

Montgomery County Cultural Plan

Task 2.8 Youth Town Hall Recap

Prepared by Metris Arts Consulting

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On March 31, 2025, Metris and AHCMC teamed with District 6 County Councilmember Natali Fani-González' office to hold a Youth Town Hall for middle and high school-aged students, open to students from across the county. More than 100 students came to the Regional Service Center in Wheaton on a day off for Montgomery County Public Schools. Councilwoman Fani-González promoted the event on social media, in communication with schools and parent-teacher associations, and by reaching out to students who had attended a previous town hall. Most of the students in attendance came from schools in Rockville and Silver Spring (93 of 147 registered). Students received community service hours for participating in the event.

The day was infused with creativity, from the discussion topics to the activities designed to engage participants. We asked students to reflect on what creativity means to them and to join us in collaboratively writing a community poem. A graphic recorder summarized the proceedings in real-time with vibrant, colorful sketches. Youth documentarians from Action Youth Media recorded the event and produced a [video summary](#). The students even crowd-sourced a playlist of songs that make them think of "home" using dynamic polling.

When Metris conducted stakeholder mapping during the DISCOVER phase of cultural planning, several advisors listed youth as a key constituency for the cultural plan, one that could be highly affected by the outcome of the plan, but is unable to exert much influence on its creation. Montgomery County youth are therefore a priority for our engagement efforts. Hosting this town hall to hear directly from young people is a key component of our research and engagement for the Montgomery County Cultural Plan.

SETTING THE STAGE

Councilwoman Fani-González welcomed the students, noting that the location of the meeting was in the heart of the Wheaton Arts & Entertainment District. AHCMC Executive Director Suzan Jenkins opened with a story that illustrated why art and culture are essential to all of us. She told of hearing music from Puerto Rico and Trinidad that made her feel a sense of belonging after she had moved to the mainland from Puerto Rico. She said, "Having music, art,



and culture in our lives to reflect who we are and who our families are is really important.” Jenkins explained that one of the goals of the new cultural plan is to foster that sense of belonging for everyone in the county. To make that possible, “we need to hear from you,” she told the students.

Through all my degrees and accomplishments, it was important to me to bring my culture with me. Achievement is not as important as being able to take that spark of creativity and use it in your life.

– Suzan Jenkins, AHCMC Chief Executive Officer

Metris affiliate Maame (May) Amoyaw then gave a brief overview of cultural planning. She started by soliciting responses from the participants to the queries, “What is art? What is culture?” Amoyaw explained how a cultural plan is a place-based plan that guides county decisions about what the local government funds and how it uses its resources.

SHARING IDEAS

Students sat at tables in small groups, each with an adult facilitator to help guide them through a series of conversation prompts. Some of the tables held their discussions in English and some in Spanish. The groups took their time, with students contributing to the discussion verbally and sketching their thoughts. Amoyaw then led the full group in a “report out” to share the thoughts and ideas discussed at each table with the full group.



What is your favorite way to express yourself creatively?

The first topic participants discussed was how they engage in art and cultural activities themselves. During the report out, Amoyaw asked students to stand when she named the creative activity they liked doing. Many students stood up at the mention of “typical” creative activities like drawing, dancing, and making music. Amoyaw asked for other ideas and students told the group they also saw sports, cooking and eating, journaling, doing makeup, and many other endeavors as important means of creative expression.

What are some ways you experience or learn about cultures other than your own?

Students said they learn about other cultures in several ways. Exploring new foods and music were popular answers. Some students mentioned traveling. Closer to home, young people said they learn a lot through their friends from other cultures. They mentioned connecting with these friends at school and through school programs.

**What is the place/activity that makes you feel most like you belong to a group or a community?**

Another question asked participants to think about our key cultural plan priority of *belonging* and how they experience it in their lives. Friends and family conjure feelings of belonging for many students. Others talked about activities they participate in, like sports and clubs. Still others cited places like their local recreation center, parks, and nature. School can also be a key place where some students feel a sense of belonging.

What are some problems in your community? How do you think art, creativity, and cultural expression could help solve those problems?

Students were very thoughtful in their responses to our query about how art and culture can be used to address community challenges. They were quite candid about the challenges their own communities face, including racism, homelessness, drugs, economic challenges, and trash and litter.

Their ideas for art and culture-based solutions included art-based fundraisers for better housing solutions, making art out of recycled materials, neighborhood beautification efforts, posters with messages that reinforce important values, murals made by people who live in the area, and events where people can have shared experiences of art and culture and come to understand one another better.

*At my high school, there is a lack of action against racism.
I feel like cultural expression can help educate others.*

Several students had ideas for using art and culture through the schools, including expanded access to summer camps and after-school activities, clubs that come from student ideas, and more decorative art in schools. Some ideas included:

- Murals that represent a multicultural community created by those who live within the community
- Preserva la naturaleza - grupos para recoger basura (preserving nature - groups to collect trash)
- Cooking, baking, and yoga programs in schools
- Putting up posters/murals/art for awareness
- Discussion groups and art therapy to deal with anxiety and depression
- More abstract art to help people “think outside the box”
- Las personas se desestresan al hacer actividades o admirar arte (People de-stressing by doing activities or admiring art)

GRAPHIC RECORDING

Throughout the event, bilingual (Spanish-English) artist Renatta Algarrarondo of See In Colors captured the discussion in notes and drawings for all to see. Her artwork served as an in-the-moment summary for the participants and lent vibrancy to the event. Students were visibly excited to see their words and ideas represented in the graphic record.



COMMUNITY POEM

As the culmination of our time together, artist and poet Holly Bass led the group to co-create a community poem. Participants worked together at each table to create a line for the poem in response to a given prompt: "My community looks like/sounds like/feels like/tastes like/smells like..." Bass collected all the contributions, assembled them, and performed the final poem.

My Community/Mi Comunidad

My community tastes like...

Sour Patch: it's sour at first when you're new and sweet when you get accustomed to it
chicken, tamales, scones and spicy food
sourdough
niños felices de latinoamérica

My community sounds like...

static, sirens, engines and horns, bird song and guttural growls
quiet, peaceful, vibrant, upbeat, athletic
dogs barking, birds chirping, grills cooking, lawn mowers, people talking, wind, animals, leaves rustling,
ambulances/sirens
a jungle
niños riendose
birds chirping, wind chimes blowing, pool splashing, jazz music

My community feels like...

home
love, peace, positivity, kindness, wonderful
un hogar cálido

My community looks like...

homes adorned with blooming flowers and green trees
everyone is together, we connect with one another, a gathering, happy, not perfect but on the better side
a salad
trees, dancing, spacious land with few homes
diverse races, cheering/loud/chirping, warm and welcoming, spring/flowers/vibrant blossoming, cars/fresh/crisp
air
people having fun, always people going on walks outside,
ala vez bien y ala vez mal
partying and barbecuing

fandoms/online talk
cherry blossoms

My community smells like...

pancakes cooking and Febreze
food and drugs (weed)
fresh coffee beans, fresh cut grass, beautiful spring flowers, with hints of vanilla and cherry blossoms, and
delicious cava
personas buenas
morning incense, the grinding of coffee, Hispanic food, the scents of the ashes from the chimney, flowers, and the
strong scent of my mom's cooking

My community...

tastes like the spicy taste of seasoning that never says goodbye
sounds like rhythm, pulsing softly beneath the sky
feels like happiness, love, kindness, that always stays
looks like diversity of kindness of people every day
smells like fresh flowers that never go away

Photos by Dream Story Productions (2025), Youth Town Hall