

# Student Demographic Data Report

A closer look at belonging and safety  
across student identity groups

*May 2026*



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# Introduction

Creating learning environments where all students feel safe, valued and supported requires a clear understanding of students' experiences in school.

As part of its ongoing commitment to anti-racism, reconciliation and equity, the Division is working to deepen its understanding of these experiences and how they are shaped by students' diverse identities. This work is grounded in listening to students and learning from their perspectives, recognizing that student voice is essential to supporting their success.

Student demographic data, alongside other Division data sources, plays an important role in building this understanding. These data sets provide insight into the diversity of students across the Division and help inform how schools can better support inclusive and responsive learning environments.

Building on this foundational understanding, the Division has examined student experience through an equity lens to identify key areas for focused attention. Belonging and safety emerged as central to this work due to their strong connection to student well-being, engagement and success.

This report presents findings related to students' sense of belonging and safety across the Division. It highlights key patterns and supports continued engagement, reflection and action.

*“If the Board, working with our administration, is committed to change and to finding ways to address the gaps that exist in education for racialized communities then we must begin the process of measuring where the gaps are. We expect that meaningful use of data will lead to policy and planning change which will lead to greater equity within our school division for racialized students.” —Board motion report, September 22, 2020*

## Context

This work builds on the Division's [Anti-Racism, Reconciliation and Equity Action Plan](#), which identifies student demographic data as a key area of focus to deepen understanding of Division students and inform actions that respond to their needs.

The Division's collection of student demographic data reflects a commitment to learning more about the students we serve and to using that information to guide action. This approach supports a data-informed understanding of student experiences, helping to identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth, and supporting ongoing accountability in this work.

This work is grounded in the Division's commitment to anti-racism and equity, including the Board of Trustees' [motion to collect race-based data](#), to better understand and address disparities in student experience.

## Student Demographic Survey

The Division conducted its first [Student Demographic Survey](#) (SDS) in November 2022. The survey was developed through consultation, research and planning, with careful consideration given to the information collected and how it would be used. Each question was designed to contribute to a clearer understanding of student perspectives and to support informed and responsive action.

The survey collected information about student identity, including Indigenous identity, racial identity, ethnicity, religion or spirituality, gender identity and, for students in Grades 7–12, sexual orientation. The results provide insight into the diversity of students, supporting a clearer understanding of the identities represented across the Division. This data provides a Division-wide perspective and is not intended to be used to draw conclusions about individual schools.

Following the release of the [initial survey results](#), demographic data has been connected with other Division data sources to support a broader understanding of student experience at a system level.

## About this report

This report presents findings from the analysis phase of the student demographic data work. In this phase, demographic data was connected with other Division data sources, including data from the Youth Resilience Survey (YRS), to better understand student experiences across the Division. The YRS provides insight into how students experience school, including their sense of belonging and safety.

Engagement with staff and leadership further informed this analysis. Engagement with staff and leadership further informed this analysis, helping to identify belonging and safety as key areas for further exploration due to their strong connection to student well-being, engagement and overall success.

The analysis focuses on identifying differences in students' sense of belonging and safety across student identity groups, aiming to deepen understanding of how these experiences vary across the Division.

The purpose of this report is to:

- identify differences in students' sense of belonging and safety across student identity groups
- establish a Division-wide baseline of students' experiences of belonging and safety
- build a shared understanding of student experiences across the Division
- engage students to deepen understanding of their experiences and inform decision-making
- inform responsive, data-informed actions to strengthen belonging and safety across the Division, including how the Division plans, supports and responds to student needs

## Belonging and safety

### A foundation for student success

Belonging and safety are foundational to student success—and to creating welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments, as outlined in Section 33(1)(d) of the *Education Act*.

Research shows that when students feel a strong sense of belonging and safety, they are more likely to experience positive academic outcomes, well-being and behaviour.

When students feel safe and valued, they are more likely to engage in learning, build positive relationships and achieve success. Research consistently links a strong sense of belonging to improved academic achievement, mental health and overall engagement in learning (Allen et al., 2019; St-Amand et al., 2017; Ungar et al., 2019), and shows it can contribute to greater academic growth over time (TNTP, 2024).

These experiences are shaped by relationships, school climate and the broader conditions that influence how students experience connection, support and inclusion. Together, these factors reflect the overall culture of a school community and play a critical role in student success. Supporting belonging and safety is a shared responsibility across staff, students, families and community.

### **Understanding student experiences**

Division data, including results from the YRS, indicates that staff and families don't always have an accurate sense of students' feelings of belonging and safety. This highlights the importance of centring student voice and ensuring that student perspectives continue to inform how schools understand and respond to student needs.

Research and evidence from Canadian school jurisdictions indicate that student experiences are influenced by identity, including gender identity, race and ethnicity (Patte et al., 2021; Rodriguez & Wy, 2024; Graham et al., 2022; Viano & Truong, 2022). These experiences are shaped by a range of factors, including relationships at school, school climate and broader social conditions, and have important implications for student well-being, engagement and achievement (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Lacoë, 2013).

Recognizing how these factors shape student experience is an important step in strengthening learning environments where all students can feel safe, connected and supported.

# Exploring the data

The first data source considered for linkage to the student demographic data is the YRS. The YRS is a Division-wide initiative created in collaboration with Dr. Michael Ungar and the Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University to support data-informed decisions on student mental health and well-being. The survey provides insights into factors that strengthen resilience among Grades 4 to 12 students, helping to inform interventions and strategies at both school and Division levels. Central supports, resources and professional learning opportunities support schools in using this data to strengthen student resilience and mental health. More detailed information is available in the [2023–24 Youth Resilience Survey Summary Report](#).

The YRS includes two questions about belonging and safety that were linked to student demographic variables:

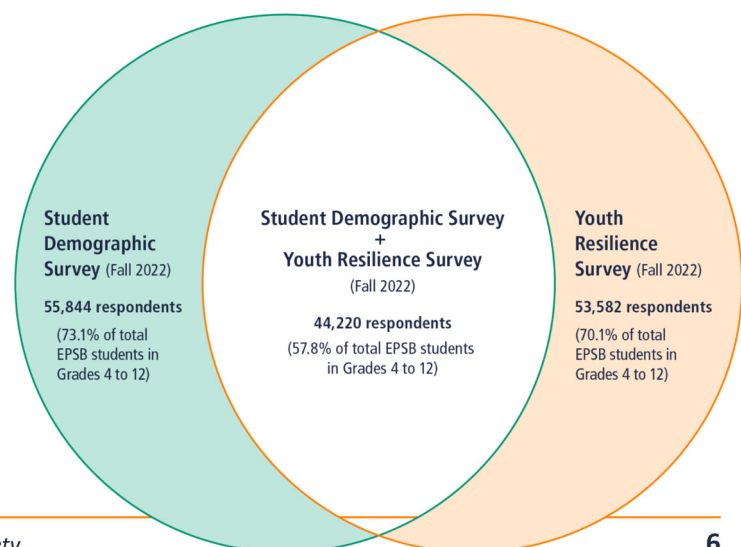
1. I feel like I belong at school.
2. I feel safe at my school.

