

July 28, 2022

Our school district worked with representatives from CESO Communications in the spring and summer of 2022 to engage with middle school and high school students, team members, and parents/guardians, as well as other community stakeholders to get community input on our strategic planning goal of creating a learning environment that is collaborative, safe, and inclusive for all students. More than 100 members of our school district community responded to the call to participate in person. In addition, 1,767 middle school and high school students provided input through a survey on the learner experience, belonging, and empathy at their school. CESO's report on the input from these community engagement activities is contained in the attached report.

After analyzing the information in the report from CESO, I draw the following belief statements from our community input.

1. It is essential that all students, no matter their background, have a right to be welcomed into our school community.
2. Students should feel physically and mentally safe in our schools.
3. Students should feel comfortable being seen for their uniqueness and not be ridiculed for it.

Below are actions we are committed to taking to ensure a sense of belonging for all students, consistent with the input from our students, staff, and community. School and district leaders will work to translate these commitments into annual priorities through our strategic planning process.

1. Elevate student voices - Establish processes to directly engage with groups of middle school and high school students in the discussion of complex topics and decisions that impact them.
2. Address negative behavior to improve school climate - Address negative behaviors, including accountability for the use of derogatory comments. This includes behavior that occurs in class, as well as in the hallways and throughout the school. Our processes will help students understand what they did wrong, the harm that was caused, and how to move forward from the mistake. Students need to know that when they report mistreatment that their concerns are taken seriously and that something is done about it.
3. Teach critical thinking skills - Provide training to teachers to integrate and teach critical thinking skills.
4. Teach conflict resolution - Provide training to teachers to teach students to learn to disagree with peers, respect differences, and practice empathy.
5. Teach and promote community, belonging, and accountability – Provide training to teach and integrate the skills associated with these themes.

District leaders will report progress on any annual priorities generated from this list of commitments to the Board throughout the school year.

We also remain committed to improving mental health support for students. We have added middle school and high school counselors over the past two years and are prepared to expand in-school therapy capacity this fall with our community mental health partners.

We have important work ahead of us. We welcome the input and support of our community to ensure our students are getting the best education in positive learning environment, consistent with our vision and motto.

Sincerely,

Dr. Brad Welle  
Superintendent of Schools



**Grain Valley Schools**  
*Stakeholder Engagement Report*  
*School Climate & Belonging*

June 2022

prepared by Susan Brott, APR, Senior Strategist,  
CESO Communications

C ●  
e ●  
S ●  
O ●



## 01 | Executive Summary •

In May 2022, Grain Valley Schools (GVS) contracted with CESO Communications (CESO) to facilitate a series of stakeholder engagements around the topic of creating a learning environment that is collaborative, safe and inclusive for all students. Rather than directly addressing the issues surrounding the LGBTQ+ situation (i.e. “safe space” stickers) in the district, the engagement conversations were structured to align with the district’s strategic plan, specifically the focus on a “Collaborative, Safe and Inclusive Environment” focus.

The goal of the engagements was to provide insight that the district could use in its implementation of the strategic plan and additional activities to enhance a culture of communication and engagement throughout the district. By focusing on the broader issue of belonging, engagements provided a safe space for all voices while also insulating the LGBTQ+ students and community from excessively negative and potentially hurtful comments.

Our approach included the following engagement activities to ensure a variety of voices were heard:

- Discussion groups with middle school and high school students and staff members
- An online student survey with middle school and high school students
- A large-group community conversation open to students, parents, staff and community members

Engagements were well attended and offer significant insights into how the district wants to heal and move forward from recent events. Details on key findings can be found at the end of the document. In general, insights from students, parents, families, teachers and community members centered around three key themes: Belonging, Engagement and School Climate. In addition, many comments at the community conversation, as well as in student and staff focus groups, focused on the recent actions of the school board. No matter which side of the sticker debate individuals may fall, it is evident that the community of Grain Valley is interested in coming together to address what has happened and work together to create a more welcoming and inclusive school environment where all students feel they belong.

## 02 | Stakeholder Engagements •

### STUDENT ENGAGEMENTS

There was an intentional effort to include student voices in the process in order to understand how recent decisions and school climate is impacting them. Middle school and high school administration invited a representative group of students from their respective schools to participate in focus groups and all secondary students were provided time the last week of school to complete a brief climate survey.

## Focus Groups

One focus group at each middle school and two focus groups at the high school were held with students on May 31 and June 1. In all, 29 students participated in the focus groups. With no administrators or staff in the room, students were encouraged to respond openly and honestly to a number of questions focused on their experience in Grain Valley Schools. Topics centered around belonging, school climate, and ways that climate can be improved to encourage safe and supportive environments for all students. Students offered insights about what teachers and staff members can do, as well as what students can do to improve the climate at their schools.

First, students were asked to rate — on scale from one to five, with five being very favorable to one being not all favorable — the climate at their school during the 2021-2022 school year. Overall, middle school students rated their school climate more favorably than high school students, with the average score for middle school being 3.6 (leaning toward favorable) and high school at 3.0 (somewhat favorable).

Students next identified one or two words that came to mind when they thought about the climate at their school. The following word cloud is a combination of all of the students' responses.



## Belonging

Discussion then turned to how the students define belonging and what they think adults, both inside and outside the school, mean when they talk about belonging.

Students were very reflective when sharing what it felt to belong. None of the students failed to respond to this question, and their answers were quick. Students seemed to genuinely have



examples and experiences to pull from in which they felt they belonged, and when they did not feel they belonged.

