

How are the Children?

Introduction: “And How Are the Children?”

Earlier this year, we began to imagine what impact it would have on our community conversations about the future of young people if we adopted the Maasai practice of asking the question “How are the children?” For the Maasai people of Kenya, the health and safety of the community is measured by the well-being of its youngest members. The customary response, “All the children are well”, reflects that life is in balance, the village is strong, and the people are living in alignment with their responsibilities to one another. In African and Afro-diasporic worldviews, children are sacred - and they should be to all of us, because if the children are not well, then none of us are truly well either, and our future is in peril.

This question - and the way it challenges us to think about the present condition and future prospects of our community - only became more pressing as the unprecedented budget crisis facing the Winston Salem Forsyth County Schools (WS/FCS) mushroomed. The crisis - which is the result of both gross financial mismanagement (reaching back at least 7 years, according to the state audit) and the chronic underfunding of our public schools by the state government - is directly impacting the 49,000 students, their families, and the over 7,000 instructional and support staff employed by the district.

The challenges facing our district were well-known long before the current crisis emerged. According to WSFCS published data, Black and Hispanic students and economically disadvantaged students consistently place 20% behind district averages on all measures of achievement, from reading and math proficiency to ACT scores. The same gap is present when rates of chronic absenteeism are reported. While only 3% of white students have been assigned to out of school suspension (OSS) during each of the past three academic years, that number hovers around 13-15% for Black students. The aforementioned deficit in achievement indicators more than doubles when Black and Hispanic students are compared to their white peers in the district.¹

¹ WS/FCS Data Dashboard: <https://www.wsfcs.k12.nc.us/page/wsfcs-district-data-dashboards>.

The budget crisis has led to cuts in Assistant Principals (who are an integral part of the disciplinary apparatus), teachers and assistants for Exceptional Children, as well as services and support that are critical as we strategize together how to bridge gaps in achievement, absenteeism, and exclusionary discipline. The loss of the Panorama survey robs us of a key source of data for leading indicators that assist us in predicting progress as we seek to close these gaps. All of this further aggravates our efforts to improve outcomes for all of our students, but most especially those who have historically been relegated to the margins of success.

The misalignment between the vision of Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools and the current reality has resulted in deep community wounds, and there is a healing process that must take place. It also presents a unique opportunity to build something new that embodies the school ecosystem our community needs to thrive. In the words of State Superintendent Mo Green, we have the “opportunity of a lifetime” to show the state what can happen if a community embraces its public schools.²

Justice for Every Child Manifesto Workshops

The Justice for Every Child Manifesto Workshops were designed to provide a platform for us to consider what needs to change in our community so that we can one day say, truthfully, that “all the children are well.” The feedback received during these initial workshops represents a wide and diverse cross-sector of our community, with more than 200 residents (including youth) participating.

Workshops were held in partnership with key community partners:

- Galilee MB Church - one the historic Black Church congregations in the city;
- Temple Emanuel - the central gathering place for our city's Jewish community;
- Una Bendicion - a grassroots organization primarily serving the Latine community;

The themes that have emerged from our workshops emphasize the needs and the hopes that we have encountered repeatedly in our work with the community of those most impacted by the decisions made by stakeholders and elected officials.

² From his remarks at Knollwood Baptist Church, October 7, 2025.

The Manifesto Initial Findings: A Journey to Our New Shore

During each workshop community members were guided through interactive small group discussions by an experienced facilitator to answer the following questions and ultimately understand how can we as a community can say “the children are well”:

- What must be addressed immediately to remove or prevent harm to children and families? How can these urgent needs be addressed effectively?
- What long-term shifts will make a meaningful difference in shaping a future where our children thrive?

Each discussion provided insight into what community members believe should be addressed and implemented to develop a school system that fosters positive outcomes for our children, schools, and communities.

Key Themes:

Student Experience & Wellbeing

Community members and students expressed a need for school environments where emotional safety, joy, and wellness are prioritized for students and educators. They envision schools where every child is seen through a strengths-based lens, where educators are honored as essential leaders, and where families are welcomed as equal partners in their children's learning journeys.

To accomplish this:

1. Schools must expand access to culturally responsive mental health services, trauma-informed practices, and restorative approaches, especially for Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other historically marginalized students.
2. Schools must recruit and retain a diverse, well-prepared teaching workforce that reflects the communities they serve and is equipped to meet the varied needs of students and families.
3. Educators must receive ongoing professional development, emotional support, and access to resources that enable them to teach and lead with confidence and care.

Access & Resources

Participants emphasized the need for equitable access to well resourced learning environments, tools, and supports that foster academic, emotional, and social growth. This included an emphasis on increased school funding and access to pathways of postsecondary attainment.

To accomplish this:

1. Schools must provide access to nutritional meals for all students.
2. Schools need increased funding from the state government to provide students access to adequate educational resources such as books, computers, and well maintained school buildings.
3. Schools must provide every student, especially those who attend Title 1 schools and those from lower income backgrounds with access to extracurricular activities, volunteer opportunities, and afterschool programs.
4. Schools must prepare students for post-secondary success by providing academic counseling on pathways for financial aid, career counseling, and post-secondary options.

Equity & Belonging

Winston-Salem Forsyth County School serves a diverse student population with various learning styles, backgrounds and academic experiences. Community members continually discussed the need for intentional relationship development with students and families to foster trust and healing. They emphasized how students and families should feel safe and welcomed.

To accomplish this:

1. Schools must continue to engage in systems change work, fostering inclusive environments dedicated to meeting the needs of every student and family.
2. Educators and staff must be supported in building intentional and trusting partnerships with students and families.
3. Schools must create innovative mechanisms to provide necessary information and updates that allow families to engage as partners in their children's educational journey.

Governance & Accountability

We set out to work with community members to understand what they want to see in their school system, but the recent budget crisis confirmed the community's need for more transparency and accountability. Participants emphasized the importance of intentional leadership that works in alignment to address barriers, such as funding, that hinder our students ability to thrive.

To accomplish this:

1. Schools must work in collaboration with community leaders, policymakers and families for greater alignment in advocacy and funding efforts.
2. Schools must commit to a co-governance model that invests in community members as trusted partners who are invited to participate in every step of the process as new ideas and initiatives impacting students and families are considered and ultimately, implemented.

Each of these key themes aligns with our priorities for what the Winston-Salem Forsyth County community needs from its new school [superintendent](#) , the [whole school, whole community model](#), and the [state's vision for public education in North Carolina](#).

Community Voice

Key Theme	Urgent Need	Long-term Shift
Student Experience & Wellbeing	"Students and teachers need peace, healing, and emotional safety"	"Build emotional intelligence and well-being into systems"
Funding & Resources	"Advocate to and educate legislators about real needs"	"Government spending should prioritize children and education"
Equity & Belonging	"Parents want to work together; Schools should value parent involvement"	"No separation between community enhancement and school improvement"

Governance & Accountability	"Communities are tired of being told "no"; Schools, leaders, and institutions must listen with care"	"Rebuild trust through transparency, consistency, and care"
-----------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------