Dear South Portland Schools Community,

In the spring of 2019 the South Portland School Department reached out to the Mid Atlantic Equity Consortium (MAEC) to engage their services to support our ongoing work to ensure that our schools provide equity of access to opportunity to all of our students. Many times districts are directed to engage with MAEC after there have been significant incidents of unrest in a school community. With the full support of the School Board, South Portland Schools invited MAEC to partner with us. This was a proactive step to guide us in looking at issues around equity as part of our strategic vision for our district. Hearing the voices, particularly the voices of students, is an important part of creating a vision upon which to act.

The following report from the Mid Atlantic Equity Consortium is a summary of themes from focus groups conducted at South Portland High School in early March of 2020, just before the start of the pandemic. This represents one step of many to listen, learn and grow on our journey to ensure all students have equitable opportunities to learn and achieve at high levels.

While the pandemic delayed the completion of the focus groups report, it has not delayed the work of the district. Since the focus groups were conducted in March of 2020 faculty and staff have engaged in significant professional learning across all of our schools, developed anti-racist resources for families and teachers, supported the formation of a Black Student Union at SPHS and more. This is only a start. Much still needs to be done. South Portland Schools will learn from the MAEC recommendations and work closely with our community and with MAEC to move forward.

As the South Portland Schools committed to from the start of this journey, we are sharing the summary of themes from the focus groups with our community so that we can continue to listen and learn. With support and collaboration from MAEC, and with the ongoing commitment of the School Board and the entire school administration, we will continue our work to ensure a safe and supportive school environment and equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Sincerely,

Ken Kunin
Superintendent

Dr. Daryl Williams
Senior Education Equity Specialist

South Portland School Department

MAEC
Equity in South Portland Public Schools

Summary of themes from focus groups

March 22, 2021

DISCLAIMER

The Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, Inc. is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this report were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.
Overview

The Center for Education Equity (CEE) conducted 14 focus group interviews to learn about strengths and challenges related to equity at South Portland School District. These focus groups consisted of the following:

- One parent focus group (approximately 11 parents);
- Eight student focus groups at South Portland High School (approximately 12 students in each group); and
- Five teacher focus group at South Portland High School.

Central office personnel recruited focus group participants and scheduled each focus group with stakeholders. Conducting these focus groups allowed CEE to use small group interviews to generate qualitative data for an articulated purpose (Krueger & Casey, 2009). CEE selected this approach in order to understand stakeholders’ views and experiences related to critical issues in the district, identify emerging issues, and uncover factors that may contribute to or address the issues.

Focus group designs are advantageous as they can create a space for participants to express a range of opinions or ideas within groups and provide varying information across groups. Data generated from focus groups depends largely on the selected participants and composition of the group. Thus, findings from focus groups may not represent the views and opinions of all stakeholders within an organization, but can reveal deep insights related to the shared concerns of stakeholders.

Procedure

Two facilitators from CEE conducted focus group sessions during the dates of March 9 – 10, 2020. Focus group discussion followed an unstructured interview format where facilitators asked eight questions during the parents and teachers’ sessions and seven questions for the student sessions. Focus group participants were informed about the scope of work between CEE and South Portland High School. They were informed that their participation was strictly voluntary and that they were under no obligation to participate. Participants were asked to consent to being audiotaped and were notified that their identities would remain anonymous in all reporting related to the focus groups. Before asking the questions, a brief, but open definition of equity was provided to each group (Definition: Equity in education focuses on what is fair and just; it means providing all students the supports and levels they need). With the unstructured interview format, participants were able to respond with flexibility (Devlin, 2018). The focus group sessions ranged in length from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. Facilitators took notes that were used for analysis. Focus group sessions were also audio-recorded. The audio was transcribed and transcriptions were analyzed for key themes.

Analysis
The analysis of focus group data began with identifying ideas and themes within and across focus groups. First, CEE staff reviewed notes from the focus groups to begin generating broad thematic categories. Second, CEE staff re-read focus group notes to highlight key excerpts related to themes. Third, CEE staff sorted the excerpts from across focus groups by themes. This allowed us to select common themes and points of differences within and across focus groups. Fourth, after sorting excerpts, CEE staff created summaries for each theme that succinctly and accurately represented what was discussed in the focus groups. Finally, CEE staff engaged in further analysis to conceptually link themes together.

**Themes**

The following themes emerged within and across the parent, teacher, and student focus groups. This report provides exemplar quotes, including concerns, expressed by focus group participants across these themes. The selected quotes do not represent the full scope of individuals who shared their thoughts. While a number of comments were not included in the report, there was agreement and a commonality among much of the statements from the focus groups.

**Parent Focus Groups**

Parents’ participation in the focus groups was very active and engaging. Parents raised numerous topics well beyond the scope of our work. CEE staff identified themes outlined below based on the common ideas among respondents.

**Lack of parent involvement.** In general, parents commented that there is a lack of parental involvement across the school—especially from parents from lower social economic backgrounds. One reason sighted was these parents often have more than one job. One parent commented when referring to the low turnout of parents for the focus groups: “family involvement is important and look how many people are here, and how many students are in the school. It’s almost embarrassing that there aren’t more parents engaged in this.” This parent also noted: [Children], they don’t get the support at home, it’s so hard to carry into school.” Another parent noted “A lot of families aren’t putting in that extra time but then a lot of situations are a lot of those family members are working 2-3 jobs.” Parents also explained that the school tries to engage parents in many ways “There’s been many occasions where I’ve been in programs that I’ve been in and we’d send out enormous amounts of information whether it be us calling the parents and telling them ‘Hey, we’re having this going on, we’d like all of you to come’... You get nobody, even after talking to people. Flyers come and it goes right through the trash.” This parent also explained “It just depends on what some families are going through. I don’t know how many people or children that we know are doing things that we can barely do as
adults. Raising their 2-year-old brother or sister when they are 13. Doing a lot of different things that they shouldn’t be doing at their age. I don’t know how much particular individuals and people factor in but I know...a lot of times people are in their situation based on their parents and I feel like it has to be two-way street.”

