

What Would You Change About School?

Summary of Census 2023 Student Ideas

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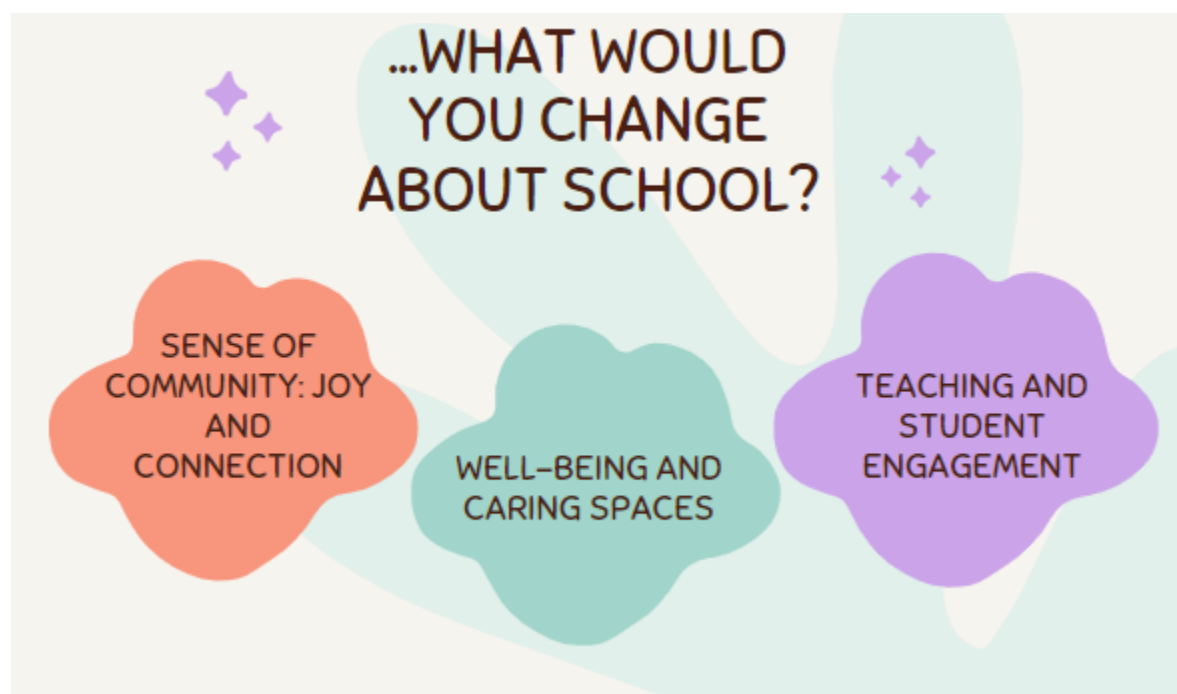
Introduction

The final question on the Student Census 2023 was an open response item that asked:

If you were in charge of your school, what is one thing you would change about it?

Approximately 36,000 students responded to the question. A representative sample, based on demographics and Toronto District School Board (TDSB) school geography was created and analyzed.

Overall, students had many ideas about how they would improve their school experience to ensure students feel welcome, included, affirmed, safe, and cared for all the while having engaging learning experiences. There was a wide spectrum of responses about student experiences within TDSB schools with ideas falling into three large thematic areas.



Thematic Summary

Sense of Community: Joy and Connection

- **Joy:** Students' perceptions of joy centered on having fun and spending time together outside of the formal learning environment. This was the most common type of feedback from elementary students and was a strong theme among secondary students as well. Students wanted a greater sense of community and joy in their schools. Some suggestions elementary students offered included more communal activities such as gym, art, pizza parties, new food options, free choice activities, fun assemblies, etc. Secondary students suggested activities such as more school dances, school spirit days, graduation trips, better music on the morning announcements. For both panels, respondents suggested adding new clubs and sports to make sure all kids had the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities. Some students asked for school to be more fun, engaging, and with more hands-on learning activities.
- **Connections and relations between staff and students and peer groups:** An important theme, students called for more empathetic relationships between staff and students and more respect and kindness shared within the student body.

Teaching and Student Engagement

- **Curriculum changes:** Students offered suggestions on how to refocus certain curriculum pieces. Some students felt that school was too focused on careers and didn't provide enough time for them to reflect on their personal strengths and goals. Other comments suggested slowing down the pace of learning to support students that might be struggling or adjusting the amount of work and consider students' well-being when scheduling assignments, homework, and exams. Secondary students were looking for more opportunities for paid work, volunteer experience or for job-embedded learning, such as internships and co-op placements.
- **Learning schedules:** Students commented that school schedules should be more responsive to student needs. For elementary students, requests for longer recesses (or adding a recess type break for older students) was most common. For secondary students, adding more late starts, early dismissals, or just shifting the hours of the school day to be later were the most common suggestions.
- **Teaching:** Students indicated that the teachers' passion for learning impacts classroom engagement. They felt that it is important to ensure teachers are experts in their field and passionate about teaching students.
- **Student leadership:** Students expressed a desire to have their voices heard and be more involved in school decision making. This included activities such as class assignments,

assignment weighting, course availability, classroom participation expectations, and classroom/school rules, and conflict resolution practices.

