



FIRST-  
GENERATION  
COLLEGE  
SURVEY

Mercury.  **SFER**

# Who is SFER?

Mercury.



**Students for Education Reform (SFER)** develops college students into grassroots organizers who fight for educational justice in their communities. Our experiences and stories of overcoming educational inequality are undeniable and validate the demand for transformative change in our K-12 system.

***“SFER is working to ensure that students have a seat at the table in the ongoing national discussion on public education reform.” – Alexis Morin, Executive Director***

# SFER conducted a first-of-its-kind poll of first-generation college students



**Students for Education Reform (SFER)**, in partnership with Mercury Public Affairs, commissioned a first-of-its-kind, national poll of first-generation college students.

The purpose of the poll is for SFER and education advocates to have access to concrete, empirical evidence as we continue to reform our national education system so that it works better and provides more opportunity for all students, regardless of background.

# First-generation college students: an overview

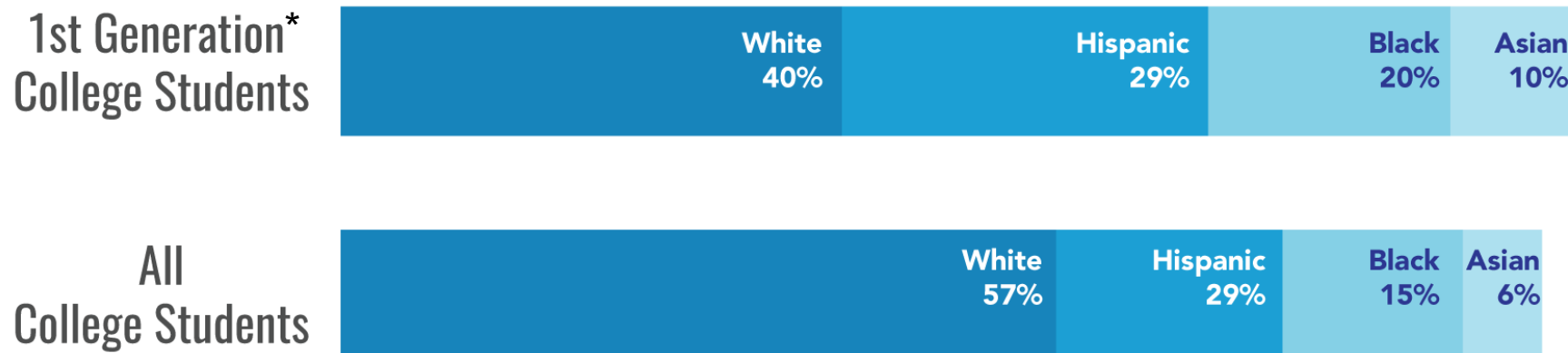
- 34% of undergraduates were the first in their families to go to college in the 2011-12 academic year, according to the National Center for Education Statistics
- First-generation students are more likely to attend two-year and for-profit schools than their peers
- First-generation students are less likely to complete their college degree in six years than their peers whose parents had at least some college experience (50% vs. 64%), according to 2011 data
- Only 11% of low-income, first-generation college students will have a college degree within six years of enrolling in school, compared to about 55 percent of their more advantaged peers who are not low-income or first-generation students, according to 2003 data

**The pipeline to college begins with K-12 education**

# Who did we poll?

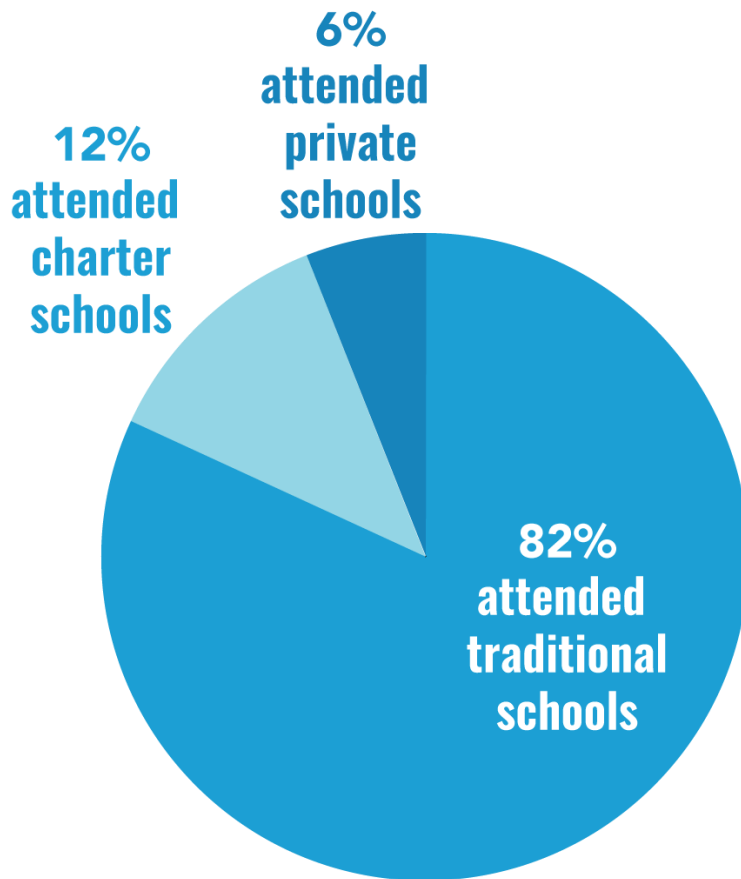
First-generation college students are good indicators of the health of our public education system.

