

Student Safety: A Student's Perspective

*Student Safety & Safe Passage Surveys (Washington, DC)
School Year 2021 - 22*



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Stakeholders & Community Partners

Office of the Student Advocate

The Office of the Student Advocate is an independent office, housed in the District of Columbia State Board of Education. Our office developed two student safety surveys and restarted our in-person focus group discussions with DC public and charter school students and family members. The following staff members helped develop and facilitate the survey and focus groups:

- Dan Davis, *Chief Student Advocate*
- Phillip Copeland, *Student Advocate*
- Natalie Powell, *Student Advocate*
- Renatta Landrau, *Student Advocate*
- Valeria Popolizio Torres, *Program Associate*

Urban Institute

The Urban Institute supported the Office of the Student Advocate to design the 2021 OSA Safe Passage Survey about the safety threats to high school students and analyze the results. Shubhangi Kumari and Megan Gallagher helped develop and analyze the Safe Passage Survey administered in the fall of 2021.

- Shubhangi Kumari, *Research Analyst*
- Megan Gallagher, *Senior Research Associate*

Partner Agencies and Organizations

The following organizations and agencies either helped organize / co-facilitate a focus group, provided a space for focus groups, or distributed the Safe Passage survey:

- Collaborative Solutions for Communities (CSC)
- DC Public Library
- DCPS: Office of Engagement & Partnership
- DC State Board of Education, Student Advisory Committee
- El Comite De Familias Latinas de DCPS
- Mikva, DC
- Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME)
- Panther Guardians PTO
- Pathways 2 Power, Thurgood Marshall Academy PCS
- Randle Highlands PTO
- Teaching for Change
- The Tumaini Way

Overview

In school year (SY) 2021 - 22, the Office of the Student Advocate (OSA) administered surveys and conducted focus groups with students to better understand their experiences traveling to and from school. Our office anticipated a surge in incidents related to student safety due to multiple factors affecting students return to the classroom such as increasing levels of community violence, and decreased socialization skills from pandemic isolation. Due to these concerns, we collaborated with the Urban Institute to survey more than 430 students to start the school year about their safety concerns. We were able to learn more about how students felt while traveling to and from school using various forms of transportation. As the school year progressed, we did see a spike in concerns related to student safety emerge.

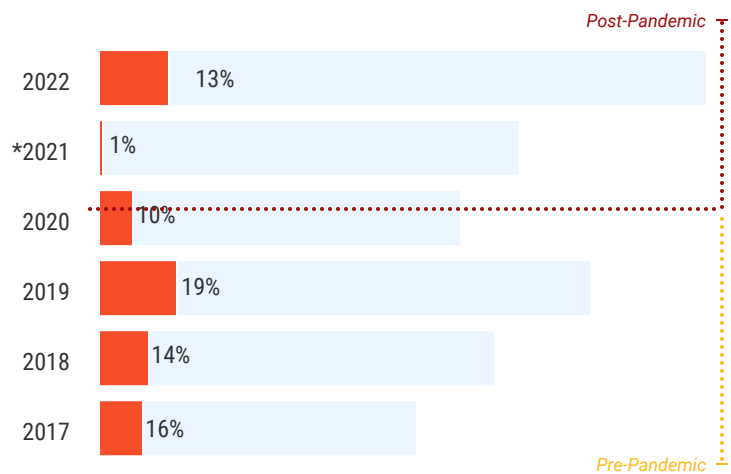
In response to these growing concerns, our office restarted our in-person focus group discussions from before the pandemic. We expanded these discussions to include middle school students, the families of elementary aged children, and English language learning students and families. We continued to work with youth leadership organizations like Pathways 2 Power and Mikva DC, while expanding our partnerships with community based organizations like Collaborative Solutions for Communities. In addition to learning more about their experiences traveling to and from school, we used these discussions to learn how students and families feel about current Safe Passage programming.

Background

The safety of our children should always come first. Unfortunately, we know that instances of harassment and violence jeopardizes the safety of our children. In response to the volume of requests for assistance our office receives related to student safety, we have worked with numerous schools, government agencies, and community based organizations to help students feel safer and help families maintain confidence that their children are safe while traveling to and from school. In 2017, we started facilitating community centered discussions addressing concerns regarding student and family safety while traveling to and from school. From those conversations came community driven approaches to protect our students and their families mirroring successful efforts from other school districts

Student Safety has consistently been a top-5 area of concern for families who requested assistance from OSA. Prior to the school closures of SY 2019 - 20, the number of calls related to student safety increased consistently each year. When schools closed for in-person instruction in 2020, the number of calls decreased significantly. This can be attributed to most students being home for virtual instruction. When schools reopened in SY 2021 - 22, we experienced a surge of student safety related calls returning to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 1: A 6-year look at Student Safety Related Requests for Assistance



*Schools were operating virtually for SY 2020 - 21 in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

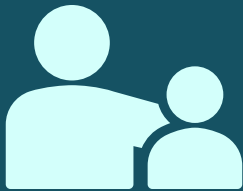
Due to the consistent level of concerns expressed from families, OSA conducted focus group discussions to learn more from students. These discussions were used to guide future policy discussions related to their safety. In SY 2019 - 20, our office spoke with 452 students across 27 DC Public Schools (DCPS) and Public Charter Schools (PCS) and shared their perspectives in our *Safe Passage: A Student's Perspective* report in January 2021. With the emergence of safety concerns following the return of in-person learning, our office engaged with nearly 700 students and 50 parents/guardians/family members across 42 DCPS and PCS schools. The following report reflects the experiences of those students and family members.

SY 2021 - 2022 Participants



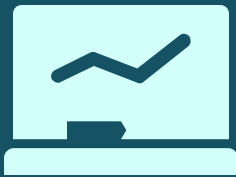
693

Total Students completed the survey.



49

Total family members completed the survey.



23

DC Public Schools

Ballou HS, Ballou STAY, Bard HS, Banneker HS, Cardozo EC, CHEC, Deal MS, Duke Ellington School for the Arts, Dunbar HS, Eastern HS, Garrison ES, Jackson-Reed HS, Johnson MS, Lafayette ES, Malcolm X ES, Phelps ACE HS, Randle Highlands ES, Ron Brown HS, Roosevelt HS, School Without Walls HS, Tubman ES, Walker Jones EC, Woodson HS.



19

Public Charter Schools

Capital City, Cesar Chavez, Center City - Congress Heights, EL Haynes HS, Elsie Whitlow Stokes - East End, Friendship Collegiate, IDEA, KIPP DC - Legacy / Key / College Prep, Lee Montessori - East End, Maya Angelou, Next Step, Richard Wright, St. Coletta's of Greater Washington, Statesmen Academy, Thurgood Marshall Academy, Two Rivers, Washington Latin Upper School.

**All participant open-ended responses are represented in this report as submitted.*

Part 1: Safety Concerns

Beginning of the Year Analysis

Methodology

The Office of the Student Advocate (OSA) collaborated with the Urban Institute to develop and administer the **2021 OSA Safe Passage Survey**. The survey completed by students used a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions. The close-ended questions provided a baseline when understanding the perspective of the student respondents. The open-ended questions provided context to the responses from close-ended questions. The surveys were distributed virtually due to COVID-19 concerns. The Urban Institute provided written analysis of the survey results and provided OSA with a detailed summary of the results.

Participant Selection

OSA collaborated with individual DC Public Schools (DCPS) and Public Charter Schools (PCS), Local Education Agencies (LEA) and community based organizations (CBO) to ensure a balanced representation of DCPS and PCS students. Similar to the [Safe Passage: A Student's Perspective](#) survey from SY 2019 - 20, the target audience for this survey were DCPS and PCS high school students.

OSA intentionally reached out to schools within historically marginalized communities where safety concerns may be disproportionately higher. Targeted school communities were located in or adjacent to the communities highlighted as [priority areas](#) by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME). OSA also collaborated with the Urban Institute to translate the survey into Spanish for English language learning students as well.



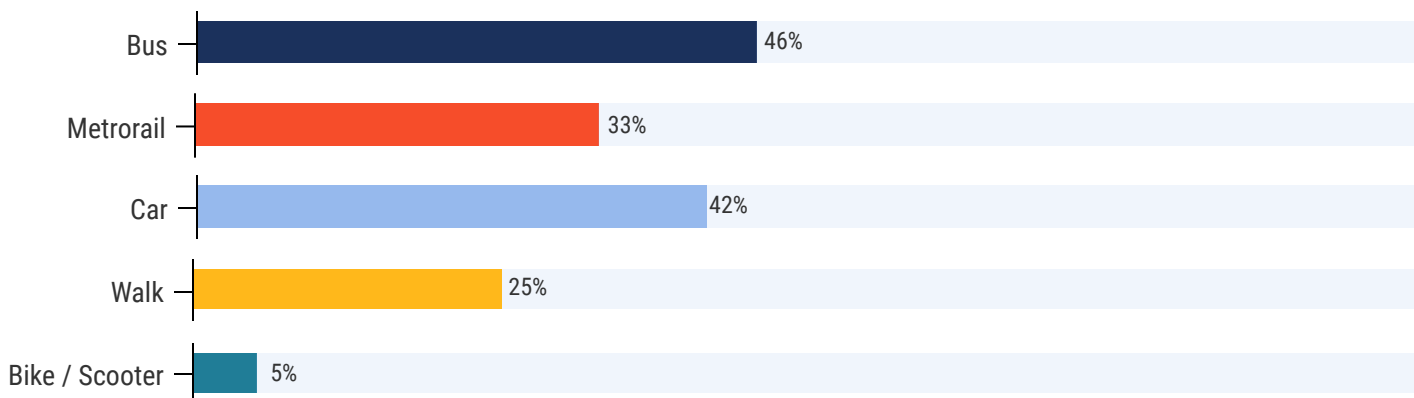
437

**Total Students
completed the
survey.**

How Students Travel to School

Students within Washington, DC have many modes of transportation available to them. More than 40 percent of students reported using multiple modes of transportation when traveling to and from school. Most commonly, students used the bus to get to school. Traveling by car and Metrorail were the second and third most commonly used modes of transportation. About one-quarter of students said they walk to school. About one-quarter of students said they walk to school. About one-quarter of students said they walk to school.

Figure 2: How do you plan to travel to school? Select all that apply.