These questions had possible responses of “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree”, and “Strongly Disagree”. For ease of interpretation, responses of “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” and those of “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree” were collapsed into two categories, “Agree” and “Disagree”, respectively.

The results are presented with students in Grades 4 to 6 and Grades 7 to 12 grouped respectively, as the SDS differed between these two grade groups to accommodate different levels of comprehension ([Student Demographic Survey questions](#)). The current analysis is focused on questions about racial identity (including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit identity), religious or spiritual affiliation, gender identity and, for students in Grades 7 to 12 only, sexual orientation.

Of the 55,844 students who completed the SDS (73.0 per cent of students enrolled in Grades 4 to 12), 44,220 (79.2 per cent) also completed the Youth Resilience Survey in the fall of 2022. A comparison of the two samples showed no meaningful differences in their demographic profiles.

The analysis in this report is based on the responses from the 44,220 students who



responded to both surveys, representing 57.8 per cent of the 76,438 students enrolled in Grades 4 to 12 as of fall 2022.

# Results

## Opportunities for reflection

We acknowledge that the results of this report contain difficult truths. For some readers, this will not be new knowledge, and for others, it will be. If you are struggling as you read this report, please take the time you need to process the feelings that arise as a result of your reflections on the findings.

This report presents the results of an analysis examining how students' feelings of belonging and safety at school differ across demographic groups. As such, it is important to review the results in this report with the understanding that:

- The onus for change in inequities rests with the Division to take actions that further enhance belonging and safety for all students in school.
- Biases must be examined to ensure that students, families and communities are not further marginalized or stigmatized through reviewing and interpreting data.
- Disparities in student experiences are a reflection of societal and systemic inequities.
- Responses to disparities in student experiences must focus on strategies and initiatives to promote equitable institutional structures and practices.

We encourage readers to review the prompts below and keep them in mind when engaging with the results shared in this report.

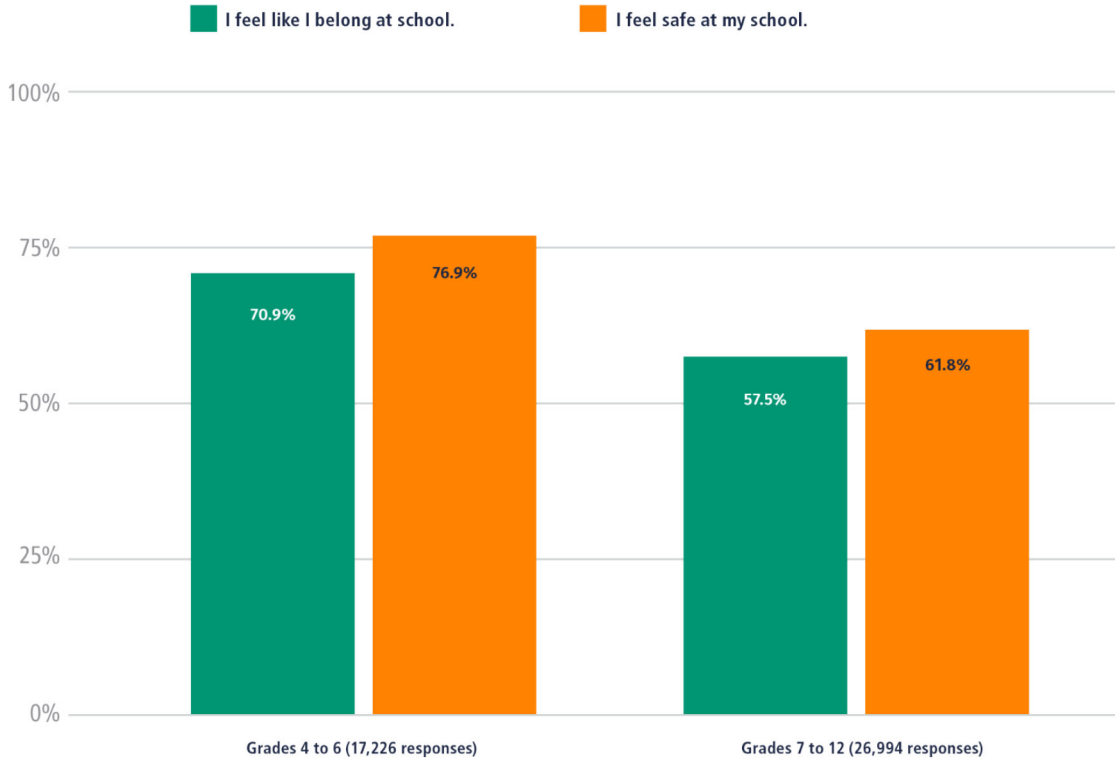
### Anti-bias prompts

- What might the data suggest about the experiences of students and their families?
- How does the data shift your thinking about systems and structures within the Division?
- How will you shift, maintain or deepen your focus on the Division's work and responsibilities?
- How does your bias influence how you interpret the data?
- What additional information is required to understand perspectives about educational experiences?
- Whose voices may not be represented in the data?
- What expectations did you have before engaging with the data?
- What are the questions that remain unanswered by the data?

*We would like to acknowledge that this section is built on the work of York Region District School Board through their Anti-Oppressive Framework developed for reporting on the Every Student Counts Survey.*

# Overall Division results

The following results provide the average agreement level to the two survey questions in focus for students who completed both the Youth Resilience Survey and the Student Demographic Survey.



These results represent 44,220 students who completed both the YRS and the SDS. The results indicate that overall, there is substantial room for improvement in experiences of belonging and safety for all students. Results show that both a sense of belonging and of safety decline as grade level increases. This pattern is consistent with existing research (Hughes et al., 2015; Neel & Fuligni, 2013; OECD, 2023).

## Overall disparity

To better understand the extent of inequity experienced within racial identity groups, religious or spiritual groups, gender identities and sexual orientations, a “disparity measure” has been created. This measure gives a number that shows how much people in these groups differ in their feelings of belonging and safety at school.

**Disparity Measure (Percentage Point Difference [PPD]) =  
group with highest % agreement - group with lowest % agreement**

In this report, disparity is measured by calculating the difference between the highest and lowest percentage of agreement within an identity group. Across all identity groups, disparities in agreement about feeling a sense of belonging at school range from 16.0 per cent to 30.2 per cent, and disparities in feelings of safety at school range from 13.0 per cent to 24.0 per cent. As students progress through school, both their sense of belonging and feelings of safety tend to decline. However, the disparities across groups tend to persist as students age.

