

A FOCUS-GROUP BASED MARKET ANALYSIS OF STREETSBORO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

PRESENTED TO STREETSBORO, OHIO, BOARD OF
EDUCATION

BY

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METHODS

During the days and evenings of May 6 through May 8, 2009, we met with six focus groups. The first group consisted of four administrators, four teachers, and four staff. It was preceded by a conversation with the central administration and two representatives from the Board of Education. The remaining five focus groups found a total of 57 members of the community involved. No types of recording devices were used in any of the sessions. We simply listened, took notes, and asked follow-up questions as warranted.

Each group was asked the same three major questions:

“What are the strengths of Streetsboro Schools?”

“What are the weaknesses of Streetsboro Schools?”

“What are the needs of Streetsboro Schools?”

After listing the needs, as they were identified by each group, on a visible sheet of newsprint, each group member was given a piece of paper with the numbers 1, 2, and 3 on it. They were then asked to look at the list of “needs” the group had just generated and pick from it the “single most important” need of Streetsboro Schools. This need was to be written next to the number 1. Next to their number 2 was their choice of the “second most important need” and next to their number 3 was their choice of the “third most important” need. The “ballots” were collected and the group was dismissed. This process was repeated in each group.

To rank-order the needs supplied by each group, we awarded three points to a need cited as “first” by a participant; two points to a need cited as “second”; and one point to a need cited as “third” most important. The ranking of these needs is shown in part of the sections which follow.

STRENGTHS - - AS SEEN BY BOARD/CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

- Stable Board
- New administration
- Teachers – lots of them single out kids for special reinforcement and praise
- Diverse student body - - “really cool kids”
- An incredible desire overall from people to do what is best for the school district
- People who care about facilities
- Most of the positives are people-oriented: e.g., playground staff; bus drivers; kindergarten teachers who make all kids feel special
- The school website - - neat - - informational - - has kids on it
- P.R. impact is very positive
- P.T.A.
- The district is growing - - economically fairly stable
- The schools are the focal point in the community - - really no town center
- Successful sports teams and athletes
- Campus orientation of schools

STRENGTHS - - AS SEEN BY TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF

- Great teachers - - make kids feel special; provide praise and reinforcement
- Small community
- Kids from good families
- Two communities - - “New” and “Old” Streetsboro provide lots of new ideas
- Above average financial stability - - in a good position to build
- High growth area
- High school is comfortable size - - students don’t get “lost”
- Diversity of students
- Great friendly, welcoming staff
- Proximity to several universities
- Nice geographic location with available land - - not near the chaos of the city
- The campus arrangement - - facilities collaboration
- Most kids come to learn and don’t bring “baggage”; there are support systems for those with “baggage”
- Unique extra-curricular activities - - e.g., juggling club; morning news, etc.
- Transportation is offered to everyone
- Available technology and support
- Grade level buildings provide good education

STRENGTHS - - AS SEEN BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS

HEARD IN ALL GROUPS - - - NONE

HEARD IN MAJORITY OF GROUPS

- Teachers: They go above and beyond - - go out of their way to help; dedicated; keep in touch
- New Superintendent - - a listener with a wealth of resources; deals great with parents; visible; involved; enthusiastic
- Good “back and forth” communication between schools and community

HEARD IN MORE THAN ONE GROUP

- Parental involvement - - families are involved, enthusiastic, participatory, caring
- School employees - - everybody (aides; lunchroom workers, office staff, etc.) participates and cares
- We are competitive with surrounding schools
- Interaction of schools with Chamber of Commerce and business
- Cultural diversity
- Voice-mail and e-mail technology
- Website - - Very parent-friendly; kids’ grades are easily accessed
- Coaching staff - - wonderful; help kids with college
- Wait School - - everyone there is great
- Parents are allowed to participate in their children’s education - - “The doors are open”
- Streetsboro is a good hometown - - “old school values” - - safe, country atmosphere

HEARD IN ONLY ONE GROUP

- Nice to see former Streetsboro students coming back as teachers and/or involved parents
- Small class size
- Elementary curriculum
- Cooperation between schools and police
- Middle School Collaboration Team
- State test scores are improving
- Skills outside academics are also taught - - e.g., interviewing for a job
- School buildings set up by grade levels
- Campus setting
- Informal open houses at the beginning of the school year
- Administrative staff - - caring - - engaged - - willing to help kids
- Having these focus groups is a good start
- Athletic programs; family oriented; something for every age group
- D.A.R.E. program
- (My) child has grown more in this system than in private school
- Most teachers live in the community
- Drug raids have not found drugs at the high school
- Early identification of gifted children
- Special education students are not labeled
- P.T.A.
- Statistics are good here - - e.g., graduation rate
- Extensive report cards
- “Accelerated Reader” programs at Campus and Wait
- Use of technology at Campus and Wait e.g., student research papers
- The “leveling system” at Defer - - kids get needed help
- Growth in the district
- Placement of students moving into the district

