



**Community Consolidated School District 181
Report of findings from community, student and
staff focus groups
February 25, 2015**

On February 18 and 19, 2015, 11 focus groups were conducted with individuals representing key stakeholder groups within the District 181 community. From a low of four participants in each of two groups (HMS and HMS Feeder School staff members and district administrators) to a high of 18 (students from Clarendon Hills Middle School), the groups featured lively participation and strong opinions on the subjects discussed.

Each of the groups – with some modest modifications for the CHMS and HMS student groups – followed an identical order of events:

- Participants' impressions of their community, presented as if they were describing it to a newcomer.
- Impressions of the school district that they would share with that same newcomer.
- A review of the three leading options being discussed for the future of Hinsdale Middle School.
- Discussion of other topics on which the district should be focusing, in addition to addressing the HMS situation.

One Patron Insight staff member facilitated each focus group discussion, while a second Patron Insight staff member took notes. (The lone exception was the two student groups, which were held at the same time. In these cases, the group moderator also took notes.)

A review of the findings from a written exercise that was part of the group process, plus the extensive volume of notes that documented the conversation in each group, shows a series of themes that – with slightly varying degrees of intensity – were consistent across the groups, regardless of the members' characteristics.

While it is important to remember that focus groups are a qualitative exercise, and should not be viewed with the same certainty as quantitative research, such as random telephone studies, the goal of helping to bring the key issues to be tested in such future quantitative research was achieved over the course of two intense days of conversation.

This report presents the key themes emanating from the focus group participants. Each theme is followed by a discussion of that theme and, where applicable, sample verbatim comments from the participants themselves (presented anonymously, to protect the confidentiality that was promised to all group members).

Theme: The communities served by District 181 have a well-known and well-cultivated brand, characterized by “family” and “engagement,” and guided by the highly successful and motivated individuals who reside there.

All research processes begin by engaging respondents on basic topics, then strategically working their way toward the core subject matter, as participants get to know each other and the process (in the case of focus groups), or become comfortable with the subject matter and flow (in the case of quantitative research, such as telephone studies).

The District 181 focus groups began by presenting a hypothetical situation, in which group participants were asked to share what they might tell a potential new resident about the community as a whole. It was clear from the results of this exercise that there is a commonly held, much appreciated brand in the community.

That brand is characterized by the presence of successful, high net worth individuals and families, who have committed themselves to engagement with their community, their neighbors and their schools. Multiple individuals used the term “Mayberry” (the fictional town in “The Andy Griffith” television show) to describe how individuals in the community interact with – and help – each other, and how they get involved in areas that protect and further the community’s brand and quality of life.

It was also clear that the communities within District 181 are seen as destinations by most residents, rather than interim stops on the way to a final, long-term city of residence. This is important for the district, because it seems likely (particularly in a district with little to no available land for growth) that the challenge of engaging residents who no longer have children in school may increase over time, as more people remain after they become empty nesters.

Representative verbatim comments:

“There’s a real ‘Mayberry’ feel. People know each other and help each other out a lot.”

“The children have a lot of activities, and that’s how families get to know each other.”

“The citizens are educated, they are well-read and they are worldly.”

“Community members are vocal, which could be a double-edged sword. Parents attend Board meetings, especially if there are important things that are happening.”

“There is individual and organizational pride. Things get done.”

“Some people are a bit overly concerned about others and their business.”

“It’s safe and fun to be able to walk around the neighborhood.”

“It’s a great place to raise children. Kids play in their yards and ride their bikes. There are a lot of parks and activities.”

Theme: The quality of District 181 attracts families to the region, and focus group participants were generous in their praise of the teachers and the academic performance, and called each school a “community” in and of itself. At a more macro level, however, there were notable areas of concern that group members felt needed attention.

Transitioning the conversation to what the participants might say about the school district to the fictional newcomer, the praise was free-flowing.

Citing the fact that many people move to the area specifically because of the schools, participants pointed to numerous areas they perceived to be strengths.

