Valuing Girls' Voices

Lived Experiences of **Girls of Color** in Oakland Unified School District

Photo Credit: Techbridge

Acknowledgements

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Alliance for Girls (AFG) commissioned a landscape study to learn more about the lived experiences of girls of color within Oakland Unified School District. In 2015, AFG received a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The purpose of the grant is to develop protocols or policies within local government agencies that are informed by the lived experiences of at-risk girls and gender-specific, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, strength-based and developmentally appropriate (GCTSD) approaches. AFG was also funded to develop coordinated community responses to at-risk girls by helping youth-serving government agencies implement GCTSD approaches. This report provides a summary of the key findings of the landscape scan and a set of recommendations for prevention efforts to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline for girls of color.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

The findings are based on results from an analysis of Oakland Unified School District data on academic success and school-engagement indicators, a series of focus groups with girls of color and interviews with district and other stakeholders working on promoting girls-specific services, supports and policies. Except where noted, the key findings refer to girls of color as a group, including African American, Latina, Native American and Asian / Pacific Islander. Among the key findings are the following:

- *Appreciation of Girls-Specific Opportunities*: Girls of color appreciate opportunities to engage in girls-specific programming, enrichment activities and support, and yearned for more of these types of opportunities.
- *Girls-Specific Programming Is Emergent*: Girls and administrators alike have noticed new programming for boys over the past several years and a corresponding lack of similar programming for girls. Most agree that a school-district-level focus on girls is emergent and that the district and schools have not done enough to understand their experiences, strengths and needs. However, much can be learned from boys-specific programming, and there are opportunities to create alignment and collaboration across gender-specific efforts.
- *Peer Relationships*: For girls interviewed during this scan, peer relationships, conflicts and aggression are the primary source of stress and cause of suspension for girls of color. Girls report being subject to taunts and stereotypes from their peers and boys, and do not feel that adults do enough to address name-calling.
- *Quality Schools*: Girls who attend higher-quality schools with positive school climates feel safer at school and look forward to being in school, while girls who attend schools that are chronically failing, undergoing school transformation or have a consistently negative school climate feel unsafe. In the latter case, girls' expectations of adults to create safe environments are not being met. At the same time, girls do not have an understanding of the broader conditions that create underperforming schools and have a "blame the victim" mentality. For example, girls felt that even though adults were not enforcing rules or standards as they expected, they noted that it was on the girls to "act right" to avoid punishment.
- *Lack of Care for African American Girls*: African American girls do not experience OUSD schools as caring environments, citing numerous examples of unconscious and conscious bias, low expectations and abusive language coming from adults and peers. African American girls were the only ethnic group that consistently perceived and experienced schools as "not seeing us for who we are" and treating them unfairly. African American girls shared experiences of exclusion from the classroom and the disparate application of disciplinary action on the basis of race.

They were less likely to report caring relationships with adults in schools than other girls. Data support the findings that schools disproportionately suspend African American girls. Administrators and stakeholders agree that African American girls should be a priority population of focus for the district.

- *African American Girls Have Diverse Experiences*: On the other hand, African American girls who described their families as highly involved in their education and reported academic success in school viewed their school experiences more positively. These girls reported more experiences with caring adults, but felt that their experiences, as "high achieving black girls" are missing from the conversation when people talk about efforts to help African American girls achieve. They felt that their peers often act out because they come from broken families and are in need of attention, positive or negative. They cited the need for more opportunities for African American girls of all backgrounds to learn from and support each other.

- *Latina Girls as Largest Population*: Latina girls represent the largest population of girls in the district. Like the experiences of other girls of color, the experiences of Latina girls vary on the basis of the quality of the schools they attend. They do not perceive disparate treatment on the basis of ethnicity but experience peer and social aggression, which decreases their feelings of safety. They were more likely to report relationships with caring adults. Administrators and stakeholders suggested that there was a need to understand more about the needs, preferences and strengths of Latina girls.

Among the recommendations for improving girls' experience in OUSD schools are the following:

- Create more opportunities for adults, stakeholders and staff to hear about the experiences of girls of color in OUSD. Support positive youth-development, leadership and advocacy efforts driven by girls.

- Support an expansion of girls-specific programming and policies, implementing district-wide policies while also supporting site-specific efforts to create restorative spaces for girls. Expand prevention efforts that create opportunities for African American and Latina girls to come together and for boys and girls, regardless of their ethnicity, to have positive experiences with each other.

- Support improvements in school quality, school climate and quality instruction, which will create more positive experiences for boys and girls of color.

- Identify opportunities to learn from and align with other efforts happening in the district, including boys-specific efforts, restorative justice and equity work. Work intentionally to avoid creating "gender silos."

- Develop programming and policies that support adults' capacity to have caring relationships with African American girls, such as training on unconscious bias and trauma-informed approaches.

- Create opportunities for African American girls to build sisterhood, celebrate their achievements and access culturally relevant education.

- Create a task force with girls and key adult stakeholders to review, modify and implement model policies and programs to prevent and intervene in instances of sexual misconduct at school.

- Continue to study the experiences of girls of color within OUSD schools.

Methodology

Three methodologies were used to develop this landscape scan: data analysis on girls' outcomes in Oakland Unified School District, focus groups with girls and key informant interviews with stakeholders.

Data Analysis: Data on middle school and high school girls in OUSD were analyzed and summarized to understand the need for girls-specific programming. Indicators of risk (e.g., suspension and chronic absence) were analyzed by gender and by race/ethnicity for the 2014–2015 school year. Existing charts from the Urban Strategies Council on academic-success indicators from the 2012–2013 school year (third-grade reading, A-G completion and graduation) are also provided here. All charts represent data for girls in middle school and high school only, except for one chart that describes suspension rates for elementary-school girls. The Urban Strategies Council provided the raw data, which was summarized and analyzed by Bright Research Group.