The following is a sampling of direct quotes from students when asked how they know if they belong:

- Getting welcomed in to the school or group
- Not pressured to believe the same thing as other people
- Have a group of people you can confide in or are "true" friends with
- Be open to people
- Be able to not be judged all the time
- Having friends that care about me
- Seeing me for who I am, not feeling invisible
- Being able to go into the hallway and not having people ruin my day
- People's body language matches their words
- Encouragement and treating everyone fairly
- Recognizing me for who I am now
- School spirit – everyone is an eagle
- Can talk to anyone
- Not being "messed" with
- Not being told how to view things
- Having my opinions respected
- Where I can be 100% myself
- Feeling safe around the people you are with
- Can disagree, but still get along
- Unconditional love and support

When asked what they think adults mean when they talk about belonging and climate in Grain Valley Schools, students were less quick to respond. Many responses were similar to their own definitions, although some students, especially at the high school, noted that some adults may not really understand what it is like to be a student today, both in general and specifically at GVHS. For example, one student highlighted how technology (cyberbullying, social media) has made school climate different for students, and a lot of adults really don't understand what that is like. They also noted that perhaps it was generational and that perhaps adults are just more "fervent" in their beliefs. Students also noted that many teachers in GVS understand what students are going through, but feel that more of the misunderstanding comes from adults outside of school. As one student said, "They are focused on it [school climate] like it is their job, but it's not. It's *our* life."

### **Benefits and Challenges of being a student in Grain Valley Schools**

As for the best part about being a GVS student, many commented on the relationships they have built with friends and teachers. In particular, students talked of having the ability to meet people from diverse backgrounds and with diverse beliefs. One student shared that it was

because of the different friends she made at school over the last three years that she now feels she has discovered who she really is. Several comments were also made about the wide range of opportunities and activities, especially athletics, available to students.

When asked about the challenges of being a student in GVS, student responses returned to issues of climate and how students (and some teachers) are divided in their beliefs, with a lack of respect for views that are different from their own or views that are perceived as different from the “normal” student. At the middle school level, most challenges identified were related to how students treated each other — bullying, rumors, peer pressure, “drama” of teenage life. At the high school, students talked often about the use of the “N” word and overt acts of racism as well as homophobic and other derogatory comments between students with no action by adults to address it. High school students also commented about the impact of the recent sticker incident and resultant news coverage. Several students noted that they feel the incident has put a negative label on GVHS and the community as whole. They shared specific examples of feeling this when in competitions at other high schools or when talking with friends and co-workers from outside Grain Valley.

### Improving School Climate

Students offered several actions teachers and other school staff could take to help create a more safe and supportive school climate for all students. Comments focused on the understanding that students spend a lot of time at school and every student should be able to feel safe and not be judged for who they are or what they believe.

Specifically, they suggested that adults in the building should:

- Directly address the issues and be willing to talk to students about issues (including what happened to the stickers)
- Take the time to make sure students are ok, that they are feeling safe
- Put themselves in student’s shoes to better understand what they are going through
- They (the board) need to allow teachers to provide space for conversations and things happening outside of school, even if controversial, so that students are better prepared to deal with it. Don’t hide it from them.
- While classes like AP Government allow students to respectfully debate issues, that should not be the only class where this occurs. These are real life issues and we need to be able to talk to our classmates in class with a teacher who can help us learn how to have the conversation.
- Too many negative actions and behavior by students go unaddressed. Even if we tell a teacher or principal, some students continue the behaviors (e.g. racism, derogatory comments, Confederate flags).
- Be willing to hold assemblies at school to address such behaviors with the entire student body (as told by a student who admitted they don’t like assemblies, but they are sometimes necessary).



- Pay closer attention to what is going on during class, in the hallways, at lunch, and addressing the behaviors. Don't ignore them. Sometimes teachers need to tell us it is wrong because the student may not really realize it.
- All the responsibility for these conversations shouldn't fall just on counselors. Teachers need to take responsibility for what is happening in their classrooms too.
- Every adult should work on building relationships with students. Some teachers are great at this, others don't seem to think it is their responsibility.
- Treat all students fairly, don't be biased. Some teachers only talk with a few students or those they know from outside of class.
- Let students know you are there for them and willing to talk with them as needed.

When asked about what they and other students can do to improve the school climate, students at the middle school talked a lot about not getting caught up in teenage drama, such as relationship drama, who said what on social media, who is more popular, and/or friend cliques. Both middle school and high school students talked about the importance of being kind and respectful — don't judge others for different beliefs, be nicer in general, stop using derogatory comments about others, especially comments regarding race, gender identity and ability. There were also comments about keeping "politically charged" statements out of school. In general, students talked about the need for students to stop thinking there is one way to be, one type of person. Be open and recognize that people are different, and that is ok. As one student said, "We need to make everyone feel proud to be here at our school, where kids want to come here and parents want to move here."

On their own, high school students moved to a discussion about the stickers (without any prompting from the facilitator). Some students noted how it made them feel when the stickers were removed, others said they frankly never noticed them and didn't understand how they became a big deal. As one student said, "It seems like it only became an issue when the board directed them to come down, which tells me students were not having an issue with them, only some adults were."

### **Additional considerations**

Finally, students were given the opportunity to offer any additional suggestions for changes needed at Grain Valley schools or other thoughts they wanted to share. Responses were varied, and included:

- Allow for deeper discussion and "debate" on topics raised in class.
- Offer diversity training to staff and school board.
- Create a student advisory board at school that is focused on addressing issues of climate.
- Create a student panel that shares their experiences directly with teachers.
- While privacy prevents discussion of consequences given to students for bad behavior, help the "victims" understand that justice was done.