Students were able to select more than one mode of transportation. More than half of students reported using public transit every day. Several of the students who get dropped off by car indicated using a ride sharing mobile application. The fewest number of students reported riding a bike or scooter.

When asked about their commute to school, one student responded:

"When I say 'walking to school,' I mean I have to either walk to the A8 bus stop to get to school because the D12 or D14 doesn't come a good majority of the time when we need it to get to the A8 bus stop, so we walk."

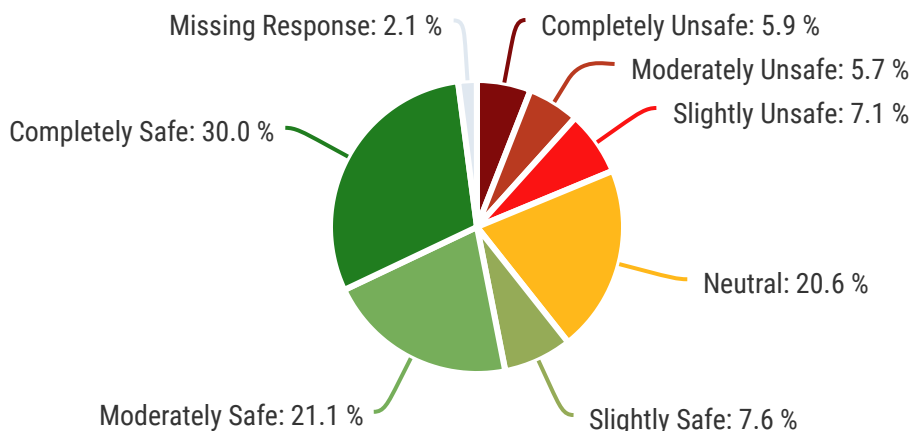


How Students Rated Their Safety While Traveling

Question: *How safe have you felt while using this mode of transportation?*

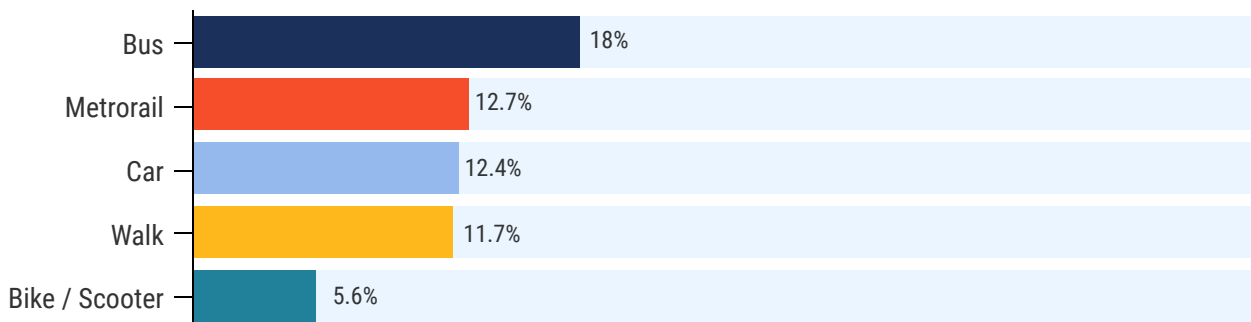
Each student was asked to rate their level of safety while traveling to and from school. About 19 percent of students reported feeling unsafe while traveling to and from school, with an additional 21 percent feeling neither safe or unsafe. Approximately 60 percent of students reported feeling safe.

Figure 3: Student Safety Rating (Combined Responses)



Each percentage shown below represents the amount of students who reported feeling unsafe by their mode of transportation. Students felt most unsafe while using the bus. About 18 percent of students reported that they felt unsafe while riding the bus. About 12 percent of students who walk, travel by Metrorail, or by car to school felt unsafe.

Figure 4: Percentage of students who felt unsafe by each mode of transportation.



One student wrote:

"I also take the X2 bus route from Gallery [Place], which is very dangerous because a lot of people on that bus have mental issues."

Unwanted Attention

More than one-quarter of students reported experiencing unwanted attention or interactions during commutes. Students who identify as female reported even higher incidences. About 40 percent of female students reported unwanted attention compared to about 20 percent of male students. There were not enough nonbinary respondents in our sample to present findings.

Figure 5: Have you ever experienced any unwanted attention or interactions during this part of your travel?

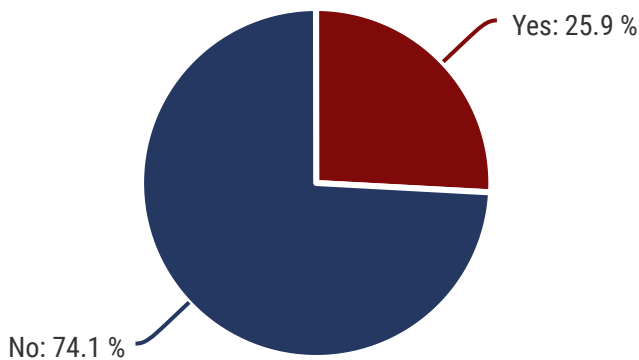
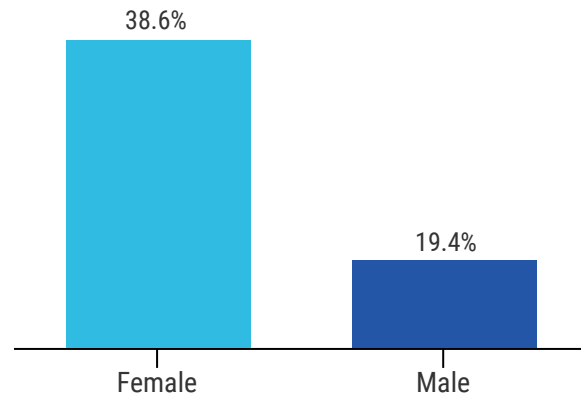


Figure 6: Students who identify as female are twice as likely as males to report unwanted attention.



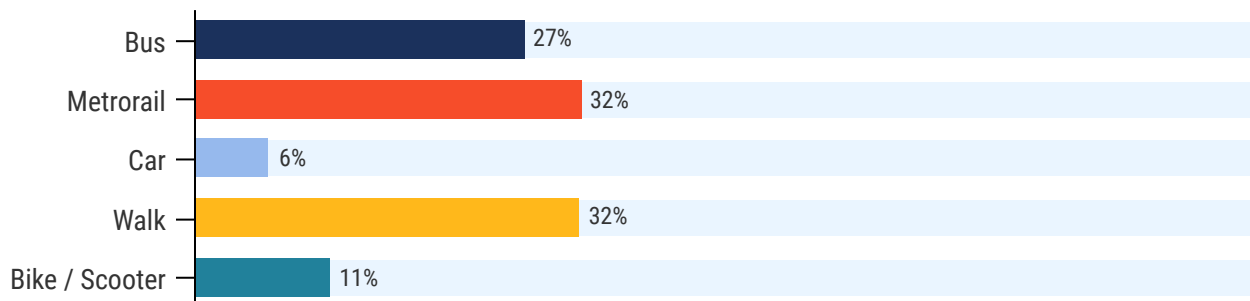
Source: Urban Institute analysis of OSA Safe Passage Survey 2021.

One student described feeling discouraged about the harassment she experiences:

"I know I'm not the only girl who has been harassed or followed by old creepy men while taking public transportation, and it's really annoying. I wish it would stop, but I feel like there's nothing you can really do about it."

The percentages shown below represent the amount of students who reported unwanted attention or interactions per mode of transportation. For example, about 32 percent of students who reported taking the train reported that they experienced unwanted attention or interactions with others.

Figure 7: Students who take the bus, train, or walk reported higher rates of unwanted attention or interactions with others.

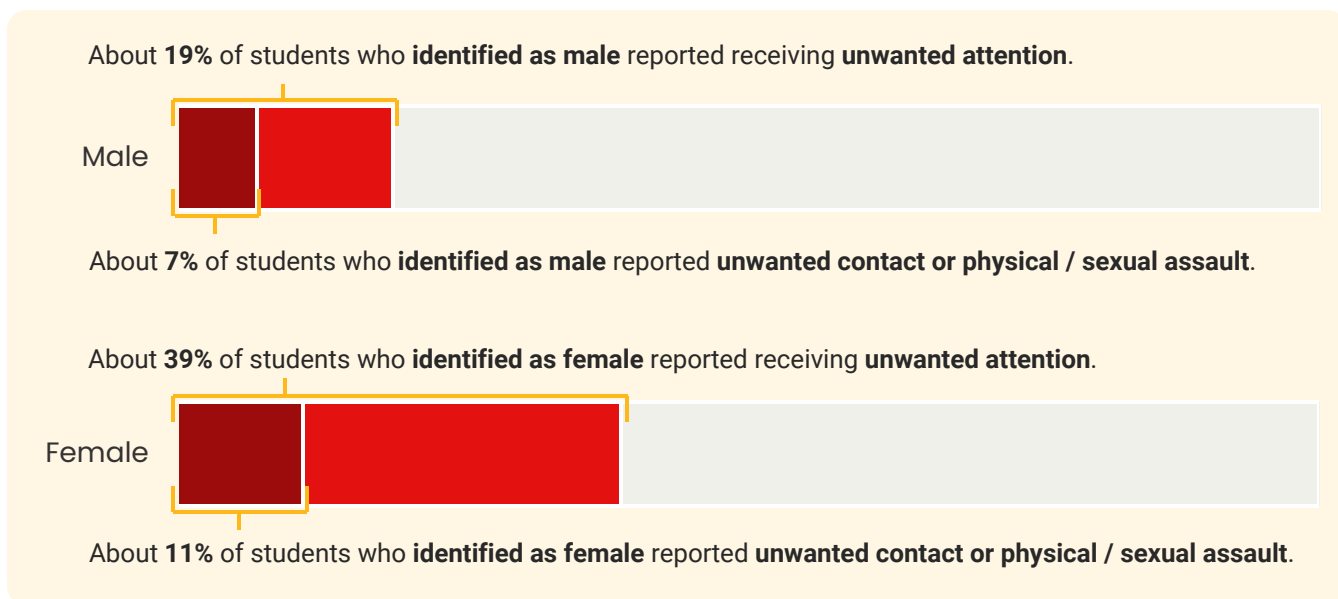


Unwanted Physical Contact or Sexual Assault

Students who reported receiving unwanted attention were asked if they ever experienced unwanted physical contact or physical/sexual assault. More than one-quarter of students who reported receiving unwanted attention also reported unwanted physical contact or physical/sexual assault.

