

Oconee County Schools

Community Engagement Session

Community Conversation – September 24, 2013
Online Survey – September 25 – October 15, 2013

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To assist the Strategic Planning Team with their work, Oconee County Schools engaged its community in a process to gauge the thoughts, feelings and perceptions that stakeholders hold regarding the district – before the plan was developed.

The engagement initiative, designed and implemented by the Georgia School Boards Association, included a community conversation and an online survey. A genuine effort was made to make the process as inclusive and transparent as possible.

Participants of the community engagement initiative responded to the following questions:

1. To be the best it can be, what should Oconee County Schools preserve/keep?
2. To be the best it can be, what should Oconee County Schools change/do differently?
3. As a community, what do we want our public schools to provide for students?
4. What do you think are the top challenges faced by Oconee County Schools?
5. What do you think are the top challenges faced by the students in Oconee County Schools?

The intention of this report is to provide a collection of the best thinking of school and community members regarding the five questions presented. The information gathered is qualitative and seeks to focus attention on those areas that generated the most energy. Members of the strategic planning team will use the input to assist them in developing a plan to move the district forward and one that is reflective of its community.

The Format

Community Forum

During August and September 2013, the district worked to recruit participants to attend the community engagement session. A great deal of effort went into inviting all segments of the community. Notices were distributed in the paper, on the district's website, through school announcements and at meetings throughout the district.

At the community forum on September 24 at Oconee County Civic Center, about 260 participants heard a presentation on the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA)

strategic planning process and a "State of the District" presentation by Dr. Jason Branch, Oconee County superintendent. Information included: educational issues, school district achievement data and the process to be followed that evening regarding the small group discussions. Participants were randomly divided into smaller groups to hold their conversation. Volunteer facilitators, who were not employees of the school district, agreed to lead the discussions, clarify issues, keep each group focused, make sure every person had an opportunity to be heard, and ensure that what was said was properly recorded.

Facilitators did not ascribe any individual's name to comments written in the notes of the small group discussions. At the conclusion of the discussion, facilitators asked participants to prioritize their lists of comments by marking the ideas or comments they thought were most important for each question asked.

GSBA staff transcribed all of the notes. Laura Reilly compiled the report by sorting the comments and using the results of each group's prioritizing activity. Results of the community conversation were synthesized with the results of the online survey.

Online Survey

An online survey using the same questions offered an additional input opportunity. If they desired to do so, participants could provide additional comments on all questions and on the survey as a whole. The choices listed for questions were used only to add structure to the survey and avoid ending up with lists of comments in no order or context. Zoomerang was used as the online survey tool. Open-ended comments were sorted through a manual process. GSBA administered the survey.

The Response

About 260 community members, teachers, students and staff participated in the community forum. There were 262 full responses to the online survey. The largest percentage of respondents to the online survey identified themselves as parents (66%). The next group with the largest number of participants was the teacher group (14%). Attendees of the community forum were not asked to identify themselves, but facilitators indicated that for most of the groups, there was a good mix of parents, teachers and staff.

Reasons to be Proud and Assets to Build Upon

When asked, “To be the best it can be, what should Oconee County Schools System preserve/keep?” the following represents the areas of greatest agreement among survey respondents and/or community conversation participants:

- 1) **Student achievement** – The current focus on student achievement and improving the lives of children are important issues to stakeholders. They also recognize the challenges associated with doing this (funding).
- 2) **Fine arts, foreign language and extracurricular activities** – Stakeholders believe that the arts, foreign language instruction and extracurricular activities assist students in becoming well-rounded individuals.
- 3) **Teachers and staff** – Stakeholders are proud of the teachers and staff in the district. Many comments reflected appreciation for what they do and the desire for the district to continue to work to retain highly qualified teachers. Stakeholders also voiced appreciation of educators’ work to differentiate instruction to accommodate different learning styles and abilities.
- 4) **Strong sense of community** – Participants of the community conversation talked about their pride in Oconee County and also concern about growth disrupting the strong sense of community currently in the county. They also felt it important that good relationships be nurtured between the school board, administrators, schools, parents and the community.
- 5) **Safety** – Issues surrounding providing a safe, orderly environment generated a great deal of discussion and agreement among participants of the community conversation as well as the online survey. Stakeholders are concerned about the safety of students and staff. They recognize and appreciate what is being done in this regard, but also feel safety needs to remain a focus and priority for all levels of administration.
- 6) **Small class sizes** – This is an example of an issue crossing over into other areas. Stakeholders want to keep class sizes small where that is already the case, and focus on finding ways to decrease class sizes in the future.

