2019

BETTER TOGETHER COMMISSION FINDINGS REPORT

REPORT COMPLETED BY

ONE VOICE

www.onevoicems.org

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Thank you to our partners, allies, and supporters, and a special thank you to all the canvassers for their tireless efforts to talk to Jackson families.

ABOUT ONE VOICE

One Voice is a 501 (c)(3) organization whose purpose is to improve the quality of life for African Americans and other disenfranchised communities while building local and regional ability to sustain hard-won battles. This is a vision that connects justice to educational and economic opportunity. One Voice's work focuses on building power within underserved communities as a tactic to address the ongoing systemic disparities that plague these communities. Over the past 11 years, One Voice has leveraged its expertise in policy analysis and research, community and civic engagement, and leadership development to support sustainable change within communities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The challenges experienced by Jackson Public Schools are not unique in that urban school districts across the country face dire circumstances related to school funding, poor student outcomes, dwindling student populations, and tense relationships with oversight bodies. However, the students, the people, and the communities in Jackson are unique in their culture, history, economic, and political experiences. The purpose of this report is to provide a review of the canvassing and field research project to assess the community perception of the Jackson Public School district.

Through a mixed approach of community canvassing and community conversations, we uncovered a comprehensive view from the perspective of community stakeholders on the status of the district. Among the most pressing concerns regarding the Jackson Public School District were teacher quality, district leadership, and test scores. These concerns were consistent across racial and age groups. Additionally, the report highlights the importance of early childhood learning, parent engagement, and a focus on college and career readiness.

It is the hope that the approach taken for this study, one that values community voice, will deepen community engagement and opportunities to learn from stakeholders while encouraging community-led solutions.

BACKGROUND

The challenges experienced by Jackson Public Schools are not unique in that urban school districts across the country face dire circumstances related to school funding, poor student outcomes and dwindling student populations. However, the students, the people, and the communities in Jackson are unique in their culture, history, economic, and political experiences. Additionally, a current opportunity exists to reimagine the school experience of students and parents that interact with Jackson Public Schools. The experience reflected in this data demonstrates a process to re-envision the district that is inclusive of all Jackson Public School stakeholders, namely students, parents, education paraprofessionals, teachers, school leadership, and the Jackson, Mississippi community.

This report is only one component of a process designed to enhance student outcomes. As a result, One Voice was commissioned to partner with communities to better understand both the challenges and opportunities in supporting the Jackson Public School District to maximize its impact as an institution that meets the needs of its students and provides unquestionable educational quality.

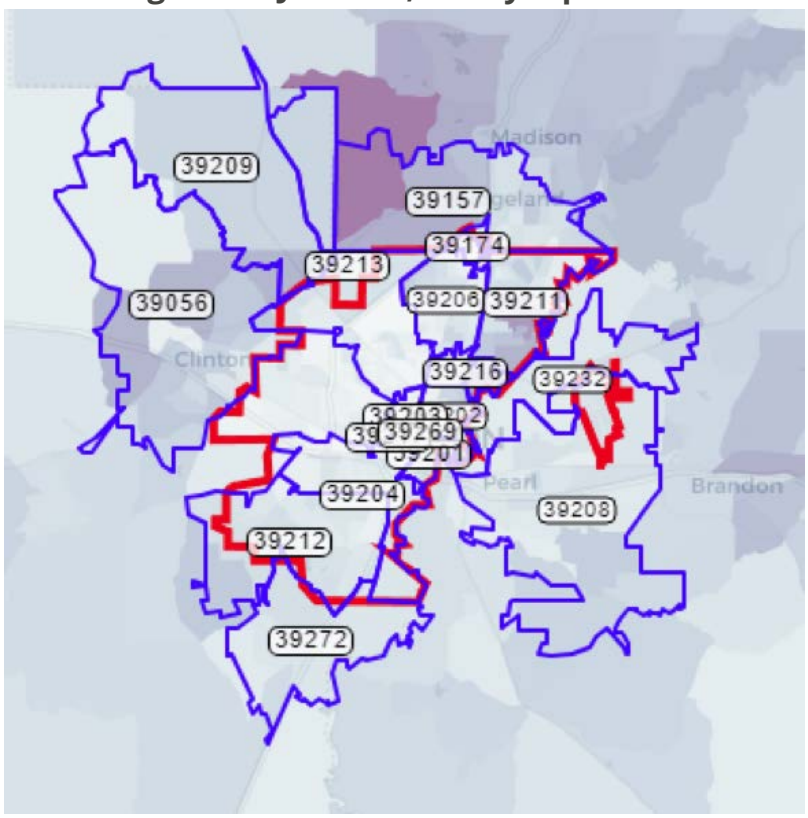
JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI
THE COMMUNITY

Jackson, Mississippi is both the capital city and the state's only urban municipality. With an estimated population of 166,965 residents, the city has experienced a significant population decline in recent years. Since the last U.S. Census in 2010, the population has declined by 3.8%. When examining the population by who is leaving the city, the city of Jackson has been experiencing "white flight." There has been a 71% decline in white residents living within the city since 1980. After Detroit, Michigan, Jackson is the second majority minority city with 80% of the city's residents identifying themselves as Black or African American.

As the city's population has declined, the city and its residents have also experienced economic hardships. Almost 31% percent of the city's population lives in poverty, and the median household income is $32,866, compared to the state average of $40,528. Even in a city that is majority Black, the negative impact of these socioeconomic indicators disproportionately impacts the city's Black residents. Black residents of Jackson are more likely than White residents to be unemployed. In 2014, about 11% of African-American adults between ages 25 to 64 were unemployed, compared with only four percent of the White population.

The city of Jackson is composed of seven wards and covers 18 zip codes. Ward 1 covers the area of LeFleur's Bluff State Park and Golf Course and the Eastover neighborhoods (39211). Tougaloo College is located in Ward 2 (39174). Ward 3 covers the areas near the Jackson Medical Mall and the Medgar Evers Home Museum, and includes the zip code 39213 and neighborhoods such as Presidential Hills and Northwest Hills. Ward 4 sits along the I-220 interstate near Mynelle Gardens and Hawkins Field, in the area along Clinton Boulevard and is the largest of the wards covering the 39209 zip code. Jackson State University and the COFO Civil Rights Education Center are located in Ward 5 covering the 39217 and 39203 zip codes. Alta Woods, one of the oldest neighborhoods in South Jackson, is near the I-20 interstate and comprises Ward 6. The Eudora Welty House and neighborhoods within the Greater Belhaven area makeup Ward 7 and covers zip code 39202.

