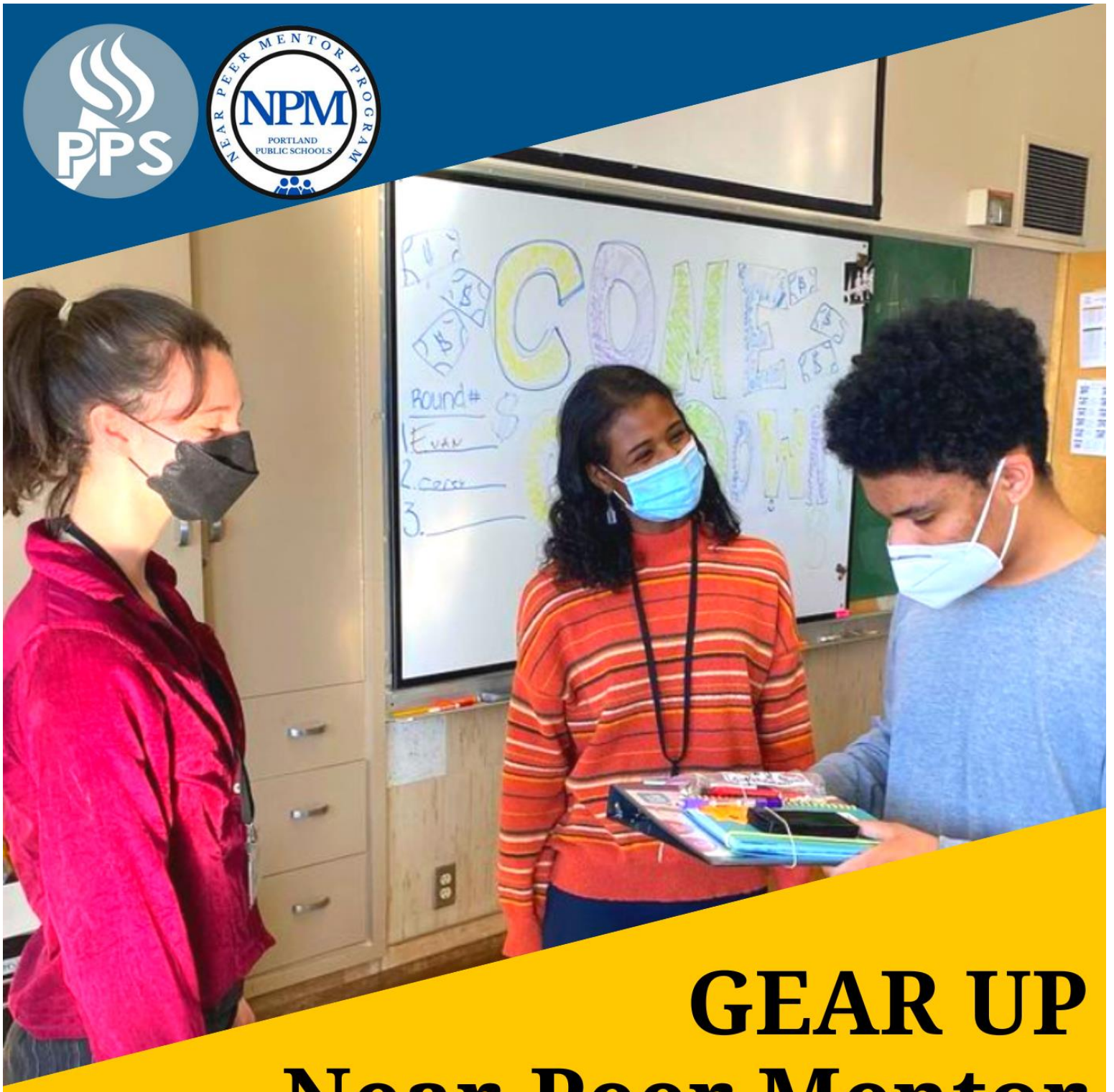


GEAR UP Near-Peer Mentor Program Evaluation

Mixed-Methods Report
2019-2021

Engage, Empower, Elevate

Published: September 2022

Contents

The GEAR UP Grant

Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness in Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is a federally funded grant that is intended to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP provides six-year or seven-year grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. GEAR UP grantees serve an entire cohort (grade level) of students beginning no later than the seventh grade and following the cohort through high school.

Portland Public Schools (PPS) was awarded the seven-year Engage, Empower Elevate (E3) GEAR UP grant in 2018 and now provides direct services to students in Jefferson, McDaniel, and Roosevelt High Schools, and leadership, administrative, and funding support for the district's Near-Peer Mentor (NPM) and Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) programs.

The vision of E3 is to develop and sustain wrap-around classroom-centered support structures that elevate student voice and experience, authentically and respectfully collaborate with families, prioritize culturally sustaining pedagogy, and ensure responsive classrooms and engaged students, resulting in a classroom climate in which all students can realize their academic potential and fulfill college and career goals. Key to this strategy is recognizing explicit and implicit racial inequities, committing to transforming traditional power structures, eliminating structural and academic barriers for underserved students, supporting teacher professional capacity-building, and empowering students and families as equal partners in education.

GEAR UP Core Strategies

Near-Peer Mentor Program: Using the classroom as the nexus of student services, GEAR UP provides leadership and support for a cohort of college-going near-peer mentors (NPMs). They collaborate with a teacher partner to represent youth voice, model appropriate academic behaviors, improve student engagement and academic skills, and help younger peers cultivate post-secondary aspirations and identity. The Near-Peer Mentor program currently operates in the district's nine comprehensive high schools.

Teacher Capacity Building: GEAR UP TOSAs (Teachers on Special Assignment) promote data-informed teacher professional development and networking to explore, practice, and build teacher capacity to embed student voice and life experience into pedagogy, curricula, and assessment. GEAR UP TOSAs also help to integrate GEAR UP core strategies in support of the district's Instructional Framework, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy Objectives, and Educator Essentials. PTHV and Family Engagement: GEAR UP supports an evolving parent organizing and leadership model that activates family voice, while connecting them more deeply with each other, teachers and the educational system. GEAR UP also provides leadership and centralized administrative support for the district-wide Parent Teacher Home Visit (PTHV) Program. PTHV is a nationally recognized methodology that provides opportunities for parents and teachers to come together as equal partners through

voluntary home visits designed to build trust and collaborative relationships in service to student academic success.

Holistic Data Practices: In partnership with Research, Assessment, & Accountability (RAA), GEAR UP supports the operationalization of quantitative and qualitative data tools and processes that gather the voices and experiences of our stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, and mentors. Currently in a pilot phase, GEAR UP and RAA are using community researchers to conduct interviews and focus groups, compiling stories and experiences that will be analyzed and integrated with other district assessment data. The goal is to provide a richer, more informative and authentic measure of student academic progress commensurate with the district's Graduate Profile.

Purpose

Although GEAR UP has four core strategies of operation, due to the COVID-19 pandemic that interrupted in-person learning and educational services for the 2019-20 & 2020-21 school years, for the first round of evaluation we focused on examining GEAR UP's Near-Peer Mentoring that was still operating in online learning settings during that time.

We approached this work by centering three tenets in our evaluation: participatory, developmental, and iterative.

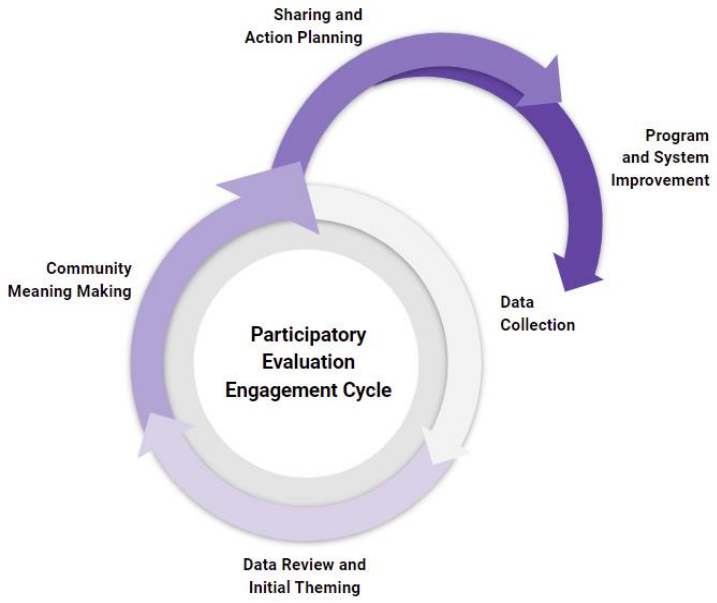
The participatory approach to evaluation involves stakeholders as partners in conducting the evaluation. Participatory evaluation can help improve program performance by (1) involving key stakeholders in evaluation design and decision making, (2) acknowledging and addressing asymmetrical levels of power and voice among stakeholders, (3) using multiple and varied methods, (4) having an action component so that evaluation findings are useful to the program's end users, and (5) explicitly aiming to build the evaluation capacity of stakeholders (Burke, 1998). In this evaluation, stakeholders played a critical part in the evaluation work. We employed an evaluation guiding council composed of teachers, students, and near-peer mentors. The guiding council met every other month to provide feedback on data collection tools and review of preliminary findings. Additionally, we have embedded a process for community meaning making into our evaluation plan. During community meaning making sessions, evaluation stakeholders and participants will be invited to engage with and provide context to the data as it was collected and analyzed.

Developmental evaluation is a relatively new approach to evaluation that focuses on helping programs adapt in complex dynamic systems leveraging evidence as its north star (Patton, 2010). Innovation and evaluative thinking powered our developmental evaluation, collecting and applying an evolving evidence base regarding classroom-based mentoring. Developmental evaluation does not plan for change, it assumes change will be ever-present in programming and systems. As our understanding of the systems in which classroom-based mentoring deepened, our evaluation model adapted to leverage our new understanding.

Our final tenet for this evaluation work reflects an iterative nature. We developed an evaluation cycle as a framework for our work as shown in Figure 1. The cycle provides our evaluation with flexibility and opportunities for improvement based on the emerging evidence we uncover. The iterative process starts with data collection. Once the data have been reviewed and themed, we

engage in a community meaning making session to ensure our understanding reflects the voices of participants. The next stage is to share and plan for our next steps. The sharing and action planning stage informs program and system improvement which drives us back to the beginning of the cycle.

Figure 1: Evaluation Cycle



For this cycle of evaluation, we centered our work around two evaluation questions: 1.) What are the lived experiences of students, families, and educators engaged in the varying levels of GEAR UP practices; 2.) To what extent are students, families, and educators affected by different levels of their engagement with GEAR UP practices

Near-Peer Mentor Intervention

Implementation of Program

The GEAR UP Near-Peer Mentoring (NPM) model differs from traditional one-on-one mentoring programs. As mentioned above, NPMs support the entire classroom, serving as a liaison between the educator and student. They offer guidance and help students with academics, social and emotional skill development, and act as a bridge to strengthen teacher-student relationships. Ultimately, the vision of NPMs is to reinforce authentic relationships and center student voice in the classroom.

For the 2020-Inside the classroom, there are five types of services that NPMs provide: Classroom Enrichment, College Exposure, Career Exposure, College Journey Workshops, and Financial Education.

