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Student Town Halls

In partnership between the Office of Accountability and the Student Advisory Committee (SAC), three student-led virtual town hall events were held in 2020-21. The purpose of the town halls was to provide a space for students to connect and discuss topics important to them, explore solutions to challenges, and demonstrate the value of student voice to attendees. Topics, event dates, and the number of students who registered for the event were:

- Town Hall #1: Distance Learning, November 17, 2020, 152 student registrants
- Town Hall #2: Equity and Inclusion, December 15, 2020, 125 student registrants
- Town Hall #3: Social Emotional Well-Being, January 19, 2021, 201 student registrants

Discussion themes from each event were captured through a qualitative analysis of event audio and video recordings. Chat dialogue and responses to conversation prompts were also saved and analyzed. Surveys were sent to attendees after each event to gather their feedback about the topic discussed, what they learned, their overall satisfaction with the event, and the extent to which participation influenced interest in student voice.

This summary describes the themes expressed in the dialogue and surveys from each event.

Distance Learning Discussion Themes

Students struggle to learn in distance learning classes.

Students described how they have struggled with distance learning. They complained about the amount of work assigned, challenges with Edgenuity, inaccurate and complicated attendance taking practices, disconnection with teachers, and inability to participate in school activities they had been looking forward to. Some said full distance learners are at a disadvantage compared to hybrid and in-person learners because they do not have the same opportunities to engage in on-campus activities, as one student described,

“I feel like the reason it is really difficult [to stay motivated] is that, especially if you’re full distance with Edgenuity, a lot of people that at least I’ve talked to have agree that the pacing for Edgenuity is really bad and the way that they explain it we don’t really feel like we’re learning anything. And the fact that we’re at home and it’s not supposed to be a work environment we’re creating where we spend cozy and comfy into a work environment makes us feel not motivated at all and it just makes working in general just very difficult.”

In the minority, some students said they can navigate distance learning, *“Distance learning is not too complicated for me.”*

Communication with teachers and other students is key to emotional well-being.

Students said communication is critical to their ability to learn and stay connected with others in their schools. Specifically, distance learners described feeling very disconnected from their teachers, *“For me, I feel like I am not connected with my teachers at all.”* Students described feeling isolated, even when in

class. For example, students said they feel isolated in Edgenuity classes since there is not a way to interact with teachers and students during. To combat this isolation, they asked for opportunities to connect to one another.

Students said it takes too long to get responses when they need help, *“If you have a question and you are in a specific class half the time you do not get your answer until the next class and then you have to go back and do extra homework.”* Students also experienced a lack of communication with their peers, sometimes feeling isolated from each other even when they are in the same class, *“The classes aren’t really together, you know, so it’s just like you’re working on your own and that’s it.”* Students said they need more communication with their teachers and other students to better understand class content, to help with schoolwork, and to feel less isolated.

More tech support, interesting instruction, and less “busy work”

Students in distance and hybrid learning models described obstacles to learning, including classes across several platforms, the need for multiple apps when completing assignments, a lack of timely responses when trying to log into an online class, and frustration with their school workloads. Students reported differing levels of work they are expected to do, with some who felt there is a misperception that students have too much free time when they actually do not have any free time because their workload is so overwhelming, *“Everyone is like ‘we play video games on our off day,’ we don’t have off days!”* They also reported needing to find other online resources to help them with their classes, since Edgenuity tends to move quickly and does not provide adequate explanations,

“With Edgenuity sometimes it’s hard because they don’t really like explain everything clearly and sometimes they just jump ahead not explaining the process and it can be really hard to understand. I usually go to like other websites like Kahn Academy or YouTube to try to understand the topic there but it’s kind of hard with Edgenuity classes.”

Students acknowledge that teachers are under a lot of stress too.

Many students sympathized with teachers, are concerned about their well-being, and pledged to be patient with them as they too navigate challenging times. They suggested streamlining processes for teachers to reduce teacher stress, which will ultimately help students. In reference to attendance-taking procedures, a student suggested that, *“If we can make it better for the teachers, it makes it better for the students.”*

Attendance in distance learning is a challenge.

