



# RACE TO LEARN

*Findings, Recommendations,  
and Reflections from the  
Kentucky Student Voice Team's  
Race, Ethnicity, and School  
Climate Student Survey*





We are young people co-creating more just, democratic Kentucky schools and communities as research, policy, and advocacy partners.

Our work includes building capacity in students to serve in meaningful education decision-making roles, coaching students to lead evaluations of school climate and culture, and mobilizing young people around legislative advocacy campaigns focused on a range of education issues. We also amplify and elevate student voices across a number of media platforms aimed at intergenerational audiences.

Above all, we listen to students other than ourselves, with a special emphasis on listening to those who may be otherwise least heard. And we do so in hopes of building the collective power of young people across the Commonwealth and showing Kentucky and the world what's possible.



# Who We Are

We are citizen researchers from the Kentucky Student Voice Team, an independent non-profit organization of young people co-creating more just, democratic Kentucky schools and communities as education research, policy, and advocacy partners.

Our research team of 26 young people is supported by a number of adult allies and represents schools and communities from across the Commonwealth.

# Why We Did It

The rationale behind the *Race to Learn Study* is threefold:

1. By surfacing student stories and statistics, we hope to provide insight that can guide education decision makers to be more responsive to the needs of students through and well beyond the current legislative session;
2. By sharing this research, we also hope to bridge the empathy gap between and among students and the adults who support them; and,
3. By operating as a transparent, inclusive, and collaborative team, and by documenting our process, we hope to provide a model for how young people and other stakeholders can act as citizen researchers to ensure more just and democratic schools and communities.

# What We Did

The *Race to Learn Study* is a student-driven initiative launched in the midst of heated local and national conversations about whether and how to discuss issues related to race and ethnicity in school. The goal was to capture the real-time experiences of Kentucky youth to better inform public discourse around the subject and help ensure that it is more student-centered.

The *Race to Learn Study* shares results from our Race, Ethnicity, and School Climate Student-to-Student Survey. It was inspired by our previous school and state-level school climate research, including a series of student-led school climate audits we've conducted since 2016 and our 2020 *Coping with Covid Student-to-Student Study*. And it was refined by young people and adults beyond our team who provided extensive feedback ahead of its dissemination.

The survey window opened to the public on December 6, 2021, and when it closed two weeks later, 10,725 students responded from 114 of Kentucky's 120 counties.

We relied on an extensive network of students, families, teachers, administrators, researchers, and community leaders to target individuals and groups who were underrepresented in the responses after the first few days of dissemination. Our results mirror the racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity of the state.

This report focuses on six broad themes derived from our quantitative results and includes a range of student voices from our open-response questions that were analyzed and distilled by our research team.

# Dedication

*This report is dedicated to the 10,725 Kentucky middle and high school students who took the time to share their perspectives on a sensitive and significant subject.*

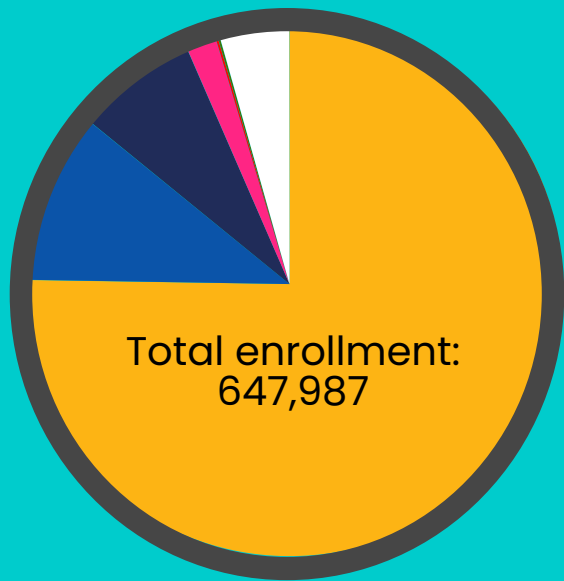
*We hope by amplifying and elevating what we heard from you in this way that we honored your voice and your trust in us.*

## Findings

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# Ethnicity of K-12 Kentucky public-school students



# Demographics of Respondents of the Race, Ethnicity, and School Climate Survey



# Geographic Representation



Finding 1

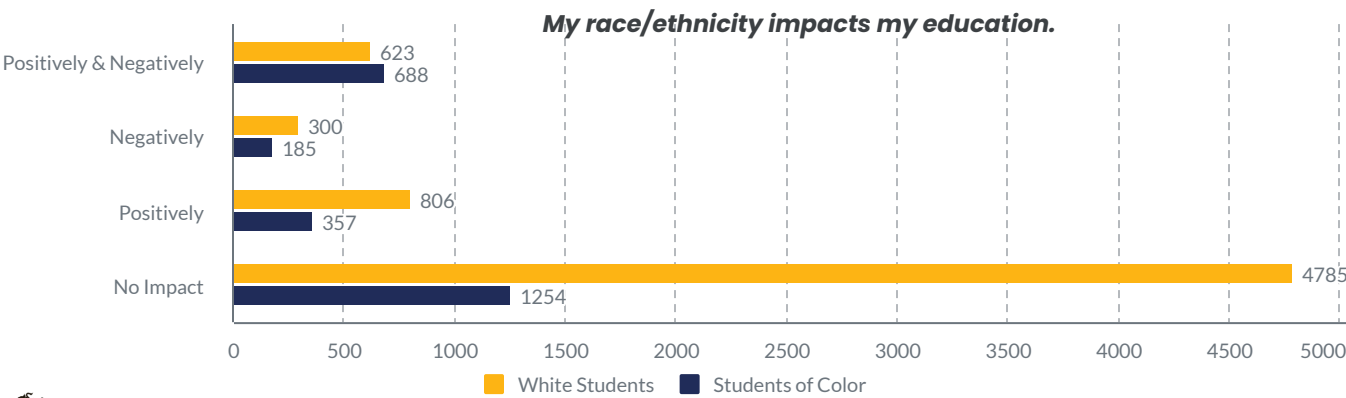
# Confronting Racism

Nearly half of all Kentucky students express that racism is a prevalent issue that schools need to address.

