

Invisible and Unheard

The Black Experience at Lexington High School

June 2020

INTRODUCTION

Lexington is viewed as an idyllic community throughout the state of Massachusetts and nationwide – carefully manicured lawns, seemingly progressive politics and highly ranked school systems. From the outside looking in, there is little reason to be concerned about the state of the town and its residents, students, workers and visitors. Lexington prides itself in its tolerance and acceptance, overwhelmingly voting for liberal political candidates in state and national elections. The highly educated, and wealthy, populace strives to present itself as a beacon of tolerance throughout the region, often touting the diversity of the town within public forums.

Lexington High School, one of the most highly ranked high schools in Massachusetts, has a black student enrollment of 3.4%. This is roughly 77 students - in a school of over 2,200. Unfortunately, many of Lexington's students have suffered, in regard to education and social wellness, at the hands of this very town. While claiming to have high rates of diversity and an extremely accepting populace, Black students at Lexington High School have been neglected, ostracized and in the worst-case scenarios, harassed. The following study explores the ways Lexington High School has treated its students from marginalized racial groups and provides Lexington Public School administration an insight into the feelings of students whose voices have long went unheard, and whose concerns long went unanswered.

METHODOLOGY

Over the course of five days, an anonymous survey was conducted via Google Forms. The survey was distributed directly to current Black and Latino students at Lexington High School, as well as alumni. Various means, including different social media platforms, were used to distribute the survey and reach as wide of an audience, yet as relevant of an audience, as possible.

A total of 132 responses were collected, representing students from the Class of 2009 to the Class of 2022. From 2009 to 2020, there have been a total of 1,046 Black students enrolled at Lexington High School. This represents a sample of 12.6%. Given a selected confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of 10.0, it can be adequately determined that the following results are statistically significant.