Figure 1 - Jackson, MS by Zip Code



***Source: City Data - Jackson, MS**

Despite many socioeconomic challenges, the city is currently experiencing a resurgence in development, building the Eastover District and two downtown museums: the Civil Rights Museum and the Museum of Mississippi History. Additionally, Jackson has a strong civic and community engagement history that is rooted in the Civil Rights Movement and continues to advance an agenda rooted in equity and equality. The city has recently taken on the title of “the most radical city on the planet.”

I MAY BE GOING TO HEAVEN OR HELL, BUT I'LL BE GOING FROM JACKSON.

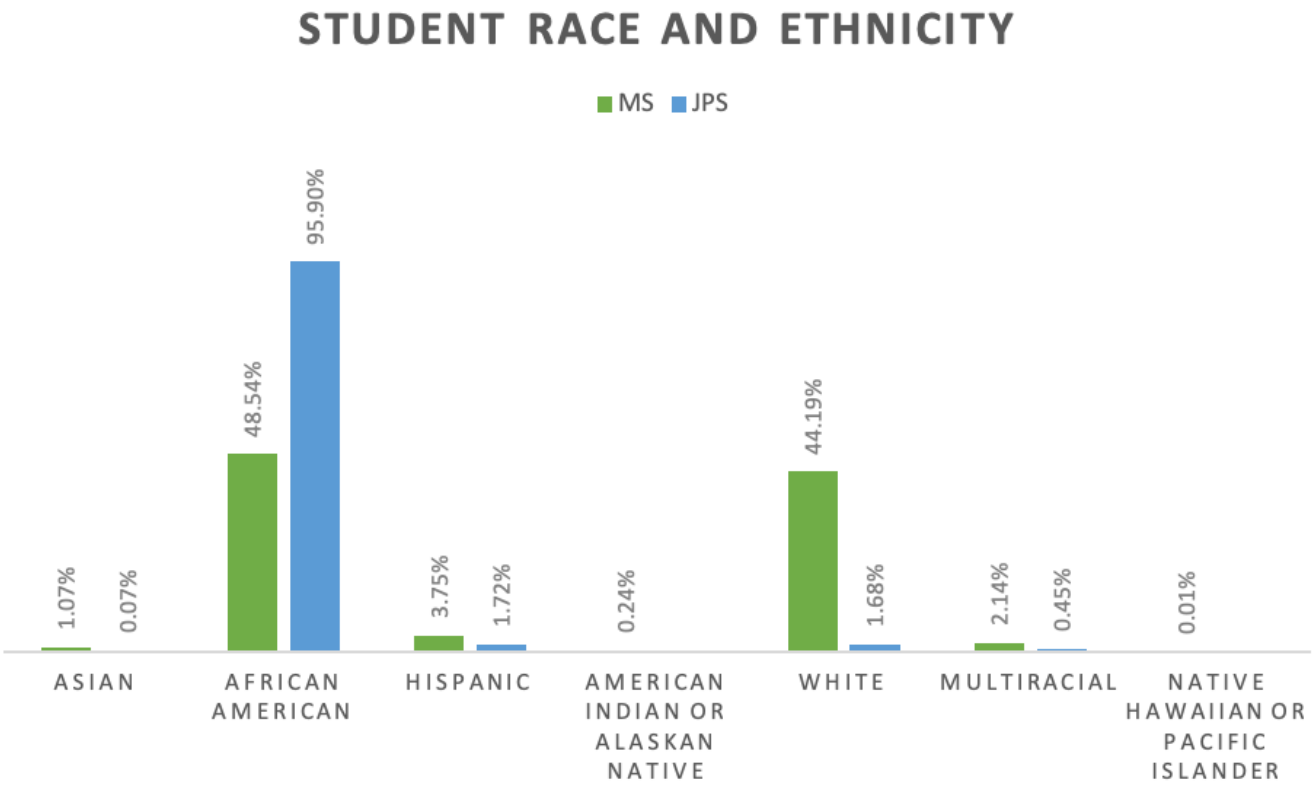
- MEDGAR EVERS

JACKSON PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT: THE SCHOOL

Jackson Public Schools (JPS) is the second largest school district in Mississippi. JPS serves about 26,000 students, representing more than 80 percent of school-aged children in Jackson. The school district is composed of 7 high schools, 12 middle schools, 33 elementary schools, and 2 special schools comprising the district's 54 school sites. These schools are divided into 7 feeder patterns based on the high school receiving the area's students.

In 2017-2018 school year, 49.35% of JPS students were female and 50.65% were male. The Mississippi State Department of Education reports seven racial and ethnic categories: Asian, African American, Hispanic, American Indian or Alaskan Native, White, Multi-Racial, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. The majority of students enrolled in the Jackson Public School District are Black or African American (95.99%). This is in contrast to 48.54% Black student population across the state. The disparity continues in that 44.19% of Mississippi's students are White, yet only 1.68% of the Jackson Public School District students are White. Data regarding other racial and ethnic backgrounds were suppressed in this report due to nominal percentage values and the privacy of individuals within these groups. Of the students enrolled in JPS, 99% are eligible for free or reduced lunch, 4,156 are homeless, 103 are in foster care, and 2,400 children have disabilities. The highest proportion of Jackson Public School students is concentrated within elementary and middle school populations. Over the last ten years, the school district has seen a decline in enrollment from 30,552 students in 2009-2010 to now nearly 22,527** in 2018-2019 school year.

Figure 2 - Jackson Public School District Student Race and Ethnicity



THAT'S WHY I WANT TO CHANGE MISSISSIPPI. YOU DON'T RUN AWAY FROM PROBLEMS - YOU JUST FACE THEM.