Focus Groups: A series of nine focus groups was conducted with 74 girls of color attending public schools in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). African American girls were oversampled on the basis of an analysis of attendance, suspension and high-school-graduation data. While Pacific Islander and Native American girls display similar risk factors, they represent a relatively small portion of the overall population of girls in the district. Latina girls represent a majority of girls in the district but experience lower-than-average suspension rates. White girls were not represented among focus group participants; they represent 8% of the population of girls in OUSD middle and high schools and are not at high risk for future high school dropout or criminal-justice involvement. Nearly half (47%) of the girls were African American, while 28% were Latina.
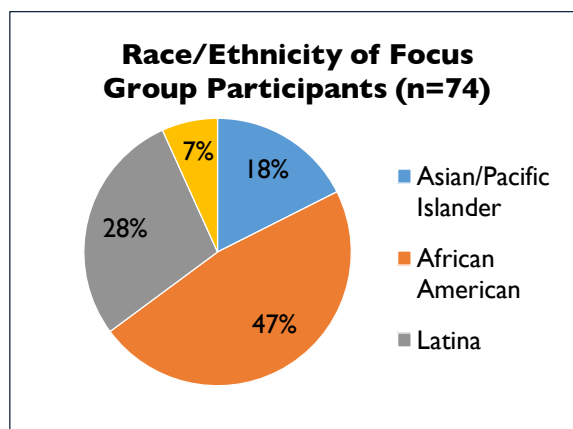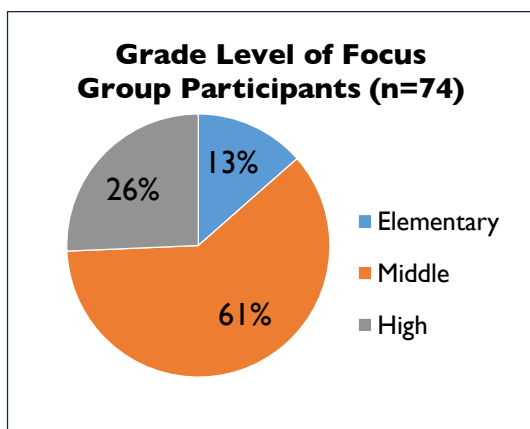
The schools selected to participate were located in low-income, culturally diverse neighborhoods. Six focus groups were conducted in middle schools, two in high schools and one at an elementary school with fourth- and fifth-grade girls. Efforts were made to include schools from all Flatland neighborhoods. Focus groups were conducted at one elementary school, three middle schools, a community based organization, and three high schools.

The focus group participants were recruited by school staff or staff from after-school and other enrichment programs at the school. Focus groups were held at the school during regularly scheduled programming. Participation was voluntary, but girls were required to sign up in advance. Letters were sent to parents in advance of the focus group, informing them of the purpose and providing them with instructions for opting out. A snack and a $10 Jamba Juice gift card were provided to each girl to incentivize participation. The focus groups were held in a private and confidential format and facilitated

by staff from Bright Research Group. Programming and school staff were not in the room. The topic of the questions included girls' perceptions of school safety, interactions with teachers and school staff, access to activities or supports for girls and the experiences of being a girl at their school, including questions regarding differential treatment on the basis of race, ethnicity and gender.

Interviews: Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in efforts to improve and promote equity in Oakland Unified School District. Interviews were completed with Curtiss Sarikey of OUSD; Stephanie Martinez of Girls Inc.; Aimee Eng of the OUSD School Board; Kamilah Mitchell; and Chris Chatmon of OUSD. Two key informant interviews were conducted with African American girls.

Data Analysis Findings

POPULATION OF OUSD GIRLS

There are nearly 7,700 girls in OUSD middle and high schools. Latina girls represent the largest proportion of girls at OUSD's middle and high schools (40%), followed by African American girls (32%).

The graphic on the next page outlines the key findings about the risk and academic-success indicators for girls in the four largest populations in OUSD: African American, Latina, Asian and White girls. Detailed charts for each of these indicators are provided on subsequent pages.

Race/Ethnicity of Girls at OUSD Middle and High Schools (n=7,682)
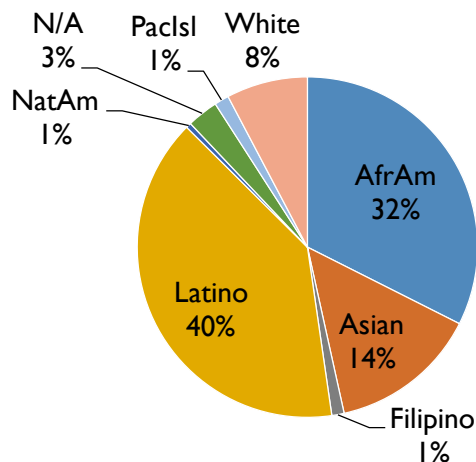
SUSPENSION: ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

In the 2014–2015 school year, 59 girls and 250 boys in elementary school were suspended. Among the 59 girls suspended, 69% were African American.

Suspensions of Girls in Elementary School by Race/Ethnicity (n=59)

African-American Girls

2,491 Students

20% Chronic Absence
10% Suspended

One out of three girls are Black

Two out of three suspended girls are Black

Academic Success

31% Reading proficiency in 3rd grade
36% A-G completion
61% Graduate

White Girls

593 Students

10% Chronic Absence
3% Suspended

Below Average Rates of Chronic Absence and Suspension

Academic Success

77% Reading proficiency in 3rd grade
75% A-G completion
81% Graduate

Latina Girls

3,052 Students

13% Chronic Absence
3% Suspended

Below Average Rates of Chronic Absence and Suspension

Academic Success

24% Reading proficiency in 3rd grade
61% A-G completion
65% Graduate

Asian Girls

1,084 Students

7% Chronic Absence
1% Suspended

Lowest Rates of Chronic Absence and Suspension

Academic Success

60% Reading proficiency in 3rd grade
71% A-G completion
77% Graduate

Reading proficiency in 3rd grade | A-G completion | Graduate

SUSPENSION: MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS

On average, OUSD suspends 5% of all of its girls in middle and high school. African American girls are twice as likely to be suspended (10%) and have higher rates of suspension that most groups of boys, except for African American and Native American boys. Pacific Islander girls and Native American girls also have above-average rates of suspension; however, the sample size is very small, with 106 girls and 38 girls, respectively.