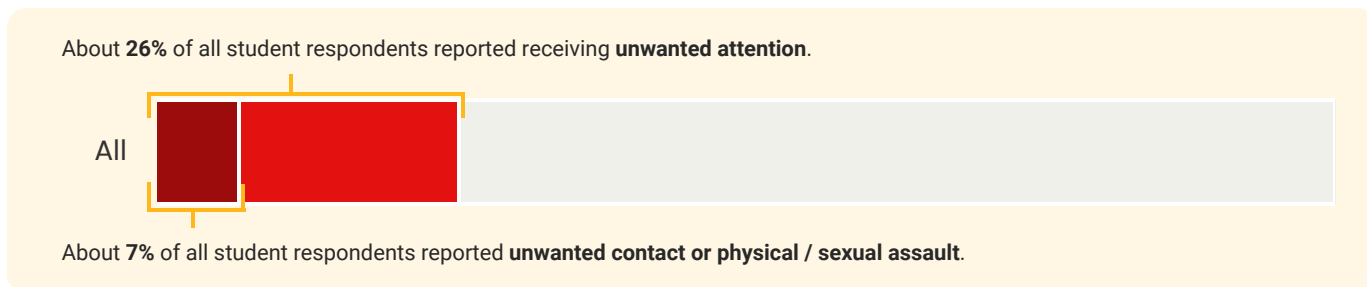
Students who identify as female reported unwanted attention and physical contact at a higher rate than students identifying as male. While non-binary students in our sample represented less than two percent of the overall sample size, it is worth noting that more than 70 percent of non-binary students reported receiving unwanted attention while almost 30 percent reported unwanted contact or physical/sexual assault.

Figure 8: Portion of students who experienced any unwanted physical contact, physical or sexual assault by gender identification.



Even though less than 20 percent of students felt unsafe (Figure 3) while traveling to and from school, more than a quarter of those same respondents described instances of receiving unwanted attention. About seven percent of respondents experienced unwanted contact or sexual assault during travel.

Figure 9: Portion of students who experienced any unwanted physical contact, physical or sexual assault during travel.



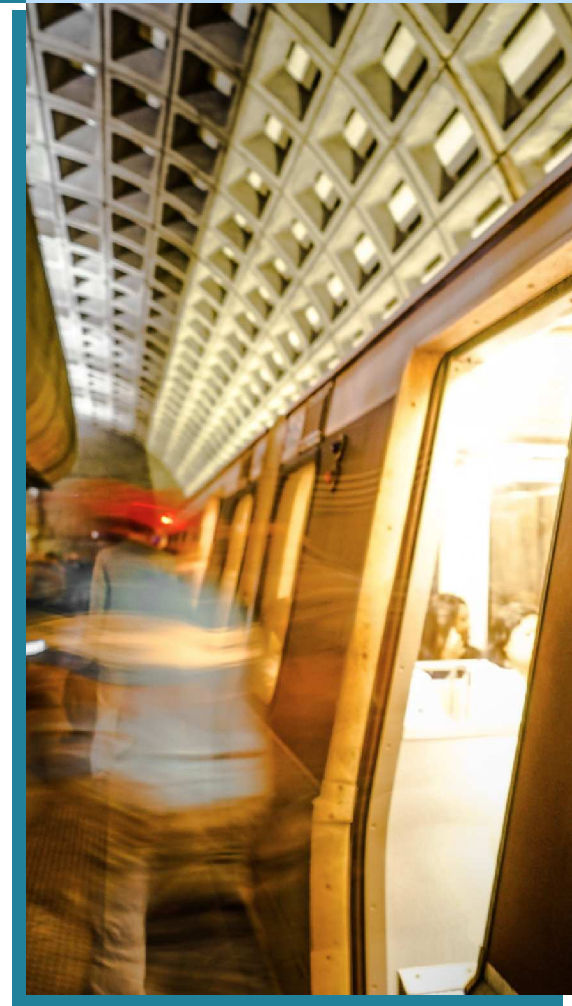
Obstacles While Traveling

Students were asked several questions regarding the obstacles they endure while traveling to and from school. These questions related to people they encountered and environmental conditions along their paths.

Below are responses that highlight some of the obstacles related to people and environmental conditions:

Table 1: Most common *obstacles related to people* reported

Most common people related obstacles reported	Percentage of Respondents
Too crowded	23.57%
Not wanting to be disturbed by others	21.28%
Unsafe people	16.25%
Unsafe due to crime	12.36%



One student wrote:

"I live close to a fairly unsafe liquor store and the direction I walk in to the metro station is notorious for violence and few times than not I have [heard] bullets and bullet cases less than a mile from where I live."



Table 2: Most common *obstacles related to environmental conditions* reported

Most common environment related obstacles reported	Percentage of Respondents
Too much traffic	20.59%
Too much construction	10.3%
Too much noise	10.07%
Surface problems (potholes and cracks)	9.61%

Additional Observations

Related to COVID-19

Although DC's Safe Passage efforts have traditionally focused on keeping students safe from community violence or vehicular threats, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced new threats to students' safety. Half of respondents in this sample reported some concern about getting COVID-19 while traveling to or from school, and 26 percent were extremely concerned or moderately concerned.

When students were asked about how they protect themselves from COVID-19 while commuting, 60 percent reported they would wear a mask, 30 percent said they would practice social distancing, and 22 percent said that they would avoid crowded trains. About one-quarter reported already being vaccinated at the time of the survey in July/August 2021. But for many, COVID-19 concerns were not top of mind.

One student wrote:

"I'm more concerned about shootings and violence than COVID, there is a liquor store outside of the bus top, and men are always hanging around."

Summary: Safety is multifaceted, so policy solutions should be too.

The **2021 OSA Safe Passage Survey** suggests students may encounter different concerns jeopardizing their safety as they travel to and from school. In a city where students use various modes of transportation to get to school, policymakers should consider diverse ways to support student safety.

Many policy proposals in 2021 took significant steps in addressing increasing instances of vehicular fatalities, but more must be done ensure the safety concerns of public transit riders. Further, harassment is too common and the COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of concern.

Future policy decisions must be multifaceted in order to address the needs of our students traveling to and from school.

Part 2: Safety Concerns

End of the Year Analysis

Methodology

The Office of the Student Advocate (OSA) facilitated more than 25 focus group discussions to close the school year. These discussions focused on the perspectives of students and families related to their safety while traveling to and from school. OSA administered two identical surveys for students and the families of elementary aged children. **Parts 2 & 3** of this report include the findings from these two surveys.

Parts 2 & 3 of this report were designed to provide a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the perspectives that students and their families shared. The survey completed used a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions. The close-ended questions provided a baseline when understanding the perspective of the student respondents. The open-ended questions provided context to the responses from close-ended questions.

Participant Selection

OSA collaborated with individual DC Public Schools (DCPS) and Public Charter Schools (PCS), DCPS offices and community based organizations to ensure a balanced representation of DCPS and PCS students.

In previous surveying attempts, OSA spoke primarily to high school aged students. This year, OSA expanded the target audience to include the perspectives of middle school students and the families of elementary aged children.

OSA was also intentional about having these surveys translated into the major languages within DC (Spanish, Amharic, Chinese, French, Korean, and Vietnamese). OSA facilitated multi-lingual focus groups for English language learning students and their families.



256

Total students completed the survey.



49

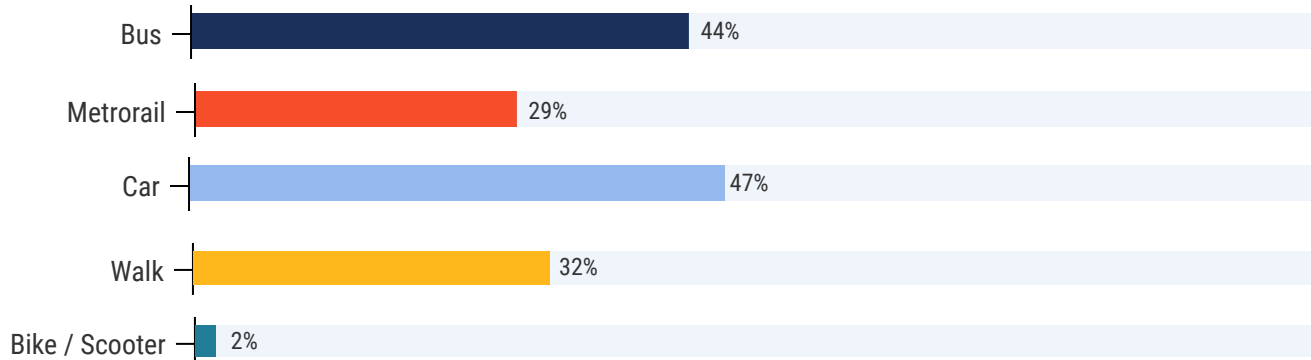
Total family members completed the survey.

How Students & Families Travel to School

Students within Washington, DC have many modes of transportation available to them. Many of the middle and high school aged respondents used multiple modes of transportation while traveling to school. Compared to beginning of the year responses, there was a decreased rate of usage by students on public modes of transportation.

Question: *How do you travel to and from school? Select all options that apply (Student Responses).*

Figure 10: *Modes of Transportation (Student Responses)*

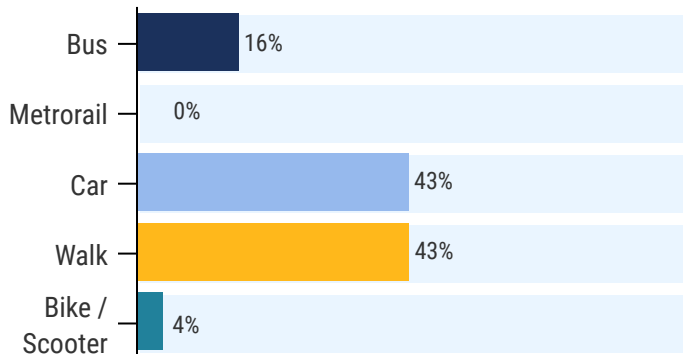


While students reported using the bus at the highest rate from the start of SY 2021 - 22 (Figure 1), a higher rate of students reported being driven to school to close the school year. There was also a notable increase in students who reported walking along their paths.