SFER and Mercury surveyed 1,000 first-generation students across the country.



\* This breakdown mirrors the demographics of FGCS nationwide.

# Who did we poll?



**19%**

**LGBT**



**37%**

**Live in non-English speaking home**



**62%**

**Received free or reduced lunches**

\* This breakdown mirrors the demographics of FGCS nationwide.

# Summary of Key Findings

- ❑ Education is important to first-generation college students (FGCS), many of whom come from low-income households, and is seen as the best pathway out of poverty.
- ❑ School choice and vouchers are popular with FGCS, and many wished they had access to them.
- ❑ Financial literacy, resume building, job interviewing, and stress management are skills a majority of FGCS wish they had learned in high school.
- ❑ Teachers make a difference. The effective teachers wanted FGCS to succeed, played an important role in getting them to college, and deserve a raise. Ineffective teachers should be fired based on performance as determined by student evaluations, student growth in testing, and teacher peer evaluations.
- ❑ FGCS recognize the importance of testing but feel like they're spending too much time on test prep and on taking tests.
- ❑ Suspension has a significant impact on future success, and alternative discipline measures are needed.

# FGCS see education as their ticket out of poverty.

## Statements on Education

■ Agree   ■ Unsure   ■ Disagree

Families should be able to choose the best school.



Education is the best pathway out of poverty.



Poverty affects ability to perform in school.



Poverty limits school performance.





# FGCS acknowledge challenges but expect to be held to high standards.

## Statements on Education

■ Agree   ■ Unsure   ■ Disagree

Students should be learning the same material.



Students should not pay for remedial college courses.



Students should be held to a high standard.





“My parents didn’t go to college and my family struggles a lot with money. But, I know education is the way I can earn a good living. It’s important for me to learn, but I need good teachers. I think my school should do more to reward the good teachers and get rid of the bad teachers. And I think I should have a say in telling my school which teachers are the best.” – **Eduardo Martinez, University of California, Davis**

# FGCS want to reward good teachers, but ineffective teachers must go.

## Views on High School Teachers

■ Agree ■ Unsure ■ Disagree

Teachers should have been paid more.



Financially reward or punish teachers.



Hire and fire the newest teachers first.



Teachers want me to succeed.



Teachers were the most important factor in school.



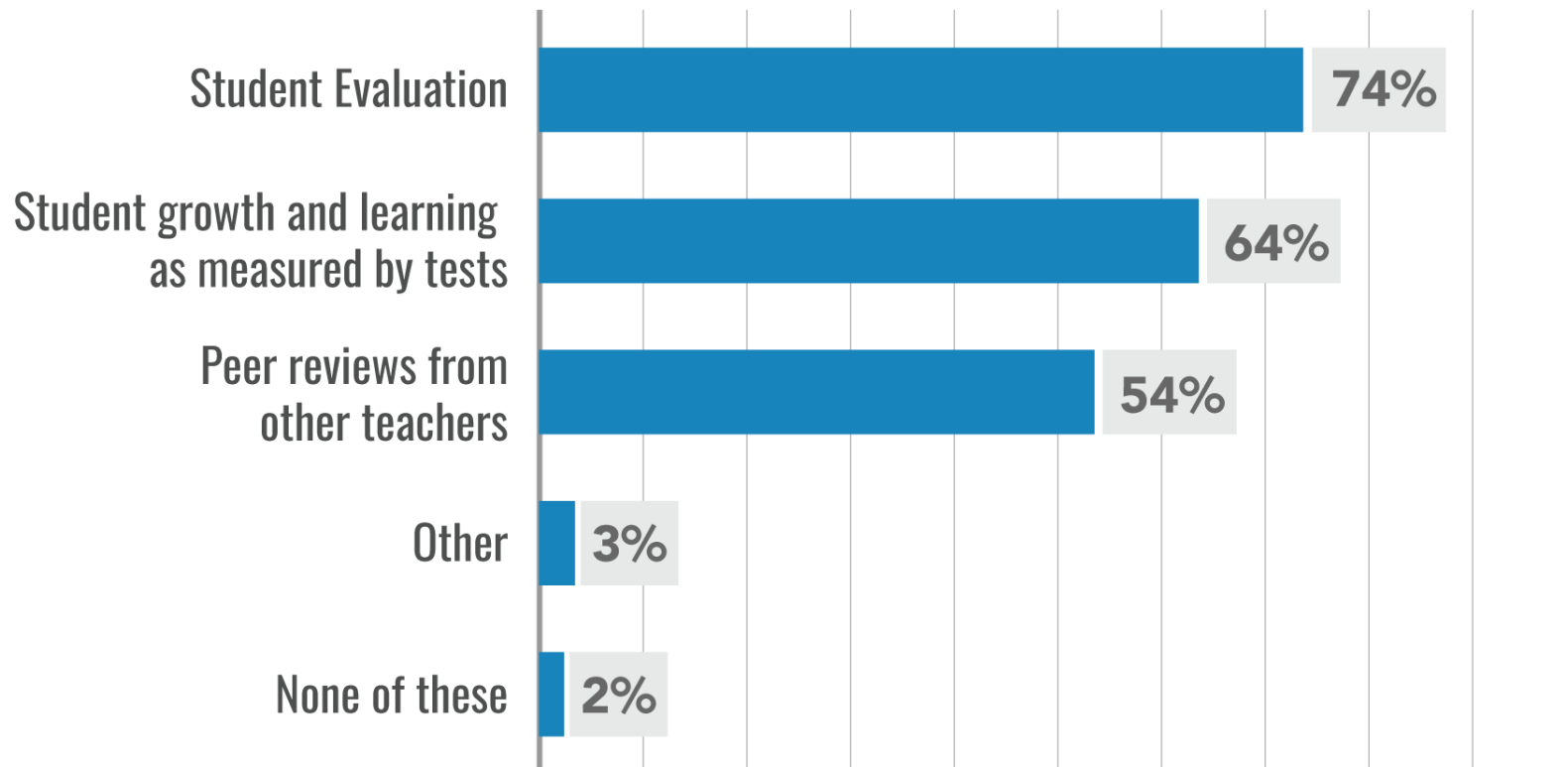
Teachers treated me the same as other students.