Attendance taking is confusing to students and is often inaccurate. Students were frustrated about being marked absent for classes they were present for,

“There has been a lot of problems, like, even though the teachers tell you exactly what to do for attendance and I complete whatever they tell me to do I still get marked absent. And so, I had to email my assistant principal and teachers many times asking why I still have an absence showing even though I did whatever they asked for.”

They explained that if they have trouble logging into a class on time, the teacher often does not see their email in time to help them address the problem. Overall, students described the general attitude of the school district regarding attendance as being *“absent until proven present.”*

Five Student Insights about Distance Learning at-a-Glance

1. **Students struggle to learn in distance learning classes.** The challenges with distance learning led some to feel stressed, anxious, and overwhelmed.
2. **Communication with teachers and other students is key to maintaining emotional well-being.**
3. **Students ask for more technology support, instruction aligned to their interests, and less “busy work”.**
4. **Students acknowledge that teachers are under a lot of stress.** Many sympathize with them, are concerned about their well-being, and pledge to be patient with them as they too navigate challenging times.
5. **Attendance in distance learning is a challenge.** Attendance taking is confusing and often inaccurate.

Equity and Inclusion Discussion Themes

It has been a while since students have been heard.

When asked about the last time they felt their voices were heard, students mostly said they have not been listened to and their needs have not been heard by school or district staff since moving to distance learning last spring. However, when referring to times when they were in school many students shared inspiring stories about *“...standing up to people bullying my friends,”* and *“...start[ing] our Black Student Union a few months ago.”* This town hall represented an opportunity for students to have their voices heard by adult moderators who could share the students’ voices with administrators across the district.

Students learned about equity, culture, and inclusion. Some noted that the district wants to be inclusive. Others described the structural aspects in the WCSD that support inequity, *“I learned that students of different cultures can often be forgotten or not included in our education system.”* Another student explained, *“That many students in our district suffer from the same injustices, proving that there is a district-wide inadequacy in terms of student equality...”* Students described examples of inequity, such as different funding levels across schools, the removal of Spanish courses from some schools, and disparities in suspensions and enrollment in gifted and talented programs across student populations.

In their discussions, students were exposed to the viewpoints of other students about equity, *“There are many differing ideas about the district’s approach to, and execution of, equity and inclusion.”* They said

their awareness of other student groups, such as LGBTQ+ students and students with disabilities, was increased and that they learned a lot that they did not know before.

Cultural expression should be celebrated.

Students described wanting to learn about other cultures and celebrate their unique strengths. They demand an inclusive curriculum with BIPOC and LGBTQ perspectives in history, lecture, and textbooks. Students suggested schools adopt International Days to build awareness of various cultures, *“That’s a day where we kind of introduce all cultures even if that culture is not currently at the school, we want to still learn about it to understand how other people feel and how their culture works.”*

Students called for increased representation of diverse perspectives in the curriculum,

“One solution that we wanted was to have the curriculum be more inclusive and to highlight...Black Indigenous People of Color and LGBTQ people, and also to educate other students about like the positives of the culture and what makes them so special.”

Students believe that learning about diverse cultures and experiences will lead people to be more understanding and accepting of others who are different from themselves.

Students need their classrooms to be emotionally safe.

Students expressed that they expect teachers and administrators to address *all* instances of bullying & exclusion. Some provided accounts of teachers who succeeded at making them feel welcome in the classroom and compared them to teachers whom they felt were less focused on inclusion,

“...my band teacher – she’s like very, very big on inclusivity and like she wants to make sure that every single person there like feels like they have someone to talk to feels like they have a friend and whatnot and like my history teacher also makes sure that all of his students feel heard and whatnot and then some of the other teachers like it feels like they focus more on the curriculum and trying to get their content out instead of like engaging the students and hearing their needs.”

Students called for action by teachers and students to support equity and inclusion:

- Students to respect each other’s viewpoints and differences.
- Teachers to teach students how to consider the perspectives of others.
- More accepting school environments for LGBTQ+ students.
- More interaction and communication between teachers and students.
- All people to treat those who are different from themselves with kindness and acceptance.

Students want more just and equitable schools.

Students also said that they want schools to break the patterns of injustice in larger society by addressing specific student needs and promoting change. They believe that if the school district and their peers are willing to listen to diverse voices, empathy and understanding will spread, allowing for injustice to be erased.