**Unbalanced class sizes.** Parents commented on the unbalanced class sizes between the different schools in the district, particularly at the elementary schools. One parent noted “I have a son in one elementary school that has 13 kids in a classroom, and another place around here in his same grade, one of the other elementary schools has 25 kids in a classroom. That’s a huge difference. That’s not equitable. I think that that’s horrendous.”

**Inequities in grading policy.** Parents reported grading being “a big equity piece”. One parent noted “The way different people are graded, the different programs for people that come from different areas. When you started in elementary schools, we finally got the grading system changed here thanks to some seniors that graduated last year that pushed for it and pushed and pushed and finally said “We’re being ignored, I guess we have to go this other route.” And they did and we were able to get our grading system changed. Because the way the grading system...I’m seeing it affect our kids now. It affects my son right now because he’s bright, but doesn’t want to do homework but he’s also coming off of a system that, from when he was in 3rd and 4th grade, you can turn homework in 50 weeks late.” Another parent noted that the changes in the grading policies are causing problems for graduating seniors. “My daughter is graduating and she will have gone through three grading systems in high school, and you know how hard that is to present to college administrator offices? Well, let me try to explain the transcript to you, I can’t really do that.”

**Racial and homophobic comments from teachers.** A participant who works as a substitute teacher explained that teachers often “say things around you that they don’t realize anyone is listening to. And I have heard racist comments, I have heard incredibly sexist comments, and I heard homophobic comments, I have heard all kinds of things. It is not in any way broad scale, there are a few teachers who I never want to be around them again and I don’t want my kids near them.” Another parent described how empowered the students are in the school to speak up when they hear something inappropriate. The parent described this as a “beautiful thing.” The parent recounted that “right after the election... my daughter heard something in class that her teacher said something stupid and it was the other kids who turned around and went ‘You’re not going to get away with that’. There was a teacher here who was doing inappropriate things and it was a group of students who got together and made the list and brought it to the principal and said this is what’s got to happen so they are really empowered to look out for each other.”
Anti-bias and cultural competency training. Parents expressed there is a strong need for anti-bias training in the district, especially in light of the influx of diverse students into the district. One parent summarized that teachers can feel “that I can keep doing the same thing I’ve been doing because I’m a great teacher...but it's hard to see that’s a blind spot. If you’ve lived in a white community for your whole life and for the most part you haven’t left, there are pieces that you’re going to miss because there are differences in culture that you can miss connecting with your kids if you don’t recognize that thing... there are things happening that are culturally not what [teachers] are familiar with...or used to.” Another parent recounted an incident of a music teacher introducing a song that was an old minstrel song that made her child uncomfortable. The parent recounted, “The music teacher didn’t realize it was offensive but I said [to my child] ‘What happened, what did you do?’ He said, ‘Well I left the music room and I was upset. They sent me to the guidance counselor and the guidance counselor told me, ‘Well, you shouldn’t really feel that way because...’ And as soon I heard the words ‘You shouldn’t really feel that way because...’—that’s an example of why they would need anti-bias training... I am not saying the teacher is racist he shouldn’t have ever done that...but just to be able to sit with my son and say, ‘Oh yeah, I could see how you could feel that way’.”

Differential treatment of students based on their race. As the district gets more diverse, parents expressed seeing differential treatment of children of color and children who are white. One parent expressed “It’s a full-time job observing, making sure that, especially my son doesn’t get over corrected. Two things, my son and another kid-white kid can do the same things and he gets a suspension and the other kid kept in for recess. So, you have to observe what’s happening so that my son isn’t criminalized and I have many examples of that... You can’t keep making mistakes in these kids' lives, micro-aggressing against the kids while they’re in school out of...you have good intentions and you don’t mean to but this is forming the kids school experience. A fire has to be lit under the district because 30% of the district is non-white.”

Gender neutral language in Parents –Teacher Communications. Parents expressed they would like gender neutral language used on forms and documents, instead of calling out mothers and fathers. One parent stated “All forms across the district really should have parent or parent and guardian, not mother and father. I’m tired of seeing mother and father on everything. They do much better than a lot of other places do but still every now and then they’ll ship out an old form and I’m like ‘again?’.”

Underrepresented groups in advanced courses. Parents reported being satisfied with South Portland’s AP course enrollment policy. One parent stated “I will say one reason I like South Portland versus the other schools is because they made it easier for kids to take AP classes. My son does not like to do his homework all the time and he was shut out from some AP classes in other districts so here if you want to be in the AP classes, you can be. You can get a
teacher recommendation but you don’t need one. However, parents noted that there is a lot more girls in AP classes than boys. This was a matter of concern to the parents who said this is something that needs to be explored further and addressed.

**Trusting relationships between students, teachers, and parents.** Overall parents reported having mostly trusting relationships with students, teachers, and other parents. Parents reported that certain teachers have certain reputations, however, they also noted that there are many teachers who are positive examples. One parent explained “That’s why I’m here. I could’ve moved anywhere I wanted...I love that my kids are getting this diversity.” Another parent stated “I’d say about 90% of the teachers I trust.”