Rate of Suspension (6th - 12th grade)
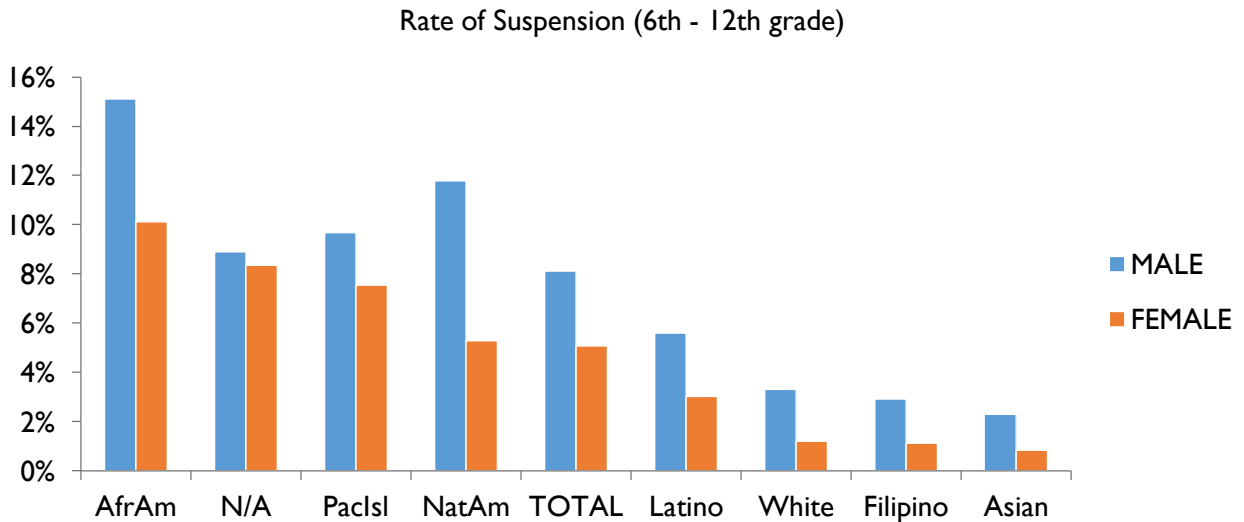
While only one out of three girls is African American, they represent two out of every three girls who are suspended. African American girls are the only population of girls at OUSD who experience this disproportionality when it comes to suspensions.

Proportionality of Suspensions v. Enrollment (6th - 12th grade)
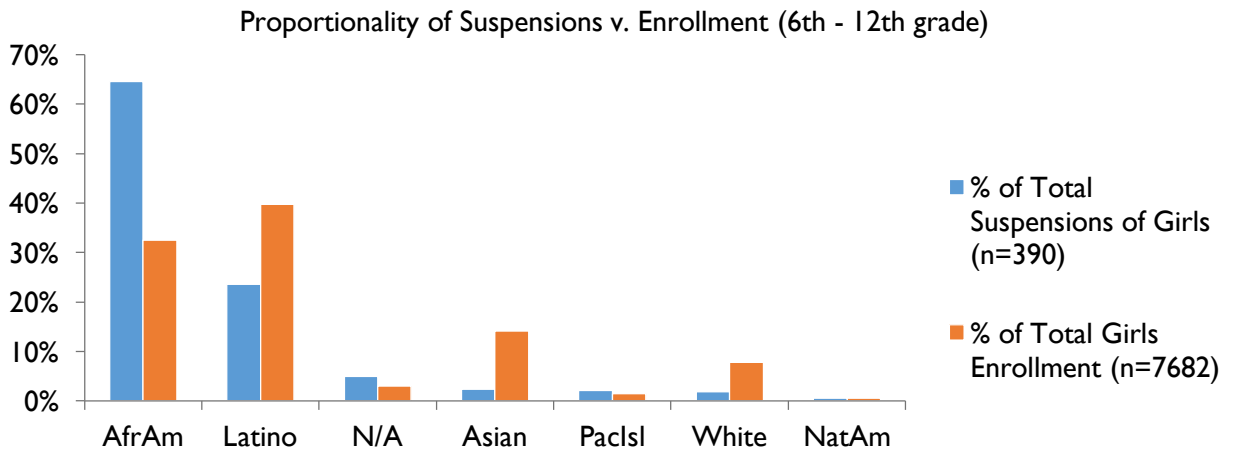
CHRONIC ABSENCE

Fifteen percent of OUSD girls in middle and high school are chronically absent (80% attendance or less). Girls are more likely to be chronically absent than boys on average and across most racial/ethnic g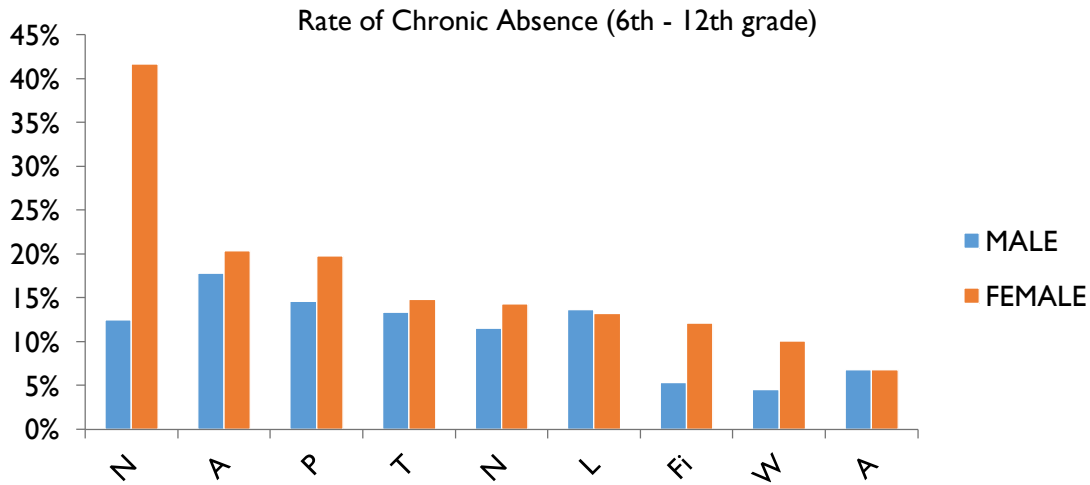roups; Latina girls are slightly less likely to be absent than Latino boys; and Asian girls and boys are absent at the same rates. Native American girls (n=38) have the highest rate of chronic absence among all groups (girls or boys), at 42%.

