

“Nobody ever asked me why I left high school.” Let’s ask them.

*A qualitative study with 70 students and young people by
Wilder Research and High School for Recording Arts*

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“It’s not new that a fair number of young people don’t find (conventional) school interesting, rewarding, or relevant. As far back as 1988, when he first floated the idea of ‘charter schools,’ Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, talked about how conventional schools adequately serve about 20 percent of their students. The other 80 percent, according to Shanker, were those who can’t sit still for six hours, can’t cope with the textbook, or need special help. ‘These students aren’t stupid,’ he wrote in his April 3, 1988 column in the *New York Times*. ‘They just don’t fit into the standard system’—into conventional schooling.

Conventional schooling groups students by age into grades. It has a standardized curriculum with knowledge divided into subjects and taught in courses, with students moving from teacher to teacher and from class to class. Conventional schooling is characterized by classroom-centric pedagogies and teacher-centered instruction, is often competitive and assesses a narrow concept of achievement. Uniformity is a virtue. Superintendents live with what some have called ‘a remorseless pressure for sameness’ (‘batch processing’ was Theodore Sizer’s summary description, ultimately motivating him to found the Essential Schools movement). Time is a constant, so learning is a variable. The organizations and individuals involved talk about schooling as ‘delivering education’ and see it as preparation especially for academic work in college.

Students aren’t listened to very carefully about what school should look like. It’s a discussion dominated by adults. The Civic Affairs Trust and the Center for Policy Design decided to explore the attitudes of young people who had left conventional school—asking in what way and to what extent conventional school itself was the reason for their departure. This report based on interviews with a variety of ‘leavers,’ conducted for us by Wilder Research and High School for Recording Arts, shows that leavers of all types want and need a different kind of schooling.

These concerns from our 40 years in Minnesota’s education policy discussion point to the importance of having a better understanding of what young people actually want, especially those who have decided to leave conventional high school. We hope that a better understanding of what they find missing will help Minnesotans think more clearly about what to change. ”

—Ted Kolderie, Civic Affairs Trust and Center for Policy Design

Executive summary

Beginning in late 2019, the Center for Policy Design and the Civic Affairs Trust contracted with Wilder Research (Wilder) and High School for Recording Arts (HSRA) to conduct qualitative interviews with 70 students and young people who left conventional high schools. Our research questions, designed in collaboration with the Center for Policy Design and the Civic Affairs Trust, include:

- What is it about current schooling that propels student departure from conventional high schools and/or fails to address their aspirations, aptitudes, and other needs?
- If a significant cause is the schooling, how could schools, curriculum, and teaching be changed to keep students enrolled and learning to their potential?

To answer these research questions, Wilder and HSRA developed an interview protocol together and received feedback from the Center for Policy Design and the Civic Affairs Trust to finalize the protocol. Wilder partnered with two youth-serving organizations—Northfield Health Community Initiative and Ujamaa Place—to conduct phone interviews with 40 students and young people. HSRA formed a team of current HSRA students who conducted 30 interviews with current and former HSRA students that took place in person and via video chatting software.

Key findings

The 70 interviews conducted by Wilder and HSRA identified three primary findings regarding why students left conventional high schools and what they desired as part of their high school experience:

- More holistic adult-student relationships
- Personalized teaching and supports
- Interest-aligned curriculum

In essence, respondents communicated that these three recommendations would have solved many of the issues that they experienced at their conventional high schools. It should be noted that all respondents talked about both positive and negative experiences at their conventional high schools as well as issues not directly related to school that factored into their decision to leave their convention high schools. These experiences and issues are reported in detailed later in this report. Here, however, we only report these three primary findings, which take the form of recommendations put forth by respondents regarding how to improve conventional high schools.

More holistic adult-student relationships. Nearly every respondent talked about the importance of adult-student relationships for their high school experience. In particular, the large majority of our respondents appreciated when teachers and school staff showed interest in their lives outside of school, such as their educational and career aspirations or their extra-curricular interests and hobbies. Many respondents also noted negative experiences in which teachers assumed that poor academic performance or consistent tardiness or absenteeism were due to a lack of personal drive or interest from the student, rather than a result of issues outside of school. Such experiences were offered as examples of teachers and school staff failing to understand students' lives and how to support them throughout their high school experience.

Teachers at the high school just really cared about grades. They did not really care about helping me learn. I wish they had been more like the ALC [Area Learning Center]. –Wilder respondent

The teachers were like employees, they didn't care about teaching. They cared about clocking in and clocking out, that's it. –HSRA respondent

To be honest, the people [at the ALC] helped me so much. They did everything they could [to keep me in school]. They reached out outside of school. They did "out of the kindness of their hearts" type things to help me. They knew I was on my own. Best of all, the teachers were understanding when I couldn't make it to class. They were like, 'He's gotta do what he's gotta do to live.' –Wilder respondent

I developed a really good support team of people who wanted something more for me than just graduating, and wanted me to be honest, a different way of success, by letting me really take over my whole curriculum of what interests me, which was great. And I think I graduated with a much stronger view of myself, and who I wanted to be and my goals and potential. –HSRA respondent

Personalized teaching and supports. The large majority of respondents talked about wanting more personalized teaching and supports as part of their high school experience. Many respondents mentioned not receiving any one-on-one support or attention from teachers. Likewise, while supports like counseling were offered at their conventional high school, many respondents noted that they rarely had the opportunity to access these supports and that they were largely unhelpful when they did receive them. Often, responses about personalized teaching and supports were offered in conjunction with critiques of large class sizes and large school populations.

My high school wasn't personalized at all. I don't even know how to explain it. There was never enough time to ask the questions that I wanted. In a perfect school, I'd want multiple like free-roaming teachers that are able to sit there and get you through the stuff that you're not able to do. –Wilder respondent

It would be cool to have enough school counselors to accommodate everyone without overloading the counselors, and staff to connect students with resources outside in the community. –Wilder respondent

I was excited about going to the smaller school. I feel like smaller schools are better for those that is battling depression and all that other stuff... I feel that it helped me a lot and I didn't feel like it was just so much, I didn't feel like it was so much going on because when you're in a bigger school you just feel like there's a lot going on. –HSRA respondent

Teachers at HSRA that I hadn't even previously like spoken to or met with approached me on this and just like we'd start talking and they would like challenge me to do certain things, like create a song or do this or that. And it was just like definitely very different to be challenged especially in something that like I actually care about instead of like I'm going to challenge you to do this project on this part of history or something. You know, I felt like it was an individual challenge. –HSRA respondent

Interest-aligned curriculum. A large number of respondents said that they did not see the relevance of what they learned at their conventional high school or were otherwise uninterested in the curriculum at their conventional high school. Many respondents said that they appreciated the project-based learning approach used by non-conventional education providers, such as HSRA or their ALC, saying that they had more choice in what and how they learned at such programs. Many respondents likewise said that they wished their conventional high schools had offered more elective classes or pursued student-driven approaches to curriculum development and delivery.

It would be cool to see teachers asking kids what about the subjects that they are interested in learning in addition to the typical curriculum. That is what the ALC did. –Wilder respondent

A lot of the stuff I would've learnt at regular school I would never use in real life. I wouldn't have applied it to my everyday life. At a regular high school they don't even teach you how to make a budget or how to do stuff like that. –HSRA respondent

Notable differences between Wilder's and HSRA's findings

There were a few notable differences between Wilder's and HSRA's findings, largely stemming from methodological differences and differences in respondents' high school experiences. In particular, the authors of this report would like to highlight the following two findings from HSRA's interviews that were not as prominent in Wilder's interviews.

The importance of culturally responsive schooling. All of HSRA's respondents appreciated the cultural responsiveness inherent to HSRA's approach to schooling—and in particular, the social justice lens through which HSRA co-creates students' education. In addition, numerous HSRA respondents mentioned experiencing racism at conventional high schools, often noting that the student population at conventional high schools they attended was largely White. For example, one HSRA respondent said that

they felt like they were “getting pushed out of that [previous] school only because of probably the color of my skin.” While some Wilder respondents also noted instances of racism at conventional high schools, this theme was a less common theme in Wilder’s interviews as compared to HSRA’s interviews.

Not only as a woman... but as a Black woman in America I've learned so much about who I am through HSRA and [staff member], I love him so much. He's taught me so much in African American history, African history, that gave me the courage to go out and try things that I've never tried before. –HSRA respondent

This difference in Wilder’s and HSRA’s interviews highlights a methodological limitation. Specifically, because Wilder’s interviews were conducted over the phone with respondents we otherwise did not have relationships with, our analysis is limited solely to what respondents said in interviews. We did not conduct observations at conventional high schools in southern Minnesota nor did we have access to other information about these high schools that might allow us to examine implicit or explicit racial bias in practice or policy, such as how these schools discipline their students or whether they include racial or cultural literacy in their standard curricula.¹ This additional information, which was not examined as part of this study, would allow us to more adequately report on the importance of culturally responsive schooling from the perspective of students and young people who attended conventional high schools in southern Minnesota.

Arts-based curriculum. HSRA’s education program uses the arts as a pedagogical and engagement tool. As such, many HSRA respondents talked about the importance of HSRA’s arts-based curriculum for their reengagement in and perseverance through high school. While it is not particularly surprising that a large number of HSRA respondents noted the importance of the arts for their learning, it is useful to call out this salient finding as an example of interest-aligned curriculum development and delivery. Some of Wilder’s respondents also mentioned the importance of the arts for their schooling, but this finding was not as prominent in Wilder’s interviews as compared to HSRA’s interviews.

