Fall 2019 Listening Sessions

Student and Family Engagement Themes and Takeaways Report

Better Together

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I. Purpose and Background

Bend-La Pine School District has prioritized connection and communication with families in their district for many years. Throughout 2019, Better Together has worked in partnership with Bend-La Pine administration and core community stakeholders to develop an intentional, authentic system of engagement focused specifically on families of color in the school district. This system centers around creating safe affinity spaces where families of color can share their education experiences openly with others who have shared language and/or shared lived experience. In early fall of 2019, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) published family engagement priorities with an emphasis on ensuring *all* families were engaged to inform district planning for the Student Success Act. For this process, ODE required a focus on engaging specific priority populations including families of color, those impacted by poverty, families who live in rural areas, and other populations of students for whom significant disparities in education outcomes exist. Given this imperative from the state and Better Together's shared priorities with Bend-La Pine School District around equitable and authentic family engagement, we stood ready to provide any additional capacity needed to support in the collection and/or analysis of qualitative data the district would gather from families.

Better Together's role in this process included recruiting and training local community members to facilitate listening sessions in affinity space with families, as well as analysing the qualitative data from all listening sessions with both students and families across populations for the district. This report is the result of our analysis of the data collected by the district in the fall of 2019. It is our hope that we can continue to support Bend-La Pine School District in ongoing family engagement efforts in ways that add value to the district's mission and work.

II. Data and Methods Included in Analysis

The data used in this report was collected during 36 listening sessions. In planning the sessions, the district made a commitment to utilize *affinity groups*, or dedicated spaces for individuals with like racial, ethnic, or other shared identities to talk about issues among people who likely share similar experiences. To the extent possible, historically underrepresented groups, which included students and families of color, linguistically diverse families and students, students with disabilities and their families, and LGBTQ+ identifying students, were engaged in affinity space with facilitators that shared their identity. The sessions included 15 *general community* groups comprised of students or families not necessarily in affinity space, as well as the Superintendent's Student Advisory Group; 5 groups comprised of students of color and their parents, 6 groups of linguistically diverse students and families, 1 group of Native American families, 5 groups of students in special education and their families, and 3 groups for LGBTQ+ identifying students.

Better Together utilized a *grounded theory approach* to analyzing the listening session records and didn't start the analysis with an established coding scheme or a working theory for what information we expected to to track. This method allowed us to approach the data from a place of curiosity and empathetic understanding about family and student experiences in Bend-La Pine Schools. To complement this approach, we utilized a *structured inductive coding method* to name, categorize, and track concepts and themes as they were encountered during our analysis. This coding scheme was refined on an ongoing basis to group like-concepts and improve the meaning of the categories and codes into themes as they emerged over the course of the analysis. Our analysis also centers an *under-represented group lens* and *favors participant*

voice in defining concepts and themes throughout the analysis. Historically-underserved groups were intentionally over-represented in the listening session sample to better understand the experiences and needs of these communities within the district. To elevate these voices, our analysis started with examining these sessions, so concepts and themes present in this report were initially defined and populated with information shared by these groups. To the extent possible, we've used the language of participants to define concepts, codes, and themes throughout our analysis and this report.

III.   Use and Limitations

The discussion of themes and takeaways in this report should be used in conjunction with other available data and information by the district. Relevant data to compare and analyze could include student, family, and community survey data, academic indicators and trends, behavior and discipline data, financial and human resources data, and other available information to provide context to the themes and the participant quotes included in this report.

While the number of sessions conducted and included in this report is substantive, the sessions included a relatively small sample of Bend-La Pine students (172) and parents (133) overall. We are not able to state that this sample is representative of the full Bend-La Pine Schools community due to the various recruitment strategies used to identify and invite participants to the listening sessions, as well as different levels of participation at each of the sessions (ranging from 1 to 35 participants). While we cannot claim that the specific sample included is representative of the district overall, we do strongly believe that the themes and experiences shared in this report are true for individuals and families that participated in listening sessions and that this report constitutes an important and authentic view into student and family experiences within Bend La Pine Schools.

IV.   Topics

The focus questions used during the family and student listening sessions covered topics including:
- *Student and family perceptions of their school community*
- *Participation at school*
- *Communication*
- *School fit and belonging*

The focus questions were designed by a coalition of regional school district administrators with the guidance of Better Together to solicit participant feedback and ideas about how to improve these factors in Central Oregon schools.