*Table 1. Disparity measures in feelings of belonging and safety at school within identity groups*

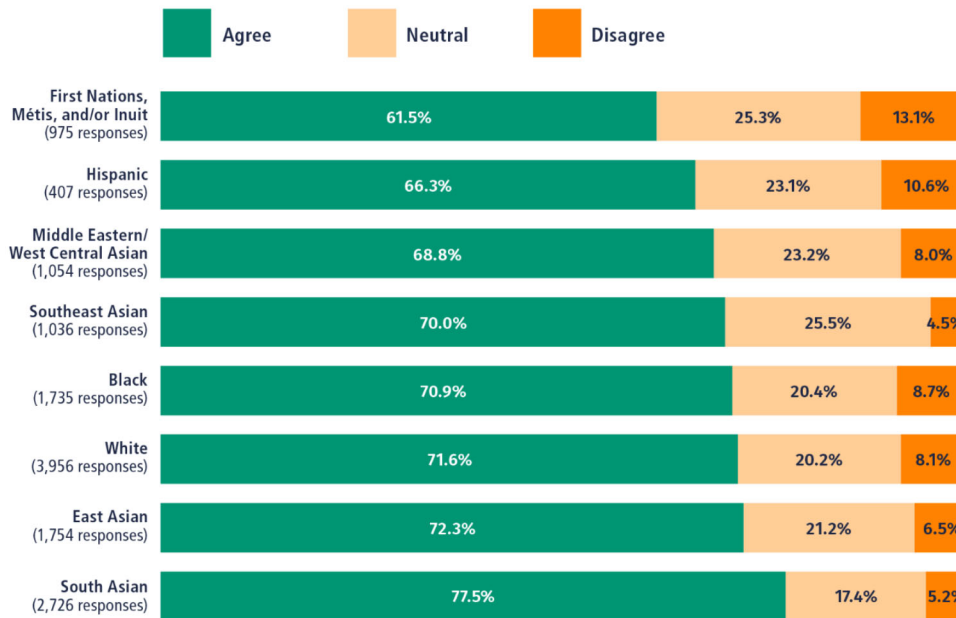
Identity group	“I feel I belong at school.” (PPD (range))	“I feel safe at my school.” (PPD (range))
<b>Racial identity</b>		
Grades 4 to 6	16.0% (61.5% to 77.5%)	13.0% (70.1% to 83.1%)
Grades 7 to 12	20.5% (45.2% to 65.7%)	13.9% (54.6% to 68.5%)
<b>Religious or spiritual affiliation</b>		
Grades 4 to 6	23.8% (56.2% to 80.0%)	17.5% (67.2% to 84.7%)
Grades 7 to 12	24.1% (45.0% to 69.1%)	18.6% (52.1% to 70.7%)
<b>Gender identity</b>		
Grades 4 to 6	27.3% (45.9% to 73.2%)	24.0% (55.3% to 79.3%)
Grades 7 to 12	30.2% (32.8% to 63.0%)	21.7% (43.7% to 65.4%)
<b>Sexual orientation</b>		
Grades 7 to 12	25.8% (35.7% to 61.5%)	20.3% (44.3% to 64.6%)

# Results by identity group

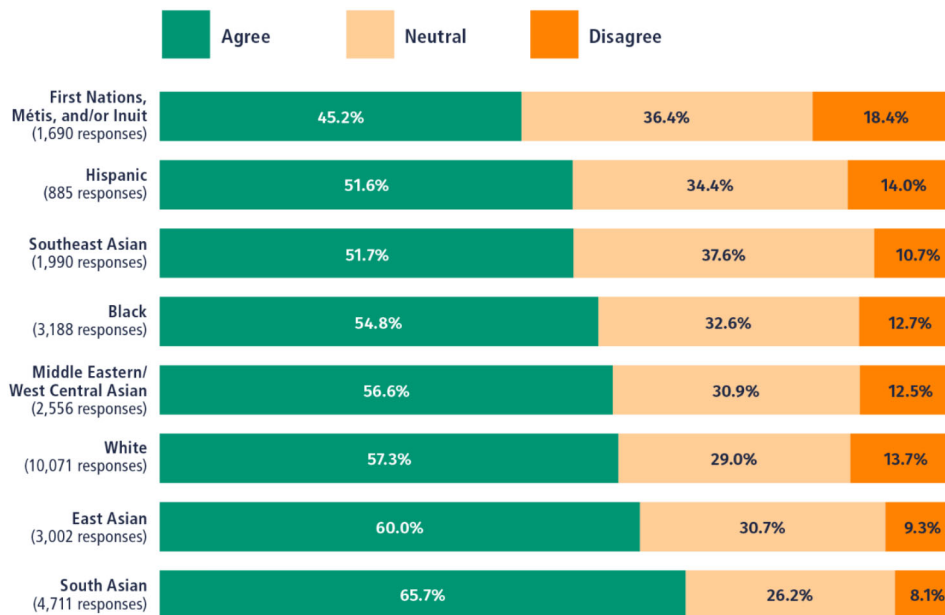
## Racial identity

*I feel like I belong at school.*

I feel like I belong at school. (Grades 4 to 6)



I feel like I belong at school. (Grades 7 to 12)