I love art. I'm not really artistic myself, but I just love the creations that other people can make and where they can expand their thoughts and I just love seeing it. I just like art. So, I'm surrounded by that. I was just like, 'Oh yeah, I need to be up in here.' –HSRA respondent

¹ Extensive research has been conducted on racial bias in American high schools. As a starting point of recent work in this area, please see Strey-Wells’ *How Educators Can Utilize Culturally Responsive Teaching To Enhance Personalized Learning Opportunities In The Secondary Classroom* (2019), Muñiz’s *Culturally Responsive Teaching: A 50-State Survey of Teaching Standards* (2019), Besse & Capatosto’s *Ending Racial Inequity in Out of School Suspensions* (2018), and Nance’s *Student Surveillance, Racial Inequalities, and Implicit Racial Bias* (2017).

Respondent characteristics

We attribute the differences in findings in part to differences in respondent characteristics between Wilder’s respondents and HSRA’s respondents. For example, the majority of Wilder’s respondents attended high school in greater Minnesota and identify as White. The majority of HSRA’s respondents attended high school in the Twin Cities metro area and identified as Black. Please Figure 1 for more details regarding respondent characteristics.

Respondent characteristics

Respondent characteristic	Wilder’s interviews (n=40)	HSRA’s interviews (n=30)	Total (N=70)
Geography			
Twin Cities metro	13	30	43
Greater Minnesota	27	--	27
Gender			
Man	21	11	32
Woman	19	18	47
Transgender	--	1	1
Racial identity^a			
Black/African American or African	14	26	40
Asian American or Asian	2	--	2
Indigenous American/Native American	--	2	2
Latinx or Hispanic	5	1	6
White/European American	21	1	22
Another race (non-specified)	1	--	1

^a Respondents could choose more than one racial identity category.

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About the study

In late 2019, the Center for Policy Design and the Civic Affairs Trust issued a request for proposals to conduct an interview-based study with students and young people who left conventional high schools. The Center for Policy Design and the Civic Affairs Trust were particularly interested in hearing directly from students and young people about why they left their conventional high school. They were also interested in qualitative inquiry—they wanted to hear stories, perspectives, and experiences from students and young people. As such, this study offers a unique perspective that supplements larger survey projects about school experience, such as the Minnesota Student Survey.

This proposal request identified the research questions noted earlier in this report and asked for proposals that would involve respondents with a number of specific experiences: respondents who attended an Area Learning Center (ALC) or charter school, respondents who left school and didn't pursue another education program, and respondents whose high school experience was interrupted by incarceration. During the study, it was decided to add respondents who were officially enrolled in a conventional high school, but pursued off-site secondary education, such as through a Post-Secondary Education Opportunity (PSEO) program or through Odysseyware, a web-based secondary education program.

The Center for Policy Design and the Civic Affairs Trust decided to contract with both Wilder and HSRA to complete the study. The project team for the study included Ted Kolderie and Bill Blazar (Center for Policy Design/Civic Affairs Trust); Edith Gozali-Lee, Ryan Evans, and Bunchung Ly (Wilder); and Tony Simmons, Michael Lipset, Joey Cienian, and Amanda Galloway (HSRA). This team met regularly during the project lifespan to update each other about project progress and to ensure a high level of cohesion throughout the project despite differences in methodology and sample.

Methodologies

Wilder's methodology resembled the traditional researcher model in that Wilder staff were "outside" researchers interviewing respondents with whom they otherwise did not have a relationship. Wilder partnered with Northfield Healthy Community Initiative and Ujamaa Place to connect with respondents.² Wilder compensated these organizations for their time recruiting interview respondents. HSRA implemented aspects of youth

² Northfield Healthy Community Initiative is a community-based organization in southern Minnesota that is involved in a number of secondary and post-secondary education efforts, including student and family advocacy efforts as well as school systems change efforts. Ujamaa Place is a nonprofit in the Twin Cities metro area that serves primarily young black men; their programming centers on education, housing, employment, mental health, family and relationships, and criminal justice-related advocacy and prevention.

participatory action research to complete their interviews. In particular, HSRA staff trained current HSRA students to conduct interviews with current and former HSRA students, representing a peer-to-peer interview methodology. HSRA leveraged their connections to current and former students to recruit respondents for their interviews. Both Wilder’s and HSRA’s respondents received a nominal financial incentive to participate in the interview.

In terms of respondents, Wilder’s respondents primarily lived in southern Minnesota and attended high school in Northfield and Faribault. The exception to this are the eleven respondents whose high school experience was interrupted by incarceration; these respondents primarily lived in Saint Paul. HSRA’s respondents primarily lived in the Twin Cities metro area. Additionally, the majority of Wilder’s respondents identified as White or European American whereas the majority of HSRA’s respondents identified as Black or African American.

Analysis

Based on how respondents answered interview questions, Wilder and HSRA developed distinct but related analytical frameworks for analyzing and ultimately presenting our findings. Wilder used a “presence-absence” analytical framework and HSRA used a “push-pull-stick” analytical framework.

Wilder’s “presence-absence” analytical framework. The large majority of Wilder’s respondents talked about particular characteristics that they either wanted or did not want in their high school experience, then they noted whether the desired or undesired characteristics were present or absent in the high schools they attended. This was often the primary reason they left or remained at a high school.

The three key findings presented previously—more holistic adult-student relationships, personalized teaching and supports, and interest-aligned curriculum—are examples of desired characteristics. Students were more likely to attend schools where these characteristics were present and likewise were more likely to leave schools where these characteristics were absent.

HSRA’s “push-pull-stick” analytical framework. The large majority of HSRA’s respondents talked about particular factors that pushed them *from* a school, pulled them *to* a school, and helped them stick *at* a school, once enrolled.

This framework emerged from the use of “pushout” to describe students moving from one school to another and the use of “stick rate” as a quantitative metric to identify the number of students that stay in a reengagement program (such as HSRA) over the course of the year. Drawing parallels between these concepts and the concepts of “push factors” and “pull factors” used in migration studies to identify why people choose to leave their home country, HSRA found that these three categories (push, pull, and stick) were useful for organizing their findings.

Toward a nuanced understanding of why students leave school

While distinct, there is clear overlap between Wilder’s and HSRA’s analytical frameworks. Most notably, the presence of desired characteristics was often what pulled students to a school or helped them stick there, once enrolled. Likewise, the absence of desired characteristics—or the presence of undesired characteristics—was often what pushed students from their high school.

The connections between these analytical frameworks highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of the reasons that students choose to leave or stay in school. For the rest of this report, we present Wilder’s and HSRA’s findings separately because of the differences in findings, respondent characteristics, and analytical frameworks.

In doing so, we offer a directive to policy makers, school professionals, and education researchers: Ask students why they are at their high school or why they left their previous high school. What do they like or dislike, and does their school meet these desires? What pushes them or pulls them, or makes them stick?

Wilder Research's interviews

In total, Wilder Research conducted 40 interviews with young people who left conventional high schools. This includes:

- 11 interviews with young people who attended Area Learning Centers (ALCs)
- 9 interviews with young people who pursued off-site secondary education, including Post-Secondary Education Opportunity (PSEO) students and students who completed high school coursework through an online program called Odysseyware
- 9 young people who were pushed out of high school and did not enroll in another education program
- 11 young people whose high school experience was disrupted by incarceration

Wilder Research partnered with Northfield Healthy Community Initiative to recruit young people from the first three respondent groups (ALC, PSEO/Odysseyware, Pushed out) and we partnered with Ujamaa Place to recruit young people whose high school experience was disrupted by incarceration. In total, we interviewed 27 young people from southern Minnesota (mainly Northfield and Faribault) and 13 young people from the Twin Cities area.

Of the young people we interviewed, less than half of respondents (15 of 40) had a high school diploma or equivalent at the time of the interview. Just over half of respondents (21 of 40) had an individual education plan (IEP) while in high school. Half of respondents (20 of 40) had attended more than one previous high school. Just under half (18 of 40) said that they were currently in an education program or were otherwise pursuing their education goals.

In regards to demographic characteristics, 21 respondents identified as men and 19 respondents identified as women. The large majority of respondents (34 of 40) were 18 years old or older at the time of the interview. Regarding racial background, 12 respondents identified as Black or African American, 2 respondents identified as African, 2 respondents identified as Asian or Asian American, 5 respondents identified as Hispanic or Latina/o, 21 respondents identified as White or European American, and 1 respondent identified as another race. Respondents could identify with more than one racial group.

Desired and undesired school characteristics

Positive relationships with adults (stick factor)

Many respondents from all respondent groups talked about positive relationships with adults during high school (Figure 1).

1. Positive relationships with adults

Subtheme	ALC (n=11)	PSEO/ Odysseyware (n=9)	Pushed out (n=9)	Previously incarcerated (n=11)	Total (N=40)
Receiving help with issues not related to school	8	6	7	7	28
General positive comment about or experience with adults	7	7	7	5	26
Receiving help with academics	5	7	8	2	22
Positive interactions related to pedagogy or class size	4	5	4	--	13

Note: Responses could be coded into multiple subthemes.

Receiving help with issues not related to school

Overall, 28 of 40 respondents talked about the significance of receiving help with issues not related to school as a contributing factor for why they stayed at their high school or education program. Most often, respondents talked about these experiences with the teachers and staff at non-conventional high schools, such as ALCs or charter schools. In general, respondents mentioned experiences where teachers or school staff would help them with their issues or goals, such as talking through family problems or helping them to create a résumé. As the most common subtheme within the “positive relationships with adults” theme, the popularity of this subtheme suggests that such interactions and relationships are particularly important for students as they navigate high school.