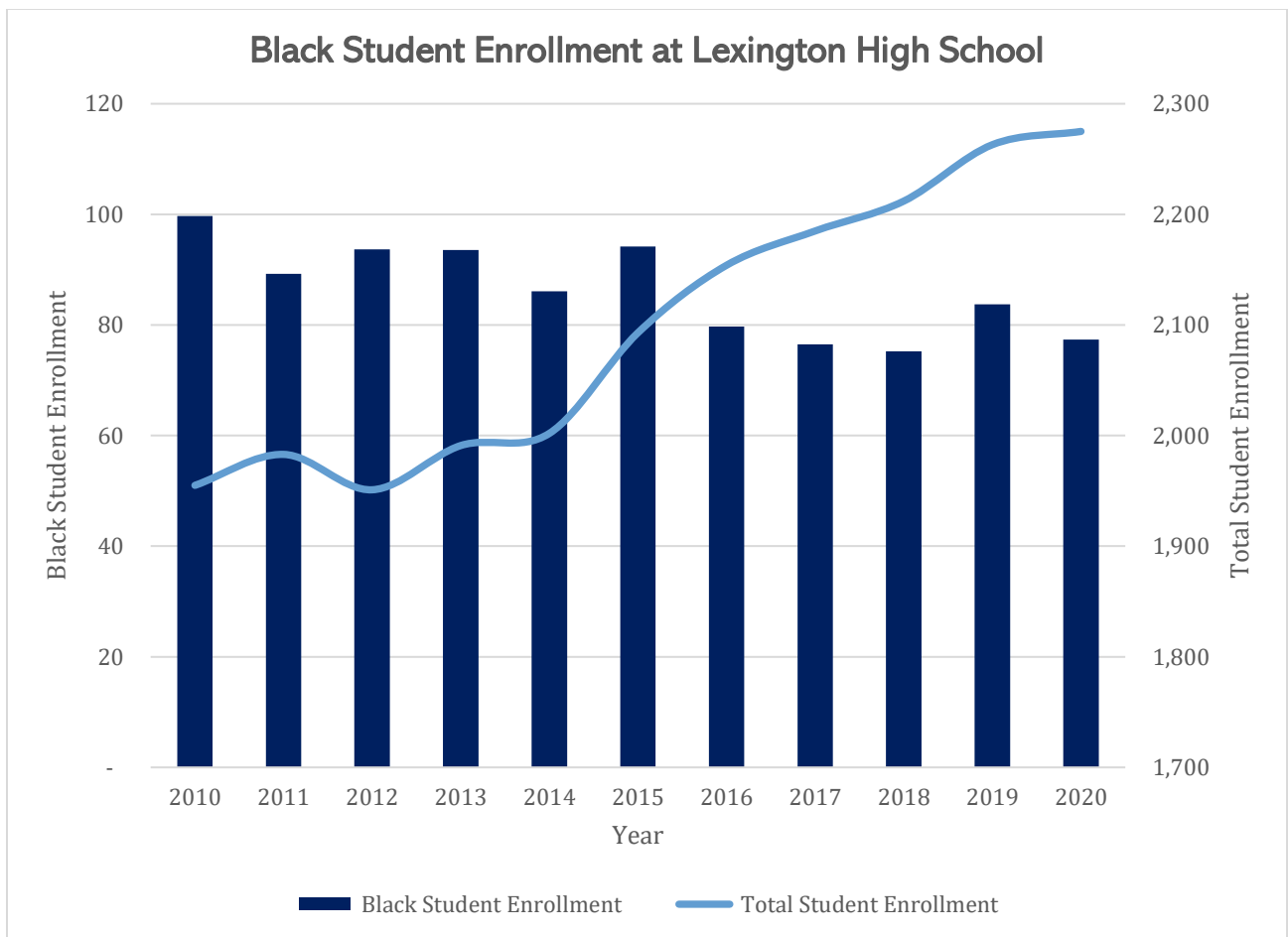


Figure 1.) Black Student Enrollment at LHS (Source: MassDEP)

KEY FINDINGS

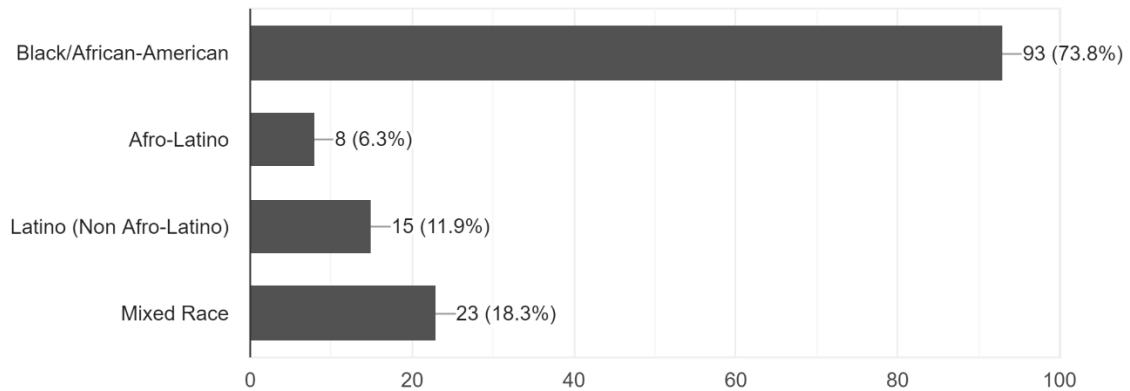
- While the enrollment of Lexington High School has grown 14% from 2009 to 2020, the **Black student enrollment has decreased 21%**
- Only **41% of Black students complete advanced coursework** while at LHS, as compared to **86% of White students** and **95% of Asian students**
- **72%** of Black students surveyed **never had a Black teacher at LHS**
- **62%** of Black students surveyed felt as if LHS faculty **treated them differently than their white counterparts**
- **60%** of Black students surveyed felt as if they were **not pushed to excel academically** at the same rate as their white counterparts
- **48%** of Black students surveyed stated they **thought about their race “very often”** while attending LHS, while **28.9%** said they thought about their race “often”
- **59%** of Black students surveyed felt as if their fellow classmates and teachers **made assumptions about their backgrounds “very much”**
- **62%** of Black students surveyed felt as if the LHS curriculum was **not inclusive of racial diversity** while **27%** felt as if it was somewhat inclusive
- Only **7.8%** of Black students surveyed stated that **they learned the most about Black history via LHS courses**

