



TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 211

SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

JANUARY, 2016

INTRODUCTION

Township High School District 211 utilized a trained facilitator from UNICOM•ARC to conduct several focus groups to gather input from a variety of constituent groups representative of the community. A total of 14 listening sessions, including well over 200 participants, were conducted in late January 2016. These group discussions have been conducted in advance of a community wide survey and a large public engagement program that the District will conduct during the months of February, March, April, and May. The purpose of this engagement process will be to engage representatives of the full community in identifying strategies that will improve the work of the District and its efforts to support the academic, social and emotional growth of its students. Participants included a wide variety of individuals that make up the school community including citizens at large, municipal officials, parents, students, business owners, members of the District 211 staff, and several groups representative of the resident immigrant population.

This summary is not a verbatim account of these discussions, but rather a review of conversations that were documented by the focus group facilitator.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

In coordination with District administrators, UNICOM•ARC developed a discussion guide to be used during each group session. The following is in summary of that discussion guide.

- If you were talking to someone planning to move to this area, how would you describe the community? And if they asked about public education — what would you say? How would you describe District 211 to someone new to the area?

- When thinking about public education here in District 211, what do you see as its strengths? What might you consider the District's major challenges going forward? (Probe) What are you concerned about as you consider the District's future? What challenge, in your opinion is most critical and must be looked at as a priority issue?
- Let's think about academic preparation of students here in District 211. What skills must a successful graduate in 2020 possess? (Probe) What skills, aptitudes, and preparation are most important for students graduating from District 211 in the next 5 years? What future demands will be placed on students as they graduate and take on a career or attend college?
- Do you have any specific ideas or suggestions for improving the educational program in District 211? (Probe for impressions about starting time — meaning a later starting time might be good for students and about the integration of technology into the curriculum).
- Let me ask you about the District's long-term financial health. Do you think that District 211 has more than enough funds available to meet its academic obligations, sufficient funding, or less than sufficient funding?
- How would you describe the condition of District 211's facilities? (Probe) Do you have any area of concerns with respect to school facilities? Do the school buildings meet the changing dynamics of teaching and learning?

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Perceptions of the Community and of Township High School District 211

Most participants gave very positive comments to how they viewed the quality of life found in areas that are within the attendance boundary of the Township High School District. Most comments suggested that the community offered a great place to live, work and raise a family. Participants found a sense of connection and optimism in their larger community where people enjoyed living, value their property and were provided a full and supportive range of city services.

For the most part, participants found District 211 as "unequaled" in the Chicagoland area. Most were very happy with the performance of the District and agreed that a strong school system protected the value of their homes. Families often move into the area in order to have their children attend schools within the elementary and high school districts. The population of District 211 was thought to becoming more diverse with significant growth in the numbers of Latino, Polish and Indian families moving into the area. By and large, participants viewed this diversity as positive, offering students an enriching educational experience in knowing those of various nationalities and cultures.

Participants agreed that there existed a concern among some members of the community that local taxes were increasing and having an impact on families throughout the area. Some thought that parents and community members were at times, complacent in their support of the District, remaining silent on controversial issues that were being brought forward by small minority groups.

The Strengths of Township High School District 211 — *What do we do well?*

Participants thought the District to be well respected, innovative, academically strong, and financially sound. Teachers and administrators are held in high esteem and found to be caring and nurturing in their work with students. Most participants agreed that staff members would do “whatever is necessary” to encourage a student’s success.

Areas of strength included, tutorial programs for students that may need extra help, the use of technology as an integral part of the instructional process, a strong and successful program for special needs students, various gifted, magnet and advanced credit programs, a rigorous curriculum, a strong summer school program and, importantly, safe and orderly schools. Each group, without exception, was appreciative of the way the District responded to the needs of all students.

The Higgins Educational Center and Project Excel programs were mentioned frequently as outstanding examples of how the District attempts to build success for all students.

Challenges Facing Township High School District 211 — *What don’t we do well?*

There seemed to be a wide variety of comments when asked what challenges faced District 211 now and into the near future. Most, however, responded that the growth in diversity was a continuing issue that would require the District’s sustained attention. Likewise there was common discussion with regard to external pressures being placed on the District by the State of Illinois. Some worried that the State might seek remedy of its economic troubles by placing more mandates on school districts like District 211.

Other comments that were shared with some commonality included:

- That greater emphasis and awareness be given to those students who are not college bound or less academically strong. Participants had some concern for the District’s response to those students who fall into the middle of achievement groupings.
- The diversity of staff members does not reflect the diversity among students. More minority staff members would be of benefit to the District as it embraces the wide-ranging diversity among its student population.
- Keeping all parents involved in their student’s education was of common interest
- Allowing staff time to meet the emotional and social needs of students. This was a general concern among teachers and administrators.

In addition, there were discussions among the student group that should be noted. Students were well aware of the fact that, although they felt fortunate to have iPads, not all students had access to the Internet at home. Students felt this to be unfair.

In addition, there was some discussion around the lack of recognition, outside of major sports, given to students for their various achievements. And, several students felt concern that female students were not being “encouraged” into STEM type programs equal to that of young male students.

