

# **Executive Summary: Belmont Public Schools District-Wide Equity Audit**

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## Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Student Surveys. Measuring Students' Sense of Belonging, Cultural Awareness and Action, Diversity and Inclusion at their school.                     | <b>3</b>  |
| Staff Climate Surveys. Measuring Staff's Equitable Mindsets and Sense of School Climate.   | <b>5</b>  |
| Educator and Staff Interviews. Measuring to what extent and how BPS Educators and Staff uphold and practice Equitable Educator Mindsets              | <b>8</b>  |
| Student Interviews. Understanding Students' Experiences at BPS schools: Their Perception of BPS Culture and Adults' Equitable Mindsets and Practices | <b>10</b> |
| Focus Groups. Understanding Families Experiences across BPS schools: Their Perception of BPS Culture and Equitable Mindsets and Consequences         | <b>12</b> |
| Policy Analysis: BPS Policies and Procedures Manual and Disciplinary Policy Statements provided by School leaders.                                   | <b>16</b> |
| Hiring Analysis: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis   | <b>21</b> |

## Student Surveys. Measuring Students' Sense of Belonging, Cultural Awareness and Action, Diversity and Inclusion at their school.

### Middle School Student Surveys

- **Sense of Belonging.** *There are inequitable racial and gender imbalances in Sense of Belonging scores.* Across all student races and gender identities, Belonging scores are lowest on average for Black students and for students who Self-Describe their gender (i.e. nonbinary, gender queer, gender fluid). These students report experiencing that they belong the least, and that they matter less than other students at the Middle School. On the other hand, White, Hispanic, Asian, and Multiracial students, and students who identify as either Male or Female, on average report higher scores for belonging and the extent that they matter at their school.
- **Cultural Awareness and Action.** *There are mostly equitable results for Cultural Awareness and Action scores, with some differences for Black and Mutiracial students. There were no major gender differences for this category.* Most students, across race and gender demographics, report that they think “Frequently about what someone of a different race, ethnicity, or culture experiences.” One third of students across all groups report on average that when there are major news events related to race, adults “Frequently” talk about them with students. Most students also report that their school helps students speak out against racism “Quite Well,” followed by “Slightly Well.” However, while most students across backgrounds report that teachers “Frequently” encourage them to learn about people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures, most Black students report that teachers only do so “Sometimes.” Furthermore, while some students are mostly “Quite confident” that their peers can have honest conversations about race (i.e. Hispanic/Latino students, White, Asian students), Black and Multiracial students on average report being only “Somewhat confident” and “Slightly confident” that their peers can have these honest conversations about race. Alongside this, significant amounts of Black and Multiracial students are reporting that they aren't feeling comfortable having these conversations, on average, with other students.
- **Diversity and Inclusion.** *There are some equitable results for this category, but they differ significantly by student race. Black and Multiracial students report the lowest scores on average for their experience of Diversity and Inclusion. White students report the highest scores on average for their experience of Diversity and Inclusion. There were no major differences across gender identities for this question category.* More than half of all students at the Middle School report that students from different races, ethnicities, and cultures “Frequently” hang out with each other. In addition, nearly half of all students, regardless of race, report it is “Quite Common” for students to have close friends from different racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. However, the survey scores show that experiences for this category do vary by student's race. Black and Multiracial students report lower scores than any other race for how fairly students and adults at their school treat people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures. Specifically, while more than half of students overall report that adults at their school treat people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures “Extremely Fairly,” this doesn't hold up when scores filter by students' race. 60% of White Students report that adults at their school treat people from different races, ethnicities and cultures “Extremely Fairly”, followed by 53% of Hispanic students, 48% of Asian Students, and

47% of Multiracial students report the same. By contrast, only 29% of Black Students report “Extremely Fairly.” Black and Multiracial students also report they are less likely to have classes with students from different races, ethnicities, or cultures. Black students have the highest proportion of students, who report they “Almost never” share classes with students from different races, ethnicities, or cultures. Other students do not show these patterns at all.

## High School Student Surveys

- **Sense of Belonging.** *There are inequitable racial and gender imbalances in these scores. Scores are lowest for Black/African American and American Indian/Alaskan Native students. White students, followed by Asian students, report the highest Belonging scores. Intersex students report the lowest Belonging scores within the gender identity category.* Compared to other races on average, Black students measurably report feeling less understood as a person, less connected to adults at their school, and there are many Black students who report they “*Don’t feel connected at all*” to adults at their school. Less Black students than the other race feel they are shown respect by other students at their school. Black students also report feeling they matter less to others at their school than anyone else. The scores for these questions are also low for American Indian/Alaskan Native students. Notably, one third of American Indian/Native Alaskan students at the High School report that they “Don’t matter at all”.

On the other hand, the majority of White, Asian, Multiracial, and Hispanic students report feeling “Understood quite a bit” as a person. White students report the highest on average for this question and most of the others in this category. Nearly half of *all other* students from other races report feeling “Quite a bit of respect” from other students, while *only a third* of Black students report feeling “Quite a bit of respect.” Similarly, students who identify as either Male or Female report experiencing more respect than students who Self Describe their gender. While most students report they “Belong quite a bit overall,” Black students have a significantly higher proportion than any other students reporting they “Belong a little bit overall,” with nearly a quarter of Black students reporting so at the high school.

