



**Key themes from the collected research methodologies
Clayton 360 Initiative
May 14, 2012**

With the completion of the parent and staff online surveys, the Clayton 360 data collection process is drawing to a close; only the student survey analysis remains.

Through the course of a kick-off meeting, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, a community telephone survey, online surveys, and three Town Hall meetings, District patrons, staff and students have been afforded numerous opportunities to provide input to the process.

Even acknowledging the strong likelihood that some individuals participated in more than one research process (and, therefore, had their opinions recorded more than once), the number of interviews completed throughout the Clayton 360 initiative is still rather staggering. Without a doubt, the District can say with confidence that anyone who wished to share his or her opinions on the subject of Mission, Vision and Core Values had ample opportunity to do so.

Now, the hard work of turning these ideas into crisp, clear statements that reflect the kind of school district that the community, the staff and the students envision can begin in earnest. The challenge, of course, is distilling all this research input into a series of cogent thoughts that can inform the creative process.

While no brief summary can replace a thorough study of each of the research reports, nor completely capture every nuance of what was shared in the process, it can represent a starting point for the conversation by collecting the ideas that were common across the various audiences. After all, while there may be some differences of opinion among parents, staff, students and the community at large on these issues, the district will be creating one Mission Statement, one Vision Statement and one set of Core Values. Understanding where there is agreement among the audiences is the first step.

(The themes are presented in no specific order.)

Theme 1: Academic excellence is (and must remain) a cherished point of differentiation for the School District of Clayton.

Research participants overwhelmingly applauded the District's commitment to having rigorous academics that can position talented students for acceptance to the leading colleges and universities, while giving the remainder of the student body an increased opportunity for some form of higher education as well. This is clearly a point of pride, as numerous respondents throughout the various research formats were able to list off the accomplishments of students whose academic exploits have been well-publicized.

Such a level of excellence is, according to research participants, a combination of factors: quality students and families, a strong and committed teaching staff, coursework that has suitable rigor, and a willingness to "push" students to excel beyond where they (the students) believe they are capable.

There was, however, a measure of hand-wringing going on in many of the responses, as some worried that the District's evolution of its Mission, Vision and Core Values might end up weakening its resolve to produce scholars. But, others saw it as merely a chance to affirm its commitment to providing academic options and challenges for all students, while retaining its focus on competing with the best districts nationally and (for some research participants) internationally.

Theme 2: Hiring and retaining the most component, most innovative teachers is the most effective way to adequately prepare students.

There was much conversation throughout the various research processes about the inherent connection between student success and teacher excellence. (Interestingly, some individuals were somewhat aghast at the seeming attempt to separate the two by having the research ask about the importance of each individually, as if the District was missing the "obvious relationship.")

Within the general message about the importance of the District having excellent educators were the following, more specific, concepts:

- Hiring practices should be more rigid (including some wanting to make a Master's Degree a requirement for employment as a teacher).
- Professional Development must be ramped up, so that teachers not only stay current with their skills and with the latest teaching techniques, but so that they (the teachers) can feel appreciated, leading them to stay with the District.
- Diversity among the teaching staff needs attention – not just cultural and ethnic diversity, but also age and experience level.
- Parents and students should have an annual opportunity to evaluate the performance of teachers through surveys.
- Tenure (for those who called it out specifically) prohibits the District from making critical personnel decisions based on performance and should, potentially, be eliminated.

The tone was simple: Students deserve the best teachers, and the District should eliminate any official procedure or informal practice that makes securing and retaining such teachers more difficult.

Theme 3: Each student deserves an individualized education that helps maximize his or her potential (whatever that may be), after graduating from high school.

This is an idea that is difficult to adequately capture in a single thought, because it seeks to have the District balance the desire to produce world-class scholars with the recognition (and acceptance) that some students will not achieve at that level.