V.   Emerging Concepts and Themes

The following concepts and themes were identified through the analysis of listening session records. We've grouped like concepts together into larger themes. A summary of the participant experiences and ideas that informed these concepts and theme areas are included as well. Participant quotes and summaries are indicated in *italics* within the concept and theme summaries to provide additional context and description.

Good Quality Teaching

Using a variety of teaching strategies: Students find teachers who change their teaching strategies to reach more students to be the most engaging and motivating: *understand that not all students learn the same; some like to learn alone; some need visuals.* In particular, many students mention the use of hands-on and interactive activities, lively group discussions and debates, competitions and games, and group work and projects as the classroom activities they found most engaging and motivating to learn.

Providing actionable feedback: Among nearly all of the student sessions participants cited a desire to hear from teachers about what they could improve on and how, with a sentiment that *it is ok to be wrong; that's how you learn.* Students also discussed striking a balance among teachers having high expectations for learning and growth, and a desire to be held accountable for those standards, but also engagement by teachers to *ask students what obstacles they are struggling with in being successful and creating a plan.* One student stated: *telling us what we can improve on, not pushy, but private comments help, "try next time, with specifics."* On this same subject, students mentioned that that ability to negotiate the learning process with the teacher and *go at our own pace is highly motivating.*

Ensuring All Students are Participating: *I like it when teachers involve everyone, not just three people in class.* Across sessions students talked about teachers who encourage everyone to participate and actively find ways to bring all students into the learning environment as their best teachers. Students noted that when some students aren't engaged in class, they believe their teachers should also notice and do something about it. One student described how some of her best teachers set up their classrooms for better engagement*: I like it when teachers have everyone face each other rather than in rows. I feel like it helps me engage with other people. I feel like when I am in a line, I get really bored...it is harder to engage. Seeing everyone's faces makes it more relatable.*

*Demonstrated passion for teaching and material***:** Students in virtually every session stated that they wanted their teachers to demonstrate a passion and interest in what they were teaching. Here's how they described how a teacher's passion (or lack thereof) impacts learning:
- *When teachers are genuine....they don't let some students pull their stuff, interrupt the class. Then they're really focused on their passion, their subject.*
- *I know a teacher is passionate and knowledgeable when the learning transcends the classroom...when we learn about things outside of the classroom, apply that to real-world situations.*
- *I would try to bring a passion to my teaching. If you don't care, the students won't care. At least pretend you're passionate.*

Relevant and Real-World Learning: Students and parents echoed each other in calling for career and "future" connected learning and course options. Many students were interested in learning real-world things that could be applied to their lives now, ranging from Career Technical Education (CTE) courses to practical skills that would help them understand the world around them.

Focus on collaborative learning and an opportunity for students to direct learning: Learning through collaborative opportunities with peers and the ability for students to develop their own learning objectives and activities were also cited as highly motivating across student groups. Below are the main categories of collaborative and student-directed learning types that were cited:

- Whole-Class/Interactive Discussions: *It was great to see everyone was respecting others' opinions.*
- Student-Led Projects: S*tuff where you can do your own research, make your own stuff, make your own essay at the end.*
- Group Activities/Projects:*Anything that brings all students forward and engages them is good*.
- Self-Directed Learning: *Letting students participate in building their curriculum*

Relationships Lead to Engagement

Teacher to Student Relationships: Across schools we heard an overwhelming call for more genuine and caring relationships between teachers and students. We know from the body of positive youth development evidence that a caring adult can make the difference in engagement and success for young people. An elementary school parent expressed how important, yet tenuous, school staff's role is: *Their one connection to another person might be that staff member who crushes their spirit or who raises them up.* It's clear that students are looking for their teachers *to see me, know me, check in with me and show an interest in me*. When this student-teacher engagement is strong and genuine, students are more likely to show up for school, take an interest in coursework and activities, and succeed. They say:

- *My favorite teachers have been super personal. Real conversations, ask about my weekend. Those teachers make me want to do better.*
- *Make an effort to connect and build trust with me; be approachable.*
- *Teachers should check in with students, ask how we are doing.*
- *I've had teachers that talk to you and engage in actual conversation instead of just doing their jobs.*