- **Cultural Awareness and Action.** *There are inequitable racial and gender imbalances in this category. Overall Black students, followed by American Indian/Alaskan Native, report the lowest scores for their experience of Cultural Awareness and Action at the High School. Students who Self Describe their gender report the lowest scores on average for the gender category.* Most students on average report that they “Frequently” think about what others of different races, cultures and ethnicities experience. However most students, regardless of race, report only feeling “Somewhat confident” that they can have honest conversations with one another. Significant proportions of racial minority students (e.g. Black, Multiracial, and Self Describing) report they are “Not at all confident” with this. Black students report the lowest scores of all students’ races for this topic. Furthermore, *all* students on average report that they are only “Sometimes” encouraged to think more deeply about

race related topics. Even worse, when filtered by race, many Black students and Native Americans say that they are “Almost Never” encouraged to do so.

Regardless of race or gender identity, the majority of students report that students “Almost never” have important conversations about race even when it’s uncomfortable. Furthermore, Black students differ from White and Asian students in their view of how often adults talk about major news related to race when major social events occur. Finally, while most students report that their school helps students speak out against racism “Somewhat well,” Black students, more than any students’ race, mostly report that the High School helps students speak up against racism “Not at all well”.

- **Diversity and Inclusion.** *There are inequitable racial imbalances in these scores. Overall, Black students report the lowest scores for their experience of Diversity and Inclusion at the High School. There were no major differences across gender identities for this question category.* Overall, most students report that they “Frequently” spend time with students from different races, cultures and ethnicities at their school. Still, American Indian/Alaskan Native and Black students report notably higher percentages than any other students, that this “Almost Never” happens. While most students, regardless of race, positively report that students at their school treat people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures “Quite Fairly,” Black students have the highest proportion of students who are report that students at their school treat people from different races, ethnicities, or cultures “Not at all fairly.” (17% of Black students compared to 5% or less of all other students’ races report this).

Distinctly, Black students report significantly higher proportions of students than any other race, that they “Almost Never” have classes with students from different races, ethnicities, or cultures: 15% of Black students report this, compared to 0% - 3% of students who report this from all other races. Finally, there are measurable discrepancies in Black and Native American students’ reports about the way adults at the High School treat people from different races, cultures, and ethnicities. Black students score *significantly lower* on average than any other students for this question. Furthermore, and alarmingly, 50% of American Indian/Alaskan Native students report that at their school adults treat people from different races, ethnicities, and cultures ‘Not at all fairly.’

## **Staff Climate Surveys.** Measuring Staff’s Equitable Mindsets and Sense of School Climate.

### **Equitable Educator Mindset Surveys:**

Mindset scores range from least to most equitable on a 6 point scale. A 6 represents Highly Aware, Asset-framing, Context - Centered, and Equity Mindsets. On the opposite spectrum, in parallel, a 1 represents Highly Avoidant, Deficit - framing, Context -

Neutral, and Equality Mindsets. For the Mindset Survey Recommendations - See “Professional Development” in the Future Directions section of the Audit.

### Overall Mindset Trends for BPS Staff.

- *BPS educators score the highest on the “Context Neutral v Context -Centered ” mindset questions overall (5.25 of 6) and lowest on the “Equality-Equity” mindset questions overall (4.84 of 6). For the strongly Context-Centered leaning score this suggests that BPS staff do well seeking to understand and build on students’ home-to-school connection to support interactions that support student learning. For the slightly Equity oriented leaning score, some Belmont educators may not recognize how academic achievement is related to broader social realities or societal structures.*

### Equity Mindset Survey scores for educators at Belmont compared to public school educators in MA, the Northeast, and the United States.

- *Compared to other public school educators’ scores across MA, the Northeast, and the US, BPS educators score similarly and relatively high on the average total scores for each Equitable Educator Mindset (Awareness, Asset-Framing, Equity, and Context-Centeredness), with average scores for each mindset resulting between 4.84 and 5.25, out of the 6 point scale. However, this is a common finding on average in DEI Survey research, with survey responses not typically aligning in real practice.*
- *BPS staff scored lower than public school staff in MA, the Northeast and US for the following three topics specific to the “Asset v. Deficit Framing” and “Awareness v. Avoidance” equity mindsets: **Deficit Mindsets About Student Support, Deficit Mindsets about Traditional School Rules, and Avoidant Mindsets about School Curriculum.***
  - For the “Asset v Deficit Framing” survey question: **“Every student can be successful given the right support.”** BPS staff averaged 5.21, while MA, Northeast, and US public school staff averaged 5.58, 5.33, and 5.33, respectively. Specifically Belmont staff reportedly agreed slightly less with this statement on average than staff in the comparative districts, which suggests room for improvement regarding staff’s ability and willingness to motivate and challenge all students, including tapping into students’ unique strengths and traits.
  - For the Asset-Deficit mindset question: **“All students should be expected to follow the same traditional school norms.”** Belmont public staff averaged 3.75, while MA, the Northeast, and US public school staff averaged 4.46, 4.45, and 4.34, respectively. Specifically, Belmont staff agreed with this statement significantly more than staff in other school districts, suggesting significant room for improvement on the extent that staff draw on students’ unique cultural, behavioral, and linguistic assets even when they don’t align with the dominant school culture.
  - For the “Aware-Avoidant” mindset question: **“The current school curriculum is meaningful for students from almost all backgrounds,”** Belmont staff averaged 3.94, while MA, Northeast, and US public school staff respectively averaged 4.11, 4.16, and 4.27. Specifically Belmont staff agree with this statement slightly more than other staff, suggesting room for improvement in BPS

staff “Awareness” mindset regarding the extent that school curriculum is equitable and meaningful for all students.

