



Participant Experiences at the 2019 Youth Voice/Youth Vote Conference

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Introduction

This report describes the results of a survey administered to participants at the 2019 Youth Voice/Youth Vote conference organized by YVote and Middle College National Consortium. Participants completed the surveys anonymously on digital devices.

A total of 82 complete survey responses were returned from the approximately 130 attendees (16 surveys were opened but left incomplete). Nulty (2008) recommends a liberal threshold response rate of 15% for populations of 150 (80% confidence level), and a stringent response rate of 77% for populations of 155 (95% confidence level). The present response rate of 63% suggests a high degree of confidence in the representativeness of the sample, though the voluntary nature always leaves open the possibility that especially disaffected views may not be represented..

The survey, which is described in more detail on the following pages, was designed in consultation with YVote to address some of the key experiences and outcomes the conference was intended to cultivate. The results of the survey cannot be interpreted to support causal claims about the long-term impacts of the conference.

Instead, the survey was designed to systematically gather information about how participants viewed their experiences and what they believe they gained. This information can be used to help determine whether student participants, the primary stakeholders, found the learning opportunities the conference was designed to cultivate.

Assessing Attendee Experiences

Civic participation requires an array of skills, dispositions and attitudes, and foundations of knowledge. The Youth Voice/Youth Vote conference was primarily focused on promoting civic efficacy, a critical attitude, and building skills for civic engagement by fostering peer-to-peer learning in an open and supportive environment.

1	Communication and Climate	The survey begins by probing participants' impressions of how open the discussions were and how much participants felt valued by others.
02	Social Engagement	Next, participants are asked about the learning experiences effective presentations and discussions are expected to cultivate: engaging with similar and different others; and using cognitive and intellectual abilities to explore specific topics or issues.
03	Cognitive/Intellectual Engagement	
04	Civic Skills & Efficacy	Then, participants report how the program contributed to their civic skills and sense of civic efficacy .
05	Demographics	The survey concludes with demographic questions, as well as a question addressing interest in attending a similar event in the future.

Attendee Experiences: *Presentation and Discussion Quality*

Communication Quality & Climate

Research focused on small group dynamics has shown that they are most productive when participants feel that all they and others are free voice their opinions and have them heard respectfully.

Often referred to as *psychological safety* (Edmondson, 1999) this feature of small groups overlaps substantially with the concept of open communication developed by Barry and Stewart (1997).

Accordingly, two items from an abbreviated psychological safety scale (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009) and one item from Barry and Stewart's (1997) open communication scale are used to assess the overall quality of discussions and climate.

Measurement

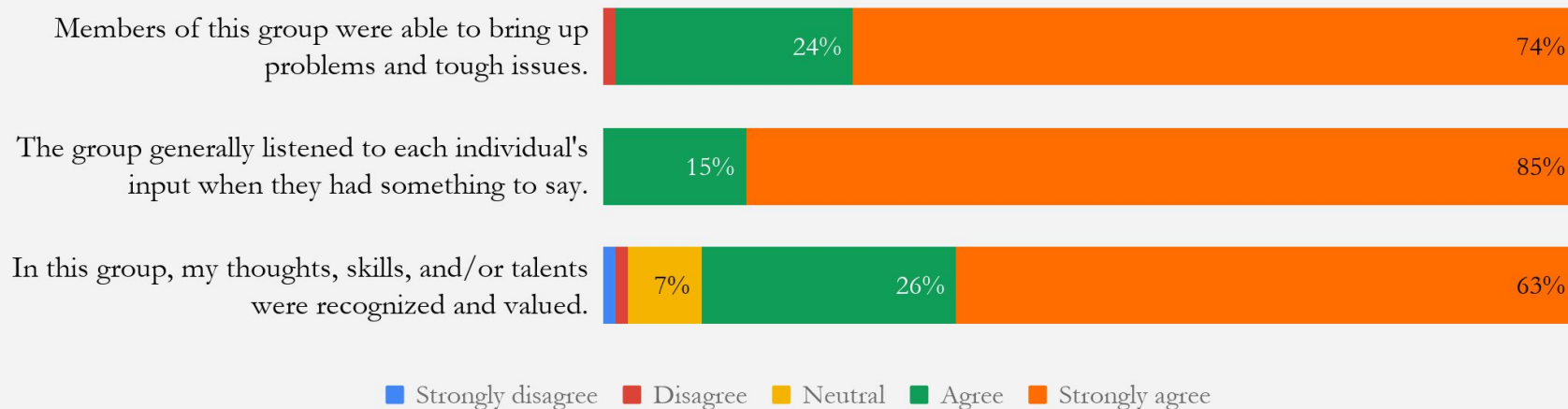
Participants were asked to respond to each statement below on rating scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*)

