



DETROIT PAL PRESENTS

..... **CRITICAL** **CONVERSATIONS**

PROGRAM IMPACT SUMMARY REPORT



WINTER • 2026

OVERVIEW

Since 2020, the Critical Conversations program has empowered youth to engage directly with law enforcement, fostering positive police–community relationships and stronger, safer neighborhoods. Through facilitated classroom discussions on topics such as the role of police, encounters with law enforcement, and media influence, the program creates space for honest dialogue and mutual understanding. Over the past five years, it has been refined and expanded to reach more communities and more youth. Originally developed for middle school students, Detroit PAL began including high school students in the program last year, continuing to create change one conversation at a time.



PARTICIPATION

In Winter 2026, Detroit PAL implemented the Critical Conversations program in two Detroit-area schools:

- **A. L. Holmes Academy of Blended Learning**
- **Old Redford Academy High School**

A total of 55 middle and high school students, ages 12 to 18 years old, participated in the Critical Conversations program in these schools from February to March 2026. Attendance at each session ranged from 18 to 24 students.





PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Once per week, over six weeks, program sessions were delivered in person during the regular school day by two Detroit Police Department officers, six Detroit PAL staff, and two school staff. Each session was 60–90 minutes in duration. Sessions included information sharing, small-group discussions, and role-playing scenarios. Week 5 was a combined group field trip and the program concluded in week 6 with a celebration. Each week focused on a different topic, as follows:

DATE	LESSON TOPIC
Week 1	Roles of Police
Week 2	Perception and Social Media
Week 3	Police Misconduct
Week 4	Positive Interactions/Live Action
Week 5	Police Academy Field Trip
Week 6	Program Celebration

KEY FINDINGS

To assess the impact of this program, students took pre and post surveys. The data contained in this report reflects only those students who submitted both pre and post surveys, totaling 29 students. The program data collected demonstrated changes that occurred in students’ attitudes and opinions as a result of their participation. Additionally, a post survey was completed by Detroit PAL staff (5), Detroit PAL intern (1), law enforcement officers (2), and school staff (2) for a total of 10 completed surveys. The purpose of the survey was to collect their thoughts on program outcomes and implementation. These findings are described below.



RESPECT DEVELOPS FROM COMMUNICATION

Small-group discussions are a central piece of the Critical Conversations program. Students and law enforcement shared their thoughts and perspectives with one another in a way that allowed for honest conversation in a safe space, promoting feelings of respect. The number of students who said they had respect for police officers grew from 66% to 79%. Some students noted mutual respect as an underlying reason. **“If they respect me, I’ll respect them,”** explained one of the students. Others said that respect for law enforcement resulted from recognizing contributions to the community: **“They are putting their lives on the line for us.”**

I HAVE RESPECT FOR POLICE OFFICERS.



Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed.

FEELINGS OF SAFETY IMPROVE WITH KNOWLEDGE . .

Throughout the program, students learned more about the role that law enforcement plays in keeping their community safe and how students play a part in ensuring their own safety, particularly during police encounters. When asked what words came to mind when thinking about police officers, the most frequently cited words included **“safety”** and **“protection.”** Survey results showed an increase of 13% in the number of students who felt safe with police officers around. As one of the students explained, **“At the end of the day, they work hard to make sure everyone is safe and okay.”** Another shared, **“I feel safe with police officers because with anything that might happen, they’ll be there.”**

I FEEL SAFE WITH POLICE OFFICERS AROUND.



Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed.

TRUST DEVELOPS THROUGH UNDERSTANDING

As students got to know officers on a more personal level and learned more about their everyday responsibilities, trust in their local police department grew. One student who described feeling an increase in trust by the end of the program stated, **“I say this because I have a better understanding of the police.”** The percentage of students who reported trust in their local police department grew from 41% to 48% over the course of the program. **“I feel this way because I seen how seriously they worked,”** described a student. Even though an increase was observed, less than half of youth post program felt that they were safe with law enforcement and had trust for officers underscoring the need for continued and deeper conversations like these.