### **Significant BPS Staff Educator Mindset Question Scores by Staff Race.**

*3 individual questions for the “Asset - Deficit” and “Aware - Avoidant” Mindsets were significantly different between staff of different races at BPS for the same topics outlined above: Deficit Mindsets About Student Support, Deficit Mindsets about Traditional School Rules, and Avoidant Mindsets about School Curriculum.*

- For the “Asset-Deficit” Mindset Question: **“Every student can be successful given the right support.”** BPS staff reported the extent to which they agree with the statement. Black staff report the highest “Asset - framing” mindset scores here, while Asian staff and those who prefer to Self-Describe their race or ethnicity report the lowest scores for this question. Unlike in other racial categories, there is a small proportion of Asian and White BPS staff, who report disagreeing with the Asset-framing statement above. These proportions reflect a Deficit mindset from these staff about students’ ability to succeed when properly supported, and lacking an expansive view that all students are able to learn.
- For “Asset-Deficit” Mindset Question: **“All students should be expected to follow the same traditional school norms.”** BPS staff reported the extent to which they agree with the statement. Black staff reported the highest scores, reflecting an Asset framing view of students, suggesting they address disconnects between home and school cultures equitably. Hispanic and Asian staff reported the lowest scores for this question, reflecting more Deficit framing views of students in terms of not seeing the value in finding alternative ways to engage some students who do not demonstrate traditional behaviors.
- For the Aware-Avoidant Mindset Question: **“The current school curriculum is meaningful for students from almost all backgrounds.”** Staff report the extent that they agree with the question (Reverse Coded). Asian staff and those who prefer to Self Describe report the highest agreement scores. This is reflective of a more Avoidant mindset towards students, suggesting these staff operate without considering how ethnically diverse students experience the curriculum. Black staff reported the lowest agreement scores with this question, reflective of an Aware mindset of inequities in the curriculum and the extent that diverse students are best served or not by the curriculum.

### **Staff General Climate Survey.**

- **Overall Climate Survey Compared to Other Districts.** *BPS staff have lower ratings on average for the School Climate Survey overall measure than MA, Northeastern, and US public school staff .*
- **Significantly Different Climate Survey Questions by Staff Race.** *2 General Climate survey questions significantly differed by Belmont staff’s race: the statements that “Faculty share a common vision of quality teaching and learning” and that “School leaders do not treat faculty as professionals.”*

- For the statement, “**Faculty share a common vision of quality teaching and learning,**” both Black/African American and White staff report the lowest scores for faculty sharing a common vision for quality teaching and learning. Staff who prefer to Self Describe their race report the highest scores for this question.

For this finding we recommend BPS faculty adopt a common vision of quality teaching and learning that centers on Equity. These results imply that even if a school mission statement or vision does exist, it is not cohesive. There should be actions taken to ensure this vision is shared, understood, and applied across the district. The DEI Director’s Vision Statement would serve as an excellent statement to share, understand, apply, and build upon for improving equity and common vision across BPS.

- For the statement “**School leaders do not treat faculty as professionals,**” Black/African American and Asian staff report the highest scores in agreement that school leaders do not treat faculty as professionals. Specifically, Black and Asian staff at Belmont on average are reporting that they only “Somewhat Disagree” that school leaders do not treat faculty as professionals. Staff who prefer to self describe their race or ethnicity agree the least that school leaders do not treat faculty as professionals. Most other staff “Strongly Disagree” with this statement on average.

For this finding we recommend that school leaders ensure that they are treating all faculty, regardless of race, cultural background, status or role within BPS, as professionals. There should be no space for disrespect, condescension, or discrimination towards staff. It is important that all staff disagree and strongly disagree with this statement.

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## **Educator and Staff Interviews.** Measuring to what extent and how BPS Educators and Staff uphold and practice Equitable Educator Mindsets

*Most teachers exhibit equitable educator mindsets but struggle with ways to transfer them into practice. There is a stark difference in equitable mindsets and implementations between special education educators and general education teachers in both Chenery Middle School and Belmont High School. Our interviews revealed that some general education teachers exhibit racist and/ or ableist behaviors contributing to poor experiences of students of color and students with IEPs. In these cases, they are not always held accountable for the harm caused and continue to teach in BPS. Some teachers express a lack of trust from administration and school leaders to address their needs in supporting classroom culture shifts and student experience but believe that with more appropriate resources and targeted support, better progress toward equity can be achieved in many areas.*

We interviewed 12 staff members including teachers at Wellington Elementary School, Special education and general education teachers at both Chenery Middle School and Belmont High

School. We also interviewed School Leaders (Principals, Assistant Principals) and Curriculum Directors, and District leaders (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, School Committee Members, Equity Subcommittee Members) and METCO Leaders.

- **Equity/ Equality Mindsets**

*Most teachers demonstrate an Equity mindset when considering multiple factors that contribute to student success, flexibilities in policies, however the majority of teachers express Equality mindsets in their reliance on student merit to determine academic success. Most teachers believe policies must be flexible given the student and situation, however explain that some policies are simply not flexible and at times inhibit student achievement both socially and academically. It is important for most teachers to work with individual students to meet the unique needs that contribute to academic success but some general educators do not always meet the needs of students with IEPs.*

Fiscal decisions rarely center equity, creating missed opportunities for school leaders to address inequities at the systemic level in areas such as schools structure, hiring practices, diversifying staff, curriculum content, teacher supports and development, and student and family support, and extracurricular activities.