The discussion about equity was a call to action for several students who said they believe it is important to *“stand-up to problems.”* One student said they learned about efforts to support equity and are

inspired to act, *“All the programs that are working to different things such as bullying, racism, depression, and others and that a lot of people are suffering in this world and that I should help.”* They said it is important for all schools to have the same opportunities for their students and touched on why resource distribution across schools might vary based on specific school needs,

“We talked a bit about opportunities and providing the same opportunities for all schools rather than having some schools with more opportunities than others. We learned that a lot of us are facing problems in our schools, but some schools are more adapted to those problems than others.”

Students want to discuss and to display symbols of the causes they are interested in. Some strongly believe teachers should have the freedom do so as well,

“Recently the Washoe County School District passed a thing that did not allow certain flags and posters to be shown in class and I think that is so BS, so BS, and so unfair and really stupid. Like now teachers can't have Pride flags in our classroom, Pride posters, Black Lives Matter stuff, it can't be in the classroom, which is so wrong, so wrong, I hate it with a burning passion.”

Communication is super important right now!

Students miss connecting with other students and teachers. They explained that the lack of extra-curricular activities further limits communication,

“A common problem is that there's a big lack of communication and interaction especially with going distance learning and such and a lot of us are really missing sports that was our primary source of communication and interaction with others.”

Some students acknowledged that communication has helped them to feel accepted in their school community, *“I feel like I do belong since I can talk easily to my classmates and my teachers... I don't feel anyone is against me.”* Students desire more connections and the emotional benefits that come with those connections.

Five Student Insights about Equity and Inclusion at-a-Glance

1. **It has been a while since students have been heard.** Many say they feel like they have not been heard since going to distance learning.
2. **Cultural expression should be celebrated.** Students want to learn about other cultures and celebrate their unique strengths. They demand an inclusive curriculum with BIPOC and LGBTQ perspectives in history, lecture, and textbooks.
3. **Students want their classrooms to be emotionally safe.** They expect teachers and administrators to address *all* instances of bullying & exclusion.
4. **Students need more just & equitable schools.** Students want their school to break the patterns of injustice in larger society by addressing specific student needs and promoting change.
5. **Communication is super important right now!** Students miss connecting with other students and teachers.

Emotional Well-Being Discussion Themes

Students are not alone!

Students learned that everyone has mood changes, and it is normal for feelings to fluctuate. They want to listen and provide support to each other during emotional highs and lows: Many demonstrated this desire by offering their social media and email connections to other students to talk or become friends. Overall, students were clear that they believe having connections to others, especially during turbulent times is beneficial to their general well-being,

“It’s just nice to like see everyone and like when you’re locked in your room all day just doing work it kinda takes a toll on you but when you’re like face-to-face and like with your friends and like the teachers and like interacting it’s kind of like, it helps me pay attention more and I think it keeps me happier.”

When students feel low, it is important to reach out for support.

Students discussed how even though talking to others about feelings can be hard, it is the best thing to do. Regardless of the who a student talks to, one student noted:

“I learned that it’s better to be confident than to shy away from people because almost always you have to communicate to people how you’re feeling [in order] for other people to understand and for the issue to resolve.”

Students said it can be difficult to seek support from others, especially adults, when they are experiencing hard times. They typically feel more comfortable talking to their peers, especially close friends, because they are more relatable. Students explained that talking to parents or other adults can be scary because they might make it a “*bigger problem*” than it needs to be or try to fix it instead of just listening.

They also said it can be difficult to put feelings into words, “*I think it can be hard to like share what you’re feeling and thinking sometimes because you’re not sure how to like say it into words to explain it to other people.*”

Emotional well-being is maintained through intentional focus and hard work.

Students learned that like the rest of our bodies, mental health requires exercise. Although it is not fully understood how emotion is perceived and how it changes, students discussed how talking about feelings is beneficial to emotional well-being, every person has different qualities to them and experiences different hardships, and there are different types of mental health and different ways to support emotional well-being.

Students thought emotional well-being was an important topic to discuss, “*Emotional health has become a huge point of discussion, which is comforting to hear.*” They described ways to support emotional well-being and emphasized strategies that work for them, including:

- Focusing on happy moments.
- Doing things that make themselves happy.
- Expressing gratitude and appreciation.

There was also a consensus that students should not try to hide their emotional or mental health experiences, but rather work to understand their emotions and improve their well-being.