# In addition to performance on tests, students should play a role in teacher review.

## Methods Used to Evaluate Teachers

*(Multiple Selections Allowed - responses will equal more than 100%)*





“I didn’t always feel safe at my school. And it seemed that some of us were given harsher punishments. I was suspended in my school but a friend did the same thing and only got detention. Missing all of those days of school affected my grades. It really set me back.” – **Thomaiyah Reeves, North Carolina, incoming first-year student**

# A sizable minority of students did not feel safe or secure at their school.

## Views on High School Experience

Disagree Unsure

Felt physically safe at school.



Comfortable expressing my full identity.



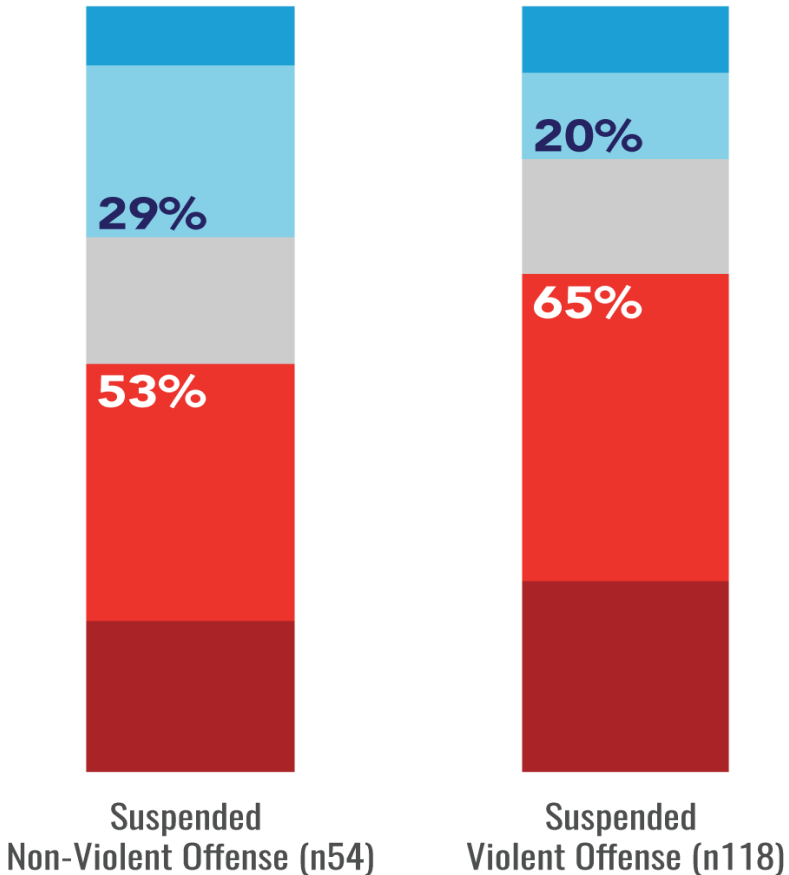
School was an emotionally safe and inclusive place.