This is an area of practice to deepen in our schools, since not all students are feeling connected to teachers. One student stated, *sometimes I feel like the only thing my teacher says to me is "did you do your assignment."* Other students gave more examples of ways teachers have shown up for them: *I wrote an essay about coming out, and the teacher wrote "thanks for sharing" at the end of my essay. This meant a lot to me. I knew if I had any problems I could talk with her.* A handful of students reflected that, in their experience, teachers who are coaches or club advisors are often better at connecting with students. School staff physically showing up for student activities can also demonstrate an interest in building authentic relationships: *Some of the teachers are more involved with our outside of school activities...at basketball games, almost all of the Lit and Comp department showed up to games.*

Student to Student Connections: From both the student and family sessions, we heard a call for school staff to facilitate connections among students in the classroom and beyond. Across grade levels, parents requested schools create spaces where students can connect and belong. In particular, lunch time activities or *safe tables and places* for kids to be and belong. A middle school parent suggested: *Could*

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we have a buddy lunch? where some teachers and kids are in charge of being warm and welcoming with other friends for example. With the rapid growth of both Bend and La Pine, new schools opening, and shifts in school boundaries, parents recommended that school staff provide targeted programming for and be attentive to ensure new students (and families) feel welcome, connected, and integrated into their school.

Among the high school sessions, we heard similar but distinct desires for teachers to facilitate connections in the classroom to encourage students to connect outside of "their group." Students discussed how disconnection among groups is the norm: *It is easy to not know some people. There are lots of people in our classes we have no clue about them, no clue what their names are or anything about them.* To counter this, students commented: *some teachers were asked to do some "get to know you" games on the first day. It would be great if all of our teachers would have done that. It would have been better if every teacher had done that with every class.* Students also indicated that their best teachers were teachers who built opportunities into their classroom routines to get to know their classmates on an ongoing basis: *one teacher starts everyday by asking a simple question to the entire class. We learn something about each other. This makes us feel more connected to each other.* We know from the emerging literature around youth engagement, and our partnerships with regional school districts, that students aren't strongly reporting they feel they belong at their school or fit in with other children, helping students make these connections has the potential to lead to increased engagement and success in schools.

School-Family Partnerships

Parents as experts: Parents want to be partners in helping their children succeed and they value opportunities to engage in meaningful ways. Parents shared specific occasions where collaboration has led to improved relationships at school and positive outcomes for their children. One family talked about partnering with their child's principal on an informational session about gender identity, as a result there is more open conversation at school and among parents about how to support non-binary children. A participant in the session responded: *A lot of other parents didn't know anything about transgender kids. We didn't know how to talk about it without feeling like we weren't minding our own business. We wanted to help. It was neat to be a part of that.* At a different session, a parent of an older autistic child, learned their younger child's teacher didn't have a lot of direct experience with autism and the parent described meeting with the teacher to help to make the classroom more welcoming for students with autism. These examples show the power of engaging parents as experts to make school welcoming, safe, and inclusive for students.

Volunteering at Schools: Parents across schools mentioned volunteering at school as the primary form of family engagement. While many talked about the value and deep connections they have created through volunteering, many more talked about the barriers and challenges. A lack of time and work schedules were the most commonly cited barriers to getting involved; a number of stories surfaced about parents who really wanting to get involved, but felt the way schools/teachers shared opportunities favored non-working parents: *the volunteer sign up is filled before the end of the day. By the time I am able to get to the sign up, they tell me they are already full. If they stick to the same volunteers all the time, how can I ever volunteer?* Another parent lamented: *Being a working mom, I don't even get those personal emails until 8:00 after I put my son to bed. Sometimes I feel this school in particular has such a high percentage of parents available during the day that they forget that some families have two working parents and can't communicate or come in during the day.* Parents suggested

implementing non-email options to sign up, an awareness about spreading out opportunities among families, but also finding ways for parents unable to help during the work day to contribute, or to tap into parents skills/talents beyond just being available and present at school.

Other barriers exist to parent volunteering, at the middle school level in particular, parents had been told volunteers weren't needed after elementary school. One parent stated: *I feel like they are telling me, "we don't really need you as a volunteer" and I was ready to volunteer. What a bummer! I felt I was losing the chance of involvement in my school.* Latinx parents described the barriers imposed by the district's Raptor System which had excluded undocumented parents from entering schools during school hours. One parent shared in her frustration: *It's been years of us wanting to volunteer here, and they required that we bring our papers to come into they school, and that stopped us from being involved here.* Another parent responded: *They ask us to be present, and then don't let us come in.*

Students and families at the table: Parents requested the opportunity to share decision-making roles with school administrators. In everything from attendance policies, to fence and gate installation, to new course offerings students suggested that schools: *get opinions from students before making giant changes, and maybe include our parents before changes are made, too.*

Coordinated, Proactive and Positive Communication with Families

Targeted and Coordinated Information from Schools: In the age of tech and hyper-connectedness, families are swimming in information and communication. There was a resounding request that schools streamline and target communication. At present, many teachers are using apps to connect with families, share assignments, and stay in touch. Teachers tend to each use their own app. For families with multiple kids in the district and more teachers working with students as they progress in school, the number of apps is hard to keep track of, and important information is getting lost. Parents want more targeted communications - detailed information that pertains to their 2nd grader, for example, not detailed information for each grade K-5.

