

## 2017 Community Engagement - Overview of Activities

J.Marie Riche of Ideal Communications was hired to work with Snohomish School District leadership to develop and facilitate a series of community engagement opportunities. Activities included:

- preliminary research and project planning;
- facilitate planning and survey design for interactive online discussion using ThoughtExchange;
- work with district leadership and ThoughtExchange staff to synthesize and summarize the online input;
- facilitate in-person meetings with staff, students, parents, and community members to deepen our understanding of what was learned through the online conversation;
- synthesize and summarize the input shared during the in-person meetings; and
- provide an executive summary of the overall process and input shared.

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## Executive Summary - Process

While the Snohomish School District is known for its strong relationships and sincere community engagement, it has been many years since the district coordinated a broad-based, systematic effort to gather stakeholders' thoughts. With Dr. Kultgen in his first year as superintendent, this was an ideal time to invite people from across the community to share their perspective about Snohomish schools' successes, challenges, values, and priorities. He and the district leadership team wanted to check back in and make sure they understand what is most important to the Snohomish community now. What has changed over the years? What should we focus on next?

The school district started with an online conversation tool called ThoughtExchange in order to cast a wide net and hear from as many people as possible. All staff, parents, and secondary students were personally invited to participate via email, and the school district further publicized the opportunity to participate via its district-wide newsletter, website, Facebook page, "Dear Friends" key communicator email, and school-based communications. 1,368 people participated in the process, sharing 3,876 thoughts, and using nearly 90,000 "stars" to demonstrate which ideas have broadest support. J.Marie worked with district leadership and ThoughtExchange staff to review and synthesize those thoughts into meaningful themes based on the thoughts that were shared or supported the most in each of four question areas.

In addition to the online ThoughtExchange conversation, the school district also hosted a series of in-person meetings with staff (one meeting, 60+ participants), secondary students (ten sessions, 225+ middle and high school students), parents and community members (two meetings, 135+ participants).

In these meetings, we explored what we learned through the ThoughtExchange process and facilitated small group dialogue to identify shared values and the characteristics that exemplify great schools. An additional goal of the parent and community member meetings was to generate renewed awareness and enthusiasm for the work of public education and to identify new people who might be interested and willing to step into formal and informal leadership roles (you might think of this as renewing a strong base of support and leadership).

## Executive Summary – Three Major Themes

So. What did we learn? First and best, we learned that there is incredible satisfaction with and support for Snohomish schools. Only ten percent of the 1,374 participants in the online conversation reported that they were somewhat (7.5%) or very (2.5%) unsatisfied with the school district. While it is important that district leaders are already starting to dig into the data to better understand what causes those folks to feel unsatisfied, the information we learned through this process affirms that next steps for Snohomish schools involve refinement and improvement rather than wholesale change.

It was also encouraging to note the extent to which there was uniformity of perspective across the district. While there are a few issues that were locally focused, there was a remarkable amount of overlap and shared perspective across the board, regardless of role (parent, student, staff, community member) or other demographics like school attendance area (north vs. south or elementary vs. secondary). This is helpful in that it simplifies the school district's next steps.

There were literally thousands of comments to read, organize into themes, and synthesize into this report. Nearly every idea or issue you can imagine that has any nexus to education came up at least once, but there were three themes that rose to the top repeatedly, showing up many times in many ways in both the online and in-person input. Those themes are community, culture, and strong relationships; academic opportunities; and respect and care for each student as in individual (you could also call this theme nurturing the “whole child”).

### **Community, Culture, and Strong Relationships**

#### **Staff are appreciated.**

It is no surprise that Snohomish values its relationships, and the feedback gleaned through this process underscored the continued importance people here place on feeling connected, informed, engaged, and empowered to act on behalf of students. When asked to talk about an experience that highlights Snohomish schools at their best, 36.2% of ThoughtExchange respondents noted the many ways that teachers, staff, and principals go above and beyond for their students.

#### **Snohomish students have a uniquely positive culture and are respected by the community.**

The staff at ThoughtExchange pointed to another theme that they tell us is completely unique to Snohomish: the extent to which participants recognized students for building and maintaining an inclusive, respectful, kind culture and for being involved in the larger community in visible and meaningful ways. This was the second strongest theme in the responses to the “at our best” question; in most communities, there might be a few comments along these lines, but Snohomish is the first community ThoughtExchange has surveyed where praise for student culture rose up as a theme, much less a top theme!

**The rubber really meets the road with the teacher/student relationship.**

When we focus on the value of specific relationships, the ones that are most valued by all demographic groups are the relationships between teachers / teaching support staff and their students. In their meeting, staff members listed strong relationships with students and families as the educational value they hold most dear (29% of responses were about this).

