REGIONAL SCHOOL UNIT 22

2020–2021 Equity Audit Report

Prepared by Abbott & Associates

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2.1 Data from interviews and surveys indicate high levels of tension and disagreement in the school community, but survey evidence suggests there may also be areas of agreement on certain issues.

2.2 Political and ideological conflicts and polarization in American society are influencing community perceptions of RSU 22 and will likely pose significant challenges to community dialogue, compromise, and consensus on a wide range of equity-related issues.

2.3 Evidence suggests that misinformation about RSU 22 circulates widely in the district.

2.4 Persistent, multigenerational community narratives will likely complicate equity work in the district.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

2.5 Establish clear policies requiring civil and respectful adult conduct in all district buildings, events, and interactions.

2.6 Host facilitated community dialogues and forums focused on building mutual understanding across cultural and ideological differences.

2.7 Consider launching a participatory budgeting process.

SECTION 3. BIAS, PREJUDICE, DISCRIMINATION, BULLYING, AND HARASSMENT

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

3.1 Most stakeholders report low overall levels of bias, prejudice, discrimination, bullying, and harassment in the district.

3.2 Some students and family members report experiencing harmful incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment.

3.2A Heterosexism, Homophobia, and Transphobia

3.2B Racial and Ethnic Bias, Prejudice, Bullying, and Harassment

3.2C Sexism

3.3 District staff report experiencing relatively low levels of bias, prejudice, or disrespectful treatment in the workplace.

3.4 District and school responses to bias, prejudice, and bullying affecting students are likely inconsistent and in some cases insufficient.

3.5 Some district staff members likely possess low levels of self-awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, or skill when it comes to appropriately handling and responding to specific incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

3.6 Consult with legal, disciplinary, and developmental professionals to determine appropriate interventions and disciplinary responses for different forms of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment.

3.7 Adopt unambiguous policies and procedures related to harassing and hateful speech, gestures, and symbols.

3.8 Improve staff-wide self-awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and skill related to the appropriate handling of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment among students and in the workplace.

SECTION 4. DISTRICT AND SCHOOL POLICY

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

4.1 Some district policies are outdated and do not directly address equity issues.

4.2 School-level policies and procedures related to equity likely vary from school to school, and the implementation of policies may be inconsistent across the district.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

4.3 Adopt a comprehensive board-approved position statement and policy on equity work in the district.

4.4 Utilize the Equity in Education subcommittee of the school board to draft equity policies and subsections for full-board consideration and adoption.

4.5 Add regular reports and updates on equity initiatives and progress to school board meetings, including presentations that are developed, organized, and led by students and staff.

SECTION 5. DISTRICT COMMUNICATIONS AND SURVEYS

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

5.1 Expectations for staff communication and responsiveness are high, and day-to-day communication and coordination burdens are significant.

5.2 The consistency of family-facing communication is uneven across the district, and families report frustrations with the accessibility, quality, and responsiveness of district and school communication.

5.3 Surveys are not being coordinated at the district or school levels, findings from surveys are not routinely shared with surveyed populations, and staff, students, and parents do not know what actions, if any, result from surveys.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

5.4 Consider hiring a district communications coordinator to manage, consolidate, and improve district communications.

5.5 Establish standardized communication protocols and appropriate family expectations at the school and classroom levels over time.

5.6 Develop a coherent and coordinated district-wide survey plan.

SECTION 6. SCHOOL FACILITIES, RESOURCING, AND BUSING

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

6.1 Many disparities and inequities in school facilities or resourcing are well-known to administrators, staff, and community members.

6.2 Structural features of the school system pose significant barriers to educational equity.

6.3 Some community members perceive structural inequities in RSU 22 to be intentional inequities, and some community members are uninformed about structural disparities in school resourcing.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

6.4 Address misperceptions directly through improved communication.

6.5 Initiate a community conversation about restructuring the middle-level experience in the district.

6.6 Restart the Educational Foundation and raise funding for equity investments.

6.7 Establish a private-grants program—if and when district staffing levels are sufficient.

SECTION 7. CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

7.1 The majority of students surveyed in grades 6–12 report having positive, respectful, and supportive academic relationships with teachers, but they are significantly less likely to share social or emotional problems with teachers.

7.2 Efforts are underway in district schools, content areas, and grade levels to modernize curriculum and instruction, but progress is uneven across the district.

7.3 Academic expectations are inconsistent between the two RSU 22 middle schools, and the two schools have different instructional cultures.

7.4 Some areas of student support may be deficient in the district.

7.5 Some community viewpoints on the current state and future direction of the RSU 22 curriculum are both divergent and incompatible.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

7.6 Establish clear, principles-based curriculum guidelines related to racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse content and instruction, but remain open and responsive to ongoing community dialogue and concerns.

7.7 Appoint teachers to coordinate grade-level and content-area curricular audits, and modernize curricula with the active participation of grade-level and content-area faculty teams.

SECTION 8. ATHLETICS AND EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMMING

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

8.1 Based on available data, patterns of participation in high school athletics suggest potential inequities.

8.2 Civil rights teams and other student groups present opportunities to expand, diversify, and enhance student voice and leadership in the district, including projects directly related to educational equity.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

8.3 Begin tracking student participation in extracurricular programs and analyze disaggregated student-participation data annually.

8.4 Create more opportunities for students to engage in authentic forms of youth leadership, decision-making, and advocacy.

SECTION 9. STAFF HIRING AND RETENTION

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

9.1 RSU 22 does not currently have a formal process in place for diversity hiring or the evaluation of equity proficiency during the hiring process.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

9.2 Develop a diversity-hiring strategy and a process for evaluating and considering equity proficiency when making hiring decisions.

SECTION 10. DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

10.1 Some district and school leadership decisions could be more inclusive, and shared-leadership opportunities could be more broadly distributed among staff members.

10.2 Patterns of preferential treatment appear to occur throughout the district.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

10.3 Create more opportunities for staff leadership and staff-involved decision-making, and work toward more self-aware and inclusive approaches to involving staff members in leadership roles.

10.4 Develop standardized procedures and policies to address patterns of preferential treatment in the school system

A. WHY EQUITY MATTERS

Improving equity in public schools requires a multifaceted process that addresses everything from curriculum development and instructional practices to guidance counseling and mental-health support to anti-bullying and anti-bias programs to staff certification and professional development.

But why is equity important? And why should schools prioritize and invest in equity work?

1. **Education is a fundamental civil right.** In Article VII, Section 1, the Maine Constitution states that access to the advantages of public education is "essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people," and "to promote this important object, the Legislature are authorized, and it shall be their duty to require, the several towns to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the support and maintenance of public schools."

2. **Public schools are required to comply with state and federal laws.** Numerous state and federal laws require public schools to provide equitable learning environments, programs, and opportunities to all students. For example, the Maine Revised Statutes states: "All students have the right to attend public schools that are safe, secure and peaceful environments. The Legislature finds that bullying and cyberbullying have a negative effect on the school environment and student learning and well-being. These behaviors must be addressed to ensure student safety and an inclusive learning environment. Bullying may be motivated by a student's actual or perceived race; color; religion; national origin; ancestry or ethnicity; sexual orientation; socioeconomic status; age; physical, mental, emotional or learning disability; gender; gender identity and expression; physical appearance; weight; family status; or other distinguishing personal characteristics or may be based on association with another person identified with such a characteristic." (See Title 20-A: EDUCATION, Part 3: ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION, Chapter 223: HEALTH, NUTRITION AND SAFETY, Subchapter 6: SAFETY, §6554. Prohibition on bullying in public schools.)

3. **To guarantee a student's civil rights, public schools must provide equitable access to a high-quality education, safe learning environments, and fair treatment for all students.** While the Maine Constitution and numerous state and federal laws require public schools to provide safe, secure, and inclusive learning environments that are free from any form of bias, prejudice, bullying, discrimination, or harassment, public schools have historically failed to ensure equitable access to high-quality educational experiences, safe learning environments, or fair treatment for far too many students. To this day, students continue to be inadequately educated in public schools throughout the United States, to have their civil rights violated, and to be denied fair treatment, safe learning environments, or equitable access to educational opportunities. Our contemporary national discussion about "educational equity" is an attempt to raise awareness of these historical injustices and

ensure that public schools actively implement the policies, procedures, programs, and practices that are necessary to adequately educate all students, protect their civil rights, and ensure fair treatment, safe learning environments, and equal access to educational opportunities.

4. **Mistreatment must be actively addressed in public schools to protect children from harm, create conditions that promote student well-being, and facilitate the learning process.** When any form of student mistreatment occurs in public schools, educators and publicly elected officials are obligated to take all necessary and appropriate actions to stop the mistreatment, protect children from harm, and create conditions in public schools that ensure student safety, promote wellbeing, and facilitate the learning process. These actions require that administrators, faculty, staff, and school-board members are versed in all applicable laws and regulations; educated about the features, manifestations, and dynamics of educational equity and inequity in educational systems; and knowledgeable about relevant professional standards, ethical considerations, and equity-related proficiencies.

5. **Educators must be able to respond effectively to changing demographics, social dynamics, and professional standards and expectations.** Population demographics in Maine and the greater Bangor region are changing rapidly, and over the coming years the public schools in RSU 22 will be serving an increasingly diverse population of students and families. In addition, student learning needs are evolving in response to social, economic, and cultural dynamics in American society, and RSU 22 will be obligated to meet those needs with corresponding shifts in policy, procedure, and professional practice. To educate students effectively and equitably, administrators, faculty, and staff in RSU 22 will need to acquire new knowledge, new skills, and new professional proficiencies.

6. **Today's employers expect their employees and new hires to possess a variety of equity-related skills.** If students have not acquired equity-related skills before they graduate from high school or college, they will be at a distinct disadvantage in the modern workplace. Increasingly, employers expect their employees and new hires to possess a wide variety of equity-related skills, including the ability to communicate effectively and respectfully across cultural differences; work productively in racially, ethnically, or culturally diverse teams; and refrain from any form of biased, prejudiced, or discriminatory behavior in the workplace and in their professional interactions. In the modern workforce, employees need to be able to take personal responsibility for their words and behavior. Applicants who cannot demonstrate that they possess these skills are less likely to be hired, and employees who cannot communicate, interact, or collaborate in unbiased, self-aware, and respectful ways with customers, clients, or colleagues from diverse backgrounds are more likely to lose their jobs or be denied opportunities for career advancement.

B. DISTRICT STRENGTHS AND ASSETS

Over the course of the assessment, the investigator identified several strengths and assets in RSU 22. It should be noted that many school districts in Maine and across the United States do not possess many of the assets described here, and each of these assets will help the district as it works to implement equity initiatives over the coming years.

- **A caring, dedicated, and hardworking administrative team, faculty, and staff.** When asked to identify strengths in RSU 22, interview respondents—nearly to a person—described a caring, dedicated, and hardworking administrative team, faculty, and staff.
- **A collegial, respectful, and supportive professional culture.** A majority of employee interview and survey respondents described a professional culture that is predominately collegial, respectful, and supportive.
- **A majority of students report positive school experiences.** In responses to both school-administered surveys and the student survey administered during the assessment, a majority of students report positive educational experiences, including largely positive relationships with teachers and peers.
- **Students have access to a variety of learning opportunities and extracurricular activities.** For a district of its size, RSU 22 offers students a wide variety of learning opportunities and extracurricular activities.
- **A majority of employees report favorable views of district and school leaders.** In interviews and survey responses, a majority of staff respondents provided positive evaluations of RSU 22 administrators and faculty leaders.
- **A robust and diversified professional development program.** For a district of its size, RSU 22 provides a comparatively robust and diversified set of professional learning opportunities to faculty and staff.
- **Most families have a favorable view of the district.** In interviews and survey responses, a majority of family members provided positive evaluations of the education their children receive in RSU 22.
- **The schools function as community centers.** The schools in RSU 22 function as community centers by hosting a wide range of community-oriented activities that bring together people from different towns and backgrounds.
- **There is a strong sense of community pride in the school system.** Interview and survey respondents described a strong sense of community pride in the school system.

- **A positive reputation.** RSU 22 has a positive reputation in the region, and many families move into the district because of the educational experiences and opportunities the schools are able to provide to their children.
- **Community support for the district budget.** To date, the RSU 22 community has shown a willingness to support the district financially.
- **Strong civic engagement potential.** Interview and survey respondents report that the RSU 22 community is generally willing to support the school and fellow community members through volunteerism, donations, fundraising, and other activities.
- **Student representatives on the school board.** The RSU 22 school board currently has two elected student representatives, which provides opportunities for youth leadership and voice at the policy level.
- **Equity in Education Committee.** The recently formed equity subcommittee of the school board can play an important role in advising the full board on equity policies and initiatives.

C. HOW TO READ THE REPORT

This section provides background information, context, and guidelines intended to help readers interpret the findings and recommendations detailed in this report.

- The investigator wants to express deep appreciation for the many RSU 22 community members who contributed to this report through interviews, survey responses, working groups, and data requests. Cumulatively, the report represents hundreds of hours of time donated by RSU 22 administrators, educators, staff, students, and family members.

- The report is based on a six-month assessment (December 2020–May 2021) that was limited in time, scope, methodology, and situational constraints, including the partial shutdown of RSU 22 schools, the transition to a hybrid model of instruction, and other systems-wide effects of the pandemic. While the equity audit included the analysis of data and evidence collected from interviews, surveys, and district documents and reports, it must be noted that public schools are extraordinarily complex institutions, and no assessment—no matter how comprehensive—will be able to fully describe every policy, program, procedure, or practice that has a bearing on educational equity.

- The audit focused more heavily, but not exclusively, on RSU 22's high school and middle schools. Interviews conducted early in the assessment process indicated that equity concerns were more apparent in the upper grades than the lower grades, and only students in grades 6–12 were invited to participate in the student survey due to developmental considerations. It must be noted, however, the assessment's relative emphasis on grades 6–12 was strictly based on logistical limitations—specifically, limitations of human resources, contract time, and student access—and not on importance. Equity in the lower grades is as important as equity in the upper grades, and decades of research indicate that inequities in the education of young children can have damaging effects on their educational progress, achievement, and attainment later in life. As RSU 22's equity work unfolds over the coming years, the investigator recommends that the district consider conducting an equity assessment focused on the elementary grades.

- One shortcoming of this report is that it is not more informed by a greater number of first-hand dialogues with a larger percentage of the RSU 22 staff, student body, and families. While some data from student focus groups was collected and analyzed, the findings outlined in this report would have been stronger if more focus groups had been conducted with RSU 22's three primary stakeholder groups. The investigator encourages the district to invest in an ongoing process of dialogue in which staff members, students, and families are given opportunities to describe their experiences and express their viewpoints in supportive spaces where they feel safe speaking about potentially uncomfortable topics. These conversations can take the form of a formal focus-group

process facilitated by an independent contractor, or they can take the form of small-group dialogues moderated by trained facilitators who live and work in the community.

- All equity assessments must rely on informational sources that are potentially misrepresentative, whether it's an absence of applicable data, subjective first-person reporting, misremembered incidents, or contradictory, disputed, or unverifiable claims. In many cases, it is simply not possible to determine the accuracy of a given data point, statement, or claim. Throughout the assessment process, however, the investigator looked for discernable patterns in available evidence—for example, multiple interviewees or survey respondents making factually consistent claims—while also focusing the assessment on pertinent issues indicated by multiple data sources. When questions about the accuracy of certain relevant claims arose, the investigator sought out confirming or disconfirming evidence through follow-up questions, data requests, document fact-checking, and other methods. This general methodology also applied to the selection of interview and written survey statements that are quoted in this report. While the quotations reflect the personal viewpoints and experiences of individual members of the RSU 22 community, the statements were selected because they are representative of broader trends and patterns that were discernible in the available evidence.

- The findings outlined in this report represent only a small portion of the evidence collected and analyzed by the investigator. A large number of statements, claims, and descriptions collected by the investigator were not included in this report, and a majority of the data, documentation, and other evidence collected and reviewed by the investigator is not featured. For reasons of practicality and utility, the report presents only a selection of findings that were prioritized based on both confirmability (multiple sources of evidence suggesting a broader pattern) and an informed evaluation of the relevance, importance, and urgency of any given equity issue. Interview participants and survey respondents should not interpret the absence of their viewpoint in these pages as a dismissal of their opinions or experiences; rather, they are encouraged to view any oversights or gaps in this report as an opportunity to bring their viewpoints forward in other forums.

- Survey data can provide a variety of useful insights into the culture of a school system or the experiences of staff, students, and families. Yet survey data rarely provides clear and actionable answers to many of the most important equity questions facing a school district. When considering survey data, the following metaphor is helpful: surveys are one way to "take a temperature" in a school district. When diagnosing illness, medical professionals will take a patient's temperature to determine whether the patient has a fever. A temperature check, on its own, will not provide a medical diagnosis, but it is an important tool that can provide a fuller picture of a particular patient's overall health or illness when evaluated alongside other diagnostic information. Surveys provide a comparable kind of information: they can indicate where problems might exist in a school district, but they need to be

combined with other sources of information in the context of a more comprehensive professional evaluation.

- The quantitative survey data presented in this report shows response percentages by question and subgroup (a *subgroup* is any particular category of respondents within a larger group of respondents, such as, for example, the employees of a particular school in a district, employees who identify as a particular gender, or employees who work in a particular professional role). Importantly, the data collected from the surveys used in the assessment do not reveal information about individual members of a particular subgroup. For example, employee responses on the staff survey used in this assessment indicated that a higher percentage of non-instructional staff members report lower levels of equity knowledge and understanding (see Section 1.1). While staff members who are not responsible for the academic instruction of students may, as a group, report lower levels of equity knowledge, individual staff members in this subgroup may in fact possess a high level of equity knowledge. In short, group-level survey findings should not be attributed to individual members of that group, just as a group should never be defined by the characteristics, beliefs, or behaviors of any of its individual members.

- Some survey results and charts have been left out of this report due to low respondent numbers in a given category. When response numbers are low in a certain category, reporting numerical data may inadvertently reveal a particular respondent's identity. For this reason, the report only provides written descriptions of findings or general percentages for some survey results that relate to the race, gender, and/or sexual orientation of RSU 22 employees or students. In addition, numerical data from the employee survey will not be reported for the following categories: employees who identified their workplace as *Central Office* or *Prekindergarten Programs*, and employees who identified their professional role as *District Administrator, School Administrator, and School Board Member*.

- No personal names are used in this report. Equity audits do not evaluate individuals or individual behavior; they evaluate systems and analyze evidence to identify discernable patterns. For the same reason, the report will avoid naming distinct roles in the system, such as "principal of the high school," and instead use more general terms and attributions, such as "administrator" or "faculty member." In selected cases, personal names and specific roles have been omitted from quoted statements, in accordance with common editorial standards and practices, and some statements were not used in this report because they named individuals or would have revealed individual identities.

- The qualitative data collected for this report is based on first-person reporting, not direct observations of the educational process in RSU 22. The decision to rely on first-person reporting, rather than first-hand observations, was due to limitations in resources, time, and access. While observational studies were not conducted, it should be noted that the inclusion of observational components would not necessarily improve the accuracy of the

equity audit's findings. First-hand observations of the educational process can be time consuming, and the relatively small amount of time that is dedicated to first-hand observation, regardless of contractual scope, will only be able capture an extremely small percentage of the educational and interpersonal interactions that take place in a school system over the course of days, weeks, months, and years. Comparatively, the collective perspectives and first-hand experiences reported by interviewees and survey respondents who work, learn, and live in the RSU 22 community represent a vast archive of first-person experiences that have unfolded over multiple decades.

- While efforts have been made to make this report as accessible and understandable as possible to both educator and non-educator audiences, it should be noted that public schools are highly specialized and sophisticated professional operations. Consequently, a certain level of technical analysis and language are required when describing the nuances of educational policy, practice, and culture, or when putting forth recommendations that are intended to be understood and acted upon in a professional context. Although the full report is available to the public, and any interested member of the RSU 22 community is encouraged to read it, some readers may find certain passages, findings, or recommendations less comprehensible than others.

- One of the potential benefits of an equity audit conducted by an independent investigator—an investigator who is neither an employee of the district nor a resident of the community—is that the investigator is able to bring an external perspective that is not only informed by lessons and insights from other public-school systems, but that is less likely to be biased or unduly influenced by past personal experiences in the community or its schools. On the other hand, any professional assessment conducted by an independent investigator will not be able to fully represent the extensive institutional knowledge that professional educators working in the district have acquired over years or decades, nor will the assessment be able to fully represent the "lived perspective" of the district's staff, students, and families. It must be noted, therefore, that the findings and recommendations in this report are based on a partial understanding of the full history, context, culture, and practices of RSU 22, and it is the district's administrators, educators, students, and families who will need to appropriately interpret the findings in this report and choose which recommendations will be prioritized and implemented.

- The recommendations outlined in this report should be viewed as *options*, not *requirements*. In addition, the investigator does not expect, and certainly does not recommend, that RSU 22 attempt to act on all of the recommendations detailed in this report or act on them all at once. The findings and recommendations in this report will need to be discussed, appropriately prioritized, and collectively acted upon by the RSU 22 community, which knows best which strategies should be pursued and in what sequence.

- "Equity" is an extraordinarily complex concept with innumerable historical, political, legal, social, cultural, and educational origins, features, and implications. Achieving even a proficient working knowledge of the basic features and dynamics of "educational equity" requires many years of dedicated study, dialogue, and practice. RSU 22 should recognize that equity is a process—one that must be sustained over many years—and not a task or goal that can be checked off a list. In addition, this report, while detailed, cannot address every nuance related to a particular finding or recommendation. For these reasons, the investigator will be available to answer any questions that might arise about contents of this report, or engage in further discussions about the report's findings or recommendations with RSU 22 leaders both before or after the contract period has ended.

- The investigator sincerely hopes that the findings and recommendations in this report are helpful to the RSU 22 community as it works to more fully understand the dynamics of equity and inequity in the district's schools. As educational and community leaders determine the future of equity work in the district, the investigator encourages RSU 22 leaders to develop authentic and inclusive decision-making processes that actively involve educators, staff, students, and families. No report, including this one, can replace the depth of knowledge, skill, and expertise already present in the RSU 22 community.

- Finally, the investigator encourages all members of the RSU 22 community to view this report as one contribution to an ongoing process being undertaken by the district's administrators, educators, staff, families, and student leaders. The report is not, and was never intended to be, a definitive assessment of the district's work or progress on equity. While the investigator has confidence in the findings presented in this report, any given finding can only tell part of a much larger and more complex story.

D. DATA SOURCES AND ASSESSMENT METHODS

This section provides a detailed overview of the data sources and assessment methods used in the equity audit.

The following quantitative data was collected and analyzed during the equity audit.

Quantitative data provided by the district:

1. Student enrollments (past five years by school and sending town).
2. Student demographics (current year by race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status).
3. Special education and Chapter 504 identification rates (current year by school).
4. Graduation rates (past five years).
5. Dropout rates (past five years).
6. Truancy (past three years by school).
7. Average daily attendance (past three years by school).
8. Chronic absenteeism (past three years by school).
9. Bullying rates (past four years by school—official reports of substantiated incidents only).
10. Behavior-related suspensions (past three years by school).

Quantitative data provided by Hampden Academy:

1. Student enrollments (current year).
2. Student demographics (current year by race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status).
3. Advance Placement and honors course enrollments (current year by race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and sending community).
4. United Technologies Center enrollments (current year by race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and sending town).
5. Student participation in athletic programs (past six athletic seasons by sending town).

Quantitative data from three equity surveys:

1. Staff survey (25 selected-response questions and 309 respondents—includes district administrators, school administrators, and school board members).
2. Student survey (28 selected-response questions and 813 respondents from Hampden Academy, Reeds Brook Middle School, and Samuel Wagner Middle School—students enrolled in grades 6–12 only).
3. Family survey (32 selected-response questions and 723 respondents).

The following qualitative data was collected and analyzed during the equity audit.

Qualitative data from three equity surveys:

1. Staff survey (two open-response questions, 350 written responses, and 11,846 words).
2. Student survey (one open-response question, 356 written responses, and 4,957 words).
3. Family survey (one open-response question, 235 written responses, and 18,880 words).

Qualitative data from interviews:

1. Ten family interviews with 11 respondents (approximately 15 hours of interviews).
2. Seventeen faculty and staff interviews with 18 respondents (approximately 24 hours of interviews).
3. Twenty-two administrative interviews with 17 respondents, including school board members, directors/coordinators, and central-office staff (approximately 32 hours of interview, including follow-up and fact-checking interviews).

Survey Background and Methodology

- All three surveys (of staff, students, and families) were developed by the investigator, in collaboration with district stakeholders, and designed to address equity-related issues that (1) were identified as priorities by the district, (2) were surfaced in interviews conducted during the first two months of the equity audit, or (3) are widely viewed as important educational equity concerns in the field.
- All three surveys followed standard, well-established procedures and practices for conducting evaluative surveys.
- A national sample of model surveys was reviewed during the survey-development process, and several survey questions were adapted from a comprehensive student school-climate

survey that has been used and revised annually by the Iowa City Community School District since 2014.

- The investigator interviewed the university researcher who led the development of the Iowa City Community School District survey, as well as the annual analysis and presentation of survey results. A detailed report of that interview was prepared by the investigator, and several findings and recommendations from the interview informed the survey-development process.
- A staff work group was convened in January to review a draft of the staff survey. Three volunteer RSU 22 staff members participated in the work group. The staff members represented the three major developmental grade spans in the district—elementary school, middle school, and high school—and included one guidance counselor and two teachers from different content areas. Modifications based on feedback and suggestions from the work group were incorporated into the final version of the staff equity survey.
- A family work group was convened in January and February (two times) to review a draft of the family survey. Three volunteer RSU 22 parents participated in the work group, and each parent had multiple children who had attended multiple schools in the district. Modifications based on feedback and suggestions from the work group were incorporated into the final version of the parent equity survey.
- Two student work groups were convened for 15 weeks between February and May to review a draft of the student survey and discuss findings. Twelve volunteer RSU 22 students—six from the high school and six from the district's two middle schools—participated in the work groups. Modifications based on feedback and suggestions from the two work groups were incorporated into the final version of the student equity survey.
- The staff survey was open for three weeks. The survey was sent to all district employees and school board members, and all district employees received multiple communications related to the survey.
- The student survey was open for a week. The survey was administered during the school day under the supervision of school faculty and staff members. A detailed consent letter and description of the survey was emailed to families in advance of the survey administration, and all parents and guardians were given the opportunity to opt their children out of the survey. Nine parents or guardians contacted the district to request that the survey not be administered to their child or children, and all nine requests were honored.

- The family survey was open for two weeks. The survey was sent to all parents and guardians of students currently enrolled in RSU 22, and all parents and guardians received multiple communications related to the survey.

Interview Background and Methodology

- In preparation for the interviews, the investigator developed a detailed interview protocol that was shared with, and approved by, RSU 22 leaders. The protocol was used during all stakeholder interviews.
- The interview protocol and process followed standard, well-established procedures and practices for conducting evaluative first-person interviews.
- Only adult members of the RSU 22 community were interviewed. No student interviews were conducted.
- Interview participants were selected based on requests and recommendations from the investigator or on recommendations from district administrators, school administrators, and interviewees. During interviews, the investigator asked a selection of participants to suggest additional interviewees, and a majority of the interviews resulted from specific investigator requests or recommendations from interview participants.
- All interviews were voluntary, and the RSU 22 employees and community members who were invited to participate in an interview were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary.
- Interviews were conducted using the online Google Meet video-conferencing platform. Interviews were video recorded for the purposes of documentation and analysis, and later interviews were both recorded and transcribed using automated software. All interview participants were asked at the outset of the interview whether they consented to being recorded, and no interviewees declined to be recorded.
- At the outset of the interviews, the investigator addressed interview anonymity and confidentiality. The investigator explained that (1) selected statements from the interview may be used in public reports or presentations, but all statements used in public reporting will be anonymous; (2) no personal names will appear in public reports or presentations, and statements will only be attributed by general role, such as *administrator*, *faculty member*, or *family member*; (3) when attributing statements to RSU 22 employees, the investigator, to further ensure anonymity, will not identify the specific office or school the interviewee worked in; (4) the investigator will make an effort to ensure that personally identifiable information is not inadvertently revealed when selecting and presenting interviewee statements; (5) interview recordings and transcripts will not be shown to or

shared with anyone, including RSU 22 administrators; and (6) all interview recordings and transcripts will be deleted at the conclusion of the equity audit.

- The investigator also gave interview respondents the option to request that particular statements be kept "off the record." The request to keep certain information out of formal reporting was made a few times, but these requests represented less than 15–20 minutes of interview time.
- If the investigator felt that certain statements and information provided by interview participants might be personally identifiable, such as descriptions of specific incidents, the investigator asked the interviewee for permission to use the applicable statements or stories before including them in this report. In two cases, the applicable passages were sent to the respondents for their review and approval prior to publication.
- A selection of the interviewee statements that appear in this report have been lightly edited to improve readability or focus, and all modifications follow standard procedures related to the presentation of verbatim statements in qualitative assessments. No substantive changes were made to the content or intended meaning of the statements. Edits were largely limited to removing inessential verbal phrases (such as *um*, *uh*, *like*, *well*, *you know*, *I think*, etc.) or omitting phrases and passages to shorten the length of a particular quotation, leave out digressive or less-relevant content, or remove personally identifiable information.

SECTION 1. STAFF EQUITY KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING, AND COMMITMENT

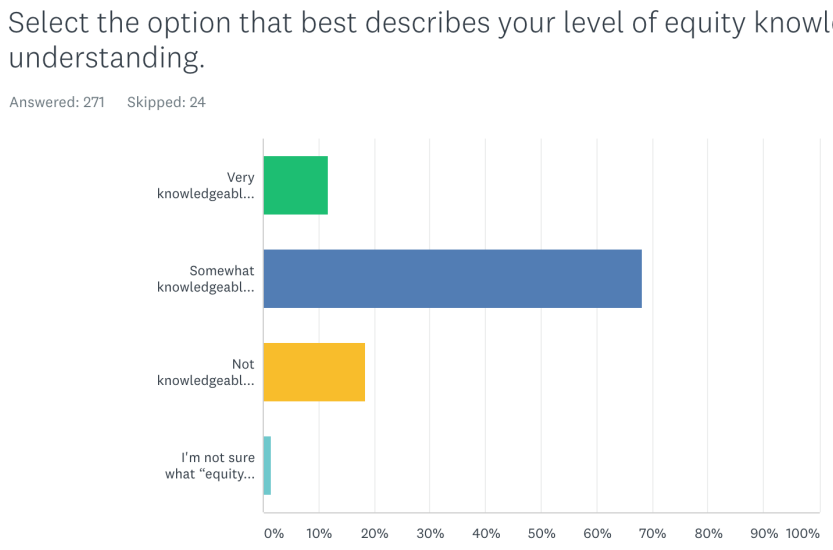
PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

1.1 Equity knowledge and understanding are unevenly distributed across the district.

Interview and survey evidence suggest that levels of equity knowledge and understanding vary significantly across RSU 22 employees, with non-instructional staff members and educational technicians self-reporting, as a group, the lowest levels of equity knowledge. Survey evidence indicates that levels of self-reported equity knowledge vary less significantly by school or length of professional tenure. Interviews with RSU 22 employees generally confirmed the survey findings.

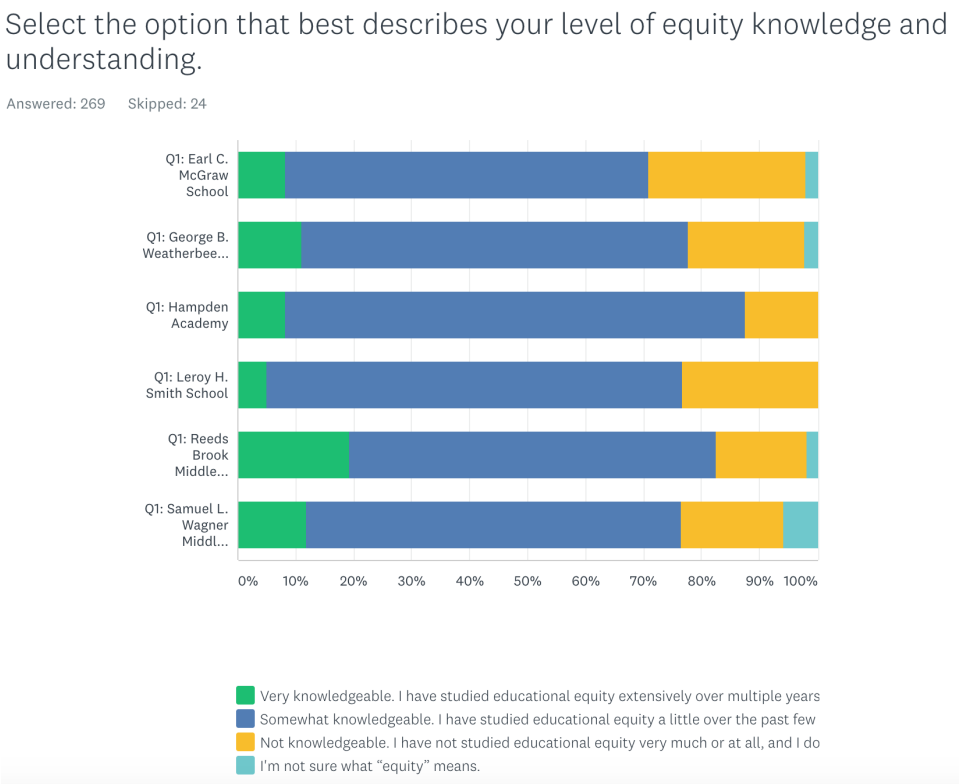
When asked to self-assess their equity knowledge and understanding, 12% of surveyed employees selected “very knowledgeable,” 68% selected “somewhat knowledgeable,” 18% selected “not knowledgeable,” and 2% selected “I’m not sure what equity means.” When asked on the staff survey to provide a definition of equity, 20 respondents (6%) wrote that they did not know, or were unsure of, the definition. An additional 55 respondents (18%) declined to answer the write-in question. (Figure 1.1A)

Figure 1.1A



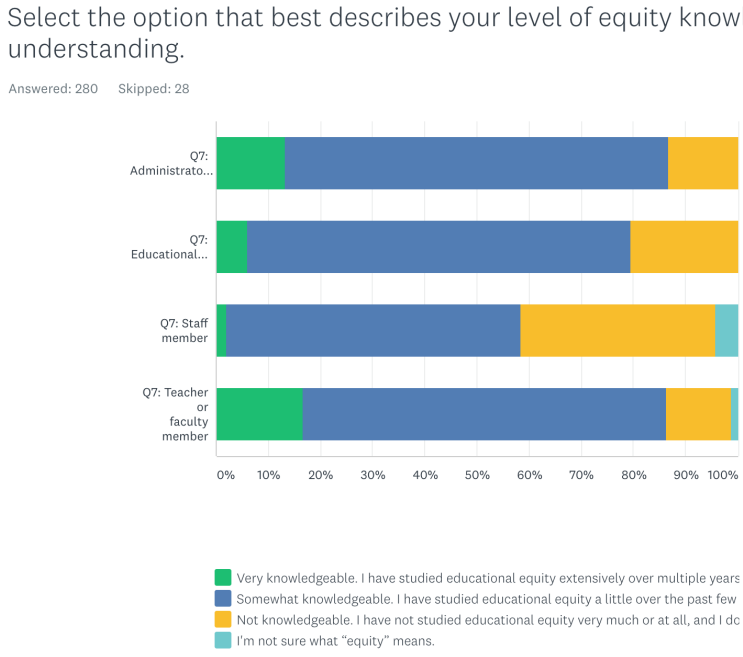
Levels of self-reported equity knowledge and understanding among district employees did not vary significantly by school, but lower levels of self-reported equity knowledge and understanding were marginally higher in the elementary schools and one middle school. (Figure 1.1B)

Figure 1.1B



Administrators and faculty members reported the highest levels of self-reported equity knowledge and understanding, and non-instructional staff members and educational technicians reported the lowest levels (as a percentage of those two employee populations). (Figure 1.1C)

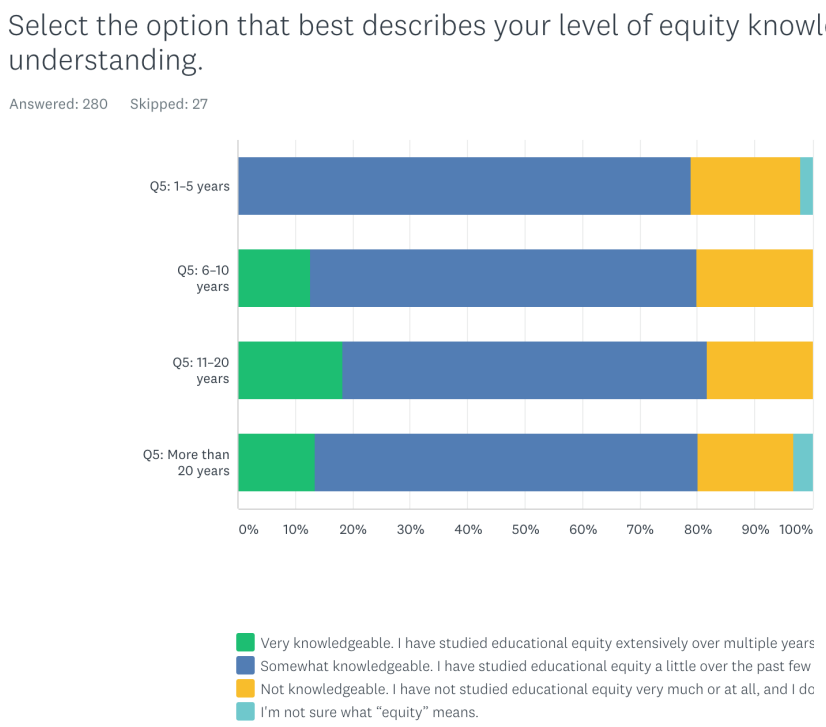
Figure 1.1C



NOTE: Respondents were advised to select "staff member" if their professional role in the district did not include the *academic* instruction of students. The following example roles were provided: administrative assistant, athletic coach, bus driver, custodian, nurse, nutrition staff, school resource officer, and social worker.