Personalized and proactive communication: Parents consistently talked about how much they valued direct communication and one-on-one conversations with principals and teachers. Regardless of whether the parent or the school staff initiates, being in direct contact matters. Parents also made a distinction between reactive and proactive communication; school are excelling at the former. When issues come up, parents are generally satisfied with the quality and timeliness of the response they get from their child's school, but there is a desire for more proactive communication. A parent who has experienced the power of proactive communication calls it out directly: *It is great. The teacher reaches out before something becomes a bigger issue. They are proactive, rather than reactive. The parent conferences are so short and so rushed...but, I have such a good ongoing relationship with the teacher...it is great.*

Positive feedback without prejudgement: A substantive group of parents lamented that they only hear from their kids school when something has gone wrong, especially after elementary school, and it's challenging. *I want to hear the positive things that happen too*, a parent remarked. Parents also talked about feeling of pre-judged from their child's school, and that feeling gets in the way of positive communication. One parent stated, *it's hard to calmly engage if you feel like you are on the defensive about yourself, family, or children from the start of every interaction with the school.*

Access to interpreters and quality translations: Many linguistically diverse families discussed challenges to effectively communicating with their child's school. Many, note that interpreters are available for official school events, meetings, and conferences, but not for connecting directly with teachers informally or ad hoc about their child's needs or progress: *Although there are interpreters for us, we still don't speak English, and teachers here can't understand when we need to ask something.* The difficulty engaging in regular, informal communication leads to parents disengaging from their student's school: *There is a huge need for interpreters. We ask for what we need, but our requests aren't taken seriously and they don't do anything, and in the end I end up not communicating anymore.*

Every group of linguistically diverse parents mentioned the importance of quality, accurate translated materials. One parent in particular talked in depth about how the poor quality of translation of district communications not only made it hard to understand the information, but it made her feel like the district didn't care about communicating with Spanish-speaking families. A parent commented: *The district should look for the resources to make sure translations are correct. They need to be better written so everyone understands. It's not ok to just let it pass, it shows that there isn't enough care to make sure it's correct.* Families were also bothered that some materials still came home in English: *Everything (written) needs to be bilingual. Permission slips, sign up sheets for sports, etc. Events. Are there so few hispanic kids that it's not important to translate everything?*

School isn't a safe place for all students to learn and participate

Lack of confidence that harassment will be taken seriously: Across virtually every student session there was a sentiment that when issues of bullying, but especially race or gender based harassment were reported, students couldn't trust that the issue would be taken seriously by school staff or that a meaningful resolution would occur. One student recounted: *You get threatened, you talk to a teacher, and it just gets brushed off.* Another student recounted: *last year two kids were being racist during spanish class and teacher didn't say anything. Pretty sure she heard it. It wasn't whispered.* Another student stated: *The administrators listen to us...they agree, but then nothing happens. At least provide reasons for why nothing happens or compromise.* Another talked about a lack of follow up: *I reported verbal abuse on campus but the staff never followed up with what happened. Even if not physical assault, it's still scary. Treat hate speech as serious as it is.* Overwhelmingly these statements were more common among students of color, linguistically diverse, and LGBTQ+ student groups, but present among other groups too.