# Student discipline has a significant impact on performance.

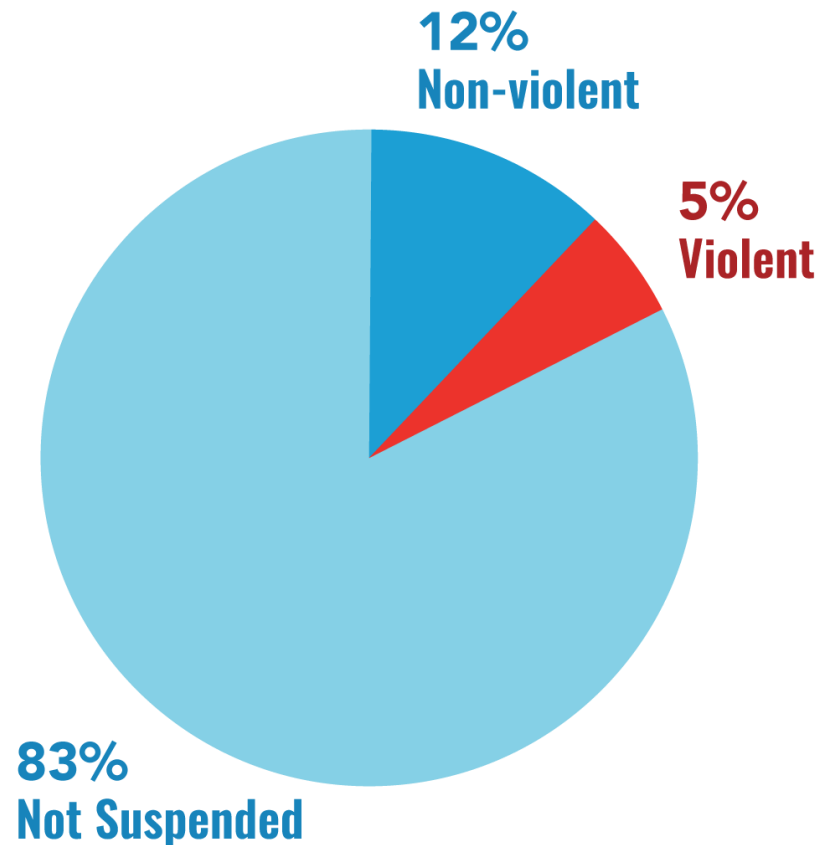
## Path to College and Eventual Graduation

■ Challenging ■ Neutral ■ Easy



# Two thirds of FGCS suspensions were for non-violent offenses.

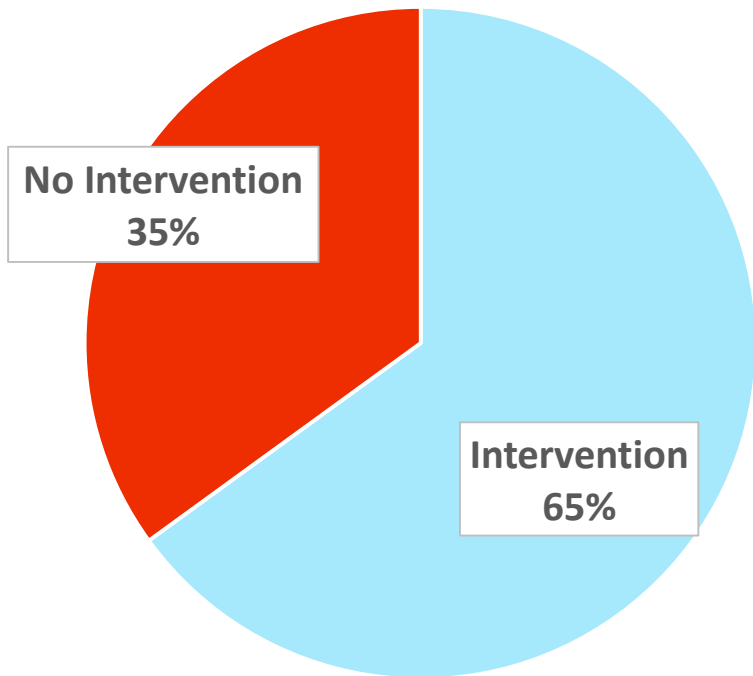
## First-Generation College Student Suspensions



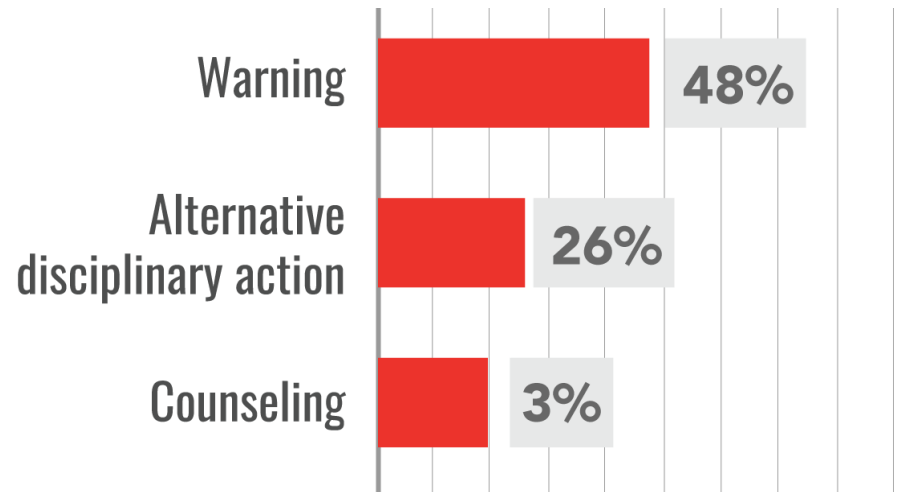


# And of those suspended, more than one third did not receive any intervention prior to suspension.

### Intervention Prior to Suspension



### Most Common Types of Intervention



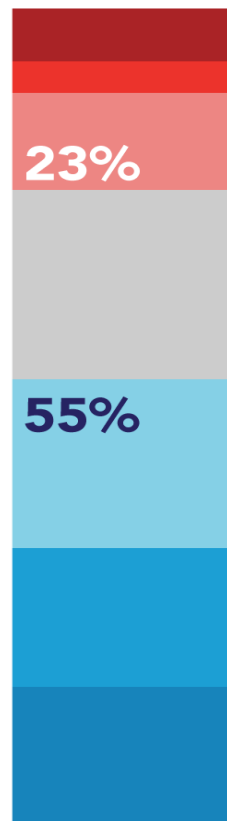


“Testing is important and I think students like me should be held to the same high standards as other students, but teachers should have some freedom to adapt curriculum. Current testing at my school didn’t let my teachers make any changes that could have helped me learn better. We need fewer tests and a little bit more freedom to actually learn.” – **Peyton Browning, Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design**

