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DO I BELONG?

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education.
Education Systems Improvement Science

by
Audrey Danielle Gilden
August 2024

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

To measure students' Social-Emotional-Learning (SEL), Lowcountry School District (LSD) administers Panorama Education surveys to students, teachers, and staff twice a year. The mission of the surveys is to support educators in radically improving student outcomes with data. Students are given two surveys: 1) Student SEL Competency & Well-Being and 2) Student Supports & Environment. The first survey focuses on supportive relationships and self-management, while the second focuses on teacher-student relationships, sense of belonging, and school climate. Looking specifically at the Student Supports & Environment survey, two areas of concern are school climate and sense of belonging. School climate measures the perceptions of the overall social learning climate of the school, and sense of belonging measures how much students feel they are valued members of the school community. In 2022 River High School (RHS) scored in the 10th% for school climate and sense of belonging when compared to all schools in Panorama's national dataset.

My research aimed to increase student supports and environment in areas of school climate and sense of belonging by 20% by Spring 2024, as measured by the Panorama surveys as prior data show students do not feel they belong at RHS. My research used qualitative data through student's voice in Student Advisory Committee (SAC) meetings and quantitative data through pre and post-surveys and Spring 2024 Panorama data. Based on these findings student voice increased school climate by 13% and sense of belonging by 15%.

DEDICATION

To my husband Corey and my son Maddux, I could not have accomplished this without you. Thank you for picking up extra duties at home so I could focus on achieving my educational goals. I love and appreciate you more than you will ever know.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In 2020, many life activities were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including education. Transitioning from in-person to virtual learning with quarantine periods and mask protocols affected students' social, emotional, and academic well-being. DiStefano conducted a research study on the effects of remote learning in South Carolina during the COVID-19 Pandemic and found 22.8% of teachers and 50.9% of parents reported a lack of social interaction for students and 26.4% of teachers and 38.8% of parents reported increased stress on children/families (2020). Danielson et al.'s empirical research of four school districts across four states found that an average of 21% of students had enough symptoms to meet the criteria for any externalizing or internalizing disorder (2020). These disorders include “attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), generalized anxiety disorder, social phobia, separation anxiety, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, agoraphobia, post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, dysthymic disorder, mania and hypomania” (Danielson et al., 2020, Table 3). Mental disorders “are described as serious changes in the way children typically learn, behave, or handle their emotions that cause distress and problems getting through the day” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023, About Children’s Mental Health section). As stated by Burwell in *Council on Foreign Relations*, “according to a 2015 report from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, the number of students visiting counseling centers increased by 30 percent between 2009 and 2015 (enrollment grew by only six percent) (2018, Challenge

and Response section). As student achievement is connected to a student's social-emotional well-being, schools must educate the whole child (Moulton, n.d.).

Because attendance, behavior, and course performance, such as GPA and assessments (ABCs), correlate with school climate and students' sense of belonging, it is essential to focus on academics and social-emotional well-being (Panorama Research Team, n.d.). In Durlak and colleagues' meta-analysis on school-based universal interventions, results show social-emotional learning (SEL) "participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement" (2011, p. 405). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) suggests incorporating the five core competencies into any SEL program: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (2020). After the implementation of the SEL curriculums, positive results have been reported by researchers, including prosocial behaviors (Zolkoski et al., 2021), academic performance increased from below the tenth to the ninetieth percentile in a state in south central United States (Fisher & Crawford, 2020), and after not meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for four years, the benchmark was met the year after the curriculum was implemented (San Antonio, 2018). These are important gains as schools in South Carolina receive their overall ratings based on factors such as academic achievement, preparation for success, student progress, school climate, and English learners' progress toward proficiency (SC Department of Education, n.d.). South Carolina General Assembly supports "embedding social emotional learning in academics in all public

schools from kindergarten through twelfth grades” (H. 3901, 2021). An article in the Post and Courier quotes the founder and chairman of the Social Emotional Learning Alliance for South Carolina, Al Estee, stating most of the school districts in South Carolina do not have a social-emotional learning curriculum (Schiferl, 2020). However, “more than 80 percent of elementary schools and 100 percent of middle schools in the Lowcountry School District (LSD) have access to schoolwide SEL programs” (Heather Anderson in Schiferl, 2020, p.9). In LSD, SEL curriculums became available to elementary schools in 2013, middle schools in 2017, and high schools in 2021.

According to West and colleagues’ research study, trends such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status play a part in SEL. They also noted that students of color experience hardships outside of the school environment that the surveys do not take into account (2020). After disaggregating River High School’s (RHS), the context for my study, spring 2022 Panorama survey data, English language learners, students with 504 plans, and Black or African-American students scored lower than all respondents in school climate and sense of belonging (see Appendix A). Jagers et al. introduced transformative SEL to address issues such as privilege, discrimination, social justice, and educational equity by “fostering more equitable learning environments and producing equitable outcomes for children and young people furthest from opportunity” (2019, p.163).

A vicious cycle: A social-psychological account of extreme racial disparities in school discipline considers that teacher-student relationships and school climate can be hindered by inconsistent discipline and consequences due to implicit biases (Okonofua et

al., 2016). To determine an intervention to increase student SEL, a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions suggests that programs should include SAFE practices (sequential, active, focused, and explicit) and be well-designed and conducted (Durlak et al., 2011).

Problem of Practice

My research aimed to increase student supports and environment in areas of school climate and sense of belonging by 20% by Spring 2024, as measured by the Panorama surveys as prior data show students do not feel they belong at RHS. During the Lowcountry Educator Symposium, LSD leaders presented changes to the Department of Alternative Programs to include Student Support Services to “focus on increased access to Mental Health Services” (L. Allison personal communication, August 10, 2023).

While the mission of LSD is to educate and support every child in achieving college, career, and citizenship readiness by three pillars: 1) rigorous grade-level instruction, 2) high quality teachers/leaders, and 3) wrap-around services, LSD’s guardrails state “The Superintendent shall not allow students to go without social-emotional learning” and “The Superintendent shall not allow a negative or unsupportive staff culture” (L. Allison & M. Bocchino, personal communication, July 26, 2023). In the following sections I will provide an overview of my research site where my study will take place and the rationale behind my research.

River High School (RHS) is located in an affluent community in Harborview. River is the largest high school in the LSD and ranked fourth best South Carolina high school (U.S. News & World Report, 2023). RHS serves students in grades ninth through

twelfth in the LSD. In 2022-2023, the population of 2,994 students at RHS was approximately <1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, <1% American Indian/Alaska Native, 2% Asian, 3% two or more races, 3% Hispanic, 10% Black, and 81% White (see Common Core of Data, n.d.). After the 2015-2016 school year, Liberty High School, a neighboring rural school in Pinegrove closed. The 260 students in grades sixth through twelfth were bussed almost an hour to school in Harborview. As shown in Figure 1.1, RHS scored 13.1% higher in English and 17.6% higher in Algebra compared to LSD academically (SC State Report Card, n.d.).

Figure 1.1

SC Ready English Language Arts and Mathematics

English - Scoring C or Higher



Algebra - Scoring C or Higher



To measure students' SEL, LSD administers Panorama Education surveys to students, teachers, and staff twice a year. The mission of the surveys is to support

educators in radically improving student outcomes with data. Students are given two surveys: 1) Student SEL Competency & Well-Being and 2) Student Supports & Environment. The first survey focuses on supportive relationships and self-management, while the second focuses on teacher-student relationships, sense of belonging, and school climate.

Looking specifically at the Student Supports & Environment survey, two areas of concern are school climate and sense of belonging. School climate measures the perceptions of the overall social learning climate of the school, and sense of belonging measures how much students feel they are valued members of the school community. As can be seen in Table 1.1, RHS scored lower than LSD in both areas.

Table 1.1

Spring 2022 Panorama Survey Data

	RHS	LSD
School Climate	46%	49%
Sense of Belonging	40%	43%

Although RHS's school climate and sense of belonging are comparable to LSD's when compared to all schools in Panorama's national dataset, RHS scored in the 10% for

school climate and sense of belonging on the SEL surveys, as can be seen in Figures 1.2 and 1.3.

Figure 1.2

School Climate Compared to National Data Set

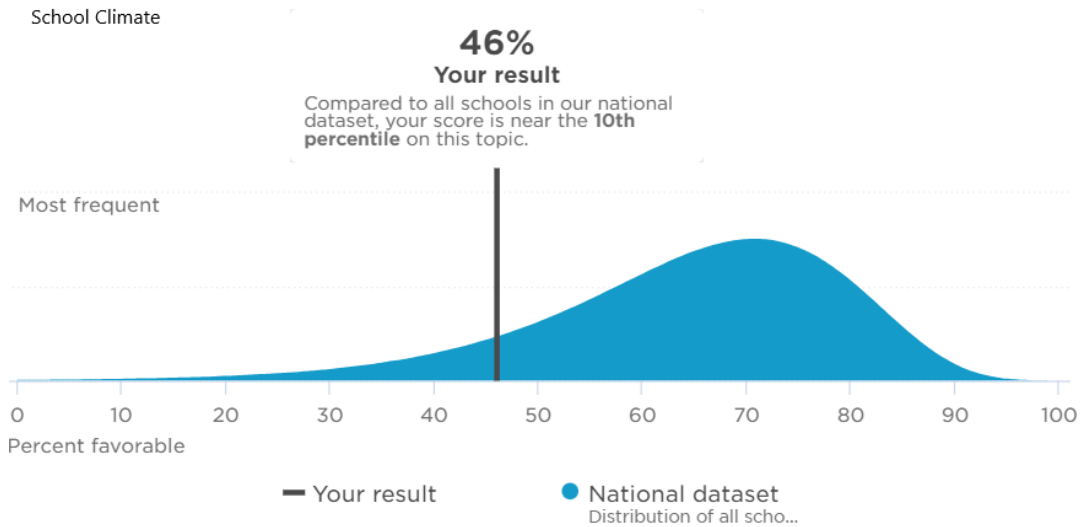
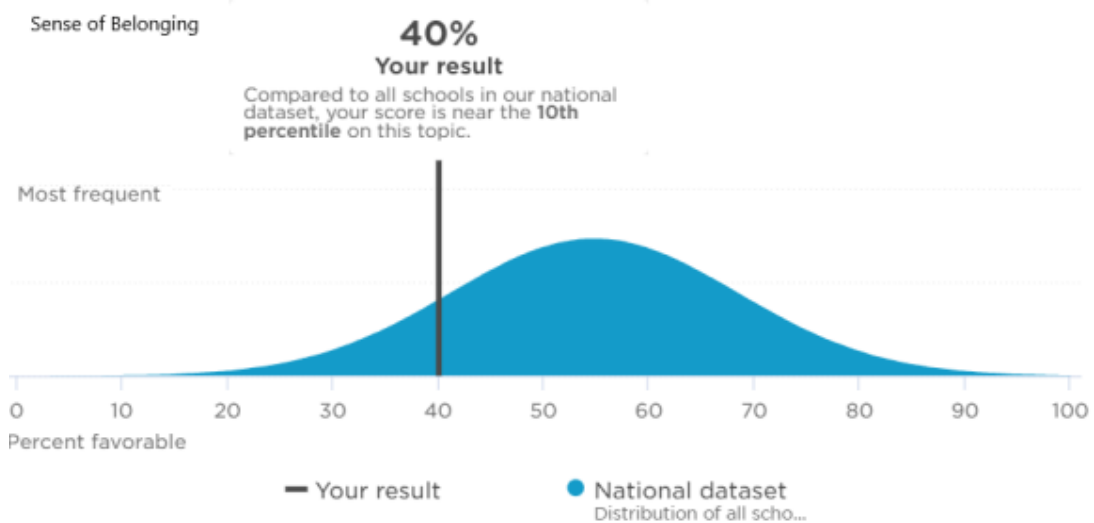


Figure 1.3

Sense of Belonging Compared to National Data Set



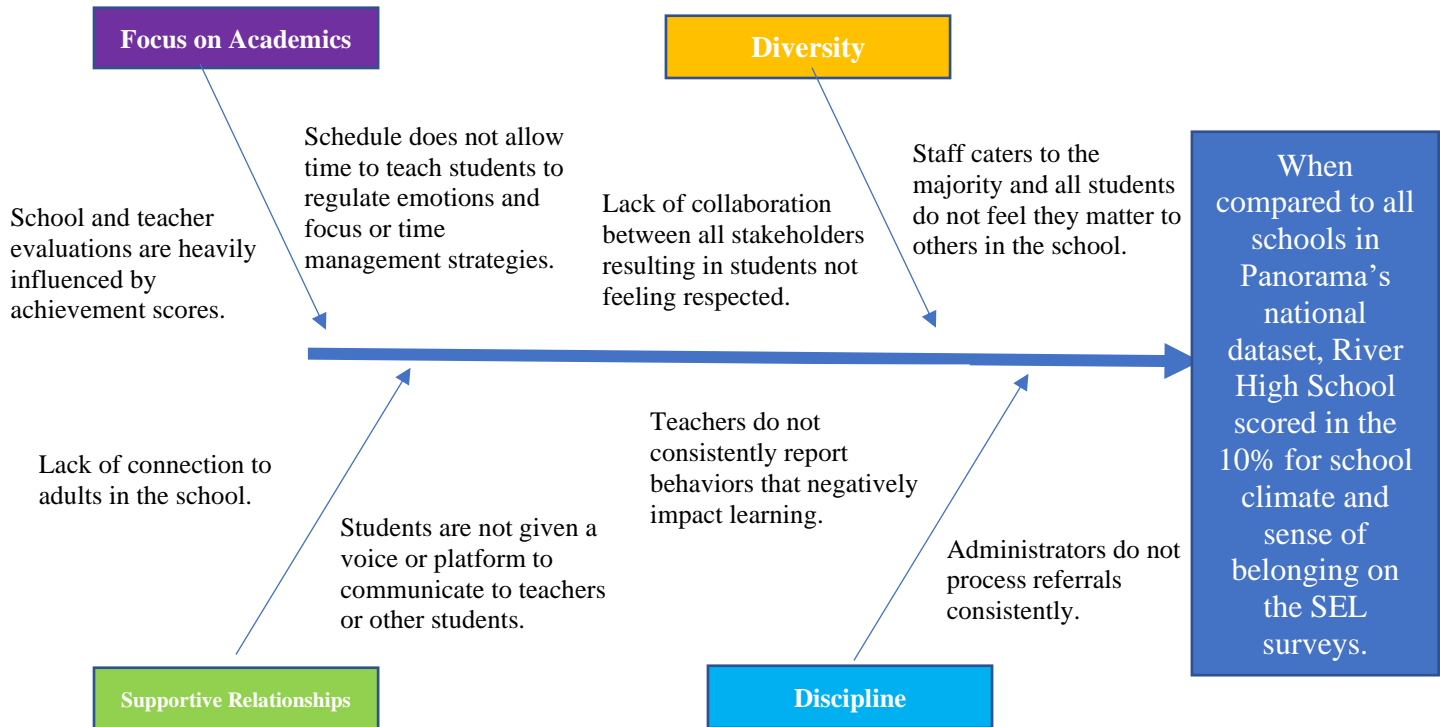
As an Assistant Principal at RHS and a parent in the direct community, school climate and sense of belonging are integral to educating the whole child. As the Panorama lead for River High School, I have access to data, participants, and district professional development opportunities. Incorporating SEL has shown positive impacts on student's academics, mental health, skills development, and school climate (Mahoney et al., 2018) which connects SEL to LSDs mission, vision, and guardrails (H. Anderson, personal communication, July 25, 2023). The Panorama data shows a need for school climate and sense of belonging interventions to increase student support and environment. My research helped identify these issues and determined solutions to positively impact students at RHS and can be expanded to the entire district. In the following sections, I will discuss the scholarly research on school climate and sense of belonging, introduce the research/improvement team I collaborated with throughout the inquiry process, and the research questions I used to guide my study.

Literature Review

In trying to understand the school climate and students' sense of belonging, I asked the following questions: 1) Which students have low SEL?, 2) Why do students have low SEL?, and 3) Who contributes to students' low SEL? In the following sections, I will discuss school climate and sense of belonging outlined in four categories relevant to River High School: focus on academics, diversity, relationships, and discipline as shown in Figure 1.4.

Figure 1.4

Fishbone Diagram



Focus on Academics

The role of schools is to educate students toward mastery of grade-level standards in each subject area. Especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, schools focused on the learning loss students experienced during school closures. However, a teacher reported “students are so far behind academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally that I am doing way more than “teaching”” (DiStefano, 2020, p. 25). Therefore, schools can no longer focus on academics alone. In fact, “the quality of the climate appears to be the single most predictive factor in any school’s capacity to promote student achievement” (Schindler et al., 2016, p. 9). In Schindler et al.’s empirical study, the School Climate

Assessment Instrument (SCAI) was used to measure the quality of climate by measuring “school appearance *and* physical plant, faculty relations, student interactions, leadership decision making, discipline environment, learning environment, attitude *and* culture, and school community relations” (2016, p. 10).

In McEvoy and Welker’s (2000) empirical research study, they call for five requirements to build relationships and a positive school climate: 1) a safe environment focusing on academics as well as social skill development, 2) a rigorous curriculum supported by all faculty, 3) ongoing assessments to monitor progress towards goals, 4) the elimination of practices that group students by ability, and 5) celebration of achievements toward academic progress. In Schindler et al.’s (2016) conceptual research, they give four practical implications to improve school climate: 1) consider the consequences of the status quo, 2) assess your school’s current climate, 3) evaluate the current practices at your school, and 4) classify practices as the psychology of success (POS) or psychology of failure (POF). While both McEvoy and Welker and Schindler et al. suggest important steps to build relationships and create a positive school climate, a mixture of both would be more beneficial. As a leader, it is important to set expectations for all faculty at the beginning of the year to ensure all staff are working towards the same end goal (McEvoy and Welker, requirements 1 and 2). After looking at the data, the leadership team can determine an area of weakness (Schindler et al. requirement 2). After determining the weakness, programs or systems should be evaluated to determine if they are creating the results they are intended to (Schindler et al. requirement 3). If a program or system is unsuccessful, it should be tweaked, or a new intervention should be tried

(McEvoy and Welker requirement 4, Schindler et al. requirement 4). The new intervention should be monitored to determine the successfulness of reaching the intended goal (McEvoy and Welker requirement 3).

As with any change of policy, procedure, or adding a new intervention, there will be challenges, such as teacher buy-in, time, resources, professional development, and implementation with fidelity (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Also, “those calling for school reform often are disappointed with the results of reform initiatives because programs do not affect the environments in which students learn and behave” (McEvoy & Welker, 2000, p. 134). If classrooms are filled with behavior issues, the teacher cannot teach, and the students cannot learn. Therefore, to increase student engagement and achievement, schools must foster a positive school climate where all students can learn.

Diversity

According to Hill’s (2022) conceptual research on Creating a Sense of Belonging in the Context of Racial Discrimination and Racial Trauma, discrimination and marginalization of communities result in educational disparities in disciplinary rates, sense of belonging, mental health, and academic achievement. Tinto’s theory suggests “that students must dissociate from their cultural communities and adopt the dominant values and norms of their respective campuses in order to succeed” (Museus et al., 2017, p.189). Instead, sense of belonging can be established through the climate and culture of the environment by creating cultural awareness of all ethnicities served in the school. Using Tinto’s framework, Museus (2017), in his empirical research, developed The Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) Model to show the relationship

between culturally engaging campus environments to higher levels of sense of belonging. The CECE framework can be separated into two categories: 1) cultural relevance and 2) cultural responsiveness.