Parents, guardians and adult family members of elementary aged children were asked the same questions as students above.

Question: *How do your children travel to-and-from school? Select all options that apply (Family Responses).*

Figure 11: *Modes of Transportation (Family Responses)*



Most of those adult respondents reported driving or walking their children to school at the highest rate. About 43 percent of them used a car and 43 percent walked with their children. About 16 percent of those families used the bus and no families reported using the Metrorail.

What Makes Students Feel Uncomfortable or in Danger?

Students and adult family members were asked if they ever felt uncomfortable or in danger traveling to school. Only a fifth of students reporting that they felt uncomfortable or in danger, but 60 percent of adult respondents stated that they felt uncomfortable or in danger (Table 3).

Question: *Do you ever feel uncomfortable or in danger traveling to school?*

Table 3: *Percentage of Students & Family Members who feel uncomfortable or in danger.*

Response	% of Students	% of Families
Yes	20.4%	60.0%
No	69.1%	32.5%
Unsure	10.4%	7.5%

How Students Rate Their Safety and Why

Even though nearly 70 percent of our respondents reported not feeling uncomfortable or in danger traveling to school, about 57 percent of them reported feeling safe when asked to rate their levels of safety.

Question: *Using the scale below, how would you rate the level of safety you feel traveling to and from school?*

Figure 12: *Student Safety Levels*

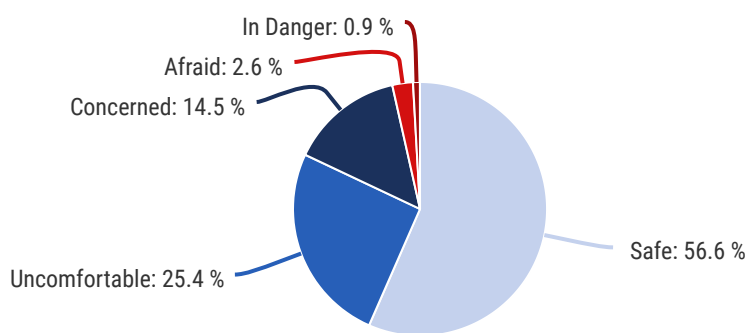
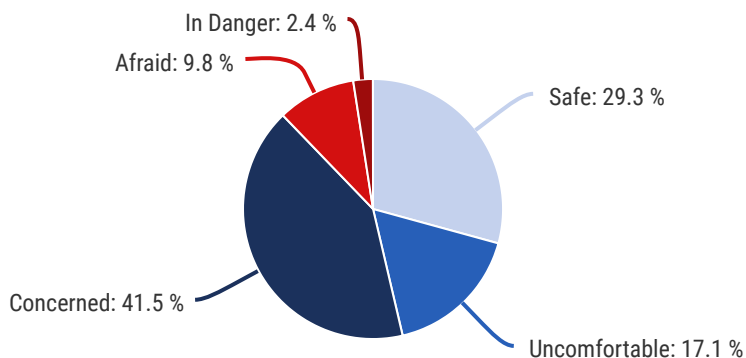


Figure 13: *Family Safety Levels*

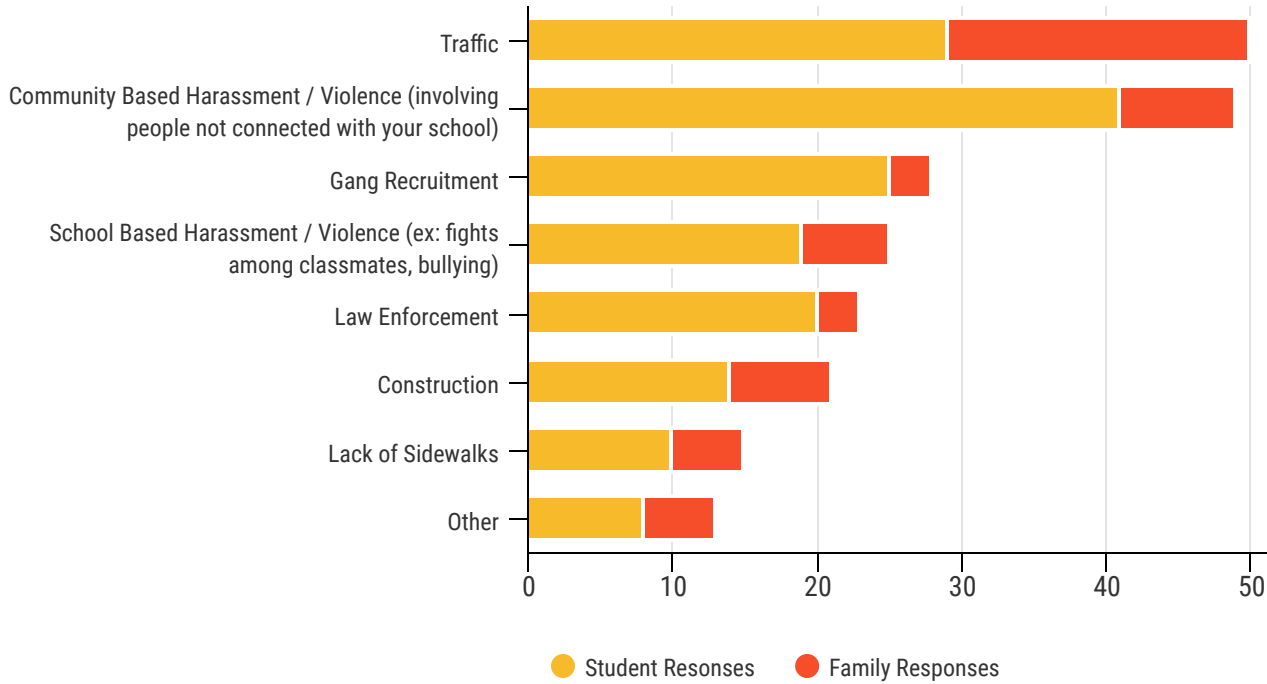


Adult respondents showed more consistency in their responses regarding their safety. About 60 percent of those adults reported that they felt either uncomfortable or in danger, which is in alignment with the 29% of respondents who reported that they felt safe.

Areas of Concern for Students & Families

After indicating their levels of safety, students and family members were then asked to identify specific conditions that contributed to them feeling unsafe. Instances related to traffic safety, community based harassment/violence, and gang recruitment were the top 3 areas of concerns for students and families combined.

Figure 14: *What conditions make you feel unsafe while traveling to school? Select all that apply:*



There were notable differences between the concerns of students and family members. Community based harassment/violence was the highest area of concern for students while traffic was the highest area of concern for family members. Below is a list of the top 5 areas of concern for students and families:

Table 4: *Top 5 Areas of Concerns for Students*

Condition of Concern	% of Students
Community Based Harassment / Violence (involving people not connected with your school)	24.70%
Traffic	17.47%
Gang Recruitment	15.06%
Law Enforcement	12.05%
School Based Harassment / Violence (ex: fights among classmates, bullying)	11.45%

Table 5: *Top 5 Areas of Concerns for Families*

Condition of Concern	% of Families
Traffic	36.21%
Community Based Harassment / Violence (involving people not connected with your school)	13.79%
Construction	12.07%
School Based Harassment / Violence (ex: fights among classmates, bullying)	10.34%
Lack of Sidewalks	8.62%

Key Themes

Students were asked to provide an example to describe why they felt the way they did from the questions highlighted on the previous page. Their open-ended responses align with the Areas of Concerns highlighted in [Figure 14](#). Three major themes emerged related to traffic/transportation concerns, uncertainty/community violence, and unwanted attention/sexual harassment.

Traffic/Transportation Concerns:

According to the DC Department of Transportation, more than 600 pedestrians have been injured by a vehicle and 22 pedestrians were killed since the beginning of SY 2021 - 22. Issues related to traffic and transportation safety ranked highest when combining both student and adult responses. About 17 percent of students reported "Traffic" as an area of concern. Here are some of their responses:

Student Responses:

"People following me or driving reckless!" -12th Grade Student

"The person I'm in the car with drives too fast and sometimes drives too fast to the point that we are going to crash." -8th Grade Student

"Because of how fast that person drives." -8th Grade Student

"I would rather be picked up from school then catch the bus because I hate the bus way too loud and uncomfortable." -11th Grade Student

More than 35 percent of adult family members reported that "Traffic" is an area of concern from them. Even though adult respondents were a smaller sample size, they described traffic safety related instances at a much higher rate than students:

Adult Family Responses:

"Crossing a busy street after the crossing guard is no longer on duty (my daughter is in after care). Also fellow drivers not following laws or paying attention in school zones when I drive to drop off my oldest." -Parent/Guardian of a Kindergarten Student

"Crossing that intersection in the morning is dangerous because cars are constantly in that crosswalk and will not give us the right of way. We have almost gotten hit several times." -Parent/Guardian of a 1st Grade Student

"The traffic and the aggressive drivers are horrific. Little to no regard is given to the crossing guards and or children when crossing the street to get to the school." -Parent/Guardian of a 3rd Grade Student

"Drivers do not always stop at crosswalks and it feels less safe during after care hours when the crossing guards are not on duty anymore." -Parent/Guardian of a Kindergarten Student

Key Themes

Issues related to community based harassment/violence was the second highest area of concern for students and family members combined. Even though "Community Based Harassment / Violence" was included together as an answer choice for respondents (Figure 14), a significant portion of students reportedly experienced instances of community based violence that were distinct from instances of sexual harassment. Instances of harassment and violence were categorized separately due to the volume of responses for each.

Uncertainty / Unsafe People / Community Based Violence:

About one-quarter of students reported community based harassment/violence as an area of concern, which was the highest chosen category of concern. A significant portion of responses expressed uncertainty regarding their safety. Many also expressed unsafe people as a factor disrupting their own safety.

Here are some of their responses:

Student Responses:

"Because there is always a threat walking out of the door anywhere so I always feel a little uneasy."

-11th Grade Student

"There are a lot of incidents happening and I never know if I could ever be in one of those incidents."

-10th Grade Student

"Sometimes shady people be doing stuff and people be have Guns and knives while walking."

-7th Grade Student

"Sometimes something could happen, like a shooting in the area, etc."

-9th Grade Student

"... it's just never a promise that one will make it home or survive the day so it's just always you have to be safe and cautious."