Rate of Chronic Absence (6th - 12th grade)

African American girls are disproportionately represented among girls who are chronically absent. Almost half (46%) of all chronically absent girls are African American, while they represent only 32% of girls in the district. Latina girls—the second-largest population of girls at OUSD—represent a large portion of girls who are chronically absent (36%), but it is proportionate to their representation in the student body.

Proportionality of Chronic Absence vs. Enrollment (6th - 12th grade)
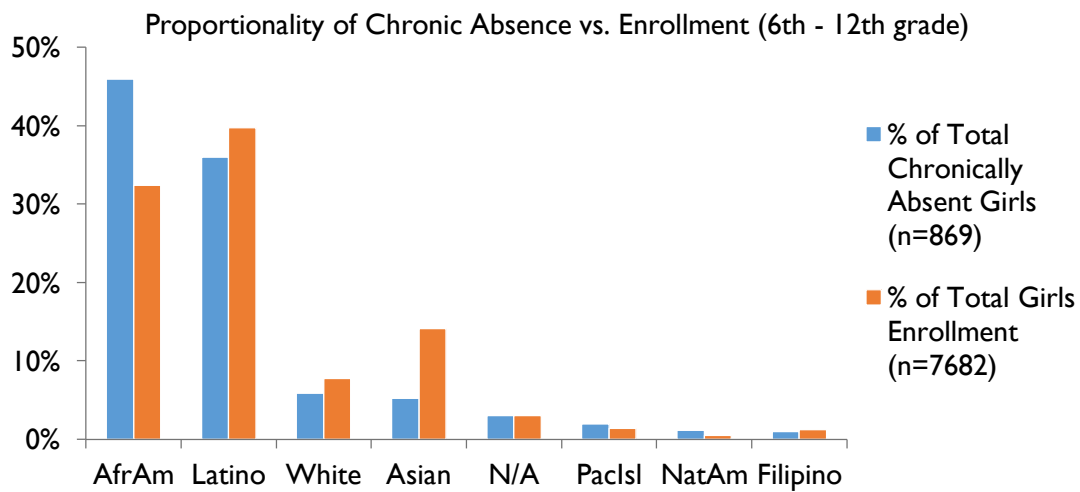
THIRD-GRADE READING (CHART SOURCE: URBAN STRATEGIES COUNCIL, OAKLAND READS 2020)

Latina girls (24%) and African American girls (31%) have the lowest levels of third-grade reading proficiency among all girl groups.
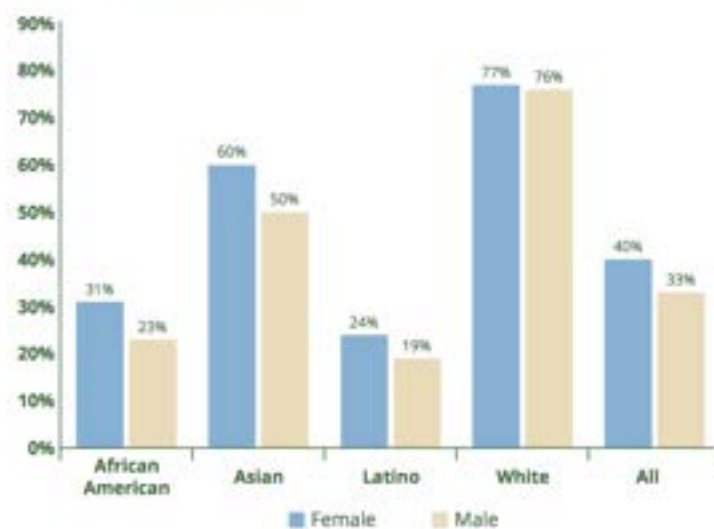
FIGURE 13: OUSD 3RD GRADERS SCORING PROFICIENT OR ABOVE ON THE CST ELA TEST IN 2012-13 BY ETHNICITY AND GENDER

A-G COMPLETION (CHART SOURCE: URBAN STRATEGIES COUNCIL, OAKLAND ACHIEVES 2014)

Girls of color had higher rates of A-G completion than boys of color, although African American girls have an extremely low rate of completion.
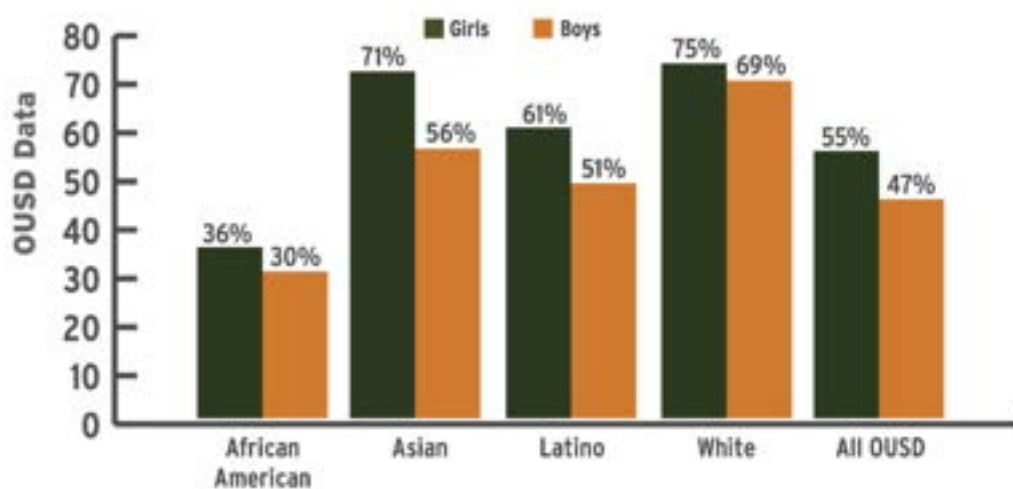
Note: Filipino, Native American and Pacific Islander students were excluded due to small sample size.

