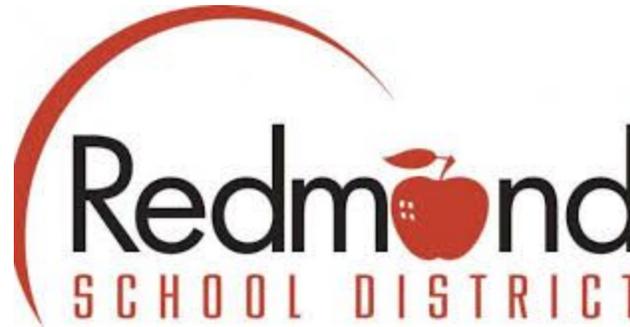


# Fall 2019 Listening Sessions



## *Student and Family Engagement Themes and Takeaways Report*



November 2019

Prepared by: Whitney Swander, *Director of Data and Evaluation*

## **Table of Contents**

<b>I. Purpose and Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>II. Data and Methods Included in Analysis</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>III. Use and Limitations</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>IV. Topics and Emerging Themes</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>V. Emerging Concepts and Themes</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>VI. Key Takeaways for Historically Underserved Groups</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>VII. Key Takeaways for Linguistically Diverse Families</b>	<b>10</b>

## I. Purpose and Background

Redmond School District has prioritized connection and communication with families in their district for many years. Over the course of 2019, Better Together has worked in partnership with Redmond School District administration and core community stakeholders to develop an intentional, authentic system of engagement focused specifically on families of color in the school district. This system centers around creating safe affinity spaces where families of color can share their education experiences openly with others who have shared language and/or shared lived experience. In early fall of 2019, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) published family engagement priorities with an emphasis on ensuring *all* families were engaged to inform district planning for the Student Success Act. For this process, ODE required a focus on engaging specific priority populations including families of color, those impacted by poverty, families who live in rural areas, and other populations of students for whom significant disparities in education outcomes exist. Given this imperative from the state and Better Together's shared priorities with Redmond School District around equitable and authentic family engagement, we stood ready to provide any additional capacity needed to support in the collection and/or analysis of qualitative data the district would gather from families.

Better Together's role in this process included recruiting and training local community members to facilitate listening sessions in affinity space with families, as well as analyzing the qualitative data from all listening sessions with both students and families across populations for the district. This report is the result of our analysis of the data collected by the district in the fall of 2019. It is our hope that we can continue to support Redmond School District in ongoing family engagement efforts in ways that add value to the district's mission and work.

## II. Data and Methods Included in Analysis

The data used in this report was collected during 18 listening sessions. In planning the sessions, the district focused on creating *affinity groups*, or dedicated spaces for individuals with like racial, ethnic, or other shared identities to talk about issues among people who likely share similar experiences. However, in forming the sessions, the facilitator didn't not often share the identity of the participants and therefore we cannot claim that these were affinity group sessions. The sessions were generally conducted during the school day, and included 4 *general student* groups comprised of students from across various backgrounds and lived experiences, 4 sessions with Latinx students, 1 session with linguistically diverse students, and 4 groups comprised of students in special education. In addition, the district held 3 listening sessions during the Juntos sessions at 3 schools. At each of these events, a listening session was held with students present, and a separate session was held with parents facilitated by Latinx, Spanish-speaking community members.

Better Together utilized a *grounded theory approach* to analyzing the listening session records and didn't start the analysis with an established coding scheme or a working theory for what information we expected to track. This method allowed us to approach the data from a place of curiosity and empathetic understanding about student and family experiences in Redmond Schools. To complement this approach, we utilized a *structured inductive coding method* to name, categorize, and track concepts and themes as they were encountered during our analysis. This coding scheme was refined on an ongoing basis to group like-concepts and improve the meaning of the categories and codes into themes as

they emerged over the course of the analysis. Our analysis also centers an *under-represented group lens* and *favours participant voice* in defining concepts and themes throughout the analysis. Historically-underserved groups were intentionally over-represented in the listening session sample to better understand the experiences and needs of these communities within the district. To elevate these voices, our analysis started with examining these sessions, so concepts and themes present in this report were initially defined and populated with information shared by these groups. To the extent possible, we've used the language of participants to define concepts, codes, and themes throughout our analysis and this report.