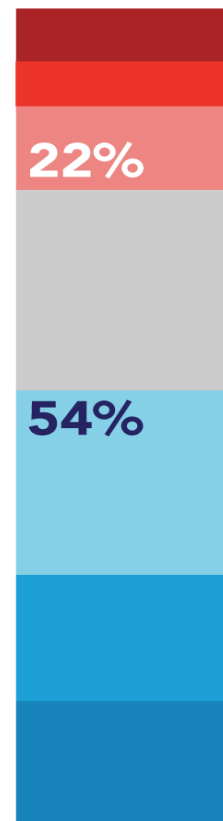
# A majority of FGCS understood the importance of testing in schools...

## Statements on Education

Agree    Unsure    Disagree



Testing is important.

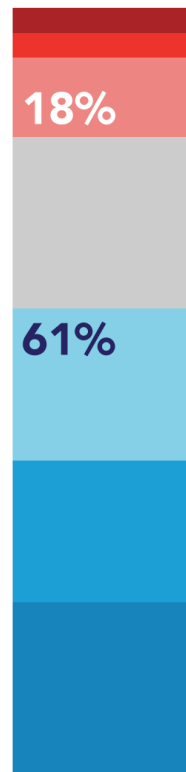


Tests measure student knowledge.

# ... but believed that too much time was spent on standardized tests.

## Views on High School Experience

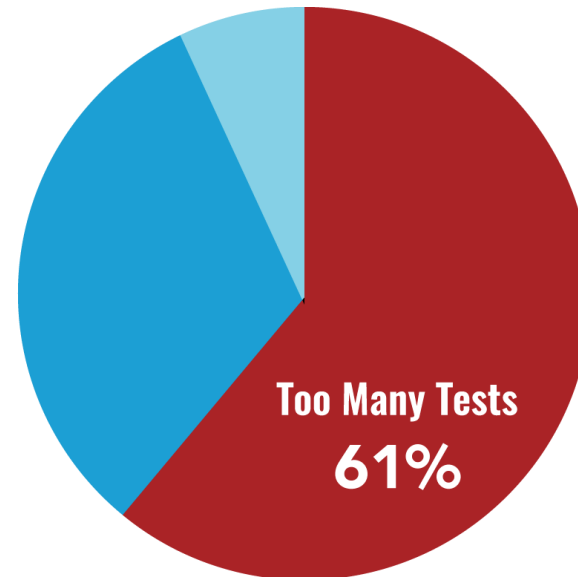
■ Agree   ■ Unsure   ■ Disagree



Spent too much time focusing on standardized tests

## Frequency of Standardized Tests

■ About right   ■ Too Few   ■ Too Many Test

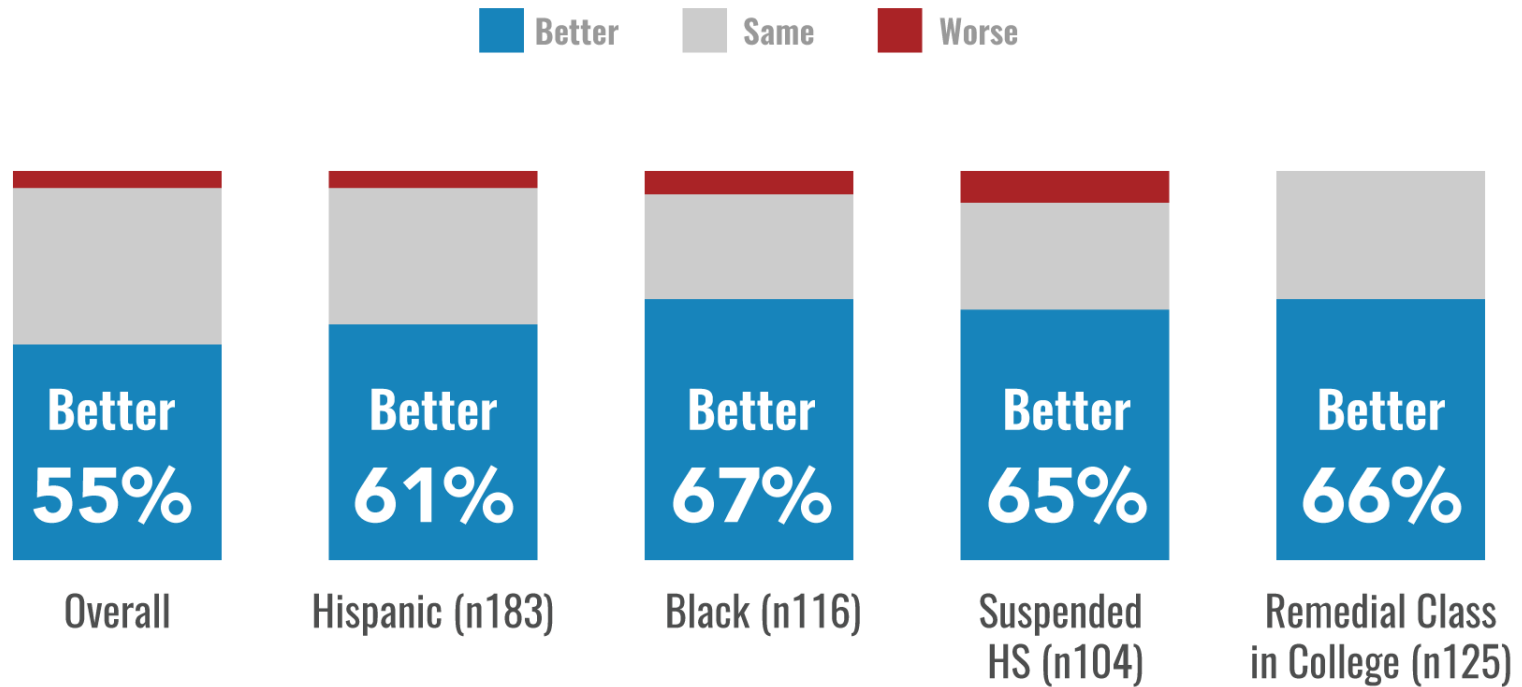