Figure 30: Rate of Completion of A-G Requirements, by Ethnicity and Gender, OUSD 2012-13

GRADUATION (CHART SOURCE: URBAN STRATEGIES COUNCIL, OAKLAND ACHIEVES 2014)
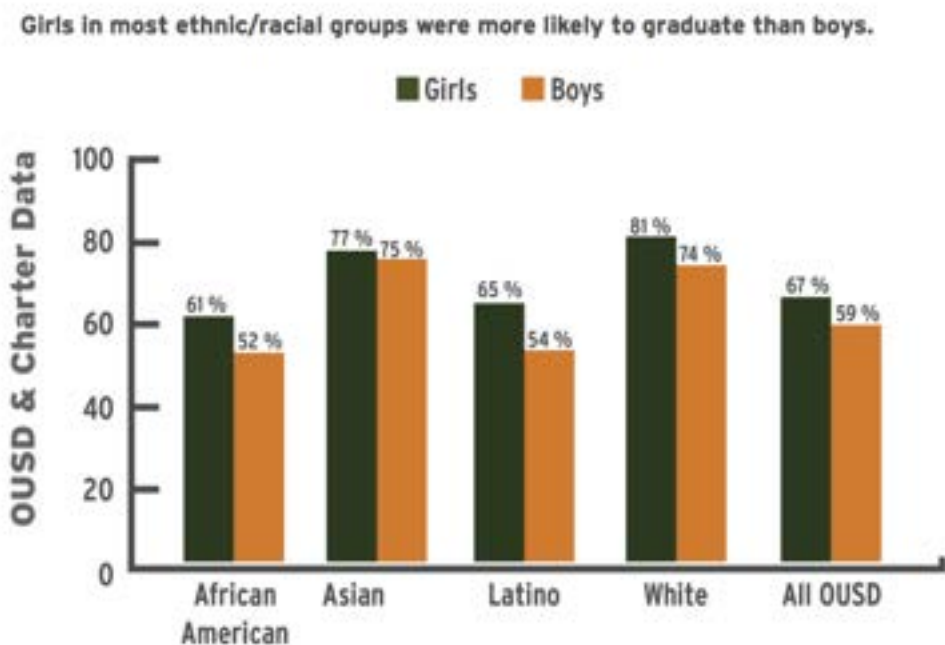
Girls in most ethnic/racial groups were more likely to graduate than boys.

Note: Filipino, Native American and Pacific Islander students were excluded due to small sample size.

Figure 34: Graduation Rates, by Ethnicity and Gender, OUSD & Charter 2012-13

Focus Group Findings

The focus group findings are categorized into four key areas: 1) Perceptions and Experiences with School; 2) Relationships with Adults at School; 3) Relationships with Peers at School; and 4) Policies and Services at School. Except where noted, the findings refer to girls of color overall.

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES WITH SCHOOLS

SENSE OF SAFETY AND SECURITY

Some girls viewed schools as a safe haven in an otherwise unsafe neighborhood or community, while others described their schools as equally unsafe environments. The girls' perceptions of safety at school varied by school.

The girls surveyed through the focus groups for the most part reside in low-income communities with high levels of violence. There was general agreement among girls that their neighborhoods are unsafe, which puts their families at risk for victimization. In all the focus groups, girls agreed that they experienced daily exposure to crime and violence in their communities.

The focus groups revealed that for girls of color, feelings of safety and security vary significantly by school. For example, girls at two schools experienced their schools as a safe place staffed by caring

adults who were looking out for their well-being. Girls at four different schools, on the other hand, did not report feeling physically or emotionally safe at school. In particular, girls at two schools felt that coming to school contributed to anxieties about their personal and physical safety. In these instances, girls reported that it was their responsibility to protect themselves. That is, girls reported that they needed to act, talk or speak a certain way in order to protect themselves from harm at school or in the community. Girls at two schools agreed that if you "act right," you will be safe, but if you "act out," you will "get what is coming to you." There were no significant differences by ethnicity when it comes to the sense of safety of girls of color.

INTEREST IN ACADEMICS

Girls' experiences in class varied by school, with a majority of girls reporting that they were bored in class. Some said that boredom led to their disengagement in school and was in part responsible for truancy.

With the exception of girls at two schools, most girls who participated in the focus groups reported feeling bored in class. Many girls found instruction to be rote and routine. When asked to write down the three feelings that they experience when they come into school every day, "bored," "annoyed" or "irritated" were common responses. Girls attending Life were clear outliers compared to girls at all other schools, as all the other girls reported feeling excited, supported and ready to learn. Girls at all schools also reported that they were excited or happy to see their friends. Some African American girls described facing stereotypes, including the idea that they are not interested in learning, academically focused or smart.

Girls reported that their boredom and aggravation at school were factors that led to a disinterest in being there. Some girls said that they were late or skipped school because they knew they would be bored. Others reported that "drama" with their classmates or people just making "bad choices" were reasons other girls missed school.

SPACE FOR PEACE AND QUIET

Girls of color want more spaces to de-compress or find solace and quiet in and out of school.

During icebreaker activities with Peace and Justice cards, girls were asked to pick a card that made them feel safe and secure. Most cards placed them in natural settings or parks, where they could find time for themselves. Girls expressed a desire for more spaces in their schools and communities where they could experience peace and quiet. At sites with girls-specific programming during or after school, girls felt that those programs provided them with a respite from the drama or chaos of the school environment. This desire was common across school sites and ethnicities.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS AT SCHOOL

LACK OF TRUST WITH CARING TEACHERS

The quality of girls' relationships with adults varied by school. Girls at many schools cited counselors, social workers or after-school-program staff as adults whom they felt they could trust or turn to for support. In other cases, African American girls in particular did not report caring relationships with adults at their schools.

Research has shown that relationships with caring adults are a protective factor for young girls at risk of school disengagement, dropout or truancy. Girls at two schools, as well as the girls who participated in programming at another site, shared that they had many teachers or adults at their schools whom they could trust. Latina girls were also more likely to report caring relationships with adults.

However, girls at four schools shared that they felt that teachers did not respect them or their peers. This was an issue for African American girls in particular. They expressed a desire for greater respect from their teachers and attributed bad behavior or "acting out" to a lack of respectful relationships with adults on campus. Girls at these schools were not able to name many adults on campus whom they could go to if they had an issue or a problem. Further, many girls at these campuses described interactions with teachers and principals that made them feel as if they were destined to fail. Girls said that they do not hear strengths-based or empowering messages about their futures; rather, girls reported a variety of instances in which they were told that they were at risk for becoming teen moms, convicts or low-skilled workers. At two sites, African American girls reported name-calling by teachers and principals.

