

Rock Island – Milan School District #41 District Equity Audit

Equity Audit Final Report

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Our AIR team appreciates the collaboration and receptiveness of the RIMSD community, and we are energized by this opportunity to support a school district that is clearly committed to centering equity in its activities and is continually working toward improvement. We look forward to seeing the RIMSD community continue its journey in embracing diversity and ensuring access, opportunity, and equity for all.

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Executive Summary

Rock Island – Milan School District #41 (RIMSD) contracted with the American Institutes for Research® (AIR) in winter 2023 to conduct a District Equity Audit aimed at developing a conceptual understanding of the drivers of equity gaps between students. This report presents the main findings from that audit and is focused on four core areas. **Core Area 1** concentrates on issues of equity related to student achievement, discipline, and chronic absenteeism. **Core Area 2** examines issues of equity related to workforce diversity, professional development, and curricula. **Core Area 3** explores issues of equity related to family and community engagement, with a particular interest in communications with linguistically diverse families. Finally, **Core Area 4** considers data on equitable resource allocation across schools.

Between April and December 2023, AIR collaboratively conducted the equity audit with RIMSD. Together, AIR and RIMSD planned the audit and developed guiding questions, collected data on each of the core areas, and made meaning of the analyses AIR conducted through an in-person root cause analysis event with 24 RIMSD community member participants. This report details the results of the equity audit, identifying both RIMSD’s successes and its ongoing challenges in ensuring equity for all members of its diverse community. The report also provides recommendations for evidence-based policy and practice changes to continue advancing access, opportunity, and equity in RIMSD.

The equity audit identified successful improvement efforts and ongoing challenges across the district in ensuring that all students and families have access to rigorous learning environments; diverse, effective, and culturally and linguistically competent teachers; effective family and community engagement; and equitable resource allocation. The key findings detailed in this report are summarized below.

Core Area 1

- There were gaps in student growth and achievement between grade levels, schools, and student groups.
- Black students and students receiving special education services faced higher rates of discipline than other students.
- Chronic absenteeism was a persistent and major issue at all levels and schools.

Core Area 2

- Student access to experienced teachers varied across building and student groups.
- Although RIMSD staff and the teacher workforce was less diverse than the student population, the district has invested considerable effort in improving workforce diversity.
- RIMSD has worked to equip staff with the knowledge and skills to engage culturally and linguistically diverse students, as reflected in the district’s commitment to professional development. However, more work may be needed to ensure that all students have access to culturally and linguistically relevant school environments.

Core Area 3

- RIMSD maintains a robust infrastructure for supporting family engagement activities and facilitating one-way communication, but improvements are needed in two-way communication and opportunities to engage non-English-speaking families.

Core Area 4

- Teacher salary data highlight uneven distribution of teacher experience and education across the district.
- RIMSD has made meaningful investments in instruction and facilities, but community members identified lingering needs and inequities across schools.

Introduction

Rock Island – Milan School District #41 (RIMSD) aims to prepare all children for success by providing a safe and inclusive quality education within a multicultural community. This mission is informed by the district’s growing diversity: 36% of students identify as White, 32% as Black, 15% as Hispanic, 9% as multiracial, 8% as Asian, and just under 1% as American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. The district is home to families who speak nearly 40 different languages, as well as a sizeable community of resettled refugees from across the world. RIMSD’s students also come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, with more than 60% of students belonging to low-income families in 2022. Finally, meaningful populations of students receive special education services (RIMSD, 2022).

To support its diverse community, the district created an Equity Statement, which is integrated within its Strategic Plan. The Equity Statement describes a clear commitment to embrace diversity, establish inclusive school environments, address biases, eliminate structures that impede equity, and incorporate culturally responsive practices. This commitment is evident in a range of activities, including the work of the CQ team, the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) team, and the district’s strategic priority of advancing equity and opportunity for all students. The district’s investments to better understand the experiences of students from marginalized groups, including its English learner (EL) and special education audits, reflect a consistent interest in using data and evidence to support equity efforts.

Building on these existing equity activities, RIMSD contracted the American Institutes for Research® (AIR) to conduct a District Equity Audit aimed at developing a conceptual understanding of the drivers of equity gaps between students. The equity audit focused on four core areas:

- **Core Area 1** explored issues of equity related to student achievement, discipline, and chronic absenteeism.
- **Core Area 2** examined issues of equity related to workforce diversity, professional development, and curricula.
- **Core Area 3** explored issues of equity related to family and community engagement, with a particular interest in communications with linguistically diverse families.
- **Core Area 4** examined issues of equity related to resource allocation across schools.

Between April and December 2023, AIR collaboratively conducted the equity audit with RIMSD. Together, AIR and RIMSD planned the audit and developed guiding questions; collected data on each of the core areas; and made meaning of the analyses AIR conducted through an in-person root cause analysis (RCA) event. This report details the findings of the equity audit, highlighting the district’s successes and ongoing challenges in ensuring equity for all members of its diverse community. The report also provides recommendations for evidence-based policy and practice changes to continue advancing access, opportunity, and equity in RIMSD.

The first section of this report describes AIR’s approach to conducting an equity audit, including information on the purpose of equity audits, an overview of AIR’s multistage equity audit process, a description of how AIR collaborated with the district, details regarding the role of the Equity Audit Steering Committee (EASC), and a list of the audit’s guiding questions. Section 2 describes the quantitative and qualitative research methods used to explore the guiding questions, as well as the root cause analysis used to make meaning of key findings. It also provides an overview of data collection procedures, analytic choices, and processes for analysis. (Appendices B–D provide further methodological information.) Sections 3–6 focus on each core area of the equity audit, providing background detail on the importance of equity in that area and an overview of audit findings. Section 7 provides recommendations for advancing equity in RIMSD, based on the findings and root causes identified across core areas. The report concludes by looking toward next steps along RIMSD’s equity journey.

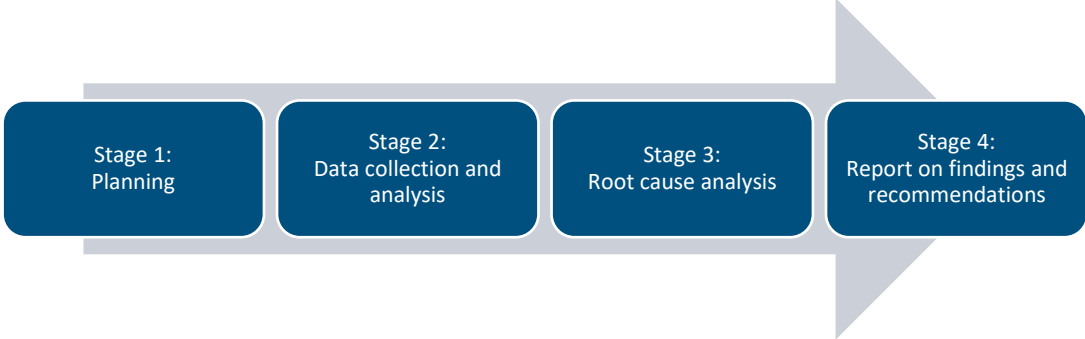
The Equity Audit Approach for RIMSD

AIR does not conceptualize an equity audit as something we “do to” a community, but rather as a collaborative process that we facilitate alongside communities. We bring experience, strategies, and tools for engaging communities in collaborative reflection on where a district stands in terms of equity, and where it wants to be. The AIR model for conducting an equity audit involves a multistage process that provides school districts with an opportunity to identify, review, and make meaning of data regarding educational equity. In partnership with diverse community participants, the audit identifies gaps in opportunities and experiences for students, convenes diverse community members for conversations about key findings and their root causes, and leverages research to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving equity in places that are most in need of attention (Skrla et al., 2009; Green, 2017).

The RIMSD District Equity Audit occurred between April and December 2023, as depicted in Exhibit 1. **Stage 1** laid the foundation for collaboration between AIR and the district. During this period, AIR and RIMSD leadership held regular weekly meetings, identified goals for the equity audit, finalized the timeline for the project, established the EASC, and developed a

communications plan to support focus group recruitment. Preparation for data collection also began during Stage 1. This stage was completed in June 2023. **Stage 2** focused on data collection and analysis. During this period, AIR finalized administrative data sharing with RIMSD, analyzed administrative data, began identifying research findings, and developed data visualizations. AIR also worked with RIMSD leaders to recruit focus group and interview participants and conduct focus groups and interviews with school leaders, staff, students, and parents and families. AIR analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data, compiled data summaries for the root cause analysis, and conducted a document review to better understand existing policies, practices, and monitoring tools used by RIMSD to advance equity. The data analysis stage was completed in October 2023 and included additional analyses suggested by RIMSD leaders following the root cause analysis. **Stage 3** included the in-person RCA event (conducted on October 12) and the development of a summary report of root causes identified by participants. During **Stage 4**, AIR developed this final report on the audit’s findings and recommendations, along with a presentation for the RIMSD School Board.

Exhibit 1. RIMSD District Equity Audit Stages



Collaboration With RIMSD Leadership

Initial meetings with RIMSD leadership began in April 2023. The AIR team met with the district superintendent and cabinet-level leadership team on a weekly basis for 1 hour. These meetings occurred most Thursday mornings between April and November 2023. During this period, there was a significant leadership transition in the district, but collaboration and meetings continued in partnership with the district’s leadership team. These regular meetings kept the District Equity Audit on track, enabling AIR and RIMSD to collaborate on communications, planning, and decision making throughout the project. In addition, each leadership team member supported data collection by providing documents, data sets, and background information on their work, which informed the data analyses and research findings. Quantitative data collection was also supported by the district’s data administrator, and focus group recruitment was conducted in collaboration with RIMSD’s communications director and translation coordinator.

Equity Audit Steering Committee

AIR understands that decision making for an equity audit should not only involve district leaders but also members of the wider community. Accordingly, we worked with RIMSD leadership to identify an EASC to inform audit activities and serve as champions for the project in the RIMSD community. RIMSD leaders asked the existing District Leadership Team to serve as the EASC. This team included district leaders, school leaders, staff, parents, School Board members, and other community members. AIR met with the EASC in May and June 2023 to introduce the project and timeline, invite participants to share their perspectives on equity in the district, consider data analysis methods, and finalize guiding questions. Two EASC subcommittees met during June and July 2023, one to finalize the audit’s guiding questions and the other to provide guidance on topics and focal audiences for focus groups and interviews. Some EASC members further supported the District Equity Audit by participating in school leader and staff focus groups. EASC members also participated in the in-person RCA event, accounting for 15 of the 24 participants.

Guiding Questions

AIR worked with the RIMSD leadership team and the EASC to establish a clear focus for each core area of the equity audit. While questions of equity manifest across all aspects of education, it would not have been advisable for the District Equity Audit to examine equity in RIMSD in an exhaustive way. Instead, the EASC and AIR developed guiding questions to point the research toward specific areas of concern within each core area. These questions drove methods for data collection, analysis, and reporting, and ensured that the amount of information generated was manageable and useful. Exhibit 2 details the main guiding questions for each core area. Appendix A provides the full list of guiding questions, including sub-questions.

Exhibit 2. Key Guiding Questions for Each Equity Audit Core Area

Core Area 1: Students

- To what extent and in what ways are there group differences in students' access to rigorous and inclusive learning environments?

Core Area 2: Staff

- How effective has the district been in promoting equitable access to diverse, effective, and culturally and linguistically competent teachers?

Core Area 3: Families

- To what extent and in what ways are family and community engagement efforts successful in promoting participation and belonging for RIMSD's diverse family and community members?

Core Area 4: Resource Allocation

- How do district policies and processes support equitable distribution of resources based on student needs?

AIR staff developed an initial draft of the guiding questions for each core area and facilitated a conversation with a subcommittee of EASC members on June 15, 2023, to refine the questions. The revised questions were then brought before the full EASC for additional consideration and approval. The questions were finalized with RIMSD leaders on July 3, 2023.

Methods

In this section, we provide an overview of the data collection and analysis methodologies used in this equity audit to answer the guiding questions: quantitative analyses, a document review, focus groups and interviews, and a facilitated root cause analysis.

Quantitative Data Methods

AIR requested extant data on students, staff, family and community engagement, and resource allocation. The team organized the requested data based on the core areas and guiding questions. RIMSD and AIR met on May 17, 2023, and June 2, 2023, to discuss data elements and modify the data request to align with the district's information needs and data capacity.¹ Between May 17, 2023, and November 3, 2023, RIMSD provided all quantitative data requested

¹ Amendments to the data request did not affect the measurement of guiding questions.

and AIR independently analyzed the data. This section outlines AIR’s analytic decisions. Appendix B provides greater detail on the data received.

Analytic Decisions

- Aggregate analyses excluded sample sizes below 10 for two primary reasons: firstly, to safeguard the privacy of individual students who could potentially be identified based on the measured outcomes; and secondly, to prevent misinterpretation of data that might be overly influenced by the results of only a few students within the sample.
- The AIR team created a key for each year of student enrollment with unique records by student by school by year. The local student ID was used to uniquely identify each student and recover missing demographic data from prior years.
- If a student in any file could not be identified and linked to the enrollment data for each year (using available student ID variables), they were excluded from the analysis as necessary grade-level and demographic information was unavailable.
- A subset of discipline data was collected for 2018–23 to help with data management and cleaning. Data from 2021 were omitted due to the low incident rate (n=21), which was attributed to the virtual instruction provided during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Teacher experience and demographic analyses at the district level were conducted using teacher-level files. Analyses excluded teachers who could not be linked to any students in the course enrollment file.
- Course enrollment files contained several inconsistencies from year to year in course ID, course names, and state course IDs. Specifically, there were over 2,000 unique course names present in the course enrollment files for 2015 to 2023. Correct names for courses were recovered manually, and analyses were limited to 2021–23 to help with data management and cleaning and to isolate trends in course enrollment related to the last term of the previous superintendent.
- There was significant variation in the demographic composition of elementary schools. To support our interpretation of differences across schools, we used statistical methods to group schools based on demographic factors.

Document Review

AIR conducted a document review to gather descriptive information about how RIMSD policies, systems, and practices support equitable educational experiences and outcomes for students, families, and staff. This review was designed to help AIR identify strengths and areas for growth in each of the core areas of the equity audit. The document review focused on documents that RIMSD provided that describe district-level activities.

Document Collection Process

AIR conducted a comprehensive search of the RIMSD website to identify all publicly available policy- and practice-relevant materials, such as the Code of Conduct, the Discipline Improvement Plan, the Equity Statement, and quarterly reports. Materials were catalogued based on their relevance to each of the core areas. Following the root cause analysis, RIMSD leadership provided AIR with additional documents related to discipline, family and community engagement, hiring and recruitment, and teaching and learning. All documents ($N = 68$) were included in the document review.

Document Review Procedure

The document review protocol was adapted from AIR’s prior equity work. The AIR qualitative lead for the District Equity Audit reviewed and summarized each document, aligning documents with the guiding questions for each core area. Documents were coded as providing evidence of (a) a policy, plan, or initiative; (b) implementation of a policy, plan, or initiative; or (c) monitoring or evaluation of a policy, plan, or initiative. No assertions or assumptions were made about the intent, purpose, or use of documents that were not clear from the documents themselves. The quality of the content contained within documents was not evaluated. A high-level holistic summary of documents within each core area was provided to offer context for the district’s exploration of the guiding questions. Documents that were relevant to key findings were flagged for inclusion alongside results in the final report. Exhibit 3 describes the number and type of documents reviewed by core area.

Exhibit 3. Number and Type of Documents Reviewed by Equity Audit Core Area

	Core area 1	Core area 2	Core area 3	Core area 4
Plan, policy, or initiative	10	4	4	2
Implementation	6	14	8	0
Monitoring and evaluation	8	9	12	10

Note. Some documents provided multiple types of evidence and were therefore counted multiple times. Sixty-eight unique documents were reviewed in total.

Focus Group and Interview Data Collection and Analysis

To address our guiding questions across the four core areas, the qualitative team conducted five student focus groups, three staff focus groups, two school leader focus groups, and one family focus group. To ensure the inclusion of families who do not speak English, the qualitative team conducted interviews with one Arabic-speaking parent, two Karen-speaking parents, one Swahili-speaking parent, and one Spanish-speaking parent. Focus groups included three to eight participants and interviews were conducted individually, with assistance from an interpreter.

Each focus group lasted for 45–60 minutes and included eight to 10 open-ended questions. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes.

Focus group and interview protocols were developed to generate information for guiding questions in each of the core areas that could not be answered using quantitative data alone. Exhibit 4 details the participant type, subject, number of groups, and number of participants for the focus groups and interviews.

Exhibit 4. Focus Group and Interview Participant and Subject Information

Participant Type	Focus Group/Interview Subject	Number of Groups	Number of Participants
Students (Junior High School and High School)	Belonging, Achievement, Resources	3	22
Students (Junior High and High School)	Inclusive Instruction and Communication	2	9
School Leaders	Resource Allocation and Equity	1	6
School Leaders	Academic Support and Cultural and Linguistic Competence	1	3
Staff	Rigorous Instruction, Discipline, and Well-being	2	8
Staff	Inclusive Instruction and Communication	1	5
Parents	Communication and Belonging	1	5
Parents	Experience as Non-English Speaking Family regarding Communication and Family Engagement (Interviews)	5	5
TOTAL			63

Examples of focus group and interview questions are provided in Appendix C.

Focus Group and Interview Recruitment

All junior high and high school students were invited to participate in focus groups. Junior high school students were recruited for focus groups through their advisory periods, Rock Island High School students were recruited in their English classes, and Thurgood Marshall Learning Center students were recruited during Titan Time. Teachers were provided with materials to help them explain the focus group opportunity to students. After describing the opportunity, teachers provided students with a link to sign up for a focus group, if they chose to do so.

Parents were provided with an opportunity to opt out their children from participation. Only students who expressed interest in participating and whose parents did not opt out were invited to participate in focus groups.

School leaders and staff were invited to participate in focus groups through districtwide emails and signed up using an online form. English-speaking parents were recruited via Remind, email, and paper communications and signed up for focus groups via an online form. Digital recruitment tools were not available for communications with non-English speakers. Instead, non-English-speaking parents were recruited via translated written materials which were passed out to students to share with their families. Interested parents signed the materials and returned them to staff at RIMSD, who relayed the information to AIR. The qualitative research team selected parent(s) from each language represented in the sign-ups and worked with the district's Translation Services team to invite and confirm interview participation. All focus groups were conducted virtually, transcribed, and analyzed to identify emergent themes related to the guiding questions.

Root Cause Analysis

Root cause analysis is a facilitated, five-step process to identify the origin of a problem, focusing on deep, underlying causes. The process helps districts identify a problem, consider why it happened, and look toward a primary root cause. This process brings together diverse members of the community (e.g., teachers, school leaders, district administrators, parents, and community members) to collaboratively make meaning of district and school quantitative and qualitative data and identify successes, root and contributing causes of identified challenges, and promising strategies for addressing inequities.

The most important aspect of the root cause analysis is Step 3—the collaborative 5Whys process—which helps districts identify contributing and root causes of a problem. After identifying a problem or concern based on the data, participants ask “why” questions to arrive at an underlying root cause; a cause that, if addressed, will have a possibility of eliminating the problem. Not all problems have a single root cause. The RCA process may instead point to overlapping causes. Some of these may be root causes and some may be contributing causes that have a smaller possibility of eliminating the problem if addressed. The RCA process provides an opportunity for diverse community members to learn about and make sense of data and findings; share their perspectives on challenges,

Five Steps for Root Cause Analysis

1. Defining problem statements using key findings
2. Identifying possible causes and categories
3. Digging deeper using the “5Whys” process
4. Differentiating contributing causes from root causes
5. Planning next steps

issues, and problems; and identify possible causes that provide direction for future district action.

In-Person Root Cause Analysis Event, October 12, 2023

AIR facilitated an in-person RCA event on October 12, 2023. In preparation for the event, AIR collected, cleaned, and analyzed data to address the guiding questions for each core area. The team prepared data summaries that included key findings and suggested problem statements. These data summaries served as the starting point for the RCA event, providing data evidence for findings that informed conversations on root causes.

Twenty-four RIMSD community members participated in the October 12 RCA event, representing a diverse group of district staff and community members. Many of these community members had already participated in decision making on the project as members of the EASC. Participants were split into four groups to review key findings and problem statements; brainstorm, categorize, and prioritize possible causes of problems; and identify root causes using the 5Whys process. Each group worked on a specific topic within Core Areas 1 and 2, including student achievement, student discipline, student chronic absenteeism, and teacher workforce and diversity. Appendix D contains the *Root Cause Analysis Summary Report*, which details the activities of the RCA event, lists categories of possible causes identified by participants, and describes the results of the 5Whys process.

Core Area 1: Students

In recent years, RIMSD has invested significant effort in ensuring that all students have access to rigorous and inclusive learning environments. The Rock Island – Milan (RIM) Pipeline to a Productive Future Strategic Plan (2020–2025) represents a clear commitment among district leaders and staff to expand student achievement and close gaps for all students. This dedication is echoed in the district’s Equity Statement and demonstrated by many of the instructional, curricular, discipline, and student service resources used by district leadership and schools. For example, RIMSD has invested in the creation of rigorous and inclusive learning environments by providing instructional coaches to support teacher learning and instruction. Coaches are available to all teachers, and data collected by the district suggest that coaches are a valuable and cost-effective way of enhancing educator effectiveness. The district has also directed efforts toward its Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to meet students’ diverse academic, behavioral, and social and emotional needs; and has developed an Instructional Resources and Strategies Toolbox, which connects educators with high-leverage practices for creating deep and effective learning experiences for diverse students. Existing district resources also reflect intentional consideration of equity in addressing student discipline and

absenteeism. For example, the Social Emotional Learning and Behavioral (SELB) Resources and Strategies Toolbox provides a variety of resources to support equitable behavior management by centering social emotional learning (SEL) and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS).

While RIMSD has made a significant investment in supporting equitable learning environments, district leaders are aware of the many challenges schools face, and they remain committed to addressing the educational barriers that prevent certain groups of students from succeeding. Accordingly, RIMSD leadership, the EASC, and AIR staff developed the following guiding question for Core Area 1: **To what extent and in what ways are there group differences in students' access to rigorous and inclusive learning environments?** To investigate, AIR researchers focused on student achievement, discipline, chronic absenteeism, and their intersections. The following subsections detail key findings and supporting data from Core Area 1, relevant research, and the potential root causes identified by RCA event participants.

Key Finding: There Were Gaps in Student Growth and Achievement Between Grade Levels, Schools, and Student Groups

What Does the Research Say About Student Growth and Achievement?

Educational inequity is deeply rooted in the history and policies of the United States. Historically, students of color were systematically denied access to high quality public education, both through *de jure* policies of slavery, Jim Crow, and racial segregation, and through *de facto* segregation and discrimination. Although legal segregation has been eliminated and many communities have improved academic opportunities for all students, academic disparities persist. Indeed, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data reveal a significant race/ethnicity gap in reading (NAEP, 2019) and math (NAEP, 2022), with White students outperforming their Black and Hispanic peers at 4th, 8th, and 12th grade. Research suggests that racial gaps persist across K-12 education for a variety of reasons, including unequal access to academic support, fewer school resources, and higher rates of discipline faced by racial minority students (Jones et al., 2020). Racial inequities also intersect with socioeconomic inequality, as racial minority students are more likely than White students to attend lower income and lower performing schools (Reardon et al., 2022).