It's a lot more personal [at the ALC]. If you have something going on at home, they're flexible and willing to work with you. They really valued how I felt.
–ALC respondent

95% of teachers at [my charter school] helped me with housing and shower. They gave me many resources. They also helped kids with housing. They helped me get a state ID. –Respondent who was previously incarcerated

To be honest, the people [at the ALC] helped me so much. They did everything they could [to keep me in school]. They reached out outside of school. They did “out of the kindness of their hearts” type things to help me. They knew I was on my own. Best of all, the teachers were understanding when I couldn’t make it to class. There were like, ‘He’s gotta do what he’s gotta do to live.’ –Pushed out respondent

General positive comment about or experience with adults

Many respondents (26 of 40) talked in general about positive experiences or relationships that they had with their teachers or school staff. It was common for respondents to contrast their experiences at a conventional high school with their experiences at an ALC, for example, often saying that at the ALC they felt more cared for by teachers and staff.

I felt way more cared for at the ALC. The teachers, staff, and principal were very connected and great. Nobody did that at my last high school. It is like a family more than anything at the ALC. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

The staff were great. I really loved the teachers because they really cared about the students, more than they cared about anything else. There was not a particular student they cared about; they cared about everyone. –Pushed out respondent

Receiving help with academics

More than half of respondents (22 of 40) said that receiving help with academics from teachers or school staff was a significant contributor to them continuing their education. Overall, respondents talked about teachers or staff helping them one-on-one with academics during their time at non-conventional high schools as well as at conventional high schools. Academic help was the third most common subtheme within the “positive relationships with adults” theme, which suggests that experiences of receiving help with issues not related to school and a having generally positive feelings about teachers and staff are more important to students than academic help.

When I was doing bad in school, when my grades were down, the principal would help—he would get my work for me sometimes and he’d help me do it in the office. –Pushed out respondent

Ms. B. was the sweetest teacher. She would help me write papers and make sure I got my stuff done—she really helped me. Also, in 10th grade, Ms. C. would make sure I would do the math problems and she would help me with other classes when she didn’t have to. They still reach out to me. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

Positive interactions with adults related to pedagogy or class size

More than a quarter of respondents (13 of 40) noted that their positive interactions with adults often stemmed from individual teachers’ or staff peoples’ pedagogies and that teachers’ approach to working with students was often related to class size. This theme

supplements the popular suggestion from respondents to decrease class sizes in conventional high schools and to focus on more personalized, student-centered teaching and service provision (these suggestions are detailed later in this report).

At the ALC, the classes are so much smaller. The teachers are able to do more direct care. –ALC respondent

There's not that many students in the class—I think there are 9 or 10—so I can focus better. They have it where, if I have to work, they're not going to get me in trouble for not going to the class. The teacher will help me with my work schedule. He'll save me the work and stuff. He'll give it to me in a packet and he'll tell me to get it done when I can and when it's done bring it back to him. – Pushed out respondent

Negative relationships with adults (push factor)

Many respondents talked about negative relationships with adults during high school, with ALC respondents mentioning experiences like this more frequently as compared to other respondent groups (Figure 2). ALC respondents were most often referring to negative relationships with adults at conventional high schools prior to enrolling at an ALC.

2. Negative relationships with adults

Subtheme	ALC (n=11)	PSEO/ Odysseyware (n=9)	Pushed out (n=9)	Previously incarcerated (n=11)	Total (N=40)
Lack of interest or engagement from adults	10	3	2	5	20
Adults only focused on schoolwork or classroom management	7	3	--	4	14
Adults had a punitive mindset	6	2	1	3	12
Insensitivity, bullying, or discrimination from adults	3	3	1	2	9
Class size as a factor for lack of attention or otherwise negative experiences with adults	4	2	--	--	6

Note: Responses could be coded into multiple subthemes.

Lack of interest or engagement from adults

Overall, half of respondents (20 of 40) discussed the lack of interest or engagement from adults in their high school as one of the reasons why they left or sought other education opportunities. These respondents expressed that their teachers did not help them understand the lessons or provide help when they explicitly requested it. Numerous respondents also mentioned that they did not feel cared for by teachers and staff.

The adults there could have been like, ‘Okay, let’s work with you a little more—what do you need? Let’s see you what you need.’ They were never like, ‘Let’s try to figure out what is going on and try to fix it.’ –ALC respondent

At the high school, I did not really understand fully what they were teaching. When I asked for help, they did not provide any. They did not help me understand what I needed to do to learn and to pass the class. –ALC respondent

To me, teachers are supposed to care, but some teachers don’t. They just want to do the job and get it over with. My last school was like that. Out of 30-40 teachers, 5-15 really cared. I felt like the teachers didn’t care as much as they were supposed to. That’s why I stopped going. –Respondent who was previously incarcerated

Adults only focused on schoolwork or classroom management

More than a quarter of respondents (14 out of 40) talked about negative learning experiences that they had with teachers and school staff. In these instances, respondents mentioned that adults at their school were more focused on testing and grades than helping them learn. Respondents shared similar experiences with other school staff, such as principals and guidance counselors. Respondents also noted that their teachers showed favoritism for students who understood the lessons and ignored students who needed help in class.

Teachers at the high school just really cared about grades. They did not really care about helping me learn. I wish they had been more like the ALC. –ALC respondent

They just seemed stoic, like this is their job—teach to get a good score and not care. The principal, I got the same feelings with them. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

The high school teachers focused more on the students who got it and understood it. They just failed me. –ALC respondent

Adults had a punitive mindset

More than a quarter of respondents (12 out of 40) noted that teachers and school staff approached students with a punitive mindset rather than an empathetic or relationship-based mindset. In general, respondents said that when they were disciplined or redirected by teachers and staff, often the first response from teachers and staff was to punish them rather than ask them about why they were behaving a certain way.

I had a lot of trouble during school. Instead of having adults there help me out or find out what’s wrong, it was a punishment: ‘You’re getting punished for this, this, and this.’ –ALC respondent

They always jumped on me and tried to suspend me. It reached a point that I did not understand it. Anything I did would get me into trouble. They really looked at me as a bad kid. –Respondent who was previously incarcerated

Insensitivity, bullying, or discrimination from adults

Nine out of the 40 respondents shared particularly negative experiences they had with teachers and school staff, including bullying and discrimination. While just a small number of respondents shared discrimination experiences, the majority of our respondents identified as White or European American; this likely affected how frequently discrimination experiences were reported by respondents overall. We note this because of the ubiquity with which High School for Recording Arts' respondents mentioned discrimination experiences in their interviews.

Like there was one teacher who would literally seriously fucking bully kids. Ninth grade was awful for me because every day I had his class and he'd call me a dumbass in front of class. When people, including myself, reported it over the years, nothing happened. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

My English teacher was the worst person I ever met. He was evil. I had a 504 plan that would allow me to sit next to the window but he put me next to his desk. It was nerve wrecking to sit next to him. One time, he came and asked, 'What are you going to do with your life?' and when he heard that I was going to the ALC, he said that when I go to ALC, I will just get GED and cannot really do anything with that. –ALC respondent

I did feel uncomfortable being a young Black male at [Saint Paul high school]. I feel like some teachers do give special treatment or opportunity to some students while other students might not get it. –Previously incarcerated respondent

Class size as a factor for lack of attention or otherwise negative experiences with adults

Six out of 40 respondents discussed not getting enough individual attention or one-on-one support from teachers because of the large number of students in their classes, though only ALC respondents and PSEO/Odysseyware respondents mentioned this subtheme. This finding supplements the popular suggestion from respondents to decrease class sizes in conventional high schools, as noted later in this report.

I feel like I personally need more one-on-one support when it comes to learning. I feel like that wasn't accessible to me. There's so many kids in the classes. –ALC respondent

For me, I feel like a big part of why I left the high school was the class size. It is hard to get closer to your teachers when they have 30 other students to worry about. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

Negative peer interactions and feeling unsafe (push factor)

In our interviews, many respondents linked negative peer interactions with feeling unsafe while at school, with more students from ALC feeling so than other respondents (Figure 3). This suggests that it was primarily other students that contributed to respondents feeling unsafe.

3. Negative peer interactions and feeling unsafe

Subtheme	ALC (n=11)	PSEO/ Odysseyware (n=9)	Pushed out (n=9)	Previously incarcerated (n=11)	Total (N=40)
Experiences with harassment or bullying from peers	7	2	3	4	16
Too many people at the school	5	1	1	1	8
Associating with the “wrong crowd” ^a	1	1	2	3	7

Note: Responses could be coded into multiple subthemes.

^a We acknowledge that this is judgmental language; however, this was the language used by many respondents who talked about this subtheme.

Experiences with harassment or bullying from peers

Sixteen of 40 respondents talked about a wide variety of harassment and bullying, including verbal harassment, sexual assault, and fighting with peers. ALC respondents were more likely to talk about experiences with harassment or bullying from peers as compared to other respondent groups. Respondents had varying experiences with teachers or staff intervening in instances of harassment or bullying. Many received minimal assistance from adults, some were “brushed off” by adults from whom they sought help, and others did not feel comfortable approaching adults at their school for help. However, most respondents said that they wished teachers and staff had done more to prevent bullying and harassment.

I told the principal, ‘I don’t feel safe at this school because this guy and his group of friends are bullying me.’ They just said to use a different hallway. But they kept harassing me, so I didn’t feel safe going to a traditional high school.

–ALC respondent

A lot of the students picked on me and I just got completely full of it. I didn’t feel like I could talk to anyone so I went to the ALC. It was a little bit easier to talk to people there. –Pushed out respondent

Too many people at the school

Eight of 40 respondents said that they thought there were too many people at their previous high school, oftentimes noting that this negatively impacted their mental health. ALC respondents were more likely to talk about these concerns as compared to the other respondent groups. The most common concerns among respondents centered on the number of students in classrooms and the lack of spaces within their school to be alone or get away from other people.

