

Summary of Citizen Input
School District of Clayton Town Hall Meetings
on April 21, 23 and 24, 2012
May 10, 2012

As part of the comprehensive process of gathering data for the Clayton 360 initiative, Town Hall meetings were held on April 21, 23 and 24, offering an opportunity for the community at large to come and share its views on the subject of the District's Mission, Vision and Core Values in one-on-one conversations with committee members.

Each meeting began with a welcome to the guests, an introduction to the format of the meeting and brief background about the results of the research work that had been completed to date. Written material documenting a summary of the research findings was also provided to each citizen who took the time to attend.

After these formal remarks, respondents were dismissed to visit tables stationed throughout the room at which they were to share their thoughts, ideas and concerns with committee members. Those thoughts were recorded by "scribes" on a laptop, in as much a verbatim form as possible.

The general findings from these three events show two things quite clearly.

First, the opinions of those who attended are, essentially, in alignment with the input that had been gathered previously in one-on-one interviews, focus groups and a community telephone survey. While the format of the Town Hall events did allow for more elaboration than some of those other methodologies, the ideas that were mentioned most frequently were similar to those that had been heard already.

This is good news, in that it suggests that the story that has been building through the other research methodologies appears to still be on target after the Town Hall meetings. It is encouraging to see that the passionate individuals who took the time to attend these meetings feel generally the same as the cross-section of patrons who were contacted in the phone survey, and the individuals who took part in the focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

Second, the general public that attended these events appears to have a preferred "definition" for the School District of Clayton – its present, its future and the values it holds dear – but has a somewhat difficult time separating that definition into the categories of Mission, Vision and Core Values. They know what they want from the District, and seem to feel comfortable with the District sorting it out, in terms of the category where it fits.

As such, this report presents the themes and ideas that seemed to resonate throughout the discussions, without specific regard to whether the comment dealt with Mission, Vision or Core Values. These themes are divided into three tiers, based on the frequency with which they were mentioned in this qualitative process.

The specific wording below reflects a distillation of the thoughts. And, in some cases, more than one thought is captured in a theme, because those two or three thoughts are all related to the same topic. Again, these are not the exact words of the participants, but rather the ideas that were shared in quantity by those who chose to attend one of the three Town Hall meetings.

The top tier

Effectively serve the academic and developmental needs of all students, while always striving for maximum performance.

Overwhelmingly, participants focused on the idea that the District should do all it can to help each student achieve his or her maximum academic performance, while also recognizing that each student's "maximum" is very individual.

There was a lot of commentary about the need to serve "all students," with special attention paid by many participants to the challenges faced by students whose skills fall somewhere in the middle, in comparison to their classmates. These are the students who, participants said, need more attention than they are receiving now.

In addition, there was a measurable amount of conversation about the need for support for each student's social and emotional development. While the specifics on this were somewhat scant, the idea that this was important was threaded throughout the comments about the need to serve "all students."

Focus on having exemplary teachers, and on providing them the necessary continuing education to maintain that status.

It is a given, of course, that exemplary teachers are a requirement for a district to achieve the kind of high-performance status that is seen in the School District of Clayton.

As such, the comments seemed more along the lines of making certain that the District does not forget to specifically spell out the importance of topflight teachers as it evolves these key statements. The tone was both defensive (needing to retain the superior teachers currently on staff) and offensive (making the District a place where leading teachers want to come to work).

A subset of these ideas was the notion that the District must make certain it commits to providing regular access to superior continuing education for the teaching staff. The language in these comments does not suggest that Town Hall meeting participants necessarily thought such training was missing today. Rather, again, it seems that they simply wanted to spell out its importance.

Demonstrate a commitment to staying on the leading edge in terms of curriculum, technology and the complete classroom experience.

This topic generated a myriad of comments with little specificity.

In other words, guests at the Town Hall meetings said that the District should make certain that it stays current (or, for some people, “ahead”) in its curriculum, the technology it employs and what we would term the “classroom experience” – the ways in which that leading-edge content is delivered.

Such a lack of specificity is not terribly surprising; patrons expect their school district to know about the latest and greatest content, tools and delivery approaches. As was the case with the comments about teachers, the feeling one gets from reading the ideas is that they simply felt it was important to state this concept specifically.

Insist on impeccable integrity, in word and deed.

The concept of integrity was a strong vote-getter in the other research processes, and it clearly resonated with individuals who participated in the Town Hall programs.

While several patrons went into detail about their views on the value of integrity in building strong district/patron relationships, most simply said that integrity was, in our words, a non-negotiable item.

It also seemed as though they found favor with the idea of a school district expressing this as something it values, which, in and of itself, sends a message about how the District operates on all fronts.

A secondary tier

Ensure a commitment to open, active, two-way communications by the District with parents and with the community at large.

A number of participants went to some lengths to detail their views on the value of an active communications program between a school district and its patrons, which not only provides information, but also seeks input.

Again, these comments did not appear to diminish the communications efforts already under way, but rather simply to serve as a charge to the District to be vigilant in this critical area.

Build an appreciation and understanding among students about their role in their community – locally, regionally and globally.

There was a great deal of conversation spread across the three meetings on the subject of community, and the role of the District in preparing students to be effective members.

Some of those comments would fall under a general category of “building good citizens,” while others focused on the need to help students prepare for working and living in a global society.

Focus on student character development, recognizing the District’s important role in creating responsible individuals and a safe school environment.

The topic of school and student safety, and how having programs and rules that create a safe environment leads to a lifetime of thoughtful, respectful behavior, received a meaningful measure of attention from Town Hall meeting participants.

While there were generic pronouncements by some attendees about the importance of maintaining a bully-free school environment, many respondents also talked about the value of character education programs for individual student development.

A tertiary tier

Build a lifelong love of learning among students.

This subject was fairly devoid of specific content (as in how to accomplish this), and was expressed mostly as a wish that students would not cease learning as soon they completed all of their schooling.

Respect diversity for all that it brings to the student experience today, and for how it prepares each individual to understand the world in which they will live and work tomorrow.

While some respondents specifically mentioned how much they believe the VST program has added to the District, most simply expressed a desire for their students to be in a diverse learning environment that would more accurately resemble the world in which they will live and work.

Practice fiscal responsibility – from the building level to the District level.

A bit of a subset of integrity, the idea of fiscal responsibility was expressed mostly along the lines of effective, intelligent management and utilization of tax resources and sound budgeting practices.