Survey responses indicate that equity knowledge and understanding does not vary significantly by length of professional tenure, though no employees who have worked in education between 1–5 years indicated they were "very knowledgeable" about equity. (Figure 1.1D)

Figure 1.1D



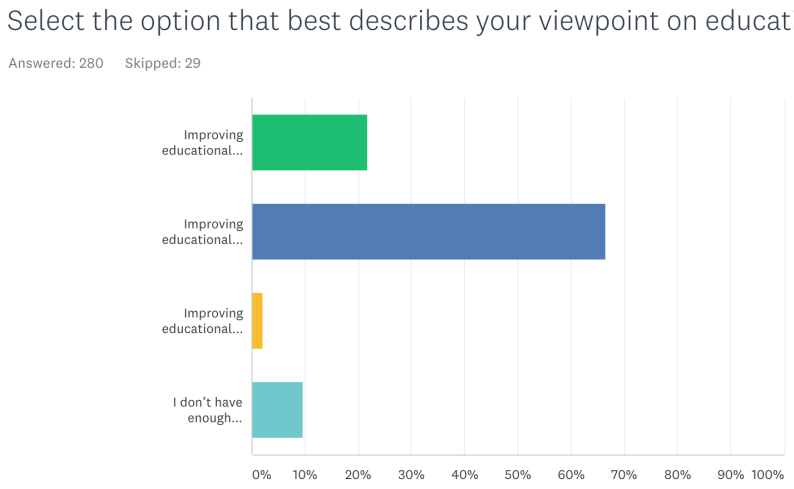
1.2 Equity commitment and prioritization are unevenly distributed across the district.

Interview and survey evidence suggest that levels of equity commitment and prioritization also vary significantly across RSU 22 employees.

When asked whether improving educational equity should be a top district priority, and whether the district or their school should be investing staff time and resources in equity-related work, 22% of survey respondents indicated that they believe educational equity should be a top priority, 66% believe that equity is important but should be balanced with other priorities, 2% believe equity should not be a priority and resources should be invested in other initiatives, and 10% indicated

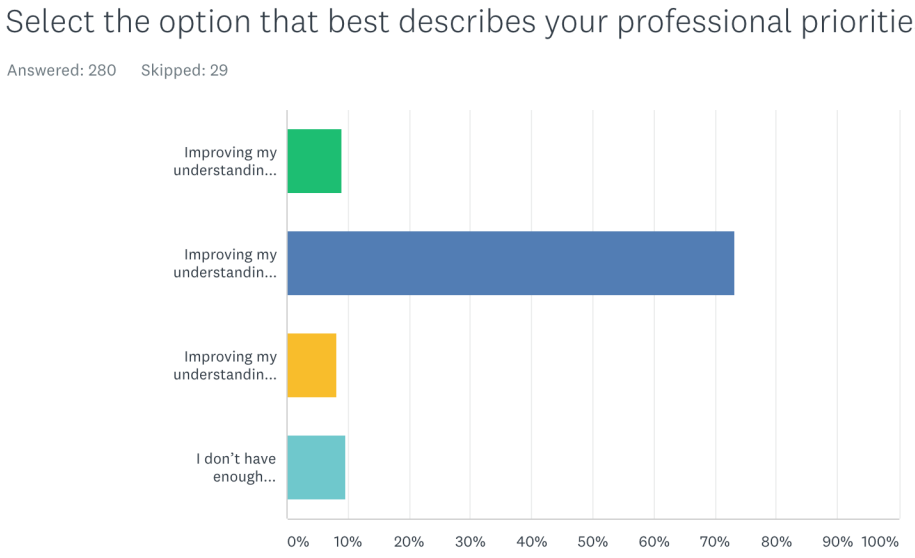
that they did not have enough information to form an opinion on equity work in the district or their school. (Figure 1.2A)

Figure 1.2A



When asked whether improving their understanding of equity was a personal priority, and whether they would like to participate in more educational opportunities related to educational equity, 9% of survey respondents indicated that improving their understanding of equity is a top professional priority, 73% indicated that educational equity is one of many professional priorities, 8% indicated that improving understanding of educational equity is not a professional priority, and nearly 10% indicated they don't enough information to determine whether equity should be a professional priority for them. (Figure 1.2B)

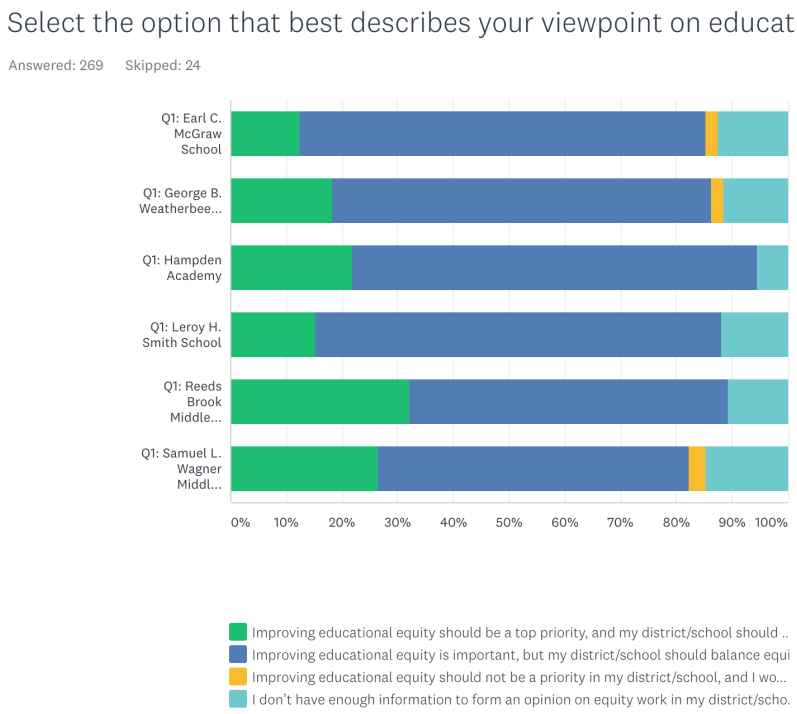
Figure 1.2B



A greater percentage of RSU 22 employees (22%) believe that equity work should be a top priority for the district than the percentage of employees (9%) who report that equity work is a top professional priority for them personally. Respondents who identified as non-instructional staff members were least likely to identify educational equity as a professional priority (20% indicated that educational equity is not a personal professional priority), while faculty members responsible for the academic instruction of students were most likely to identify educational equity as a professional priority (only 5% indicated that educational equity is not a personal professional priority). (Figure 1.2C)

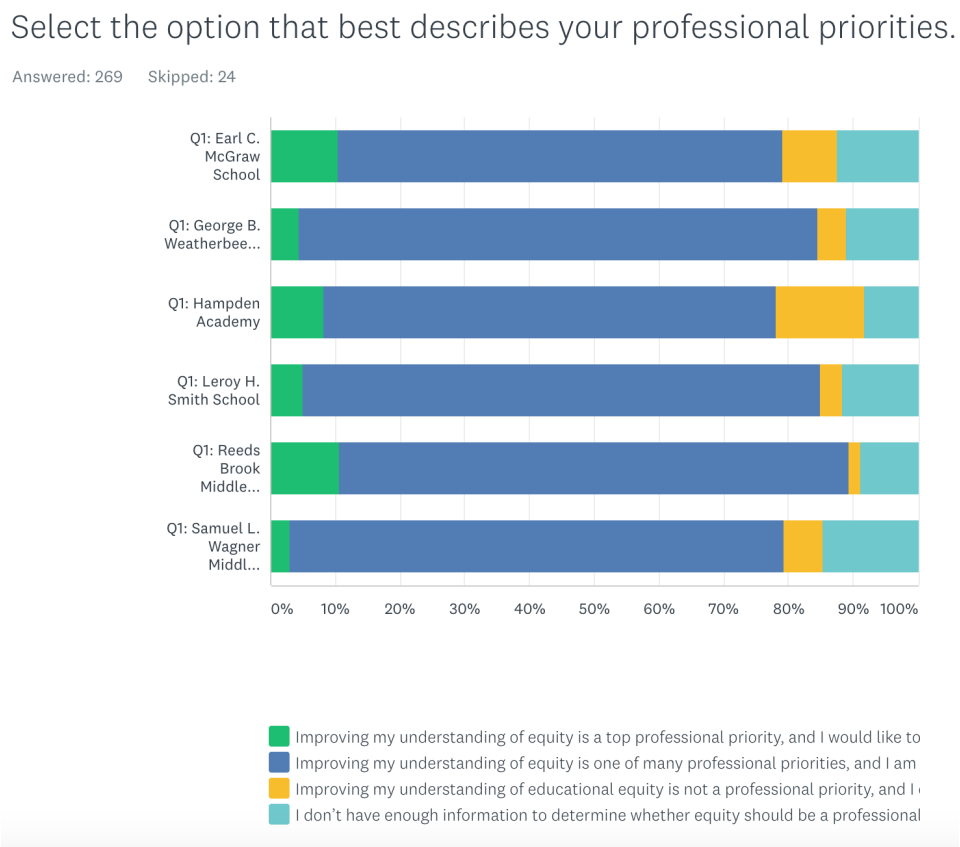
Survey responses indicate that staff prioritization of equity does not vary significantly by school. Only five respondents in the district selected "Improving educational equity should not be a priority in my district/school, and I would like to see staff time and resources invested in other initiatives."

Figure 1.2C



While more respondents indicated that educational equity was not a top professional priority for them personally, the percentages in each category of prioritization were relatively even across the six district schools. (Figure 1.2D)

Figure 1.2D



1.3 Equity definitions address only a narrow range of equity concerns, expertise, and practice.

In interviews and on the staff survey, RSU 22 employees were asked to define equity and briefly describe how equity works in school systems. In both interview and survey responses, a clear pattern emerged: A majority of employees defined equity in terms of educational access, opportunity, and outcomes for students, while a smaller percentage of responses addressed various equity issues related to employment conditions, employment opportunities, and employee treatment. Other dimensions and dynamics of educational equity were notably absent from survey responses and interviews. For example, only one staff interviewee discussed how unequal power relations and historical injustice contribute to inequities in schools, and only one staff survey respondent addressed injustice and discrimination: "Equity means being able to live, work, and exist in a community free of discrimination and injustice."

Out of 309 respondents who completed the staff survey, 243 respondents submitted written definitions of educational equity (66 respondents skipped the question). A term-frequency analysis

of the written definitions of equity provided by staff respondents found that the following concepts were most commonly associated with staff conceptions of equity:

- *Opportunity* or *opportunities* appeared 103 times in 92 definitions.
- *Equal*, *equally*, or *equality* appeared 90 times in 72 definitions.
- *Fair*, *fairly*, or *fairness* appeared 65 times in 61 definitions.
- *Access* appeared 42 times in 25 definitions.
- *Impartial*, *impartially*, or *impartiality* appeared 15 times in 15 definitions.
- *Include* or *inclusion* appeared 7 times in 7 definitions.
- *Level playing field* appeared 5 times in 5 definitions.
- *Safe* appeared 4 times in 4 definitions.

By comparison, the following terms appeared far less frequently in staff equity definitions:

- *Bias* or *biased* appeared 8 times in 8 definitions.
- *Privilege* or *privileged* appeared 2 times in 2 definitions.
- *Discriminate* or *discrimination* appeared appeared 2 times in 2 definitions.
- *Prejudice* appeared 1 time in 1 definition.
- *Injustice* appeared 1 time in 1 definition.

The following write-in responses are representative of the majority of the equity definitions provided by staff respondents:

- “Everyone has the same access to the same opportunities.”
- “Equity is fair and impartial treatment of a person or group, regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, or economic status, or social standing.”
- “Equity for me is that each student has an equal chance for success.”
- “Equity is giving every student in your class the same opportunities for success and giving all students the support that they need to be successful.”
- “Equity is providing students with what is needed for them to reach their full potential.”

- “Equal opportunity in education regardless of circumstances (such as gender, sexual orientation, race, poverty, etc.) All students have equal access. All students have the opportunity to get what they need.”
- “Everyone is equal.”
- “Fair and consistent treatment for all.”
- “To be fair, impartial toward individuals. Do not judge anyone based on color, race, gender, or age.”
- “Fair, uniform, no preferable [sic] treatment to majorities or minorities.”
- “To me equity means that everyone is viewed the same and everyone is given the same opportunities.”
- “I believe that an equitable school offers the same opportunities for everyone.”

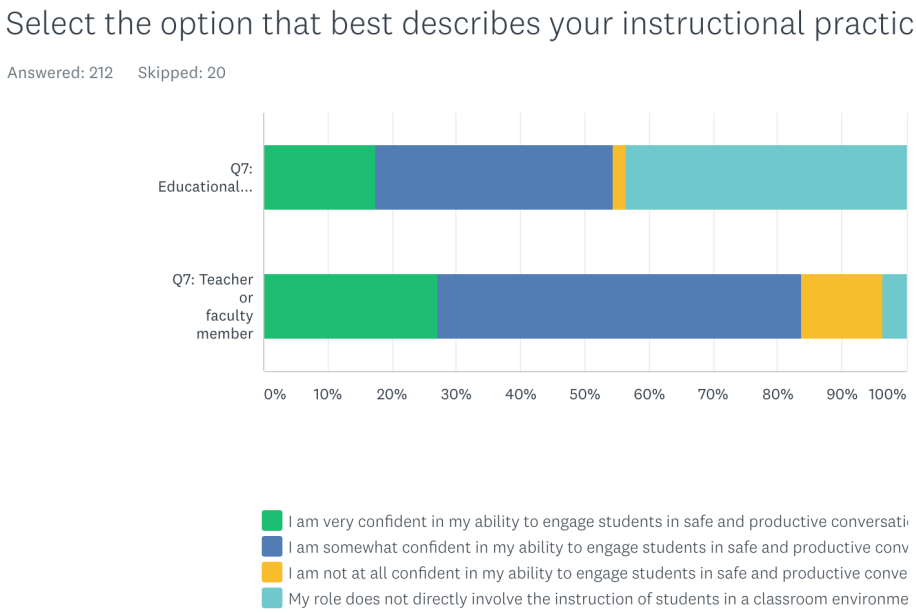
Many respondents addressed the distinction between *equity* and *equality*—specifically, they indicated that the practice of educational equity in schools may require an uneven distribution of resources such as staffing, staff time, or funding allocations:

- “Equity is providing students what they need in order to be successful. This means not all situations will be equal or the same as every individual has different needs and experiences.”
- “I think equity in schools means meeting students where they’re at. This does not mean that all students receive the same things. Closing the opportunity gap is something that should be focused on for all students in the district.”
- “Equity does NOT mean everyone gets the same, it means that everyone gets what they need.”
- “Equity means equal and fair access to education for all students regardless of ethnicity, beliefs, or socio-economic status. This access doesn't look the same for all students. Individual needs must be considered. For staff, equal opportunity and treatment. Favoritism should not be a thing.”
- “Equity means a fair, not equal, opportunity for all.”

1.4 **Potentially significant levels of discomfort and anxiety about equity work, practice, and changing norms may be present in the district.**

When asked on the staff survey to report their level of confidence in their ability to "engage students in safe and productive conversations about race, class, gender, or other sensitive topics," 27% of teacher and faculty respondents indicated they are very confident, 57% indicated they are somewhat confident, 13% indicated they are not at all confident, and 4% indicated that their role does not directly involve the instruction of students in a classroom environment. (Figure 1.4A)

Figure 1.4



For survey respondents who identified as educational technicians, 17% indicated they are very confident, 37% indicated they are somewhat confident, 2% indicated they are not at all confident, and 43% indicated that their role does not directly involve the instruction of students in a classroom environment.

While the staff survey did not directly ask about equity-related anxiety, multiple interviewees and survey respondents expressed feeling anxious about equity expectations in the workplace or in their teaching practice, or they described talking with colleagues who had expressed feeling anxious about the shifting landscape of social, professional, and instructional norms related to race, gender, sexuality, and other topics:

> "When I hear the word 'equity'...I don't know. The movement with systemic racism and all that is scary to me. Personally, I don't have a super clear understanding of it, and I'm still in the learning process with everything. And you can say one thing and you could be considered racist…. It's just so new to me, and it's certainly a conversation that needs to happen, but for us in this district it's fairly new….. What's scary is not saying the right thing and people misinterpreting what you're

saying, and then accusing you of pushing your political beliefs when you're just trying to show both sides. It's all the other person's interpretation of your motivations and what you've said. I've never felt this way in my teaching career until this year, especially with how hot politics has been." —Faculty Member

"I am fearful that a classroom discussion on equity-related topics could be misconstrued to parents and parents attacking individual teachers." —Faculty Member

"We have lived in a relatively white state, we have been relatively isolated for a long time, and we haven't had to deal with a lot of these issues…so I think that the fear comes from being ill-equipped: I don't know how to talk about slavery with an African American student in the classroom—that's never happened to me before. How do I talk about coronavirus? I have a student of Asian descent in my class. How am I going to make them feel comfortable? How am I going to get the information out and how am I going to present it so that the other kids in the classroom won't turn around and look at them? I think most teachers want to do the right thing, but they're afraid that they're going to be, you know, called on the carpet because something they did was wrong. And so they just won't do it—it's easier to avoid everything. I'll just put in that video about Abraham Lincoln one more time. I'll just read out of that book about the Gilded Age one more time…. They don't know what to do, so they talk about World War I again. It's easier and not as controversial." —Faculty Member

"I am extremely interested in engaging my students with discussions related to these topics, but I do not feel confident in my knowledge of some. I tend to avoid these topics if I don't feel that I will be able to provide a safe and knowledgeable space to have these discussions. I think I tend to worry about other students' responses to their peers and how to handle them. I am also worried that my personal beliefs will come through no matter how much I try to stay neutral, which I don't want to happen. I appreciate that the district is working towards becoming more equitable in all schools; I think it is extremely important for staff to be trained in how to be more inclusive with their content and open with their discussions. Personally, I would like training that will specifically help me address these topics in the classroom. For example, how to mediate appropriate discussions with students at any grade level, how to make sure content is inclusive in any subject area, how to communicate this content to parents, etc." —Faculty Member

When professional educators and school staff are not confident in their ability to discuss—with colleagues, students, or families—issues such as race, gender, sexuality, politics, science, or history, one common reaction is avoidance. Some staff members will stick with more traditional content that they are comfortable teaching, some will be self-conscious about expressing their

beliefs or opinions in the workplace, and some will avoid sensitive topics entirely out of fear they may be judged or called out by their colleagues.

In schools, patterns of avoidance are not only unlikely to support positive progress on organizational equity or individual equity proficiency, but they are also unlikely to reduce the levels of discomfort, anxiety, or fear experienced by some staff members; in fact, avoidance of difficult conversations often amplifies anxiety levels, making people less receptive to the forms of dialogue, education, or collaboration that are required to increase confidence and capability in the diverse range of skills required to be an equity-proficient professional.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

1.5 Develop a deeper understanding of why equity matters among a broader cross-section of the RSU 22 community.

In interviews and survey responses, RSU 22 staff members expressed a wide range of viewpoints on educational equity, though most definitions of equity converged on a few common themes—specifically, ensuring educational access, opportunity, and fairness for all students. While foundational democratic principles such as *fairness* are indeed essential components of educational equity, principles alone rarely provide a sufficiently compelling rationale for prioritizing equity in school systems that may already be struggling to appropriately balance many other important priorities. Voicing support for democratic principles such as fairness is relatively easy, and few people will argue that fairness is unimportant in public schools. However, actually *practicing fairness* in public education is extremely challenging, and staff members may hold divergent views on what "fairness" actually means or on what it looks like when enacted in a school or classroom.

When school systems do not articulate a strong rationale for prioritizing equity and instead move directly into professional development or the implementation of initiatives, faculty and staff may be more likely to ignore, question, or even resist the equity priorities being supported by educational leaders. In many cases, the rush to implement equity initiatives is well intentioned, and educational leaders may in fact have a strong rationale they have articulated to themselves and others. But if the staff and faculty in a school system have not yet developed a shared understanding of the "why"—why equity matters, why it needs to be prioritized, why everyone should be involved—then building systems-wide understanding, buy-in, and ownership will be much more difficult.

Interview and survey data suggest that faculty and staff in RSU 22 have not yet developed a shared understanding of why equity matters and why it should be prioritized. Consequently, many staff members appear to question why equity is being prioritized, why resources and time are being invested in equity initiatives, and why other important priorities are not being addressed.

> "I think it would be useful to teach and develop a shared vocabulary among faculty and staff about racism. I think it would be useful to gather experience from schools who are further along in their journeys in equity and inclusion." —Faculty Member

Building a shared understanding of why equity matters will take time, and may require that some equity plans be delayed or modified, but overlooking this vital step in the process often risks undermining the efficacy of a school system's investments in equity work.

1.6 Create opportunities for safe, honest, and respectful dialogue among staff.

Interview data suggests that potentially significant levels of anxiety about equity work and changing norms may be present in the district, though much of this anxiety may be hidden or suppressed in professional contexts—in part due to a fear of being judged, criticized, or embarrassed, as discussed in Section 1.4.

One foundational practice in equity work is *dialogue*. In the equity and civic-engagement fields, "dialogue" refers to intentional forms of conversation that are used to improve mutual understanding, appreciation, and respect among individuals and groups, often for the purpose of facilitating a collaboration or decision-making process. Dialogues are usually small- or large-group conversations that are purposefully designed to achieve specific goals, such as helping people work together to solve a problem, develop a plan, execute a project, or resolve a conflict, but they can also be used to explore new topics, particularly topics that people are likely to avoid because they are sensitive or controversial.

> **NOTE:** For a more detailed overview of dialogue practices in schools, visit organizingengagement.org/principles/dialogue.

When dialogues are well planned and facilitated, they provide a respectful and emotionally safe forum for people from diverse backgrounds to discuss difficult or contentious topics. One form of dialogue often used in equity work is an *affinity group*. Affinity groups bring together people with similar backgrounds, identities, or roles, and they are commonly used to develop knowledge, skills, and confidence in a particular area, whether it's teaching practice or cross-cultural communication.

While the term "affinity group" is most commonly associated with small-group dialogues that are based on race, gender, or other forms of identity, affinity groups can also bring together people who have similar professional roles in an organization or people who are at similar stages in a learning process. For those in the RSU 22 community who may be hesitant to discuss equity in larger, mixed-group settings, a smaller, well-facilitated affinity group could be considered. Guidelines and advice for conducting affinity-group dialogues are readily available online and in print publications.

Affinity groups, however, are only one form of dialogue that RSU 22 can consider. Other forms of facilitated dialogue can be used within academic departments or grade-level teams, with groups of students or parents, and with people who may hold different beliefs or opinions. Unlike debate, dialogues are more likely to bring people together on an issue than drive them further apart, and unlike a training session, dialogues are less directed, better suited to exploration, and more focused on participants sharing their personal experiences and viewpoints.

Dialogues can also be used to bring groups into conversation with people who they are unlikely to interact with otherwise, such as people from different racial backgrounds, social classes, or political identities. As a learning strategy, less-formal dialogues can, in some circumstances, be more effective than formal training sessions.

> "We just don't have those conversations [about sensitive topics such as race or gender identity] because they're aren't many people around to have those conversations with. So it's so hard.... Because there's not enough people here to have that dialogue with to help us understand, I think that would be instructive. I think that kind of dialogue would be more instructive than anything. We don't need someone to preach to us and tell us how badly we're doing or how little we understand. We know that we need somebody to help us understand and move forward, but we're stuck." —Teacher

As the statement above suggests, RSU 22 could consider inviting speakers from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds to share and discuss their experiences with faculty and staff. If this dialogue strategy is pursued, however, the investigator recommends inviting experienced speakers, such as professionals who are compensated for their time or community members who have done dialogue work in the past. It would be inappropriate to ask anyone to speak about their experiences with race or identity, for example, if they are not comfortable and confident doing so, particularly anyone who may feel pressured, such as an employee being asked by a supervisor. Any form of tokenism should also be avoided.

1.7 Focus professional development on one or two equity frameworks to establish a shared equity language and understanding across the district, and prioritize one or two equity initiatives or practices that will have a systems-wide impact.

Interviews with RSU 22 staff members indicate that a significant percentage of district employees are likely experiencing high levels of work-related stress, and multiple interviewees expressed concerns about the potential for "burnout." While increased levels of work-related stress were attributed, in part, to the changes in workloads, responsibilities, and professional practice caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, staff interviewees also described a general condition in which new responsibilities are being added to their professional role each year on top of existing responsibilities. Interviewees also indicated that RSU 22 staff members tend to hold themselves to

high professional standards, and that it is common for staff members to invest significant amounts of time and energy in new initiatives, even initiatives they may not fully support.

While respondents report that a majority of RSU 22 employees possess a strong work ethic, hold themselves to high professional standards, and invest significant amounts of time and energy in their job—including working uncompensated hours or working during evenings, weekends, and school breaks—several respondents also noted that a minority of RSU 22 employees do not fulfill basic employment obligations, demonstrate low professional standards, work the least number of hours possible, and/or fail to respond to questions or requests from students and family members. As in any organization, it is the responsibility of administrators and supervisors to monitor individual employee behavior and take appropriate action when specific employees fail to meet employment obligations and expectations.

When asked what RSU 22 could improve, a staff interviewee gave the following answer:

> "The first one that comes to the top of my mind is teacher burnout. We don't have official policies in place for us to be able to teach all students equitably. We teach all students *equally* and the informal set of expectations is that you will teach all students *equitably*. And there is a disconnect there and it burns teachers out. We have lost a number of good instructors over the years; they just couldn't take the pace. They just couldn't keep up with the demands of the job. A second problem, and this is probably not endemic just to RSU 22, but it is the overwhelming number of requirements that come our way. As a district prior to [the current administration], we jumped on every bandwagon and anything that was new. We jumped on it, and we did it. And unfortunately, we don't do anything half-heartedly; we jump in with both feet and that exacerbated teacher burnout.... I think the public would be amazed at the requirements that we have for teachers…. We just keep adding more and more and spreading ourselves thinner and thinner. This equity piece is terribly, terribly important. It's important to the district, and I think it's important to the future of the district. The problem is, what else do we need to do? When the state says you've got to do X or Y, so now we're doing equity plus X and Y.… I don't know how we as educators can deal with that. I don't know how we can get it all done. We usually just smile and say, yeah, we'll do that, we'll do that, we'll do that… But at some point, we just don't have the ability to do it all." —Faculty Member

The situation described above is not unique to RSU 22. National studies and surveys indicate that educator workloads and work-related stress levels have increased significantly over the past few decades, a condition that has not only contributed to concerning levels of professional burnout and demoralization in the field, but that also contributed to high rates of attrition (educators leaving public schooling for pursue careers in other fields), declining enrollments in teacher-preparation programs, and increasing difficulties filling faculty and staff vacancies in public schools nationwide.

To make progress on equity priorities, RSU 22 will need to develop an implementation plan that balances new initiatives, and the new responsibilities they entail, with existing initiatives and responsibilities, which may require that certain existing initiatives be curtailed, paused, or abandoned. Given that public schools are obligated to comply with a large number of federal and state laws, rules, and regulations, and that most school programs are either mandated, such as special education programming, or beneficial in some way to educators, students, and families, appropriately balancing new and existing initiatives is an ever-present, ongoing challenge in school districts.

As a first step, RSU 22 could consider conducting a "priority audit" to determine whether any existing programs can be curtailed, paused, or abandoned without sacrificing educational quality, staff support, or student outcomes in the district. If conducted, the audit should include the active participation of RSU 22 faculty and staff, and any resulting decisions or plans should be informed by input from faculty and staff, which could be collected through a collaborative information-gathering process or an employee survey. RSU 22's district and school administrative team can then decide, based on recommendations from each school, what initiatives and responsibilities, if any, can be curtailed, paused, or abandoned based on district priorities, budgetary considerations, and staffing levels.

Given the number of important and potentially competing priorities, initiatives, and responsibilities that are already in place in RSU 22, equity initiatives should be undertaken with strategic prioritization and focus. For example, interview and survey evidence indicates that RSU staff have not yet developed (a) a shared understanding of what equity means and why it matters, (b) a majority agreement on which equity initiatives and practices should be pursued, or (c) a common language for talking about equity.

To build shared understanding, agreement, and language, RSU 22 could focus on one or two equity frameworks over the course of 1–2 years. For example, Equity Literacy is a framework and set of resources that have been used in districts and schools throughout the United States (see equityliteracy.org/equity-literacy). Equity Literacy focuses on building the foundational knowledge, skills, and capacities needed to do equity work in all areas of schooling. Equity Literacy does not focus on any one area of equity practice; it can be used to develop the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness needed to address all forms of inequity in education, whether those inequities appear at the systems level, school level, or the classroom level, or whether the inequities are based on race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, language, religion, immigration status, or other individual or group characteristics.

If Equity Literacy is not the best fit for RSU 22, other equity frameworks can considered, but focusing system-wide on one approach for a sustained amount of time is more likely to increase equity proficiency and common understanding among a critical mass of staff members than pursuing a "scattershot" approach to building understanding that introduces several sophisticated frameworks that are only considered for a comparatively short period of time.

Similarly, RSU 22 could prioritize one or two equity initiatives or practices that will have a *systems-wide impact*, and then sustain those initiatives for multiple years. The important distinction here is differentiating between equity initiatives and practices that are effective and useful in certain areas, and equity initiatives and practices that cultivate foundational proficiencies that can be applied in all areas of schooling.

For example, a practice such as cultural responsiveness, which includes culturally responsive instruction, is not limited to specific grade levels, content areas, or student learning needs. In brief, culturally responsive instruction connects curriculum and teaching practices to the experiences, perspectives, cultures, and histories of the students being taught. For example, in a history course teachers might integrate elements of Maine history, discuss historical figures from the local community, or assign projects that include students researching the history of their family or cultural group.

Culturally responsive practices can be applied at the systems level, school level, and classroom level, and all staff members, not just teachers, can improve their knowledge and skill in culturally responsive practice, and related skills such as cross-cultural sensitivity and communication, and then apply those practices in their particular sphere of responsibility. In addition, culturally responsive practice can be integrated into existing school programs, interventions, curriculum, lesson plans, and the knowledge, skills, and proficiencies of culturally responsive practice are less likely to become outdated, irrelevant, or inapplicable if state regulations or standards change, if old initiatives are sunsetted and new ones introduced, or if students demographics and learning needs shift over time.

It must be noted, however, that a downside of more generalizable equity practices, such as cultural responsiveness, is that the impact of the practice is likely to be more diffuse and difficult to measure, while more targeted programs, such as the Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) program that is being implemented at Hampden Academy in the ninth grade (see barrcenter.org for more information on the program), are more likely to produce measurable and quantifiable results among the subgroup of students affected. In addition, a program such as BARR provides a clear step-by-step approach that teachers can learn and follow, while there is no clear and easy-to-follow roadmap to culturally responsive proficiency, which requires educators to make a variety adaptive changes—such as shifts in beliefs, mindset, and self-awareness—alongside technical modifications to their practice.

1.8 **Provide a foundational level of equity-related professional development to all RSU 22 employees, but prioritize, differentiate, and sequence professional development based on identified needs.**

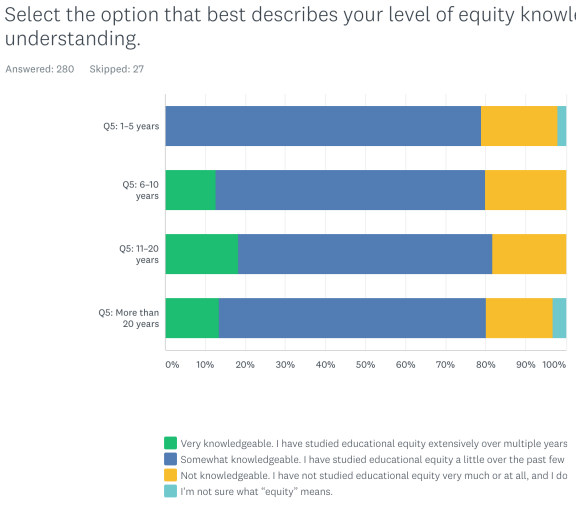
Failing to provide a foundational level of professional development to an entire staff is one common shortcoming of equity initiatives in schools. When districts and schools undertake equity initiatives,

it is common for school administrators and teachers to participate in equity-related professional development, workshops, conferences, and other learning opportunities, while educational technicians and non-instructional staff members typically receive little or no equity-related professional development. The rationale for excluding certain staff roles from equity-related professional development may vary by district or school, but these decisions often reflect oversights, biases, and prejudices that mirror and reinforce traditional professional hierarchies.

In school systems, nearly all employees have daily interactions with students and families, not just administrators and faculty, and all employees play an instrumental role in the education of students, even if they are not directly responsible for delivering academic instruction in a classroom. Every employee also contributes to, and is affected by, the culture in a district or school, and every employee is responsible for implementing both formal and informal policies. For example, administrative assistants are often the first employees to greet parents when they enter a school facility or to answer the phone when parents call. Consequently, administrative assistants play an essential role in determining whether parents feel welcome or unwelcome in a school, and yet most school districts across the country provide little or no professional development in cross-cultural sensitivity or communication to administrative assistants.

Due to limitations in funding, staffing, and time, school systems need to appropriately prioritize and differentiate professional development. However, the failure to build a foundational level of equity knowledge, understanding, and skill among all staff members in a school system can have a range of consequences. Given that RSU 22, like all public-school districts, must make difficult decisions about how best to prioritize, differentiate, and sequence district-supported professional learning, the district should also consider targeting professional development based on identified needs. (Figure 1.8A)

Figure 1.8A

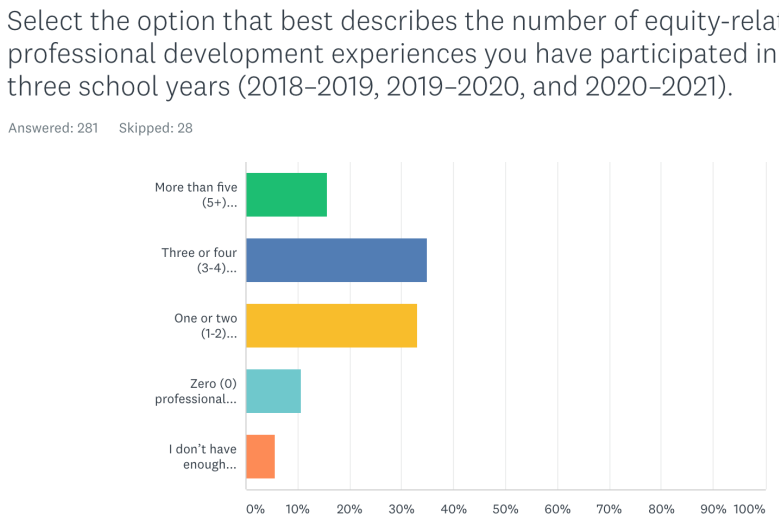


For example, survey data indicates that self-reported equity knowledge and understanding is lowest among staff members who have worked in education between 1–5 years, though approximately 20% of staff members, regardless of the length of their tenure in education, selected either “not knowledgeable” or “I’m not sure what ‘equity’ means” when asked to self-assess their level of equity knowledge and understanding. Nearly 40% of survey respondents indicated that they have worked in RSU 22 between 1–5

years, and nearly 20% indicated they have worked in education between 1–5 years.