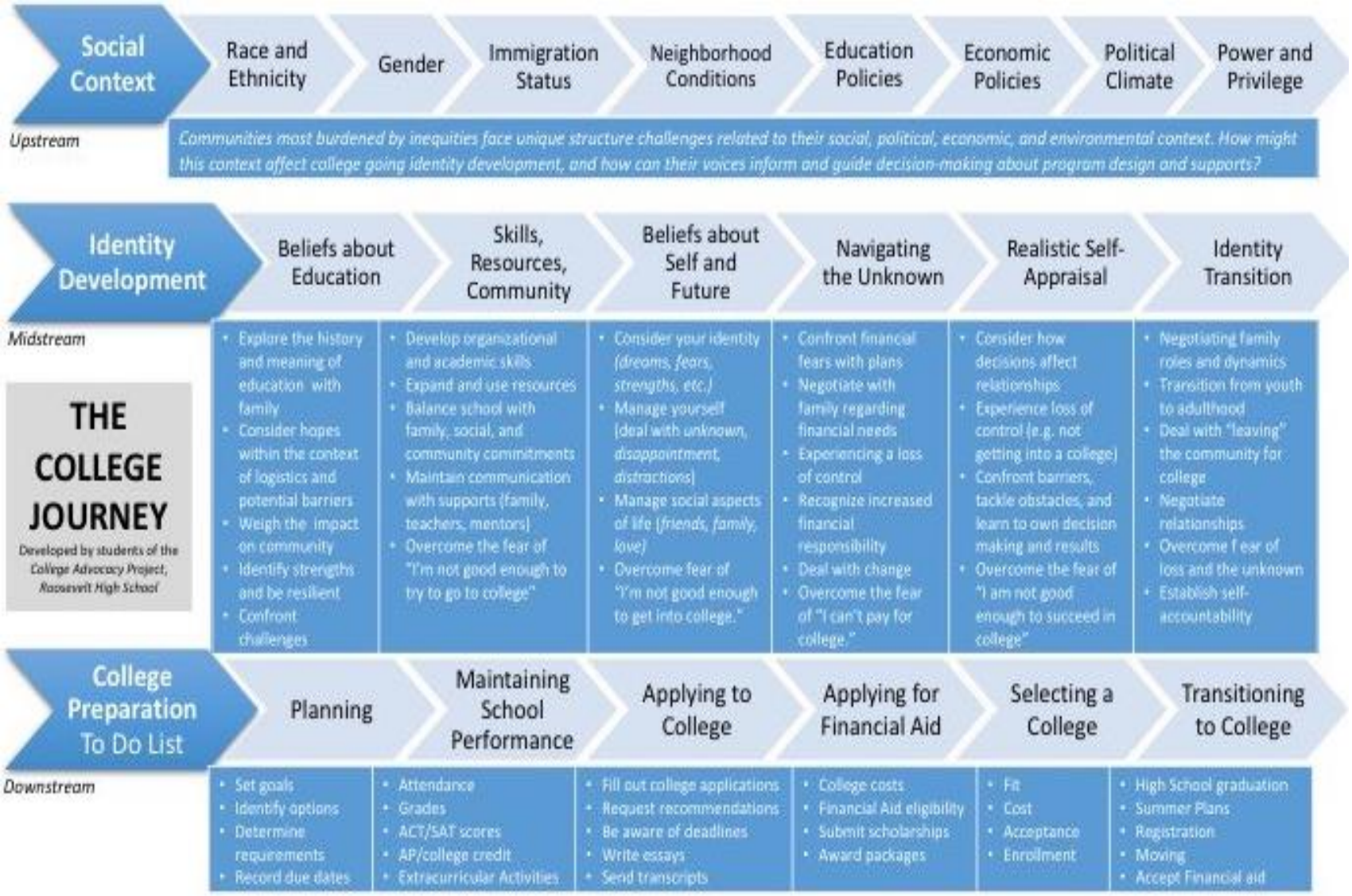
Classroom Enrichment is a mentor's presence and engagement in the classroom. First and foremost, their role is to build rapport with students and teachers. They do this by becoming an integral part of the classroom environment, getting to know the community, and sharing their genuine selves. Another piece of classroom e2021 school year, GEAR UP placed 21 NPM Mentors with 30 Partner Teachers.

Enrichment is modeling positive student engagement (participating in group discussions, asking critical questions, etc.). And lastly, mentors also enrich the classroom by connecting their real-world experience with the content being taught. Mentors bring their lived experiences—as previous high schoolers and as current college students—to highlight ways in which they've used their educational materials in their own lives. For example, when a former teacher facilitated a lesson on gentrification, two of her mentors asked to share their experiences having to relocate further from campus and the implications this had on their families.

Mentors also support teachers in implementing College and Career Exposure activities. Sometimes these activities are led exclusively by mentors, while other times it is a joint effort with their Partner Teacher, but these types of activities can involve campus field trips to colleges and career facilities, college student or workforce panels, and workshops designed to get students thinking about college and career exploration.

The fourth type of service that NPMs provide is College Going Identity Workshops. When the Director of GEAR UP was working at Roosevelt High School, she led activities with students that got them thinking about the needs of first-generation students versus students who were already college-bound. Together they created the College Journey Framework, which outlined that for first-generation and low-income students of color, and other students who aren't college-bound, there are different layers of college readiness that need to be in place before a student can start completing what's typically known as the college checklist (filing FAFSA, writing college essays, applying to college, etc.). In the College Journey Framework (Figure 2), those students identified that there were upstream, midstream, and downstream factors that impacted the college process that included students needing support in raising their awareness around social context, identity development, as well as the college preparation checklist.

Figure 2: College Journey Framework



NPMs provide workshops based on the College Journey Framework because the social context and midstream factors create many barriers for first-generation, low-income students of color in pursuing and succeeding in college and career opportunities, and without efforts working to address those needs, those students will continue to struggle to reach their college and career goals. College Journey Workshops are designed to help students build insight into self, confidence, and spark critical inquiry of the world around them.

Lastly, NPMs also provide Financial Education Workshops that are designed to increase knowledge of financial aid, financial literacy, and money management. However, it's worth noting that mentors are not hired because they are financial aid specialists. The skills that mentors are able to bring to these workshops and conversations are about their own lived experiences. Workshops on financial aid might include a Jeopardy game where students guess the cost of tuition at a certain college, and then the mentor who attends that college talks a little about how much they pay, where those costs go, and how they learn to manage their money. Workshops are meant to give students an idea of what it's like to be a college student and prompt their thinking around what life after high school could look like for them.

Evaluation Methods

For this round of evaluation, we focused on learning more about how students, families, and educators engaged with GEAR UP and the depth with which they engaged. This kind of descriptive data gives us a better understanding of their lived experiences with the program and will help guide future iterations of program evaluation.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

NPMs tracked the dates and topics of their activities with students and in classrooms. Student-level participation and service categorization were determined by grant-level staff based on standardized service definitions, attendance records, and students' schedules.

Students' demographic data, attendance, and grade point average (GPA) were collected from the district student information system. Then, the data were entered into a database containing student-level demographic, attendance, and academic data.

Additionally, we administered a student survey to measure students' perceptions regarding the instructional practices in the classroom. The survey was administered in two waves during winter 2020 and spring 2021. The survey was an identified survey that allowed matching of students' responses, demographic data, and academic data. Data were collected from 703 students, representing a response rate of 31% of students in 9th through 12th grade at GEAR UP high schools. A copy of the survey can be found in the appendix.

Using the tracked service hours data, we also cross-referenced those responses with survey responses, demographics, attendance, and academics in Excel.

Quantitative analysis focused on understanding three components of Near-Peer Mentoring implementation. First, the analysis explored how NPMs, and students engaged with one another. The next part focused on what differences existed between students supported by NPMs and those not supported. Finally, the analysis looked at the academic outcomes of students supported by NPMs relative to those not supported.

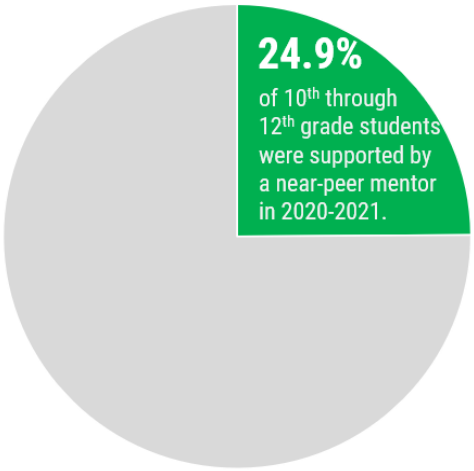
Near-Peer Mentor Support

After analyzing the student-level data from the 2020-2021 school year, we had a better understanding of how students and NPMs engaged. In 2020-2021, students in tenth through twelfth grades at Jefferson High School, McDaniel High School, and Roosevelt High school were supported by NPMs. There were three primary categories in which students and NPMs engaged: mentor-embedded classes, individual or small-group support, or a combination of mentor-embedded classes and individual or small-group support.

NPMs provided support in the form of college exposure, academic planning, college prep, career support, time management, relationship building, college identity, classroom enrichment, and tutoring/homework support. Classroom enrichment was the activity category most frequently recorded.

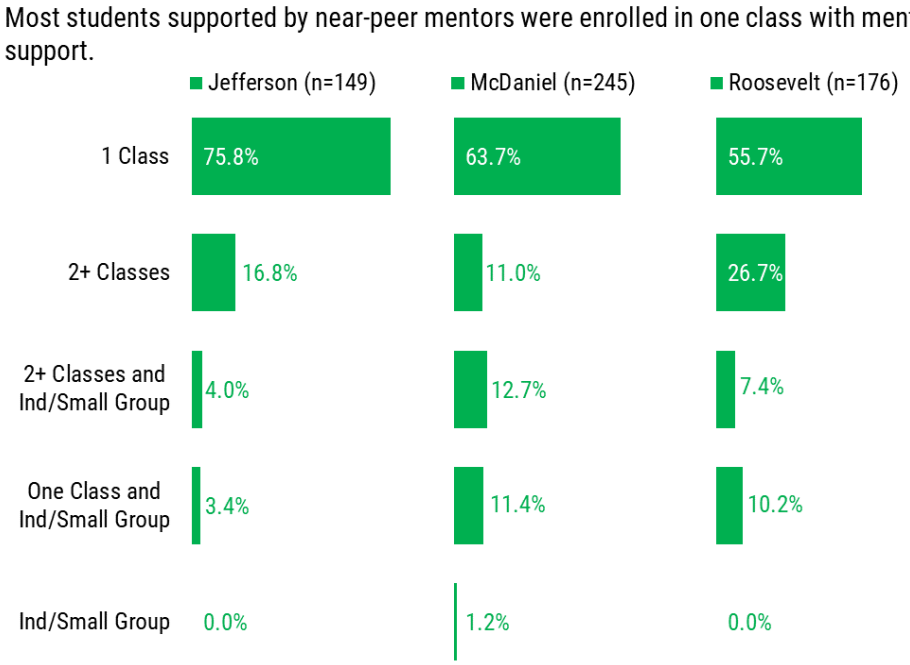
As shown in Figure 3, nearly a quarter (n=570) of all tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders at the target high schools receive some support from a NPM. Within each school, the percent of tenth through twelfth grade students supported by a NPM varied with 18% at Roosevelt, 29% at McDaniel, and 31% at Jefferson. There were some challenges in recruiting mentors at Roosevelt during the 20-21 school year.

Figure 3: Students Supported by NPMS



There were three primary categories in which students and NPMs engaged. However, for this analysis, we further categorized students by the number of NPM supported courses in which they were enrolled. Across the three high schools, nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of supported students were enrolled in one class with a NPM. Within each school we saw a similar pattern with one class being the most common type of support. However, the data suggest some variation in implementation across the three high schools as shown in Figure 4. At Roosevelt High School, more than a quarter of supported students were enrolled in two or more classes with NPMs, compared to just over fifteen percent at Jefferson and eleven percent at McDaniel. The differences in engagement between students and mentors should be considered when reviewing these data.

Figure 4: Type of NPM Support Students had by School



Demographics of Students

This section compares students who were supported by NPMs (n=558) to students who received no support during the 20-21 school year (n=1,625). Data were analyzed across the three high schools and within each of the high schools to identify differences between the two groups of students.

As shown in Table 1, there were more students of color supported by NPMs (75%) compared to students who were not supported by mentors (65%). While this difference across the high schools is not statistically significant, it is important to note the difference at McDaniel is statistically significant with a p-value of less than <.001. At McDaniel, 84% of students supported by NPMs were persons of color, compared to 60% of students not supported.