Cultural relevance increases a student's sense of belonging by ensuring the environment is relevant to a student's background and identity by including opportunities to connect with faculty, opportunities to share knowledge about their communities, opportunities to give back to their communities, participation in solving real world problems, and feeling their cultural background is valued (Museus, 2017). Cultural responsiveness increases a student's sense of belonging by ensuring the programs and practices meet the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds by including values of teamwork, meaningful relationships with students, ensuring students have the opportunities and support, and access to faculty members (Museus, 2017).

When programs or initiatives are multi-step or multi-layered, like the CECE framework, issues with implementation with fidelity come into play. In Hornstra et al.'s (2015) empirical research, a quick fix, such as classroom composition, could increase student motivation, sense of belonging, and achievement. The study results showed that students with more ethnic minority classmates showed higher self-efficacy, initial reading comprehension levels, greater achievement, and higher initial levels of task orientation (Hornstra et al., 2015). The study also found that ethnic minority students showed a higher level of task orientation, sense of belonging, and greater achievement in reading comprehension when taught in classrooms with other ethnic minority students (Hornstra

et al., 2015). When students are surrounded by individuals that can relate to their cultural background, students feel more connected and valued members of the classroom.

Although the past cannot be changed, schools can and must educate students “to mitigate these negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing requires racial/ethnic socialization and cultural embeddedness that emboldens students’ sense of belonging and identity and prepares them to understand the sources and etiologies of racial and ethnic bias” (Hill, 2022, p. 196). Schools provide the perfect platform for students to learn about different cultures, religions, and ethnicities of their peers. Through this learning and reflection, compassion towards others and their past will help ensure we do not repeat history as well as create a positive school climate and a sense of belonging for all students.

Relationships

While the school, teachers, and staff contribute to students’ low student supports and environment in school climate and sense of belonging, family and friends can also play a factor (Hoffman, 2017). In an empirical research study, Scales et al. (2020) found that student-teacher relationships positively impact students’ engagement, motivation, and academic performance. To create teacher-student relationships, five elements should be followed: 1) express care by showing students they matter, 2) challenge growth by pushing students to get better, 3) provide support to help students achieve their goals, 4) share power by allowing student voice, and 5) expand possibilities by helping students for their future (Scales et al., 2020). Some examples of implementing these elements in the classroom to build teacher-student relationships can be seen by:

Warmly uses a student's name or smiles when interacting with them...; asks a question about their interest out of school; praises them for working hard...and helps them learn from their mistakes; show students they will not give up on them...; connects them with opportunities or other students or school staff or community adults who can help them pursue a personal interest; talks with them about college...; or asks for students' input and opinions on classroom routines, assignments, and interesting questions of content (Scales et al., 2020, p. 671).

The Scales et al. (2020) study showed that students with stronger teacher relationships, using the elements above, had a higher sense of belonging, school climate, motivation, and grade point average (GPA). These relationships “promote motivation by positively affecting students' perceptions about their own agency and competence, and their connectedness to teachers” (Scales et al., 2020, p. 649). However, students with low socio-economic status (SES) showed a regression in teacher relationships by the end of the school year (Scales et al., 2020).

While teachers affect motivation and GPA, students reported that their peers at school were the lead relationships that affected school connectedness (Gowing, 2019). In Gowing's empirical research study on the effects of peer-peer relationships and connectedness and belonging in schools (2019), themes around learning, relational, and extra-curricular activity opportunities emerged as influences on school climate, sense of belonging, and students' overall motivation to attend school. School leaders should collaborate with school psychologists to “generate a more deliberate consideration of ways in which school environments hinder and promote opportunities for positive peer-

peer encounters to occur and relationships to develop” (Gowing, 2019, p.74). Through positive teacher-student and student-student relationships, schools can exhibit a positive school climate and a greater sense of belonging, affecting academic achievement.

Discipline

According to Grace’s (2020) empirical research study, institutional racism is evident in the school systems with the increasing achievement gap and inconsistent discipline practices. In most cases, “suspension and expulsion usually exacerbate the difficulties of establishing the bonds necessary to manage behavior and to enhance commitment to academic achievement” (McEvoy & Welker, 2000, p.137). In Bottiani et al.’s (2017) empirical research on student’s perceived equity, school belonging, and adjustment problems associated with the discipline gap found a significant negative association between out-of-school suspensions and Black students’ perceived equity and sense of belonging which leads to adjustment problems. Practices such as uncertified or low-performing teachers, under enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, overrepresented in special education programs, standardized testing, tracking, labeling, and zero-tolerance policies “are examples of institutionalized racism and often coincide with disparate discipline practices that also disproportionately impact black males” (Grace, 2020, p. 39).

Fisher et al.’s empirical research (2019) explains that the racial gap in discipline is connected to students’ sense of belonging, as Black students are suspended at greater rates than their White counterparts. They also explain “that there is not always a single school climate within a school, but that there are multiple and diverse school climates for

different groups of students” (Fisher et al., 2019, p. 1482). Interestingly, during the study, they noted the school's racial composition as a factor in racial disparities in school climate and suspensions. (Fisher et al., 2019). Because most public schools do not control the racial composition of the student population, interventions to address school climate should be considered. The study found some key factors, such as the “odds of a Black student being suspended decreased in schools where Black students felt a higher sense of belonging relative to White students (Fisher et al., 2019, p. 1491). However, “this study also found that schools in which Black students perceived a greater sense of belonging had higher overall suspension rates for all students” (Fisher et al., 2019, p. 1493). Therefore, when increasing sense of belonging, one must consider the balancing factor of discipline. Fisher et al. (2019) suggest strategies to increase sense of belonging, such as implicit bias workshops, representative bureaucracy, and cultural competency trainings woven into the curriculum and social experiences for students.

There is never one solution that fits all students or schools to address a problem. However, research shows positive gains in school climate and sense of belonging when the focus is not on academics alone (McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Schindler et al., 2016; Burwell, 2018), embracing and cultivating diversity (Hill, 2022; Museus et al., 2017; Hornstra et al., 2015), fostering relationships with teachers and peers (Scales et al., 2020; Hoffman, 2017; Gowing, 2019), and addressing disparities in discipline (Grace, 2020; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Fisher et al., 2019; Bottiani et al., 2017).

Research/Improvement Team

To improve school climate and student sense of belonging at River, the Principal, an Assistant Principal, Climate Coach, Parent Educator, student advisory committee members, and myself collaborated to find solutions. The Principal previously taught and was an Assistant Principal at River for eleven years. He has served in the Harborview community for fifteen years and after three years of leading a neighboring middle school, he increased the school climate for students and staff. The Assistant Principal has served at River for four years. In his current role, he serves as a liaison between the Pinegrove community leaders and the school, as our minority students live in this community. Table 1.2 shows data from the Census Reporter and further shows the disparities between students from Liberty High School and students living in Harborview (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). These statistics are possible reasons why students from the Pinegrove community feel a lower sense of belonging. The Climate Coach previously taught at River before moving into a district position. His role on the team was beneficial with training and disaggregating Panorama data. The Parent Educator was an invaluable resource as her children have/are attending River High School. She has numerous connections to the students as well as the community. Together, with our experiences and expertise, I am confident we worked together to create an inviting school environment where all students feel welcome.

Table 1.2

Census Reporter Data

	Harborview	Pinegrove
Per capita income	\$67,812	\$43,458
Poverty	5.1%	6.3%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units	\$721,300	\$395,800

Research Questions

My research aimed to increase student supports and environment in school climate and sense of belonging by 20% by Spring 2024, as measured by the Panorama surveys. My study sought to determine specific interventions to increase student supports and environment. I conducted the research at River High School in Lowcountry, South Carolina. The Panorama data showed a need for school climate and sense of belonging interventions to increase student support and environment.

My research study answered the following questions:

1. How can students' supports and environment in school climate and sense of belonging be increased?
2. To what extent, if any, do focus groups increase school climate and sense of belonging through student voice?

Causal Analysis

With River students scoring higher academically than other students in LSD, my initial assumption was that school climate and sense of belonging would also be higher. After reviewing Panorama data, my assumption was disconfirmed. RHS is actually scoring lower than the district in school climate and sense of belonging. After reviewing the data at River High School, the trend is that students score school climate and sense of belonging lower in the Spring than the Fall as shown in Figures 1.5 and 1.6.

Figure 1.5

Trends in School Climate at RHS

School Climate

Based on 1,756 responses

Perceptions of the overall social and learning climate of the school.

How have results changed over time?

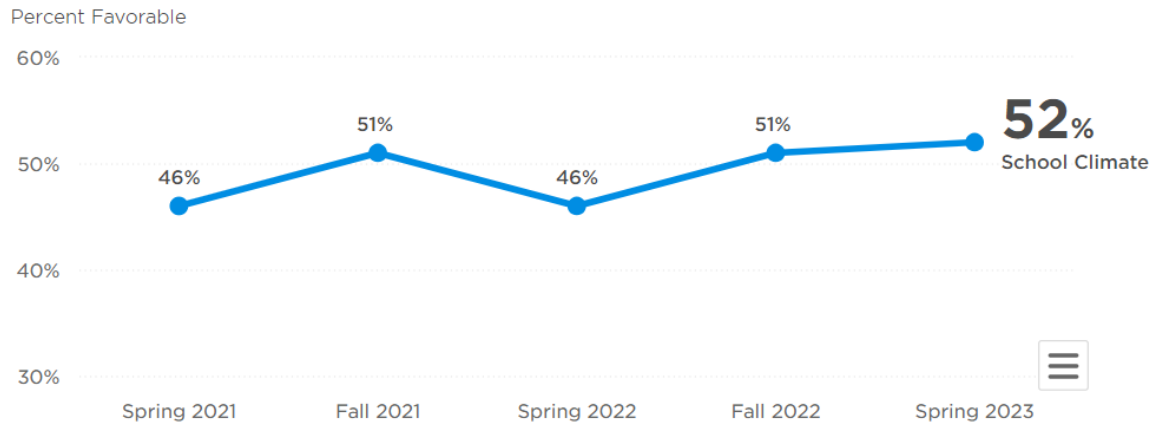


Figure 1.6

Trends in Sense of Belonging at RHS

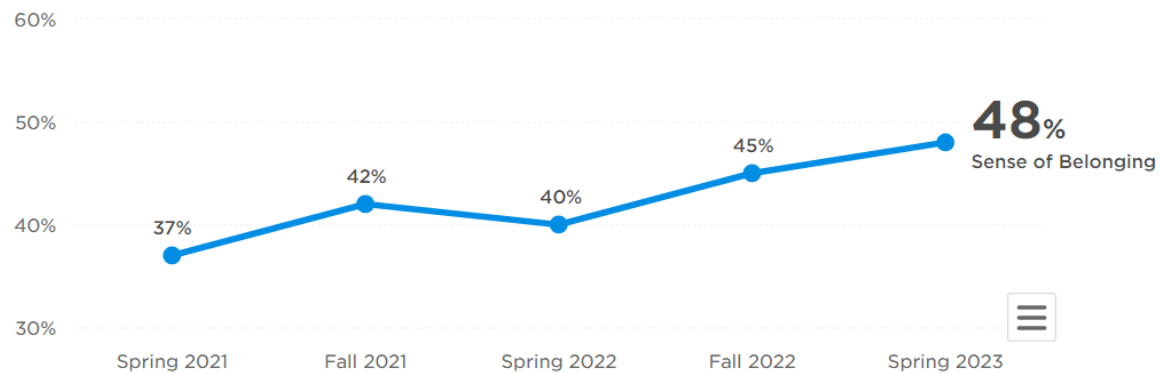
Sense of Belonging

Based on 1,756 responses

How much students feel that they are valued members of the school community.

How have results changed over time?

Percent Favorable



Spring 2023 is an outlier on both school climate and sense of belonging data with scores increasing in the Fall term. However, only 64% of the student population completed the surveys in Spring 2023 resulting in the lowest participation rate. After disaggregating the data further, students with a 504 plan, Arabic speaking students, and Black or African-American students had a lower perception of the school climate and sense of belonging. Looking at the student instructional setting in Figure 1.7, students in Special Education have case managers to regularly check-in and assist with any issues. Students in general education nor students with a 504 plan consistently have a support person to rely on. Figure 1.8 shows the languages students primarily speak at home.

River offers World Languages classes such as Spanish, German, French, and Latin. The campus security manager on campus speaks Russian. Students who speak Arabic are isolated and do not feel they have a support group or belong. Lastly, Figure 1.9 shows school climate and sense of belonging broken down by student race. Black or African-American students possibly have a lower perception of the school climate and sense of belonging due to the level of disproportionality in referrals (Appendix B). During the 2022-2023 school year, Black or African-American students were 262% more likely to serve in-school suspension (ISS), 353% more likely to serve out of school suspension (OSS), and 500% more likely to be referred to a Disciplinary Alternative Education (DAE) Program.

Figure 1.7

Comparison of Student Instructional Setting

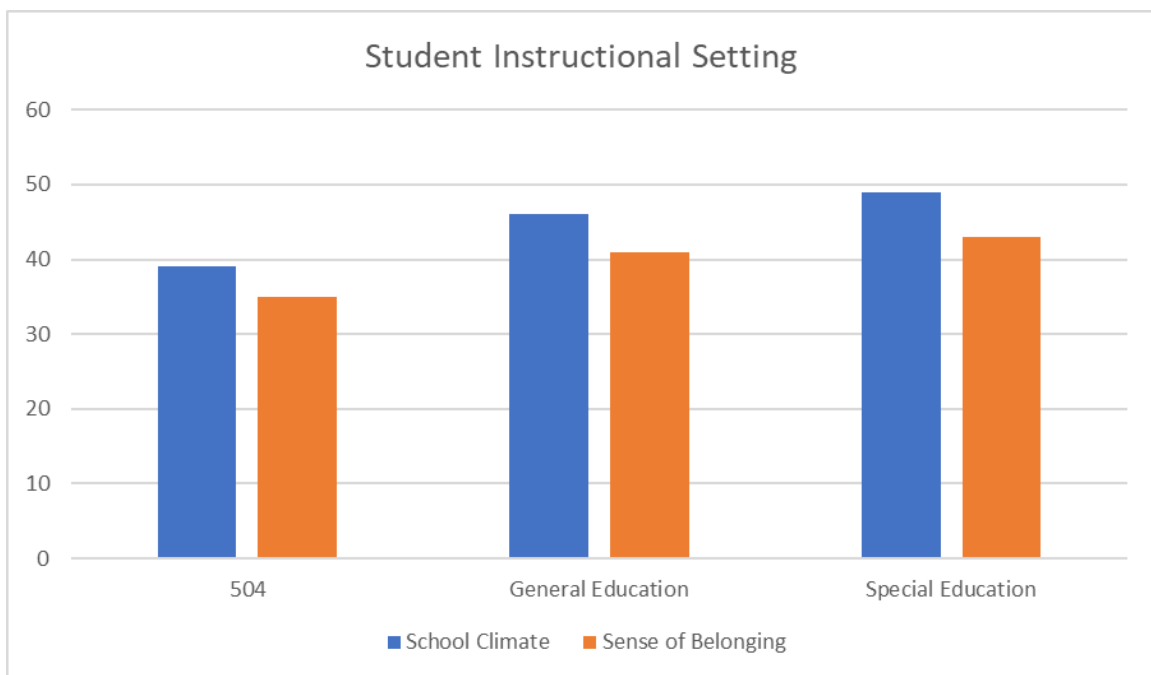


Figure 1.8

Comparison of Student Primary Home Language

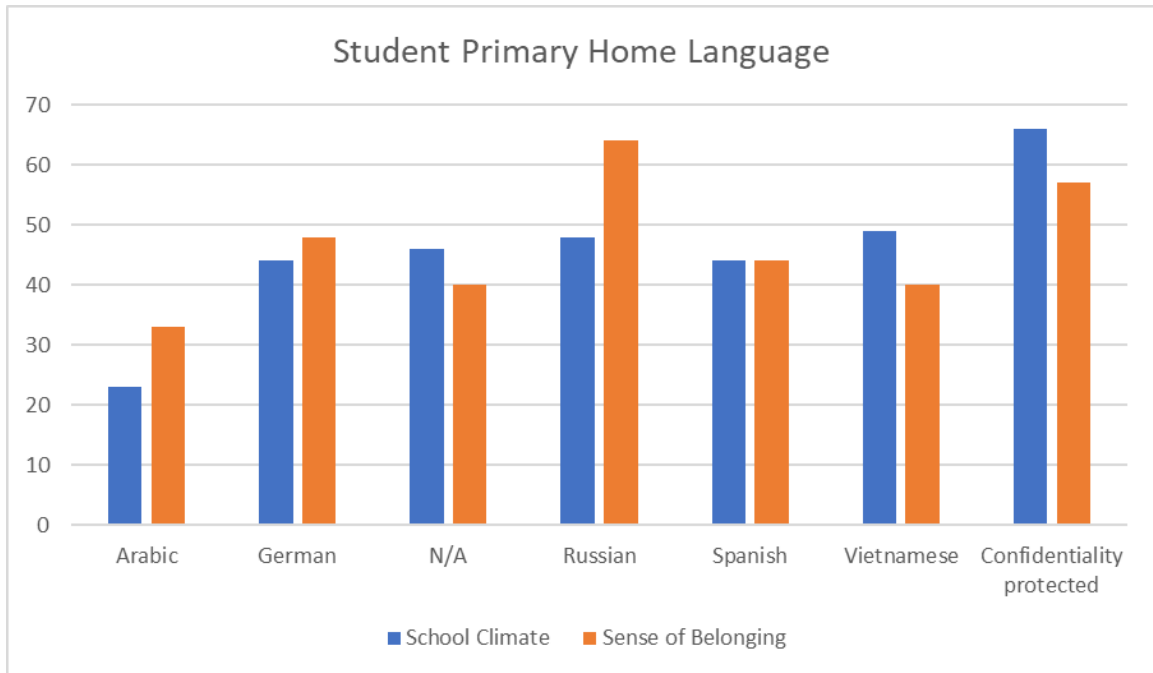
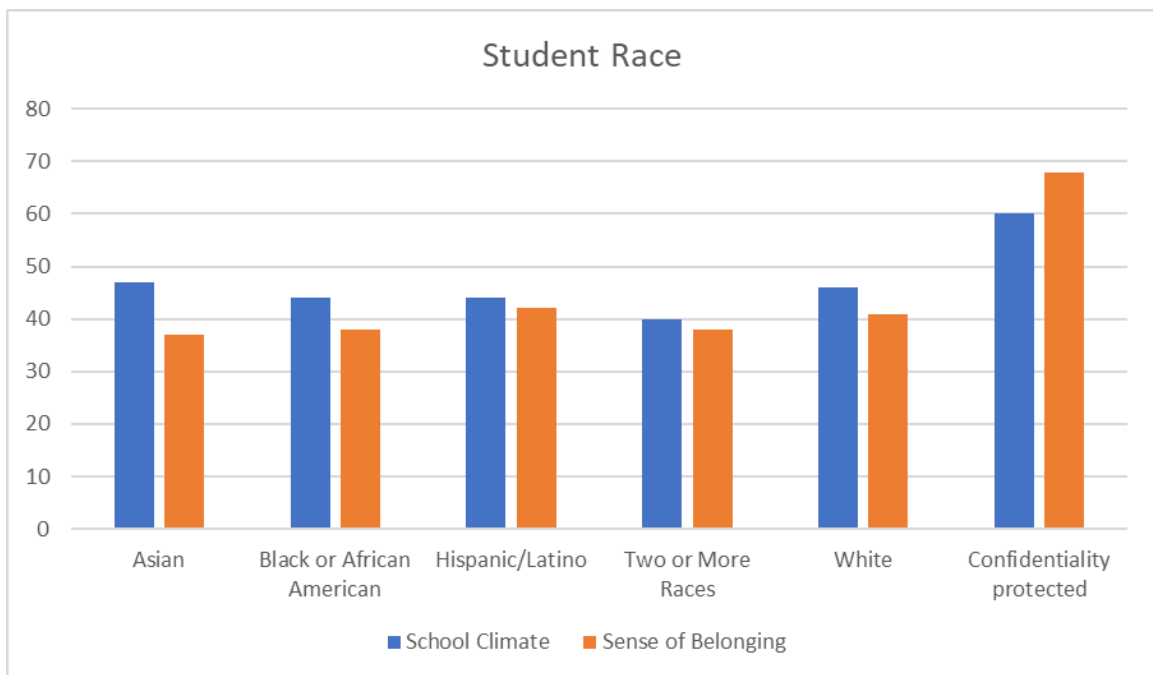


Figure 1.9

Comparison of Student Race



My study sought to determine specific interventions to consistently increase student supports and environment during the Fall and Spring terms. In addition, I aimed to have at least an 80% participation rate during the 2023-2024 school year.