- Enforce the rules that are outlined in the handbook. Too often teachers and adults let things go.
- Use “Eagle Time” to provide opportunities for discussions of different perspectives about a variety of topics including diversity of sexuality, race, religion, mental health issues and suicide, and bullying.
- More discussion in general about different views, allowing students to form their own opinions and be critical thinkers.
- Importance of students having a say and not letting their learning get overshadowed by what their parents or other adults say.
- More attention to representing all cultures in our schools, but not through stereotypes.
- *Middle School specific suggestions:*
  - More breaks – more time for students to connect (four minutes is not enough).
  - Longer exploratory classes and more electives.
  - Start school later.
  - Offer more diverse options for food, because “with better food, students will be in a better mood and better able to learn.”
  - Too often students get sent to the “buddy room” as punishment, but kids actually like to go there.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Student Survey

The district has previously administered student climate surveys on an annual basis. Over the last six years, these surveys show that on average, 83% of middle school students and 73% of high school students strongly or somewhat agree with the statement “I feel like I belong.”

Building on that and other student climate survey data, an additional anonymous survey was administered to middle school and high school students during the last week of school (May 23-27, 2022). The survey asked students to rate their level of agreement — *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree* — with statements about the learner experience, belonging and empathy. What follows is a detailed analysis of that end-of-year survey. Note that the word students is used interchangeably with “respondents” throughout this analysis but is only intended to represent the students who answered any given question.

## Participation

The survey had strong participation, especially given the time of year it was administered. In total there were 1,767 responses, with a 92% completion rate. The survey was intended to be brief and easy to complete. The typical respondent took a little less than four minutes to complete the survey. High school students comprised 47% of respondents and middle school students represented 53% of respondents, with a statistically equivalent response rate between the two middle schools. When looking at individual grade levels, all grades were well

represented, except for grade 12, which is not unexpected given that many seniors had already graduated and were not readily engaged with school.

## Demographics

Demographic analyses of groups (race, gender, grade/school) only note areas where there are noticeable differences among groups when compared to either the overall results or other groups within the same category. Groups and categories not noted in this report showed no significant difference when compared to the overall survey results.

### Race/Ethnicity

Students were asked to voluntarily identify their race/ethnicity. There was a lot of variety in the size of the different racial groups in which students categorized themselves. Students identifying as white represented more than three-quarters of all respondents. The next largest group was 135 students (7.64%) who identified as more than one race/ethnicity. Other racial/ethnic groups were represented as follows:

- American Indian/Alaskan Native - 2.04%
- Asian - 1.30%
- Black/African American - 4.58%
- Hispanic/LatinX - 5.15%
- Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander - 0.96%
- Prefer not to answer - 3%

Generally, responses from white students mirrored the overall responses. Among the different groups, students identifying as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander differed the most from other groups, but it should be noted that they were also the smallest racial/ethnic group with only 17 respondents.

### Gender

Responses were evenly distributed between respondents identifying as man/boy or woman/girl, with five percent of respondents choosing not to identify their gender.

### Additional Demographic Analysis

Responses from students who preferred not to identify themselves (in both the race/ethnicity and gender categories) showed the most significant differences/disparities as compared to overall results and other groups within their demographic categories, with the greater disparity occurring among students who preferred not to identify their gender.

### Learner Experience

Among questions about learner experience, students were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements:

- I enjoy learning — it is fun, engaging, worthwhile and relevant
- I like coming to my school every day
- I am greeted by name at my school by my teacher(s)

- I am confident at school — I feel I can do things
- I am resilient — I can deal with challenges at school
- I feel supported at school — I receive help when I need it
- At school I feel as if I have to be careful about what I say and how I say it
- At school I feel hesitant to share my ideas with others

For the purposes of analysis, we have assessed results to indicate either overall agreement (strongly agree/agree) or overall disagreement (disagree/strongly disagree). Where statistically significant, we have identified areas of intensity — strongly agree or strongly disagree — in responses.

### All Students

- More than 76% of students enjoy learning
- Approximately 57% of students like coming to school every day
- A strong majority of students (87%) report being greeted with their name by teachers
- About three-fourths of students report feeling confident at school
- More than 85% of students see themselves as resilient
- Approximately 80% of students feel supported at school
- Nearly 80% of students feel they have to be careful about what they say at school
- Just over half (53%) of all students report they feel hesitant to share their ideas with others

### Learner Experience Responses by Race

There were few significant differences in responses when comparing white students to all other races (as a combined group). Although students identifying their race/ethnicity as something other than white represents less than 25% of respondents, the following racial/ethnic group observations are noted:

- *Black/African-American*
  - 53% disagree with the statement, "I like coming to my school every day." (compared to 44% of all respondents)
  - 82% report feeling confident at school (8% more than white students)
- *Hispanic/LatinX*
  - 53% disagree with the statement "I like coming to my school every day." (compared to 44% of all respondents)
- *Prefer not to answer*
  - The biggest disparities in the Learner Experience category is found among the 53 students who elected "prefer not to answer" for their race. Among these students
    - 54% disagree with the statement "I like coming to my school every day." (an increase of 10% over that of all respondents)
    - 67% agree that they feel hesitant to share their ideas with others (14% more than overall responses)



### Learner Experience Responses by Gender

There were very few differences in responses when comparing students identifying as man/boy or woman/girl, with the exception of the following:

- More girls (30%) disagreed with the statement about being confident at school when compared to boys (16%).

The biggest disparities in this category — and across the survey — can be found among the 90 students who selected “prefer not to answer” with regard to their gender identity. Among these students:

- Almost two-thirds (65%) disagree with the statement “I like coming to my school every day.” (21% more than agreement rate of all respondents)
- Slightly more than half of these respondents (52%) report feeling confident at school (compared to 75% of all respondents)
- Approximately 30% disagreed with the statement, “I feel resilient at school.” (compared to only 13% of all respondents)
- About 33% report not feeling supported at school (compared to less than 20% of all respondents)
- More than 90% report feeling they need to be careful about what they say to others (compared to 80% of all respondents)
- 76% agree that they are hesitant to share their ideas (compared to only 54% of all respondents)

### Learner Experience Responses by School/Grade Level

There were very few differences in responses when comparing schools and grade levels of students, with the exception of middle school students reporting that they like to come to school more than their high school counterparts.