Table 1: Student Demographics

	Supported by NPM	Not Supported by NPM
Gender		
Female	249	819
Male	209	804
Unknown Gender	0	2
Race/Ethnicity		
Student of Color	416	1058
Not a Student of Color	142	567
ESL Status		
Yes	113	125
No	444	147
Unknown	1	23
IEP Status		
Yes	79	258
No	478	1345
Unknown	1	22

Looking at English Language Learners (ELL), more ELL students were supported by NPMs (20%) compared to students who were not supported (8%). The difference between these two groups of students is statistically significant with a p-value of less than .001. The difference in ELL students supported was most pronounced at McDaniel High School, where ELL placements were prioritized.

With regards to students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), there were no differences across the three high schools. However, at McDaniel there were significantly more students with IEPs supported by NPMs compared to those not supported ($p < .05$). At Roosevelt, there were significantly fewer students with IEPs supported by NPMs compared to those not supported ($p < .001$).

Academic Characteristics of Students

We analyzed data from two academic outcomes average daily attendance (ADA) and grade point average (GPA). Both outcomes reflect the value at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. The purpose of the analysis was to identify and describe differences, not to suggest that support from a mentor caused these differences. We compared students supported by NPMs to students who were not supported, and we looked across the categories of support discussed previously.

Average daily attendance represents the percentage of days a student attends school as a function of the number of days the student is enrolled. An ADA value of 75% for a student enrolled for 100 school days, indicates the student was present for 75 out of 100 days during the year. As a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, a large portion of the school year was delivered virtually. Teachers were still responsible for taking attendance; however, research has shown public school attendance rates were lower than previous years in school districts not providing in-person instruction (Carminucci et al., 2021). It is important to keep this context in mind when reviewing the data.

Descriptively, students supported by a NPM had slightly lower ADA rates (74%) compared to students not supported by NPMs (75%). The results of a t-test [t (1025) = -1.1, p = .28] indicated no significant differences in ADA between supported students and students with no support. Using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine the difference in means by the categories of support, we again found no significant differences [F (4,2242) = 0.289, p=0.886]. The results of the ANOVA test are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: ANOVA Table for Average Daily Attendance by Near-Peer Mentor Category

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Between groups	4	0.05	0.01	0.289
Within groups	2242	98.13	0.04	
Total	2246	98.18		

Note: n = 2,247
p=0.28

With regards to GPA, we did not find statistically significant differences in GPA when comparing supported students to students with no support [t (983) = -0.20, p = .84]. As shown in Table 3, there are descriptive differences between the five near-peer mentor categories.

Table 3: Grade Point Average by Near-Peer Mentor Category

Near-Peer Mentor Category	Mean 20-21 GPA
Students not supported by NPM	3.05
Students in one class supported by NPM	2.98
Students in one class supported by NPM and receiving individual or small-group support from NPM	3.18
Students in two or more class supported by NPM	3.27
Students in two or more classes supported by NPM and receiving individual or small-group support from NPM	3.08

An ANOVA test found significant differences by the category of support students received from the NPMs. While the differences were significant, the effect size, as measured by Cohen's f (f = .0035),

indicates the differences were small according to Cohen's Rule of Thumb (Cohen, 1998). The results of the ANOVA are displayed in Table 4. A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that students enrolled in two or more classes with NPMs had higher GPAs than students with no support from NPMs (p-value < .05). Second, the GPA of students enrolled in two or more classes with NPMs was higher than students enrolled in one class with NPMs (p-value <.05).

Table 4: ANOVA Table for Grade Point Average by Near-Peer Mentor Category

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Between groups	4	7.6	1.90	2.85*
Within groups	2235	1490.4	0.67	
Total	2239	1498.0		

Note: n=2,240
*p=.023

The results of the analysis indicate that comparing students who received some support from NPMs are statistically similar to students who received no support from NPMs in terms of GPA and ADA. Digging deeper to compare the different levels of support from NPMs results in two significant differences in terms of GPA. First, students enrolled in two or more classes with NPMs had higher GPAs than students with no support from NPMs (p-value < .05). Second, the GPA of students enrolled in two or more classes with NPMs was higher than students enrolled in one class with NPMs (p-value <.05).

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

GEAR UP's qualitative evaluation used a developmental participatory approach to conduct 67 interviews and focus groups with students, teachers, families, mentors, and other program staff. This process was guided by our two evaluation questions: a.) What are the lived experiences of students, families, and educators engaged in the varying levels of GEAR UP practices, and b.) To what extent are students, families, and educators affected by different levels of their engagement with GEAR UP practices?

Our team of community researchers analyzed transcripts from the interviews and focus groups using inductive, open coding in multiple rounds. In the first round, we coded the transcripts individually. In the next round, we joined with the team of Community Researchers to finalize codes and identify overarching themes.

There were three stages of analysis for our qualitative data: individual coding, group marveling, and finally theming.

In preparation for group marveling sessions (discussed below), Community Researchers would read the transcripts and watch the videos of an interview or focus group. They would then leave notes on the document that would begin our coding process.

Once the data were reviewed individually, teams of two-to-five Community Researchers, Xcalibur Evaluators, GEAR UP Coordinators, GEAR UP AmeriCorps, and PPS Evaluators would convene for what we called Marveling sessions. In these sessions, we would go through the codes we highlighted during our individual read throughs and discuss similarities, differences, nuance of meaning, and begin grappling with the stories. This was where our themes started to form but weren't yet finalized until the next stage.

Once all interviews and focus groups from a particular stakeholder were complete (students, teachers, families, mentors, etc.), the team came together for some theming sessions where we identified the overarching themes, we heard from all the stories from those stakeholders.

Through qualitative analysis, we heard five primary themes: the development of mentor-teacher partnerships; interrupting the traditional cycle of education with mentorship; relationships, community, and connection; and experiences of race and culture.

Development of Mentor-Teacher Partnerships

Through the qualitative data collection, we learned more about the nature of how mentor-teacher partnerships begin, grow, and thrive—or don't.

The inception of each mentor-teacher partnership varies from the next. In the interviews, some mentors and teachers reflected on developing their relationship in the school setting, prior to the program, where the mentors were high school students, themselves taking one of the teacher's classes. Others talked about having interacted a few times prior to the program—since the mentors were alumni of the school where the teacher taught—but that didn't consist of any interactions within the classroom setting. And there were others still who had never met or heard of each other until being partnered together in a mentor-teacher placement.

A sense of nostalgic fondness was often present in the voices of mentors and teachers who'd known and/or worked together pre-GEAR UP that wasn't as prevalent in interviews with those who had no pre-existing relationship. That didn't necessarily relate to how mentors and teachers felt about their placements, but it could sometimes mean a more connected and cohesive relationship where mentor(s) and the teacher knew how to work together, how to communicate, and how to make the most out of their time before they became coworkers.

Because it is not often a common practice among mentoring programs to outreach directly and intentionally to former graduates of the teacher partners, we were especially interested in hearing what this evolving relationship was like, for teachers and mentors, as well as students.

"**That's been the coolest thing**," one teacher shared about her former student, now mentor. She described how unique it was to get to watch her former student—who, it seemed, had been slightly

disruptive while he was still in high school himself—turn into a leader for her next cohort of students. Working with him as a mentor gave her an opportunity to see him in a new role, and with some new skills.

"**We actually hired [mentors] out of that class, so we got to kind of pick them**," one teacher explained when reflecting on when they first started thinking about working with the mentors. "**It was really awesome to see them grow and change**." Many teachers appeared grateful for the opportunity to get to see their former students growing into their young adulthood. Another teacher reminisced about one of her shyer former students, "**I clearly remember him in my class, and he was so conscientious, and…now he's just flat doing this. I just get amazed and just so proud… Because it's hard, and they graduate in four years or three years or whatever amount of time, navigating this crazy…system, and they're successful**."

There seemed to be something very fulfilling about it for teachers. So often they teach their classes and then never see or hear about their students again after graduation, but the relationships they build with those students matter. They care deeply about their students and are invested in their futures and getting to work with their former students almost seemed to be the missing piece of a puzzle. "**Because of [mentors], I'm more connected to my students after they graduate. So, I am seeing their college journey after they've left me, and seeing what things that I did that helped them**," another teacher explained. She went on to say that working with the mentors has helped her identify the gaps in some of the content she'd been facilitating with students. "**Now I'm seeing, you know, how I can change my practice based on their experiences after they leave**."

Beyond fulfillment and practice refinement, for some teachers having that relationship prior really helped them welcome a mentor into their classroom. "**I had known you for a long time**," one teacher explained to the interviewer, who happened to be her former mentor. "**Since you were a student. So, I felt with that relationship that we were able to do things that sprang out of what was interesting to me and to you**."

Students are also impacted by the relationship between teachers and mentors who were former students. Although mentors didn't have to be former students to be memorable or appreciated, it did seem to create a new dynamic in the classroom, one where students could start to envision a path forward for themselves after high school. "**My students, before they've even graduated, [they're] talking about how they want to come back and be a [mentor]**," one teacher shared. "**It really does push them to be more motivated to be successful in college**." We heard this from a few students as well, who shared that their plans post high school graduation were to return to their high school classes as mentors.

Even those who didn't state an interest in returning still seemed to benefit from having mentors that were former students. It gave mentors a built-in leg-up on empathy where they were able to relate to students on a level that wasn't possible otherwise, because these mentors could say that they'd sat in the very same chairs as the students—literally. They'd had those very same teachers, had gone through the exact same curriculum and understood the way the teacher graded. And although that wasn't required for their work to matter, students noticed it and seemed to find value in it. One student shared that her mentor, **"…had [the teacher] two years ago as well so, he understood kind of—I think that was especially helpful, like he understood [the teacher's] teaching style**."

Other folks talked about the former-student mentors being more familiar with the curriculum and therefore more academically supportive, being more integrated into the classroom, working more cohesively with the teacher, and being more helpful with navigating institutional obstacles (like trying to figure out how to file FAFSA, scheduling an appointment with a counselor, etc.).

One thing that seemed evident from the interviews and focus groups was that the depth of the connection, trust, and ability to collaborate had a profound impact on the perceived successes of the placement. A quote shared by a former mentor at Roosevelt articulates this nicely when they said, "**A [mentor] really does have the potential to change a classroom drastically...If the [mentor] and the teacher have a really great connection then, you know, things will change… As long as your teacher is willing to be flexible**."

Interviewees suggested that if a mentor and their partner teacher could learn to collaborate, trust each other, and share leadership, the classroom environment could be transformed.

This is often a long process for the teacher-mentor team though, because, as one teacher reflected, "**Teaching is usually so autonomous**." She went on to say, "**There's a lot of ego in like I'm the voice of wisdom in the room**." She described that for teachers to collaborate and develop a co-teaching model, they first must give up control, and become interested in the idea of leveling the power dynamics in the classroom, or just be interested in change in general. "**I did spend my first couple of years with the door closed**," one teacher shared when reflecting on their earlier years of teaching, before working with mentors. "**I…didn't have a teaching partner… It was very lonely. I was a new teacher and I second-guessed everything, and I felt like my scope was so limited and maybe there were better ways to do it**." Other teachers described this as well, that before their partnership with their mentors (or in some cases, other collaborators and co-teachers) they experienced a lot of self-doubt, loneliness, and they were exhausted by navigating the constant and ever-shifting demands of the classroom and school. One teacher said plainly, "**I was really tired of that dynamic**," and she wasn't the only one.

For many teachers, this seemed to be one of the main reasons why they'd initially agreed to have mentors in their classrooms: they wanted support for themselves, for their students, and they wanted to build community.

"**There was a high level of collaboration**," one teacher described of his work with his NPMs. "**I felt like we were able to lean in and support kids and families way better**." Many of the educators we spoke to talked about how the dynamics in their classroom changed once they started working with their mentors, and even more so once they found their groove with them, so to speak—but it's worth noting that this takes time, something we'll talk more about later.