“I was the first of my family to attend college. My school did not have math and science courses that would have helped prepare me for college, but a school nearby did. I think that students like me know far better than politicians what I need from a school, and I should be permitted to make important choices about my education.” – **C.J. Parker, Northeastern University**

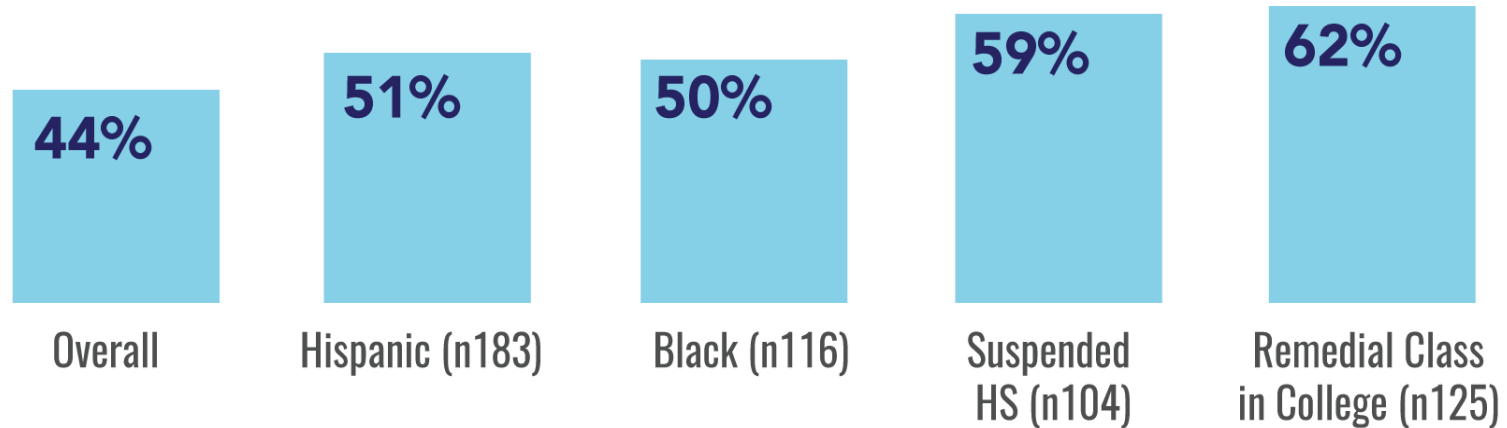
# FGCS believe in school choice...

Do you think your educational experience would have been better with school choice?



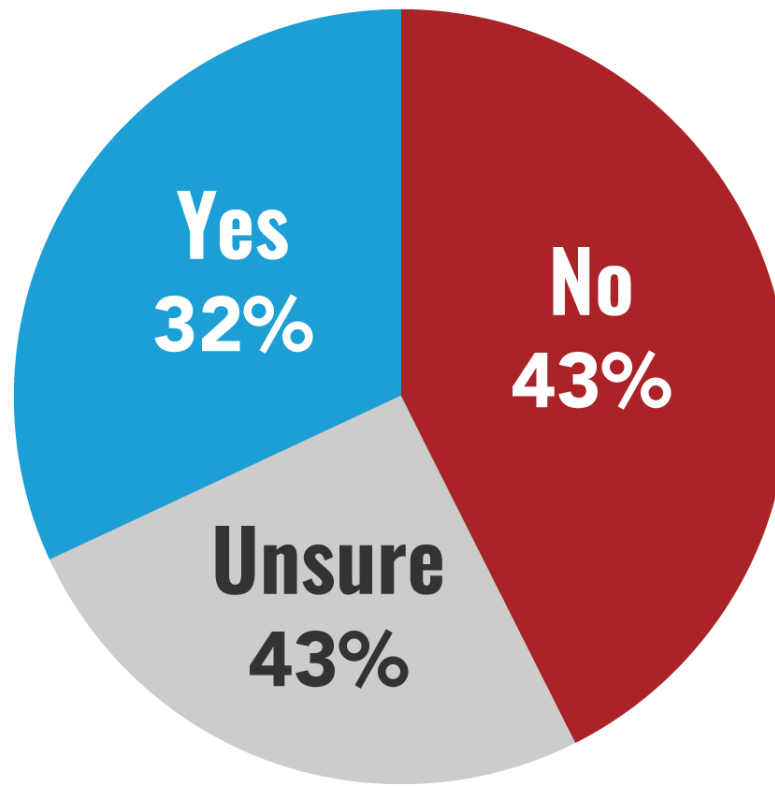
# ...and large minority of FGCS would have attended another school had choice been an option...