Aim

Researching ways to increase school climate and sense of belonging was essential not only for River High School but for all students in the Lowcountry School District, as our Panorama scores are similar (see Table 1.1). According to the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI), 56.2% of South Carolinians, age 12-17, who have depression did not receive any care in the last year, and high school students with depression are twice as likely to drop out compared to their peers (2021). My research has the potential to increase student supports and the school environment and decrease the percentage of students not receiving care, as well as mandate school and district policies to implement interventions to increase school climate and sense of belonging.

CHAPTER TWO

Theory of Improvement

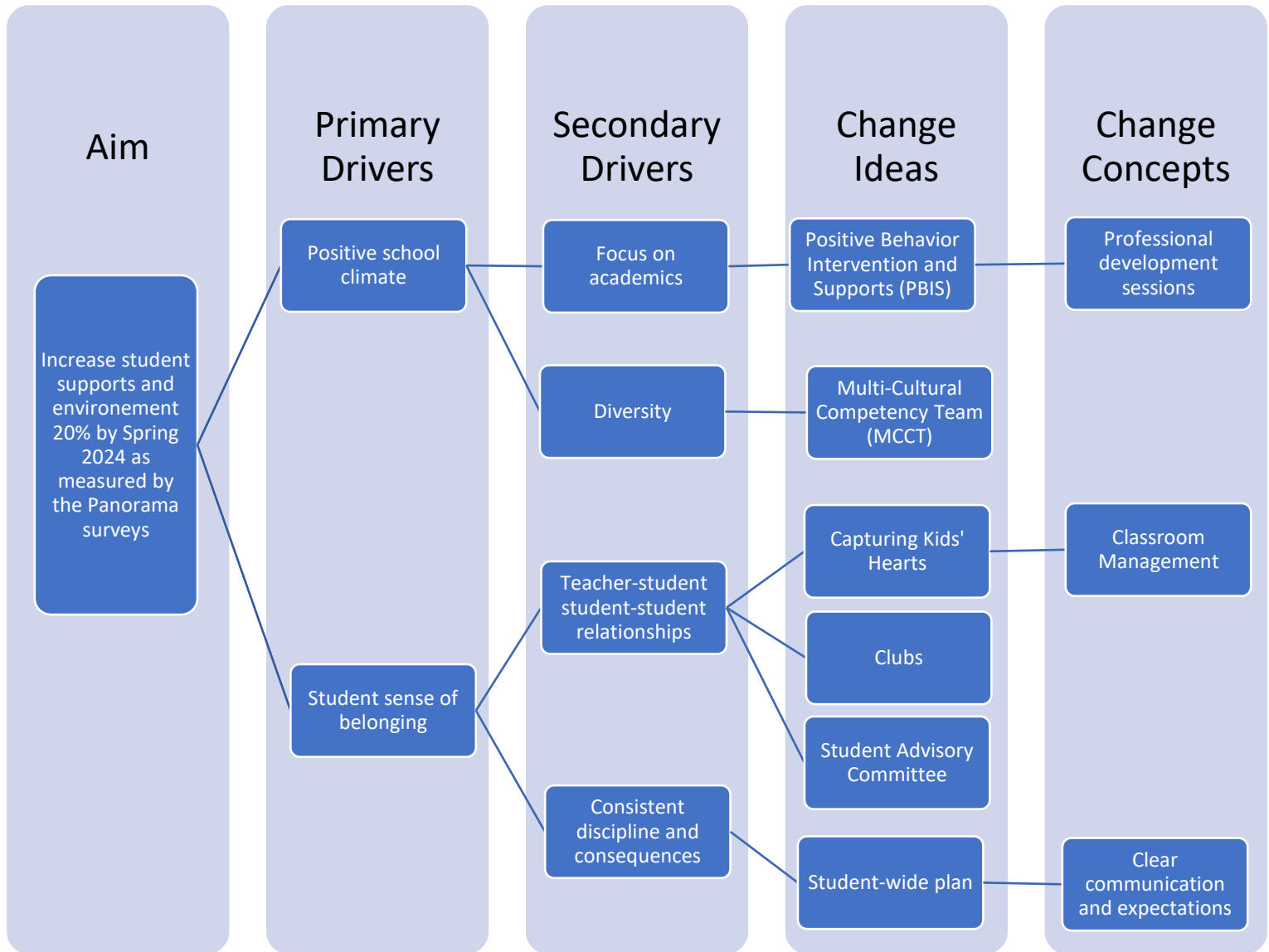
According to Hinnant-Crawford, a theory of improvement answers the question: “*What change might I introduce to solve my problem of practice and why?*” (2020, p. 116). When problems arise, educators are quick to suggest solutions to the problem which essentially is putting a bandaid on the system that is creating the problem. To address the problem of student supports and the environment, “principals influence school achievement primarily through changes in school climate” (Darling-Hammond, 2018, p. 8). There are many ways school climate can be improved to increase a sense of belonging for students. SEL can “serve as a lever for equity, addressing issues such as power, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, social justice, empowerment, and self-determination” (Schlund et al., 2020, p. 24). Students who have SEL skills can better handle their emotions and behavior (Albrecht & Brunner, 2018). Interventions such as Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), Multi-Cultural Competency Team (MCCT), clubs, student advisory committee (SAC), and school-wide plans may increase school climate and student sense of belonging. Positive outcomes such as better test scores, higher graduation rates, improved behavior, and school safety have been achieved through the implementation of SEL (Darling-Hammond, 2018).

As shown in Figure 2.1, increasing school climate and students’ sense of belonging may increase overall student supports and the environment. Possible reasons for low SEL are the focus on academics (McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Schindler et al., 2016, Burwell, 2018; DiStefano, 2020), lack of recognition of diversity (Hill, 2022;

Museus et al., 2017; Hornstra et al., 2015), relationships with teachers and peers (Scales et al., 2020; Hoffman, 2017; Gowing, 2019), and inconsistent discipline and consequences (Grace, 2020; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Fisher et al., 2019; Bottiani et al., 2017). Implementing Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) (Center on PBIS, 2023; Scott, 2001 in Tillery et al., 2012; Albrecht & Brunner, 2018; Cook et al., 2015) and a Multi-Cultural Competency Team (MCCT) (Schlund et al., 2020; Jagers et al., 2018) may increase school climate. Implementing clubs (Soria et al., 2022; Midgen et al., 2019), a student advisory committee (Mittra, 2004; Voight & King-White, 2021; Midgen et al., 2019), and a school-wide plan (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985 in Gottfredson et al., 2005) may increase students' sense of belonging. These changes can be achieved through professional development sessions and communication. Due to my sphere of influence, Capturing Kids' Hearts is not an option due to resources.

Figure 2.1

Driver Diagram



Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)

PBIS is a three-tiered approach to provide students with positive incentives to support student's social, emotional, academic, behavioral, and mental health (Center on PBIS, 2023). In *Adult Connections and School Belonging*, schools implementing a PBIS system have fostered a positive school climate and sense of belonging for all students (Scott, 2001 in Tillery et al., 2012). Through the implementation of PBIS, "students experience improved behavioral, social, emotional, and academic outcomes; schools and programs reduce their use of exclusionary discipline practices and improve their overall climate" (Center on PBIS, 2023).

After implementing PBIS, 74% of teachers and staff reported a positive school climate, 60% reported strong/positive teacher morale, and after three years, there was a decline in the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions (Albrecht & Brunner, 2018). Another study researched the effects of PBIS only, SEL curriculum only, and a combination of PBIS and SEL. The results showed the implementation of PBIS had a larger mean change than that of implementing a SEL curriculum. However, the combination of PBIS and SEL showed greater change (Cook et al., 2015).

River High School is classified as a PBIS school where teachers nominate students to receive a 'Golden Guardian' or 'Guardian of the Week' positive behaviors. Once a month, students observed 'Walking the Guardian Way' can be nominated to receive a 'Golden Guardian'. Students receive a certificate, a positive phone call home, and a token to purchase something at our school store. To recognize our top-notch students who go out of their way to help others, bring positivity to the school, and enjoy

getting involved at River, a student can be nominated as ‘Guardian of the Week’. Students receive a certificate, a positive phone call home, a card for a free Chick-Fil-A meal, and a social media post. Although RHS is a PBIS school, not all teachers are nominating students for the recognition. Expanding PBIS to all teachers and having pushes focused on behaviors can positively affect school climate and sense of belonging, not academics alone.

Multi-Cultural Competency Team (MCCT)

Cultural competence is “the ability to critically examine the social and cultural identities of oneself and others, understand and appreciate diversity from a historically grounded and strengths-focused lens, recognize and respond to cultural demands and opportunities, and build relationships across cultural backgrounds” (Schlund et al., 2020, p. 10). Before incorporating cultural competence into the curriculum, teachers must reflect on their own implicit biases. Because “students from diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds are often placed at risk by the dominant culture of schools” (Jagers et al., 2018, p. 6), the school must educate the students, and teachers, on the different cultures that are represented by the student body to create a sense of belonging for all students.

LSD leaders complete walkthroughs every year to provide feedback to schools. RHS’s walkthrough happened in December where leaders were greeted with a 16-foot Christmas tree and hallways filled with Christmas music playing over the speakers. During the debrief, leaders asked in what ways we celebrate other religions or cultures, to which we did not have an answer. Since the walkthrough, a MCCT has been developed

and meets monthly to discuss ways to increase cultural awareness throughout the building through the announcements and posters around the building. Creating a calendar of observances and heritage months for teachers to incorporate lessons into their classrooms could create a sense of belonging for all students.

Clubs

Aside from academics, school is an excellent time for students to explore other interests and meet new people. Clubs such as African-American club, chess, criminal justice, or film to name a few, can meet before, during, or after school. These sessions allow students to feel connected and have a sense of belonging to the school community.

During a research study to determine the effects of participation in recreational activities, there were positive and significant effects on students' resilience and sense of belonging when students participated in instructor-led group fitness or exercise classes, intramural sports, open recreation, outdoor recreation, or sports clubs (Soria et al., 2022). Another study used focus groups to understand students' perceptions of belonging through discussions. After the discussions, four key themes emerged: teaching and learning, environment, relationships, and extracurricular activities. The second most frequent theme identified was extracurricular activities, including clubs and school trips, as "children seemed to appreciate these activities for a range of reasons, which included opportunities to be with their friends (again strengthening the perception of the importance of relationships to children), doing things they enjoyed or thought were fun, and the chance to experience something different" (Midgen et al., 2019, p.18).

Currently, for River's 2,619 students, there are approximately twenty five clubs ranging from general to co-curricular clubs for students to join. Surveying students to determine their club interests and contacting teachers to sponsor the clubs would provide other opportunities to create a sense of belonging among the students.

School-Wide Discipline Plan

Consistency is always key. All teachers, staff, and administrators must be on board with school-wide plans such as discipline policies. When pockets of teachers do not enforce policy expectations or administrators do not process referrals consistently, students feel singled out and victimized. Gottfredson & Gottfredson reiterated their earlier findings stating, “studies have shown that schools that establish and maintain rules, effectively communicate clear expectations for behavior, consistently enforce rules, and provide rewards for rule compliance and punishments for rule infractions experience lower levels of victimization” (1985 in Gottfredson et al., 2005, p. 418). School rules must be fair and consistently managed to increase school climate and sense of belonging.

This year, LSD updated the Progressive Discipline Plan (PDP), the document schools use to write and process referrals. Although the document is used district wide, River has created school policies for behaviors such as tardies. These policies can also be brought to the School Improvement Council (SIC) for parent input and the student advisory committee for student input. Expectations for these policies need to be communicated often to ensure all teachers and administrators are holding students to the same standard the entire year.

Student Advisory Committee (SAC)

According to research studies on student voice, students that participated in the initiatives showed an increase in agency, belonging, competence, improved relations with teachers, emotional pride and protection for the school, confidence in public speaking (Mitra, 2004), communication, leadership, decision making, responsibility, analytical skills, and advocacy (Voight & King-White, 2021). Student voice can vary “from schools gathering information from students through focus groups and surveys to students working alongside teachers to develop and implement strategies for school improvement” (Mitra, 2004, p. 652). In the study by Midgen et al., the question ‘What does it look like to belong?’ was asked during a focus group. Students “commented that even the opportunity to be involved in this kind of conversation helped to promote their sense of belonging” (2019, p. 17).

This past year, River began a SAC for students to voice their opinions and provide their perspectives on decisions around the school. Students applied for the opportunity through a Google form, and students were not accepted if they had any referrals as they were seen as leaders in the school. Their job was to collect feedback from other students and be the spokesperson for any issues or suggestions that may arise.

Intervention

Due to my role, locus of control, and resources, a SAC was the intervention to increase school climate and sense of belonging. The purpose of the committee was to gain feedback from students on school climate and student sense of belonging. The SAC brainstormed possible solutions to implement and improve school climate and sense of

belonging ultimately increasing overall student supports and the environment. Last year, the SAC was a branch of the Student Council (STUCO). STUCO often only receives the opinions of a specific group of students, those who are involved with STUCO or Honor Societies, which are our A-B students. As an intervention, I opened the SAC to all students regardless of grade, class, or referral status, as this group of students had different perspectives on problems at the school. Ishimaru states schools not only require the leadership of district and school level leaders but also the leadership of the youth directly impacted by the system (2022). According to Mitra, a nationwide study of communities found no instances where student governments engaged in formal problem solving related to either the school's academic program or social-emotional climate" (2008, p. 9). I also began by sharing the Panorama survey data with the committee and discussed ideas to improve the school climate and sense of belonging for all students. Data was collected through transcribing the focus group meetings. The ideas were shared with the administration, leadership, and department chairs to implement a change. Using this one intervention had the capability to touch on the others, such as clubs or diversity, based on the conversations and feedback during the focus groups.

Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA)

To increase student supports and the environment, Figure 2.2 shows the theory of action using the change idea of student voice through a student advisory committee as "students are the experts of their own lives. They hold the most promising answers to the challenges they face every day. The greatest gains will come, therefore, from working in partnership with students" (Sussman, 2015, p. 133). My research aimed to increase

student supports and environment in areas of school climate and sense of belonging by 20% by Spring 2024, as measured by the Panorama surveys.

Figure 2.2

Theory of Action



Figure 2.3 shows the PDSA cycle that was used to monitor the implementation of the SAC. During the planning stage (June - September 2023), attending a Panorama survey training was crucial to understanding the implementation of the surveys as well as how to disaggregate the data once it was collected. Disaggregating previous years Panorama data was beneficial to understand areas of need and researching possible solutions to address those areas. During the do stage (October 2023-April 2024), the Student Advisory Committee was advertised with posters, weekly announcements, teacher input, word of mouth, interest forms, and a club fair.

Figure 2.3

PDSA Cycle

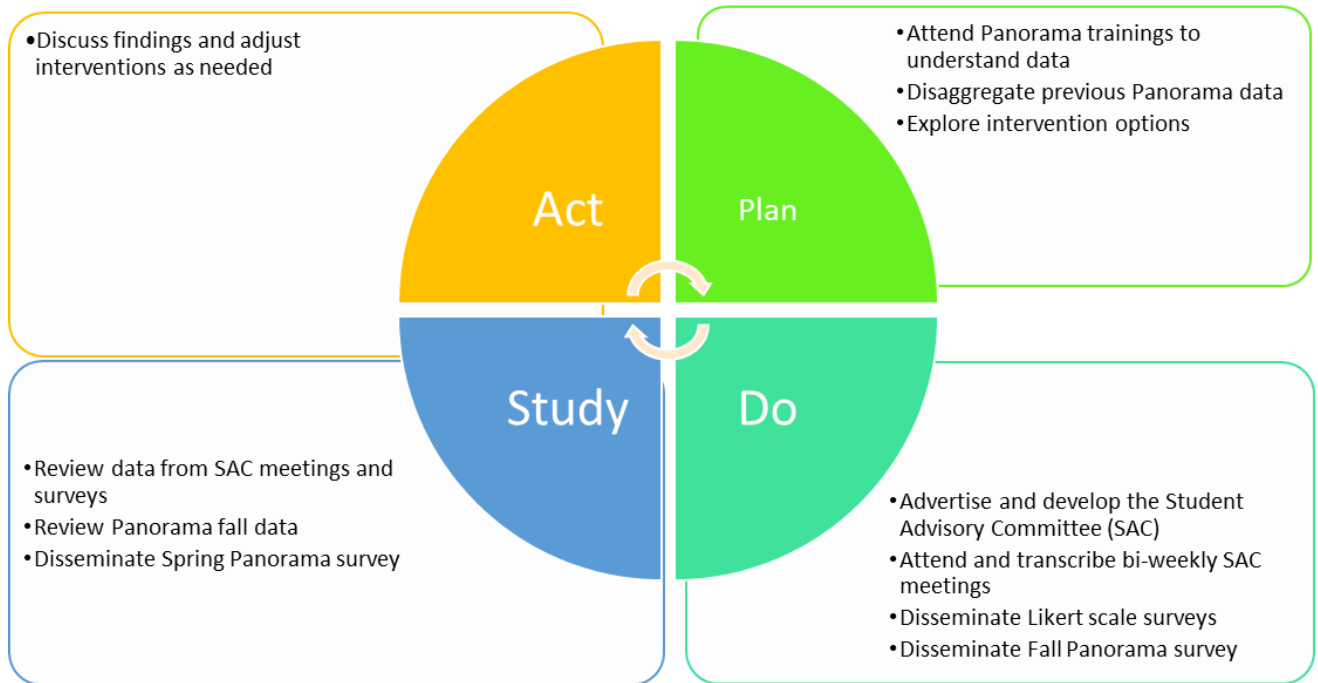


Table 2.1 depicts the student interest during the club fair and students that were recommended by their teachers to participate in the SAC. To receive additional participation from the Pinegrove community, communication was sent out to the Culturally Unmatched Resilient Legacy Students (C.U.R.L.S) club as these students are former Liberty High School students. After the 2015-2016 school year, Liberty High School, a neighboring rural school in Pinegrove closed. The 260 students in grades sixth through twelfth were bussed almost an hour to school in Harborview. The Census Reporter shows the disparities between students from Liberty High School and students living in Harborview with a \$24,354 difference in per capita income and \$325,500

difference in median value of owner-occupied housing units. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The isolating effects of the closing of their neighborhood school, long commute, and economic disparities are possible reasons why students from the Pinegrove community feel a lower sense of belonging. Additional opportunities through zoom meetings or listening circles during the lunch periods was accommodated to ensure the C.U.R.L.S club members had an opportunity to voice their concerns and suggestions on how to increase school climate and sense of belonging at River High School.