There were so many people at the high school. It was overwhelming.
—ALC respondent

There were too many people there. I am a reserved person and it is hard for me to be in a big group like that. —PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

Associating with the “wrong crowd”

Overall, seven out of 40 respondents said that they associated with the “wrong crowd”—and that this contributed to an overall negative experience in high school or that it was part of the reason that they left high school. We acknowledge that this is judgmental language; however, this was the language used by a number of respondents to describe their peer group while in high school. Respondents who were previously incarcerated were somewhat more likely to note associating with the “wrong crowd” as compared to other respondent groups. A few respondents noted difficulties they had in distancing themselves from peers that were involved in criminalized activities.

I was hanging out with the wrong type of people. I was one of those kids myself.
—Respondent who was previously incarcerated

It taught me how to choose the people. At first, I wasn't smart about that. When it started hitting me, I started choosing the correct people to hang out with. Now I can tell if a person is someone who can get you caught up in trouble or if they're involved in bad stuff. —Respondent who was previously incarcerated

A lot of people would try to get me involved in illegal things at school and it just made me feel completely uncomfortable. And so the principal always associated me with kids that were doing bad stuff. —Pushed out respondent

Issues outside of school (push factor)

Respondents from all respondent groups talked about issues outside of school and how these affected their experiences in high school (Figure 4).

4. Issues outside of school

Subtheme	ALC (n=11)	PSEO/ Odysseyware (n=9)	Pushed out (n=9)	Previously incarcerated (n=11)	Total (N=40)
Involvement in violence, drugs, or other dangerous or criminalized activities	1	2	2	4	9
Family issues	1	3	2	2	8
Mental health issues	3	2	1	--	6
Financial issues	1	1	2	--	4

Note: Responses could be coded into multiple subthemes.

Involvement in violence, drugs, or other dangerous or criminalized activities

Overall, nine out of 40 respondents talked about their involvement in drugs, violence, or other dangerous or criminalized activities as one of the reasons they left high school. These experiences were shared most often by respondents whose high school experiences were disrupted by incarceration. While almost a quarter of respondents noted this as a reason for leaving school, it should be noted that often they took personal responsibility for their participation in activities like these.

These were things that I got myself into—it was not about school, it was more about myself. –Respondent who was previously incarcerated

I just wasn't feeling school. It just wasn't me. I'd go to school, try to pay attention and everything—but I'd come to school all fucked up. I'd be high and shit. That's what it was back then. That's why I didn't really go to school. –Respondent who was previously incarcerated

I don't know how to put it. I was not in the greatest relationships, and my substance abuse didn't make anything easier. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

Family issues

Eight of 40 respondents said that family issues contributed to their decision to leave high school or otherwise made their high school experience difficult. Some respondents said that they would have appreciated more care and attention from teachers or school staff regarding family issues, with one saying that they would have wanted to “just talk” to someone about family issues without drastic consequences and another saying that their parents refused to believe teachers and school staff regarding their attention issues.

My home scenario was very dramatic and it affected my school life plenty of times, but there wasn't too much I could do about it because it was bad enough that, if I reported anything about it, I may not have been able to stay at my house any more. It could've been a really big deal. I didn't want anything to change drastically. So I really wanted someone to talk to and not have it get super drastic and be a really bad scenario. –Pushed out respondent

I've had really bad ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] since I was a kid. My elementary school tried to point it out to my parents and tried to get me an IEP, but parents shot it down, saying 'She's just a little kid, whatever, we don't need to deal with that—it's not true.' Even though it runs in the family, and even though I had gone to my counselors a bunch for these issues, the school just basically ignored it because they didn't want to deal with my folks. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

Mental health issues

Six out of 40 respondents noted their personal mental health issues as a barrier for attending or completing high school. Specifically, respondents largely mentioned anxiety and depression, and a few respondents mentioned drug issues. They said that their mental health issues sometimes prevented them from attending or engaging in class. A few respondents said that adults at their high school did not notice or did not care about their mental health issues. Some also noted that while their high schools had a counselor or therapist, oftentimes these staff people were too busy to see them or simply didn't provide the depth of care necessary.

I had a lot of mental health issues and other substance issues. I'm surprised nobody noticed. None of my teachers said shit. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

I really desperately needed to see the school psychiatrist one day. And all I got was, 'She's available in three months.' They told me that it is reserved for kids that have serious issues that need one-on-one stuff every day. They said they're available, but it was extremely hard to access. – PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

Financial issues

Four of 40 respondents talked about financial hardship during high school. Some respondents talked about prioritizing employment or other needs over high school because of their own financial situation or their family’s financial situation. Other respondents were highly mobile or homeless during the time they were in high school.

I had become homeless. I was really left with no other choice—I had to put a place over my head, food in my mouth, get medication. Those were my priorities at that point in time. –Pushed out respondent

Right now my family is lower middle class, but we used to be living pretty far below the poverty line. Paying for college is not something my parents can help out with. It very much was a financial decision [for me to do PSEO]. I’m trying to get ahead, trying to get some credits done while someone else pays for them. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

Suggestions for improving high school

Relationships, supports, and pedagogy (pull/stick factor)

Many respondents from all respondent groups offered suggestions for improving conventional high schools that were related to relationships, services, and pedagogy (Figure 5). The subthemes within this theme include: 1) personalized teaching and supports, 2) more meaningful relationships with adults, 3) smaller class sizes, 4) positive relationships among students.

5. Suggestions for improving relationships, supports, and pedagogy

Subtheme	ALC (n=11)	PSEO/Odysseyware (n=9)	Pushed out (n=9)	Previously incarcerated (n=11)	Total (N=40)
Personalized teaching and supports	11	7	6	8	32
More meaningful relationships with adults	8	7	4	9	28
Smaller class sizes	4	3	4	1	12
Positive relationships among students	1	1	3	2	7

Note: Responses could be coded into multiple subthemes.

Personalized teaching and supports

A large majority of respondents (32 of 40) noted their desire for more personalized teaching and supports during high school. All ALC respondents expressed this desire compared to smaller proportions of other respondent groups. In particular, respondents noted that they wanted more one-on-one interactions with teachers as well as additional school staff, such as counselors, so that they would have more opportunities to receive in-school services.

My high school wasn't personalized at all. I don't even know how to explain it. There was never enough time to ask the questions that I wanted. In a perfect school, I'd want multiple like free-roaming teachers that are able to sit there and get you through the stuff that you're not able to do. –Pushed out respondent

It would be cool to have enough school counselors to accommodate everyone without overloading the counselors, and staff to connect students with resources outside in the community. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

More meaningful relationships with adults

Almost three-quarters of respondents (28 of 40) talked about wanting more meaningful relationships with adults during high school. In general, respondents noted a desire to have more holistic relationships with their teachers and school staff—specifically, relationships that are not solely focused on school. One respondent suggested adult staff people or volunteers whose primary responsibility is building relationships with students and helping to prepare them for life after high school.

I'd want for teachers to pay attention to why students aren't doing their work, not just dismissing it. More than just, 'Oh, they don't want to learn,' but like checking in on each student. It doesn't have to take a whole hour to do that, just a minute to check in with each student personally. –ALC respondent

I would want to have staff who can make all students feel comfortable being around the school, volunteers who will work with young Black men to talk to them about life and what to expect outside of school. –Respondent who was previously incarcerated

Smaller class sizes

Twelve of 40 respondents shared their preference for smaller class sizes. Overall, respondents mentioned similar experiences regarding larger class sizes in their conventional high schools—that in larger classes they didn't feel connected to the teacher and they had few opportunities for personalized learning. Additionally, some respondents said that smaller class sizes would be better for them considering their mental health issues, such as social anxiety.

What I like about the ALC, for example, is that it's smaller and more direct. The classes usually have 5-10 people in them and it's more directed towards you. You can't just fall under. –ALC respondent

If you struggle with social anxiety like me and you're in a big classroom, you're not going to raise your hand to speak in front of 50-60 people. –ALC respondent

Positive relationships among students

In total, 7 of 40 respondents said that they would have wanted better relationships among peers at their conventional high school. Specifically, respondents noted bullying as an issue. They tended to place the responsibility for addressing this issue on teachers and school staff, while still acknowledging that it is a complex and difficult issue.

I know that putting a foot down on harassment would help out a lot. I know that people are bullied to the point where they stop coming to school, or to the point that they hurt themselves. –Pushed out respondent

Maybe a little more personal bully awareness, but I don't really know how you could go about that too much.—Pushed out respondent

Curriculum (pull/stick factor)

Many respondents offered suggestions for what kinds of classes they would want to take, with personal finance classes being the most common (Figure 6). After personal finance, the most common response was allowing for students to choose their own curriculum based on their interests, or at minimum for students to have more choice in what they learn, such as by offering more elective classes. Please see the “student-driven” subtheme following Figure 6 for more information about how respondents talked about this suggestion. This is the only subtheme for which we provide more explanation.

6. Suggestions for improving curriculum

Subtheme	ALC (n=11)	PSEO/ Odysseyware (n=9)	Pushed out (n=9)	Previously incarcerated (n=11)	Total (N=40)
Personal finance	4	2	3	--	9
Student-driven	3	3	1	1	8
Arts (visual, performing)	4	2	--	--	6
Languages	--	1	1	1	3
Social-emotional development	--	1	1	--	2
Trade skills	1	--	--	1	2
Computer and technology skills	--	1	1	--	2
College readiness	--	1	--	1	2
Other suggestions	2	4	2	1	9

Note: Responses could be coded into multiple subthemes.

Student-driven

Nine of 40 respondents shared their preference for more student-driven curriculum. Respondents' preference for student-driven curriculum centered on having more elective classes or personalized projects.