### Belonging

Among questions about belonging, students were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements:

- I feel accepted for who I am at my school
- I am cared for and liked at my school
- I have friends at school
- I feel my perspective is valued and respected at school
- I am comfortable sharing my ideas and opinions with others at my school
- I feel that others around me at my school are accepted and welcomed
- I feel pressure to conform in order to feel accepted at my school
- I feel as if I just don't fit in with the other people in my classes

For the purposes of analysis, we have assessed results to indicate either overall agreement (strongly agree/agree) or overall disagreement (disagree/strongly disagree). Where statistically

significant, we have identified areas of intensity — strongly agree or strongly disagree — in responses.

### All Students

- 80% of all respondents feel accepted for who they are at school
- 85% of students agree they are “cared for and liked” at their school
- Almost all (95%) students report they have friends at school
- Approximately 70% of respondents feel their perspective is valued and respected at school
- Slightly more than two-thirds of students are comfortable sharing ideas and opinions with others at school
- 70% of students agree with the statement, “I feel that others around me at my school are accepted and welcomed.”
- More than half (54%) of students feel pressure to conform in order to feel accepted at school
- 37% of students report feeling they don't fit in with the other people in their classes

### Belonging Responses by Race

Among the different racial categories, the most significant difference was among students who identified Black/African-American who disagreed with the statement “I feel others around me at my school are accepted and welcomed” at a significantly greater rate (61%) that the rate of all students (29%).

As with learner experience, the biggest disparities in the belonging category is among students who selected “prefer not to answer.” Among these students:

- About one-third (32%) disagree with the statement, “I feel accepted for who I am at my school.” (compared to less than 20% of all respondents)
- 32% also disagree with the statement “I am cared for and liked at my school.” (compared to less 15% overall)
- Almost 40% do not feel that their perspective is valued and respected at school (compared to 30% of all respondents.)
- 43% are not comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions with others at school. (compared to less than 33% of all respondents who feel the same way)
- Nearly half (49%) indicated they feel as though they just don't fit in with others at school (compared to only 37% of all respondents)

### Belonging Responses by Gender

When comparing students who identified as girls versus students who identified as boys,

- 37% of girls compared to 26% of boys said they were not comfortable sharing their ideas at school
- 35% of girls disagreed more than boys (19%) with the statement, “I feel that others around me at my school are accepted and welcomed.”

Again, the biggest disparities in this category is found among students who selected “prefer not to answer” for their gender identity. Among these students:

- Almost two-thirds (65%) do not feel accepted for who they are at their school (compared to 20% of all respondents)
- 38% disagree with the statement, “I am cared for and liked at my school.” (compared to less than 15% of all respondents)
- 55% do not feel that their perspective is valued and respected at school (compared to only 30% of all respondents)
- 56% of respondents do not feel comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions with others at school (compared to less than 33% of all respondents)
- Only 40% agree that “others around me at my school are accepted and welcomed” (compared to 70% of all respondents)
- Over two-thirds (68%) report feeling “pressure to conform in order to feel accepted at my school” (compared to 46% of all respondents)
- 72% report feeling “as if I just don’t fit in with other people in my classes” (compared to 37% of all respondents)

### **Belonging Responses by School/Grade Level**

Differences in a sense of belonging were genuinely attributable to the different ages and maturity levels of students:

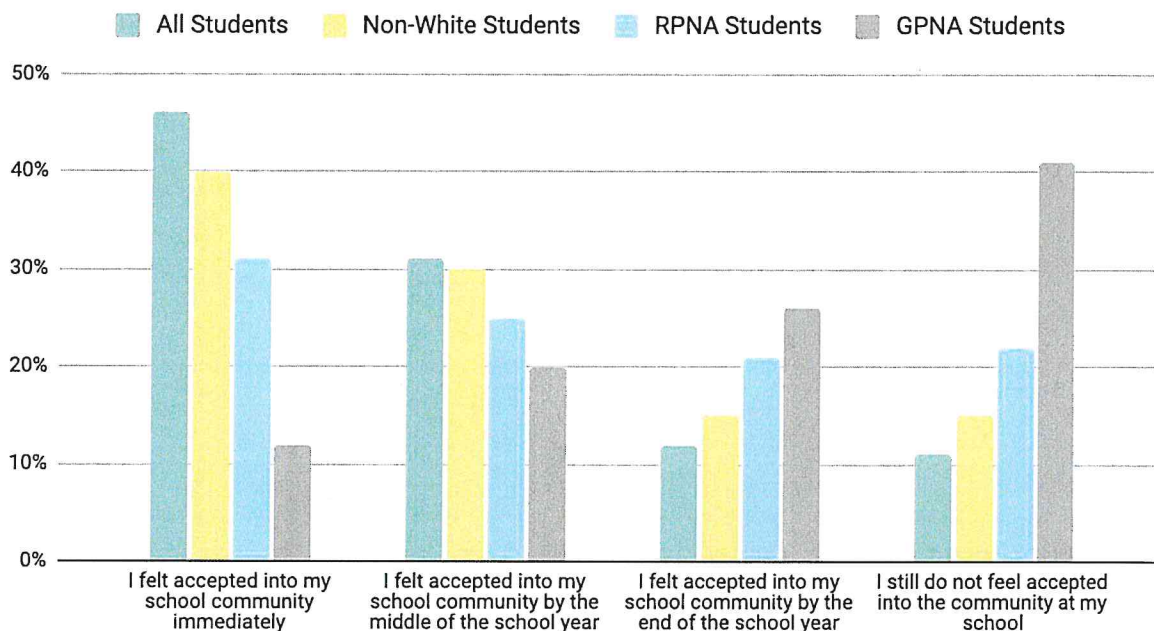
- Middle school students were more likely to strongly agree about having friends at school than high school students
- More middle school students feel their perspective is valued as compared to high school students
- More middle school students feel comfortable sharing their ideas as compared to high school students
- More middle school students feel others are accepted and valued as compared to high school students
- High school students are less likely to feel like they fit in as compared to middle school students