Students are also exceptionally clear on this topic. When asked what about their education has worked well for them, teachers were at the very top of their list – specifically teachers who know them well, care about them as individuals, use hands-on activities and other engaging methods to make learning fun, and those who are able to pace the content appropriately (including backing up to re-teach when needed). Parents agreed, noting their appreciation for teachers who are creative and invested in their kids. When asked what about their education they wish were different, students put teachers at the very top of that list, too – specifically teachers who don't seem to care, who don't know what matters to them as individuals, who move through the content without regard for students' experience and ability to keep up, and teachers who rely on worksheets (very unpopular), PowerPoints, and other rote / unengaging teaching methods.

**Other relationships matter, too. (In fact, they all do.)**

When asked about values, staff noted the importance of having opportunities to collaborate with each other, and when asked about characteristics of great education, community was the second-most mentioned theme (being intentional about meeting student needs was #1).

When students were asked about experiences that they are likely to remember into their adulthood, most of their reflections were about their relationships and the activities that built or celebrated those relationships. Many of them talked about activities from their elementary days that brought loved ones into school, things like Dads-n-Donuts, Moms-n-Muffins, Grandparent / Special Friend Day, etc. They appreciate the Watch Dogs program, their coaches and club advisors. They remember field trips where parents and guardians were part of the experience, and students who have served the community beyond the classroom note how meaningful that has been for them. Students want even more opportunities to merge their experiences, bringing family and the community into education and taking them and education out into the community.

**“Thanks for asking!”**

One more idea that emerged within this larger theme of community connection is appreciation for providing these opportunities for parents and others to influence local education by sharing their thoughts, values, and priorities with school district leaders. The school board was recognized for engaging the community well around the recent superintendent selection. That process was followed by Dr. Kultgen's entry plan activities. The combination of those overlapping processes was noted as an example of the school district asking for input, acting on it, and then circling back to demonstrate that it was worth folks' time to share their thoughts. People in Snohomish like that level of transparency and demonstration of respect, and are primed for the school district to continue engaging them like this in future.

## Breadth of Academic Opportunities

As we worked through how to best organize the thousands of thoughts that were shared during the online conversation, the ThoughtExchange analyst noted that when the Snohomish community talked about its hopes and expectations for student education, there were two distinct tracks. This also held true with the perspectives that were shared during the in-person meetings, so that is how the feedback is organized here.

One track of input was focused on students' academic experience:

- ensuring a breadth of course offerings to meet a variety of interests and abilities (most important by a landslide, prioritized by every demographic group);
- building higher expectations for academic excellence;
- improving the opportunities for students at the top of the academic spectrum while maintaining supports for students who struggle;
- increasing opportunities for students to engage in subject matter in more creative, hands-on ways, including opportunities to learn in teams, work on projects that span multiple classes, get out of the classroom and learn outside, take field trips, etc.;
- students value and would expand the study/homeroom period, noting that it is one of the few flexible/unstructured times in their academic week and it allows them to catch up where needed or engage in enrichment that matters most to them; and,
- teachers, parents, and students shared significant concerns around the amount and purpose of testing and large class sizes.

Participants expressed deep appreciation for the opportunities students have here, including everything from AP to CTE, Running Start to AIM and PPP, the high schools' Pathways to JROTC. They noted the importance of protecting and expanding those opportunities. When it comes to course offerings at the secondary level, parents and students alike value breadth of opportunity in order to better “hook” students on school and meet them where they are in terms of their natural abilities. Since this was an area of such interest and support, here are some additional details about what participants prioritized within this theme area:

- more STEAM opportunities (“STEM” plus the Arts);
- an expansion of foreign language (more options, offered earlier);
- maintaining, expanding, and doing a better job of communicating about the variety of “real world” vocational, career-prep opportunities available to Snohomish students; and
- students in almost every group that provided input asked for a life skills class focused on things like balancing a bank account, understanding compound interest in mortgages, credit cards, and investments/savings, how to vote and be a good citizen, etc. In short, they want a class about what one student charmingly called “how to ‘adult.’” Seven percent of parents and community members in the public meetings also specifically suggested a stronger focus on building basic life skills.

## Respect for Students as Individuals

A related but separate theme emerged around student education; this one focused on what we might think of as students' emotional and social experience. It was important to people in all demographic roles that there be "a place for everyone" here in Snohomish.

This aspect of education was at least as important to parents and community members as the "hard skills" of math, reading, college/career readiness, etc. In fact, soft skills edged out the more academic topics by a percent. 26% of parents' and community members' comments around Snohomish's education values were in support of nurturing the "whole child" vs. 25% of comments in support of more traditional academic skills.

Teachers and staff framed this as being intentional about meeting individual student needs (34% of staff noted some variation of this idea as a top characteristic of education when it's at its best). Parents frame this idea in terms like "knowing and caring about my child." And students express a need to be both respected and nurtured. One GPHS student said it well, "I love it when teachers respect us like adults, but support us like teens." Many students specifically noted the desire to be entrusted with increasing self-regulation as they get older (not surprisingly, this was especially important to middle schoolers, who chafe at rules around gum, hats, earbuds, hoodies, etc., and wish adults would "chillax" a bit).