1. The group listened to each individual's input.
2. Members of this group were able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. In this group, my skills and talents were recognized and valued.

Communication and Climate: *Participant Responses*

Survey respondents reported that the discussions were open and respectful, with nearly all participants indicating that participants listened to each other and felt able to speak freely. Respondents were only slightly less in agreement that they felt they were personally valued by others.

Communication and Climate



Engagement: *Social and Cognitive/Intellectual*

Social Engagement: Bonding & Bridging

Gatherings like the Youth Vote/Youth Voice conference can provide opportunities for developing relationships. One way in which they can do this is by strengthening existing relationships. Sharing thoughts and feelings can help foster a sense of belonging by affirming shared experiences and values. Conferences can also bring together people who would otherwise be unlikely to spend time together. In these cases, participants may come to better understand the perspectives and experiences of members of different social groups who are either present or represented. These different ways of cultivating social ties can be understood in terms of *bonding* and *bridging* social capital, as described by Putnam (2000).

Cognitive/Intellectual Engagement

Intellectual engagement is often characterized by reflecting on one's previous beliefs, or metacognition, and gaining deeper understanding, or insight, into an issue. These types of thinking are often assessed in undergraduate liberal arts education, making them relevant to high quality secondary school programs.

Measurement

Social bonding was assessed with the following items:

1. There were voices and perspectives represented here that reflected my own experiences.
2. I felt that other people here shared many of my interests and values.

Social bridging was assessed with the following items:

1. This program helped me to understand people whom I'd ordinarily not encounter.
2. This program helped me to understand the experiences of people who differ from me.

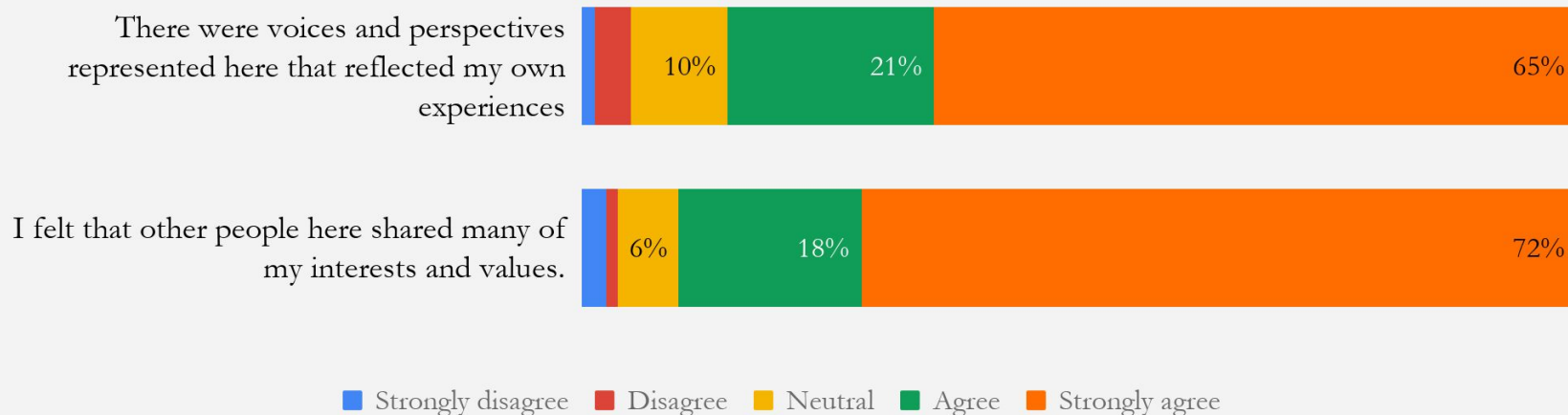
Cognitive/Intellectual Engagement was assessed with the following items:

1. This program enabled me to understand the strengths and weaknesses of my own views on a topic or issue.
2. I learned something that changed the way I understand an issue or concept.

