

**Stakeholder Engagement Analysis: Maggie L. Walker Governor's School**

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In 2021, Maggie L. Walker Governor's School for Government and International Studies (MLWGS) was ranked #5 out of 19,314 public schools in the nation by Niche (*School Profile*, n.d.). MLWGS is a public governor's school in Richmond, Virginia that serves students in grades 9-12 from fourteen nearby school districts. Their mission, as stated on their website, "is to provide comprehensive educational opportunities that advance gifted students' understanding of world cultures and languages. Our diverse and supportive community develops students' character and ability to contribute, collaborate, and lead" (*Mission Statement*, n.d.). Prospective students go through a rigorous application process during their 8th-grade year that includes a review of transcripts, a letter of recommendation, and an aptitude test; each year over 1100 students compete for fewer than 200 slots (*2020-2021 School Profile*, n.d., p. 1). Given this level of competition in the application process and the school's dedication to excellence, it is no surprise that MLWGS continually produces incredibly high-achieving students. For the class of 2021, the average GPA was 4.27, the average SAT score was 1422, and the average ACT score was 32 (*School Profile*, n.d.).

Though the enrolled student population is relatively small in comparison with other public schools in the area (758 enrolled students in 2022), the Maggie Walker community is expansive (*School Profile*, n.d.). Stakeholders include families, students, teachers, administrators, alumni, prospective students and their families in all fourteen counties the school draws from, and the residents of the community in which the school is physically located. As an alumna of Maggie Walker (Class of 2016), I too have a personal stake in this institution. This paper will summarize and evaluate the current state of stakeholder engagement in the MLWGS community.

## Local Context

While The Governor's School undoubtedly provides an excellent education and continually produces outstanding students, the school's relationship with the local community has historically been strained. This tension is not without cause; it stems primarily from the ghosts of systemic injustice and the inequity still present at MLWGS.

Maggie L. Walker Governor's School for Government and International Studies is a relatively new school, but the Maggie Walker building has a long history. The building was originally founded in 1937 as a college for Black women (Garimella & Tang, 2022, p. 2). Shortly thereafter, it became Maggie L. Walker High School, one of two all-Black high schools in Richmond City. When the *Brown v. Board* decision outlawed "separate but equal" facilities and called for integration, Virginia was defiant. After a several-year period of "Massive Resistance" to integration, Virginia schools were forced to desegregate, though many would argue that these desegregation efforts failed, even today (Ryan, 2010). As part of its desegregation plan, in 1979, the Richmond school system implemented "Plan G" which consolidated the schools in the area; as a result, the Maggie Walker building was left unused for more than a decade (Garimella & Tang, 2022, p. 2). In 1991, the Governor's School for Government and International Studies was created as a school within a school at Thomas Jefferson High School (previously a segregated White school). Shortly thereafter, renovations began on the long-vacant Maggie Walker building to provide a physical space for the Governor's School, which would become MLWGS as we know it today (*Welcome to MLWGS*, n.d.). This change was not welcomed by many alumni of the former Maggie Walker High School (Garimella & Tang, 2022, p. 2). The building that once was a safe haven for Black Richmonders now houses a program that has, for decades, faced allegations of racism and elitism (Hunter, 2021).

Since 2020, MLWGS has made some efforts to improve relations with the community at large, and Maggie Walker High School alumni, in particular. These initiatives (discussed further in Part II) appear to be just the start of reckoning with the ghosts that still linger.

### **Part I. Summary of Stakeholder Engagement**

Efforts to engage stakeholders in the MLWGS community are numerous. The school is the product of a public/private partnership and, due to its very design, requires extensive collaboration across geographic boundaries and sectors (*Welcome to MLWGS*, n.d.). Below, I will identify and summarize some of the school's major engagement efforts.