Table 2.1

Student Advisory Committee

	Interest after Club Fair	Teacher Recommendation
Number of Students	11	26
Ethnicity	73% White; 18% Black; 9% Asian	73% White; 19% Black; 4% Hispanic; 4% Asian
Gender	73% Female; 27% Male	42% Female; 58% Male
Grade Level	64% 10th; 9% 11th; 27% 12th	12% 9th; 27% 10th; 23% 11th; 38% 12th
Instructional Setting	9% 504; 9% IEP; 82% General Education	19% 504; 81% General Education
City	82% Harborview; 9% Pinegrove; 9% transfer	88% Harborview; 8% Pinegrove; 4% transfer

During the bi-weekly committee meetings, check-ins with Likert scale surveys was used to monitor if student voice was having a positive impact on school climate and sense of belonging. According to Sussman, “members [student advisory committee] demonstrated greater confidence, responsibility, proficiency with speaking and listening, knowledge of issues and change processes, and investment in school and self” (2015, p. 122). During the study stage (April – May 2024), the data collected from the interviews and surveys along with the fall Panorama data was disaggregated to determine if progress was being made toward increasing student support and environments in school climate and sense of belonging by 20%. During the act stage (May - July 2024), the spring Panorama data was used to determine if the implementation of the student advisory committee positively impacted student supports and environment. If an increase of 20% is made, the implementation will be expanded to more students. If the goal is not met, tweaks will be made to determine what changes will increase the school climate and sense of belonging.

Practical Measurement System

During the research process, qualitative data from the student advisory committee and quantitative data through surveys was used to collect data to determine if the interventions implemented were increasing school climate and sense of belonging at River High School. Adapted from Hinnant-Crawford (2019), table 2.2 shows the practical measures used in improvement science.

Table 2.2

Practical Measures

Question	Measure
Did it work?	Outcome
Is it working?	Driver
How is it working?	Process
Is it working as intended?	Balancing

Outcome Measure

An outcome measure is a summative assessment to determine if the intervention chosen made a positive impact on the area of need. Students at River High School take the Panorama surveys twice a year to measure Student SEL Competency & Well-Being and Student Supports & Environment unless a parent opts their child out of the survey. The Spring Panorama survey results acted as the outcome measure to determine if school climate and sense of belonging increased by 20%.

Process Measure

A process measure uses formative assessment checks throughout the process to determine how the chosen intervention is working. To give students a voice, a student advisory committee was created of at least twenty students. The SAC met every other Tuesday for at least thirty minutes. The students were chosen for the committee based on a student application (see Appendix C) or teacher recommendation. These students represented the school by bringing student concerns to the attention of the administration,

climate coach, and parent advocate in the committee meetings. As a team, we discussed possible solutions, and the students reported back to the study body with the outcome. The conversations were student-led, with the administrator acting as a facilitator to ensure students stay on topic and all ideas and voices were heard. The first meeting, the Board Chair shared the Panorama data with the SAC to start the conversation on why students feel they do not belong. During the meetings, Otter was used to transcribe the conversation. The process measure was measured by the transcripts in the SAC meetings to determine the attendance and participation in the SAC.

Because my research aimed to determine if student voice through the SAC increased school climate and sense of belonging in vivo coding was used as my study “prioritize[s] and honor[s] the participant’s voice” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74). During the first cycle of coding, I read through the transcripts and used in vivo coding to highlight “words or short phrases from the participant’s own language” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74). During the second cycle of coding, deductive coding (Miles et al., 2014) was used to group the in vivo codings into categories based on my literature review. Table 2.3 shows a list of the categories along with the coding that was used in the margins during the second cycle of coding. If additional categories emerge, they were documented and coded as other.

Table 2.3

Deductive Coding Scheme

Category	Code
Focus on Academics	ACA
Diversity	DIV
Relationships	REL
Discipline	DIS
Innovation	INN
Changes to Current Practices	CCP
Other	OTHER

Driver Measure

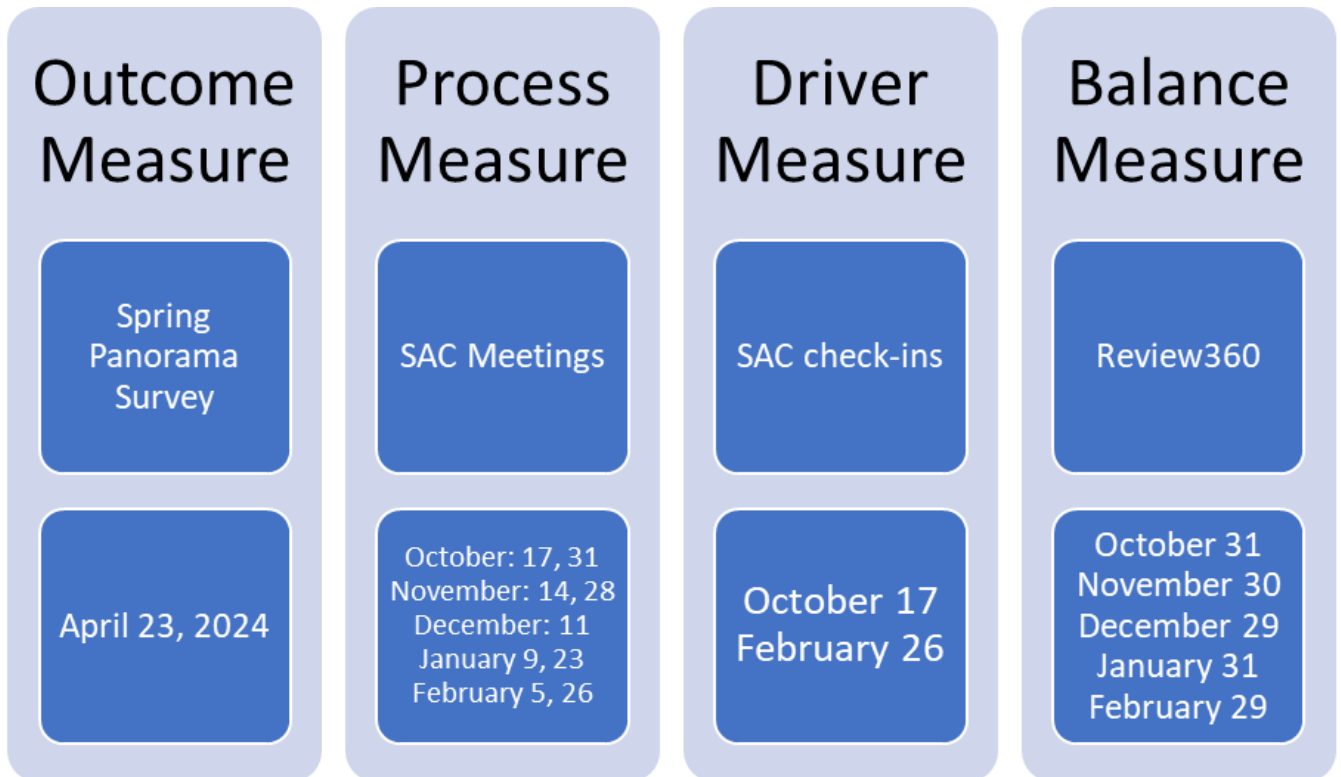
A driver measure also uses formative assessment checks throughout the process to determine if the chosen intervention is working. Pre and Post check-in surveys using a Google form measured student sense of belonging during student’s participation in the Student Advisory Committee (see Appendix D). Parents and students were notified and could opt-out of the check-in surveys. The data from the check-in surveys was uploaded into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to compare the pre and post test data and determine if there was a correlation between gender, race, grade level or instructional setting and a student’s perception on school climate or sense of belonging.

Balance Measure

A balance measure is a summative assessment to determine if the chosen intervention worked as intended and can be used to reflect if the intervention created any unforeseeable problems. The SAC allowed a space for students to use their voice to advocate for change. LSD and RHS use Review360, a platform to document and communicate behaviors to parents. Student discipline through Review360 reports were used as a balancing measure to ensure student voice was working as intended and not having any negative effects such as referrals since participation in the SAC. Below is a timeline of the data collection for each measure.

Figure 2.4

Timeline for Practical Measures



Ethical Considerations and Limitations

At River, I serve as an Assistant Principal overseeing the science department and a group of tenth through twelfth grade students. The student advisory committee was completely voluntary and an opportunity for students to voice their opinions and provide their perspectives on decisions around the school as they are the closest to the problem (Perry et al., 2020). Although the student advisory committee members are known school-wide the specific comments or suggestions made by an individual student remained confidential, and was not shared with anyone outside of the committee. Adapted from Herr and Anderson (2005), I was an insider collaborating with other insiders (Perry et al., 2020) to increase school climate and student sense of belonging. One potential issue is that Lowcountry School District and the town of Harborview has a very active Moms for Liberty activist group. The Moms for Liberty group is responsible for protesting outside of schools during the mask mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic, banning of books, parental rights bill in which teachers would be required to show parents lesson plans and resources, and most recently made an allegation the newly hired Superintendent created a hostile work environment. The court case determined the accusations were false and only after three months in office, the Superintendent decided to part ways with the Lowcountry School District. After the separation, the Deputy Superintendent was named acting Superintendent. With over 25 years of service in the Lowcountry School District, she still felt the need to send communication to teachers to ensure she is not part of an advocacy group (Moms for Liberty) to protect herself, her school aged children, and her reputation. Moms for Liberty was also behind opting

students out of the Panorama surveys as the group views “the purpose of SEL is to change the consciousness (attitudes, values, beliefs, morals, and worldview) of children to view America as a society that gives privileges to some and oppresses others” (Moms for Liberty, n.d., p.5). To mitigate any parent concerns during the research and soliciting students for the SAC, it is imperative parents understand the purpose is to use student voice to come up with ways to make students more involved in activities and proud to be a River Guardian.

As a leader in the school and a parent in the direct community, school climate and sense of belonging are integral to educating the whole child. As the Panorama lead for River High School, I have access to data, participants, and district professional development opportunities. To ensure trustworthiness in data collection, I used triangulation by comparing the data from the qualitative and quantitative data to validate my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The intervention and methods were followed through with fidelity to increase overall student supports and the environment. To ensure my analysis is valid and trustworthy, four strategies were implemented to remain unbiased. First, prior to data collection, my research was approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to protect the rights of the students and to ensure I acted ethically as a scholarly researcher (Perry et al., 2020). Second, my advisor and committee members acted as an external auditor to review my research and data processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Third, I debriefed with the research/improvement team (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to review findings from the student advisory committee as “today’s educational systems and the problems embedded in them are so complex that no

individual can solve them alone” (Perry et al., 2020, p. 114). Fourth, member-checking with the Student Advisory Committee members to recap my transcriptions and survey data by asking 1) “How accurately do you feel the findings captured your thoughts/experiences?” and 2) “What could be added to the findings to capture your experiences better?” (McKim, 2023, p. 46). Member-checks took place at the mid-way point and at the end of the Student Advisory Committee meetings to ensure validation and accuracy by the participants in my research study.

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction to Findings

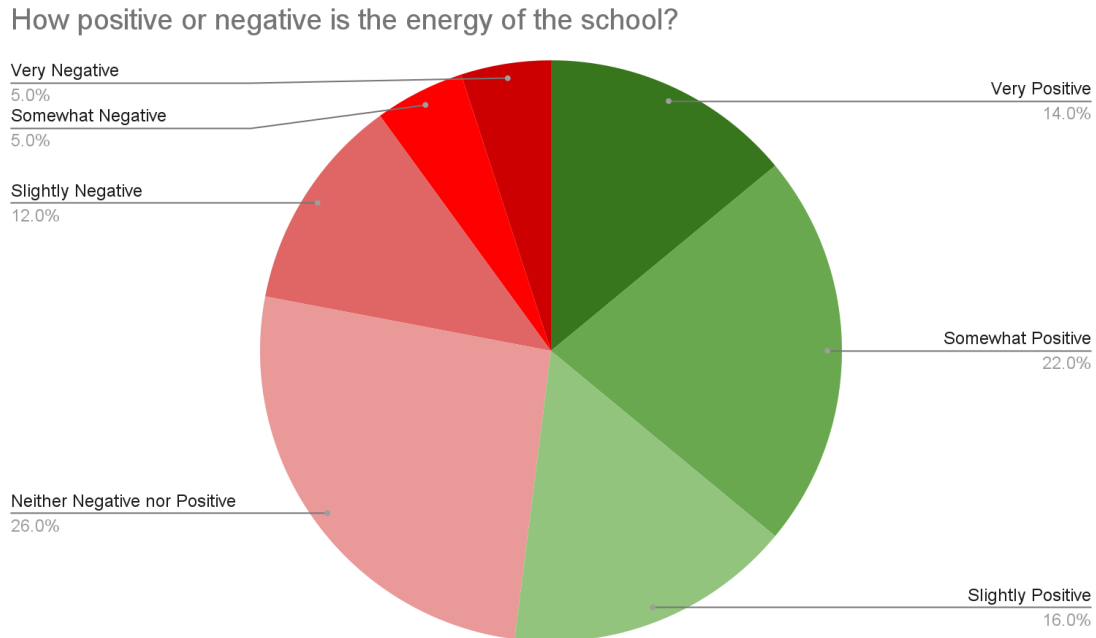
To increase student supports and environment by 20% by Spring 2024, as measured by the Panorama surveys, a Student Advisory Committee (SAC) was formed to give students a voice on their perspective of the school climate and sense of belonging. To facilitate my research, a PDSA cycle was used and key findings were found and noted during each state.

Plan

During the planning stage in July 2023, I attended district professional developments to include ‘How to Build a Tier 2 SEL Program’ and ‘Strengthening School Climate Systems with Student Support Services’. These sessions, along with collaborating with my Research Improvement Team, I learned more about the Panorama surveys. For example, in the Student Supports and Environment survey one of the questions to measure school climate asks: How positive or negative is the energy of the school? Figure 3.1 shows the students' answers from the Fall 2023 survey.

Figure 3.1

Panorama School Climate Fall 2023



With this Likert scale survey, 26% of students were indifferent about the energy of the school. However, the choice neither negative nor positive is counted in the overall percentage for not favorable. A professional development session was held for teachers to better understand the answer choices. The Student Advisory Committee also created a Google Slides presentation to recap the events so far this year RHS has implemented to increase school climate and sense of belonging.

Do

During the do stage, the majority of the behind the scenes work commenced. In October, the Panorama surveys were administered to all students at RHS minus the 75 students who opted out of the surveys. Both surveys had a 95% completion rate. Also in

October, RHS held a club fair during lunches for all students to learn about opportunities and join clubs offered at the school. During the club fair, eleven students filled out the interest form to join the Student Advisory Committee (SAC). To gain more participation, I sent an email to teachers to recommend students to recruit a diverse group of students to mirror the population of the school as shown in Table 3.1 and to elicit a different viewpoint on how to improve the school climate and sense of belonging for all students. Emails with information about the SAC and how to sign up was sent to the twenty-six students recommended by teachers.

Table 3.1

Student Advisory Committee Population vs. RHS Population

	Interest after Club Fair	RHS Population
Number of Students	11	2539
Ethnicity	73% White; 18% Black; 9% Asian	81% White; 9% Black; 5% Hispanic; 3% Asian; 2% Two or More Races; <1% American Indian or Alaska Native; <1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
Gender	73% Female; 27% Male	52% Female; 48% Male
Grade Level	64% 10th; 9% 11th; 27% 12th	26% 9th; 24% 10th; 25% 11th; 24% 12th

Instructional Setting	9% 504; 9% IEP; 82% General Education	12% 504; 8% IEP; 80% General Education
City	82% Harborview; 9% Pinegrove; 9% transfer	90% Harborview; 9% Pinegrove; 1% transfer

Table 3.2 shows the dates and action items of the Student Advisory Committee meetings. During the SAC meetings, Otter.ai was used to transcribe the meetings. After the meeting, the recording was reviewed to ensure the accuracy of the transcription and to omit any identified data. The recordings were deleted within a week after the meeting.

Table 3.2

Student Advisory Committee Meetings

Date	Action Items
October 23, 2023	Pre-Survey to SAC
November 8, 2023	
November 28, 2023	
January 23, 2024	
February 6, 2024	SAC Member Checking
February 28, 2024	
March 13, 2024	
March 27, 2024	

April 10, 2024

April 24, 2024 Post-Survey to SAC and Spring Panorama Survey

Study

During the study stage (March - April 2024), the data collected from the focus groups and surveys along with the Panorama data was disaggregated to determine if progress was being made toward increasing student support and environments in school climate and sense of belonging by 20%. The ten Student Advisory Committee meetings were transcribed using Otter.ai. After the meetings, the recordings were reviewed to determine if the transcriptions were accurate. During the first cycle of coding, five major themes evolved: 1) lunch improvements, 2) student engagement, 3) communication methods, 4) holiday and cultural celebrations, and 5) school climate and belonging. During the second cycle of coding, deductive coding (Miles et al., 2014) was used to group the in vivo codings into categories based on my literature review (see Table 2.2).

Implementation Overview

A Student Advisory Committee was the intervention to increase school climate and sense of belonging. The purpose of the committee was to gain feedback from students on school climate and student sense of belonging. The SAC brainstormed possible solutions to implement and improve school climate and sense of belonging ultimately increasing overall student supports and the environment. The Panorama survey data was shared with the committee to discuss ideas to improve the school climate and

sense of belonging for all students. Data was collected through transcribing the focus group meetings.

The SAC was a student-led club run by a Student Council member. The intent of the committee was to elicit student voice from students that mirrored the makeup of the student population at RHS. With the club meeting after school on Tuesdays, modifications to the plan were made to increase student participation in the focus group meetings. For example, instead of inviting club representatives to the Student Advisory Committee meetings, we went to their meetings. During the November SAC meeting, the students started looking toward ways to celebrate Black History Month around the school. Instead of planning in a silo, the students reached out to the Culturally Unmatched Resilient Legacy Students (C.U.R.L.S) club and the African-American club to see if we could plan Black History Month celebrations together. The students began to meet on Tuesday and Thursdays during their lunch time to plan. Table 3.3 shows the updated participation in the SAC. To gain even more feedback from the entire student body, the Student Advisory Committee sent a twenty-five question google form to gauge school climate for students at River High School (Appendix E). The survey can be broken into four sections: communication, bathroom and hallways, lunch, and engagement based on the feedback from the first SAC meeting in October.