Percent Would Have Gone to a Different High School  
(n685)



...but only a small minority of FGCS have school choice.

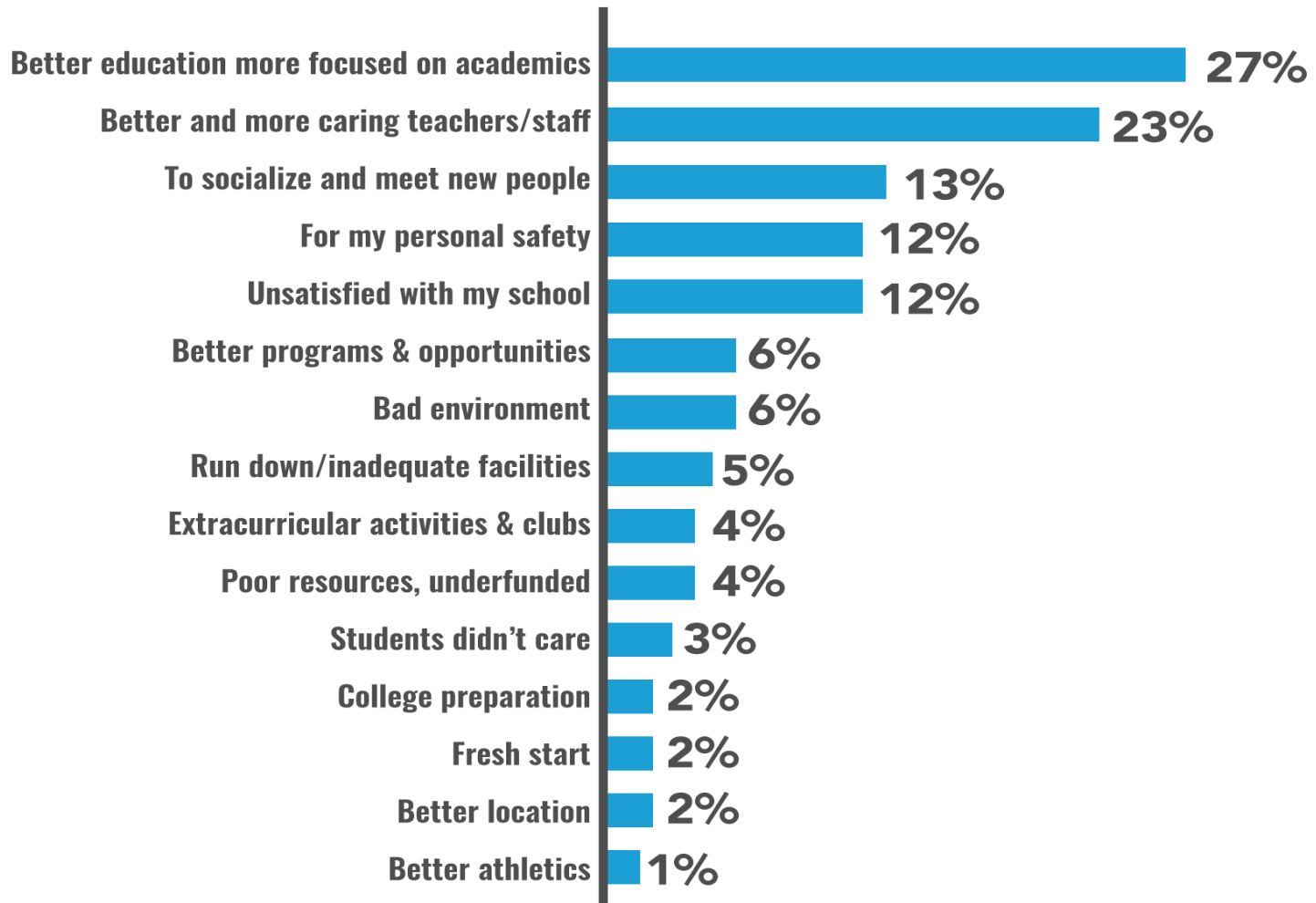
District Have School Choice?