- FANNIE LOU HAMER

Table 1 - Jackson Public School District Enrollment (2009-2019)

Grade	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019**
Pre-K	672	674	685	673	671	640	659	633	633	545
Special Education Pre-K	20	22	23	28	29	29	17	27	32	31
Kindergarten	2,410	2,430	2,543	2,599	2,535	2,474	2,110	2,214	2,075	1,765
Special Education K	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Elementary Special Education	297	286	270	244	243	234	296	258	230	199
Grade 1	2,480	2,469	2,403	2,505	2,558	2,491	2,410	2,093	2,107	1,913
Grade 2	2,407	2,424	2,411	2,384	2,460	2,426	2,390	2,324	1,986	2,001
Grade 3	2,424	2,293	2,283	2,342	2,280	2,352	2,479	2,372	2,197	1,860
Grade 4	2,385	2,383	2,237	2,210	2,261	2,220	2,053	2,287	2,208	2,082
Grade 5	2,272	2,283	2,304	2,165	2,138	2,185	1,982	1,721	1,917	1,815
Grade 6	2,280	2,217	2,194	2,274	2,117	2,044	2,019	1,839	1,545	1,604
Grade 7	2,292	2,205	2,182	2,172	2,210	2,027	1,963	1,947	1,788	1,386
Grade 8	2,086	2,279	2,130	2,108	2,085	2,114	1,933	1,849	1,815	1,544
Grade 9	2,809	2,642	2,610	2,416	2,390	2,375	2,286	2,072	1,878	1,520
Grade 10	2,163	2,120	2,059	2,095	2,064	2,059	2,018	1,994	1,897	1,555
Grade 11	1,683	1,750	1,682	1,700	1,718	1,706	1,690	1,677	1,668	1,320
Grade 12	1,691	1,681	1,707	1,671	1,601	1,613	1,646	1,593	1,576	1,297
Secondary Special Education	116	112	106	95	107	92	131	129	139	86
Secondary GED	56	34	12	18	30	0	0	0	0	0
Total Enrolled	**30,552**	**30,313**	**29,849**	**29,711**	**29,506**	**29,088**	**28,085**	**27,031**	**25,693**	**22,527**

*** Represents suppressed data to prevent the identification of individuals in small cells or with unique characteristics**
**** Data retrieved from district officials not available on MDE website**

In 2014, the state of Mississippi implemented a new accountability system, which evaluated how schools and districts performed after implementing the state's more rigorous college- and career-ready standards. These rankings are depicted by a letter grade. The accountability grades factors in student proficiency, a standards-based growth model, and the four-year graduation rate if the school has a 12th grade. The grade reflects proficiency in the following subjects: reading, math, history, and science. In 2014-2015, Jackson Public Schools received a state accountability label of D. During that time, seven schools received "A" ratings, and six schools received "B" ratings. Twenty-one schools in the district were rated "C". Furthermore, 16 schools were "D" rated and eight schools received "F" ratings. As reflected in the table below, over the last five years, the accountability rating of Jackson Public Schools has continued to decline. In the most recent year of data collection, 2017-2018, 41% of schools within the district had an "F" rating.

Table 2 - Jackson Public School District Accountability Rating

Accountability Year	A Schools		B Schools		C Schools		D Schools		F Schools		Total Schools
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
2013-2014 MCT	7	12	6	10	21	36	16	28	8	14	58
2014-2015 PAARC	7	12	6	10	22	38	21	36	2	3	58
2015-2016 MAAP	4	7	5	9	7	12	21	36	21	36	58
2016-2017 MAAP	4	7	9	16	4	7	11	19	30	52	58
2017-2018 MAAP	9	16	6	11	4	7	14	25	23	41	56

The impact of the Jackson Public Schools' accountability rankings has continuously added to the challenges experienced by the district. However, even in the face of these challenges, the students, parents, and community have remained steadfast in supporting the school district. This has included community members, civic and social organizations, and city leadership rallying to support the district in averting state takeover by the Mississippi Department of Education. The commitment of Jackson residents remains strong in supporting the students of Jackson Public Schools.

THE APPROACH: LEARNING FROM THE COMMUNITY

One Voice undertook the development of this report guided by its approach to civic and community engagement. One Voice's civic engagement approach is designed to identify and address issues of public concern and to make a difference in the civic life of vulnerable and marginalized communities. This approach included four phases: (1) development, (2) community education, (3) policy, and (4) governance. Each of these phases had specific roles for engaging communities. However, the overall role of these phases collectively supported deepening the relationship communities had with the governing process to further encourage community partnerships and community led solutions. Additionally, One Voice ensured the scientific integrity of this report by using Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) as a guiding principle to explore concerns for and perceptions of the Jackson Public School District from its stakeholders.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) places an emphasis on joining with the community as full and equal partners in all phases of the research process. CBPR, with its emphasis on partnering with communities, provides an alternative to traditional research approaches that assume a phenomenon is best separated from its context for purposes of study. Understand that the solutions needed to address the challenges faced by Jackson Public Schools could not be found without community insight, the study approach utilized by One Voice centers around community input and observation as the primary means to identify data-driven conclusions that will enhance positive outcomes for Jackson Public School students. As a result, the data for this project was collected through a mixed methods approach that included both quantitative and qualitative data which was collected through community canvassing and community engagement.

Jacksonians conducted a community canvass across the city, garnering responses to a survey designed to capture Jackson residents' perceptions of Jackson Public Schools. This process, begun in July and concluded in September, included both door-knocking and attending community events. Overall, the community canvassing effort resulted in 69,711 door-knocks, 31,845 conversations, and 12,889 survey participants. The VAN system was the chosen technology platform for data collection during the canvassing efforts. Canvassers went door-to-door with a pre-assigned list of residents for each shift. Using "MiniVan" which is a component app for VAN, the canvassers conducted their efforts either on smartphones or tablets. Door hangers with contact information and a link to the survey were left behind at unanswered doors.

A total of 325 canvassers and 30 volunteers participated in the process. The majority of individuals who worked as canvassers were employed or enrolled in college. Canvassers worked in one or two shifts from 4:45-7:30 pm during weekdays; 9:45-12:00 pm and 3:30-6:00 pm on Saturdays; 2:00 pm-5:00 pm on Sundays at an hourly rate of $14. A total of $190,000 was paid in wages to participating canvassers.