Table 3.3*Updated Student Advisory Committee*

	Participation in SAC meetings	Returned Parent Consent	RHS Population
Number of Students	32	14	2539
Ethnicity	81% White; 6% Black; 3% Hispanic 3% Asian 6% Two or more races	71% White; 7% Black; 7% Hispanic; 14% Two or more races	81% White; 9% Black; 5% Hispanic; 3% Asian; 2% Two or More Races; <1% American Indian or Alaska Native; <1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
Gender	81% Female; 19% Male	93% Female; 7% Male	52% Female; 48% Male
Grade Level	41% 10th; 43% 11th; 16% 12th	50% 10th; 36% 11th; 14% 12th	26% 9th; 24% 10th; 25% 11th; 24% 12th
Instructional Setting	13% 504; 87% General Education	14% 504; 86% General Education	12% 504; 8% IEP;

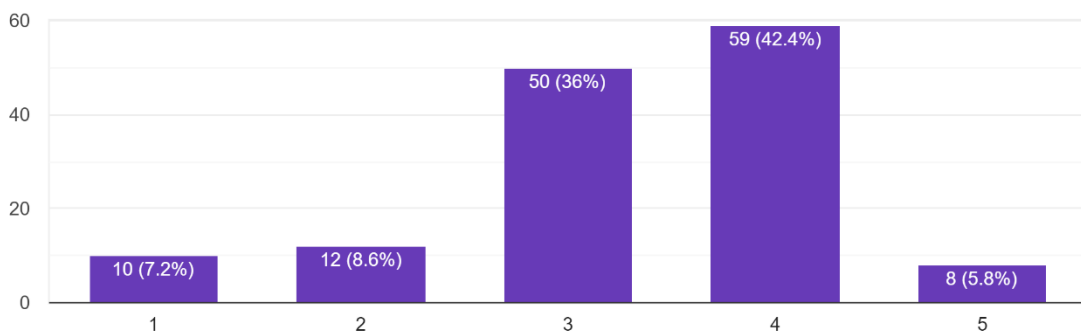
			80% General Education
City	91% Harborview; 3% Pinegrove; 6% transfer	79% Harborview; 7% Pinegrove; 14% transfer	90% Harborview; 9% Pinegrove; 1% transfer

Communication

The School Climate survey had a total of seven questions regarding communication containing one Likert-scale, four multiple choice, and two short answer questions. Questions asked students to rate school communication, preferred platforms to receive communication, and possible solutions to improve school communication. Figure 3.2 shows that 84.2% of students rated the communication at River High School average or above average.

Figure 3.2

School Communication about events, clubs, and games



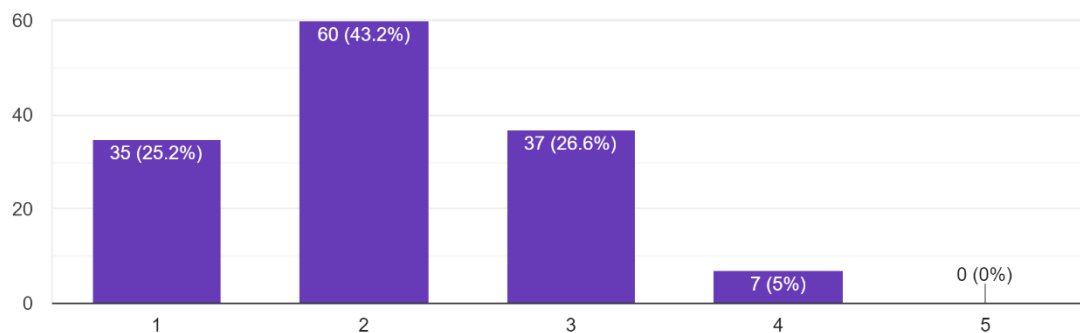
Although students scored communication as average or above average, students had great suggestions to improve school communication such as “A standardized system for communication that all of the teachers use, rather than a mix of canvas, google classroom, remind, etc.”, “you could do a news just for river about certain events at river, etc. and have it play during 2nd block or even post them on tiktok or Instagram”, “text me”, and “having a schedule/calendar of everything so we don’t have to decipher the posters every single week. A google calendar with different colors/calendars for each type of activity like academic clubs, performances, club meetings.”

Bathroom and Hallway

The School Climate survey had a total of three questions regarding bathroom and hallways containing one Likert-scale, one multiple select/write your own answer, and one short answer question. Questions asked students to rate the quality of the bathrooms and possible solutions to improve the quality of the bathrooms and hallways. Figure 3.3 shows that 68.4% of students rated the quality of the bathrooms as lower than average.

Figure 3.3

Quality of the Bathrooms



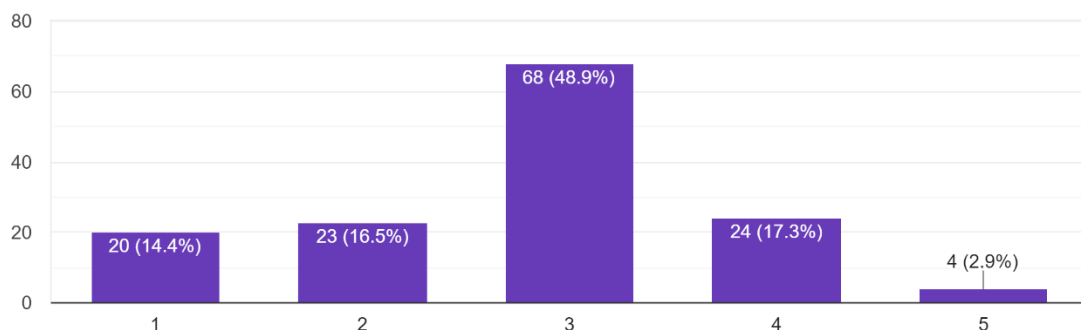
With the quality of the bathrooms receiving the lowest rating on the School Climate survey, students had suggestions to solve the issue such as “Clean them more frequently, get the writing off the walls, refill the soaps, get new facets that don’t spray or turn off immediately, get a paper towel dispenser, make sure kids don’t vape, and get a good smelling fragrance in there”, “Teach people basic respect, people trash the bathrooms because they don’t care about the people who have to clean them”, “Clean them more or have an adult by the bathrooms at all times”, and “it’s the students, not y’all.”

Lunch

The School Climate survey had a total of five questions regarding lunch containing one Likert-scale, one multiple select/write your own answer, and three short answer questions. Questions asked students to rate the quality of the lunch food, activities they would like to see offered during lunch, and possible solutions to improve the quality of the lunch food and school store. Figure 3.4 shows that 69.1% of students rated the quality of lunch as average or above average.

Figure 3.4

Quality of Lunch



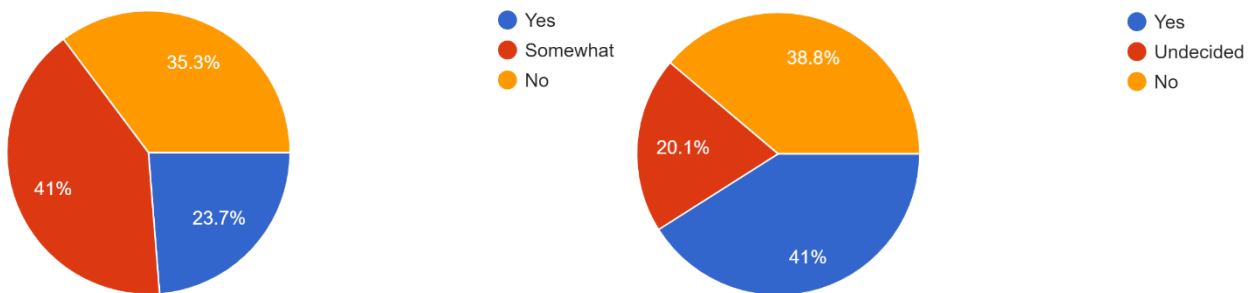
Although students scored lunch as average or above average, students had great suggestions to improve lunch such as “It’s not actually healthy. More actual fresh food and healthy food options in the lunch room and store,” “Go back to the food court style cafeteria where each stand has its own food option”, “I don’t eat it often, but when I have it is usually fine. Maybe try switching it up more often and making sure that there is enough food choices for all lunches. Also maybe offer something other than milk or apples and carrots as a healthy side option, they just get thrown away anyways and it’s a waste of school resources”, and “Bigger portions, more diversity within the hot lunch menu.”

Engagement

The School Climate survey had a total of seven questions regarding engagement containing three multiple choice and four short answer questions. Questions asked students if they enjoyed pep rallies, suggestions to improve engagement at games and clubs, and possible solutions to improve pep rallies. Figure 3.5 shows that even though only 23.7% of students enjoy pep rallies, 41% of students would enjoy more pep rallies.

Figure 3.5

Do you enjoy pep rallies vs. Would you enjoy more pep rallies?



To increase engagement at events and pep rallies, students suggested “More advertising and themes for games besides only doing themes and announcing football and boy’s basketball, could do a point system for people that attend school events and can put points in for prize”, “make it free”, “Student games at each like tug of war, floor is lava, or other things like that. Make it some kind of contest”, and “If there was a way to actively engage everyone there it would be fun. Ex. Glow Sticks, candy, audience relay races for a prize. As nice as it is seeing teams perform, I think it isn’t always fun for the audience.”

The SAC reviewed the multiple choice, Likert-scale, and short answer responses to determine the overall problems and possible solutions and recorded their answers on a Jamboard (Appendix F). as students requested “Some clear effort to improve the issues brought up in this survey would be appreciated.” Figure 3.6 summarizes the SAC finding.

Figure 3.6

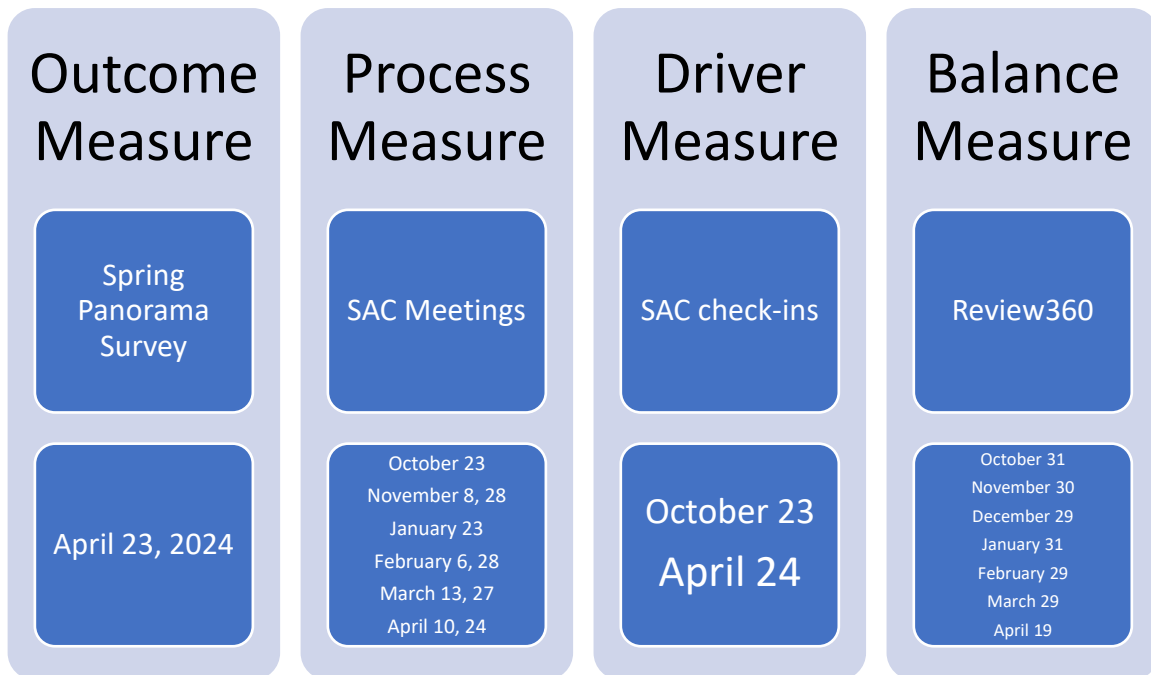
Problems and Solutions from the SAC’s School Climate Survey

Communication	Problem: Multiple forms of communication (Remind, Google Classroom, Canvas, Social Media, etc.) is too hard to keep up with.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Homeroom more often to go over announcements. •Print out of announcements given during 2nd block. •Updated calendar of events posted in a consistent location. 	
Bathroom and Hallways	Problems: Bathrooms are not kept with soap and toilet paper. SmartPass does not allow enough passes for students to go during class.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Have QR codes outside of the bathrooms for students to report supply issues. •Go back to using agenda books as hall passes. 	
Lunch	Problems: Healthy, vegetarian, and more variety and larger portions. Students want to leave campus during lunch.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Add items such as ice cream and tea to the a la carte line. •Have more food trucks or catered lunches once a month with students using a Google form to order lunch ahead of time. 	
Engagement	Problem: No school spirit at pep rallies, athletic games, or dress up days.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Make the athletic games free for students. •Have themed pep-rallies. •Advertise the games at the pep rallies and allow students to sign up to participate. 	

Figure 3.7 was adapted from Chapter 2 Figure 4 to include the new dates for each measure that was collected. The findings from each measure will be discussed in the following sections. Due to a decrease in participation and student input, an email was sent to fifty-one club leaders to join the SAC. To gain more participation the meetings were moved from after school on Tuesdays to during school lunches on Wednesdays.

Figure 3.7

Timeline for Practical Measures



Drivers and Change Ideas

Pre and Post check-in surveys using a Google form measured school climate and sense of belonging during student’s participation in the Student Advisory Committee (see

Appendix D). Parents and students were notified and could opt-out of the check-in surveys. After participating in the SAC, data from the pre and post survey showed a 14.3% increase in overall sense of belonging. Out of the thirty-two students participating in the SAC, fourteen students returned a parent consent form. The data from the check-in surveys for the fourteen students was uploaded into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to compare the pre and post test data and determine if there was a correlation between gender, race, grade level or instructional setting and a student's perception on school climate or sense of belonging.

A paired samples t-test, was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between a student's perception of the school climate before (M=5.11, SD=0.76) and after (M=5.50, SD=0.52) participation in the SAC. The paired samples t-test also determined if there was a significant difference between a student's sense of belonging before (M=3.54, SD=0.83) and after (M=4.01, SD=0.58) participation in the SAC. Table 3.4 shows the paired samples statistics for the t-test.

Table 3.4

Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pre School Climate	5.1143	.75779
Post School Climate	5.4979	.52045
Pre Sense of Belonging	3.5429	.83179
Post Sense of Belonging	4.0143	.57893

There was a strong and positive correlation between the pre and post surveys on school climate ($r=0.96$, $p=0.17$) and sense of belonging ($r=1.03$, $p=0.091$). Due to the low sample size, the school climate analysis found the mean difference to be negligible ($M=0.38$, $SE=0.27$) and insignificant, $t(14)=1.4$, $p=0.17$. The sense of belonging analysis found the mean difference to also be negligible ($M=0.47$, $SE=0.26$) and insignificant, $t(14)=1.8$, $p=0.091$. However, if all thirty-two students participating in the SAC were taken into account, the mean difference for school climate and sense of belonging would have been significant. Table 3.5 shows the paired differences and significance for the pre and post surveys.

Table 3.5

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences						Significance			
	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference						t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
	Mean	SD	SE	Lower	Upper					
Pre/Post Climate	.38357	.99792	.26670	-.19261	.95975	1.438	14	.087	.174	
Pre/Post Belonging	.47143	.96590	.25815	-.08627	1.02912	1.826	14	.045	0.091	

The paired samples effect sizes are shown in Table 3.6. The effect size for the SAC on school climate was small, with a Cohen's $d=0.38$. The effect size for the SAC on sense of belonging was medium, with a Cohen's $d=0.49$.

Table 3.6*Paired Samples Effect Sizes*

	Point Estimate
Pre/Post School Climate Cohen's d	.384
Pre/Post Sense of Belonging Cohen's d	.488

A Pearson correlation coefficient was performed to evaluate the relationship between school climate and sense of belonging. The results indicated that the relationship between school climate and sense of belonging was not significant, $r(12)=0.488$, $p=0.77$ as shown in table 3.7.

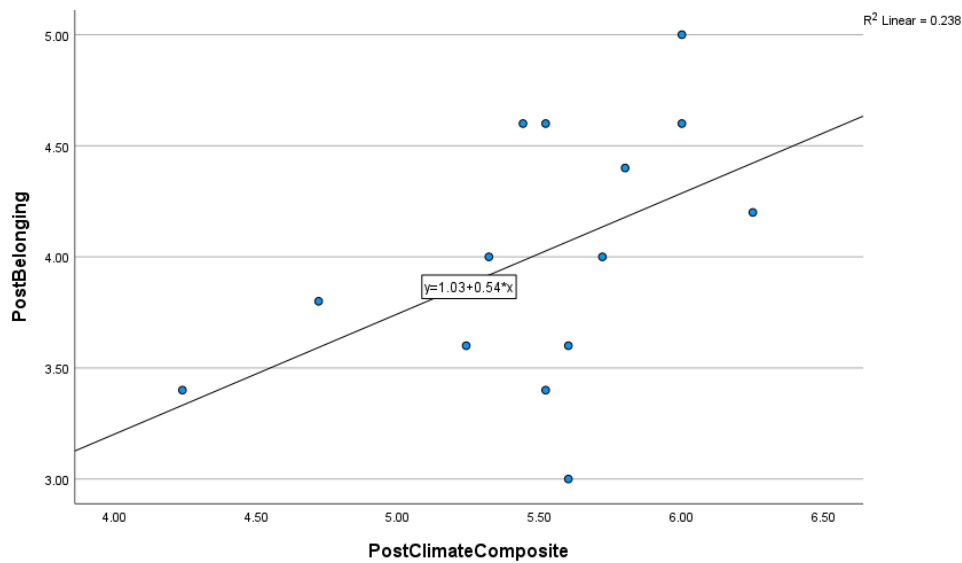
Table 3.7*Correlations*

		Post Climate	Post Belonging
Post Climate	Pearson Correlation	1	.488
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.77
	N	14	14
Post Belonging	Pearson Correlation	.488	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.77	
	N	14	14

Although the correlation between school climate and sense of belonging was not significant, there is a positive relationship between school climate and sense of belonging, as shown in Figure 3.8.

Figure 3.8

Scatter Plot of Correlation



In order to maintain confidentiality, chi-squares were not completed to examine the relationship between gender and climate, gender and belonging, race and climate, race and belonging, grade and climate, grade and belonging, instructional setting and climate, and instructional setting and belonging because the sample size of each category was less than five.

Process Measures

The process measure was measured by the transcripts in the SAC meetings to determine the attendance and participation in the SAC. The meetings were transcribed using Otter.ai and were printed out after each meeting. The audio recordings were used to clean the transcriptions and deleted within a week of the meeting. During the first cycle of coding, five major themes evolved: 1) lunch improvements, 2) student engagement, 3) communication methods, 4) holiday and cultural celebrations, and 5) school climate and belonging.

Lunch Improvements

At RHS, there are three forty-two minute lunch sessions for students based on the students third block class. Students can eat lunch in the cafeteria, outside on the patio, attend a lunch-and-learn session with a teacher, or hang out in the media center. During the SAC meetings, students discussed improving the lunch options, lunchroom experience, and introducing new activities during lunchtime. For the food, students reported “there were a lot of cases last year with like mold in salads and the food not tasting good” but it has been better this year. Another student reported “I have an early out and I don’t really stay for lunch but when I do stay, I wish they had like a more readily available calendar for the food and stuff so I can better plan and prepare my day.”

With the new implementation of the lunch-and-learn sessions, an opportunity to receive additional help in all subjects during the school day, RHS increased the lunch time from twenty-five minutes to forty-two minutes and students are unsure what to do with the extra time. About the media center, a student commented, “I know people would

probably enjoy having like board games or chess sets or checkers, or whatever, maybe like cards to play card games.” The SAC has also been working on “activities during lunch like music or live performances by like either the orchestra or the bands and either open gym or open track.” To create a more positive school climate and increase student sense of belonging during lunch would require innovation of additional activities for students to participate in and changes to current practices by providing students with a monthly calendar of food options.