**46%** of students report that their school needs to do more to confront racism.

**8% of students of color** say that their race/ethnicity negatively impacts their education.

**28% of students of color** say that their race/ethnicity impacts their education both positively and negatively.



## Student Voice

"I wish they would stop ignoring the topic and stop beating around the bush like nothing happened. It's like someone saying 'I don't see color' [but] you're ignoring the fact that I am someone of color. If you don't see color you don't see me."

**Fayette County Senior, Black**

"I feel like the school doesn't really care about any student. Moreover, the ones given the least amount of resources are brown/poor people. Issues that affect students heavily outside school, their situation may not be understandable to others with different backgrounds."

**Shelby County Junior, Hispanic**

"It's not fair to African Americans and minorities in schools to have to wait when they've been waiting their whole life to just feel appreciated at school. White students are not oppressed; the real oppression is white people. We are fragile when discussing what our problems are, so we don't want to talk about them. Being fragile makes it worse, because you can't call someone openly racist, or they'll get angry or defensive. All I'm saying is something must be done; try something."

**Rowan County Junior, White**

"...A lot of students do not see how much privilege they have just because they are white, and it's really horrible that they can get away with saying racial slurs/cruel things toward minorities. This could easily be avoided IF the school would teach students about racism, not just white-washing it. I hear NO teachers talk about racism (and if they do, it's watered down to a minuscule thing)."

**Muhlenberg County 7th Grader, White**

"I could pinpoint all the racist teachers in this school right now. WE ARE ALL PEOPLE AND WE ARE ALL EQUAL. STOP THE HATE AND RACISM."

**Caldwell County 7th Grader, Black**

### KSVT Research Team Reflection

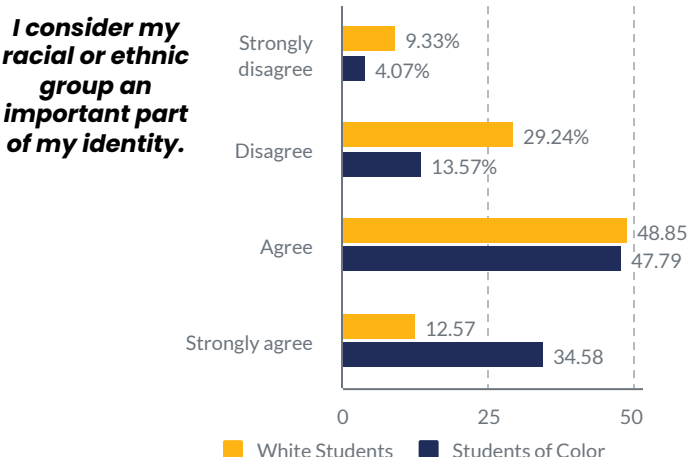
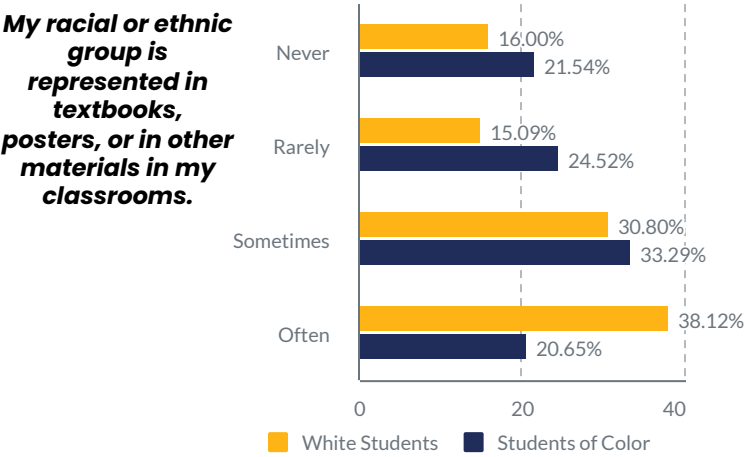
"So many of the open responses speak to the fact that fragility and tension around topics relating to diversity, acceptance, and racism have further marginalized students of color. When students sense apprehension to discuss these issues by adults in school, it can undermine their well-being and success."

Finding 2

# Racial & Ethnic Representation in the Classroom

A significant number of Kentucky’s students of color feel unrepresented in what they learn in school.

- 46%** of students of color report that their racial or ethnic group is rarely or never represented in textbooks, posters, or in other materials in their classrooms.
- 31%** say they never have the opportunity to talk about their own experiences with race in class. 53% of students say their teachers rarely or never talk about issues related to race or ethnicity in the classroom. At the same time, 82% of students of color say that their race or ethnicity is an important part of their identity, as do 61% of white students.