### Anti-bias prompt

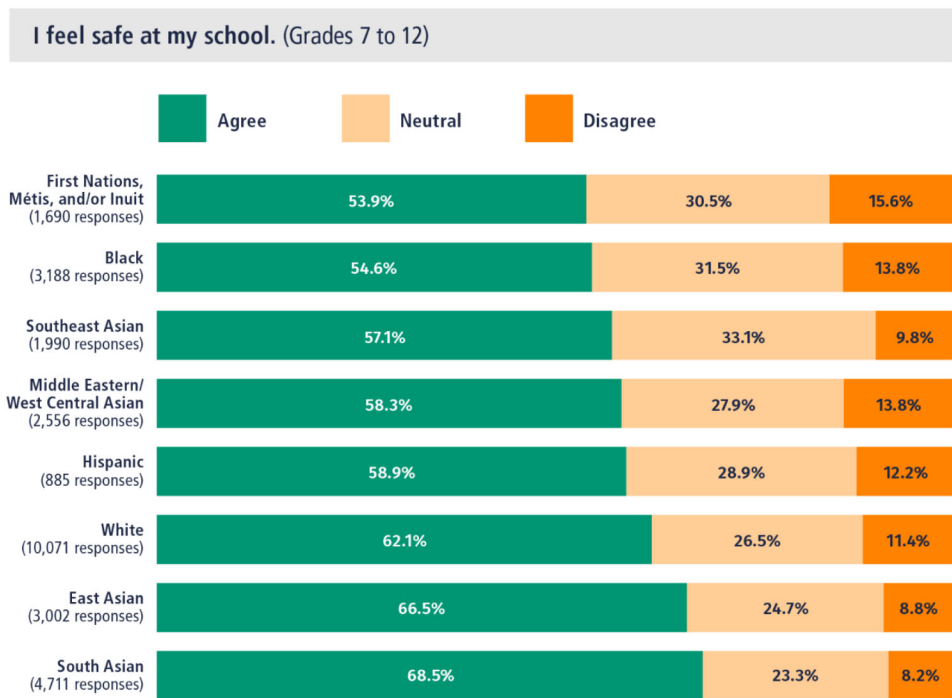
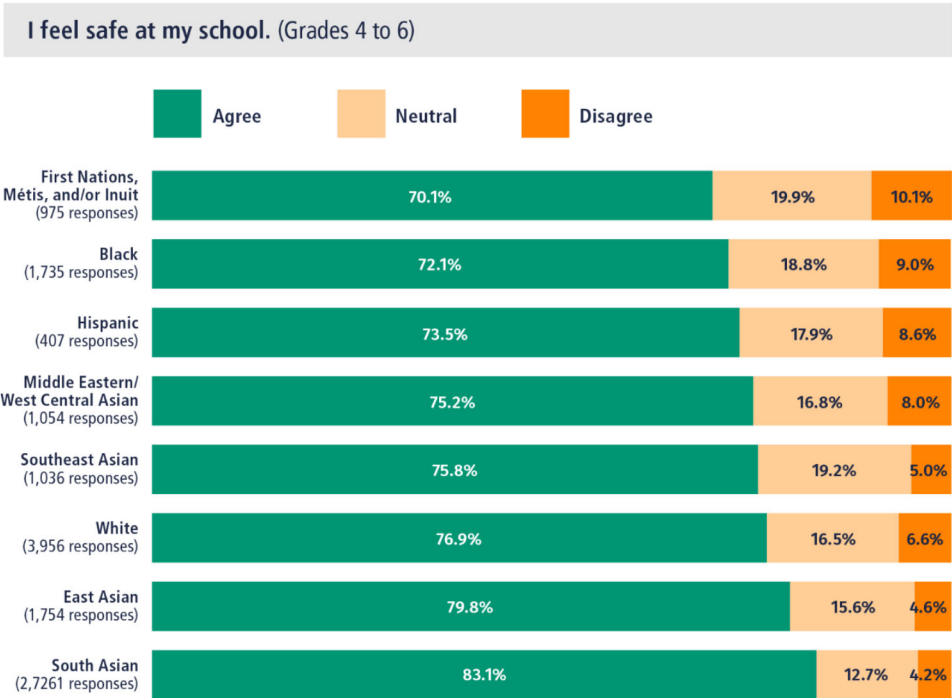
What else do I need to consider when reflecting on these results?

*Example: What might the data suggest about the experiences of students and their families in the Division?*

*(See page 8 for more prompts)*

## Racial identity

*I feel safe at my school.*

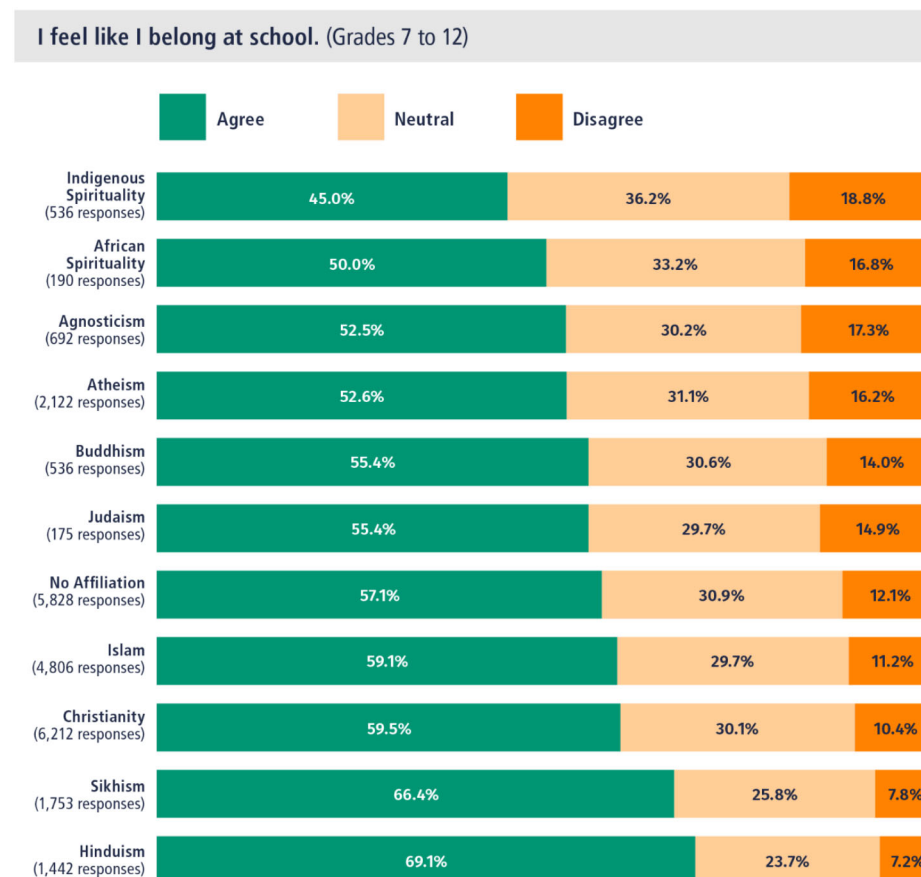
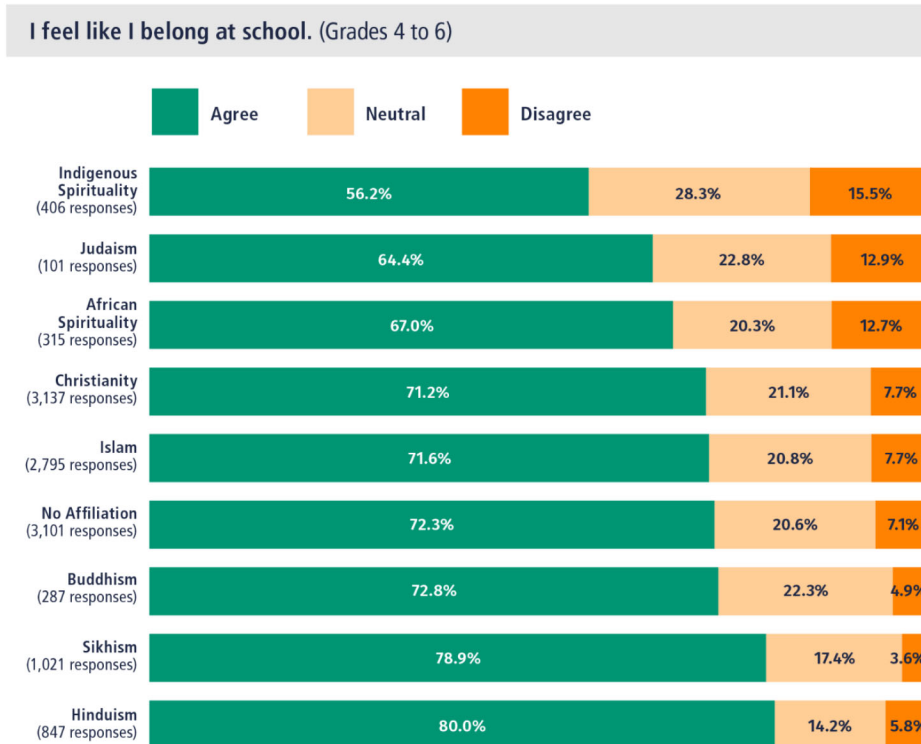