It would be cool to see teachers asking kids what about the subjects that they are interested in learning in addition to the typical curriculum. That is what the ALC did. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

I wish I had had more elective choices [at the high school]. –ALC respondent

I would like to go slightly more in-depth with certain subjects if the teachers would allow it. For example, with science class, students could have the options to do a completely different project if they want. –PSEO/Odysseyware respondent

High School for Recording Arts' interviews

In total, High School for Recording Arts (HSRA) conducted 30 interviews with young people who either attend or have attended HSRA. This includes:

- 10 interviews with current students
- 10 interviews with alumni (referred to as “graduates” in this section of the report)
- 10 interviews with former students who left the school (referred to as “leavers” in this section of the report)

Of these 30 students...

- 26 identified as Black or African American, 1 identified as White, 2 as Indigenous, and 1 as Latinx
- 11 identified as men, 18 identified as women, and 1 identified as transgender
- 3 interviewees identified as members of the LGBTQI2S+ community
- All interviewees were 18 or older
- 7 of these students had IEP's upon enrollment

The participants interviewed for this study had been to an average of four different conventional high schools before attending the High School for Recording Arts. The students' longest period of enrollment at any high school was at the High School for Recording Arts, a data point that was derived with the participants' permission from the state of Minnesota's Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) database.

In order to conduct these interviews, we co-created interview questions with our partner organizations, Wilder Research and the Center for Policy Development, as well as with our student interviewers. We then coached student interviewers on best practices for qualitative inquiry. Youth-led approaches to research are often referred to as “youth participatory action research,” which place young people at the center of every part of a research process. For the purposes of this research project, our youth interviewers served as the primary research assistants with coaching from adult mentors. The goal was to establish an environment of comfort and understanding between the interviewers and interviewees that might not have been accessible otherwise.

Our findings are categorized in the following ways:

- Conventional school
 - Pull factors – Stick factors – Push factors
- Non-conventional school
 - Pull factors – Stick factors – Push factors
- External influences
 - Push factors – Stick factors

Given that the focus of our study was to answer the research questions agreed upon with the Center for Policy Design and the Civic Affairs Trust in conjunction with the students of HSRA, our findings report heavily on HSRA itself. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Data is presented in the order of pull factors (what drew students to a school), stick factors (what kept students at a school), and push factors (what caused students to then leave a school).

Conventional school

Pull factors

Students from HSRA were drawn to prior, conventional schools for a few distinct reasons. Often, they were initially drawn for sports offerings (4 graduates). The other pull factors that emerged from the data for conventional schools were only corroborated by one student each. They included: having friends or family in attendance; school seen as the default option; school in a convenient location; school offered a work-for-credit and/or college readiness program; larger building; a breadth of social opportunities; and art offerings. Interestingly, only one student out of 30 named academics as a pull factor to conventional schools.

Stick factors

As this research project sought to find out why students stay and leave some schools when compared to others, and our particular cohort focused on students who had already left conventional schools, stick factors at conventional schools were not well-represented throughout the data. Two themes emerged as stick factors: that of a caring relationship with a social justice-oriented teacher or support staff member of color, and sports. We also provide a list of other stick factors presented throughout the data that did not receive enough attention from multiple participants to be considered themes unto themselves.

Caring relationships

I had more bonds with the security guys. I don't know why but I did. Every time they see me they would just have conversation. (Lavasia, personal communication, 4-5-2020)

Many of our participants named having only a handful of quality relationships that mattered to them at their conventional schools (3 current students, 2 graduates, and 5 leavers). Interestingly, these relationships were only found between two groups of adults within conventional schools: support staff, specifically those involved in upholding the rules as seen in Lavasia's quote (1 current student, 1 graduate, 2 leavers), and social justice oriented teachers (2 current students, 1 graduate, and 3 leavers). In a state where the vast majority of teachers are White, the importance of finding racial affinity amongst support staff stood out to our students who named these staff-members as crucial to understanding our participants' needs, as seen in the quote above. Support staff, and individuals responsible for upholding expectations around student behavior in particular, seemed to bring a deeper level of understanding regarding why students might be late from one class to another or uninterested in going to a particular class, than teachers and administrators in conventional schools. When students did identify teachers they felt close too, they often mentioned the social justice-oriented nature of the work done by those teachers, as seen in this quote from Jordan:

My art director. She was a part of my team. I didn't really meet her until my junior year, but she was awesome. I was one of the people who valued our social justice group. So, it was her and one other adult, and they were both kind of on my team. (Personal communication, 5-12-2020)

Sports

What made me keep going is I wanted to play basketball. (Desso, personal communication, 4-9-2020)

For many participants, sports were both a pull and stick factor at a prior, conventional school. When push factors at the school or in life more generally became greater than the draw of sports, students were more likely to leave for a different setting.

Additional stick factors at conventional schools

The following stick factors were named by students with regard to their experiences at conventional schools, but none were named with enough frequency to be identified as their own theme. We include them here for your reference. They are: non-academic and extracurricular programs such as college readiness and arts programming; room to create students' own initiatives such as a newfound student group; relevant electives; and friends.

Push factors

For conventional schools, push factors included primarily a lack of caring relationships. This lack of care showed up in a way that students identified as adults who were only present at the school to clock in and clock out rather than to invest in their pupils' long-term success. As well, students saw the education programs at conventional schools as lacking relevance to their lives. Either concepts were presented without connection, or the concepts taught seemed like they had no real-life application for the students tasked with learning them. Lastly, students identified racism as a reason for leaving conventional schools, both in a lack of representation throughout the adults in those schools as well as with regard to how students were treated.

Lack of caring relationships

Everybody was doing their own thing; teachers did their own thing. They don't really care about anything. Nothing. (Samuel, personal communication, 5-8-2020)

When describing why they left conventional high schools, 8 of 10 currently enrolled students, 9 of 10 graduates, and 5 of 10 HSRA leavers described a lack of caring relationships as one primary reason they left conventional schools. Eight of these students (1 currently enrolled, 5 graduates, and 2 leavers) described the teachers in conventional schools as simply in it for the sake of employment rather than genuinely interested in seeing their students succeed. Participants referred to teachers as disengaged from supporting their students, which meant limited interactions outside the classroom and minimal one-on-one attention. This feeling of passivity extended to wraparound service offerings such as counseling and other support services, which students identified as either non-existent or felt were too routinized and impersonal to be helpful (5 currently enrolled students, 8 graduates, 2 leavers identified passive or non-existent wraparound services in conventional schools as a factor contributing to their departure).

Ultimately, these experiences contributed to students' lacking a sense of safety at the school, since they were unable to find help when they needed it most (6 current students, 5 leavers). As well, students felt the culture of the school and their own belief systems did not align, particularly regarding school cultures that excluded Black culture (3 currently enrolled, 5 graduates, 2 leavers). Students linked this disconnect to feelings of abandonment from teachers who did not believe in their success and potential as individuals.

The teachers were like employees, they didn't care about teaching. They cared about clocking in and clocking out, that's it. (Cynthia, personal communication, 4-22-2020)

More specifically, the perception that conventional school staff saw themselves as employees, rather than as mentors, guides, and models of authority in students' lives, further disenchanted students from their learning. This approach to teaching, students said, was represented in everything from packet-based learning that removed teachers from the student-teacher learning dynamic to irrelevant curricula, inflexible credit-earning structures, and subject-areas that were taught separately from each other despite the potential for interdisciplinary connections to be drawn (7 current students, 7 graduates, 8 leavers).

Irrelevant education program

A lot of the stuff I would've learnt at regular school I would never use in real life. I wouldn't have applied it to my everyday life. At a regular high school they don't even teach you how to make a budget or how to do stuff like that." (Steven, personal communication, 4-17-2020)

In addition to the aforementioned push factors identified for conventional schools, the education program came up as one of the strongest push factors and reasons for students leaving a conventional high school (7 currently enrolled, 7 graduates, 8 leavers). Often, this push factor was coupled with an identified absence of personalization in students' learning experiences. Specifically, one student, Aaron, named this lack of personalization in this way:

"They ain't asking me what I want to do. They only going to ask you at the end of the year when they make you write an assessment about yourself, what do you want to do?" (personal communication, 3-12-2020).

Aaron clearly felt his conventional school experience rarely considered who he was as a person, particularly with regard to what and how he learned. Students also echoed this sentiment, as will be seen in the "Non-conventional school" section and the

“Recommendations” section, by emphasizing the need to personalize learning and ask students what their education should consist of.

In addition to not having had their learning connected to their lives, students identified a lack of relevance to their own identity in their learning, often with respect to their race. One student, Desso, said:

“School’s not showing what should be shown to like kids in our colour – definitely our history. Because nowadays how I look at it is like these kids don’t even take our freedom seriously versus what all the ancestors and all these people went through just to get us this and nobody’s taking it seriously” (personal communication, 4-9-2020).

Another student, Kevin, said:

“Y’all are teaching me everything that happened from when y’all was hanging us on trees, from when all this was going on – from when we was picking cotton. That’s all y’all are teaching us” (personal communication, 7-16-2020).

While Desso argued for the instruction of Black history as one way to catalyze Black youth to engage in their learning and society more broadly, Kevin made clear that how the histories of students of color get taught can also serve to further marginalize students whose identities remain peripheral to predominantly Eurocentric curricula.

Other push factors rooted in the education program of conventional high schools that our participants identified included an absence of ethnic studies courses; inflexible curricula, instruction, credit-earning system, scheduling and budgeting; lack of high expectations; lack of relevant arts programming; and a lack of one-on-one attention.

Racism

*It was a mostly White school, so there was a little bit of some racist stuff.
(Elyse, personal communication, 3-12-2020)*

Adding to the impersonal nature of conventional schooling was the presence of institutional racism manifesting in conventional schools in ways that labeled students as deviant and did so through inequitable disciplinary actions (3 current students, 5 graduates, 2 leavers). As these schools were also quite large, our participants often felt overlooked and underrepresented among the staff and students as seen in the quote above, sometimes leading students to feel as though they had been actively pushed out of some of these conventional institutions. Racist treatment of students at conventional schools, in the words of a currently enrolled student named Lavasia, led to feeling like they were

“getting pushed out of that school only because of probably the color of my skin” (personal communication, 4-5-2020).