RACISM AND DISPARATE TREATMENT

African American girls surveyed during the focus groups experience schools as uncaring and often unfair. Latina girls feel that all girls are treated the same, regardless of ethnicity.

African American girls were far more likely to report feeling that their teachers were uncaring and that schools were uncaring spaces for them. African American girls shared many instances of verbal abuse from their teachers, principals and peers. While most Latina girls agreed that schools treated girls the same regardless

Teacher Statements as reported by girls

"Do you want to work at McDonald's for the rest of your life?"

"If you keep going like this, you will be a teen mom."

"Only ratchet girls let their books fall out of their bags like this."

"Do you want to go to jail, or do you want to succeed?"

"Girls who look like me have no respect for me. Latina girls have more respect than you do."

"Teachers are more scared of Black girls."

"African American girls are thought of as being loud, but that's because no one wants to hear us. We have to speak up to be heard."

of their background, African American girls often felt stereotyped because of their race. In most focus groups, African American girls felt that for Latina girls disciplinary action was far less common and more forgiving. In some instances, girls shared that teachers would address differences in the behaviors of African American and Latina girls with racist or disparaging commentaries. African American girls did not associate the race of the teacher with increased fairness, describing instances of African American and White teachers or staff interacting in biased ways. Girls felt that the outcomes of disparate treatment are that African American girls are more likely to get kept after class, be referred to the office for minor infractions and/or receive negative marks on their behavior on their report cards than other girls.

> "This one Mexican girls' report card said, 'It was a pleasure to have you in my class.' You never see a Black girl with that note on their report card."

> "No one ever tells boys, 'Be careful. You might be a teen dad one day!' It's always left to the girls."

SEXISM AND DISPARATE TREATMENT

Across all focus groups and ethnicities, girls reported that girls and boys receive differential treatment at school.

Girls felt that adults hold girls to a higher standard than boys and that girls are expected to act like "young ladies." Girls reported that teachers and principals put pressure on girls to regulate their behavior because boys "can't control themselves." For example, girls said that they often heard messages around not becoming teen moms, but they also noticed that similar messaging was not employed with boys. Girls said that they feel that adults are not strong allies in addressing demeaning language or sexual micro-aggressions and advances from boys. Many girls reported getting in trouble when they were defending themselves or their friends against these type of advances. For girls at two schools, many reported that they had been suspended because of fights that they had had with boys at school. Girls felt that they were more likely to be punished for defending themselves than boys were for making inappropriate comments. There were no significant differences by ethnicity.

SEEKING GUIDELINES AND BOUNDARIES

In schools undergoing a significant transition or lacking a positive school climate, girls felt that adults in those communities were not enforcing rules consistently or addressing serious infractions. African American girls, in particular, wanted adults to play a more assertive role in setting boundaries.

Some schools were described as out of control by girls, particularly in focus groups with African American girls at two schools. Classroom management, overall school climate and safety, and lack of appropriate interventions for violations of school rules were identified as concerns by girls in those focus groups. Girls reported that boundaries and rules were enforced inconsistently. For example, some girls reported that students were having sex on campus, but that no actions were being taken even though adults knew about it. Girls surveyed through the focus groups interpreted these types of instances as a lack of care or respect on the part of school staff and teachers. Many African American girls shared that they feel that their teachers are afraid of them, which keeps the teachers from

controlling the classroom, addressing misbehavior appropriately or creating an environment in which students can learn.

> "These bad kids are making the rest of us look bad. They cast a shadow on the rest of us. Because of them, I don't get a chance at an education."

Girls at several schools—four sites— felt that most behavioral issues or major problems were with a handful of students who were not being held accountable for their actions. Girls at these schools noted that teachers had given up on the "bad kids" with the worst behavior and, instead, turned their attention to other students who were present in class. As a result, girls felt that they were more likely to be punished for minor infractions like cell phone use, cursing or being late to class, while other kids who were doing or selling drugs on campus or having sex on campus were not being punished. Several girls felt that they were being lumped together with the "bad kids" because of the way they looked (i.e., their race/ethnicity) or the way they dressed, and that teachers were not making an effort to understand their unique personalities or assets.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS AT SCHOOL

GOSSIP

While girls look forward to seeing their friends at school, gossip or "drama" create conflicts between girls.

When asked what it was like for girls in their schools, girls were most likely to report that gossip or "drama" was a major issue among girls. Girls report that gossip spreads fast because of social media. Slut-shaming and name-calling were the most common topics of gossip raised by girls. Girls reported needing counseling and support for their social-emotional well-being and safe spaces for girls who are the target of gossip at any given time. Some girls suggested wanting more opportunities to speak with a counselor, stating that they simply wanted an opportunity to vent and release their anger and frustration with their experiences that day versus help around a specific issue. At the same time, girls felt that seeing their friends was one of the few positive aspects of coming to school.

BODY IMAGE AND SEXUALIZATION OF GIRLS

Girls experience unwanted advances from boys in and out of school.

Both inside and outside of the school, girls across all focus groups reported being cat-called or, more seriously, being harassed, followed or robbed. As a result, many girls said that they get dropped off at and/or picked up from school by a parent. Many girls said that exposure to aggressions and micro-aggressions from boys and men in school and their community was a source of stress. For example, girls have experienced unwanted advances from boys at school (including boys pinching or slapping their behinds as they walk by, or yelling inappropriate comments), or being approached by older boys or men on their way to and from school. No significant differences were reported by ethnicity.

Girls said that they do not see boys being punished for using sexualizing or disparaging language with girls. Many girls noted that the lack of response and intervention on the part of adults makes them feel

unsafe. Girls at several schools said that boys regularly call them "bitches," "sluts" or "hos" in the presence of teachers and adults, without teachers punishing the boys or showing care for the girls' feelings. At one school, girls reported that boys had branded Fridays as "Slap-Ass Fridays" and walked up and touched girls' behinds. Girls reported that this tradition was well known by teachers at the school but that their responses focused on the girls' reactions instead of addressing the boys' behavior.