### **III. Use and Limitations**

The discussion of themes and takeaways in this report should be used in conjunction with other available data and information by the district. Relevant data to compare and analyze could include student, family, and community survey data, academic indicators and trends, behavior and discipline data, financial and human resources data, and other available information to provide context to the themes and the participant quotes included in this report.

While the number of sessions conducted and included in this report is substantive, the sessions included a relatively small sample of Redmond School District students (123) and only Latinx parents (17) overall. We are not able to state that this sample is representative of students that attend Redmond Schools community due to the various recruitment strategies used to identify and invite participants to the listening sessions, as well as different levels of participation at each of the sessions (ranging from 2 to 10 participants). While we cannot claim that the specific sample included is representative of the district overall, we do believe that the themes and experiences shared in this report are true for those who participated in listening sessions and that this report constitutes an authentic view into student and family experiences within Redmond Schools.

### **IV. Topics and Emerging Themes**

The focus questions used during the family and student listening sessions covered topics including:

- *Student and family perceptions of their school community*
- *Participation at school*
- *Communication*
- *School fit and belonging*

The focus questions were designed by a coalition of regional school district administrators with partnership from Better Together to solicit participant feedback and ideas about how to improve these factors in Central Oregon schools.

## V. Emerging Concepts and Themes

The following concepts and themes were identified through the analysis of listening session records. We've grouped like concepts together into larger themes. A summary of the participant experiences and ideas that informed these concepts and theme areas are included as well. Participant quotes and summaries are indicated in *italics* within the concept and theme summaries to provide additional context and description.

**Good Quality Teaching:** Consistently Students across sessions and groups honed in on the defining elements of quality teaching and learning when they talked about *what made them excited and motivated to be at school* and *the things their best teachers do that they wish all of their teachers did*.

**Using a variety of teaching strategies:** Across multiple student sessions students mentioned how much they valued teachers using multiple teaching strategies to ensure that they truly were learning content. *One student gave an example: the teacher should explain, give examples, give a visual representation and then give time to practice. Everyone has a different way of learning.* Students understand that using a variety of teaching strategies ensures that no one gets left behind: *If you see a lot of students are failing your class, that shows something. They should think that maybe they should do something else. The best teachers are the ones that know how to teach so everyone can know what they want us to learn.*

**Providing actionable feedback:** Students cited the value of getting feedback on their work and learning so that they can adapt, ask questions, and work toward mastery. *I like it when teachers tell us what we did right and didn't do right on the test we so we know (and they do it with the whole class so we know we're not alone).* Across groups students also talked about how much they value it when their teachers check in Checking in on students to make sure they are getting the information to make sure they are getting help.

**Demonstrated enthusiasm for teaching and material:** Students in virtually every session stated that they wanted their teachers to demonstrate a passion and interest in what they were teaching. Teachers that show their love for teaching and their subject are better at engaging students in the classroom, which leads to an overall better school experience. Here's what two students had to say:

- *Teachers need to be enthusiastic because when they show a genuine passion about their class we know they care about their job and they care about us.*
- *My favorite teacher was really interactive and because of that the class interacted back.*

**Future Oriented and Real-World Learning:** Generally, and with few exceptions, students appreciate the future oriented culture of Redmond schools. One student stated, about what motivates them to come to school, *it's about realizing that coming to school everyday is setting me up for success. It's not only the things we learn in class, but it is about the process of learning and teaching me discipline.* Students also discussed in depth the value and importance of CTE classes, electives and AP classes. Through this discussion **students choice in what they learn** was a clear theme that emerged in this area and also an appreciation for **hands-on learning** where students learned by doing.

Within these discussions, students also named the importance of seeing upperclassmen take advanced classes, apply to college, and graduate from high school as **role models** for them.