WEAKNESSES - - AS SEEN BY BOARD/CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

- FACILITIES! Pick a building, but start at the high school; Bad image compared to other schools; the kids “feel it”
- Some staff haven’t “bought into” the schools - - finding problems rather than solutions thus holding the district back
- Strong union mentality - - primarily from teaching staff
- Resistance to change from community - - possibly from staff
- Mistrust of (prior) Board
- Negative criticism of (current) Board
- High school curriculum; the “block scheduling” problem; perception that the current curriculum doesn’t do well in preparing kids for college

WEAKNESSES - - AS SEEN BY TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS, STAFF

- Job stability sometimes abused; lack of merit-based pay can hurt effort
- Facilities - - age
- Facilities - - outgrown and overcrowded
- Facilities - - problems here will soon begin to affect instruction
- Lack of long-term strategic planning; even starting now, we'll still be five-six years behind
- Kids coming in hurting academically; a year behind for Cleveland area kids
- No system to recycle/replace technology; much is donated
- Need coordination of technology; more staff training needed
- Community struggles with communication; lack of goal-setting between schools/government/community
- Need more continuity of administrators
- Move-ins limit the community's "coming together"
- Little parental involvement; too many parents "afraid of" academics
- Many parents wanting to help but not feeling welcomed - - having to be fingerprinted, etc.
- Lack of communication (high school) between teachers and parents; parents don't know how to find/utilize a forum for teacher-parent interchange
- Lack of trust in Board and Administration
- Morale low now among teachers and staff
- Morale low among parents; feeling of many that teachers don't want them "there"
- Too many teachers living outside the school district
- Takes too long to bring about change - - many people just "give up"
- Groups who get involved (PASS) get frustrated; feeling that you get "beat up" for trying to get change and failing - - then they pull their kids out to private schools
- Need "exit interviews" with parents who pull their kids out

- Persons leave because Streetsboro doesn't offer enough programs (like engineering; music; "show choir")
- Transportations problems with multiple buildings - - they hate the "switches/transfers" with younger kids
- Parent expectations from the "Old Streetsboro" vs. the "New Streetsboro"; creates problems for staff; many staff can't handle the "New Streetsboro" kids
- Preconceived notions of what high school is like from parents whose education experiences were not positive
- Demographic and socio-economic changes are a challenge

WEAKNESSES - - AS SEEN BY COMMUNITY MEMBERS

HEARD IN ALL GROUPS

- Buildings/facilities - - particularly the high school - - seen as contributing to a bad image for the schools; seen as soon to begin to hurt instruction;
- Curriculum issues: Block scheduling criticized; Seen as not preparing Streetsboro students for college; Seen as over-soft; lack of breadth with some specific areas mentioned - - science; engineering see as lacking

HEARD IN MAJORITY OF GROUPS

- Some teachers with “union mentality” - - leaving school as soon as legally possible; not welcoming parents, etc.
- Parents not feeling welcomed by teachers when they come to schools
- Coordination of bussing; too much “switching”, etc.
- Bad “image” of Streetsboro schools; not competitive with surrounding districts
- Curriculum (high school) too soft
- Overcrowded schools
- Too much “teaching to the tests”

HEARD IN MORE THAN ONE GROUP

- Gifted programs are weak
- Mistrust of (earlier) Boards
- Weak parental involvement
- Too many teachers/administrators use Streetsboro as a “stepping stone”
- Student code of conduct not sufficiently enforced
- Teacher-parent communication lacking
- Too little “life skills” taught
- Teachers living outside the district

- Tax abatements for businesses have hurt
- “Old Streetsboro” vs. “New Streetsboro” a problem
- Socio-economic change in the district a problem
- Lack of family structure a problem
- Board doesn’t want change
- Not enough minority teachers
- Grading standards too low

HEARD IN ONLY ONE GROUP

- Special Education weak
- Staff has not “bought into” the schools
- Resistance to change from the community
- Resistance to change from the teaching staff
- Lack of breadth in curriculum
- Lack of merit-based pay for teachers
- Losing our best kids and best families
- Old buildings
- Lack of long-term strategic planning
- Kids moving in from Cleveland area are a year behind academically
- Lack of technology
- Lack of technology training for teachers
- Lack of school – community cooperation
- Lack of school – city cooperation
- Lack of trust in administration
- Low morale among teachers
- Low morale among staff
- Lack of acceptance of change