-10th Grade Student

"Yes, since every time im on my way to school, i always see a fight or a crime scene."

-7th Grade Student

"You can never know when someone could decide to end your life just because they feel like it."

-6th Grade Student

"...sometimes when im leaving from tutoring i always see this group in the alley looking at me and sometimes im scared that they will try to rob me or jump me."

-8th Grade Student

While I do not feel uncomfortable near my school. When I am near my house, I am quite scared of how impulsive someone might be.

-12th Grade Student

Key Themes: Community Based Violence

About 14 percent of adult family members reported that "community based harassment/violence" is an area of concern. This was the second highest category chosen by adult respondents. All open ended responses from adult respondents were related to community based violence with no input regarding harassment.

Here are their responses:

Adult Family Responses:

"High crime, students are getting robbed near school." -Parent/Guardian of a 11th Grade Student

"Random shootings, after school fights, adults hanging out around cars..."
-Parent/Guardian of 5th, 7th, & 8th Grade Students

"There has been an increase in fights after school." -Parent/Guardian of 5th, 7th, & 8th Grade Students

"...there are fights at least 3 times a week." -Parent/Guardian of 8th, 11th, & 12th Grade Students

"Because of all the shootings we hear of we are afraid." -Parent/Guardian of 4th & 7th Grade Students

"Fights after school has increased. Individuals [from different schools] have come to the school to fight. School guards cannot follow students to ensure safety after a certain point."
-Parent/Guardian of a 5th, 7th, & 8th Grade Student

"one of the times my son was walking from school students from [a different school] drove by with a gun showing him, and I have so many other stories."
-Parent/Guardian of a 9th Grade Student

"My son was attacked and beaten by other students from [a different school] and they stole his bike, he's being stalked by that group of students, no one at the school but just the Dean has cared about this situation, this problem started from the beginning of the school year. Most of these students have firearms and drugs, which makes the safety of my son a number one concern, and other children and adults."
-Parent/Guardian of a 9th Grade Student

"Things are unpredictable. You don't know when an incident can pop off. I've accepted that I can die at anytime, just don't want it happening in front of my children or for me to witness the same."
-Parent/Guardian of a Kindergarten, 2nd, & 9th Grade Students

While "community based harassment/violence" was selected at higher rates by students and families, students were the only respondents to express unwanted attention and sexual harassment as a major obstacle traveling to and from school.

Key Themes: Unwanted Attention / Sexual Harassment

Though instances of traffic safety and community based violence has dominated discussions regarding student safety and safe passage, students consistently expressed more frequent instances of receiving unwanted attention or being sexually harassed.

Here are some of the responses from students:

Student Responses:

"When old men look at me when I'm alone." -8th Grade Student

"Being harassed, catcalled, followed, threatened, or stared at." -11th Grade Student

"Having strange men stare at me, point at me, perform sexual acts while looking at me and throwing things at me." -11th Grade Student

"Men staring at me weirdly, Trying to talk to me going to and from school even when I clearly have a bookbag on." -9th Grade Student

"People staring, following me closely." -11th Grade Student

"Sexual Harassment from men..." -12th Grade Student

"what made me feel uncomfortable is when grown men look at me when i am getting off bus or even just walking too school." -8th Grade Student

"When random older people try to talk to me and I'm a minor." -9th Grade Student

"When strangers are to close for comfort and always trying to harass me." -10th Grade Student

"Some threw a glass bottle at me and it shattered inches away from my feet and cut me. Grown men stare at me while I wear my school uniform." -11th Grade Student

Street and sexual harassment are issues students consistently experience traveling to and from school. While many students who identify as male express concerns regarding harassment, students identifying as female disproportionately experience unwanted attention/contact or sexual harassment/assault. This aligns with the results highlighted on [Figure 6](#) from Part 1 of this report, where female students were twice as likely as their male counterparts to experience unwanted attention.

Additional Observations

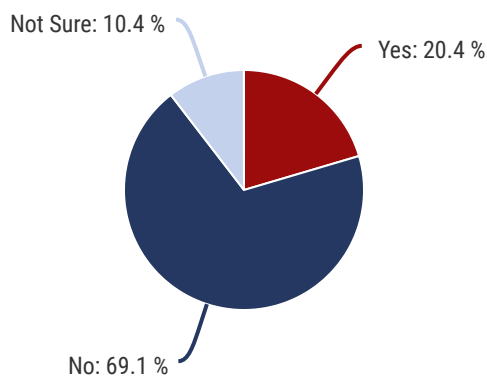
Adult family members had more consistent responses when rating their safety. While 33 percent of adult respondents reported not feeling uncomfortable or in danger, about 30 percent of them also reported feeling safe while traveling to and from school. About 60 percent of these respondents reported feeling uncomfortable, concerned, afraid, or in danger.

Student Safety Levels Do Not Match their Perceived Level of Safety

There were differences between the experiences students highlighted and how they perceived their level of safety. When students were asked "Do you ever feel uncomfortable or in danger," nearly 70 percent of them answered no. However, less than 60 percent of students reported feeling safe. There is a 12.5 percentage point difference between students not feeling uncomfortable or in danger and students feeling safe.

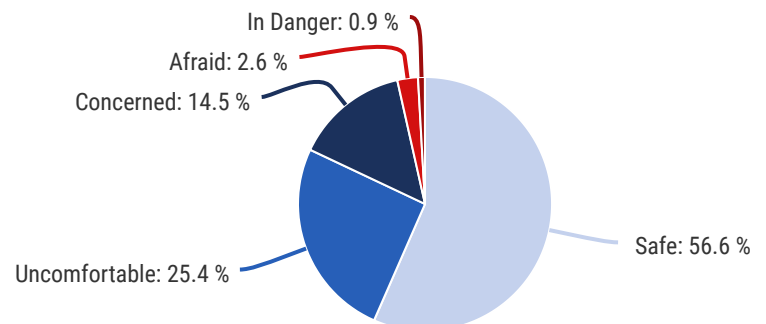
Question: Do you ever feel uncomfortable or in danger traveling to school?

Figure 15: Percentage of Students who feel uncomfortable or in danger.



Question: Using the scale below, how would you rate the level of safety you feel traveling to and from school?

Figure 16: Student Safety Levels



Similarly to results from the [Safe Passage: A Student's Perspective](#) report in SY 2019 - 20, the experiences expressed by students were not reflective of their level of safety. Even though about 62 percent of those students reported not feeling uncomfortable or in danger traveling to school, only 42 percent of them reported feeling safe when asked to rate their level of safety. The gap between students who reported not feeling uncomfortable or in danger and students feeling safe was 20 percentage points. Education stakeholders must continue to standardize what safety means for students.

Beginning & End of Year Observations (SY 2021 - 22)

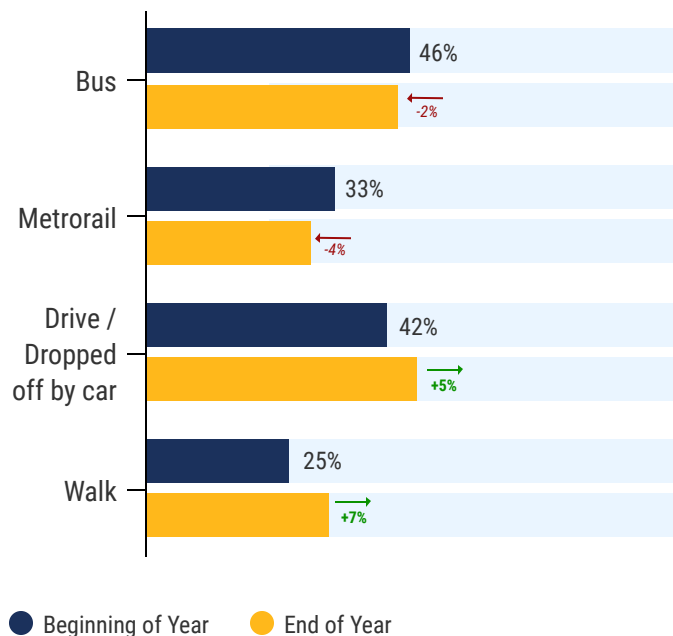
Some notable trends are seen when comparing the survey information from the beginning of the year to the end of the year even though there were differences in how questions were asked and how surveys were administered. These comparisons are based on the information highlighted in Part I & Part II of this report.

Since the sample size from Part I is larger than the sample size from Part II, this section will compare the rates of student responses. This comparison will focus only on student responses since the survey to start the year focused on student responses. Since both surveys have representative samples by ward of residency, the following trends should be considered.

Changes in Modes of Transportation by Students

To start SY 2021 - 22, approximately 46 percent of students reported using the Bus (either Metro, Circulator, school shuttle, or OSSE bus). About 33 percent of students reported using the Metrorail. About 47 percent of students were either dropped off to school by car or drove themselves to school. Approximately 32 percent of students walked at some point along their paths. There were some notable changes in transportation usage by the end of the school year.

Figure 17: Comparison of Student Transportation Rate (SY 2021 - 22)



When evaluating the percentage rates of usage by students, there was a decrease in student ridership on the bus and/or train. The rate of bus usage decreased by two percentage points and train usage went down by four percentage points. The rate of students who walked saw a seven percentage point increase and the amount of students who were driven saw a five percentage point increase.

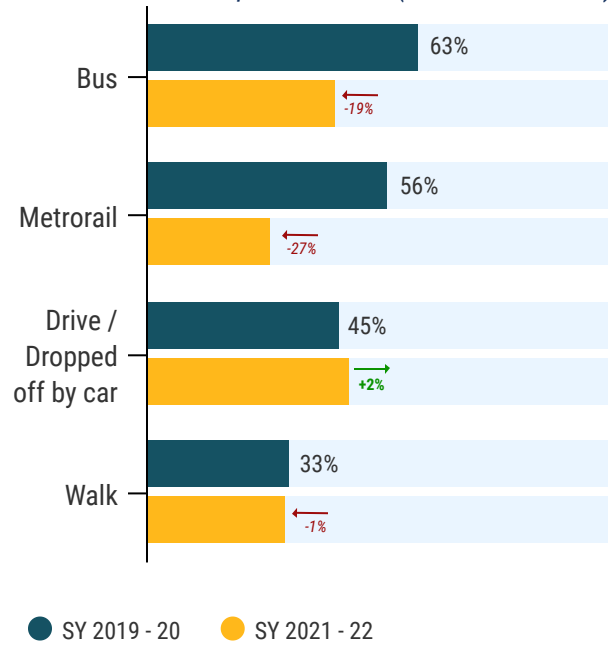
Observations & Remaining Questions (SY 2019 - 20 to SY 2021 - 22)

Certain similarities and differences appeared when comparing these results to survey responses from before the pandemic.