But first, let's discuss what students, teachers, and mentors said about this growing relationship and the changes that occurred in the classroom.

Many of the people we spoke to alluded to an element of trust, one that could exist before the development of the mentor placement with the teacher, and one that grew over time. "**Because I knew [the mentor] I felt a little better about giving over some control**," one teacher explained. Teachers feel a lot of responsibility for taking care of their students and the class as a whole, and it can be a process for teachers to relinquish some of that responsibility to NPMs to facilitate workshops or assist students with classwork and interpersonal conflicts. In the early stages of a

mentor-teacher partnership, the teacher might be hesitant to share some of the classroom duties. However, over time teachers seemed to form an understanding of the benefits of shared leadership and recognized that there are some strengths that the mentors possess that the teachers sometimes do not, due to their different roles in the classroom. One teacher realized the power dynamics in her classroom, and shared, "**Sometimes [students] go through the [mentor] when they could come directly to me…they are nervous**." She goes on to explain that students are sometimes afraid of not having the right answer, and they can be more vulnerable and feel like it's okay to make more mistakes with their mentors than they can with teachers. Speaking with the mentors first helps them come to the teacher later, thereby strengthening their relationship. Her mentor talked about the same thing. They said that students, **"…felt comfortable enough, you know, to talk to me about it.**"

Our long-term partner teachers seemed to intentionally build in space for this dynamic to occur. Many of them talked to the belief that, "**There are things that my college student [mentors] do better in the classroom than I do, and I'm going to let them support me in that, and I'm gonna learn how to do it from them**." Another teacher described the relationship between her, her mentors, and her students as "**magic**". During the last few years of partnership and watching her mentors at work and the interactions they have with students, she's learned how to, **"…step back and ask the [mentors] to explain this because I know they're going to listen to the [mentors] more**."

This specific bridge between student and teacher hadn't seemed to previously exist without the mentor. Those students might have remained quiet otherwise and kept their questions and challenges to themselves. But with the mentors present, students seemed to gain the confidence and skills to take a more proactive role in their education, when teachers allow space for such a dynamic to form and exist. Again, it's all about trust and relinquishing control. It's not just what the mentor brings but also what the teacher fosters. One student noted that his mentors **"…contributed to that welcoming and vulnerable atmosphere. But I don't think they necessarily sort of like facilitated it or like started it**." He believed that it's the teachers who establish a safe and welcoming environment for students and mentors alike, and only then can mentors work their real magic.

Developing this cohesion between mentor and teacher does not come without challenges. If the relationship between the mentor and teacher does not feel strong, mentors, teachers, and students alike seemed to express a belief that the placement wasn't as successful and that students weren't served the best that they could've been.

A few teachers identified struggling with how to approach and communicate with mentors when they weren't meeting expectations. One teacher talked about how one of her mentors was on their phone during class or nodding off during another. She really grappled with being frustrated by the behavior and empathizing with being a recent high school graduate, current full-time college student, and juggling working part-time. "**It was really hard to confront him—**" she explained—"**because as his former teacher as well, I knew he was having a rough time in college**." Teachers were sometimes unsure of how to navigate giving feedback to their mentors, seeing as they were now work peers, but also there was still that bit of power difference between the two as the teacher was the leader, so to speak, of the classroom.

Interestingly, this experience was paralleled for mentors who, as near-peers to students while simultaneously being paid mentors, grappled with the dueling identities between a pseudo-friend and a professional role model. One mentor shared how they navigated the fine line between friend and mentor that they, **"...act like a friend or a brother or sister. That is how I describe the relationship with them too. When you just act like an adult, like a staff... that makes them not feel comfortable to communicate**." Another mentor shared that for them it is about, **"...showing that humility that you're learning and you're growing alongside them, even though you've been through the same exact thing with them before**."

But perhaps the most challenging part of navigating the not-student, not-teacher role isn't between student-mentor, but between mentor-teacher. One mentor recalled what it was like to return to their school after graduating, saying, "**I felt surprised and weird. Surprised because this time... I'm not a student anymore. I have to be like an adult person**." In regard to the relationship with their former teacher now turned classroom-partner, they went on to say, "**I don't think I am considered a coworker. But sometimes in class I have to say... 'she is my coworker right now.' It's weird for me. But after the class she'll still be my teacher... I just act like (I'm) still in high school to make it easier for me to communicate with them. When I communicate with them, (and) I act like a coworker with them, I feel weird. I'm not on an equal—the same level with them. I don't want to act like a coworker with them**."

Other teachers talked about shifting their own understanding and expectations of their mentors to better suit their role and function. Sometimes, at the beginning of a partnership, it was easy for teachers to expect a mentor to come into the classroom with the skillset of a teacher—after all, for many of them, their only experience with co-teaching is with student-teachers. However, that's not the function of the NPMs, nor their skillset, so part of the challenge for teachers can be reframing their perspective of the mentor role to better incorporate mentors into their classes. "**They don't necessarily have the curriculum design expertise to really lay out a super new, complicated idea, but they can definitely tell about their own experience**," one teacher shared when reflecting on how she and her mentor would plan for upcoming lessons. She and other teachers described that they learned to create space for mentors to share their personal stories, and that those experiences were highly engaging and relatable for students, while still connecting to the curriculum and making it more meaningful.

Mostly, it was teachers who shared freely about the challenges they experienced in the relationship, but mentors shared indirectly about the challenges they faced as well. We heard a few mentors share about sudden or abrupt changes to their placements, and how that felt like a violation of their relationships with students and the teachers they'd been working with for years. Some mentors talked about their uncertainty with their roles and seemed to hint at wanting their teachers to give them more guidance and direction on how to support their classes. At the same time, some mentors also hinted at struggling to find their own voice or sense of leadership in the classroom, and not wanting to step on the teachers toes but also wanting to establish themselves as an accessible supportive adult in the classroom. A few mentors also talked about being asked to take on tasks that were maybe outside of their scope of work or expertise and grappling with wanting to do everything they could to support students but also not wanting to feel exploited.

Teachers stated repeatedly that one solution to these challenges was having designated time to work together and communicate with their mentors. "**It would have taken more collaboration**,"

one teacher shared. "**I needed to have that time to sit down with the [mentors]…to make sure that there's ways they can be involved**."

However, time is often a barrier for teachers who are so regularly overworked. They value the partnership they have with the mentors, but sometimes they struggle to find the time to enhance it. One of the teachers talked about the practical side of partnering with mentors and how they had a standing one-hour monthly meeting. "**That's another hour of prep time that doesn't exist so that has to happen somewhere else because it doesn't just go away. You still have to prepare things. That becomes evening preparation time instead, so you're offsetting that time to your personal time**." She goes on to explain that it's not necessarily a bad thing, nor does she bemoan it, it just becomes one more thing on a teachers' already very busy plate. Another teacher explained that there is a bit of give and take when it comes to planning time. "**In some ways it's nice because you can be like, on Wednesday I don't have to plan anything because [the mentor] has got that covered. So, in some way that's nice. Then in another way it's like 'oh, but I still have to get through the argumentative essay and how am I going to do that?**'"

Teachers explained that, at first, the give and take can seem impossible to newer partner teachers or prospective teachers, and therefore it can be difficult to persuade teachers to partner. "**Sometimes it was a hard sell**," one teacher stated. "**Because of that you really do have to give up some time and some control**." But once a teacher can see the give and take and witness the positive impact the partnership can have on the teacher, the students, and the classroom environment, the idea of giving up time becomes a lot more palatable; it becomes an investment that's worthwhile. As one teacher noted, "**I will always put in the extra time to sit down and talk to my [mentors] and create a plan and debrief. That work is extremely valuable… I'm fully invested**."

As we've mentioned above, the development of placements, the relationships between teachers and mentors, and the shifting beliefs and understanding about roles and collaboration, all of it takes time to develop. Some of the teachers we interviewed had only been partner teachers for a few months, many of whom described still trying to figure out how to work best with their mentors, while others have been working with their mentors for three or four years and described a synergy that they'd been able to build over time.

Many first-year partner teachers seemed to describe an uncertainty regarding how to best utilize their mentors and collaborate with them. "**The first year we were never really sure what that was looking like**," one teacher explained. Teachers and mentors seemed to think this had to do with a variety of reasons, including the development of relationships, the shifting of dynamics in a classroom, norm-establishing, and building trust. It seemed that often it was that relational piece, that foundation of trust, that was the catalyst to building a classroom community that fully incorporated and utilized the mentors in meaningful ways. The same teacher said that once she'd established a working relationship with her mentors, "**…their willingness to be able to speak with [students] about a whole range of things, was much more evident and much more impactful for students directly**." Another teacher reflected on her first year as a partner teacher saying, "**The first year didn't seem super focused and I didn't quite know—at that point I was kind of just like okay**." She goes on to explain that she knew there was value in having the mentors in the classroom, and she saw it when they'd interact with students, but she felt like there could still be more, but didn't know how to tap into it just yet.

This experience was common during the first year of working with mentors, but after that initial year—or for some teachers, especially those with preexisting relationships, a period much shorter—placements began to gain traction. "**It was really clunky to get it going**," one teacher described their early months as a partner teacher. They went on to say, "**Once I understood more what I was supposed to do with the [mentor] I was able to better utilize them**." Another teacher who'd been working with mentors for a couple of years said, "**At this point [the mentor]'s pretty familiar with all the projects**." Not only is the mentor familiar, but he had a deep understanding of the material, so much so that the teacher was able to rely on him to help co-teach the class. "**I would basically teach Fridays**," the mentor reflected. "**And it has continued on to the point where basically if [teacher] is busy doing something else, he'll feel comfortable being like, 'Hey, you know how to start the project. Can you just give them the instructions and let them know how to do things?'**" Again, this teacher-mentor pair referenced the trust they were able to build with each other as being the foundation for this kind of opportunity to transpire.

Creating Pathways for Maintaining Community

A participating teacher shared:

"**Now that I've had a number of years to make observations and process the whole [mentor] relationship with students and myself… I think just because of who [mentors] are, students relate to them in ways they'll never relate to me. As someone closer to their age, someone who's in college, someone who's from the Portland area, that community, they see them as one of them, and now they can actually have a tangible role model… Even if someone wants to follow a similar path…like in the mind of a student I've seen this—kind of like I don't have to figure this out all on my own. I don't have to reinvent the wheel, there's someone who's done this path. And just gives that roadmap of 'This is someone like me and I can do this too.' With the conversations I've overheard with [mentors] and students, helping fill in some of those details of just the practical stuff like what do I need to do to prepare for this? What do I need to do to make that transition? What's it going to be like, especially for someone in my particular circumstances, from my community? All that**."

There was something very cyclical in the way that students, mentors, and teachers described the NPM program and how they each interacted with it. Not only do students return as mentors to work with their former teachers and encourage the next cohort of students to do the same, but there was also this desire to interrupt the cycle of roadblocks in education.

Students and teachers described their experiences and how the NPM model could either disrupt the negative cycle they could sometimes get caught in—such as students not understanding the instruction and getting farther behind academically; teachers being overwhelmed by the workload and not having enough time to check-in with each individual student—as well as amplify the positives outcomes—like when true community and relationship are built between students and teachers.

Students didn't use the exact phrase of a failing system, but that seemed to be the ethos behind the way some of them experienced their high school years.

"**High school slapped me in the face**," one student explained after sharing a story about his suspension and feeling like no one from the school was available to help him. Another student shared that they were struggling with virtual learning and so they stopped trying in hopes of getting held back and having the opportunity to reattempt their senior year when school resumed face-to-face. When their plan backfired, and the school graduated the student, the student felt, "**…very unhappy, because…it wasn't me that graduated… I just graduated without trying like—I felt so disappointed. Not in only myself but in the system because I literally wasn't trying**." Another student described trying to balance school with a long commute and other life responsibilities and feeling as if the institution and his teachers were unwilling to help ensure his success. He told the interviewer, "**I'm just a student. I'm trying to get taught something I want to learn…it's not like we all have the resources to like, get to school like everybody else**."