- Teachers received adulation for their work in the classroom, and for their willingness to actively communicate with parents about their child’s progress and needs.
- The district’s academic performance was noted as being a strength, but also as being an expectation. Specifically, respondents pointed to the fact that the area’s residents are highly successful and competitive, and they expect their school district to meet their high expectations for performance.
- Parent involvement and support was talked about at length. Individuals not only discussed the more routine types of involvement, but they also commented extensively about families stepping up at a significant financial level when called upon. (Technology needs throughout the district and the gym floor at Clarendon Hills were two frequently mentioned examples of this generosity.)

However, the groups were not without their criticisms of the district, both at this point in the group process, and at the end – when they were asked what additional areas should be a focus as the district moves forward. Specifically:

- The funding of technology by parents drew strong comments from many who believe that the district has dragged its feet on moving forward with such initiatives, preferring to wait for data to arrive that would support taking steps in this area. Aside from the concerns about the practical side of this (parents paying for technology, rather than the district), this issue was seen as being an ideal example of a risk-averse decision-making approach that is contrary to what high-achieving parents said they expected.
- The lack of availability of all-day kindergarten was also seen as a shortcoming of the district, with many participants commenting that the district is falling behind its peers, because of the lack of such a program. If the need is space, then steps should be taken to create such space, said the participants. If it is a desire to see data that attests to the benefits of all-day kindergarten, then the district should move expeditiously to secure and review such data from districts whose demographics match those found in District 181.
- The lack of a more complete foreign language program at the elementary level was seen as a negative by many participants, who called the current part-time program for late elementary grades insufficient.

- There were numerous questions about the rigor of some programs – particularly math (which some said seemed to undergo routine changes of approach as well). Parents worried that this lack of challenging math early on would place their students behind as they entered high school, making it more difficult for them to secure a slot at their preferred college or university.
- General concerns were also expressed about classroom space at various schools in the district, with a host of average class size counts mentioned throughout the two days of focus groups.
- Finally, the lack of parking – a problem that is not limited to the school properties in the district, but is a community-wide concern – was mentioned throughout the focus group process.

It is also interesting to note that there were some modest differences among the groups, based on demographics.

For example, one group that ended up consisting of 10 very engaged mothers of current students was more negative than a group that included a cross-section of area residents. Similarly, the less-engaged parents were still keenly aware of the problems at HMS, and thought that the school (in its present condition) was detrimental to the overall district brand.

These types of differences – driven mostly by the participant’s individual level of direct involvement – should be kept in mind as the engagement process moves forward and, eventually, the district makes a decision about a specific referendum question, if needed. While there will be an overall communications strategy, certain stakeholder groups may require more focused attention, based on their specific views.

Representative verbatim comments:

“Statistics show that the school district is excellent. The curriculum is really strong. We’re trying out some new math this year that is challenging, but (because of it) they will be ready for high school and beyond.”

“Very caring administration and staff; very child-centered. The amount of time that is spent with students who need it is amazing. The staff is very caring about student success.”

“There are lots of young families. Most people leave the city, because they don’t want to send their kids to the public schools there.”

“It’s really odd to see elementary schools with this many amenities.”

“People value high scores, new ideas, new toys and new buzzwords. Whatever is the new thing, we jump on it.”

“If we fall from 99 percent to 98 percent, it hits the newspaper.”

“It’s a public district that feels somewhat like a private district.”

“We really support our schools as community members. A good example was the gym floor project at CHMS. You can’t imagine how people came together to get that project done.”

“We have very motivated teachers. They go the extra mile for students, and continue working on their own professional development outside of the district – like getting their advanced degrees.”

“The district has consistently high expectations of staff, students and parents.”

“There is an expectation for excellence. The standard is just so much higher.”

“We’re way behind on full-day kindergarten. The teachers have so much they have to do, and there’s not enough time in half a day.”

“Foreign language is lacking at the elementary level.”

“The academic rigor may not be enough for kids to succeed later on.”

“We are parent-responsive – too much so, sometimes.”

“Squeaky wheels get greased, whether it’s the right grease or not.”

“It’s hard to be a teacher in the district, because you are trying to please everyone.”