**Teacher Focus Groups**

Participants discussed many topics of concern regarding equitable practices at SPHS. Topics included the needs of academic and socio-emotional needs of English Learners and students of color, social segregation, student diversity in courses and the need for more diverse staff, use of racial slurs, the role socioeconomic status plays in student access, student-teacher trust, intersectionality, and white privilege.

**English Learners**

**English Learners face specific challenges in accessing and thriving in courses.** Teachers expressed the difficulty students who are English Learners (EL) have in their classes (e.g., English classes, AP classes). For example, in English classes, sometimes it is difficult finding translations of the texts students read and for advanced classes like AP, modifying the curriculum to suit the needs of English Learner students is challenging. One participant expressed, “I don't know how you would address that, because I don't think [EL students] are not capable of [doing well in AP courses]. They just don’t get to those level classes because of where they start when they get here as an ESL student, learning a new language. I think that's a little bit of a barrier there that I don’t really know how you address that.”

Another participant discussed unfair practices in how EL students select their courses. According to this participant, English Learners have the least amount of time to register for classes based on how class talks from guidance are scheduled. “English language learners are the last visits, consistently across the years. There’s this date at which all the applications, all the requests need to be in, the students who take the longest time to get those done, and need the most consultation are the ones who have the least amount of time to have that consultation.” Some participants also remarked that the students who are not able to receive the most updated technological devices are sometimes the students who need it the most such as EL students who
need access to translation/dictionary apps. In general, more time for EL teachers to collaborate and co-plan with other staff was recommended.

**Engagement and communication practices with EL families need improvement.** Participants discussed that family engagement at events like parent-teacher conferences is difficult for English Learner families even if translators are provided. For families who are able to attend, communication between teachers and families is still difficult because of the language barrier, which then affects the family’s ability to be engaged in their child’s learning. There was brief discussion about providing alternate conference times or inviting EL families in at one time and then having multiple translators on hand at that time.

Another factor that affects family engagement is providing communication in multiple languages. Regarding communication and family engagement, participants noted that forms that students and/or families have to fill out are not translated into multiple languages (e.g., technology forms, insurance waivers, sports application forms, etc.) and that this is unfair. One participant recommended hiring a central registrar at Central Office so that the registration processes don't have to be completed at the individual schools, which can be difficult for families with children in multiple grades, particularly EL families.

**Students of Color**

**Higher level courses lack racial diversity.** Participants also noticed that the student makeup in more rigorous classes, like AP, lacks racial diversity. “I've heard from many students of color that they feel that they are underrepresented in higher level classes, and that they are denied access when they have requested it,” remarked one participant. “Students will sometimes actually stereotype themselves based on what group they see themselves being part of and if that group is capable or not capable of doing,” remarked another participant. Participants also felt that they need more training on how to develop more diverse and inclusive curriculum that benefits all students. Relatedly, there was also some general discussion on whether or not students understand what courses are available for them to take, course progressions, and whether or not students “get stuck” in the tracks they are placed in.

**Social segregation by race and feelings of lack of belonging.** Similar to what students reported (see below), teachers have noticed that students seem socially segregated by race (at lunch, in classes, etc.), stating that while students generally get along well, they do not naturally integrate. “I think kids generally treat each other well but you have the students of color sit with each other and you have the white students sit with each other. While I think we behave well towards each other, I don’t think we’re integrated.” Participants also expressed that the segregation may also be due to students of color wanting to be with students who are of their
culture; there was also discussion about whether or not this is a positive or negative phenomenon. One participant stated, “Yes, the separation, the isolation is a time of ‘I’m with people that understand me, it’s safe, there’s no aggression, there’s no racism, we’re just us, and we can be us.’ But what I worry about is: Is that isolation happening because the [peer majority] is not receptive? Are there microaggressions? Is there active racism? Do they feel comfortable out there? Or are they actively being pushed away?”

Participants observed students (both POC and non-POC) who appear alone regularly or have expressed that they feel “on the periphery” of SPHS in terms of belonging and feeling part of SPHS. “I feel like a lot of the students of color in our school might have a stronger relationship with a staff member, or a teacher, or an administrator, one or two. I think at least some of them express to me that they don’t feel like they’re a part of the system as a whole, like they’re on the periphery. They look around them and they don’t see themselves as a part of South Portland high school. I think that they feel like outsiders a lot of times.”

Participants felt that SPHS puts the onus on the students to advocate for themselves if they are feeling lonely; however, students are not always comfortable doing so and/or may not know to advocate for themselves. Participants noted that it is important for teachers to check in with students and/or communicate with social workers, guidance counselors, etc. if a student appears particularly isolated and to be persistent with advocating for students. Some participants felt that EL students in particular tend to self-segregate while others have observed students being socially inclusive of EL students.

**Navigating how to address the use of racial slurs by teachers and students is difficult.** Participants also discussed how some teachers have used the “N” word in their classrooms because it was referenced in one of their class’ texts and the discussion over whether or not it was appropriate or handled in a culturally sensitive way. Participants generally agreed that students did not like teachers using the “N” word in class even if it was for academic purposes. There was also brief mention that some teachers have used the “N” word or other racial slurs in a derogatory way.