One area of interest that was noted in the interviews was that these challenges were often named as the very reason why students wanted to give back to their school and community.

One student shared that she was, "**…hoping to help, yeah, help students. Share as much as I can…because I know what they have been through**." She described wanting to help ensure that other students didn't experience the same isolation, frustration, and hopelessness that she had, especially as an ELL student. She goes on to say, "**When you grow up somewhere your entire life and you leave everything and come to another country…it's really difficult for mental health and stuff. So, students—they really need help, not with education. They need somebody to talk with them and feel what they have been through**.".

We heard this a lot from the mentors we interviewed, this profound desire to come back to their school—and in many cases, to return to their same classes—to help the next generation of students succeed.

One mentor shared, "**I really liked the idea personally of working back at my high school I graduated from and working back with the teachers I've already had previous connections with…throughout my own high school experience I don't feel like I reached out a lot and I don't feel I got enough support like I needed to… I think there's a lot of power when it comes to sharing your story**." She goes on to explain that part of what she shares with students is how when she was in high school—sometimes sitting in their very seat—she didn't believe she was smart enough to go to college. She explained to the interviewer how that vulnerability helps show students that it's possible for them to go to college too. She concluded by saying she felt, "**…very blessed I get to work with people in my own community and to watch their own journey to becoming who they were meant to be**."

Another mentor who was also in English Language Learning/English as a Second Language (ELL/ESL) classes in high school shared: "**I want to help the students who have the same situation like me when I was in high school… I understand how hard it is being an ESL student in an ESL class. So, they will have many struggles. So, they won't have enough support from the other program/organization. That's why I decided to come back to work as a [mentor]; to help the students**." Another mentor talked about the harm done by the educational institution, and how as a mentor, she helps to dismantle that harm: "**You're making them feel like they belong in a system that isn't really—that's telling them it's not meant for them**."

It seems that some students are hungry to return to their school, to stay connected with the community of support they've built there—or, in some cases, the community they didn't get the opportunity to build—once they graduate high school and being a Near-Peer-Mentor provides them an avenue of doing so.

Although this structure exists, it then becomes up to the teachers to decide whether and how they'll utilize it. Usually, the program hires mentors and partners them with teachers, but in some instances, the teachers are recruited by their former students.

One teacher explained how she actively prepares students throughout the school year so that once they graduate, they know they're welcome back as a mentor: "**I'm like, 'So one day you are going to be in my classroom as a [mentor] and you're going to come and work with me.' Just to show that yes, you will get to that point, and you will be able to help the next people coming along**." This prep work can help support a transition for students who are graduating and moving onto college, job programs, and other post-secondary endeavors. Once they're in the classroom as a mentor, the teacher has a constant connection to the community via their mentors. "**Two of our [mentors] this past year were [PPS school] grads and are currently in [college]**," explains one teacher. When asked about the value of having former graduates mentoring inside the classroom, she went on to say, "**I think that was really important for our graduating seniors…It's just different coming from your teacher versus someone who's living that experience right now**."

Again, when we think about the experiences of GEAR UP participants and the depth with which they are impacted by the program, there is just something very cyclical and complimentary about this process. Students graduate high school, are worried about their post-secondary life and where they fit, but here is this opportunity for them to stay connected with their community in a meaningful way that, instead of holding them back from growth, actually builds them up as leaders and mentors until they finish their post-secondary programs or are ready to move onto the next experience in life, where they then pass the torch onto the next cohort of mentors.

The benefits aren't just self-fulfilling either. Students, mentors, and teachers talked about the vast array of ways that mentors are a solution to some of education's endless list of challenges.

For starters, many participants seemed to agree that by having mentors around, the classroom environment became more efficient in terms of students getting the help they needed. One student reflected on how frustrating it would be to wait on a teacher to come help her or answer her question, and how helpful it was having a mentor available to help get to her sooner. "**This 'kid' would come up to help me. Not really a 'kid,' but like a young adult. Like somebody seeming like one of my peers but a little bit older…he would come and sit down and help me and stuff. And that was just cool to have because I feel like it kind of like takes pressure off the teacher a little bit**." She also went on to explain that by receiving help sooner it, "**…helps us feel seen because there can only be one teacher in the classroom depending on what the class is, so it's good to have somebody else there**."

Students also talked about how having a mentor present had benefits that differed from having a teacher present. "**You might not want to listen as much to some adult who, who maybe you feel like doesn't really understand your experience**," one student explained, a sentiment shared by many of the other students who were interviewed. Another student elaborated that sometimes students need people close to their age or reflective of their other forms of identity—namely their

race, ethnicity, and culture—to feel comfortable. "**It's nice just having somebody else there…somebody that's kind of like around our age, somebody we may be able to relate to a little bit more… [The mentor] was a young Black girl… She went to college, so she would talk to us and help us. And it was just cool to have somebody that looked like me be in the classroom and engaging with us, work with us, talking to us**." This was reinforced in the analysis of students' characteristics. In 20-21, three-quarters of students supported by mentors were students of color, which is about 10 percentage points higher than students not supported by mentors. Additionally, about 20% of students supported by mentors were English Language Learners, compared to 8% of students who were not supported by mentors.

One of the teachers we spoke to understood why these experiences would be so helpful to students. She explained, "**It's so powerful for [students] to see [mentors] that have gone through the same program as them that are now in college and actually on their way to stable careers and stable incomes**." Other teachers agreed. One explained during their interview that one of the challenges that first-generation students face when accessing post-secondary is not knowing how to navigate the system or knowing where to go for help. The teacher went on to say, "**To me a no-brainer is schools finding someone like a [mentor] who's in college to help supplement that navigational skill**." And one teacher went so far as to describe working with mentors as being, "**Crucial to our programming**". She goes on to say that she even hopes that the cycle will continue and that the mentors will return post-college as counselors, teachers, and principals—tangentially, many of the mentors we spoke to mentioned wanting to do just that.

Many participants also described mentors as serving as a bridge between students and teachers, who often didn't understand each other. "**It's hard to ask teachers for questions**," one student explained. "**But usually like the mentors that we had were young, kind of like close to our age, so I felt more comfortable asking them questions. And I felt like the way they would word or they would explain certain things, explain it to us, it was a lot more easier to understand than if I were to get an explanation from a teacher**."

For some it was more than just a lack of understanding, but that there was an institutional wall of power felt between the students and teachers that prevented them from speaking up. Many students explained that they could rely on mentors to help them advocate for their needs, ask questions on their behalf, and serve as a sounding board when confusion or missteps occurred. One student explained, "**You get that like, anxious feeling. You're like, well I want to say this, but I'm not getting the opportunity to say it so what should I do. Just having the [mentor] there helps out**."

Teachers witnessed this too. They acknowledged that despite their best efforts, there are still ways in which it is difficult to relate to students. "**I don't listen to the same kind of music they do. I don't probably watch most of the same kinds of things like TV or movies**." Another teacher pointed to age and race as other barriers to relationship-building, saying, "**Asking me as [an older] White woman to relate to a 16-year-old Black or Hispanic boy, or even girl, is like really a stretch**." However, that doesn't mean that relationships aren't built. The same teacher goes on to explain that she still connects with students by sharing information about herself and relating the content materials to her personal life and to the lives of her students. She says that by doing this, at least she and the students will, "**...feel like we know each other, even if it's not we are the same**." In this way, the students and teachers are still able to build relationships and learn from each other.

However, having a mentor present in the classroom gives students an additional positive role model to relate to. "**Having someone on the team who is that near-peer is such a really neat way to bridge the gap between the hierarchies that do exist in classrooms**," another teacher explains. "**They are kind of this middle ground if you are stuck in this hierarchy, they disrupt it because they're not expected. I love it**."

Simply put, the stories gathered in this report seem to suggest that mentors are just one tool at the school's disposal, but one that has the potential of impacting student-teacher relationships, classroom efficiency, and creates a pathway for post-secondary students to return to their school communities as leaders. Mentors are living, breathing examples of what young adulthood for first-generation students of color can look like after high school, and that experience alone doesn't seem to be replicable via any other avenue at the schools.

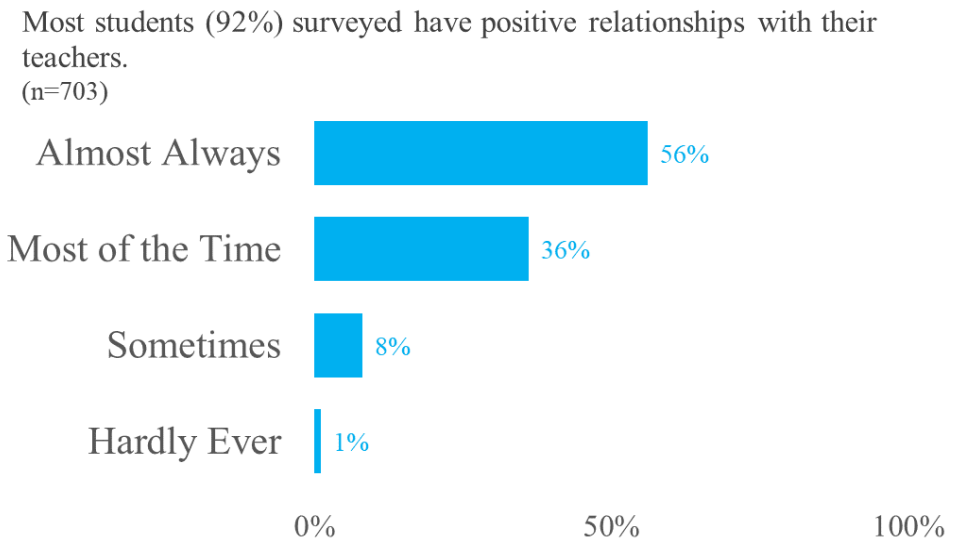
Relationships, Community, and Connection

Students, mentors, and educators also discussed a shared experience of building community, genuine relationships, and a sense of connection in the mentor-supported classrooms and talked about how classroom-based mentorship was both reliant on and helped to foster these factors.

On a foundational level, there was an expressed belief that personal relationships with students were a necessity to developing a strong sense of community in the classroom. If students felt disconnected, unimportant, or unseen, the classroom suffered, or at least the goal of learning was more challenging to attain. "[**The teacher] never really heard me out… I had a general resentment towards her class**," one student shared when asked to think about how their relationship with their teacher impacted their desire to engage in that classroom. As one mentor put it, "**If [students] don't like the teacher, they don't like the environment, they're not going to want to go, right. I have kids that honestly think social studies is boring but because of the teacher they wanted to go**." In other words, relationships improve the educational experience of students.

That said, what we heard from students who participated in the 20-21 student survey who indicated that they feel like they have positive relationships with their teachers. As shown in Figure 5, 92% of students (n=705) indicated they have positive relationships with their teachers almost always or most of the time.

Figure 5: Student Positive Relationships with Teachers



Sometimes that relationship-building comes from the teacher, but not all students will bond with all teachers much the same way that not all humans get along with each other. Many teachers recognized this and found that their mentors could help reach some of the students that they themselves couldn't. One teacher shared, "**I basically want to do everything I can to facilitate [mentors] making deep connections with as many students as they can**." There seemed to be this general belief that the more adults in the classroom meant more support and a greater sense of connection for students. In some cases, students felt as if the mentor was the only educator in the room that they could connect with. "**With a GEAR-UP mentor, they—you feel like you have more of a personal connection with them, and they absolutely feel like they want to—you actually feel like they want to help you. It's kind of that bond. But with a teacher, you don't really get that much of a bond**."

A few students shared this sentiment for a variety of reasons.