Social Bonding: *Participant Responses*

Respondents reported generally high levels of social bonding, suggesting that the conference provided opportunities for strengthening a sense of belonging and community. These findings are perhaps to be expected given that students attended the conference because of a shared interest in civic engagement. Yet, there was also a good deal of diversity at the conference, with students coming from different regions, small and large communities, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. These findings suggest that despite these differences, participants found much in common with their fellow attendees.

Social Bonding



Social Bridging: *Participant Responses*

Social bridging refers to relationships cultivated across groups. Thus, a critical condition for developing *bridging* relationships is that people are exposed to people or ideas that differ from those they ordinarily engage with. Most participants reported that the event helped them understand people who differ from them. These findings likely reflect both the diversity of the conference attendees and their travels throughout NYC during the conference.

Social Bridging

This program enabled me to understand people whom I'd ordinarily not encounter.



This program helped me to understand the experiences of people who differ from me



Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

Cognitive/Intellectual: *Participant Responses*

Respondents reported high levels of cognitive/intellectual engagement, and it is notable that over 70% strongly agreed that they learned something that changed their understanding of the topic. Students were learning not only from other student groups participating in the conference, but they were also engaging in discussions with students at schools they visited across NYC that introduced them to new perspectives. These experiences provided opportunities for both formal and informal examination of previously held beliefs and attitudes.

Intellectual Engagement

This program helped me examine the strengths and weaknesses of my own views on a topic or issue.



I learned something that changed the way I understand an issue or concept.



■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

Efficacy: *Internal Efficacy, Citizenship Self-efficacy, & Collective Efficacy*

Citizenship Self-Efficacy and Internal Efficacy

Civic efficacy is assessed here using items adapted from measures of citizenship self-efficacy and internal efficacy developed for the 2009 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (Schulz et al., 2010). Citizenship self-efficacy refers to confidence in one's ability to undertake concrete actions to make a difference, such as organizing people. Internal efficacy more broadly refers to an individual's self-assessed competence to deliberate about and take action to address civic and political issues.

General Efficacy and Collective Efficacy

The survey included an *ad hoc* item addressing general feelings of civic efficacy similar to the internal efficacy items. An item addressing *collective efficacy* was also included to reflect the importance of collective action in bringing about civic change.

Civic Skills and Capacities

Civic action can be thought of in terms of *voice*, using rhetoric to advance a cause, and *influence*, utilizing official and unofficial mechanisms for change (e.g., legislation, boycotts). Participants were asked to reflect on a list of items describing resources needed to exercise civic voice and influence, and then select all they believe the program helped them develop.

Measurement

Internal Efficacy

1. This program has helped me feel more able to take part in political or civic action.
2. Participating in this program has made me feel more confident that I have political opinions worth listening to.