Taken as elements of a “recipe” that led to this statement seeking an individualized education, the following thoughts were expressed in quantity:

- The School District of Clayton excels in providing programs, services and guidance for both high-achieving students and those students who struggle. The large group of students who reside “in the middle” receive significantly less attention, making it difficult for them to maximize their potential – whatever that may be.
- The District (and the community) need to come to terms with the reality that not all students are “Ivy League material.” Yet, all students can still succeed in school and beyond.
- Students who reside “in the middle” need extra guidance and mentoring to discover their strengths and to create an academic program that helps them maximize their potential.
- Core courses are essential building blocks, but the District cannot shortchange the curriculum and programs that produce well-rounded adults (extracurricular activities, arts programs, etc.).
- Teachers must be willing to take extra steps (primarily identified as making extra time available) to keep mid-level students from falling behind their peers.

Again, the primary message is that the District must do a better job of serving the needs of lower-profile students, and that doing so is possible without losing the commitment to academic excellence and the success that have long been the hallmarks of the District’s brand.

Theme 4: Test scores, grades, AP and Honors enrollment levels (and grades), etc. are not the only ways to measure a student’s achievement.

The role of numerical measurements of student progress in adequately judging growth stimulated much attention throughout the multiple research processes, but not universal agreement.

While many research participants said that grades, test scores (MAP, AP exam results, ACT and/or SAT), the number of students receiving National Merit Scholar recognition and the like were the best way to judge achievement, there was also a significant call to make certain that coursework was not simply a means toward a good test score. Specifically, the District was called upon to:

- Teach students how to apply critical thinking skills to solve problems.
- Provide more real-life, project-based opportunities.
- Expand community-service expectations for students.
- Offer more “education-related” field trips (meaning trips that have an actual educational benefit, rather than mostly for recreation).
- Not shortchange basic life skill development, such as household finance and budgeting.
- Maintain or expand offerings outside of the core courses, such as math, science and social studies.
- Recognize the accomplishments of students in areas such as technology and the arts with the same enthusiasm that more traditional academic successes are being acknowledged.

This will be the most delicate balancing act of the entire Clayton 360 initiative, because it will require the District to demonstrate its commitment to continued traditional academic excellence, while also championing student successes in other areas.

Theme 5: Students benefit when the District is open to new approaches to curriculum and instruction.

This theme is the direct result of having an extremely engaged, research-savvy, highly intelligent patron population that has “done its homework” and that has a lot of thoughts to share on curriculum and instruction.

Specifically, the message is that the District should not be bound by tradition and history, but should be always investigating new and better ways to deliver content. Whether those concepts come from sources that are local, regional, national or even international is immaterial. If they are tested and proven, they should be considered for inclusion by the District, so that Clayton students benefit – even if such changes initially make the District uncomfortable.

Of course, the challenge here will be to identify and implement appropriate measures to make certain that while the door to new approaches opens a bit wider, the rigor with which potential additions are evaluated is not diminished. This will keep the District from, as several people put it, “jumping on the latest fad,” while still creating expanded opportunities for new ideas to be considered.

Theme 6: Integrity and openness are non-negotiable elements of a successful District/patron relationship.

Just below “teacher excellence” and “academic excellence” on the preferred list of Core Values was “integrity,” and the comments across the spectrum of research methodologies suggest that the community has a fairly high bar for this value (and ideas related to it).

While it is unfortunate that some of the research was being conducted during the time when there was much media attention focused on the CHS principal issue, the undercurrent surrounding the expectations of stakeholders on this concept were found throughout all the research results.

With “integrity” as the headline, here are some ideas that were expressed extensively:

- Openness needs to be practiced with more fervor than is present now. While there is an understanding that some things must remain confidential, the general view is that the list of what is considered confidential is longer than it needs to be.
- Two-way communication is lacking right now, with the opinions of parents, students and other stakeholders being dismissed with regularity.
- Financial issues are not clearly presented, and the logic behind budget decisions is unclear.

Again, recognizing the unfortunate timing of some of the research (which brought more passion to the conversation than had been seen in research conducted earlier in the process), the general message was still consistent: This is a community that holds integrity in high regard, and that expects its school district to behave accordingly.