

Youth Engagement Sessions with SFUSD

Introduction

Over the course of several months from December 2020 – April 2021, the Our Children Our Families' (OCOF) Child & Youth Friendly SF Initiative (CYFSF) and the San Francisco Planning Department (Planning Department) partnered to deliver a series of classroom sessions on youth participation and decision-making in San Francisco. The CYFSF is modeled after UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative framework and aims to elevate the rights and voices of children and youth in government decision-making. The Planning Department is currently designing its Child & Youth Engagement Strategy to bring youth voices into the city planning process and ultimately, help shape policies and the built environment of San Francisco. By developing joint lesson plans and working with teachers to tailor sessions based on current classroom topics, both CYFSF and the Planning Department were able to empower students to better understand the planning process, how planning decisions get made in San Francisco and identify specific priority areas and ways to improve their communities. CYFSF and the Planning Department were also able to capture valuable student recommendations for including youth voice and participation in future projects to engage young people in San Francisco.

What We Did

The Planning Department and the Child and Youth Friendly SF Initiative partnered from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021 to carry out a series of presentations and focus groups with approximately 215 students from the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). The presentations and discussions explored decision-making at the city level, youth ideas for their communities and neighborhoods, and civic participation.

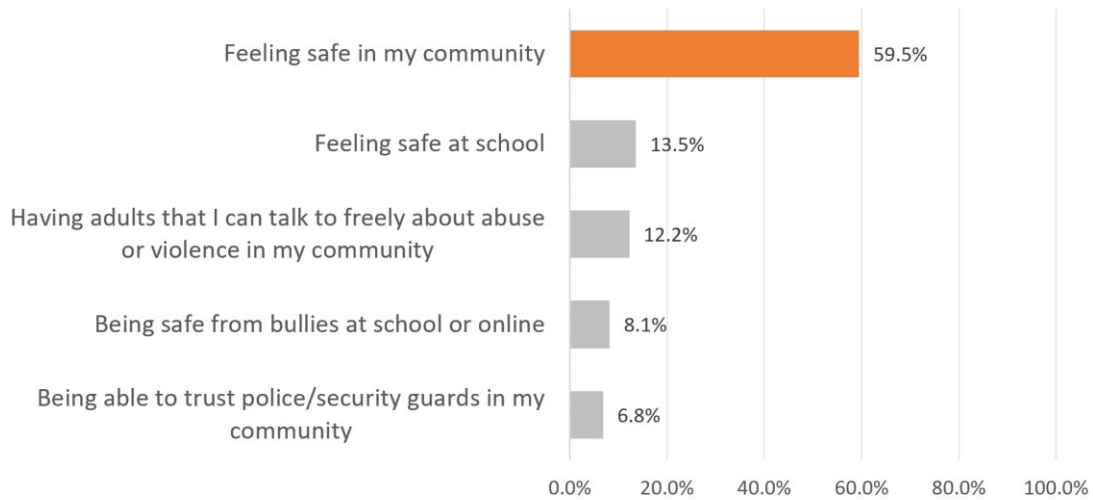
Students from Balboa High School, Presidio Middle School, Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, and Aptos Middle School participated in the virtual sessions. The lessons were built in collaboration with teachers to meet the goals of the classroom and generally followed this structure: Icebreaker, Introduction to the Child Friendly Cities Initiative and the San Francisco Planning Department, Presentation about City Planning and Decision-Making Processes, Indicator Voting and Group Discussion Activities, and Wrap-Up.

Results

During the sessions, youth had the opportunity to use their voice and vote on issues that they wanted the City to prioritize. These issues were pulled from UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative framework and its five goal areas: Safety & Inclusion, Youth Participation, Equitable Social Services, Safe Living Environment, and Play & Leisure. The following graphs show the feedback received and the priorities across the five issue areas.

