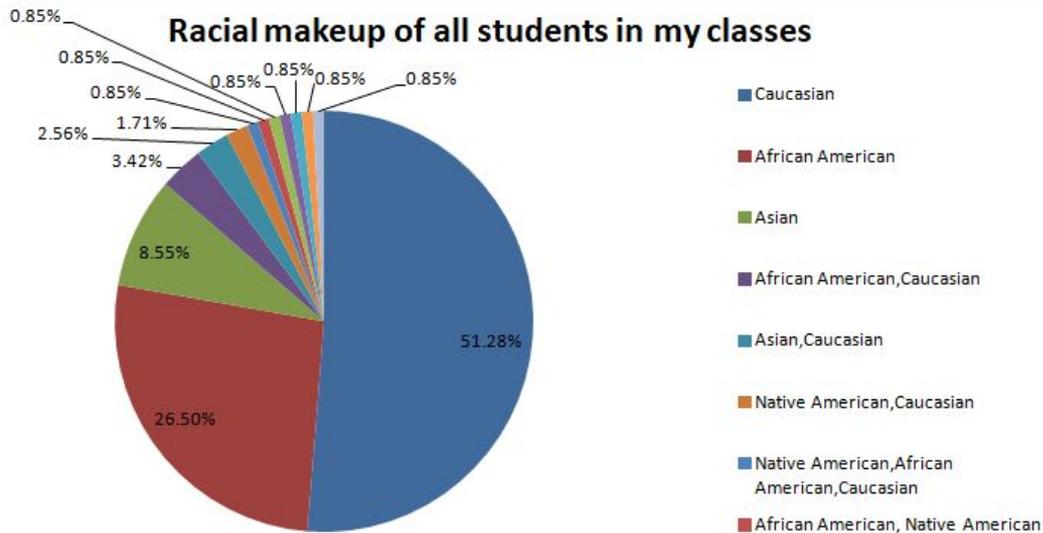


Whose voices were heard?

- The data that was most representative of my entire student body were the data from my classroom lessons;
- The survey data over-represented students who were excelling academically and under-represented chronically absent students;
- The focus group data were not at all representative of my class demographics.

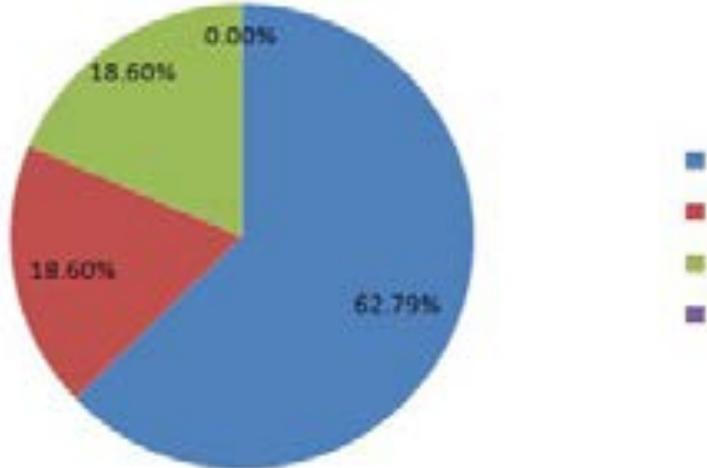
This suggests that the best way to get representative input from my students may be through interactive activities. Certain groups of students are less likely to be “heard” in surveys.

Whose voices were heard?



Whose voices were heard?

Survey completors by SES



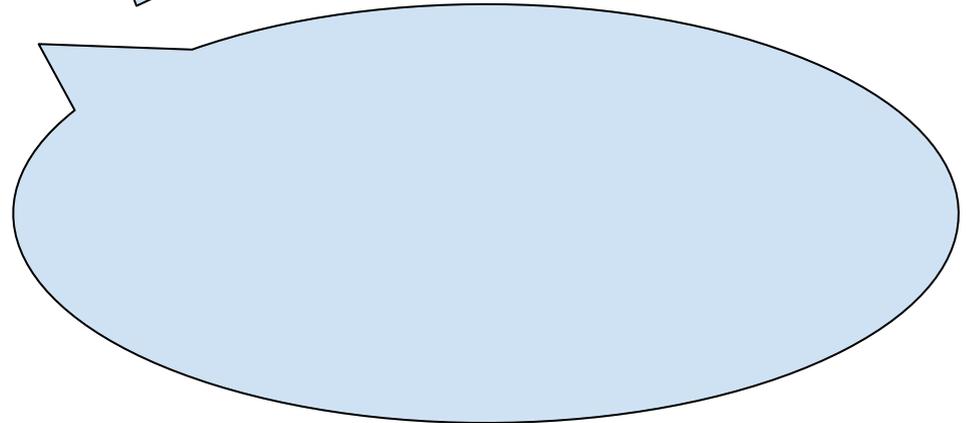
receive free and reduced lunch
receive free and reduced lunch
free and reduced lunch