#### **Regional School Board**

The main governing body of Maggie Walker is the Regional School Board. The board functions similarly to other school boards in that its primary purpose is to set policy for the school and to “represent and interpret the objectives, goals, programs, and needs of the Maggie L. Walker Governor’s School.” This board is different from typical school boards, however; in order to engage each participating district in the decision-making process at MLWGS, the board is composed of one school board member from each participating school district. The 2022 Regional School Board is diverse in terms of race and gender, though it appears relatively homogeneous in terms of age (*Regional School Board*, n.d.).

#### **Planning Committee**

The Planning Committee is somewhat similar to the Regional School Board in makeup: it is composed of one representative from each participating locality. These representatives are frequently the Gifted Education Coordinator for the district, though this is not a requirement of the Committee. The 2022 Planning Committee is overwhelmingly White, female, and middle-aged. While the Regional School Board exists to set policy for the school, the Planning Committee is responsible for developing admissions and selection criteria as well as, more

broadly, assisting the Director in directing and implementing the school mission (*Planning Committee*, n.d.). The Planning Committee engages additional stakeholders in the counties that make up the MLWGS community who would not necessarily be directly involved otherwise.

### **Governor's School Foundation**

One of the largest and most influential stakeholder groups affiliated with MLWGS is the Governor's School Foundation. The Foundation is a non-profit 501c3 that was created with the sole purpose of supporting and enhancing activities to enrich student academic experience at Maggie Walker. The Foundation runs an Annual Fund Campaign throughout the year, partners with businesses, and holds an annual fundraising event, The Night of the Dragon, in order to fund various school programs. Each year, the Foundation directly underwrites academic competitions, student aid, travel, and technology, and awards a cash grant to a MLWGS teacher through the Patricia E. Taylor Teaching Award. In addition to their extensive fundraising efforts, the Foundation also serves to "keep our growing alumni connected to the school, its current students, and the RVA community" (*Governor's School Foundation*, n.d.). The Foundation is governed by a Board of Directors made up of parents and alumni with ex officio members from the school's administration, the Regional School Board, and the PTSA.

### **PTSA and Boosters**

While the Governor's School Foundation is run by and engages a wide variety of MLWGS stakeholders, there are two other relatively similar programs that are founded primarily on parental involvement: the PSTA and the Boosters. As evidenced on the school website and through my own experience as a student, parental involvement and volunteerism is a core tradition at Maggie Walker. The PTSA (Parent Teacher Student Association) is run by a group of Officers who are current parents of MLWGS students. The group sponsors events throughout the year including the Fall Festival (a school event open to the community), faculty and staff

appreciation meals, and Grandparents' and Special Friends' Day. The PTSA also runs the Dragon's Lair (the school store) and publishes the student directory and a weekly newsletter (Smoke and Scales) (*PTSA, SCRIP*, n.d.).

The PTSA sponsors activities throughout the year and across disciplines; even with support from the PTSA and the Foundation, some activities require additional financial assistance. In order to provide this assistance, activity-specific Booster groups were formed. There are currently four Booster groups: Athletic Boosters, Drama Boosters, Music Boosters, and Visual Arts Boosters. Each group is parent-run and provides both financial and logistical support to the activity with which it is associated. The Boosters also support the PTSA and the Foundation with larger-scale fundraising events (*PTSA, SCRIP*, n.d.).

### **School Advisory Council (SAC)**

Probably the second-largest and most inclusive stakeholder group at MLWGS is the School Advisory Council (SAC). The SAC mission is "to serve in an advisory capacity to enhance the quality of education, promote comprehensive educational opportunities, support the effective components of the existing programs, and ensure that the MLWGS mission is achieved" (*School Advisory Council*, n.d.). The Council is composed of 18 members representing current students, parents, teachers, alumni, and staff who meet once per month as a team and more frequently in smaller committees. The role of the School Advisory Council is broad and somewhat difficult to define, as their work varies year to year; what remains consistent is the intentional way in which SAC brings together representatives of each major stakeholder group to work for the betterment of the school.

### **Alumni Showcase**

Each year, the MLWGS dedicates one day to showcasing the work of successful alumni. Alumni return to the school and present on their work for current students as a way to inspire, connect, and share advice (*Showcasing Our Alumni*, n.d.).