Collecting first-hand, community supplied data is essential to developing community-led solutions. It is through the analysis of this data that one can learn the specific issues of importance held by the community from the community itself. However, survey data is only one component used to create a full understanding. In addition to collecting survey data, One Voice conducted key informant interviews with Jackson residents and partnered with the Children's Defense Fund (Southern Regional Office) for a series of community conversations to provide a full context and voice to the data being collected. These interviews and community conversations included canvassers and parents and explored a range of topics related to Jackson Public Schools.

Both the data collected through community canvassing and community conversations were analyzed by One Voice. The quantitative analysis of survey data was completed using STATA statistical software. The qualitative data collected was transcribed and coded using open coding. Qualitative data analyses were guided by grounded theory, which is the process by which each interview is coded and analyzed using an inductive process grounded in participants' voices and later linked together to form formal themes and concepts. Quotes collected from interviews and community conversations are included in the study findings to provide additional context and depth. All identifying information of participants and references to places have been changed.

KEY FINDINGS:
WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE COMMUNITY

The challenges faced by Jackson Public Schools are not unique to an urban school district. However, the assets that exist in the Jackson Public School District and the Jackson community provide a unique opportunity to support the district and the children it serves. The findings from the community canvassing and the community conversations are presented in an analysis that weaves both the quantitative and qualitative data into an intricate narrative providing a deeper context of the community's perception of Jackson Public Schools.

As evidenced throughout this report, community engagement proved essential in uncovering issues related to Jackson Public Schools and will prove central to the future success of the school system. During the community conversations, the theme of a holistic approach surfaced several times. Residents expressed that to successfully generate significant change within the district, decisions could not be left solely to top level administration. Instead, an ecosystem of support must be put in place, utilizing churches, local colleges, and community organizations. Though these organizations tend to work as silos, a collective approach would increase the depth of support within the city of Jackson. Residents further suggested that these organizations should have access to school curriculums enabling them to better support schools with after school care and services. Community members stated that everyone, whether they have a child attending school within the district, should be present at school board meetings. Additionally, opening lines of communication through the use of online forums would help to better connect residents.

Canvassers who engaged residents in the field noted that Jackson residents felt like they were voiceless and hoped that through the survey, community conversations, and interviews that they would be heard. Additionally, canvassers who had no prior engagement with the school district, felt a renewed sense of civic engagement by being a part of the project. One canvasser shared how he had once given up on the leaders stating:

"There are people who are voiceless out there that need someone to speak for them. So that ignited the flame back in me and that is why I want to do more. I want to play a more active role because there are so many issues that are disadvantaged and disenfranchised and I know you can't fight them all, but I feel like a lot of things are not being addressed."

The communities in which children are raised has a profound effect on who and what they may become as adults. Supportive environments and an abundance of resources are essential to the promotion of whole, healthy children. While the school may be a hub, it also is a direct reflection of its community and, as such, requires community input, resources, and buy-in to best serve and support its students. It becomes clear that Jackson Public Schools must be intentional in its efforts to create a whole child and whole school, acknowledging the pivotal role that the communities play in its future success.

Community Demographics: Who Spoke With Us?

A major component of this study included community canvassing aimed at talking with Jackson residents and gathering input about their perceptions of the Jackson Public School District. Overall, 12,889 residents responded to the survey. Most of the individuals that responded to the survey were between the ages of 36 and 50, and 61% of survey respondents identified themselves as female. Consistent with Jackson demographics, the majority of survey respondents (81%) self-identified as Black or African American. Survey respondents' level of education varied with a majority of the respondents having a level of education ranging from high school diploma to a bachelor's degree. Seventy percent of the sample surveyed had students enrolled in public school, 10% in private school, and about 3% in a charter school. Although "other" reflects approximately 15%, it proved difficult to distinguish exactly which school type was represented in that data point.

Table 3 -Demographic Overview of Canvassing Survey

Demographic Overview of Canvassing Survey (N=12,889)	
Gender	**% of Sample**
Male	30%
Female	61%
Other/didn't identify	9%
Asian-American	2%
Black (African-American)	89%
Latino/Hispanic	1%
White	7%
Other (Mixed, Native, etc.)	1%
Education	**% of Sample**
Less High School	4.29%
High School Diploma	23.10%
College No Degree	16.60%
Associate Degree	13.20%
Bachelor's degree	17.84%
Master's degree	9.52%
Professional Degree	1.40%
Doctorate	1.51%
Age	% of Sample
18-25	7%
26-35	21%
36-50	33%
65+	13%
School Type	**% of Sample**
Charter	3%
Home schooled	1%
Other	15%
Parochial	1%
Private	10%
Public	70%
Zip Codes	**% of Sample**
39201	0.1%
39202	3%
39203	3%
39204	10%
39206	17%
39209	16%
39211	13%
39212	20%
39213	15%
39216	1%
39272	0.1%

The community conversations were structured similarly to town hall meetings and were held in four wards in the city of Jackson. On average, approximately 25 individuals attended each ward meeting. Key informant interviews with canvassers were also conducted, each providing a deeper understanding about their experiences canvassing in Jackson and their perception of participation, while also contributing anecdotal conversations and observations obtained from residents. Ultimately, three canvassers and seven parents (5 females and two males from both within and outside the district) agreed to be interviewed.

Community Informed Themes

Through community canvassing and community conversations, several themes emerged from an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data. Two major themes included challenges within the district and opportunities for district growth. The "challenges within the district" theme had three primary sub-themes: teacher quality, district leadership, and testing. The second major theme, "opportunities for district growth," included: early childhood education, parent engagement, and educational quality of the learning environment.

Challenges within the District

Through our community engagement efforts, several issues emerged as the most pressing concerns for Jackson Public Schools (Table 4 Most Pressing Issues: Caregiver or Parent; Table 4.1 Most Pressing Issues: Jackson Public School Employee). Regardless of whether respondents were parents/caregivers, the same top three concerns were given. These concerns were teacher quality (27% and 25%), district leadership (24% and 30%), and test scores (20% and 18%). These results were consistent across race, age, and profession groups. These three topics were also consistently brought up during community meetings and in-depth interviews with parents.