While equity gaps appear at the national level (in terms of academic achievement) and at the school level (in terms of students' access to high-quality educational experiences and resources), they also manifest within schools. There are well-documented disproportionalities in gifted programs across the country, with Black students, Latinx students, and students from low-income families consistently underrepresented in these programs and, as a result, disproportionately denied access to rigorous learning opportunities (Grissom et al., 2019;

Peters et al., 2023). Inequities in students’ early learning experiences have implications for their later achievement, their likelihood of persisting in college, and their likelihood of emerging from school ready to pursue a career.

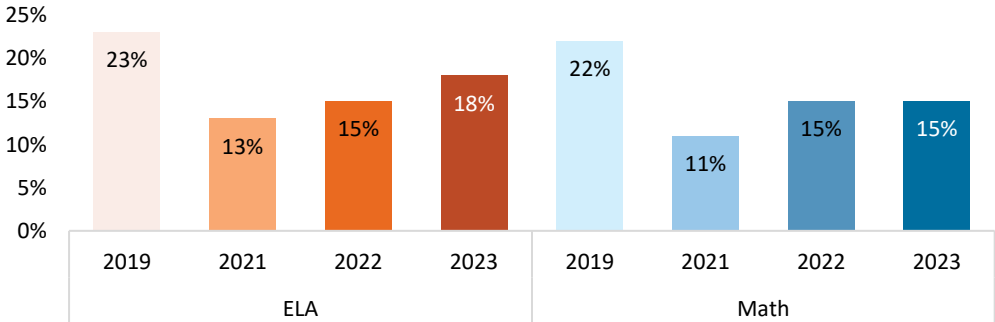
Students of color and students from low-income families systematically lack access to the learning opportunities they need to succeed in college and attain high-earning careers (Griffin & Birkenstock, 2022; Johnson et al., 2019). For example, Black and Latinx students are less likely to be identified as college and career ready (CCR) by school metrics (Triplett & Ford, 2019; Zhou, 2023). From school entry to exit, racial and socioeconomic disparities are persistent across many different measures of achievement, making student achievement an important outcome in an equity audit.

What Did We Learn About Student Growth and Achievement in RIMSD?

Student Growth and Achievement at RIMSD Schools

As is true in districts across the country (Kuhfeld et al., 2022), RIMSD students of all backgrounds experienced a decrease in achievement following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, achievement has steadily improved in subsequent years. Exhibit 5 demonstrates that student readiness—assessed by performance on the Illinois Assessment of Readiness (IAR)—declined by nearly 50% in both mathematics and English language arts (ELA) for students in Grades 3–8 between 2019 and 2021. However, on average, RIMSD students made gains in readiness between 2021 and 2023.

Exhibit 5. Illinois Assessment of Readiness Pass Rates for RIMSD Students in Grades 3–8 Declined by About 50% Between 2019 and 2021 But Improved Each Year Between 2021 and 2023

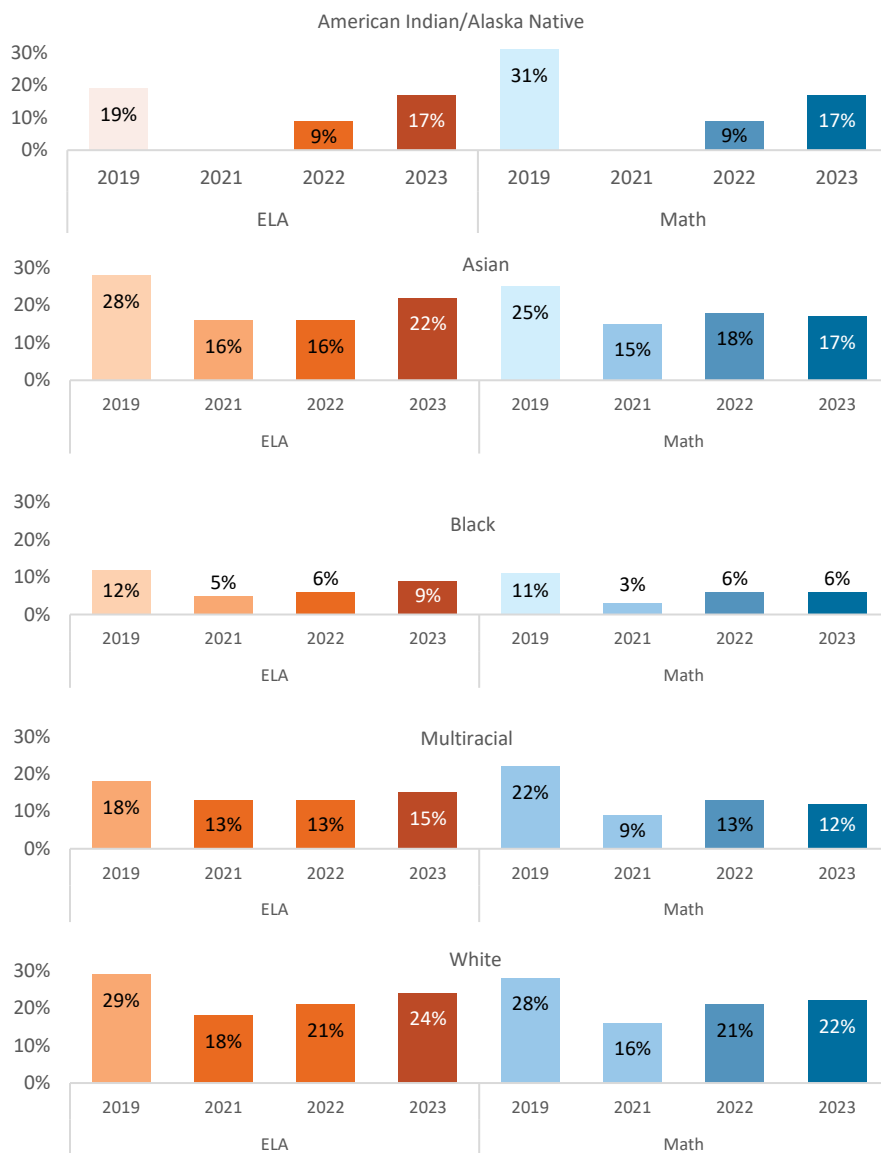


Note. IAR was not administered in 2020.

While RIMSD students on average experienced recent gains in readiness, RIMSD data also highlight persistent academic achievement gaps across student groups in Grades 3–8. Exhibit 6 provides a breakdown of IAR pass rates by student racial identity between 2019 and 2023. Pass

rates among Asian and White students were typically the highest across all racial groups in both mathematics and ELA, while Black students had the lowest pass rates of all groups. These data also highlight a particularly large decrease in American Indian/Alaska Native students' IAR pass rate between 2019 and 2021, constituting the largest decrease in performance by a group of students in Grades 3–8 in RIMSD. However, due to the small number of American Indian/Alaska Native students in the district, any year-over-year change is more sensitive to small variations, compared with student groups with larger populations.

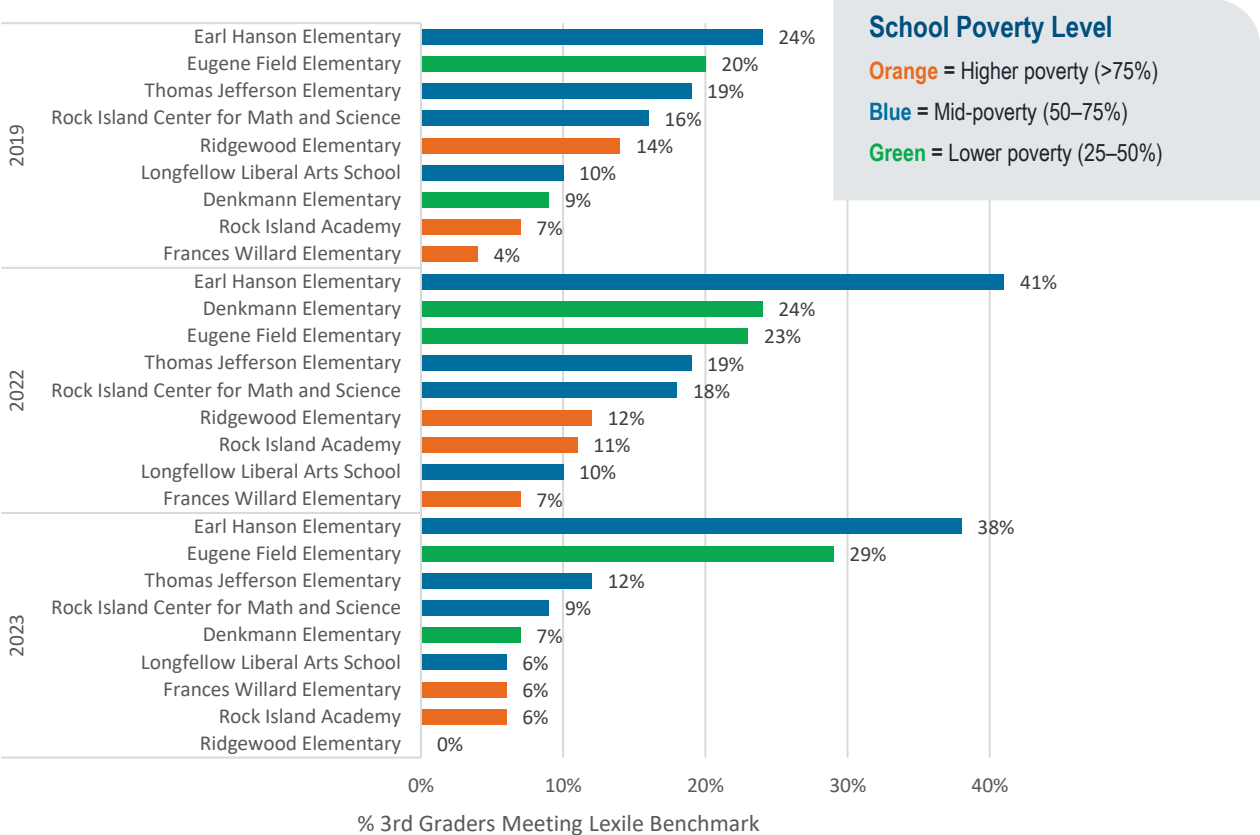
Exhibit 6. Between 2019 and 2023, Illinois Assessment of Readiness Pass Rates for RIMSD Students in Grades 3–8 Were Consistently Highest Among Asian and White Students and Lowest Among Black and Multiracial Students



Note. Percentages for American Indian/Alaska Native students in 2021 were suppressed due to small sample sizes.

Looking at reading fluency via the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) Lexile benchmark data, exhibit 7 illustrates that achievement gaps were also evident based on differences in socioeconomic status. Between 2019 and 2023, schools with higher levels of poverty—defined as more than 75% of students belonging to families experiencing poverty—typically had the lowest percentage of Grade 3 students meeting their Lexile grade-level benchmarks. For example, higher poverty schools, such as Frances Willard Elementary and Rock Island Academy, were among the three lowest performing schools in 2019, 2022, and 2023. Similarly, mid-poverty and lower poverty schools had consistently higher reading scores compared with higher poverty schools, led by Earl Hanson Elementary (the consistent top performer) and Eugene Field Elementary (a top-three performer in each year of analysis). It is important to highlight that all gifted students in elementary school are housed at Earl Hanson.

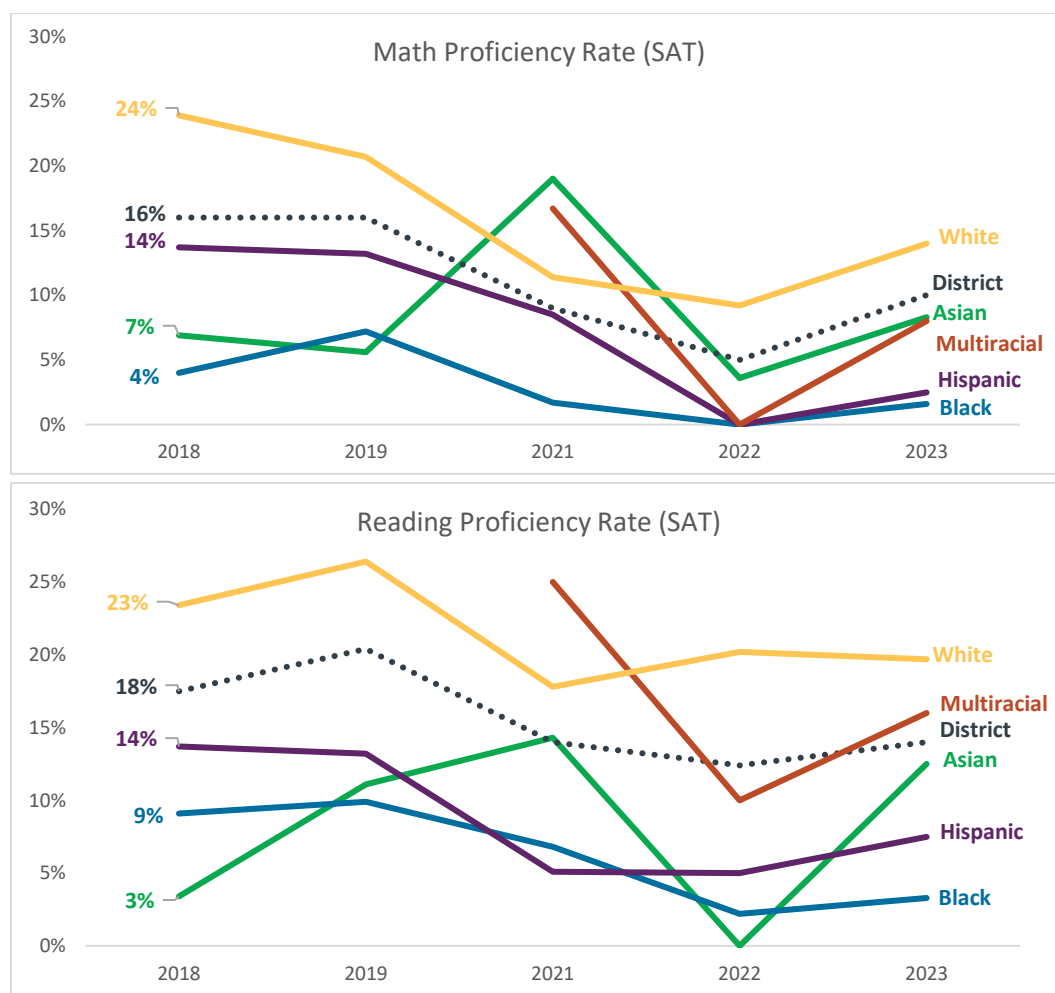
Exhibit 7. Grade 3 Students at Earl Hanson Routinely Outperformed Other Elementary Schools on Lexile Grade-Level Benchmark Attainment, and the Lowest Performing Schools Were Consistently Schools With the Highest Poverty Rates



Note. The Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) were not administered in spring 2020 and spring 2021. Poverty level classifications are relative, as all schools included a substantial number of students experiencing poverty.

Disparities in academic achievement were also experienced by RIMSD’s high school students. Exhibit 8 presents the percentage of students who were proficient in mathematics and reading on the SAT from 2018 to 2023 by race and district average. Since 2018, White students have generally accounted for the largest percentage of students proficient in both mathematics and reading and have been consistently above the district average (24% of White students were proficient in 2018 in mathematics and 23% were proficient in reading, compared with 16% and 18%, respectively, for the district overall). This pattern has remained consistent since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 14% of White students proficient in mathematics and 20% proficient in reading in 2023, compared with 10% and 14%, respectively, for the district overall.

Exhibit 8. Between 2018 and 2023, Proficiency Gaps Across RIMSD High School Students Persisted in SAT Mathematics and Reading, With White Students Consistently Scoring Above District Averages and Black and Hispanic Students Scoring Below District Averages



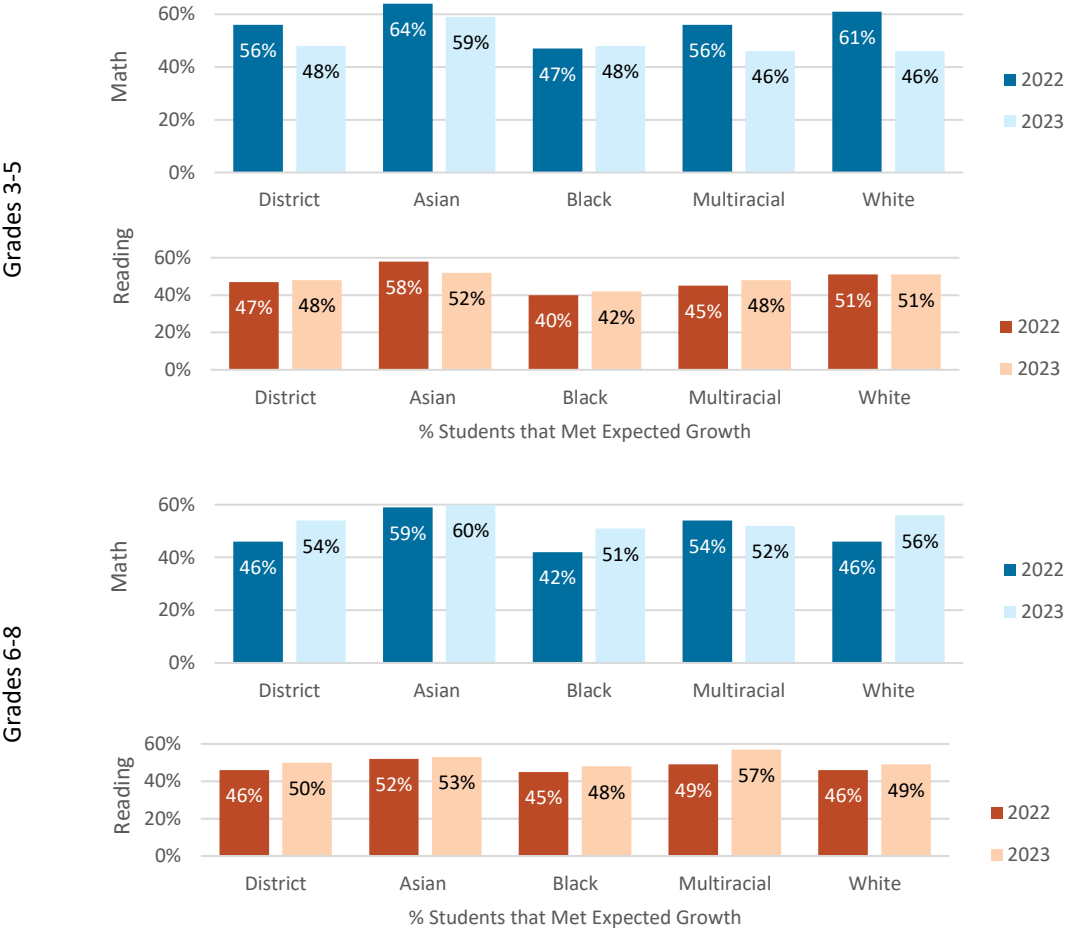
Note. Percentages for multiracial students in 2018 and 2019 and American Indian/Alaska Native students in all years were suppressed due to small sample sizes. RIMSD students did not take the SAT in 2020.

Hispanic and Black students' proficiency rates were consistently below the district average. Further, students have experienced decreasing rates of proficiency since 2018, with 0% of Hispanic, Black, and multiracial students demonstrating proficiency in mathematics in 2022 and 5% of Hispanic students and 2% of Black students demonstrating proficiency in reading. However, in 2023, these numbers did increase slightly to around 2% proficiency in mathematics for both groups of students, while 7.5% of Hispanic students and 3% of Black students demonstrated proficiency in reading (still well below the district levels of 10% for mathematics and 14% for reading).

Additionally, multiracial and Asian students saw a more variable proficiency rate over time, with increased proficiency rates in 2021, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and a drop for both groups in 2022 (Asian students experienced a 0% proficiency rate in 2022 for reading). However, in 2023, Asian and multiracial students saw a bounce back to higher proficiency levels in both reading and mathematics.

Running counter to this trend of academic gaps, recent data also suggest continued academic growth for students of marginalized identities. NWEA MAP interim benchmark assessment data provide teachers with accurate, actionable evidence to help gauge student progress, monitor student growth, and inform instructional strategies. These data provide a measure of academic achievement beyond overall performance. Exhibit 9 presents growth goal attainment rates for students in Grades 3–5 and Grades 6–8 across racial identities and depicts meaningful gains experienced by Black and multiracial students. Between spring 2022 and spring 2023, the percentage of students in Grades 3–5 who met their projected growth in mathematics held steady for Black students while diminishing across the district. Mathematics growth goal attainment in Grades 6–8 increased for Black and White students. Growth rates in reading increased slightly or remained steady for all student populations from 2022 to 2023, with the exception of a 6 percentage point decrease for Asian students in Grades 3–5. Multiracial students experienced the largest increase in reading growth goal attainment, from 45% to 48% in Grades 3–5 and 49% to 57% in Grades 6–8.

Exhibit 9. Between 2022 and 2023, Black Students Experienced the Most Meaningful Gains in NWEA MAP Mathematics Growth Goal Attainment and Multiracial Students Experienced the Largest Increases in Reading Goal Attainment



Note. Percentages for American Indian/Alaska Native students were suppressed due to small sample sizes.

Echoing this variation in student achievement across years, measures, and student groups, school community members who participated in focus groups and interviews pointed to both successes and challenges in ensuring access to high-quality instruction in RIMSD schools. All non-English-speaking parents who were interviewed believed that their children had access to rigorous learning in school. These parents shared stories about their children’s academic growth and accomplishments in RIMSD, with one parent describing how their daughter “knows a lot more numbers and letters, and she understands so much better. She can now write her name, and she would tell me certain words.” Many parents also expressed gratitude for teachers’ efforts, with one non-English-speaking parent saying:

I feel like the teachers at school do a great job ... I know a school is like a second home for the children. And you guys know that you guys are a role model for them ... And so, I'm really very grateful for that. [Translation]

School leaders also pointed to rigorous instruction in classrooms across the district, as evidenced by existing curriculum and supports, such as the 3-8 English Language Arts curriculum and MTSS structures. Beyond the curriculum, school leaders pointed to school resources and community partnerships as effective tools for supporting student achievement. One school leader celebrated the district's efforts to expand technology access for students so that they had "the different tools that they needed to complete their assignments." Staff largely agreed that rigorous instruction was a priority in RIMSD, and one high school teacher perceived a meaningful increase in rigor over the past 10 years.

At the same time, school leaders and staff reported that they sometimes struggled to ensure rigorous learning environments for students with additional needs. For example, one elementary school leader suggested that schools relied too often on restrictive settings for students receiving special education services and that "We are afraid to let them go or flourish in [the] gen ed setting." Some staff perceived the curriculum as an impediment to rigorous instruction for certain groups of students. As one teacher explained, "If the material is not interesting to them, they're not going to be as willing to work as hard on the things you're asking them to do." Teachers also described challenges in supporting students with special needs, such as English learners and students receiving special education services. For example, one teacher explained that even though they "have [an] EL endorsement ... there is just not enough for us to use as educators, where we could dig deeper for the curriculum."