I TRUST MY LOCAL POLICE DEPARTMENT.

Pre • 41%

Post • 48%

Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS BOOST POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

For many students, the Critical Conversations program offered their first opportunity to interact directly with a police officer. This reinforces the assumption that perceptions of officers stem more from what is observed on various forms of media and anecdotal accounts rather than first-hand interactions. From the initial program session to the last, 45% more students recounted having a positive experience with a police officer. **“This program showed me that the police are not that bad,”** explained one student. Another shared, **“I learned how challenging it could be being an officer. I appreciate them way more now.”** First-hand interactions and experiences demonstrate one of the core principles of this type of programming; ensuring that young people’s first encounter with law enforcement is in-person and positive.

I HAVE HAD A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE WITH A POLICE OFFICER.

Pre • 38%

Post • 83%

Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed.

RAPPORT BUILDING SHAPES PERSPECTIVES

When asked to reflect on their perspective of police officers at the end of the Critical Conversations program, more than half of the students (59%) reported that their view was better or much better. Student comments demonstrated their shift in opinions was influenced by conversations with officers, observations during the police academy field trip, and content delivered during the program sessions. One of the students remarked, **“I don't consider them as scary as they once were.”**

Another explained, **“Not all officers are bad, and they're really here to do their job.”** This finding provides strong support for the program's format and content and shows that youth and law enforcement relationships can be fostered if programming is structured and intentional.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES: BECAUSE OF PARTICIPATING IN THIS PROGRAM, MY VIEW OF POLICE OFFICERS IS...

59%

Percentage of students who responded better or much better.

STAFF REFLECTIONS REVEAL STUDENT GROWTH

Staff facilitating the Critical Conversations program noted a positive shift in students' attitudes toward and perceptions of police officers. As explained by a staff member, **“Most of the students expressed that the negative perception that they had towards police officers no longer existed due to having the opportunity to engage one-on-one with officers and getting to know them on a personal level, which developed the much-needed trust.”**

Many commented that the program component appearing to have the most impact was the opportunity for students and law enforcement to have direct one-on-one conversations. **“This program**

helps reinforce the importance of creating safe, structured spaces where youth feel heard and respected. For most youth, you could see them open up and be more willing to share their opinion as the program went on. This allows the space for that honest dialogue and trust-building,” observed one of the program staff. Sixty percent of staff felt students' feelings of respect for officers and feelings of safety around law enforcement have improved or improved a lot. More staff (70%) felt students' trust in law enforcement has improved or improved a lot.

STAFF SURVEY RESULTS: PROGRESS TOWARD FULFILLING THE GOAL OF IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN YOUTH AND LAW ENFORCEMENT.

80%

Percentage of staff who rated progress successful or very successful

CONCLUSION

Results from the Winter 2026 Critical Conversations program evaluation indicate an overall increase in the number of students who expressed respect for law enforcement, a sense of safety around officers, and trust in their local police department. Their perceptions of law enforcement improved, and many participants reported having a positive experience with a police officer as a result of program participation. Student comments and staff reflections revealed that students enjoyed Critical Conversations and learned a great deal about the roles and responsibilities of police in their community. As summed succinctly by one of the students, **“You guys rock! Keep up the good work.”**

The results of Critical Conversations are essential for program planning and preparation. Staff and youth surveys are thoroughly reviewed by the program staff to identify areas of strength in the program and areas for improvement. By understanding participant outcomes, Critical Conversations can be tailored to the students, ensuring that the information distributed is relevant and educational. Evaluation of these data allows Detroit PAL staff to make informed, strategic decisions that align with our mission of helping youth find their GREATness.

“The Critical Conversations program absolutely was effective in making meaningful changes in the attitudes of the youth towards local police.” – Program Staff

Questions? Contact Joseph Smith at jsmith@detroitpal.org





PROMOTING
UNITY
IN THE COMMUNITY