“Students can feel more open, proud and safe being who they are.”

—Student voice on their hopes for the demographic data collection project, June 2022

## Religious or spiritual affiliation

*I feel like I belong at school.*



### Anti-bias prompt

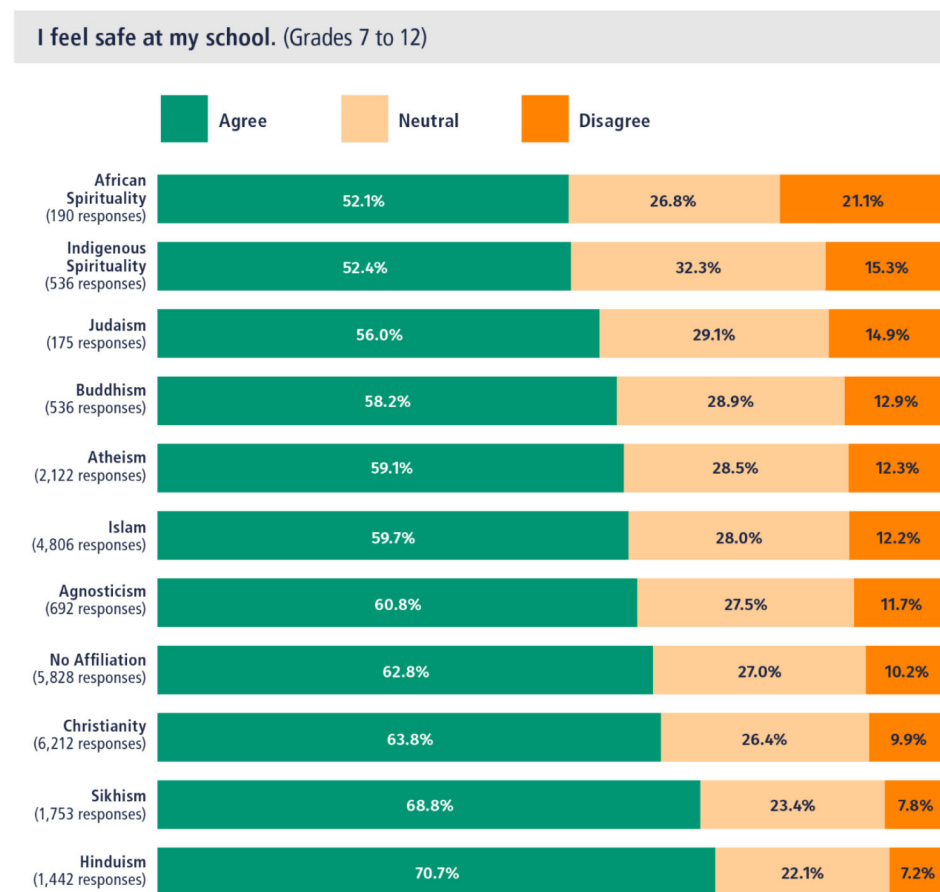
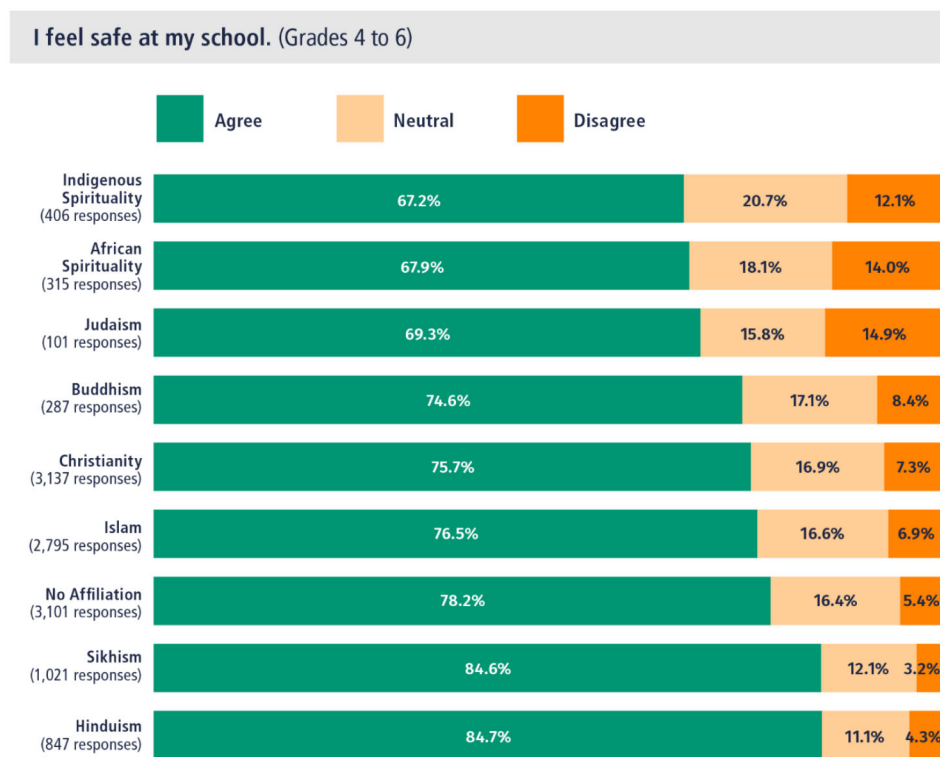
What else do I need to consider when reflecting on these results?

