

Community Engagement in Pittsfield Public School District: Executive Summary of Findings

April 2022

Overview of the TNTP/PPSD Partnership

In November 2021, Pittsfield Public School District (PPSD) engaged TNTP to help gather and synthesize community feedback on strategies for creating safe, secure schools for all students—with a special focus on the role of School Resource Officers (SROs). TNTP also worked to model an approach to community engagement the district can use with any issue in the future, and to build the district's capacity to continue authentic engagement with the students, families, and communities it serves.

Approach and Methodology

TNTP's approach to community engagement is holistic and rooted in the belief that the entire community plays a role in ensuring that students meet their full potential. TNTP's vision for authentic engagement rests on four pillars:

1. **Shared Vision:** Communities and school systems must first work closely together to shape a common vision for student success and make sure that everyone—from students to teachers to parents to community leaders—has a role to play in that vision.
2. **Intentional Culture & Diversity:** To build trust—especially in communities that have experienced divestment—schools and districts must address bias, understand the unique context and assets of specific communities, and encourage the sharing of diverse perspectives.
3. **Authentic Collaboration:** Families and community organizations are critical to student success. Schools and districts need to share data and resources that can help families and community organizations better support student learning outside of school.
4. **360-Degree Communication:** Sharing information regularly and transparently is critical, but it is not enough. Schools and districts must create meaningful opportunities for all voices to be heard—and families and communities need to know how their feedback was incorporated into decision-making.

With these pillars in mind, we used a variety of strategies over the course of four months to reach as large and diverse a group of PPCD stakeholders as possible:

- We spoke with 8 community organizations (including the NAACP Berkshire County Branch, Latinas 413, and Berkshire Interfaith Organizing) to hear their perspectives on school safety issues and partner with them on subsequent community outreach.
- We visited all 4 PPCD secondary school campuses, where we conducted walkthroughs focused on school culture and interviewed more than 100 students, educators, and support staff.
- We interviewed 11 city officials, including school committee members, city council members, the mayor, and the chief of police.
- We administered a survey to all PPCD families, and to all students and staff in secondary schools. In all, we received 2,802 responses.
- We hosted 9 focus groups for teachers and students, and 6 focus groups for community members.

We paired this stakeholder engagement with an analysis of data on reported discipline incidents at a sample of PPCD secondary schools between September and December 2021.

Summary of Findings

Community feedback and data analysis revealed several trends that PPSD should consider when developing community engagement strategies to determine future policy changes regarding school safety.

School Culture

- **All stakeholder groups agree that positive relationships between students and teachers are the foundation of safe schools that help all students thrive.** In interviews and focus groups, we heard consistently that school culture and safety depend first and foremost on the relationships educators build with their students. During the interviews, we heard resoundingly from staff that they want to build those positive relationships and help students be successful.
- **Students experience culture differently across different schools—and even within the same school.** When we asked students in surveys and interviews if they could think of any teachers or administrators who care about them, many provided examples (including a notably high number of students at Pittsfield High School). But many shared that their teachers and administrators lack the ability to build trusting relationships with students.
- **Families, students, and school staff pointed to concerns about issues related to bullying and lack of access to counseling as significant areas of concern.** When we asked about aspects of school culture that most concerned stakeholders, almost 80 percent of families, more than 50 percent of students, and more than 90 percent of staff identified issues related to bullying and cyberbullying as a concern. About half of families and students and almost two-thirds of staff identified lack of access to counseling as a concern.

Disciplinary Reports

- **Students identified as male at birth, Black and multiracial students, and students from low-income families may appear to be overrepresented in reported disciplinary incidents.** Note: Disciplinary incidents are logged as Level 1 (teacher-managed) – Level 4 (school-leadership managed). Students identified as male at birth accounted for two-thirds of all reported disciplinary incidents, despite representing only about half of enrollment at the schools we studied. Black and multiracial students accounted for 31 percent of reported incidents, despite representing only 22 percent of enrollment. (By comparison, white students accounted for only 52 percent of reported incidents despite representing 59 percent of enrollment.) Students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch accounted for 69 percent of reported incidents, despite representing only 51 percent of enrollment.

SROs

- **The survey responses showed 51 percent of students agreed that they feel safe with an SRO overall,** with just 41 percent of Black students and 45 percent of multiracial students.
- **Families and staff members have a wide range of opinions about SROs.** Our survey responses showed that 74 percent of families and 69 percent of staff “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” that they feel safe with an SRO on their campus. We also heard significant concern about the role of SROs from community members of color in focus groups.
- **Few stakeholders appear to be aware of recent changes PPSD has made to the SRO role.** PPSD recently signed a memorandum of understanding with the Pittsfield Police Department making significant changes to the scope of the SRO role, including limiting the role of the SRO in disciplinary incidents and including community in the hiring process. Yet surveys and interviews showed that most families and school staff are

not aware of these changes: for example, only 9 percent of survey respondents correctly estimated the number of SROs in PPSP.

Our findings paint a complicated picture of a complicated issue. The PPSP community has a range of opinions about school safety. The opinions appear to be most negative among historically marginalized communities. More broadly, our findings emphasize the need for PPSP to focus on all the dimensions of school safety and culture, regardless of any additional changes it makes to policy around SROs.