What did students say?

“The school does not push students enough”

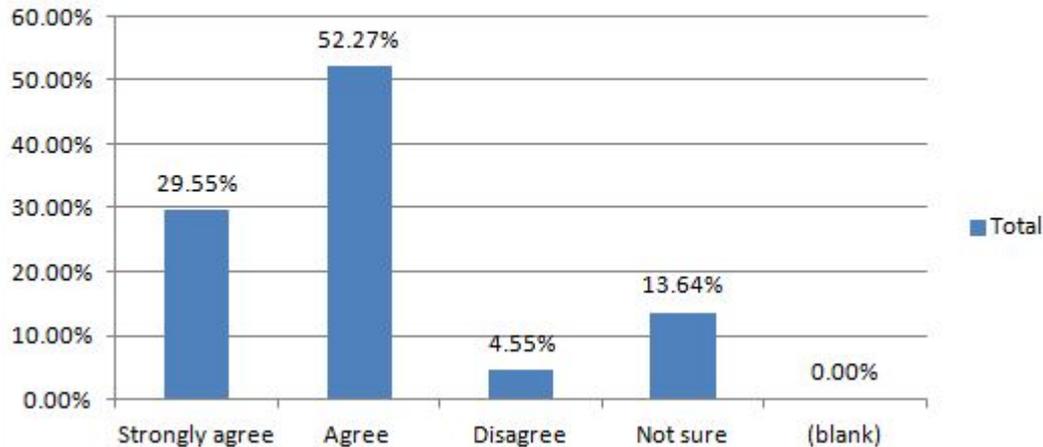
“Maybe make more electives half year course so we can take more”

CRLS would be better with...
“Less testing, stop making quiz & text grades have such a big impact on our grades”



Most respondents think student empowerment is an important goal of schools

Survey question: Should classes teach students how to make changes in their community?



Question asked to students during class activity: How could we improve CRLS?

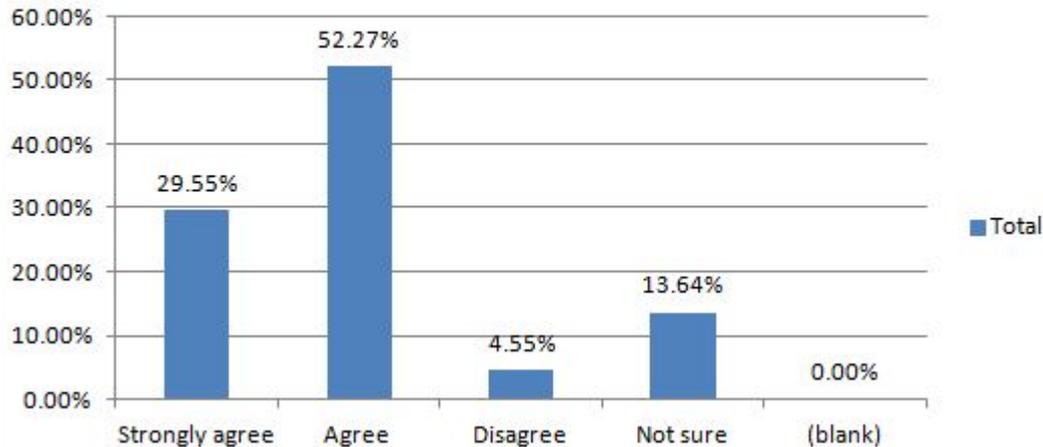
“make student voices more valuable”

Note from the focus group:

“schools should take more initiative to push students to try to make change in their communities”

Most students think empowerment is important, and yet...