Students can advocate for their own well-being.

Students were reminded that adults want to hear about their successes, challenges, and ideas for supporting student needs. They also acknowledged that there are a lot of people who care about them and want to listen to them, such as counselors, teachers, family members, coaches, and mental health clinicians outside of school. Many students stressed the importance of the support given to them by their families and recounted how critical that support has been to their emotional well-being over the past year.

Although they know that they can advocate for their well-being by reaching out to adults, they are often hesitant to do so. They explained that it is difficult for them to reach out to adults about their challenges, *“Students are self-aware but are struggling to talk to adults and share their emotions.”* The primary reasons for their reluctance are:

- They have trouble communicating how they feel.
- They do not always trust their teachers or school counselors will keep their conversations confidential.
- It is easier to talk to their peers.

Several said they would like to be able to talk to their counselors confidentially, without their parents being informed unless they are in danger,

“I would make the counselors at school keep all the info from students and keep them to their selves, stop calling our parents about our feelings that we don’t want to be telling them. I’ve gotten in trouble because of this.”

Students want safe spaces at school and mental health resources.

Students argued for the provision of a quiet, safe space in their schools, *“Give students a safe room for anxiety breaks.”* They also want one-on-one check-ins with teachers, administrators, and counselors that are free from distractions, *“Maybe offer like extra time like after class... like just to talk so like you’re not kind of overwhelmed because of the other students around you.”* They suggested that this could be done through motivational emails or brief surveys for distance learners, *“Encourage the practice of weekly emails to individual class periods a teacher may have to spark a trend of closer teacher student interaction, and hopefully a better social environment.”*

In addition to having a safe location at school, students would like schools to provide access to resources available any time they need them. For example, students want hotline numbers, outlets to share their problems, and knowledge of who a “safe person” is to talk to.

Five Student Insights about Emotional Well-Being at-a-Glance

1. **Students are not alone!** Everyone has changes in moods, and it is normal for feelings to fluctuate. Young people want to listen and provide support to each other during emotional highs and lows.
2. **When students feel low, it is important to reach out for support.** Talking to others about feelings can be hard, but it is the best thing to do.
3. **Healthy emotional well-being is maintained through intentional focus and hard work.** Like the rest of our bodies, mental health requires exercise.
4. **Students can advocate for their own well-being.** Adults, such as teachers and counselors, want to hear about our successes, challenges, and ideas for supporting student needs.
5. **Students want space spaces at school and mental health resources.** They ask for opportunities to connect to one another.

Giving Voice & Listening to Others

The town halls were intended to provide students an opportunity to engage in civic discourse to allow them to grow their SEL skills and to enhance their competencies in being leaders in their school communities. Comments by some students suggest this goal was achieved, as one student explains, “We were able to discuss with other students in the district about issues. While we did not always agree, everyone was respectful and there was no judgment shown by the students.” Another student said, “I learned about the perspectives and struggles my peers have faced and the different ways they would tackle that.”

“I learned that lots of students are having the same struggles as I am.”

Student participant, VTH Emotional Well-being

Many felt more connected to others through their participation in the town halls by learning that other students have similar experiences to their own, “It possibly allowed others to see we all have similar things going on in our lives even though we are all unique.” They even share similar struggles, “I learned that lots of

students are having the same struggles as I am.” Another student reflected that students and teachers also share common challenges, and they can work together to solve them, “I learned I am not alone and we as students and teachers can get through this if we work together :).” These discoveries led to repeated acknowledges in comments and dialogue that “I am not alone.”

Feedback about the Town Halls

The survey completed after each Town Hall gauged the degree to which attendees felt the town hall will benefit students, their interest in Student Voice opportunities, and collected their suggestions on ways to improve future student-led forums.

“You are listening. That is what is most important to me. Just that you guys care enough to try and hear our side of things.”

Student, VTH Emotional Well-Being

Benefit of Town Halls to Students

Students said the town hall events benefit the WCSD by valuing student perspectives, by revealing pressing challenges in the district that students face, and by prompting action and supporting changes to improve identified challenges.