Some believed that it was an age thing, that having folks in the room who were younger and closer in age to students helped them be more relatable. "**They can relate to the teenagers a little bit more**," one student explained, "**...like have more fun conversations about us like while we're working**." Another student agreed that having NPMs in the classroom made it easier to talk to, and when asked to elaborate on why, he said, "**I can't really go to adults for, for my um, for my problems all the time**."

Students talked about the casual conversations they were able to have with mentors because of that age proximity, but also in terms of college information. One student explained, "**Having a teacher who's much older than you talking to you about college, it's like oh, like, you went to college in like the '90s. It's been, you know, 30 years. Things may have changed big time. While having someone who's a current college student when I'm going to be a college student next year, it's way more, um, it feels way more real and it feels way more like an experience that I could relate to in the future**." We heard a similar understanding from teachers. "**For that kind of**

stuff it's so much better to have it come from them and it's more believable. I was an undergrad, a college freshman in 1994. I assume it's different."

We touched on this a little above, but for some students it was more of a relational aspect that made connecting easier. Although age could play a role, they thought that it was easier to connect with mentors on a personal level because they had shared or common interests with them, which wasn't always true of their teachers. Students talked about being able to share their love of video games, movies, music, sports, and other hobbies with mentors who shared the same interests. For some, they even got to see what it would be like keeping in touch with those hobbies while in college. "**That was the first time that I got to see people who were older than me in a classroom setting that like, really take an interest in who I was**," shared one student, reflecting on the power of being seen as a human inside the educational institution.

Teachers described incorporating this kind of personal connection in their curriculum—making the content more applicable to students and their personal experiences, letting them choose the topics they'd be writing/researching about, studying current events and giving time for self-reflection—however, it seemed that when talking about personal relationships, connections, and relatability, it was the one-on-one or small group conversations that students most readily reflected on. Some teachers seemed to agree that this level of connecting with students could be difficult, given their other responsibilities in the classroom, but also simply because of the gap in shared interests. One teacher shared that her mentor talks to students about, "**...movies and Xbox, things I can't connect with students, to be honest, because I'm not a movie person, I'm not a gamer**."

Even with this barrier though, educators are eager to relate with their students—for many, it's the reason they chose this profession—and sometimes they learn from mentors how to make these more intimate connections. Teachers talked about a deep desire to be in community with their students, one saying that she, "**...dreamt of being really integral in community that way, like living and working and grocery shopping and running into families in the same neighborhood… That sounds so fun! I would love to run into a kid on the weekend, and their parent or guardian**." Another teacher shared that her mentors are, "**...having conversations and making jokes and all of this stuff. And I'm like, oh yeah, these students are people… I need to slow down and truly be checking in**."

But therein lies the challenge of a traditional educational system: there are a lot of demands on educators, a lot of content and requirements they must get through, and less time to "**slow down and check-in**" with students. Teachers talked about this a lot. One explained that "**[A student] could be waiting for me for 5-10-15mins on a bad day, just waiting for me to get to people ahead of them. That's just wasted instructional and project time. With the [mentor] there that doesn't seem to happen. We can always easily make the rounds of students. And when that happens, when you have more time with students, you can make a lot deeper connections**."

Teachers felt this and recognized the asset that having a mentor in the classroom could provide, but what was unexpected for this team to learn was just how aware students were of their teachers' heavy workloads as well. In terms of relationship development, many students seemed to believe that it had less to do with the mentors or teachers themselves, and more to do with a teacher's capacity for deep-relationship work given their numerous responsibilities and how little time they

could afford to work one-on-one with every single student in their classes. In other words: they recognized and felt the institutional barriers that are inhibiting their relationships with their teachers. "**[The teacher] was being severely overwhelmed**," one student shared. Another student elaborated that her teacher, "**...can't help every student. Like, it's hard for that environment, and everybody's just talking, and it's kind of like a lot going on. And I would say like a class that's like that...the teachers just needed more help**."

Most students expressed an overwhelming amount of compassion and understanding for their teachers and what they have to juggle, and how systemic it was that teachers didn't have dedicated time in their day for more personal connections with students. However, there were a few students who reflected on how—system issue, or not—this negatively impacted the students' ability to engage in the classroom. One student explained, "**Knowing the teacher—some teachers—wouldn't exactly help was, I wouldn't—I want to say belittling... I don't know, just them not like, offering the help or the resources that, for me to complete something I can do—I know I can do—but they're not willing to give me the time for it because they're so busy... Why would I even want to try passing your class if you're not going to give me the help for it**."

What students seemed to share repeatedly was this correlation between their perception of how much a teacher cared for them with how much time a teacher could invest in developing an individual relationship with students. As mentioned above, sometimes that relationship hinged on opportunities to share about personal interests, while other students reflected on the support their teachers gave them with classwork and assignments. "**[My teacher] especially is very good at making sure everyone's keeping up or checking in with everybody, like, where you at? But I have had teachers where—they don't care, and it's like they speed up or they leave kids behind**." There was not only an expressed appreciation for teachers who were willing to work with students outside of the class, but a distinct frustration when teachers weren't willing, and how that made students feel like those teachers don't care about them. Another student reflected that "**My teacher would send me like an individual email and ask me if I was doing okay and anything like that. I feel like that's when I knew like they actually cared**." Students could recognize that teachers were busy, but they still wanted their attention and support, and in some ways, when they didn't receive it, it could feel personal. "**When people were sending [the teacher] emails and stuff, he was like, 'don't send me emails or like text messages, it's annoying'**." Students want to be able to turn to the adults in their lives for support, and when they feel like that's not an option, they feel lost and on their own, and they sometimes can view the teachers as selfishly ignoring the students' needs in favor of their own.

Again though, many students were able to reflect on the opposite though and recall times when teachers went out of their way to support students in their time of need. "**Actually, [my teacher] is my best friend**," one student described after sharing a story of her teacher being there to comfort her during a trying moment. Another student talked about what his teacher did to ensure that her classroom was a place where students felt invited and were encouraged to share. "**[The Teacher] made it known to everyone like that her classroom was a safe space... And she just like helped me through a lot of things like during that year, personally and school-wise. So it was just like someone I was very comfortable with in the school. Like if I ever had an issue or if I just needed like a space to be in, that was where I was... She accepted everyone. She always found the like the bright side of every student... Having that space where she was making—**

constantly finding time to make sure every student was on top of what they needed and if they were struggling with something finding like even an alternative way to get them through the assignment was super cool."

Students seemed to view their teachers as more than simple educators on one subject—or at least they seemed to have a desire to rely on them for more than that. Students wanted to be able to share their hardships with a trusted adult. Sometimes that was a teacher. Sometimes students shared stories about how their teacher would, "**...really notice when a kid was feeling down, and he'd be like, 'Are you okay? How are you doing today?'**" But for other students, they didn't feel like the teacher filled that role, however sometimes the mentor could. One of the mentors shared that "**I've had youth tell me one of the reasons why they even show up to the class is because they know that I'm there. They know I'll always be there to have their back or help them out**." This sentiment was corroborated by students as well, one student saying that, "**Generally, I did just feel a little bit more supported, like, education-wise but also just like, emotionally and mentally. I always had [my mentors] to go to, and because we were a little bit more close in age range, it was easier to approach them and have conversations, whether that be about college or just like, you know, they made it very clear, like, 'if you ever just need help with school and life in high school, you can come and talk to us'**."

Mentors had different availability than teachers usually did, not only within the classroom setting, but also outside. Many students talked about eating lunch with their mentors, and some even attended virtual evening office hours or would reach out via text to their mentors for homework support and other life-related challenges. But even within the classroom, students felt like, "**It was like no different asking [the teacher] a question versus [the mentor]. You got the same answer so yeah, it was just helpful. And they like, they clearly like cared about you and stuff, too, so it was nice. Like they wanted you to figure it out. It wasn't just like they were there to be there**."

We talked earlier about how mentors often served as a bridge between student-institution, and that seemed to surface again when discussing relationships and community within education. Mentors and teachers described the mentor role as being a bridge between or even acting as a liaison between students and their education (sometimes that included teachers, other times it was navigating a confusing system, etc.).

Students might not have used the same language, but they described the same sentiment. "**I feel more comfortable because we have— [the mentors] are not teachers. They are both. To me, they are both teacher and friend**." Many students seemed to find value in having mentors in their classes who were near-peers, and especially near-peers who were also first-generation college students themselves. "**At a school like [PPS school] where a lot of kids are going to be the first one in their family to go to college, I think it's really helpful having someone like that**." Teachers, too, were able to marvel at the profound impact that it had on students to have these NPMs in the classroom. "**They were totally part of our class. And in the exact way they're supposed to be where they're totally near-peers. Like they definitely are not seen as friends or straight-out peers by the students. The kids are like whoa, you're in college**." Another teacher commented, "**They are a connection to the community that the school often doesn't have and I don't have to go out and find it; I just have it there all the time**."

For mentors, being this liaison between school, student, and teacher was one of their most notable job duties, and something they worked very hard to provide to students. When one mentor was reflecting, she shared, "**It's also me trying to be that bridge in between or like [mentors] trying to be the bridge in between teacher-student relationships where it's like how can you—how can you get the student and the teacher to get along… I guarantee you that there were students in that [class] that would not have passed that class if I had not been there as a connector or almost as a glue between the teacher and the student**."

This is what a mentor can do for a classroom environment. It's almost as if they act as a translator for the student, for the educator, for the institution, and by sharing their own experiences they're able to weave the community closer together in a way that might not happen in other classrooms. One teacher described it as the benefit of having community leaders. "**It really, really emphasized the need for community partners**," she explained. "**Someone who's outside of the school system—I don't know that I could keep teaching without that component anymore, now that I've experienced what it's like to have such an integral community partner it feels really important to me**."

Other teachers agreed that something special happened to the sense of community in their classrooms when mentors were present—not just present, but truly integrated. "**Every individual class is this little community**," one educator reflected. "**And [the mentor] just adds a whole new dimension to that. Because they can help build that community in ways I can't do it by myself**." It seemed difficult for some to pinpoint why that is exactly, other than age and shared interests, how a mentor helps build community more deeply, but one student described it as, "**I feel more fully engaged and I just feel, I feel like I can take a take a deep breath and just get ready to learn and not have my mind like be filled with turmoil or like worry**."

The last piece we'd like to discuss regarding relationship development and community-building that surfaced in many of the interviews was this notion of a reciprocal relationship. We talked earlier about how there is this desire to give back, that students are interested in returning to their schools and communities as mentors to help foster the next generation of young people into the world—and that some of those mentors then decide they want to stay at their schools as counselors and teachers—but it seems like there's something more than just wanting to give back.

There is a reciprocal nature of the mentorship program. As one mentor described it, "**I'm helping you and you're helping me**." The students we spoke to might not have been as aware of it, but many mentors talked about how much they were learning from their students, their teachers, and from each other because of their mentorship roles. For some, they gained leadership skills, for others they learned more about their career goals, but many of the mentors who talked about their growth in the role could identify that the growth branched out to everyone involved. With students, mentors felt that they were "**…showing that humility that you're learning and you're growing alongside them, even though you've been through the same exact thing with them before**," as one mentor stated. But the reciprocal growth expanded toward teachers as well. Some teachers noticed that learning to work with mentors had helped them learn to share control and ownership over their classroom in a way that opened more opportunities for students. "**I'm much more flexible**," one teacher shared. "**When I have a [mentor] who's interested in teaching the class about something, I'm just like, yeah, let's do that, let's follow that trail. And then we follow the trail to somewhere beautiful that, like, I wouldn't have gotten to at all without their**

input." These teachers are open to change, and in many ways invite it—maybe not all, not at first, but the longer they work with their mentors, the more they come to understand and trust each other, the more open they are to the possibilities that arise from co-teaching a classroom with a young, first-generation college student. It's not an experience that many educators have otherwise. A couple teachers shared that working with mentors was their first experience with co-teaching, one going so far as to say, "**I think every teacher who co-teaches is a stronger teacher than before you do that**." It seems to be from this simultaneous learning and reciprocal growth that the relationships and community formed seemed to deepen.