When asked to identify the number of professional learning opportunities on educational equity and related issues they had participated in during the past three school years (2018–2019, 2019–2020, and 2020–2021), 16% survey respondents indicated more than five (5+), 35% indicated between three and four (3–4), 33% indicated between one and two (1–2), 11% indicated none (0), and 6% indicated that they did not enough information to answer. Staff members who have worked in education between 1–5 years reported receive the fewest number of equity-related professional development opportunities. (Figure 1.8B)

Figure 1.8B



Interview data also suggests that educational technicians are not involved in some professional development opportunities provided to other faculty members, and that many non-instructional staff members may receive little professional development in general and likely no professional development directly related to equity. For example, interview respondents indicated that educational technicians in RSU 22 receive four paid in-service (or professional development) days each year, and that weekly hourly pay is capped at 35 hours. Interview respondents indicated that many educational technicians not only work unpaid hours each week, but they may also face difficult financial decisions related to professional development, given that participating in professional development opportunities that fall outside of the four paid in-service days are not compensated.

Administrator interviews indicate that the current compensation and training structure for educational technicians is a topic of ongoing discussion at the administrative level, and that some elements of the current structure, such as the four-day limit on paid inservice, are a response to former conditions—specifically, in this case, an underutilization of paid inservice days for professional development by educational technicians in previous years.

In addition, staff survey responses indicate that educational technicians in RSU 22 have participated in fewer equity-related professional development over the past three school years, compared to faculty members, despite prioritizing educational equity at levels that are comparable to teachers and other faculty members. (Figure 1.8C, Figure 1.8D))

Figure 1.8C

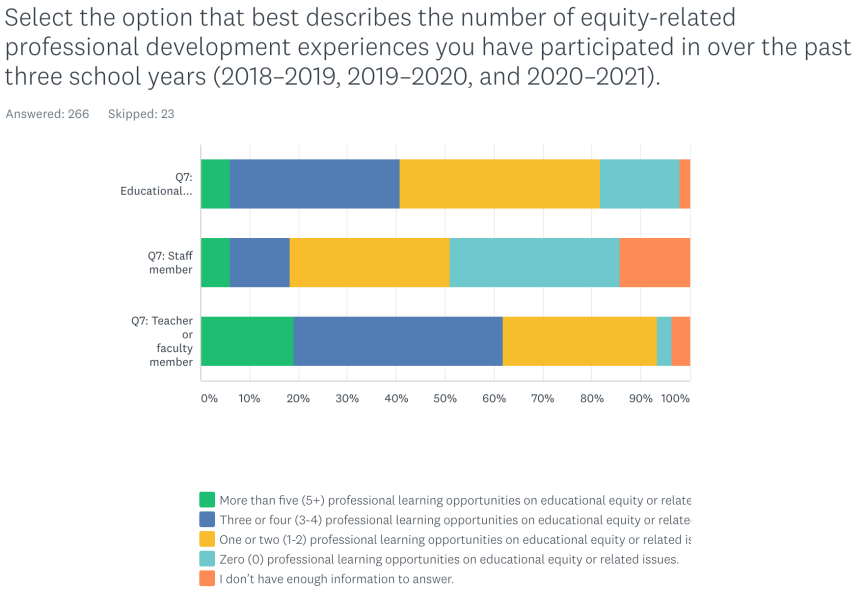
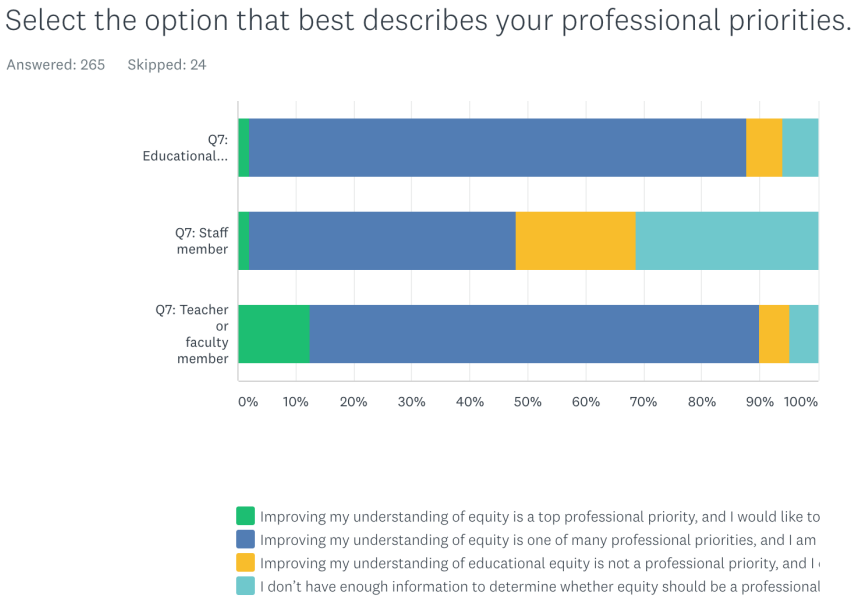


Figure 1.8D



1.9 **Develop a more comprehensive understanding of equity, and related policies and practices, throughout the district over time.**

As discussed in Section 1.3, a majority of RSU 22 employees define equity in terms of educational access, opportunity, and outcomes for students, while other dimensions of educational equity were notably absent from staff definitions provided in interviews and written survey responses. Data collected from interviews and surveys indicates that while RSU 22 employees hold similar conceptions of equity, those conceptions omit many dimensions of equity that are widely studied and discussed in the educational field. For example, survey and interview respondents, with only a few exceptions, did not address issues such as power relations (how disproportionalities in power can create and perpetuate inequities, and how educational decisions typically benefit those in positions of power), structural inequity (how inequities can be built into the governance, policies, and operational structures of public schooling, either formally or informally), or historical injustice (how and why public schooling has historically worked well for some groups but not others).

On the topic of historical injustice, for example, many professional development opportunities, workshops, and trainings intended to promote "diversity, equity, and inclusion" in public schools often fail to provide any account of the historical context that preceded, and ultimately created, America's contemporary national discussion about the need to address inequities in school systems. Just as Americans generally have widely divergent conceptions of American history, educators often have similarly divergent conceptions of the history and purpose of public education. And without some degree of common understanding of the historical antecedents, movements, and events that shaped the American public education system, it can be much more difficult to achieve a shared understanding of the rationale for prioritizing and investing in equity work.

While the history and dynamics of inequity in American public education, and in society more generally, are indeed vast, the subject does not need to be addressed, and should not be addressed, in full or all at once. Interviews indicate that RSU 22 began the 2020–2021 school year with an inservice on the historical context of inequity in education, and the district should continue to integrate historical context, when feasible and appropriate, into ongoing professional development for administrators, faculty, and staff.

To begin the process of developing a more comprehensive understanding of equity among a larger percentage of district staff, RSU 22 could, for example, begin building knowledge and understanding of foundational concepts, rather than rolling out an intensive, multipart training program that attempts to address too many complex topics too quickly. This "concept-based" approach breaks down complex, nuanced, and far-reaching concepts such as "equity," "diversity," "inclusion," or "injustice" into component parts, which can make the educational process more manageable, particularly in busy school systems where professional development time is limited. While "equity" simply cannot be meaningfully discussed in an hour or two, it is possible to engage

staff members, during that same amount of time, in a substantive and actionable discussion of more narrowly focused concepts, such as “implicit bias,” for example. (For detailed definitions of “bias” and “implicit bias,” see Section 3 below.)

In the context of a relatively short inservice, the features, dynamics, manifestations, and educational implications of implicit bias could be introduced to, and discussed by, a group of staff members. Over time, building a stronger understanding of distinct concepts can develop into a more holistic and integrated understanding of educational equity.

Based on interview and survey data, as well as the specific social and cultural conditions in RSU 22, the investigator recommends that RSU 22 consider, in addition to bias and implicit bias, building greater awareness and understanding of the following concepts among district staff: *adultism*, *adverse childhood experiences* (or *toxic stress*), *deficit narratives,* and *stereotype threat.*

To elaborate on one of these concepts, *deficit narratives* can be defined as recurring themes, perspectives, and stories that circulate in schools, communities, or societies and that reinforce and perpetuate negative ideas or stereotypes about individuals, groups, or populations. In brief, deficit narratives define individuals in terms of the least favorable characteristic of their group, or they define groups in terms of behaviors exhibited by some individual members of the group. For example, describing students as “low-income students” defines them in terms of their family’s household income, and the “low-income” label carries a wide variety of negative connotations and associations that are based on either generalizations or stereotypes. While individual students in RSU 22 do live in households with lower income or less wealth than others, it would be unethical, not to mention pedagogically misguided, to assume anything about those students or their families based solely on household income.

Common deficit narratives in schools might include, for example, narratives about certain student populations having lower motivation, ambition, or aspirations than other student populations, or about parents and families from certain racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups not valuing or caring about education as much as parents and families from other groups. Commonly used terms and phrases such as “at-risk,” “low aspirations,” “disadvantaged,” “minority,” or “culture of poverty” are the “deficit language” that make up the component parts of deficit narratives.

Raising awareness and understanding of a concept such as “deficit narratives” can, over time, help district administrators, educators, and staff members be more self-aware and reflective about the language they use, and the related knowledge and skills they acquire can then be applied in their instructional practice or in their interactions with students and families.

1.10 **Invest in and leverage staff expertise.**

In many cases, districts embark on equity work by hiring multiple trainers to provide professional development to staff or by sending staff members to conferences and workshops. While external

trainers do possess valuable specialized expertise, and conferences and workshops can offer rewarding learning experiences, an overreliance on outside professionals and expertise can have many downsides. For example, sending even small groups of educators to conferences can be expensive, and the insights, knowledge, and skills they learn will not be acquired by colleagues who were unable to attend. Over time, the individuals who attend conferences develop a perspective that is not shared by other colleagues, which can then produce significant disparities in understanding, motivation, or urgency among staff when it comes to addressing issues or initiatives such as equity. Interview evidence suggests that a similar "branching" in levels of staff equity knowledge, understanding, and commitment is already in progress throughout RSU 22.

Based on interviews and district documentation, RSU 22 appears to have a robust and diversified professional development program in place. The district also administers a yearly survey to all staff members each spring to determine their professional development interests, needs, and priorities, and faculty members are given opportunities to request or take advantage of a variety of ongoing professional-learning opportunities.

As a first step, RSU 22 can make a distinction between (a) specialized training that some staff members need, (b) specialized training that certain groups of staff members need, and (c) general training that all staff members need. For example, only science teachers may need to attend a conference on science education, but perhaps all teachers and educational technicians should be exposed to certain student-support strategies. And while many staff members may not need to learn specific instructional techniques, perhaps all staff members should participate in professional development related to identifying mental-health concerns among students or creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment.

As a second step, RSU 22 could consider designing, in collaboration with faculty and staff, a long-term professional development program on educational equity that utilizes and invests in staff development and expertise to the fullest extent possible. There are numerous peer-to-peer professional development models and approaches that RSU 22 could consider, and the district is already utilizing multiple peer-to-peer strategies, including common planning time for grade-level teams and departments, professional learning communities, book groups, and ed-camp-style workshops led by faculty members, among others. Regardless of the approach taken, faculty and staff should be actively involved in the decision-making process and design of the program to ensure that the program is supported by a majority of relevant RSU 22 staff populations and that it addresses expressed needs and priorities.

For example, teams of two or three staff members, representing different roles in the district, could educate themselves about a topic, such as the "deficit narrative" concept discussed above, then develop and deliver a workshop for colleagues during an inservice. Multiple staff-led workshops such as these could also be offered during a daylong, in-district "conference," a model that has already been used in RSU 22, according to interviewees who spoke positively about the experience. When feasible and appropriate, stipends, continuing education units (CEUs), and other

incentives or compensation could be offered to staff members who volunteer to develop and facilitate these workshops.

It should be noted, however, that equity work in public schools must balance principled priorities with staff voice and involvement—not every decision can or should be a consensus decision that results from a group process. In some cases, district and school leaders may identify an equity need that is not widely recognized by the faculty and staff, and addressing that need may necessitate a leadership decision that is not fully understood or supported by the faculty or staff. In these cases, district and school leaders should engage in a proactive and productive dialogue with their faculty and staff, to the extent feasible, but they should also be prepared and willing to make difficult leadership decisions that may be criticized by some employees and community members.

SECTION 2. COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

2.1 Data from interviews and surveys indicate high levels of tension and disagreement in the school community, but survey evidence suggests there may also be areas of agreement on certain issues.

The large number of RSU 22 stakeholders who were interviewed and surveyed during the equity audit describe high levels of political, ideological, and cross-cultural tension in the district. Responses collected through the RSU 22 staff and family surveys further affirmed this finding. Respondents also describe an escalation in tensions over the past several years, a trend that mirrors growing divisiveness in American politics, race relations, media, and other social dynamics.

While some RSU 22 employees report experiencing some tensions or disagreements between colleagues in the workplace, the highest levels appear to reside in the relationship (a) between the school system and some families or cultural groups, and (b) between different cultural groups residing in the four primary sending communities.

While the political divisions were the most frequently cited source of tensions and disagreements during interviews, differences in educational background, social class, and town residency were also frequently cited sources. For this reason, the family survey asked respondents several demographic questions, including questions about town residency, annual household income, and educational attainment in the household. These questions allowed the investigator to disaggregate survey responses by residency, income, and educational attainment to determine whether significant differences of perception or opinion existed among these categories, and whether survey data aligned with interviewee perceptions.

An analysis of disaggregated survey responses did not yield many notable disparities. With few exceptions, survey responses tended to show similar patterns across most questions when disaggregated by residency, annual household income, and educational attainment in the household. With that said, it should be noted that surveys can be influenced by "self-selection bias," which occurs when individuals "select" themselves into a group (in this case, the group of survey respondents), potentially biasing results or statistics. It is possible that the perceptions shared by the family members who were motivated to complete the survey reflect some degree of unknown selection bias, and that survey results would have shown different patterns if a larger percentage of RSU 22 family members had completed the survey.

As discussed in Section 2.4 below, for example, self-reported household income levels on the family survey were relatively consistent across the four primary RSU 22 sending towns: Frankfort, Hampden, Newburgh, and Winterport. However, district data on free and reduced lunch eligibility

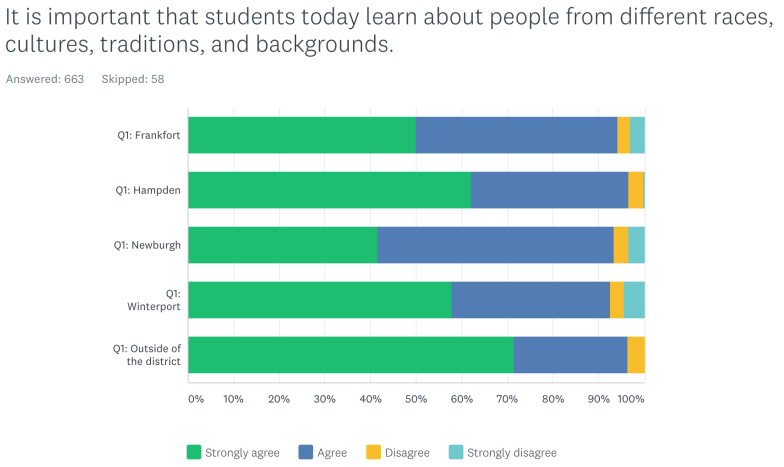
(a proxy for household income) shows that while the average free and reduced lunch eligibility rate in RSU 22 was 27% of the student population in 2020–2021, the rates for Leroy Smith Elementary School and Samuel L. Wagner Middle School in Winterport were 51% and 49% respectively. It is possible that the subpopulation of RSU 22 families who opted to complete the family survey represent a biased sampling of the total population of families served by the district.

Because tensions and disagreements related to the teaching of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in RSU 22 were raised on several occasions during interviews, the family survey also asked respondents for their level of agreement or disagreement with three statements addressing racial and cultural diversity in learning. The questions were included in the survey to assess whether different demographic groups in the RSU 22 community held relatively consistent or divided views on the topic.

The three questions that appeared in the family survey:

- Question 23: It is important that students today learn about people from different races, cultures, traditions, and backgrounds. (Figure 2.1A)
- Question 24: It is important that students today learn to interact respectfully with people from different races, cultures, traditions, and backgrounds in school. (Figure 2.1B)
- Question 25: My child's school is doing a good job teaching my child about people from different races, cultures, traditions, and backgrounds. (Figure 2.1C)

Figure 2.1A



Prior to the administration of the family survey, interview data suggested that perceptions about the importance of teaching about racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in school would vary significantly based on community residency, household income, and/or educational attainment, but survey data indicates low levels of disagreement across the three demographic categories.

Figure 2.1B

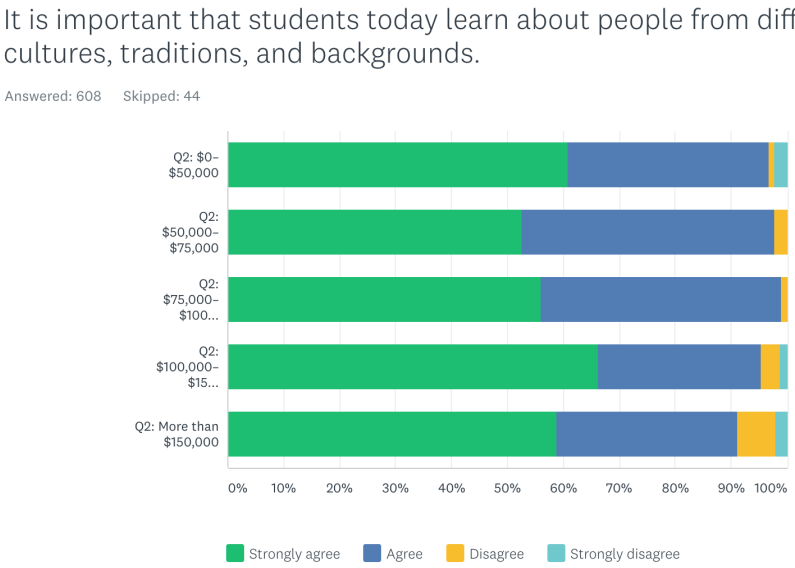
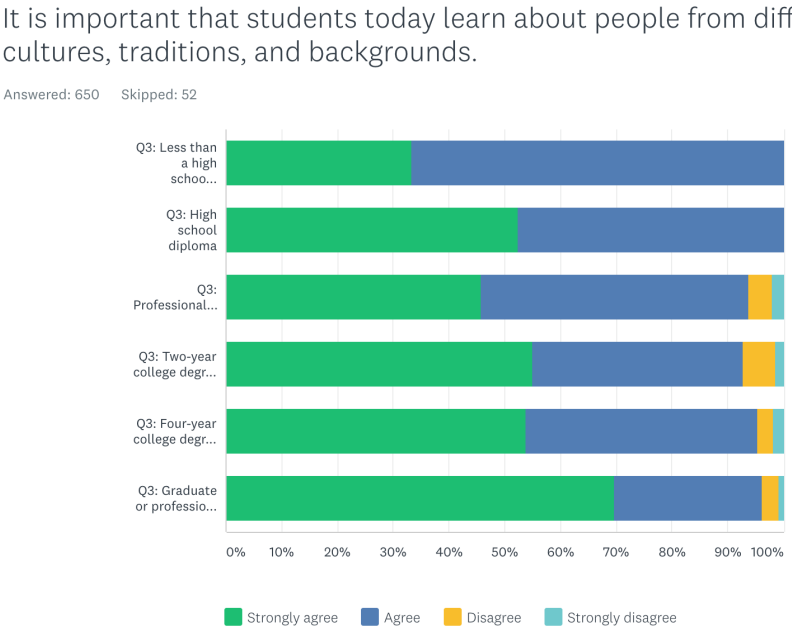


Figure 2.1C



Survey data shows similarly consistent patterns of support and perception about the importance of teaching respect for people from "different races, cultures, traditions, and backgrounds" in school. Yet when asked to evaluate how well their child's school is doing when it comes to teaching students about people from different races, cultures, traditions, and backgrounds, survey respondents showed higher levels of disagreement. (Figure 2.1D, Figure 2.1E, Figure 2.1F)

Figure 2.1D

My child's school is doing a good job teaching my child about people from different races, cultures, traditions, and backgrounds.

Answered: 649 Skipped: 72

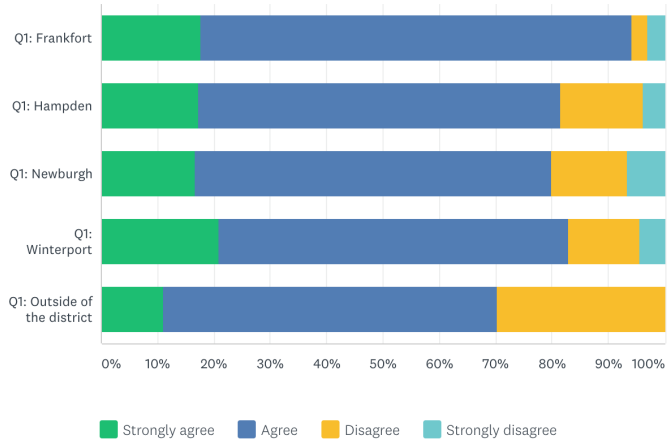


Figure 2.1E

My child's school is doing a good job teaching my child about people from different races, cultures, traditions, and backgrounds.

Answered: 597 Skipped: 55

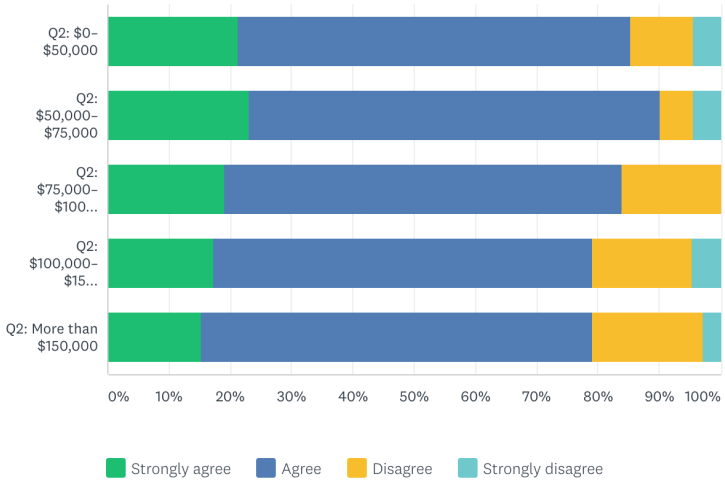
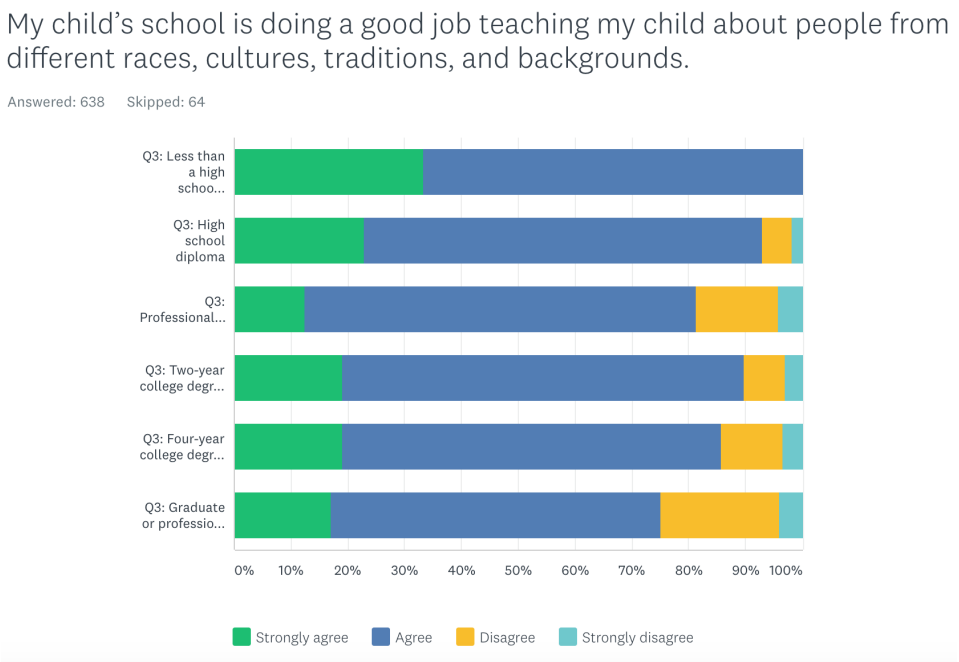


Figure 2.1F



In summary, high levels of tension and disagreement certainly exist in the RSU 22 community, but the community may also harbor less obvious commonalities and shared values. As the charts above indicate, for example, a majority of family respondents support, at least in principle, the teaching of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, along with respect for that diversity, in school. Yet when it comes to how diversity should be taught, and whether RSU 22's approach to diversity education is the right approach to take, higher levels of disagreement emerge.

While interviewees perceived that support for diversity in education varied significantly by town of residence, household income, and educational attainment, survey data suggests that political and ideological differences are likely the primary drivers of tension and disagreement observed in the community.

Because political affiliation is a highly polarized—and polarizing—topic in American culture and in the RSU 22 community, no questions were asked about political affiliation during interviews or on any of the three surveys administered during the assessment.

2.2 Political and ideological conflicts and polarization in American society are influencing community perceptions of RSU 22 and will likely pose significant challenges to community dialogue, compromise, and consensus on a wide range of equity-related issues.

The write-in comments submitted through the family survey displayed a striking degree of disagreement about nearly every major element of the educational process in RSU 22. For every comment that applauded the district's work in a given area, the survey elicited a comment that stridently criticized the district's work in that same area. And for every comment that expressed a desire for the district to take a certain position on equity, there was a comment demanding the district take the exact opposite position. In fact, it would be difficult to overstate just how divided the RSU 22 community is on the purpose and role of public education in general, and on the specific approaches RSU 22 should take with respect to educational equity and many other matters.

It must be noted that the stark levels of disagreement represented in the family survey present an enormously challenging situation for RSU 22, given that the comments describe an impossible set of conflicting expectations and demands that no school system could fully satisfy.

In pluralistic democratic societies, the functioning and effectiveness of public schools relies on an ongoing process of dialogue, compromise, and consensus grounded in shared democractic values, civil behavior, community trust, and good faith. But when community dialogue, compromise, and consensus break down, and when shared democractic values, civil behavior, community trust, and good faith are absent, public schools can become the target of escalating hostility, unrealistic demands, or unwarranted attacks that are often driven by misinformation or an unwillingness to engage in respectful dialogue, listening, and compromise.

Based on the write-in comments to the family survey alone, it is clear that growing political and ideological conflicts and polarization in American society are not only influencing community perceptions of RSU 22, but those perceptions may be unduly taxing the day-to-day functioning of the district and, to some extent, undermining the district's ability to effectively serve it's student population.

In school districts, thousands of urgent and important decisions need to be made every day, and yet the time required to make effective decisions is usually the most critical, and yet scarcest, resource. While school administrators, educators, and staff are obligated, as public servants, to be responsive to community needs and requests, the day-to-day burdens associated with navigating, managing, and responding to hundreds of conflicting, unreasonable, or time-consuming demands will, over time, adversely affect the ability of a school system to allocate necessary levels of staffing and staff time to the education of students.

Finally, the investigator would like to express deep concern about the level of hostility that characterized some of the written comments submitted through the family survey. In some cases, family respondents described justifiably upsetting and emotional incidents, such as incidents of bullying or harassment experienced by their children, but in other cases family respondents submitted angry speculations about RSU 22 that were clearly reactions to politicized narratives

circulating in national media or on social media, not reactions to any specific policies or personal experiences in RSU 22 schools.

2.3 Evidence suggests that misinformation about RSU 22 circulates widely in the district.

Interview and survey responses indicate that misinformation about RSU 22 may circulate widely in the community, and that some forms of misinformation have been circulating for many years. Respondents described a wide range of misinformation circulating in the community, though a majority of the misinformation appeared to mirror a small number of persistent community narratives described in Section 2.4 below.

For the purposes of this report, "misinformation" will be defined as *misrepresentative or inaccurate statements of fact that can be readily disproved by evidence*.

To cite one example of widely circulated misinformation, multiple respondents reported hearing RSU 22 community members discussing their belief that student athletes attending Samuel L. Wagner Middle School were forced to (a) wear the used, hand-me-down athletic uniforms formerly worn by student athletes attending Reeds Brook Middle School or (b) wear old, worn uniforms while student athletes at Reeds Brook received new uniforms. One interviewee involved in RSU 22's athletic programs described hearing these inaccurate beliefs being expressed many times by community members in both school and community settings, such as in the local grocery store.

Another interviewee pointed to the fact that this particular inaccurate narrative may have resulted from the fact that the two middle schools replace athletic uniforms on an alternating schedule, so in some years student athletes attending Reeds Brook Middle School will receive new uniforms while student athletes attending Samuel L. Wagner Middle School will not. When asked about the uniform-replacement policy in the middle schools, district administrators confirmed that middle-school athletic uniforms are indeed replaced on an alternating schedule so that associated costs fall within different budget years. Administrators also pointed out that athletic teams in the two schools use two different colors—blue for Reeds Brook and green for Samuel L. Wagner—so it would not be possible for student athletes at one school to wear used athletic uniforms from the other school.

While this particular example of misinformation circulating in the RSU 22 community is just one of many similar examples provided by respondents, it is being cited here because the example illustrates how easily misinformation can spread, and how misinformation is often based on misperceptions and partial truths—in this case, athletic uniforms being replaced on alternating years. It also illustrates how difficult it can be to correct misinformation once it takes hold in a community, given that this specific misperception persists despite the fact that anyone who attends athletic events at the two RSU 22 middle schools will see that team uniforms display different color schemes, and that numerous school communications, news reports, and

photographs posted online show students wearing the two schools wearing differently colored uniforms.

2.4 **Persistent, multigenerational community narratives will likely complicate equity work in the district.**

In interviews and surveys, respondents described a few persistent and often multigenerational narratives that widely circulate in the RSU 22 community. In some cases, respondents described the narrative, while in other cases they expressed viewpoints consistent with the community narratives described by others.

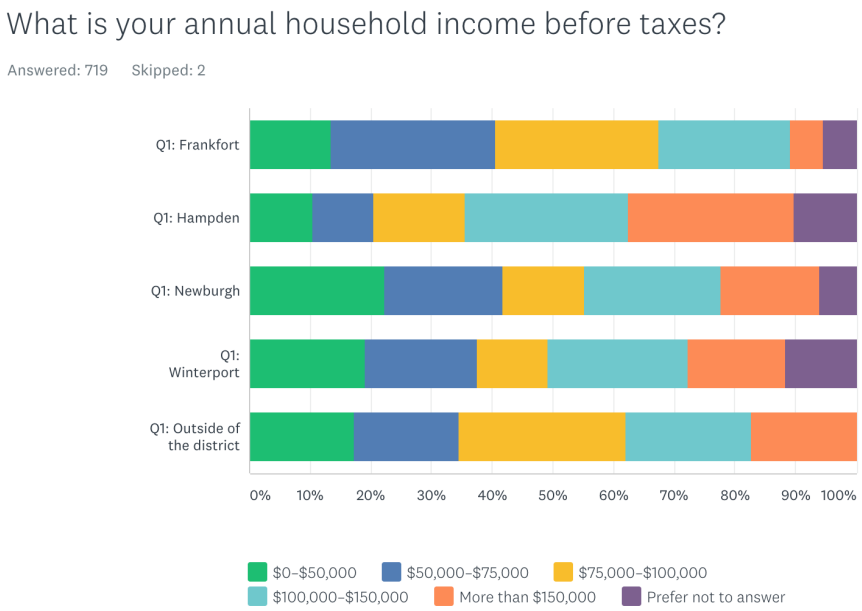
For the purposes of this report, "community narrative" will be defined as *a widely held and discussed perception of the community or school system that is repeated by a large number of community members over time and that is perceived by many to be an accurate understanding of the community or school system*.

While community narratives may be based, in part, on factual information, community narratives tend to oversimplify complex social dynamics and, in some cases, cause community members to misperceive or misinterpret events.

The investigator documented three widely held community narratives that were repeatedly described by RSU 22 respondents:

1. **Narrative #1: People from Hampden are wealthy, entitled, and snobby; people from Winterport and Frankfort are poor and backward.** Some form of this narrative was described in a majority of interviews and appeared in a significant number of written survey comments. While this narrative may reflect some level of socioeconomic and cultural disparity between the more suburban and more rural areas of RSU 22, the narrative also reflects and reinforces deeply problematic and harmful stereotypes that do not accurately describe the beliefs, behaviors, or financial situations of a large percentage of the RSU 22 population. Misrepresentative community stereotypes such as these are not only misleading, but they are often used to justify prejudicial beliefs and disrespectful or hurtful behavior directed toward groups and individuals. To cite one example of just how misrepresentative community stereotypes can be, family-survey data from 721 respondents, when disaggregated by town of residence, shows that self-reported household income levels are likely far more evenly distributed across the district than many community members realize. (Figure 2.4A)

Figure 2.4A

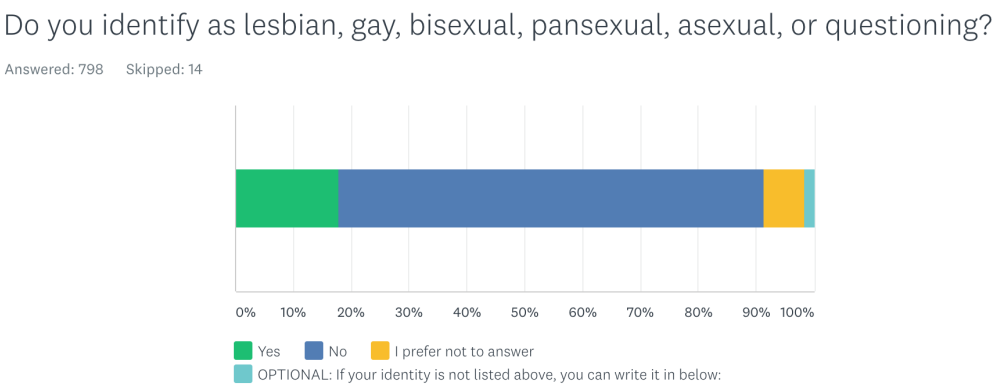


2. **Narrative #2: Hampden schools and students get preferential treatment; Winterport schools and students are treated unfairly.** Like Narrative #1, Narrative #2 was described in a majority of interviews and appeared in a significant number of written survey comments. But unlike Narrative #1, it is harder to ascribe the persistence of Narrative #2 to community stereotyping, and it is more likely that individual members have had personal experiences in RSU 22 that appeared to confirm the narrative. Over the course of the equity audit, the investigator collected evidence suggesting that patterns of preferential treatment are indeed a potential issue in RSU 22 (see Section 10.2 for a more detailed discussion), but that patterns of preferential treatment most likely occur in all RSU 22 schools and are not based on community residency. In addition, while the equity audit found evidence of some inequities between the schools, the investigator did not find evidence that the Winterport schools or its students are being systematically subjected to unfair treatment by RSU 22 administrators, educators, or staff, or that Winterport schools were being systematically under-resourced compared to the schools located in Hampden. What emerged from the assessment, instead, was a picture of a school district making difficult decisions about the best way to allocate limited resources in a community with complex student needs and divided opinions about what should or shouldn't be prioritized.