- No “exit interviews” conducted with parents who are moving their kids
- Lack of programs like “Show Choir”, etc.
- Discipline problems at the high school
- Teachers who “can’t handle New Streetsboro kids”
- Lack of respect for teachers
- Lack of respect for administrators
- Parents not enough involved with their kids’ academics
- Aides/helpers treatment of kids
- “Nobody cares” if a kid drops out of school
- Diversity under-recognized; lack of resources on diversity and diverse student populations
- Not enough minority principals/guidance counselors
- Teacher tenure
- No recourse for actions of teachers/administrators
- Racism complaints - - middle school
- Racism complaints - - not addressed promptly
- Need more positive public relations - - “People don’t realize all of the good things going on here”
- Accountability lacking
- Need to be compared to other than Hudson or Aurora

NEEDS OF STREETSBORO SCHOOLS - - THE BOARD AND
CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION VIEW

THE 'TOP TWO'

Facilities: Having a high school large enough for anticipated growth and with technical facilities sufficient to accommodate new technology and curriculum

Campus-wide plan for facility and land use

OTHER NEEDS

Updated and more rigorous curriculum

New central services/technology building

Close Wait

New middle school

Central office/administration building; use current building for technology

NEEDS OF STREETSBORO SCHOOLS - - THE TEACHERS,
ADMINISTRATORS, AND STAFF VIEW

THE 'TOP FIVE'

Need to evaluate the effectiveness of what we do - - and be willing to change

Facilities upgrade

Successful and trustworthy leadership

Tolerance and respect for change

Listen to the community as to why they are not sending their kids to our schools

THE SECOND TIER

Developing common goals across all stakeholders

Timely and effective communication into and out of our schools

Identify WHO and WHAT we are

Give more attention to positive people

Listen to the community about why they don't feel welcome in our schools

Tolerance and respect for new administrators

NEEDS OF STREETSBORO SCHOOLS - - THE COMMUNITY VIEW

THE 'TOP TEN'

Evaluate and upgrade the curriculum

New high school building

Upgrades in technology and its applications

End block scheduling

More classroom resources and aides

Zero tolerance policy enforced for ALL

Athletic complex and infrastructure

Cultural awareness

More welcoming of parent involvement

More diverse/minority staff

THE SECOND TIER

More accountability from Administration down through school aides

More efficient routing of busses

Enforced accountability to code of conduct for faculty and staff

Enforced student dress code

Early intervention initiatives

Expansion of gifted program/services

Search for creative NEW sources for funding

Upgrade/remove Wait

More city/school partnership and cooperation

Library upgrades

Build new elementary schools

Begin career education and life skills at an earlier age

Eliminate tenure

Raise GPA for sports participation

Letter grades at elementary schools

Upgrade Campus

Higher expectations for students

More qualified coaching staff

Financial accountability for donated funds

Provide adequate school supplies promptly

Reduced school fees/explain their use

More/better public relations

OTHERS MENTIONED

New middle school

Wider range of Special Education services

More school/parent/community communication

Celebrate student Academic achievements

Use weighted grading at the high school

Dress code for teachers

Fund-raisers which give immediate returns

Later start/end times for high school students

RECOMMENDATIONS

As we listened to the responses to our three basic questions and to the interactions (sometimes rather lively) among members of the focus groups, we heard more than just the words which were uttered. The tone, the tenor, and the intensity of the discussions are reflected in our recommendations. Also reflected here are our insights drawn from well over 30 years of listening to members of school communities as they discussed; criticized; praised; or battled in varying arenas and dimensions the situations of their public schools.

Your Board and Administration are to be complimented for their willingness to listen to their community, and to their employees, as they participated in these sometimes “no holds barred” interactions focusing on their schools.

It must be recognized that a person’s PERCEPTIONS are for that person their REALITY on many fronts and in many situations. For example, a careful reading of the “strengths” and “weaknesses” of Streetsboro Schools will show that rather commonly the same perceived strength may be criticized as a weakness by a different individual. This phenomenon is similar to the legend of the multiple blind persons who each felt an elephant from a different perspective and came up with strikingly different descriptions of the beast. So it is with schools, and likely with most if not all public entities. Certainly the “truth” (or at least the truth as the schools would perceive it) may lie with only one of the perceptions - - or at many points between different perceptions.

This leads to the following basis for our major overall recommendation:
THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS TOO MUCH COMMUNICATION PROVIDED BY A SCHOOL TO RESIDENTS OF ITS COMMUNITY!

This is particularly true of communication presented to (and hopefully received and understood by) persons who no longer have - - perhaps never had - - kids in the public schools. This group is critical since it is by far the largest segment of the population in any community. Included in this group is the segment of older citizens. It is this segment which is likely to turn out and vote in the largest proportions - - particularly when any form of tax issue might be on a ballot! Any and all efforts aimed at involving the senior citizens of the community with exposure to the schools, their facilities, their programs, and their kids who benefit from them must be emphasized and strengthened whenever possible. ANYTHING being done or considered should be examined from (among others) the perspective of: how might this be of value or benefit to our senior citizens, and/or those with no kids in school? And how might this best be communicated and explained to these folks? And how might this be used to bring these folk into more, or closer, contact with our schools?