Citizenship Self-Efficacy

1. I have learned about ways I could organize a group of people to achieve changes in my community.

General Efficacy

1. This program made me better equipped to be a changemaker and activist in my community.

Collective Efficacy

1. This program made me feel more confident that I am part of a larger community committed to positive change.

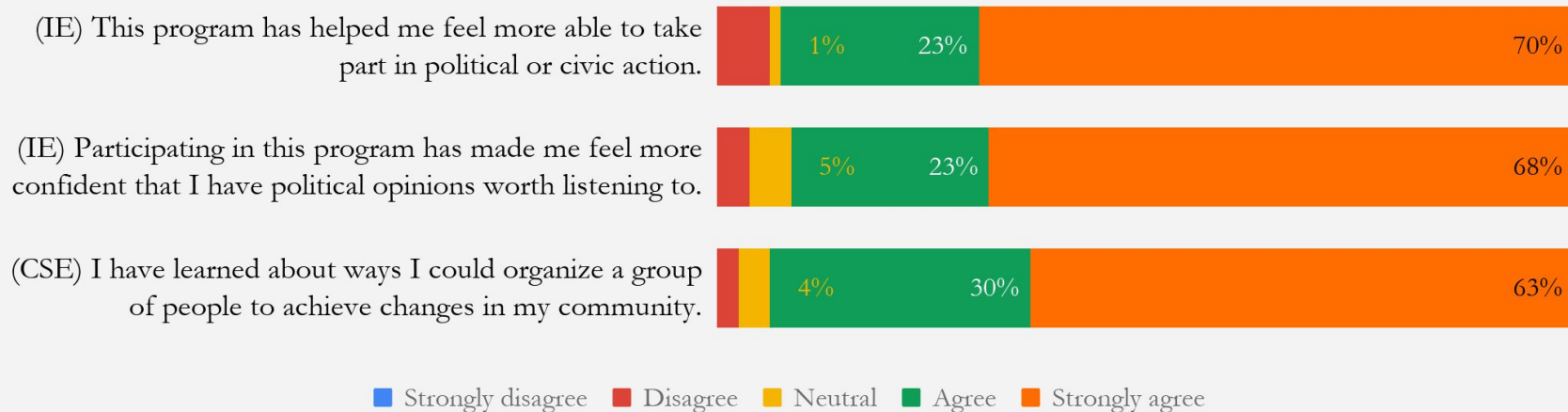
Civic Skills and Capacities

A list of civic-related outcomes was presented, and participants were asked to select all they felt they got out of their participation in the conference.

Internal Efficacy and Citizenship Self-Efficacy: *Participant Responses*

Overall, participants reported that the conference helped improve their feelings of internal efficacy and citizenship self-efficacy, with only a few attendees remaining neutral or disagreeing with the items. It is important to keep in mind that the items specifically refer to positive changes in efficacy, so disagreement (or agreement) does not necessarily indicate low (or high) efficacy. Instead, disagreement may simply mean that a participant's efficacy did not change.

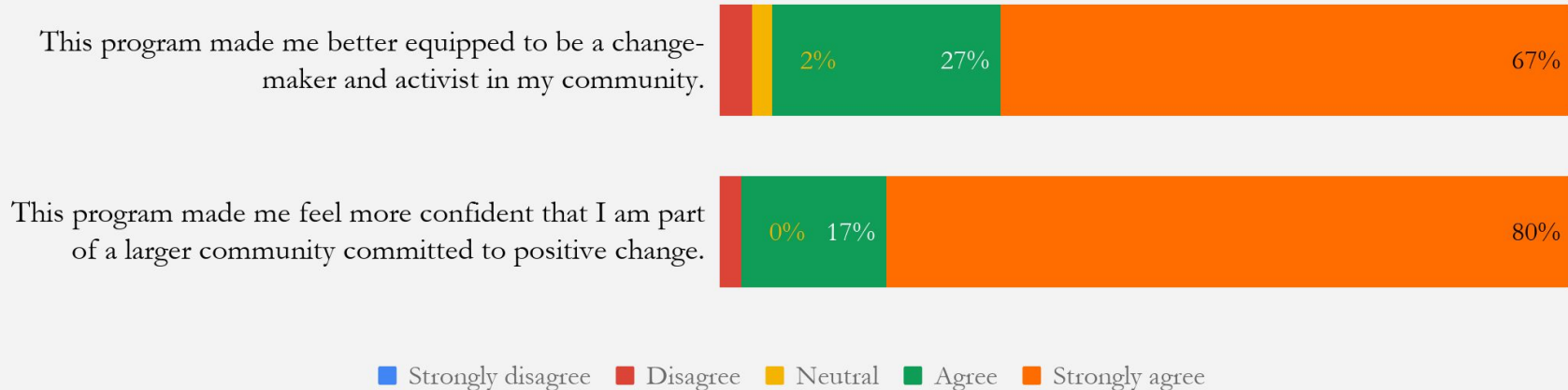
Internal Efficacy and Citizenship Self-Efficacy