### **Length of time to feel accepted at school**

In addition to rating their level of agreement to the above statements, students were also asked to describe their experience this year in terms of feeling accepted into their school community. When compared to the overall results, students who elected not to identify either their race (RPNA) or gender (GPNA) reported not feeling accepted at all or taking longer to feel accepted when compared to all students.



## Length of Time to Feel Accepted at School



## Empathy

Among questions about empathy, students were asked to how frequently — never/rarely, some of the time, most of the time, all of the time — they were able to do the following during the 2021-2022 school year:

- Carefully listen to other people's points of view
- Care about other people's feelings
- Get along with students who are different from me
- Remain calm, even when someone was bothering me or saying bad things
- Allow others to speak without interruption
- Respectful of the views of others when they disagreed with me
- Disagree with others without starting an argument
- Stand up for myself without putting others down

Generally, higher degrees of empathy correlate with individuals being able to do the above with more frequency. However, it should not be concluded that such individuals are more empathetic overall. Factors such as feelings of safety, belonging and connections all influence how empathetic someone is able to feel in a particular environment.

For the purposes of analysis, we have assessed results to indicate either frequently (most of the time, all of the time) or infrequently (never/rarely, some of the time). Where statistically

significant, we have identified areas of intensity — never/rarely, some of the time, most of the time, all of the time — in responses.

### All Students

- More than 78% of students reported carefully listening to other people's points of view most or all of the time
- Four out of five students reported they cared about other people's feelings most or all of the time
- About three-fourths of students say they frequently "get along with students who are different from" them
- 63% of students were frequently able to remain calm, even when someone was bothering them or saying bad things
- Just over 80% of students reported they allow others to speak without interruption" most/all of the time
- 78% of students felt they were "respectful of the views of others when they disagreed with me" most or all of the time
- Two-thirds of respondents reported they can disagree with others without starting an argument
- Around 70% of students felt they could stand up for themselves without putting others down most/all of the time

### Empathy Responses by Race

In general, students who identified as non-white reported lower frequency with the statements compared to white students, and thus reported fewer feelings of empathy at school during the 2021-2022 school year. The exceptions to this were the statements about caring about others feelings and getting along with those who are different. Such responses were equivalent to those of white students.

Students who selected "prefer not to answer" for their race/ethnicity reported moderately higher levels of frequency with the statements compared to their peer

The group of students whose responses most significantly varied from other students was among students who identified as Black/African-American:

- 52% reported frequently being able to "remain calm, even when someone was bothering me or saying bad things" (compared to 64% of all students feeling the same)
- 58% reported frequently being able to "disagree with others without starting an argument" (compared to 67% of all students)
- 62% reported frequently being able to "stand up for myself without putting others down" (compared to 72% of all students)

### Empathy Responses by Gender

Overall, the responses of girls indicated higher levels of empathy than those identifying as boys. In particular, 67% of boys said they frequently were able to be “respectful of the views of others when they disagreed with me” compared with 80% of girls.

Among those who selected “prefer not to answer” for their gender identity,

- 55% reported frequently being able to “remain calm, even when someone was bothering me or saying bad things” (compared to 64% for all students)
- 62% reported frequently being able to “stand up for myself without putting others down” (compared to 72% for all students)

### Empathy Responses by School/Grade Level

Overall, high school students reported higher levels of frequency with the statement than middle school students, which again is likely attributable to maturity and development.

