

If You Listen...
We Will Thrive



» Student Voice Project

Student voice matters at KPR, and if we listen – students will succeed and thrive! The Student Voice Project, one of the 2023-2024 Director's Priorities, served as a platform for amplifying student voices in educational decision making.

During the 2023-2024 school year, over 180 high school students from all secondary schools and alternative education sites participated in focus groups facilitated by Elder Melody Crowe and Director of Education Rita Russo. The project captured students' perspectives on their day-to-day experiences at school. Participants spoke openly about both the positive aspects of school and the challenges. They offered many insights into how educators, leaders and school staff can make school experiences better for current and future KPR students.

» Key Themes

The following themes emerged through the discussions:

- » Caring, Welcoming Spaces
- » Co and Extra-Curriculars
- » Course Availability
- » Discrimination and Racism
- » Safety and Access to Bathrooms
- » Support for Students
- » Benefits of Alternative Education





» Caring, Welcoming Spaces

- Schools are generally seen as welcoming and supportive places with caring staff who want students to be successful.
- Most staff hold high expectations for students and are available to help students who may be struggling.
- Not all staff show the same level of support or interest in teacher-student relationships.

‘Most teachers set high expectations and believe that we can achieve, I know my teachers feel that about me because I’m super academic, but I have seen a bias toward students that have had discipline issues.’

‘Sometimes it feels like they do the ‘Get to Know You’ activities at the beginning of the semester, like ask about your pronouns, your interests, or they ask things to learn about you and then never use any of that information, it’s like a checklist and feels like they don’t really care deeply.’

» Co- and Extra-Curriculars

- Students have access to a variety of clubs (art, drama, music, technology, diversity) and sports teams that they enjoy and appreciate.
- Students noted the dedication of staff who make these opportunities possible.

‘There are so many sports, so many things I could do. It’s easy to find a group I could fit into.’

‘We have a music club that was started by a student and it’s pretty great.’

‘Sometimes I wish things weren’t so competitive with sports teams. I joined a team because I wanted to learn the sport and obviously, I wasn’t that good because I was there to learn... There needs to be both options, competitive and learning.’

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‘We have an excellent range of clubs, there’s something for everyone. There’s lots of inclusivity in sports and intramurals.’
”



“
‘We have to
take e-Learning
credits because we
can’t get the courses
and e-Learning isn’t
always that great.’
”

» Course Availability

- Students are looking for a wide variety of course offerings to meet their needs.
- Depending on the size of the student population or the availability of program offerings in a particular school, students don’t always have access to courses they would like to experience.

‘I want to try automotive, carpentry, welding or masonry and I’m lucky I can do it here.’

» Discrimination and Racism

- The overwhelming majority of students spoke positively about the increase in diversity at KPR, however incidents of racism and discrimination were reported by all focus groups.
- Most focus groups participants could cite a specific example of blatantly racist comments or actions by students or staff.
- Many students suggested more training is required for teachers and principals on how to respond to such incidents.

‘Indigenous students sometimes feel the burden of having to represent the culture, sometimes I’m the only Indigenous student and I’m singled out to explain things during discussions and I don’t know why the teacher calls on me, I’m learning too.’

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‘There are spaces for prayer now and that’s a significant improvement from having to pray in less private areas like the stairwell.’

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‘People make racist comments all the time. I just take it. Sometimes they get in trouble, and it gets dealt with and sometimes not. Teachers are trying their best, but sometimes I can see they ignore it, and I know they hear it.’

‘I’m grateful for the Indigenous Cultural space in my school, it helps me a lot, but non-Indigenous students and staff don’t know what it is, and they need to learn more about it. Sometimes teachers think I go there to get out of work and that’s not true.’

» Safety and Access to Bathrooms

- Every high school and alternative learning focus groups reported a serious concern with the bathrooms at their respective sites. Comments ranged from recurring vandalism, vaping, and limited access to bathrooms because they are closed by administration for a variety of reasons.
- Many students choose not to use bathrooms at their schools. Some students cite safety as a reason for not using the bathrooms and a few commented on the lack of accessible bathroom facilities.

'I don't use the bathroom because there are always people hanging out in the bathroom, sitting on the floor, vaping, eating in the stalls like they own the place and I just don't feel safe, so I don't go.'

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I like that menstrual products are available, I think that's really good, but we still have to teach students how to be respectful with the products because sometimes they are just thrown around and floating in the toilets.

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'There's only one all gender bathroom and students with mobility needs use it and you need to get a key to use it, so I don't go to the bathroom.'

'Principals do bathroom checks all the time and everyone knows who the problem kids are, but nothing happens, nothing changes.'

» Support for Students

- There are concerns about teachers not being familiar with the accommodations some students need to be successful. Some students expressed that their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are supported while other students feel that their IEPs are dismissed by teachers, and that teachers need a better understanding of how to implement IEPs.
- Most staff members hold high expectations for students and are available to help students who are struggling or who need help.
- Some students reported it is hard to adjust to different teaching styles and expectations from class to class.
- Students struggling with mental health challenges like anxiety, depression or addiction generally feel supported by their educators, particularly at alternative education sites. They report feeling like there is a genuine care for their success and well-being. Some students in traditional high school settings don't feel well supported.

'The guidance department is a good place to go for help, but it's always booked so you have to wait. At our school, child and youth workers (CYW) are alerted if a student is having a bad day and the CYW helps with mental health.'

'Most teachers understand mental health issues, but some don't and think it's used as an excuse. They need to learn more about things like anxiety and how to help students with it.'

'I think teachers need time and training to better understand and implement IEPs, as well as to handle mental health issues with sensitivity.'



» Benefits of Alternative Education



- Students generally described their alternative school experience as **inclusive and supportive**. Teachers are willing to accommodate different needs, and they take the time to get to know students and celebrate their successes.
- The **flexible schedule** allows students to work, while also gaining the credits they need to graduate. Students can work at their own pace and get the help they need without judgement from teachers or peers.
- Most students struggled with mainstream education - whether it was the social aspect of school, their own learning challenges or the structured nature of traditional high school. The alternative learning setting gave them **hope for the future**.

'I don't have a negative thing to say about this place, I think it's great. My advice to teachers is to treat us with respect, that's all we want. Take the time to listen to us. Let us take the lead in our learning and if we don't talk, it doesn't mean we're dumb, we just don't want to talk.'

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Don't use the alternative learning site as a threat... It shouldn't be seen as the place where all the bad kids go. I'm not a bad kid. This place is the best thing that ever happened to me.

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'Everyone says hello, knows my name and is really happy to see me when I show up. Teachers listen and help, they don't just teach... and there's always food here. I never have to worry about being hungry or feeling like I don't fit in.'



» Student Voice Matters

Thank you to student participants from the following schools:

Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Bowmanville High School

Campbellford District High School

Clarington Central Secondary School

Clarke High School

Cobourg Collegiate Institute

Courtice Secondary School

Crestwood Secondary School

East Northumberland Secondary School

Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

Norwood District High School

Port Hope High School

Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Clarington Centre for Individual Studies

Peterborough Alternative and Continuing Education

Northumberland Center for Individual Studies

Special thanks to the administration and staff who coordinated student participation in the focus groups and supported logistics, including refreshments!

» Next Steps

The summaries contained in this booklet identify frequently mentioned themes from the discussions that took place, and which were common to most schools. Individual concerns, localized themes, and less frequently mentioned ideas were also captured, and all information will be used by administration to identify future actions to support students.

We want to keep listening! During the 2024-2025 school year, more opportunities will be available for student engagement. Learn more on the KPR website, www.kprschoos.ca