Valuing students. Students said that being listened to and having their ideas heard shows that WCSD educators and leaders care about them. *“You are listening. That is what is most important to me. Just that you guys care enough to try and hear our side of things.”* Students also valued listening to others and being heard by other young people, *“It benefits students by showing people that they aren’t alone in their experiences and that their concerns are valid and valued, and will be addressed, as well as giving them a voice.”*

Revealing pressing challenges. Through participation in the town halls, many students described learning about the experiences of other students and common challenges related to each discussion topic. The identification of these challenges was a necessary first step toward addressing them.

Prompting action. Students expect there to be changes made in the district based on information emanating from the town hall events. This expectation was repeated by several attendees and is exemplified by one student’s comment following the emotional well-being town hall, *“I personally hope it will change the way that the Washoe County School District does things from now on.”* Students said they want the discussions to result in teachers, counselors, school board members, and the Superintendent to be more aware of student needs and wants.

“It’s good to acknowledge what was discussed, but what is the district going to do about it?”

Student participant, VTH Equity

Students appreciated the format of the virtual town halls which allowed some adult leaders to join in breakout rooms to listen to the discussion. Students believed this provided an opportunity for adults to hear from students and better understand them, *“I think it will benefit students for the teachers to understand that students and kids have hard times just as same as the adults. We may not be the same in age, but we are both humans.”*

Although students saw the potential for their insights to result in positive changes, they noted that the conversations in the town halls mostly led to expanding awareness and understanding of the topics and

only minimally addressed actual solutions. When asked if the town hall on equity will benefit the WCSD, a student said, “No, this is just wishful thinking, I think. We talked but in reality, we did nothing to make it clear what we need.” Another student’s question revealed skepticism about the degree to which the insights of the students will be utilized and put into action for change, “It’s good to acknowledge what was discussed, but what is the district going to do about it?”

Likelihood of Future Participation in Town Halls

Most students (93%) who attended the town hall events said they are likely or very likely to attend another town hall in the future (Table 1). The percentage of students who said they are very likely to attend increased with each successive event, from 50% to 57%.

Table 1. Likelihood of future attendance to student-led virtual town hall events by student attendees, in percent.					
Town Hall Event	Number of Respondents	Likelihood to Attend			
		Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
VTH 1 Distance Learning	16	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
VTH 2 Equity & Inclusion	66	1.5%	7.6%	37.9%	53.0%
VTH 3 Emotional Well-Being	53	1.9%	5.7%	35.8%	56.6%
Combined	135	1.5%	5.9%	38.5%	54.1%

Note. Reported for students who attended the virtual town hall meetings. This data does not include adult survey respondents or students who did not attend a virtual town hall meeting.

Participants were satisfied with the town halls overall. Specific aspects they noted in their comments that they liked were:

- The ability to connect with other students from across the district.
- Having a forum to engage in conversation about topics important to them.
- Being heard by adults who have the power to make changes.

Students were asked about their interest to participate in student voice opportunities. They were most interested in joining or learning more about the SAC (n = 68) (Table 2).

Table 2. Interest in participating in future student voice opportunities.	
Student Voice Opportunity	Number Interested
Joining or learning more about the Student Advisory Committee	68
Planning a town hall meeting that is open to all students in the Washoe County School District	13
Leading a town hall breakout room discussion that is open to all students in the Washoe County School District	12
Planning a town hall meeting that is only open to students at my school	12
Starting a student voice club or advisory council at my school	11
Other opportunity	2

Note. Combined responses across all three town hall event surveys. Students may have completed the survey multiple times if they attended more than one event. This data does not include adult respondents.

Two additional student voice areas of interest noted by students were “Putting posters up at my school” and “How to deal with the struggle that is Distance Learning.” Four students indicated they were not interested in pursuing any student voice opportunities.

Suggestions to Improve Future Forums

Suggestions for improving town hall events focused on outreach and participation, event format to support dialogue, and follow-up on commitments made during the events.

Outreach and participation. Several participants asked for broader outreach to ensure greater representation of students from across the district. To encourage participation, attendees suggested that the events be shorter in duration, held earlier in the day to correspond with class time, and multiple email reminders about the event. A few suggested that event organizers enlist school counselors, teachers, and parents to advertise the events. An adult participant provided a suggestion for expanding to other students through talking tours:

“We need more events like this, and more often. We may need to provide talking tours to ensure all student voices are heard for those who were unable to attend. Since there is so much information, there may need to be multiple sessions to allow for more in-depth discussion.”