Table 4 - Most Pressing Issues: Caregiver or Parent

Most Pressing Issues: Caregiver or Parent		
Question: What do you think the most pressing problems are in JPS?		
Caregiver or Parent	**YES**	**NO**
Teacher quality	27%	25%
School Administration	9%	11%
District Leadership	24%	30%
State Test Scores	20%	18%
Student Safety	7%	7%
Modern School Building	6%	4%
Student Support Services	6%	4%
Student Extra-curricular	1%	1%
Better Athletic Facility	1%	1%
Other	6%	8%

Table 4.1 - Most Pressing Issues: Jackson Public School Employee

Most Pressing Issues: Jackson Public School Employee				
Question: What do you think the most pressing problems are in JPS?				
Problem	**Teacher**	**School Administrator**	**Paraprofessional**	**Other**
Teacher quality	20%	21%	21%	24%
School Building Admin	16%	9%	10%	10%
District Leadership	24%	29%	25%	28%
State Test Scores	21%	27%	20%	18%
Student Safety	4%	3%	7%	6%
Modern School Build	1%	1%	5%	3%
Student Support Services	3%	1%	1%	2%
Other	7%	19%	36%	7%
Student Extracurricular	1%	1%	0%	1%
Better Athletic Facilities	1%	1%	0%	1%
Other	9%	6%	11%	8%

Teacher Quality

Teachers are the single most important school-based factor affecting student achievement. The Jackson Public School District is one of the largest employers in the city's metropolitan area with over 4,000 employees--approximately 1,318 certified teachers; 235 temporary licensed teachers; 99 limited service teachers; and 245 support staff (librarians, counselors, academic coaches, and interventionist). Furthermore, an analysis of student data reveals that low-income students and students of color are disproportionately located in the lowest-performing schools and that those schools have half as many highly effective teachers but 1.5 times as many ineffective teachers when compared to high-performing schools. Providing high-need students with equitable access to effective teachers is essential to any strategy attempting to close the achievement gap.

The theme of teacher quality consisted of several components: experience, absenteeism (resulting in the use of substitutes), capacity, management of the classroom, and support. According to responses from those surveyed who are also employees of JPS, teacher quality was a top concern within the district by those who were teachers, school administrators, paraprofessionals (bus drivers, etc), and other positions. Particularly, parents were concerned that those who are in the classroom are not there out of a passion for teaching. One parent expressed, “I have never had issues with the school, mine is the teacher herself, I guess she should have not just been a teacher.” The teacher shortage across the state has driven many districts to rely on alternative teacher certifications to fill in the gaps. Alternative certifications are given to individuals who already hold a degree but do not possess an educational degree. Furthermore, in the previous school year, JPS employed 93 temporary (one year) licensed teachers compared to 235 during the current 2018-2019 year. Some parents are concerned that individuals who are certified to teach their child or children are primarily doing so as a way to secure stable employment, but lack the experience, training, and classroom management skills to be effective. Professional development for teachers was suggested as a solution to improving the quality of teachers. In defense of the teachers, one parent shared a story about some of the pressures that teachers feel:

I had an auntie that was a teacher, not in the JPS district. But because of the No Child Left Behind, they are not allowed to fail any children. And she got suspended because she failed half of her class. And she did it because, one, half of them wasn’t doing the homework, the assignments, Fs on the test. The principal came to her and told her it doesn’t matter give them a D. I think a lot of the teachers have that on the brain. That pressure, if I don’t pass 90% of my class, I might not have a teaching license next year.

Overall, parent satisfaction with the teachers varied by school. When asked about their thoughts on the teachers, one parent stated that, ***"teachers have no time to teach. They have so much paperwork there is no time to teach the students. Expectations are too crazy."*** Several suggested that teachers in-classroom presence has been diminished by other obligations and requirements placed on them by administrators.

District Leadership

Among those surveyed who were also Jackson Public Schools employees, 24% of teachers, 29% of administrators, 25% of paraprofessionals, and 28% of support staff believed district leadership to be a top concern. Themes about district leadership included the following: stability, accountability, disorganization, communication, and allocation of funds. A common complaint among parents was the disconnect between things happening at the district level and things happening at the school where their child attended. One parent stated:

I don't know about the whole district. I really don't know. They only handing stuff down to them the same way my corporate job does. It is up to me to do it. They customer service people too. They need to hold the teachers more accountable, maybe take some of the anxiety of them failing out of it and teach them how to be more warm and friendly. Like she said maybe they do need to go through training. Cause some of these kids have stuff going on. You should be able to come and talk to your teacher.

Though this statement pulls the focus away from district leadership and returns to the issue of teacher quality, parents see the selection of quality teachers as the responsibility of upper level administration and believes it should receive more attention. For parents, district leadership is an omnipresent system exists but does not interact with them directly. On the other hand, employees within the district are privy to the structures, processes, and practices the district employs.

Parental involvement with district level administration is limited, relying more on school level administrators. One parent shared that she felt that the administrators at her child's school really cared:

The counselor and the librarian are like really [great], anything, like if he gets frustrated. You tell them, and they will talk to him about it. I like that about them. When I had to go take his supplies, they will come just smiling and greet you. Hospitality, they open the door for him and helped him out and told me hello. They care.

Community members felt that there is a lack of transparency among district staff and they are often unaware of many problems until it is released in the media. They shared that there is division within the district and that the central office needs to be more accountable. Many felt that there has been a mismanagement of funds which has led to a lack of resources or the equitable distribution of funds across the district. This lack of transparency also makes residents question the fiscal responsibility of the district.

Testing

Despite the important role of assessments, they can become harmful if used improperly. Every minute spent testing is one fewer minute for instruction. Additionally, testing can increase anxiety not only among students, but it places pressures on teachers as well. More attention should be given to understanding if the benefits derived from time spent testing truly outweigh the cost of lost instructional time. One parent stated:

Another thing that scare parents is that reading exam. They fail the test anyway because the questions are so screwed up. It could be this answer. It just screws them up regardless. Maybe they need to help them with test anxiety.

One survey respondent's views connected district leadership to the focus on test scores. The respondent commented:

District leadership is not preparing students for college. No. I feel like they are more concerned with getting good test scores. Students are also not well prepared for the workforce. Not well. Kids are not exposed to things that will truly prepare them to be adults. [problem] Too many people that are not concerned with the actual well-being of the kids. It is more of a sit down and be still type of teaching. I do not like how the teachers use the internet programs to teach.