### **Mentorship Program and Community Service**

The above programs connect a wide array of stakeholders in the Maggie Walker community but leave out one key group: the community in which the school is physically located. There are currently two major efforts that seek to engage this group: the mentorship program and the community service requirement for graduation.

In their senior year, students at Maggie Walker complete a “senior research requirement.” This research requirement is typically fulfilled either by participation in a senior seminar or a formal mentorship. The mentorship program allows students to dive into a particular area of interest through a minimum of 115 hours of field-based experience in the community. In recent years, mentorships have taken place at VCU Health Systems, the University of Richmond, the Richmond City Circuit Court, the Richmond Times-Dispatch, and many more (*Senior Seminars and Mentorships*, n.d.). Additionally, in order to graduate, students are required to complete 140 hours of community service. Half of these hours are allowed to be completed at the school, but the other half must be completed in the community (*Community Service*, n.d.).

These programs both encourage current students to venture out into the community in which they are located as active citizens and encourage the school’s administration to maintain positive ties with the local community.

## **Part II. Analysis of Stakeholder Engagement by Group**

The description of the seven groups and programs above provides a picture of the ostensive state of stakeholder engagement at Maggie Walker. Below, I will analyze the actual

performance of stakeholder engagement by stakeholder type and identify major gaps and challenges facing the school.

### **Families of Current Students**

“Parental involvement and volunteerism in Maggie Walker are some of our longest-standing traditions. Parent volunteers are in the halls, the school offices, the classrooms, and at every major school event” (*PTSA, SCRIP*, n.d.). There are ample opportunities for family involvement at MLWGS including general volunteering, PTSA, Boosters, the Governor’s School Foundation, and the School Advisory Council. Parents’ voices are heard through multiple avenues and are generally valued by teachers and administration.

Issues that may make parental involvement difficult include (1) geographical diversity (some students travel over an hour each way to attend) and (2) economic diversity (i.e. not all families have the financial security to volunteer during the school days as mentioned in the quote above), among others. There is currently no publicly available data on formal parental involvement with the MLWGS groups listed above or informal involvement through attendance at school-wide events or parent-teacher conferences. Therefore, while anecdotal evidence suggests that MLWGS families are generally very involved, it is difficult to say for certain if this group is engaged equally across difference.

### **Current Students**

In my experience, and in the experience of the two stakeholders I spoke with, the students at MLWGS are some of the most engaged and passionate students that exist. Maggie Walker students have opportunities for engagement through the School Advisory Council, Student Government, and clubs/student groups.

Many of the same barriers exist for students that exist for their families, particularly the issue of geographical diversity and transportation. In order to combat this issue and ensure ample



opportunities for student engagement, MLWGS structures the school day around a one-hour lunch period in which the entire building is opened up for student organizations and clubs to meet. Students who wish to participate in sports or theater do still have practices before or after school and there are no additional transportation services to support these students.

In discussing student engagement, it is important to remember that the student body is not homogenous. Some groups of students face particular barriers to engagement, especially Students of Color. The recent Richmond Times-Dispatch series and a student-published special edition of *The Jabberwock* both highlighted feelings of exclusion that Students of Color often experience while attending MLWGS. The school does have a formal group in place to support these students, Peer Mentors. This group “serves as a safe space for many students, fostering a sense of community” (Mazzo & Palavalas, 2022, p. 14). However, alumni believe that these students need more support. The Black Alumni Group, in particular, has focused its efforts on mentorship and support for current students of color.

While we know anecdotally that students are involved in school processes and vocal about their opinions, there is no data publicly available about student engagement, let alone disaggregated data. The concerns expressed by current students, parents, and alumni in recent publications are an indication that student engagement is not equal across the board.

### **Faculty and Staff**

There is not much available information about faculty and staff engagement at MLWGS. Faculty and staff are represented on the School Advisory Council, but this is the only group discussed in Part I that faculty and staff have the opportunity to be involved in.

