

STUDENTS SHAPING BETTER SCHOOLS

FEEST Youth-Led Participatory Research Project Findings





STUDENTS ASKED. STUDENTS LISTENED. STUDENTS IDENTIFIED WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE.

During the 2025–2026 school year, FEEST Student Organizers developed research questions to better understand the barriers they and their peers experience at school. Student Organizers interviewed and surveyed 153 students across five high schools to better understand what helps young people feel supported, healthy, safe, connected, and ready to learn.

This project reflects FEEST’s commitment to youth-led organizing. It is our core belief that the people most impacted by school policies and practices should have meaningful power in identifying problems, shaping solutions, and deciding what change should look like.

We’re excited to share what we learned! This report will help guide Student Organizers as we refine campaign goals, build strategies, and organize for changes in our schools.

RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

5 SCHOOLS

153 STUDENT RESPONSES

Student Organizers used interviews, surveys, tabling, and conversations to gather feedback. This research is unique because each school asked questions based on its own priorities. This report shares common themes alongside school-specific findings rather than directly comparing schools.

WHAT WE HEARD ACROSS SCHOOLS

EVERY SCHOOL COMMUNITY IS DIFFERENT. STILL,
WHEN WE LOOKED ACROSS THE RESEARCH,
SEVERAL SHARED THEMES STOOD OUT.

Students talked about homework, tests, grades, deadlines, classwork, and feeling like there is never enough time to finish everything. Some students felt that school focused more on grades and completing assignments than on learning, creativity, and balance.

Students also described how heavy workloads can make it harder to rest, maintain relationships, participate in activities, or handle responsibilities outside school. Across the research, schoolwork was one of the most common sources of stress.

1 SCHOOLWORK IS A MAJOR SOURCE OF STRESS

2 STUDENTS FEEL OVERSTIMULATED

Students described classrooms and hallways as loud, crowded, and overstimulating. Many said a quiet place to rest could help them calm down, clear their minds, regain focus, and return to class ready to learn.

This aligns with our Student Organizer's campaign goal of Wellness Rooms. Students imagined Wellness Rooms as spaces with comfortable seating, dim lighting, snacks, water, music, fidgets, creative activities, and trusted staff who are available to offer supports and resources.

When we asked students what support looks like, they talked about adults who listen, check in, give guidance, show compassion, and take time to understand what is happening in their lives. Many students mentioned having adults check in and listening to them is supportive.

Students also shared that support can be inconsistent, difficult to access, or focused only on academics. Some students did not know what resources were available or whether asking for help was even an option.

4 FOOD SHAPES THE SCHOOL DAY

Students are coming to school while managing jobs, family responsibilities, finances, transportation, friendships, community safety, lack of sleep, and uncertainty about the future.

These stressors affect students' energy, focus, attendance, mental health, and ability to complete schoolwork. Students want schools to recognize that their lives do not pause when they enter the classroom.

SUPPORT STARTS WITH TRUST

3

Students raised concerns about food quality, portions, variety, affordability, and access to school meals.

They want school food that is healthy, fresh, filling, culturally relevant, and free for all students.

Students also talked about lunch as a break, a chance to connect with friends, and something that can improve their mood during a stressful day.

5 WHAT HAPPENS OUTSIDE SCHOOL AFFECTS LEARNING INSIDE SCHOOL



WOW

SCHOOL BY SCHOOL RESULTS

CHIEF SEALTH INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL



STUDENTS WANT ACCESSIBLE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND A DEDICATED PLACE TO RESET

Young people at Chief Sealth are experiencing stress both within and outside of school, making it difficult to balance social and emotional wellbeing as well as academic success.

Students want opportunities to pause, process, and take care of themselves, and they believe a Wellness Room is part of the solution. They have a plan for how to get one!

Students strongly supported creating a wellness room at Chief Sealth. They imagined a quiet, low-stimulation space where students could rest, regulate, and return to class more prepared to learn.

Additionally, students are worried about how to support their friends and classmates who are also struggling with their mental health or are not having other material needs met.



WHAT STUDENTS SHARED:

- Workload, grades, tests, and deadlines create significant stress.
- Existing quiet spaces are limited or not available to every student.
- Mental health resources need to be easier to find and understand.
- Staff support makes a difference when it is consistent and built on trust.

“I [want] a wellness room area where people are free to quietly exist, be comfortable, and be heard.”

- Chief Sealth Student

WHAT STUDENTS WANT:

- A Wellness Room with comfortable seating, dim lighting, snacks, water, fidgets, creative activities, and staff who are available to provide support.
- All teachers receive trainings and supports on engaging with students dealing with stress. This does not mean providing extensive mental health support, but knowing how to check in with students, identify signs that they are not doing well, and referring students to the proper people and supports when they are struggling.
- Conversations about mental health are practiced in school, reducing stigma and teaching students who and how to ask for help.
- Greater flexibility with assignments and deadlines
- Regular check-ins with trusted adults
- Better visibility for existing support and counseling resources

EVERGREEN HIGH SCHOOL



STUDENTS WANT STRONGER COMMUNITY, FAIR TREATMENT, AND CONSISTENT ADULT SUPPORT

Evergreen students described mixed experiences with adults at school. Many students could identify someone they trusted, while others felt that support was limited, difficult to access, or focused only on academics.