## Student Voice

“Race has not been a problem in my 14 year lifetime. I don’t need to talk about my experiences in class. It’s the last I would and not to mention that it’s school, not a meeting about race. It doesn’t matter if we have people of different races on posters as it says. School isn’t about race, it’s about learning.”

**Bell County Freshman, White**

“We barely talk about black history unless it’s black history month and we shouldn’t just be important only for a month.”

**Fayette County Senior, Black**

“As a Person of Color, going into a classroom where you don’t feel welcome half the time is pretty rough, and I don’t think they consider what all we experience outside of school let alone on the inside.”

**Rowan County Freshman, Black & White**

“I feel that as a white person in a majority white school, I see my race represented everywhere. There are no posters in my school with POC featured on them. The history that is taught here is extremely white washed and the only time we ever discuss POC is when the topic of slavery comes up. I also feel that my experience with the education system in my county is much more positive than the few POC here.”

**Pendleton County Senior, White**

“I learn more about other races than my own. The only thing we learn about is slavery, and it’s not taught the correct way.”

**Jefferson County Senior, Black**



## Finding 2 (Continued)

### Student Voice

"I wish my school knew that even though we are a predominantly white school, I still want to learn about other cultures and experiences. We can all learn to be more empathetic if we were aware of others' experiences."

**Lyon County Junior, White**

"Teach all of history, not just from the distorted point of view of white colonizers. Stop teaching about how white settlers were heroes and start talking about how they ruined indigenous communities and committed mass genocides against people of color. Start talking about the true horrors of the American slave system. Start including social equity classes in the school curriculum."

**Campbell County Freshman, White**

"This is pointless. I'm white so of course it's gonna be represented in textbooks because we ruled the world for hundreds of years."

**Clay County Sophomore, White**

"I just feel like in history we do not really talk about what really happened to black people. They [teachers] just say slavery and move on."

**McCracken County 8th Grader, Black & Native American**

"I don't think it is fair that in all the books, there are only white people. How do you think African American people feel?"

**Letcher County Senior, White**

"I wish my teachers knew how many times I have felt like I was walking on eggshells by stating my opinion."

**Harlan County Freshman, White**

### KSVT Research Team Reflection

"Most of the responses that were addressing representation in the classroom were related to the structures around students, like their teachers, their peers, who's in the classes with them, what their clubs look like, and who appears in their history curriculum. Students were not necessarily referencing the material representations of diversity that our survey question was meant to evoke. History was brought up the most, as it's seen as not fully incorporative of how diverse history actually is. But across the board, students were citing the lack of diversity in their education, specifically in how they are taught and what they are taught."

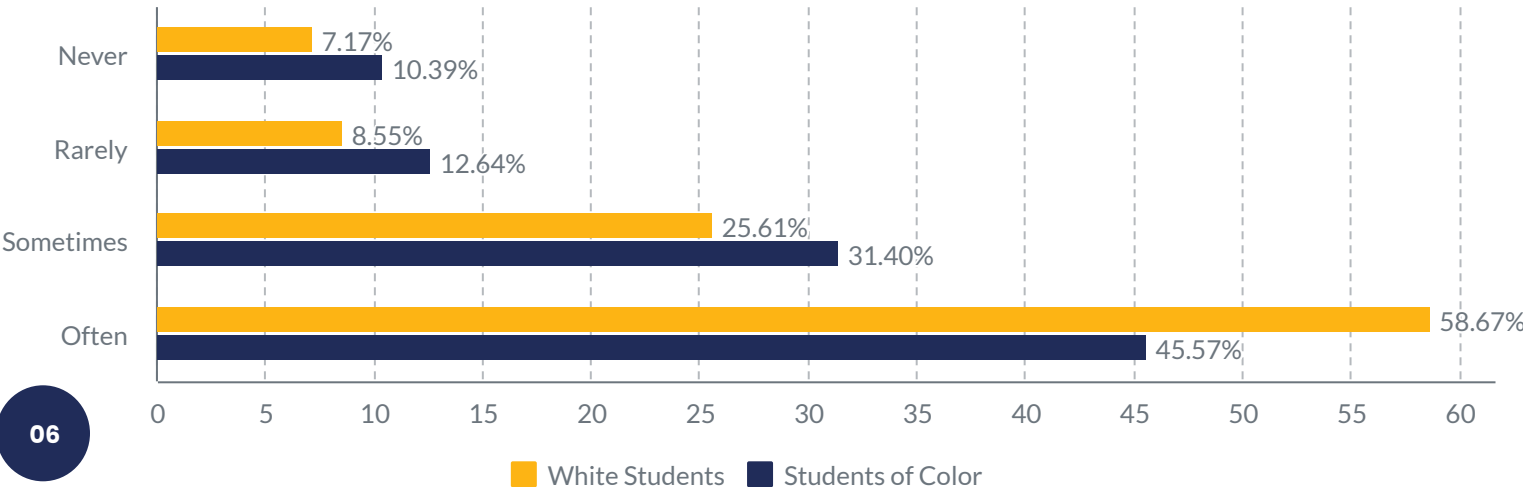
## Finding 3

# Perceptions of Equitable Rule Enforcement

A fair number of Kentucky students perceive racial or ethnic bias in the way rules are enforced in school.

**18%** or 1 in 5 students report that rules are "rarely" or "never" fairly enforced for students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. For students of color, this number rises to about 1 in 4 (23%).