School staff identified the district's Instructional Toolbox as a helpful resource for their efforts to provide rigorous instruction, noting that it highlights practices that create deep and effective learning experiences for students. However, some teachers reported challenges in implementing toolbox strategies, with one high school teacher explaining:

I do like the toolbox ... because there are some really nice strategies in there ... but with the limited amount of prep time that we're given to prepare the materials, [it's difficult to] be able to do anything high quality.

Some school staff described co-teaching as an effective way of offering high-quality learning experiences to general education students, in addition to providing necessary support for

special education and English learner students. One special education teacher explained that “when you have that extra person in that room [it] help[s] all kids, because when I co-teach, I’m helping way more than just my kids with IEPs [Individualized Education Programs].”

Many students felt that they had access to a high-quality education, but they expressed that rigorous instruction often brings added pressure and burdensome amounts of homework. At the same time, many students across achievement levels described challenges in accessing academic resources or otherwise engaging in school due to discomfort with their teachers and classmates. These students expressed that teachers do not have the time to understand their academic and emotional needs, and that fellow students are often unkind and negative. Others highlighted learning limitations due to crowded classrooms and buildings with insufficient space for the student population. Inconsistent expectations were also a recurring theme, with students feeling that some groups and individuals were treated differently than others. Students expressed a dichotomy in treatment between the “smarter” kids who are tasked by teachers to help their classmates and students who are struggling who are told to ask their peers for help. One Edison Junior High School student highlighted this gap in expectations, explaining their experience in class when needing support:

They basically exclude you, or they tell you to do this, do that, or they tell you to ask another student for help, and they won’t help you.

Students’ perceptions were independently echoed during the RCA event, when participants identified uneven academic expectations as an ongoing challenge in RIMSD. While the district has made a significant investment in helping RIMSD staff build cultural competence and an understanding of bias (e.g., through the work of the CQ team and through professional learning), RCA participants indicated that many teachers maintain different expectations for students from different backgrounds. Participants explained that existing accountability efforts to support buy-in around cultural competence have not reached all teachers. This was identified by participants as a contributing cause of academic achievement gaps across student groups.

Root Cause Analysis Result

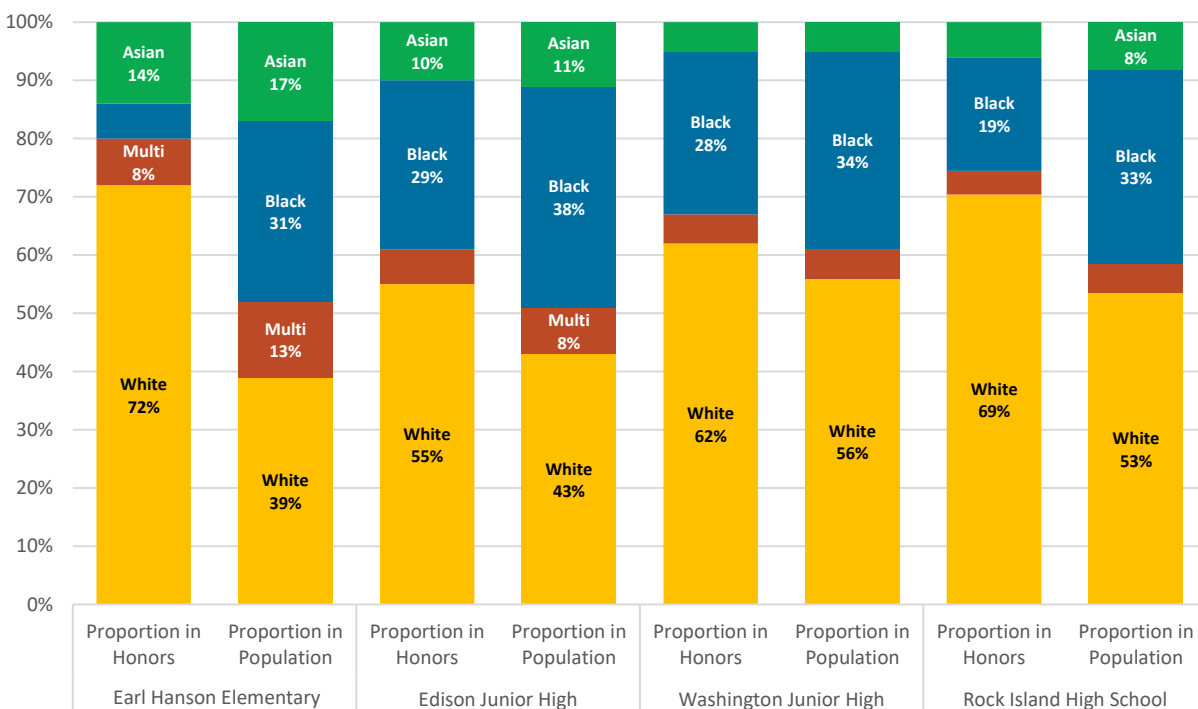
Contributing Cause: Variations in expectations for students are connected to uneven teacher buy-in regarding the importance of understanding bias and building cultural competence.

Honors Placement and Gifted and Talented Placement at RIMSD Schools

In addition to examining measures of achievement and instruction, Core Area 1 analyses examined equity in students' access to rigorous learning experiences provided through Honors and Gifted and Talented courses. Honors course placement data for 2022–23 were available for both RIMSD junior high schools and Rock Island High School. Honors enrollment at the elementary school level was concentrated exclusively at Earl Hanson Elementary School. Our analysis compared the demographics of the full student population's honors class enrollees, with a focus on identifying disproportionalities—i.e., the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a particular group, compared with expectations.

Exhibit 10 demonstrates a common trend of disproportionality in honors course enrollment across schools in RIMSD: White students were overrepresented in honors courses, while Black, Asian, and multiracial students were underrepresented. This disproportionality was particularly stark at Earl Hanson Elementary, where White students accounted for 72% of honors students but just 39% of the student body; Black students accounted for 31% of the student body but just 6% of honors students. This large disproportionality can be partially explained by the consolidation of the district's gifted program at Earl Hanson. However, the trend was also found at both junior high schools and at the high school. For example, at Rock Island High School, White students were overrepresented in honors courses (accounting for 69% of honors students but only 53% of the student body) while Black students were underrepresented (accounting for 19% of honors students and 33% of the student body).

Exhibit 10. White Students Were Overrepresented in the Population of Honors Students Across Schools in 2023, While Black, Asian, and Multiracial Students Were Underrepresented



Note. Percentages for American Indian/Alaska Native students were suppressed due to small sample sizes.

While disproportionality in honors enrollment is not unique to this district, such outcomes may point to gaps in equitable procedures for determining honors placement in RIMSD. The *Gifted/Enrichment Handbook* describes an identification process that is committed to nondiscrimination with respect to “gender, race, ethnicity, economic background, national origin, or handicapping condition” (RISMD, n.d., p. 12). This commitment is echoed in the district’s Board of Education policies on programs for gifted students. However, there is no clear guidance in either the handbook or Board policy on how to assess or ensure nondiscrimination in gifted and honors placement. Indeed, during the October 12 RCA event, participants identified variation in criteria and implementation for honors enrollment as a possible contributing cause of enrollment disproportionality between student groups. RCA participants explained that specific district criteria for identifying students do not exist for all courses and student groups, and that existing mindsets and expectations regarding students may affect decisions on honors placement. RCA participants acknowledged ongoing district efforts to identify and implement criteria and resources to support equitable student identification and placement in honors courses.

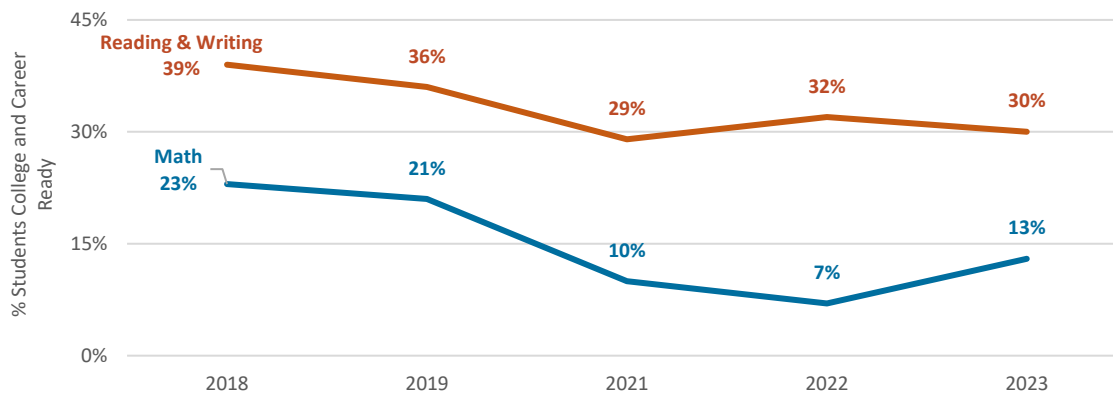
Root Cause Analysis Result

Possible Contributing Cause: There is variation across RIMSD teachers regarding the criteria used and implementation follow through in determining honors enrollment.

College and Career Readiness at RIMSD

Students' early educational experiences set the stage for later success in post-secondary education and employment. To examine equity in this domain of achievement, we used SAT performance as a proxy for assessing the college and career readiness of RIMSD students. Each test-taking student was assigned an indicator of readiness (Yes or No) based on their SAT score, with scores of 480 for reading and writing and 530 for mathematics set as the minimum cutoffs for determining readiness. Overall, in the years following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, student performance on the SAT decreased. As such, the percentage of students identified as college and career ready also declined. Exhibit 11 depicts how students scored on both mathematics and reading and writing, with large decreases evident across all students between 2019 and 2021. Declines were greater in mathematics (down 11% between 2019 and 2021) than in reading and writing (down 7%). Mathematics readiness for all RIMSD high school students continued to decline in 2022, to a low of 7%, but meaningfully rebounded to 13% in 2023. Reading and writing readiness increased between 2021 and 2022, from 29% to 32%, but then decreased slightly in 2023 to 30% of RIMSD students.

Exhibit 11. With the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Percentage of RIMSD Students Identified as College and Career Ready Declined in Both Mathematics and Reading and Writing

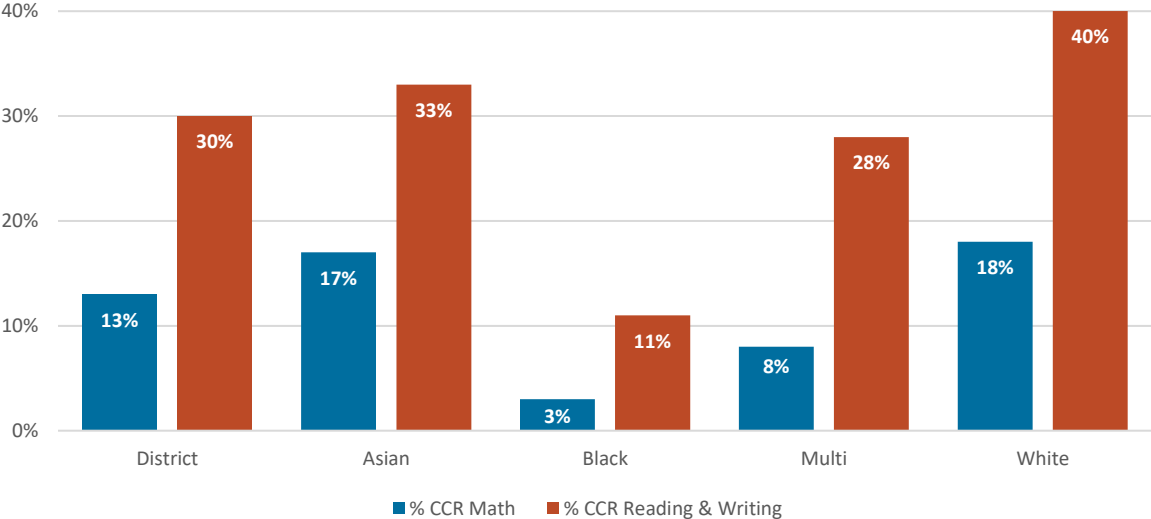


Note. RIMSD students did not take the SAT in 2020.

Though college and career readiness scores have declined in recent years for all students, it is important to examine disparities in college and career readiness between student groups. Exhibit 12 illustrates that Black and multiracial students were less likely than their peers from

other racial groups to be identified as college and career ready in 2023. While the district readiness average was 13% in mathematics, only 3% of Black students and 8% of multiracial students were identified as ready. Black students also meaningfully trailed the district average in reading and writing readiness, with only 11% of Black students identified as ready, compared with 30% across the district. Asian and White students surpassed district averages in readiness for both mathematics and reading and writing.

Exhibit 12. Black and Multiracial Students Were Less Likely to Be Identified as College and Career Ready on the SAT, Compared With the District Average



Note. Percentages for American Indian/Alaska Native students were suppressed due to small sample sizes.

Key Finding: Black Students and Students Receiving Special Education Services Faced Higher Rates of Discipline

What Does the Research Say About Student Discipline?

Exclusionary discipline refers to disciplinary actions that remove students from their usual education setting, including suspensions and expulsions (Raoul & Ayala, 2021). Student experiences with discipline can affect their perceptions of safety and support in school (Lacoe, 2015) as well as student outcomes for both students receiving discipline and those who remain in the classroom (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Perry & Morris, 2014). Research shows that discipline is often not a neutral process and may be influenced by implicit bias (Staats, 2014; Welsh & Little, 2018), and that the use of exclusionary discipline often “reflect[s] and reinforce[s] marginalization and institutionalized racism” (Espelage et al., 2023, p. 8).

Looking at national data, disproportionalities in discipline across race are evident: Black students face higher rates of discipline than White students across all student subpopulations

and academic settings (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). Further, boys of almost all racial identities face disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline, and students receiving special education services are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their peers (Office for Civil Rights, 2022; Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). It is important to highlight intersectionality in the incidence of discipline disparities, as boys who are non-White and have disabilities face some of the highest rates of discipline in schools.

What Did We Learn About Student Discipline in RIMSD?

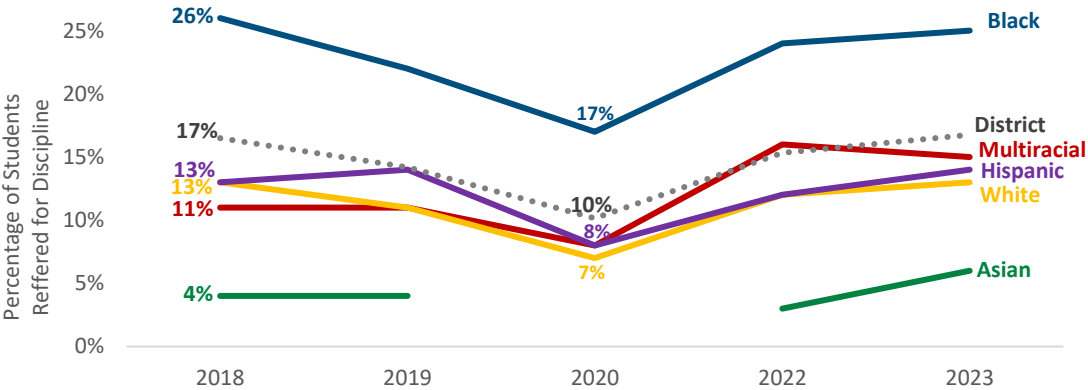
RIMSD’s Code of Conduct describes disciplinary rules to ensure that student behavior does not detract from the learning environment, and to help students accept a sense of responsibility for their actions. The document details student, family, and school responsibilities to support student conduct; describes behavioral rules and expectations; and provides guidance regarding appropriate disciplinary actions for different levels of infractions. At the same time, the document recognizes that the school has a responsibility to build a respectful community where students experience positive relationships with peers and teachers and due process in discipline matters. The Code of Conduct also recognizes the importance of considering non-exclusionary discipline when “practicable and reasonable,” and calls on school officials to limit the number and duration of out-of-school suspensions (OSS) when possible.

The 2022 RIMSD Discipline Improvement Plan highlights both ongoing challenges and strategic action to ensure inclusive and equitable disciplinary outcomes. The use of exclusionary discipline increased between 2016 and 2018 in RIMSD, and the suspension rate in RIMSD was in the top 20% of districts in Illinois between 2017 and 2020. In response to these data, RIMSD implemented many changes to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and racial disproportionality. New policies and practices include the development of a behavior assessment rubric, the implementation of MTSS and SEL curricula, professional development for staff, and increased investment in staff to support school safety and student mental health in Rock Island High School. In the 2023 *Discipline Improvement Plan Progress Report*, RIMSD reported that PBIS yielded promising results and the use of restorative justice practices increased in elementary and secondary schools. Likewise, RIMSD reported that the district established a districtwide MTSS structure for Tier 1 supports and is working on structures for Tier 2 and 3 supports.

Exhibit 13 shows that discipline referral rates have remained relatively consistent in RIMSD since 2018, except for a decrease experienced by all student populations in the 2019–20 school year. This reduction was due to students attending fewer days of school in person following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2022–23 school year, 1,013 students (approximately 17% of all students) received a discipline referral. However, discipline referral rates were not the same for all student groups. Black students consistently had the highest

percentage of students receiving discipline referrals. In 2022–23, 533 Black students across the district (i.e., 25% of all Black students) were referred for discipline. All other race/ethnicity groups had a referral rate below 17%—a statistically significant difference in each year since 2018. This was true for the percentage of students with referrals and for out-of-school suspensions (see Exhibit 14).

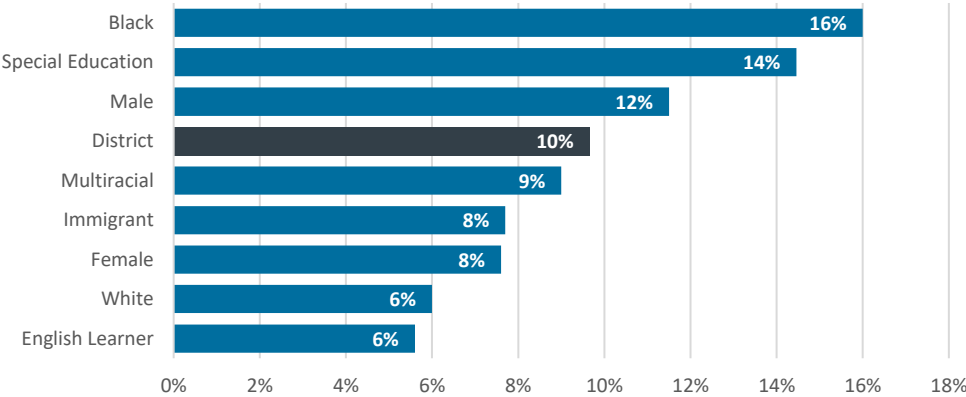
Exhibit 13. Across All Years, Black Students Were Most Likely to Have Experienced a Discipline Referral



Note. Percentages for Asian students in 2020 were suppressed due to small sample sizes. Percentages for American Indian/Alaska Native students were suppressed due to small sample sizes.

In addition to disparities in discipline referrals, data revealed inequities in student rates of receiving an out-of-school suspension after being referred for discipline, as illustrated in Exhibit 14. During the 2022–23 school year, RIMSD’s out-of-school suspension rate was 10%, meaning that 10% of all discipline referrals ended in an OSS. Looking at gaps across race/ethnicity, Black students were suspended at a higher than average rate of 16%, while White and multiracial students were suspended at much lower rates. Echoing national trends, students receiving special education services and male students were suspended at higher rates than the district average, at 14% and 12% respectively. Other student populations were less likely to be suspended when referred for discipline, including immigrants (8%), female students (8%), and English learners (6%).

Exhibit 14. Black, Special Education, and Male Students Experienced the Highest Rates of Out-of-School Suspension Following a Referral During the 2022–23 School Year



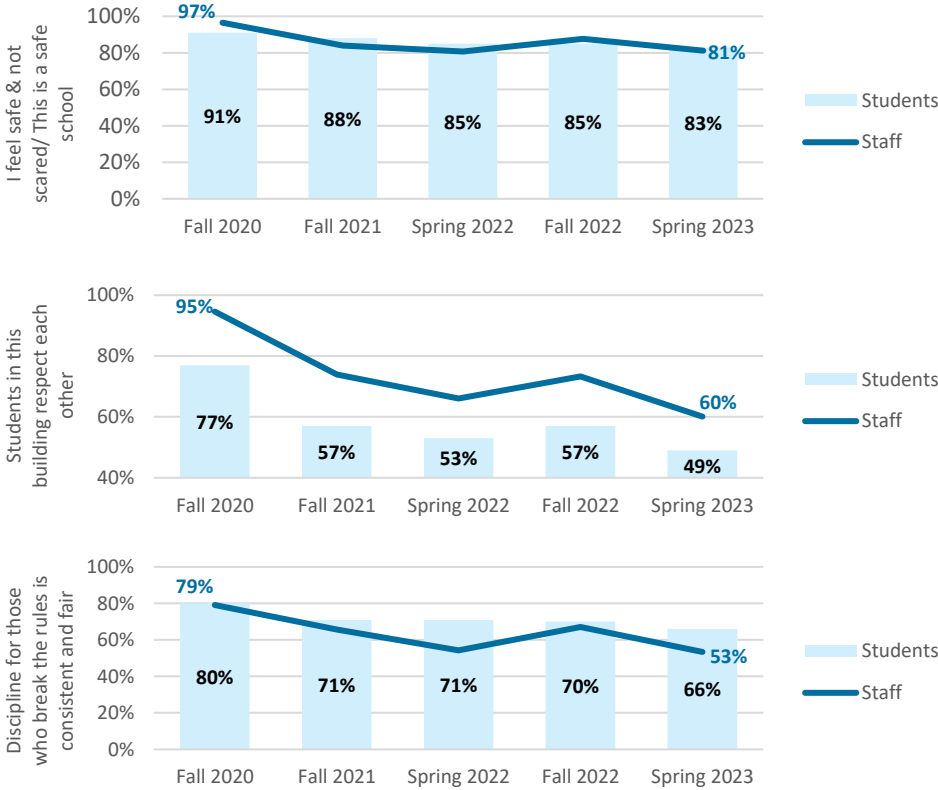
In focus groups, district staff and school leaders discussed behavior challenges that affect safety, with one elementary special education teacher stating that the “biggest challenges right now really do focus around violence, inappropriate behavior, and, in general, respect.” School staff and leaders suggested that some of these challenges may spillover from issues outside of school, such conflict within the community, while others highlighted a need to support students and families’ socioemotional and material wellbeing. For example, a high school English learner teacher suggested that “[a] lot of issues that take place at home [and] get carried to the schools,” while a high school leader pointed to a “[I]ack of coping skill and [the] response being violence.” Parent involvement was also seen as an issue that exacerbates some disciplinary situations in counter-productive ways, with high school teachers pointing to incidents where parents explicitly condoned inappropriate behavior that went against the code of conduct and when teachers and families experienced conflict in addressing student behavior.

At the same time, many RIMSD community members recognized that discipline challenges were intertwined with student experiences of marginalization and exclusion, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. A school social worker highlighted that many students with discipline challenges had experienced trauma and had mental health concerns, while an elementary special education teacher stressed that “relationships matter so much because ... once you build those relationships..., you can really curb” problem behaviors. Echoing this sentiment, one district administrator explained:

I think so much of our discipline comes from a place of not feeling wanted, not feeling valued, not understanding what’s going on.