Student Engagement

With a new principal this year at RHS, our biggest initiative over the next couple of years is to increase student engagement in academics, club, athletic, and fine art programs offered. During the SAC meetings, students discussed efforts to increase student participation in school events. The SAC suggested to “advertise all clubs when rising 9th graders are touring River” and to “have a sports fair along with the club fair.” Both of these suggestions would be a change to our current practices but would provide an opportunity for students to develop positive relationships and feel more connected to the school.

For athletic engagement, the student body participates in football games. However, other sports such as tennis, baseball, softball, soccer, and lacrosse do not draw a crowd. In response to the SAC’s Student Climate Survey results, they worked alongside administration and Parent-Teacher-Student Organization (PTSO) “to get student engagement at other sporting event by opening up spring sports for free for students if they come with a student ID.” Allowing students to enter the games free is an innovative

idea that can increase student engagement, create a memorable high school experience, and make students proud to be a River guardian.

Communication Methods

The SAC focused on finding effective ways to communicate with the student body because as one student said, “I check my email pretty often, but most of my friends, especially in lower classes, do not check their email at all unless someone tells them to.” The SAC discussed the need to “create a Remind for students”, “better advertising for sport games, orchestra concerts, and tutoring”, “separate school news site or online brochure”, and “post more on Facebook showing how fun the school is.” Overall, effective communication by the school is the foundation of other themes such as lunch and student engagement as strong communication and social media presence will assist students in feeling proud of River High School.

Holiday and Cultural Celebrations

The SAC focused on ideas for holiday festivities, such as decorating and organizing events that cater to various cultural backgrounds to celebrate diversity and foster a more inclusive community atmosphere. During the holiday season, students discussed incorporating more Christmas-like themes. One student said, “I mean, there’s a tree and little things but we need something more like in your face. The first one that comes to mind is Hanukkah which is probably going to be the one that is most prevalent outside of Christmas...we can ask for funds for the menorah.” Through the SAC’s work, the holiday festivities included ornament decorating stations with Hanukkah options, door decoration contests, food drive, dress up days, and a hot chocolate bar. After

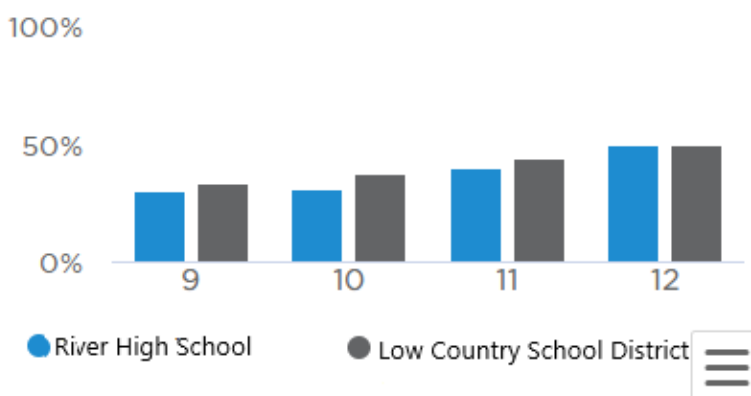
planning the holiday celebrations, the SAC began looking at the rest of the year. One student shared, “We do have MLK day in January so we could do something around the school and February is Black History Month and President’s Day if we wanted to look towards those observances.” Fostering and educating students about diversity is likely to increase school climate and sense of belonging for all students.

School Climate and Belonging

After sharing the fall Panorama survey with the SAC, they quickly jumped on board with the aim of my research to increase student supports and environment in areas of school climate and sense of belonging by “putting more effort into student happiness.” After looking at how connected students feel to the adults at school in Figure 3.9, a sophomore student suggested, “actually, that’s not too surprising. It’s over time to develop relationships and seniors have been here the longest.” In the past, students are assigned to the same homeroom teacher all four years of high school to build positive relationships with the adults in the building. However, this year homerooms were changed to help with school-wide testing such as ACT and SAT.

Figure 3.9

Breakdown by Student Grade Level

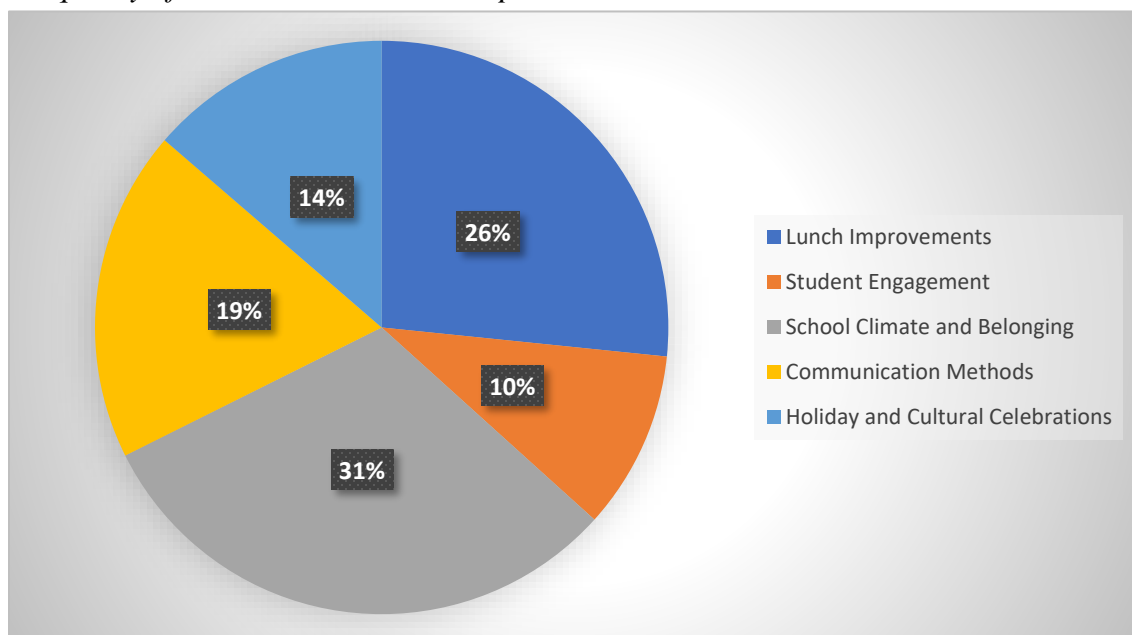


After sharing River’s school climate result is lower than that of the district, a student said “I feel like a lot of people that haven’t been to other schools don’t know what to compare it with.” Although the student brings up an excellent point, to increase school climate and sense of belonging for all students, RHS must acknowledge the low scores are communicating how students actually feel about the school, be innovative and open to new ideas, and make changes to current practices.

After reviewing the transcripts, I captured in Figure 3.10 the frequency each theme was mentioned during our SAC meetings. According to the SAC, making changes to lunch, student engagement, communication methods, and holiday and cultural celebrations will all impact the overall school climate and sense of belonging for students at RHS.

Figure 3.10

Frequency of Themes in SAC Transcripts



Overall, the SAC meetings were a success. To elicit more student participation, the SAC continually added members through teacher recommendations and an invitation to all club sponsors throughout the year. The SAC moved meeting times from after school on Tuesdays to during school lunches on Wednesdays. As an administrator, looking at the Panorama data and trying to determine what changes to implement to create a positive change seems impossible without student input. The SAC was an invaluable resource that provided student voice to create changes that will positively impact school climate and sense of belonging at RHS.

Balance Measures

Student discipline through Review360 reports was used as a balancing measure to ensure that student voice is working as intended and not having any negative effects such as referrals since participation in the SAC. Table 3.8 shows the breakdown of the student’s Review360 during his or her participation in the Student Advisory Committee. However, one student did have a referral prior to joining the SAC.

Table 3.8

Review360 data

Student	# of Referrals						
	October	November	December	January	February	March	April
turtle	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Michelle	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
pink	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Cherry	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
sully	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dancer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mary Caroline	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
S.O.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Remy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sydney Shanley	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Liz (Elizabeth) Streets	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bow and arrow	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Goat	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Because the SAC was a voluntary club, students who wanted to provide student voice to increase school climate and sense of belonging were students who normally do well academically and are more involved in school activities. Therefore, students in the SAC did not exhibit any major behavior issues in class or on school grounds.

Outcomes

Students at River High School take the Panorama surveys twice a year to measure Student SEL Competency & Well-Being and Student Supports & Environment unless a parent opts their child out of the survey. During the 2024 spring Panorama Survey, eighty-three students were opted out by their parents. The spring Panorama survey acted as the outcome measure to determine if school climate and sense of belonging increased

by 20%. The survey was administered on April 23rd during a student’s second block class. Both surveys had an eighty-five percent response rate. Since Spring 2022, RHS’s school climate increased 13% and sense of belonging increased 15%. Although the 20% goal was not met, RHS is now scoring higher than the Lowcountry School District as shown in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9

Updated Panorama Survey Data

	Spring 2022		Spring 2024	
	RHS	LSD	RHS	LSD
School Climate	46%	49%	59%	57%
Sense of Belonging	40%	43%	55%	52%

However, when compared to all schools in Panorama’s national data set, RHS school climate increased from the 10th percentile to the 30th percentile as shown in Figure 3.11 and sense of belonging increased from the 10th percentile to the 50th percentile as shown in Figure 3.12.

Figure 3.11

Spring 2024 Panorama compared to National Data Set

School Climate
Compared to National

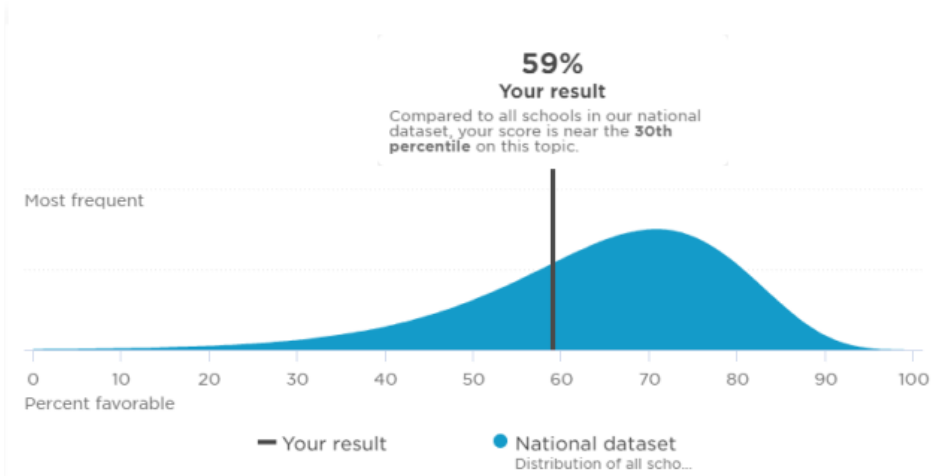
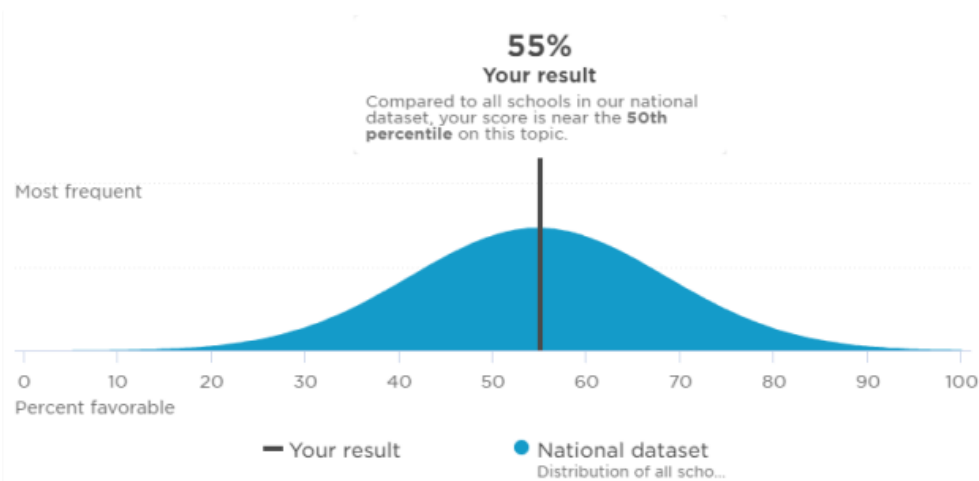


Figure 3.12

Spring 2024 Panorama compared to National Data Set

Sense of Belonging
Compared to National



The initial trends showed students scored sense of belonging and school climate lower in the Spring with Spring 2023 being an outlier. Spring 2024 is also an outlier. Figure 3.13 shows the trends in school climate with Spring 2024 being the greatest gains in both areas since Panorama has been administered at RHS. During the seven survey administrations, the median school climate was a 51%.

Figure 3.13

Trends in School Climate

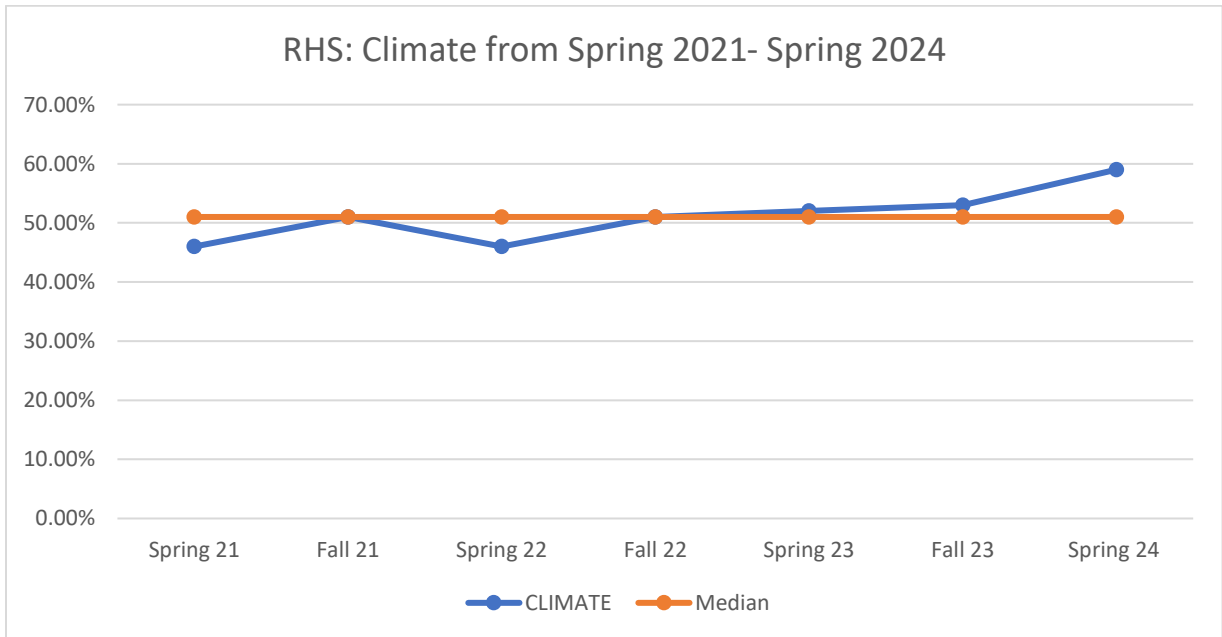
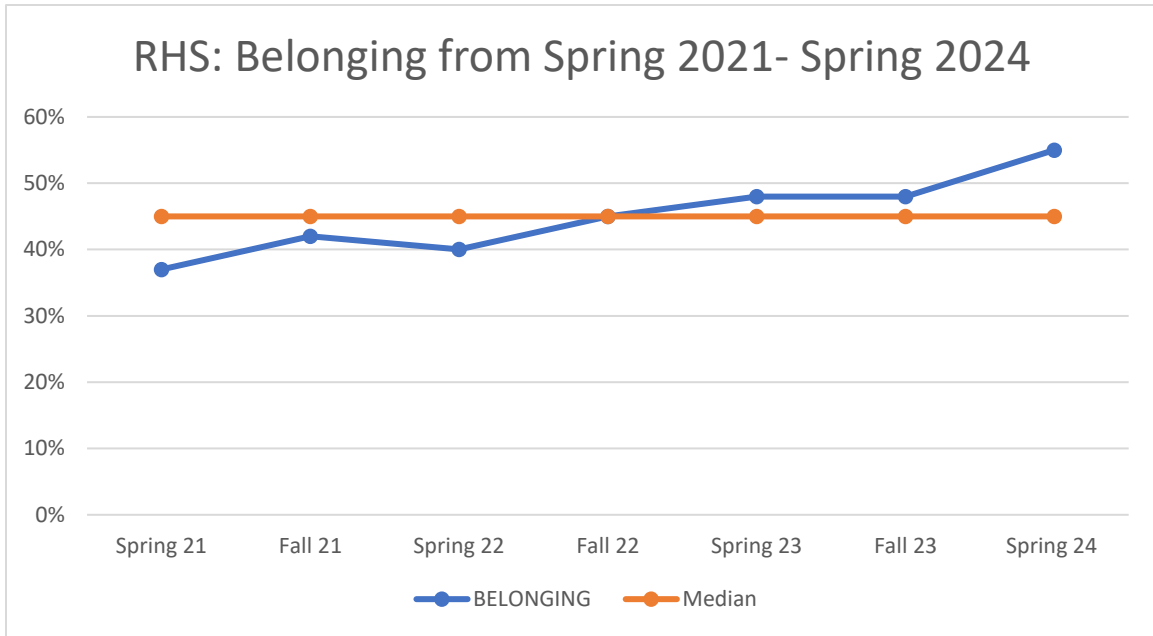


Figure 3.14 shows the trends in sense of belonging with Spring 2024 being the greatest gains in both areas since Panorama has been administered at RHS. During the seven survey administrations, the median sense of belonging was a 45%.

Figure 3.14

Trends in Sense of Belonging



Since Fall 2022, there has been four consecutive survey administrations in a positive direction. The Fall 2024 data will determine if there is an upward trend in school climate and sense of belonging at RHS. Since Spring 2023, there has been three consecutive survey administrations above the median. To show shift in school climate and sense of belonging at RHS, the Fall 2024, Spring 2025, and Fall 2025 survey data will also need to be above the median.

During the initial data disaggregation, students with a 504 plan, Arabic speaking students, and Black or African-American students had a lower perception of the school climate and sense of belonging. After the Spring 2024 survey, all subgroups showed an increase in school climate and sense of belonging except confidentially protected students for student primary home language and student race. However, the confidentially

protected category changed from 2022 to 2024. In 2022, Russian was its own category for students primary home language. In 2024, it was combined into confidentially protected. The same is true for student race. In 2022, two or more races was its own category. In 2024, it was combined into confidentially protected. Therefore, the confidentially protected does not provide an accurate data point as it is not comparing the same groups of students for the 2022 and 2024 surveys. The following figures depict the updated comparisons from the Spring 2022 survey to the Spring 2024 survey in the areas of school climate and sense of belonging for a students instructional setting, Figure 3.15, primary home language, Figure 3.16, and student race, Figure 3.17.