Parents also reported a similar lack of confidence that harassment would be taken seriously. One elementary parent told her group that her child had been called a *tattle-tail* by their teacher after reporting racist comments that another student had said. The parent remains unhappy with the response she received when she followed up. A parent in a linguistically diverse session, told the group: *When I reached out to the principal about bullying, he didn't really say anything. They ignore us, it seems they don't understand us, or they don't want to know.*

Racial Discrimination: During listening sessions, students and parents shared numerous accounts of racial discrimination and racist incidents that had occured at school. *Bend schools are white schools,* one high school student stated frankly. Students of color recounted a number of racist jokes and slurs directed at them on a regular basis by other students (*"at least I'm not Mexican,"* jokes about eating dogs in front of Asian students), and blatantly racist remarks made by a teacher during class time as well (*I don't like mall shootings, but I do like*

mosque shootings). Parents also recounted hurtful comments said to their children too, *One thing my daughter has heard so many times is, "I am friends with you even though you are black." She picked up on that even in 2nd grade.* Another parent recounted having to reinforce her child's right to claim her own identity when teachers and students make assumptions about her: *I have to teach my child to say, "I'm not Japanese, I'm Chinese."*

Within this theme, parents and students discussed the impact and barriers to addressing racial discrimination at school. One parent in a bi-racial family shared that as a result of the discrimination, *my children have been lonely; I know we look different. It hurts.* A student stated that when they try to address what they've experienced at school, *white people feel attacked when we try to talk about racism.* Another student stated: *they want us to just act as white as we can to make them feel comfortable. What we need is equity.*

Authentic inclusion and engagement of historically under-represented diverse students and their families
Barriers to feeling welcome: While there are more specific examples included throughout this report, a significant theme, particularly among families and students from historically underrepresented groups (students of color, students with disabilities, linguistically diverse, and LGBTQ+ students) shared not feeling entirely welcome or at ease within the physical environment, policy and practice, and general culture of the district and schools. Students described the *whiteness* of schools on a number of occasions, one student observed, *it would be nice if all of the teachers greeting us at the door aren't all white people.* Another student, reflecting on their experience in Spanish class stated: *even my Spanish teacher "white-ifies everything," like their accent when they say words like "abuelo," "gracias." The teacher is well-traveled, but doesn't even try to pronounce words correctly.* Multiple groups of parents discussed how the limited access to interpreter services made them feel unwelcome in schools: *We don't feel connected, we feel excluded. I think that they put us aside because we don't understand the language and like we don't have feelings or the need to understand what's happening with our kids. For schools we are minority. Sometimes when I come to school I feel like it's an obligation to help me, while I observe that for other (non-Latino) parents it's friendly and a pleasure to help them.* Other parents continue to mourn the years lost of engaging in schools due to the exclusionary policies of the district's Raptor system: *They ask us to be present, and then don't let us come in.*

LGBTQ students discussed the stress and shame caused by teachers who *"refuse" to use their identified pronouns or name. They find "excuses" to not use it, like saying "it's a health issue."* Students cite the constant worry and issue of having their identify affirmed (or not) by teachers with the use of their pronouns and chosen name throughout our sessions, which is a real barrier to students showing up ready to learn and engage at school. Similarly, students with disabilities and their parents cite the varying degrees in which students are meaningfully included in the school environment. A parent discussed what they seek for their child is *more natural and genuine participation within the school environment, reciprocity, not charity*. The continued practice of pulling kids out of classrooms and into SpEd only spaces perpetuates a culture of separation for students with disabilities.

Culturally Relevant and Accurate Curriculum: A notable portion of students reflected that only dominant culture perspectives are present in their course content, materials, and educational experiences throughout their education. At its core, culturally relevant education focuses on student achievement, affirms and cultivates students' cultural awareness, and develops socio, cultural, and political understanding and

critique of educational and social institutions' roles in society. Students commented that the current curriculum and school culture within the district is creating a narrow and incomplete understanding of history and culture. One student stated, *It would be cool to learn in history about different cultures. The only African American history we learned is about slavery. The last time we'd learned about African Americans was in 3rd grade about MLK, Rosa Parks. No Mexican history.* During a parent session, a parent reflected on their child's experience: *she's been a part of the district for 2-3 years now, but there hasn't been an interest or awareness in her identity as a Native student.* Another parent summarized the importance of this theme well: *In school we need our students to learn about culture, other cultures, your own culture. Understand our kids' stories and the skill sets they have.*

Culturally relevant and accurate curriculum doesn't just benefit students from diverse backgrounds. It's comprehensive education for any student to gain a more complete perspective and experience of the world in which they live. In an earlier section, we discuss the theme, *school isn't a safe place for all students to learn and participate.* It's not possible to disconnect student safety and experience at school from course content and context. Throughout student sessions, and many parent sessions, students lament the lack of cultural awareness and racial literacy among teachers and other students. By incorporating a broader perspective of culture, history, and perspective into the districts' training, curriculum, and school environment, teachers can engage students in a different level of discourse that leads to a more inclusive, welcoming, and safe environment where students from different backgrounds can see their experience reflected in their education.