Possibilities for Change and Growth

When asked, “To be the best it can be, what should Oconee County Schools change or do differently?” the following represents the areas of greatest agreement among survey respondents and community conversation participants:

- 1) **Assessment** – Stakeholders in a number of the discussion group voiced concern about the current “report card” being used in the elementary school. They feel the standards-based reports are confusing to students and parents and are not a good way to communicate performance.
- 2) **Fine arts, foreign language and extracurricular activities**– Focus on the whole child was a phrase used to communicate the desire for students to have more access to these types of programs.
- 3) **Common Core Curriculum** – A number of stakeholders at the conversation and on the online survey are concerned about the new curriculum and the related assessments. Feelings of change made for the sake of making change and changes moving too fast were also expressed.
- 4) **Technology** – Providing adequate technology resources to teachers and students was voiced by a number of groups. They also indicated the need for staff support in the area of technology.
- 5) **Facilities** – The maintenance of buildings, the district’s facilities plan and equity in facilities across the district concerns a number of stakeholders.
- 6) **Small Class Sizes** – This is a big issue for a great number of participants of the conversation, as well as the online survey. Stakeholders understand the financial constraints of having small class sizes, but also feel the quality of instruction could be affected by larger class sizes.

What the Community Wants the District to Provide Students

Several themes emerged from the respondents of the online survey and the participants at the community conversation:

- **Curriculum** - One theme emerged as a major focus for stakeholders at the community conversation and on the survey. They expressed a strong desire for a curriculum that includes college *and* career preparation. Vocational education, exposure to different careers, life skills such as personal finance and the need for more electives were cited as examples of what stakeholders want the district to provide for students.

- **Rigor** – While a number of groups called for rigor and increased rigor, there was also a call to define rigor. “Is it just more work, or is it something else?” asked one group.
- **Rigor With Balance** – Along with a desire for more rigor, is the need for more balance for students and a focus on the “whole child.” From nurturing a love of learning by making instruction more interesting to providing time for physical activity came up in discussions.
- **Student Apathy** - A number of groups at the community conversation brought up the need to increase motivation and accountability for learning on the part of students. They provided ideas such as providing field trips; scheduling guest speakers; more interaction with business leaders and UGA staff and students; and teaching children to appreciate diversity by increasing their global awareness.
- **Technology** – Stakeholders are interested in seeing technology as a focus for the district. This includes use and access by teachers and students.
- **Highly Qualified Teachers** – Having well-educated, experienced teachers is important.
- **Safety and Security** – Providing a safe and secure learning environment for students and staff is important

Top Challenges Faced by the School District

The following are issues that surfaced most often through the online survey and the community conversation:

- **Funding** - Stakeholders overwhelmingly recognize the financial and funding challenges the district faces.
- **Small Class Sizes** - Because preserving small class sizes is costly, many stakeholders also listed this as a top district challenge.
- **Sense of Community/Community Divide** – Stakeholders cited concern that growth may affect the strong sense of community that exists now. They also noted concern about the “divide between North Oconee and Oconee” and the perception of disparity in facilities and services between the two.
- **Recruiting and Retaining Highly Qualified Teachers/Staff** – Because of funding issues and the lack of pay raises coupled with increased responsibilities, stakeholders fear that the best employees may leave.
- **Technology** – Providing for the effective instructional use of technology was noted as a top district challenge.
- **Instruction** – Participants noted the challenge for teachers in differentiating instruction and trying to care for the “whole child.” Time was mentioned as the reason for the challenge.

Top Challenges Faced by the Students

The following are issues that surfaced most often through the online survey and the community conversation:

- **Pace of Change** - Too many changes to the curriculum, the pace of instruction and the difficulty of the new curriculum were cited as major challenges for students. Groups and survey participants noted the stress placed on students by the amount of testing, lack of physical activity and social time, as well as the lack of services to help stressed, depressed teens.
- **Behavior and Discipline** - There is a need for more character education, bullying prevention, and continuing to maintain high standards for behavior. These concerns are based on the potential for negative peer pressure, drug use, and bullying