“I’m concerned about all the testing. They are constantly prepping for tests, and you miss some of the basics, when you are prepping for so many tests.”

“There has been a large turnover in administration; four curriculum directors and three superintendents in the last seven years.”

“The Board often strangles progress, like taking a wait-and-see attitude on technology, for example.”

“Special Education classes are not great, particularly since we pulled out of the Special Education cooperative.”

“We’re big on the ‘next big thing.’ Then, two years later, we move on to the ‘next, next big thing.’”

“There’s a disconnect between how administration expects us (staff members) to do things, and how it really works on a day-to-day basis.”

“Parents are present at their own school and support their child’s teacher, but they want to stay away from district politics.”

“Educated people who can read an article and then feel like they understand a problem can drive the decision-making process.”

“We are not assessing students early enough. We had to go outside for an assessment, because we don’t have an assessment expert anymore.”

“The gifted program has been replaced by ‘Learning for All,’ and that is disappointing. It has caused a lot of frustration.”

“Families are choosing to go with a private elementary school to get full-day kindergarten.”

Theme: A bias for action exists, as participants expressed much frustration that problems at HMS (along with other needs) continue to linger, in their view.

Evident throughout the two days of focus groups was a high degree of fatigue, mixed with a feeling of *déjà vu*, as the subject of Hinsdale Middle School was introduced.

While championing the value of data-driven decision-making, and the wisdom of investigating the work of other high-achieving districts in high net worth communities to see what lessons they have learned that could be applied in District 181, respondents talked at length about the need to move forward with common sense solutions that solve the problems at HMS, that inject current technology into more classrooms, that ratchet up rigor, and the like.

The feeling was that the current research that was being undertaken (of which they were now a part) to find a solution to the HMS situation that would be acceptable district-wide was a repeat of work and study that had already been completed – multiple times, in the view of some participants.

They believe that the current Hinsdale Middle School falls well short of the expectations associated with the Hinsdale community brand, and that the issues with the facility are well-known across the district. While some said they believed that any possible referendum would likely need to include at least some other needs (outside of HMS) to secure support district-wide, others bristled at the notion that residents would be so parochial in their evaluation of a proposal and would vote “no,” if they did not see any personal benefit included therein.

Representative verbatim comments:

“There will have to be a big marketing effort to help taxpayers understand the right priorities for the school.”

“Should we provide something to be a giveback to the community, like a parking garage? Marketing and explaining ‘What’s in it for me?’ will be important.”

“The education is solid, but the renovation should have been done years ago, and now, we are still waiting and planning!”

“We are tired of waiting. Let’s get it taken care of.”

“There is an urgency to find a solution.”

“We are continuing to talk – it is paralysis by analysis.”

“I get tired of hearing how high people’s taxes are. You chose to live here.”

“Need to get out there and tell people that their taxes are low, by comparison.”

“I’m optimistic. This is a community that values education. It’s been a long time since we proposed a referendum, so I’m optimistic, if there is one in the future.”

Theme: While there is evident affection for the location of Hinsdale Middle School, the current building draws much criticism – both for its design being out of step with today’s educational needs, and concerns that the infrastructure maladies that have dogged it recently have caused irreparable harm to community perception.

When discussing the future of Hinsdale Middle School, the conversation reached a very clear fork in the road: Respondents find much favor with the location, but have no love for the building itself.

Being so close to downtown and abutting a neighborhood were seen as pluses that would be lost if a replacement facility was constructed elsewhere – an idea that drew almost no support throughout the two days of groups.

Respondents talked with much affection about the appeal of students being able to walk to town on Friday afternoon for recreation, and the opportunity for them to be joined by CHMS students who arrive via train. The placement of the current HMS is in keeping with the community feel and “Mayberry” perception that dominated the conversation about the appeal of the region.

The building itself, however, draws mostly criticism, centered in two areas.

First, the 1976 open-concept design is seen as being counterproductive to the educational needs of today’s students. From the oddly shaped (and often undersized) classrooms, to the library that offers no privacy, to the issues related to a third floor gymnasium – along with numerous personal issues of concern expressed by those with a direct connection to HMS – there is no shortage of criticism about the design.