Figure 3.15

Updated Comparison of Student Instructional Setting

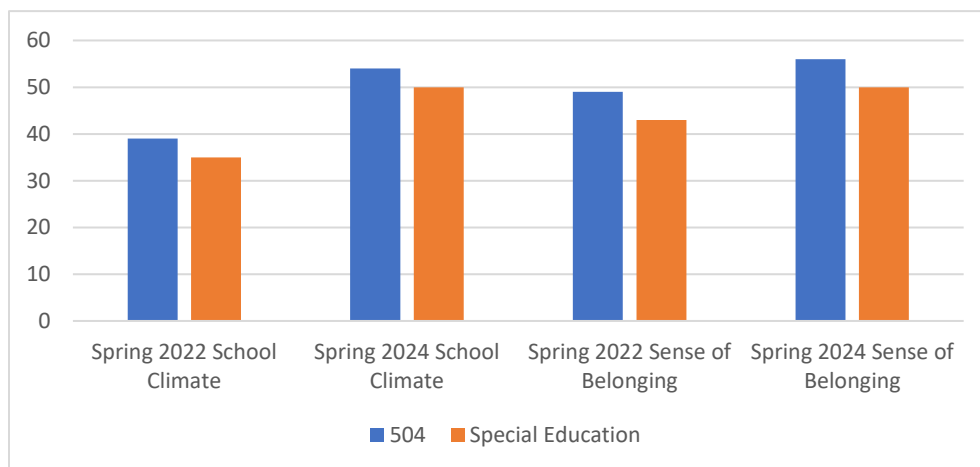


Figure 3.16

Updated Comparison of Student Primary Home Language

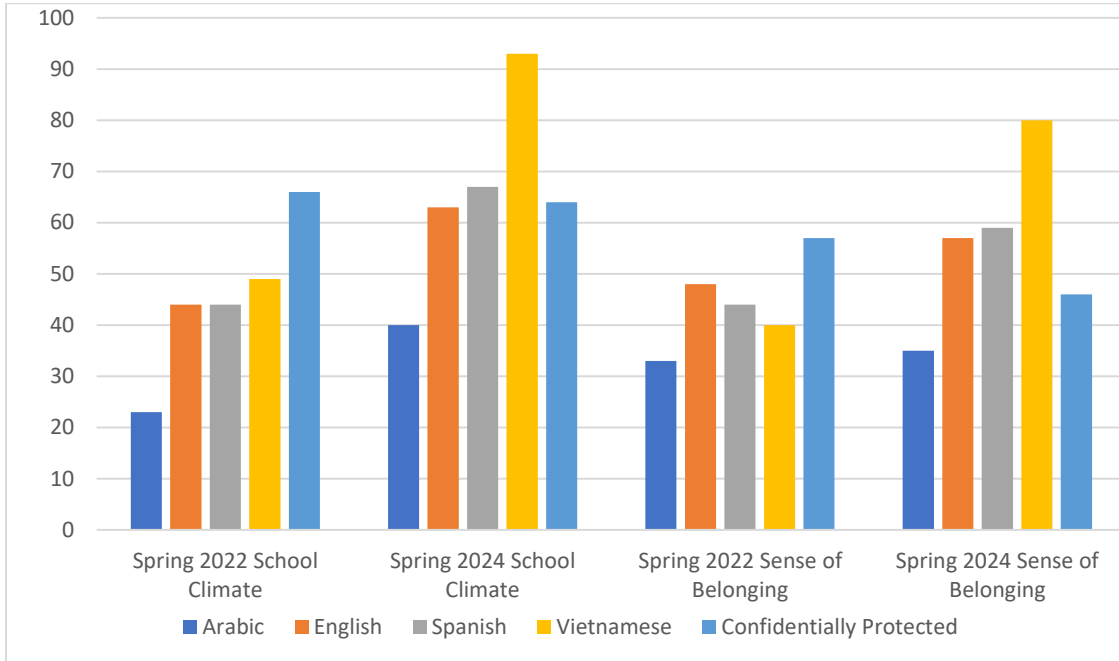
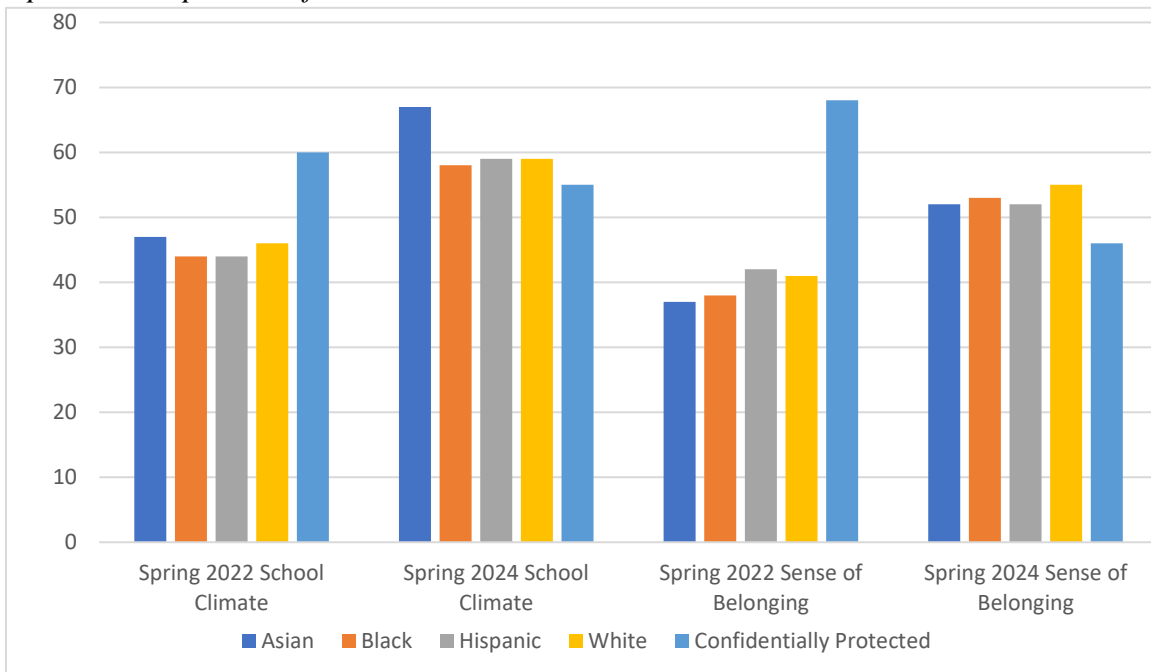


Figure 3.17

Updated Comparison of Student Race



Student voice in the Student Advisory Committee has not only impacted the students participating in the meetings, it has also impacted the entire student body at RHS. Although a 20% increase in the areas of school climate and sense of belonging were not met, school climate increased by 13% and sense of belonging increased by 15%. Student voice through the SAC will continue to be a part of the culture at RHS in the future, as this year's results had the greatest gains since the administration of the Panorama surveys.

Spreading Changes

The SAC was the intervention used to increase school climate and sense of belonging. The purpose of the committee was to gain feedback from students on school climate and student sense of belonging. The SAC brainstormed possible solutions to implement and improve school climate and sense of belonging ultimately increasing overall student supports and the environment. Although the quantitative data from the pre and post surveys did not show statistical significance between a student's participation in the SAC and school climate or sense of belonging measures, survey results indicate the mean of school climate and sense of belonging did increase. Due to the positive impact student voice had on school climate and sense of belonging, the team at River High School plans to continue the implementation of the Student Advisory Committee with some adjustments.

While planning for the 2024-2025 school year, the teachers at RHS developed a committee to brainstorm ways to increase student engagement which ultimately impacts the school climate and student sense of belonging. Through a house system, students will

earn points by attending sporting or fine arts events, participating in dress up days, receiving student of the month awards, random ID checks, and least amount of tardies or absences. The house system will give students an additional opportunity to obtain a leadership position as there will be four student officers per house. To develop a stronger bond and sense of community, homerooms will start meeting once a week for announcements, to discuss upcoming events, class meetings, and to update house points.

As with any change, factors such as student and teacher buy-in can facilitate or hinder the intervention. However, the SAC and teachers have played an integral role in planning the house system for next year. While RHS will still continue to meet with the SAC along with club leaders, the house system will allow for more student voices to build a positive school climate where all student's feel a sense of belonging. To adapt student voice to different contexts, leaders must be willing to review data, listen to student suggestions, and create action plans to be change agents.

Limitations and Lessons Learned

During the PDSA cycle, there were challenges and successes. First and foremost, the Lowcountry School District initially denied the request to research school climate and sense of belonging using the Panorama surveys. After over two and a half months of discussing the research with the district, my research to increase school supports and environment in the areas of school climate and sense of belonging through student voice in a Student Advisory Committee was finally approved. Secondly, even after input from a student survey, the meetings were changed from Tuesdays after school to Wednesdays

during school lunches, attendance and participation in meetings were inconsistent with thirty-two students attending and only fourteen parent consent forms returned.

However, the successes of the SAC far outweighed the challenges. The students truly took on a leadership role and developed their own school climate survey specific to RHS. After sharing the Fall Panorama results with the SAC, a student suggested, “First thing I’m thinking of maybe we send out surveys like this. Kind of our own Panorama survey but just for us and like more specific to the good and bad things we know about our school.” After reviewing the student survey responses, the SAC identified common areas of need and developed possible solutions to address those needs which was shared with the school’s Multi-Tiered Systems of Support team and some suggestions have already been implemented such as having more student engagement at the pep rallies by allowing students to sign up to volunteer for the games played. The student voice in the SAC meetings has been a huge driving force in decisions being made to increase school climate and sense of belonging.

Conclusion

Even though only fourteen students participated in the SAC meetings, there were sixteen sports, clubs, and organizations represented such as AP Academy, ROTC, C.U.R.L.S, theatre, band, dungeons and dragons, police explorers, and basketball. The SAC did uncover common themes of lunch improvements, student engagement, communication methods, holiday and cultural celebrations, and school climate and belonging that will continue to be the focus for future SAC meetings and leadership planning meetings over the summer. The increase from pre and post-survey data on

school climate and sense of belonging for students participating in the SAC was not statistically significant due to a small sample size. However, the overall student population's school climate increased by 13%, and the sense of belonging increased by 15% as reported by the Spring 2024 Panorama data. In the final chapter, I will discuss the implications of my findings on student voice to increase school climate and sense of belonging for future research, practice, and policy.

CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

My research aimed to increase student supports and environment in areas of school climate and sense of belonging by 20% by Spring 2024, as measured by the Panorama surveys as prior data show students do not feel they belong at RHS. Although RHS's school climate and sense of belonging are comparable to LSD's when compared to all schools in Panorama's national dataset, RHS scored in the 10% for school climate and sense of belonging on the SEL surveys. The Panorama data shows a need for school climate and sense of belonging interventions to increase student support and environment.

A Student Advisory Committee (SAC) was the intervention to increase school climate and sense of belonging through student voice. The purpose of the committee was to gain feedback from students on school climate and student sense of belonging. The SAC brainstormed possible solutions to implement and improve school climate and sense of belonging ultimately increasing overall student supports and the environment. The following sections will include my reflections on the improvement science process, the implications of the findings, contributions to research and practice, and recommendations for practice and policy.

Reflection on the Improvement Science Process

Overall, the improvement science process was an opportunity to become a better school leader. All schools should use this process to create positive, research-based interventions based on a needs assessment. Schools constantly monitor test data to

determine if they meet district and state goals. Through the process, school leaders can use practical measures to adjust the intervention to ensure the district and state goals are met. Through my research process, there were ups and downs. On one hand, during the literature review phase, I was lucky enough to work alongside a district social-emotional learning (SEL) counselor. She was an invaluable resource that provided me with the background information on SEL and resources in the district. On the other hand, after completing my proposal, LSD originally denied my request to research as it was a district policy to not allow Panorama data for individual research. After waiting for two and a half months, LSD granted permission to move forward to conduct the research.

Throughout the process, I continued to recruit students in an attempt to mirror the student population at RHS as shown in Table 3.3. To gain more participation, the after-school meetings were changed to during the school day during lunches. More students were able to participate during the school day, but I still had to compete with food truck Wednesday. However, I believe the SAC members felt they were making an impact on the school climate and student sense of belonging as one student said, “will this continue next year? I did not know this was a club and I have really enjoyed it.”

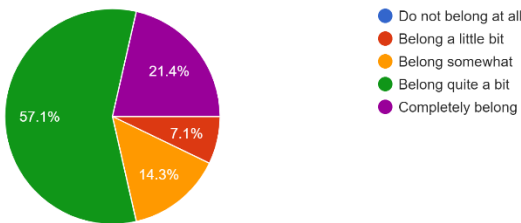
Revisit the Theory of Improvement

As seen in Figure 2.2, a Student Advisory Committee can increase overall school climate by increasing student voice and student sense of belonging. The SAC completed a pre-survey in October and a post-survey in April to measure school climate and sense of belonging using the Panorama questions. As shown in Figure 4.1, student’s overall

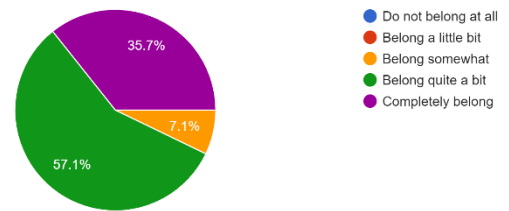
sense of belonging increased from 78.5% favorable to 92.8% favorable after participation in the SAC.

Figure 4.1
Sense of Belonging Pre-Survey vs. Post-Survey

Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?
14 responses



Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school?
14 responses



Overall, the theory of improvement was effective in guiding an increase in student’s sense of belonging through student voice in the SAC. While the pre and post-surveys can provide an accurate account of a student’s sense of belonging, there are modifications I would consider to measure school climate in the future. Instead of asking students, ‘How positive or negative is the energy of the school?’, school climate can be measured by student engagement in clubs, sporting events, fine art shows, or pep rallies. As it currently stands, the SAC is not sustainable as participation in the meetings was not consistent and did not give student voice to the majority of the student population at River High School. However, through the implementation of new systems next school year, school climate can be measured, and the SAC can be expanded. The house system can increase school climate by monitoring and encouraging engagement by houses earning points for student attendance at sporting or fine arts events, participation in dress

up days, receiving student of the month awards, random ID checks, and least amount of tardies or absences. The house system will give students an additional opportunity to obtain a leadership position as there will be four student officers per house. Also, with homerooms meeting once per week, the SAC can be comprised of at least one student per homeroom to gain insight from their peers and report back to the SAC. To ensure diversity in the SAC, the students can volunteer to participate as well as continue teacher recommendations.

Reflect on the Aim

The aim of my research was to increase school supports and environment in the areas of school climate and sense of belonging by 20% as measured by the Panorama surveys. Reiterating the statics from my aim, 56.2% of South Carolinians, age 12-17, who have depression did not receive any care in the last year, and high school students with depression are twice as likely to drop out compared to their peers (National Alliance for Mental Illness, 2021). For the 2023-2024 school year, there are three hundred and sixteen students with a 504 plan. Of the three hundred and sixteen students, thirty-one percent have accommodations due to a depression or anxiety diagnosis.

My research has the potential to increase student supports and the school environment and decrease the percentage of students not receiving care, as well as mandate school and district policies to implement interventions to increase school climate and sense of belonging. With the Lowcountry School District's budget cuts for the 2024-2025 school year, it was left up to each individual school to fund our clinical social worker, mental health counselor, climate coach, and mental health and wellness coach.

With a combination of student voice through the SAC and funding our student support positions, school climate and sense of belonging can continue to increase at RHS, across the district, and state.

Implications of Findings

To increase student supports and environment in the areas of school climate and sense of belonging, programs such as Capturing Kids Hearts is not effective because “those calling for school reform often are disappointed with the results of reform initiatives because programs do not affect the environments in which students learn and behave” (McEvoy & Welker, 2000, p. 134). Therefore, to increase student engagement and achievement, schools must foster a positive school climate where all students can learn. Incorporating SEL has shown positive impacts on student’s academics, mental health, skills development, and school climate (Mahoney et al., 2018). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) suggests incorporating the five core competencies into any SEL program: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (2020). Ishimaru (2022) states schools not only require the leadership of district and school level leaders but also the leadership of the youth directly impacted by the system.

The Student Advisory Committee provided students with an opportunity to incorporate the five core competencies, set out by CASEL, as well as being leaders in school decisions. The SAC was self-aware of their perceptions of the school climate compared to all students, built relationships with the rest of the student advisory committee to have tough conversations on the findings from the school climate survey

responses, and created responsible decisions to improve the school climate and sense of belonging for all students. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) framework discussed in chapter 2 also aligns with using student voice to increase school climate and sense of belonging at RHS. The CECE framework is broken into two categories: 1) cultural relevance and 2) cultural responsiveness.

Cultural relevance increases a student's sense of belonging by ensuring the environment is relevant to a student's background and identity by including opportunities to connect with faculty, opportunities to share knowledge about their communities, opportunities to give back to their communities, participation in solving real world problems, and feeling their cultural background is valued (Museus, 2017). Cultural responsiveness increases a student's sense of belonging by ensuring the programs and practices meet the needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds by including values of teamwork, meaningful relationships with students, ensuring students have the opportunities and support, and access to faculty members (Museus, 2017).

For student voice through a Student Advisory Committee to be replicated, it is imperative the demographics of the committee match the demographics of the entire student population for equity and justice in education. In order to achieve this, flexibility with meetings during the school day will need to be accommodated to ensure all students can participate as meetings moved from after school to during school lunches this year to increase student participation. Also, for school climate and sense of belonging measure to actually increase, action steps should be taken to address issues discussed in the SAC as a

student suggested “some clear effort to improve the issues brought up in this survey would be appreciated.”

Contributions to Research and Practice

My research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a context in which a high achieving school can increase student supports and the environment in areas of school climate and sense of belonging through student voice. However, according to Mitra (2008), a nationwide study of communities found no instances where student governments engaged in formal problem solving related to either the school’s academic program or social-emotional climate” (p. 9). The SAC at RHS created their own school climate survey to gauge school climate and sense of belonging. The committee read through the multiple choice and short answers to find common themes and problems. The committee then developed solutions to address those problems and the solutions were presented to the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) team. Next year, changes are being made based on the SAC’s suggestions such as a weekly homeroom for announcements to aid in communication, a QR code to report low or no supplies in the bathrooms, first one hundred students will be allowed into the spring games for free to encourage student engagement, and students can sign up to participate in pep rally games for more student involvement.

My research and intervention impacted my leadership capacity and understanding of how to lead in educational contexts. As a leader, especially in Harborview, decisions cannot be made in isolation. Decisions cannot be top-down and need student input, teacher buy-in, and support from the parents and the district. This intervention allowed

me the opportunity to present the Panorama survey data to the SAC to gain an understanding on why they thought RHS's school climate and sense of belonging scores were low, especially lower than the district. The SAC's ideas were the driving force for changes and showed positive gains in the areas of school climate and sense of belonging. In line with my original assumption, RHS is now scoring higher academically and on school climate and sense of belonging measures compared to the LSD. Future research should expand student voice by gaining more student participation as well as exploring if student voice in Title 1 or rural schools has an impact on school climate, student sense of belonging, or academic achievement.

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

Currently, it is a practice for RHS to have a student council. However, student council is a class listed as global leadership community engagement with sixteen total students. According to the program of studies, the class helps develop skills to become college and career ready as well as develop leadership and character. Student council normally plans dress-up days and pep rallies for the entire student population.

Lowcountry School District policy AR BDF-R states at least two students should participate in the School Improvement Council (SIC) to prepare a five-year plan and develop and monitor school improvement and innovation plans.

The current practice and policy limits student voice and does not gain insight from a sample that matches the demographics of the entire student population. Decisions made in silos may not accurately reflect student's needs and could lead to trying interventions year after year with no improvement which could lead to teachers and

students losing faith in the process and will not easily buy into the next intervention.