---

## STAFF ENGAGEMENT

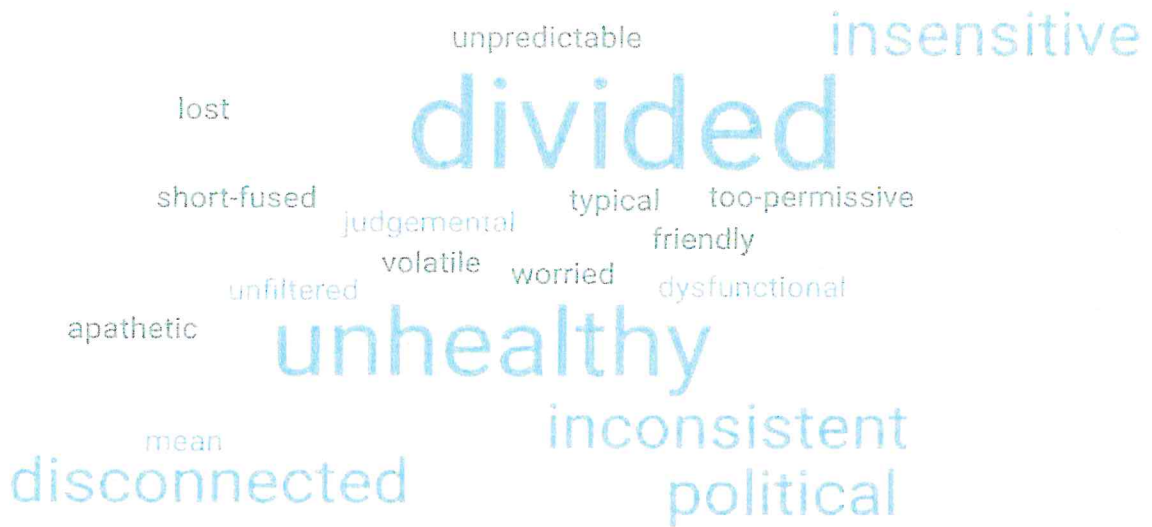
### Focus Groups

A representative group of secondary teachers and staff were invited to participate in insight sessions. Focus groups were held on May 31 for middle school staff and on June 1 for high school staff. In total, 27 staff members participated in the discussions. As with students, no administrators were present for the discussions. Staff provided candid and thoughtful responses to questions about their own experience as employees in Grain Valley Schools, and about their observations of students' experiences and the overall climate in their school. Staff provided numerous suggestions and strategies about what could be done to improve the climate and learning environment and to ensure each GVS student feels that they are welcomed and have a sense of belonging.

As with students, staff were asked to rate — on scale from one to five, with five being very favorable to one being not all favorable — the climate at their school during the 2021-2022 school year. Overall, staff at both the middle schools and high school all rated the climate in their school as only somewhat favorable, with an average score of 2.9.

Staff next identified one or two words that came to mind when they thought about the climate for students at their school. The following word cloud is a combination of all of the teachers' responses.





## Belonging

Discussion then turned to how the staff describe when students feel like they belong at school. Staff shared that it is very evident when students feel like they belong. The following is a sampling of direct quotes from staff about student belonging:

- They take care of the things around them, showing they care about their surroundings
- They are and feel safe to be themselves
- They don't have to hide their personality
- They want to be at school
- Their journals and written assignments reflect how they act
- Kids feel safe and teachers/adults care about them
- They are not afraid to take risks
- There is strong participation and engagement in school
- Kids have a sense of responsibility
- They take ownership of their actions
- They are able to advocate for themselves and others
- They are more caring
- They can be who they are and don't have to change for other students or teachers
- They have good relationships with each other and their teachers
- They care and want to learn
- No kids are sitting by themselves at lunch or hiding in the bathroom
- There is connection, genuine inclusion
- There is no single type of student - diverse groups of students being who they are

When asked what they think other adults in the community mean when they talk about the importance of belonging and climate in Grain Valley Schools, teachers' answers were

significantly different, and tended to be more negative. Responses focused on how they feel many adults in the community seem to have one definition of what it is like to be a student and what is needed for students to belong. “Everyone is the same and all needs are the same,” said one participant. Staff said that many parents focus only on what their child needs and have difficulty thinking about all students in the school. Several participants commented that there is a “traditional” view about students in Grain Valley without recognition that students are diverse in their backgrounds, beliefs and abilities. Differences are often perceived as “weird” or “outsiders.” Participants said there seems to be less parent involvement than there used to be and less connection between parents. Staff did recognize that the pandemic has had a significant impact in parent engagement.

### **Benefits and Challenges of being a student in Grain Valley Schools**

As for the best part about being a GVS student, staff frequently mentioned the experience and quality of the teachers, especially how teachers genuinely care about students, and how they often go above and beyond the curriculum to build relationships and create safe places where students can share and want to learn.

Staff also noted that there are many opportunities in Grain Valley for students to be involved, no matter the background or ability of the student. They also commented about the community resources and partners that work with the schools to provide additional opportunities for students. Teachers noted the approachability of staff, especially commenting about how visible they are and how they work to build relationships with students. Overall, staff indicated that relationships are a pillar of Grain Valley Schools and need to be allowed to flourish.

As for challenges, participants noted that the growth and demographic changes in the community are creating challenges for some members of the GVS community who want to “keep it as it is” and don’t want to adapt. As one participant said, “We seem to be holding onto a small town mentality, but we are no longer a small town.” Comments were also made about the lack of consistency in student discipline and the lack of restorative justice/practices to help students learn from their mistakes. Finally, staff identified the negative influence the Grain Valley Residents Facebook page is having on school climate, noting that most posts in the group are negative and harmful.

### **Improving School Climate**

Staff offered several actions that students could do, as well as what they could do, to create a more safe and supportive school climate for all students.

Teachers said students need to increase their awareness and understanding of diverse perspectives, understanding that there are views and beliefs that are different than their own, but that are not necessarily wrong. They also encourage students to not jump to conclusions about others based on stereotypes they have heard or created. They hope students can respect others and not try to change the beliefs of others. In general, teachers said that most

students do want to help each other, but they are not always given the opportunity to do so. There was a general consensus among participants that students need to learn more empathy and have experiences with people who are different from them..

Staff also encouraged students to take more ownership and responsibility for their actions. Students need to follow the expectations for behavior and think about how they speak to one another.

As for what they or their colleagues could do to help improve school climate, staff said that there needs to be safe classrooms and spaces for students to go and have safe conversations. They encouraged their colleagues to celebrate differences more. Several participants suggested hiring a more diverse staff that is representative of the students, and making that a priority in employee recruitment.

Staff also said there needs to be more consistent disruption by all staff of bad behaviors. But it needs to go beyond just interrupting negative behaviors, there needs to be follow-up conversations to help students take ownership of their actions. They noted it was important for staff to model the behavior they want to see in their students.

Finally, staff asked for more diversity training and for strategies to create more inclusive and supportive classrooms. They also suggested that lessons could be built into Eagle Time where all teachers and students are learning lessons in social-emotional learning and embracing diversity.