Second, the well-known facility issues involving leaks and the discovery of mold appear to have caused permanent damage to the belief in the community about the long-term viability of the building. Under the banner of “perception is reality,” the district may have addressed and eradicated the mold in the building, for example, but focus group participants expressed doubt that the general community would ever again have full confidence in the air quality in the building. It was also expressed that the water leaks – again, which have been fixed – have created a “Wonder what will happen next?” concern in the community.

Representative verbatim comments:

“It was a poor design when it was built, and it’s even worse now.”

“The infrastructure of the building is not set up for the current student load.”

“Students are opting out of HMS for medical reasons.”

“The stress from the building issues has to be hurting students. The inequality of the education is a shame.”

“HMS is in a great location. People live where they do, because of where HMS is.”

“People like the fact that the school is located in downtown Hinsdale.”

“It might be better to renovate and add on, if the health problems can be alleviated.”

“Renovating would be just throwing good money after bad.”

“There is some emotional attachment to the current building, with people saying, ‘It was good enough for me.’”

“It’s hard to imagine renovating it, because HMS is viewed as a ‘sick building.’”

“The negatives of the building cannot be overcome without a complete replacement.”

“When you consider that everyone’s grandma and grandpa has to go up to the third floor to see their grandchild in a game, that’s an issue.”

“There won’t be an emotional attachment to HMS; people just won’t want to pay for it.”

“People are sick, and the whole north wall of the building is leaking.”

“My understanding about mold is that if it’s in one spot, then it’s in other spots.”

Theme: Of the three options presented for consideration, rebuilding on the same property was somewhat more popular than extensively renovating the current structure. As mentioned previously, there was little support for building at a new location, because of the loss of the convenience to downtown and the doubt that suitable property could be located for a reasonable cost.

The focus groups dissected the two options (of the three presented) that they saw as being at least somewhat viable solutions to the needs at HMS. The most commonly held views on each were as follows:

Renovation

Not surprisingly, the main advantage mentioned by participants was the perceived cost savings versus constructing a new building. Expressing concerns about the already high taxes in the area, these participants said that the goal should be to “put something on the ballot that would pass” and that a lower-cost proposal might have a distinct advantage.

However, the stronger sentiment was that renovation would need to be so drastic (“to the bare walls,” as one respondent put it) that it would be seen as “throwing good money after bad” by many in the community. There was also puzzlement about how that level of renovation could take place without causing a major disruption to HMS students and families. In essence, the belief was that residents would find fault with spending money on a nearly 40-year-old building that is rife with design and mechanical issues.

Rebuilding at the same location

While there were many questions about the practical aspects of this solution, (Where would it be located on the property? Is there enough room? Will it be disruptive to students to have construction going on outside, while they are in school?), the appeal of being able to remain on the current property was a strong draw for this option. It was also seen as the option that would allow a “fresh start,” in terms of building a school that would be suitable for today’s educational needs and be acceptable for decades to come.

Aside from the basic “How would it all come together?” questions stated above, cost was seen as the primary negative. (Although, it should be pointed out, several participants quoted their understanding of the formula that is applied to determine when it makes more financial sense to build new than to renovate.)

While the “vote” among the options – used as a tool to simply commence discussion on the subject – clearly leaned toward rebuilding at the same location, there was enough interest in considering renovation that it would be wise to include this option, as the research process moves forward.

Representative verbatim comments:

“Where are the kids going when you are rebuilding? Do students have to move?”

“You cannot have students in the school while we are renovating the school. If you try to leave sixth-graders in their elementary schools, for example, it would be very disruptive.”

“Do not displace the students during the process. You cannot sacrifice a crop of kids.”

“The new school should be a showplace of the community – an opportunity to make it a central focus of the community.”

“Building on the same spot gives us a clean start, including looking at the design of the building.”

“We need to redo the spaces, because of how instructional approaches have changed.”

“We have invested millions in Veeck Park. Why tear it up?”

“There is a lot of history that suggests that it wouldn’t be successful to try to move to a new location.”