Therefore, a diverse SAC should be a practice at all schools to create innovation plans to address the needs of the student population. The student council and SIC students should be a part of the SAC to deliver information back to the perspective committees and for all committees to be working towards a common goal.

Conclusion

My research study successfully answered the following questions: How can students' supports and environment in school climate and sense of belonging be increased? and To what extent, if any, do focus groups increase school climate and sense of belonging through student voice? Contrary to Mitra's (2008) claim of no instances where student governments engaged in formal problem solving related to the school's social-emotional climate, student voice through a Student Advisory Committee increased school supports and environment in the areas of school climate and sense of belonging at RHS. To increase student engagement and achievement, schools must foster a positive school climate where all students can learn. According to Mahoney, incorporating SEL has shown positive impacts on academics, mental health, skills development, and school climate (Mahoney et al., 2018). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) suggests integrating five core competencies into SEL programs: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (2020). Ishimaru (2022) emphasizes the need for leadership not only from district and school leaders but also from the youth directly impacted by the system.

The Student Advisory Committee provided students with an opportunity to incorporate these five core competencies and take on leadership roles in school decisions. The committee members demonstrated self-awareness by understanding their perceptions of school climate compared to the broader student body. They built relationships within the committee to engage in tough conversations about the school climate survey findings and made responsible decisions to improve school climate and sense of belonging for all students.

In a seven month time span, students who participated in the SAC sense of belonging increased 14.3% and overall sense of belonging at RHS increased 7%. Students enjoyed the process as one student at the last SAC asked, “will this continue next year? I did not know this was a club and I have really enjoyed it.” The SAC was process I actually enjoyed and looked forward to our meetings. The students exceeded my expectations and created solutions far better than I could have imagined. I am excited to continue and expand the SAC next school year.

APPENDICES

Appendix A



Spring 2022 Student Supports & Environment (SY 21-22)

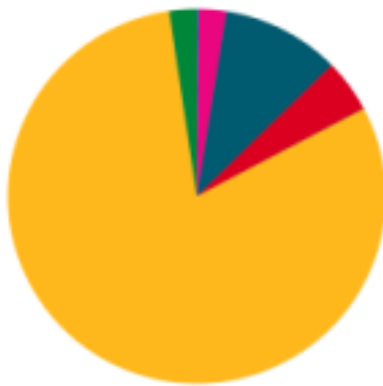
Group Name	Group Size	School Climate Sense of Belonging Teacher-Student Relationships		
		46%	40%	58%
All respondents	2,336	46%	40%	58%
Student Instructional Setting				
504 Plan	100	-7	-5	-9
General Education	2,067	0	+1	0
Special Education	169	+3	+3	+4
Student Primary Home Language				
ARB	6	-23	-7	-5
GRM	5	-2	+8	-22
N/A	2,268	0	0	0
RSN	5	+2	+24	+6
Spanish	22	-2	+4	-4
VTN	7	+3	0	+8
Confidentiality protected	23	+20	+17	+16
Student Race				
Asian	58	+1	-3	+3
Black or African-American	194	-2	-2	-9
Hispanic/Latino	81	-2	+2	-3
Two or More Races	54	-6	-2	-9
White	1,944	0	+1	+1
Confidentiality protected	5	+14	+28	+6

Appendix B

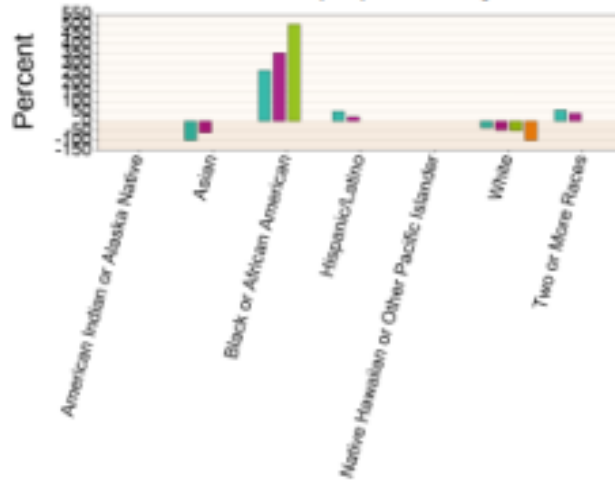
Suspensions By Ethnicity
Academic Year, 2022-2023



High
Population



Level of Disproportionality



- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Two or More Races

- In School Suspension
- Out Of School Suspensions
- DAEP
- Expulsion

In School Suspension



Total: 312

Out of School Suspension



Total: 203

DAEP



Total: 10

Expulsion



Total: 4

Appendix C

Focus Group Protocol and Application

Arrival-in person: We will meet with the students that are in the student advisory committee. Students are instructed to seek comments, questions, and concerns from their peers and report back to the student advisory committee to problem-solve issues that may arise. We will meet in the media center classroom that is set up with a big conference table. Each student will be greeted and signed in by scanning their student ID.

Overview: The purpose of the SAC is to gain feedback from students on school climate and student sense of belonging. We will brainstorm possible solutions to implement and improve school climate and sense of belonging ultimately increasing overall student supports and the environment.

Confidentiality: Although the student advisory committee members are known school-wide, the specific comments or suggestions made by an individual student will remain confidential and will not be shared with anyone outside of the committee. Explain that we cannot guarantee anonymity for the group, but as a leader, I will maintain confidentiality.

Follow-up: Give each student my e-mail address. Explain they can contact me if there is something they want to share privately if they have follow-up thoughts, or if they have questions.

Closing: Thank students for their involvement and set the next student advisory committee focus group meeting.

Student Board Interest

Quick Survey to Gauge Interest in a Student Board

audrey_gilden@k

[Switch account](#)



* Indicates required question

Email *

Record audrey_gilden@charleston.k12.sc.us as the email to be included with my response

Are you interested in participating in student board? (These are meetings between students to share our thoughts on what we should/shouldn't change, then we work together to make those changes and improvements. Anyone can come.)

Yes

Maybe

No

Other: _____

Do you think a Student Board would help the school?

Yes

Maybe

No

Other: _____

What major issue(s) do you feel we should address?

Your answer _____

Are you available to meet after school on the second Tuesday of each month? (Our First meeting will be on 10/17)

Yes

Maybe

No

Other: _____

Appendix D

SAC Check-ins

Student Board: Sense of Belonging Pre

* Indicates required question

1. Email *

2. Pseudonym *

3. Gender *

Mark only one oval.

Male

Female

Other

4. Race *

Mark only one oval.

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic/Latino

Two or More Races

White

American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander

5. Grade Level

Mark only one oval.

9th

10th

11th

12th

6. Instructional Setting *

Check all that apply.

I have a 504 plan

I have an IEP

I have neither a 504 or IEP

7. How positive or negative is the energy of the school? *

Mark only one oval.

Very negative

Somewhat negative

Slightly negative

Neither negative nor positive

Slightly positive

Somewhat positive

Very positive

8. How pleasant or unpleasant is the physical space at your school? *

Mark only one oval.

- Very unpleasant
- Somewhat unpleasant
- Slightly unpleasant
- Neither pleasant nor unpleasant
- Slightly pleasant
- Somewhat pleasant
- Very pleasant

9. How fair or unfair are the rules for the students at this school? *

Mark only one oval.

- Very unfair
- Somewhat unfair
- Slightly unfair
- Neither unfair nor fair
- Slightly fair
- Somewhat fair
- Very fair

10. At your school, how much does the behavior of other students hurt or help your learning? *

Mark only one oval.

- Hurts my learning a tremendous amount
- Hurts my learning some
- Hurts my learning a little bit
- Neither helps nor hurts my learning
- Helps my learning a little bit
- Helps my learning some
- Helps my learning a tremendous amount

11. How often do your teachers seem excited to be teaching your classes? *

Mark only one oval.

- Almost never
- Once in a while
- Sometimes
- Frequently
- Almost always

12. How well do people at your school understand you as a person? *

Mark only one oval.

- Do not understand at all
- Understand a little
- Understand somewhat
- Understand quite a bit
- Completely understand

13. How connected do you feel to the adults at your school? *

Mark only one oval.

- Not at all connected
- Slightly connected
- Somewhat connected
- Quite connected
- Extremely connected

14. How much respect do students in your school show you? *

Mark only one oval.

- No respect at all
- A little bit of respect
- Some respect
- Quite a bit of respect
- Tremendous amount of respect

15. How much do you matter to others at this school? *

Mark only one oval.

- Do not matter at all
- Matter a little bit
- Matter somewhat
- Matter quite a bit
- Matter a tremendous amount

16. Overall, how much do you feel like you belong at your school? *

Mark only one oval.

- Do not belong at all
- Belong a little bit
- Belong somewhat
- Belong quite a bit
- Completely belong

Appendix E

Student Climate Survey

A poll to understand and document the consensus of students on certain subjects.

 Not shared



* Indicates required question

Gender (Optional)

- Male
- Female
- Other:

What class are you in? *

- Freshmen
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

From 1-5 (1 being least, 5 being most) How do you rate school communication about events, clubs, and games? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Least	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Most

Would a School wide remind make getting information easier for you? *

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

Would a School wide Google Classroom make getting information easier for you? *

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

How can we better improve school communication?

Your answer

How often do you check your email? *

- Every Day
- Every Other day
- Once or twice a Week
- A couple times a Month
- Never

What platform would keep you the most informed about events at Wando? *

- Instagram
 - TikTok
 - Gmail
 - Facebook
-
-

What do you recommend we do to improve communication?

Your answer

From 1-5 (1 being least, 5 being most) How do you rate the quality of the bathrooms?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Least	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Most

How can we improve the quality in the bathrooms?

Your answer

From 1-5 (1 being least, 5 being most) How do you rate the lunch food? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Least	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Most

How can we improve the lunch food? What would you like to see? Since this goes through the district, we can't guarantee results, but we will try.

Your answer

Pick the three activities you would like most to have during lunch. None of this is * guaranteed, but we'll try our best based on your responses.

- Ping Pong
 - Chess and other board games
 - Open Gym (Some days)
 - Open Track/field (Some days)
 - Outside Toys (Frisbees, Jenga, Cornhole, Spikeball - If a specific game, put in "other" option)
 - Volleyball
 - Soccer
 - Basketball
 - Clubs
 - Drawing/Doing Art
 - Classes
 - Other:
-

What would you like to see in the lunchroom?

Your answer

What would you like to see in/from the school store?

Your answer

From 1-5 (1 being least, 5 being most) How do you rate the decorative quality of the hallways? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Least	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Most

What decorations or beautification do you want to see in and around the school? *
(Yet again, we can't guarantee anything, but we will do our best.)

- Painted Ceiling Tiles
 - Paintings/Artwork
 - Plants
 - Pictures by Wando students/teachers
 - Pictures of landscapes
 - Other:
-
-

How can we improve the amount of people who show up to games and clubs?

Your answer

Do you enjoy pep rallies? *

- Yes
 - Somewhat
 - No
-
-

Would you enjoy more pep rallies? *

- Yes
 - Undecided
 - No
-
-

How can we improve pep rallies?

Your answer

How can we get you more hyped and excited about being at school?

Your answer

Would you enjoy a quarter-long competition between teams of students, where you play a game in a tournament style order until there is one overall winner? *
(Games like kickball or dodgeball between students led by advisors)

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

Any thoughts, recommendations, celebrations, or issues you have with the school?

Your answer

If you are interested in joining a student led group that is focused on increasing student representation, you should come to Student Board's next meeting on March 13th during all lunches!

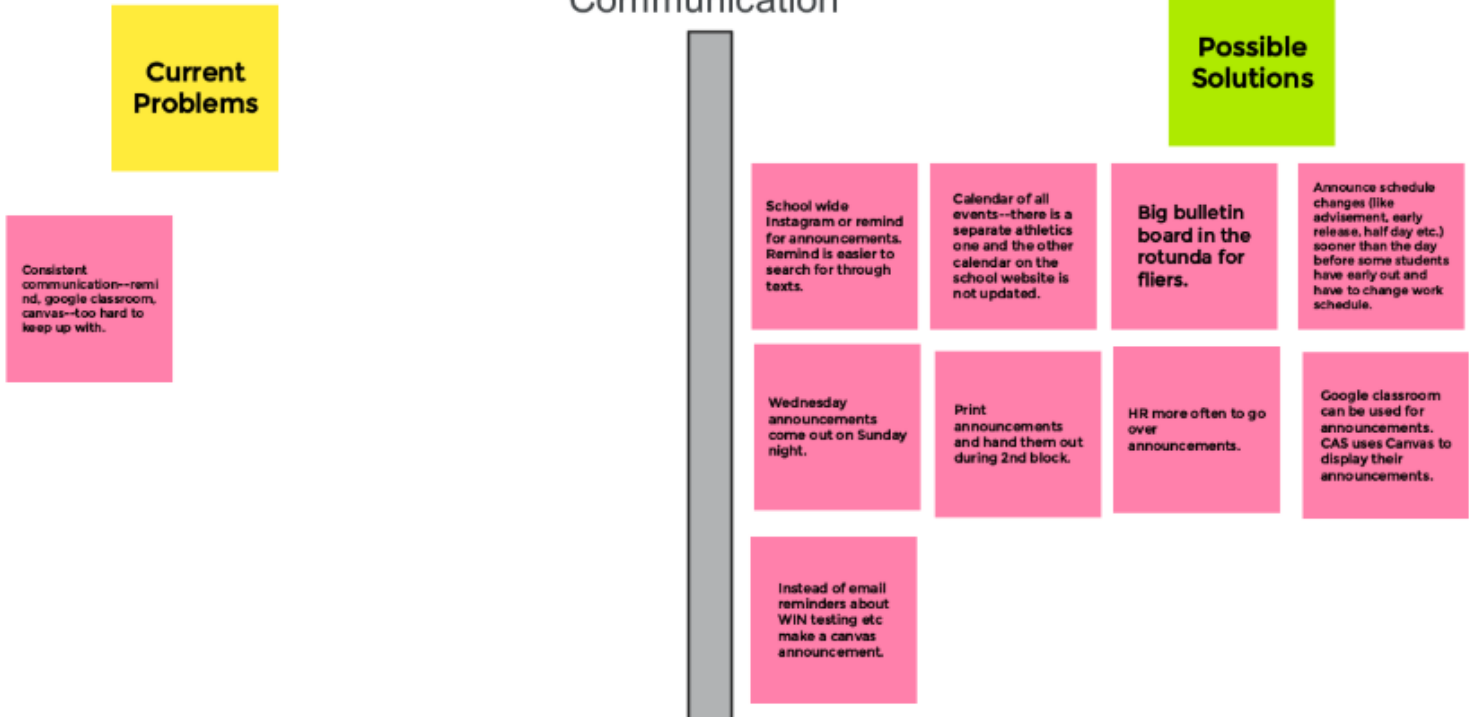
Submit

Clear form

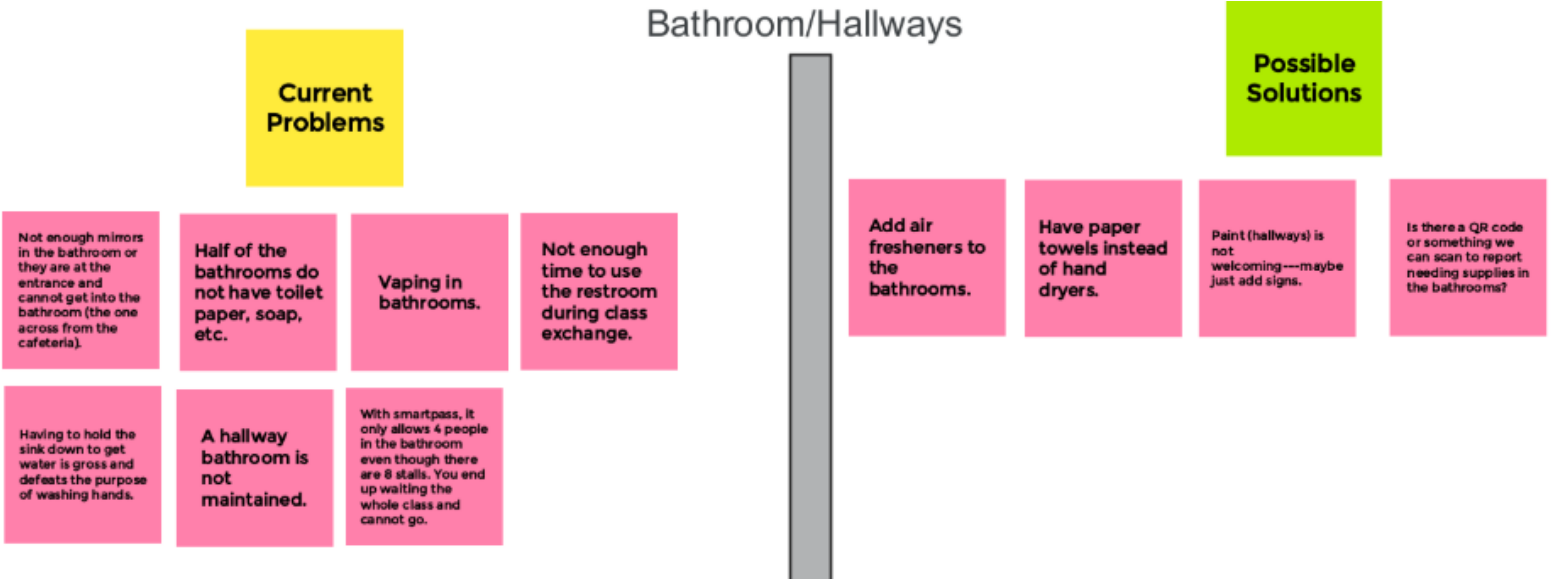
Appendix F

Student Advisory Board Jamboard

Communication



Bathroom/Hallways



Lunch

Current Problems

Healthy and vegetarian options

More variety--getting tired of the same things and want other sides other than apples or carrots.

Portions are not big enough.

Price of lunch--maybe publicize the aid.

Students want to leave during lunch

Do they clean the tables between lunches?

Possible Solutions

Add napkins to the utensil area.

Salt packets and condiment options

Music during lunches

Service dogs come into cafeteria

Google sign up for students to order ahead or cater lunches once a month.

School store opened in the mornings.

Want icecream

Want tea/arnold palmers.

Engagement

Current Problems

Overcrowded and difficult getting in and out of pep rallies--stagger them or hold them during lunches.

More student participation--not just sports.

More holiday recognition---St. Patrick Day--wear green, etc. have a scavenger hunt and get an award.

Students do not participate in the dress up days--Instead of sending an email for students to vote, have paper voting in the rotunda.

More things to do at lunch.

Sound system during pep rallies

Admin handling IDs in a negative way (if you don't have your ID get against the wall right now!)

No school spirit.

Football games are not fun--there are too many fights and things going on and do not feel safe going.

Possible Solutions

Drawing for students who purchase a ticket to an event for a gift card.

Free games has made an impact on attendance.

Pep rally at the stadium

Live music as students are entering the pep rallies.

More themed pep rallies--like black out with glow up sticks.

Fun pep rally games like half court shoot out.

Games during lunches like ping pong, jeopardy --CAS offers this. Student will reach out to the MC to start planning.

Publicize the quiet space more for students that do not like the loud noise at the pep rallies.

Student sign up for pep rally games for more student involvement.

Vet class @ LBHS--can we replicate that her or at the CAS?

More flexible seating (beanbags, etc) in classrooms.

Loved the basketball during class (Australia).

Use the outdoor classroom more.

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