Relaterely, participants discussed student use of the “N” word and whether or not black/brown students should be allowed to use this word. One participant expressed, “I think we as a staff struggle with how to deal with students using the “N” word. I think that’s a big one that makes everybody uncomfortable. Dealing with maybe two students of color who are using it, and as a white teacher stepping in and saying, ‘We don’t use that word here’. They look at you like, ‘You have no idea what that word means to us and it’s perfectly fine for us to use it, you’re white, stay out of it’.”
Participants stated that they would like to have more opportunities for teachers and students to come together and learn from each other: “I would love to see training with the staff and students. I’d love to see staff and students together learning how to deal with these things; I think there would just be more understanding that way.” Events like diversity/ally week are a positive celebration of diversity, but these events are not intended to be a space/time for teachers and students to discuss difficult topics like racism/systemic racism. Participants stated that they would like training on cultural competency.

Disproportionate disciplinary practices. In one focus group, there was discussion about “fight week” and how six male students were arrested and suspended for multiple days for fighting. These students were all students of color and this event was compared to a similar event by a white student, who did not receive a suspension. Regrets about the arrest and the need to better address student loitering in hallways was expressed.

There is a need for more racially diverse staff. Participants talked about the need for more racially diverse staff; applicant pools themselves have not been diverse and they would like to know more about what administration is actually doing to diversify the staff makeup. “Why are we not getting diverse applicants? How do we work on that, what initiatives are being in place? Is the administration doing something?” One participant stated that a school in a different district worked to diversify their staff by recruiting English Learner parents and families who worked as teachers in their previous countries.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status plays a role in family engagement, student use of technology, and participation in extracurricular activities. Participants also noted that families who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have lower participation events like parent teacher conferences and that students sometimes have trouble completing their homework due to responsibilities they have at home. Participants also discussed how students who did not grow up with access to technology in their household may struggle in class.

Relatedly, it is unclear whether or not students have reliable access to the internet. Participants discussed a school survey that said all students have access to the internet, but in reality, students had been informing teachers that they do not have internet access at home. (There was also some disagreement from participants about whether or not the technology insurance fee could or could not be waived for students who could not afford it.) For matters like these concerns, teachers stated that it is the responsibility of the teachers to resolve issues/discrepancies such as these.
Participants also discussed the intersection of access and privilege, SES, and sports, such that participation in certain sports requires students to have access to transportation, the ability to afford implicit costs, etc., and how this can affect the demographic makeup (e.g., racial, SES) of students who participate in sports.

**Student-Teacher Trust**

*Student-teacher trust appears adequate, but staff should take more time to build relationships.* Regarding student-teacher trust, participants remarked that the amount of trust depends on the specific student and teacher. While participants perceive that most students do have at least one trusted adult that they can go to, they also said that it could be valuable to build/further build relationships during the home base period.

Relatedly, participants also discussed how they facilitate classroom participation (e.g., asking questions to the whole class, calling on specific students, utilizing written participation vs. verbal, etc.). Teachers talked about how they want participation to be voluntary, especially since some students have anxiety, but they also want all students to feel that their voices are heard so some teachers have check-ins will all students.

**Intersectionality and White Privilege**

*The interconnectedness of equity issues and white privilege was noted.* Overall, participants also remarked on the circular and interconnected nature of these issues (e.g., needs of EL students, classroom/faculty/staff diversity, engaging families, student/family needs due to SES, etc.). For example, participants noted the about the difficulty of addressing race and LGBTQ+ topics together, noting an incident where students were discussing a YouTube video and students commenting that people from Africa are homophobic. Participants were not sure how to address this incident.

Participants also recognized the limitations to the teacher focus group and internal staff conversations about race, being that the majority of teaching staff is white. “I, as a white guy, didn't necessarily know how to be comfortable addressing the racial ... It's something we care about, but [...] what do we do about it? Particularly as a majority white teaching staff.” On a related note, participants also discussed the change in demographics in Portland at large and how that also plays a role in racial dynamics and language barriers at SPHS. “I think we, as a white staff, can try to connect with a lot of these students but I think relating to them is difficult, because we don't know their background, we don't know what it's like to be here and not speak the language and have different skin color. I think that's a stretch for a lot of us.”
Student Focus Groups

Students expressed that there are students who experience special treatment based on having a relationship with school staff, self-segregation among students and difficulties faced by English Learners, and incidents and fear of physical violence. Students also discussed accommodations for learning disabilities, situations of instructional inequity, and a sense of unfairness regarding the school’s late policy.

**Special treatment based on having a relationship with school staff.** One student stated that “certain people have better relationships with the assistant principals and maybe the office ladies might be able to get out of detention a lot easier than certain other students, despite them being still a good student and with a good reason for their tardiness.” Another student in the same focus group said that this is not isolated to administrative staff, and that “it trickles down to like the teachers because they can change attendance before they submit it. So if they are close to and having a good relationship with a student, they might be like, ‘Oh, you're finally here.’ And then they'll change the attendance then send it in.”

**Self-segregation among students and difficulties faced by EL students.** Students reported that there is a tendency of students to racially self-segregate and/or that students typically only interact with students in their classes, which may also be segregated. One student noted that SPHS is “self-segregated in a way. It's really difficult for students of color...our group of students of color are majority first generation, they're immigrants, or refugees. Language is sometimes a barrier, but it's also the fact that our school doesn't push us to be together.” Students discussed the difficulties EL students face at SPHS, saying that language barriers inhibit EL students from getting placed into advanced classes with one student stating, “You can see it even in our classes, like [in] honors classes, diversity, goes way down probably as a result of those barriers like language.” Some students have also felt that teachers and students make assumptions about them based on the color of their skin (e.g., assuming that they do not understand English).