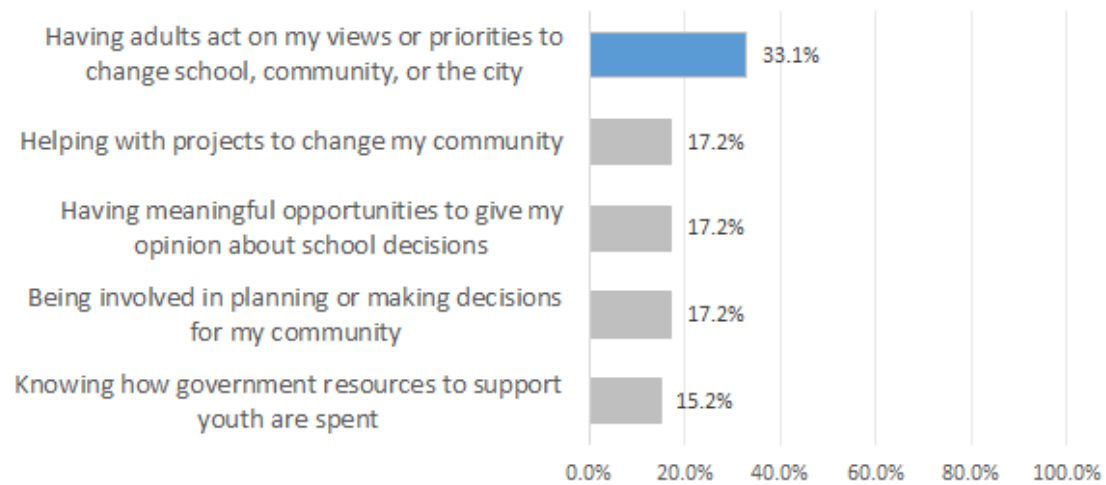
Safety & Inclusion, n=74

Nearly 60% of students voted that feeling safe in their community as a top priority



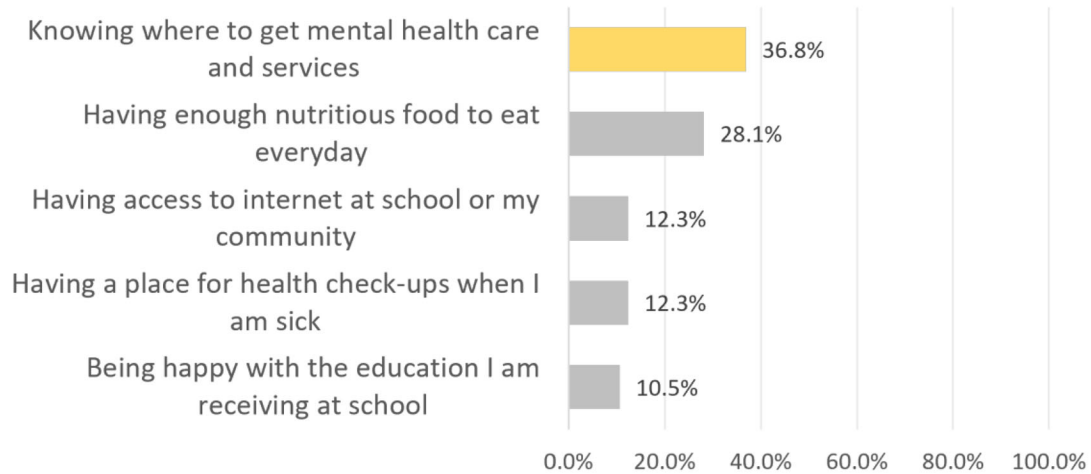
Youth Participation, n=145

33% of students voted that having adults act on their views/priorities (accountability) as most important