Students also talked about a lack of school spirit and community. Lunch restrictions, closed-campus rules, bathroom conditions, and low participation in school activities contributed to a feeling that students had limited freedom or connection.

Some students reported concerns on classroom dynamics and bias, and not receiving help when they asked for it. At the same time, students named teachers they appreciated for being compassionate, approachable, and supportive.



WHAT STUDENTS SHARED:

- Family responsibilities, lack of sleep, limited supplies, and lack of quiet homework space affect school performance.
- School spirit and connection across the school community feel limited.
- Students have mixed experiences with adult support.
- Students value teachers and adults who listen, explain expectations, and treat them fairly.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT:

- Students want more guidance and communication from teachers.
- Stronger school spirit and sense of community
- consistent treatment from adults
- Better guidance and academic support
- Cleaner bathrooms
- Greater freedom and trust during lunch
- Clear responses to bias and harmful classroom experiences

"I don't have a lot of quiet spaces at school, so it's challenging to be able to work on my schoolwork. I just need helpful guidance."

- Evergreen Student

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL

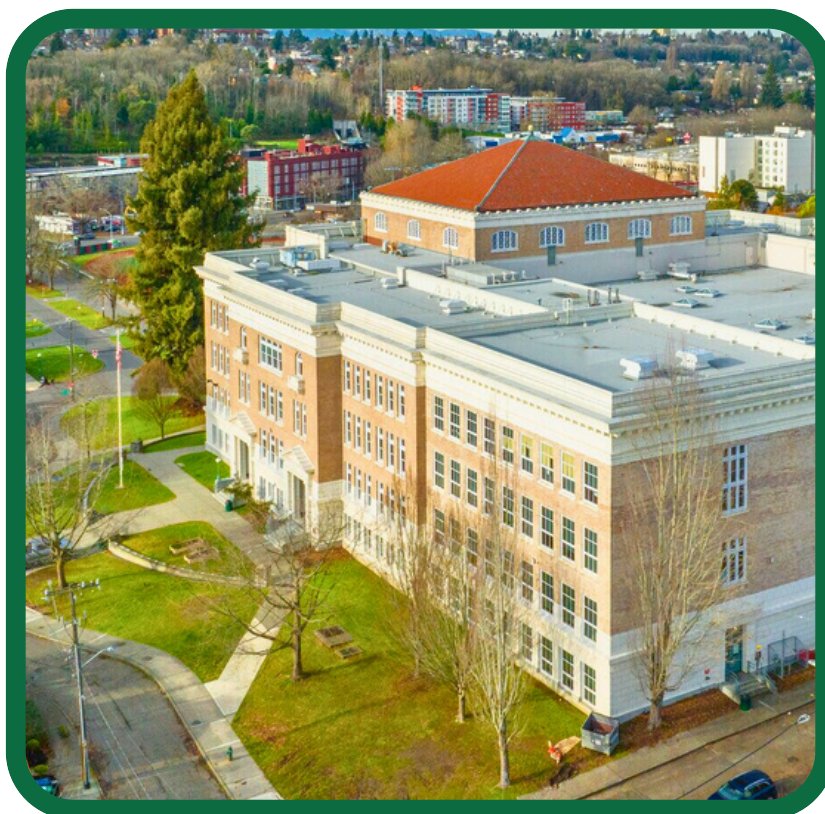


STUDENTS WANT CALM SPACES, TRUSTED SUPPORT, AND RELIEF FROM BURNOUT

Franklin students described feeling burned out from school, difficulty focusing, and feeling overwhelmed by classwork.

Students also talked about stress from home life, school food quality, and safety concerns near or around school.

When students described what helps them cope, they named a clear desire for Wellness Rooms. That is, a place they can go to for peace, quiet, music, snacks, rest, fidgets, creative activities, and trusted people who listen.



WHAT STUDENTS SHARED:

- Burnout and difficulty focusing are common challenges.
- Adults who check in and listen are more likely to earn students' trust.
- Students need clearer information about available resources.
- Food quality and access affect students' energy and ability to focus.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT:

- A quiet and comfortable Wellness Room
- Better communication about mental health resources
- Healthier and higher-quality food
- Support that recognizes stress inside and outside school

***"We need peace, quiet, good vibes, snacks."
- Franklin Student***

TYEE HIGH SCHOOL



STUDENTS WANT LESS ACADEMIC PRESSURE, STRONGER SUPPORT, AND BETTER FOOD

Tyee students named schoolwork and outside of school stressors as impacting their school experience and ability to learn. When asked what mental health support looks like, students talked about listening, checking in, encouragement, and having someone available when they need help.

Students described the school atmosphere in many different ways. Some called it welcoming, friendly, or connected. Others described it as boring, stressful, or chaotic.