Staff that is representative of the diverse students and families in the district: Overwhelmingly parents and students cited a more racially, culturally, and linguistically representative school staff would help their kids be successful. Both parents and students cited the importance of having staff that students identified with, a student commented: *Teachers who are like me, are more approachable.* An elementary parent stated that more diverse staff is good for all students, not just students of color: *Seeing a successful person of color in your community is very powerful and helps to remove stereotypes.* Linguistically diverse parents and students also talked about the need for bilingual and bi-cultural staff who understand their culture and families as critical for success; serving Latino families is more than just speaking a language. Similarly, another parent stated: *I think the biggest thing is not seeing any staff members who are black. When things come up with identity, there is no staff member who is black. I would strongly recommend that the district actively recruit more staff of color, creating a cultural shift in schools takes a very skilled staff with lived experience.*

Diversity Training Staff: *Know who's in your classroom, culturally,* is a sentiment that was expressed across many of the sessions. In many different scenarios, parents and students expressed a need for diversity training for school staff from bus drivers to teachers to school administrators. There was a resounding sentiment that staff are unaware of the issues of race and power at play within school and beyond and also ignorant about and unequipped to deal with issues when they arise. From the teacher who came up to a group of students of color and said: *"What's up brothers?" We are not brothers, and I think he thought he was trying to be cool and connect, but it didn't come off that way.* To what seems to be a regular practice of brushing off racist microaggressions and racially motivated bullying as innocent and unimportant; participants in listening sessions were resounding in their call for comprehensive diversity training for school staff.

Social Emotional support to help students and families cope

Stress, Anxiety, and Workloads: Students even from an early age and balancing a lot it seems. Across parents groups, there were mentions child anxiety, breakdowns, and self-harm ideation. Students also mentioned how stressed they are feeling. One student described a choice they feel they make daily: *Keep your grades up and be really stressed, or get involved and m*eet *new people.* Another student empathized with her peers*: A lot of students feel overworked - feel stressed - hours on end of homework each night, they feel like they can't even have a social life.*

Social Emotional Skills and Empathy: Across all of the sessions and discussions about both the positive and negative experiences of students and families in schools, the desire for more opportunities to develop social-emotional and empathy skills was resounding. Parents asked that *schools check in regularly socially and emotionally with students, not just academically.* Parents also asked that schools include social emotional training as part of the curriculum and culture of schools. A parent commented: *Kids need this (social emotional) training. Above and beyond the Social Emotional Learning curriculum. The need to practice it daily. They needed it embedded in their day and modeled. It should come from administration, not individual teachers alone.*

Parents and students also articulated the why of social emotional skills in form of a need for greater empathy. Participants remarked:
-   *Some kids don't feel comfortable sharing their culture with other people because they don't trust how people will treat them.*
-   *People should understand what everyone's going through*
-   *We need to be more open-minded; like "don't judge people"*

Finally, participants discussed increasing social emotional skills and empathy as strategies to address issues in our school communities, for example, a student in special education pleaded that [students and teachers] *need to have empathy for kids that have blowouts*. Another parent remarked that *she wished schools would engage with students called out for behavior problems and ask: What's happened that causing you to act out? rather than assuming it's just because they are mean/bad kid.* Parents also stated bluntly that social emotional and empathy skill building is not just for elementary school, it should extend throughout the grade levels. When discussing the importance of building these skills a parents reflected the need to *be open with kids. They are smart and know a lot more than we did at their age about the world and people, but they need the tools to interact and be successful.*

Forums to Share Student Experiences: Extending the theme of empathy, parents and students both expressed a desire for intentional and safe forums for students to share their experiences in an effort for other students to understand and empathize. One parent wondered: *What if they open a space where every kid talks about something they are worrying about? Maybe if they share with all the other kids, they can have more empathy...more community building.* Other descriptions seemed rooted in or informed by Restorative Justice practices. A parents shared: *what if after an issue, schools created listening sessions or forums for students to share their stories, experiences, and the impact of what happened and what they are feeling*. Students also stated a need for students to engage, share, and listen to understand each other better, a few students cited the Restorative Justice and Equity Group's Town Hall events that gave them an opportunity to talk about what it's like to go to school in Bend La Pine Schools as a student of color.