Experiences of Race and Culture

In the interviews, we asked students, mentors, and teachers how race, culture, and heritage played a role in the classroom, how those aspects of identity were integrated into the curriculum, and how they impacted their experiences in education. We heard a nuance of experience between the different stakeholders, as well as dichotomized understandings of race from white stakeholders compared to stakeholders of color. Ultimately, it seemed like there was a general acceptance of, or desire to be inclusive of, all people of all backgrounds but that sometimes the application of this belief was surface level, or the onus fell on people of color to truly embed.

As mentioned, it seemed that in general, the people we interviewed believed that there was a level of acceptance and understanding of racial and cultural heritage at their schools. Students frequently mentioned schools being "**open when it comes to like, culture and ethnicity, and like, racial backgrounds**."

They often described feeling like because the schools they attended were so diverse that it provided ample opportunities to share their race, culture, and ethnicity. "**It just came up naturally**," one student explained when reflecting on conversations he had with his peers. Some students were also able to recall opportunities they had within the classroom where they were able to talk about their racial and cultural identities. One student shared an assignment where, "**A lot of [students] that were part of the Latino/Latinx community did a lot of um—did a lot of paintings of food from their—there weren't too many African Americans in my class, but there were, I'm pretty, I can't remember it was two of us. So, we did kind of something that was representing our culture**." He continued to talk about how grateful he was to be able to learn about his peers, as well as share his own experiences. Another student recalled a very memorable experience from middle school. "**I took an African drumming class…It was drumming, and it was dancing. We learned different movement, and we took off our shoes and socks… It felt really immersive and energizing**." But when asked about his experiences in high school, he struggled to think of specific opportunities. "**I didn't see any African drumming classes. I saw band, but we didn't really learn much about different cultures in band class**."

Like the student above, some students of color often struggled to identify how their culture was reflected in the curriculum and school, or times when they were encouraged to share their racial identities in the classroom setting, or when they felt reflected in the curriculum, unless it was during a culturally specific month, or the focus of the conversation was about a negative aspect of their race and culture. "**I believe my opportunities are through Black History Month**," one student shared. "**It's a whole month that embraces…the history of Black people and**

everything they went through." This student continued to explain how he has opportunities to "**...describe how I feel about the past and how slavery and everything took effect in my life**," and though he didn't sound especially worried or disappointed that his opportunities to share his cultural heritage were focused on negative historical events, other students expressed that sentiment more clearly. "**We're learning about [Indigenous Peoples] but not in a, I guess I would say, in a positive manner. We're learning what happened with America and Christopher Columbus, but we're not embracing like the bright side of it, and at least from my experience, I remember being in class and just learning how they were treated back then, and not more of an embracement than what Black History Month or Hispanic Heritage Month get. It's not really embraced as much, it's not really, I know during Black History Month, there's always like posters around about different colored idols and historians, but you don't really see that with Native Americans**."

Students of color seemed to share a general sense of disappointment and exhaustion around assignments and conversations about race, not because they didn't want them to continue, but because many of their experiences with them so far have felt underwhelming. There was a general sense of displeasure that conversations about race oftentimes only arose when, "**...a really like dramatic or like, important news story came up about a colored person—them being hurt or killed**."

From students of color, it seemed that they felt comfortable sharing their racial and cultural identities with peers and the mentors and wanted more genuine and authentic opportunities within the classroom as well—and maybe even more pointedly, more opportunities to share meaningfully with teachers.

There were a few students who were able to describe what this looked like for them, given their experiences with some of their favorite teachers. "**We talked about race a lot**," one student of color explained when talking about his interactions with another teacher of color. "**[My teacher] was really big on intersectionality and just like the conversations between me and her, like ethnic—being ethnically ambiguous... It was so cool to be able to experience both sides and see—learn about her culture and stuff that's normally not taught in general**." While another student of color talked about how white educators can achieve the same level of connection and inclusion: "**I got a lot of help and support by—from teachers by sharing their own experience and...they will share something that could make me feel that yes, even though this teacher doesn't—doesn't come from the same culture, but they have then this same thing of being in a whole different community when you're from somewhere else. Like they-they share their experiences**." This sentiment of sharing personal experiences to connect culturally came up with teachers as well, one educator noting that, "**Asking me as a 47-year-old White woman to relate to a 16-year-old Black or Hispanic boy or even girl is like really a stretch. But again, I share information about myself so that at least we feel like we know each other, even if it's not we are the same**."

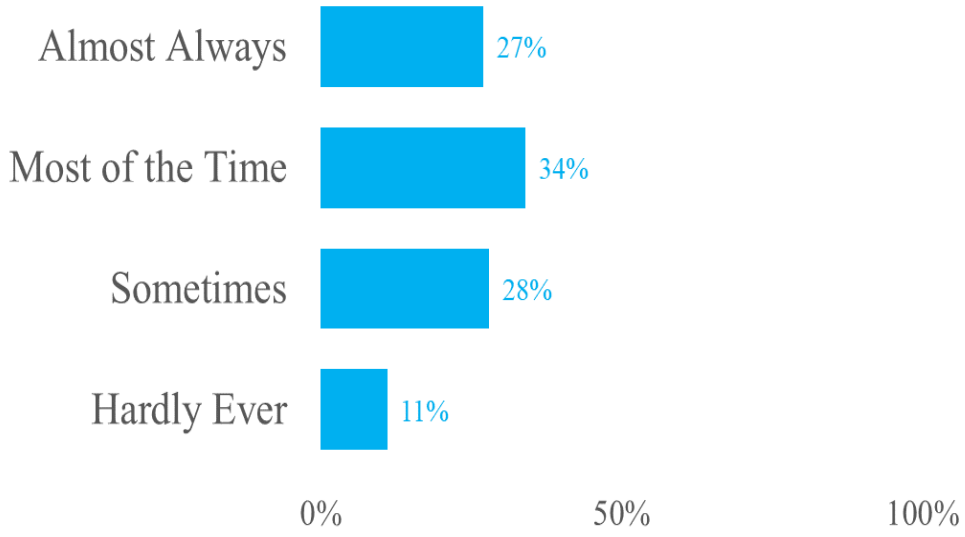
Students seemed to find a lot of value in having opportunities to share their race, culture, and ethnicity in class. One student said, "**I think it help us become closer to each other**." Another student elaborated that, "**When I share my experience and culture I guess I feel more... confident when people know me. I feel more connection with them**." Although there were some students who felt no benefit from having explicit opportunities to talk about their race and

culture. "**I haven't always gotten the opportunity to sharing my culture yet**," one student said. "**But it's never been an important thing for me to be able to share, so it's like now that I do share it's like, it's like, I don't know, it's not 'bad,' but it's not outstandingly good either. It's just, uh, it's a good opportunity but it's one that if I didn't have I wouldn't be too upset**." However, although sharing these aspects of self with peers and educators wasn't important to this student, he still expressed understanding that for other students it was very important.

We triangulated these findings through both our qualitative and quantitative analyses. Although in one-on-one interviews we seemed to hear more from students saying that they didn't have as many genuine opportunities to share about their race and culture in the classroom, in our student survey we see the opposite.

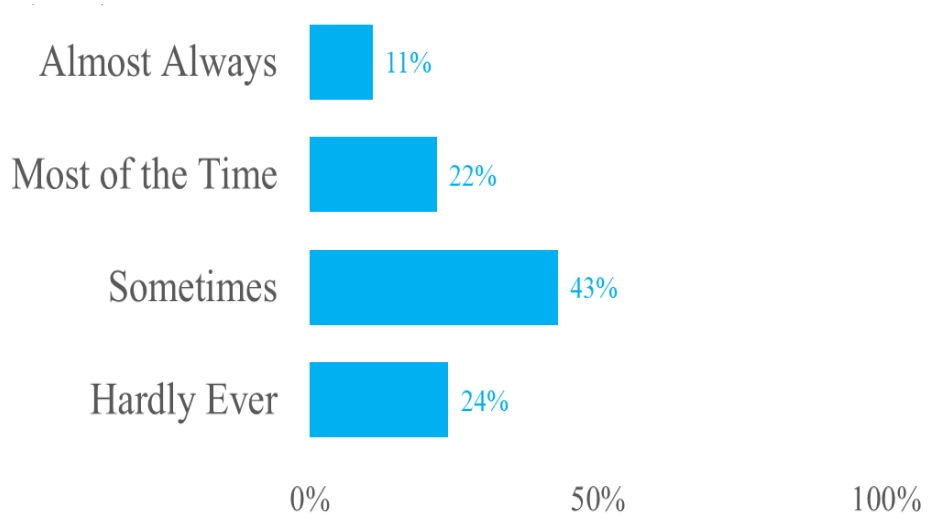
As shown in Figure 6, nearly two-thirds (61%) of students indicated they see themselves in the curriculum almost always or most of the time. However, more than a third (39%) of students see themselves in the curriculum only sometimes (28%) or hardly ever (11%).

Figure 6: How often do students see themselves in the curriculum?



While most students often see themselves in the curriculum, only a third of students reported they often have time to share their family culture in the classroom. In fact nearly a quarter of respondents indicated they hardly ever have time to share their family culture in the classroom, as seen in Figure 7 below:

Figure 7: How often do students share their family culture in the classroom?



One of the reasons why students and mentors didn't feel like the classroom setting—or larger educational institution—was the space for these conversations was because the environments themselves weren't safe or felt racist. The unfortunate truth is that many students of color had experienced racism in the classroom, from peers as well as from their educators.

Students and mentors alike shared moments that highlighted how racist ideation showed up in their classrooms, and why they'd be hesitant to share parts of their identities authentically. One student told the interviewers, "**There was like a group of students who—we just weren't successful in that class, just because we felt kinda like outsiders**." She goes on to say, "**[The teacher] didn't say that we were never going to graduate, but it was more of I felt like—and multiple peers felt like—she didn't want to help us graduate. She didn't want us to succeed, and she just thought of us as the stereotypical Black people, Hispanic people, like she—or the bad kids... That's how I thought she thought of us**." In a similar vein, another student shared, "**I feel like to a certain extent [teachers] don't trust us. They feel like we're going to steal**." The same student seemed relieved to talk about another of her teachers who didn't seem to share these same beliefs and attitudes about students. "**[A difference teacher] shows that he trusts us. He shows that he doesn't fear that we're going to steal because we're Black**."

When students felt like that was how their teachers viewed them—like they were bad kids based on their racial identities alone—it made students distrustful of educators, and even less likely to share openly, especially about aspects of their racial and cultural identities. "**If it was my idea to share, I never would have minded it. But if it was like a teacher asking me to specifically share it was kind of like awkward...**" It made students uncomfortable to have conversations about race in spaces where an untrustworthy adult was present or where that strong relationship and sense of community didn't exist.

Mentors witnessed this dynamic as well. One mentor recalled, "**When you tell somebody 'Hey, don't speak your native language,' like that's kind of like you're not really embracing somebody's culture**." Another mentor shared, "**[Students] don't feel like the teachers fully give them attention, maybe because of their race or their ethnicity, you know. The teachers I**

work with, they're all white but I have a lot of students who are of color, um, struggle in finding that middle ground, finding that relationship with the teacher."