Survey question: Should classes teach students how to make changes in their community?

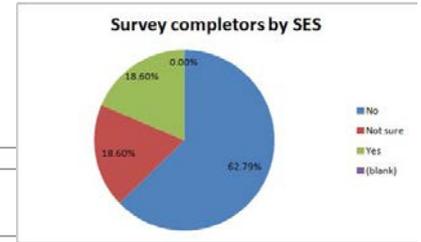
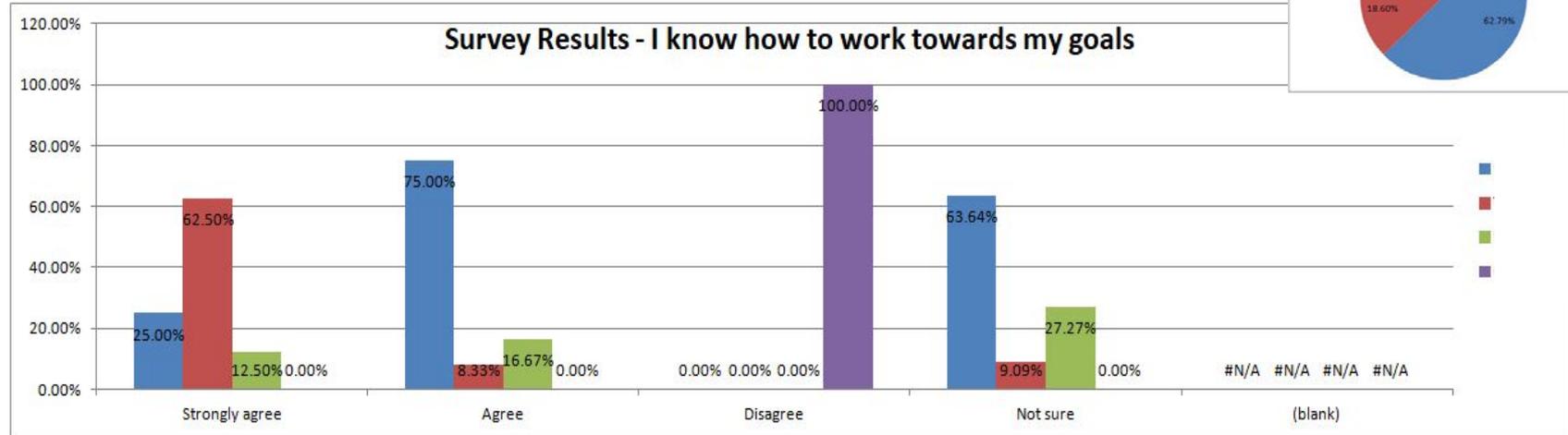


Approximately 18% of survey respondents don't think that this should be a primary goal of schools.

- Why not?
 - What do these students think is the primary goal of school?
-

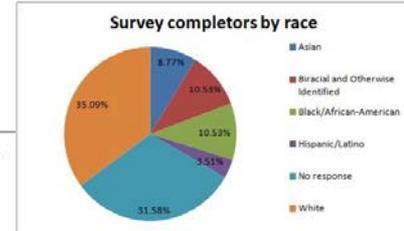
Some students don't feel empowered. *What patterns do you notice as you look at this same data through different lenses?*