Non-conventional school

We identify non-conventional high schools as those that place an emphasis on smaller class sizes, project-based learning, student-centered programming, reengaging out-of-school students, providing wraparound services, educating through a social justice orientation, robust arts programming, teacher-driven decision-making, and other non-conventional best practices in education. Though the majority of our data reports directly on the High School for Recording Arts as one such school, some of our students had also attended other area non-conventional education programs. The following data refer to the High School for Recording Arts unless otherwise noted.

Pull factors

Supplementing findings about conventional schools, caring relationships emerged as the primary pull and stick factor at non-conventional schools. These relationships gave way to a school community rich with culture and identified by its smaller size. Perhaps most importantly for a school, though, was the education program, identified predominantly for its approach to arts and project-based learning that made learning feel relevant to students.

Relationships

My mentors. I built great bonds with them from day one to like – actually day one [staff name] used to stalk me. She used to stalk me. And so, became my advisor and then we built very good bonds. (Cynthia, personal communication, 4-22-2020)

In contrast to the relationships found in conventional schools, which were limited to a few adults in the building, students at non-conventional schools and the High School for Recording Arts in particular were able to rattle off name after name regarding adults to whom they felt close. Of the 30 students interviewed, six graduates, one leaver, and two current students identified relationships as a pull factor. In addition to caring relationships, students emphasized these relationships were represented by high expectations adults held students to, the importance of mentorship to their life and learning, and the presence of caring relationships to the receipt of services meant to support students in finding housing or mental health support.

Community

The biggest thing about the school that I love so much and that drew me in so much was the community aspect. Everything about it, regardless if we were learning, if we were eating, if we were just plain old having fun, it was a community. There were always people. If you were hurting, if we were hurting, it was a community. If we lost someone, be it everyone knew or no one knew, we all felt it together. (Jessica, personal communication, 4-20-2020)

Community is defined here as anything relevant to the collective group of people that make up a school. As identified by Jessica in the quote above, the most important pull factor for her at High School for Recording Arts was a sense of community that led her to understand she was not alone in her journey through high school. As a member of the community, Jessica knew that whatever she was going through, good or bad, she would have people in her corner to support her. The same, she said, was true for anyone, which helped Jessica and others understand the shared nature of success and failure, joy and pain. Across our participants, six graduates, five leavers and five current students identified community as a pull factor. Within the theme of community emerged three important sub-themes as pull factors. They include school culture, word of mouth and a smaller size. Each will be given its own detail below.

Culture

I went for orientation and just started looking around the school and was just wowed by the walls, the people, the signing, the music playing during the day. I'm like, 'Oh my God, this is where I need to be.' (Cynthia, personal communication, 4-22-2020)

School culture has been defined as comprising everything from the art on the walls of a school, to the building itself, the languages spoken within the school, and the traditions, norms, and mores that govern behavior. In the quote above, Cynthia identifies a number of these as pull factors that drew her to the school during orientation. It was these factors that led her and other students (5 graduates, one current student) to enroll at HSRA.

Word of mouth

I heard about you all, because one of my friends went there and they told me that you guys was a really good school and at the time you all was at the old building. (Brandy, personal communication, 7-17- 2020)

Though word-of-mouth is not necessarily a novel pull factor or a necessarily profound finding, it is worth noting the number of students who claimed to have been drawn to HSRA simply based on a referral from a friend or family member already at the school. Of the 30 students interviewed, three current students and five leavers said they came to HSRA as a result of hearing about the school through the grapevine. This subtheme within the broader theme of culture as a pull factor indicates that HSRA had done well enough by its current students and staff that they wanted to recommend the school to their friends and family, as is shown in Brandy's quote above.

Smaller size

I was excited about going to the smaller school. I feel like smaller schools are better for those that is battling depression and all that other stuff... I feel that it helped me a lot and I didn't feel like it was just so much, I didn't feel like it was so much going on because when you're in a bigger school you just feel like there's a lot going on. (Samuel, personal communication, 5-8-2020)

In the quote above from Samuel, the importance of smaller schools represents not just the importance of one-on-one attention, but the importance of a trauma-informed approach as well. Samuel, as someone dealing with depression, also identified a calmer, quieter atmosphere as important to his ability to do school. Calm, quiet atmospheres have become best practices of trauma-informed approaches to care and education when working with young people battling depression or other mental health issues. Other students identified the size of non-conventional schools as making it easier for them to ask questions, describing the anxiety they felt in larger schools where not everyone has the opportunity to do so. Of all of our participants, two leavers, two current students, and three graduates identified a preference for a smaller school.

Education program

I transitioned to HSRA, pretty much, because I realized that school would better suit me and my future... I really became like a music artist, I would say, when I went to HSRA and developed myself. (Isaiah, personal communication, 7-15-2020)

The education program, for all of its flexibility and student-centeredness, was a major draw to HSRA for students coming from conventional schools (7 graduates, 7 current students, 8 leavers). Of 30 students, 22 named some component of HSRA’s education program as a pull factor. Included in the education program as a pull factor were HSRA’s credit recovery options, personalized, student-centered learning, competency-based curricula, freedom/flexibility, self-pacing, opportunities for professional certification, the advisory model and field trips. The two most prevalent subthemes of the education program as a pull factor, however, were HSRA’s approach to arts – particularly the recording arts – as a form of project-based learning and the relevance of the learning to students’ lives.

Approach to arts-based and project-based learning

I love art. I'm not really artistic myself, but I just love the creations that other people can make and where they can expand their thoughts and I just love seeing it. I just like art. So, I'm surrounded by that. I was just like, 'Oh yeah, I need to be up in here.' (Cynthia, personal communication, 4-22-2020)

In the quote above, Cynthia identifies the arts as important for her as a student, despite the fact that she doesn’t really consider herself artistic. For other students, as seen in the quote from Samuel opening this section on the education program as a pull factor, the recording arts in particular presented an unprecedented opportunity to engage his deepest dreams and desires while also working towards his high school diploma. The art offerings at HSRA – music production and recording, singing/song writing, rapping, photography, videography, post-production and more – presented more authentic and interesting opportunities for students to express themselves than those found in their prior, conventional high schools. For some, they discovered these offerings during a tour or orientation. For others, however, the art offerings available at HSRA were made aware to them through the same word-of-mouth process identified in the section covering “community” as a pull factor. Students who demonstrated an interest in the arts would hear about HSRA from a friend, family member or other person in their life and be pulled to the school for those reasons. The recording arts provided opportunities for students to engage in culturally sustaining, project-based learning opportunities, like the documentary on the Rondo community that

students produced, or field trips to historically important locations throughout the world (including annual trips to Ghana and Kenya).

Relevant education program

My stepdad was like telling me about this school and how he knew I liked photography, and he thought it was a good business choice to do. (Elyse, personal communication, 3-12-2020)

As a pull factor, the relevance of the education program to students' lives appeared as a result of a recognized overlap between students' own interests and the opportunities offered at HSRA. Much more will be said about the relevance of the education program in the "stick" section on non-conventional schools, but as a pull factor, relevance had enough recognition (4 students total) from students to be named its own subtheme.

Stick factors

Caring relationships and interpersonal press

[A staff member] helped me get out of a place that I was stuck in for like probably... seven years. I was in a deep place. I had to just be, I don't know, it was just a talk, nice little 30-minute talk. You know, he powerful. (Zora, personal communication, 7-15-2020)

The importance of interpersonal relationships to students' persevering through school cannot be overstated. Almost every participant (9 current students, 8 graduates, 9 leavers) was able to name a number of staff members with whom they felt a close relationship and that they could call on at any time for anything. Students named these relationships as the primary reasons they stayed at HSRA. Students named feeling deeply appreciative that the adults at HSRA were willing to be in contact with them off campus, support them when students were not in school, sometimes providing rides in times of need and showing up in court when students needed an adult representative. This differed starkly from conventional schools where students named only one or two adults with whom they felt a close connection. These connections were found in abundance at HSRA and are symbolized at the institutional level through flexible budgeting, flexible scheduling, and an education program that required adults actually get to know students before supporting them in designing their own learning experience.

Perhaps most importantly, the depth of relationships between adults and students resulted in high expectations for students in their academic work as represented in the quote above. The transition from interpersonal relationships to academic press has led us to identify the presence and importance of what we're calling "interpersonal press," or the ability of adults in a school to push students to extraordinary academic achievements as a result of their relational bond. In each instance of interpersonal press represented in the data, students identified being taken from a low place personally to a place where they felt capable of achieving more than they previously had. Interpersonal press was represented in interviews with four current students, five graduates, and two leavers. It was the relationships between staff and students that enabled staff to use their interpersonal press to push students to achieve, both personally and academically, more than they otherwise might have.

No student described the importance of caring relationships and interpersonal press better than Jessica, who offered this quote in reflection upon a moment where a staff member led her to realize she had more to accomplish:

So just looking back on all of that, after that little grey period, I realized that there was no cap for me. Back then I thought there was a cap, 'Okay, after I get on this stage and do this, I'm the bomb. There's nothing else I can do.' Nope, there was more. Nope, there was more. Am I done? Nope, there was more, you know, and there was—so realizing that, I realized I can go further than this. I can be something great, I have all of these skills, I have the capability of learning more skills and not only that, I know how I learn. (Personal communication, 4-20-2020)

Jessica points out, quite astutely, that interpersonal press at HSRA lay firmly rooted in each student's own trajectory of growth (or zone of proximal development). As students accomplished more, grew into themselves as learners, school personnel (staff and teachers alike) encouraged students to set higher and higher goals. Rather than rooting learning in standardized testing outcomes, the school set its sights on outcomes that represent growth and achievement relative to each students' own, unique path.