“People are sensitive to green space, because we are so landlocked.”

“There’s already an established traffic pattern (at HMS). There are things that have already been thought through and put into place with that location in mind.”

“The school district did own a chunk of property where they could have built a new HMS, but nobody wanted to send their kids down 55th Street. It was like they would have fallen off the edge of the earth if they had to do that.”

“There is a certain dollar figure where, once you reach it, you should just rebuild. I think we would be there if we tried to renovate HMS.”

“Without knowing whether you could build them side by side, I just can’t be sure. But if you could build it and keep the students from having to be displaced, then it would be good.”

“If you could find a way to use the entire space effectively, you would get a lot more community support.”

“Renovating the building is probably the most practical, politically appropriate option. It seems like it could be made better, so that it would work for another 25 or 30 years. Rebuilding would be too expensive.”

“Could they close an elementary and rebuild it as a middle school?”

Theme: A clear, complete presentation of the details on each option will be critical, as the conversation and research move forward.

Over the course of the 11 focus groups, participants asked numerous questions that they would expect to have answered, as the process moves toward a decision that may eventually appear in a referendum, if one was needed.

The most prominent topic, not surprisingly, was cost. Most respondents said they will not be able to offer a clear preference between the two options, until they have a chance to review the total project cost for each choice, and the specific impact on their tax bill for each option. They would also want to know what steps the district took to evaluate all the financing alternatives, in an effort to limit the cost impact on residents.

Additional questions included, but are certainly not limited to, the following:

- What is the time line for this process? (Considering the perception that there has been much talk, but little action, a time line – and documentation of steps being completed on that time line – would appear to be essential to build faith among those in the community that the district is moving toward a decision.)
- What would a new HMS on the same property look like (in terms of an architect’s rendering), and where would it be situated?
- What would be the capacity of a new building, and how does that capacity relate to anticipated changes in the student population?
- What plans would be in place to limit the disruption that would be caused by construction taking place on the same piece of property where school is being held? What about safety concerns?
- If a new structure is built, how would parking be addressed? Athletic fields? Making the facility available for appropriate community use? Maximizing green space?
- If the choice is renovation, how would the exterior appearance change, if at all?
- How would the district manage the process of renovating the building, while students are occupying it?
- What would be the level of renovation? How different would the inside look, and how would the changes “work” for students and staff? (Again, an architect’s rendering would likely be in order.)
- What assurances can be provided to the community that the infrastructure issues have been solved for the long-term?
- What is the reasonable life expectancy of the renovated building?

All of these questions should be answered as part of an educational effort by the district, intended to draw community members to forums at locations on both sides of the district, along with locations exclusively for staff members – particularly HMS staff members.

Representative verbatim comments:

“We would need numbers – like the cost of renovation or replacement – before we can make decisions.”

“Whatever solution gets voted on, it should clearly show that it will improve property values.”

“People are willing to pay higher taxes for a good school. People will choose to pay the taxes.”

“It’s not fair that CHMS has a student-to-teacher ratio of 20 to 1, while HMS is 29 to 1.”

“The message about the need for a new building to the non-parents is going to be very difficult.”

“We need to work with the political agendas around things like parking, if we decide to rebuild. This is the school district’s and the Village’s chance to solve the parking problem.”

“There is no mentality of innovation. There is no one in the community pushing for innovation. They are no risk-takers or dreamers.”

“People will have to understand how bad the HMS building is. Straight out. Black and white. Right out there.”

“Even if there are other issues, the focus needs to be on HMS.”

“There is a group that is very anti-change. They are in the minority, but they are loud.”

“Is there any money in reserve that you can use to help make it cost less?”

“Security – not inside the building, but when the kids are outside of the building. Is there any linkage to the police department with our security systems? Maybe some way to link to the police department with cameras?”

“I’m worried that there will be some people thinking about all the money that we’ve spent on that building. Would people support tearing it down?”

“Has the district sought advice from districts in similar situations – high-performing districts in landlocked areas? They should collaborate with other districts. Some things might not work for our community, but some might. We’re close to so many great districts. Why don’t we ask them?”