### **Alumni of the Governor’s School**

Alumni of the Governor’s School have been provided opportunities for engagement by the MLWGS itself, and, when not immediately available, have organized formally to ensure their

voices are heard. Alumni frequently serve as members of the Governor's School Foundation, are represented on the School Advisory Council, return to the physical building for the Alumni Showcase, and frequently serve as mentors under the formal Mentorship program. There is an Alumni newsletter organized by the foundation that keeps alumni up-to-date on school news, and a Facebook community for informal interaction and networking between alumni. Additionally, two Alumni groups that are not organizationally affiliated with the school have been formed in order to influence MLWGS policy: the Black Alumni Association and the Anti-Racist Alumni Association (ARA). As previously mentioned, the Black Alumni group (composed of Black MLWGS alumni) mainly works on an interpersonal level to provide support to current Students of Color (F. Alejandro, personal communication, February 22, 2022). The Anti-Racist Alumni group is composed mostly of White alumni who work to influence MLWGS school policy, lobby for state reform, and provide support to the school when necessary and appropriate (*Our Mission*, n.d.).

Alumni engagement at MLWGS is particularly strong, especially for alumni who may have felt unsupported when attending MLWGS as students. That said, I believe that the strongest opportunities for alumni engagement come from groups that were started by alumni, not the school's administration.

### **Alumni of Maggie Walker High School**

Alumni of Maggie Walker High School have long felt disconnected from the Governor's School community and efforts to engage this group have only just begun in earnest. Alumni were always invited and encouraged to attend MLWGS events that were open to the public, such as Fall Festival, but this information was never disseminated in an organized fashion and MWHS alumni have not been a visible part of the MLWGS community. Alumni of Maggie Walker High School are not included under the "alumni" category in the School Advisory Council or

highlighted in the Alumni Showcase. One recent effort to engage this group was the creation of a mural on the building by the Leigh St entrance designed by local artist Colleen Hall. The mural tells the story of Maggie Lena Walker, the school's namesake, and was painted by students, faculty, and alumni from MWHS (*Mission Statement*, n.d.). The school also hosted its first major Black History month celebration in 2021 and highlighted some artifacts from the old MWHS in the building, now on permanent display (Garimella & Tang, 2022, p. 2). Both of these efforts have been relatively brief one-time encounters with no emphasis on sustained interaction, though in combination with the recent focus on the history of MLWGS by the Richmond Times-Dispatch and the special edition of *The Jabberwock* may represent some hope for the future in this arena.

### **Prospective Students and Families**

Based on publicly available documents and data, prospective students and their families are the most underserved and under-engaged group of MLWGS stakeholders. Maggie Walker does not publish any information on their website or social media platforms regarding prospective student outreach or policy other than calendar events noting “middle school visits” and “accepted and waitlisted future dragons visitation days.” When I reached out to the Director for more information about prospective student outreach, I was told that most of these events are coordinated by the Planning Committee; I reached out to the Chair of the Planning Committee for more information Did not receive a response. Thus, the following analysis is based on the information available in the calendar and conversations with alumni and current parents. In 2021, MLWGS conducted ten middle school visits in October and November. These visits were scheduled to last one hour and mostly began between 5:00pm and 6:00pm both virtual and in-person. In November, the school held one “Virtual Information Forum for New Students.” Evaluations for applicants took place in January and February, and decisions were sent out in

February and March in time for visitation days at MLWGS in the middle of March. New student registration will be held on Tuesday, April 19, at 6:00pm at MLWGS (*Calendar*). Though this information was taken from the 2021-2022 calendar, which was, of course, impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, this schedule and amount of outreach is roughly equivalent to what I remember from my time at Maggie Walker.