3. **Narrative #3: RSU 22 doesn't have much racial or ethnic diversity, so it doesn't have an equity problem.** Interview participants reported hearing various forms of Narrative #3 expressed in the RSU 22 schools and community, and the narrative also appeared in some written responses to the staff and family surveys. The perception that "equity problems" only exist in racially and ethnically diverse school systems is both

widespread in American education and demonstrably false. Inequities can adversely affect any population of students or families, and all school systems harbor some form of inequity. The perception that only racially and ethnically diverse school systems have equity problems also reflects a problematic, biased, and false assumption that racially diverse schools must have race-related problems while white-majority schools somehow cannot be racially inequitable. Furthermore, Narrative #3 obscures the fact that students from non-majority groups are *more likely* to feel alienated, misunderstood, or neglected in school than students from majority groups. When viewed in this way, the comparatively low levels of racial and ethnic diversity in RSU 22 actually recommend the prioritization of racial and ethnic equity, given that non-white students are more likely to have negative experiences in school, and that educators and staff are less likely to possess the knowledge, skills, mindsets, and experiences required to effectively educate racially and ethnically diverse student populations. And as demographics continue to change in the region, RSU 22 will be educating an increasingly diverse population of students over the coming years. Finally, Narrative #3 also obscures and minimizes the inequities that may be adversely affecting other student populations. On the student survey, for example, 142 of 798 respondents (18%) in grades 6–12—or nearly one-fifth of the surveyed student population—indicated that they do not identify as heterosexual, and evidence collected during the assessment suggests that problematic and harmful levels of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia are present in the RSU 22 school system and community (see Section 3.2 for a more detailed discussion). (Figure 2.4B)

Figure 2.4B



2.5 Establish clear policies requiring civil and respectful adult conduct in all district buildings, events, and interactions.

As discussed above, interview and survey responses suggest the presence of several challenging dynamics in RSU 22, including deep cultural and ideological divisions in the community, the persistence of problematic community narratives, misperceptions and speculations about district policies, and the widespread stereotyping of individuals, families, and communities. In addition, many comments submitted through the family survey demonstrated a concerning level of hostility, anger, and aggression directed toward the district and its staff.

Because the functioning and effectiveness of public schools relies on an ongoing process of dialogue, compromise, and consensus grounded in shared democractic values, civil behavior, community trust, and good faith, it is imperative that administrators, staff, school board members, families, and other adults in a school community demonstrate civil and respectful behavior toward one another at all times, while also modeling civil and respectful behavior for the youth and children served by the school system. Uncivil and disrespectful behavior, if left unaddressed and unchallenged, can have deeply corrosive effects on the culture and day-to-day functioning of a school district. Unchecked incivility, in the worst cases, can lead to bullying, harassment, and even violence.

To establish appropriate policies, expectations, and norms for civil and respectful conduct, the investigator recommends consulting with the Office of the Maine Attorney General, Maine Department of Education, Maine School Management Association, or other appropriate professional or legal organizations for relevant guidance.

The school board should also consider and adopt a formal policy on civil and respectful behavior in all district buildings, events, and interactions, and school board meetings should begin with a recitation of the rules and expectations outlined in the district's policy governing civil and respectful behavior during public meetings. While respondents did not describe problematic levels of incivility, disrespect, or disruptive behavior during school board meetings, interview and survey responses suggest a worrying trend toward increasing incivility and disrespect in the district. As the district's publicly elected governing body, the school board can play an affirmative, proactive role in establishing, modeling, and enforcing policies governing civil and respectful behavior.

For more detailed guidance on promoting civility and civil discourse in school communities, see organizingengagement.org/principles/civility.

2.6 Host facilitated community dialogues and forums focused on building mutual understanding across cultural and ideological differences.

To help address the concerning levels of cultural and ideological division in the community, RSU 22 could consider hosting community dialogues that are organized and facilitated by professional facilitators, student-leaders, or trusted members of the community. In many cases, school districts feel compelled to organize and host dialogues, forums, or other activities intended to address community tensions, but it should be noted that community dialogues and forums do not need to be exclusively organized by the district or its schools—volunteers, family members, and student groups can organize and facilitate community dialogues and forums, and professional organizations can be hired to advise local groups, conduct training, or provide independent facilitation services.

If RSU 22 chooses to pursue a community-dialogue strategy, the investigator recommends a process that does not unduly burden either coordinators or participants, that is sustained over time, and that is led by skilled and trained facilitators. Building relationships, trust, and mutual understanding across cultural or ideological divides can take months or years, and poorly planned, structured, or facilitated events can in some cases cause more harm than good. If RSU 22 would like to seek out professional guidance, training, or facilitation, the investigator can recommend several non-partisan organizations for consideration.

For a detailed discussion of dialogue practices and how they can be used to build mutual understanding in school communities, see organizingengagement.org/principles/dialogue.

2.7 **Consider launching a participatory-budgeting process.**

Participatory budgeting is a democratic civic-engagement process that allows community members to decide how to spend portions of an annual public budget. Participatory budgeting has been used in school systems throughout the United States, and in many cases the participatory-budgeting processes that are conducted in either cities or school districts will be entirely organized and led by youth. For example, the City of Boston has been hosting an annual youth-led participatory-budgeting process since 2014 called Youth Lead the Change, which gives young people in the city the power to determine how more than $1 million of the city's annual budget will be spent.

Participatory budgeting is typically an annual process in which funding from a municipal, institutional, or school-district budget is allocated for use in a community decision-making process. Participatory budgeting generally uses discretionary funds that are not committed to essential or fixed expenses (such as employee salaries, approved contracts, pensions, or debt service, for example), and the funds approved for use in a participatory-budgeting process typically represent only a small portion of a public budget.

A district of RSU 22's size could start with a small pool of discretionary funding and potentially expand the allocation over time. If RSU 22 pursues a district-wide participatory-budgeting process, the funding allocation should be large enough to fund multiple meaningful projects that would add

value to the district. A school-level participatory-budgeting process, such as a process organized and run by a group of high school students to benefit Hampden Academy, could be run effectively with a smaller funding allocation.

Based on the particular social, cultural, and ideological context in RSU 22 and its sending communities, the investigator believes that an annual participatory budgeting process could provide a range of benefits to the district. For example:

- In many communities, taxation and school budgeting are potent sources of tension, disagreement, and conflict. Participatory budgeting provides a constructive, transparent, inclusive democratic process that can bring together people from different cultural and ideological backgrounds to make real decisions about how to allocate public funding.

- A participatory-budgeting process is typically open to anyone in a community, including youth who are ineligible to vote in state or federal elections. Some community members will choose to be involved in the development of funding proposals, while others can participate though voting.

- In a participatory-budgeting process, community members learn about school-district budgeting, discuss and deliberate local educational needs and priorities, and work in teams to develop funding proposals that the community will ultimately vote on and approve. As part of the process, participants develop foundational skills related to interpersonal dialogue, group deliberation, problem-solving, conflict resolution, consensus-building, democratic compromise, and civic leadership.

- Because community members are discussing, deliberating, and creating proposals in groups and teams, they develop a stronger understanding of other people's perspectives, values, and ideas, and a stronger appreciation and respect for cultural and ideological viewpoints that may be different than their own.

- Participatory budgeting provides an opportunity for community members to actively participate in a public decision-making process that produces visible results in a school system or community. When participants see and experience the tangible results of their contributions to a community process, it can increase community satisfaction, motivation, and positivity, while also reducing the levels of distrust and frustration that characterize many school-community relationships.

- Community members can develop a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the difficult decisions that school leaders and public officials routinely encounter. In most cases, all the proposals developed through a participatory-budgeting process represent potentially valuable contributions to the educational experience in a district, and yet only a selection of the proposals will ultimately be approved by community voters and funded.

- Participatory budgeting can increase rates of voting, volunteerism, and civic engagement in a community, and it can also cultivate future leaders by teaching important leadership skills and motivating youth and residents to contribute their energy, talents, and passion to public service and community volunteerism.

Similar to community dialogues and forums, a participatory-budgeting process would not need to be exclusively organized by the district or school staff—community volunteers and student groups could be primarily responsible for organizing, coordinating, and facilitating the process. For example, a student-leadership group could be formed at Hampden Academy, under the guidance of staff members, to run the process each year, and/or coordinating the process could be part of a credited yearlong course on democratic practice, public engagement, and civic leadership offered at Hampden Academy.

If RSU 22 would like to seek out professional guidance or training related to participatory budgeting, the investigator can recommend organizations for consideration. It should be noted, however, that while professional guidance can help a district or community develop an effective participatory-budgeting process more quickly while also avoiding common mistakes, coordinating a process does not require professional guidance or training. Many resources are readily available online that describe how to design and implement a participatory-budgeting process.

For a more detailed overview of how participatory budgeting is used in school systems, see organizingengagement.org/models/participatory-budgeting.

SECTION 3. BIAS, PREJUDICE, DISCRIMINATION, BULLYING, AND HARASSMENT

For the purposes of this report, the following definitions of *bias*, *prejudice*, *discrimination*, *bullying*, and *harassment* will be used:

- *Bias* refers to subtle forms of partiality that target particular individuals or groups for either preferential or unfair/harmful treatment. Bias may be difficult to identify in practice, and incidents of bias may go unrecognized or unacknowledged by those engaging in biased behavior and/or by those experiencing either preferential or negative forms of bias. *Implicit bias* refers to attitudes and stereotypes that influence human understanding, behavior, or decisions unconsciously and involuntarily.

- *Prejudice* refers to overt and observable comments and behaviors that target particular individuals or groups for either preferential or unfair/harmful treatment. Prejudiced behavior is more likely to be conscious and intentional, and individuals and groups who are affected by prejudice are more likely to recognize prejudicial behavior while it is happening than they are likely to recognize biased behavior in the moment.

- *Discrimination* refers to statements, actions, or policies that either provide preferential opportunities or unfairly limit/deny opportunities to certain individuals or groups. Discrimination can be practiced by organizations, groups, and individuals—particularly individuals in positions of power and authority—and it can be enacted through both official and unofficial policies.

- *Bullying* refers to deliberate behaviors and comments that are intended to hurt, threaten, intimidate, demean, or embarrass a person or group. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social (groups engaging in bullying behavior toward individuals or other groups). Bullying can also happen in-person or online, and both adults and minors can engage in bullying or be the victims of bullying.

- *Harassment* refers to the specific civil rights protected under federal and state law that are described and addressed in RSU 22 district policies ACA, GBA, JBA. From policy JBA, "Acts of harassment based upon race, color, sex, religion, age, national origin, ancestry, sexual orientation or handicapping condition are not only a violation of this policy, but also constitute illegal discrimination under state and federal laws. Examples of prohibited harassment include, but are not limited to: A. Unwelcome sexual advances, gestures, comments, or contact; B. Threats; C. Offensive jokes; D. Ridicule, slurs, derogatory action or remarks; and E. Basing employment decisions on practices of submission to harassment."

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

3.1 Most stakeholders report low overall levels of bias, prejudice, discrimination, bullying, and harassment in the district.

Interviews and survey responses indicate that most stakeholders have experienced little or no overt bias, prejudice, discrimination, bullying, or harassment in district schools. District data also indicates that the number of officially reported incidents of student bullying is very low—5 district-wide incidents in school year 2017–2018, 12 in 2018–2019, 8 in 2019–2020, and 0 in 2010–2021—although these figures only reflect "substantiated" incidents of bullying, not reported incidents that administrators were unable to substantiate or, importantly, incidents that occurred but were unreported.

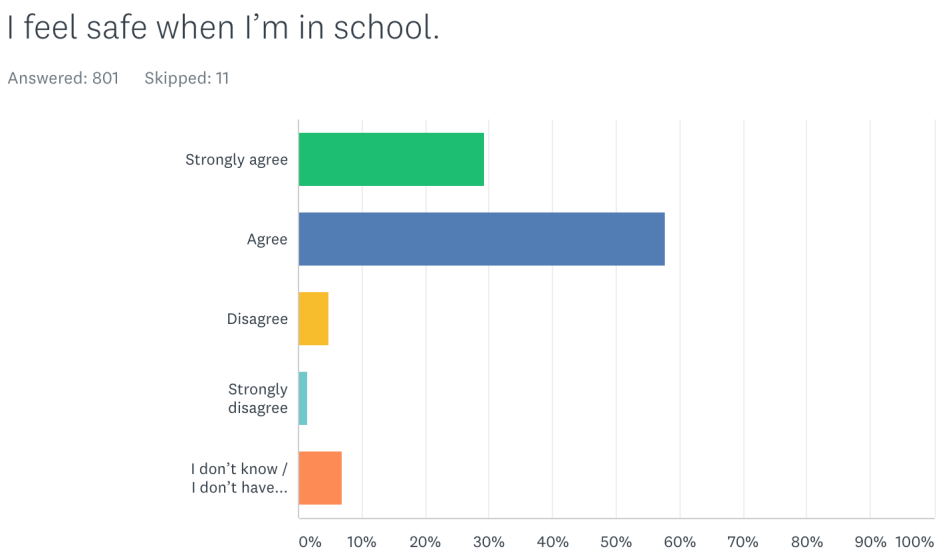
Overall, RSU 22 provides a welcoming, inclusive, respectful, and safe environment for the majority of staff members, students, and families, according to evidence collected during the assessment. However, it must be underscored that these findings, while positive overall, are not a rationale for complacency or inaction, given that any incidents of bias, prejudice, discrimination, bullying, or harassment in public-school systems are causes for concern that demand immediate attention and appropriate responses.

While the assessment did find evidence that instances of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment have adversely affected some individuals and groups in RSU 22 schools, the assessment did not find evidence of systemic patterns of discrimination against individuals or groups—with two possible exceptions described in Section 3.2: Sexism below. It is possible, even likely, that some individuals and groups have experienced discrimination in district schools, but the data, interview documentation, and survey results reviewed by the investigator only indicated two discernable patterns of potential discrimination.

Evidence reviewed during the assessment indicates that RSU 22 could improve educational opportunities and support for certain students, such as students with dyslexia or mental-health concerns (see Section 7.4 below for a more detailed discussion), but interviews suggest that limitations in funding, staffing, or organizational awareness are most likely the cause of these shortcomings, not systemic discrimation based on bias or prejudice.

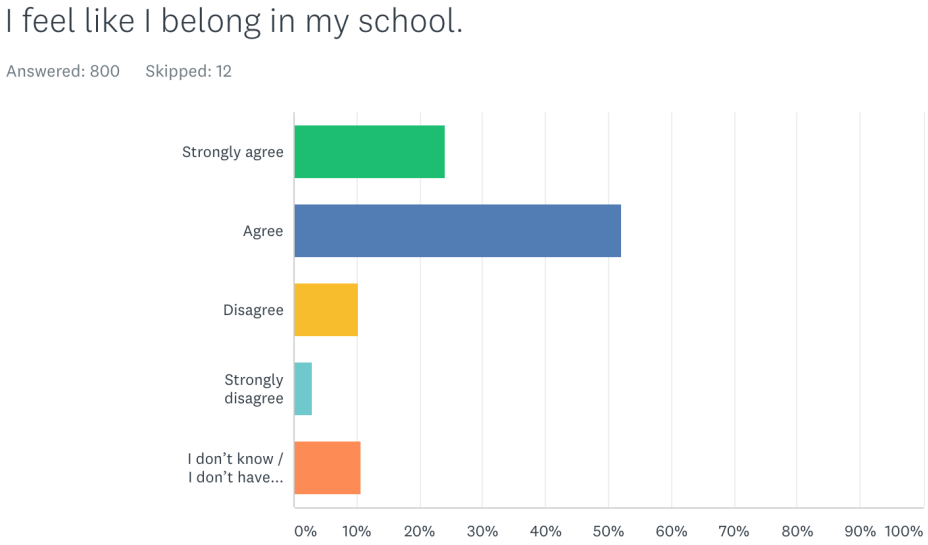
When asked for their level of agreement with the following statement, "I feel safe in school," 29% of student respondents selected "strongly agree," 58% selected "agree," and 6% selected "disagree" or "strongly disagree." (Figure 3.1A)

Figure 3.1A



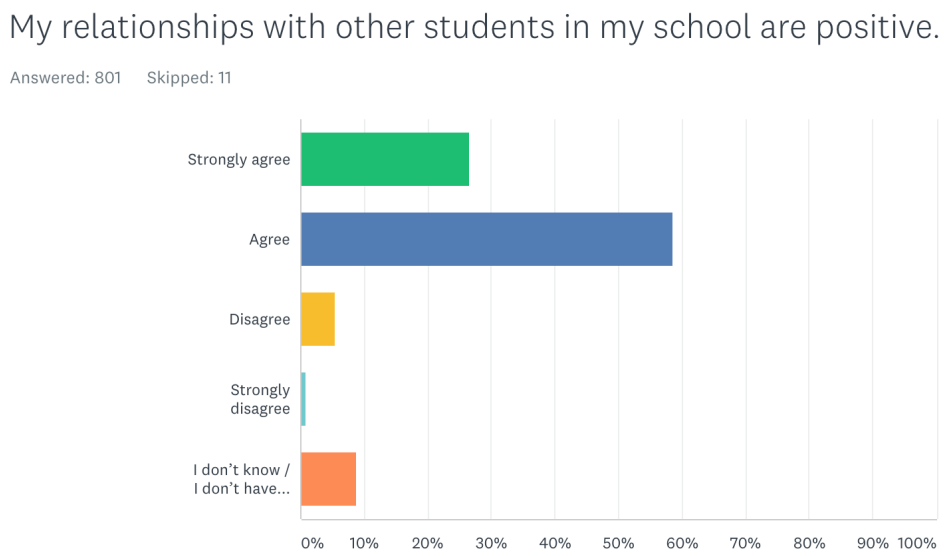
When asked for their level of agreement with the following statement, "I feel like I belong in school," 24% of student respondents selected "strongly agree," 52% selected "agree," and 13% selected "disagree" or "strongly disagree." (Figure 3.1B)

Figure 3.1B



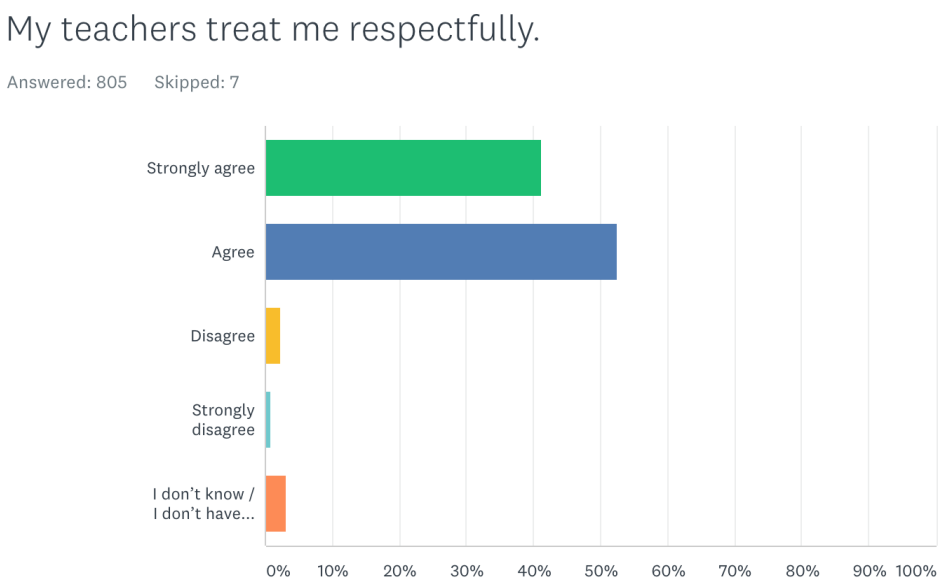
When asked for their level of agreement with the following statement, “My relationships with other students in my school are positive,” 26% of student respondents selected “strongly agree,” 59% selected “agree,” and 6% selected “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” (Figure 3.1C)

Figure 3.1C



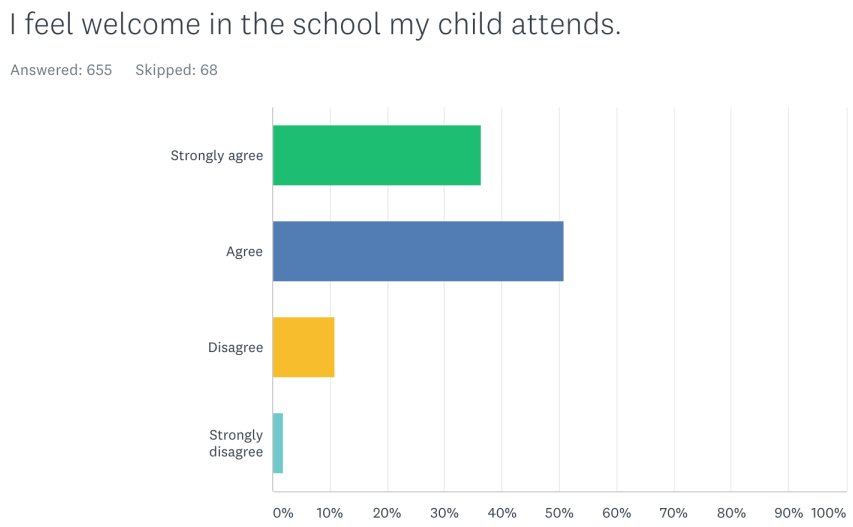
When asked for their level of agreement with the following statement, “My teachers treat me respectfully,” 41% of student respondents selected “strongly agree,” 53% selected “agree,” and only 3% selected “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” (Figure 3.1D)

Figure 3.1D



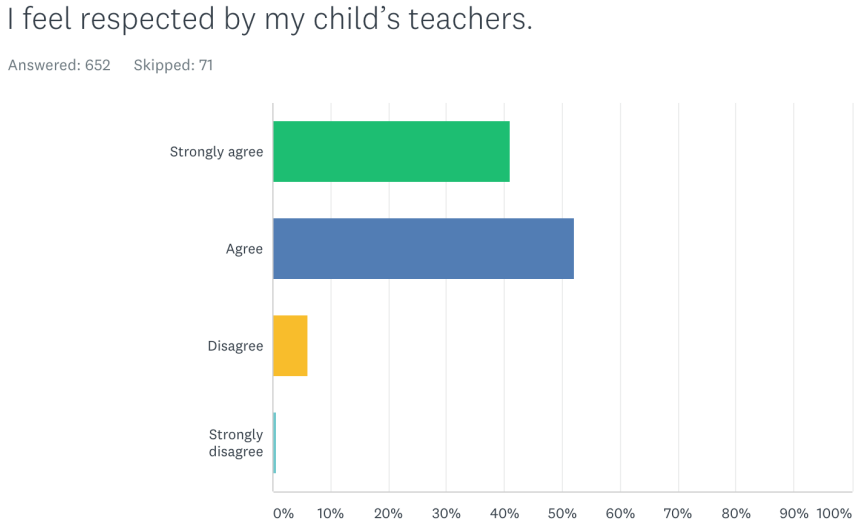
When asked for their level of agreement with the following statement, “I feel welcome in the school my child attends,” 36% of family respondents selected “strongly agree,” 51% selected “agree,” and 13% selected “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” (Figure 3.1E)

Figure 3.1E



When asked for their level of agreement with the following statement, “I feel respected by my child’s teachers,” 41% of family respondents selected “strongly agree,” 52% selected “agree,” and 7% selected “disagree” or “strongly disagree.” (Figure 3.1F)

Figure 3.1F



3.2 **Some students and family members report experiencing harmful incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment.**

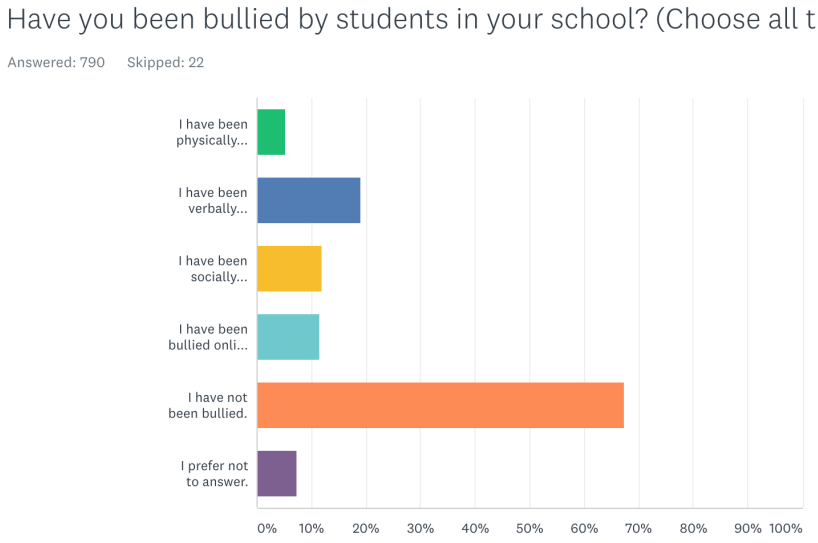
Interview and survey data indicate that some students and family members have experienced offensive, hurtful, hateful, and degrading behavior and comments directed at them from other members of the RSU 22 community.

The student survey, which was completed by 813 students in grades 6–12, asked multiple questions about bullying. Students were provided the following definition of bullying on the survey:

1. Bullying is any behavior or comment that is intended to hurt, threaten, intimidate, harass, or embarrass another person on purpose.
2. Bullying can be physical (pushing, hitting, spitting), verbal (disrespectful, hurtful, or hateful comments), or social (groups of students engaging in bullying behavior).
3. Bullying can also happen in person or online.

When asked, “Have you been bullied by students in your school?,” 5% of student respondents indicated they had been physically bullied, 19% indicated they had been verbally bullied, 12% indicated they had been socially bullied, 12% indicated they had been bullied online (through social media, texts, or email), and 67% indicated they had not been bullied. (Figure 3.2A)

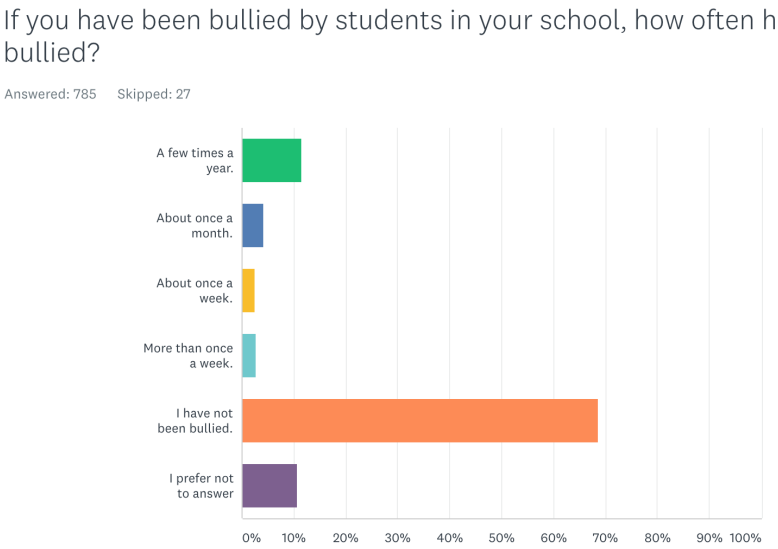
Figure 3.2A



When asked, “If you have been bullied by students in your school, how often have you been bullied?,” 12% of student respondents indicated they had been bullied a few times a year, 4%

indicated they had been bullied about once a month, 2% indicated they had been bullied about once a week, 3% indicated they had been bullied more than once a week, and 69% indicated they had not been bullied. (Figure 3.2B)

Figure 3.2B



Student respondents were also asked to indicate, if they had been bullied, the reason or reasons why they were bullied. The following chart shows response rates for different categories of bullying. (Figure 3.2C)

Figure 3.2C

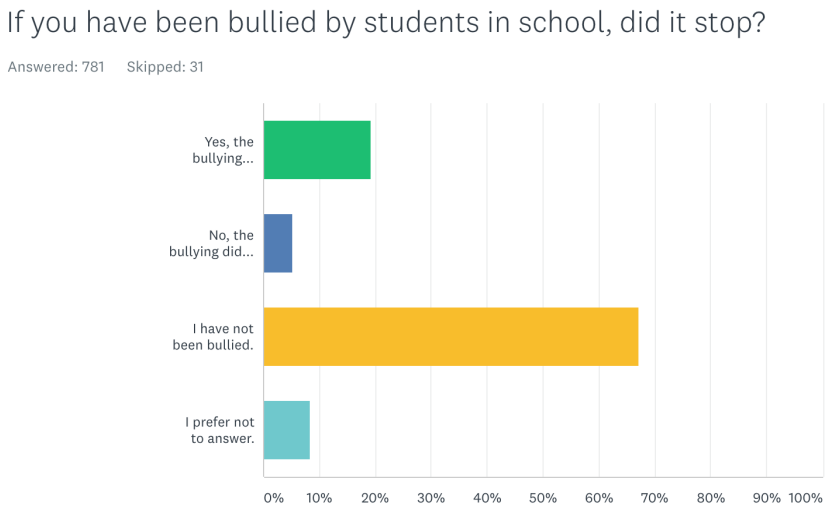
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
My race or ethnicity	2.06%	16
My birth country or immigration status	0.51%	4
My gender or gender identity	3.86%	30
My sexual orientation	5.79%	45
My learning disability or difference	3.22%	25
My physical disability or difference	1.29%	10
My family's income level or social class	2.96%	23
My physical appearance or clothing	11.45%	89
My language or language ability	1.16%	9
My religious beliefs	1.93%	15
My political beliefs	6.95%	54
I have not been bullied.	66.80%	519
I prefer not to answer.	9.14%	71

Student respondents were also given the opportunity to submit written comments describing the reason or reasons why they were bullied. Student respondents described a wide range of reasons, including weight, height, retaliation, jealousy, rumors, political beliefs, mean personalities, and various situations related to dynamics of group inclusion and exclusion. Many students also indicated that they did not know the reason.

Based on feedback and suggestions from the two student work groups that reviewed drafts of the student survey, two additional questions addressing bullying behavior were added to the survey.

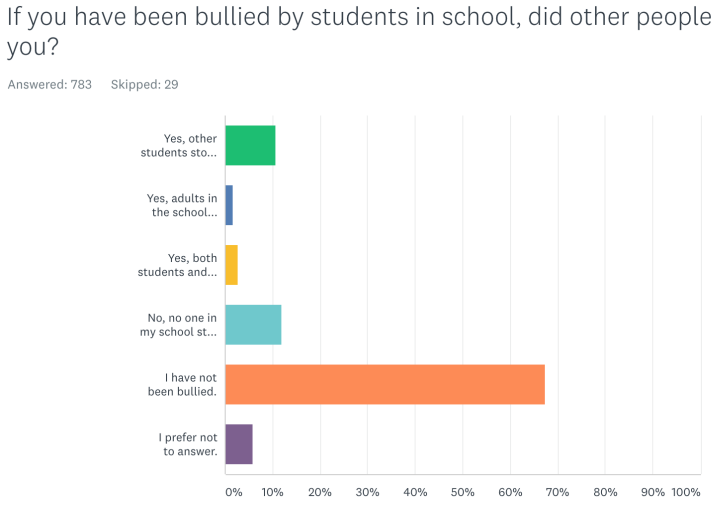
When asked, “If you have been bullied by students in school, did it stop?,” 19% of student respondents indicated the bullying stopped, 5% indicated the bullying did not stop, and 67% indicated they had not been bullied. (Figure 3.2D)

Figure 3.2D



When asked, “If you have been bullied by students in school, did other people stand up for you?,” 11% of student respondents indicated that other students stood up for them, 2% indicated that adults in the school stood up for them, 3% indicated that both students and adults in the school stood up for them, 12% indicated that no one stood up for them, and 67% indicated they had not been bullied. (Figure 3.2E)

Figure 3.2E



The student survey also included one written-response question: “Is there anything else you would like to share about your school experiences?” In written comments, some student respondents described experiencing or witnessing incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment by RSU 22 students in school or online.

In addition, three focus-group conversations were held with students from Hampden Academy, Reeds Brook Middle School, and Samuel L. Wagner Middle School on February 28, 2020. While the investigator did not participate in the focus groups, the investigator discussed the conversations with the focus-group facilitator and reviewed real-time notes that documented student comments. Discussions about bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment were also conducted with the two student work groups convened to provide feedback on the student survey. The investigator also asked about bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment during interviews with RSU 22 staff and family members.

Interview reports and survey responses indicate that some concerning instances of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment have occurred in RSU 22 schools and between students in online interactions, including incidents involving hateful, degrading, and threatening comments and behavior.

3.2A HETEROSEXISM, HOMOPHOBIA, AND TRANSPHOBIA

Survey, interview, and focus-group respondents report potentially significant levels of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia in the schools and community. Student survey respondents who identified as LGBTQ+ also indicated that they experience more frequent bullying, including forms of harassment, and receive less support from fellow students or adults when they are bullied.

- One student respondent wrote, “There is A LOT of homophobia everywhere in this school.” The student wrote that she was told she was “going to hell” on social media, that “the F slur (f@gg0t) is thrown around constantly in school and all over social media,” and that her girlfriend “had her pride flag stomped on, called slurs, and more. She once had pride socks on and a boy came up to her just to tell her he had nazi symbols and the confederate flag on his socks. No one has said anything about it and there is so little support for LGBTQ students in this school.” She concludes, “Please advocate for LGBTQ youth, especially because we have an 8.5 times higher rate of suicide because of lack of support and bullying.”
- Another student respondent wrote, “Yea i dont think that being gay or trans its not ok theres olny 2 genders. i dont know what all of these outer ones are but its not ok [sic].”
- One student who participated in a focus group said that transgender students are “super targeted” for prejudice, harassment, and bullying in RSU 22.
- An interviewed faculty member described having to intervene when a student who harassed another student in class by repeatedly using the other student’s “dead name” despite being asked to stop on multiple occasions (a “dead name” is the birth name of a transgender person who later changes their name to better suit their gender identity).

In a student survey developed and administered by the Hampden Academy Civil Rights Team, name-calling, jokes, and stereotypes related to gender and gender identity were the most common forms of prejudicial behavior experienced or observed by high school respondents, including students intentionally misgendering and dead naming fellow students (see Section 8.2 below for a more detailed discussion).

When responses to the student survey were disaggregated by self-reported gender identity and sexual orientation, a concerning trend emerged.

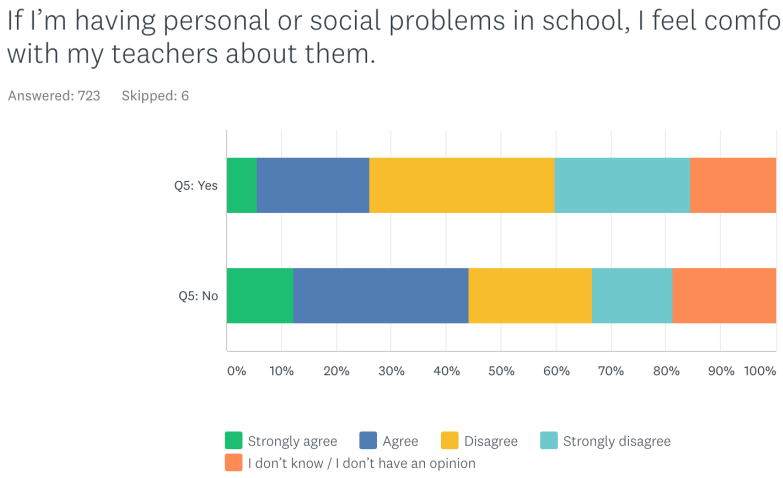
While responses number in these categories were low, student respondents who self-identified as transgender, non-binary, or gender questioning were less likely to feel a sense of belonging in school, to feel safe in school, or to have close or positive relationships with other students in school, and they were more likely to experience frequent bullying or harassment. Two of the student respondents also described, in written responses, suffering very concerning mental-health issues due to experiences in school that were related to their gender identity.

Similarly, 18% of the student survey respondents (142 students) who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or questioning also reported negative school experiences at higher rates than students who self-identified as heterosexual. In the charts below, “Yes” indicates the

students self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or questioning (LGBPAQ) and "No" indicates that they did not.