**Focus on collaborative learning:** Overwhelming students cite *group project, project-based learning, and opportunities to engage and learn side-by-side with their peers* as the most engaging and motivating activities they do in school. Here two students describe this type of learning in their own words:

- *I like working in groups and communicating. I get a better understanding of what I am doing.*
- *One thing I would do if I were a teacher would be to have open discussions and debate; it helps you learn more about the subject through group interaction.*

**Student Voice at the Table:** Across multiple sessions, students requested that they be included in decision-making within their school. There were two particular scenarios that students called out a desire to have more input, 1) teacher hiring, in at least two of the session students mentioned a desire to form part of the hiring committees for teachers: *Let students be part of teacher interviews.* And 2) providing input into course design, either giving feedback to help design classroom activities and teacher to engage more students and increase understanding material, or to get input into workload or due dates. A number of students appeared to be overwhelmed or struggling with workload and a simple notion of “ask me” seemed to be present when considering how teachers assign course work.

## Relationships Lead to Engagement

**Teacher to Student Relationships:** Across student groups, students expressed a call for the importance of genuine and caring relationships between teachers and students. We know from the body of positive youth development evidence that a caring adult can make the difference in engagement and success for young people. Generally, students expressed desire that their teacher know them personally, and vice versa. *I want them to genuinely care for me and get to know me better.* The best way to do this? Many students said: *one-on-one conversations; you feel like you can build a better relationship with a teacher.* Another student stated: *walk up to the students and personally talk to them, doing that more often, that way it building their relationship with student and teacher.* The impact of these relationships is transformative. Students used words like trust and honesty frequently when describing the importance of student-teacher relationships. When these relationships are in place students cited that they are *more likely to ask for help when they are struggling if they know their teachers and have a personal relationship with them.*

Knowing students' identity and needs are also important in building strong teacher to student relationships. Students with disabilities described wanting their teachers to take the time to understand their accommodations, so that they didn't feel like they were having to advocate for their unique needs. Students of color and Latinx students said they felt like their *teachers should take the time to know their identity* and understand their racial background and why it matters.

**Helping Students Connect:** Equally important to connections to adults at schools, students in Redmond schools discussed the importance of peer relationships. However, while they value connections to peers, students also discussed the importance of the school and teachers in facilitating these connections. Multiple students stated they wanted more *activities that force you to talk to others, not just the same people; to get out of your [comfort zone] to get to know new people*. One student described how Camp 9 gave them a safe and structured environment *to get to know people before [the school year started] which was nice*. Another student stated: *It's nice to have a sense of community as school*, and as students described the conditions of creating connections, school staff often played pivotal roles.

## **Non-Academic Issues Create Barriers for All Students to Learn and Participate**

**Facilities, Equipment, and Materials:** The most resounding recommendation from students when asked about how their school could improve related to the physical facilities, equipment, and materials at their schools. In particular students had a lot of concern about the state of bathrooms from broken stalls and handwashing stations, to the availability of basic hygiene products (seat covers, soap, etc.). Additionally, a number of students mentioned the need for newer, more modern sports equipment (helmets, mats, uniforms), and other students requested more materials for the hands-on classes they enjoy so much, particularly art.

**Class size:** Among the high school sessions, numerous students discussed the challenges that large class sizes pose to their ability to learn. Here are two powerful ways that students described the impact of class sizes on their learning:

- *Class sizes are really large and teachers don't have time to personalize for each student.*
- *We have class sizes of 40+ all day. It's difficult to learn. That is something we could definitely invest in.*

**Racial Divides and Discrimination:** Discussion about racial bias, divides, and discrimination was present in every session of students of color and linguistically diverse students and appears to be a consistent experience across schools. The experiences shared by students can fit into two concepts within this theme. One, students discussed a feeling of both division and exclusion. Students discussed that they felt like their social groups were generally divided by race and ethnicity, *we are in the Latino group*, one student described, another student described how they didn't feel like they could fully be themselves at school because *the Latinos that come here we don't show who we are when we are outside of school*, in an effort to "fit in" or not feel further excluded from the dominant school culture.