*Example: How will you shift, maintain or deepen your focus on the Division's work and responsibilities?*

*(See page 8 for more prompts)*

## Religious or spiritual affiliation

*I feel safe at my school.*

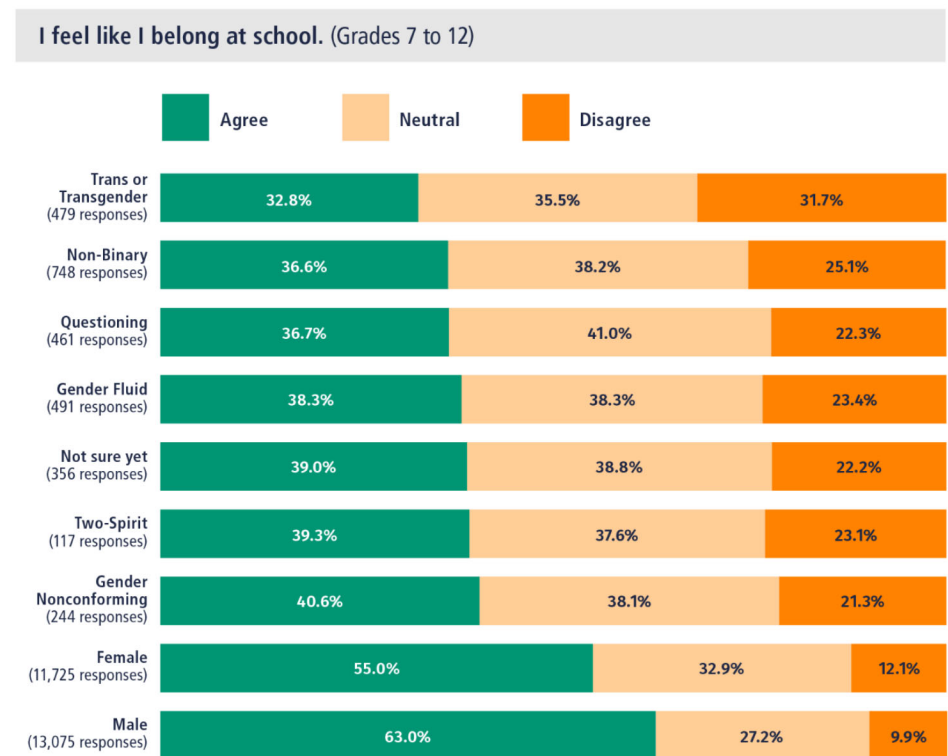
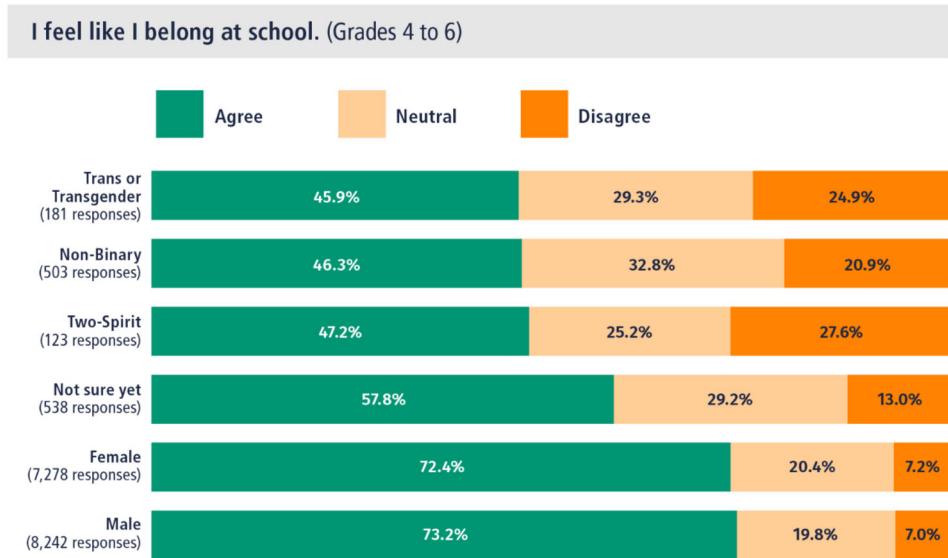


“A deep seated hope is that students will feel a true sense of inclusion within the school community; they will feel heard and able to trust that those who heard will take action. Students will feel accepted within school buildings and develop a sense of inclusion and belonging.”

—Voice of Equity Advisory Committee about the demographic data collection project, March 2021

## Gender identity

*I feel like I belong at school.*



### Anti-bias prompt

What else do I need to consider when reflecting on these results?

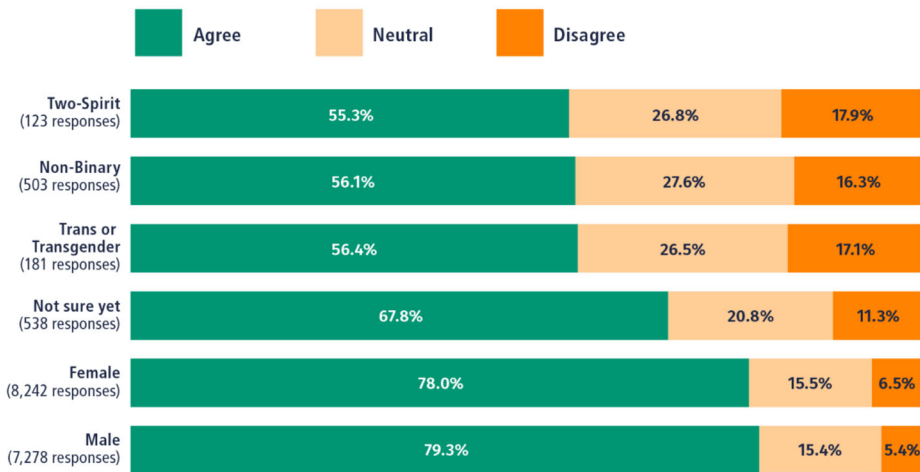
*Example: What expectations did you have before engaging with the data?*