**The rules in my school are fairly enforced for students regardless of racial or ethnic backgrounds.**





### Finding 3 (Continued)

## Student Voice

"I can't think of a thing that my school does to support students of different races or ethnicities. White students can be openly racist and receive no punishment whatsoever. It is so excused to be racist, which is absolutely horrible."

**Robertson County Freshman, White**

"Regarding the rules being fairly enforced, there have been a few cases involving POC students, primarily black, in which administration immediately assumed that they were guilty of whatever incident occurred without investigating first. Black students that get into fights are almost always given a more severe punishment, even if they did not start the fight."

**Pendleton County Senior, White**

"I think people of different [races and ethnicities are] treated differently than other students, and I think there is so many racist comments here and there should be more done."

**Menifee County 8th Grader, White**

"In one of my classes the teacher gives more of a punishment to one of the black students in the class but takes it easy on the white kids."

**Henderson County 6th grader, White**

"I feel like the students of different races never get the time to talk about when they're racially profiled by the students and the teachers. There are a few people that do get treated differently by the way they look and just by their skin tone and there should be something done about it but no one really talks about it or talks about how awful this is."

**Madison County Freshman, White**

### KSVT Research Team Reflection

"The difference in responses reinforces the idea that students of color are just forced to be so much more conscious of race in everyday life while a lot of white students never have to think about it and just don't perceive anything having to do with race or any related issues. Many students, specifically white students, believe that everyone is treated the same regardless of their skin color. However, students of color, even from the very same schools, say differently. This may explain the wide difference in perception of equitable rules."

### Finding 4

# Racial & Ethnic Exclusion

Too many students contribute to a school climate that feels exclusive to students of color.

**31%** report that they "often" hear students make insensitive comments about the race or ethnicity of other students in school.

- Just 3% of respondents say the same about adults in their school, however. Furthermore, 45% of students surveyed "agree" or "strongly agree" that adults in their school work hard to recognize racial or ethnic diversity while another 40% of students are neutral on this statement.
- 10% of students report they themselves are "sometimes" or "often" treated negatively by peers due to their race or ethnicity; 5% say the same about their teachers.





## Finding 4 (Continued)

### Student Voice

"I wish they would understand how much actually goes on as a POC in high school. Everyday it's like insensitive and racist comments flying at me all the time. And I still have to put my head down and do my work."

**Hardin County Senior, Black and White**

"I wish they understood how hard it is to walk the halls without hearing something racist or a white student say slurs."

**Pike County Junior, Southeast Asian**

"Race is color. it's whatever people make it out to be. I could be black, I could be white. I could be Asian or Hispanic and it does not have an impact on anything I do. People shouldn't treat race like it's a religion because we truly all are equal and I know that because I'd never put shame on something God gave them."

**Bell County Sophomore, White**

"This school presents a lot of racism and inequality. I've walked down the hallway and heard people saying the n word, and other terms of slander. "

**Bell County Freshman, White**

"As students of color, we are not always treated the same and we have very negative stereotypes. Many peers of mine are racist towards me because of the color of my skin but when I confront them, I am in the wrong. In all honesty people of color are not asking for a lot, just to be treated like our white peers while we can still be ourselves."

**Christian County Senior, Black**

"The racist comments/slurs I hear made by my peers create an uncomfortable environment."

**Ohio County Sophomore, Hispanic**

"The amount of slurs and offensive words regarding race and ethnicity I hear in my school is unacceptable. A first good step for my school is teaching students about why it's not okay to say these words and building harsher punishment for those who continue using them. But the most important thing my school should do is teach students about different races and ethnicities.

Normalizing differences and informing and teaching students in my predominantly white school about race and ethnicity would most likely open the eyes of many and create an environment where people respect and learn from each other."

**Rowan County Freshman, White**



### KSVT Research Team Reflection

"So many of the quotes that we were looking at related to racial slurs and how their use creates an uncomfortable learning climate. That basic level of support and respect does not exist in some schools, and that really inhibits the learning of students of color and prevents a safe and productive school environment. There's a real urgency that we're seeing for just a basic level of understanding."

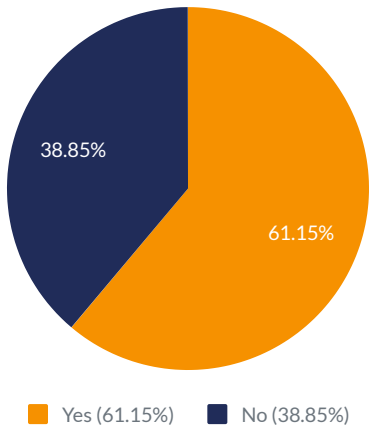
# Teacher Diversity

White students and students of color are all missing out on the benefits of more diverse teachers.

**39%** of Kentucky students of color report that since Kindergarten, they have never had a teacher of a similar racial or ethnic background.

*Since kindergarten, have you had at least one classroom teacher with a racial or ethnic background similar to your own?*

Students of Color



## Student Voice

"I've been in school for 9 years and I have literally never had a different raced teacher. Only white."

**Fayette County 8th Grader, Black**

"Sometimes my mother talks about moving to a different state, because Kentucky does not feel diverse."

**Fayette County 8th Grader, Hispanic and White**

"I've always had white teachers so I never really got to have a teacher that was like me and felt comfortable to talk to. I don't like to talk to teachers much."