Transportation Usage

Before the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to close for in-person instruction in SY 2019 - 20, nearly two-thirds of students reported taking the bus and more than half of students reported taking the train. The percentage of students using those modes of transportation saw a significant decrease since then. To close SY 2021 - 22, the amount of students riding the metro decreased by 19 percentage points, and the amount of students taking the train decreased by 27 percentage points.

Figure 18: Comparison of Student Transportation Rate (SY 19-20 to 21- 22)

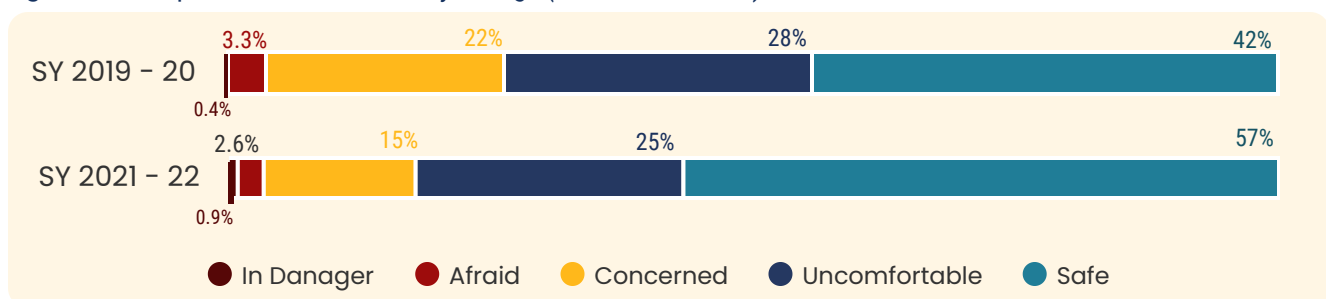


Since COVID-19 emerged, the rate of students being driven to school increased by two percentage points, while the amount of students walking at any point decreased by one percentage point. Key questions should be considered: can the decrease in public transit usage be attributed to the emergence of COVID-19? What dynamics altered the decision making of families?

Student Perceptions of Safety

The rate of students who reported feeling safe increased by nearly 15 percentage points since the pandemic in SY 2019 - 20. Since SY 2019 - 20, several city wide initiatives have been created to ensure the safety of students traveling to and from school. Since both surveys were conducted in school communities targeted by the city for student safety related programs, what dynamics influenced their most recent perceptions of safety?

Figure 19: Comparison of Student Safety Ratings (SY 19-20 to 21- 22)



Part 3: Safe Passage

End of the Year Analysis



Research Based Practices

How can students be expected to excel academically when instances threatening their safety persist? To better address these growing concerns related to the safety of students traveling to and from school, a citywide effort went into place to learn what solutions helped address similar issues in other states, cities or school districts. Fortunately, numerous programs addressing student safety traveling to and from school existed previously in school districts across the country.

Programs like Safe Passage in Chicago provided a blueprint for DC specific programming being offered. Safe Passage programming has led to double digit decreases in violent crime along routes for students traveling to and from school in Chicago, Illinois. Safe Passage programming also contributed to a 1.68 percentage point increase in school attendance rates.

What is **Safe Passage**?

Current and future programs related to student safety while traveling to and from school are referred to as “Safe Passage.” Safe Passage is a city-wide, multi-tiered approach to ensure the safety of students and their families while in transit.

CITY-WIDE COORDINATION:

Various government agencies coordinated community driven solutions to address student safety.

COMMUNITY DRIVEN:

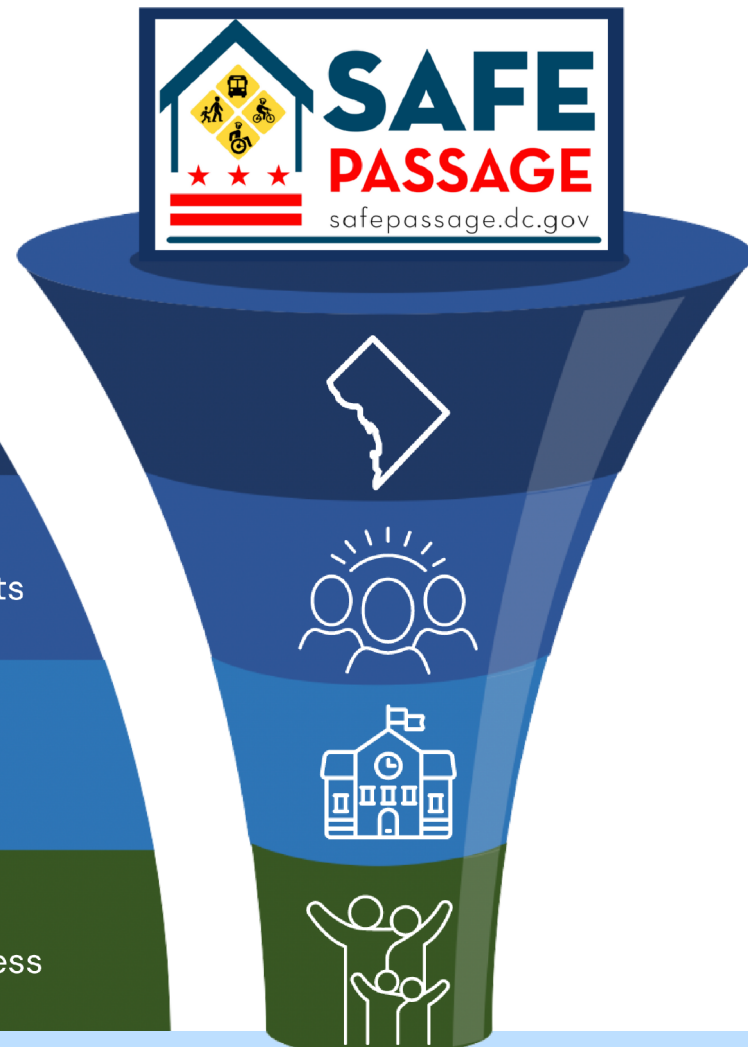
Local businesses & community-based organizations have agreed to support students and their families.

SCHOOL INVOLVED:

Schools have partnered with community-based organizations and agencies to ensure student safety.

STUDENT & FAMILY CENTERED:

Students & their families have been a part of creating community driven solutions to address student safety.



Sources:

¹ <https://www.npr.org/local/309/2019/06/05/730003703/chicago-s-safe-passage-curbs-street-violence-without-police-studies-show>

² <https://chicagopolicyreview.org/2019/12/23/keeping-students-safe-positive-results-from-chicagos-safe-passage-program/>

Where does **Safe Passage** exist?

The School Safety and Safe Passage Working Group collectively decided to focus on specific areas of the city to improve student safety as they travel to and from school. Areas were selected based on the number of student-involved incidents in the area data from Metro Transit Police Department with feedback and supporting information from various stakeholders within the Working Group.



Safe Passage Priority Areas:

Ward 8:

- Anacostia
- Good Hope Rd
- Congress Heights

Ward 7:

- Minnesota Ave

Ward 5:

- NoMa -
Gallaudet U

Ward 6:

- L'Enfant Plaza &
Water Front

Ward 1:

- Columbia
Heights

Ward 4:

- Safe Passage work recently expanded to the **Georgia Ave / Petworth** community

What Safe Passage programs exist in DC?

The **Safe Spot** Initiative:

In 2019, our office collaborated with the Deputy Mayor for Education's (DME) office to recruit community based businesses and organizations to provide safe spaces for students in need of help. These businesses and organizations are known as "Safe Spots."

How do **Safe Spots** work?

- Students are encouraged to utilize Safe Spots if they feel they are being threatened, as a means to avoid confrontation, or if they need help after an incident.
- Students will be able to recognize a Safe Spot by the **Safe Passage logo** that should be displayed in a visible area in the front of the business.



Where are current **Safe Spots** located?

Ward 8:

Congress Heights

Alabama Ave
(Stanton Rd to MLK Ave)

Anacostia

(MLK Ave to
Good Hope Rd)

Ward 7:

Minnesota Ave

(Nannie Helen Burroughs
Ave to East Capitol)

Ward 5:

NoMa

(New York Ave to
Eckington & Union
Market)



Safe Passage Assessments: Safe Spots

Students were asked about their familiarity with the Safe Spots initiative here in DC. The following reflects their responses.

Student Responses

Nearly 60 percent of student respondents were familiar with the Safe Spots initiative. If students answered "Yes" to the question, "Do you know what a Safe Spot is", they were then asked if they have ever seen one before. Only a quarter of students familiar with the program has ever seen or used a Safe Spot.

Table 6: Do you know what a Safe Spot is?

Response	Percentage
Yes	59.7%
No	40.3%

Table 7: Have you seen or used a Safe Spot before?

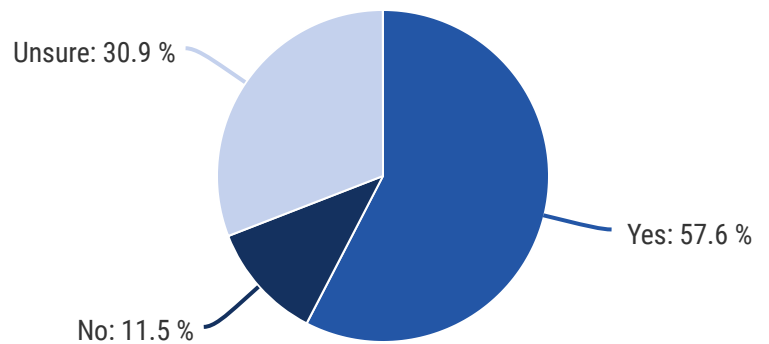
Response	Percentage
Yes	24.8%
No	75.2%

If a respondent did not know what a Safe Spot was, they were provided more information before answering the next question. Students were then asked if the presence of a Safe Spot along their path would make them feel safer while traveling.