RESULTS

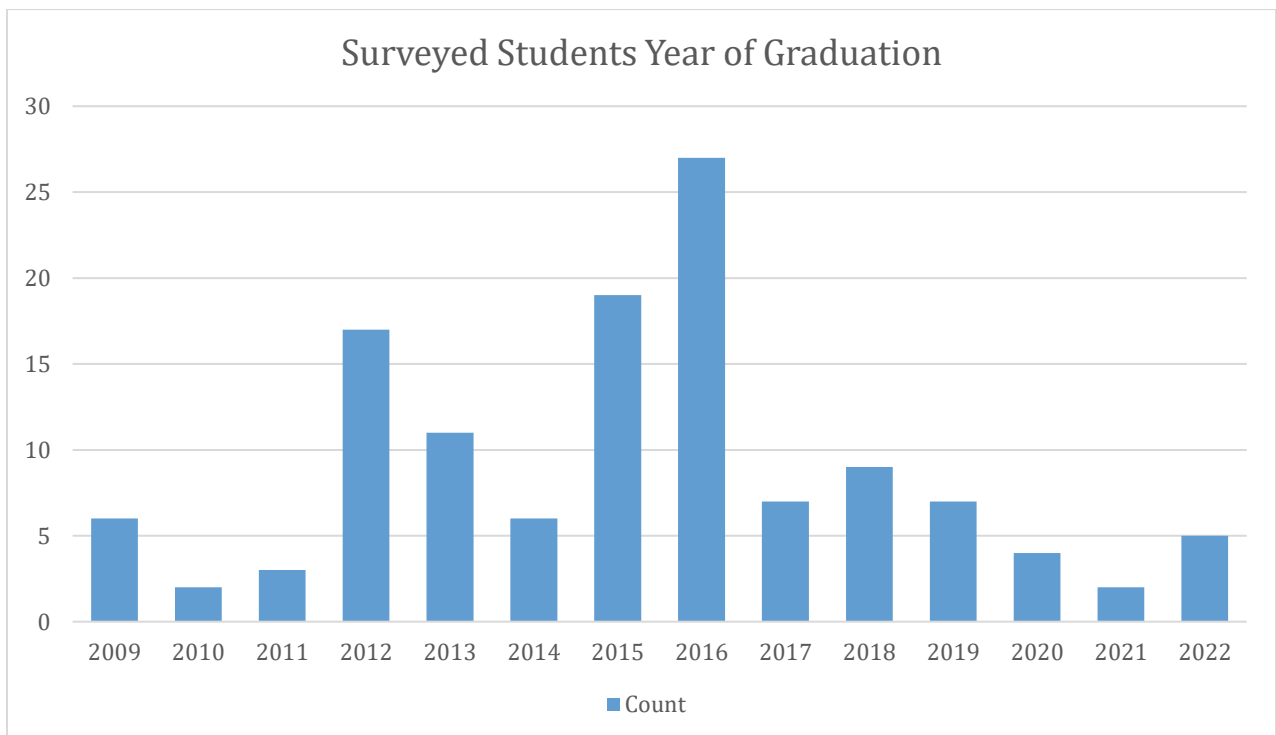
Question 1: How would you identify yourself? Select all that apply.

How would you identify yourself? Select all that apply.

126 responses



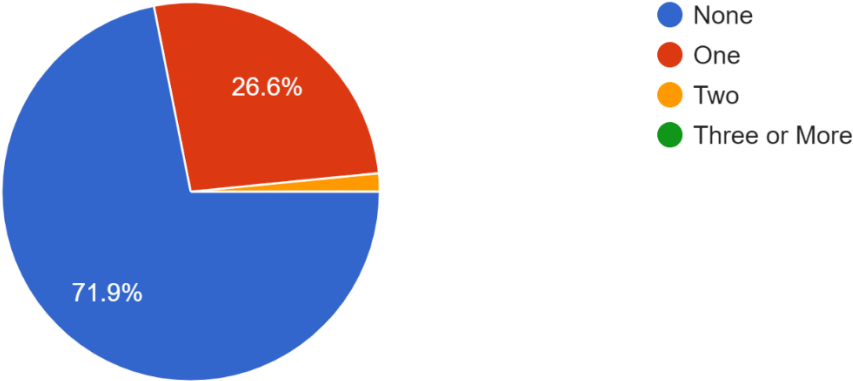
Question 2: What year did you graduate/are set to graduate from Lexington High School?



Question 3: How many Black teachers did you have during your time at LHS?

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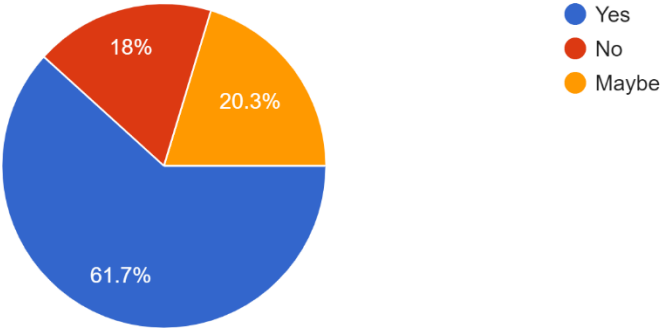
128 responses



Question 4: Do you feel as if LHS faculty (teachers, guidance counselors, etc.) treated you differently than your white counterparts?