VI.   Key Takeaways for Historically Underserved Groups

LGBTQ Students

Foster Gender Inclusive Cultures: Students and families talked about both policy and practice elements of what gender inclusive schools would entail. In policy, it includes **access to gender neutral bathrooms** (without having to ask an adult to unlock them), ensuring inclusive access to locker rooms with teams, field trip accomodations, and other school activities where a non-binary gender identity can lead to exclusion. In practice, this means that **school staff do things like ask for and use student pronouns and also use students chosen name**. Additionally, **staff awareness of gender-binary activities** (*girls to the left, boys to the right*) and language (*good morning boys and girls*) that lead to non-binary gender students feeling marginalized or excluded from school activities. Multiple students also mentioned the **importance of teachers who are "safe space" trained** and to have prominent signs on their doors and in their classrooms, signaling their allyship.

Accuracy of Student Identity in Synergy: Students also stressed the importance of **accurate information about their names and gender identity in Synergy**. The presence of legacy information about students' sex and given name in the system has led to confusion by staff of what information is accurate. As a result students report that some **teachers asserting their preference (or power) to recognize and affirm a students' gender identity and/or their chosen name, or to not.**

LGBTQ Inclusive Curriculum: All three sessions with LGBTQ+ identifying students stated the need for relevant course content in health and history that is inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community and individuals experience and needs.

GSAs Matter: All LGBTQ+ affinity sessions, and 2 additional sessions mentioned the importance of GSA clubs to create inclusion and belonging for LGBTQ+ identifying students. One student remarked, *I sometimes feel out of place in Bend, in general. At school. I have found people like me so I feel included and supported.*

Students of Color and Linguistically Diverse Students and Families
Participants from both of these affinity groups expressed specific concepts and themes in common, and we have included them here together to provide emphasis in their shared experiences.

Distinct tone differences of how schools could improve: There was a clear contrast in the tone when students of color and linguistically diverse students discussed their experience at school. The non-affinity groups tended to focus on things like increasing activities, involvement opportunities, and school spirit. Affinity groups all cited the need to address **racial discriminiation and racism in student interactions, increase racial literacy and diversity awareness by staff, to improve the representation of school staff, and to implement culturally relevant teaching and activities across grade levels.** Many students describe the exhausting reality of navigating multiple cultures and need to code-switch at school to get by; other expressed a need for intentional efforts for schools to make events, assemblies, and student activities more culturally inclusive. Students recommended that **racial diversity, equity, and**

culturally specific education be integrated into the curriculum, the same way that are career preparation is included into classes. It's that fundamental.

School system burdens are often carried by students and families: Spanish-speaking students discussed their **frustrations with how English Language Learners are expected to learn**. One student lamented: *We need to focus on our own education, but sometimes we are pulled out for ELL services and other times we are asked to help other students who need language support; it's not fair.* A parent shared a similar sentiment: *I have two kids, and we came to this school 2 years ago. At first I felt really frustrated because other kids in class had to help my kids to understand and do their work. Should there be an adult who helps with kids who have recently arrived?*

Parents also discussed how **accessing language services can make them feel like they are an inconvenience**, even when they are showing up to support their children. One parent shared: *We need more Latino Liaisons, but the liaisons also shouldn't be responsible for all of the communication and support for Latino families. Every person in every school should be able to receive us and help us. It's not fair that the school says we have to wait for the one person who speaks Spanish to come help us, or to tell us they can't help us because that person isn't available. It's not fair. My family should receive the same attention and service as any other family and not feel marginalized when I get to my child's school.* Another parent shared: *we wish meetings were in Spanish. It would be a big help, and we could participate more. It's uncomfortable to participate in a school-wide meeting through an interpreter.* Throughout the sessions, linguistically diverse participants shared their experience of feeling like they are obligations to school, rather than engaged and concerned parent partners.

Students with Disabilities and their families

School-Family Partnerships: Parents of students with disabilities share a deep appreciation for and desire for more collaboration between staff and families to help their children thrive. Parents reported that teachers and aides taking time and interest to hear how morning routines went at home as a gauge for how the rest of the day might go makes them feel connected and at ease. It makes an even bigger impact when staff are open to meeting with families to collaborate on solutions to issues as they come up during the week. One parent commented about the pushback they sometimes receive from staff: *Don't feel threatened if we offer some ideas about how to help our kids!* Parents wished there was more consistency between the grade levels in terms of partnering with schools, with a feeling that *at each grade level we have to do this all over again, re-start the system and process of creating a plan that works all over again.* It would be helpful in there was more continuity, more trust in making these transitions go more smoothly by partnering with families, early and often.