This sentiment of marginalization was echoed by students in RIMSD. Exhibit 15 compares climate survey responses for students and staff between fall 2020 and spring 2023. Both staff and students responded favorably and similarly regarding perceptions of safety at their schools over time. However, student responses diverged from teacher responses regarding the following statement: “Students in this building respect each other.” Student agreement with this statement was meaningfully lower than teacher agreement, and both student and teacher rates of agreement with this statement dropped tremendously over time. Student agreement fell from 77% in fall 2020 to 49% in spring 2023, and teacher agreement fell from 95% to 60% over the same period. Students were consistently more likely than teachers to agree that “Discipline for those who break the rules is consistent and fair,” but rates of agreement also dropped over time, from 79% in fall 2020 to 53% in spring 2023.

Exhibit 15. Both Student and Staff Rates of Agreement Regarding Feelings of Safety, Student Respect, and Discipline Fairness Declined Between September 2020 and May 2023



Student focus groups surfaced experiences of marginalization in relation to discipline challenges, with students suggesting that they were often overpoliced in school. One Rock Island High School student described their experience being monitored for dress code violations, even though their outfit choice met requirements: “I’m not gonna change ... it’s not my fault that you basically telling me that you don’t think that should be on.” Other students

described feeling judged by teachers when they were upset at school and suggested that they were not treated with sufficient respect. In a particularly challenging story, an Edison Junior High School student described a teacher who was hostile toward specific classmates:

They'll tell other staff that you're a danger to the school, and that they don't want you there. They did that to one of my friends last year, and they wouldn't let her in a certain classroom, but she said that teacher said she was a threat and a danger to the school.

Students also reported that they were subject to discipline actions that were often inconsistent and unrealistic. One Edison Junior High School student described teachers who were too quick to dismiss students to the hallway and assign detention. A Washington Junior High School student explained that detention policies often did not align with student and family needs outside of school. This student explained that a friend had been repeatedly assigned detention but “has to take care of her siblings after school, [so] if she gets the detention, she really can't serve it.”

RCA participants identified student experiences of marginalization and insufficient district efforts to address student needs as causes of discipline inequities. Participants identified socioeconomic conditions outside of school as a source of some discipline challenges, while also identifying the role of teacher and administrator biases and prejudices in assigning discipline. Participants highlighted that RIMSD was not sufficiently prepared to support inclusive engagement for students of color, suggesting that academic disengagement may be a contributing cause of discipline challenges. Participants also highlighted that school staff may consider students of color to be less capable of meeting behavior expectations and accordingly may treat these students differently in terms of assignment to discipline. Participants identified their school cultures as lacking space to truly engage and build meaningful connections with all students, across different identities. This was classified as a root cause of discipline inequities in the district.

Root Cause Analysis Results

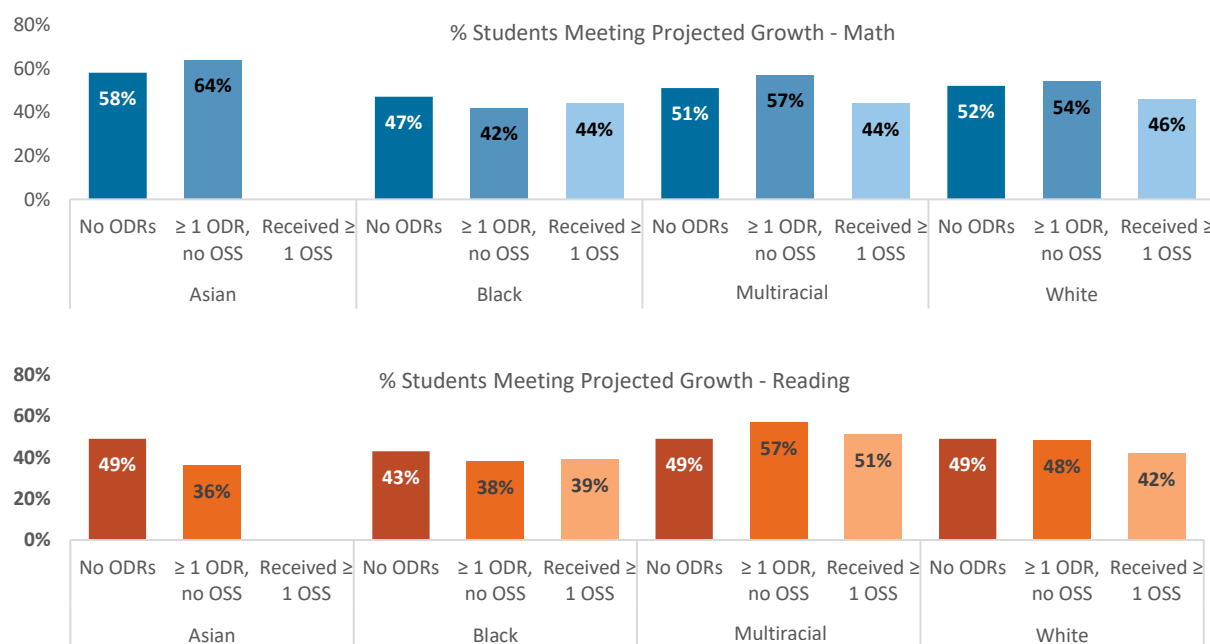
Contributing Cause: We have not had enough learning, practice, and time to get comfortable with student engagement practices for all marginalized students.

Root Cause: The cultures of our buildings do not create space for student and family engagement and connections, which impacts staff beliefs regarding the capacity of students of color to meet behavior expectations.

Relationship Between Discipline and Achievement

Mirroring other research findings (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019), data from RIMSD suggest that experiences with discipline are connected to diminished academic achievement. Exhibit 16 shows how NWEA MAP growth rates in mathematics and reading varied across discipline experiences and race in 2023. Across all racial identities, students with no office discipline referrals (ODRs) almost always outpaced their classmates with at least one out-of-school suspension in meeting growth rates. For example, 51% of multiracial students without ODRs met their mathematics growth rates, compared with 44% of multiracial students with an OSS. Similarly, 49% of White students without ODRs met their reading growth rates, compared with 42% of White students with an OSS. These data suggest that receiving a discipline referral may undermine academic achievement in RIMSD. However, RIMSD students with at least one ODR but no OSS outpaced their classmates in mathematics growth attainment rate for all students across all racial identities – a pattern that holds for all racial identities except Black students. Similarly, students with no discipline referrals outperformed their referred classmates in the reading growth rate across all student groups, except multiracial students. This finding underscores the influence of discipline that removes students from the classroom on achievement but raises questions as to how specific groups of students experience discipline overall.

Exhibit 16. Across All Racial Identities, Students With No Office Discipline Referrals Almost Always Outpaced Their Classmates With at Least One Out-of-School Suspension in Meeting Growth Rates



Note. Percentages for American Indian/Alaska Native students were suppressed due to small sample sizes.

Key Finding: Chronic Absenteeism Was a Persistent and Major Issue at All Levels and Schools

What Does the Research Say About Chronic Absenteeism?

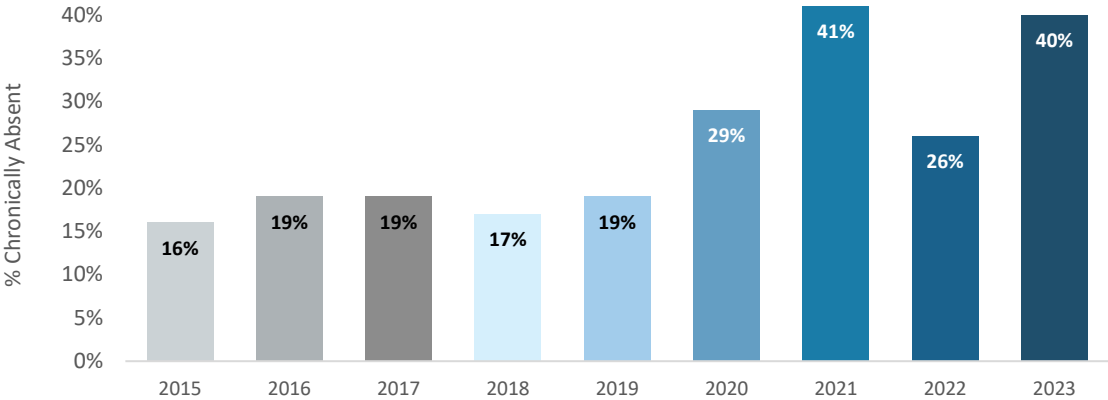
Chronic absence is defined as missing 10% of school days or more due to absence for any reason—excused absences, unexcused absences, and suspensions. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, chronic absenteeism has become a significant and persistent challenge for schools across the country. In 2019, about 16% of students were chronically absent from their schools; in 2022, this figure reached 30%. Further, only 25% of students attended schools with high or extreme rates of chronic absenteeism in 2019, defined as having at least one fifth of students miss almost 4 weeks of school. In 2022, 66% of students in the United States attended a school with high or extreme rates of chronic absenteeism (Chang et al., 2023). Even before these recent trends emerged, school districts serving students of color and students from lower income families experienced higher rates of absenteeism, with students of color often overrepresented in schools' chronically absent populations (Nauer et al., 2014; Triplett & Ford, 2019). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, students of color and students from families experiencing poverty have seen some of the largest increases in absenteeism (Gee et al., 2023; Swiderski et al., 2023).

Chronic absenteeism is associated with lower academic performance for students from all backgrounds, as well as lower graduation rates and lower standardized test scores (Ginsburg et al., 2014; Gottfried, 2009; Triplett & Ford, 2019). Research also suggests that chronic absenteeism is associated with diminished student experiences of belonging in school. Students who feel disconnected from their peers and adults at school are more likely to be chronically absent, and chronic absenteeism is associated with reduced social and academic engagement (Chang et al., 2019; Gottfried, 2014).

What Did We Learn About Chronic Absenteeism in RIMSD?

National trends in chronic absenteeism are evident in RIMSD, as seen in Exhibit 17. While the district's chronically absent rate was 19% in 2019 and preceding years, the rate jumped to 29% in 2020 and then 41% in 2021. This reflected the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the virtual mode of instruction offered to students. In 2022, there was a meaningful drop in absenteeism to 26%, but this was followed by a large rise to 40% in 2023.

Exhibit 17. Chronic Absenteeism Rates Doubled, Compared With Pre-Pandemic Levels



As seen nationally, there are large disparities in the absenteeism rate in RIMSD. As depicted in Exhibit 18, many student populations had chronic absenteeism rates that exceeded the 2022–23 average of 40%. Chronic absenteeism rates in 2023 were highest for American Indian/Alaska Native students (63%), followed by students receiving special education services (47%), Hispanic students (46%), and Black students (45%). English learners, Asian Pacific Islander students, and Asian students had the lowest chronic absenteeism rates in the district, with only 20% of Asian students identified as chronically absent—half the district average.

Exhibit 18. Chronic Absenteeism Rates Hovered Around the District Average for Many Groups of Students, With Some Outliers

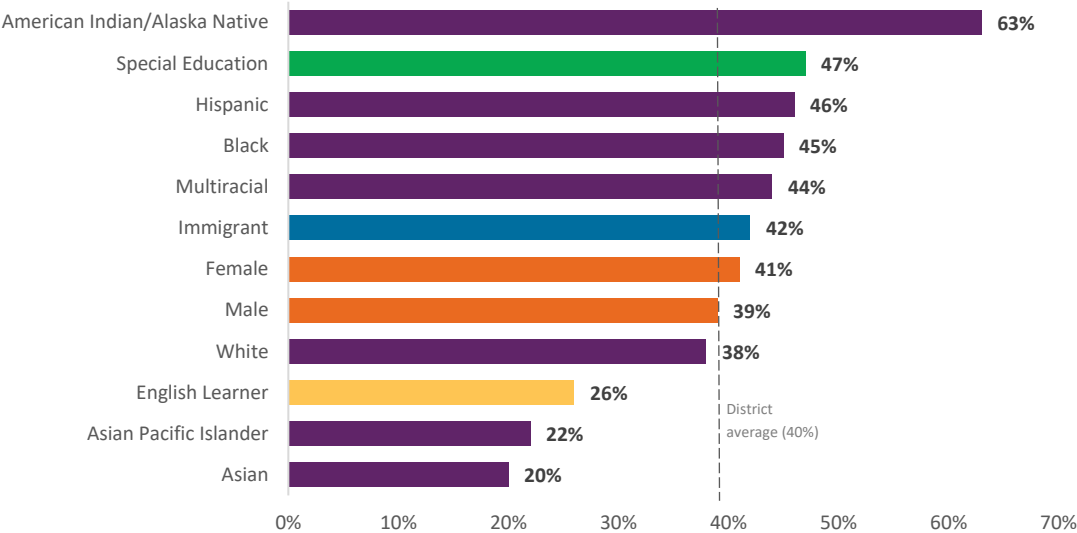
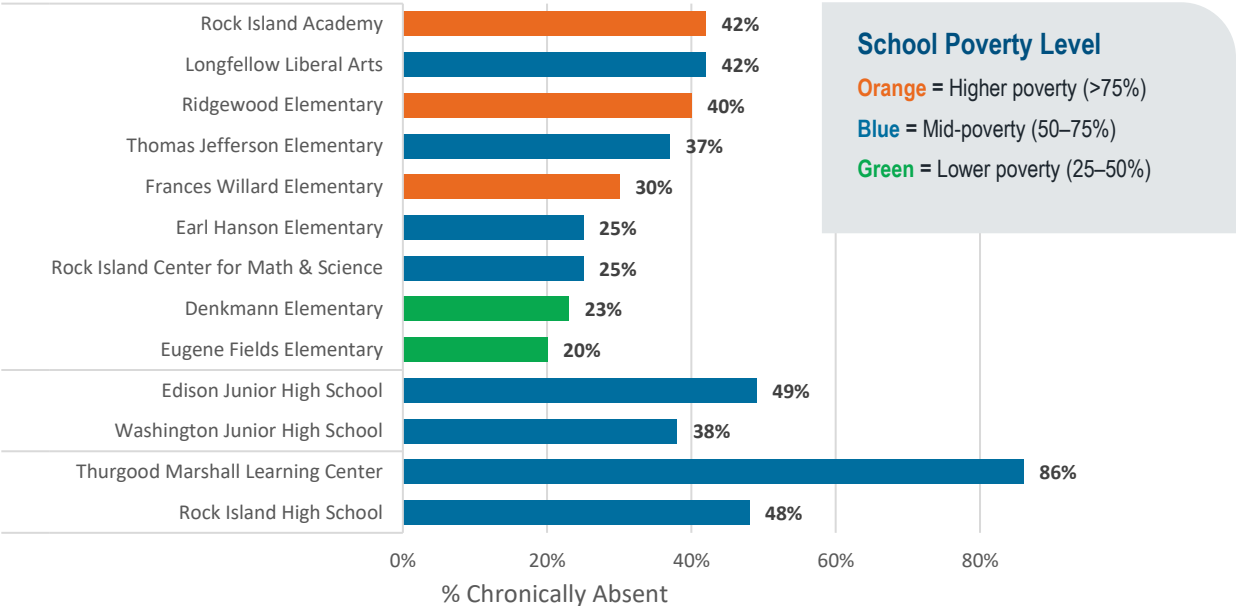


Exhibit 19 provides additional evidence of inequities in chronic absenteeism across RIMSD schools. In 2023, elementary schools with higher levels of poverty (defined as more than 75% of

students belonging to families experiencing poverty)—Frances Willard Elementary, Rock Island Academy, and Ridgewood Elementary— typically had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. Lower poverty schools—Denkmann Elementary and Eugene Fields Elementary—had the lowest rates of absenteeism (23% and 20%), at nearly half the district average (40%). Chronic absenteeism rates were significantly higher at Edison Junior High (49%), compared with Washington Junior High (38%); and Thurgood Marshall Learning Center had a very high rate of 86%.

Exhibit 19. Chronic Absenteeism Rates in 2022–23 Were Significantly Greater for Higher Poverty Elementary Schools, As Compared With Lower Poverty Elementary Schools



Note. Poverty level classifications are relative, as all schools included a substantial number of students experiencing poverty.

Focus groups with RIMSD school community members underscored chronic absenteeism as an ongoing challenge. School staff identified barriers that might help to explain student absenteeism, including transportation issues and family responsibilities. One high school teacher highlighted homelessness as a barrier, describing a student who was recently added to their class who was “homeless for several years and was finally returning to school [but who had] only come to school twice since she’s been added.” A family services worker described medical requirements as a limiting factor on attendance because many families have limited access to medical services. School leaders also identified student engagement as a challenge for supporting student attendance, with one school leader describing the experience of disconnected students as follows:

For students there comes a point in time where there is a total lack of hope. There is [Sic] a number of students that come to school some days and there is a disconnect.

Students also discussed their experiences with classmates who are less connected to their schools. One Rock Island High School student remarked that high school is the “building ground of your future, and I think that everyone should care about that. But sadly, not everyone does.” These interview responses regarding absenteeism and student engagement were echoed by some participants during the RCA event. RCA participants suggested that causes of absenteeism may include family responsibilities, transportation difficulties, negative relationships in schools, social and emotional health challenges, insufficient school facilities, and district systems that do not effectively support student learning. Participants focused on the important role of relationships in student engagement and identified districtwide gaps in supporting positive relationships between students and teachers as a contributing cause of absenteeism.

Root Cause Analysis Result

Contributing Cause: Students are chronically absent because they do not have the relationships to make school relevant and engaging.

Relationship Between Chronic Absenteeism and Discipline

By treating chronic absenteeism as a proxy for students’ sense of belonging, we can examine the relationship between chronic absenteeism and discipline rates across the district and among different groups of students. Student experiences with discipline affect their feelings of being welcome in school, as discipline can affect their perceptions of safety and support (Lacoe, 2015). When discipline experiences reinforce an unwelcoming school environment, students may be more likely to miss classes and exhibit chronic absenteeism. Exhibit 20 depicts the relationship between chronic absenteeism rates and discipline referrals in RIMSD over time. Between 2018 and 2023, students with at least one office discipline referral had a chronic absenteeism rate that was about 26 percentage points higher than students with no discipline experience. Though the overall chronic absenteeism rate grew in this period, the gap between students who received an ODR and those who did not stayed consistent. As such, the chronic absenteeism rate for students who experienced one or more ODRs was 20 percentage points higher than the district average in 2023, with a chronic absenteeism rate of 63%.

Exhibit 20. Chronic Absenteeism Rates for All Students Increased Over Time, but Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Students Who Experienced at Least One Office Discipline Referral (ODR) Were Drastically Higher Than for Students with No Referrals

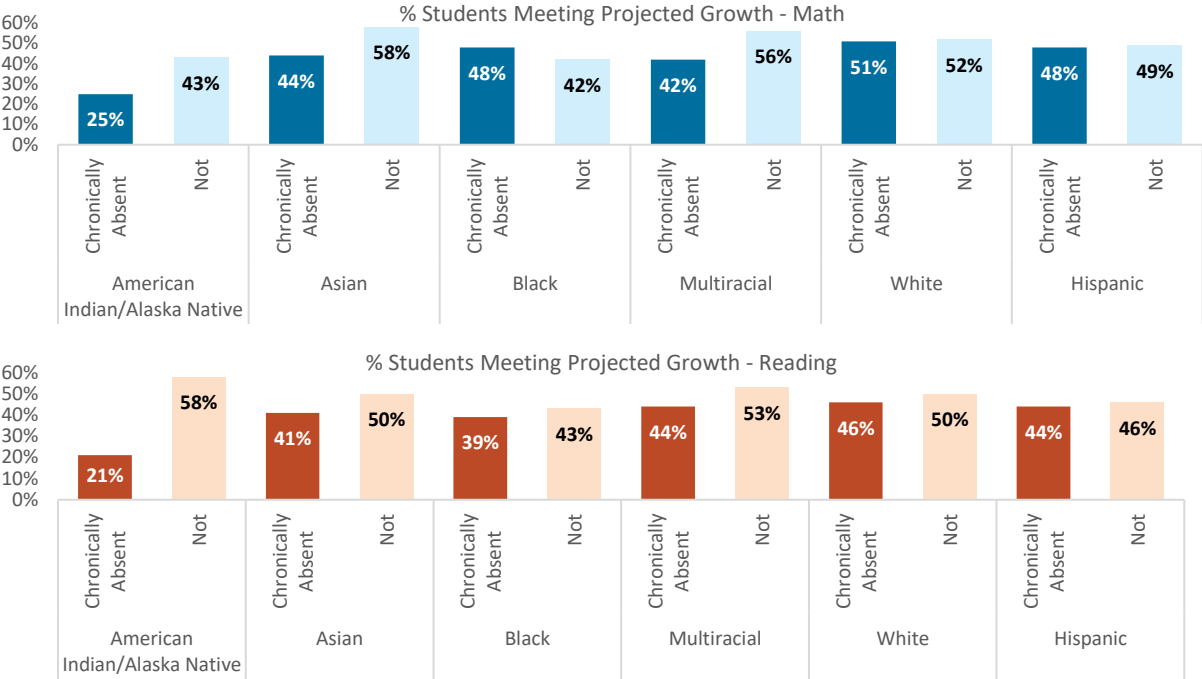
	2018	2019	2020	2022	2023
District Average	22%	22%	30%	31%	43%
Received no ODRs	14%	17%	28%	22%	37%
Received at least one ODR	40%	40%	42%	57%	63%

Note. Data for 2021 was excluded because school was conducted virtually and only 42 incidents of discipline were recorded for that year.

Relationship Between Chronic Absenteeism and Achievement

Achievement data from RIMSD in 2023 echoed national findings on the negative relationship between chronic absenteeism and achievement (Ginsburg et al., 2014; Gottfried, 2009; Triplett & Ford, 2019). Exhibit 21 depicts NWEA MAP growth goal attainment data in mathematics and reading across race/ethnicity for students who were chronically absent and those who were not. In mathematics growth goal attainment, chronically absent students trailed their well-attending peers in all student population groups except Black students. The largest gaps in goal attainment were experienced by American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, and multiracial students. Forty-three percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students, 58% of Asian students, and 56% of multiracial students who were not chronically absent met their mathematics growth goals, compared with just 25% of chronically absent American Indian/Alaska Native students, 44% of chronically absent Asian students, and 42% of chronically absent multiracial students. Regarding reading growth goal attainment, chronically absent students consistently lagged their peers across all student identities, with the largest gap experienced by American Indian/Alaska Native students. Fifty-eight percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students met their reading growth goals—the highest rate of any identified race/ethnicity. However, only 21% of chronically absent American Indian/Alaska Native students met their reading growth goals. It is interesting to note that with regards to mathematics growth goal attainment, chronically absent Black students outperformed their Black peers who were not chronically absent, meeting goals at a rate of 48% and 42%, respectively.