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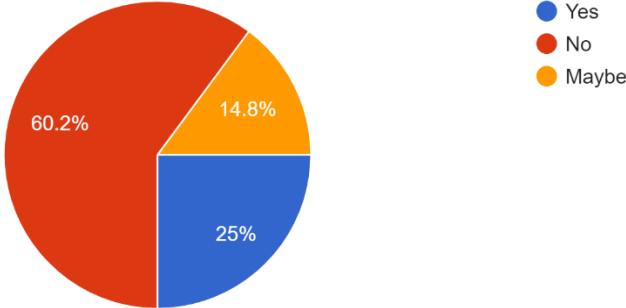
128 responses



Question 5: Do you feel as if you were pushed to excel academically (AP courses, college applications, etc.) at the same rate as your white counterparts?

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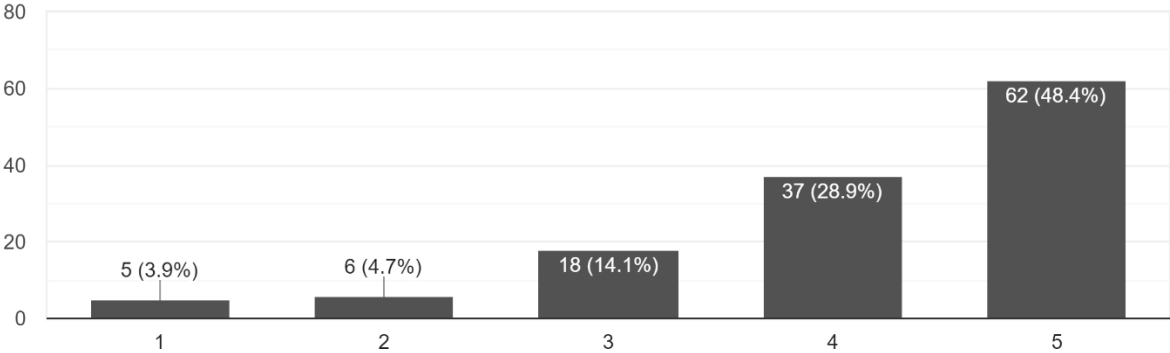
128 responses



Question 6: On average, how much did you think about your race while attending LHS? Please rank from 1 to 5, with 5 being “very often” and 1 being “not at all.”

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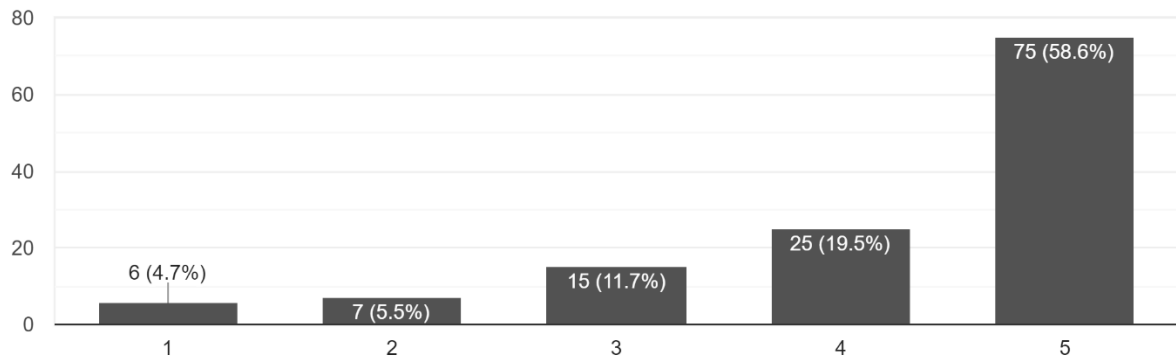
128 responses



Question 7: How much do you feel fellow classmates and teachers made assumptions about your background? Please rank from 1 to 5, with 5 being “very much” and 1 being “not at all.”

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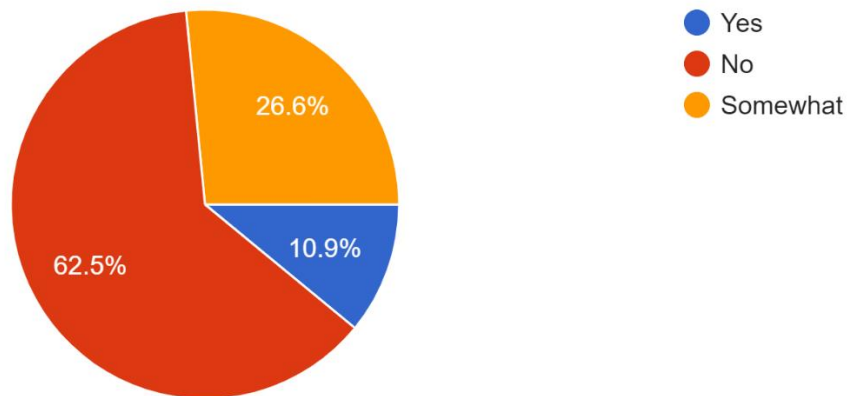
128 responses



Question 8: Do you feel as if your LHS curriculum was inclusive of racial diversity?