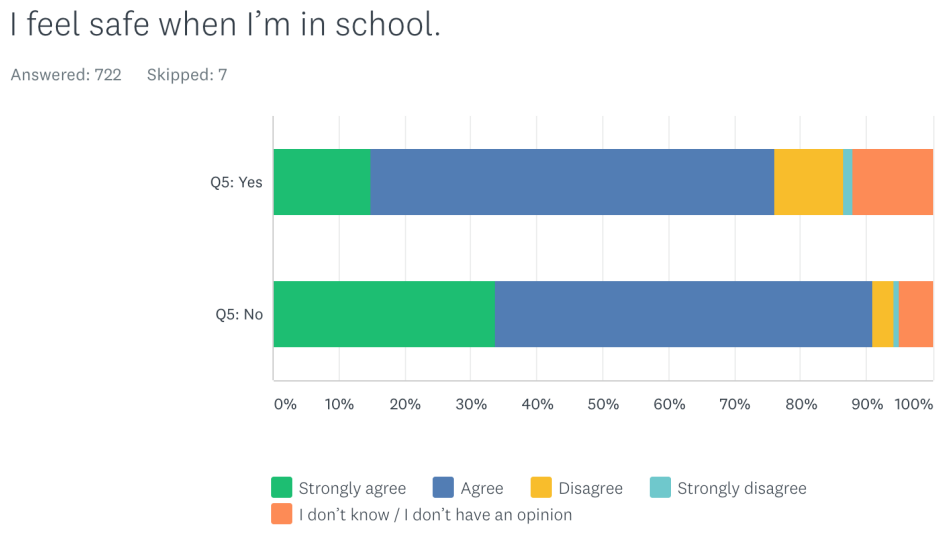
LGBPAQ students are less likely to discuss social and emotional problems with teachers. (Figure 3.2F)

Figure 3.2F



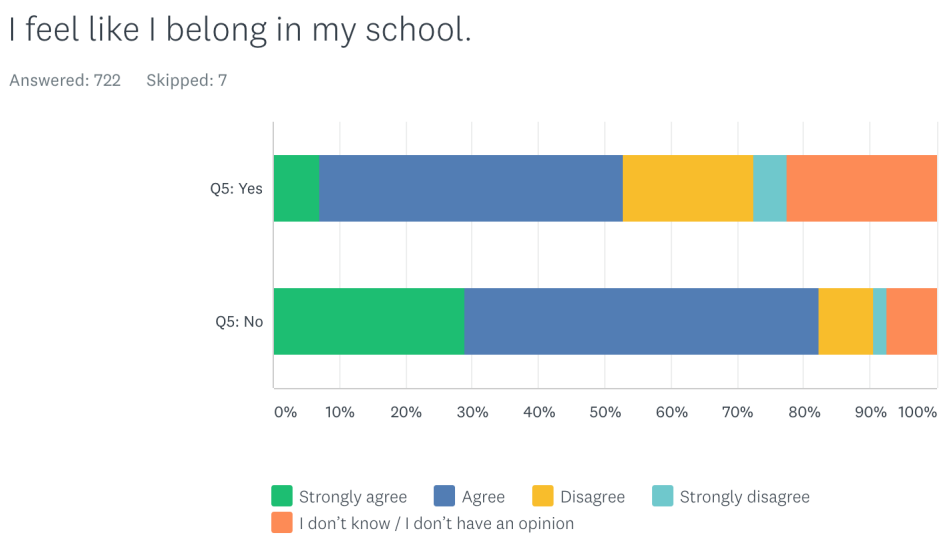
LGBPAQ students are less likely to feel safe in school. (Figure 3.2G)

Figure 3.2G



LGBPAQ students are less likely to feel a sense of belonging in school. (Figure 3.2H)

Figure 3.2H



LGBPAQ students are less likely to have close and positive relationships with other students in school. (Figure 3.2I, Figure 3.2J)

Figure 3.2I

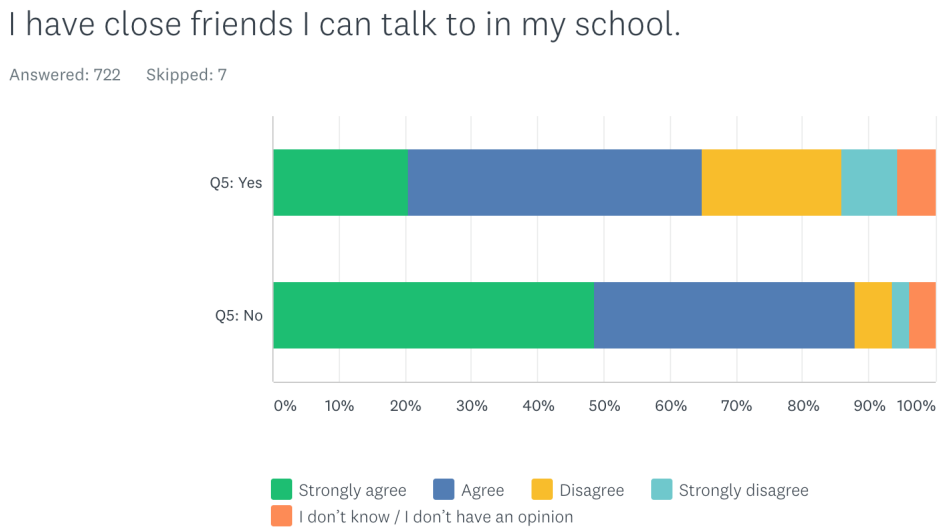
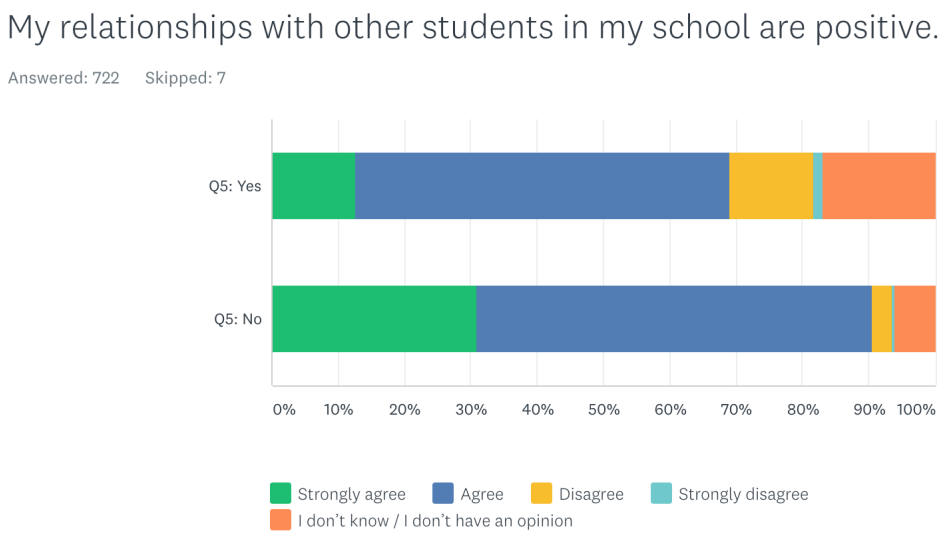


Figure 3.2J



LGBPAQ students are less likely to believe that their school's rules are fair or that students are treated fairly when they break the rules. (Figure 3.2K, Figure 3.2L)

Figure 3.2K

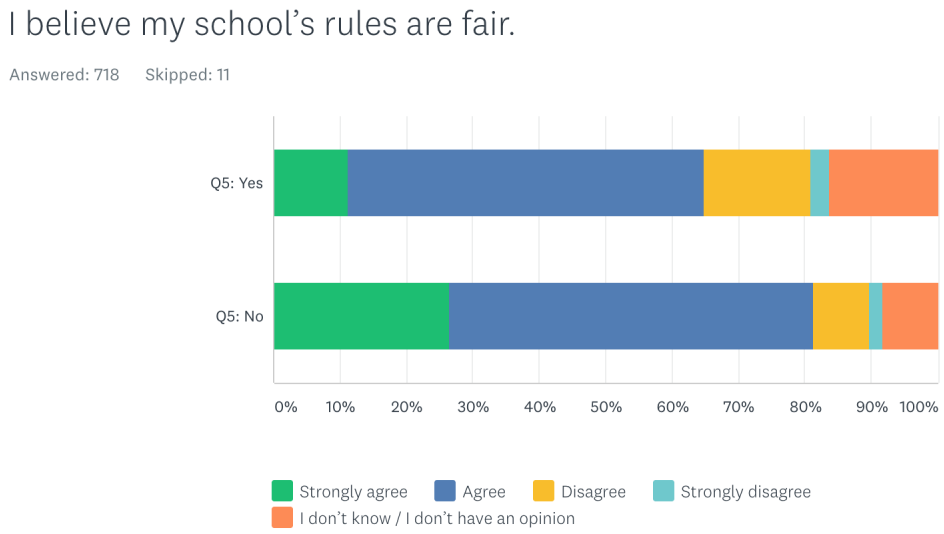
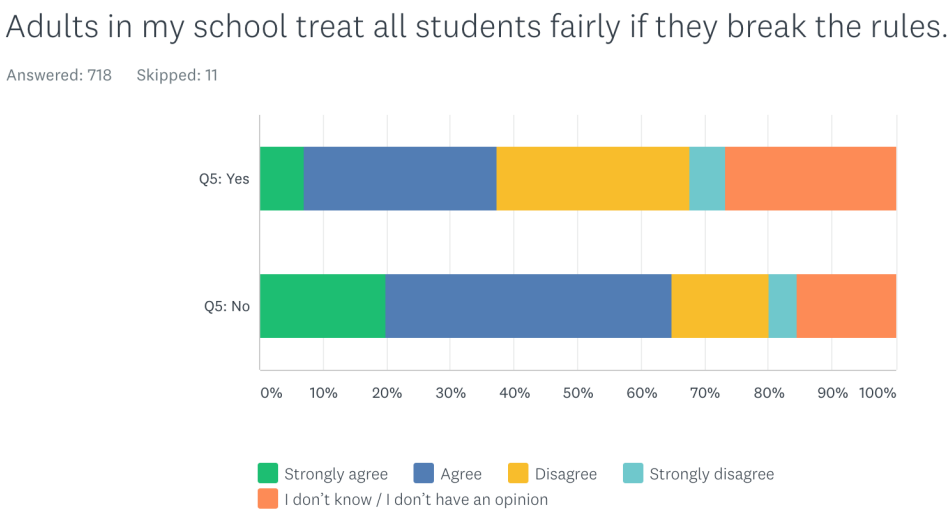


Figure 3.2L



LGBPAQ students are less likely to believe that adults in their school listen to student concerns or take action when concerns are raised. (Figure 3.2M, Figure 3.2N)

Figure 3.2M

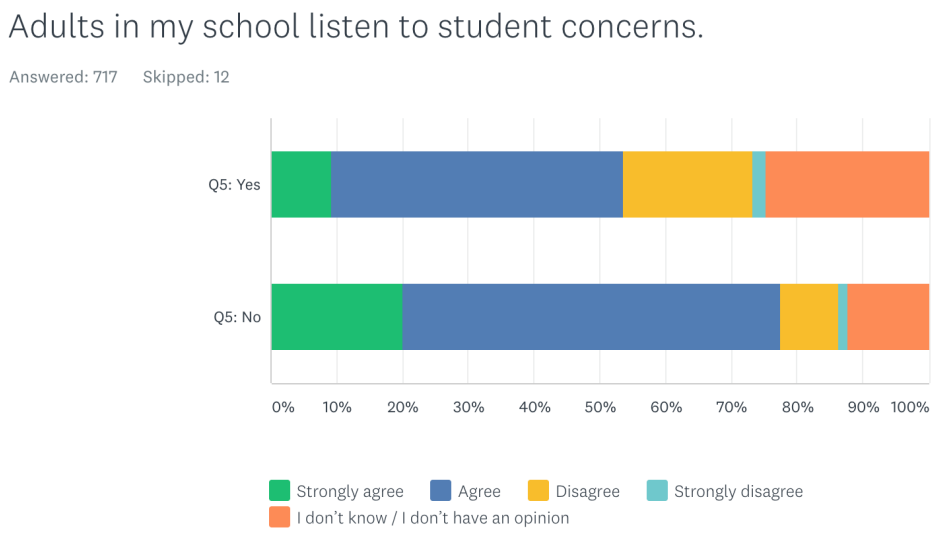
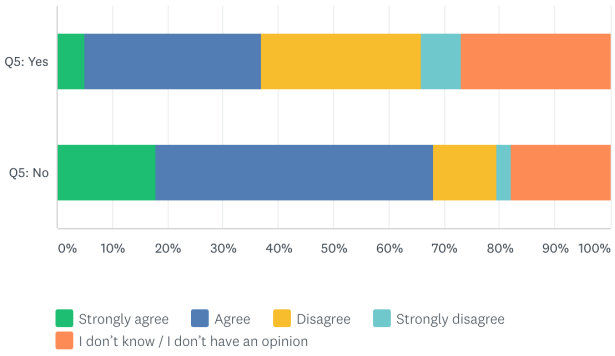


Figure 3.2N

When students bring up problems, adults in my school take action to fix the problem.

Answered: 717 Skipped: 12



LGBPAQ students report being bullied more frequently, and they are less likely to report that the bullying stopped or that adults or other students stood up for them when they were bullied. (Figure 3.2O, Figure 3.2P, Figure 3.2Q)

Figure 3.2O

If you have been bullied by students in your school, how often have you been bullied?

Answered: 709 Skipped: 20

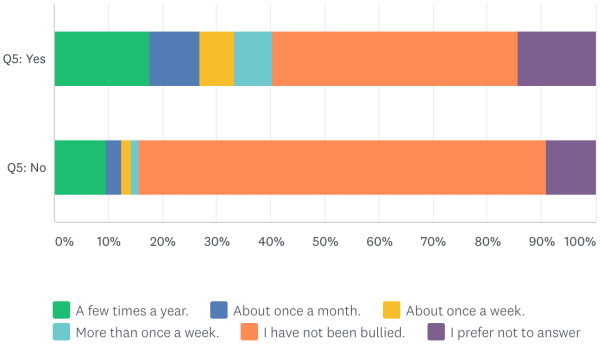


Figure 3.2P

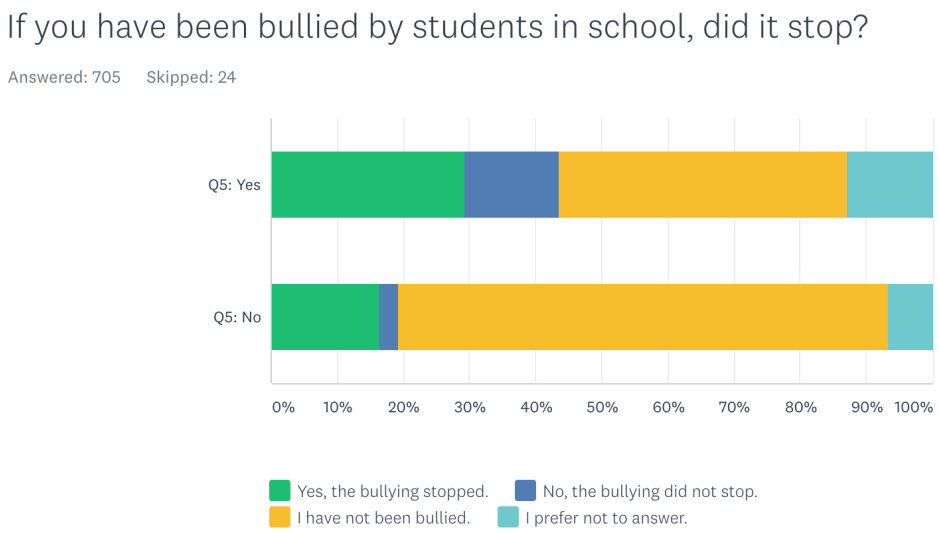
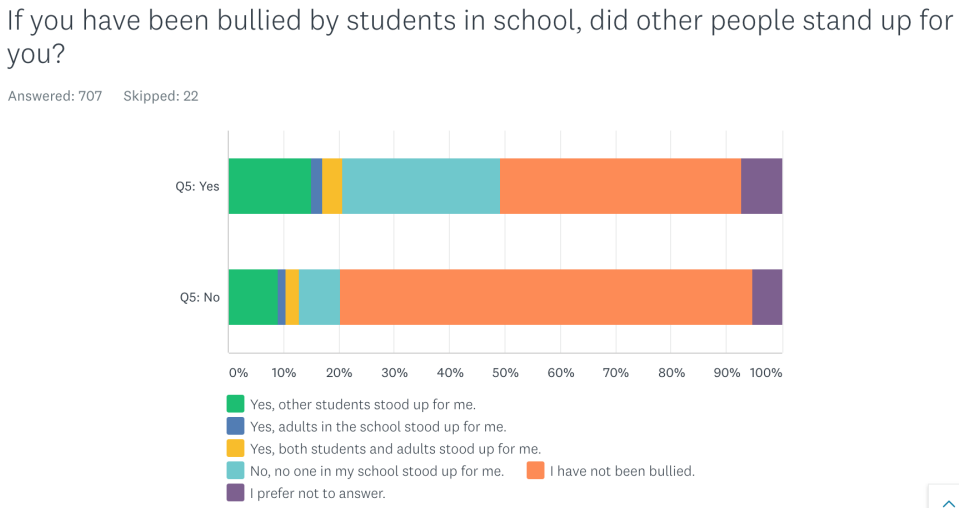


Figure 3.2Q



Interviews, survey responses, and focus groups indicate that heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia are also present in interactions between adults in RSU 22 and between staff members and students—a concerning finding that should be investigated by the district.

- On the staff survey, one faculty member wrote, “Some teachers still refuse to accept students’ gender identities and pronouns despite district policy.”
- Another faculty member described the following incident: “In one of our PD sessions earlier in the year (the first Jen Abrams presentation), I was in a breakout room with a teacher from a different school who spent the whole time talking about how uncomfortable she was with

transgender students, and how she disagreed with it, thought kids were just confused. It made me feel very uncomfortable, even though the teacher was not expressing any bias towards me. I think we have a LONG way to go in our district, even if we feel that we are making progress, in large part because we are in a very non-diverse part of the country."

3.2B RACIAL AND ETHNIC BIAS, PREJUDICE, BULLYING, AND HARASSMENT

Because the population of non-white employees, students, and family members in RSU 22 is small, the surveys administered during this assessment, due to low respondents counts in non-white demographic categories, are unable to establish reliable statistical patterns related to self-reported race or ethnicity. For this reason, no quantitative survey data will be presented in this section, and only incidents reported during interviews or in written survey comments will be featured.

Based on interviews with both white and non-white respondents in RSU 22, interviews with respondents from different ethnic backgrounds, and interviews with members of biracial families, as well as written responses to the three surveys administered during the assessment, several concerning incidents of racial or ethnic bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment were related to the investigator. A selection of these incidents are described in this section.

The assessment did not find evidence of racial bullying and harassment occurring between staff members in the school system, and all the concerning incidents described below involve student behavior. However, some incidents of racial bias by RSU 22 administrators, teachers, and staff members toward students of color were also documented during the assessment. While these incidents did not appear to be overtly and deliberately prejudicial—meaning that it was entirely clear to everyone involved in the incident that the behavior was clearly and unacceptably prejudicial—the reported incidents do suggest patterns of racial, ethnic, and cultural insensitivity, and a lack of self-awareness about or refusal to take full responsibility for these incidents of insensitivity, by RSU 22 staff members.

One pattern that emerged in interviews and surveys responses was the perception that RSU 22 administrators, faculty, and staff fail to respond appropriately or adequately to some cases of reported incidents of racial or ethnic bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment. This perception was expressed by employees, students, and family members, and specific incidents of neglect, dismissiveness, minimization, or inaction were described in detail. This pattern is more fully discussed in sections 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, and 3.8 below.

In some cases, the described incidents of neglect, dismissiveness, minimization, or inaction by RSU 22 administrators and staff occurred several years ago and involve former district employees who are no longer employed by the school system. In other cases, the incidents occured in the recent past, including during the 2020–2021 school year.

It should also be noted that while patterns of neglect, dismissiveness, minimization, or inaction in response to reported incidents of racial or ethnic bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment were identified during the assessment, the assessment also documented many incidents of responsive, sensitive, and appropriate action being taken by RSU 22 administrators, teachers, and staff.

In addition, incidents of neglect, dismissiveness, minimization, or inaction appear to have declined significantly under the current district administration compared to the previous district administration, and respondents also described several incidents of responsive, sensitive, and appropriate action being taken by school administrators currently employed by the district.

The following incidents were described to the investigator during the assessment:

- A parent interviewee described how their Jewish child, on the day following a presentation on the Holocaust, was "sieg heiled" by a group of students in the lunchroom in view of lunchroom staff. Reportedly, no staff members who were in the cafeteria at the time intervened or spoke with the group of students. That evening, while attending a school function, the same Jewish student was "sieg heiled" again by another student. Following these incidents, the family brought their concerns to the school principal at the time. According to the parent respondent, the students who engaged in these antisemitic gestures did not apologize to the Jewish student and did not appear to receive any observable punishment in school. The principal at the time (who is no longer employed in the school system) cited student-privacy concerns and declined to tell the family whether the students involved in these incidents were given any form of punishment, an action that is consistent with student-privacy laws and district policy. The parent described other concerning incidents their child experienced in school and in online interactions with other RSU 22 students, including an antisemitic prank and offensive Holocaust jokes.

- Interview respondents also reported experiencing or witnessing disturbing incidents of hateful speech and symbolism, some of which happened several years ago. Multiple interviewees described incidents in which students (a) displayed large confederate flags on their vehicles on school grounds; (b) drove around school property, including middle schools and elementary schools, during school hours while yelling, honking, and waving confederate flags; (c) barred students from exiting school buses by standing in front of the bus doors while holding a spread-open confederate flag; (d) displaying confederate flags in view of students in school by holding them up to the entryway doors and windows of the school; (d) engaged in various incidents of racial taunting, bullying, and harassment that involved confederate flags, including confederate flags draped around the provoking students in the manner of a cloak or cape. Multiple people interviewed during the assessment also reported observing RSU 22 students using confederate flags as their online profile icon or avatar during online classes or featuring confederate flags and other racist imagery in social-media posts and online exchanges between students. When these incidents were reported to administrators at the time, their responses were described as

dismissive, minimizing, and negligent. Family frustrations about administrative inaction led to the creation of a local family-led organizing and advocacy group whose goal was to bring attention to the problem and compel RSU 22 administrators to take action.

- Multiple interview and survey respondents report a wide range of racially biased and prejudiced behavior by students, including behavior that constitutes racial bullying and harassment. These reported incidents involved a wide range of student behavior, including derogatory and degrading language (such as the N word), physical intimidation and assaults, and forms of sexual harassment by students that involve elements of racial prejudice. All of the incidents described during the assessment were hurtful, many were deliberately hateful, and many deliberately hurtful and hateful bullying behaviors were sustained over long periods of time (such as months or years). On the student survey, one respondent wrote that the N word is "thrown around constantly in school and all over social media" and in social-media live streams and videos that were "spreading over the school." According to this student respondent, when these and similar incidents were reported to administrators and staff in the school, "nothing happened" to the offending students and "nothing was done." In some cases, the incidents of prejudice, bullying, and harassment outlined here caused affected students to suffer a variety of concerning mental, emotional, and psychological issues, including incidents of self-harm and concerning levels of anxiety and fear that adversely affected their education and desire to attend school.

- One adult interviewed during the assessment described a range of prejudicial anti-Hispanic/anti-Latino comments and behavior by students, including students asking how to say "build the wall" in Spanish and students attempting to "build a wall" around the adult with classroom chairs during a geography lesson.

- In a survey developed and administered by the Hampden Academy Civil Rights Team, 40% of student respondents describe experiencing or observing incidences of prejudicial name-calling, jokes, and stereotypes based on race (see Section 8.2 below for a more detailed discussion).

3.2C **SEXISM**

Sexism involves any form of bias, prejudice, discrimination, bullying, or harassment that is based on "sex"—i.e., gender. Gender entails both biological gender and gender identity, and consequently many forms of sexism blend into or combine with forms of transphobia and related prejudice. In addition, gender—conceptually, biologically, and experientially—is widely misunderstood in American culture, and consequently many forms of sexism also blend into or combine with forms of heterosexism and homophobia. Because patterns and incidents of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia were described above, this section will only address sexism based on perceptions of biological gender.

During the assessment, some incidents of gender-based bias and discrimination were documented. Specifically, two forms of bias and discrimination: (a) some faculty members who identify as female believe that sexist bias and discrimination may play a role in some administrative decisions, such as which faculty members are selected for certain leadership roles (as discussed in Section 3.3), and (b) some students who identify as female believe that sexist bias and discrimination play a role in student discipline, especially disciplinary actions related to attire and school dress codes (dress-code policies are detailed in the most recent versions of the Hampden Academy, Reeds Brook Middle School, and Samuel L. Wagner Middle School handbooks.

Only a few reported perceptions of potential sexist bias and discrimination directed toward employees who identify as female were documented. Consequently, the assessment is unable to establish whether such incidents may constitute a concerning pattern. Given the limited data available, the investigator recommends that RSU 22 (a) conduct its own investigation into whether sexist bias and discrimination may play a role in some leadership decisions, and (b) monitor and track the distribution of leadership roles assigned to faculty and staff to determine whether the percentage of leadership roles assigned to male employees and female employees is roughly equivalent to the percentages of employees who identify as male and female.

During the assessment, the investigator collected evidence indicating that some students who identify as female likely experience some level of sexist bias and discrimination in student discipline related to perceived dress-code violations. In at least one case, the punitive enforcement of school dress codes appeared to target a female student of color disproportionately compared to the student's white female peers. Specifically, the student believed they were cited for a violation for wearing attire that was similar to, or even less revealing than, attire worn by white female students. It should be noted that systemic patterns of disproportionate enforcement of perceived dress-code violations in public schools against non-white female students have been documented in national studies and reports, and there is an ongoing national dialogue in the educational field about the persistence of "racist" dress codes that specifically describe and penalize attire, hairstyles, and accessories that are more commonly worn by female youth of color.

During focus groups with students, several students who identify as female described feeling targeted for unfair or disproportionate enforcement of dress-code violations, most commonly related to the extent of skin exposed on certain parts of the body, especially the chest area or upper thighs. The female students described students who identify as male commonly and routinely wearing attire that should, in their view, constitute a dress-code violation, including clothing that reveals their chest area and upper thighs, such as "muscle" shirts with low necklines, cut-off sleeveless tee-shirts with large cutouts that extend several inches below the armpit, or "short shorts" that expose the upper thigh, among other forms of clothing. The female students believed this attire violated their school's dress code, and that the violations would have been penalized if female students had worn similar clothing.

Again, it should be noted that systematic patterns of disproportionate enforcement of perceived dress-code violations in public schools against female students, compared to male students, have been documented in studies and reports, and there is an ongoing national dialogue in the educational field about the practice of "sexualizing" the bodies of young women through the disproportionate or unwarranted regulation of clothing perceived to be too revealing. For example, female students will be cited for dress-code violations, while male students will not, for wearing tight-fitting jeans that show the outline of their buttocks, or female students with larger chests will be disproportionately cited for dress-codes violations, compared to other female students without the same physical features, for wearing similar types of clothing. These disproportionate or unwarranted actions, in the view of some observers, imply that female bodies, or certain body types, are inherently "sexual" or "distracting," a perception that is then used to justify the overregulation of female attire in ways that are inconsistent, unwarranted, unfair, or hurtful.

Only a few incidents of potential sexist bias and discrimination directed toward students who identify as female were documented, and the student survey did not indicate that students who identify as female believe that school rules, or the enforcement of those rules, are unfair. When asked whether they believed their school's rules are fair, and whether adults in their school treat all students fairly if they break the rules, students who self-identified as female and students who self-identified as female reported similar levels of agreement and disagreement. Consequently, the assessment was unable to establish whether such incidents constitute a concerning pattern.

Given the limited data available, the investigator recommends that RSU 22 (a) conduct its own investigation into whether sexist bias and discrimination may play a role in dress-code enforcement, (b) conduct listening sessions on school discipline with groups of students who identify as female at the high school and middle school levels, and (c) review and revise dress-code policy language and procedures in the high school and two middle schools to ensure that rules are more precisely articulated and more fairly applied and enforced for all students regardless of their gender, gender identity, or sexuality.

As noted in above, student survey respondents who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or questioning were less likely to believe that their school's rules are fair or that they are treated fairly when they break the rules. Given the presence of concerning patterns of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia, including multiple reported incidents of RSU 22 employees expressing biased and prejudicial viewpoints, it is possible that students who identify as LGBTQ+ are also disproportionately and unfairly targeted for dress-code violations.

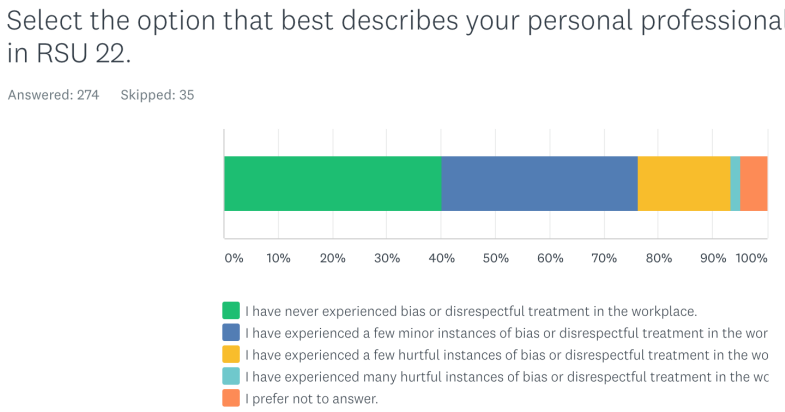
3.3 District staff report experiencing relatively low levels of bias, prejudice, or disrespectful treatment in the workplace.

Interviews with RSU 22 administrators, faculty, and staff suggest that a majority of employees in the district likely experience little or no overt bias, prejudice, bullying, or harassment in the

workplace from other adults, and interviewees described a largely collegial, welcoming, inclusive, and professional workplace culture in RSU 22 schools. No respondents, either during interviews or in survey responses, described overt instances of workplace bullying or harassment. Staff survey responses affirmed these general findings.

When asked to "select the option that best describes your personal professional experiences in RSU 22," 40% of staff respondents indicated that they have experienced no bias or disrespectful treatment in the workplace, 36% indicated that they have experienced a few minor instances of bias or disrespectful treatment, 17% indicated that they have experienced a few hurtful instances of bias or disrespectful treatment, and 2% indicated that they have experienced many hurtful instances of bias or disrespectful treatment. (Figure 3.3A)

Figure 3.3A



An analysis of staff survey responses disaggregated by school, race/ethnicity, gender identity, and other self-reported categories did not indicate concerning patterns of systemic bias or disrespectful treatment in the workplace. However, respondents who self-identified as male reported somewhat higher rates of bias and disrespectful treatment compared to respondents who self-identified as female, and reported levels of bias and disrespectful treatment also varied somewhat by workplace. (Figure 3.3B, Figure 3.3C)

Figure 3.3B

Select the option that best describes your personal professional experiences in RSU 22.

Answered: 263 Skipped: 34

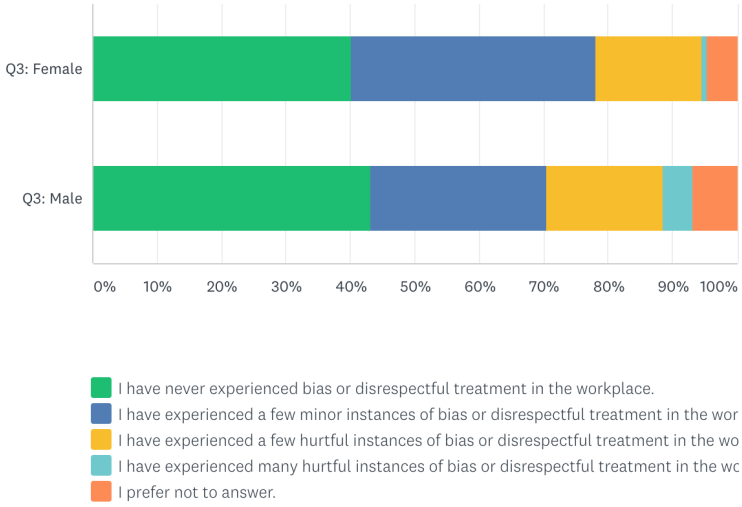
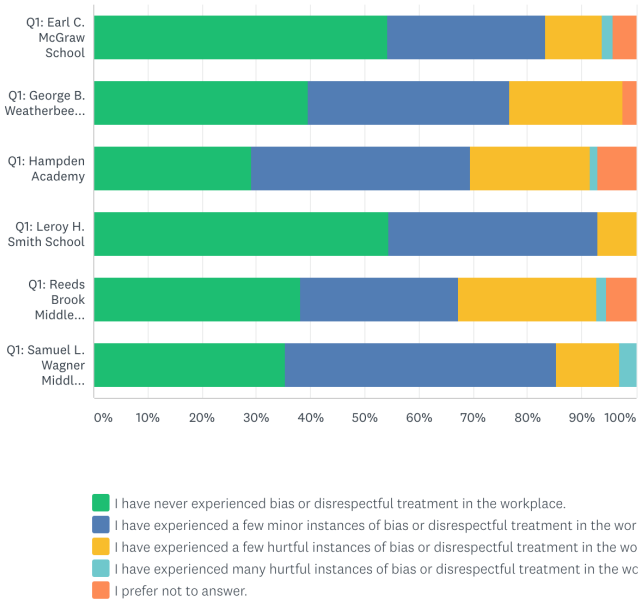


Figure 3.3C

Select the option that best describes your personal professional experiences in RSU 22.

Answered: 264 Skipped: 29



During interviews, RSU 22 staff members of color did not report experiencing bias, prejudice, bullying, or harassment based on their race or ethnicity, though only three staff members of color were interviewed. Staff interview respondents who identified as female did not report experiencing incidents of overt bias, prejudice, bullying, or harassment based on their gender, though some interview comments and written survey responses indicate that some faculty members who identify as female believe that sexist bias may play a role in some administrative decisions, such as which faculty members are selected for certain leadership roles (as discussed in Section 3.2).

3.4 District and school responses to bias, prejudice, and bullying affecting students are likely inconsistent and in some cases insufficient.

One pattern that emerged in interviews and surveys responses was the perception that RSU 22 administrators, faculty, and staff fail to respond appropriately or adequately to some cases of reported incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, or harassment. This perception was expressed by employees, students, and family members, and specific incidents of neglect, dismissiveness, minimization, or inaction were described in detail (a selection of examples are described in Section 3.2).

In some cases, it was unclear to respondents if any corrective or disciplinary action was taken by school administrators or staff (a) because they did not observe or hear about disciplinary actions being taken, (b) because RSU 22 staff did not follow up after the incident was reported, or (c) because administrators declined answer specific questions do to student-privacy concerns. In other cases, respondents described personal interactions and experiences of neglect, dismissiveness, minimization, and inaction by RSU 22 administrators, faculty, or staff.

3.5 Some district staff members likely possess low levels of self-awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, or skill when it comes to appropriately handling and responding to specific incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment.

As described above, interviews and survey responses indicate that some RSU 22 administrators, faculty, or staff may fail to respond appropriately or adequately to some reported incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment.

For example, multiple respondents described interactions characterized by dismissiveness and minimization. Specifically, instances of offensive, degrading, and hateful comments or behavior were treated as though they were “typical” or relatively harmless forms of adolescent behavior that did not demand significant interventions or more severe disciplinary actions. In some cases, the respondents who reported these incidents described responses that rationalized or excused the behavior, that minimized or dismissed the harmfulness of the behavior, or that implicitly questioned the credibility or honesty of the student or parent who was reporting the incident.

It must be noted that subjective experiences and perceptions can be misrepresentative, of course, and that administrators and staff in public schools frequently cannot determine precisely what occurred or didn't occur when students or families report incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, or harassment. In addition, administrators and staff routinely have to manage and respond to a wide range of problematic student behavior that occurs in schools on a regular basis, and consequently the perspective that professional educators adopt toward student behavior may sometimes appear inappropriately "casual" or "unconcerned" to students or families, especially those who have been directly harmed by incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, or harassment.

The investigator wants to point that this "perceptual gap"—the difference between (a) a professional educator responding to and managing hundreds of behavioral incidents among students and (b) the emotional experience of students and families who have been directly harmed by incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, or harassment—is a frequent source of misunderstanding, tensions, and frustrations between educators and families in public schools.

Much like doctors managing health concerns and crises in a hospital, educators are obligated to professionally evaluate a case, make an assessment, and select the best course of action they can based on their experience, their training, and the ethical, legal, and professional rules and standards governing their profession. And much like patients, students and families will have valid emotions, concerns, questions, and expectations following an incident of bias, prejudice, bullying, or harassment. In some cases, professional educators may display insufficient sensitivity, but in others they may be calmly and appropriately acting in accordance with established best practices or regulations that family members may be unaware of. To the extent possible, the investigator recommends that all parties begin with listening, sensitivity, dialogue, and mutual respect, and then attempt to address the situation as a team, rather than as adversaries.

In many cases, due to laws and regulations governing student privacy, district and school administrators cannot share information with students or families about disciplinary actions taken against students who engaged in biased, prejudiced, bullying, or harassing behavior toward other students. For this reason, students and families may not know that the district or school took appropriate disciplinary steps following a reported incident.

With that said, evidence collected during the assessment suggests potential patterns of dismissiveness, minimization, and inadequate action or follow-up likely occur in district schools, and that some administrators, faculty, and staff may not have possess adequate levels of self-awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, or skill when it comes to appropriately handling and responding to certain forms of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment. The absence of clear and directive procedural guidance from the district, along with insufficient staff training, are likely contributing factors.