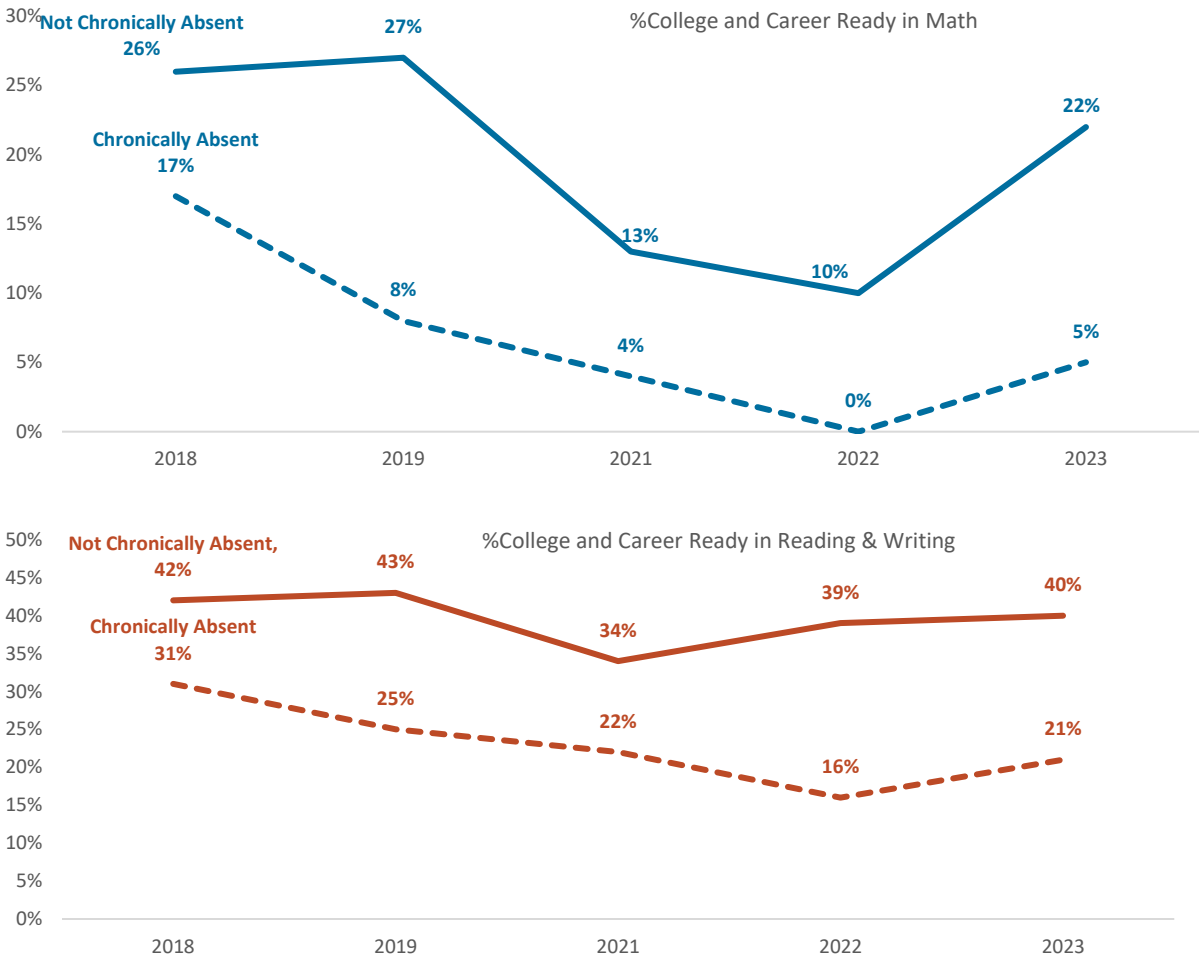
Exhibit 21. In 2023, Chronically Absent Students Trailed Their Peers in Mathematics and Reading Growth Goal Attainment Across Almost All Student Identities, With the Largest Gaps Experienced by American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, and Multiracial Students



Note. Chronically absent is defined as missing more than 10% of school days.

Chronically absent students in RIMSD also exhibited lower rates of college and career readiness. Exhibit 22 illustrates persistent and growing gaps in college and career readiness in mathematics and in reading and writing between students who were and were not chronically absent. Students who were not chronically absent were consistently identified as college and career ready at a higher rate than chronically absent students in both mathematics and reading and writing, and this gap widened over time. The mathematics readiness gap grew by 6 percentage points between 2018 and 2023: chronically absent student readiness fell from 17% to 5%, while readiness among students who were not chronically absent fell from 26% to 22%. Similarly, reading and writing readiness remained around 40% for students who were not chronically absent between 2018 and 2023, while the readiness rate for chronically absent students fell from 31% to 21%. This growing gap suggests there may be a relationship between chronic absenteeism and college and career readiness.

Exhibit 22. Chronically Absent Students Consistently Lagged in College and Career Readiness, Compared With Peers Who Were Not Absent, and the Gap Grew Between 2018 and 2023



Note. RIMSD students did not take the SAT in 2020.

Core Area 2: Staff

RIMSD has made it a strategic priority to improve student access to diverse teachers and staff. The RIM Pipeline to a Productive Future Strategic Plan (2020–2025) represents a clear commitment among district leaders and staff to recruit, retain, and develop diverse staff, as well as an understanding of the importance of cultural competence. This dedication is echoed in the district’s Equity Statement and demonstrated by many of the intentional recruitment and monitoring efforts used by district leadership and schools. This work is exemplified by the establishment of the Diversifying the RIMSD Staff taskforce. The district has also made significant investments to support a culturally and linguistically competent staff. RIMSD efforts

to support diverse teachers include a robust commitment to professional development. The district's CQ team has led efforts to expand cultural responsiveness in RIMSD schools, including developing resources, hosting professional development opportunities, and establishing partnerships with community organizations. Cultural competence learning is also part of other professional development efforts, including a robust list of resources to support equity and cultural responsiveness on the RIMSD intranet and equity-focused sessions offered during professional development days.

While RIMSD has demonstrated significant investment in advancing diverse hiring and supports for staff, district leadership understands that challenges remain in ensuring that all students have access to teachers who are prepared to meet their diverse needs and help them thrive. Accordingly, RIMSD leadership, the EASC, and AIR staff identified a guiding question for Core Area 2 to learn more about student experiences in the district: **How effective has the district been in promoting equitable access to diverse, effective, and culturally and linguistically competent teachers?** To investigate, AIR researchers focused on student access to experienced and diverse teachers, as well as experiences of cultural and linguistic competence in schools. The following sections detail key findings from the Core Area 2 data analysis process, relevant research on the topic, the data on which each finding is based, and the potential root causes identified by RCA event participants.

Key Finding: Student Access to Experienced Teachers Varied Across Buildings and Student Groups

What Does the Research Say About Student Access to Experienced Teachers and Retention?

Experienced teachers support student success. Teacher experience is positively associated with student achievement and attendance, with studies suggesting that the impact of teacher experience is most important in the early years of a teacher's career (Kini & Podolsky, 2016; Rice, 2010). Research suggests that students of color and students in high-poverty schools may have less access to effective teachers, compared with White students (Cardichon et al., 2020).

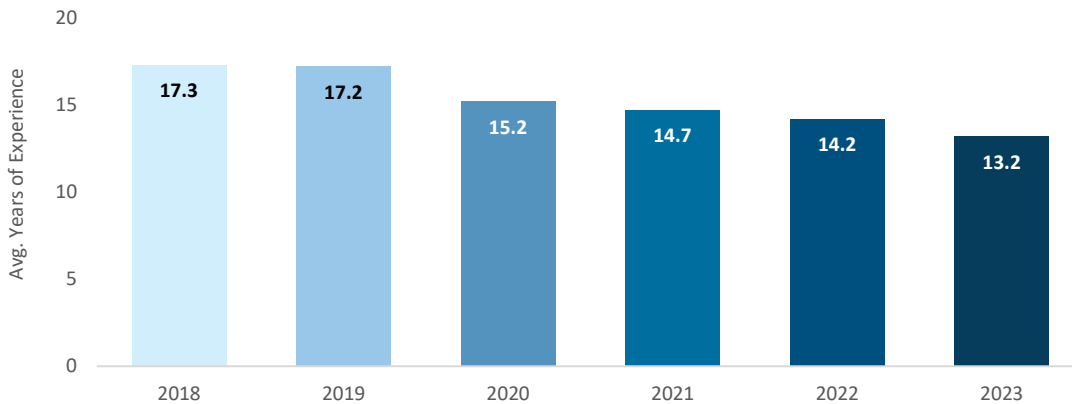
The teacher retention rate has also been shown to be strongly related to student achievement, as turnover reduces productivity and teacher experience levels (Hanushek et al., 2016). Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, around 8% of teachers left the profession each year, with teachers of color experiencing higher levels of turnover (Goldring et al., 2014; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). However, by the fall of 2020, attrition rates had risen quickly in many districts, often attributed to the stress associated with remote and hybrid instruction, as well as perceptions of insufficient pay given the risk of COVID-19 (Diliberti et al., 2021). In subsequent

years, many schools have continued to experience elevated rates of teacher departure (Barnum, 2023).

What Did We Learn About Student Access to Experienced Teachers in RIMSD?

In RIMSD, the average number of years of teacher experience across the district has slowly decreased since 2018, as depicted in Exhibit 23. There was a small decrease from 2018 to 2019 (by just 0.1 years, from 17.3 years to 17.2 years), but a larger decrease occurred following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with a drop to 15.2 years. Since 2020, there has been a consistent decrease in the average number of years of teaching experience, with a low of 13.2 years in 2023.

Exhibit 23. Average Number of Years of Teaching Experience Declined Over 4 Years, From 2018 to 2023



It is important to note that even when we account for this decrease in teaching experience, teacher experience levels in RIMSD are similar to national averages (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Further, the effects of having fewer years of teacher experience may be most meaningful when considering teachers in their first few years of teaching (Rice, 2010). As such, the overall impact of teacher experience changes—from 17.3 years to 13.2 years—may be relatively limited. Exhibit 24 shows how declines in the average number of years of teaching experience varied across schools in the district.

Exhibit 24. Average Number of Years of Teaching Experience Varied Significantly Across Schools in the District, and Not All Schools Experienced the Same Decline

		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Higher poverty (>75%)	Ridgewood Elementary	25.2	25.8	25.3	24.5	24.5	24.2
	Rock Island Academy	12.2	12.2	11.7	11.3	10.6	10.8
	Frances Willard Elementary	12.9	12.6	11.3	10.8	10.4	9.6
Mid-Poverty (50-75%)	Thomas Jefferson Elementary	20.5	19.6	18.6	18.6	18.4	17.7
	Longfellow Liberal Arts School	16.0	15.2	14.0	13.8	13.8	13.8
	Rock Island Center for Math and Science	13.1	13.5	13.9	14.0	14.1	12.7
	Earl Hanson Elementary	21.2	20.8	11.3	10.8	11.3	11.3
	Edison Junior High School	17.8	16.8	16.1	16.0	14.2	12.2
	Washington Junior High School	15.9	16.3	13.3	12.6	12.4	12.1
	Rock Island High School	16.9	16.8	15.0	14.4	13.6	12.2
	Thurgood Marshall Learning Center	16.9	16.5	15.1	12.8	13.5	11.3
Lower poverty (25-50%)	Eugene Field Elementary	20.3	21.4	20.9	20.3	20.8	20.9
	Denkmann Elementary	24.3	24.1	21.4	22.2	22.4	19.7



Note. Poverty level classifications are relative, as all schools included a substantial number of students experiencing poverty.

Between 2018 and 2023, the average number of years of teaching experience in higher poverty schools was consistently lower than in other schools, except at Ridgewood Elementary, where average teaching experience was higher than in all other schools in the district. In 2023, Rock Island Academy and Frances Willard Elementary had teacher experience levels that were meaningfully lower than the district average (10.8 years and 9.6 years, respectively), while average teacher experience at Ridgewood remained at a very high level (24.2 years). Conversations with RIMSD staff suggest that this finding reflects strong teacher preferences for staying at Ridgewood and district limitations in encouraging teachers to change schools.

Declines in average teacher experience between 2018 and 2023 also varied across the district. The average number of years of teaching experience fell by nearly 3 years at Thomas Jefferson Elementary, compared with a 1-year decrease at Ridgewood Elementary and no decline at Eugene Field Elementary. Earl Hanson Elementary saw the largest decline in average teaching experience across the district, from a high of 21.2 years on average in 2018 to 11.3 years in 2023. Between 2018 and 2022, Edison Junior High School students had teachers with more experience than students at Washington Junior High School, but this gap closed in 2023. Conversely, while Rock Island High School and Thurgood Marshall Learning Center had the same level of teaching experience in 2018 (16.9 years), a small gap of 1 year emerged between the schools in 2023.

Exhibit 25 demonstrates how access to experienced teachers also varied across the district by student population. Asian and Black students were consistently taught by teachers with less experience, on average, than multiracial or White students. Across each year between 2018 and 2023, Asian and Black students' teachers had about 1 year less experience than the teachers of their multiracial and White peers. Hispanic students tended to have teachers with similar or a slightly lower number of years of experience than the district average. English learners were consistently taught by teachers with less experience than the district average, with a 1.5-year gap in 2023 (11.7 years for English learner students, compared with the district average of 13.2 years). Immigrant students typically had teachers with less experience on average, until 2023 when average teaching experience matched that of the district, at about 13 years. Students receiving special education services typically matched district averages in terms of teacher experience, but in 2023 they had less experienced teachers than the district average (12.5 years for special education students, compared with a district average of 13.2 years).

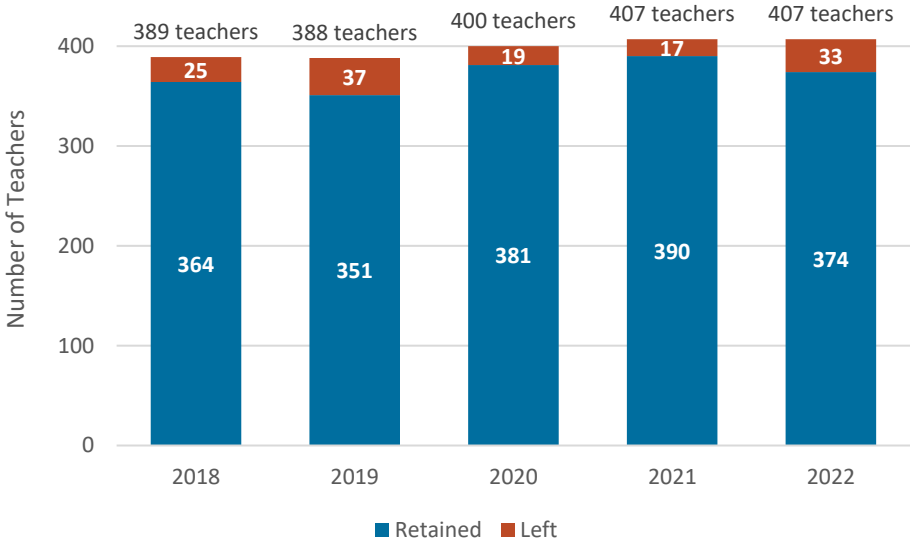
Exhibit 25. Asian, Black, and English Learner Students Were Routinely Taught by Teachers With Less Experience Than the District Average

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
District	17.3	17.2	15.2	14.7	14.2	13.2
Asian	16.9	17.4	14.7	14.3	13.7	12.6
Black	16.4	16.4	14.6	14.2	13.5	12.6
Multiracial	17.9	16.9	14.9	15.1	14.4	13.9
White	17.8	17.6	15.7	15.0	14.7	13.6
Hispanic	17.0	16.7	15.0	14.2	13.9	12.9
Female	17.3	17.3	15.4	14.8	14.2	13.3
Male	17.3	17.1	15.1	14.6	14.2	13.1
Special Education	17.6	17.1	15.2	14.9	14.1	12.5
English Learner	15.7	15.4	13.9	13.1	12.4	11.7
Immigrant	15.9	15.9	14.1	13.4	13.6	13.0



Even with these decreases in average teacher years of experience, RIMSD experienced little change in retention between 2018 and 2023. Exhibit 26 demonstrates how overall teacher retention remained stable over time. The district teacher workforce grew slightly over this period, from 389 teachers in 2018 to 407 teachers in 2023. At the same time, RIMSD met its strategic goal of a 90% retention rate for teaching staff in each year between 2018 and 2023. Retention was highest in 2021, at 95.8%, and lowest in 2019, at 90.5%.

Exhibit 26. Teacher Retention in RIMSD Remained Stable Over Time



RCA event participants on October 12 identified a variety of causes to help explain overall decreases and differences in teacher experience throughout the district. Participants pointed to teacher burnout and retirement due to stress, limits on their curricular creativity, and philosophical differences on policy. RCA attendees also identified a variety of factors that may have influenced teacher attrition among the most tenured teachers, including state incentives; and noted the growth in alternative routes to teaching, which may have contributed to the lower average age of teachers. Participants highlighted that existing district policies make it easy for teachers to stay at their preferred school and limit the district’s ability to make changes, identifying existing collectively bargained policies as potential barriers. Participants recognized that the district had not previously prioritized policies on equity and teacher mobility in their negotiations with the collective bargaining unit, which they identified as a contributing cause of staffing inequities.

Root Cause Analysis Result

Contributing Cause: Policies on equity and teacher mobility have not been prioritized in collective bargaining negotiations.

Key Finding: Although RIMSD Staff and the Teacher Workforce Was Less Diverse Than the Student Population, the District Has Invested Considerable Effort in Improving Workforce Diversity

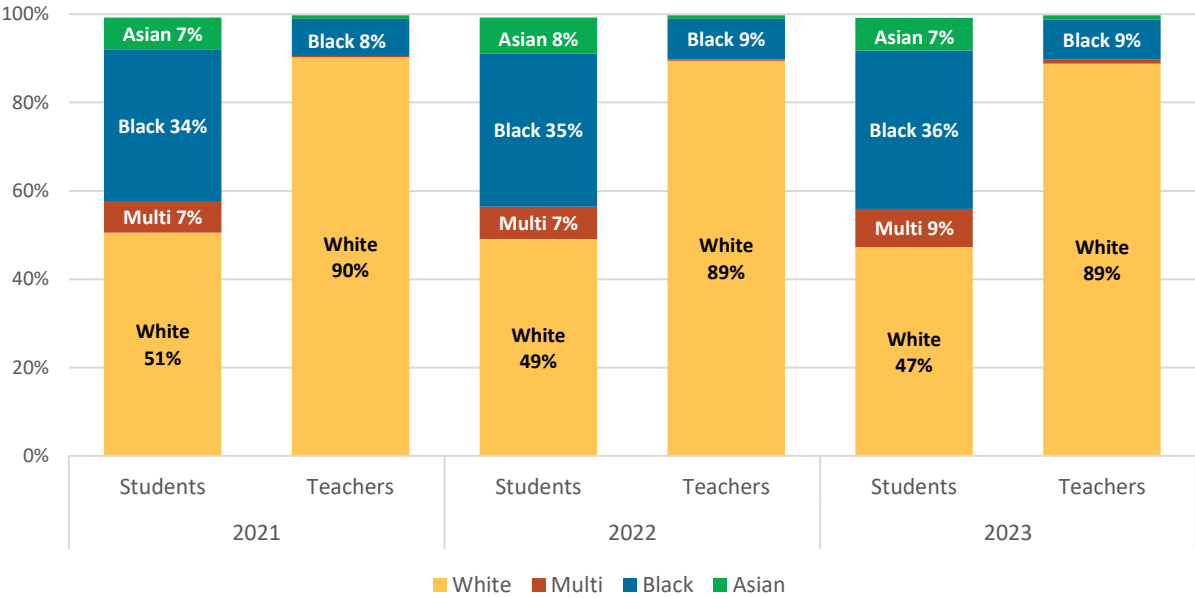
What Does the Research Say About Student Access to Diverse Teachers?

Nationally, teachers are disproportionately White, compared with their students. American Community Survey data from 2015 found that while nearly 50% of all students were non-White, less than 25% of teachers were people of color. This finding was particularly pronounced for Hispanic students and seemed to be driven by gaps in the teacher pipeline related to high school and college graduation rates (Figlio, 2017; Lindsay et al., 2017). Students' access to a diverse teaching staff is associated with positive academic, behavioral, and social and emotional outcomes and may be related to having greater access to teachers using culturally responsive practices (Blazar, 2021). Having teachers of the same race also has a positive impact on student achievement, including an increase in high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates (Egalite et al., 2015; Gershenson et al., 2022). Impacts are not limited to achievement, as students with a teacher of the same race also have reduced levels of absenteeism and fewer suspensions (Holt & Gershenson, 2015). In addition, evidence shows that students assigned to teachers with similar demographics (both race and gender) have more positive academic perceptions and attitudes, such as increased effort and happiness in class (Egalite & Kisida, 2018).

What Did We Learn About Student Access to Diverse Teachers in RIMSD?

Over the past 3 years at RIMSD, there has been a meaningful gap between student and teacher diversity. Exhibit 27 depicts student and teacher diversity in the district between 2021 and 2023. The population of students of color in the district has gradually increased over time, from 49% in 2021 to 53% in 2023. This has been driven by increases in the Black student population, from 34% to 36%, and by growth in the multiracial population, from 7% to 9%. Despite a large and growing population of students of color in the district, White teachers remained predominant during this period, accounting for about 90% of the teaching population. Black teachers were the next most common population, accounting for 8% of teachers in 2021 and 9% of teachers in both 2022 and 2023.

Exhibit 27. From 2021 to 2023, the Student Population Was Continually and Significantly More Diverse and Non-White Than the Teaching Population



While diversity gaps remain in RIMSD, the district has expanded its efforts to support workforce diversity and established a Diversifying the RIMSD Staff taskforce. This taskforce has supported recruitment teams that attend local and national job fairs to promote RIMSD. In recent years, these teams have focused on recruitment from colleges and universities in Illinois and the south and west regions of the United States. The RIMSD talent acquisition team has been managing these efforts and has developed tools and metrics to track recruitment successes. Work to diversify staff at RIMSD has also involved increased efforts to build a pipeline for future teachers, including a partnership with Western Illinois University that brings MA in Teaching students into the district as interns. This program began in 2020.

RCA event participants on October 12 discussed workforce diversity and identified these ongoing efforts to expand recruitment. Participants highlighted that intentional work to support diverse recruitment and retention is a relatively new priority for the district. Accordingly, they pointed to limited past attention as a potential contributing cause of gaps in workforce diversity. Other identified potential causes include challenges recruiting diverse candidates to the Quad Cities region, a districtwide culture that may be seen as more welcoming of White teachers, and nationwide gaps in the teacher development pipeline.

Root Cause Analysis Result
Possible Contributing Cause: In the past, district leaders did not give sufficient consideration toward addressing inequities in the hiring process.

Key Finding: RIMSD Has Worked to Equip Staff with the Knowledge and Skills to Engage Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students, Reflected in the District’s Commitment to Professional Development. However, More Work May Be Needed to Ensure That All Students Have Access to Culturally and Linguistically Relevant School Environments

What Does the Research Say About Student Access to Culturally and Linguistically Relevant School Environments?