### Additional considerations

Finally, participants were given the opportunity to offer any additional suggestions for changes needed at Grain Valley schools or other thoughts they wanted to share. Responses were varied and included:

- Creating an approved social-emotional learning curriculum and providing the space for training and implementation of it
- Ensuring that all such trainings and efforts are genuine, intentional and continued throughout the year, not just at the beginning of the school year
- Concerns about the depth of racism and homophobia in the community and how it is seeping into the schools
- Stop allowing confederate flags and other controversial clothing to be used as apparel (capes)
- Encourage the board and community to have more of a growth mindset rather than trying to return to something it used be
- Some teachers felt that the board was more apt to listen to the loud voices in the community about what is happening in the classroom rather than respect their voice and expertise



- Many noted that they would like the board to address the negative impact of their decision on teachers, students and families

## PARENT/FAMILY & COMMUNITY MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

### Community Conversation

A community conversation was held on June 1. The session was open to all members of the Grain Valley Schools community — students, parents/families, staff and community members. While 131 people registered to attend, it is estimated that approximately 120 people attended the event on June 1.

### Format

The structure of the Grain Valley Schools community conversation was adapted from a national facilitated conversation format<sup>1</sup>. At the beginning of the event, an overview of the agenda was shared with all participants, as were the communication agreements (see appendix) that would be followed by all participants in the discussion. These agreements were offered as draft agreements, allowing for clarification and discussion by participants.

After gaining consensus of participants, the discussion was turned over to the small groups. Participants voluntarily selected a small group at which to sit. Each table sat five to six people, with each table including a trained table facilitator who were administrators, teachers or staff in the district. The primary role of the table facilitator was to listen and scribe the conversations. Additionally, they were responsible for leading the group through the agenda, managing time, ensuring that communication agreements were followed, and taking notes on key points shared during the conversation. They were not there to answer questions about actions taken by the district or to speak on behalf of the district.

Conversations were structured in a facilitated dialogue format. A facilitated dialogue is a conversation in which the participants' primary goal is to pursue mutual understanding rather than agreement or immediate solutions. In this dialogue, participants are able to:

- Listen and be listened to with care
- Speak and be spoken to in a respectful manner
- Share airtime so that all speakers can be heard
- Learn about the perspectives of others
- Reflect on their own views

Each table started with brief introductions, and a couple of grounding questions intended to help build connections between participants at the table and model the structure of the conversation (i.e., one person speaking at a time for a limited amount of time). The grounding

<sup>1</sup> Fostering Dialogue Across Divides, Essential Partners, 2018

questions also allowed for participants to share their hopes and expectations for the evening. Following these grounding conversations, the discussion shifted to questions about belonging and school climate, and why individuals hold the opinions and beliefs that they do. In so doing, participants were able to dig deeper into their own values while also understanding what is behind the views of others. The conversation finished with an opportunity for participants to ask questions about the responses of others at the table, with the expectation that they are seeking understanding or clarification and not seeking to debate or argue (see appendix for communication pathways). This format allowed participants to deepen their understanding of what had been shared and heard.

## Table Conversations

### Belonging

First, participants were asked to explain what the term “belonging” meant to them. Additionally they were asked to share about how the recent conflicts in Grain Valley about belonging and school climate had personally affected them.

Responses about what belonging means was similar to the response from the student and staff focus groups. In general, participants talked about feeling safe, a place in which one feels heard, all are welcome (in all capacities), everyone feels included. Feeling that one belongs means there is no judgment about who a person is or what they believe, that beliefs are respected even if they are different from one’s own beliefs, that there is someone in the organization or group with which one can align and honestly engage, and that one’s feelings and beliefs are respected and valued. For one participant, a sense of belonging was defined as when “people miss me when I’m gone.”

### Heart of the Matter

Participants were then asked to reflect on perspectives and values they hold about belonging and to dig into what is at the root of these beliefs. The goal of this question is that others at the table better understand what is driving certain beliefs and why they are important.

Responses about what drove individual definitions of belonging were varied. For some, the heart of the matter was more personal, rooted in faith/religion, upbringing and family values. For others it was more about concerns over what was happening at school — concerns about mental health of students, miscommunication between the school and home, fear that the sticker incident is just the “tip of the iceberg” that will lead to other divisive issues (e.g. Critical Race Theory, religion in schools, etc.). Many participants cited that safety was at the heart of the matter — ensuring that every student feels safe at school and in the community. Some table groups talked about how recent events had damaged the reputation of the school district and community, and impacted school spirit. While other conversations focused more on the issue that the community is changing and not every student or family needs the same thing. Most responses to this question centered about the notion of relationships, and the



importance of every student having positive relationships with a group of peers and at least one adult at school.

### **Connected Conversations**

During the less structured format portion of the conversation, participants were able to more directly engage with one another to respectfully seek understanding and clarification. These conversations were wide ranging depending on the individuals at the table.

For many tables, discussions were focused on the stickers and the directive by the school board to have the stickers removed. With regard to the school board, many asked questions about why the board made the decision they did about the stickers, why there was no engagement of teachers, students or families prior to the decision, and why there has been no comments from the board since the decision. Other discussions focused on how teachers felt and what will be the long term consequences of the action (i.e., lose teachers, have trouble recruiting staff, lose families).

### **Outcome**

Overall, feedback from participants about the structure of the format was positive, with many commenting that they appreciated the ability to share their views and respectfully hear from others. Comments were also positive about the diversity of views and people at the table — students, parents, teachers, community members.

The most common comment was with regard to the school board. Some questioned why the school board did not speak during the gathering, or why only some school board members were present while others were not. There was a common thread of comments about the need for the school board to provide a public explanation about why the directive about removal of the sticker was ordered.

Many participants noted the desire to continue to have these kinds of conversations in the future, whether about this same topic or other issues. Comments about how they appreciated just having face-to-face conversations with fellow community members was something that is needed.