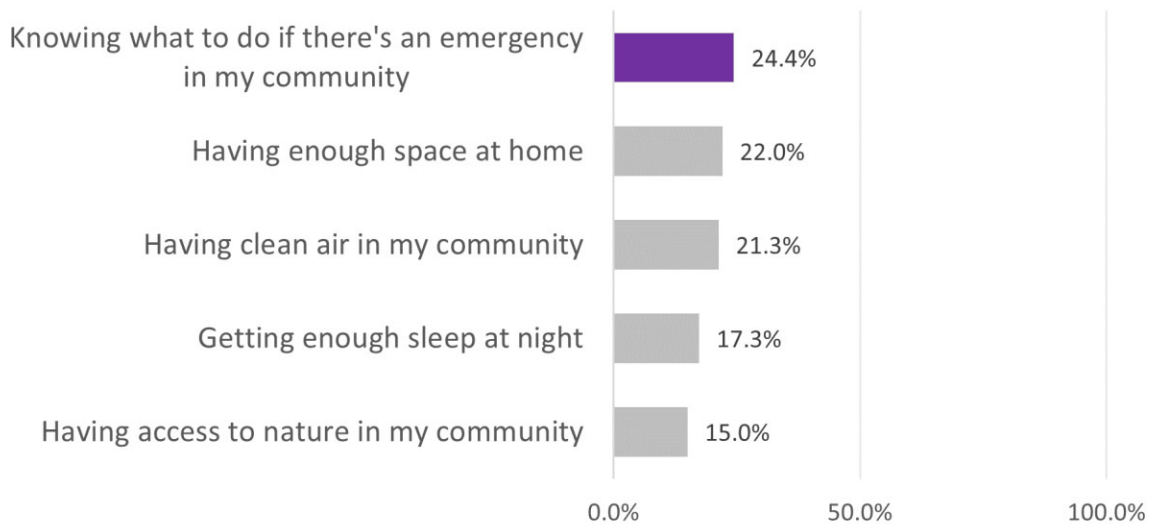
Equitable Social Services, n=57

Nearly 37% of students voted that access to mental health care was a top priority



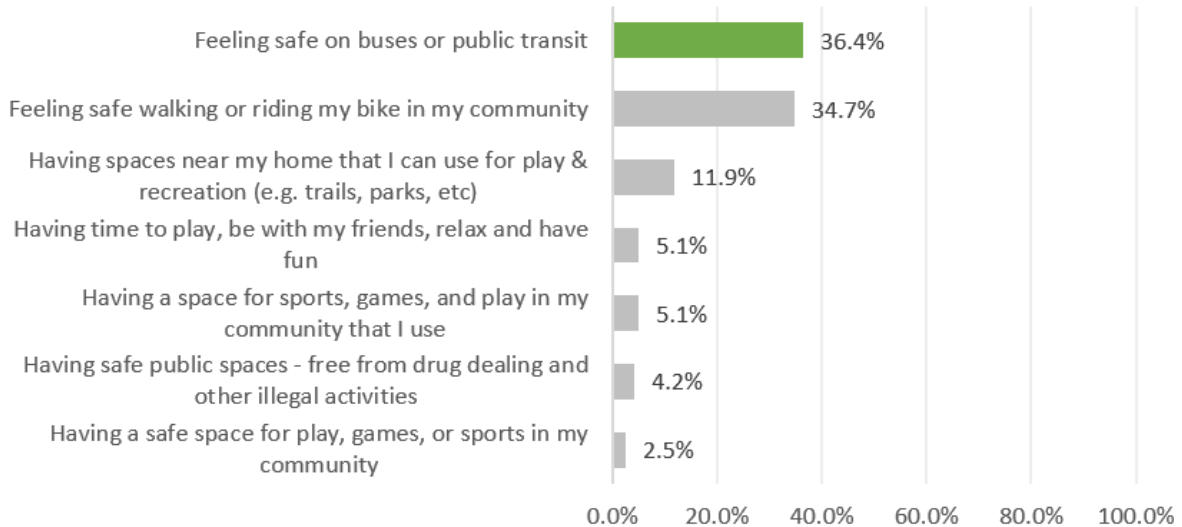
Safe Living Environment, n=127

24% of students indicated that knowing what to do in an emergency was a key priority