Culturally and linguistically relevant school environments view students’ identities, home cultures, and home languages as valuable assets and resources to support learning (Hollie, 2012; New Mexico Public Education Department, 2020). These environments utilize instructional and engagement practices that empower students to connect their in-school learning to their out-of-school experiences and identities (Gay, 2013; Goldston, 2017). Teachers create engaging and effective learning experiences for students from diverse cultural backgrounds by providing opportunities for students to use their “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance styles” (Gay, 2000, p. 31). Teachers also build students’ cultural and sociopolitical knowledge by connecting classroom discussions to real-world events, having students work together in diverse groups, and engaging in critical reflection about issues of race, politics, and justice (Goldston, 2017; Krasnoff, 2016; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005). Culturally and linguistically relevant learning environments support both student academic and sociopolitical development (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Research suggests that culturally and linguistically relevant learning experiences have a meaningful impact on student outcomes, including achievement, attendance, and engagement (Byrd, 2016; Borrero & Yeh, 2011; Muniz, 2019). Likewise, students have been found to develop a stronger sense of belonging and sense of cultural affirmation when their schools utilize culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (Dee & Penner, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2004). This approach to education can play a powerful role in advancing equity by ensuring all students, including those from historically marginalized racial/ethnic backgrounds, have access to rigorous, engaging, and effective educational experiences.

What Did We Learn About Student Access to Culturally and Linguistically Relevant School Environments?

In focus groups, many RIMSD staff, students, and parents identified experiences of cultural and linguistic diversity in their schools. Students discussed opportunities to learn about different life experiences through their ELA classes, as well as representation of different cultures in their curricula. One Washington Junior High School student highlighted their exposure to different cultures in history class:

I just felt like good to learn ... what the other cultures do compared to yours. And then you can respect those other cultures and understand what they do differently It's kind of cool to learn.

Another Washington Junior High School student celebrated the Community Club, describing it as an important space to “learn about different sexualities and what it means to have a different sexuality.” Diverse families also explained that their children have had the opportunity to share their cultures in class. A non-English-speaking parent described how their child had the opportunity to wear their traditional dress at school. Similarly, a bilingual parent reflected on their child’s opportunity to celebrate *Dia de los Muertos* in school, explaining that such representation “makes me feel good because I’m like, okay, well, they’re actually interested in for you to know what this means to us.”

At the same time, students identified limitations to the cultural and linguistic inclusivity of their schools. Some students described other students as disrespectful. One Thurgood Marshall student described classmates as aggressive, and one Edison Junior High School student described peers making racist jokes during a unit on slavery. Some students also perceived staff as creating a school environment that was not inclusive. One Rock Island High School student described a negative experience with a former school staff member, explaining that “he was really disrespectful... and would always kind of like yell at me in front of other people.” In addition, students hoped for a wider range of diverse experiences to be included in school curricula. For example, one Edison Junior High School student explained that many cultures beyond Black and White people are not reflected in their curricula. A Karen student explained that their identity is not “talked about enough,” even though they make up a meaningful population in the school.

Professional Development to Support Culturally and Linguistically Relevant School Environments

RIMSD efforts to support culturally and linguistically relevant school environments are represented by a robust commitment to professional development. The district’s CQ team has led efforts to expand cultural competence in RIMSD schools, including compiling the *Implicit Bias Guide: Mitigating Measures* to support school-level conversations on bias, convening a Critical & Courageous Conversations learning series, partnering with the YWCA on the Revolutionary Readers program, and maintaining the CQ corner in regular district newsletters. Cultural competence learning is also part of other professional development efforts, including a robust list of resources to support equity and cultural responsiveness on the RIMSD intranet. The district also supported equity-focused sessions facilitated during Teaching and Learning

conference days and summertime, such as a session on Developing Trauma-Informed Classrooms, as well as sessions focused on mental health and English learners. In addition, the district monitors schools for continuous growth in cultural competence, using a rubric focused on student performance, instructional practice, family engagement, and school organizational culture.

While the district facilitates meaningful professional development on cultural competence, some teachers identified ongoing gaps. School staff celebrated the district’s diversity and the many existing resources to support cultural and linguistic competence, with one staff member describing it as “phenomenal work.” However, a school staff member explained that too few teachers participate in professional development opportunities to expand cultural competence, while another asked if it would be possible to make this professional development compulsory. A school administrator suggested that there may not be districtwide understanding of what cultural competence means in practice:

We have surveys that go out that kind of gauge cultural competence ... But we don't really clarify what it looks like ... Staff [don't] know how to go deeper.

Staff also expressed an interest in expanded professional development opportunities to help them better meet the needs of all students. Staff identified this as particularly important for working with English learner students. Multiple teachers shared a desire for additional trainings on engaging students and families who speak a language other than English, particularly, as one teacher explained, because the district is “growing so quickly in our refugee and immigrant population.”

Core Area 3: Families

RIMSD has made it a strategic priority to engage all community stakeholders, and especially the families of RIMSD students, by building respectful relationships. The RIM Pipeline to a Productive Future Strategic Plan (2020–2025) represents a clear commitment among district leaders and staff to expand family engagement through two-way communication, opportunities for community feedback, and meaningful and inclusive activities for families and parents. This dedication is echoed in the district’s Equity Statement, which highlights RIMSD’s responsibilities to serve as a community asset, maintain consistent family and community collaboration, and create space to celebrate diverse experiences. These efforts have been led by the district’s Family and Community Engagement (FACE) team, with a focus on building respectful

relationships; fostering a positive climate of mutual trust and respect; and promoting a culture of respect, understanding, and acceptance. Activities have included expanding and monitoring family engagement events, supporting school-based family engagement teams, and working with community family members through Partners in Education. Family and community engagement work has also involved significant investment in translation and interpretation services to support communications with non-English-speaking families.

While RIMSD has made a significant investment in supporting family engagement, district leadership is aware that barriers still exist in ensuring that all students and families have access to meaningful engagement opportunities. Accordingly, RIMSD leadership, the EASC, and AIR staff identified a guiding question for Core Area 3 to learn more about student experiences in the district: **To what extent and in what ways are family and community engagement efforts successful in promoting participation and belonging for RIMSD’s diverse family and community members?** To investigate, AIR researchers focused on RIMSD’s family and community engagement activities and the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students and families. The following sections detail key findings from the Core Area 3 data analysis process, relevant research on the topic, and the data on which each finding is based.

Key Finding: RIMSD Maintained a Robust Infrastructure for Supporting Family Engagement Activities and Facilitating One-Way Communication, But Improvements Are Needed in Two-Way Communication and Opportunities to Engage Non-English-Speaking Families

What Does the Research Say About Family and Community Engagement?

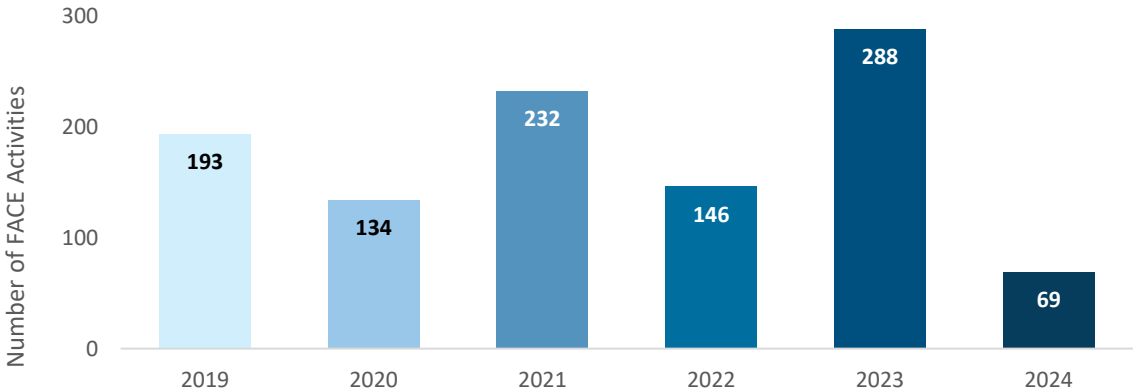
Family engagement in school is important for child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and is associated with improved academic achievement and reductions in discipline referrals for students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Further, having parents and family members engaged in school is a significant predictor of a child’s cognitive skills and social and emotional skills, such as motivation, attention, impulse control, and self-confidence (Boberiene, 2013). Schools can support family engagement by focusing on improving relationships with students’ communities; developing inclusive and individualized opportunities for family participation, as well as opportunities for parent education; and offering activities that engage students and families together (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Two-way communication—opportunities for parents and schools to correspond—are especially important for driving effective family engagement (Boberiene, 2013; Benson, n.d.). Likewise, family engagement is most meaningful when it includes opportunities for families to participate in school decision-making, volunteering, and community collaborations (Epstein et al., 2018).

Family and community engagement efforts in school are particularly important for students with families who do not speak English. Such families often experience a lower level of engagement, and language and cultural barriers can make families feel unwelcome, powerless, and marginalized (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Schools can support the engagement of linguistically diverse families by encouraging parents to support learning at home in their home languages, along with other practices that engage families in school learning (Barrueco et al., 2017). Equitable family engagement thrives when schools connect with families outside of school, partner with community organizations, and identify the best communication tools to reach diverse families (Breiseth, 2021; Jacques & Villegas, 2018).

What Did We Learn About Family and Community Engagement in RIMSD?

RIMSD’s efforts to support family and community engagement have been led by the FACE team, which is made up of district leaders and family and community liaisons. This team has developed resources to support engagement activities, with school-based family engagement teams playing an important role in organizing activities. In 2023, FACE activities included holiday celebrations, meetings for parents and teachers, activities that celebrated art and music, parenting classes, discussions of district and school policies, and more. To ensure that these activities reach students and families, the district has developed monitoring metrics to track events, staff perspectives, and participant attendance. Data highlight that the number of FACE activities grew throughout the district between 2019 and 2023, as depicted in Exhibit 28. Two hundred and eighty-eight activities were hosted in RIMSD in 2023, compared with 193 in 2019, with activities most common at Eugene Field Elementary. Recent FACE events have reached many district community members, with around 50% of activities welcoming 60 or more attendees in each year between 2019 and 2023. Initial data from the 2023–24 school year suggest growing attendance, with 71% of the 69 events held so far attracting 60 or more attendees.

Exhibit 28. The Number of Family and Community Engagement Events Was Highest in 2023



Note. Data for the 2023–24 school year are incomplete and only reflect events held through October 2023.

Meaningful family engagement at RIMSD includes the work of the district’s translation and interpretation teams. One district leader explained that RIMSD does a “fabulous job at having items translated,” while another staff member described the usefulness of translation services in their work with English learner students and families. At the same time, staff described limitations in their ability to use these support resources. One family services worker said that they could not access translation services in all needed languages, and an elementary school teacher explained that “it takes a lot to get an interpreter in my case.”

Parent and Family Perspectives on Communications With the District

Overall, family members appreciated the district’s communication efforts and reported that they can communicate with their children’s teachers. However, the ease and frequency with which family members accessed these services varied, including among speakers of the same language. English-speaking parents shared that they regularly received updates from their children’s teachers through Remind, text messages, paper materials, Class Dojo, emails, and the Skyward platform. Parents received information about events going on at school, homework, grades, assignments, and what students were learning. Parents whose primary language is not English experienced more varied frequency and ease of communication. Several parents expressed that they were able to communicate with teachers through in-person and tele-interpreters, as well as email and text. One parent explained that “it’s very easy and whenever we contact them in any way, they would bring an interpreter [Translation].” However, this feeling was not shared by all parents, with one explaining that, “honestly, I think they do their best, but I don’t understand because it’s all in English [Translation].” This perspective was shared by another parent who described challenges in communicating with teachers:

I don’t have any way to find out information if I want to find out how my kids are doing because I don’t know how to call; the only way I could do it is to call through an interpreter, but [I don’t know how to do that]. [Translation]

Parents’ varied experiences communicating with their children’s schools highlighted the importance of both two-way communication and parent education opportunities. Both staff and parents who spoke languages other than English highlighted a need for more support in accessing translation and interpretation services. School leaders recognized these limitations, with one leader explaining that “[schools] do an excellent job with one-way communication that is not timely in nature, but there is not a true methodology to two-way communication.”

Parents reported hearing from teachers about a range of topics, from daily updates to more intentional conversations about their children’s needs, particularly during parent–teacher

conferences. However, both English-speaking and non-English-speaking parents expressed a desire for more regular updates regarding their children’s performance. One parent explained that they “think it would be very helpful if they would give us periodic reports on how the children are faring in school [...] not just to get a report card after the term.” Another parent expressed, “I do want them to improve contacting me with interpreters because I really want to know how my kids are doing in terms of their grades [...] so I can do my part at home.

[*Translation*]” Parents discussed that they want to be able to support their children’s education at home but find that communication sometimes arrives too late. Most parents suggested that they take a hands-on approach to their children’s education but found that if there was an issue with their child, they did not hear about it until after the fact. For example, parents reported that they did not know there was an issue with their child’s behavior until they received a call from a principal.

Both English-speaking and non-English-speaking parents expressed a desire to be more involved in school and district events but identified obstacles such as interpretation assistance and a lack of transparency. Two parents whose primary language is not English expressed a desire to be more involved in school but need access to interpreters and transportation. This was stressed by one parent, who asked:

Please don’t leave me behind in case there are meetings. I would not want to be left behind on anything written to the children’s schooling, and also with the opportunities to visit the children in school. I would also appreciate that.

[Translation]

At the district level, some parents described a lack of transparency, communication, and agency. Even if they were involved in the district, one parent explained that “there is no communication or transparency; [they] might hear from teachers and principals, but districtwide it would be nice to have some kind of information on what is coming up.” Other parents were frustrated by this lack of communication and described that they “really don’t think we have the opportunity or platform to voice our concerns. [The] district is really big on ‘inclusion,’ but what does that actually mean?” Another parent commented, “the district would say that there are platforms to share opinions, but I feel that concerns are not heard or valued. Many parents in the district feel this way. It is just frustrating. Where is the action?” Many parents reported taking their calls to action straight to board meetings and still saw no change or indication that they were heard. From an equity perspective, one parent voiced, “I don’t feel like, as a parent, I have been given a platform, especially as an African American parent.”

Minority parents also expressed feelings of unwelcomeness upon entering the school building to resolve issues regarding their students.

Despite their frustrations, all parents firmly believed that their children had access to rigorous learning experiences. Though there are challenges with communication and transparency, parents “feel like teachers are probably doing their best.” Parents of students who receive learning supports or English language support felt that “[the instruction is] very rigorous” and that their children were not being left behind. Other parents were extremely grateful for teachers’ efforts to help their children grow academically and, as one explained, make “school [feel] like a second home for the children.” One parent enthusiastically shared their appreciation for RIMSD, explaining:

Would not trade [the] education children are receiving with anywhere in this area. The academic part is strong in our district.

Core Area 4: Resource Allocation

RIMSD has made it a strategic priority to equitably allocate resources. The RIM Pipeline to a Productive Future Strategic Plan (2020–2025) represents a clear commitment to equitable resource allocation that supports student access to opportunities, as well as ensuring that all buildings are safe, modern, and welcoming. This dedication is echoed in the district’s Equity Statement, which highlights RIMSD’s responsibilities to create an equitable learning environment for all students. These efforts are reflected by the district meeting or exceeding targets in 2023 to complete and update Life Safety Reports, meet compliance on the Regional Office of Education Facility Compliance Report, and maintain a comprehensive district maintenance plan.

District leaders understand that challenges remain in equitable resource allocation in RIMSD. Accordingly, RIMSD leadership, the EASC, and AIR staff identified a guiding question for Core Area 4 to learn more about resource allocation in the district: **How do district policies and processes support equitable distribution of resources based on student needs?** To investigate, AIR researchers focused on school spending metrics and the perspectives of school leaders on district facilities. The following sections detail key findings from the Core Area 4 data analysis process, relevant research on the topic, and the data on which each finding is based.

Key Finding: Teacher Salary Data Highlight Uneven Distribution of Teacher Experience and Education Across the District

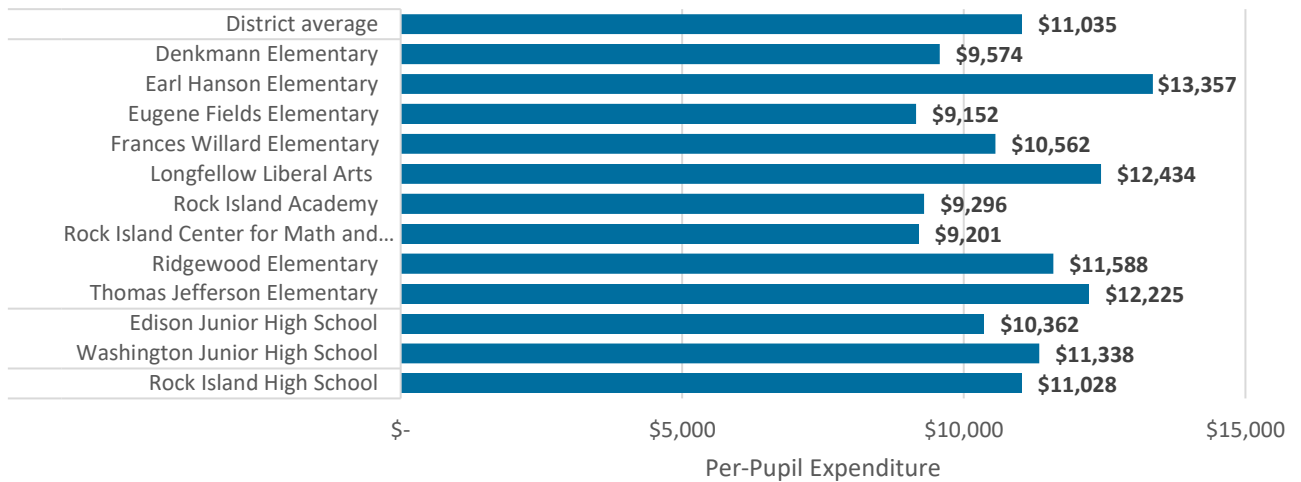
What Does the Research Say About Resource Allocation and Teacher Salaries?

Decades of research have documented unequal funding and inequitable access to experienced, high-quality educators across student races/ethnicities and socioeconomic status (e.g., Baker, 2017; Clotfelter et al., 2006). Simply put, lack of access to high-quality instructional resources prevents students from receiving adequate opportunities to learn (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2004). Lack of access to high-quality instructional resources is often intertwined with lack of access to highly qualified teachers, and research suggests that 80% of district budgets and expenditures are tied to staffing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Accordingly, district and school per-pupil spending are common metrics in accountability report cards in states, in the interest of providing transparency to the public on the extent to which districts are allocating resources equitably to meet student needs (Chiefs for Change, 2017). However, pupil expenditures can be misleading in terms of representing resource allocation decisions because teachers are typically paid according to a district-level salary schedule (Knight, 2017).

What Did We Learn About Resource Allocation and Teacher Salaries in RIMSD?

Analyses of per-pupil expenditures at the school level for RIMSD from the 2021-22 school year (Exhibit 29) suggest that the district allocated fewer resources to some schools than others. However, the district's direct allocation of dollars to schools is quite small compared with the overall budget, and the district only has control over about 8% of the budget to allocate on discretionary needs. Likewise, Title funding was allocated to all schools at the same per-pupil rate. As such, a comparison of per-pupil expenditures alone does not provide significant information regarding resource allocation decisions in the district.

Exhibit 29. There Was Some Variation in Per-Pupil Expenditures Across the District During the 2021-22 School Year



Accordingly, analysis on resource allocation must look into differences in teacher salaries. It is important to put staffing and financial data in conversation with each other in ways that elucidate how the distribution of teacher experience and education (which varies significantly across schools) is potentially a driving factor behind inequities in educational outcomes. While it is true that RIMSD has little control over teacher salaries as a function of the teacher collective bargaining agreement, inequities in access to high-quality instructional resources in school districts are directly linked to the inequitable distribution of teacher experience across schools (Knight, 2017). This has financial implications for the district.

Teacher salary and education data from the 2020-21 through 2022-23 school years are summarized in Exhibit 30. Base salary rates, which are used to determine eligibility for Title I funds across schools, are comparable across the district. However, salaries determined by the STEP schedule range from \$67,103 at Frances Willard to \$85,116 at Ridgewood Elementary. Exhibit 30 also details the percentage of teachers with master’s degrees and the median STEP for teachers in the school. The percentage of teachers with master’s degrees ranges from 57% to 83% and the median step level ranges from 10 to 24. The intersection of resource allocation and workforce data underscores the importance of putting different data sources in conversation with each other as a more impactful way to understand disparities in students’ educational experiences and outcomes.

Exhibit 30. There Were Meaningful Differences in Teacher Salaries and Levels of Experience Across RIMSD Schools in 2022–23

School	Student Enrollment	Pupil-Teacher Ratio	Total # of Teachers	% of Teachers with Masters	Base Salary	Avg. STEP Salary	Median STEP Level
Ridgewood	269	10.8	25	72%	\$48,055	\$85,116	24
Earl Hanson	229	9.5	24	83%	\$53,941	\$82,031	18
Rock Island Center for Math and Science	442	15.8	28	79%	\$51,912	\$81,808	20
Thomas Jefferson	276	10.2	27	78%	\$46,046	\$81,031	22
Denkmann	368	16	23	70%	\$49,115	\$80,751	24
Longfellow	226	14.1	16	63%	\$49,078	\$78,362	19
Thurgood Marshall	115	9.6	12	83%	\$49,954	\$77,815	18
Edison Junior High	423	13.2	32	59%	\$43,987	\$75,636	20
Washington Junior High	511	13.8	37	84%	\$45,927	\$72,076	12
Eugene Fields	434	18.9	23	65%	\$51,956	\$71,981	11
Rock Island Academy	517	15.7	33	61%	\$51,226	\$67,615	11
Frances Willard	350	15.2	23	57%	\$49,069	\$67,104	10

Note. Salary and education data for Rock Island High School were not provided at the time of request.

Key Finding: RIMSD Has Made Meaningful Investments in Instruction and Facilities, But Community Members Identified Lingering Needs and Inequities Across Schools

RIMSD’s budgeted expenditures reflect an understanding of student needs in the district. RIMSD’s estimated expenditure documents from SY2020–21 through SY2023–24 suggested 23% of the district’s instructional spending (\$57.6 million) in 2023–24 is invested in special education services (\$10.2 million) and bilingual programs (\$2.1 million), representing a 3% increase from SY2021–22. Dollars budgeted for student support services in the areas of

attendance and social work also increased by 18% between SY2021–22 and the current school year. This reflects the addition of staff, as well as services that may help to address recent increases in chronic absenteeism.

RIMSD also shared the distribution of \$68 million in capital improvement expenditures from SY2018–19 through SY2023–24. The cumulative expenditure analysis revealed substantial investment in critical facets of facilities improvement, with heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC), security, and roofing collectively accounting for a significant portion of overall spending. Notably, HVAC expenses accounted for 34% of capital spending, in line with national trends in HVAC spending following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (DiMarco & Jordan, 2022). Security allocations accounted for 23%, underscoring the commitment to safeguarding the premises. Roofing costs represented a considerable 18%, emphasizing the priority given to maintaining and fortifying the structural integrity of buildings. These combined expenditures highlight a deliberate strategy to enhance infrastructure and ensure both functionality and safety across the district.²

At the same time, RIMSD school leaders identified noticeable gaps in district resources across schools. Some school leaders explained that there was a lack of transparency regarding the distribution of resources and community partners, while a school leader explained that there were many “parameters and red tape to go through in terms of spending ... money.” Another school leader pointed to inequities in the distribution of staff across district schools, highlighting that some elementary schools have assistant principals and behavioral support staff while others do not. These perspectives on inequities were echoed by district school leaders regarding facilities. One school leader highlighted accessibility issues that limit some students and families from accessing upstairs floors in certain buildings. These disparities were highlighted by a school leader who compared the district’s two junior high schools:

I would certainly love to know how decisions are made with regards to building maintenance and repairs. We only have two junior high schools in our district, and...[o]ur two schools look like they belong in two different districts.