# Academics, safety, and better teachers are top reasons for choice.

## Reasons For Going to a Different High School if it Was an Option (n685)



# When given the opportunity in the poll, FGCS were very clear about why they wanted school choice.

*“The high school I attended was low funded. We had minimal resources and even though the teachers did their best to teach us with what they had, it still wasn't the greatest experience. I didn't learn how to write on Microsoft word or use a Texas instrument calculator until I attended college. If I had those resources, I feel I wouldn't be this slow in grasping college.”*

**– Asian, Female, Public School**

*“I probably would have performed better academically if I was in an environment that promoted academic success. My overall performance doesn't represent what knowledge I knew or had the potential to learn.”*

**– African-American, Female, Public School**

*“The reputation and low expectations of the students made me feel like the teachers and staff didn't care if we succeeded or not beyond high school.”*

**– Hispanic, Female, Public School**

*“I feel as though maybe I wouldn't have fallen in with a lower performing crowd and settled for my low performance like the way I did.”*

**– White, Male,  
Supplement Family Income, Public  
School**

*“My school in Houston was absolutely terrible. The teachers did not care to teach the material or alter it to the class to make it fit. On top of that there were metal detectors every morning and knife fights during lunch. I did not feel safe nor was I learning. Then there was the bullying because I wasn't the same as everyone there.”*

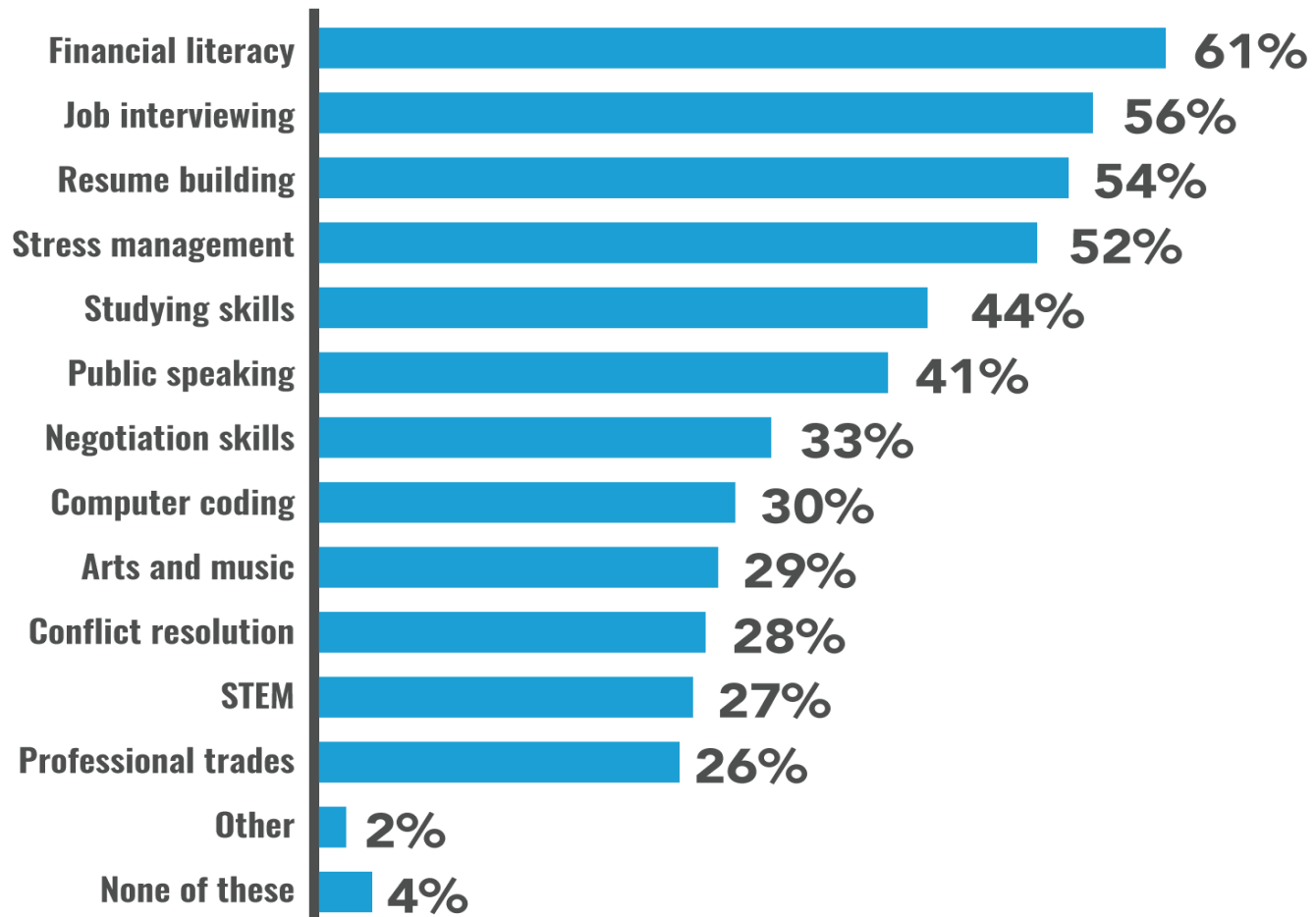
**– White, Female, LGBT, Public School.**



College is difficult but the courses are not the most difficult part about being a first-generation college student of color. I wish my school would have taught me how to deal with stress and manage my finances. Balancing work, school, internships, and a social life is the most difficult.” -**Brenda Contreras, Sacramento State University**

# Students had specific suggestions to improve high school prep for college.

## Life Skills & Subjects Wished High School Had *(Multiple Selections Allowed - responses will equal more than 100%)*



**In conclusion...**

**First-generation college students have invaluable opinions on education.**

If we want to provide public education worthy of our students' dignity, talents, and limitless potential, we must allow students – and organizations that represent them – to have a seat at the table.