

Suburban Balance is a non-profit organization started by a concerned parent, with the mission to provide educational and cultural opportunities to children of color and their families growing up in communities that lack diversity. To date, Suburban Balance has served over 1000 kids in the Kansas City metropolitan area. Through organizing and mobilizing the community, Suburban Balance parents, students, and the community at large were successful in advocating for educational equity policies and practices to be implemented in the Lee's Summit school district.

From January to July 2022, with the help of a grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and project management by The Burns Brothers (TBB), Suburban Balance (SB) undertook the long overdue task of compiling data on Black parent and student perspectives on growing up in the suburbs of Missouri and Kansas.

The objective of this endeavor was to present the findings to leaders all over Kansas City metropolitan area, with the hopes of effecting change through equitable school policies that would benefit children of color in Missouri and Kansas schools. The project took place in three stages:

1. Primary Interviews and Focus Groups
2. Stakeholder Survey
3. Documentary Filming and Production

Stage One: Primary Interviews

Our project team carried out research and development on this project by engaging with parents, current students, and alumni of the Kansas City metro's schools. Over video chat, we conducted six 1:1 interviews and five focus groups—talking to a total of 56 persons.

Suburban Balance supplied interviewees for these interviews from their wide-reaching network of parents, students, and relevant contacts in the Kansas City metro area. Their commitment to the organization and belief in our vision is absolute, and they were eager to participate. The responses from these initial interviews formed the basis for the survey questions asked in the second stage of this project.

Stage Two: Survey

Over 500 people participated in the survey portion of this project. 422 of them were parents, 101 were students, and the majority of participants resided in the Lee's Summit suburb. The survey was designed to hear feedback from Black parents and students in suburban school districts relating to their feelings about the quality of education they were receiving, the diversity and representation among their school's staff, and the current steps they perceived their schools were taking in order to promote an inclusive and just environment.

A few standout replies to our survey questions include:

1. When asked “How important is teacher and faculty racial or ethnic diversity to you?” a majority of students responded, “Extremely important” but when asked “How would you describe the current racial or ethnic makeup of teachers and faculty at your school?” most students responded, “Not diverse at all.”
2. When asked about the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within schools, most parents answered that they were “Dissatisfied” with current efforts put forward by their child’s school, if there were any to begin with.
3. When asked, “What is your current level of satisfaction with your child’s school? Parents wrote:
 - I. “I do wish they did more representation of teaching the children about black culture and what we contributed to history.”
 - II. “Equity needs to be foundational within in extra-curricular activities, especially when it comes to work, and initiatives led by sponsors and coaches.”
 - III. “Equity is an afterthought in our district. There is no diversity in the staff. There are few extracurricular activities at the middle school for 6th & 7th graders.”
4. When asked, “What is your current level of satisfaction with your school? Students wrote:
 - I. “I think student diversity is a big part of having a good school and I wish there was more student diversity. “
 - II. “Not enough Black representation in teachers. Activities not as inclusive for African Americans.”
 - III. “There is not enough diversity in the school district within the staffing.”
 - IV. “They are doing a good job of trying to motivate students, but not checking in mentally and emotionally with their students.”

Stage 3: Documentary

TBB contracted a video production company ([MigKeb Productions](#)) and arranged for their filming crew and a TBB Client Experience Manager to fly to the Kansas City metropolitan area to conduct in-person interviews that were filmed for the documentary piece.

The final product consisted of three videos entitled:

- The Power of Support: The Difference Suburban Balance is Making
 - In this video, LaShawn Walker, CEO of Suburban Balance, talks about the importance of their work. Suburban Balance provides a support system for Black families when they move to the suburbs and face racism in their neighborhoods and in the classroom.
- The Power of Connection and Community: Why Families Value Suburban Balance
 - This video features both parents and students who speak to the importance of community in raising and supporting children of color. Parents recall how Suburban Balance brought them together with other Black families in the Kansas City metropolitan area, and Suburban Balance parents have gone on to become community leaders and elected officials.
- Centering Youth Voices: Student Stories and Opportunities Suburban Balance Creates

- Three students tell their stories on what it was like growing up in the suburbs as children of color. Students interviewed related that through Suburban Balance, they know they have a place to go to when they experience trauma (examples given include microaggressions, use of racial slurs, and school property tagged with symbols of hate groups) and therein tackle their concerns as a group because there is power in numbers.

Key Takeaways:

- Students interviewed for the documentary believe their schools are too reactionary, and do not proactively try to rewire attitudes that lead to the racially-charge issues outlined above.
- Parents of Black students—and the students themselves—do not feel that they are 100% safe in schools.
- Students explained that they do not see themselves, their racial and ethnic backgrounds, or their ancestors' contributions to this country represented adequately in their curriculums. Representation matters.

Recommendations:

- Enact equitable teaching, discipline, and decision-making policies within every school district.
- Staffing policies and school rules should reflect proactive efforts towards inclusivity, versus reacting to negative situations.
- DEI efforts should be ongoing, not one-offs.
- Keep representation and diversity top of mind when hiring faculty and support staff.
- Allow students and parents to be heard before making decisions that will affect them.
- Ensure American History is taught honestly. Avoid excluding or minimizing the contributions of any racial and ethnic groups.

Ultimately, Suburban Balance found the survey results unsurprising. These answers show that the needs of Black students in schools are not being met. DEI is trending in the corporate world because of changing social norms and various social justice movements, but the trickle-down effect is taking too long to reach schools. We cannot wait for a societal reckoning to occur in education, we need to be the change.