² Capital improvement projects were categorized based on the titles of the projects. When a project title indicated more than one category of improvement (e.g., security and roofing), we split the amount across both categories. This may result in over- or under-inflation of individual categories within facilities improvement but does not diminish the significance in understanding how RIMSD is using capital improvement dollars.

Recommendations to Support Equity in RIMSD

Recommendations to Support Rigorous and Inclusive Instruction

Teachers are eager to deliver rigorous and inclusive instruction and the district has developed meaningful tools to support instruction and curricula. However, many teachers feel ill-equipped and constrained when it comes to delivering instruction in ways that support the diversity of RIMSD students. While the district has provided supports, such as the instructional toolbox and professional development opportunities, there seems to be a disconnect. Teachers do not feel that they have the necessary time to apply what they learn through these resources and would like to use ready-made materials. **To meet this need, RIMSD leadership can consider working with school leaders, teachers, and the teachers' union to identify ways to provide learning opportunities that include sufficient time for educators to apply learning.** If educators have more time to learn about and practice implementing curricula and instructional resources, they may be more effective in their instruction and more willing to consider underutilized resources.

Teachers in certain schools have identified solutions for delivering rigorous and inclusive instruction that may be possible to scale and may help to alleviate other issues. For example, teachers identified co-teaching as an especially impactful addition to their classroom, benefiting students with additional needs and the general student population. **An expansion of co-teaching opportunities may benefit students and educators by improving the quality of instruction, increasing student engagement, and decreasing behavioral issues** (Jones & Winters, 2023).

Recommendation to Support Workforce Diversity

Many RIMSD community members expressed a love of the district community but understood that many diverse applicants may not see the district as welcoming of all identities. **One way the district can make the community more welcoming for teachers of color and other marginalized identities is by creating workplace affinity groups.** These spaces provide staff and teachers with opportunities to develop community among similar peers and discuss success and challenges in their schools that may be specific to their identities. These spaces can help teachers of color to navigate feelings of isolation and find community. Research on affinity spaces suggests that they are an effective way to put diversity into action and boost a sense of belonging and inclusion (Catalino et al., 2022; Great Schools Partnership, n.d.).

Recommendations to Support Culturally and Linguistically Relevant Family Engagement

RIMSD has made a significant investment in resources and efforts to create culturally and linguistically relevant environments, including the CQ team, the FACE team, and interpretation services. These are valued resources throughout the district, but there are opportunities to further expand RIMSD's efforts to meet community members' needs. For example, interpretation is not available in all languages—a barrier noted by both parents and staff. Similarly, while some cultures have been integrated into district activities (e.g., *Día de los Muertos*), there is a desire for more cultural activities and opportunities (e.g., language instruction) that engage diverse students and families. Many families want to be involved in school activities but are hesitant to participate because of language barriers. **The district may benefit from expanding FACE activities that provide opportunities for speakers of the same language to come together. These activities may provide parents with a space to build relationships, share resources, and come together to volunteer for the district.**

While the FACE team collects meaningful data about the number of engagement events, as well as attendance counts and other data provided by schools' family engagement teams, there was no information about attendees. **To better understand current participation trends, and to better target future activities, the FACE team can enhance data collection efforts to track participant demographics.** Potential attendee data for collection may include race, language spoken at home, country of origin, and the English learner and special education status of children.

RIMSD district leaders and staff spoke highly of the services provided by community organizations, such as mental health resources and supports for refugee students provided through World Relief. **District community members see a need for expanded partnerships with the larger Rock Island and Quad Cities communities to deal with many of the challenges facing RIMSD.** For example, partnerships with community organizations would benefit efforts to address concerns regarding discipline and safety; develop trusting relationships between students, parents, and teachers; and address health- and transportation-related drivers of chronic absenteeism. These partners may assist the district in meeting student resource needs and can help to bridge some of the gaps staff experience in finding productive ways to engage students and families.

Recommendations to Support Equitable Resource Allocation

Though the district's budgets are limited by staffing, it is important for RIMSD to ensure that available discretionary spending is equitably used. **Many school districts around the country use structured processes to assess the suitability of school spaces for instructional needs, as well as facilities' physical status and safety. RIMSD should embrace such assessments in its**

review of school conditions and the school spaces students need to thrive. These assessments may also be important for improving transparency in resource allocation decision making. Examples of these assessments include the following:

- [School District of Philadelphia: Facilities Planning Process](#)
- [DeKalb County School District: Educational Suitability Assessment Guide](#)
- [Austin Independent School District: Educational Suitability Assessment](#)

In addition, **the Alliance for Resource Equity has developed guidebooks and other resources to support district- and school-level planning for equitable school funding and learning-ready facilities. RIMSD should use these resources to identify actions needed to improve equity across schools.** Resources include the following:

- [Resource Equity Guidebook: School Funding](#)
- [Resource Equity Guidebook: Learning-Ready Facilities](#)
- [Resource Equity Diagnostic Tool](#)

Recommendations to Support Overall Data System Improvements for Equity

Decisions to address and promote equity are only as good as the data on which they are based. RIMSD leverages Illinois report card data to track year-over-year patterns and trends in student outcomes but is limited by the indicators, data sources, and business rules specified in the report cards, which do not always align with RIMSD’s information needs. Many school districts, like RIMSD, have an abundance of data, yet the extent to which those data are accessible, comprehensible, and useful to education stakeholders varies. In conducting the equity audit, AIR learned of RIMSD’s rich data environment and the myriad ways in which data entered dialogue around students, staff, resource allocation, and family and community engagement. RIMSD leaders agreed that many strategies for data collection, analysis, reporting, and use are siloed from each other, and that it is challenging to put data from different sources “in conversation” with each other. RIMSD expressed interest in specific strategies that would enhance its capacity to access, analyze, and use data to address issues of equity and strengthen overall data capacity as a district. **AIR suggests two recommendations for RIMSD’s data strategy that will enhance current efforts to improve data quality, as well as suggestions for developing further capacity going forward. Likewise, these recommendations will enable the district to better monitor data for equity concerns, as well as monitor the implementation of policies to improve equity across RIMSD.** The first recommendation pertains directly to the “business of data” in the district, while the second pertains to setting up RIMSD with quality data sets to support goal setting, benchmarking, and progress monitoring of equity initiatives.

Establish a Districtwide Data Team, Policies, and Practices

As RIMSD deepens its use of data to inform decision making, it will be valuable to invest time and resources in developing key data policies and practices. Specific policies enable district and school users and managers of K–12 data to have clear understandings of data definitions, data ownership, authority, accountability, security, reporting needs and requirements, and the accompanying processes and timelines. Importantly, these policies and practices are not primarily about technologies or the tools and systems used to collect and store data. Rather, the policies predominantly address the people and processes involved in maintaining safe and effective data management, use, analysis, and communication (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2020). The creation of these specific policies and practices could be spearheaded by a districtwide data strategy team, who would be responsible for overseeing the implementation and continuous improvement of data policies and practices. This team should include individuals with interest, experience, and expertise in data management, analysis, and cross-department collaboration. The team would be responsible for regularly reviewing and updating data policies and practices (described below) to align with changing district needs and external regulations. Further, the team would develop and facilitate routines and protocols for departments to engage in a collaborative review of data quality and analysis that is aligned to reporting calendars.

The team would be tasked with developing and overseeing specific policies and practices, including the following:

- **District data dictionary and standardized definitions:** Develop a centralized data dictionary that outlines standardized data definitions used in priority reporting areas, ensuring a common understanding of key terms across the district. This dictionary should be easily accessible to all users and regularly updated to reflect changes or additions. Clear and consistent data definitions are important to avoid misunderstandings and discrepancies in reporting and analysis.
- **Data ownership and authority:** Clearly define data ownership and authority structures within the district. Specify who owns specific data sets and who has the authority to make decisions regarding data access, modification, and sharing. Implement a process for requesting and granting data access permissions, ensuring that access is granted based on job responsibilities and the principle of least privilege. This practice aims to enhance data security and maintain the integrity of information.
- **Accountability and reporting processes:** Establish transparent accountability mechanisms for data quality and reporting accuracy. Implement regular audits and checks to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. Clearly communicate reporting needs and requirements to district and school users, emphasizing the

importance of timely and accurate data submission. Develop a protocol for addressing data discrepancies and errors, including a process for corrections and updates.

- **Data security and privacy protocols:** Prioritize data security and privacy by implementing robust protocols and practices. Define and communicate data security measures to protect sensitive information and develop clear guidelines for handling and storing personally identifiable information outside of district data systems, in compliance with relevant privacy laws and regulations. Provide training for district and school staff on data security best practices to mitigate the risk of data breaches.
- **Data literacy training:** Institute ongoing training programs to enhance the data literacy skills of staff involved in data-related tasks. Develop a curriculum that covers fundamental data concepts, interpretation of data reports, and the effective use of data for decision making. Ensure that these programs are accessible to all staff, from teachers to administrators, and tailor the training content to address the specific needs of different roles within the district. Regularly assess the effectiveness of these programs and adjust as needed to meet evolving skill requirements.
- **Technology integration:** Regularly assess the technology landscape to ensure it continues to meet the district’s evolving data management needs without compromising security and compliance. Ensure that the selected data management tools and systems align with established policies and practices. Implement user-friendly interfaces and provide training sessions to facilitate user understanding and adoption of the technology.

Taking these steps would reduce districtwide issues with accessing and using data, help to minimize inefficiencies in data collection and storage, avoid poor data decisions or planning that erode public trust in the district’s ability to securely collect and maintain data, and eliminate data misinterpretation and misrepresentation.

Establish a Baseline of Quality Data for All Equity Areas of Focus

Assessing progress toward equity requires confidence in the baseline data against which patterns and trends can be compared. As AIR collected data for the audit, we learned of instances where data had been entered incorrectly or changed without proper reason, resulting in data quality issues and misinterpretation of data. For example, AIR encountered 28 possible course names for Algebra 1 over 3 years, without clear patterns as to how names evolved or were aligned with the state course ID, department codes, or enrollment population. Furthermore, RIMSD provided AIR with up to 9 years of student and staff data (SY2015–SY2023) but a recent change in student information systems (SIS) had created a “break” in continuity regarding data quality. This resulted in a disclaimer that the data provided before the SIS

change were developed under different data standards, with less consistency in data entry and less confidence in data quality. AIR encountered many of these issues when attempting to summarize all 9 years of data and, as a result, truncated several analyses to focus only on the last 3–5 years.

AIR recommends that RIMSD invests time and resources to address data quality issues related to student and staff data from SY2022–23 and SY2023–24. Hopefully, RIMSD can leverage the clean data sets AIR created for this audit as an anchor for the work. We specifically recommend the following steps to improve baseline and future data quality:

- Create a field in the SIS that tags gifted and talented students across the district.
- Create a data dictionary and data standards for local course IDs and course names, and update course fields in the SIS to align with an internal coding system that can be consistently applied to distinguish course types (e.g., honors, general, enrichment, and remedial) or flag whether a course is specific to special education services or English learners.
- Create a field in the SIS that aligns discipline reasons with the distinct categories of discipline described in the Student Code of Conduct. This will allow the district to better understand the extent to which discipline outcomes align with the expected assignment of discipline, given the category of severity.
- Review and rename employment fields for staff to capture staff entrance (e.g., original date of hire in the district and role at that time), progress (e.g., date when tenure is achieved), mobility (e.g., date when a staff member starts in a different school or changes role), exit (e.g., reason for termination, retirement, etc.), and credentials received.

Conclusion

AIR analyzed a range of RIMSD data, including focus group data; data on student achievement, discipline, assignment to gifted and talented programs, the workforce, and resource allocation; and data from district documents. RIMSD school leaders, staff, teachers, parents, and other community members used much of these data in the RCA process to highlight potential causes of findings and inform priorities for this report.

The equity audit process revealed both meaningful successes and ongoing challenges regarding equity in the district. While differences persist across student groups in student achievement, discipline, and chronic absenteeism, RIMSD is invested in expanding tools and resources that

benefit all students, especially students of color and those needing additional support. In terms of RIMSD staff, the district has been working to expand diverse hiring and professional development opportunities related to cultural and linguistic inclusion. Nonetheless, gaps remain in students' access to experienced teachers, and more work is needed to improve cultural and linguistic diversity in classrooms. RIMSD has excelled in providing family engagement activities and one-way communication, but improvements are needed in two-way communication and opportunities to engage non-English-speaking families. Lastly, while the district is committed to achieving equity in resource allocation, there are meaningful differences in teacher salaries and facilities across RIMSD schools.

In summary, this report describes a school district that is consistently working to improve equity for all its students and families. However, more work is needed, and the recommendations in this report may provide a good place to start. RIMSD has a strong foundation on which to make positive changes to policies and practices, and its many community members are prepared to take the next steps to advance equity for all.

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Appendix A. Guiding Questions

The finalized guiding questions were submitted to Rock Island – Milan School District #41 school leaders as a deliverable on July 3, 2023. A copy of this guiding questions document is provided in this appendix.

Rock Island – Milan School District #41

District Equity Audit

Guiding Questions



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Core Area 1: Student Achievement, Discipline, and School Climate

To what extent and in what ways are there group differences in students' access to rigorous and inclusive learning environments?

- To what extent and in what ways are there racial, gender, and socioeconomic disproportionalities in enrollment in Gifted and Talented, Honors, Advanced Placement, and post-secondary pathways?
- To what extent are there disparities in access to core/Tier 1 instruction due to:
 - Access to resources/support for students with different educational needs (e.g., students with disabilities; English Learners)?
 - Disciplinary processes and outcomes (e.g., referrals, reason for referral, outcome)?
- To what extent and in what ways are there group differences in:
 - Students' perceptions of belonging, expectations for learning, and academic and socioemotional support at school?
 - Teachers' perceptions of students' socioemotional wellbeing, particularly for students with disabilities?
 - How do teachers' perceptions compare to students' perceptions?

Core Area 2: Workforce Diversity, Professional Development, and Classroom Instruction

How effective has the district been in promoting equitable access to diverse, effective, and culturally and linguistically competent teachers?

- To what extent and in what ways are there group differences in students' access to teachers who are experienced in the profession and the district?
- How have hiring practices/policies affected students' access to racially diverse teachers, administrators, and other staff members?
- How have professional learning opportunities supported teachers in building cultural and linguistic competence and delivering culturally and linguistically responsive instruction?
 - How does the district monitor implementation of professional learning strategies?

Core Area 3: Family and Community Engagement

To what extent and in what ways are family and community engagement efforts successful in promoting participation and belonging for RIMSD's diverse family and community members?

- How do schools use the available resources (e.g., translation services, diverse methods of communication) to engage families in equitable and inclusive ways?
- What are the preferred methods of one-way and two-way communication among culturally and linguistically diverse families?
- To what extent and in what ways do RIMSD's culturally and linguistically diverse families and community members experience a sense of belonging and voice?

Core Area 4: School-Level Spending

How do district policies and processes support equitable distribution of resources based on student needs?

- What guidance does the district provide to schools regarding decisions about resource allocation and use?
 - How do student- and school-level data inform decisions about resource allocation?
 - How do existing policies and processes support equitable resource allocation?
 - How do existing policies and processes act as barriers to equitable resource allocation?
- To what extent do schools' resource allocation decisions equitably support the needs of their diverse student populations?
 - What student or school factors are considered when allocating funding for student learning?
 - How do schools assess the effectiveness of resource allocation in supporting equitable, high-quality learning?

Appendix B. Quantitative Data Methods

Exhibit B-1 details the administrative data used by the quantitative analysis team throughout this equity audit.

Exhibit B-1. Analytic Data Set for Quantitative Data Analysis

Guiding questions	Administrative data received (Years)
Core Area 1: Student achievement, discipline, and school climate	
<p>1. To what extent and in what ways are there group differences in students' access to rigorous and inclusive learning environments?</p> <p>1.1 To what extent and in what ways are there racial, gender, and socioeconomic disproportionalities in enrollment in gifted and talented, honors, advanced placement, and postsecondary pathways?</p> <p>1.2 To what extent are there disparities in access to core/Tier 1 instruction due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to resources/support for students with different educational needs (e.g., students with disabilities, English learners)? • Disciplinary processes and outcomes (e.g., referrals, reason for referral, outcome)? <p>1.3 To what extent and in what ways are there group differences in students' perceptions of belonging, expectations for learning, and academic and socio and emotional support at school?</p>	<p>Year-end student-level demographic and program data (2015–23)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School enrollment • Demographic characteristics³ (grade level, race, gender, ethnicity, birth country [proxy for immigration status]) • Participation data in bilingual education (English learner) • Participation in special education services • Days enrolled in Rock Island – Milan School District #41 (RIMSD) • Days attended school <p>Student well-being data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student satisfaction survey, aggregated at the district and school levels (2021–23) • Student-level discipline data (discipline reason, discipline outcome) (2015–23) <p>Student academic outcomes data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grade 3 Lexile scores and Grade 7 projected growth attainment from the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP; 2016–23) • Graduation outcomes (2015–23) • Illinois Assessment of Readiness (2015–22) • Advanced placement/International Baccalaureate participation (2015–23) and performance (2018–22) • SAT/Preliminary SAT (2018–22) <p>Not available: Postsecondary outcomes, subgroup differences in student climate data</p>

³ Data on free and reduced-price lunch were not provided by RIMSD. All schools are covered by Community Eligibility Provision and do not collect data except as provided through direct certification.

Guiding questions	Administrative data received (Years)
<p>1.4 To what extent and in what ways are there group differences in students' access to teachers who are experienced in the profession and the district?</p>	<p>Year-end, student-level demographic and program data (2015–23)</p> <p>Student course enrollment data (2015–23)</p> <p>Teacher-level data (2015–23)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity) • Grade level (elementary, middle school, high school) and subject (middle school and high school) • Years of experience • Retention (years in the district) <p>Number of counselors, school psychologists, school resource officers, and other support staff (2019–23)</p>
<p>1.5 To what extent and in what ways do the existing curricula and pedagogical approaches in RIMSD promote diversity, equity, and inclusion?</p>	<p>Course offerings related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (2015–23)</p>
<p>Core Area 2: Workforce diversity, professional development, and classroom instruction</p>	
<p>2. How effective has the district been in promoting equitable access to diverse, effective, and culturally and linguistically competent teachers?</p> <p>2.1 To what extent and in what ways are there group differences in students' access to teachers who are experienced in the profession and the district?</p> <p>2.2 How have hiring practices/policies affected students' access to racially diverse teachers, administrators, and other staff members?</p>	<p>Teacher-level data (2015–23)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographics (gender, race, ethnicity) • Grade level (elementary, middle school, high school) and subject (middle school and high school) • Years of experience • Retention (years in the district) <p>Teacher outcomes data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retention (2015–23) • Staff satisfaction survey, aggregated at the district and school levels (2021–23) <p>Number of counselors, school psychologists, school resource officers, and other support staff (2019–23)</p> <p>Note: Staff-level satisfaction data do not differentiate by staff role (e.g., teacher, support staff, building leader)</p>
<p>2.3 How have professional learning opportunities supported teachers in building cultural and linguistic competence and delivering culturally and linguistically responsive instruction?</p>	<p>Number of sessions, topics, and participation in recent professional development</p>

Guiding questions	Administrative data received (Years)
2.3.1 How does the district monitor implementation of professional learning strategies?	
Core Area 3: Family and community engagement	
3. To what extent and in what ways are family and community engagement efforts successful in promoting participation and belonging for RIMSD’s diverse family and community members?	District- and school-level family satisfaction/engagement surveys (2020–22) Attendance at family/community engagement events
Core Area 4: Resource allocation	
4. How do district policies and processes support equitable distribution of resources based on student needs?	Student- and school-level differences in overall per-pupil spending and by spending category (available from state report card, 2018–22)

Appendix C. Focus Group Collection and Analysis

The American Institutes for Research qualitative research team developed protocols for focus groups and interviews with students, parents and family members, staff, and school leaders. Some of the protocols are included in this appendix.

Family and Community Focus Group (English): Communication and Academic Environment

Communication

- 1) How often do you hear from your child's teacher or school, and what do they typically contact you about?
 - a) Probe: When your child is struggling at school – academically, socially, or behaviorally – how do you typically learn about the issue?

- 2) How often do you hear from the district, and what do they typically contact you about?

- 3) Is there anything you wish you would hear about more – from the teacher, school, or district?
 - a) How do you think that would help you or your child?

- 4) When you have a question or concern about your child, how easy or difficult is it to get in touch with their teacher or school?
 - a) Is there anything that would make this process easier?

Rigorous Learning Opportunities

- 5) Can you think of a time when a teacher or another staff member talked with you about your child's academic growth or potential?
 - a) Yes: How did that conversation go? Did it make you feel confident that your child was in good hands? Did it make you question whether your child would receive the support they needed?
 - b) No: Is there a time you wished someone had talked with you about your child's academic growth?

- 6) Would you say that your children's learning opportunities are very rigorous, not at all rigorous, or somewhere in the middle? Why? (Probe: Can you share an example?) [skip if short on time]

Culturally Responsive Engagement

Now I want you to think about both your experiences with the district and your child's experiences as a student.

- 7) Can you think of any cultural or language barriers you've encountered when trying to get information about your child(ren)?
 - a) How did that impact you or your child(ren)?

- 8) Can you think of a time when you felt like someone in the district really understood and respected you or your culture?
 - a) Yes: If you are comfortable sharing, what made you feel this way?
 - b) No: If you are comfortable sharing, can you think of anything that would help you feel understood/respected?

Closing

- 9) Is there anything you wish the district knew about your experience as a parent or community member?

Backup Questions

- 10) Can you think of an example when your child(ren) had an opportunity to learn about different types of people or cultures? What was that like for your child(ren)?

- 11) Can you think of an example when your children had an opportunity to share something about their culture or background at school? What was that like for your child(ren)?

- 12) Are there any ways you would like to be more involved in decisions/your child(ren)'s education?

Student Focus Group: Belonging, Achievement, Resources

Access to Academic Resources

- 1) When you need help with your schoolwork, where do you go to find it? (Probe for different types of support, like people, technology, at school/home, etc.)
- 2) Can you think of anything that your school could do that would make it easier for you to get help when you need it?

Access to Social/Emotional Resources

- 3) When you have a question or problem that you want to talk through, is there someone at school—maybe a friend, teacher, or counselor—that you feel comfortable talking with?
 - a) What is it about this person that makes you feel comfortable?
- 4) Can you think of anything your school could do to better support students when they have questions or problems like these?