Friends and lunch were major sources of joy and motivation. Students also had a lot to say about school food, including concerns about quality, portions, variety, affordability, and access.



WHAT STUDENTS SHARED:

- Friends are a major reason students look forward to school.
- Adult support is meaningful when people listen and check in.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT:

- More fruit, healthier meals, culturally diverse food, free food, and vegan options
- School to prioritize learning and understanding over grades alone
- Time and space to decompress
- Adults who listen and check in

"The fact that school focuses on good grades rather than actual learning."
-Tyee HS Student

RAINIER BEACH HIGH SCHOOL



STUDENTS CONNECTED LEARNING WITH SAFETY, FOOD, AND TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS

Some students felt safe inside the school building but less safe in the surrounding neighborhood. Students described how community violence and safety concerns can follow them into the school day and make it harder to focus.

Rainier Beach students also talked about schoolwork and the importance of trusted adults.

They connected food access with energy, attendance, mental health, and completing schoolwork. They want healthier food and stronger support for students who are not eating enough during the day.



WHAT STUDENTS SHARED:

- Schoolwork and attending school in person can be stressful.
- Safety includes what happens inside school and in the surrounding community.
- Students value adults who listen, understand, and offer guidance.
- Missing meals or eating low-quality food affects focus and energy.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT:

- Stronger safety support inside and around school
- Adults who listen and consistently show up
- Better school meals and more food access
- Support that recognizes what students carry into school
- Student leadership in decisions about school policies and resources

"I feel like I've been around too many gun issues in the area to ever feel safe around the school."

-Rainier Beach HS Student



IN STUDENTS' OWN WORDS

The research gave students space to describe school in their own words.

Their responses were honest, thoughtful, funny, frustrated, hopeful, and clear about what they need to thrive in their school communities.

"Support looks like safe places and people you trust."

— Chief Sealth HS Student

"Low-quality food, and it seems like [the schools] don't care about us. I would change the quality and get good, healthy food."

— Tyee HS Student

"I don't like how everyone is so disconnected. This year feels like a warm-up year because of the new school. Everything is a bit rushed."

— Evergreen HS Student

"There could be major changes happening in your life, and you'd still have to go to school the next day and act normal."

— Chief Sealth HS Student

"When students are hungry, they're more worried about what they're eating than focusing in class."

— Rainier Beach HS Student

"School can feel like a place that you want to escape. It's just so associated with work."

— Chief Sealth HS Student

"I don't think that I've become less stressed over the years, but I've adapted to the stress."

— Chief Sealth HS Student

"Give students time to not worry about academics and grades for a little bit."

— Tyee HS Student

"I think a wellness room is an area where people are free to quietly exist, be comfortable, and be heard."

— Chief Sealth HS Student

"...my mental health that affects my school work i find myself slacking because my mind is elsewhere"

— Evergreen HS Student

"I just want there to be a place for everyone, so that no matter how you do things, everyone can rest there."

— Chief Sealth HS Student

What This Research Means

Students are telling us that wellbeing and learning are deeply connected.

Students cannot be expected to focus when they are hungry, exhausted, overwhelmed, unsafe, or unsure where to find support. Quiet spaces, trusted adults, flexible practices, strong relationships, and good food all shape whether students can fully participate in school.

The findings also show that students already understand what meaningful support can look like. They are asking for schools that listen, respond, and recognize the full lives young people carry with them each day.



Across schools, students described support as:

- Adults who listen and check in
- Wellness Rooms - Quiet places to rest and reset
- Food that is healthy, filling, and accessible
- Flexibility when life outside school becomes overwhelming
- Clear information about available resources
- Safety, trust, and stronger school community
- Meaningful opportunities to shape school decisions

Each school has its own priorities, but the message across the research is clear: school should be a place where students can learn without sacrificing their wellbeing.



HOW STUDENT ORGANIZERS ARE USING THEIR RESEARCH

We gathered the research. Now we are organizing with it.

Student Organizers are using these findings to understand which concerns are most deeply and widely felt in their school communities.

We are using what we learned to:

- Refine campaign priorities and goals for each school and district
- Build strategies alongside our peers
- Share findings with students, families, community members, and school and district leaders
- Organize for changes in policies, practices, and resources
- Continue gathering feedback as our campaigns grow

The research provides Student Organizers data, stories, and community knowledge that can guide our organizing.

Stay tuned. This is where the research turns into action.

CALLS TO ACTION

Students did the research. Now we need our community to carry it forward.

We are asking school leaders, district staff, elected officials, funders, families, and community partners to:



Read and share these findings



Meet directly with Student Organizers



Attend School Board meetings and stay up to date on what's happening in your school communities



Invest in youth-led solutions



Improve access to fresh, free, culturally relevant food, mental health supports, and Wellness Rooms



Address safety concerns and barriers to belonging



Include students in decisions that affect their schools



Support the campaigns and strategies students develop from this research



Now we are asking decision-makers and community partners to listen, respond, and act.

Stay In Touch



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