**Franklin County 6th Grader, Black**

"The schools need all different races of teachers so they can relate to their students that are the same race as them because the white teachers don't go through what the different races go through."

**Henderson County Sophomore, Black**

"It is really interesting that I never had a teacher with a racial or ethnic background similar to my own."

**Fayette County 6th Grader, Black**

"Most of my teachers are white. I have had barely 4 teachers of different races. Whenever I bring up topics of race, some teachers of mine try to get away from the subject like I shouldn't talk about it, or like I'm overreacting."

**Henderson County Sophomore, Black and White**

"Just realized there are no black teachers in this school but this is Harlan county. It will never change."

**Harlan County Sophomore, Black and White**

"Besides even my own background, I've never had a non-white teacher ever. I can remember maybe 1 or 2 subs who weren't white, but that's all. It feels pretty isolating. lol our school is so white my grade has double as many queer kids than poc. In the classroom, students/teachers have made comments but because everyone is white no one even realizes/cares that it's insensitive."

**Madison County Junior, Southeast Asian**

## KSVT Research Team Reflection

"When we thought about diverse racial and ethnic representation in school, we first thought about the materials, classroom conversations, and the curriculum and then we thought about students themselves. But in looking at our data and so many voices from students across the state, we realized that adult representation in the form of teacher diversity has an enormous impact too on whether or not a school feels inclusive. And that appears to be true for both students of color and white students alike."

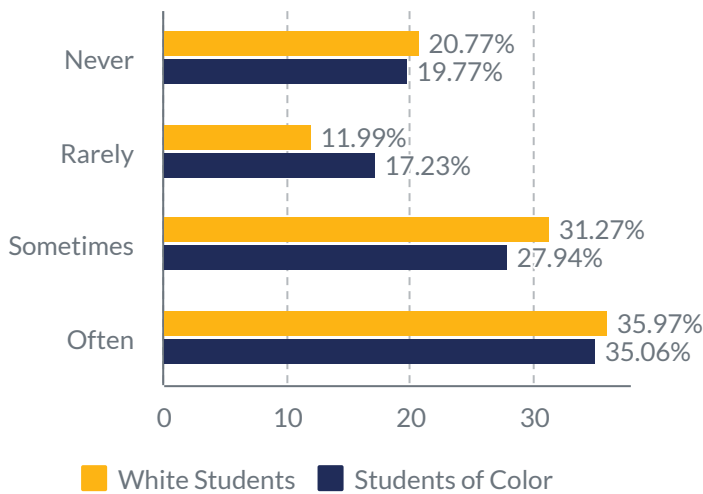
# Racial & Ethnic Conversations Beyond the Classroom

Despite what is taught or not taught in the classroom, Kentucky students are talking about race and ethnicity.

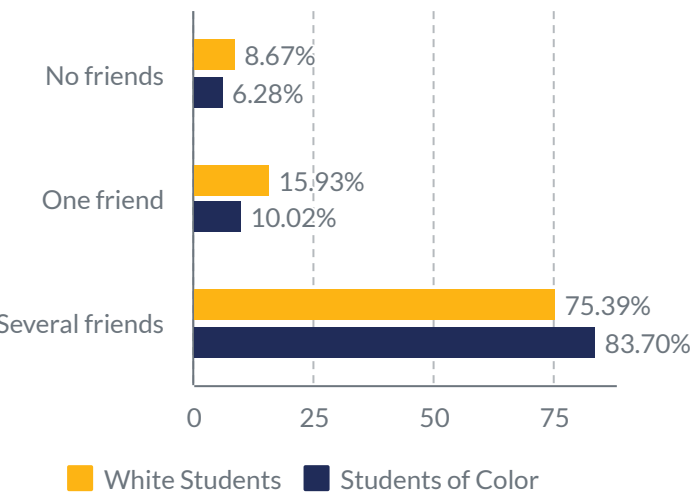
**39%** of students report that they regularly have conversations with each other about race and ethnicity outside of the classroom.

**78%** of students surveyed report having not just one but “several” friends of races and ethnicities different from their own. This rises to 84% for students of color.

*Students in my school have conversations with each other about issues related to race and ethnicity outside of the classroom.*



*How many friends do you have from a different racial or ethnic background than your own?*



## Student Voice

“As a white student, I feel like I’m treated better by other white students than they would treat students of color. I hardly see white students socialize with students of color, especially students with darker skin tone, outside class.”

**Marshall County Senior, White**

“My teacher rarely to never talks about these things. I think personally if they did and allowed us students to, the environment of the class room would be more open.”

**Clay County Freshman, Native American and White**

“Our school has done a decent job of discussing race and attempting to build an equitable environment for students of color, however, less discussion is not what we need. Having listened to my peers of color, I’ve realized there’s still work to be done, and we accomplish this through conversation which is the only thing that creates action. If we are restricted from having these conversations, we are restricted from attempting to bring about positive change.”

**Fayette County Junior, White**

**KSVT Research Team Reflection**

“Open responses suggest that students do not have a standard experience discussing aspects of race and ethnicity in the classroom. Furthermore, students are worried that they will be perceived as racist or insensitive if they do have these conversations. That fear of appearing racist inhibits learning about different cultures in classrooms, despite the fact that students are very curious. But as students are already talking about race and ethnicity on their own, and as so many have friends from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, being supported to have these difficult conversations in school would help students be more informed and constructive when talking about race and ethnicity in their lives, inside and well beyond the classroom.”