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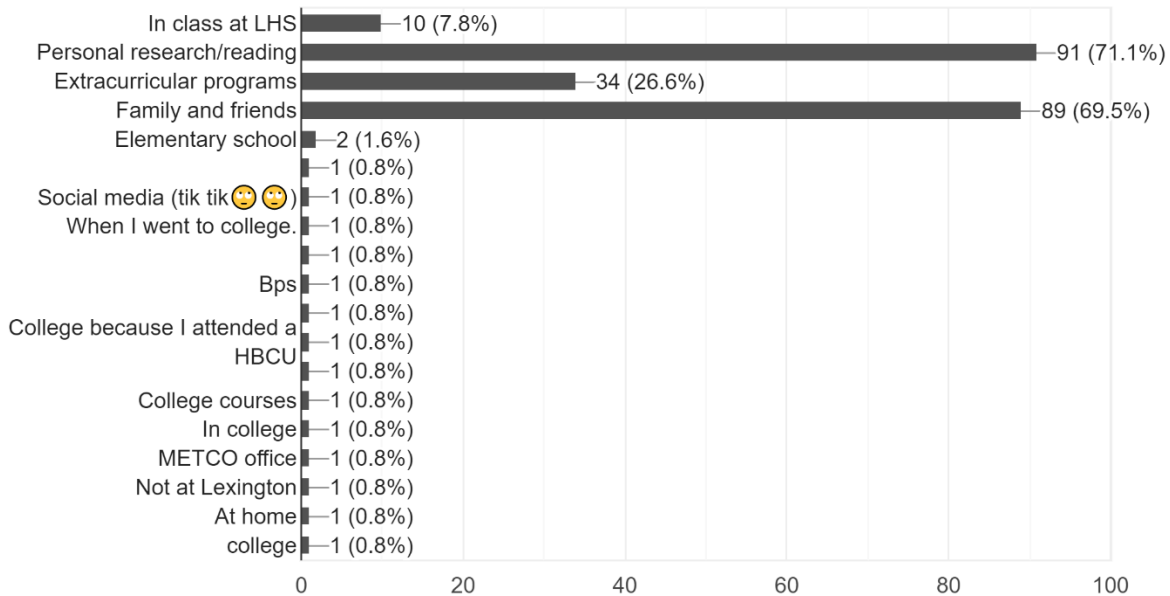
128 responses



Question 8: Where did you learn the most about Black history?

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128 responses



Question 9: What could LHS do to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for Black and Latino students?

Sample responses include the following:

- History classes should include black history throughout the year and not only during black history month. There should be training against calling on the only minority to speak as a representative of their race. If a student wanted to add something to the conversation they would. There should sensitivity to the fact that they may have limited knowledge of their ancestry. I had an instance where my teacher told me I didn't accurately complete a project because my ancestry didn't go back far enough. To which I had to explain in front of my class that for as far as my family knows we've been in Georgia since slavery. I have dozens of examples of times I was personally put on the spot because I was the black student, and honestly those moments still

stick with me all these years later. There were several times I, as a 15/16-year-old, had to explain to my teachers their insensitivities about my race.

- Not a lot honestly. Ms. Canniff even took down a Black Lives Matter poster once saying that a faculty member didn't approve it even though there was a clear signature on it. The next week a Blue Lives Matter poster was hung up in the same exact spot with no signature from faculty, and proceeded to stay up after she had walked past it countless times. Racist encounters with other students were not taken very seriously when reported to staff.
- Students need to be held accountable for their racist behavior. We're sick of being told we can come to you guys (the adults) when there's an issue and when we do, the issue isn't dealt with. Students were constantly saying offensive things and getting nothing but a detention or suspension and then came back to school and continued their negative behavior
- I know there used to be a race and gender class at LHS at some point. I never had the chance to take it. Bring that class back, hire a person of color to teach it. In the history classes, they need to put some focus on police brutality, racial stereotypes, and sexual harassment.
- Have better METCO staff that stand for the students of color. Have African studies classes that can be taken in replacement of literature or history classes. Have more discussions around pan-Africanism. Address the subtle forms of racism i.e.. micro aggression that the students of color face on a daily.
- Don't separate the students so quickly to a IEP (Individualized Education Plan). Also don't assume that you can't use a IEP in a AP class. I also think that when it comes to black history month that more guest speakers can come to better help the African American students deal with ignorance either by choice or not from the students. I think also having more diverse teachers on campus.
- I think a great way to help students would be to provide a space solely for Black and Latino students. With the amount of discrimination and racism we experience in school, it can make it difficult to focus on classwork. If students had a safe space that was just for them, it would give them the chance to step away from everything and