3.6 Consult with legal, disciplinary, and developmental professionals to determine appropriate interventions and disciplinary responses for different forms of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment.

Evidence suggests that administrator, faculty, and staff responses to incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment are likely inconsistent across the district, and that some students and families perceive past responses to have been inadequate, unsatisfactory, or ineffective in addressing reported incidents. While different categories of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment typically entail a wide range of complex behaviors, and it is often difficult to determine precisely what occurred during a given incident, school districts should nevertheless strive to establish clear and appropriate distinctions between different categories of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment, and to adopt policies and procedures that enable staff to respond more consistently, appropriately, and effectively in all district schools.

As a first step, RSU 22 could consult with legal, disciplinary, and developmental professionals to determine appropriate interventions and disciplinary responses for different forms of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment at different developmental stages. These consultations can then inform the development of a procedural framework and training program that provides clearer and more directive guidance for district administrators, faculty, and staff on appropriate responses to different forms and categories of bias, prejudice, and bullying, and harassment.

3.7 Adopt unambiguous policies and procedures related to harassing and hateful speech, gestures, and symbols.

As defined above, *harassment* refers to the specific civil rights protected under federal and state law that are described and addressed in RSU 22 district policies ACA, GBA, JBA. While all forms of bias, prejudice, and bullying demand immediate and appropriate responses, overt and deliberate incidents of harassment “based upon race, color, sex, religion, age, national origin, ancestry, sexual orientation or handicapping condition” constitute a legally distinct category of behavior, which requires a similarly distinct procedural response from the district and it’s schools.

Racist, heterosexist, ableist, or antisemitic speech, gestures, and symbolism, for example, cannot be equated with other forms of bullying. These forms of threatening harassment or hateful speech evoke centuries of marginalization, stereotyping, oppression, and violence, and they are each uniquely offensive, humiliating, threatening, degrading, or dehumanizing.

In many cases of harassment, situational and developmental considerations may recommend less-penal interventions, such as personal apologies, restorative conversations, or completion of an educational process that enables students to learn about and reflect on harm that was caused. In

other cases, the severity of a given incident of harassment, particularly when it involves any form of hateful speech, behavior, or symbolism, may require more severe interventions or disciplinary actions.

While public-school districts, including RSU 22, have policies that address bullying and harassment among students, these policies rarely name specific forms of hateful speech, gestures, and symbolism, including student displays of confederate flags, swastikas, Nazi salutes, or white-supremacy symbols, for example. District harassment policies may also fail to address how such displays might appear in modern educational environments, such as students using hateful symbols as a profile icon or avatar during an online class.

As a first step, RSU 22 should consult with legal, disciplinary, and developmental professionals to determine appropriate policies addressing hateful forms of speech, behavior, and symbolism that may constitute harassment. These consultations can then inform the development of a procedural framework and training program that provides clearer and more directive guidance to district administrators, faculty, and staff on appropriate responses.

It should be noted that insufficient, avoidant, or mismanaged responses to harassment involving hateful speech, behavior, or symbolism in schools can precipitate a community crisis. To cite one example that was widely reported in Maine news media, RSU 21 was accused, in 2019, of mismanaging its response to an incident of racial harassment by students that involved a confederate flag and targeted a black teacher. This incident precipitated a prolonged community crisis that included resignations, investigations, public accusations, lawsuits, significant legal expenses, and long-term damage to reputations, relationships, and trust in the community. The incident that occured in RSU 21 bears similarities to incidents, described in Section 3.2, that have already happened in RSU 22. Similar crises have occured in other Maine communities more recently.

3.8 **Improve staff-wide self-awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and skill related to the appropriate handling of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment among students and in the workplace.**

Once RSU 22 has developed a procedural framework that more comprehensively describes appropriate responses to different types and categories of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment, the district should begin the process of providing relevant training to district administrators, faculty, and staff. The investigator recommends contacting the Civil Rights Team Project at the Office of the Maine Attorney General, or other appropriate agencies and professional organizations, to discuss training opportunities.

As discussed in Section 1.4, some staff respondents described feeling anxiety about the shifting landscape of social, professional, and instructional norms related to race, gender, sexuality, and other topics. Based on interview and survey responses, it is likely that many RSU 22 staff members

have not had the opportunity to discuss equity in an environment in which they feel socially, emotionally, or professionally safe talking openly, honestly, and candidly about sensitive topics such as race, gender, sexuality, or prejudice.

In school systems that want to increase staff-wide knowledge of equity, staff members must be held accountable and take responsibility for their behavior, but unduly judging, criticizing, or penalizing staff members for not having knowledge they have never had the opportunity to acquire rarely produces positive outcomes. In fact, when adults feel judged for not having equity knowledge they have never been given the opportunity to learn, and especially when they fear public embarrassment, unduly harsh responses can have a "chilling" effect that often makes adults more defensive, more risk-averse, more unwilling to speak up or engage in honest conversations, and more likely to dismiss, disparage, or resist equity initiatives.

If comparatively minor incidents of bias occur, and circumstances do not necessitate a firmer corrective response, staff members can be invited into a respectful learning process and be given the opportunity to reflect on and make amends for their behavior. In some cases, adults who engage in biased behavior may not be aware they are displaying bias, may have positive intentions, may be mirroring behavior that is commonplace in their social group, and may never have had their bias pointed out to them. In these cases, it may be more appropriate and effective if these staff members are taken aside, by administrators or other appropriate personnel, for a constructive, private conversation about their behavior, given opportunities to apologize or make amends, and brought into educational dialogue or process that increases their understanding and awareness of how their behavior negatively affects others.

SECTION 4. DISTRICT AND SCHOOL POLICY

While this section discusses findings, considerations, and recommendations related to RSU 22 policies, other sections of the report also address policy-related findings, considerations, and recommendations in relevant topic areas.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

4.1 Some district policies are outdated and do not directly address equity issues.

A review of existing district policies (rsu22.us/policies) found that RSU 22 has developed, over multiple decades, a comprehensive policy framework for the district, and that in recent years many new policies have been adopted and older policies have been updated.

However, the review also found that many district policies are likely outdated, that equity concerns could be more explicitly addressed in certain policies, and that the district does not have a formal, board-approved policy, definition, or position statement on equity.

4.2 School-level policies and procedures related to equity likely vary from school to school, and the implementation of policies may be inconsistent across the district.

While a granular, school-by-school analysis of equity policies, procedures, and practices was beyond the scope of this assessment, interview and survey responses suggest that school-level policies, procedures, and practices related to educational equity and inequity most likely vary from school to school, and that the implementation of policies, procedures, and practices may also be inconsistent within schools.

Based on the findings, considerations, and recommendations described in this report, the district administrative team, which includes administrators from central office and all six district schools, should prioritize and engage in an ongoing discussion of equity policies, procedures, and expectations.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

4.3 Adopt a comprehensive board-approved position statement and policy on equity work in the district.

The term “equity” carries different meanings for different people, and confusion, misunderstanding, and disagreement are more likely to occur in school communities when complex and nuanced

terms such as “equity” are not clearly defined and described in detail (for related discussions, see sections 1.3, 1.5, 1.7 and 1.9).

To date, RSU 22’s Equity in Education committee has developed the following working definition of equity for the district:

> “Equity is the process by which equality occurs. In RSU 22, this process means we create a system of policies, programs, and learning environments to promote equal access to educational resources, academic rigor, and community belonging. Equity means that students and staff are provided with resources and opportunities that they need to succeed.”

As a next step, RSU 22 should consider expanding this working definition into a formal board-approved position statement and policy on equity that describes, with sufficient detail, how equity will be enacted in district facilities and academic environments. On at least a biannual basis (every two years), or when recommended by changing circumstances, the policy and position statement should be revisited and revised in collaboration with, and/or in response to feedback from, district stakeholders.

4.4 Utilize the Equity in Education subcommittee of the school board to draft equity policies and subsections for full-board consideration and adoption.

The Equity in Education committee of the RSU 22 school board was recently instituted as a formal board committee, after having been established as an ad-hoc working group in 2019. To date, the specific roles and responsibilities of the Equity in Education committee have not yet been fully elaborated. Going forward, the Equity in Education committee should continue discussions to determine the specific role it should play as a formal committee of the school board and, by extension, what specific responsibilities it can or should take on.

One option the Equity in Education committee could consider is to adopt an advisory and policy-development role similar to legislative committees. While the Equity in Education committee would not determine district policy, it could (a) monitor equity work in the district by visiting schools, observing the educational process, and listening to staff, students, and stakeholders; (b) identify equity-related issues, needs, and opportunities suitable for review and consideration by the full board; (c) gather and evaluate relevant equity data and information, in collaboration with RSU 22 stakeholders, for presentation to the full board; and (d) recommend specific courses of action or policy revisions to the full board.

4.5 Add regular reports and updates on equity initiatives and progress to school board meetings, including presentations that are developed, organized, and led by students and staff members.

To ensure that RSU 22's equity work remains an accountable priority, the school board should consider adding standing reports and updates on equity initiatives to board meetings. The appropriate frequency and duration of these reports can be determined by the school board in consultation with district leadership.

In addition to technical reports and updates on equity initiatives, the investigator recommends making time for presentations by students and staff, especially presentations that give students and staff the opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives, projects, and work. For example, teachers could be invited to tell the story of a school project related to civil rights and participating students could be invited to describe what they learned. Equity is a human process, and understanding why equity matters and how it actually works in practice, is aided when those who have been involved and affected are given opportunities to tell their personal stories.

SECTION 5. DISTRICT COMMUNICATIONS AND SURVEYS

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

5.1 Expectations for staff communication and responsiveness are high, and day-to-day communication and coordination burdens are significant.

Email has become an increasingly time-consuming feature of the contemporary professional life of public-school educators. And while email communications and other online technologies, such as Google Classroom, have in many ways improved communication and coordination in school systems, email and other online technologies are also (a) consuming an ever-increasing amount of work time in public schools and (b) increasing staff, student, and family expectations for responsiveness.

In interviews with district administrators, faculty, and staff, respondents not only described a professional landscape of time-consuming communication and coordination obligations, but also a large number of "time-fragmenting" obligations. While one email may only take a few minutes to answer, responding to 50 or 100 emails per day requires multiple dedicated hours or many shorter, distracting, unfocused periods of time scattered throughout the work day.

Educating students effectively requires not only responsive communication with colleagues, students, and families, but also sufficient amounts of dedicated, focused, productive, and uninterrupted time for instruction, student feedback, curriculum planning, team collaboration, student advising and mentorship, and ongoing professional learning and skill-building. In modern public schools, dedicated, focused, productive, and uninterrupted periods of work time are in increasingly short supply—and RSU 22 is no exception.

While significant and time-consuming communications demands are, to some extent, unavoidable in modern school systems, a large amount of time is often spent on unnecessary, redundant, or inefficient activities when school systems don't have clear communication procedures and expectations in place, or when staff and departments don't coordinate effectively. At some point, the amount of work time taken up by email, meetings, and other forms of communication and coordination will eat into the time that educators must dedicate to the process of educating students if they are to educate them effectively. For this reason, the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of communication and coordination procedures in a school system can have a direct and negative impact on educational quality and equity.

One interviewee provided the following example when asked about which school priorities were less important than others:

> "The difficulty is that they're all important and each group thinks theirs is important—and it is to that group. But they don't realize that there are seven other

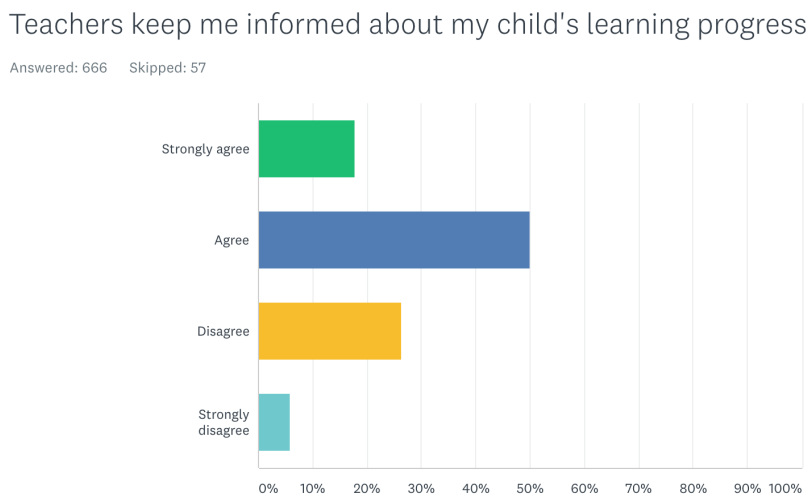
groups. I encounter this on a daily basis as a classroom teacher: Guidance wants to have a meeting—okay, great, not a problem. But so does special education, so does the principal, so does the department, so does the union, so does someone else. So which one do I go to? How many do I not go to? These groups are not trying to pile them on, but at some point you just go: How many more can I do? Each group will think, 'We only called one meeting.' Yes, but you were one of seven groups that called one." —Faculty Member

5.2 The consistency of family-facing communication is uneven across the district, and families report frustrations with the accessibility, quality, and responsiveness of district and school communication.

Clear and transparent communication is foundational to the educational process, the advancement of equity, and the engagement of students, families, and community members in public-school systems. Survey responses suggest that the consistency of family-facing communication is uneven across the district, and many families report frustrations with the accessibility, quality, and responsiveness of district and school communication.

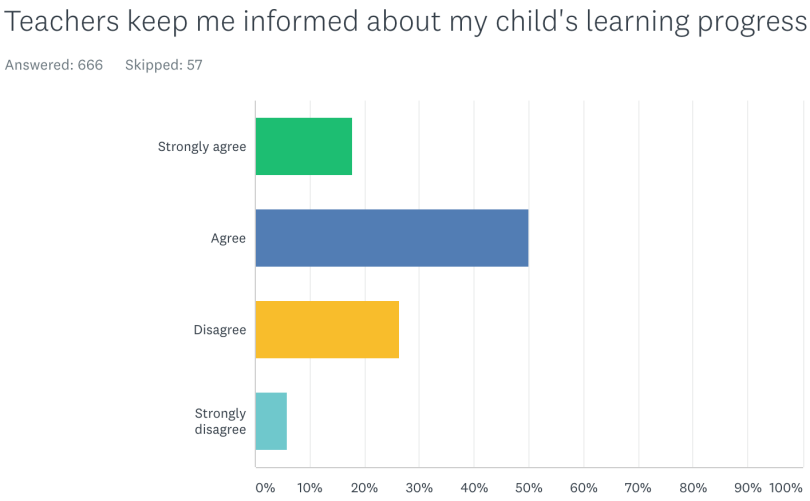
When asked to rate the quality of communication from their child's school, 21% of family-survey respondents selected "excellent," 44% selected "good," 28% selected "fair," and 7% selected "poor." (Figure 5.2A)

Figure 5.2A



When asked for their level of agreement with the following statement, "Teachers keep me informed about my child's learning progress in school," 18% of family-survey respondents selected "strongly agree," 50% selected "agree," 26% selected "disagree," and 6% selected "stongly disagree." (Figure 5.2B)

Figure 5.2B



In written comments, some family-survey respondents praised the district's communications, while others expressed criticism and frustration. And while some respondents expressed appreciation for the email responsiveness of RSU 22 educators, others claimed that district educators rarely or never respond to emails. A representative selection of communication-related comments from the family survey demonstrates just how divided family perceptions are on district and school communication:

> "Thank you for all your team does—we know you are doing your best! One area of improvement: Communication is often spotty and confusing. Sometimes showing up on Facebook—sometimes elsewhere. Am not sure if we're supposed to keep communicating and using Google and Seesaw? We get more notices and reminders in different ways about picture day than more important things like reopening surveys (one notice buried in a long email) and the last day of school, which was only announced on Facebook at first for a few weeks. Please communicate the same thing via multiple ways at the same time and not just to certain places like Facebook or to very vocal, well connected, and assertive families." —Family Member

> "I think it is appalling that some teachers/school counselors get away with not responding to emails. And the principal does not rectify the problem." —Family Member

> "School Newsletters and email communication in general: enough with School Messenger. Put what I need to know in the body of the email. There is zero need to force a download of the newsletter. There is nothing in these emails that EVER requires a download. If you want parents to read this stuff, make it as easy as possible to access." —Family Member

“Most teachers are wonderful and communicative. Some teachers do not reply to email questions and concerns and this should be strictly enforced by admin. A reply to a parent within 24 hours is perfectly reasonable.” —Family Member

“It’s difficult to find things on the website and much communication has links to pdfs, which make it difficult to access the information, since I have to download it and then locate the file and open it. It’s even more difficult on a mobile device. I know it’s more convenient to make a pdf for the printed information that gets sent home, but it would be so so so great to have actual text in an email so I can reference it quickly from my phone. It would also be helpful if I could send email to my kids’ school email so I can scan attachments for them. And a Google calendar for school events wouldn’t hurt.” —Family Member

“I think the school is doing the best it can with the funding it has. The specific teacher to parent communication could be much better. I would like to be more involved in my child’s learning but feel very disconnected from what they are doing. I wish the teachers gave a little guidance as to how I can supplement what they are teaching at school when my child is home.” —Family Member

“We have been so grateful for the regular, informative communications by the Superintendent’s Office over the past year. Similarly, the school communications (newsletters and communications from the school principals) have been generally positive, with a couple really good, thoughtful and caring content pieces! Thank you for conducting this Survey.” —Family Member

“So much [district and school] communication comes through social media, which we do not use in large part due to racism in the community. Need for much more aggressive and active anti-racism education. It is rampant on social media.” —Family Member

“As far as the communication answers, I have tried to find things on the website multiple times to no avail. Specifically one I have tried to find an answer to multiple times is a view of the current school year calendar. I don’t know if it’s because I’m trying to find it on my phone and that’s the problem, but even if that’s the case we should be able to view that on a mobile device. Also getting the school calendar out for the next year sooner would really help parents plan around the school schedule. Thank you for taking the time to allow us to have input into our schools.” —Family Member

“I’ve never gotten any emails/updates directly from any high school teachers or advisors. No communication from guidance counselor regarding common app, progress in needed classes and other things with my seniors. Luckily both my older

children have been pretty independent and trustworthy, otherwise I can see where kids would slip through the cracks." —Family Member

"I feel comfortable reaching out to our school's principal, however the communication from our school (principal) is very poor. Many times it's incomplete or missing information or just not helpful." —Family Member

"Communication has been an issue at RSU 22 long before covid. I had high hopes for the app as a useful tool in knowing what is happening, but it seems to only tell me when to check my email. Social media could be used more efficiently to get information out. I often have to go looking for scheduling information and often find myself circling all around the website before I find what I need. I think going back to the full time schedule in the lower grades was a bad choice and don't think it was really effectively relayed to parents that this would happen before it did…. But more than anything, communication, communication, communication. This is the number one issue at RSU 22. On a positive note, the teachers and staff have been very supportive and we appreciate their hard work and sacrifices in making this year go as smooth as it did. We know it has been a challenge for everyone. Thank you for all you do." —Family Member

"I have had a couple of instances where a teacher has not responded to my email. It would also be appreciated if there were comments on report cards and not just grades." —Family Member

"Although overall I agree that the schools are doing a great job I feel that Wagner could use a little improvement on their communication. I understand trying to put things in the kids hands for responsibility but they are still learning and still young and I often feel in the dark with this school. There have been occasions where I send an email to a teacher or teachers about vacation or other questions and I get absolutely no response. They need to do better with this." —Family Member

"At times thru the pandemic we have felt very alone. The process of hybrid learning and learning exclusively from home provided us with some great opportunities. At times those opportunities were hard to find/figure out. Communication was good but there was no consistency between teachers." —Family Member

5.3 **Surveys are not being coordinated at the district or school levels, findings from surveys are not routinely shared with surveyed populations, and staff, students, and parents do not know what actions, if any, result from surveys.**

Interview, survey, and focus-group respondents report being asked to complete a significant number of district and school surveys each year. The frequency of survey administration also

increased in 2020–2021 due to COVID-19-related issues, such as the need to solicit family feedback on school reopening plans or evaluate the social and emotional wellbeing of students. Respondents also report completing surveys with repetitive or redundant content.

Overall, survey administration practices across the district and its schools appear to be uncoordinated, inefficient, and potentially confusing or frustrating to some respondents.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

5.4 Consider hiring a district communications coordinator to manage, consolidate, and improve district communications.

Interviews and survey responses indicate that improved communication at the district and school levels could help to address, though certainly not resolve, some of the issues raised in this report, including the communications-related frustrations expressed by some family members, the circulation of misinformation in the RSU 22 community, the persistence of problematic community narratives, and misperceptions of and speculations about district policies. In addition, growing divisiveness and polarization in American society, politics, race relations, media, and other areas are likely to pose significant challenges to equity work in RSU 22 over the coming years, as discussed above.

While RSU 22 is obligated to be responsive to its families, the district's ability to be responsive is not unlimited. Above all, RSU 22 is a public institution tasked with the education of children, and the district must dedicate its limited funding, staffing, and resources to that project first and foremost. Furthermore, RSU 22 not only cannot resolve divisiveness and polarization in American society, but it cannot satisfy every expectation or demand made by families and community members. As discussed above, the stark levels of disagreement represented in the family survey alone describe an impossible set of conflicting expectations and demands that no school system could fully satisfy no matter how much funding, staffing, and resources it has.

The investigator also wants to underscore that RSU 22, at its current staffing levels, simply cannot satisfy or maintain the level of communication, responsiveness, and community engagement desired by RSU 22 staff, students, and families. Communicating clearly, proactively, and responsively with staff members, students, and families requires a large investment of time each day, and the small administrative staff in the central office, and in the district's schools, simply do not have the capacity, training, technical background, and time required to effectively manage, alongside their other numerous responsibilities, the substantial range of communication expectations and demands articulated by district staff, students, and families over the course of this assessment.

Evidence indicates that the daily communication demands being placed on administrators, faculty, and staff are already significant—and may in fact be bordering on unmanageable in certain areas—and that any increase in those demands is likely to compromise the quality of administrative leadership or educational effectiveness in the district, if it has not already.

For this reason, the investigator recommends that RSU 22 consider hiring, at a minimum, a district communications coordinator. Ideally, the communications coordinator would be a full-time employee with at least several years of relevant professional experience. RSU 22 does not need a "public relations" professional, someone with experience pitching stories to news outlets, but rather someone who can develop and implement a district-wide communications plan, write and edit communications content at a professional level, compose and send out email newsletters or text notifications, create and update website content, post to and manage social-media accounts, manage and update a district-wide event calendars, and oversee projects that require photography, videography, and graphic design.

Over time, a dedicated district communications coordinator could help RSU 22 leaders implement a comprehensive communications plan that could improve information transparency and responsiveness across the district, increase understanding of district policies and initiatives among families, and reduce some level of misinformation, misperception, and frustration in the community.

To cite one specific example raised in the family survey: some respondents expressed frustration about having to access district information by downloading a PDF. In school districts, informational documents are often created in word-processing programs and then exported to PDFs. This practice is typically used as a time-saving strategy because it allows districts or schools to create one document that can then be printed, emailed, or posted to a website or social-media account. In many cases, this practice has been effectively mandatory in schools because, as discussed above, schools do have the staffing or expertise that would be required to create and publish multiple versions of the same document for distribution across multiple platforms. For example, if creating a print-ready version of an informational document for distribution in print and digital formats, such as PDF, requires two hours of staff time, it might take six or eight hours of time to create that same document, then create and format an email-newsletter version of then document, and then create and format another version for publication on multiple district and school websites.

If RSU 22 had a dedicated and skilled communications coordinator with the requisite expertise and technical skills, the coordinator could address this problem, and satisfy this request from families, by developing and executing a plan to coordinate and systematize district-wide publications, by writing informational content that administrators are currently writing, and utilizing modern publishing applications and platforms that will allow the district and its schools to create one version of an informational document that can then be efficiently exported for distribution in variety of digital formats.

It should be noted that while few school districts in Maine have a full-time communications coordinator, nearly every district urgently needs one. The communication demands and expectations being placed on school systems have grown exponentially over the past two decades along with society's increasing reliance on an ever-growing array of digital, online, and mobile applications. In the 1990s, school districts did not have websites, social-media accounts, online learning platforms, email newsletters, or student-information systems, and administrators and teachers did not send and receive hundreds of emails each week. Yet this dramatic increase in communications-related demands and expectations has not been offset with a corresponding increase in dedicated communications funding, staffing, and training in public schools.

A full-time communications position is not currently funded in the RSU 22 staffing budget, and the district will need support from the community to create this position.

5.5 Establish standardized communication protocols and appropriate family expectations at the school and classroom levels over time.

Prioritizing equity in RSU 22 will require an investment of staff time over the coming years, and yet sufficient time—for new initiatives and new learning, for staff planning and collaboration, or for relationship-building and dialogue between staff and families—is increasingly difficult to find in public schools.

As discussed above, staff interviews and survey data suggest that a significant percentage of district employees are likely experiencing high levels of work-related stress, and multiple interviewees expressed concerns about the potential for "burnout." While increased levels of work-related stress were attributed, in part, to the changes in workloads, responsibilities, and professional practice caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, staff interviewees also described a general condition in which new responsibilities and expectations are being added to their professional role each year on top of existing responsibilities.

To reduce the amount of professional time spent on potentially unnecessary, redundant, inefficient, or unproductive activities, RSU 22 could establish, over time, clearer and more consistent communication procedures and expectations at the school level for staff members, students, and families.

As a first step, RSU 22 could survey faculty and staff to evaluate how work time is currently being allocated across the district and what specific professional activities and communication demands take up the most time. Based on this information and suggestions from district staff, RSU 22 administrators could begin to develop appropriate communication procedures and expectations. For example, an absence of standardized, agreed-upon email protocols in a district or school often produces counterproductive communication habits, such as copying several people on emails that only need to be exchanged between two people or relying on lengthy email chains to schedule a group meeting instead of using a more efficient scheduling strategy, such as an online scheduling

application. While classroom-level communication can be more difficult to standardize, teachers may be able to develop protocols and practices that allow them to create and send, for example, one informative email, blog post, or other online message to families each week instead of reacting to dozens of information requests throughout the week.

In addition to modifying procedures and practices, the district and its school should work to establish clear and reasonable expectations for communication among families. As the district and its schools improve communication standardization and quality over time, families will be more informed and more likely to know where and how to access necessary information, which should also reduce levels of confusion and frustration, which will then reduce overall district-wide communication demands, such as the quantity of email traffic being generated each week across the district.

5.7 **Develop a coherent and coordinated district-wide survey plan.**

As discussed above, survey administration across the district appears to be haphazard. Surveys are vital informational tools in school systems, but poor survey practices, including the overuse of surveys, can have a variety of negative consequences, such as lower response rates, less accurate results (because stakeholders stop taking them seriously), and increased levels of general aggravation, apathy, and disengagement (a general conditions sometimes call “survey fatigue”). A coherent and coordinated district-wide survey plan could help to address these issues.

Ideally, a coherent and coordinated district-wide survey plan would include, at a minimum, the following general elements:

- A dedicated, part-time “survey coordinator” responsible for coordinating, designing, and administering all district and school surveys. While the specific content for surveys can be recommended or created by different members, departments, or groups, the survey coordinator would ensure that surveys did not overlap or repeat questions, that stakeholder groups are not being over surveyed, and that survey results are centrally organized and accessible in a single location.
- A district-wide survey calendar that allows the district to appropriately prioritize, sequence, and manage surveys.
- A yearly survey-administration goal that does not exceed three or four surveys (or ideally two) per stakeholder group, per year.
- The elimination of as many repetitions, redundancies, and inefficiencies as possible across all district surveys.

- A commitment and plan to share (a) survey results with surveyed populations and relevant stakeholders following each administration and (b) information about the specific actions that were taken, or the decisions that were made, based on survey data.
- The involvement of staff, students, and families in the co-development of surveys, and in the analysis and presentation of survey findings, to the extent possible when appropriate.

One common shortcoming in district and school survey practices is a failure to communicate back to survey participants that their voices have been heard and acted upon. During interviews, district respondents not only expressed frustration with the quantity of surveys they had to complete, but also with the frequent absence of any follow-up or communication of results after a survey was completed. While some survey data cannot be publicly shared, such as confidential data protected by student-privacy laws, staff and student respondents indicated that most survey data is never shared with them, including data that might help them in their professional practice.

When community members—whether it's staff, students, or families—are asked to invest their time or share their perspectives, a best practice is to always let them know that their participation was sincerely appreciated, that their voices were heard, and—most importantly—that their suggestions have been or will be acted upon. A failure to follow up, on the other hand, can breed cynicism, distrust, or disengagement, particularly when surveys are used frequently in a district or school. In addition, greater transparency in survey practices demonstrates that district and school leaders have listened to, heard, and acted upon community feedback, which can help to instill greater confidence in leadership and generate stronger support for resulting proposals.

It must be noted, however, that at current staffing levels RSU 22 likely cannot implement all the recommendations outlined above, or implement them effectively, unless a new stipended position is created or a new staff member, such as a communications coordinator, is hired.

SECTION 6. SCHOOL FACILITIES, RESOURCING, AND BUSING

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

6.1 Many disparities and inequities in school facilities or resourcing are well-known to administrators, staff, and community members.

In large school systems, staff members who work in one part of the system are often unaware of disparities or inequities in other parts of the system, and district administrators may even be entirely unaware of school-level inequities and resourcing disparities among schools. This is not the case in RSU 22. During interviews, administrator, staff, and community respondents not only described several well-known disparities in school facilities and resourcing in detail, but they indicated that the disparities were the topic of ongoing consideration, discussion, or improvement.

While school-level staff members and families were less likely to be informed about other schools, district and school administrators not only appeared to be well-informed about disparities in facilities or resourcing across the district, but in many cases the administrators indicated that strategies intended to address or mitigate disparities were already in process or under discussion.

Overall, the RSU 22 administrative team appears to be well-informed about structural inequities in the district, committed to naming and openly discussing those inequities, and proactively engaged in a process intended to address some known inequities in the district.

6.2 Structural features of the school system pose significant barriers to educational equity.

As discussed above, many disparities in facilities or resourcing between RSU 22 schools are well-known and widely discussed in the district. However, a few structural features of the school system will be discussed here as well, given that they pose potentially significant barriers to educational equity:

- Reeds Brook Middle School is able to offer students opportunities that Samuel L. Wagner Middle School cannot. Several years ago, the community voted to maintain a middle school in Winterport, rather than invest in a single middle school in Hampden that served all middle-level students in the district. Community decisions to either consolidate or not consolidate schools are common in public education, and every decision presents both advantages and disadvantages. For example, consolidated schools are typically able to offer a larger variety of educational and extracurricular opportunities, but smaller community

schools often feature smaller class sizes, shorter bus rides for students, and other advantages. Similar compromises were made in RSU 22 when the decision was made to maintain two middle schools. While a full and comprehensive audit of inequities in facilities, resourcing, and student opportunity was beyond the scope of this assessment, a few disparities will be discussed in this section. Compared to students attending Reeds Brook Middle School, the students attending Samuel L. Wagner Middle School have less expansive athletic/outdoor facilities and fewer seasonal athletic opportunities. Due to the co-location of the middle school and high school facilities, students attending Reeds Brook have access to the high school's facilities and, by extension, the opportunities those facilities provide. And because Wagner is a smaller school in a different community and Maine county, its students participate in a different athletic league—a decision that is made by the Maine Principals' Association, which coordinates athletic leagues statewide.

- The architecture of Early C. McGraw School offers classroom environments that, in some cases, are less conducive to the educational process than the classroom environments in other district schools. For example, at McGraw School students and staff have to walk through classrooms to move around the building, while in other schools centralized hallways allow people to move around the building without disrupting in-process lessons. The school's "open-classroom" architecture and other features contribute to more "cramped" and "noisy" classroom experiences, according to some respondents, and portable buildings have been in use for multiple decades.

- Students attending Reeds Brook Middle School have access to afterschool busing opportunities that are not available to students attending Samuel L. Wagner Middle School. Due to differences in school-day schedules between Reeds Brook Middle School and Samuel L. Wagner Middle School, and due to the co-location of the Reeds Brook middle school and Hampden Academy facilities, students attending Reeds Brook have access to afterschool busing options that students attending Samuel L. Wagner do not. This disparity in opportunity results from structural limitations that are built into the busing contract and daily schedule—specifically, an existing bus route already stops at the Hampden Academy/Reeds Brook facility during the afterschool period at Reeds Brook—and overcoming those constraints would require a significant monetary investment in additional busing. In this case, the district is extending an available opportunity—an existing bus route—to middle school students at Reeds Brook, which is appropriate and equitable, but unfortunately that same opportunity is not available to Samuel L. Wagner due to current budgetary constraints.

6.3 **Some community members perceive structural inequities in RSU 22 to be intentional inequities, and some community members are uninformed about structural disparities in school resourcing.**

During interviews, respondents reported that some staff, families, and community members perceive structural inequities in RSU 22 to be intentional inequities. For example, the financial, operational, and circumstantial constraints (described above) that contribute to inequities in access to afterschool busing between Reeds Brook Middle School and Samuel L. Wagner Middle School are not widely known in the schools and sending towns; consequently, some members of the RSU 22 community perceive this inequity to be intentional, rather than budgetary or structural.

Most likely, this particular misperception is being driven, in part, by the persistence of the "Hampden schools and students get preferential treatment" narrative described in Section 2.4. In addition, some inequities in school systems are more "visible" than others, such as the disparities in athletic fields or busing, while other inequities are less visible, such as disparities in academic expectations or support between schools. For example, Samuel L. Wagner Middle School has smaller teacher-student ratios, and it receives federal Title I funding each year that allows the school to provide more student support, compared to Reeds Brook, in reading and math. Because these two disparities are not as visible, they are likely not as widely known or discussed in the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

6.4 Address misperceptions through improved communication.

As discussed in Section 5, improved communication strategies at the district and school levels will likely help to dispel some misperceptions or misunderstandings in the community—though certainly not all of them. In this case, the district could, when specific misperceptions are identified, publish brief "explainers" that provide background information related to district policies, procedures, and decisions. These publications should not "refute" misperceptions or misinformation, they should merely provide accurate information about the district and its schools. While improved communication and greater transparency will not, on their own, entirely eliminate misperceptions or misunderstandings in a community, these strategies can reduce overall levels of misinformation and help build greater trust in the community over time.

6.5 Initiate a community conversation about restructuring the middle-level experience in RSU 22.

In districts such as RSU 22 that have multiple middle schools feeding into a single high school, structural, educational, and experiential inequities between schools are not only common, but also unavoidable to some degree. When programmatic inequities between middle schools are identified, districts can in some cases reallocate funding, staffing, and other resources to address deficiencies or increase student support, but systemizing programmatic equity across schools and grades levels can be challenging and time-consuming, particularly when the schools involved have

different cultures or student needs—which appears to be case between the middle schools in RSU 22. In addition, structural disparities in school facilities and other areas may be insurmountable, as exemplified by disparities in the athletic facilities available to Reeds Brook and Samuel L. Wagner students.

Based on interviews with RSU 22 administrators and staff, a process is already underway to address some programmatic inequities between the two middle schools. For example, the two middle schools recently revised their student handbooks to establish a more consistent policy framework for both schools, more data is being collected and used in both schools to better understand student-achievement levels, the BARR program was instituted at Hampden Academy to address uneven academic readiness among incoming ninth-grade students, and both administrators and grade-level teams are engaging in more cross-school conversations and collaboration (one result of the restructuring that resulted in 2020–2021 due to COVID-19 was an increase in the weekly time available for staff collaboration across the district).

However, certain structural disparities between the two schools are likely insurmountable, as discussed, and programmatic inequity is likely to persist, to some degree, for years to come despite the best efforts of administrators, faculty, and staff.

To ensure greater equity and consistency in educational access, opportunity, and achievement between RSU 22's two middle schools, the community could consider restructuring the middle-level experience in the district. Specifically, all students in the district could attend Samuel L. Wagner middle school for grades 5–6 and Reeds Brook Middle School for grades 7–8. This restructuring would ensure that all middle-level students in the district receive a comparable educational experience, and it would give all students in grades 7–8 access to the facility and programming advantages that are available to students attending Reeds Brook.

A restructuring of middle-level experience in RSU 22 represents a significant departure from the district's current structure and programming, and a decision of this magnitude requires both a community conversation and community support. Yet given the potential advantages such a restructuring could provide to students, it's a conversation that should at least be considered and initiated in the district.