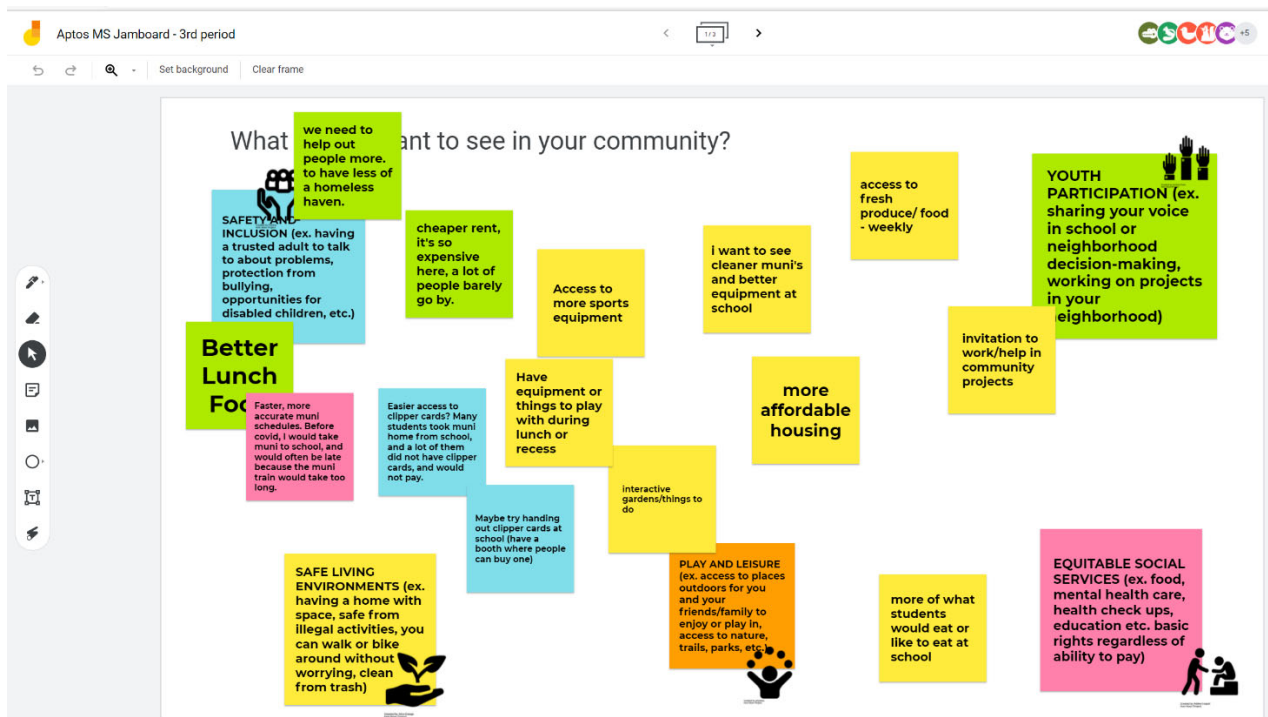


Play & Leisure, n=118

Nearly 37% of students voted that feeling safe on buses or public transit was a top priority



Following the voting activity, the students had smaller group discussions to explore why the specific priorities were chosen. Focusing on a priority of their choice, students identified the issues in their community related to that priority and considered solutions. The students' issues fell into four main themes: Safety, Issues Related to Mobility, Street Cleanliness, and Gentrification and its Impacts. Other issues that did not fall neatly into those categories were placed in an "Other" category.



Safety. Many students named safety as a big issue for them, especially at night and in public spaces including transit or on the street. Poor street lighting at night, “sketchy areas,” violence and shootings, drug abuse, bullying in and outside of school, and not enough law enforcement were called out as contributors to feeling unsafe. On more than one occasion, students who identified as female mentioned that their concern for their own safety was heightened because of their gender. Another area related to safety that was discussed was emergency preparedness: students had mixed feelings on whether or not they would know what to do in the case of an emergency, and reflected on the fact that there could be many types of emergencies encountered.

To help address concerns related to safety, students made the following recommendations:

Ensure adult allies should receive better training and education on how to help young people and to develop safe channels of communication between adults and youth. This includes teachers, administrators, security guards at school, and transit operators to help with bus safety.

- a) Provide more resources to all people who are experiencing mental illness, such as hotlines and mental health services.
- b) Add more lighting on streets and sidewalks and alarms on stop lights to notify that there is danger nearby.
- c) Increase fire and police department presence in neighborhoods.
- d) Develop emergency preparedness kits, demonstrations, and engaging tutorials for students to feel more equipped to address various types of emergencies.

Issues Related to Mobility. While students frequently mentioned lack of safety on public transit and on city streets, there were also other aspects of moving around on public transit and other modes of transportation that made it less than an ideal experience for them. Bus dependability, crowdedness, uncleanliness of vehicles and bus stops, difficulty accessing Clipper Cards, cars going too fast, and conflicts with motorized vehicles while biking or walking were some of issues named. In addition, some students discussed the concept of accessibility and wanting to ensure that those on wheelchairs could also move around public spaces.