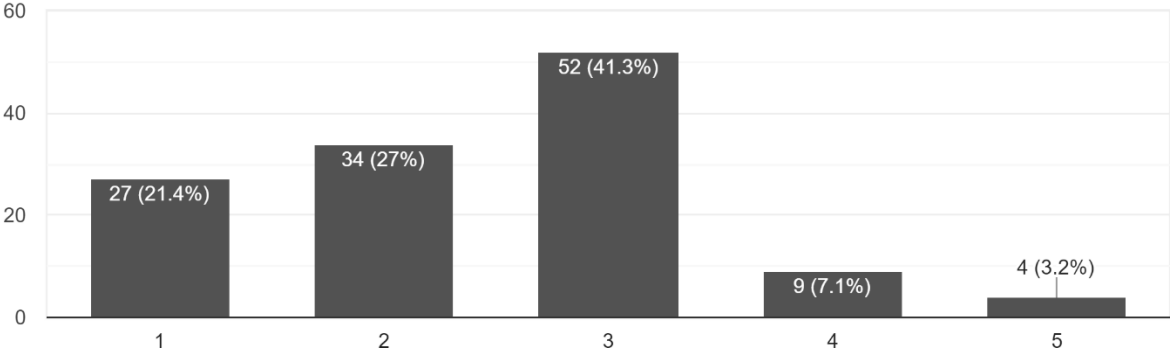
take a needed mental break. It would also provide a space for them to be themselves, without fear of judgement.

- Additionally, faculty, staff, and students need to be educated about racism and implicit biases. I think this is the first step towards people identifying their racist and biased beliefs. If people are unable to identify it within themselves, then how are they expected to change? However, what that education looks like will be difficult to define and would likely have a lot of pushback from parents. Nonetheless, conversations about racism need to be held within schools. Perhaps one of the easier ways to do this is to teach U.S. history as it actually occurred rather than how the U.S. think it occurred. The history we are taught is white-washed and sugar coated. Despite the fact that the U.S. stole this country from people, committed genocide, supported slavery, murdered people (particularly Black and Indigenous people), looted countries, and upheld racism and white supremacy, we are taught that those wrongs have been corrected and the U.S. is better than everyone else. That is completely false and contributes to upholding racism, both individual and systemic. That is why we need to reevaluate what is taught in the classroom.
- I think it's also important for faculty to be held accountable. Students should be able to make formal complaints about teachers if they are being discriminated against in their classroom. It's not fair for students to accept their fate and have their academic opportunities stripped away simply because their teacher makes assumptions about them based on the color of their skin. Teachers have a HUGE impact on a student's confidence and future, which is why it's critical for them to understand the important of supporting all students, especially Latino and Black students. If teachers aren't able to create a safe and welcoming environment where they encourage all students, then they shouldn't be teaching
- Teach all of the kids at LHS to stop looking down to the kids who are of different races and teach them about the white privileged they have. Also, Lexington wasn't fair about how they would give out punishments to students. The deans and the school officers would give out very harsh punishment just to the kids of color and the kids who were white would just get a free pass. MAKE METCO BIGGER.

- Fund the African American & Latinos scholar group that was committed to showing academic success for people of color in Lexington. As a member, our group lacked a lot of resources to make the impact we needed in the community and for our competitions in representing Lexington how we could've. We volunteered and spoke to the elementary and middle schools to uplift our voices and show that we can succeed. In addition, college preparing to help students of color and scholarships on the database for students of color. In addition, helping fund the METCO Scholarship Fund which helps finance college education. I think also that the administration should be working to seek out leaders of colors to help strategize on what can be done.
- Teaching more on Black/African American history. Not just about Rosa Parks or Little Rock Nine. It should be more in-depth on the systemic impact of these events and how this carried into today's society such as how the Boston busing back in the 1970's led to even more segregated education system. This is a small example but honestly, not much is really taught about Black history. We essentially learn very surface level history and this would go a long way.
- Broaden its US history while focusing on and labeling not just the positive but negative effects of policy against African Americans. And focusing on not only the wrongs and effects that other countries such as Belgium and France had on peoples of African descent. They should also make educating students on the African diaspora and different indigenous peoples around the world. These subjects don't only have to be brought up in history classes but can be touched on in multiple subjects, such as English and literature abc even biology courses. Biology especially can touch on the effects and measures that were taken to study people of color around the world.
- Invest in the METCO program. Have humanity classes every quarter, so students can understand and be more accepting. I feel as if majority of people didn't try to become friends with Black people. I knew a lot of people and was popular but no one except a few knew my life stories or wanted to know. Everyone lived in their own world and showed off their wealth.