Experiences of High Expectations at School

- 5) How would you describe your teachers' expectations for you, or for students in general? Do you feel like their expectations are very low, very high, or somewhere in the middle?
 - a) What do teachers do or say that makes you feel this way?
 - b) Do you think there are any groups of students who have more—or less—access to rigorous learning experiences than others?

Experiences of Belonging/Connection with Peers and Teachers

- 6) If you were to choose a word or phrase to describe the students at your school, what would it be?
- 7) Can you think of somewhere at school—maybe a class, a team, or a club—where you really enjoy being with the other students?
 - a) What makes this class/team/club special?

Backup Questions

- 8) Can you think of a time when you felt like someone at school really understood or respected you?
 - 1) What made you feel this way?

- 9) Can you think of a time when you felt like someone at school really did *not* understand or respect you?
- a) What made you feel this way?

Closing

- 10) Is there anything that you wish your teachers or principal knew about what it's like to be a student at your school?

School Leader Focus Group: Rigorous Instruction, Inclusive Instruction and Communication

Processes for Supporting Access to Rigorous Learning Experiences

My first questions are about students' learning experiences and the support your district provides staff and students. I'd like to hear about your perceptions of rigorous learning experiences. By this, I mean learning experiences where students are challenged and supported to grow, from whatever level they start at?

- 1) When you think about all of your district's goals, how much of a priority is it to provide *rigorous learning experiences*?
 - a. What makes you feel this way?
 - b. Can you think of any actions that the district has taken to create rigorous learning experiences for students?

- 2) Thinking about your school, are there any groups of students you're concerned may not be sufficiently challenged through core instruction? (e.g., students with different ability levels or prior exposure to class material)
 - a. What guidance do core instruction teachers receive for supporting these students?
 - b. Are there pathways for these students to find rigorous learning experiences outside of core instruction?
 - i. How are students identified for these pathways/programs?
 - ii. How, if at all, are families involved in this decision?
 - iii. Do you know of any district guidance for considering equity in these programs? (Probe: How students are identified, how families are involved)

- 3) Are there any groups of students that you're concerned may struggle to access or keep up with core instruction? (e.g., students with different ability levels, language proficiency, income brackets, immigration status)
 - a. What guidance do core instruction teachers receive for supporting these students?
 - b. Are there pathways outside of core instruction for students to receive additional support?
 - i. How are students identified for these pathways/programs?
 - ii. How, if at all, are families involved in this decision?

- iii. Do you know of any district guidance for considering equity in these programs? (Probe: How students are identified, how families are involved)

Disciplinary Process and Implications for Out of Class time

Now, I'd like to shift gears and think about behavioral and disciplinary issues that might affect student learning.

- 4) What would you say are the biggest challenge in terms of student behavior or disciplinary action at your school?
 - a. How does this issue affect learning – for the students involved and for other students?
 - b. Have you received any guidance from the district about how to address this issue?
 - i. Yes: What are the district's recommendations?
 - ii. No: How do you or your staff typically address this issue?
 - iii. Probe: Are parents ever involved?
 - 1. What is the process for getting them involved?
 - 2. Is there anything that seems to work particularly well when you involve parents?
 - 3. Is there anything that doesn't work so well? Why do you think that is?

Support for Student Socioemotional Wellbeing (particularly SWDs)

My next questions have to do with student wellbeing. Coming out of the pandemic, this is a big topic we're hearing about from educators across the country. I'd like to hear your perspective about students in your district.

- 5) How do you feel students are doing in terms of their socioemotional wellbeing?
 - a. Are there any particular socioemotional issues that come to mind?
 - i. How do these issues affect students? (Probe: engagement, friendships, performance)
 - b. Are there any students who struggle more than others in socioemotional wellbeing?
- 6) Does your school or district have any resources for supporting students' socioemotional wellbeing?
 - a. How do you access those resources?
 - b. Are there any that you've found particularly helpful?

- c. Are there any additional resources that would be helpful for your students or staff?
- 7) Are any of these resources that are tailored to specific students, like students with disabilities, English learners or students from lower-income families?
- a. How do these students' needs differ?
 - b. Have you used these resources?
 - i. No: Is there anything that prevents you from using them, or anything that draws you toward a different approach?
 - ii. Yes: How effective are the resources?
 - c. Can you think of other resources that would be helpful for these students?

Communications with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families [Skip if run out of time]

My last set of questions focuses on the resources you've used – or would like to have – to connect with culturally and linguistically diverse families and students. When I say “culturally and linguistically diverse” I'm referring both to people who speak different languages (e.g., English, Spanish, Swahili) and to people who have different cultural backgrounds – whether that's because of race, nationality, religion, or another identity.

- 8) Can you tell me about any resources that your district provides for engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families – either inside or outside of the classroom? (Probe for cultural diversity as well as linguistic diversity)
- a. Have you used these resources?
 - i. Yes: How often do you use them? How helpful have you found them to be?
 - ii. No: Was there anything preventing you from using them? Or anything that would have made it easier for you to use them?
- 9) In your experience, what have been the biggest barriers for engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families?
- a. Have you found any helpful strategies for overcoming these barriers?
- 10) How much of a priority would you say culturally responsive instruction is for your district?
- a. What makes you feel this way?
 - b. Can you think of any initiatives that have helped educators prioritize this? (Probe hiring)

i. How effective has this initiative been?

11) Can you think of any professional learning that you or your staff have received about how to engage culturally and linguistically diverse students and families?

a. Did you have any key takeaways from that experience?

b. Have you had a chance to try something you learned in your work with students or families? If so, how did it go?

Closing

12) Is there anything you wish the district knew about your experience as a school leader?

Staff Focus Group: Rigorous Instruction, Discipline, Wellbeing

Processes for Supporting Access to Rigorous Learning Experiences

- 1) When you think about all of your district's goals, how much of a priority is it to provide rigorous learning experiences? By this, I mean learning experiences where students are challenged and supported to grow, from whatever level they start at?
 - a. What makes you feel this way? Can you think of any specific examples?

- 2) Thinking about your school, are there any groups of students that you're concerned may not be sufficiently challenged through core instruction? (e.g., students with different ability levels or prior exposure to class material)
 - a. What guidance do core instruction teachers receive for supporting these students?
 - b. Are there pathways for these students to find rigorous learning experiences outside of core instruction?
 - i. How are students identified for these pathways/programs?
 - ii. How, if at all, are families involved in this decision?
 - iii. Do you know of any district guidance for considering equity in these programs? (Probe: How students are identified, how families are involved)

- 3) Are there any groups of students that you're concerned may struggle to access or keep up with core instruction? (e.g., students with different ability levels, language proficiency, income brackets, immigration status)
 - a. What guidance do core instruction teachers receive for supporting these students?
 - i. If "none," Can you think of anything that would be helpful?
 - b. Are there pathways outside of core instruction for students to receive additional support?
 - i. How are students identified for these pathways/programs?
 - ii. How, if at all, are families involved in this decision?
 - iii. Do you know of any district guidance for considering equity in these programs? (Probe: How students are identified, how families are involved)

Disciplinary Process and Implications for Out of Class time

Now, I'd like to shift gears and think about behavioral and disciplinary issues that might affect student learning.

- 4) What would you say are the biggest challenges in terms of student behavior or disciplinary action at your school?
 - a. How does this issue affect learning – for the students involved and for other students?
 - b. Have you received any guidance from the district or your school leadership about how to address this issue?
 - i. Yes: What are their recommendations?
 - ii. No: How do you typically address this issue?
 - iii. Probe: Are parents ever involved?
 1. What is the process for getting them involved?
 2. Is there anything that seems to work particularly well when you involve parents?
 3. Is there anything that doesn't work so well? Why do you think that is?

Support for Student Socioemotional Wellbeing (particularly SWDs)

My next questions have to do with student wellbeing. Coming out of the pandemic, this is a big topic we're hearing about from educators across the country. I'd like to hear your perspective about students in your district.

- 5) How do you feel students are doing in terms of their socioemotional wellbeing?
 - a. Are there any particular socioemotional issues that come to mind?
 - i. How do these issues affect students? (Probe: engagement, friendships, performance)
- 6) Does your school or district have any resources for supporting students' socioemotional wellbeing?
 - a. How do you access those resources?
 - b. Are there any that you've found particularly helpful?
 - c. Are there any additional resources that would be helpful for your students or staff?
- 7) Are any of these resources that are tailored to specific students, like students with disabilities or English learners?
 - a. How do these students' needs differ?

- b. Have you used these resources?
 - i. No: Is there anything that prevents you from using them, or anything that draws you toward a different approach?
 - ii. Yes: How effective are the resources?
- c. Can you think of other resources that would be helpful for these students?

Closing

- 8) Is there anything you wish the district knew about your experience as a staff member at your school?

Appendix D. Root Cause Analysis Results

The *Root Cause Analysis Summary Report* details the results of the October 12 root cause analysis event. A copy of the summary report is provided in this appendix.

Rock Island – Milan School District #41 District Equity Audit Root Cause Analysis Summary Report



Root Cause Analysis Summary – October 12, 2023

To conduct stage 3 of the Rock Island – Milan School District #41 (RIMSD) District Equity Audit, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) team facilitated a root cause analysis (RCA) event. To prepare for the RCA, the AIR team worked with the district to identify and access data from a wide range of sources, including both district quantitative and qualitative data. The AIR team also worked with the district to coordinate focus group recruitment. Focus groups were then conducted by AIR staff and used as an additional data source for the RCA event. The AIR team categorized this data to align with the 4 Core Areas, developed key findings based on a data review, and developed draft problem statements that served as the starting point for conversations for the RCA participants. RIMSD recruited 24 participants, representing a diverse group of district staff and community members, to participate in the October 12th meeting. Many of these participants had already participated in decision-making on the project as members of the Equity Audit Steering Committee. Participants were split into 4 table groups to review problem statements, brainstorm, categorize, and prioritize possible causes, and identify root causes using the 5Whys process. Each table group was responsible for working on a specific topic within Core Areas 1 and 2, including student achievement, student discipline, student chronic absenteeism, and teacher workforce and diversity.

Root Cause Analysis

Root Cause Analysis is a facilitated process to identify the origin of a problem using steps to find deep, underlying causes. The process helps district participants determine what happened, consider why it happened, and look toward a primary root cause of a problem. The five-step process includes:

- Defining Problem Statements using Key Findings
- Identifying possible causes and categories
- Digging deeper using the 5Whys process

- Differentiating contributing causes from root causes
- Planning next steps

The collaborative 5Whys process helps districts identify contributing and root cause(s) of an identified problem. After identifying a problem or concern based on data, participants ask “why” questions to arrive at an underlying root cause. Asking five questions is not a requirement; the key is to probe within a problem deeply enough to understand why it is occurring. Participants ask why again until a cause is identified that can be labeled a root cause – a cause that if addressed, will have a possibility of eliminating the problem. Not all problems have a single root cause. The RCA process may instead point to overlapping causes, some of which may be root causes, and some may be contributing causes that have a smaller possibility of eliminating the problem if addressed. The Root Cause Analysis process provides the opportunity for diverse community members to learn and make sense of data findings; share their perspectives on challenges, issues, and problems; and identify possible causes that provide direction for future district action.

Root Cause Analysis (RCA) Results

Below are the results of the RIMSD RCA event, broken down by Core Areas and topic of focus.

- **Exhibit 1:** Presents categories of possible causes brainstormed by table 1 participants focusing on Core Area 1 – Student Achievement.
- **Exhibit 2:** Presents the results of the 5Whys process for categories prioritized by table 1 participants focusing on Core Area 1 – Student Achievement.
- **Exhibit 3:** Presents categories of possible causes brainstormed by table 2 participants focusing on Core Area 1 – Student Discipline.
- **Exhibit 4:** Presents the results of the 5Whys process for categories prioritized by table 2 participants focusing on Core Area 1 – Student Discipline.
- **Exhibit 5:** Presents categories of possible causes brainstormed by table 3 participants focusing on Core Area 1 – Student Chronic Absenteeism.
- **Exhibit 6:** Presents the results of the 5Whys process for categories prioritized by table 3 participants focusing on Core Area 1 – Student Chronic Absenteeism.
- **Exhibit 7:** Presents categories of possible causes brainstormed by table 4 participants focusing on Core Area 2 – Workforce Experience and Diversity.
- **Exhibit 8:** Presents the results of the 5Whys process for categories prioritized by table 4 participants focusing on Core Area 2 – Workforce Experience and Diversity.

Group 1: Core Area 1 - Student Achievement

Exhibit 1. Core Area 1: Student Achievement – Root Causes

Category: There are variations in expectations for students to do their best.

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| Possible causes: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Perceptions on testing are not the same across schools, grades, and student groups.• Growth goals and focus may be different across schools, grades, and student groups.• Lack of inclusionary practices may cause issues among schools, grades, and student groups.• Low expectations for specific groups lead to low achievement.• Language challenges adversely impact achievement.• A focus on athletics vs. academics by school and the community. |
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Category: Staff are not prepared and lack confidence to deliver curriculum with fidelity.

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| Possible causes: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is variation in curriculum fidelity.• Use of curriculum and opinions on rigor may differ across staff.• An educator’s ability to apply Tier 1 instruction for all affects academic growth.• Staff perceptions may be impacted by workload and initiatives in place when surveys were administered. |
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Category: Attendance impacts student performance.

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| Possible causes: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attendance can have an impact on achievement (student growth).• Student attendance impacts growth across schools, grade levels, and student groups. |
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Category: Criteria and follow through for honors enrollment lead to disparities.

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| Possible causes: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The criteria for identifying students who enroll in honors /gifted programs could be a factor in disparities.• Placement of students in honors courses may be different across staff members. |
|------------------|--|

Category: Differences in family and community connections and partnerships.

Possible causes:

- Living in inadequate/unsafe housing.
- Parent expectations of students differ across schools, grade levels, and student groups.
- School access and levels of support hinder academic growth.
- Lack of family support
- Lack of access to quality health care.
- Families do not have strong histories of educational attainment.

Category: Parents are not thought of as important in education.

Possible causes:

Table group did not implement the 5Whys process for this category.

Category: Parents do not have what they need to help their children succeed.

Possible causes:

Table group did not implement the 5Whys process for this category.

Exhibit 2. Core Area 1: Student Achievement – 5Whys Process

Identified Priority 1: Variations in expectations for students lead to student performance disparities.

5Whys Answers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have different beliefs regarding whether all students can learn. • We carry experience, past practice, attitudes, bias, and beliefs in current decisions and practices. • Despite our efforts, this has not taken root for all staff. • The district/system does not have an accountability system that monitors consistency of the message and follow-through for ALL staff.
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Conclusion: **Contributing cause.**

Identified Priority 2: There is variation in criteria and follow through for honors enrollment that results in overrepresentation of White students and underrepresentation of historically underrepresented groups.

5Whys Answers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The criteria are subject and grade level specific. • Criteria does not exist for all courses or groups. • Time and personnel factors. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – District is working on developing these in the T&L/Student Services dept. – Communication and enforcement next.
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Conclusion: **Possible Contributing Cause.**

Identified Priority 3: Attendance impacts achievement, and chronic absenteeism is high.

5Whys Answers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students stay home with illness in higher frequencies than pre-pandemic. • The pandemic created a germ phobia. • We are not capitalizing on the opportunity for students to access curriculum when at home. • The state and district changed expectations on what to do when you are at home ill.
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Conclusion: **Possible Contributing Cause.**

Table 2: Core Area 1 – Discipline

Exhibit 3. Core Area 1: Discipline – Root Causes

Category: Staff’s ability to meet increasing needs of students is limited.	
Possible causes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We have staff that use old-school educational manners.• Lack of student engagement amongst Black students may be due to disconnect between relevance of curriculum and instruction.• Challenges in adults’ abilities to stop, listen, and move forward.• Lack of culturally relevant instruction (or how to do it).• There are both disengaged students and extreme behaviors by students that call for exclusion.
Category: We have disparate expectations for students and policies that are not always aligned to expectations.	
Possible causes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We do not have an expectation that students can achieve academically or exhibit positive behaviors, so we do not challenge students or hold them accountable.• Black student referrals may be handled differently than other students. Do some students get a pass on behavior that is not accessible to others?• Staff and student beliefs are not aligned with school expectations for Black students.
Category: Poor attendance and academic deficits may lead to a loss of hope and increased discipline incidents.	
Possible causes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor attendance, including discipline days missed, may create difficulties in catching up.• Students have a loss of hope in the value for school for their life plans.• Loss of hope.• Poor attendance leads to missed schoolwork, which impacts grades.• Student academic deficits may contribute to discipline issues.• There is a vicious cycle of learning difficulties, not feeling welcome, absences, and school exclusions.• There is a lack in helping students set goals and understand the ‘whys’ for school.

Category: Bias, stereotypes, prejudices, and a limited understanding for culture, backgrounds, and trauma lead to punitive actions.

Possible causes:

- Lack of understanding of cultural behaviors.
- We lack an understanding of others' trauma, experiences, backgrounds, and expectations.
- Classroom culture might penalize students who exemplify their cultural behaviors.
- We may have a bias that some students cannot achieve or behave so we do not hold them to the high standards we do for other students.
- Misunderstood cultural values.
- Staff might have biases, prejudices, and stereotypes connected to race, gender, and special education status.

Category: Socioeconomic conditions impact students and we are not building enough community partnerships with schools around families, mental health, finance, job security, and more.

Possible causes:

- There are many socioeconomic strains on families that impact education and meeting basic needs.
- Lack of health care.
- RIMSD is not keeping track of many categories of family health.
- This young generation lacks coping skills.
- Too many Tax Increment Financing initiatives that impact school funding.
- Black students are more likely to experience generational poverty, which leads to higher levels of trauma and social-emotional needs.
- Some students have family support, while some do not.

Exhibit 4. Core Area 1: Discipline – 5Whys Process

Identified Priority 1: District capacity for student engagement is limited.

5Whys Answers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We do not know all the needs. • It is easier to stay in comfort zone of preexisting assumptions of needs. • It takes a lot of time, intention, and effort to look at data and think differently about needs. • We have not focused priority on student engagement for students of color. • We have not had enough learning, practice, and time to get comfortable with student engagement practices for all marginalized students.
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Conclusion:	Contributing cause.
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Identified Priority 2: Beliefs about students and staff leads to expectations that do not align to policy, such as the Code of Conduct.

5Whys Answers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We allow inconsistencies to exist. • We see it is important to have flexibility. • We recognize that differences across boundaries and schools provides us with a need for diversity. • We do not believe that students of color can meet the expectations. • The cultures of our buildings do not create a space for student and family engagement and connections.
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Conclusion:	Root cause.
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Table 3: Core Area 1 – Chronic Absenteeism

Exhibit 5. Core Area 1: Chronic Absenteeism – Root Causes

Category: Support for families.	
Possible causes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There may be no one to wake up a student for school.• Many families lack childcare for younger siblings.• Students must care for younger siblings.• There may not be resources available to families needing support with childcare.• Family resources or needs for transportation childcare, and income impact or are seen as of more value than education.
Category: School culture and relationships.	
Possible causes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There may be negative relationships between students/families and school staff and/or classmates.• Connections and relationships between staff and students may play a role.• Bullying via social media and SEL needs are overwhelming families and schools.• Students who have higher discipline rates may have more academic concerns and less connections and relationships.• Staff are not attending school.• It only takes one negative experience with an adult to turn off students.• Students may miss school for mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression.• Students may miss school because they are struggling academically and are feeling hopeless.
Category: District systems and structures.	
Possible causes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of access to technology and internet may have an impact.• The buildings need significant work and do not look presentable or clean/updated.• Language and communications tools may play a role.• School boundaries, distance from school building, and lack of transportation may impact.• The academic calendar with 9 months in school and a few months out of school may impact attendance.

Category: Engaging and relevant educational experiences and communication.

Possible causes:

- Students need more choice in electives and more real world application of learning.
- There are few external consequences to missing schools.
- Different schools may put different levels of importance on attendance, including in creating incentives.

Exhibit 6. Core Area 1: Chronic Absenteeism – 5Whys Process

Identified Priority 1: Students are chronically absent because they don't have the relationships to make school relevant and engaging.

5Whys Answers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They do not have good relationships with teachers.• All stakeholders do not have tools to create relationships.• There is a lack of support, resources, and professional development.• There are many competing priorities and limited resources for the district.
Conclusion:	Contributing cause.

Table 4: Core Area 2– Workforce Experience and Diversity

Exhibit 7. Core Area 2: Workforce Experience and Diversity – Root Causes

Category: Attrition and/or other incentives associated with early retirement contribute to less experienced teachers in the district.

Possible causes:

- Teachers retired at a higher rate during the COVID years.
- Teachers retired at a higher rate after the school improvement grants ended.
- The past district and state retirement incentives have increased teachers leaving and retiring.
- A large percentage of tenured teachers reached retirement age.
- There are more routes to becoming an educator, which can reduce the number of years of teacher experience.

Category: Teachers are burning out at higher rates due to both internal and external barriers that are beyond the control of the district.

Possible causes:

- Less experienced teachers may be given tougher assignments.
- Teachers left the profession due to lack of support.
- Teachers are burnt out because of an inability to be creative in the classroom because of strict curricular standards.
- Some tenured teachers leave the district/field due to philosophical differences, such as regarding student discipline.

Category: The current structures and procedures allow for staff inequities district wide.

Possible causes:

- Teachers like to stay in buildings where they are comfortable.
- Potential hires may not want to teach at certain schools.

Category: Challenges with the hiring process.

Possible causes:

- Leadership may not be consistent in ensuring equity in the hiring process.
- There are not sufficient resources spent on recruitment and retention efforts.
- District has only begun in the past 3-4 years to brand the district outside of the Quad Cities area.
- Hiring initiatives are not pulling in enough diverse applicants.

Category: Challenges in pipeline for diversity.

Possible causes:

- Lack of diverse interest in the field.
- Colleges and universities have only recently recruited and retained diverse teachers for students.

Category: Impact of RIMSD culture and environment.

Possible causes:

- The RIMSD culture struggles to attract diverse professionals.
- Environment is more welcoming and better for White teachers, while more challenging and less welcoming for teachers of color.
- Behavior challenges amongst students in the district have increased since COVID.
- The district's image is not positive when attracting diverse, new teachers.
- The Quad Cities area struggles to attract younger and/or diverse professionals.
- The location of the district is undesirable to younger teachers.
- Staff stay because of the professional development provided by the district.
- Staff stay because of the district's culture, relationships, and sense of purpose.

Exhibit 8. Core Area 2: Workforce Experience and Diversity – 5Whys Process

Identified Priority 1: The current RIMSD #41 policies, procedures, and structures allow for staff inequities district wide.

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| 5Whys Answers: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The contract language limits our ability to address inequities. • The collective bargaining agreement does not include what we need to address inequities. • The contract development process has remained the same and traditional, while the culture around us has changed. • The district has not made it a priority to meet the new needs of the culture around us. • The culture is not represented as part of the bargaining process, which limits our ability to address inequities across the district. |
|----------------|---|

Conclusion:	Contributing cause.
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Identified Priority 2: The current RIMSD #41 policies, processes, and procedures knowingly or unknowingly allow for possible bias/inequities within the hiring process.

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| 5Whys Answers: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District leadership’s focus on an intentional consideration of data regarding bias and inequities in the hiring process is new. |
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Conclusion:	Possible Contributing Cause.
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