- **Transitions to post-secondary education opportunities:** Secondary students asked for more support and information around post-secondary programs and opportunities. This feedback included more information on students' options, identifying program requirements, learning about scholarship opportunities, and support through the application processes. Students called for relevant learning that will help them prepare for graduation and the world beyond high school. A small number of younger students suggested more support for students transitioning into high school.
- **School facilities:** One of the most prevalent themes among both elementary and secondary responses was about the condition of the school facilities themselves. Three aspects of facilities were identified more frequently than any others: the conditions of school washrooms, the need for air conditioning/heating, and playgrounds or schoolyards in elementary schools. Examples within these themes included: modernizations (e.g., touch-free water fountains), cleanliness and safety (e.g., repair damage, clean more regularly), aesthetics and comfort (e.g., large windows, open spaces), capacity (e.g., no portables, bigger gym), additional facilities (e.g., theatre classroom, cafeteria), updated resources (e.g., new instruments, more library books), and outdoor spaces (e.g., adding gardens, winter maintenance).
- **Technology:** A minor theme was changes or improvements to technology and software. Students suggested better Wi-Fi, updated computers, or more Chromebooks for students. A small number of students expressed a desire for less technology.

Well-being and Caring Spaces: Cultural, Emotional, and Physical Safety

- **Inclusive, supportive, and identity affirmed learning experiences:** Students called for more culturally relevant learning in schools. Some students asked for more representation of their identities within school staff, student body, learning materials and school events. In the same vein, however a minor theme, students called for greater access to culturally relevant resources and spaces (e.g., prayer rooms, culturally relevant food options).
- A small number of students commented that it is important to ensure all students have access to the necessary resources to fully participate in school (e.g., school supplies, waived activity fees, clothes, food). This also included students with accessibility needs. Students called for equal participation in school spaces and learning for students with disabilities and exceptionalities.
- Students called for more gender-based and sexual orientation-based supports like Gender and Sexuality Alliance Networks and gender-neutral washrooms. Students also suggested more support for newcomers to Canada, English language learners,

international students, and newcomers who are adjusting to Canadian life outside of school.

- At the same time, some students expressed concerns about the equity work being undertaken, such as the introduction of the lottery system or representation of diverse identities in the curriculum, pointing to a need to help students better understand the Board's equity goals.
- **Student and Staff Well-being:** Students called for an increase in mental health support. Suggestions for increased mental health supports were more common among secondary students, but an important theme in both panels. Students felt stressed about work, suggested that staff check in with students and prioritize well-being over marks. They also requested more resources such as regular access to mental health support staff or calming rooms. A small number of students – almost all elementary – expressed concerns about staff well-being and requested support for their teachers or other school staff members.
- **Student Safety:** While almost 9 out of 10 students across the TDSB report being somewhat or very safe in schools ([TDSB, 2023](#)), safety was one of the key issues raised in the open response option. Students expressed concern about sexism, homophobia, transphobia, sexual harassment, bullying in schools, and safety in general in some instances. Some students wrote about microaggressions, slurs, and other discrimination in their school communities. Many of these respondents wanted their school environment to be free of racism, discriminatory language, and bullying. Bullying was a major theme among elementary respondents, in particular. Students want to understand the reasons for different consequences and be involved in school decision making. Almost exclusively among secondary students, some respondents wished that students would not vape, smoke, or use drugs on school property – in particular, in the washrooms.
- There were disagreements that existed in the comments related to supervision. While students do not want to feel like they are under surveillance, some felt increased supervision or more staff presence in some instances would help students feel safer. Some comments reflected a lack of understanding in restorative practices.

Next Steps

This thematic summary was used to support the [Multi-Year Strategic Plan](#) renewal consultations. More detailed student comments from the Census will continue to be analyzed in collaboration with student groups and staff.

Themes are consistent with those shared by students in other spaces including conversations with African, Afro-Caribbean, and Black Students at the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement; *Decolonizing our Schools* (Dion, 2010); Youth Action Research work; and Student Check-in results (2020, 2021, 2022).

For example:

- centering joy ([TDSB, Focussed Conversations with ACB Students, Families and Community, 2022](#));
- representation in teaching and learning ([Dion, Decolonizing our Schools, 2010](#); [TDSB, Focussed Conversations with ACB Students, Families and Community, 2022](#); TDSB, Youth Participatory Action Summer Institute, 2023);
- experiences of discrimination (TDSB, Youth Participatory Action Summer Institute, 2023);
- mental health supports ([Return to School Surveys, TDSB, 2020](#); [Student and Parent Winter Check-ins, 2021](#); [Student and Parent Spring Check-ins, 2022](#); TDSB, Youth Participatory Action Summer Institute, 2023);
- mentorship and caring connections ([TDSB, Focussed Conversations with ACB Students, Families and Community, 2022](#); Youth Participatory Action Summer Institute, 2023; ([Return to School Surveys, TDSB, 2020](#); [Student and Parent Winter Check-ins, 2021](#); [Student and Parent Spring Check-ins, 2022](#));
- student leadership in school decision making and restorative practices (Youth Participatory Action Summer Institute, 2023); and
- post-secondary pathway supports ([TDSB, Focussed Conversations with ACB Students, Families and Community, 2022](#); Youth Participatory Action Summer Institute, 2023); and instructional quality ([Return to School Surveys, TDSB, 2020](#); [Student and Parent Winter Check-ins, 2021](#); [Student and Parent Spring Check-ins, 2022](#))