*(See page 8 for more prompts)*

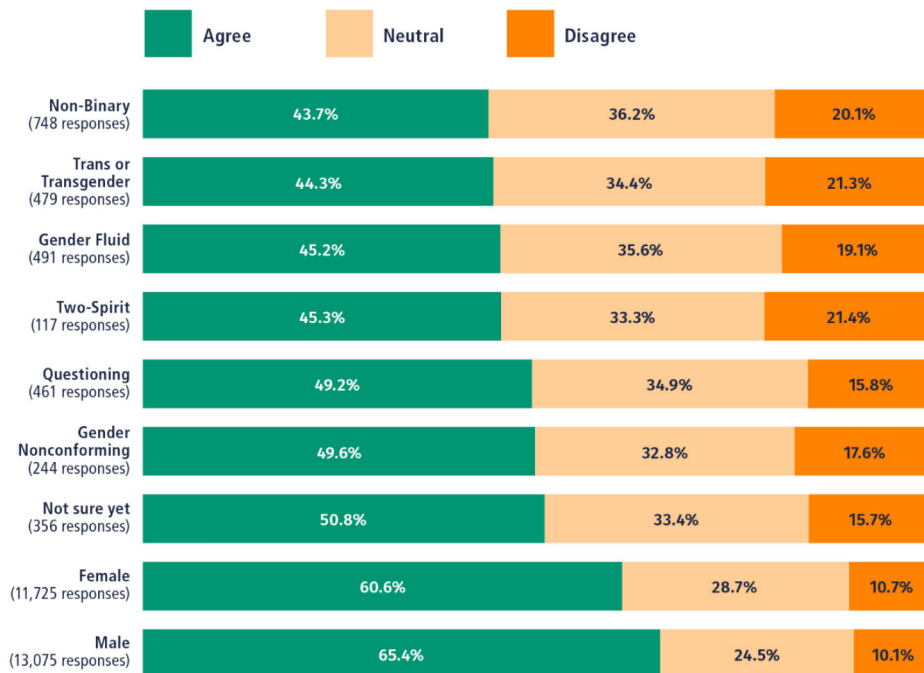
## Gender identity

*I feel safe at my school.*

### I feel safe at my school. (Grades 4 to 6)



### I feel safe at my school. (Grades 7 to 12)

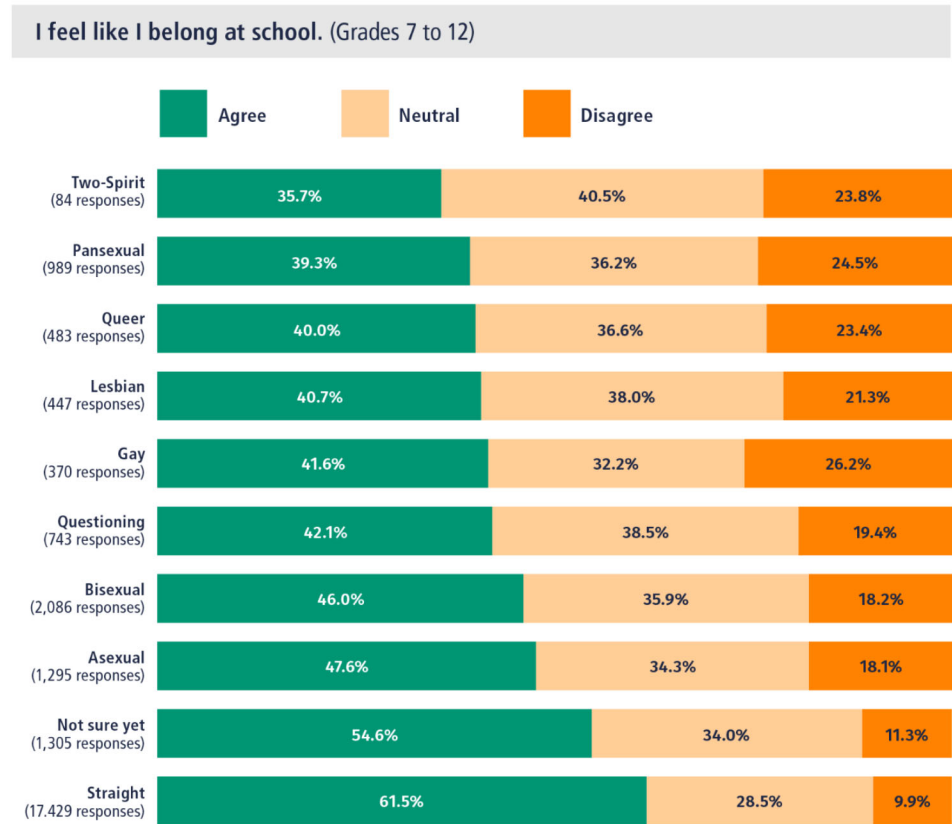


**“I hope that everyone feels safe and can truly be themselves.”**

*—Student voice on their hopes for the demographic data collection project, June 2022*

## Sexual orientation

*I feel like I belong at school. (Grades 7 to 12 only)*



### Anti-bias prompt

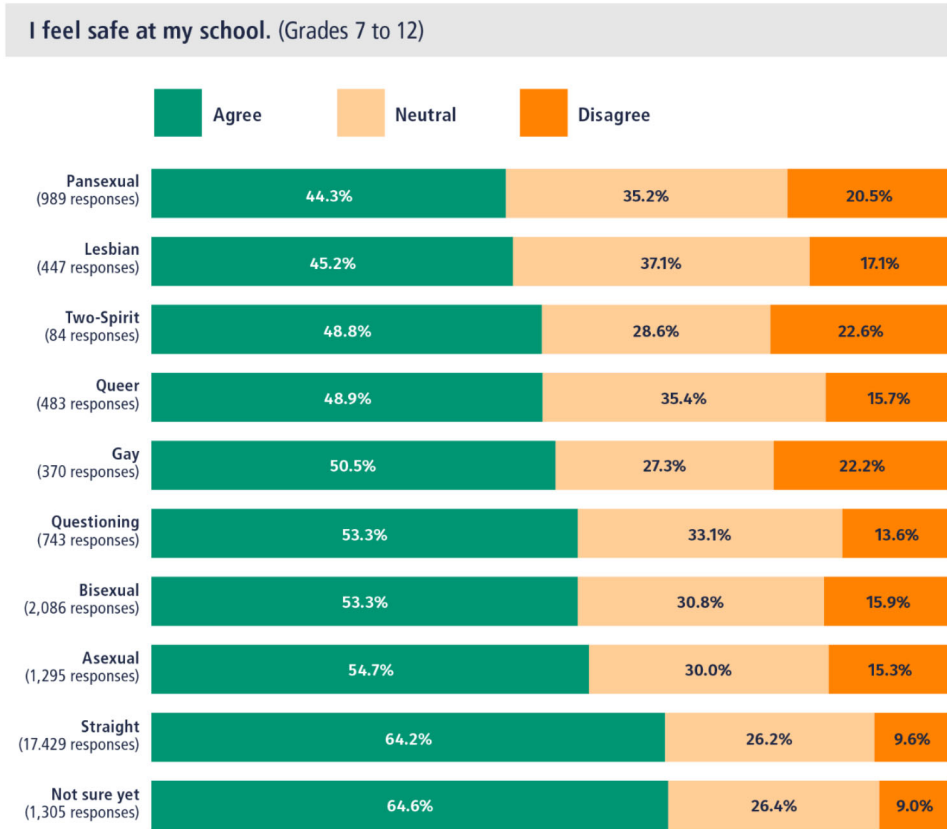
What else do I need to consider when reflecting on these results?