A support team that cares

I developed a really good support team of people who wanted something more for me than just graduating, and wanted me to be honest, a different way of success, by letting me really take over my whole curriculum of what interests me, which was great. And I think I graduated with a much stronger view of myself, and who I wanted to be and my goals and potential. (Jordan, personal communication, 5-12-2020)

One graduate, two current students, and five leavers identified the importance of a support team to their perseverance at HSRA. Students like Jordan, who is quoted above, recognized that they both left their previous school as a result of a lack of support and stayed at HSRA as a result of the support team around them. This support team was often connected first with the student's advisor, expanding out from there to include a teacher or teachers and staff working as wraparound service providers. Based on the representation of a need for a support team within the data from students who left HSRA, we believe that the greater the confluence of push factors on a student, the greater the need for a supportive team to come together to help that student get through their schooling. Jordan identified the importance of these teams as doing more than just engaging him in his learning, but pushing him to be a better human being overall.

Culturally sustaining staff

*Not only as a woman... but as a Black woman in America I've learned so much about who I am through HSRA and [staff member], I love him so much. He's taught me so much in African American history, African history, that gave me the courage to go out and try things that I've never tried before.
(Jessica, personal communication, 4-20-2020)*

Three current students, five graduates, and one leaver identified having a culturally sustaining staff as crucial to their time at HSRA. Once students enrolled at HSRA, they realized the importance of a community that was culturally aligned with their own belief and value systems. Rather than feeling targeted or stigmatized for who they were, they felt validated and able to contribute to a shared motivation to succeed. Within this culturally sustaining space, students felt safe to express themselves, capable of failing forward and trying new things, and willing to engage in transformative justice mediation protocols to resolve instances of conflict.

Relevant, student-centered education program

Teachers at HSRA that I hadn't even previously like spoken to or met with approached me on this and just like we'd start talking and they would like challenge me to do certain things, like create a song or do this or that. And it was just like definitely very different to be challenged especially in something that like I actually care about instead of like I'm going to challenge you to do this project on this part of history or something. You know, I felt like it was an individual challenge. (Angel, personal communication, 7-17-2020)

Eight current students, seven graduates, and nine leavers identified HSRA’s relevant, student-centered education program as a stick factor. HSRA models itself around four values: family, community, respect and education. Thus far, the first three values have been represented in abundance. The fourth value, education, hinges on the first three and was named by our participants as crucial to their persevering through high school. As part of HSRA’s education program, students said they enjoyed all the same elements of the education program that pulled them to HSRA in the first place as well as opportunities to align their hobbies and interests with their schooling. When discussing the importance of their own interests to their learning, many participants remarked that, before coming to HSRA, they had never been asked what interests might drive their education. Through the experience of designing their own learning, students were able to receive vocational/technical training, paid employment and certifications in areas of their choosing. Angel, quoted above, points out that they were not just presented with an opportunity to personalize their learning, but were challenged individually by their instructors. Students identified the opportunity to design their own learning as a source of empowerment. The freedom to create, move at their own pace, and learn through real-world, hands-on experiences became signifiers of an education program students actually enjoyed.

Participants named a number of elements of HSRA’s education program that they found important reasons for staying at HSRA. We will list these here along with the total number of respondents who identified each as a stick factor. They include: the arts (12 participants), flexibility (10 participants), the music industry and other creative professions (6 participants), the advisory model (5 participants), education in project-based learning (4 participants), ethnic studies and social justice oriented curricula (4 participants), one-on-one attention (3 participants), opportunities to develop financial literacy (2 participants), the development of self-knowledge (especially with regard to race/ethnicity/gender identity) (2 participants), and skill-based rather than answer-based learning (1 participants).

Wraparound services

I had got my apartment. I did get my apartment because I signed up at HSRA for it... I thought I never was going to get it. I'm like, 'Wow, HSRA they got so many resources...' There has never been another program with all these resources or another school with all these resources. Never—not one. And if it is, they're just giving out cards. Like the people don't actually be there.
(Kevin, personal communication, 7-16-2020)

Four current students, five graduates, and five leavers named wraparound services, specifically housing and mental health services, as crucial to their abilities to remain at HSRA. Kevin was able to receive housing through the support services offered at HSRA.

Participants, Kevin included, also pointed out the difference between the wraparound services at HSRA and those offered at conventional schools. At HSRA, wraparound services were provided in what could be categorized as “active support,” whereas conventional schools offered some services in ways students described as “passive support.” The difference between the services at HSRA and conventional schools students described as laying in the relationships established between students and staff. Where at HSRA, active wraparound services were seen as part of a broader school culture of family and community, at conventional schools these services were seen as just another part of a system that was not deeply invested in the lives and wellbeing of its students.

In addition to housing and mental health, students also identified important services that included a shower, laundry machines, and a “swag closet” from which students could take clothes and toiletries as needed. These wraparound services reduced barriers to attendance and learning by making students more comfortable. One student named the proximity of these services on campus as crucial to their ability to access them.

Push factors

Very few push factors emerged with regard to non-conventional schools. Therefore, we only provide those that appeared in the data in more than one place. Two push factors emerged from the data for non-conventional schools, that of a packet-based education program and that of an education program that proved to be too flexible for some students.

Non-conventional reputation

The reputation of HSRA as non-conventional did not push students to leave but rather pushed students not to enroll in the first place. Once students were able to tour the school, view its offerings and understand what makes it unique, they were able to overcome whatever preconceived notions they had built around non-conventional schools and enrolled anyways.

I really do feel like the guys here need more than just basketball to get them out of the streets and have them actually do something. (Elyse, personal communication, 3-12-2020)

For the three students who mentioned improved sports offerings at HSRA, they often came as a recognition of the need to have physical opportunities for growth and development. The quote above shows one student who recognized the need for the young men in the school to have opportunities beyond the basketball team currently offered at HSRA. We can assume students who do not identify as men would also find interest in added sports offerings. None of these students left HSRA as a result of a lack of sports offerings.

Too much freedom

Everyone knew they had a lot of freedom and stuff like that... the people around you, they took advantage of it too much. (Brianna, personal communication, 7-18-2020)

While push factors at HSRA were few and far between, four students, including the one who provided the quote above, said that the freedom and flexibility of HSRA's education program allowed extra space for peer pressure. For the four students who left HSRA and mentioned falling in with the "wrong crowd" as one reason why, they recognized the impacts that crowd had on their abilities to engage academically in an environment where students ample opportunities to choose how they learn. Based on this finding, some students felt the balance between structure and agency may have tipped to far to the side of agency, allowing for the formation of bad habits and the influence of students on others.

Packet-based learning

At the alternative schools it was boring. They would just give us packets and then they expect us to do the work, like what? Can you tell me a little bit about what I'm doing? Can we have like a project or something? (Andrew, personal communication, 2-27-2020)

Out of our 30 interviewees, two named packet-based learning at a non-conventional school other than HSRA as leading to their disengagement from the school itself. In the quote above, the student clearly states a desire to know what he's doing and why, reiterating the importance of relevant learning as identified in the "Push" section on conventional schools and the "Stick" section on non-conventional schools. This student also emphasizes his preference for project-based learning over packets, going on to show that he knows he prefers project-based learning as a result of his work at HSRA.

External influences

Push factors

Outside of conventional and non-conventional schools, students faced push factors relating to mental health (3 current students, 5 graduates, 3 leavers) and housing (1 current student, 2 graduates, 4 leavers). As well, some students reported becoming new parents (1 current student, 2 graduates, 4 leavers), either they or someone in their family facing incarceration (1 current student, 1 leaver), the need to work to provide for their family (1 current student,

3 graduates, 1 leaver), or intimate partner violence (3 leavers) as reasons for having left school.

Research shows issues of houselessness as rooted in systemic forms of violence that exclude low-income and people of color from access to safe and affordable housing. These disparities lead to comorbidities with mental health, substance abuse and becoming a parent at an early age. In the sense that HSRA has had to become more than a school in order to meet its student's needs, this research project begs the question: At what point does a school take on too much? And, how can we support schools and service providers alike in partnering to ensure the whole student is taken care of, not just the learner?

Stick factors

Interestingly, though becoming a parent led students to leave conventional schools, once at HSRA this same factor became a reason to finish school (1 current student, 1 graduate and 2 leavers). As well, having a supportive family member also appeared to be helpful to one current student, one graduate and one leaver.

Suggestions for improving high school

In order to identify what students would recommend policymakers and education leaders do to improve schools, we asked them to describe their ideal school. We also asked students to describe what they would say to policymakers if they had the chance to speak directly to people who have the power to implement such changes. The following three quotes guide much of what follows in terms of recommendations and visions for the ideal school presented by our participants.

Kind of similar to [HSRA]. I know that, I would do it similar to this. It wouldn't be too much different, because this is, like, I don't know to me it's a perfect school, I wish I were going here since 9th grade. (Tanisha, personal communication, 2-27-2020)

If I was a boss like one of them like how you speaking, I would come to the school and be like, 'How y'all want y'all school?' (Kevin, personal communication, 7-16-2020)

Really having people to help the people who are more on the outside that otherwise would go completely unnoticed. You know, I think that everybody has a point in their life where they just need that support that makes the difference between being successful in your life and, you know, and then not—I feel like every student is important and you shouldn't be satisfied with 95% you know. (Angel, personal communication, 7-17-2020)

Importantly, six current students, seven graduates, and four leavers identified HSRA as their ideal school when asked. It should be noted, then, that students’ recommendations for what they felt schools should include were drawn heavily from the structures and best practices implemented at HSRA. The most important element of HSRA’s program that students identified, however, were the staff members who made the following elements of HSRA’s model a reality, which include the school’s four pillars and four vales (Figure 7).