6.6 Restart the Educational Foundation and raise funding for equity investments.

The RSU 22 Educational Foundation is a volunteer-led charitable foundation dedicated to raising funding for educational and extracurricular programming in district schools. Interviewees report that the local Educational Foundation has been dormant in recent years, though conversations are underway to reconstitute and restart the charity.

As discussed in other sections of this report, funding, staffing, and time are always in short supply in public-school systems, and RSU 22 is no exception. Because local educational foundations are

typically managed by community volunteers, they can raise supplemental funding for schools without unduly adding to district responsibilities. Educational foundations can also bring together people from different parts of a community to participate in meaningful projects that directly benefit students or staff, which could help strengthen relationships between families and community members from different towns in the district. Finally, a portion of the funding raised by the RSU 22 Educational Foundation in future years could be directly invested in equity initiatives, whether it's scholarships for students in need, stipends for teachers leading equity work, or funding for enrichment programs that would otherwise be insufficiently resourced.

6.7 Establish a private-grants program—if and when district staffing levels are sufficient.

RSU 22 currently receives grant funding from state and federal programs, such as Title I, but it has not received many private grants in recent years. Private educational foundations in Maine, New England, and nationally are increasingly interested in funding equity work in schools, and RSU 22 could consider establishing a grants program that pursues private funding to supplement the equity investments that will be made by the district.

With that said, grants programs can be labor intensive, particularly if a district is aggressively pursuing funding or managing several active grants. Researching grant opportunities, building relationships with foundations, writing successful proposals, monitoring program progress and metrics, and managing grant-related finances and reporting responsibilities requires dedicated positions and staff members with specialized skills and expertise.

In short, a grants program could create many opportunities for advancing equity work in the district, but establishing such a program is only advisable if and when the district possesses the requisite level of staff capacity and expertise.

To cite one example, Hampden Academy has applied for and been awarded small private grants to fund the buildout of a makerspace for students, a process that has largely been led by a faculty member. As of March of this year, approximately $22,000 had been raised to purchase essential equipment, such as 3D printers and laser engravers, that typically cost thousands of dollars. Makerspaces not only allow schools to enhance their technology and computer-science programs, but they can provide applied-learning opportunities that can engage students who have a wide range of interests and career ambitions. In addition, due to enrollment limits at United Technologies Center (UTC), the regional career-and-technical education center that serves RSU 22, only juniors and seniors enrolled in Hamden Academy are eligible to take courses at UTC. The creation and buildout of a makerspace in the high school will create applied technical-education opportunities for students in ninth and tenth grades. Funding raised through private grants could be used to create other opportunities, similar to the Hampden Academy makerspace, that target limitations or gaps in available programming for students.

SECTION 7. CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT

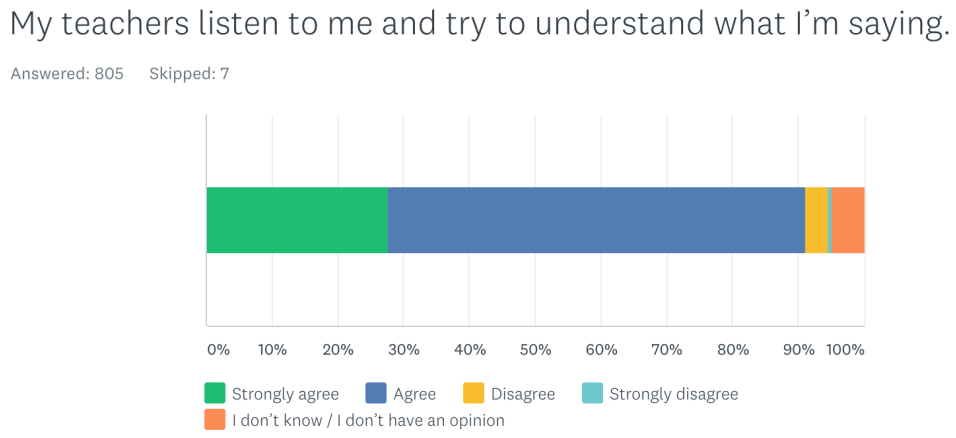
A comprehensive audit of curriculum, instruction, and academic support in RSU 22 schools was beyond the scope of this assessment—a school-by-school, subject-by-subject, or class-by-class audit would, on its own, require many months of investigation and analysis. Given the limited amount of data that was collected on the current state of curriculum and instruction in the district, this report will only address a few district-wide findings.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

7.1 The majority of students surveyed in grades 6–12 report having positive, respectful, and supportive academic relationships with teachers, but they are significantly less likely to share social or emotional problems with teachers.

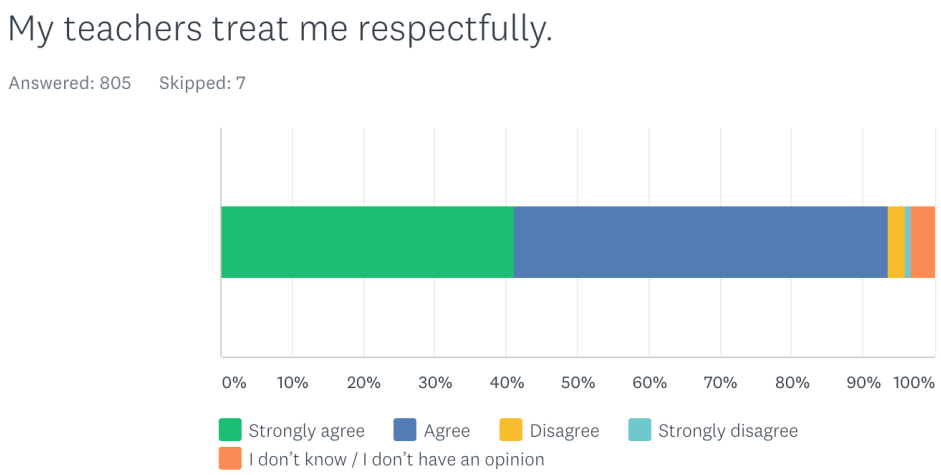
When asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement, "My teachers listen to me and try to understand what I'm saying," 28% of student respondents selected "strongly agree," 63% selected "agree," and 4% selected either "disagree" or "strongly disagree." (Figure 7.1A)

Figure 7.1A



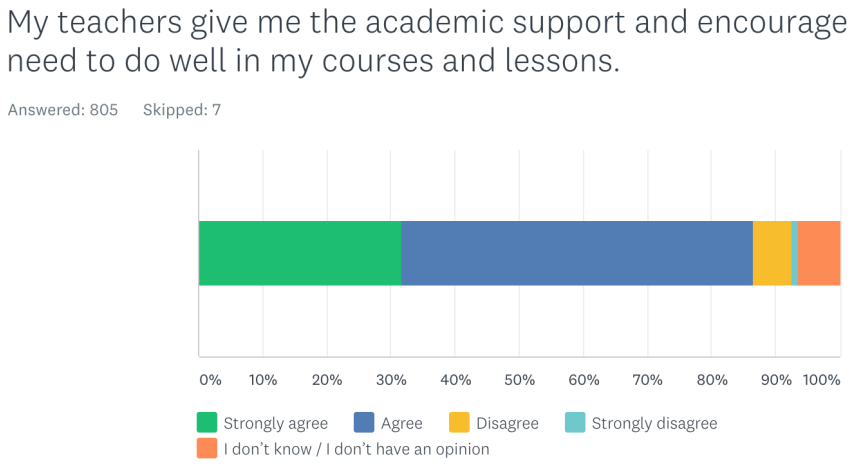
When asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement, "My teachers treat me respectfully," 41% of student respondents selected "strongly agree," 53% selected "agree," and 4% selected either "disagree" or "strongly disagree." (Figure 7.1B)

Figure 7.1B



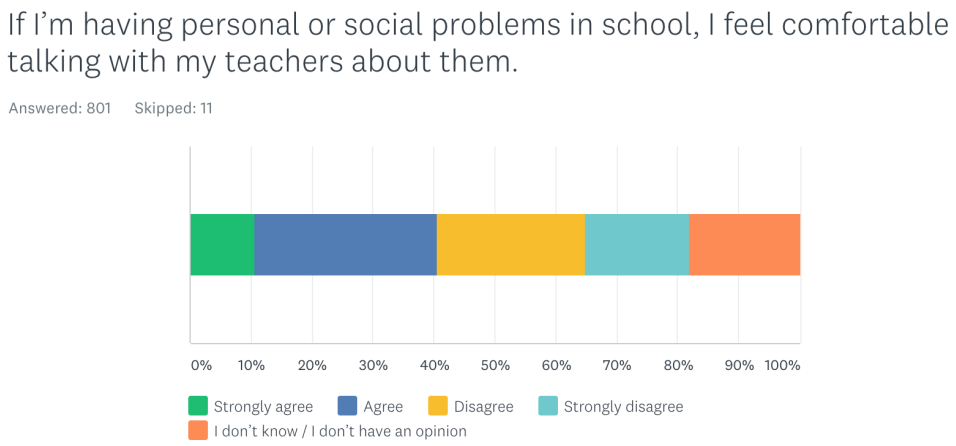
When asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement, "My teachers give me the academic support and encouragement I need to do well in my courses and lessons," 32% of student respondents selected "strongly agree," 55% selected "agree," and 7% selected either "disagree" or "strongly disagree." (Figure 7.1C)

Figure 7.1C



However, when asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement, "If I'm having personal or social problems in school, I feel comfortable talking with my teachers about them," only 11% of student respondents selected "strongly agree," 30% selected "agree," and 41% selected either "disagree" or "strongly disagree"—a significant disparity from the previous response patterns. (Figure 7.1D)

Figure 7.1D



As the survey responses above indicate, a majority of the RSU 22 students surveyed in grades 6–12 report having positive, respectful, and supportive academic relationships with teachers, but they are significantly less likely to share social or emotional problems with their teachers. Response patterns did not vary significantly when disaggregated by school, grade level, or other respondent characteristics, though students who indicated they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or questioning, as discussed in Section 3.2, were more likely to indicate (by 21 percentage points) that they are not comfortable sharing social or emotional problems with their teachers.

While survey findings indicate that students are significantly less likely to discuss social and emotional problems with their teachers than they are likely to discuss academic needs or problems, this disparity does not suggest patterns of neglect or negligence among teachers. Rather, it suggests that teachers are far more likely to know when a student is struggling academically than they are likely to know when those same students are struggling socially or emotionally.

7.2 Efforts are underway in district schools, content areas, and grade levels to modernize curriculum and instruction, but progress is uneven across the district.

Interviews with RSU 22 administrators, faculty, and staff indicate that some content-area departments and grade-level teams in district schools are in the process of reviewing, reevaluating, and modernizing curriculum and instruction, including content and teaching strategies related to (a) racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, and (b) bias, prejudice, and discrimination. Evidence indicates that these processes are still in the early stages, and that both the scope and progress of these projects vary significantly by school, department, and grade level.

Given that the district has not yet undertaken a systems-wide review, reevaluation, and modernization of curriculum and instruction in these areas, students enrolled in different district schools are likely being exposed to dissimilar academic content, particularly content related to topics that have been historically omitted, minimized, or misrepresented in public schools, such as

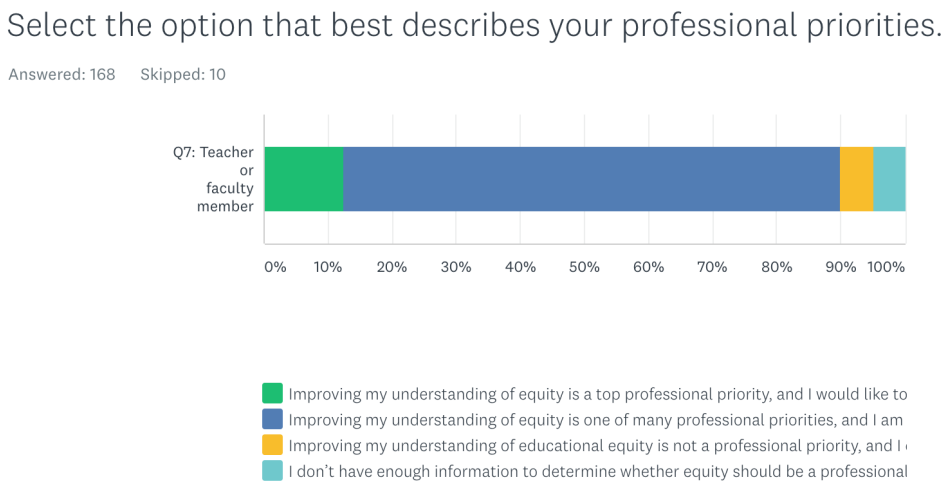
accurate accounts of history from the perspective of indigenous Americans, a more inclusive approach to discussing gender identity in health education, or the socioeconomic impact of discrimination in society, for example.

Many factors likely contribute to this uneven progress. In past years, for example, former district and school leaders did not prioritize the modernization of curriculum and instruction, and numerous other district initiatives, such as a transition to proficiency-based education, reportedly absorbed much of the time and attention of the district's faculty and small administrative staff.

As discussed in Section 1.4, potentially significant levels of faculty discomfort and anxiety about teaching topics such as race or discrimination likely contributed to patterns of faculty avoidance. In addition, several staff interview respondents report that some district faculty members do not believe they need to change or modernize their teaching practice. Staff survey responses were generally consistent with these findings:

When asked to "select the option that best describes your professional priorities," 13% of faculty members who completed the staff survey indicated that equity is a top professional priority, 77% indicated that equity is one of many professional priorities, 5% indicated that equity is not a professional priority, and 5% indicated that they did not have enough information to determine whether equity should be a professional priority for them. (Figure 7.2A)

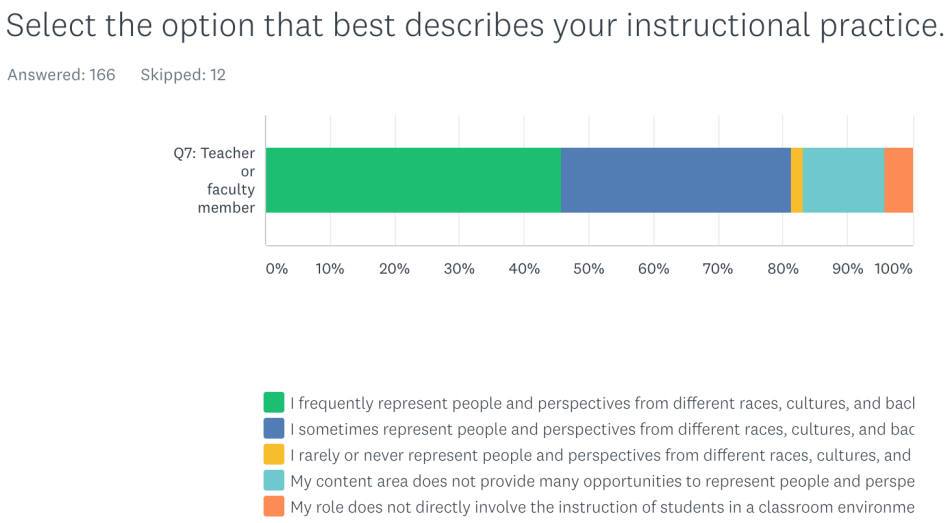
Figure 7.2A



When asked to "select the option that best describes your instructional practice," 46% of faculty members who completed the staff survey indicated that they frequently represent people and perspectives from different races, cultures, and backgrounds in their teaching, 36% indicated they sometimes represent diverse people and perspectives, 2% indicated they rarely represent diverse

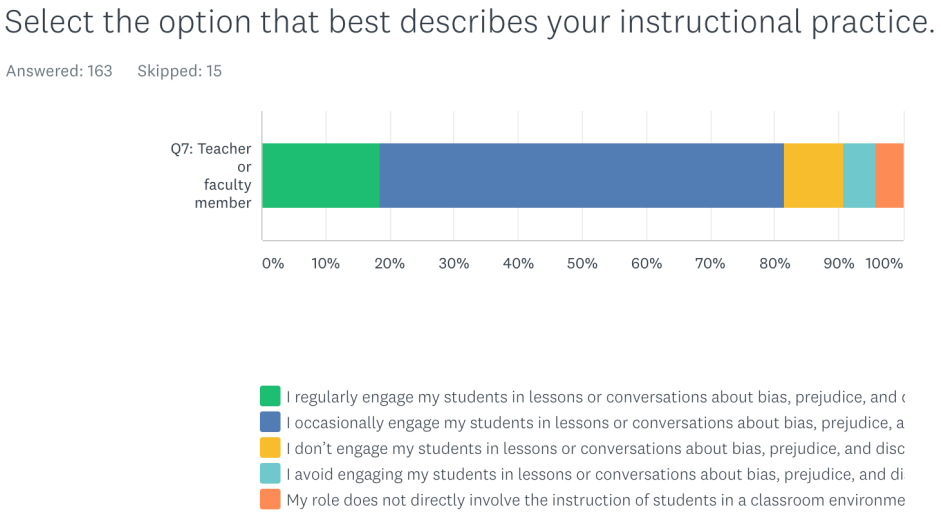
people and perspectives, and 13% indicated that their content area does not provide many opportunities to teach about diverse people and perspectives. (Figure 7.2B)

Figure 7.2B



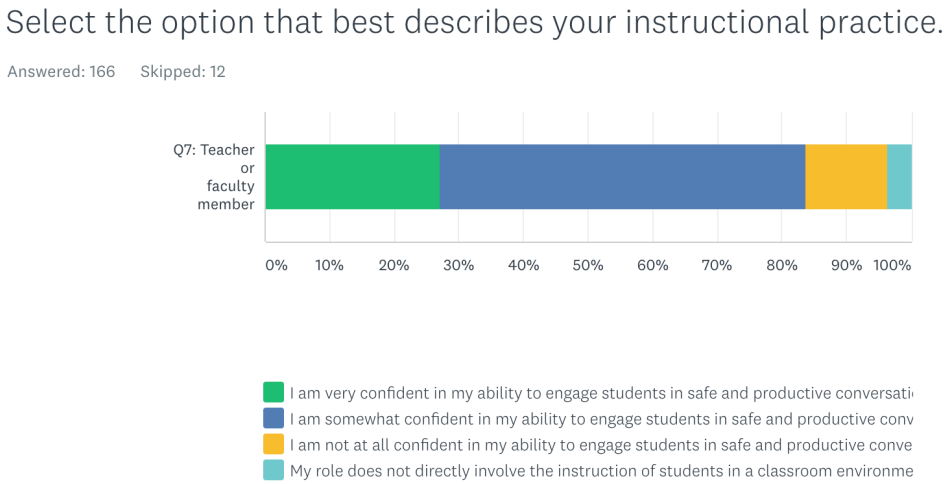
When asked to “select the option that best describes your instructional practice,” 18% of faculty members who completed the staff survey indicated that they regularly engage students in lessons and conversations about bias, prejudice, and discrimination and that it’s a top instructional interest and priority for them, 63% indicated they sometimes engage students in lessons and conversations about bias, prejudice, and discrimination but that it’s not a primary instructional interest and priority for them, 9% indicated they don’t engage students in lessons and conversations about bias, prejudice, and discrimination and that it’s not an instructional interest and priority for them, and 5% indicated that they avoid engaging students in lessons and conversations about bias, prejudice, and discrimination because it’s intimidating and they are concerned they may say the wrong thing. (Figure 7.2C)

Figure 7.2C



When asked to "select the option that best describes your instructional practice," 27% of faculty members who completed the staff survey indicated that they are very confident in their ability to engage students in safe and productive conversations about race, class, gender, and other sensitive topics, 57% indicated that they are somewhat confident in their ability to engage students in safe and productive conversations, and 13% indicated that they not at all confident in their ability to engage students in safe and productive conversations. (Figure 7.2D)

Figure 7.2D



7.3 Academic expectations are inconsistent between the two RSU 22 middle schools, and the two schools have different instructional cultures.

In interviews, RSU 22 administrator, staff, and family respondents expressed concern, and sometimes divided viewpoints, about divergent academic expectations between the Reeds Brook Middle School and Samuel L. Wagner Middle School. In general, staff members believe that academic expectations are higher in Reeds Brook than in Samuel L. Wagner, and that lower academic expectations in the Winterport middle school (and possibly in the elementary school as well) are contributing to lower academic readiness levels among some students, which then contributes to greater academic difficulties for those students as they transition into Hampden Academy.

A review of academic-readiness data provided by the district, such as student scores on the NWEA test administered in 8th grade, indicates that students from Samuel L. Wagner scored, over the past few years, approximately 20 percentage points lower, on average, on the math and reading portions of the NWEA test compared to students from Reeds Brook. Anecdotally, some Hampden Academy faculty interviewees also report noticeable differences in content knowledge and academic preparation between students who were educated in Reeds Brook and students who were educated in Samuel L. Wagner.

During interviews, respondents also described a general perception, held by some staff members in the district, about the instructional cultures in Reeds Brook and Samuel L. Wagner. While this narrative is a generalization, and it does not tell the full story of the instructional cultures in either of the two middle schools, the narrative is worth mentioning because it has a direct bearing on equity considerations regardless of the degree to which the perception is "accurate": interviewees report that the instructional culture at Reeds Brook emphasizes high academic expectations for students, possibly at the expense of relationship-building and social-emotional support in some areas, while Samuel L. Wagner's instructional culture emphasizes social-emotional support and relationship-building with students, possibly at the expense of lowering academic expectations in some areas.

As discussed above, this perception of the instructional cultures in the two middle schools is a generalization, and generalizations—even when they are generally accurate on a statistical or population level—are simplifications that may or may not accurately describe specific systems features or individual teaching practices in either of the two schools. For example, many teachers in Reeds Brook may emphasize relationship-building with students in their day-to-day practice, and many teachers in Samuel L. Wagner may hold students to high academic expectations.

7.4 Some areas of student support may be deficient in the district.

Over the course of the assessment, RSU 22 administrators and staff described a generally strong academic-support culture in the district, including a comparatively robust support staff and system of interventions for students with specialized needs. District data, documents, and surveys appeared to confirm these findings.

Yet in interviews with staff and families, respondents reported that two areas of student support may be deficient in the district: (a) identifying and appropriately responding to mental-health concerns among students, and (b) identifying and supporting students with dyslexia.

In addition, some students in the district have experienced harmful incidents of bias, prejudice, bullying, and harassment, including students of color, Jewish students, and students who identify as LGBTQ+, as discussed in Section 3. Social, emotional, and mental-health support for these students is also likely deficient in many areas across the district.

As the RSU 22 continues to invest in and evolve its student-support systems over the coming years, the district should investigate and evaluate these areas of student support and consider appropriate modifications and improvements.

7.5 Some community viewpoints on the current state and future direction of the RSU 22 curriculum are both divergent and incompatible.

As discussed in Section 2.1, multiple interviewees described tensions and disagreements related to the teaching of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, and related issues such as racism or discrimination, in RSU 22. For this reason, all three surveys administered during the equity audit—to staff, students, and families—asked a series of questions related to the teaching of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in schools. In addition, many written comments submitted though the three surveys addressed the general topic.

Survey responses indicate that high levels of both agreement and disagreement exist in the district on the topic of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in curriculum and instruction. In brief, majorities agree that teaching about racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, and respect for human diversity, are important, but higher levels of disagreement exist about the current state and future direction of diversity-related education in the district.

Given the growing divisiveness in American society on the topic, this finding is unsurprising, yet the existence of divergent and incompatible viewpoints on the topic will likely pose significant complications to RSU 22 equity work over the coming years. Specifically, it is clear that (a) community members hold divergent views on curriculum, (b) that many of these views are incompatible and potentially irreconcilable, and (c) staff, students, and families are likely to become increasingly vocal and demanding when it comes to curricular decisions in the district.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

7.6 Establish clear, principles-based curriculum guidelines related to racially, ethnically,

and culturally diverse content and instruction, but remain open and responsive to ongoing community dialogue and concerns.

RSU 22 not only cannot resolve growing political, ideological, and cultural divisiveness in American society, it should not attempt to. As discussed above, evidence suggests that district staffing and capacity is already stretched thin, and any additional increase in staff obligations is likely to have a detrimental impact on educational quality and student support in the district.

Going forward, RSU 22 should work to develop and adopt a principles-based framework for curricular decision-making in the district. The framework should not only be based on research and best practices in the education field, but it should rely on the informed guidance of experienced professionals who specialize in curriculum development. In addition, this principles-based curriculum framework should be based on (a) well-established facts and accurate source material, not changeable cultural beliefs or ideology, and (b) the guidance of credible educational professionals, not political figures, television pundits, or social-media posts.

Most importantly, the district should not base curricular decisions on pressure from outside advocacy groups, particularly any individuals or groups (a) who are motivated by prejudice or prejudicial political ideologies, (b) whose advocacy is based on either misinformation or disinformation circulating in American media, or (c) who utilize misleadingly selective, biased, and inaccurate information as a basis for their advocacy or demands. To ensure the quality, efficacy, and continuity of the educational experience in RSU 22, district leaders and officials cannot, and should not, base curricular decisions on volatile, prejudicial, and ever-shifting political and cultural conflicts in American society.

While it is clear that the teaching of nearly any topic that touches on racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity has become increasingly controversial in recent years, it is possible to adopt principled approaches to the teaching of racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity that are not unduly or inappropriately influenced by volatile political and cultural conflicts.

For example, the United States has always been, both before and after its inception as a nation, a pluralistic, multicultural, and racially and ethnically diverse society. African Americans, along with numerous other racial, ethnic, cultural, and immigrant groups, have lived in the territory that is now Maine for hundreds of years, and culturally diverse groups of indigenous people have inhabited this same land for thousands of years. These African American and Indigenous Americans are Americans, just as Asian Americans are Americans, Latino Americans are Americans, Franco-Americans are Americans, Jewish Americans are Americans, Muslim Americans are Americans, and many, many other American racial, ethnic, and cultural groups are American. The inclusion and representation of diverse groups of Americans in the teaching of American history is not only ethically and pedagogically appropriate, it is an historically accurate reflection of the many racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse human populations that have lived on the land that is now the United States for thousands of years. In fact, it is the past *exclusion* of these many diverse

voices, perspectives, and experiences from the teaching of American history that is morally and pedagogically suspect and indefensible, not their inclusion.

While the above paragraph does not address how educators *should* teach American history, it does illustrate that a principled approach to making curricular decisions is possible. A similar principled approach to making decisions about instructional practice can also be utilized across the district. For example, history educators should rely on texts and other materials produced by credible historians whose work has been repeatedly validated over the course of years or decades, and they should rely on original source material, not biased, inaccurate, and misrepresentative documents that selectively cherrypick historical information in an attempt to validate preconceived ideological narratives.

In particular, the teaching of potentially contentious topics—whether it's the history of slavery and racial violence in the United States, the colonization of indigeous peoples in the Americas, the Jewish Holocaust perpetrated during World War II, the scientific theory of evolution, the well-established scientific evidence demonstrating concerning trends in global warming and related climatological phenomena, or the biology of human gender, sexuality, and reproduction—should not be subject to modification, restriction, or censorship based solely on complaints or pressure by ideologically motivated individuals or interest groups. In these cases, administrators and educators must do their best to make principled, ethical decisions about curriculum and instruction that are informed by established facts, validated research, and credible professional guidance.

With that said, district administrators and educators should also remain open to respectful dialogue with families and community members—provided those same family and community members demonstrate similar respect for district administrators and educators, including respect for their experience and expertise as trained, certified, and knowledgeable professionals. As discussed above, there is a worrisome trend toward increasingly uncivil and disrespectful behavior in school communities across the United States, and any unwarranted form of incivility and disrespectful behavior directed at RSU 22 staff should be not be tolerated in any form by district administrators, school board members, local elected officials, or local law enforcement. If community members, regardless of who they are, cannot behave civilly or respectfully, they should not be listened to—they should be asked to leave.

When community members show up with respect, however, district administrators and educators should engage in respectful dialogue with them, even if the community members are critical of district policies and practices. Equitable school systems welcome respectful constructive criticism, while the minimization, dismissal, and rejection of criticism is more likely to be the hallmark of inequitable schools systems.

During interviews, some staff and family members expressed concern or skepticism about some aspects of the district's equity work, including the teaching of certain topics related to race, culture, and identity, and certain school policies, particularly policies related to LGBTQ+ accommodations.

During these interviews, community members expressed a range of viewpoints, but a few themes emerged. For example, one of the most consistent concerns expressed during these conversations was developmental appropriateness—specifically, the advisability of teaching certain topics, in certain ways, to children in middle school and elementary school.

For example, one family described the teaching of a text on the "death of Santa Claus" in a class with children who still believed in Santa Clause, and some family members brought up concerns about the teaching of race, particularly questions about how and at what grade level it's appropriate to teach young children about the "dark" episodes of racial and ethnic subjugation, exploitation, and violence in American history. If expressed in a respectful manner, these seem like reasonable concerns for a family member to raise, and RSU 22 administrators, educators, and staff should be open to a dialogue with families and, when advisable, making appropriate curricular adjustments based on developmental considerations.

At the same time, RSU 22 must be ready to take strong principled stands that are in the best interests of students, regardless of the criticism it may invite. For example, evidence collected during the assessment indicates concerning levels of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia are present in the school system and community; that RSU 22 has a sizeable and diverse population of students who identify as LBGTQ+; that many of these students have experienced harmful incidents of bullying and harassment in school; and that some of these students may be suffering from deeply concerning mental-health issues as consequence—including one incident in which a student wrote about physically harming themselves in a school bathroom during a panic attack.

The incidence of mental-health issues, self-harm, and suicide among students who identify as LBGTQ+ is alarmingly high. RSU 22 must do everything it can to create a safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environment for these children, an environment that not only "accepts" their identity, but that creates the systems-wide conditions necessary to ensure they are embraced, supported, celebrated, and cared for. Creating those conditions requires education—the education of both staff and students—and consequently a robust curriculum and professional-development program that addresses gender identity and sexual orientation must be part of any district program intended to ensure that LGBTQ+ students are safe in school; that their legal and civil rights are protected; that all staff are conducting themselves in accordance with applicable laws, district policy, and ethical professional practice; and that they are given the same opportunity to experience an enriching education, and to live their adolescence lives with the same dignity, as any other student in RSU 22.

7.7 **Appoint teachers to coordinate grade-level and content-area curricular audits, and modernize curricula with the active participation of grade-level and content-area faculty teams.**

Interviews with RSU 22 administrators, faculty, and staff indicate that some content-area departments and grade-level teams in district schools are in the process of reviewing, reevaluating, and modernizing curriculum and instruction, as discussed in Section 7.2. Evidence indicates that these processes are still in the early stages, and that both the scope and progress of these projects vary significantly by school, department, and grade level.

The investigator recommends a continuation of this same process, but with (a) a more systematic approach that ensures all relevant content areas and grade levels are comprehensively evaluated over time, and (b) an increase in the number of faculty members leading the process in content-area departments and grade-level teams. When needed or recommended, the district can contract with curriculum specialists to provide guidance and training to the educators leading these projects.

In addition, RSU 22 should move toward a more integrated approach to the teaching of diversity and related topics. For example, this year the district requested that educators in district schools address Black History Month in their classes. While many faculty supported this general decision, some faculty respondents felt that the last-minute request did not give them enough time to adequately prepare content, while others addressed the shortcomings of a "history month" approach to teaching about diversity and related topics. In one case, a district school that had been posting about different history months on social media failed to post about Jewish American History Month this past May, an oversight that was noted and criticized by members of RSU 22's Jewish community. This oversight, while unintentional, illustrates how siloed approaches to diversity-related education commonly lead to oversights and omissions. A more effective and sustainable approach is to (a) embed diversity-related content in subject areas, lessons, and class discussions as a standard and integrated practice, where appropriate; (b) teach students about diversity-related content in authentic, meaningful, and ongoing ways, not as a reaction to history months, holidays, or other cultural events; and (c) develop faculty-wide knowledge and skill in the teaching of diversity-related content over time so that they can integrate these topics into their practice (rather than avoiding them) in ways that are holistic (thematically consistent with other material), thoughtful (well planned and well structured), and adept (skillful and knowledge when it comes addressing difficult topics in ways that are professional self-aware, pedagogically sound, and culturally sensitive).

SECTION 8. ATHLETIC AND EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMS

NOTE: A comprehensive audit of athletics and extracurricular programming in RSU 22 was beyond the scope of this assessment, and attempts to schedule interviews with some staff members involved in RSU 22 athletic programs were unsuccessful. Given the limited amount of data that was collected on the state of athletics and extracurricular programming in the district, this section will only address a few findings.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

8.1 Based on available data, patterns of participation in high school athletics suggest potential inequities.

As discussed in Section 6.2, structural features of the RSU 22 school system pose barriers to equity, including barriers to student participation in athletic opportunities and afterschool experiences: (a) compared to students attending Reeds Brook Middle School, the students attending Samuel L. Wagner Middle School have less expansive athletic/outdoor facilities and fewer seasonal athletic opportunities, and (b) due to differences in school-day schedules, and the co-location of middle school and high school facilities in Hampden, students attending Reeds Brook have access to afterschool busing options that students attending Samuel L. Wagner do not.

Given these and other disparities between the two RSU 22 middle schools and the experiences they can provide to students, the investigator requested data on student participation in high school athletics programming from Hampden Academy. Specifically, the investigator requested athletic-participation data that was disaggregated by the following categories: (a) student athletes who reside outside of RSU 22's four primary sending towns, (b) student athletes whose town of residency is Frankfort or Winterport, and (c) student athletes whose town of residency is Hampden or Newburgh. While the goal was to evaluate athletic-participation rates based on middle school enrollment (specifically, whether students had attended Reeds Brook, Samuel L. Wagner, or a middle school outside of the district), Hampden Academy was unable to produce athletic-participation data disaggregated by sending middle school because the information is not tracked in the system used by the high school.

For this reason, the data on student participation in high school athletics was disaggregated by town of residency at time of student enrollment. It must be noted, however, that this approach is an imperfect analytical strategy, given that some students who live in Winterport, for example, attend

Reeds Brook (not Samuel L. Wagner), and some out-of-district tuition students or students with superintendent's agreements attended one of the two RSU 22 middle schools prior to enrolling in Hamden Academy.

While imperfect, this analytical strategy was pursued to evaluate whether patterns of student participation in Hampden Academy athletic programming indicated any disproportionalities in high school athletic participation that might be based on disparities in access to athletic facilities and/or athletic opportunities between Reeds Brook and Samuel L. Wagner. Specifically, the investigator was looking to see if Hampden Academy students who had attended Samuel L. Wagner were "under-participating" in high school athletics programming relative to their peers who had attended Reeds Brook.

> NOTE: The 2020–2021 school year was not included in the analysis due to disruptions in athletic programming related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What the data show is that student athletes from Frankfort or Winterport are under-participating in athletic programming compared to students who live in Hampden and Newburgh (see Figure 8.1A below).

For example, in the Winter 2018–2019 School Year, 34% of students from Hampden/Newburgh participated in athletic programming, but only 22% of students from Frankfort/Winterport participated in athletic programming. While the disparity is not large, and participation rates vary from season to season and year to year, some level of disparity was fairly consistent over the two years of data provided.

Furthermore, student athletes from Hampden/Newburgh participated at a higher rate than student athletes from Frankfort and Winterport in all six athletic seasons analyzed. In the season with the smallest difference (Fall 2018–2019), student athletes from Hampden/Newburgh participated at a 15% higher rate, and during the season with the largest difference (Winter 2019–2020) student athletes from Hampden/Newburgh participated at a 76% higher rate. (Figure 8.1A)

Figure 8.1A

Fall 2018–2019 School Year		**Percentage of HA Student Athletes**	**Percentage of Student Subgroup Participating in HA Athletics**
Total Number of Participants	285		
Tuition/Superintendent's Agreement	11	4%	19%
Frankfort/Winterport	84	29%	34%

Hampden/Newburgh	190	67%	39%
Winter 2018–2019 School Year		**Percentage of HA Student Athletes**	**Percentage of Student Subgroup Participating in HA Athletics**
Total Number of Participants	244		
Tuition/Superintendent's Agreement	20	8%	34%
Frankfort/Winterport	55	23%	22%
Hampden/Newburgh	168	69%	34%
Spring 2018–2019 School Year		**Percentage of HA Student Athletes**	**Percentage of Student Subgroup Participating in HA Athletics**
Total Number of Participants	152		
Tuition/Superintendent's Agreement	8	5%	14%
Frankfort/Winterport	33	22%	13%
Hampden/Newburgh	111	73%	23%
Fall 2019–2020 School Year		**Percentage of HA Student Athletes**	**Percentage of Student Subgroup Participating in HA Athletics**
Total Number of Participants	300		
Tuition/Superintendent's Agreement	19	6%	34%
Frankfort/Winterport	80	27%	33%

Hampden/Newburgh	201	67%	40%
Winter 2019–2020 School Year		**Percentage of HA Student Athletes**	**Percentage of Student Subgroup Participating in HA Athletics**
Total Number of Participants	252		
Tuition/Superintendent's Agreement	13	5%	23%
Frankfort/Winterport	50	20%	21%
Hampden/Newburgh	189	75%	37%
Spring 2019–2020 School Year		**Percentage of HA Student Athletes**	**Percentage of Student Subgroup Participating in HA Athletics**
Total Number of Participants	207		
Tuition/Superintendent's Agreement	4	2%	7%
Frankfort/Winterport	51	25%	21%
Hampden/Newburgh	152	73%	30%

8.2 Civil rights teams and other student groups present opportunities to expand, diversify, and enhance student voice and leadership in the district, including projects directly related to educational equity.