**Incidents and fear of physical violence.** One student shared that there was racial bullying happening to one of their friends which made them feel unsafe, and the administrative response was insufficient: “When I brought it up to the teachers and the principal and stuff, they're like, ‘Oh, well just ignore it because it's not happening to you, it's not your business.’ I'm like, well I'm the person that—they're scared to say something because they're worried that they're going to get jumped or something. Something needs to be done about it. This person doesn't feel safe at school. They're not going to get their education if they don't feel safe.”
In a separate focus group, another student shared their experience of being jumped by a group of other students: “I started dating a girl because I mean whatever, I can do what I want, it's not going to affect anyone else. I got jumped in the high school parking lot by a group of girls and guys. I was thrown to the ground, I was kicked, I was punched. And when I brought it up to the school, the most that they did was they pulled the students aside. And they're like, you can't do that, that's not okay. And then they just left it at that and it happened more than once. And I got so bad to the point where whenever one of my friends would go hug me or something, I would flinch because I was worried that I was going to get hit . . . And I have diagnosed anxiety and it's gotten worse since I've been in high school because of that fear that I'm going to get hit, I'm going to get jumped, something's going to happen because of that one experience that happened.”

Another shared that when overhearing other students make hurtful remarks about other students, they are unsure if they “want to just say something or risk getting hurt—myself getting beat up—but I usually do but I just get scared.”

**Accommodations for learning disabilities and different learning needs.** Students discussed that the level of accommodation and understanding varies by teacher. One student stated: “I think it depends on the teachers. I personally have a learning disability and some teachers are really helpful with it and then there are some teachers who are just like, ‘I'm sorry, you need to get it done.’ They don't try to help at all with it. But there are some teachers who are just so accommodating.” Another student discussed that they’ve experienced some difficulty in having their teachers understand their learning disability: “My learning disability is hard to see from the teacher's perspective because I can pay attention in short amount of time for specific subjects, but then the second I try to actually try and do anything, it's really difficult. So, I think that a lot of teachers, when I actually come to them and try and tell them about this, they don't believe me because they are like ‘but you pay attention perfectly fine in class’. I'm like, ‘but that isn't the problem. I just tried to tell you what the problem was’.”

Another student shared that while their sibling’s learning disability was identified when they were young and they had an easy time enrolling in a program that is smaller and caters to students’ learning needs, they’ve experienced a delay in accessing the same type of program: “Lately I've been kind of struggling. My parents have been trying to get me into one of those, and it's taken like a year and a half just because they don't understand that [my sibling’s learning disability] was easy to identify, but I was not. And, I feel like they just think that because I didn't have that problem when I was younger, I'll never have it.”

**Instructional inequity.** Students shared that particularly in AP/Honors courses, teachers do not diversify their instructional methods to meet the learning needs of students:
“In one of my AP classes, one of the teachers has a very lecture teaching style. They'll just go up to the board, put on a slide show and everyone's forced to take notes and stuff. And there were some people in the class and it didn't really work for them and they weren't really retaining any of the information. Instead of adjusting his teaching style, he just encouraged students to drop the class entirely because they weren't doing well, just in the first couple of weeks of school.”

“In one of my honors classes, we have our teacher who—obviously there's expectations, certain expectations for that class and the amount of support the teacher can give us—but the teacher kind of got really upset at us because we kept asking her questions. And she kept talking about how it's the expectation for us to be able to do it ourselves when sometimes it's not as clear to certain people and that was definitely really difficult on my class and it wasn't necessarily helpful to everybody who learned differently.”

Other students shared that there was a particular teacher who appeared to target students who seem to be struggling during class. One student stated this one teacher would “choose people that they knew were struggling with the class or probably didn't know the answer and this person, sometimes [they] would try to like work out the answers with certain students and other times they wouldn't work it out with them. And so they just have to struggle in front of the class.” This student said “there could have been a more constructive way to help those students other than humiliating them.”

**Sense of unfairness regarding the school’s late policy.** Students expressed that a new detention policy for being late to class is unfair to students, as some students have extenuating circumstances that may contribute to them being late. One participant stated, “So I think that's kind unfair, just the sense of you don't know the situations people are coming from and just getting to school on time can't always be someone's first priority.” One student said that the detention policy for being late affected students who care for siblings after school, and another student said that this policy is “really unfair to students” and that “the acceptable excuses for being late are ridiculous. They're three acceptable excuses and traffic is not one—there was a car accident [or] I had to like bring my siblings to school, [those] doesn't count. And the administration is so unwilling to budge. Being at school is important, but if they're going to punish kids for being one minute late, I know people who have been late to school by five minutes and have just decided to not show up at all and get their parents to call them out just to avoid that detention.”

**One Class Project**
Students in the One Class Project program shared that they experienced difficulty in enrolling in the program, are not notified in a timely manner of their credit progress, and that there is a lack of confidentiality between them and staff in the program.

**Enrolling in the program.** Students in this program shared that it took a year or longer to get into the program, with one student saying they were given inaccurate information: “Two years ago, I called here and asked if they had a program like this, and they told me that they didn't. It was only mainstream. And I called a second time, it was only mainstream. The third time, they finally tell me that this is a program, and it has been here for a while.”

**Communication about credits.** Five students in this program shared that they’ve had difficulty getting information on their credit progress and/or wish the staff in the program helped students with keeping track of their credit progress.