Question 10: Do you feel as if the social justice initiatives that LHS has taken have been impactful? Please rank 1 to 5, with 1 being not impactful at all and 5 being very impactful.

Do you feel as if the social justice initiatives that LHS has taken have been impactful?
126 responses



Question 10: What sorts of racism/microaggressions did you experience while attending LHS?

Sample responses include the following:

- Being told I'd never get into my dream college. Being told I must live in an apartment with just my mom, when my parent's had been married since before I was born and owned a two family home.
- Others constantly assumed I was a part of the METCO program even though I've gone to school with most peers since the age of five (kindergarten). Lost friendships because I was part black and not "white enough".
- Stereotyping, being described as a "model minority" ie "I like you because you're not like other black people," nonblack students using the n word
- Teachers, faculty, and other students often thought I was from Boston because of my skin color. When it was time to talk about black history, all eyes were on me. I was kept in special education classes although multiple times I spoke up about not needing it.
- [They said] I wasn't smart. I was affirmative action. I lived in a dangerous area. Parents didn't want their kids to play at my house.
- Teachers discouraging from applying to certain colleges. Coaches exuding hard work and impressive physical capability as genetic talent. The list goes on.
- Being called upon as the representative. The constant mispronunciation of my name with sly commentary.
- Been told that I was in the wrong class when I walked into AP Bio sophomore year, heard kids make fun of my mom's accent when she was cheering me on at my track meets
- In 2nd grade I had a teacher that told me and another African American student we weren't going to be successful.
- Peers gleefully using the N-word and posting it on their social media's. (Not suffering any consequences)
- Students joking about the KKK.

- In middle school a white student in my class saying that he wished I was a slave and thrown in a cage.
- White students assuming that I was poor or that I lived in an apartment in the hood.
- In high school, I started a black lives matter group with a group of other African American girls, we made posters saying “Black Lives Matter” and another one saying “hands up don’t shoot” and students would freely vandalize our posters writing “ALL lives matter”, “blue lives matter”, and drawing swastika’s on our posters (not suffering any consequences).
- The school made us watch the inauguration of Donald Trump right after that incident. We planned a silent walk out, which was then interrupted by students who supported trump, they waved their Trump/Pence flags during our protest (once again not facing any consequences).
- No one ever wanted to come to Boston.
- If tables were left unclean or there was excessive noise it was always assumed to be students of color. I was often asked questions or assumed to live in a “ghetto” or unsafe neighborhood. Friends always offered to for to stay with them, but their parents and they assumed my neighborhood was unsafe. Other students of color were always assumed to be METCO students. Students of color would be more likely to be sent to their dean or be penalized for actions that other students would not be penalized for. We were always assumed to be doing the worst in our classes or taking lower level classes than other students.
- Microaggressions about my experience as a POC (person of color). Comments about POC body image. Comments about POC fetishes. Targeted more from deans and other faculty than white peers.
- I feel like I got treated differently when it came to disciplinary actions. Where I got a 7 day suspension, my friend got a two day and he is half Asian half Caucasian.
- People assumed more about me just because of my race. I had a class where the teacher thought I smoked weed when I didn’t and made it seem like I did to the class when there was no indication that I did.

- We weren't even allowed to hang signs up about black lives matter because "all lives matter". Students made racist comments. Teachers treated me different because of my race.
- Always assumed to have a negative background or always had assumed complications for difficulty rather than it being a simple matter of similar lifestyle to other classmates but raised in a different environment.
- Bullying. Got bullied on the field hockey team for being different and I loved to play. I ended up quitting because the other girls would threaten to take me off the team because of my race. Also my car was vandalized and the school wouldn't do anything about it.
- Comments on my hair, being told I'm angry, always taking the brunt in a situation, called an angry monkey, followed by deans.
- Teachers and students assuming I'm in METCO, white teacher touching my hair, being called a monkey or hard R N word, being the only one whose paper the teacher would check every day during solo writing assignments (everyone else in class was white or east Asian), having to be the one everyone in the class looks at when the topic of race comes up in class and having to educate on why something is offense to me and other black mixed/black people in a class full of white and nonblack peers, I wore a hoodie and Jordans ONCE and never again because a teacher and a student told me I looked like I was going to beat somebody up and that I looked like a "thug" by the student. Threatened with other black and black mixed friends to be stabbed because we were talking about black lives matter and a non-black person overheard and threatened us. Being asked by white or east Asian students why they shouldn't say the N word because of "x" excuse. Hearing about my friends getting checked by a dean for marijuana they did not have but going to class later and hearing about white students openly talking about doing cocaine at a party during class and in close distance to the teacher. These are just the first things that come to mind
- Too many to list. People touching my hair constantly, lots of racist jokes, people asking me if I knew my dad, people assuming I lived in Boston and participated in the METCO program even though I lived in town.