- **Aware/ Avoidant Mindsets**

*Most teachers, school, and district leaders express an Aware mindset of inequities that persist at their school, in their classroom, and at systemic levels that impact their previous and current students such as: grouping in the elementary grades, leveling and structure of school days at the high school. On the other hand, some general education teachers express an Avoidant mindset around the role IEPs play in student success and other severe incidents such as hate speech, racism, and homophobia happening at school and in the world at large. There are many instances where conflicts arise when advocating for themselves and/or students between BPS staff, teachers, and district leaders that are left without resolutions.*

- **Asset/ Deficit Mindset**

*Across schools, teachers exhibit an Asset-framing mindset in naming strengths of all students and their family backgrounds, and holding all students to a high standard. However, some teachers represent a Deficit mindset when talking about student behavior. At both Chenery and Belmont High School, there seems to be a disconnect between what “normal” behavior looks like for students of color and what it looks like for staff. For example, educators believe students should sometimes be more “settled” in the context of being around their friends. But excitement may look differently for students in this context. Their behavior is usually attributed to other outside environments as opposed to whether or not the teachers foster a welcoming, respectful environment for all students. In addition, teachers at Belmont High observed that students of color usually come in behind academically and sometimes believe this is because they have not been held to higher standards in previous school years at Belmont Schools. Not holding students to a high standard reflects a Deficit-framing mindset and can happen for numerous reasons.*

- **Context-Centered/ Context-Neutral Mindset**

*There is a mix of both Context-centered and Context-neutral mindsets expressed by teachers, and varies in educator and school leaders practice. Across all Belmont*

Schools and grades, there are times where teachers encourage students to bring in parts of their culture into the lesson or activity, but usually only occurs around American holidays. There is a heavy emphasis and interest in International students' culture, rather than racial or gender diversity. All teachers have family centered goals and most teachers have plans on how to achieve these goals. While special education teachers make it a daily priority to embed things that matter to students in their curriculum and classrooms, general education teachers don't always make this a priority in their curriculum. In some cases, there is little flexibility in state mandated policies and requirements which determine curriculum and sometimes create a lack of sufficient opportunities for students to learn from a wide range of voices in curriculum and/ or instruction. METCO leaders are aware of challenges students and families face but lack plans to address structural changes contributing to these challenges.

### **Additional Main Concerning Findings**

- **School discipline**

Teachers express an awareness of disciplinary trends disproportionately targeting Black and Brown students throughout grades and schools. Initiatives to address this have been to end student suspensions, however some teachers are left without much clarity on consequences for certain behaviors.

- **AP Math program**

The cancellation of the AP Math program demonstrates Equity, Aware, and Context-Centered Mindset. Typically, Black, Brown, ELL, and students with IEPs would fall behind, thus making this group serve a very specific group of students and doing a disservice to others. In addition, this decision considered how some families provide enrichment and extracurricular math opportunities for their children while some families are unable to provide the same opportunities. The alternative is to have an afterschool math program where students needing more challenging work can participate. The next phase is to look at 5th and 6th graders who are not meeting math benchmarks before they fall behind in middle and high school.

### **Student Interviews. Understanding Students' Experiences at BPS schools: Their Perception of BPS Culture and Adults' Equitable Mindsets and Practices**

#### **Open Call Individual Student Interviews: LGBTQ+, White, Asian, International** \*No Black, African American, or Hispanic students participated

- **Sense of belonging:** Students are mostly satisfied with their teachers, school leaders, and overall experiences at BPS. They have an overall sense of belonging and comfort in their classes.

- **Curriculum:** Some students mentioned they would like to learn more truthful and honest narratives about US and world history in their classes with more opportunities to interact with different books and a myriad of voices that represent different identities.
- **Racism, Homophobia, and other Hateful Acts:** While all students express concerns with issues of hate and explicit racism in BPS culture, only some students are dissatisfied with the ways school leaders respond. They believe teachers and school leaders are not taking matters seriously, which then sends concerning messages to the students. For example, students laugh and joke when racist and/or homophobic incidents take place and is not always corrected by the teacher or adult present.
  - **Bullying:** International students describe common occurrences of being bullied for their appearance, accent, and only being accepted when they are displaying or discussing aspects of their culture.

## **Black/African American and Students of Color Group Interview**

- **Feelings of Being Unsafe:** Students describe school and learning environments as unsafe no matter how many times Black students get to do activities that center themselves, because they don't always feel comfortable around their peers and teachers. When racist acts happen, they are briefly addressed before things go "back to normal" for everyone except Black students.

Black students feel as though educators, staff, and classmates don't care about the injustices that impact them the most compared to other groups of students. Students gave many examples where incidents and injustices that matter to white students and families such as school shootings and the capitol insurrection, were given great attention and opportunities to talk about it and take action. On the other hand, Black students and families were not given the same attention, care, and space from school leaders and educators when something centering racism and Black genocide happened. For example, students expressed they were devastated and traumatized when Henry Tapia was murdered during a racist encounter, and the many cases of murders of unarmed black men, women, and children that happen but they were not contacted or allowed space to talk about it.

- **Racism and Microaggressions:** Students express that it is common for teachers and their peers to exhibit microaggressions, make racist comments, not correcting students who make racist comments. They recognize the academic future opportunities that BPS schools provide but are unhappy with some of their teachers. Students describe some of their teachers as being unhelpful and expressing annoyance when they ask the teacher for help leaving students feeling bad for asking for additional help. Students explain they are exhausted having to constantly deal with misconceptions about their identity and stereotypes placed upon them without any support. In addition, these students describe their experiences walking around on campus as uncomfortable as they are sometimes followed by campus monitors or other staff and are assumed to be doing something bad.