Academic Preparation of Students as They Graduate from District 211

Each group was asked questions related to the preparation of students as they graduate from high school. Consistent discussion among groups focused on the need for graduates to have strong social skills upon entering college or pursuing work or a vocational career. Of importance were proficiencies in what most described as “life skills” ... that being creativity, cooperation, collaboration, perseverance and problem solving. Also discussed was the need for strong proficiency in speaking and writing skills upon graduation from District 211.

Some common discussion among participants centered on the need for students to have “hands-on type experiences” before graduation (internships). Likewise, a rather deep understanding of technology and software’s, some ability to speak a second language and what was described as financial literacy were somewhat common among responses.

Suggesting Improvements to the Educational Program in District 211

There was little opinion among participants as to how they might suggest the District set upon improvement strategies. For the most part, those that responded to this set of questions were pleased with efforts being made by the District toward improvement. The fact the District had arranged for these focus groups and was interested in listening to input from community members was a common point of appreciation. When probed regarding start-stop times, technology integration, etc., few if any concerns were heard.

There were suggestions for improvement among the Latino, Indian, and Polish participants who took part in these focus groups. Most noted that more active interest by the District needed to be made to “include” various nationalities into the full life of the school community. Often these participants, and those in the community that they represent, found some difficulty in accessing the school system. Two factors illustrated their concern. First, a language barrier exists between a predominately English speaking District 211 and those whose first language is not English. Few interpreters are available and often-printed materials sent home were not in their native language. A second issue was the simple fact that many new to this country (and to District 211) just didn’t understand how the school system works. Rather than advocating for better

communication, they often surrender to the background. It's safe to say that many feel "disenfranchised" by the school system.

The Financial Health of Township High School District 211

Generally speaking, those who participated in these focus group sessions found the District to be financially stable using tax dollars both efficiently and effectively. As mentioned previously, some thought the tax base had been increasing and to that end, put a fair amount of difficulty on some families in the local school community. A general feeling among participants, however, was that the District had sufficient funds and that it put those funds toward reaching out to all students with various programs that supported success. This "spend to ensure student success" sentiment was clearly expressed by both the teacher and administrator participants.

Two groups in particular spent considerable time in discussion of the finances of the District.

One group thought the District was managed effectively, with good credit ratings, an established reserve fund and a professional, credentialed staff attending to the financial matters of the school system. They felt the District to be financially stable and in a good position to fulfill its mission. Some felt that if the District failed at anything in terms of the current financial condition, it was the lack of effective communications in educating the full community about financial interests and obligations of the school system. By and large, however, participants felt that District 211 provided a high quality education, contributed to stable property values and acted in the best interests of students and the community with regard to its financial responsibilities.

A second group of citizens took a different view of District finances suggesting a larger than necessary reserve fund, a lack of Board understanding of the budget process and salaries and benefits that are not in line with comparable school systems. In addition, they felt the District offers less than full transparency with the community about budgeting and finances. Participants in this group had concerns regarding possible legislation to return a portion of the teacher pension program to local districts. Should that happen, the group suggested significant and negative ramifications to the District and the community of taxpayers. To a large degree, participants in this group felt the District should reduce its reserves and control its spending in order to return a portion of its levy back to taxpayers.

Describe the Condition of the High School Facilities

Without exception, participants felt the school facilities to be in excellent condition. Building maintenance and repair programs were seen as very effective. Some comments were heard about the fact that buildings were ageing, and to that end failed to provide space that met with today's educational standards. A few comments were heard regarding the lack of field space for student sports and activities. Students felt too much attention was paid to "football" and other sport activities at the detriment of other facility needs. Overall, the condition of the school buildings was of little concern to those who participated in these focus group sessions.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, below are suggestions that found common priority among participants as translated by the focus group facilitator. These priorities will be weighed against survey results and provide some additional direction to the larger public engagement sessions.

- A. Township High School District 211 has an excellent reputation and is viewed as unequal in the larger Chicagoland area.
- B. Academic rigor was a consistent theme throughout these discussions and strength was noted in programs such as special education, advanced credit programs, summer school, the Higgins Educational Center, Project Excel programs, and in the maintenance of safe and orderly schools.
- C. The cost of living in the area, including housing and property tax expenses, are recognized as significant factors that may influence people's decisions to reside within the community.
- D. A rapidly changing demographic (both social-economic and racial minorities) throughout the community is placing additional demands on the District.
- E. Future initiatives will need to be considerate of the time needed to nurture the academic, emotional and social needs of students who attend a District 211 high school.
- F. The need to focus more attention on students who are less inclined to attend college and/or those that fall into the middle of the academic range of ability.
- G. The District is strong financially yet the need exists to more effectively communicate with and educate the community about school finances.
- H. Be watchful of ageing school facilities and plan accordingly to maintain buildings that meet today's educational standards.
- I. Life skills including communication (writing and speaking), collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, and a strong work ethic are required proficiencies of all District 211 graduates.
- J. External influences particularly at the State level may threaten the District's stability.