- I have been told that certain classes would be hard for me on the first day without knowing my capability
- Principal lied saying I choked a white girl. On a day I wasn't even in school.
- Most of my experiences we're subtle forms of micro aggression. Aside from the obvious questions and discussions about my hair that the white staff and students had, I experienced always encounters with staff. I had an English teacher in 11th grade that would fetishize the way I spoke and often times wanted me to speak out in class and read my work out loud. She thought it was interesting that I said things like " I be" instead of I was or I am. She never hesitated to tell me that and would also question how and why I developed my specific speech pattern . She made me uncomfortable and I hated her class. I had a history teacher in 11 grade that told my friend she could not do her Junior research projection on Michael Jackson. The assignment was to write about someone who significantly impacted the world. She continuously said that Michal Jackson did not impact the world greatly and could never give us a reason why she felt he didn't. I'm 10th grade a boy in my history class tried to argue that slavery was good. It was the most awkward situation I had experience at the time and I felt as if the teacher did not do enough to end that conversation.

Question 1 1: Feel free to add any other notes about your time at LHS.

Sample responses include the following:

- I was depressed most of my time at LHS and I didn't realize until much later and a lot of it was because of how I was treated racially
- Because of LHS's large amount of Asian diversity, faculty and students like to think they are open minded and diverse and not racist however they are only "open" to the diversity they are used to and comfortable with (i.e. Asian diversity) and we're completely closed and rude about other minorities and cultures (Black and latino)
- I appreciate the quality of education that LHS provides but there was a constant feeling of not feeling like I belonged in the community
- No one ever encouraged me to take AP classes.
- Attending LHS as a Black student is not an experience I could ever recommend to anyone.
- The only teacher of color I had was for my 10th grade history class and that teacher and class changed my life. Having a teacher you can relate to really is impactful.
- Speaking as someone who was in the METCO program from the first grade, I did not have a single black teacher. I think there needs to be more black representation in faculty.
- I recall having a conversation with one of my LHS teachers and Principal Lasa about including more educators of color. The sad thing about the conversation was that we discussed how students in Lexington would mistreat them. How students would abuse their privilege to disqualify those teachers and blame them for their failures. I think LHS needs to make a stance no matter how uncomfortable Lexington is with having more faculty of color. It is needed.
- I had great time at LHS and made good friends, but there was always the feeling of my race being an overhead issue. It was the one and only thing that made my time there uncomfortable. Just because it was the number one factor in decision making.
- As a black mixed person, it was incredibly difficult to feel truly a part of LHS. Not only is it difficult being a black or brown person at LHS but also the wealth disparities for

our communities vs white communities like Lexington is really difficult to firsthand witness every day.

- I was falsely charged with assault with a deadly weapon by a police officer in Lexington for watching a fight between two kids. Because I was put on probation for over a year, for something I didn't do, it stopped me from attending college. I feel like this incident changed the course of my life.
- LHS touts itself as racially diverse when the reality is that many of us feel extremely ostracized. White students often refer to groups as "the METCO kids" and "the Asian kids" etc.
- Although most of my time at LHS was negative, the one positive experience I had was with Mrs. Strizhak. I firmly believe that she is the only reason I made it through LHS and now have confidence in my academic abilities. If it weren't for her support and understanding, I don't think I would have graduated from college summa cum laude nor would I be applying to medical school for MD/MPH programs.
- I appreciated the Race & Gender course that used to be taught by Ms. Banks. That was the first course that got into the real reality of racism and stereotypes. It was a perfect course to take senior year, as I would soon go off to college and face even more microaggressions and acts of racism. I will say, I think that LHS has the right intentions and the potential to do better with the right curriculum and sources of education in place.
- Mrs. Strizhak served as an ally to me and my Black friends. Her course was amazing and she made me have faith in educators.

CONCLUSION

As shown, it is clear that there is a mountain of work to be done to truly transform LHS into the accepting, diverse and tolerant environment it so proudly claims to be. The experiences of these 132 students, and many more, can no longer be ignored and swept under the rug. It is time for systemic change throughout the country, and particularly throughout the institutions that are charged with creating our future leaders.

For privacy concerns, only a sample of text-answer responses were selected to be included in this report. For a complete data set, please fill out the following form and responses will be emailed to you promptly.

<https://forms.gle/KrTb1NLaav4wkVHbA>