“With the credits, they don't tell you what credits you have unless you go ask. I mean, I personally feel like if you’re in this program it's because you need the help. So it's good to know like every couple of weeks, like how many credits do I need instead of us having to go and all the beg to figure out how many credits do you have.”

“I had to beg to see my credits. I was asking for two straight weeks to see my credits because I had the biggest anxiety attack because I didn't know if I was graduating or not and I literally had to work my butt off to graduate.”

**Lack of confidentiality between students and program staff.** Students in this program expressed frustration with their privately shared and/or personal information being discussed between staff and being shared with other students in the program.

“The teachers talk about [private/personal information] a lot and that's how most of the students find out about it . . . Or something that I didn’t even tell them and their hearing this from like my P.O. or someone in general. It's like they shouldn’t be knowing and they shouldn't be judging me for . . . Like the other day teacher almost told everyone information I didn't tell any of my friends and I was like, I'm not, uh, telling people for a reason. It was rude of you to be able to tell the whole like class personal information like that.”

“I have like broken trust with teachers here . . . I've had similar situations where I've gone to them and given them something confidential with my private life because it was affecting my performance at school and they made us have a circle about it. And they made me talk about my parents so that everyone else knew that I wasn't in a good spot. . .
And I'm like, I came to you trusting that you're going to be able to keep this confidential and try to work with me. But instead of doing that, you're bringing it up to the entire class and I feel that kind of broke my trust with teachers. So if I have something going on, I don't go to teachers for it. I just kind of keep stuff bottled up because I don't feel like I can trust the teachers to keep my private life confidential.”

“Something that I've noticed that needs to change in here is the whole confidentiality thing. When something happens to one student, it doesn't need be put into a class project or brought up as a class. If a student comes to a teacher and says something, it needs to be kept confidential. Not everyone in here needs to know everything that's going on and everyone else's personal life. I kind of feel like that's out of line for them to do because I've seen four different people drop out of school because their confidential stuff was just boarded out everywhere.”

Students of Color and LGBTQ+ Students

Both students of color and LGBTQ+ students discussed bullying and harassment and what students reported as inaction on the part of school administration, in addition to other themes specific to their school experiences.

Students of Color

Students of color discussed a lack of access to advanced coursework, low academic expectations from teachers, and discouragement in applying to competitive colleges. Students also talked about bullying and harassment, poor relationships with school staff, teacher use of racial slurs, and inaction on the part of school administration towards their concerns. In addition, students expressed a desire for concerted initiatives in support of people of color, more diverse administration and staff, and better representation of people of color in curricula.

Limited access to advanced coursework and low academic expectations. Regarding a lack of access to advanced coursework and low expectations from teachers, one student stated “I personally think that the school system is currently failing the students of color. I can only speak for the Black students right now and I think I vouch for many of them when I say that there's not equal opportunity, especially when it comes to classes and the kind of classes we believe that we qualify to take such as honors classes, AP classes. I think they subconsciously have low expectations for Black students, which is why many of us aren't being challenged academically.” Similarly, another student said “I feel like a lot of students here are capable of being in AP and honors classes, but because of their color, they're not accepted into the classes or the stereotype—I don't think you'd do good in that class’ or ‘that class is too hard for you’.”
One student said that their friend wanted to double up on classes but was told they could not, however a week afterwards another student wanted to and was able to double up on their classes. This student shared that this same friend was told by a teacher “that her that the chances of her graduating were slim and she’d be better off making it as a plumber. Actually, pulled out a book with plumbing jobs for her.” Another student expressed frustration with having to advocate for themselves in order to enroll in AP courses: “I had to argue with the principal just to get into AP classes when white people just automatically, ‘Mom, I want to be part of this class.’ . . . I did all this independently, I didn't even call my parent. My father does not know what I did just to get into this classroom. I could have been a Harvard student, but I guess because I'm Black...”

**Discouragement in applying to competitive colleges.** Students of color discussed that they are told to apply to Southern Maine Community College (SMCC) or the University of Southern Maine (USM), and are not given the proper support to reach their academic goals. One student shared that “basically, what counselors are going to tell you is that the schools you can get to SMCC and stuff like that. They're going to really discourage you and stuff like that, not give you the adequate resources you need.” Below is a segment from one of the focus groups:

**Student A:** The fact that even if a student is struggling, that's what they're telling them, that's not good. I feel like they give us enough information to maybe survive, but not the right opportunities, the right information to actually go to a good college. How are you telling every single Black student to go to USM or SMCC? Does that make any sense? No.

**Student B:** To add to that, they try to disregard me, and tell me, "You'd be better off at SMCC." Did I say I wanted to go to SMCC? I really want to know because I set these goals for myself. I did everything that a student should do, and you're going to come sit here, directly look me in the face, and say “I think you would be better off going into this school.” If it was a white student, you know, “you should apply to Harvard, Oxford, anything that you want to do.” But, why is it because my color defines what I am capable of doing?

**Student A:** Even if you're behind, you tell them I want to go to this school, and it's a really good school, they're not going to give you the steps to get to that. They're going to be like “Oh, you can't do that.”

Students also discussed barriers in accessing SAT information and support from counselors regarding credit requirements for graduation. One student stated “when you go and ask your guidance counselor about how they can help you apply for the SAT, they're like it's not important you do something like that.” When asked if they’ve received guidance in ensuring they
have enough credits to graduate, one student also observed that they see white students get called down to the office, whereas they “always have to put in the effort.”