Socioeconomic status

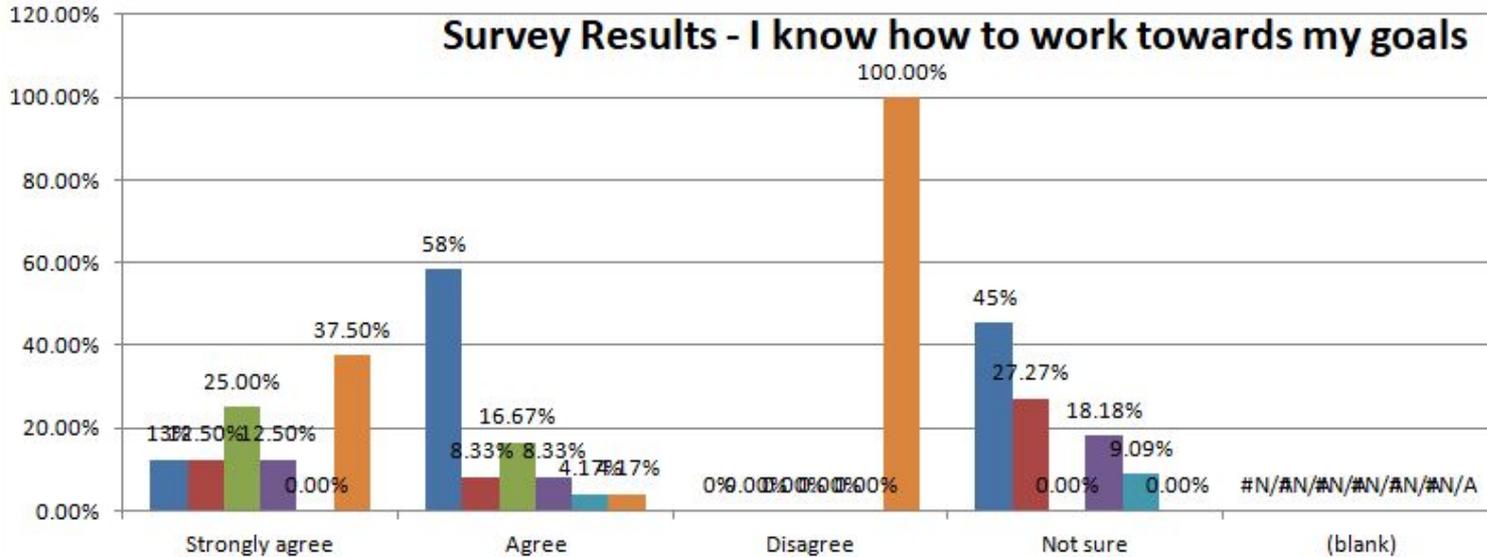


Some students don't feel empowered. *What patterns do you notice as you look at this same data through different lenses?*

Race



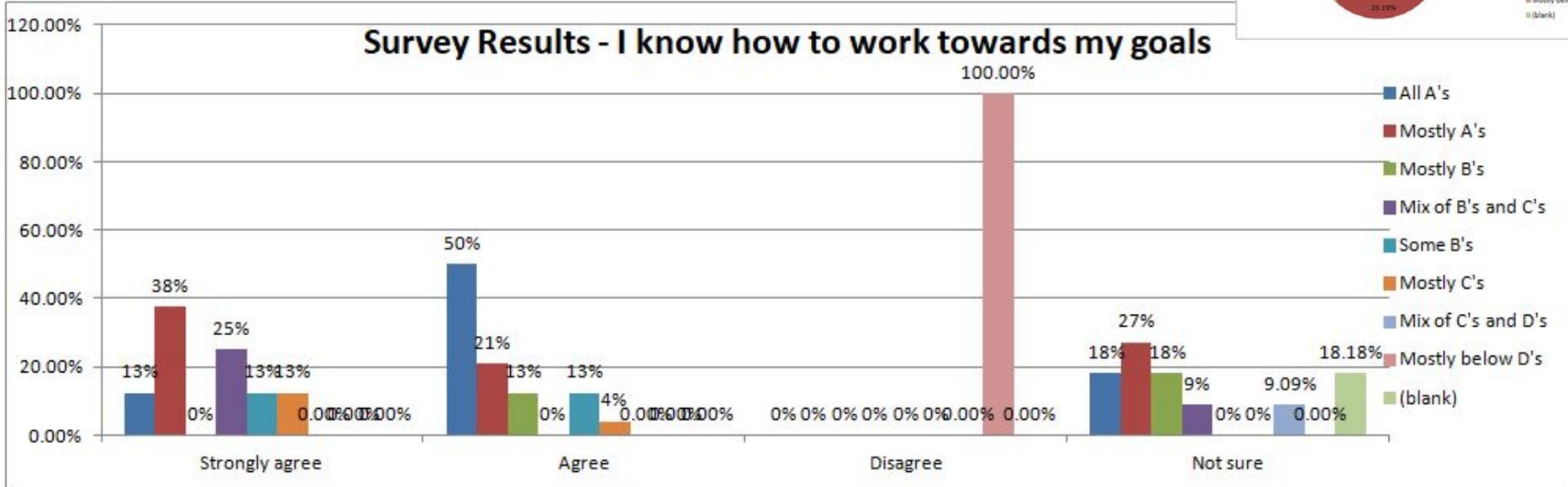
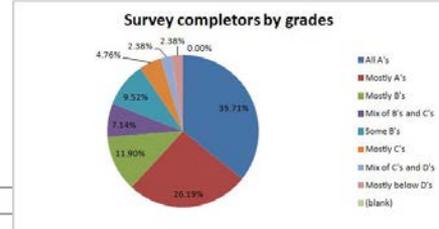
Survey Results - I know how to work towards my goals