Interestingly, parents discussed different barriers or push backs between roles at schools. When they go directly to the teacher, they find *they are receptive to feedback, want to collaborate, and are willing to try new things.* However, if they go to the school administrator, t*hey feel like they are at the gatekeeper, it takes a long time, and they often find the gate is closed (the answer is "no").*

Inclusion, not Accomodation: Across both student and parent sessions, participants expressed a desire for students with disabilities to be ***meaningfully integrated into their school community and educational experiences***. Families mentioned consistently, they just want *their kid to be treated like any kid*, and how much they appreciate the effort *to recognize, include, and connect their child into regular school activities*. Parents cited, for example, that they like it when the school reaches out to create a plan for their student to participate in a school event. It feels proactive and validates that their student is a valuable member of the class/school community. However, these plans tend to rely on parent participation. If a parent is not available to directly participate with their child in the event, the inclusion effort often falls apart. This process is an area to address and improve.

Related, the high school students that participated in focus groups shared issues around their own inclusion. A number of students discussed how they **feel judged or that they have to work to hide their disabilities**. One student shared: *I have to hide my ADHD so that I don't get judged. It makes it harder to go to school.* Another student shared: *I've been judged many times on how smart I am, every day. One mistake and then you are retarded, stupid.* Students feel a lot of pressure to feel like they belong.

The need for advocates: Across these sessions, it was made clear that families and students need advocates to support them. On the student side, there was a mix of experience. In some cases, students felt really supported within the school setting. One student recounted: *My teacher knows I have an IEP and he came to me and assured me that he was here to help and he knew what was in my IEP.* On the flip side, another recalled: *I didn't even know I had accommodations, I have an IEP. I didn't know I could take my test in a separate room, didn't know any of these things. At the end of the year last year I knew. I went my whole middle school career and freshman year not knowing this. Let students know what they can have and know.* Ensuring both students and teachers are clear about the supports students can access seems foundational to revisit.

Among parents, ideas surfaced to build community with each other in order to learn together and to learn from each others experiences in navigating the school system with a students with disabilities. Parents shared some powerful examples of how connection has occurred among families. One parent remembered: *I had an administrator ask to share my number with another parent and we are still friends to this day.* Another parent wondered: *is there a way to have another parent that could come with me to an IEP to support?* Helping facilitate connection and peer support seems to be an opportunity ripe for exploration to help parents support their children and achieve the inclusions outcomes they seek.

VII.   Key Takeaways for South County Schools

While we have included La Pine area student and family session themes into the overall report, there are some themes and areas that came up across the La Pine area schools that we feel are important to call out here.

Perception that South County Schools schools get less than anything North: *Getting less* was a general theme across La Pine area sessions. Students and parents alike felt there are fewer electives and more CTE programs available to students in La Pine, as well as few middle school opportunities for students to explore their interests. As the remedy to the theme of "less," participants explicitly named *more*: more advanced classes, dual credit classes, and CTE classes, but also more field trips (beyond AVID) and more college visits. Parents across the South County sessions also discussed the challenges in creating teacher-student relationships due to the high turnover rate of teachers. One parent group, described a feeling that *La Pine is the district's training ground for new teachers*, and as a result many teachers didn't seem invested in the La Pine community and the success of La Pine students. One parent said they felt new teachers were just *waiting it out until they got a job in Bend.* In a student session, a participant mentioned that they didn't feel like their teachers were very positive about them: *I've heard teachers talk with other teachers about kids in a negative manner.*

We have unique needs: Families across sessions in La Pine area schools discussed the need for social emotional learning, support with interpersonal interactions among students, and generally more care for students. Parents also explicitly cited a need for nurses, psychologists, social workers, and mental health providers too. An overwhelming sentiment among families was that *when the district's resources are distributed, socio-economic factors should be considered to be more fair.*

Proactive and Accurate Communication: Not unlike feedback from families across the district, there are specific requests to improve communication. In particular, families are seeking more proactive information, they don't necessarily know where they can plug into help at their childrens' schools and the don't know what resources are available to them to help their children succeed; simple things like regular email communication and an event calendar that they could subscribe to, were cited as potential solutions. Additionally, students discussed the value of having a tool like ParentVue, but mentioned issues with the timeliness and accuracy of information which had in the past caused conflict in a family around performance expectations and had caused another student to miss out on participating in a sporting event because the information about attendance and grades wasn't accurate.