Interviews with RSU 22 staff indicate that the district's schools provide a wide range of extracurricular and cocurricular opportunities to students. Evidence collected during the assessment indicates that while extracurricular offerings vary somewhat by school, and may vary more at certain times than others, each school provides access to a diverse selection of extracurricular opportunities, even if the schools do not always provide access to the same opportunities. For example, some schools may have a student club or group that other schools do

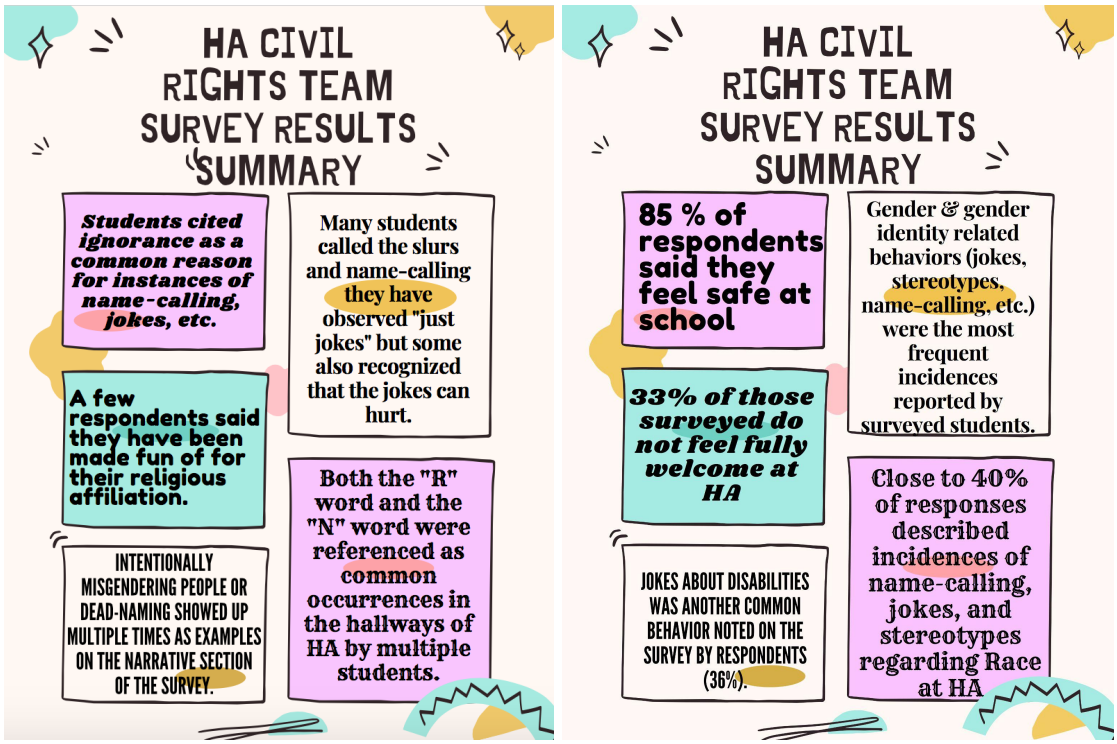
not, and advisors may or may not be available to organize and supervise a particular extracurricular program in a particular district school during a given year.

While extracurricular access and opportunity are essential equity considerations, so are the experiences that students have while engaged in those activities. For example, some extracurricular programs are more staff-directed and others are more student-directed, and some extracurricular activities happen entirely within the school walls, while others engage students in projects and volunteerism that enable those students to contribute in meaningful ways to their community.

Discussions with RSU 22 staff and students indicate that many of the extracurricular programs offered in the district—while valuable, enriching, and educational—may provide only limited opportunities for students to engage in more authentic forms of youth leadership. One notable exception are the Civil Rights Teams in the high school, middle schools, and some elementary schools. The Civil Rights Teams present an invaluable opportunity to expand, diversify, and enhance student voice and leadership in the district, including projects directly related to educational equity.

This past year, for example, the Hampden Academy Civil Rights Team developed and administered a student survey, and then shared the findings with their peers. (Figure 8.2A)

Figure 8.2A



The student-led survey found that while 85% of the students who responded to the survey said that they felt safe in school, the results also indicated that the use of prejudicial, derogatory, and hateful language was common in the high school and on social-media platforms used by students, including inappropriate jokes about student disabilities and the widespread use of the R word in the school (other forms of prejudicial, derogatory, and hateful language are discussed in greater detail in Section 3).

To help address these behaviors, the Hampden Academy Civil Rights Team created an in-school messaging campaign, called “Broncos Don’t Say,” that is designed to educate fellow students about the harmful effects of prejudicial, derogatory, and hateful language. (Figure 8.2B, Figure 8.2C)

Figure 8.2B

Figure 8.2B

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

8.3 Begin tracking student participation in extracurricular programs and analyze disaggregated student-participation data annually.

Hampden Academy is currently using the online platform FamilyID to track student participation in athletic programs. The analysis of student participation rates in high school athletics, described in Section 8.1, was only possible because some forms of student data were being tracked using FamilyID. Currently, student participation rates in Hampden Academy clubs, co-curricular teams, and other extracurricular programs are not logged in FamilyID or otherwise centrally tracked and archived by the school. It is also likely that other RSU 22 schools are not centrally tracking student participation in extracurricular programing. Consequently, it is not possible to conduct a similar analysis of student-participation rates in extracurricular programs unless the applicable student-participation data is collected from each individual staff advisor and then time-consumingly compiled, disaggregated, and analyzed.

As the analysis in Section 8.1 indicates, it is possible that students residing in some RSU 22 communities may be underrepresented in athletic programming compared to their peers residing in other communities. While the analysis does not indicate the specific cause of the disparity, it does recommend further investigation into athletic access and opportunity to determine whether some students may not be pursuing athletics due to structural or programmatic features of the school system.

In the future, the investigator recommends that RSU 22 begin collecting, as a standard district-wide procedure, data on student participation in extracurricular programming using FamilyID or a similar system. To ensure that all students in RSU 22 not only have equitable access to extracurricular activities, but that they are also equitably participating in available extracurricular opportunities, district and school administrators should monitor participation rates to determine whether barriers to extracurricular participation may exist in some areas of the school system. At least annually, data on student participation in extracurricular programs can be reviewed and analyzed for patterns that may indicate the inequities in access or involvement.

8.4 Create more opportunities for students to engage in authentic forms of youth leadership, decision-making, and advocacy.

While RSU 22 provides a variety of extracurricular and cocurricular options for students, the district could improve opportunities for students to engage in more authentic forms of youth leadership, decision-making, and advocacy. Specifically, the district could move toward creating student-led programs in which adults act as advisors but students determine the purpose of the program, assume leadership responsibilities, and make all or most of the decisions.

Historically, public schools created student programs that were predetermined by adults, circumscribed by adults, and largely directed and managed by adults. These programs, while often providing valuable learning experiences, did not help students develop many skills that prove to be vitally important later in life, such as leadership, group decision-making, conflict resolution, constructive problem-solving, public speaking, or judicious risk-taking, for example. Over the past few decades, however, youth programming in public schools has increasingly embraced more authentic forms of youth leadership, including forms that sometimes directly challenge existing systems of authority and decision-making in schools.

During the assessment, an independent facilitator, Deborah Bicknell, was enlisted to coordinate and facilitate two ad-hoc student work groups—a six-student middle school group and a six-student high school group. The two groups met on Wednesday afternoons for a period of 15 weeks this past winter and fall. The groups were convened to provide feedback and recommendations related to the student survey administered as part of this assessment, but the groups also engaged in a variety of activities and discussions related to student voice and leadership in schools. At the end of the process, Bicknell provided a set of recommendations to the district. Building on those recommendations, the investigator suggests RSU 22 consider the following actions:

- Engage students in a discussion of the student survey data and equity-audit report to determine their perspective on and interpretation of the findings and recommendations. The students who participated in the ad-hoc work group (but did not graduate from Hampden Academy this past spring) should be involved, alongside other students from the district's

two middle schools and high school. Consider these student perspectives when developing plans to implement recommendations from this report.

- In collaboration with students, develop a long-term strategy for increasing and enhancing authentic student voice, engagement, and leadership in the district. Students should be given opportunities to either co-develop or provide feedback on the plan, and at least some elements of the plan should reflect their priorities, contributions, and creative thinking.
- Offer a variety of ways for students to share their voice in ways that have a direct impact on their educational experience. For example, students could be involved in the curriculum review and modernization process; participate on an advisory committee convened to inform and expand youth involvement and influence in district, school, and school-board decision-making; participate in data-analysis sessions alongside adults to make sense of school data or survey results; or develop and lead professional-development sessions for administrators, faculty, and staff on topics of importance and interest to them, such as the gender identity or the appropriate use of non-binary pronouns (a topic suggested by students who participated in the work group).
- Educate adults in the district on "adultism" and how it affects perceptions of student abilities, how it operates in school systems, and how it influences school policies, practices, and cultures. Actively involve students in the educational process as content developers and co-facilitators.
- Identify adults in RSU 22 who are educated about and supportive of more authentic approaches to youth leadership, decision-making, and advocacy, and consider professional development opportunities that address authentic youth-adult partnerships.
- Understand and embrace that genuine forms of student leadership may challenge adult authority, mindsets, beliefs, policies, and practices. Listen to students, respect their perspectives, and be willing to consider constructive criticism, engage in uncomfortable dialogue, and support student-led recommendations and decisions even if some adults disagree with them.

SECTION 9. STAFF HIRING AND RETENTION

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

9.1 RSU 22 does not currently have a formal process in place for diversity hiring or the evaluation of equity proficiency during the hiring process.

Interviews with RSU 22 administrators indicate that RSU 22 does not currently have, at either the district or school levels, a formal process in place to (a) promote greater racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity in staff hiring or (b) evaluate and consider equity proficiency during the hiring process.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

9.2 Develop a diversity-hiring strategy and a process for evaluating and considering equity proficiency when making hiring decisions.

RSU 22 currently employs only a small number of faculty or staff of color. And given the current population demographics in central Maine, it is likely that the district will continue to have a relatively small population of employees of color for years to come. However, demographics in Maine are changing rapidly, and more urban areas, including Bangor, are experiencing the largest demographic shifts. Over the coming years, RSU 22 will be serving a steadily increasing number of students and families from a growing variety of racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

As discussed in Section 3.3, interviews with RSU 22 administrators, faculty, and staff suggest that a majority of employees in the district likely experience little or no overt bias, prejudice, bullying, or harassment in the workplace from other adults. Interviewees also described a largely collegial, respectful, and inclusive workplace culture in RSU 22 schools, and they indicated that the majority of staff members in the district are hardworking, caring, and committed professionals. Staff survey responses generally affirmed these findings.

But over the coming years, demographic change in the RSU 22 community, along with the numerous cultural shifts that are already underway in American society, are likely to create a variety of new challenges for RSU 22 administrators, faculty, and staff—some of which are discussed in this report. When significant changes in demographics, cultural norms, or student and family needs occur in school communities, the professional expectations, knowledge, and skills of public school educators and staff must change along with them.

As the population of students and families from more diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds grows over the coming years, RSU 22 should have a formal strategy in place to

recruit, hire, and retain employees from equally diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Diversity hiring and retention strategies should not be focused on merely increasing the numbers of staff of color employed by the district, but they should also be focused on creating the long-term conditions that will make employees from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds feel embraced, valued, respected, supported, and professionally fulfilled.

As demographics, cultural norms, or student and family needs continue to evolve in RSU 22, a more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse staff will bring perspectives, experiences, and expertise that will enable RSU 22 to more effectively educate and support an increasingly diverse student and family population. Without these perspectives, experiences, and expertise on staff, it will be far more difficult for RSU 22 to build staff-wide knowledge and skill in the many forms of cross-cultural awareness, communication, sensitivity, and practice required to be an equity-proficient professional or school system.

Along with a diversity recruitment, hiring, and retention strategy, RSU 22 should consider developing and adopting formal procedures to evaluate and consider equity proficiency during the hiring process. These procedures can include, for example, (a) clearly describing equity-related skills, expertise, and professional expectations in all job postings, (b) developing standard evaluative protocols and questions related to equity proficiency for use in hiring interviews and decision-making, (c) utilizing diverse hiring committees, when appropriate, during the interview and selection process that include equity-proficient staff members, and (d) creating orientation, induction, and mentoring opportunities for new hires that directly address the fundamental competencies required for equity-proficiency practice.

SECTION 10. DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

10.1 Some district and school leadership decisions could be more inclusive, and shared-leadership opportunities could be more broadly distributed among staff members.

In interviews and surveys, a large number of staff respondents report that the current administration at the district and school levels represents a noticeable improvement over the administration under the previous superintendent. While some respondents were critical of specific administrative decisions and actions, the majority of respondents who discussed administrative leadership in the district expressed a high level of confidence and trust in RSU 22 administrators, and described a positive and welcomed change in the overall relationship between administrators and staff in the district compared to the previous administration. In addition, many respondents described specific changes in policy and behavior that contributed to these positive perceptions, including greater openness to staff feedback and leadership, as well as specific administrative actions that communicated to the staff that they are valued, respected, and appreciated.

In interviews, however, respondent assessments of district and school leadership indicated two areas of leadership that could be improved: (a) creating more opportunities for staff leadership and staff-involved decision-making and (b) practicing more self-aware and inclusive approaches to involving staff members in leadership roles.

The following comments, submitted through the staff survey, are representative of the viewpoints expressed by some staff members:

> "In response to the question about involvement in decision making: I believe that I am given an opportunity to voice my opinion and have input, but that it is never taken into consideration. I think people already have their minds made up before a discussion like that, and they are 'providing an opportunity' with no intent of changing their plans." —Faculty Member

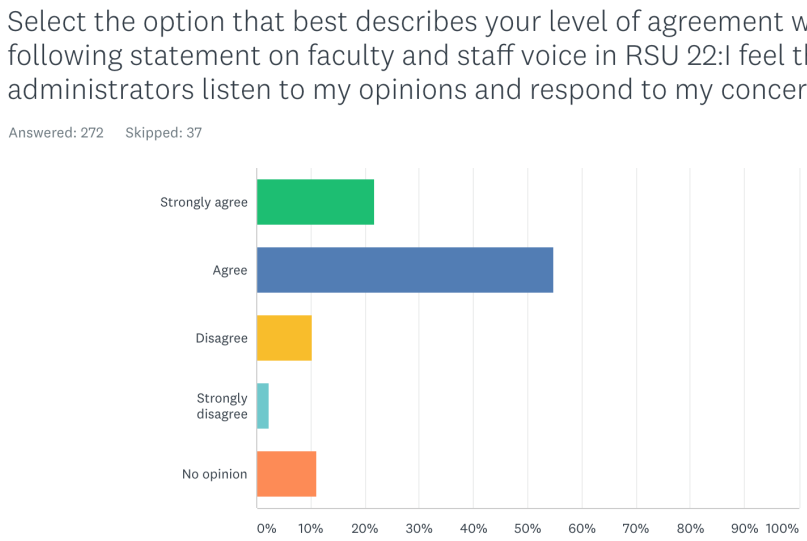
> "Fairness in the workplace is also as important as fairness for students and families. It is hurtful for many staff who don't feel as valued as others. Certain educators seem to get chosen to be in the spotlight while others don't get offered the opportunities. Some get asked to go to conferences to learn and bring back new learning to staff and some never get asked. Some of us have very special gifts that we don't share or get recognized for because we don't steal the show during

committee and staff meetings while others spill their guts about all the great things they are doing. This has been hurtful to many." —Faculty Member

The staff survey asked two questions related to staff voice in the district. One of the questions asked whether administrators listen to staff opinions and respond to staff concerns, and a second question asked whether administrators give staff opportunities to participate in important school decisions.

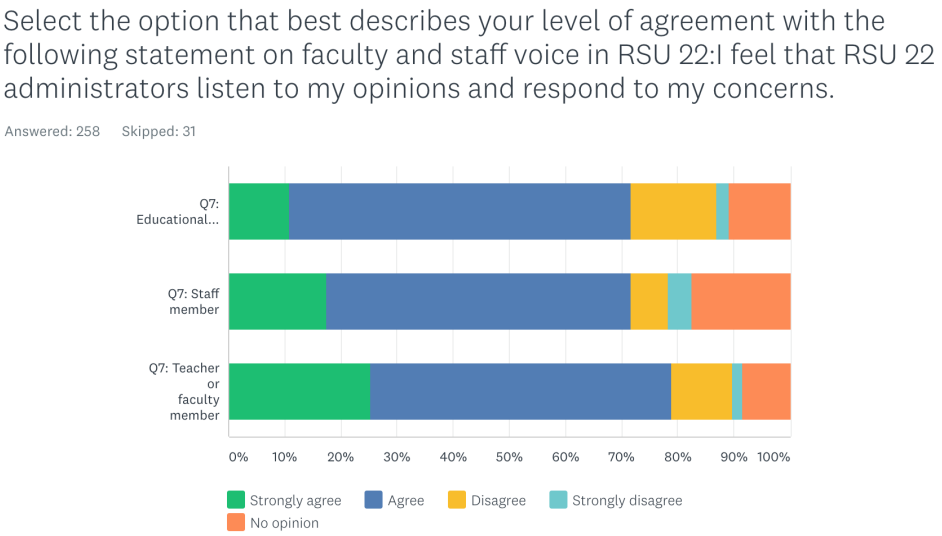
When asked to select their level of agreement with the following statement on faculty and staff voice in RSU 22, "I feel that RSU 22 administrators listen to my opinions and respond to my concerns," 22% of the staff members who responded to the survey selected "strongly agree," 55% selected "agree," 10% selected "disagree," 2% selected "strongly disagree," and 11% had no opinion. (Figure 10.1A)

Figure 10.1A



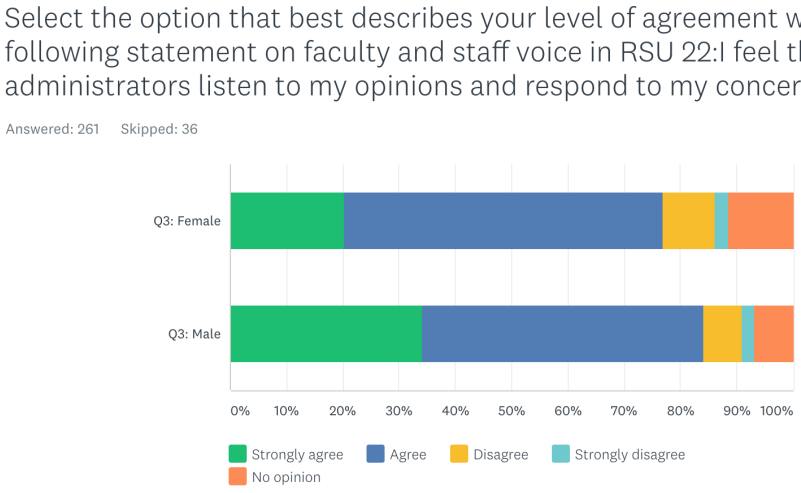
When disaggregated by self-identified role, educational technicians reported the highest levels of disagreement, followed by teachers and faculty members, but staff members reported the highest level of strong disagreement. (Figure 10.1B)

Figure 10.1B



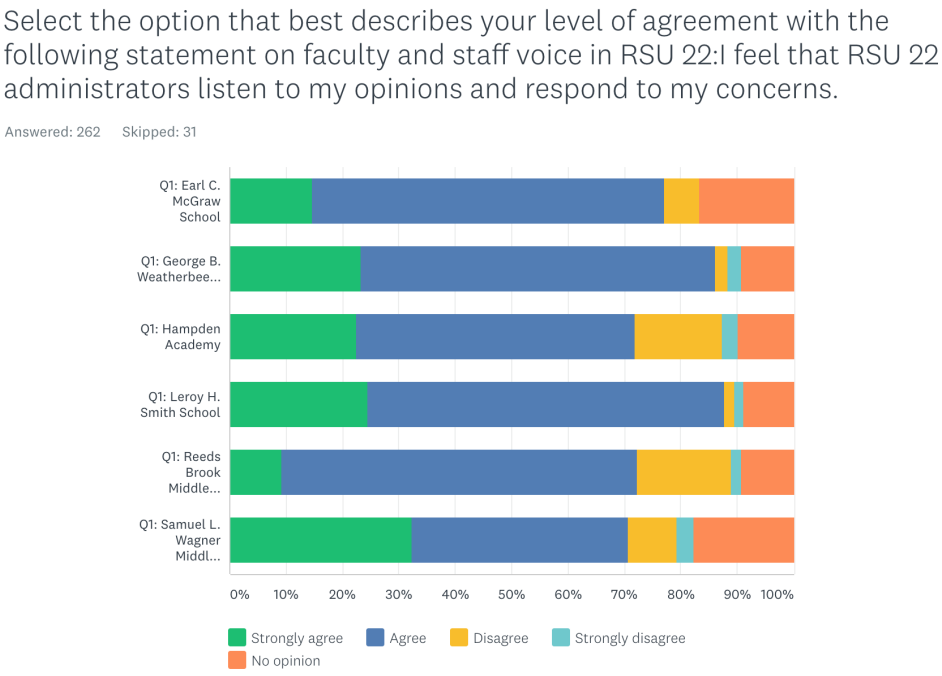
When disaggregated by self-identified gender (female and male), staff members reported similar levels of agreement and disagreement. (Figure 10.1C)

Figure 10.1C



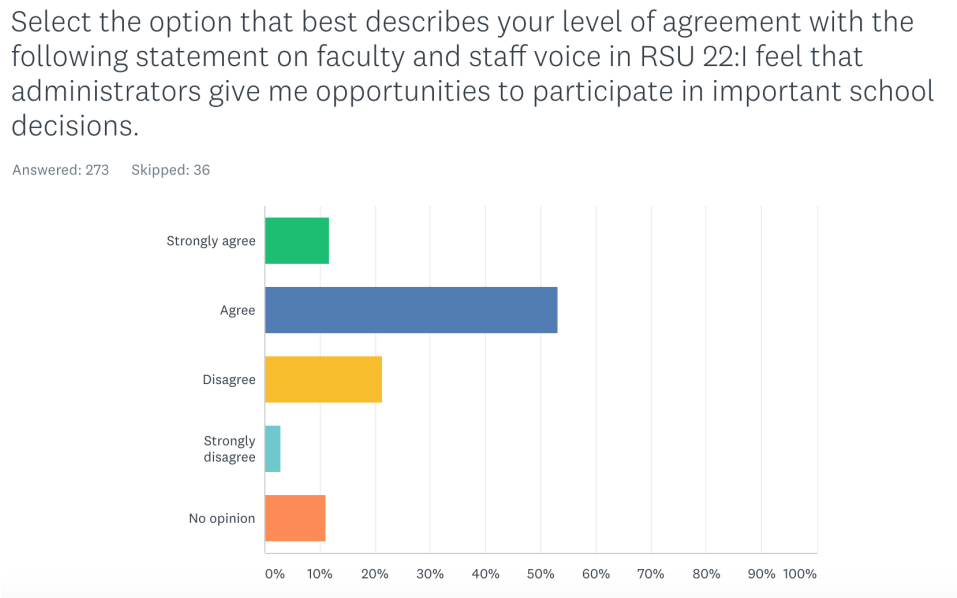
The degree to which staff members believed that RSU 22 administrators listen to their opinions and respond to their concerns varies by school. (Figure 10.1D)

Figure 10.1D



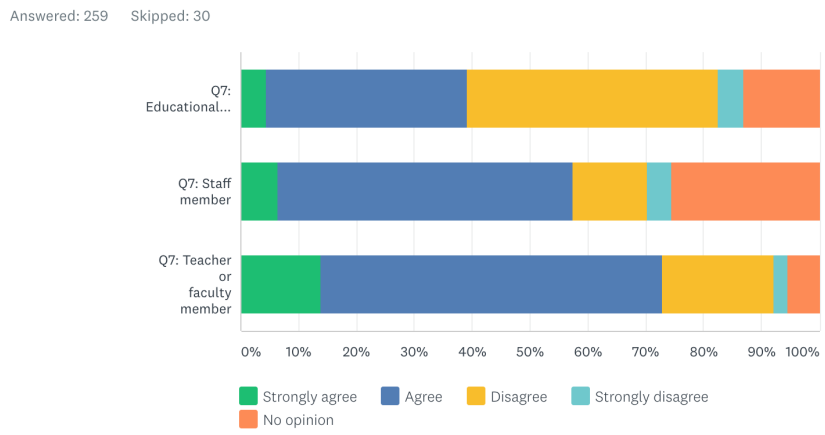
When asked to select their level of agreement with the following statement on faculty and staff voice in RSU 22, "I feel that administrators give me opportunities to participate in important school decisions," 12% of the staff members who responded to the survey selected "strongly agree," 53% selected "agree," 21% selected "disagree," 3% selected "strongly disagree," and 11% had no opinion. Comparatively, significantly more staff members believe that administrators listen and respond to their concerns than believe that administrators give them opportunities to participate in important school decisions. (Figure 10.1E)

Figure 10.1E



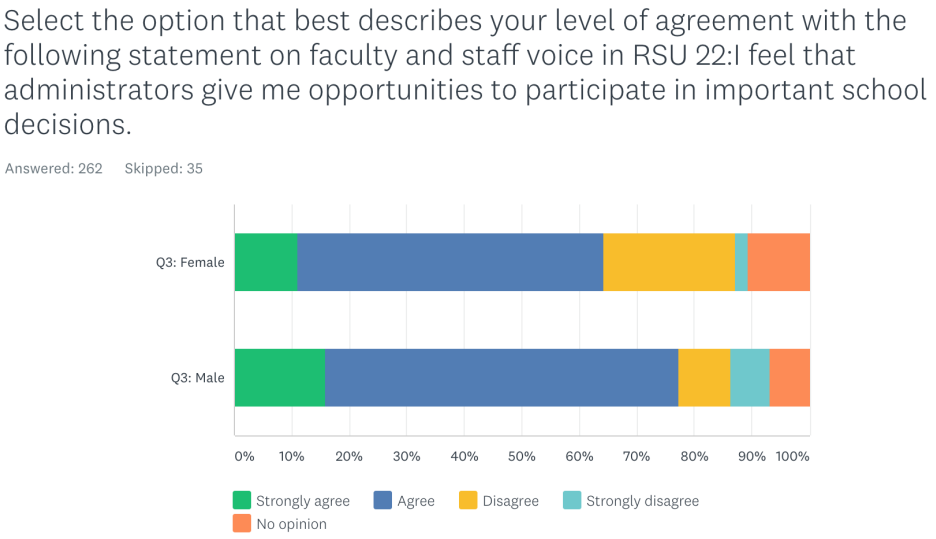
When disaggregated by self-identified role, educational technicians reported the highest levels of disagreement, followed by teachers and faculty members, while educational technicians and staff members reported the similar levels of strong disagreement. (Figure 10.1F)

Figure 10.1F



When disaggregated by self-identified gender (female and male), female staff members reported a significantly higher level of overall disagreement, but male staff members were more likely to report strong disagreement. (Figure 10.1G)

Figure 10.1G

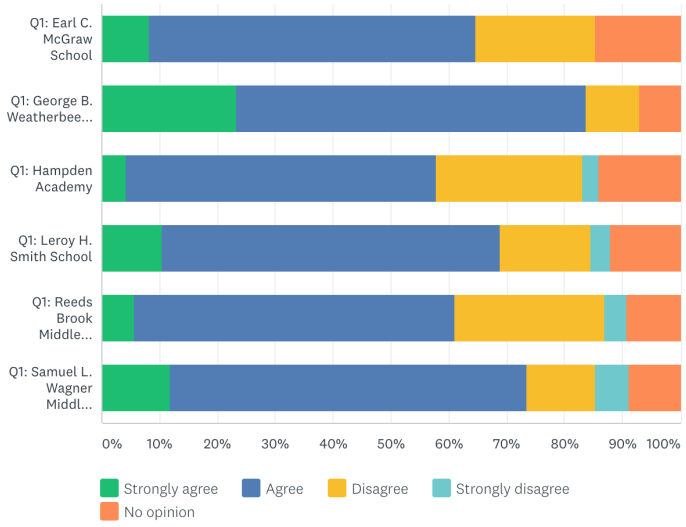


The degree to which staff members believed that RSU 22 administrators give them opportunities to participate in important school decisions varies by school. (Figure 10.1H)

Figure 10.1H

Select the option that best describes your level of agreement with the following statement on faculty and staff voice in RSU 22:I feel that administrators give me opportunities to participate in important school decisions.

Answered: 263 Skipped: 30



10.2 Patterns of preferential treatment appear to occur throughout the district.

One of the most consistent themes that emerged in interviews and survey data was the perception, among a significant number of respondents, that some stakeholders in RSU 22—whether it's staff, students, families, or other community members—receive preferential treatment compared to other stakeholders. The phrase most commonly associated with these patterns of preferential treatment was "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." In other words, the stakeholders who engage in the most assertive forms of self-advocacy, or who are the most aggressive or persistent in imposing their demands on the school system, are significantly more likely to receive exceptions, accommodations, and other forms of preferential treatment in RSU 22 compared to stakeholders who do not engage in assertive, demanding, or persistent self-advocacy. One staff member described this general situation as "managing entitlement," given that the most assertive self-advocates were, in this person's view, individuals who believe they are entitled to special treatment from the school system due to privilege, social status, personal ideology, or some other reason.

Several interviewees described unofficial and unacknowledged "norms" in RSU 22 schools that defer to staff, students, or families who engage in more assertive, demanding, or persistent self-advocacy. Observers noted, for example, patterns of preferential treatment benefiting families who have "certain last names," who possess greater familial wealth, who hold higher-status roles or

positions of influence in the community, or who believe that the school system should concede to any demand they impose on it, regardless of whether the actions they are demanding are infeasible, inequitable, or even harmful to other students or families. In the family survey, several written responses also expressed the perception RSU 22 displays favoritism toward certain students and families.

Observers noted that a variety of preferential practices are common, perhaps even widespread, throughout RSU 22—though they are, of course, not described in formal policy, not tracked or documented in district data, and not discussed openly or candidly as a persistent feature of decision-making in the district.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

10.3 Create more opportunities for staff leadership and staff-involved decision-making, and work toward more self-aware and inclusive approaches to involving staff members in leadership roles.

As discussed above, the majority of RSU 22 staff members interviewed during the assessment provided positive evaluations of administrative leadership in the district, both in general and compared to their experiences with administrative leadership under the previous superintendent. While survey results generally affirmed these findings, they also indicate a few areas where improvements could be made. For example, staff perceptions of the responsiveness and inclusivity of administrative leadership vary significantly by school and staff subgroup.

Going forward, RSU 22 should work to create more opportunities for staff leadership and staff-involved decision-making, while also working toward more self-aware and inclusive approaches to involving staff members in leadership roles. As a first step, district- and school-level administrators should develop a plan to engage in ongoing dialogue with staff members, both individually and in groups, to solicit feedback on administrative practices and decision-making. While administrators in the district are already engaged in a wide variety of formal and informal dialogues with staff members, evidence collected during the assessment indicates that these dialogues (a) may not be systematic (i.e., consistently implemented school by school, group by group, year by year, etc.) and (b) may not include all staff groups either equally or equitably.

10.4 Develop more standardized procedures and policies to address patterns of preferential treatment in the school system.

As discussed in sections 1.3 and 1.9, a majority of RSU 22 employees define equity in terms of educational access, opportunity, and outcomes for students, while other dimensions of educational equity are notably absent from the definitions staff provided during interviews and in

written survey responses. For example, survey and interview respondents, with only two exceptions, did not address or discuss how the following factors can produce inequities in public schooling: (a) *power relations* (how disproportionalities in power can create and perpetuate inequities, and how educational decisions typically benefit those in positions of power), (b) *structural inequity* (how inequities can be built into the governance, policies, and operational structures of public schooling, either formally or informally), or (c) *historical injustice* (how and why public schooling has historically worked well for some groups but not others).

Based on interview and survey evidence, it is clear that general staff awareness and understanding of these widely studied and discussed aspects of public schooling—power relations, structural inequity, and historical injustice—are not only low in RSU 22, but these low levels of awareness, knowledge, and understanding are likely contributing to systemic inequities, such as patterns of preferential treatment in educational decision-making.

For example, favoritism and preferential treatment in educational decision-making often disproportionately benefit students and families (a) who come from privileged backgrounds, such as households that are comparatively wealthy or families who have attained high levels of education, status, or community influence; (b) who have developed a high degree social confidence or a sense of entitlement (whether justified or unjustified); and (c) who have acquired negotiation or manipulation skills, including an understanding of how public institutions work, knowledge of how policies or personal influence can be manipulated to their advantage, and a willingness to engage in tense, uncomfortable, confrontational, or even bullying conversations in order to achieve desired outcomes for themselves and their children.

When administrators, faculty, and staff have not developed sufficient self-awareness, knowledge, and skills related to equitably addressing unequal power relations, hidden structural inequities, and longstanding forms of historical injustice, patterns of preferential treatment in educational decision-making are one consequence—especially forms of preferential treatment that systemically benefit the types of students and families described above, while also potentially disadvantaging students and families whose experiences have not equipped them assertive self-advocacy skills.

While public schools are obligated to be responsive to stakeholder needs and concerns, responsiveness is distinct from preferential treatment. Responsiveness means that (a) administrators, faculty, and staff listen, as impartially as possible, to concerns or requests from students and families; (b) evaluate and consider those concerns or requests to determine which may be legitimate, reasonable, and/or advisable, and then (c) take appropriate actions are in the best interest of the student/family and that also are feasible and equitable based on the policies and operational conditions of the school system. Preferential treatment means that administrators, faculty, and staff staff either act on or disregard concerns or requests based on favoritism, bias, prejudice, or other factors, such as intimidation or a fear of retaliation by administrators or influential community members. Over time, patterns of preferential treatment—if practiced throughout a

school system as a de facto but unstated policy—will produce, reinforce, or perpetuate inequities that mirror inequities in the larger society or community.

While it can be difficult to appropriately balance responsiveness and equity in school systems, it is possible to create more standardized policies and procedures that mitigate inequitable practices such as preferential treatment over time. For example, one common form of preferential treatment in schools occurs when family members request that their children be enrolled in a desired teacher's classroom, and these requests are then typically approved for some children while other family requests are denied or their children are assigned to classrooms using a standard process.

During an interview with an RSU 22 administrator, this specific form of preferential treatment was discussed. In this case, the administrator described a standard policy that had been developed in response to these requests. If a family member requests a change in classroom assignment, the family member must present a case for the change that is based on specific student learning needs. If the student's learning needs can be better met, supported, or accommodated in a different classroom, the request will be considered and potentially approved (if identified student learning needs recommend it and classroom circumstances allow for the reassignment). But if the request is based on a personal preference for one teacher over another, or the family member cannot identify any specific student learning needs that recommend a classroom reassignment, the request will likely not be considered or approved.

This policy could be further standardized by creating a classroom-reassignment request form that family members are required to fill out in advance of a consultation with the school administrator. In this case, the use of a standard form would not only document the request, the family's rationale for submitting the request, and the final decision made by the administrator, but it would allow other administrators to review past decisions should concerns about preferential treatment arise.

It must be noted, however, that some policies and procedures—including procedures such as request forms—can inadvertently create inequities, even in cases in which the policy or procedure was specifically created to address inequities. For example, some family members are more comfortable requesting and filling out forms than others, some families speak and write English while others may not, and some family members understand the nuances of public-education law or policy to a degree that enables them to manipulate the system to get their way.

While no policy or procedure can replace human judgment in specific cases or ensure equitable decision-making in every case, the example illustrates that it is possible to create standardized policies, procedures, and practices that improve a district's ability to more appropriately and consistently balance responsiveness to individual needs with organizational equity considerations.