**Bulling, harassment, and poor relationships with school staff.** Students of color expressed incidents of racially-based harassment and teachers having negative stereotypes of them. Below are quotes from one of the student focus groups:

I wouldn't say we have any relationships with any of the staff because when we confide in them, they say that they're going to handle the situation when they really don't. They don't face any consequences, so what's the point in me in confiding in you if you're not going to do anything? I feel like for example—not to be rude—the white students, they have a relationship with their teacher. Even if they don't, they have a relationship with their parents and their parents will talk to the staff. Whereby, they will listen to their parent. If my parent were to come in here, they would probably look like a maniac or someone that doesn't know what they're saying, which doesn't make any sense.”

“For me, as being a Black female, I feel like I get targeted the most because not only that I'm Black, I'm also a female. There's always that stereotype that females aren't able to do certain things. When we speak out, we're always considered angry or something else, which is not the case. Half the time, I can't even speak what I want to say because what I say doesn't matter to anyone.”

“I also feel like a lot of teachers target us a lot. For example, they will be rude to us for no reason. We could just walk into the classroom and they just have this whole attitude towards us, but if it's a different race or different group, they don't mind them. I don't understand why.”

“[In one particular teacher’s class] I was the only girl and I was the only Black person, the only person of color period. Almost every day that I was in that class, he was just so rude to me for no reason. He would call me out, constantly try to embarrass me in front of my counterparts . . . I think that had something to do with my race. I really don't know any other reason. There are other students that have had bad experiences with this teacher, students of color as well.”

**Teacher use of racial slurs.** Students discussed how teachers teach about race in a way that makes Black students feel uncomfortable and that some teachers even use racial slurs in a classroom setting without repercussion. One student said, “When teachers are teaching about certain issues about race and they choose to use the “N” word and that makes a lot of Black people and Black students uncomfortable in their classroom. And I know multiple, many of my
friends have complained to staff members and it seems like nothing is happening or changing with the way they teach.” Another student said “I've been in classes where that's happened and they kind of make it like, ‘Oh well we're using It because it's in this book’ but that kind of notion feels like they're prioritizing that over making the students feel comfortable or safe.”

When students have brought this up with school staff, one student noted that there has been a lack of action to address it: “There has been a—well, multiple incidents, of teachers using derogatory language in the classroom, like the “N” word. And I know that, last year, some students had told the administration about it but there [are] no rules in place. There are no things that will actually reprimand the teachers or consequences.” This student explained that the group of students who went to the administration last year wanted to create rules around this, but that “going into this year I had, it happened in my classroom. One of my teachers said the “N” word and there's still nothing. There's no rule that will tell them that they can't do that or we'll give them consequences.”

Another student discussed that “numerous students of color who have gone to administration” to voice their concerns with a particular teacher who taught a subject involving race and sexuality who they felt lacked empathy, however when students of color are saying that they are uncomfortable and not changing your curriculum around that, it can get so—some people have just described that classroom as hostile, in general.” From a separate focus group, another student stated “we've had a situation that's been going on with a certain teacher at the school who has been being pretty insensitive just towards minorities in general, but specifically Black students.”

One student noted that the use of the “N” word in school hallways is prevalent, but students of color feel powerless in trying to address it: “There have been many instances where students have come to teachers or people in position of power and expressed to them that we weren't comfortable with the “N” word just openly being used in the halls. Whatever you do when you're by yourself or with your group of friends, we can't control that, but as long as we're in an environment where there's multiple nationalities, I think that it's not fair for us to have to go through that. I think a lot of students of color have become desensitized to the word because it's been used so much and we don't feel like we can do anything about it anymore because the teachers have chosen to ignore it.” In the same focus group, another student shared that their sibling attended the school 10 years ago and “would have described that classroom as hostile then. Like it was just not a good, safe place to be, and I think that it doesn't matter how many times people are saying things about it, just nothing is happening.”

School events supporting people of color and lack of representation in curricula. Discussing diversity week, one student recalled that “Last year, we did something where we were
distributing food from different cultures. There were people literally taking the food just to throw it on the floor and step on it. We had a fashion show and there were people in the crowd that said there were some white girls in the back actually laughing at our culture and mocking our dances, which is really disrespectful because our parents invested time and money in making this food. I just feel like that was ... some people took it so personal [that] they weren't even going to do it this year.” Another student stated that the school doesn’t do anything for Black of Hispanic history month and wished the school would “make a big statement, like, ‘we accept these people’.” This same student also said they wished the school would give students “examples of Black and Hispanic people who are in power and not just pitied because the only people of color that we see are slaves or just in a place where people are supposed to pity them basically.”

Students recommended that they would like more racially diverse administration and teachers. One student stated, “I don't even know if it's a priority of the administration to try and diversify the administration. I'm not sitting there with the administration, but I haven't heard really any efforts to try and push for more diverse teachers or anything like that.” Additionally, a student stated that they’ve attended South Portland schools for their entire education and “never had a teacher that was a person of color.”

**LGBTQ+ Students**

LGBTQ+ students discussed bullying and harassment, inaction on the part of school administration, and lack of inclusive health curriculum. They also discussed the presence of safe space stickers within classrooms, largely supportive teaching staff, and a strong transgender rights policy.

**Bullying and harassment.** LGBTQ+ students shared that students at the school use gay in a derogatory manner, and reported that they have been called homophobic slurs by other students. Additionally, during panels put on by the GSTA during ally week, students reported that they received anti-LGBTQ+ remarks through Pear Deck because other students attending the panels incorrectly believed their comments would be anonymous. LGBTQ+ students expressed a sense of powerlessness in addressing this behavior, with students sharing that they’ve “watched the administration be very inactive about a lot of things” and have had to take initiative and “do it ourselves.”