- **Diversity and Inclusion Efforts:** Black students don't feel like diversity efforts, conversations, and events celebrating cultures include them. For example, Multicultural Night, or other class assignments and conversations exclude their experiences, voices, and seem to be reserved for their international peers in terms of diversity. They don't feel as if they belong there, and are not encouraged to be involved as most of the conversations focus on international diversity, as opposed to racial diversity.
- **METCO Program:** METCO students don't feel as supported by METCO leadership in ways that could help them overcome barriers to their academic achievement and social experience. They express needing more advocacy from METCO leaders at times in the classroom when conflicts arise. Specifically, students at Belmont High School report having to travel to Dudley station on their own time to get their bus and train passes and wish to be able to receive it at school. Students report that while METCO leadership is always available for students to talk and welcome their conversations, concerns, and experiences, there is a lack of advocacy following student conversations. Students also feel a lack of support in creating clubs and other initiatives from leadership and are not able to make these spaces for themselves because of safety purposes. METCO leaders do not always secure safe spaces for students who ask.

## **Focus Groups.** Understanding Families Experiences across BPS schools: Their Perception of BPS Culture and Equitable Mindsets and Consequences

### **Open Call Focus Group Findings**

*There are a myriad of experiences families describe at BPS where in some cases, families are extremely satisfied and believe teachers and school leaders demonstrate equitable mindsets with their children, and other families who have experienced the opposite.* The perception of diversity and equity varied from families and was highly influenced by families' historic background. There are a myriad of experiences families describe at BPS. Represented in these focus groups were families from many backgrounds including white American families, International families, families of color, and SPED families.

### **Family Concerns:**

- Families of all backgrounds express a common concern that racism and prejudice will continue to exacerbate at the middle and high school if preventative measures are not taken seriously and quickly.
- Families are worried about the experiences of Black and Brown, LGBTQ+, and Asian students face at BPS as targets of hate violence, the trauma it causes, and the constant expectation for students to thrive academically. Families are concerned that if there are no clear consequences, and as long as families only care about inequities and hate incidents when their children are impacted, then there will be no real change in BPS.

- Families are concerned at how common it is at the Chenery Middle school and Belmont High school for students to use racist language, slurs, and homophobic and violent actions.

### **Trust between families and BPS:**

- Many families express having an overall lack of trust between families and BPS school leaders, superintendents, and staff.
- Some families have great communication between teachers, school leaders, and know that district leaders have the best interest of their children.
- Families have identified multiple opportunities for schools, educators, and staff to build trust, however families feel as though these opportunities are not being taken advantage of and are dissatisfied in these areas.
- Some families express having collaborative teachers and responsive school leaders throughout their experience at BPS

### **Student Learning:**

- Most families remain satisfied with their child(rens) learning.
- Families hope that with more thorough and consistent SEL learning and other equity initiatives, there will be a culture shift in all student experience.

## **Families of Color and METCO Families Focus Group Findings**

*While some families of color express satisfaction with their children's learning, it is very common for themselves or their children to experience racism, homophobia, and/or xenophobia from other students or staff which leaves a short-term and/or long-term impact on their experience. In these cases, educators and school leaders only sometimes exemplify equitable mindsets.*

Despite some similarities, METCO families and Black and Brown families have very unique and different experiences, comfort levels, and trust with BPS and initiatives centering equity.

### **Family Concerns:**

- Some Black families express feelings of tokenism where school leaders only reach out when they need them to represent BPS values of diversity.
- Some families express feeling as though they are “disposable” by school leaders for reasons such as not donating or having other economical power - economic status influences the ways in which BPS values families of color which creates barriers between these families.
- Their children do not always have positive experiences with their teachers and/ or classmates and families believe more attention can be done to solve this. For example, students tell their parents they don't want to work with specific aides or staff providing extra academic support
- There is a lack of trust between BPS admin and families: When incidents occur, they express experiences of not being taken seriously or having to take extreme action to seek resolutions.

### **International Families:**

- Concepts such as DEI, racism, microaggressions, etc. are ideas that many international families are unfamiliar with in their context compared to the American historical context.

- They are expected by the district to talk and teach their children about these concepts with little support and resources from school and district leaders, which many families feel unequipped for.
- There is a stark difference between international families of color and white-passing international families: while white-passing international students express their kids don't experience racism, they are still subject to bullying and teasing for being different via language, religion, or accent.

### **Advanced Math Program:**

- Parents are extremely upset and confused as to why the Advanced Math Program was canceled as there was little to no communication as to why it was being canceled
- The information parents received from administration and school leaders was misleading and purportedly false.
- Families expressed multiple attempts to provide solutions to inequalities stemming from AP Math Program but explained that administration and district leaders would not listen to them or implement any suggestions.
- Families see the cancellation of the AP Math program as an Anti-Asian initiative with mal-intent because it was canceled as more Asians began joining the program.
- Some families were unaware this program existed until they heard about it from other families: the schools did not advertise this program to all families.
- Families believe their children are not being academically challenged enough in their math classes.

### **Special Education Program Family Focus Groups**

*Feedback from families suggests SPED Leadership does not exhibit any of the equitable mindsets in practice, while SPED teachers demonstrate equitable mindsets, have great communication, and support their children's needs in ways that leave their children happy and families at ease.* Families express that SPED leadership demonstrate practices of gaslighting and gatekeeping in the student evaluation and IEP process. Most families express distrust in SPED leadership, school admin, and district at large and feel like the inequities and malpractice in the SPED program are intentionally overlooked. Contributing to these sentiments are a lack of consistency in SPED evaluations, lack of basic detailed and current data, and lack professionalism leaving families to feel cornered, frustrated, and sometimes helpless. Some families believe SPED leadership do not always have the best interest of students with special needs.