# Report Recommendations

## For Students

- Be aware of the disparities between you and your peers across racial-ethnic identities as well as how ignoring privilege can allow some to continue to benefit from the cycle of racism.
- Whether or not you are formally taught about diverse history and the experience of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, embrace discomfort, ask questions, read, and inform yourself.

## For Teachers

- Establish a level of zero tolerance for racial slurs intended to harm students of color within and outside the classroom in tandem with a commitment to educate offenders to repair relationships.
- Encourage respectful conversation among students and peers about the history and legacy of racism while centering the voices and experiences of students of color.
- Avoid segregating lessons about diverse ethnic and racial groups in the classroom. Teaching about Black history, for example, shouldn't be confined to a single month in February, but integrated into the curriculum throughout the year.
- Ensure the representation of students of diverse backgrounds in extracurricular activities and in school clubs.

## For Administrators & Policymakers

- Select staff who are culturally competent and sensitive to a diverse set of students.
- Recruit and be intentional about supporting more ethnically and racially-diverse teachers.
- Foster safe, inclusive environments that encourage students to be open-minded and vulnerable and repair relationships when they make mistakes.
- Encourage students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups to voice their concerns about racism without the fear of repercussions.
- Facilitate discussions about difficult issues around race and ethnicity both in the classroom and in less formal school spaces. Students already are having these conversations in less structured spaces and could benefit substantially from the knowledge and facilitation skills that great classroom teachers provide.
- Encourage the creation of extracurricular racial/ethnic affinity clubs or spaces that allow students to safely process their learning and school climate experiences and gain confidence before sharing their thoughts with others.
- Establish feedback mechanisms that allow students to report issues specifically around racial bias.
- Take reports about school discipline discrepancies across race and ethnicity seriously. Publicly acknowledge the problem if there is one, and invite students, families, and teachers to help find solutions as an intergenerational community.
- Support training for teachers to learn about unconscious bias and how they might be unfairly treating their students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds without realizing it. At the same time, be sure to create an environment for teachers to be able to improve the school and classroom environment for students of diverse backgrounds without feeling like they're being criticized.
- Solicit feedback about school climate and the extent to which students feel safe and included from all students but with extra intentionality around students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

## For Further Discussion

- Does anything in this report particularly surprise or resonate with you? Why or why not?
- What obligation, if any, do students who feel safe and included in school have to those students who don't?
- Is there anything you could do in your sphere of influence to ensure that students of all races and ethnic backgrounds feel part of a positive school climate?
- What else would you like to know about the way Kentucky students are experiencing race and ethnicity in school that is not contained in this report?
- How might, can, or should this report be used to better inform education policymakers and the general public?

# Report Methodology

## Design

We designed our methods in consultation with our “Research Advisory Dream Team,” a group of adult allies with expertise in youth participatory action research (YPAR).

We generated and refined our survey tool over the course of both asynchronous and synchronous sessions soon after the start of the 2021–22 school year, and we did so in consultation with young people outside of our membership and with school and community-based educators throughout the state.

In addition to basic demographic questions, we employed 21 scaled questions and 5 open-ended questions.

## Dissemination

In order to reach students widely across Kentucky, we intentionally designed a survey that was mobile in every sense of the word. We ensured that it was user-friendly for electronic devices and that students understood it could be taken in or out of school. Formal and informal networks of Kentucky students and adult allies were integral to our dissemination. Those partners are listed in the index of our report.

The significance of the Kentucky Student Voice Team's informal networks is exemplified by the work of youth researcher, Abraham Garcia-Romero. In his small western Kentucky town of Beaver Dam, (p= 3,562), he was able to garner 101 responses. Pockets of support throughout the state like the one Abraham activated fueled our ability to generate responses from 10,725 students in 114 of Kentucky's 120 counties.

## Categorizing the Responses

Students were classified as a “person of color” when they indicated in our demographics section that they were of more than one race or ethnicity, including if they considered themselves “white”. Each respondent self-defined their race and ethnicity through a check-box question that allowed them to choose more than one option. We also had an open-ended question that allowed students to describe other identities, including and beyond race and ethnicity, that they considered important to them. Our team pursued self-identification in order to honor the expertise of students’ lived experiences. This methodological choice is in close alignment with a closely-held ideal: *a deference to listening first*.

## Scrubbing the Data

Our survey was live for a two-week dissemination window from December 6 to December 20, 2021. When it closed, our team went to work to clean our data. We removed responses from white students who answered no to the following question: “Have you ever had a teacher of the same race/ethnicity?” This is due to the impossibility of this scenario in Kentucky. Even in the districts and schools with the most diverse teacher groups, we found that there is less than a 0.1% chance that a white student would never have a white teacher before 6th grade. We knew that if a white student failed to answer this question accurately, it was unlikely they were able to answer the others accurately too.

We also removed responses that selected every race when asked to self-identity as well as students who were not in grades 6–12. In the open-response section, we removed responses that contained the following: excessive swearing, inappropriate/inflammatory language, jokes, nonsense/gibberish, and expressed unwillingness to take the survey, (e.g. “Why is my school forcing me to take this?”). Importantly, we elected to keep responses that disagreed with the nature of the survey or the questions (e.g. “This survey is racist.”), to best capture the breadth of views that Kentucky students hold on race. We deferred to the judgment of our student researchers to quarantine these responses within Google Sheets. These quarantined responses were then reviewed by research facilitator, Connor Flick.