## **03 | Key Themes •**

In reviewing the feedback from the various stakeholder engagements, the following themes emerged:



## BELONGING

- **Everyone belongs in GVS** - It was clear from all engagements that there is agreement on the need for all students (and staff and families) to feel that they belong in Grain Valley Schools. There was a consensus on ensuring that all students, no matter their background (i.e., race, gender identity, religion, ability) have a right to be welcomed into the GVS community and assured a place where they can authentically be themselves. Many comments, especially from students, felt that there was too much emphasis on adhering to a certain ideal of what a GVS student should be, and not enough on allowing peers to be who they are. They also commented that much of that pressure seems to come from parents and the community, and that school may be the only place where students can truly be themselves. Several comments, from students, teachers and parents, noted that GVS has grown and changed over the years and as such, there needs to be a broader understanding of who the students and families are in the community.
- **Everyone has a right to feel safe and included** - By far the most frequent comment and point of agreement was about the right for everyone, especially students, to feel safe and included in GVS. That definition of safety extends beyond physical safety in the schools to that of emotional and mental safety. There is great concern among stakeholders that students are not feeling safe as a result of their religious beliefs, race, gender, ability, etc. Respondents reported that while not everyone has to agree with each other, there needs to be a clear understanding that differences are respected, not judged, and that diversity is celebrated, not discouraged.
- **Focus on the needs of each and every student** - The majority of those who participated commented on the need to focus on the individual needs of each student, rather than just focusing on the majority. When adults are able to address each student as an individual, students feel valued. Similarly, other students see adults recognizing the uniqueness of each student, which in turn lessens the tendency to judge and ridicule peers who are perceived as "different." Similarly, by looking at each student, the pressure to assimilate, especially to a "traditional" view of GVS students, is reduced.

## ENGAGEMENT

- **Elevate student voices** - Both students and teachers/staff noted the need to elevate student voices in school and district decisions. The district should make it a practice to include developmentally appropriate ways to engage students in complex discussions and decisions that impact them. While effective ways to gather input, such engagement needs to go beyond surveys and student leadership groups to targeted focus groups and inclusion of student voices in community conversations. Having student voices at many of the table conversations on June 1 was cited as a positive by

participants, allowing them to hear first-hand about what it is like to be a student in GVS today.

- **Engage stakeholders in decisions** - Similarly, there were many who felt that the district needed to do more in general to engage stakeholders in decisions prior to making them. While discussions during this spring's engagements focused around the decision of the school board, there was a desire for more conversations and engagements like the one held on June 1. Additionally, teachers frequently commented about how too often administration and/or the school board do not seek their input when considering changes. Particularly, comments about catering to the loud voices of a few rather seems to be prevalent among staff members.

## SCHOOL CLIMATE

- **Address negative behavior** - Students and teachers both commented on the need for more adherence to the student handbooks and addressing negative behaviors with real consequences. There was a desire among both students and faculty to implement some sort of restorative practices into disciplinary actions, noting the importance for students to understand what they did wrong, the harm that was caused, and how to move forward from the mistake. It was also important to students that they understand that their concerns were taken seriously and that something is done about it. Even though data privacy prevents sharing of specific punishments and consequences, students felt that if restorative practices are included as part of the process, they would feel that their statements were valued.
- **Allow for students conversations and discussions** - Many students and teachers felt that given the recent school board action, as well as the general tenor of divided rhetoric around the country, that they are not allowed to have conversations about potentially controversial issues in class or with individual students. Students especially said they would like the opportunity to engage in such discussions in age appropriate ways and in the safety of their classroom so that they could learn how to discuss such topics and be prepared for the larger world. Currently, whether explicitly stated or inferred, there is a fear that such discussions are not allowable and could lead to negative consequences.
- **Provide training and support for teachers/staff** - Training on diversity, as well as strategies for social emotional learning and facilitating difficult conversations was identified by students, teachers and parents. Teachers admitted that they might not have all the skills and knowledge on such issues, but all expressed the will to learn.

## SCHOOL BOARD

- **Increase transparency** - Many cited the concern about how the school board made the decision about the stickers. Whether claims of secret board meetings and conservative



agendas are true, the perception is out there among many in the community and it needs to be addressed if the school district and community are going to move forward. By creating a culture of transparency — by both the board and administration — as well as a culture of stakeholder engagement, the members of GVS will again trust decisions and actions of its leaders, which in turn will lead to a more collaborative and welcoming community.

- **Speak for the whole of the community** - Many participants in the recent engagements cited a concern that the recent board action may create a narrow agenda that is not representative of the entire GVS community. Such a perception mirrors the larger attitude of citizens nationally toward elected officials. Comments from teachers and many participants at the community conversation noted that it appears the board is only listening to a few, loud voices in the community that are not representative of all residents. Whether or not this is true, the reputation of the board is damaged and there is a need to repair trust and engagement of all sectors of the GVS community.

## 04 | Final Thoughts •

We applaud the district for taking on this comprehensive stakeholder engagement effort given recent challenging events. Despite most of the engagements occurring after the close of the school year, it appears that a diverse representation of the Grain Valley Schools community was included. Such conversations after media attention are difficult, but there is clearly a genuine interest on behalf of the GVS community to repair what has been broken and move toward a more inclusive and supportive school community where everyone belongs. As is noted in the district's tagline — "Every Student. Every Day." — stakeholders have great pride in Grain Valley and want to live up to the expectation that every student is valued, respected and welcomed.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to work with you and your willingness to explore ways to move forward as a connected and welcoming school community. We also appreciate your commitment as a district to improving communications and engagement going forward. CESO Communications stands ready to assist Grain Valley Schools as it implements its strategic plan and plans for the 2022-2023 school year.