Event format. Many asked for changes to the structure of the facilitated conversations to be more inclusive of all participants. Some felt that attendees were not all given the same opportunity to talk. Some wanted more time for large group discussion, rather than breakout groups, as was described by one person, “You can benefit by giving students more time to talk and not just one student from each group. I feel like the way you guys are doing it isn’t letting all students and people express how they feel to everyone not just people in their group.”

Other suggestions to improve the town hall format were:

- Add more interactive activities.
- Provide additional rewards and incentives for participation.
- Ensure the student to adult ratio is met, with students exceeding the number of adults.

“Our WCSD students possess intelligent & insightful voices. Their diverse experiences must be explored, heard, & acted upon.”

Adult participant, VTH Distance Learning

Follow-up. Attendees stressed the importance of sharing student challenges and suggestions with district leadership and school staff, and for reasonable suggestions to be implemented. An adult attendee pointed to the special insight of students and stressed the responsibility

of district staff to listen to them, “*Our WCSD students possess intelligent & insightful voices. Their diverse experiences must be explored, heard, & acted upon.*” Students need to see change, or progress toward change, is made to confirm that their insights matter and to solidify the trust they have with their Office of Accountability partners. An adult attendee explained how follow-through benefits everyone:

“Listen to what they're [students are] saying and make changes in order to better support the students. There are problems that need to be corrected, and by establishing a plan for change, you can benefit the students who attended, as well as benefitting the ones who don't.”

One student described their hope for adults to use their insights to benefit the school district by moving forward changes because students do not have the authority to do it, *“By listening to us, not just hearing but really, truly listening, and taking from what we said to make a change in our schools that we aren't able to make on our own.”*

Future student voice event topics. Topics listed by attendees they would like future student voice events to address included topics related to instruction and learning, equity and inclusion, and emotional and physical well-being.

Instruction and Learning

- Schoolwork, workloads, and time management
- Academic engagement
 - Strategies for staying engaged in learning while at home
 - Avoiding procrastination
 - Knowing when it is okay to not be a perfectionist
 - Learning how to ask questions
- Strategies for students to support teachers
- Final exams and standardized testing: How to perform well during challenging times
- Grades and grading policies
- Improving distance learning for everyone
- Specific course subjects, such as mathematics
- The future of schools post Covid-19 and returning to in-person learning
- Student-teacher relationships within distance learning environments
- School funding and how money is allocated and securing funds for school activities
- Adding music and other courses to distance learning
- Leadership opportunities
- Preparing for life after high school: Next steps and scholarship opportunities

Equity and Inclusion

- Disparate educational practices of students with health conditions (504 plans) and who have disabilities (IEP)
- Culture
- Inclusion
- Ableism
- Sexual orientation and LGBTQIA+ issues
- Racism
- Strategies for supporting diversity at school

Emotional and Physical Well-being

- Mental health: teenage depression, educational stress

- Bullying and cyberbullying
- Suicide and prevention of suicide
- Destigmatizing mental health
- Peer to peer communication: Opportunities for increasing communication and interpersonal communication skills
- Communication between students and teachers
- Recreational activities
- Experiences of new students and making new friends
- Strategies for showing kindness
- Impact of social media
- School-personal life balance, importance of sleep, and strategies for maintaining physical and emotional health
- Reducing teacher stress
- Safety and safe places: Creating safe emotional spaces in school

Other topic areas

- Climate and environmental issues
- Strategies for students to advocate on issues important to them
- Athletics
- Community building: Ways for students to connect after the town halls

Recommendations for Student Discussion Forums

Three recommendations for student-led discussion forums are provided based on the overall feedback from students to improve participation, identification of solutions, and putting student ideas into action.

1. Increase student participation and ensure strong representation of students across gender, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic characteristics. Recruit from all schools and academic performance levels.
2. Modify the town hall discussion format to ensure:
 - a. All students have opportunities to share their ideas.
 - b. Specific, actionable suggestions are identified.
 - c. The number of students exceeds the number of adults in each discussion group. Determine an optimal ratio of students to adults to use as a guide.
3. Create a plan for prompting action by district administrators and educators to address the needs and suggestions provided by students. The plan must include a strategy for confirming progress toward change.