MLWGS pulls from 14 school districts and Chesterfield County alone has twelve middle schools. Given the mismatch between school visits and the number of potential middle schools, many of the middle schools from which prospective students apply receive no direct outreach from MLWGS each year. To help provide information, Gifted Coordinators in individual counties can and do hold additional information sessions about Maggie Walker without direct support from the school; there is no guarantee, however, that each middle school will hold information sessions. Additionally, MLWGS conducts no information sessions targeted at younger students even though one of the entry requirements for attendance at Maggie Walker is prior completion of Algebra I, which would require several years of planning to complete (*Admissions*).

The Strategic Planning Committee at MLWGS noted prospective student engagement as a priority area for improvement in their most recent five-year plan. Objective 1.1 reads, “MLWGS will engage and educate our school districts about the opportunities available to them in our learning environment” (*Five-Year Strategic Plan*). The second initiative under this objective elaborates: “Develop and enhance relationships with districts, schools, administrators, counselors, parents, and potential students. (1) Develop elementary outreach program, (2) Enhance middle school outreach program, and (3) Student-driven relationship-building; mentoring, team coaching, community service” (*Five-Year Strategic Plan*).

While MLWGS does seem aware of the lack of sufficient engagement initiatives for prospective students as noted in the strategic plan, the first “goal” includes no outcome measures to provide accountability for the proposed initiatives. Prospective student and family engagement as it currently stands is insufficient. Only a small portion of middle schools from which students apply receive direct outreach from MLWGS. Middle schools that don’t receive direct outreach may provide their own information sessions, though data on these additional sessions is not centralized. Only the middle schools visited by MLWGS or those with the resources to dedicate toward their own information session are educating students about the program, and, even then, it may be too little too late. This system of outreach perpetuates inequality in the MLWGS admissions process by providing information and access only to a privileged few while ignoring the majority of prospective students.

### **Part III. Conclusion**

As previously stated, MLWGS has, since its inception, been criticized as an elitist and racist institution. Two recent publications have delved deep into the history of racism and exclusion at Maggie Walker: the January 2022 issue of *The Jabberwock* (the MLWGS student newspaper), and a three-part series from the Richmond Times-Dispatch, “Examining the lack of diversity at the Maggie L. Walker Governor’s School.” *The Jabberwock* offers insight from the perspective of current students, focusing on a need for education on the history of the school, curriculum changes, administrative efforts for improvement, social media movements, and the work of the Anti-Racist Alumni group. The series from the Richmond Times-Dispatch focuses more analytically on admissions data provided by the school and how these policies impact students through stakeholder interviews.

The findings from the Richmond Times-Dispatch are particularly noteworthy. For the past five years, the acceptance rate for Black students has been nearly six times lower than the

acceptance rate for White students (Hunter, 2021). Additionally, Black students make up only 7% of the student population today (Gambacini et al., 2022) (for more specifics, see charts in the Appendices). These demographics are not representative of either the districts from which the students come, the neighborhood the school is located in, or the state-wide racial breakdown. “The reality is that the status quo prevents and excludes Black and Latinx students from effectively accessing equitable admission to Virginia’s Governor’s Schools” (Hunter, 2021).

The reality of racial inequity in the MLWGS admissions process is not only an issue of diversity, equity, and inclusion but also of stakeholder engagement. Prospective students and their families *are* stakeholders and it is clear through an analysis of both prospective student outreach and the racial demographics of current students that this group is not being engaged equally. In preparing this summary and analysis of engagement at MLWGS, I spoke briefly with two stakeholders. The first was an alumna from the Class of 2001 who served for six years on the Foundation Board of Directors and for just over a year on the planning committee for the most recent strategic plan. She was also one of the founders of the Anti-Racist Alumni group that works to influence equity and inclusion policy at MLWGS. When we spoke about issues of stakeholder engagement at Maggie Walker, she was clear: the biggest stakeholder engagement issue facing MLWGS today is equity in the admissions process. Though the MLWGS routine ostensibly values diversity as evidenced in the school’s mission statement and strategic plan, the performance of prospective student outreach and the lack of outcome measures in the strategic plan reveal persistent inequity and a need for policy change.