General and Collective Civic Efficacy: *Participant Responses*

Consistent with reports of positive changes to internal efficacy and citizenship self-efficacy, participants overwhelmingly agreed (and most strongly agreed) that the program increased their capacity for effective civic engagement. Agreement was even stronger for the item addressing collective efficacy. This is encouraging though perhaps unsurprising given the conference's focus on bringing together highly engaged youth and fostering a sense of community among them.

General and Collective Civic Efficacy



Civic Skills and Capacities Developed: *Participant Responses*

Student respondents were in strong agreement that their participation in the conference left them motivated, better informed, and more fully equipped to communicate with others about issues that matter to them. Participants were somewhat less likely to report developing concrete resources for taking action, including finding allies and pursuing change through official or unofficial means. These results suggest an emphasis on developing knowledge and rhetorical skills (civic voice), rather than strategies for intervening (civic influence).

Thinking about your experience in this program, please select as many of the items below that reflect what you got out of this program:



Summary

Climate

Overall, participants reported positive experiences of the conference in their survey responses. They found an open environment in which they found both people who shared their values and experiences, and those who came with different perspectives. Asked to describe their favorite part of the conference, several participants highlighted rich social engagement:

“I was really excited to see all of the deep productive conversations we were having and the dance was fun too.”

“I loved getting to know the different people from the different schools. I loved being able to connect with people over certain topics.”

“talking to other people about mutual topics”; “meeting new people”; “talking to other school[s]”

“I really enjoyed not only working with my peers from my school all year long but meeting new people and listening to different views, values, and stories.”; “the fact we got to get to know different peers at our table”

“Getting to learn about youth voices, and getting to learn about the other schools”

Others returned to this point when writing about their most important “takeaway”:

“my biggest takeaway was that different people can have different views but still get along.”

“I realized that I do have an opinion that matters, and that it's okay for others to have different opinions.”

“talking to other school”

Some comments regarding the most important “takeaway” explicitly connected social engagement with civic engagement:

“Diversity of demographics as well as thought is really important. It made me want to be more informed and active.”

“I’ve learned alot from the activist and other schools on what they studied and shared to us. Some things that they studied I didn’t know about so i was happy when I learned more”

Summary

Cultivating Civic Efficacy

The survey responses generally indicated that participants developed stronger senses of internal and collective civic efficacy, particularly in the domains of gathering knowledge and exercising civic voice. A number of participants left comments consistent with this interpretation:

“[Youth Voice/Youth Vote] allows students to collaborate and discuss matters in regard to issues that concern them. It is extremely motivating because students can listen to and understand various perspectives that people hold.”

Others were even more direct when writing about their most important “takeaways”:

“Even though I am young, I can do a lot.”; “using activism in my own school and community”

“That I have a voice and I should work on using it”; “Were the next politicians of the world. We have a voice!!”

“think about the better you can do in our community and spread awareness to people.”

In addition to strong reports of peer-to-peer learning and support, some students pointed specifically to the panels as sources of information and motivation:

“I also really liked talking to some current professional activists!”; “[My favorite part was] The panel.”

“I loved the panels and being with a diverse group of people all motivated to make a change.”

Despite general agreement that the conference helped cultivate civic voice and motivation, two participants expressed some disappointment that there was not greater emphasis on developing strategies for action, or civic influence:

“I learned some things about activism but not as much as we could have if time was managed better.”

“Please include more interactive activities that will inspire youth to take action on issues rather than simply sharing out perspectives. For example the workshops such as contacting your representative were very powerful”

For students like these respondents, additional programs for working on strategies for civic influence may be welcome. However, the overall emphasis on developing civic voice evident in the survey responses appears consistent with the mission of Youth Voice/Youth Vote.