7. HSRA’s values and pillars

4 Values	4 Pillars
Family: our community is rooted in the belief that learning is best nurtured when there is a feeling of belongingness.	Asset-based: instead of seeing students as a deficit to fix, we begin by building strong relationships and recognizing the genius in each young person.
Respect: our culture is predicated on the belief that each of us matter: our histories, and the spaces we occupy.	Wraparound services: recognizing that most of our students come from fragile homes and communities, we provide supports to them in areas such as restorative justice, mental health, food, clothing, and housing to fully realize their potential.
Community: our students contribute tremendous value to their communities, which in turn support their learning through mentorships, partnerships, internships, and jobs.	Innovative practices: to best support deeper learning, we provide our students with connections to recording & creative industry partnerships, state of the art equipment, real world content, project-based learning, and higher-order competencies.
Education: a student/teacher partnership approach develops lifelong learners through the recording arts and other creative endeavors.	Social justice lens: the world can and should be better for our students; we provide the creative space to confront societal injustices and empower our students to act as community change agents.

Specifically, students wanted to see some changes at HSRA to improve its offerings: improve food offerings (1 current student, 4 graduates, and 3 leavers); increase sports available to students (1 current student, 4 graduates); and separate freshmen from the rest of the student population (2 current students, 1 graduate). In light of Kevin’s powerful suggestion above to ask the people in a school how they want their schools to improve, we provide you with the following recommendations, pulled directly from the students themselves, on how to make schools better (Figure 8).

8. HSRA’s findings regarding respondent recommendations to improve high schools in general

Recommendations for improving high schools in general	Current students (n=10)	Graduates (n=10)	Leavers (n=10)	Total (N=10)
Provide robust opportunities to learn through the arts, specifically the recording arts and other creative mediums students have a passion for	6	7	4	17
Centralize project-based, hands-on learning to the student experience	6	7	4	17
Provide community-rooted wraparound services and teach these as subjects in school	4	5	5	14
Establish a safe, family-like, accepting, vibrant, and exciting environment for all students	3	6	4	13
Teach culturally sustaining subjects like Black history or ethnic studies courses	2	4	5	11
Hire culturally sustaining teachers and staff who are representative of the student population	2	4	5	11
Teach life skills like financial literacy, resume building, and technological literacy	2	4	4	10
Small school community and classroom size	3	1	3	7
Ample opportunities for one-on-one attention	2	1	2	5
Design for marginalized learning styles and student identities	--	4	1	5
Provide incentives for everything from attendance to credit accrual	1	1	2	4

While the aforementioned recommendations take into account that which students explicitly named as wanting to see implemented in schools they would want to attend, there are also certain elements of our data that point to recommendations derived implicitly through the data. One such finding includes the challenges non-conventional schools face when transitioning students into their program after having already left conventional schools. This transition appeared in our data as a challenge faced by students and would suggest the need for non-conventional schools to establish robust and supportive orientation processes to help facilitate the transition of students into educational programs that ask students to take on more ownership over their learning.

Appendix

Wilder's interview protocol

Introduction and informed consent

Hello! My name is _____ (name of interviewer) and I am from Wilder Research. At Wilder Research, we do interviews and surveys with people to learn about their experiences in life. Wilder Research is working with _____ (organization's name) to learn about your experiences in high school and what about your high school caused you to leave.

This interview will take 30-60 minutes, depending on how much you have to say. As a thank you, you will receive a \$20 gift card for your time. We will not share what you said with anyone outside of our research team and your name will not be associated with any of your response in any report that we write. Please also let me know if you don't want to answer any questions I ask; we will skip that question. Additionally, this interview is completely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with [organization's name] or [organization representative's name].

We would like to record this interview. We want to make sure that we capture everything you will say accurately and completely. The recording will be destroyed after it is transcribed. Is that okay with you? If not, do not record interview.

Interview questions

1. What high schools did you go to?
 - a) By "high schools" we mean traditional high schools, Alternative Learning Centers/Area Learning Centers, charter schools, and online schools. Were there any other high schools that you went to?

2. For how long were you at each of these schools?
 - a) Name of school:
 - b) Name of school:
 - c) Name of school:
 - d) Name of school:
 - e) Did you have an individual education plan at any of these schools? *If currently in school*: Do you currently have an individual education plan?
 - f) We are interested in hearing about why you left these schools. Which was the first school you left? And which was the last one that you left?

3. Please tell us why you left your last high school.
 - a) *(If needed)* Please use three words to describe your experience at your last high school. Tell us more about why you chose those words.
 - b) *(If needed)* What about this high school—the people there, how it was run, the physical building, and so on—caused you to leave?
 - c) *(If needed)* What could the school have done, if anything, to get you to stay or to help you stay?

Next, we have some questions about the adults at your last high school.

4. Please describe your relationships with adults at your last high school, such as teachers or staff (*by “staff” we mean anyone who wasn’t a teacher, like a counselor, the principal, afterschool staff*).
 - a) Were there any adults at your last high school that you liked, talked to often, or got along with? Please tell us more about those people and your relationships with them.
 - b) Were there any adults that you really didn’t like or didn’t get along with? Please tell us more about those people and your relationships with them.
 - c) Were any of these adults the reason that you left [school]?
5. What “supports or services” did you have in your last high school? By “supports or services” we mean someone that you could go to for help with work, housing, family issues, counseling or therapy, sexual health, or safety outside of school.
 - a) Were there any of these “supports or services” that you used regularly? Please tell us more about that.
 - b) Did you feel like you had time to use these “supports or services” while at your last high school?
 - c) Do you think that having more of these “supports or services” would have been useful while at your last high school?

Next, we have a question about how safe or unsafe you felt at your last school.

6. On a scale of 1-5, with “1” being very safe and “5” being very unsafe, how safe or unsafe did you feel at your last high school? Please tell us why you felt that way.
 - a) What about the school—the people there, how it was run, the physical building, and so on—contributed to these feelings?
 - b) *(If needed)* What could the school have done, if anything, to help you feel more safe?

Next, we have some questions about how your interests aligned with what you were required to do while in school.

7. Was there a particular subject that you were interested in while at your last high school?
 - a) Tell me more about how you became interested in that subject or why you liked that subject.
 - b) Were you still able to learn about or take classes in this subject after you left your last high school? Tell me about that.

8. Was there a particular extracurricular activity that you were interested in while at your last high school? (*If needed*) “Extracurricular activity” refers to sports, music or theater, academic teams, or other activities that take place outside of regular school hours.
 - a) Tell me more about how you became involved in that activity.
 - b) Were you still able to do this activity after you left your last high school? Tell me about that.

9. Was there anything you were learning at your last high school you thought you could use in your life outside of school
 - a) For example, were you learning things that you thought would be helpful for a job or generally for your life after you graduated?

Finally, we have some questions about what you want from school.

10. Please describe the perfect school for you.
 - a) What would it look like?
 - b) What would you learn?
 - c) How would the classes/learning flow throughout the day? What would the schedule be like?
 - d) What would the teachers do? How would they teach? What kind of relationships would they have with you?
 - e) Aside from teachers, what other staff would work there and what would your relationships with be like?

Demographic information

- A. What is your age? _____ years old
- B. How do you identify your gender?
- C. How do you describe your race or ethnicity?
- D. What's the last grade you completed in school? _____ (grade)
- E. Do you have a job?
 - a. (If yes) What is your job and how many hours on average do you work per week?
- F. Aside from what we've already talked about, are you currently in an education or training program of any kind, like a GED, Adult Diploma, trade certification, or other kind of education or training program?
 - a. (If yes) What is the program?

HSRA's interview protocol

- 1) Pre-Interview
 - a) Names, dates, time
 - b) Record the high school student journey—what schools did you go to for how long?
- 2) Did your high school experience push out/kick out/cause you to leave before graduating?
 - a) Describe your experience at your other high school(s)?
 - What was good, what was bad? (3 words to describe it)
 - b) Describe relationships at the school with teachers / staff at your other school(s):
 - What was good and bad?
 - Contribute to staying or leaving?
 - Who was on your side / team there?
 - c) Describe how safe or unsafe you felt at your other schools. What made it that way?
- 3) In what ways was your conventional high school incompatible with your interests and/or learning style?
 - a) Why did you change schools? (Were you pushed or kicked out? Did you transfer?)
 - b) What do you love to do outside of school?
 - How did your school incorporate your interests into learning?
 - In the way the school was set up for learning in terms of relevance, interest, passion, link to the real world
 - c) Was there anything you were learning at the school you thought you could use in your real life?
 - That would be helpful for a job or life after you graduated?
 - d) What supports did you have in your last school?
 - Support from staff?
 - Support from “Wrap-Around Services” - Support with
 - work
 - housing
 - family issues
 - counseling or therapy
 - sexual health
 - safety outside of school
 - Was there time to do any of this?

4) IF GRADUATED/LEFT/ENROLLED:

- HSRA GRADUATE: What was the turning point for you? What was your spark? What led you to graduate?
- HSRA ENROLLED: What's keeping you here?
- HSRA LEAVER: What pushed you out?

5) What kind of schooling and school would work for you?

a) Describe the perfect school for you

- What would it look like?
- How would it flow (schedule)?
- What would you learn?
- Who would work there and in what positions?
- What kind of relationships would you have?
- What would teachers do?

b) What are some ways your school now is better than schools you didn't like?

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High School for Recording Arts (HSRA) is dedicated to providing all young people a chance to realize their full potential, despite any previous setbacks. As we engage students through music and the exploration and operation of the music business, we demonstrate that core learning areas and real world, 21st century skills can be acquired at the same time. More than just earning a high school diploma, HSRA prepares students for a positive post-secondary education and life.