## Analyzing the Results

We subdivided ourselves to analyze the survey results. Each member of our team self-selected into one or more of three teams: qualitative, quantitative, and storytelling. The analysis process was anchored in all-team weekly Zoom meetings, accompanied by many more hours of asynchronous collaboration on Google Drive and on Slack. Depending on the meeting, team members worked individually or in smaller groups beforehand to present their insights to the full team. The analysis, co-facilitated by Connor Flick and Pragya Upreti, was grounded in the belief that our lived experience is critical to the process of making meaning from our survey results.

The qualitative team analyzed the 23,094 responses to the six open-ended questions. After conducting a broad reading of the scrubbed dataset, researchers compiled individual quotes that were striking at an individual level as well as quotes that illuminated a larger trend within the data. These insights informed larger conversations about the major themes held within our data. Exploration of these themes, at an individual level, were conducted by pairs of researchers on our team. Each pair was guided by a sense to uplift quotes that illuminated nuance, the racial and ethnic diversity of our state, and common threads of understanding.

In tandem with this work, the quantitative team analyzed 21 scaled questions. Our analysis included the identification of patterns in the data as we disaggregated it in order to compare the experiences of students of color and those of white students and make connections to what students were expressing in their open responses. From there, we were able to come to group consensus and prioritize some key data points and themes.

Finally, the storytelling team wove together these findings to produce the report you're currently reading. Their work was critical to thinking about how we share these stories with the complexity they deserve. Our collaborative approach of making meaning from our data illustrates our commitment to creating work that recognizes the power dynamics not only within educational settings, but also within education conversations about students. It further reveals our commitment to ensuring students are centered in all stages of the research and reporting process.

## How We Edited Student Quotes

*Transcription of a KSVT Research meeting*

**RACHEL:** So in a previous conversation about how to present student quotes from the open responses, we decided to correct for basic grammar, punctuation, and spelling so that, one, the reader can better understand what people are trying to say, and, two, so that people with influence and positional power don't dismiss quotes altogether just because the grammar, punctuation, and spelling aren't perfect. But at the same time, we're really wanting to protect the authenticity and the voice of the students who responded to our survey. How we strike that balance is the question, one that a number of our adult expert research advisors debated too. How do we explain the research team's thought process around presenting student quotes?

**MINHAL:** I was just thinking about how the very action of cleaning up quotes suggests that there is a certain way to speak English correctly, or that there is grammar and syntax that favors a "white" way of speaking versus what is viewed as educational. So I feel like sometimes changing that to make sense to what seems right to us can be harmful.

**KIRA:** I read a few quotes that were very powerful, they were making a very good point, but the grammar was pretty bad. You could tell that the student realized that something was so wrong they had to speak out on it. I think it's more powerful to see that than to clean up their grammar. It just takes away from the emphasis of the quote, if that makes sense. It wasn't as powerful without that. If it was a problem, like if the word was too badly spelled, you could put in parentheses what they meant to say, or a little thing that would help, I think, instead of changing the whole thing.

**KRUPA:** I also think it might be worth thinking about the fact that we have eighth graders talking about race and race in their schools and to keep an eighth grader's language and verbiage is just something incredibly powerful.

# What We Learned

**TA'MYRA:** Race and ethnicity are a part of our identity and when we are not able to have conversations about race or be properly educated on race in our schools which are supposed to be a safe place, then how can we teach ourselves to accept these differences and new ideas? If we don't get taught about these lessons in school, then how do schools expect us to learn to have these conversations ourselves? It felt great to see students' responses and help provide a platform that cares about their opinions. It's important that students lead this work because at the end of the day, it affects us directly and will continue affecting us throughout our lives until we become part of the change.

**MINHAL:** I have been used to hearing from students that they were not given the opportunity to speak about these issues, but it surprised me how a lot of them did not even believe it was necessary to talk about them as well. As a supporter of learning about the history and legacy of racism within schools myself, this discovery made it more clear than ever how important it is to destigmatize the notion that race has no place in the learning environment, especially for white students.

**EMMA:** The most profound idea that stood out to me over the course of studying this data is the privilege of ignorance. White students-myself included-are rarely conscious of race and racial issues in our day-to-day lives, because our race impacts us in largely positive ways. Students of color, though, do not have the luxury of forgetting about the racial issues surrounding them. They are constantly faced with micro-aggressions, unfair treatment, and curriculums centered on people who look nothing like them. Within the survey, some students argued that race is not relevant in school, and they did so from a place of privileged ignorance. Discrimination does not force them to be hyper-aware of their own race the way that their peers of color reported being. The stories told in this research show how large a role race and ethnicity play in the day-to-day lives of Kentucky students, whether or not they consciously consider it.

**CLAY:** When conducting studies like this, I think it is important that those conducting the research are able to empathize with the experiences of respondents. Since our team was composed of students, we were all able to understand and potentially relate to respondents' experiences in a way that is only possible for people who have witnessed or experienced these issues themselves.

**AUDREY:** This work shows all stakeholders that Kentucky students want to learn about different cultures. Students from all racial backgrounds expressed a desire to discuss racism in their classes and learn about different cultures. Anyone who thinks that culturally responsive content is problematic should know that so many Kentucky students are ready to welcome it and believe that it would help them become more empathetic.