The second concept in this area relates to racially discriminatory language that students use and a lack of awareness about the impact of racism at school. There were a handful of comments related to racial jokes that students use, many students even seemed to have accepted the frequency of these; one student remarked: *there are a lot of [racial] jokes that are always hurtful regardless of even if your friends are saying them*. In another session, a student stated, *some things (referring to racial jokes) like that just fly over your head, and sometimes they stick to you*. Other students discussed the impact of feeling hypervisible at their school as a student of color. One student explained: *we don't have diversity and there's a lot of racism which many people don't see because they're not a minority. That's not cool. It kind of sucks because it's racism. It's a good school but we need more diversity. There is more of an effect being a minority*. Another commented: *People don't notice details, because I'm a minority, they conflate me with "that black person" all the time. I get called "the whitest black person they've met."*

*How can I act my race? It's my race. I get called that all the time. I hear racial slurs all the time. I knock them off but, that's not cool. They mean something to someone.*

**Things are political:** As a sub-concept in this theme, a subset of participants at one high school discussed how politics had heightened this feeling of division at school. A group of students discussed that they felt uncomfortable at school when students wear politically aligned hats or t-shirts. One student commented: *When someone wears one of those hats it feels like they think they are superior and makes it okay to say things like "beaner" to me.* Another student explained: *When people wear those hats or shirts I feel attacked.* Another student discussed at length how in previous years they felt their friend group was more mixed (racially), but because of the influence of the political climate they feel like students have divided themselves among racial lines: *groups were more mixed, now white students only hang out with white students, and Mexican students hang out together.*

**Diversity Training for Staff and Students:** Students also brought solutions to the conversation. One student discussed the need for student implicit bias training: *just being aware of your biases would be a good way for students to get along with each other.* Within a core group of sessions, we also sense the students didn't feel like teachers were prepared or supported to address issues of race directly. One student shared: *Teachers are very neutral, but I wish they would talk more about race.* They went on to talk about how current events related to race impact them, and wished the teachers were better prepared to talk, incorporate, and confront charged issues when they came up at school.

**Social Emotional and Mental Health Support Helps Students Cope:** In the majority of high school sessions students referenced a need for more attention on student mental health. One student said: *push on mental health - we don't have enough support.* Another student framed a response to the need by calling for more clubs, support groups, etc. for students that are struggling with mental health issues, trauma, and anxiety. Another student expressed the need for a social emotional approach to helping students cope: *student need help learning about positive self-expression without harming themselves or others or ways to keep others' feelings in mind when they react.* Another student suggested that schools have monthly speakers that would address issues that are facing students from juuling to suicide. The student explained: *I like first-hand stories. We need to face these issues head-on, hear real stories, like "this is what happened to me." We need to talk about mental health. Just base it around our school. Mental health is a BIG one. We should discuss our problems together.*

**Empathy for Student Experience:** An interesting theme that emerged across four sessions was a call that school staff have empathy for the diverse situations that students navigate. Many students cited examples of teachers or cases when school staff extended empathy to them and it made all the difference. One student pleaded: *there should be more understanding from teachers about students' outside experiences and responsibilities. I have to pay a lot of bills and need to work. It can be overwhelming. Teachers could allow extensions. One particular teacher really works with us, but others don't. I wish they could be more like that and be more willing to help.* Another student spoke more generally: *try to understand where students are coming from. You don't know what is happening at home. If someone is getting bad grades, then try to understand what is happening that is affecting their grades.* Across sessions, students noted the value of empathetic educators to help them over these hurdles: *I had this one teacher that told us if anything was going wrong, he was always there for us to talk to.*

## VI. Key Takeaways for Historically Underserved Groups

The following concepts and themes were identified as unique to the experience of students from historically underserved groups that were either explicitly identified to participate in listening sessions or who disclosed their identity as part of a historically underserved group during the course of a listening session.