Additionally, both parents and community members shared that there is little support for how to use the data that is derived through testing. Teachers should be able to interpret the data retrieved to create a plan to serve all students particularly those who may not do well on tests but do well in class.

Often during conversations, concerns with the current curriculum were connected with the discussion relating to test scores. Participants shared that they believe there is a misalignment within the curriculum and that this keeps students from competing nationally.

Additionally, respondents stated that the curriculum should be updated to also reflect unique cultural nuances and should include teaching Black history and issues of democratic engagement like voting procedures. Low-performing school districts often prioritize test preparation over content instruction for at least a quarter of their instructional year. Community members voiced that there should be an audit of the current curriculum. They further suggested that the heavy focus on state testing is a primary reason driving parents to send their children to private schools.

Opportunities for District Growth

The second major theme, "opportunities for district growth," includes early childhood education, parent engagement, and the educational quality of learning environment. Community responses from the survey indicate the believed importance of early childhood education programs, parental involvement and support, and learning environments that prepare students to enter college or the workforce.

Early Childhood Education

Research has shown that children enrolled in early childhood education programs like Head Start benefit from the introduction of formal education prior to kindergarten. Early childhood education participants benefit in the following ways: improved social skills, higher graduate rates, higher college enrollment rates, fewer behavioral problems, and fewer criminal problems/interactions with law enforcement. Table 5, seen below, provides the number of participants, by race, who have children that attended some type of early learning program. For most of the sample, especially among African Americans, participation was primarily associated with public school programs or Head-Start programs. The "private" early learning program participants reflected the third highest number of people sampled.

Table 5 - Percentage of Attendance of Type of School by Race

Percentage of Attendance of Type of School by Race				
Question: What type of program did your child attend?				
Race	**Private**	**Public**	**Head-Start**	**Parochial/ Faith-Base**
Asian-American	32%	51%	15%	2%
Black (African-American)	15%	42%	40%	3%
Latino/Hispanic	38%	41%	21%	0%
White	45%	32%	14%	9%
Other	28%	23%	45%	4%

When reviewing the importance of early learning programs by race, we see that the majority of the sample, regardless of race, identified in the affirmative that early learning programs are important (Table 6 - Importance of Early Learning by Race and Age). Furthermore, the response is consistent across age groups. Additionally, when respondents were asked whether they felt the early learning programs were adequate in the level of education and training offered, the same trend was noticed. This was seen across race and age groups. When examining whether the early learning programs prepared their child for school, the majority of responses across both race and age groups was affirmative (Table 7 - Early Learning Prepared Child for School).

Table 6 - Importance of Early Learning Program by Race and Age

Importance of Early Learning Program by Race and Age		
Question: Do you think early learning programs, such as Head Start and pre-school, are important to a child's success in K-12?		
Race	YES	NO
Asian-American	88%	12%
Black (African-American)	94%	6%
Latino/Hispanic	87%	13%
White	90%	10%
Other	96%	4%
Age	**YES**	**NO**
18-25	89%	11%
26-35	87%	13%
36-50	88%	12%
51-65	90%	10%
65+	92%	8%

Table 7 - Early Learning Prepared Child for School

Early Learning Prepared Child for School by Race and Age		
Question: Does/did the program prepare your child to enter school?		
Race	**YES**	**NO**
Asian-American	87%	13%
Black (African-American)	92%	8%
Latino/Hispanic	94%	6%
White	87%	13%
Other	93%	7%
Age	**YES**	**NO**
18-25	89%	11%
26-35	93%	7%
36-50	92%	8%
51-65	89%	11%
65+	93%	7%

During the community sessions and on surveys, participants overwhelmingly agreed that comprehensive early childhood education is important because it helps prepare the children for school. For those parents who did not have children that participated in early childhood education programs, the reasons cited most often was availability (Table 8 - Barriers to Not Attending Early Program by Age and Race). It is important to note that, while “other” is selected at a higher rate than “availability,” it is impossible to definitively isolate the determining factor attributable to the respondent’s non-participation.

Table 8 - Barriers to Not Attending Early Learning Program by Age and Race

Barriers to Not Attending Early Learning Program by Age and Race					
Question: If they did not attend an early learning program, what factor led to your child not entering an early learning program?					
Age	Availability of EL Program	Cost of Program	Transportation Issue	Home-Based Care	Other
18-25	27%	13%	14%	5%	41%
26-35	37%	9%	10%	7%	37%
36-50	33%	12%	12%	7%	36%
51-65	33%	12%	9%	7%	40%
65+	37%	8%	8%	7%	40%
Race					
Asian-American	23%	40%	14%	3%	20%
Black (African-American)	34%	11%	11%	6%	38%
Latino/Hispanic	30%	20%	10%	0%	40%
White	29%	5%	5%	11%	51%
Other	17%	17%	0%	42%	25%

Parent Engagement

Research shows that parent engagement can improve students' behavior, attendance, and achievement. However, community members shared that parents need more resources to help them understand how to best help support their child's development. During the community conversations, members also suggested that parents are often ill-equipped to help their children with homework which gravely affects their learning outside of the classroom. Additionally, conversations and interviews with community members, canvassers, and parents suggest that negative parental behavior is linked to poor student behavior. The majority of respondents felt that parents need to be held accountable for their children. It was also mentioned that parents are at the center of chronic absenteeism. Chronic absences present academic challenges for students in attendance and those not in attendance. Teachers must balance the needs of children who fall behind due to absences and the needs of an attendant classroom of children who have already moved ahead in the lesson. Additionally, chronic absenteeism prevents children from reaching early learning milestones.

However, this only reflects one dimension of parental engagement, or its lack, as many parents are actively involved in activities at their child's school. Indeed, the majority of those surveyed, regardless of race, selected that they participated in activities. Among age groups, the participation rate among the 26-50 age was slightly higher than other age groups. Parents have higher rates of participation at school meetings, conferences, and other events in their child's school when their child is in elementary or middle school.

This trend is not unique to Jackson but is seen across the nation. The most cited reason for not participating in activities at school was work. This was true for all races and age cohorts. Quality parent engagement is crucial to the success of the district.