# How We Edited Student Quotes

*(Continued)*

**AVERY:** I think there's a very clear distinction here to be made about punctuation versus grammar or spelling versus grammar. Because, for instance, my boyfriend's from Appalachia, and in Appalachia, you say "drove" instead of "driven". You conjugate verbs differently. So I think that there is significance in the way we use grammar, less so, perhaps, in straight up spelling. Also, I know in a lot of STEM papers, what we'll do is we attach supplementary material, so really boring stuff like procedures. I think it would be not unheard of to maybe in the actual paper semi-clean up the quotes and then have supplementary materials, where someone can go and see the completely unedited quotes in their raw form.

**ESHA:** I was going to add on to what Kira was saying, because there was a quote that I was looking at earlier today or even last night, and I understood what they were saying; there was one point where I'm pretty sure they were talking about teachers, but it was hard to distinguish who are they talking about. So I think having brackets or some sort of, "Hey, this is what they probably meant," would help guide the reader better instead of actually tweaking the words themselves, but including supplementary material, like Avery was saying. I think that would be a good idea.

**TA'MYRA:** I really agree with the idea of changing spelling versus grammar because spelling, I don't think that's a big deal to change, but with grammar, depending on where you're from, it's going to change. I know, me being from Louisville, I probably talk way different than some people from some other areas that are on here, so I think not changing the grammar is really important, but maybe changing spelling would work.

**PRAGYA:** To Avery's point, I even wonder if this conversation could be something that we include at the end of our report, and the thinking behind, yes, why we made the decisions that we did, but also we had to walk this really fine line of preserving the integrity of the people that were writing these things, but also fighting this uphill battle of are people going to take us seriously if we have this language within this report that is really well put together and everything.

It just makes me really excited that we even have a transcription for this.

# What We Learned

(Continued)

**ABRAHAM:** Our mission was to give a platform to the underrepresented and oppressed voices of Kentucky's youth and to make them feel heard. With tremendous support from our team, I was able to disseminate our survey to my very rural community of Ohio County. In doing this, we gave a platform to 100-plus students to express how they truly felt about some really challenging issues. I felt incredibly lucky to work on analyzing the data and having a deeper understanding of what students felt and needed with a whole group of other students from across the state. I feel like what we accomplished together will have an impact on generations to come.

**KIRA:** What really resonated with me was that there are white students that feel uncomfortable asking questions about different races in the classroom, even though they are genuinely curious about different cultures. But the fear that they will be perceived as racist or insensitive, as well as a classroom environment that doesn't encourage conversation, stops them from asking those questions. And I think it's interesting that we hear lots of arguments regarding the teaching of "uncomfortable topics" like racism, but the real discomfort comes from *not* teaching those topics, and setting up students for a more difficult adult life, where they continue to feel out of place asking questions.

**CADENCE:** There is an urgency to engage with this essential research, but also a comfort in knowing you are working with fellow students and adults who understand youth capacity. Oftentimes, students are experiencing rigorous class schedules while also balancing other activities and a personal life. There is a common goal with an understanding of accountability and roles, but an assumption that you can step back if you need to focus on other parts of your life. As young people ourselves, we understand the dynamics of high school, and we are able to envision ourselves in the position of students who took the survey. We as peers also have a responsibility to support other students, and this survey work allows us to deeply listen to the very real and raw experiences of students in Kentucky.

**HAYDEN:** We need to leave the floor open and let conversations about race and ethnicity happen. This work shows us that there needs to be facilitated discussions with students without fear of judgment. I don't have a specific way to achieve this in mind, that's just the goal I feel needs to be reached. Additionally, I feel like getting involved in this process needs to happen at a young age, like elementary school, when kids are developing what will be foundations of their behavior for the rest of their lives.

**SARA:** I think what resonated with me so heavily in doing this research is the stark differences in response depending on perspectives. With exceptions, of course, there were dissonances between what students observed depending on their own background and I think that provides significant insight into how people's own demographics and lived experience can inform the way they perceive inequities in schools. It can also guide later thought as to how students without this experience can build further awareness that they may not instinctively have.

**RAIMA:** It was important to me that students ourselves were leading this work because we are the ones actively experiencing the effects in the classroom. Typically, decisions that impact students are made by adults. There is a divide in understanding between students and adults, and often student voices on student issues are diminished. Through this work it was evident *students* want change. On the issue of race and ethnicity in school climate, within the already small representation of student voice in Kentucky, the voices of students of color are even more underrepresented. In this project, the students leading this work have interest in amplifying these voices, to bridge the gap.

**ARIVUMANI:** Students leading this work was the crux of the survey's success. So many research studies have focused on the issues affecting students in school from an adult's perspective that they often fail to recognize and ask students the questions with the most revealing answers. By having students lead this work, we were able to be receptive to the needs of our peers and pose questions regarding race, ethnicity, and school climate that have desperately needed to be asked, analyzed, and now published.

**ESHA:** I feel as though youth-led research like this is extremely vital to showcase how young people are actively pursuing a better world for themselves and for future generations. When students are the ones being confronted with issues that compromise their well-being and safety in schools, they should also be the ones to have a say in how school environments and policies should be changed. And so I've found it extremely fulfilling to be a member of a research team comprised of students because we've taken into consideration the diverse demographics of Kentucky throughout the process of conducting this research, and I think that's extremely powerful in the sense that we, as a collective, have taken data points that could have been reduced and abstract, but we've connected them to voices and humanized them.



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# RACE TO LEARN

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