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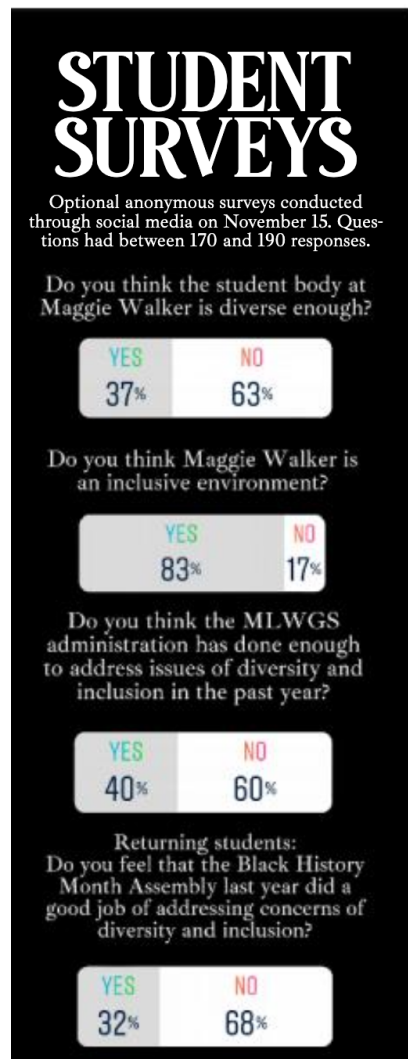
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## Appendix A

JANUARY 2022



Appendix A. This image was taken from the January 2022 edition of *The Jabberwock* from the article titled “Using Instagram to Reveal Racism.”

### Appendix B

Figures from the Richmond Times-Dispatch, “For 20 years, white students have been accepted into Maggie Walker at a rate nearly four times higher than Black students” by Kenya Hunter

#### Students accepted by race and ethnicity in Richmond

In the past five years, Richmond has sent 32 Black and Hispanic students to Maggie Walker. It sent 34 white students this year.

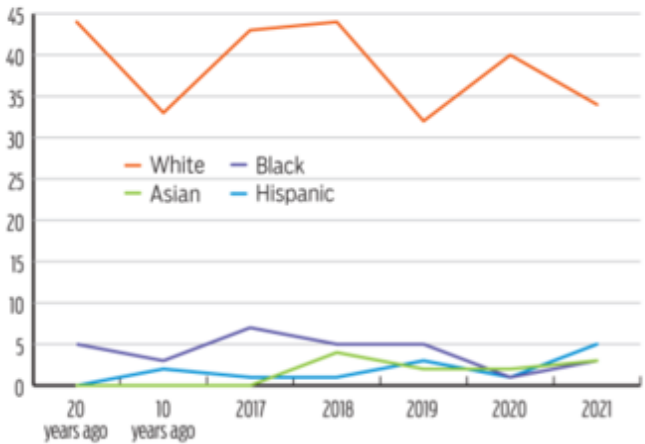


Figure B1.

#### Students accepted by race and ethnicity in Chesterfield

Chesterfield sent 12 Black students to Maggie Walker this year after switching to school-based selection - more than it had sent in the prior four years combined.

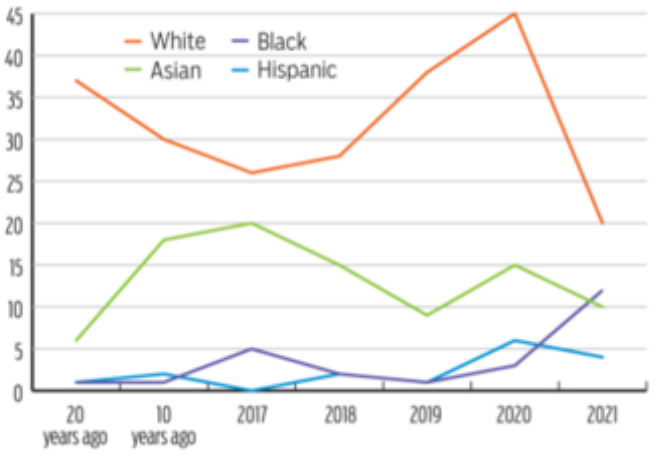


Figure B2.