Summary

Participant Perceptions of Youth Voice/Youth Vote

The students who gathered for the Youth Voice/Youth Vote conference were diverse in many ways, but their survey responses indicate that they effectively found common ground and were able to benefit from their exposure to new perspectives. Cultivating these sorts of bridging social ties is critical to finding allies and building coalitions in diverse democracies, as is the development of the advanced communication skills needed to listen and persuade across differences (Allen, 2016). As participants in the conference listened to their peers' and delivered their own presentations during practice sessions and at the schools, they appear to have honed their rhetorical skills while learning more about different viewpoints and issues, as reflected in self-reported gains of efficacy and open-ended comments. These broad conclusions have support in the survey responses, but they are perhaps best conveyed by the students themselves, who described Youth Voice/Youth Vote in these words:

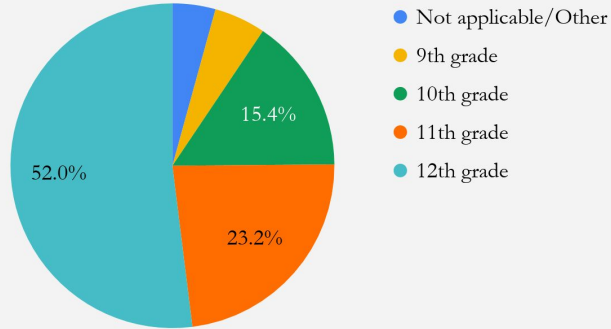
“A place with empowered students and people who are ready to make a change.”

“It teaches high school students about social justice issues while connecting them to a broader community of like-minded students.”

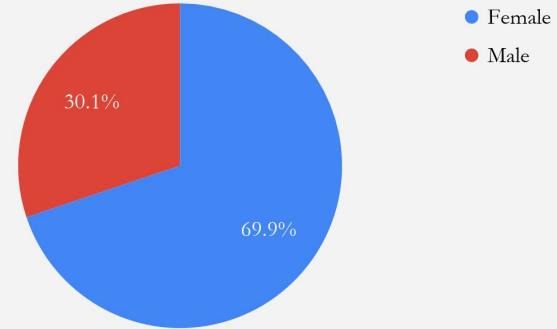
However, some students wrote that the program did not provide as many opportunities for learning strategies for achieving change as they would have liked. Although only two students specifically stated this, their view seems consistent with the relatively low frequency with which survey respondents selected items indicating they learned about official and unofficial means of effecting change. This relative deficit--about half of the respondents did report learning about strategies--should be understood in terms of the generally positive responses regarding the effects of the conference on other forms of efficacy. The imbalance should also be considered alongside the actual programming of the conference, which prioritized the exercise of students' civic voice.

Demographic Characteristics

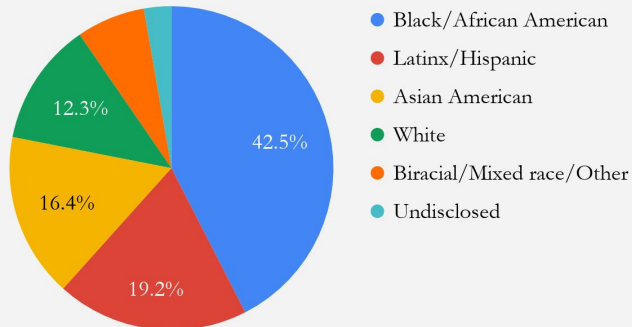
Grades of Respondents



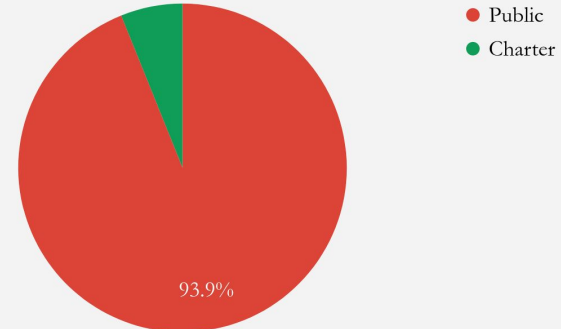
Gender



Race/Ethnicity



School Type



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