During the focus group at one school, several girls reported being sexually harassed by a staff member. The girls reported that the staff member speaks to them in sexually suggestive ways. Several girls said that the staff member stares at girls from behind as they walk by and that this person comes to girls P.E. classes to watch them in their P.E. uniforms—which they described as more revealing and shorter than their regular uniforms. Several girls said that they had reported the issue to their parents and to school staff, and that the principal had been made aware of the issue, but that no action had been taken. Girls said that this person's continued presence at the school made them very uncomfortable and was upsetting.

POLICIES AND SERVICES AT SCHOOL

INTEREST AND NEED FOR GIRLS-SPECIFIC SERVICES

Girls appreciate girls-specific programming where it is offered and wanted to see more opportunities for girls-only programming and enrichment based on girls' interests.

Across all focus groups, girls expressed a desire for more girls-specific programming and supports. Girls expressed resentment around the availability of boys-specific programming and the corresponding lack of girls-specific programming at many school sites. For girls who do not participate in sports, many said that there were simply not enough enriching experiences for them at school. Girls identified girls' empowerment programs (e.g., leadership and social justice), sexual or puberty education, girls-only support groups and other electives (specifically, gardening, cooking and etiquette) as particular areas of interest. Some girls wished that they had the option to participate in a girls-only academy or to go to a girls-only school. There was widespread recognition of the need to build community ties among girls at the school, and many felt that the best way to do that would be to remove boys from their environment. There were no significant differences by ethnicity.

DRESS CODES, RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Girls reported the need for more equitable enforcement of dress-code infractions, restorative justice and more fair treatment of African American girls when it comes to school discipline.

Dress Codes: Girls felt that they were punished more frequently for dress-code infractions, and that there are more restrictions around the way that girls dress on free-dress days. At schools with uniforms, girls felt that sending girls home when their clothes do not meet uniform standards was an extreme response. Girls reported that boys regularly wear saggy pants, but they receive only a verbal reprimand.

Restorative Justice: At some schools, girls described incidents where no efforts were taken to address traumatic incidents on campus. Girls said that there is a lack of discussion or reconciliation around incidents on campus—between students, between students and teachers, or between students and external forces. Girls shared various examples of traumatic events on their school campus and a

> "I have one hole in my jeans at the knee, and I get sent home, but the boys have their underwear showing, and no one says anything."

lack of restorative, community conversations about these incidents. This was particularly evident at one school, where girls described recent incidents of violence between security guards and students as going unaddressed.

Discipline and Suspension: Girls' perceptions of the fairness of disciplinary action varied by school site and by ethnicity. African American girls felt that they were treated less fairly and not given the benefit of the doubt, particularly at four schools. African American girls were more likely to say that the disparate treatment of teachers (noted earlier) often results in their suspensions. Girls noted a variety of reasons for suspensions, including truancy, uniform infractions, use of cell phones, fights with boys and arguments with teachers. African American girls felt that Latina or Arab girls were just as likely to participate in the same behavior but that they were less likely to be caught or punished for it. Latina girls did not share perceptions or experiences around disparate treatment when it comes to school discipline.

GIRLS' IDEAS FOR IMPROVING THEIR SCHOOLS

Girls recommended policy changes and expanding girls-specific programming to improve the experiences of girls at their schools.

When asked about their ideas for supporting and empowering girls in OUSD, girls shared a number of recommendations. Recommendations emphasized improving social and emotional health, creating a sense of belonging and community at school and empowering girls with interesting and engaging classes. The most common response was to have classes, opportunities or sports that were only for girls.

Common ideas for girls-specific programs include the following:
- Puberty education or sexual education for girls (including hygiene)
- Self-esteem or body-image classes for girls
- "Big sis" programs
- African American girls and women programs
- Enriching classes such as cooking and gardening
- Respect or etiquette classes
- More girls-only sports
- Rooms or spaces in which they could drop in to receive counseling, meditate or release anxiety

Other common ideas for general school improvement include the following:
- More counselors
- Remodeled schools

- Improved school food
- More security officers, including more female security officers
- More field trips or educational excursions
- No uniforms
- More technology learning

DISCUSSION

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRL EXPERIENCE

Cutting across many of the findings of the focus groups was a clear sense that African American girls are having uniquely negative experiences at OUSD schools. This is consistent with the quantitative data on African American girls' academic outcomes and the disciplinary actions taken against them. In a school district that is primarily African American and Latino, African American girls shared stories of negative interactions with staff and consistently described their schools as uncaring. African American girls shared repeated stories of bias, racism, discrimination and lack of care or respect for them in OUSD schools. Latina girls did not. African American girls felt that their needs, experiences and perspectives go unnoticed or unattended to by teachers or school staff, which contributes to a sense of disengagement from school. One girl said that African American girls have a reputation for "being loud, because no one wants to listen to us." Focus-group results point to a strong need to improve African American girls' experiences and relationships with teachers and staff in OUSD schools. On the other hand, African American girls shared a diversity of perspectives. While some girls had experience in the foster care system, others described their parents as highly involved, noting that missing school, getting into trouble, or not going to college were simply non-options in their families. These girls attributed higher rates of truancy among African American girls to challenges within their families. They felt that there was a need to create the kinds of supports they enjoy within their families in the schools for their peers who do not have stable families to come home to.

BLAMING THE VICTIM

While girls described daily exposure to crime and violence in their communities and, in some cases, within their schools, they tended to feel that it was their own responsibility to protect themselves. All girls—even those who reported being suspended one or more times—wanted to distance themselves from the "bad kids" at school. There was a "blame the victim" mentality that came up in girls' conversations about risks to their safety—most notably, among girls at one school. African American girls at all schools felt that they were responsible for protecting themselves, which made them feel frustrated and resentful.

African American girls described being at the receiving end of disempowering messages from their teachers, who warn them not to become teen moms, convicts or blue-collar workers, as well as unfair and disparate treatment. In addition to disempowering girls, these messages reflect a lack of sensitivity for the familial or community context of many of these students, who may come from homes with teen

moms, incarcerated parents or siblings, or low-skilled workers. Taken together, these reports indicate that many schools lack a trauma-informed approach.

THE GIRL-BOY CONFLICT

Girls longed for teachers who set boundaries, held students accountable for their actions and treated girls fairly. Girls were observant and resentful of how boys and girls are treated differently by adults at school, and notice sexist undertones in communication from school staff. Girls identified boys at the center of much of their frustration on a daily basis. Girls longed for safe spaces, activities, counseling or programs that were geared to their needs and interests.