### **Integrated Preschool:**

- Families express that the integrated preschool is a great experience for families and exceeds expectations.
- Families are extremely satisfied with the level of care, attention, and accommodations their children receive from the experienced and quality educators.
- Once students transition into elementary school, simple accommodations and/ or new goals to be added to IEPs become a struggle.

### **Teachers:**

- Families express their child's teacher as the biggest determining factor in their children's experience.
- Families are mostly satisfied when teachers step in and make great efforts to understand and meet their students' individual needs. Some of these efforts include teachers who email *and* call parents to check in, update parents on the progress made and setbacks students face, and who offer support and motivation to students and families.
- At times, teachers advise parents on student needs but ask parents to not admit to SPED leadership that they received information from the teacher.
- Some other factors parents describe in how their students' needs are met include class size, which elementary school they happen to be at, and how much out of pocket expenses families can afford to spend on outside evaluations, lawyers, and advocates.
- Families describe some general education teachers make experiences for families and students unpleasant and grave: teachers are not required and do not always attend IEP meetings, creating a lack of communication and understanding between all parties involved in student success.
- Some general education teachers and instructional aids are described as being punitive toward students for having a disability and resort to punishing them for their behavior as opposed to understanding and meeting their needs.

### **SPED Leadership:**

- Families are concerned with the way the SPED department works and question whether SPED leadership may be out of compliance with standards, procedures, and protocols and doesn't incorporate best practices or equitable educators' mindsets.
- Families describe SPED leadership as being unorganized in the evaluation and placement process
- If a student's disability is not visible, families must hire outside evaluators and provide evidence that the student has special needs.
- Many families do not trust SPED leadership and constantly receive pushback when advocating for their children.
- Some parents will not speak to SPED leaders or attend any IEP meetings without an educational consultant, advocate, or lawyer present. Without lawyers or other legal experts, parents receive constant pushback and requests are often denied.
- To properly accommodate their children, families have to conduct outside assessment, research proper accommodations and programs, and put it into writing before expecting SPED leadership to provide the appropriate services.
- Students are often incorrectly diagnosed, making the only way for families to be comfortable with BPS evaluation is by having outside evaluators holding leadership accountable for their evaluations.

### **Unmet Student Needs:**

- Parents are under a common belief that if needs are met earlier, many problems can be prevented.
- Because the evaluation process can take so long, student needs are not met in early grades in elementary school. These needs compound as students get older and academic success declines, sometimes leading SPED leaders to place students out of the district.
- There is a common concern that there is a motive behind SPED leadership reporting to send students to an out-of-district placement instead of providing them with the services they need. Parents also are interested in understanding what the SPED leadership litigation budget is and how that money can be used to serve students in lieu of fighting with parents.

### **Additional Concerning Findings:**

- **SPED Budget:** Families express concern around the SPED litigation budget and if it is influencing the way resources are dispersed and provided.
- **Students of Color:** Families have reasons to believe many students of color are either wrongfully evaluated as having special needs or sent to the LABB program and/or other out-of-district placements unnecessarily.

***\*Many of the SPED focus group findings align with our SPED policy audit conducted in the summer of 2021.***

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### **Policy Analysis:** BPS Policies and Procedures Manual and Disciplinary Policy Statements provided by School leaders.

**Notable Policy Manual Findings.** *Overall, each of the policy sections reviewed in the Belmont Public Schools Policy and Procedures Manual measurably demonstrated both equitable and inequitable tenets according to the Equitable Educator Mindsets and Consequences Framework. The most notable policy sections and language from the Manual, which we highlight and recommend equitable improvements and adaptations to, are as follows:*

- **1017 Citizen Suggestions and Complaints; 1019 Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials.** *The policies demonstrate inequitable Avoidant and Context Neutral language.*

The 1017 policy is Context - Neutral in that it externally references procedures that citizens must follow in order to make specific kinds of complaints to the Committee, yet lacks a procedure for the Committee to inform citizens who wish to make a time sensitive complaint, in real time, of the exact steps citizens should take, so they can properly share their complaint.

The 1019 policy that “*Anonymous complaints shall be disregarded*” is Context-Neutral and Avoidant. While this procedure might reduce the number of complaints addressed and may hold the public accountable for suggestions and complaints, this policy can be overall discouraging and present inequities for certain important complaints. We recommend a Context Centered policy which would ensure the Committee at least read, rather than discard, Anonymous complaints, as some community members and students’ families may prefer or need to protect their privacy and safety depending on the nature of the complaint. Regardless of complaint anonymity, the anonymity policy

should help committee members with understanding complaints of all parents and families in order to support them well.

- **4000 Personnel; 4000 General Policy Statement; 4001 Recruitment and Selection.** *The policies demonstrate both equitable Aware language, and inequitable Avoidant language.*

The 4000 policy reflects an Awareness that BPS staff should understand the educational enterprise from multiple and varied perspectives, specifically recruiting for a “*diverse representation at all occupational levels,*” and in insuring “*that a broad range of recruitment sources and professional networks will be utilized to provide the most qualified and diverse pool of candidates possible.*”

Policy 4001 is Avoidant in that it lacks any language demonstrating a commitment to equity. In addition to BPS supporting an environment that is “student centered, creative, and flexible” - this policy should explicitly support an equitable environment where personnel at each level demonstrate a commitment to Equity. We recommend this language be adapted to include explicit recruitment and selection of staff who hold an expansive view that all students are able to learn, that academic achievement must be viewed in relation to broader social realities, and who approach work with an appreciation for how students’ home and community experiences outside of school impact their learning and performance.

