

The Task

The Board of Education gave us a charge last fall to survey the community on perceptions relating to Danville Community Consolidated School District No. 118 regarding:

- Its strengths
- Its needed areas of improvement
- What the school district can do better to meet stakeholders' (or their businesses' or organizations') needs

Our assignment was to co-chair efforts to conduct focus groups with community members and organizations. Input from district staff and students would be professionally collected by Elizabeth Small. The Board planned to utilize this data as it convened the planning for a new strategic plan for the school district to effectively meet students' needs in the future.

With the state shelter-in-place order and school closures last March, we suspended our efforts after several months of work. We had originally planned to finish by May. At first, we had hoped to solicit more community feedback once daily life returned to normal. At the point of this writing, it was clear that conducting further community focus groups and holding committee meetings would not be viable options anytime in the near future.

Even though the pandemic cut short our efforts to provide additional outreach to more groups and individuals, we do feel that we met with a representative and diverse cross-section of the community. Therefore, we are submitting our final report and recommendations for the Board's consideration. While we understand that the Board's overwhelming priority is deciding upon the myriad of issues relating to educational delivery this fall, we believe that this strategic planning information should be provided while the perceptions are still relatively current. Hopefully, when these results are combined with Elizabeth Small's report, the information will be a helpful resource for the school district in its strategic planning effort.

Strategic Planning Community Advisory Committee

We have been advised by a top-notch committee of community leaders who sincerely wanted to see the District and its students succeed. We thank them for their participation and assistance, especially in reviewing the data received from the focus groups shortly before the shut-down last March. The members of the Strategic Planning Community Advisory Committee who participated in this effort are, as follows:

Carla Boyd
Gayle Brandon
Lisa Campbell
Jordan Carlton
Tracy Cherry
Steve Hall

John Hart
Pat Hartshorn
Derrice Hightower
Patty Juarez
Todd Lichtenberger
Gardner Peck

Diana Stewart
Odette Watson
Dr. Beth Yacobi
Chris Yates
Paula Young

Focus Groups

Utilizing suggestions from the advisory committee, numerous focus groups were identified, then conducted. While some groups could not be held due to the pandemic, focus groups were held with the following by the time of the shut-down:

Antioch Baptist Church	Open forums
CASA Advocates	Rotary Club of Danville – noon
DACC Administrators (Cabinet)	Second Baptist Church
Danville Board of Realtors	St. James Methodist Church – Men’s Group
Danville Police Department	St. James Methodist Church – Music Group
Danville Public School Foundation	Strategic Planning Advisory Committee
DACC students (a group made up of DHS graduates)	Sunrise Rotary
East Central Illinois Community Action Program	United Way
EnvironOx	Vermilion Advantage Executive Board
Kiwanis – noon	Vermilion County Probation
Mad Goat Coffee (open group)	Vermilion County Retired Teachers Association
Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration Committee	Workforce Investment Board
	YMCA

From these **25** focus groups, **283** community stakeholders were involved in this effort.

Our focus groups were conducted by the following retired faculty members of the school district. They attended a training session and were instrumental in getting stakeholders to open up and participate in this project. Then, they recorded and reported the data. We want to thank these retired teachers for their commendable help in this effort:

Alayne Anderson	Esther Hopper	Annie Robertson
Candy Boehm	Debi Hosch	Mary Shutt
Glenda Campbell	Marty Lindvahl	Jessica Smith
Johnnie Carey	Alice Payne	

We also want to thank the District for providing the services of Dianna Kirk to assist us in this work. Her organizational skills and support have been invaluable to our effort.

Focus Group Results on the Three Key Questions

Collating the voluminous data from the focus groups and consolidating similar responses, the top responses for the three questions being surveyed were, as follows:

Question 1 – What are the strong points of the District?

1. Variety of extra-curricular and athletic opportunities – many choices
2. Music/fine arts programming – variety, quality
3. Dual enrollment – great partnership with the college; great deal for students
4. Scope, variety, quality, and diversity of curriculum – something for every student

Question 2 – What are the most important things that the school district needs to improve?

1. Public perception of the school district - poor public relations; negative comments from students and staff; lack of a public relations office; disconnect and lack of communication between stakeholders – both within the District (central administration with staff) as well as between the District and the community; all District staff members need to share in this responsibility; need for “branding” and marketing across the District and community– everyone should know what the main goals of the District are – staff, students, and community; take advantage of social media to effectively communicate with stakeholders; streamline communication
2. Parental involvement – do whatever it takes to better engage parents in a meaningful manner; strengthen parent accountability
3. Discipline – improvement of enforcement; lack of consistency; acceptance of inappropriate behaviors; empower teachers more; fairness in suspensions/expulsions regarding socio-economic backgrounds

Question 3– What does the school district need to do to meet your (or your business’ or organization’s) needs?

1. More emphasis on teaching life skills (finance, practical applications, consumer education, etc.) and strengthening vocational offerings (including preparation for trades, i.e., plumbing, computers, electrical, HVAC)
2. Strengthen, expand, and better coordinate social media; spread good news; internal and external branding; better outreach to alumni, seek their input, etc.
3. Improve student discipline; better support for teachers; improve administrators’ back-up of staff and of the enforcement of rules; consistency; give teachers more authority

While the focus group data documented many responses for the above questions, these responses were by far the leaders in frequency.

Final Thoughts

When discussing the focus group data at our last advisory committee in February, there was a long discussion upon the need for better branding and communication for the District. Among the thoughts was the need for the establishment of clear goals for the District that everyone understands and supports – including administration, teachers, support staff, students, and parents. Once established, the District needs to emphasize the goals in all it does, including through omnipresent social media and communication. These actions would further strengthen the team concept for all District stakeholders.

Of course, since the shut-down, important new issues have arisen nationwide such as equity and Black Lives Matter. With the shut-down, the importance of safeguarding student/staff health and providing better and more powerful technology platforms to conduct effective remote learning have become evident in schools across the nation. While not mentioned in the focus groups earlier this year, it is felt that these issues would be among the forefront today.

Strategic planning is difficult because needs are not static. Once positive movement is documented in one area, new items will arise to be addressed. This is what makes true strategic planning frustrating -- yet so valuable when the plan is followed, adjusted as needed, and constantly evaluated.

It has been our pleasure to assist the District in this effort. Best wishes as you move forward to ensure that our students continue to be as successful as they can be.