Student recommendations for improving their experiences getting around the city:

- a) Greater dependability of bus service and do not cut bus lines.
- b) Easier or free access to Clipper Cards for students by placing a booth at schools that sells or hands out cards.
- c) Add signage to improve navigation in neighborhoods for walking and biking.
- d) Add more stoplights, stop signs, speed bumps, and safe bike paths in neighborhoods where students live.
- e) Add more accessibility ramps inside/outside of buildings and public spaces.

Environmental Cleanliness. Students called out environmental cleanliness as another issue. Trash in the streets, harmful impacts of nicotine and cigarettes on youth public health, and air pollution are common areas of concern. Generally, students referred to nature and parks as assets in their communities and wanted to see more trees and green spaces to contribute to a healthier environment.

Student recommendations for improving cleanliness and having a healthy living environment:

- a) Add more trash/compost/recycle bins and trash clean ups, especially looking out for needles.
- b) Create interactive gardens where young people can volunteer to help.
- c) Add more trees and nature in the streets and recreational space for young people. The city should consider utilizing underused properties for play.
- d) Improve air quality and respiratory health by banning nicotine products or raising the price of cigarettes.

Gentrification and its Impacts. Unsurprisingly, students named housing in the city as another major issue. Their concerns included: the cost of living, high rents, having enough space at home, gentrification, homelessness, and changing neighborhoods.

Student recommendations for addressing gentrification and its impacts:

- a) Preserve the historical faces of buildings and the original character of the neighborhood.
- b) Build more affordable housing and create more rental options for youth and their families in San Francisco.
- c) Build more homeless shelters and services for people experiencing homelessness. Vacant buildings can be used to house people without a home.

Other. This section is a catch-all for other suggestions that students made about their communities or things they would like to see changed.

Student recommendations:

- a) Encourage youth to talk about their problems and share where they can get mental health services. “Knowing where to get mental health care and services” was voted as the top priority by students under the Equitable Social Services category.
- b) Provide more sports equipment and more basketball courts in neighborhoods.
- c) Increase student involvement in decision-making on the lunch options for those on the Free Reduced Lunch program

How Youth Would Like to be Involved

Students participated in various activities to express their own views on youth engagement and how they would like to increase youth participation and change the City’s current decision-making processes. Their responses encompassed UNICEF’s four features of meaningful participation: space, influence, audience, and voice.

Social media and technology (Space and Voice). Social media is a good tool for engaging with youth, especially on Tik Tok, Instagram, and YouTube. Invitations to participate can be shared through social media stories and shareable posts. Other online formats to solicit ideas and engagement could include email, Zoom, Google Jamboard, and Google Meet. Content and presentations should be visually appealing. Ideas to use digital mediums beyond social media include hosting mini Ted Talks and podcasts to discuss issues that concern youth, and create informative videos of how to make San Francisco safer.

How to plug in and take action (Space and Voice) Students suggested ways to plug into and change existing decision-making processes to increase youth participation. Some suggestions include connecting youth directly with local representatives and other decision-makers to share their concerns, having teachers or other trusted adult allies present their ideas to decision-makers, increasing youth knowledge on existing opportunities to participate (like making public announcements on common transit routes, utilizing school assembly time, school newsletters, or flyers in the neighborhood), sharing surveys and petitions, and simply talking to youth and making them feel invited! Students also remarked that there should be anonymous ways to participate.

To encourage youth participation at engagement events, students suggested framing the event around a theme or including a community-bonding activity, like an ice cream social, as opposed to calling it a “youth engagement” event. Additionally, youth would be more inclined to join such events if they were youth-led events, with assistance from teachers and trusted adult allies. Some youth expressed interest in joining if there was a specific project they were invited to provide feedback on, or a tangible action they could take to improve their community, such as cleaning the streets and trash pick-up.