### Students of Color and Linguistically Diverse Students

**Belonging:** *I want the school to be more accepting of other opinions*, a student responded to the question of how their school could improve. In another session, to the question of what gets in the way of people getting along, they stated: *separation of students in groups, we see it with minorities in this school; instead of focusing on the differences, we should focus on what we have in common here*. This concept provides additional context to the broader theme around **racial divides and discrimination**; students are seeking: belonging, inclusion, and acceptance among their peers at school. The word “minority” is used often across these sessions, leading us to believe students of color and linguistically diverse students are tuned into feeling marginalized within a dominant culture settings and groups.

**Individualized Approaches Education:** Among this group of student, there was notable discussion about attending to the individual needs of students in order to learn and succeed. The specifics of what individualized education vary across sessions, but there is some consensus about: **understanding students responsibilities outside of school, helping students who learn differently, and getting input from students on due dates and expectations**, all in order to help students learn and achieve better academically.

**Opportunities to learn more languages:** While mentioned in general student sessions as well, students of color and linguistically diverse youth more frequently requested additional options to learn world languages and ASL; these seem to be highly valued electives.

**Staff diversity:** Though only mentioned twice, students from these groups mentioned **bilingual and multicultural staff** as ways their school could improve.

### Students with Disabilities

**Flexibility to Do Their Best:** Students with disabilities called out the importance of scaffolding learning for their own personal benefit, and that these practices should extend more intentionally past elementary school learning. Additionally, students with disabilities overwhelmingly mentioned the importance of flexibility for them to do their best work. Students described this flexibility as follows: *More time to complete projects, no set due dates, and understanding from teachers, among other similar ideas*.

**Make Accommodations Accessible:** Students discussed personal challenges they experience in using their available accommodations. Students mentioned that they wished that their teachers would approach them about their accommodation, not the other way around. /

want teachers to come up to students (with accommodations) and see what we need. Needing to ask or advocate for their accommodation seems to be a barrier for some students.

**Authentic Connections with Peers:** More than any other group, students with disabilities articulated their desires to increase connection and relationships with their peers. These relationships can be divided into two categories, one a **positive inclusive school environment** and two, **connections in the classroom that facilitate learning**. To the former, students in these sessions talked about how bullying and a lack of empathy are challenging to navigate: *I think the biggest things that gets in people's way is when kids bully each other, it creates a negative environment.* Another student mentioned the importance of *not calling people names or making fun of them...accept people's differences.* In the latter category, students with disabilities talked about how instructive their relationships with peers are at school; they mentioned that value of seeing their peers model things like classroom discussions or group activities as important to their own personal and academic development.

### LGBTQ+ Identifying Students

While Redmond Schools did not intentionally engage LGBTQ+ identifying students as an affinity group, the voices and needs of non-binary students were present among the listening session records. These are concepts that were mentioned by participants:

**GSA's Matter:** In sessions with issues for LGBTQ+ students came up, they either explicitly mentioned the presence or lack of a GSA to create inclusion and belonging for LGBTQ+ identifying students. One student remarked, *this school doesn't have a GSA. It doesn't feel good.* Research conducted across schools nationally, find that the LGBTQ+ students who don't have a GSA in their school report a higher incidence of anti-LGBTQ+ language and feel less safe.

**Foster Gender Inclusive Cultures:** Of the LGBTQ+ voices present in the sample, it was noted that **school staff ask for student pronouns**, and this is important and valued! However, other participants noted that they **experience anti-LGBTQ harassment and discrimination at school**. One student recounted their and a friend's experience: *I see people call her names and I'm not okay with that and I don't know what to do about it. I have seen people call her [anit-LGBT slur] in front of her. She shrugs it off. I get called names in the hallway a lot. People call me [anit-LGBT slur].* Ensuring students feel safe and protected at school, regardless of their identity is foundational to creating cultures of care in school.