Many mentors talked about how they saw it as part of their role to bridge the relationship between teachers and students, and to help represent people of color in an educational setting that is often whitewashed. But when they experienced or witnessed racism, they often struggled with how to disrupt it, sometimes for fear of reprimand. "**[The teacher is] a little racist**," one of the mentors stated plainly. "**There are certain times where she would help students that were White more often than students of color. Or she would make these hidden remarks that really off put me… I just personally didn't know what to say because I didn't want to get in trouble or get fired**." They often saw instances that they knew made students uncomfortable but weren't sure how to approach educators about them, or how to support students to disrupt racism themselves. One mentor talked specifically about how difficult it is for students to have conversations about race in classrooms because of fear of upsetting anyone. "**I think that's difficult for a lot of kids to speak up because a lot of them feel like 'if I say the wrong thing I'll get like canceled' or something like that. They're always worried that they're going to say the wrong thing and then nobody else in the class is going to like them**." Some teachers, too, talked about wanting to create spaces where students can show up more authentically and where students of color feel comfortable in the classroom. "**We have to collaborate, and our team has had a lot of conversations about how we can change the structure of our class so that it is more antiracist**."

The key being, that to reconstruct the educational system so that the classrooms within it are welcoming places of diversity and inclusion, it takes work. From everyone. And one of the obstacles to this work that we saw surface in the data was the role that white cultural ambivalence/confusion plays in impeding progress.

Some white students and white educators seemed to struggle to identify their race and culture. When asked to reflect on this subject, one student said, "**This question isn't always the most applicable to me… As far as like my culture and stuff, it's never really been an issue from teachers at all**." Some white students would refer to the cultural heritage of their immigrant ancestor, while struggling to identify how culture plays a role in their present, personal lives. "**I didn't know what my heritage was at the time… German, but like we don't really talk about Germans and Germany and all that… But even then when I do, people always joke around, 'oh, you're a German Nazi,' and it's like no, I'm not**." Another student shared about coming from a Jewish background, but not having any of the beliefs, practices, and cultural influences leftover in their lives today. It seemed a lot like some white students were grasping for a notion of racial or cultural identity that they didn't feel they possessed.

White students also seemed to struggle sometimes to identify how their own racial and cultural heritage mattered inside schools, some even going as far as to suggest that conversations about race needed to come exclusively from people of color. One student said, "**I don't usually talk about my culture and heritage in classes. I feel like I don't have a lot to offer in terms of I don't know, talking about my culture or heritage…it's just sort of not as much my role as like, I don't know, a White person in a pretty diverse area**." It seemed that there was maybe an underdeveloped sense of self in terms of racial identity for those students and educators, rather than a lack of empathy or willingness to engage. Sometimes it seemed like they believed that race

and culture was something they were taught about from others, rather than something they contributed to. One student explained, "**I've never really felt like it's necessary for me to have to speak on that because I've always just kind of, uh, it's always been relevant in a classroom…especially at—a school that is so diverse, we have had the opportunity to like learn about a lot of different peoples' cultures and have people of those cultures speak about it, which is a really cool experience**." We heard a similar sentiment from some white educators, as well, one of them saying, "**Being a White teacher at [PPS school] with a pretty diverse student body, I just think that just like having me as the leader in that room all the time, I think that was a challenge for me as a teacher. And I think it was something that I was willing to talk about all the time in my classroom, but I just think that there were some inevitable ways that I just wasn't always the best one**."

In general, we heard a decent amount of white guilt, but also a lot of curiosity, openness, and awe from white students and educators. They seemed to want to be supportive of their peers and their teachers, to create safe spaces for each other to share, and they also didn't want to hog the spotlight, so to speak, and continue perpetuating a system that is all about white supremacy culture.

However, sometimes in viewing themselves as separate from race/culture, we wondered if this doesn't contribute to the divide. It seems that some of the work that is still left to do with white students and educators is identifying their own race and culture and strengthening their ability to speak and share in diverse spaces, and that sometimes having NPMs inside classrooms can help with this work.

Sometimes this sense of cultural ambiguousness was described by students of color too, who felt a disconnection between who they were and who they thought others expected them to be because of their race, culture, and/or ethnicity. One student talked about stereotypical customs, and how his family didn't participate in them, and how that impacted his confidence to speak about his culture in classes. "**I'm not really connected to my cultural heritage**," he explained. "**My parents never celebrated holidays and other families would, so I never got that opportunity…a lot of things that a majority of Hispanic or Latino people do**." He continued to tell the interviewer that when he's asked to share his cultural heritage in class, he often feels pressured to lie about his experiences to live up to the cultural norms of the in-group, as well as the stereotypical expectations of his out-group peers. He takes it even further by explaining how those experiences make him feel: "**I felt really stupid…uneducated. Uh, to not know anything about my ethnic background…the history of my background…culture-wise**."

On the other hand, some White students, as well as some White educators, seemed to have a deep understanding of their racial and cultural identities. One White student shared, "**My culture and heritage is celebrated on a daily basis in America. I'm a straight White male… and so, as such, all of my views are generally shared by most of America**." They talked about—and sometimes named—popular critical race theory concepts like White fragility, White supremacy culture, decentering spaces around whiteness, and were able to share moments when racial and cultural identities were shared in a reciprocal manner that seemed to feel good to all.

So, we have some students who don't really understand their own race and culture, other students who have rich senses of their own culture and heritage and who feel comfortable sharing in peer groups but are perhaps a little disappointed by their opportunities to share authentically in class,

and then classrooms where teachers are predominantly White, sharing from a predominantly white lens where they know they should decenter whiteness in the classroom, and they try to, but they feel inadequate in their attempts.

This is where we've seen the GEAR UP NPM program help. We see the NPM program complimenting some of the goals presented in the Portland Public Schools reImagined Report—specifically some of the goals listed under the Educational Systems Shifts work, such as, Racial Equity Aligned Systems and Structures, Cultivating System-Wide Learning and a Diverse Workforce, Transformative Curriculum and Pedagogy, Equity-Centered Inclusive Learning for Students and Adults.

For students, it's not only great to have role models who are people of color in the classroom, but it's also helpful that they're currently in college or some other post-secondary training. For students of color, they get to see themselves in higher education in a way that many of them haven't seen much before in their education, considering many of their educators have been White, or come from a different racial/cultural background. One student reflected on how nice it was to have a mentor who looked like her in her class, and said, "**She's Black, she looks like me. We're talking about going away to college, and she's been there. She's had the experience of being a young Black woman at college, and she could talk about the difference of HBCU or staying at a closer school and what her experience has been**." She goes on to reflect on conversations she's had with a teacher of color who isn't the same race as her, saying, "**[My teacher] told me her experience about staying home for college. It's different because she's much older than me and things have changed, and she's a different race than me… Her experience is different**." In addition, for students of color who still struggled to talk about race and culture in school, having mentors of color nearby was a valuable resource. One student shared, "**Somebody asked me something about my culture… I didn't know how to answer them, and [my mentor] was there, luckily**."

White students seemed to acknowledge the benefits of having mentors who were people of color almost exclusively through the lens of it benefitting other students of color, but considering that some of them seemed to struggle to talk about race and culture when asked about it, the evaluators wondered if having strong mentors in the classroom who are comfortable sharing about their racial and cultural identities can be useful in providing White students language and helping them expand their perspective on what those identities mean as well. One White student agreed that "**Having two really strong [mentors] be able to like, show up for their culture and talk about it in class, of course, is empowering**," leading us to believe that there is perhaps more here than we were able to explore with White students.

Teachers also spoke about how beneficial it was to create or sustain a culturally affirming space when they had mentors of color in the classroom. When talking about wanting to create a classroom space that is culturally responsive and affirming, one White teacher shared, "**[Mentors] are a great support in decentering whiteness in my classroom… it's great to have co-educators in the room who are not White ladies. And it's always—they do that by being them, and then it also reminds me what, like, communal mindset looks like, and they remind me how I can act in a way that my students connect better with**." Another White teacher shared how working with mentors has increased their growth and awareness around cultural differences and how those affect a classroom setting. "**The diversity in my classroom is always something I**

try and intentionally be aware of, but it's kind of been brought out with [mentors] because when I see certain [mentors] interacting with students in a way I wouldn't, like I see parts of those students that I necessarily wouldn't have seen if I was just in there by myself." One of our teachers talked specifically about the power of having former ELL students back in the classroom as mentors. "**I see them as role models**," she told us. "**These [mentors] are students that came in with absolutely no English and they are all now in college, and so they've got personal experience of what it's like to come in as a newcomer and then navigate through the high school system, navigate through the college application process, FAFSA and all that, and be successful at the end. So, they have led workshops on how to do that and what their journey is like**." This can be especially impactful for ELL students, as this community of students can often be overlooked by college resources and face additional barriers such as financial aid challenges for immigrants/refugees. Another ELL teacher shared, "**[Mentor is] super connected in the community that attends our school and like even when we were talking about the election last year when it was happening, he has the perspective of his parents get all their news from the Vietnamese news and the newspaper, and that's their news source and it's very conservative. So, he's really been helpful in kind of helping us understand how a lot of students, in his experience, will be really stuck between what their parents believe and what they themselves believe growing up in Portland, and then going to school here and having friends who are from all over**." In general, mentors seem to help educators think in new ways. Especially for White-identifying teachers, they can broaden their perspective of culture and race and the numerous ways it impacts a classroom environment.

Conclusion

When students, educators, and mentors involved with GEAR UP shared about their experiences in the classroom, they talked about the variety of ways that these partnerships develop. Sometimes mentors come to the class already having a relationship with their teacher because they were former students; other times they've only just met. Regardless of how they come to the classroom, one thing that many GEAR UP participants recognized was that the partnership will take time to develop. It's a shift. Teachers go from facilitating the classroom community largely on their own to suddenly having a co-facilitator, someone to support with group work or facilitate their own workshops. After a while, the mentor role becomes more embedded in the classroom because teachers start to understand the value and impact of having near-peer mentors; they bring a different skill set to the classroom than teachers do, and some teachers realize they want to keep that—some even sharing how they now recruit mentors from their current students.

The GEAR UP Near-Peer Mentoring model also provides a pathway for maintaining community post-high school graduation. NPMs and teachers alike spoke about how there wasn't a mechanism in place for this outside of their work with NPMs. Students would graduate and then be gone. However, with the Near-Peer Mentor role, now they have an opportunity to return to their former high schools, work with their former teachers, and stay connected and rooted in a community that helped shape them. It is an especially valuable benefit for first-generation students of color, who can sometimes enter higher education and feel as though that sense of community is missing. But it

was equally as valuable for teachers who talked about how continuing to work with former-students-as-mentors helped them to better understand their curriculum, the needs of their students, and how to adjust to make sure they're preparing students for life after high school.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, students, mentors, and educators shared openly about their vast array of experiences with race and culture inside the educational system. Very often, once the conversation moved toward race/culture, interviewees began speaking more globally about the whole school (rather than just GEAR UP classrooms), but seeing as GEAR UP classrooms are inside schools, all of their experiences are relevant. It seemed that there was a general sense that the school communities were, as one student said, "open when it comes to like, culture and ethnicity, and like, racial backgrounds." However, many of the interviewees also seemed to describe a general sense of schools still not knowing how to embed race and culture into the curriculum and create truly inviting, welcoming, diverse spaces where everyone felt safe to come as their holistic, authentic selves. Some students of color talked about how their opportunities to share about or learn about their racial and cultural identities were still constricted to specific months (i.e. National Hispanic Heritage Month) or when something terrible happened in the media (i.e. the tragic death of Eric Garner). For many students of color, there seemed to be a general sense of disappointment and exhaustion around assignments and conversations about race, not because they didn't want them to continue, but because many of their experiences with them so far have felt underwhelming. Students of color want more from school leaders, teachers, and from their White peers who sometimes seemed to struggle with identifying their own racial and cultural identities, and how those impacted the environment. For some White students and White teachers, there seemed to be a general sense of discomfort when talking about race, but also a desire to be inclusive. On the other hand, there were a few instances where this sense of cultural ambiguity was also described by some students of color, and when some White students and teachers had deep understandings of their racial and cultural identities.

The GEAR UP evaluation team will be doing another round of evaluation during the 2022-2023 school year, this time really looking at how the learning environment changes because of GEAR UP practices—and broadening our focus from NPMs to all GEAR UP practices—and looking at how GEAR UP participants engage with data.

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