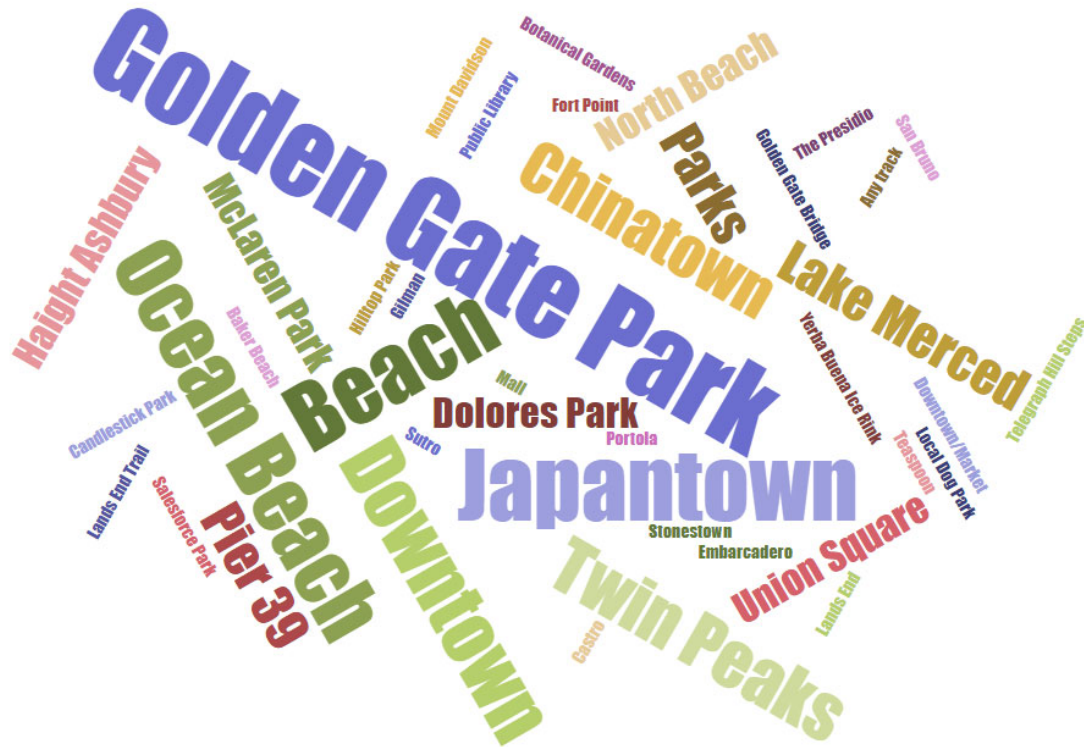
School connections (Space). Whereas some students indicated that weekends or school closure days are a good time to engage with youth, others mentioned that meeting students where they’re comfortable (in the classroom or at school) is also a good space for engagement. By connecting through school, teachers and administrators can play a role in helping to engage students by offering extra credit or community service hours. Students suggested building connection across other middle and high schools to conduct coordinated sessions simultaneously. The inclusiveness of the space was also very important – besides the school campus, students also mentioned the park, recreation centers, or common spaces as other potential spaces to engage with young people. Students did note that given COVID-19, there should be virtual options.

Respect for youth voice (Influence and Audience). Many youth expressed a need to respect youth voice and ideas by engaging with them on youth-specific issues *and* issues where adults are typically the only ones engaged. Youth perception of their level of influence is that adults don’t listen, and when they do, there is no commitment to act. It is important to them to have trusted adults (teachers, school officials) and City officials who will listen and have the ability to enact change. One student remarked feeling especially inspired by Amanda Gordon’s speech at President Biden’s inauguration and the national audience for a young person and wanted to see other opportunities for youth to speak out about the issues that concerned them in this way.

Representation (Space). Students are more inclined to participate if they see themselves represented among decision-makers. This includes Black, American Indian, people of color, and their peers.

Survey Summary

Through ice breakers and a post-activity survey, students shared more about who they are, what they like, and what they learned. Some sessions ran short on time, requiring that students complete the post-activity survey on their own time outside of class. This resulted in fewer survey responses than actual number of students who participated in the classroom sessions. Below is a summary of what we heard. Favorite places in San Francisco:



Do you think San Francisco is a good place for children and youth to live and play?

Definitely – 13
Sometimes – 21

How much did you learn about City Planning during this lesson?

A good amount – 15
Some things – 10

Would you want to become a city planner?

Maybe – 18
No – 16
Yes – 1

What social media platform(s) do you use? (check all that apply)

Instagram – 14

TikTok – 17

Snapchat – 9

Twitter – 5

Other – 7

None – 3

What language(s) do you speak at home?

English – 18

English and some other language – 2

Another language – 3