Question: *Would the presence of Safe Spots along your path make you feel safer?*

About 60 percent of student respondents reported that Safe Spots would make them feel safer and a third of them were unsure about Safe Spots. Less than 12 percent reported they would not feel safer. When students were asked what would make them feel safer, many pointed towards not being isolated or being with a family member. Some were still skeptical that a solution was possible.

Figure 20: Do you know what a Safe Spot is?



One student responded when asked: What would make you feel safer?

"Being in the open, with a ton of witnesses however, that doesn't ease my nerves a lot. There's a lot of scenarios, even in the public eye, people still tend to turn a blind eye to blatant harassment and threats and that does cause me to worry a bit."

-11th Grade Student

Safe Passage Assessments: Safe Spots

Family members of students were asked about their familiarity with the Safe Spots initiative here in DC. The following reflects their responses.

Family Responses

Adult family members were asked about their familiarity with the Safe Spots initiative here in DC. Less than 25 percent of those respondents were familiar with this program. Those family members were then asked if they have ever seen or used a Safe Spot. About a fifth of them reported seeing or using a Safe Spot.

Table 8: Do you know what a Safe Spot is?

Response	Percentage
Yes	23.1%
No	76.9%

Table 9: Have you seen or used a Safe Spot before?

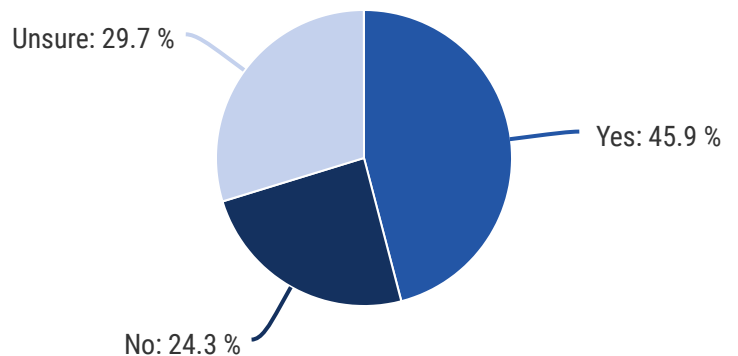
Response	Percentage
Yes	21.6%
No	78.4%

If a respondent did not know what a Safe Spot was, they were provided more information before answering the next question. Family members were then asked if the presence of a Safe Spot along their path would make them feel safer while traveling.

Question: Would the presence of Safe Spots along your path make you feel safer?

Less than half of adult respondents reported that Safe Spots would make them feel safer, and a third of them were unsure about Safe Spots. Only 24 Percent reported they would not feel safer. When families were asked what would make them feel safer, many pointed to issues related to traffic safety:

Figure 21: Do you know what a Safe Spot is?



One parent responded when asked: What would make you feel safer?

"Having sidewalks, traffic cops, and having a bus program for elementary age students to help disabled and working parents get their young children to school."

-Parent/Guardian of Prek-4 & 2nd Grade Students

The Safe Block Initiative:

In SY 2021-22, the [Deputy Mayor for Education](#) (DME) awarded grant funds to six community-based organizations to hire more than 200 **Safe Passage Workers** across seven priority areas in DC. These organizations work with both traditional DC public and charter schools across six wards. In addition to walking with students along their paths to and from school, these Safe Blocks providers also provide in-school programming to build stronger relationships within school communities.



Where are Safe Passage Workers located?

SAFE BLOCKS:

WHO ARE THE ORGANIZATIONS?

WARD 8:

- YAAY Me, Inc.
- National Association For the Advancement of Returning Citizens (NAARC)

WARD 7:

- NAARC
- East River Family Strengthening Collaborative (ERFSC)

WARD 6:

- Creative Solutions 4 Youth

WARD 5:

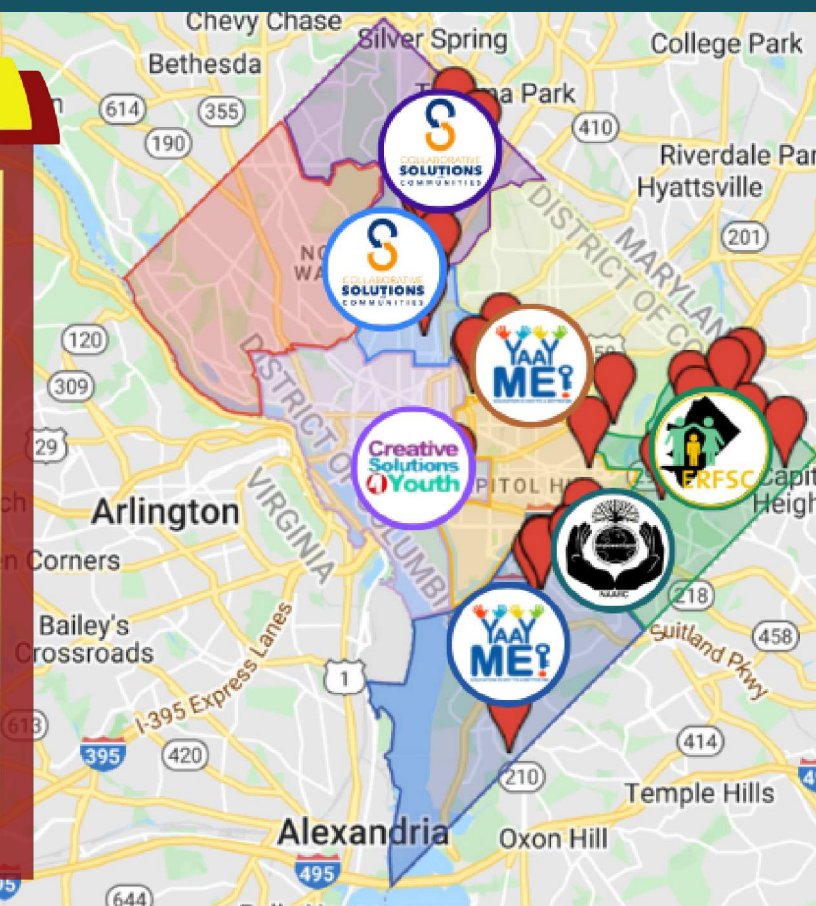
- YAAY Me, Inc.

WARD 4:

- Collaborative Solutions for Communities (CSC)

WARD 1:

- Collaborative Solutions for Communities (CSC)



Become a Safe Passage Worker:

Want to help students each day?

Submit your interest using the following form: <https://buff.ly/3KjAGQn>



Safe Passage Assessments: Safe Blocks

Participants were asked about their familiarity with the Safe Blocks initiative here in DC. The following reflect their responses:

Question: *Do you know what the "Safe Blocks" initiative is?*

Table 10: Student Responses

Response	Count	Percentage
Yes	56	25.7%
No	162	74.3%

Table 11: Family Responses

Response	Count	Percentage
Yes	10	27.03%
No	27	72.97%

Based on their answers, respondents were then provided more information describing what the "Safe Blocks" initiative is, who Safe Passage workers are, and how to identify them.

Participants were then asked the following:

Question: *Have you seen a Safe Passage worker along your path to school?*

Table 12: Student Responses

Response	Count	Percentage
Yes	113	52.3%
No	103	47.7%

Table 13: Family Responses

Response	Count	Percentage
Yes	12	32.4%
*No	25	67.6%

**Most respondents have children who attend school outside of a designated Safe Passage priority area.*

Even though more than 70 percent of all respondents did not know what "Safe Blocks" was, after being provided additional information, more than 50 percent were able to recognize Safe Passage workers along their routes.

Question: *Does the presence of Safe Passage workers along your path to school make you feel safer?*

Figure 22: Student Responses

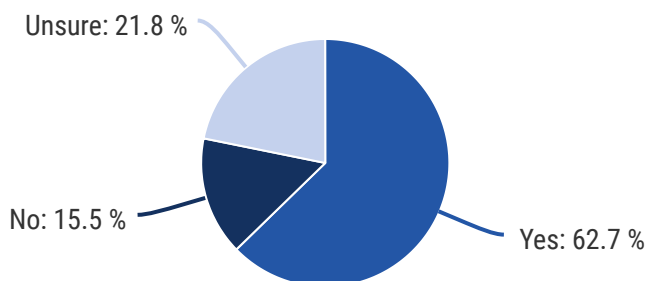
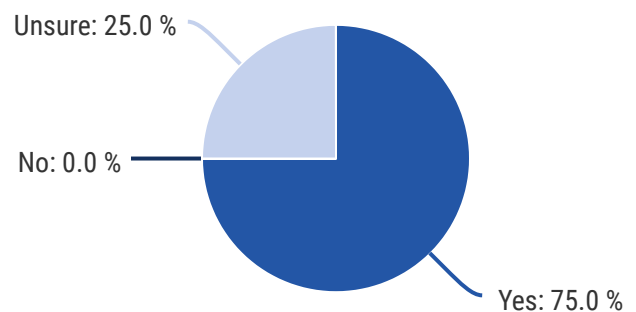


Figure 23: Family Responses



Safe Passage Assessments: Safe Blocks

Of the respondents who have seen a Safe Passage Worker, nearly two-thirds of students and three-fourths of adult family members reported that it would make them feel safer. Students and family members who have not seen a Safe Passage worker while traveling to and from school were then asked the following question:

Question: *Would the presence of Safe Passage workers along your path to school make you feel safer?*

Figure 24: Student Responses

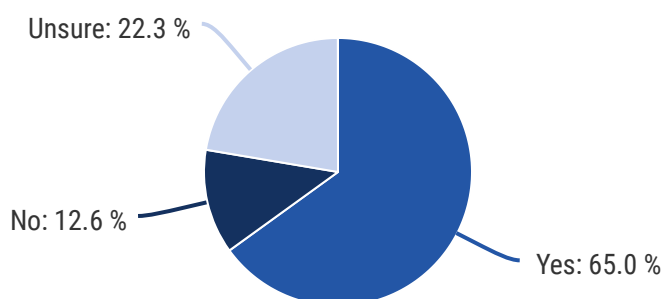
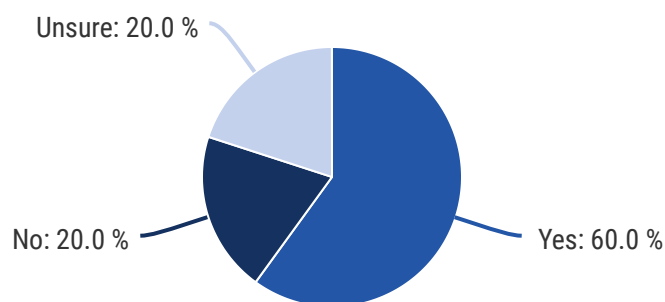