Table 9 - Parent or Caregiver Involvement in School Activities by Race and Age

Parent or Caregiver Involvement by Race and Age		
Question: Did you attend most of your child's academic (not extracurricular) school activities such as parent-teacher conferences, open house events, and IEP/PPT?		
Race	**YES**	**NO**
Asian-American	82%	18%
Black (African-American)	85%	15%
Latino/Hispanic	86%	14%
White	82%	18%
Other	89%	11%
Age	**YES**	**NO**
18-25	77%	23%
26-35	87%	13%
36-50	87%	13%
51-65	84%	16%
65+	78%	22%

Table 10 - Received Barriers to Participating in Activities (Based on those who said no)

Perceived Barriers to Participation by Race and Age					
Question: If no, what prevents you from attending these academic school activities?					
Race	Work Schedule	Childcare for others	Transportation Issue	Meetings aren't Held	Other
Asian-American	57%	23%	10%	3%	7%
Black (African-American)	43%	7%	9%	5%	35%
Latino/Hispanic	50%	6%	6%	13%	25%
White	39%	4%	9%	5%	43%
Other	22%	0%	0%	22%	56%
Age	Work Schedule	Childcare for others	Transportation Issue	Meetings aren't Held	Other
18-25	45%	10%	12%	3%	30%
26-35	49%	7%	9%	6%	29%
36-50	47%	7%	9%	4%	32%
51-65	36%	8%	10%	5%	41%
65+	34%	7%	6%	4%	49%

Educational Quality of Learning Environment

The needs assessment section of questioning examines respondents' belief in the school system's ability to provide high educational quality based on the needs of the students (Table 11 - Meets the needs of the students by Age), whether dealing with high academic achievement students (Table 12 - Meets the needs High Achieving Students by Age) or special need students (Table 13 - Meets the Needs of Special Needs Students by Age). Across all age groups, respondents consistently identified the educational quality as "good" or "acceptable." However, during the individual interviews with parents within the district, some parents felt that JPS lacked the resources to adequately meet the needs of all its students. Specifically, parents who had once been students of JPS recall how, during their time in school, Jackson Public Schools was revered stating, "At one time everybody wanted to go to JPS. For sports, JPS is known to be a powerhouse in sports but we need to be a powerhouse in schools." It is clear that this perception has shifted over the years.

Though the perception of the district's ability to meet the needs of its students was relatively consistent across all age groups, an analysis across racial lines tells a different story (Table 14 - Meets the Needs of All Students by Race). When examining opinions regarding the quality of the high achievement programs, all racial groups viewed the programs as "acceptable" to "good." However, regarding the quality of needs, Black respondents identified quality as "acceptable" or "good." Among those who identified as White, the quality was considered "poor" or "acceptable." The pattern is the same regarding the quality provided for special needs. This is consistent with reported conversations between canvassers and White residents. Those resident often stated that they removed their child from the district because services were not adequate and that the school quality had diminished over the years. One parent commented, "Most of them talked about how JPS schools were so bad they had to take the child out of JPS system and put them in another system, so they could learn better."

It should be noted that some White residents declined to participate in the survey, stating that they were unaware of the problems JPS was facing. Although schools have been integrated for quite some time, JPS is nearly an all-Black school district. Prior to integration, the Jackson Public School District (then known as the Jackson Municipal Separate School District) was completely segregated. Brinkley, Jim Hill, and Lanier High Schools were among several schools who served only Black students, while Murrah, Central (closed), Provine, and Wingfield served White students. In 1970, the city began experiencing "White flight", as many White families left the public schools and the city to populate the more well-resourced suburban areas of Madison, Brandon, Flowood, and Clinton making it harder to operate the city schools. A by-product of the White exodus, district zoning also contributes to the perception of quality (or lack thereof) for Jackson Public Schools. Parents expressed their concerns explaining that district zoning often places students at a disadvantage because students who live in the neighborhoods of "better-quality" schools are still not able to attend those schools. Two parents expressed the following:

North Jackson has always had the best schools but depending on where you stay in that area, my child wouldn't be able to go to the school. My house is here on this street but if I stayed on the other side of the street, I'd be required to send my child to another school.

If you come out to the end of the light the school is right there and he can't even go to that school. We have to turn and go two blocks up to the other school. They need to rezone. That's how it is. We can look right across the street and see this school but had to go the other school. I feel like if you stay four or five blocks within the school you should have that option to go to that school.

As the percentage of racially diverse families in the city declines, the Jackson Public School system has become re-segregated. Schools that were once racially diverse are now primarily Black. This effect can be seen in other urban areas across the United States as school district boundaries are drawn along racial and socioeconomic lines.

Table 11 - Meets the Needs of the Students by Age

Meets the needs of the students by Age					
Age	Very Good	Good	Acceptable	Poor	Very Poor
18-25	16%	27%	31%	16%	9%
26-35	13%	25%	35%	19%	8%
36-50	11%	24%	36%	20%	9%
51-65	11%	24%	33%	21%	11%
65+	12%	25%	31%	22%	9%

Table 12 - Meets the High Academic Achieving Students Needs by Age

Meets the high academic achieving students needs by Age					
Question: How do you rate the quality of support JPS provides to high achieving students?					
Ages	Very Good	Good	Acceptable	Poor	Very Poor
18-25	21%	29%	36%	9%	5%
26-35	18%	27%	38%	11%	5%
36-50	16%	28%	37%	13%	6%
51-65	17%	27%	34%	14%	8%
65+	18%	30%	34%	11%	7%

Table 13 - Meets the Needs of Special Needs Students by Age

Meets the needs of special needs students by Age					
Question: How do you rate the quality of support JPS provides to students with special needs?					
Ages	Very Good	Good	Acceptable	Poor	Very Poor
18-25	26%	26%	29%	11%	8%
26-35	18%	26%	33%	15%	8%
36-50	15%	25%	34%	16%	10%
51-65	15%	25%	31%	18%	11%
65+	13%	27%	32%	18%	10%