### Students accepted by race and ethnicity in Henrico

In Henrico, more Asian students have been selected for Maggie Walker than any other group in each of the past three years. A total of only nine Black students and three Hispanic students from the county have been selected in the last five years.

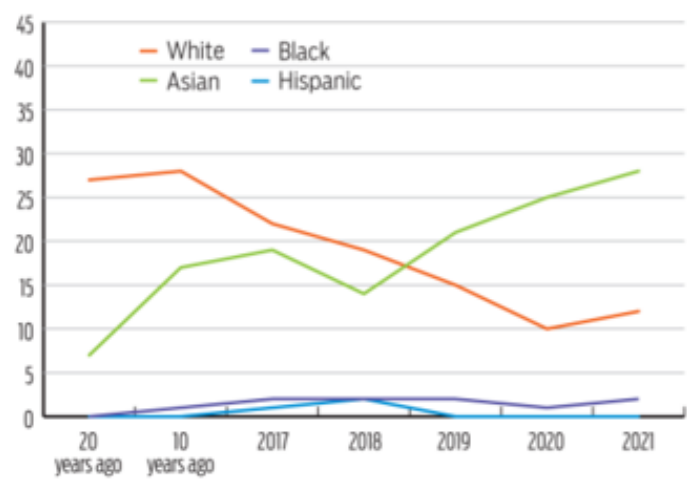


Figure B3.

### Richmond acceptance rates by race and ethnicity

The acceptance rate for white students has fallen over the past two decades in Richmond, but far exceeds the acceptance rate for Black students who apply. In 2021, white students were nearly eight times more likely to be selected than Black students.

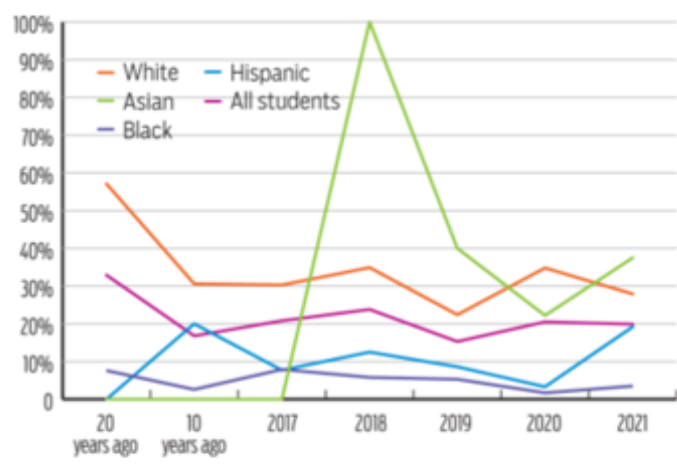


Figure B4.

### Chesterfield acceptance rates by race and ethnicity

Chesterfield switched to school-based admissions in 2021 and saw its acceptance rate for Black students more than double.

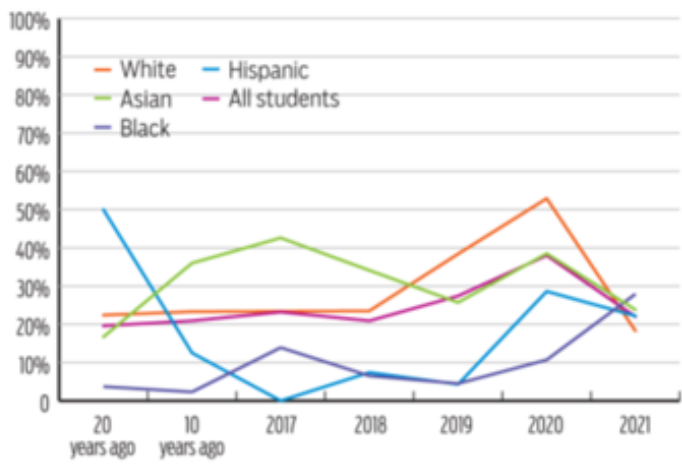


Figure B5.