Figure 25: Family Responses



Approximately 65 percent of students reported that they would feel safer with the presence of a Safe Passage worker along their path. About 13 percent of students felt Safe Blocks would not make them feel safer. Students who answered "No" or "Unsure" were then asked to describe what would help them feel safer. Below is some of their responses:

Student Responses:

"Getting Driven More." -12th Grade Student

"Catching a ride home or to my school with someone I trust." -10th Grade Student

"Con mis Papas o con un adulto." - Grade Information Not Provided

About 60 percent of family members reported that they would feel safer with the presence of a Safe Passage worker along their route. About 20 percent of families felt Safe Blocks would not make them feel safer. Here are some of their responses when asked what would help them feel safer:

Adult Family Responses:

"removing guns and drugs form these young students" -Parent/Guardian of a 9th Grade Student

"If they were also crossing guards / traffic enforcers" -Parent/Guardian of a Prek-4 Student

"It would help, but we need sidewalks and traffic control." -Parent/Guardian of a Prek-4 & 2nd Grade Students

Part 4: Recommendations

This report summarizes data from multiple surveys administered by OSA to better understand how safe students feel traveling to and from school. The students' responses highlight common themes as well as some unique experiences. Although only a fraction of DC's school population completed these surveys, the responses that were collected elevate concerns regarding student safety.

The safe passage of our students traveling to and from school is paramount, but we know various instances of harassment and violence jeopardizes the mental, emotional, and physical safety of our children. The following recommendations should be considered when addressing student safety:

1.) Increased Funding for Safe Blocks Initiative:

It was announced in 2021 that six community based organizations would be awarded \$4.3 million from the Office of Out of School Time Grants and Youth Outcomes for Fiscal Year 2022 as a part of the Safe Blocks Initiative. As a result, 215 Safe Passage workers were strategically placed at schools across seven priority areas. Nearly two-thirds of student respondents who have seen a Safe Passage worker reported feeling safer ([Figure 22](#)) and three-fourths of adult respondents felt safer ([Figure 23](#)). More than 60 percent of students and family members who have never seen a Safe Passage worker expressed support for the program once learning more ([Figures 24 & 25](#)).

In addition to the majority of student and family respondents who supported Safe Blocks, various representatives from multiple schools mentioned in city-wide Safe Passage meetings that less incidents occurred in locations where Safe Passage workers were consistently present. In a climate where communities express a higher need for community based solutions to ensure the safety of our children, it is important that key stakeholders continue to strengthen programming that is centered around the input from those communities. DC Council voted earlier this year to reduce the number of school resource officers (SRO) in public and charter schools. The number of available SROs in the District has been reduced to 60 personnel in 2022 and will fully be dissolved by 2025. Though Safe Passage workers should not be expected to serve as a replacement for SROs, more Safe Passage workers should be available to serve our students.

As our students continue to endure instances of violence and harassment, funding for the Safe Passage Safe Blocks initiative should be increased to ensure the following:

1. Increase the number of personnel available for every school that requests for Safe Passage support;
2. Increase the pay of Safe Passage workers to ensure the most qualified applicants are being selected;
3. Hire Safe Passage workers that are representative of the school communities (i.e. Race, Ethnicity, Language Spoken, Gender Identification, etc.)
4. Develop and facilitate professional development opportunities to:
 - Increase the language capacity of monolingual and multilingual staff;
 - Equip staff members with conflict resolution, deescalation, and traffic safety skills.

2.) Restructuring Public Safety Capacity in School Buildings Using the Safety Advocate Model:

Many students, families, and education stakeholders have expressed that the current system is not working to ensure the safety of our students. The DC Police Reform Commission was established by the DC Council in 2021 and highlighted that “Racial disparities in school-based policing are pervasive and the harmful effects of police contact for school-age children are significant.” More than 12 percent of student respondents reported Law Enforcement as an obstacle traveling to and from school (Figure 14). Due to the shared experiences of students and families across the country, advocates have worked to limit the number of police within school buildings in DC where the availability of SROs will continue to decrease until it is fully dissolved in 2025.

Many students, families, and education stakeholders have also expressed concern around what resources are available to fill the potential gaps in coverage that this reduction may cause. Many members of school leadership expressed that coordinating with SROs have been very important when assessing threats to student safety either within or around a school building. To satisfy the concerns expressed by various stakeholders, we recommend transitioning SROs to mirror the “Safety Advocate” program adopted by the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado. The school board in Boulder Valley, Colorado voted to end its SRO program similar to DC.

They then consulted with eight stakeholder groups to ultimately adopt the “Safety Advocate” model. Safety Advocates are connected with the Boulder Police Department (BPD), but their specific purpose is to partner with school counselors, mental health professionals, and community based organizations (CBO) to connect students and families with the support structures that they needed. Safety Advocates are non-uniformed personnel who do not carry guns. They have also been expected to “assist in conducting investigations, including threat assessments, and serve as a liaison with the police during emergencies and other events.” Safety Advocates all receive anti-bias training and work through an equity lens to support restorative justice practices within school buildings.

By adopting Safety Advocates, the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) would still be able to assist school leadership when assessing threats to student safety, while also being able to support restorative practices within school to reduce exclusionary disciplinary practices. Not being in a traditional uniform and not carrying a gun can help repair trust, which could also reduce the number of youth introduced to the criminal justice system, while allowing MPD to provide additional support for school staff. These Safety Advocates would also be expected to coordinate with MPD, Metro Transit Police Department (MTPD), Safe Blocks CBO providers and providers offering violence interruption programs. This coordination can reduce the number of incidents that started in the school building from spilling into the community and incidents starting in the community from spilling into the school building.

Benefits of Safety Advocates:

- Remains an MPD funded program;
- Removes arresting / ticketing powers from officers serving as advocates;
- Removes guns from officers serving as advocates;
- Supports restorative practices in schools;
- Provides professional development opportunities for school staff;
- Builds trust between students, police, and schools;
- Increases coordination between schools, MPD, MTPD, and CBOs.

3.) Adapt existing street harassment trainings for DC students between grades 6 - 12:

More than a quarter of respondents highlighted from [Figure 5](#) of this report expressed receiving unwanted attention from people traveling to and from school. Additionally, almost a third of all respondents from [Figure 14](#) expressed some form of harassment or violence as a condition that makes them feel unsafe in-and-out of school.

The Street Harassment Prevention Act (SHPA) of 2018 defined “Street Harassment” as:

“Disrespectful, offensive, or threatening statements, gestures, or other conduct directed at an individual in a high-risk area without the individual’s consent and based on the individual’s actual or perceived ethnicity or housing status, or a protected trait identified in the Human Rights Act of 1977.”

A “high-risk area” includes all public spaces and entities outside of a private residence, including schools, libraries, or other buildings primarily used for the instruction of students. The DC Office of Human Rights (OHR) surveyed more than 1,621 District residents in 2019 and released their findings in the [The State of Street Harassment in DC](#) report. About 69 percent of those individuals surveyed experienced verbal street harassment in DC within the last six months, and about 40 percent experienced physical street harassment. Approximately 12 percent of respondents reported dealing with daily verbal street harassment daily within school buildings, with 16 percent of respondents reporting daily physical street harassment within schools or libraries. About 13 percent of respondents reported that they changed schools or dropped a course, or dropped out of school altogether due to the harassment.

Even though DC has taken historic steps in passing legislation addressing bullying, street harassment, and sexual assault within school buildings, many of the solutions proposed are reactive. We must continue to build more preventative measures to reduce the rates of harassment and bullying our children are enduring. Trainings related to street harassment are readily available for trusted adults in public facing roles, but less opportunities exist for our youth. Students across every school that we have spoken with have expressed a strong desire to be a part of creating meaningful solutions, so we must consider more ways to empower them to be a part of the process.

To help give students the tools to address street harassment directly or indirectly, current street harassment trainings should be adapted for 6 - 8 and 9 - 12 grade bands. Introducing these skills early can help change mindset and culture that perpetuates harassment in any form. We recommend working with OHR and their current street harassment training service providers to adapt training and school curricula to empower youth within their school buildings.

4.) Re-define at the State Level what safe travel to and from school is, what it looks like, and how students should experience it:

Even though more than 60 percent of students in 2020 reported that they felt safe traveling to and from school, about 58 percent of those same students said that they felt either uncomfortable, concerned, afraid, or in danger while traveling to and from school. Similar differences were observed in SY 2021 - 22 between the experiences and the perceptions of students. Even though roughly 70 percent of respondents reported not feeling uncomfortable or in danger while traveling, only 57 percent of them reported feeling safe.

During focus group discussions, many students who said that they felt safe also highlighted instances where they have witnessed instances of violence and drug usage, endured harassment, or even seen someone carrying a weapon. A majority of students in each focus group mentioned they must always be aware of their surroundings. In order for any policy related to student safety can be felt by students, it is important for students to understand what safety is, what it looks like, and how they should experience it.

The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments defines "school safety" as:

"...schools and school-related activities where students are safe from violence, bullying and harassment, and the influence of substance abuse. Safe schools promote the protection of all students from violence, exposure to weapons and threats, theft, bullying and harassment, the sale or use of illegal substances on school grounds, and other emergencies."

This definition of safety should be adopted by Local Education Agencies (LEA) in DC and must extend with students along their routes to and from school. Before students can be expected to embrace any policy or program put into place to address their needs, they must know what it means to be safe.

LEAs should consider the following when standardizing expectations of safety:

- LEAs must find ways to incorporate perceptions of safety into any social emotional learning (SEL) framework or curriculum that is adopted;
- LEAs must find meaningful ways to include student and family voice in the center of current and future policy decisions related to student safety;
- LEAs must review those policies yearly with students and school community members to ensure that all students, families, and stakeholders have shared expectations on student safety.

Contact Us:

For additional information, or for any questions related to the Safe Passage of our students traveling to and from school, please contact us using any form of communication listed below:

Phone: (202)741-4692

Email: student.advocate@dc.gov

Website: <https://studentadvocate.dc.gov>



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