Here is some additional context around what participants focused on within this theme area:

- maintain a high level of respect for every student, who they are, what matters to them, and what they need in order to learn well (44% of parents and community members noted this as a primary educational value);
- increasing the focus and value placed on teacher and staff kindness;
- ensure students' physical and emotional safety (emphasized more in-person than online; emotional safety refers to anti-bullying types of skill-building);
- help students build their social and emotional skills;
- increase classroom supports for students who struggle behaviorally;
- increase support for students' mental health, resiliency, character, and citizenship;
- focus on building critical thinking skills (important to adults and to students, who shared comments like, "stop making me memorize things I can look up on Google!");
- protect and continue to build traditions at each school (ex: Serpentine);
- look for ways to support more mentoring opportunities (adult / college age mentors for students, plus the high school / elementary buddy programs); and
- a strong desire for more and better counseling support, with the term being used broadly by different participants to mean support for behaviorally challenged students and their teachers and classified staff, support for students with mental health needs, and guidance counseling at the high schools.

## Executive Summary – Other Important Ideas

In addition to the three primary themes described above, there were a few more ideas or issues that emerged as significant enough to warrant individual attention, specifically: equity, class size, and facilities. Here's a bit of context about each:

### Equity

Equity is a strongly-held value among all demographic groups, including students, many of whom could talk about this quite eloquently. It emerged primarily as a desire for fairness and a deep concern for making sure that all Snohomish students have opportunities to thrive, regardless of the personal, family, or social obstacles they are facing. This may take the form of different interventions and supports; adjustments / clarifications to school counselors' role; maintaining or expanding summer academic camps, the book mobile, and nutrition programs; etc. Equity also emerged as the top value around facilities (see below).

### Class Size

This was a primary theme in the ThoughtExchange process, rising into the top-five responses to the questions about concerns (#1 concern: class sizes are too high) and what we want for our students (smaller class sizes). It is closely related to another idea that emerged primarily in the staff conversation, which is concern about having enough resources to do the work well (7% of staff raised this concern). Given the complexity of state vs. local funding and the costs associated with making significant differences in class size (especially considering the competing interest to maintain strong and varied supports and extended educational opportunities), this is an issue that will require creative thinking, effective communication, and ongoing legislative advocacy.

### Facilities

Within the facilities question of the ThoughtExchange process, addressing oldest schools was the most important issue across all demographic groups, and this was related to the idea of equity. Educational technology is another priority, and within that area people were quick to point out that it isn't just the tablets and other tools that matter, but also the curricular materials and teacher training that make those tools come alive. Addressing overcrowding and planning now for future growth was important, in part because folks are very aware of the general growth in Snohomish County and concerned about Snohomish Schools' ability to keep up. General maintenance, cleanliness, and landscaping concerns popped up often enough to make the list of top five themes in this area. Some participants feel that the custodial function may still be understaffed after cuts made years ago, particularly at the high schools. Environmental and resource stewardship made the list. And, finally, parking frustrations didn't quite make the top five district-wide, but they came through loud and clear at Glacier Peak.

## Next Steps

### **There's still more to learn from these data.**

District leadership will continue to explore the raw data and the tools provided by ThoughtExchange to look at responses in different ways, by school attendance area, grade levels, and roles. They will also look for correlations between folks who said they were unsatisfied with the district and whether there are shared concerns that seem to be contributing to their lack of satisfaction.

### **Use this input to inform your thinking.**

The data will be very useful as school district leaders consider a range of issues, from the district's budget priorities and strategic plan focus areas to facilities planning and course offerings.

### **Engage more parents and community members in district-level volunteer leadership.**

During the parent and community public meetings, about three dozen people expressed interest in taking on formal and informal leadership roles for the school district. Many of them are new to volunteering at the district level, so the district will host a meeting of those who signed up to talk about possible ways to help move the district's work forward. Some initial ideas include the formation of a Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council or Parent and Community Advisory Council. It also won't be long before the district is ready to update the facility plan, which has traditionally been a process that included parents and community members.

### **Talk with your community about what you've learned here.**

Just like you did with the superintendent search, selection, and entry plan, it is very important that you circle back to your community to demonstrate that their input is valued and truly useful. The next edition of School Views will include a spread about what was learned and what the district will be doing next, and communications office will reach out to those who have participated in the process so that they get to see the information first.

### **Community Engagement: The Sequel!**

Opportunities to keep the conversation going abound! The district might choose to engage staff around how best to incorporate these ideas into the district's strategic priorities. There are a few demographic groups who – even though they had opportunities to participate – didn't engage in significant enough numbers for us to have confidence that we truly understand their unique issues. English Language Learners and families who speak a language other than English in their home would be one example.

It is important to district leadership that the community sees this series of activities within the broader context of a reenergized, ongoing two-way conversation. As Dr. Kultgen said more than once: this isn't the end of a process, but is in many ways a beginning.