Another student described that physical bullying in middle school continued as verbal abuse in the high school, and reported “a complete lack of the administration caring. Like, I was going to the office on a daily basis to say this is who it was and this is where it happened. This is what happened. This is who said what. And nothing ever happened. And it's left... It left room for this to continue happening, and it left me feeling like I wasn’t safe in the school and no matter
what happened, they didn't care, and they weren't going to do anything about it, and they didn't care if I was safe or not.”

**Curriculum.** Regarding curriculum, students discussed that the only representation of the LGBTQ+ community in health class was a movie about the AIDS crisis, and “there was next to no conversation about heterosexual people contracting HIV and AIDS”. One student said that it would be helpful to have a “solid representation” of the LGBTQ+ community in health class.

**Supports within the school.** When discussing supports within the school, one student stated that teacher awareness varies from teacher to teacher, and one student stated that “a lot of classrooms have safe space stickers on them, specifically distributed by the GSTA and most teachers are really supportive as well as students.” Another student noted that the school has a transgender rights policy, which states that if a student shares their preferred name and pronouns with a teacher, they are required to use them and are not allowed to share that with the student’s parents unless given permission.

**Student Recommendations and Solutions/Strategies**

Students would like to have more of a role in school level decision-making/discussions and more transparent communications from administration/staff to students about SPHS initiatives and decision-making. Students do not feel their voices are genuinely heard or considered and would like more avenues for authentic communication and “at least an effort [from administration] of trying to correct the issues that are being brought up rather than just saying, 'Okay,' and then moving on.” One student noted that “if [school administration] keep hearing stuff from students that's an issue, then they should actually take action instead of just saying ‘Here some posters, this will help’.”

Students of color widely requested there be consequences for use of the “N” word, as well as education for teachers and activities that unite students: “I think we need more punitive rules about when people say the “N” word. We need more education on language, we need our teachers to go through implicit bias training, we need more activities after school and in school that unite us as groups. We need more opportunities in class to talk like this. If we could just have a group of people just talking like the first day in class or the second day in class at the beginning of the year so you can get to know people, that would be better.”

LGBTQ+ students reported that the student-led panels hosted by the GSTA during ally week was a positive experience aside from the harmful anti-LGBTQ+ remarks made: “Most of [the student-led panels] this year were full which was awesome, and it's just like education, and we had some awesome guest speakers come in. It was really great.” Students feel it beneficial to
have LGBTQ+ inclusive health curriculum, as well as education for students and training for staff. When asked to provide a recommendation one of the students who responded said: “Education on queer issues because I feel like so many people make comments that they think are true or they think they know to be true that is very wrong, and I don't have the time to go through all of queer history in an 80-minute class and explain to them why their comment was not okay.”

Students in the One Class Project program recommended more staff, conversations throughout the year to discuss where students are and how they’re doing with their academics and credit completion progress, and better confidentiality. Students also discussed a desire to co-construct rules and boundaries in the program.

**Recommendations**

MAEC provides the following recommendations to South Portland Public Schools:

1. Create a district-wide equity taskforce committed to examining equity and climate issues. The taskforce should include students, families, teachers, and district administrators. The taskforce should review all district-wide and school-level practices and procedures to assess the presence and effects of inequities of the educational environment of the School and make recommendations to the Board. We recommend that the district support student-led equity initiatives and support the development of programming that will increase student awareness and knowledge of equity issues. Solicit feedback from students and include their voice when developing equity initiatives by administering an exploratory survey about school climate and their experiences.

2. Appoint an Equity Officer for South Portland High School responsible for promoting equity and diversity throughout the School. The Equity Officer should provide support to students and staff through culturally responsive practices, work with district administrators to break down barriers to academic excellence, respond to incidents of discrimination and injustices to students, provide periodic reports/updates on issues of non-discrimination, and conduct training and professional development for teachers and administrators including training on equity, bias, privilege, anti-bullying, and communication. The Equity Office should report directly to the School Superintendent.

3. Develop a district strategic plan for equity and diversity. The equity plan will promote the vision and mission for diversity and academic excellence along with core expectations and beliefs for students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community. The plan will identify action steps that will be used to address focus areas and ensure equitable change and continuous improvement.
4. Offer in-depth and ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers, administrators, students, and the district-wide equity taskforce including training on equity, bias, privilege, anti-bullying, anti-racism, LGBTQ+ issues, disability, discipline, cross-cultural communication. This professional development should provide teachers with the necessary skills to have more targeted conversations around race and equity in the classroom and with each other. To get started with this, we suggest that the district survey staff members to assess their professional development needs.

5. Conduct periodic community forums with parents and other stakeholders in order to keep the community informed, receive input, and address any concerns related to the district’s equity plan and other issues of discrimination and inequities in the district. Ensure that these community forums contain a diversity of voices and perspectives (e.g. families of color, non-English speaking families, families who have children with disabilities, are part of the LGBTQ+ community, etc.).

6. Engage in authentic, culturally responsive family engagement practices. For example, when communicating with families, use language that is more inclusive in materials (e.g., “Parents” or “Families” versus “Mom/Dad”) and provide communication materials to families in multiple languages. Intentionally engage with families that historically have been harder to reach. Strengthen and sustain the supports provided for families in need by continuing to leverage the connections the district has in the local community.