*Example: What additional information is required to understand perspectives about educational experiences?*

*(See page 8 for more prompts)*

# Sexual orientation

*I feel safe at my school. (Grades 7 to 12 only)*



“At the heart of all the focus group discussions is the aspiration that this work will lead to actual change. Change brought about with the intention of helping students to feel safe and comfortable with their teachers and school staff. All next steps taken need to be viewed with this lens.”

—Voice of Equity Advisory Committee, January 2021

# Moving forward

## What we learned

This report represents an important step in understanding student experiences of belonging and safety across the Division.

The findings show that students do not all experience school in the same way. While many report positive experiences, others report a weaker sense of connection or safety. Experiences also vary across student groups, with some students—particularly in higher grades—reporting lower levels of belonging.

At the same time, many students report feeling supported and connected at school, providing a strong foundation to build on. These findings highlight both strengths and areas where additional attention is needed.

Research shows that students' experiences of belonging and safety are closely linked to engagement, well-being and academic outcomes. These findings reinforce the importance of understanding the relationships, school climate and broader conditions that shape students' daily experiences and sense of connection at school.

## Key areas of focus

The findings from this report provide a clear foundation for action and reinforce the Division's responsibility to strengthen students' sense of belonging and safety across the Division.

The next phase of this work focuses on applying these insights and continuing to learn from student experiences in ways that support consistent, responsive approaches across schools, while recognizing the unique context of each school community.

The following areas of focus will guide the next phase of this work:

- Building understanding through student engagement
- Supporting school-based reflection and action
- Strengthening learning environments, relationships and inclusive practices
- Using data to guide decisions and monitor progress
- Building greater consistency across the Division
- Strengthening collaboration across school communities

These areas of focus support a coordinated and sustained approach to strengthening belonging and safety across the Division, within school cultures that support connection, inclusion and a sense of belonging for all students.

Creating environments where every student feels safe, valued and connected is a shared responsibility, with students, staff, families and community partners all playing a role. Guided by student voice, the Division will continue to strengthen the conditions that support belonging and success for all students.

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# Appendix

## Glossary

This glossary is provided to clarify the identity categories featured in the graphs of this report. Note that these terms were used in a glossary of identity categories included in the Student Demographic Survey. Definitions for racial identity were embedded in the survey questions, while definitions for other identities were provided in a supplemental document for students to reference as needed during the survey.

### Racial identity

The way in which a person sees oneself, or is perceived by others, as being part of a particular racial group. It is based on a socially constructed system of categorizing people into groups. For the purpose of the Student Demographic Survey, “race” is a social construct that groups people on the basis of perceived common ancestry and characteristics, oftentimes physical (e.g., skin colour, facial features), and affects how some people are perceived and treated.

**Black:** for example: African origins, Caribbean origins, North American origins

**East Asian:** for example: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese origins

**First Nations, Métis, and Inuit** is used to refer to the diversity of Indigenous peoples. This diversity is represented in part through the different languages, communities and groups of the Indigenous peoples in Canada

**Hispanic and/or Latino/Latina/Latinx:** for example: Central American origins, South American origins, Spanish origins

**Middle Eastern/West Central Asian:** for example: Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Syrian origins

**South Asian:** for example: Bangladeshi, Indian, Nepalese, Pakistani, Sri Lankan origins

**Southeast Asian:** for example: Cambodian, Filipino, Indonesian, Laotian, Vietnamese origins

**White:** for example: British Isles origins, European origins, Oceanic origins

### Religion or spiritual affiliation

Religion has been defined as being personal convictions or beliefs connected to an individual's spiritual faith. If a person does not follow any religion or spiritual affiliations, the following definitions may be helpful.

**Agnostic:** An agnostic is someone who doesn't know if any gods exist. It is different from atheism, in that atheism is about what a person 'believes' - that is, not believing in any religion. Agnosticism is about whether one 'knows' that a god exists or not

**Atheist:** An atheist is someone who does not believe in any god or gods

## Gender identity

Gender Identity is each person's internal and individual experience of gender. It is a person's sense of being a female, a male, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. A person's gender identity may be the same as or different from their gender assigned at birth. 1 Gender refers to the roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of people.

**Cisgender:** A person whose gender identity, sex assigned at birth, and physical body align

**Gender fluid:** A person whose gender identity shifts between masculine, feminine, non-binary or other labels moment to moment

**Gender non-conforming:** A person whose gender expression does not follow traditional gender presentation of their sex assigned at birth. Or, an umbrella term for a person who identifies outside of the male/female gender binary

**Non-binary:** A person whose gender identity does not align with the male/female binary. Non-binary people may redefine gender, identify as non-gendered, multiple genders, or an alternate gender

**Questioning:** A person who is not cisgender but may feel unsure of their gender identity. This can also describe someone who feels that none of the existing labels truly describe their gender identity

**Trans/Transgender:** A person whose gender identity or expression differs from their sex assigned at birth and/or physical bodies

**Two-spirit:** An identity for Indigenous people who also identify as sexual or gender diverse. Some Indigenous people use this term instead of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc.

**Not sure yet:** I have not thought about this much and/or an answer does not come to mind

## Sexual orientation (Grades 7 to 12 only)

Feelings of attraction, behavior, intimacy or emotion that influence intimacy or relationships with other people.

**Asexual:** A person who does not experience desire for sexual or physical interactions, or may experience a lowered spectrum of sexual or physical desire

**Bisexual:** A person who is attracted to people of the same gender and people of another gender (Bi meaning two)

**Gay:** An umbrella term to describe people who are attracted to people of the same gender. For example, a male who is physically and emotionally attracted to other males, or a female who is physically and emotionally attracted to other females

**Lesbian:** A female who is physically and emotionally attracted to other females

**Pansexual:** A person who is physically and emotionally attracted to people of many different gender identities. This term reaches beyond the male/female binary and is related to attraction to someone's personality regardless of gender

**Queer:** An umbrella term to describe sexual and gender diverse identities and communities. This term was historically derogatory, but it has been reclaimed by many in the community and is now used in positive ways

**Questioning:** A person who is not heterosexual but may feel unsure of their sexual orientation. This can also describe someone who feels that none of the existing labels truly describe the way they experience attraction

**Straight/Heterosexual:** A person whose attraction is understood as opposite within the male/female binary. A male who is attracted to females, or a female who is attracted to males

**Two-spirit:** An identity for some Indigenous people who also identify as sexual or gender diverse. Some Indigenous people use this term instead of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc.

**Not sure yet:** I have not thought about this much and/or an answer does not come to mind

**We extend our sincere appreciation to the students who participated in this work and the staff who provided safe spaces for them to do so.**