### Henrico acceptance rates by race and ethnicity

Henrico receives far more applications than its neighbors. In the last five years, less than 2% of Black applicants were accepted compared to 8% of white applicants and 12% of Asian applicants.

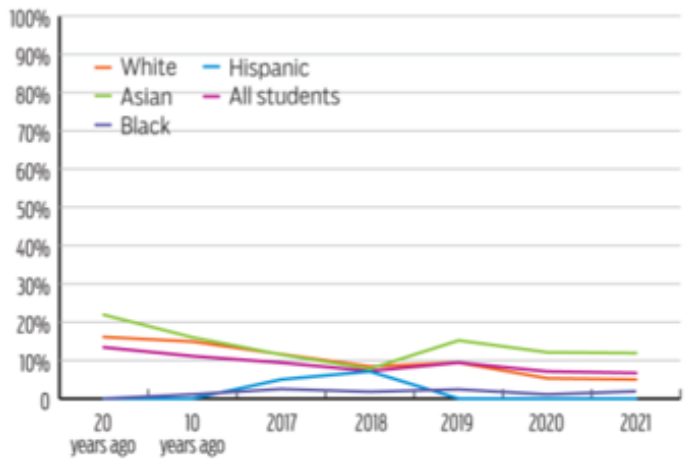


Figure B6.

## Percent of applicants accepted by race, ethnicity

Maggie Walker dropped its admissions test, and the acceptance rate for Black applicants nearly tripled to 9% but remained lower than the rates for other students.

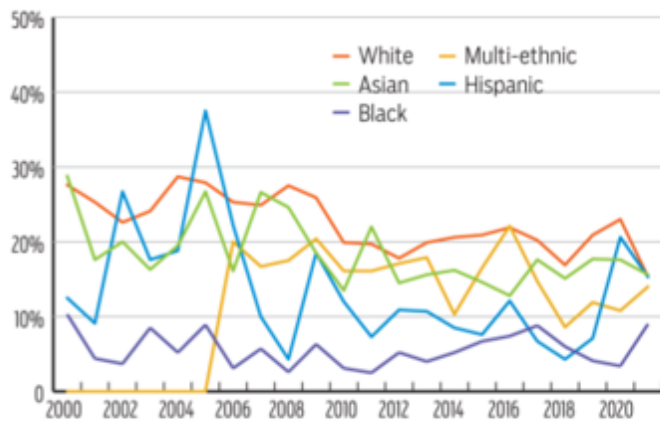
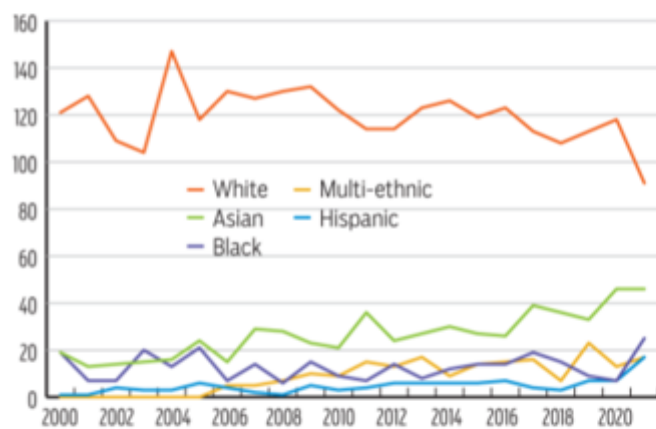


Figure B7.

## Yearly admissions by race

In the past five years, Maggie Walker has admitted seven times more white students than Black students. This year was the first year in the last two decades the majority of students selected weren't white.



Note: Fifty-five Native American or Alaska Native students have applied since 2000. Seven were accepted.

Figure B8.