## VII. Key Takeaways for Linguistically Diverse Families

**Welcoming Cultures Depend on the School:** Across the parent sessions, Spanish-speaking parents appear to have very diverse experiences within their children's schools. Some parents stated without hesitation that they feel welcome at school, other stated just as frankly, that as parents, *we are alone, isolated, not welcome, discriminated against* (with 3 'dittos' from other participants).

Parents mentioned the importance of programs like Juntos, that have built bridges between families and schools and through participation, and as a result they feel more welcome at their child's school. Building on this, a parent requested: *We need a PTA in Spanish where we can say this directly, what we need and how we feel.*

**Cultural and Linguistic Representation in School Staff:** In each parent session, participants stated a need for more teachers, counselors, and mentors who are people of color and who speak Spanish. *The staff should be diverse*, one parent stated frankly. Parents also discussed the importance of having spanish-speaking staff at school, but there is nuance. One parent recalled her first experience going to her child's high school: *The first time I came to this school it was because I needed to pay for something. The person at the front desk (a white person) began to speak to me in Spanish, and wow, it felt so good, like I started to tear up, I felt thankful that they spoke spanish.* But it's more than just language alone, another parent discussed that culture is also important, especially when conversations involve sensitive matters. One participant shared: *I don't feel trusting when the interpreter is not a native spanish-speaker or is white. I feel most trusting when the interpreter is Latinx like me.* Representation matters, and parents feel at ease and affirmed when they are able to connect with people who understand and share their culture and experiences at school.

**Barriers to Engagement:** Spanish speaking parents really value being connected to their children's education, however there were four primary barriers to their involvement:

**Schedules:** Parents often work during the school day and events and are unable to be at school, go on field trips or otherwise help out.

**Language:** Parents cited time and time again that language barriers with the school, to know about opportunities, to be included at events, and to feel confident in communicating keep them from engaging at the school.

**Level of education:** A handful of parents cited their own educational attainment as a barrier to getting more involved at school. Many shared that they hadn't themselves finished high school and therefore felt out of place or that they didn't understand the system well.

**Volunteer requirements:** In both high school sessions, parents mentioned the new requirements that parents provide a social security number in order to volunteer as a significant barrier to getting involved at school. One parent asked: *What is the purpose of the all requirements that have been placed on parents to be able to come to school? It should change because it doesn't allow us parents to be at school if we don't have authorization.*

**System Navigation:** A parent shared with some vulnerability, *some of us parents are ashamed to ask for information or help because we don't speak English*. However the issues that families described are more complicated than just speaking the dominant culture language and extend to having a working understanding and the ability to navigate and access school systems.

**Acronym Soup:** Some parents discussed the challenges in understanding what services were available to them and how to access them because the names didn't make sense. Important local and national resources, like FAN and FAFSA were mentioned, and a parent stated: *we need more information (about these programs) in spanish so that we can navigate the system*. Another parent responded: *we try to help each other, but sometimes we don't know either!*

**Commitment to Quality Translation and Access to Interpretation:** From participants at these sessions, there appear to be gaps in what information and materials are available in Spanish. One parent asserted: *We need all of the information in spanish: information from the school, calendars, events, everything that is happening*. Another parent shared: *I am always asking my son to translate information sent from the school so that I can know what is going on. I miss a lot of information*. Ensuring that all families are getting all information is foundational ensuring access and equity in their child's education. With regards to interpretation, a parent shared a desire for proactive communication in Spanish so that she can be a partner with the school: *Reach out to us (parents) in our language or with good interpretation when something is going wrong with our children, not at the last minute when it's too late to help them. Ask us to help*. We know that communication with parents is highly valued and prioritized in schools, ensuring that all parents are able to engage is critical.

**Digital Divide:** Ease of accessing information online, while efficient and streamlined, can pose additional barriers to spanish-speaking parents who may be unfamiliar with the system. However, investments by school teams to help families navigate these resources will pay off in the long run. A parent shared: *at another school, someone took the time to tell me about my child's homework and showed me how to use the webpage where I could check on all of the assignments for my child. Teach me how I'm supposed to do these things to help my child!*