Interview Findings

The interview findings are organized by Lived Experiences of Girls, Gaps and Needs, and Recommendations.

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF GIRLS OF COLOR

Efforts to understand the needs and experiences of girls in Oakland Unified School District are emergent, according to district stakeholders.

There was consensus that the experiences of girls within the district is somewhat invisible and that there is a need to more intentionally create opportunities for decision makers to learn about the experiences of girls, particularly African American girls. Several stakeholders concurred that there is a need for more efforts to bring forth the voices of girls so that leadership, teachers and other stakeholders can develop more empathy and understanding of their experiences within the schools. Efforts are underway to develop an initiative to support African American girls.

Most respondents felt that African American girls should be the priority population of focus on the basis of the indicators.

Many agreed that there was a need for trauma-informed approaches for all girls, while others felt that there was a lack of empathy, understanding, care or concern for African American girls in particular. Some recommended that there needs to be deeper and much more intentional efforts to address unconscious bias and to strengthen the role of adults in creating more caring and restorative experiences for African American girls in particular. Some felt that more information was needed about the experiences of Latina girls, as they are the largest and fastest-growing population of girls in the district, though they display fewer risk indicators. Several felt that there are significant divides between African American and Latina girls, with Latina girls being viewed as a "model minority" and experiencing less disparate treatment than African American girls. Cultural education and providing girls with an understanding of the history of racism in American society could help bridge some of these divides. There was general agreement among respondents that there is a lack of supports and supportive relationships between African American girls and teachers or other staff at most school sites. This is

consistent with the focus-group findings. One respondent recommended that the school district spend more time understanding the experiences of girls in continuation schools, because that is where girls end up after they have experienced a certain level of disciplinary action.

SCHOOL AND DISTRICT CONTEXT

The overall functioning, resources, strengths and priorities of individual school sites all play a role in whether girls-specific programming is offered and what solutions can improve the experiences of girls of color.

Consistent with some of the key learnings from the focus groups, respondents noted that factors related to school quality and climate are the biggest predictors of how safe all students, including girls, feel in OUSD schools. There was a shared recognition that when school climate, instructional quality and overall school quality improve, all students benefit. At the same time, many recognized the when these factors are absent, girls may experience the consequences in ways that differ from boys. When considering strategies for creating more girl-specific programming opportunities, respondents felt that it was important to allow school sites to customize their programming versus attempting to implement a one-size-fits-all approach. At the same time, some suggested that there was the opportunity to begin to integrate a gender lens into district-wide efforts.

Some respondents cited the importance of helping students, including girls, to understand the broader social context of their schooling experiences.

Students attending low-income, underperforming schools do not have a contextual framework for making sense of their experiences in school on a day-to-day basis. Girls of color represent an overwhelming majority of girls within the district, with many attending schools with high teacher and principal turnover, high concentrations of poverty, a lack of resources and negative school climates. When they are not given a framework for understanding what is happening in their neighborhoods, schools and communities on a socioeconomic, political or societal level, the sense of chaos, violence or lack of safety and care become normalized.

Some respondents felt that it was normal for girls to blame themselves and that there was a need for intentional efforts to help students, including girls, make meaning of their experiences in society using a youth-leadership and empowerment model. One respondent suggested adopting a "social determinants of health" (SDOH) framework to apply to schools, as has been done within the African American Male Achievement (AAMA) effort to help girls understand this broader social context.

KEY INFORMANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Key informants provided recommendations in relation to strengthening adults' capacity to support girls of color and opportunities to expand girls-specific programming.

STRENGTHENING ADULTS' CAPACITY TO SUPPORT GIRLS OF COLOR

- Consider how the district might support or incentivize school sites to adopt girl-specific policies, practices or programming in their budgets and site programming.
- Provide trainings to teachers and staff regarding gender-specific needs.
- Identify opportunities to create more gender-specific opportunities and spaces that focus on prevention and empowerment of girls beyond solely directing interventions targeting high-risk populations (i.e., CSEC).
- Provide opportunities for adults to hear about the lived experiences of girls of color, sexism from girls' perspectives and African American girls' experiences in particular.
- Support youth-led advocacy campaigns to improve the experiences of girls of color in OUSD schools.
- Identify opportunities to bring gender (both male and female) efforts together around common agendas versus creating "gender silos."
- Implement policies, training and campaigns that aim to address structural racism and unconscious bias.
- Address upstream factors, such as the underfunding of public schools, that contribute to disparate outcomes for girls and boys of color.
- Provide adults and schools with frameworks for understanding the importance of developing trusting relationships with girls and helping to increase their knowledge of trauma and how schools can decrease or reinforce the negative impacts of trauma.

GIRLS-SPECIFIC PROGRAMMING

- Focus on lessons learned from AAMA, restorative justice and other similar initiatives to create more restorative and healing experiences for girls.
- Create opportunities for girls and boys to have more healing and restorative relationships and to create alternatives to a popular culture that is full of misogyny, disrespect and sexism.
- Consider linking restorative-justice policy more intentionally to an equity agenda for African American girls and boys.
- Consider engaging community partners to create more girls-specific programming and restorative-justice opportunities for girls.
- Consider creating girls-only academies or learning environments.
- Consider creating more strength-based experiences in which African American beauty, sisterhood, history and culturally relevant education is offered, particularly for African American girls.
- Study the specific experiences of African American girls, Latina (including Spanish-Speaking) girls and girls who attend continuation schools to understand what their experiences, strengths and needs are.
- Provide more sex education.
- Create opportunities for African American and Latina girls to bridge across cultures.
- Expand sports, enrichment and other girls-specific programming.

Conclusion

This study provides stakeholders with important information about the lived experiences of girls of color within Oakland Unified School District, summarizing results from an analysis of school-district data on academic success and school-engagement indicators, a series of focus groups with girls of color and interviews with district and other stakeholders working on promoting girls-specific services, supports and policies. The hope is that this information can be used to inform the development of gender-specific, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, strength-based and developmentally appropriate (GCTSD) approaches, policies and programming. For girls who are at risk of falling into the school-to-prison pipeline, this study suggests the need to continue to expand girls-specific prevention efforts while also building the capacity of schools, districts and adults to support girls' development and growth.

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