- **5012 Freedom of Expression.** *The policy demonstrates inequitable Avoidant language.*

This policy is majorly Avoidant of the role that student demographics such as race, gender, ethnicity, ability, etc. can influence students’ experiences of the harm from certain speech. In addition to the banning of, “*obscene, libelous or slanderous expression, abusive or insulting speech, or any expression that may cause disruption or disorder within the school,*” hate speech, discriminatory, prejudiced, or racist speech, should be explicitly disallowed as free speech in this policy. To improve this policy we further recommend that consequences and disciplinary actions for students who commit any kind of the aforementioned speech be explicitly outlined to ensure accountability and to actively protect the students most harmed by such speech.

- **6008 Curriculum Development and Evaluation; 6009 Controversial Issues.** *The policies demonstrate inequitable Avoidant and Context- Neutral language.*

The 6008 Policy is majorly Avoidant and all around lacks mentions of Equity. While there is Contextual Awareness in the note that curriculum be informed by a variety of stakeholders, including parents/guardians, there should be a focus on ensuring the curriculum is equitable. This policy lacks a clear statement that curricular decisions should represent a diverse range of topics and lessons, and that it should be updated to reflect an awareness of structural inequities and power imbalances inherent in existing curricular materials in particular. This policy should strongly align with the DEI Director’s Mission and Vision Statement on the topic of curriculum.

The 6009 Policy is largely missing equitable procedures and language. There is also potentially harmful language in the policy. The statement “*Controversial issues which*

*have political, social or economic significance may be discussed in Belmont Public School classrooms after teachers have determined that the particular issue is suitable for study or discussion and that it is related to the curriculum”* is not sufficient to equitably determine which issues should be discussed. It is neither clear which issues count as controversial, nor sufficient that the teacher alone should determine which issues are suitable or worth discussing. This policy also neglects the possibility that many teachers are not prepared to decide what social issues are in the students’ best interest to discuss or not. Finally, this policy’s explicit banning of teachers expressing emotion (“*Teachers shall ensure that controversial issues are impartially presented in an atmosphere free from emotion...*”) is potentially harmful and limiting for both teachers and students, and largely unrealistic for topics concerning equity.

We recommend the 6009 Policy reflect awareness of issues which are important and relevant to students. An equitable policy here would include the necessity for Professional Development that will allow teachers to strengthen their skills related to discussing DEI topics. PD should prepare teachers to make informed, equitable, empathetic, and skillful decisions when leading discussions of social, cultural, racial, and/or economic importance. Furthermore the policy should include Aware and Asset framing language so that vulnerable students (i.e. they are in the minority at their school, their issues and topics are underrepresented, the issues have deep emotional resonance for them and their families) are protected and supported in also expressing their views and participating in discussions.

## Special Policy Considerations

- **Sections 6018 - 6021 and 6015: Educational Opportunities for Homeless Students, Military Children, Children in Foster Care, English Language Learners, and Students with Special Needs and Disabilities.** *In addition to these existing special sections, there is a critical need for a “Students within Racial Minorities” or “Diverse Students” section.*

The 6015 and 6018 - 6021 Policies provide insight into the existing categories of students who are given special attention and support across BPS. Each of these sections demonstrates equitable practices; in particular they serve as strong examples of Context Centered, Equity, and Aware mindsets. Notably equitable are those procedures in place which ensure transportation and making decisions that are in students’ best interests based on the needs of each individual student.

These models should be extended to other groups of students. This includes vulnerable racial and cultural minorities at BPS for which there are alarming inequitable patterns throughout this audit, in these students’ experiences at school : African American/Black students, Native American/Alaskan Native students, and Multiracial students.

We recommend creating a policy that addresses the disparities in these students’ experiences as well. Specifically, we suggest this policy section be titled “Students in Racial Minorities” or “Diverse Students”, and be written in a format similar to those student sections listed in Sections 6018 - 6021. Similarly to the 6018 - 6021 policies, there should be a description of the students who explicitly fit into the Racial Minorities or Diverse Students category, and written procedures that align with each item of the

Equitable Educator Mindsets and Consequences Framework. The support offered to those students should align with the findings and recommendations outlined in this audit, as well as the BPS DEI Director's Mission and Vision Statement.

- **Ensure BPS Policy and Procedures Align with the DEI Director's Mission and Vision Statement.** *The following policies in the BPS Policy and Procedure Manual critically require language that should align with equitable standards, visions, and procedures presented in the DEI Director Mission and Vision Statement, as well as all tenets from the Equitable Educator Mindsets and Consequences Framework. The DEI Director's Vision Statement in particular elaborates on equitable topics which the following policies are missing.*