- White
- Biracial and Otherwise Identified
- Black/African-American
- Asian
- Hispanic/Latino
- No response

Some students don't feel empowered. *What patterns do you notice as you look at this same data through different lenses?*

Academic performance





Many students report feelings of empowerment, some do not.

The data did not fall the way research suggests it would. Students across racial, socioeconomic, and academic lines were represented fairly proportionally across categories. It was not the case that black students, low income students, or academically struggling students were the most likely to report feelings of disempowerment.

This may mean that it's not all about race and income. The focus on black boys, and the assumption that these students are also poor, when we talk about inequity does not help me address the problem in my classroom.

Empowerment in practice

Putting empowerment at the core of my practice meant actively seeking and acting based on student voice. The hypothesis here is that listening to students and applying their feedback would help them see that their voices matter and we would see a rise in participation, attendance, and depth of conversation.

Students said they wanted lessons that were

- “Interactive “
 - “Loud and clear”
- Include “accurate and relevant information”
 - “Fun”

Focusing on these characteristics did not increase engagement for all students. Why not?

Observational and Aspen data suggest that most students engage in their learning when they are...

- Doing group work and asked to hold each other accountable
- Asking each other to participate
- Discussing
 - observations from visual “texts”
 - moral/ethical questions
 - contemporary or well known issues

Additionally, more students complete long term projects when the product is actionable (teaching a lesson) or personal (future research planning)



Empowering students to make choices about their education: What do students want to learn?

In class activities, at least 15% of students stated that they wanted to learn:

- Strategies for focusing, time management, about effective teamwork and community building, how to be independent, how to be curious, how to present, how to express themselves clearly, about organization, about work ethic

About 37% of students also said that they wanted to learn to be activists around/for the following issues:

- equal rights(9), quality education (8), mental health (5), climate change (6), and their families (15) among other things
-



Based on this research, here's what will change in my practice

- How I plan
 - How I reflect
-

Based on this research, here's what will change in my practice

- Plan: Need to **do** more and **talk** about doing more less
 - Students were more likely to **do** the work that mattered than they were to **talk** about the work that would matter
 - Reflect: Rather than singling out for intervention the behaviors that don't align with my vision, search for the point of connection across all students - what are they all looking for and what are the various ways they go about finding "it"? What do they feel is lacking and what are the various ways students go about expressing that?
 - Black boys and students with documented, unique learning needs stand out more because of deeply entrenched biases about what schools should look like and how students should engage with it.
 - Reflect: I teach the kids that the district and the books have been worried about (black students, black boys, low income students, students with IEPs). These students have performed better when I worry about the collective and remember that more connects than separates them.
-

Questions to follow up on

- What are the best projects for freshmen that are authentic, relevant, and aligned with our other district goals?
 - What is this common purpose of schooling? What critical mass needs to support it first?
 - How many people?
 - From which stakeholder groups?
 - What do we give up in order to achieve this purpose?
 - What am I afraid of losing? What are we afraid of losing? Are those fears justified?
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Thank you

Gretchen Brion-Meisels

Matthew Dunkel

Jessica Fei

Lissette Rodriguez

CPAR Researchers

My CRCS Students

Thank you for your

- Support
- Guidance
- Honest feedback
- Pushing me and lifting me up

Without all of you this would not have been possible. Without all of you change is impossible.

Thank you

Colleagues

Friends

CEA

My CRCS Students (again!)

Thank you for your

- Time
- Patience
- Willingness to listen
- Willingness to share
- Willingness to risk uncertainty for the sake of all of our students

Without all of you change is impossible.