Table 14 - Meets the Needs of All Students by Race

Meets the Needs of All Students by Race					
Question: How do you rate the quality of support JPS provides to high achieving students? *Question: How do you rate the quality of support JPS provides to students with special needs?*					
Race	Very Good	Good	Acceptable	Poor	Very Poor
Asian-American	16%	27%	36%	14%	6%
Black (African-American)	12%	25%	35%	20%	9%
Latino/Hispanic	15%	32%	30%	13%	9%
White	11%	17%	33%	27%	11%
Other	4%	15%	35%	34%	12%

A learning environment can refer to the physical setting, educational approach, or cultural context in which students learn. When queried does JPS promote a safe and encouraging learning environment, all groups across race responded in the affirmative (Table 15 Learning Environment by Race and Age). However, those who identified as White or other, displayed a much narrower response difference. Across all age cohorts, there was a consistent affirmative response. Although 70% of parents surveyed had children attending school within the district, more parents are considering sending children to local charter schools due to the perception that the quality of schools is better. Additionally, parents feel that JPS is one of the last school districts in the area to adopt a computer-based learning system. During the interviews, one parent expressed the following:

Try to be more computer-based. They like the last school district in the area that's not computer-based. And I'm not saying be like Clinton and give them a tablet or even if they don't have internet, [cable companies] offer internet essentials for $9.95 and a computer for $147. So, there is no issue there. Just make it more computer-based.

This response suggests that the community believes opting for more computer-based learning would not be a barrier as many service providers in the area are willing to make it more affordable for families to have access to the internet.

Table 15 - Learning Environment by Race and Age

Learning Environment by Race and Age		
Question: Do you feel that JPS provides a safe environment that promotes learning and teaching?		
Race	**YES**	**NO**
Asian-American	62%	38%
Black (African-American)	68%	32%
Latino/Hispanic	63%	37%
White	59%	41%
Other	53%	47%
Age	**YES**	**NO**
18-25	66%	34%
26-35	70%	30%
36-50	68%	32%
51-65	65%	35%
65+	65%	35%

Though school safety and infrastructure was not identified as a primary concern facing the district, several parents did discuss the need for the modernization of many school buildings. Several parents who are also graduates of the district shared that not much has changed with the physical appearance of most schools. This observation is confirmed as most of the school buildings and facilities (63%) in operation are 41-60 years old. The physical structure of a school is a critical part of the learning environment and affects student morale either negatively or positively. An up-to-date, inviting learning environment allows students to take pride in their space, empowers them, contributes to a sense of community, and can increase motivation.

When asked how well students are prepared for college, the majority of respondents, across racial lines, answered that students are "moderately well" trained for college (Table 16 - College Readiness by Race). This is also consistent across the age cohorts. When considering race, approximately 21% of Black residents surveyed believe that JPS prepares students "extremely well," while 19% of White residents stated, "not at all." Generally, conversations with parents were consistent with the idea that students are "moderately well" prepared to attend college. One parent, however, shared how there should be a focus on college prior to attending high school, linking back to the importance of early childhood education. A parent, who now sends their child to a local college preparatory school, expressed the following:

"Their approach [the school] is to get the kids to go to college. They are in kindergarten working on college. They are doing computer science in first grade. Why would you want to send them to another school that's not even trying to challenge them? When he was at the other, he was bored. I talked another friend of mine into sending her son to the prep school with Nathaniel. When he was at the other school they called everyday saying he was bad, he wasn't passing the work. He's been there now since school started they are asking would they like to move him up to first grade. He's kindergarten. So why move him from one school that wasn't doing well, and he go to college prep school and they trying to move him up to another grade."

This account, though anecdotal, provides insight on why some parents are choosing to remove their children from public school and place them in college preparatory charter schools.

Table 16 - College Readiness by Race and Age

College Readiness by Race and Age					
Question: How well do you believe JPS is preparing students for college?					
Race	**Extremely Well**	**Very Well**	**Moderately Well**	**Slightly Well**	**Not at All**
Asian-American	21%	13%	39%	9%	18%
Black (African-American)	9%	21%	36%	22%	12%
Latino/Hispanic	11%	32%	25%	19%	13%
White	8%	16%	35%	22%	19%
Other	4%	15%	40%	31%	10%
Age	**Extremely Well**	**Very Well**	**Moderately Well**	**Slightly Well**	**Not at All**
18-25	13%	18%	32%	24%	13%
26-35	10%	21%	36%	22%	12%
36-50	8%	21%	36%	22%	13%
51-65	8%	19%	37%	22%	14%
65+	9%	22%	36%	20%	13%

When examining whether respondents feel that students are educated for the workforce, the data shows that respondents feel students are “moderately well” trained (Table 17 Workforce Readiness by Race and Age). Notably, those who identified as Latino/Hispanic responded that they believe students are trained “very well” for the workforce. Across the age groups, the feeling is that students are “moderately well” trained for the workforce.

Table 17 - Workforce Readiness by Race and Age

Workforce Readiness by Race and Age					
Question: How well do you believe JPS is preparing students to enter the workforce after high school?					
Race	**Extremely Well**	**Very Well**	**Moderately Well**	**Slightly Well**	**Not at All**
Asian-American	15%	19%	35%	13%	18%
Black (African-American)	7%	20%	35%	24%	14%
Latino/Hispanic	8%	36%	26%	11%	19%
White	6%	15%	35%	25%	20%
Other	5%	12%	38%	26%	18%
Age	**Extremely Well**	**Very Well**	**Moderately Well**	**Slightly Well**	**Not at All**
18-25	13%	19%	30%	22%	16%
26-35	8%	20%	36%	23%	13%
36-50	7%	19%	36%	23%	15%
51-65	6%	19%	35%	24%	17%
65+	6%	21%	33%	25%	15%

Despite the many challenges and obstacles faced by urban districts and the difficulties of Jackson in particular, residents remain hopeful that the Jackson Public School District can make the necessary changes to become the “powerhouse” of its past. Early learning programs are essential to establishing a strong foundation for children in the district. Working to diminish barriers, like availability and transportation would give parents more access to quality programs. Additionally, involvement in early learning programs can begin the preparation for college and careers and extend learning beyond the completion of high school. ***Despite the challenges of teacher quality, district leadership, and testing, there is a strong base of active parents and a supportive community environment that is dedicated to helping the students of the district succeed.***