**Recommendations for equitable improvements to these policies are as follows:**

- **1013 Contests, Prizes and Awards-Sponsored by Outside Organizations.** These policies could include language prioritizing invitations to organizations that work to improve students' sense of belonging and inclusion, and sense of cultural awareness and action. This policy can also ensure that there is a context-centered approach to which outside organizations work with students - in particular those already prevalent in students' communities outside of school.
  - **4009 Professional Development.** Equity PD that addresses the major DELTAS, recommendations, and findings in this audit should be prioritized in this policy. Overall this PD policy should align with the DEI Director's Mission Statement regarding goals for educators gaining equitable skills.
  - **5000 Students Goals; 600 Instructional Goals; 6008 Curriculum Development and Evaluation.** To address the particularly Avoidant language in this policy - which lacks equity language all around - we recommend that these goals include language explicitly related to equity, rather than equality, and be reviewed to closely align with the DEI Director's Vision and Goals regarding students and the curriculum.
  - **6024 Evaluation of Instructional Programs.** The Superintendent should work closely with the DEI Director on this policy. This will ensure that ongoing assessment of the curriculum and instructional programs be measured for meeting the districts' equity goals, and those curricular goals from the DEI Director's Vision and Mission Statement. It's critical that the data collected from such assessments be used to identify areas in which modifications and improvement are needed.
- **Externally Referenced Procedures Written by Superintendents.** *For the following policies, the Manual externally references procedures to be written by the Superintendent. For these separate procedures, it is of utmost importance that they demonstrate equitable standards. A recommended next step is that the*

*DEI Director collaborate with the Superintendent on reviewing these specific policies and procedures, as they were not reviewed in this Audit.*

**The following external sections should be further reviewed for equity and are recommended as follows:**

- **1006P Procedure: Public Participation at SC Meetings; 1017 Citizen Suggestions and Complaints; 1019 Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials.** We recommend that the Superintendent's procedures for raising such complaints are clear, context-centered, and readily available to community members. The procedures should specifically flesh out a non-biased process for community members to raise any major concerns they have, and should include the steps school leaders will take to address alarming complaints and ensure accountability. Note that the topics stated in this policy which the Committee will not address without an appropriate procedure (e.g. complaints and suggestions concerning curriculum, personnel and administrative issues), are major topics which commonly present inequities in schools.
- **4011 Staff Complaints and Grievances.** The procedures for this policy should be reviewed for all of the equity mindsets (Equity, Awareness, Asset Framing, and Context-Centeredness) to ensure that there is accountability across the board for all genuine staff complaints and grievances.
- **5008 Promotion and Retention.** This process should be reviewed for taking into account the students' home to school connection, considering ways societal structures disadvantage some students and privilege others, and recognizing that student demographics are central in understanding and supporting student academic achievement.
- **5011 Student Records; 7010 Data and Records Management, Retention and Disposal.** These policies should be sure to specify the kinds of Student Records collected and kept - especially those that relate to students' equitable experiences and treatment in the classroom, and those which measure and assess whether students are having a safe, welcoming, and inclusive experience across school. This includes students' interactions with their peers and with any BPS staff.

It's critical in particular that SPED and other departments can access these records in an efficient, organized, and transparent way such that equitable decisions which need to be informed by student data can be made more effectively across BPS.

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## Hiring Analysis: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

### Quantitative Hiring Analysis

- **Comparisons of the percent of Belmont students of color and percent of Belmont staff of color.** *There is an overrepresentation of White staff compared to White students at BPS. There is an underrepresentation of Asian, Hispanic, and Black/African American staff compared to these students across BPS.*
  - There is a notably significant difference across BPS in the proportion of Asian students to the proportion of Asian staff. Specifically, with there being 21% Asian students and 3% Asian teachers, then there is a 19% gap in student to staff representation.
- **Student vs staff races across all districts in Massachusetts including Belmont.** *Belmont on average is similar to other districts in not having a proportional number of teachers compared to its demographics. For example, On average a district that has 50% of Black students has 20% Black teachers. BPS is neither higher or lower than the average district.*
  - There is an over-representation of White teachers at BPS. Though this is clearly not unusual compared to other MA districts.
- **Overall these quantitative data show that there are gaps in representation for students of color at Belmont, to staff of color.** While the comparative data also shows that BPS is not different from other school districts in the extent that staff are representative of diverse students, Belmont does have an opportunity to be a district leader in hiring, recruiting, and retaining staff to be more representative of its students. Only a small number of MA districts reach this standard. These reports should in particular motivate personnel at BPS to take concrete steps to improve the hiring of qualified and talented educators of color across all positions - in particular, African American, Hispanic, and Asian staff. These statistics also highlight the need for Equity Professional Development.

### Qualitative Hiring Analysis. BPS Second Round Sample Interview Questions for Multiple Roles Across Grade Levels.

- **Notable Sample Interview Question Findings:** *Overall, there are some areas where sample interview questions allow the hiring committee to demonstrate how BPS Culture centers equity through the framing of the questions and gives the candidate an opportunity to demonstrate similar equitable values. The sets of sample questions vary by school and hiring committee, where some sets of*

sample questions failed to ask candidates to consider how equity plays a role in their practice and other sets do a great job of this.

- **Referencing Equitable Language:** Most sample questions lack explicit references to equitable mindsets when asking about student needs, discipline, advocacy and conflict resolutions, race, gender, and identity. Despite this, most of the questions allow candidates to demonstrate their understanding of equity, how they have historically centered equitable mindsets, and how they plan to embed these practices in the role if they choose to bring these topics into the conversation. However, without being asked directly about the nuances of these mindsets, there are missed opportunities for BPS hiring committees to give candidates these explicit prompts to communicate their beliefs.

By relying on language and praxis of Equitable Educator Mindsets and Consequences Framework, hiring committees increase the chances of fostering a staff at BPS schools that embody equity mindsets in their thinking and practice to ensure all students are represented and cared for.

In these cases, we provide considerations for reframing interview questions as well as additional recommended questions to ensure candidates demonstrate a nuanced understanding of how equity-centered practices are embedded in their practices and hiring committees communicate equity-centered values to candidates throughout the interview process and beyond.