Thus one part of the "Communication" recommendation is an enhanced alertness to ways of involving/interacting with these older citizens. We will shortly be recommending the creation of several "Task Force" initiatives to tackle specific areas of interest/concern/controversy in your community.

Total and perfect communication (let alone understanding) between a school system and its community cannot be expected nor can it be found. That only means a greater need for MANY forms of such communication. The use of such traditional vehicles as a district-wide newsletter (one which goes to EVERY residence); press releases; publicity and public relations pieces are certainly critical - - - and it appears that good use is being made of these by Streetsboro Schools. In addition, other vehicles such as the praise we heard for the school's website; the user-friendly information sources for parents; and the one-call system (to name just a few) are also valuable and seem to be making a mark in your community - - - at least with people who are aware of them and who actually USE them.

But the need for more and better information/communication between school and community flows in the OPPOSITE direction - - namely the flow of communication FROM various components of the community TO THE SCHOOLS. Certainly the efforts made with the current project (the focus groups) is a large step in that direction - - and your schools have taken that step!

There are TWO additional vehicles for welcoming and stimulating useful input from the community which we would like to suggest. These are NOT some amazing new phenomena which have never been previously discovered or used by a public school district.

The first of these is a COMMUNITY ADVISORY COUNCIL. This would find a group of 20 – 25 persons drawn from the various demographic segments of the school district meeting with the Superintendent (and perhaps a Board member or two) on a regular basis. Such meetings might occur once a quarter; semi-annually; or even only once a year. The group must include some who are critics of the schools; some who have no kids in public school; some from different parts of the district; inclusion of minority community members would be a must. Like our focus groups, people who are good communicators fit here as well as people who are “connected” in the community - - hair dressers and barbers belong here as do realtors, members of the clergy, etc. Many school districts of our acquaintance have used such a group - - some for a number of years. We have frequently recommended such a means of soliciting community input into situations, plans; and problems facing the board and administration.

The second of these is a SUPERINTENDENT’S EXECUTIVE BUSINESS ADVISORY COUNCIL (or some similar name). This group - - less-frequently found than a Community Advisory Council - - would be composed of a smaller number (perhaps a dozen or less) of top leaders of business, industry, and key entities in the community. This would include bankers; health care providers (hospital CEO, etc.) industrialists; a funeral director;

union executive, etc. Such persons would likely have a different perspective from that of the membership of the Community Advisory Council. Their financial and political clout in the community could be a consideration, but this would certainly not be the sole criterion in selecting members. Such a group, also something of a “sounding board” for situations to be faced by the Superintendent and/or Board, might meet two or three times during the year.

You have a Superintendent who is actively “listening”, open to changes and to inclusion of new ideas, and very sensitive to public relations activity and approaches. Such advisory councils as suggested above mesh well with her strengths and would provide substantial impetus for nearly any move which the schools might contemplate.

We would suggest that the Board develop four separate groups to begin investigation and gathering of information which pertains to three areas which we found from listening to the focus group participants. Some of this is readily seen from the listing and ranking of “Needs” of the schools; other impetus for recommending these groups came from our listening to the comments and discussions of members of your community.

These four groups we would call TASK FORCES. They would likely include one Board member each (perhaps as its Chair). Members would be selected from community, staff, administrators, and teachers based on their interest and expertise in each of the areas of “task”. Their work would begin as soon as possible. The life of each Task Force would be determined by the time line developed to accomplish its task.

Those Task Forces we recommend would include:

- A CURRICULUM TASK FORCE - - - This issue, one which is certainly not a stranger to the Streetsboro Schools, was the topic of much input and debate in our focus groups.

- A MINORITY/DIVERSITY ISSUES TASK FORCE - - Here too is an area of interest and concern which emerged from much discussion in focus groups. This would include the challenges and opportunities involved in recruiting and hiring minority teachers, counselors, and administrators as well as diversity issues and some rough edges which focus group interaction identified.
- A SENIOR CITIZEN TASK FORCE - - This group would investigate and develop all possible ways of involving the senior citizens segment with the schools.
- A FACILITIES TASK FORCE - - There are so many dimensions to this one that this might be the group with the longest tenure as well the most areas to investigate.

We realize that we are posing a significant “To Do” list of recommendations for the schools - - and for the community as well. You do appear to have both a Board and an Administration which does not shy from challenges, nor is likely to shirk from the time and effort expectations which these Task Force and Council suggestions would entail! We wish you well in any and all of the directions which the input from your community and your employees may take you.

Glenn and Gordie