

Cherry Creek Schools
Community Forums
2009-2010

Voices of Our Community



Cherry Creek Schools
Division for Performance Improvement

in partnership with

LEARN School of Education and
Human Development,
University of Colorado Denver

March 10, 2010



Dedicated to Excellence
Cherry Creek Schools

Results from the Cherry Creek School District 2009-2010 Community Forums

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Cherry Creek Schools Division for Performance Improvement in partnership with LEARN¹ School of Education and Human Development, University of Colorado Denver

Questions For Our Community

Description of the Community Forums

Cherry Creek Schools has a long history of seeking community input on the District's future direction. In that spirit, we turned to our stakeholders again during the 2009-10 school year to further define direction in service to our mission and vision. This work will create a basis for the development of a district performance plan.

The Community Forums (CF) provided three opportunities (in December 2009 and January 2010) for parents and community members to meet, reflect, and discuss the aspects of school experience most critical to student success. About 400 parents and community members participated in the CF, with some representation by District staff. At each forum, participants divided into small groups for discussion. District staff facilitated the dialogues and recorded notes from each of the small groups. In all, we collected notes from a total of 48 small groups.

We posed the following questions for discussion, with a deliberate intent to be open-ended so as not to lead participants to discuss any particular aspect of school:

- 1** What does a successful school experience look and feel like in a district whose mission is "to inspire every student to think, to learn, to achieve, to care?"
- 2** What should a safe and caring learning environment look like for students to be successful?
- 3** What should the learning environment look like if students are displaying citizenship and character traits?
- 4** How would you measure results? What data should we collect?

¹Laboratory for Educational Assessment, Research and InnovatioN

Compiling Our Community's Feedback



Categorizing Comments: Overview of the Process

Forum discussions resulted in 48 sets of recorded comments from all forum small groups and from an online follow-up survey. We submitted all comments in electronic form to the LEARN research group at the University of Colorado Denver (UCD) for analysis and reporting. This document is a summary of the major findings, excerpts of the final report, and representative participant comments compiled by UCD.

A team of two UCD researchers independently read through and coded the forum participants' comments by:

- 1** Identifying predominant themes throughout comments
- 2** Coding the responses
- 3** Verify coding categories
- 4** Reconciling differences between coders
- 5** Refining coding
- 6** Recoding where necessary
- 7** Making final revisions and summarizing findings

Some recorded comments consisted of only a few words, while other comments extended to several sentences. Sometimes, a comment was placed into more than one category when it seemed to fit into more than one theme. A few comments were not coded due to lack of clarity.

For further details about the coding process, please see Appendix A in this document.

Themes In Our Community's Comments

Nine Themes for a Successful School Experience

Researchers identified the nine themes below in forum participants' comments and feedback. Themes appear in approximate order of importance as expressed by participants.

1	Provide a Global, 21st Century Education
2	Create a Caring Community
3	Identify and Address Individual Needs
4	Value and Respond to Diversity
5	Partner with Parents and Community
6	Focus on Character and Citizenship Outcomes
7	Align and Equitably Distribute Resources
8	Support Development of Quality Staff
9	Ensure Physical Safety

The theme sections on the following pages include a general description, a summary of the relevant comments, and examples of participants' comments.

Important Note:

The data for this report originates in notes taken by recorders during small group discussions. Some recorders typed comments verbatim; others used a summary approach. Some remarks were translated to English before they were recorded. Some comments are actual quotes, while others are recorders' summaries or restatements of key points made by participants. We have made every effort to capture the intent, key points, and spirit of participants' responses. That said, we edited some comments in this document for readability and length and made minor corrections when it was apparent that there had been a typing error.



For further details about the coding process, please see Appendix B in this document.

Theme 1

Provide a Global, 21st Century Education

Description

Across all focus groups, this theme garnered the largest number of comments. This theme represents participants' "desires for students to have a comprehensive education that develops students academically, vocationally, socially, and physically, and involves students in their own learning through hands-on, relevant, and technically savvy strategies." Students should be well-rounded individuals who are ready for post-secondary opportunities, who practice critical thinking skills, who can connect their learning to the "real world," and are prepared to serve as global citizens.

Our Community's Opinions and Reflections

Details and Comments: Participants were clear that school must be connected to life and that curriculum and instruction must focus on global education, cultural integration, and the application of learning to various professions that do or do not require college. Motivating students by establishing a clear sense of purpose was raised multiple times.

"Kids need a purpose for their learning. How can they apply what they are learning to real life? How might it help them with a job in the future?... They need to have opportunities to see the possibilities of what they can do with what they learn."

The concept of a well-rounded education directs the education system to address the needs of the whole child—academically, socially, physically, and communicatively—resulting in caring, service-oriented citizens. "You are more than a sum of your GPA..." was a recurring notion. Participants believe that in addition to academics, the District should provide affordable activities (e.g., clubs, intramural sports, arts, and music) that are available at a variety of times, including in-school, after-school and on weekends. They noted the importance of making sure that families are aware of these opportunities. Additionally, participants called for the District to offer paths to multiple post-school options with an understanding that not all students can and need to go to college but can pursue a variety of post-secondary experiences.

"Successful school experiences honor where students are developmentally and honor many post-high school options, college included. If the District continues to offer a wide variety of course options and activity options, this honoring of multiple paths to success becomes more likely."

Forum participants expressed a desire for instruction that is engaging, student-centered, hands-on, rigorous, and encourages creativity. "Student engagement and responsibility are defined from an early age and flower in high school." They want teachers to focus on helping students learn how to be lifelong learners and problem-solvers, to "organize their thinking and behaviors around learning." Central to this discussion were comments regarding how teachers should not be teaching "from the book." Teachers should strive to deliver curriculum that takes students deeper than discrete facts by integrating materials and tools used in the "real world" to make connections across subject areas.

"...21st Century learning skills—being involved in a project rather than just sitting and listening; experiential learning; technology. Don't teach to a test—the real test is real life." "Provide multiple opportunities to demonstrate knowledge."

“Don’t teach to a test—the real test is real life.”

“Critical thinking/deeper reasoning and understanding of the materials. We are missing this in public education in general. Students need to hurry through material because they need to move on to the next topic. Even a first grader feels they haven’t spent enough time on a topic for them to learn all they want to about a subject.”

Additional comments addressed the manner in which instruction should be approached. Participants requested that teachers integrate more collaborative approaches to learning while being clear and realistic about the nature of competition and individual recognition for accomplishments. They wanted curriculum options that prepare students for life, including topics such as post-school financial management, working with others, college, relationship-building, understanding credit, expanding foreign language offerings to include Arabic, instituting and requiring that all students learn a foreign language. Others called for an increased focus on technology, beginning in elementary levels, and use of laptops in classrooms in-line with standards for 21st Century skills.

A final set of comments associated with this theme regarded assessment. Forum participants identified the importance of steady growth each year for all students across academic and social dimensions, noting that students should have the confidence that they have grown and are ready for subsequent levels. Having said that, participants also were very clear in their conviction that grades should be based on what students can do and demonstrate, not on participation.

“Merit based grades... grades should be based on the work, quizzes and tests, not on whether or not they used their hall passes.”



Theme 2

Create a Caring Community

Description

This theme generated the second largest number of comments by forum participants. Participants expressed the need for students to feel emotionally safe, cared for, respected, encouraged to succeed, and be a part of a connected school community in which learning was collaborative, fun, inspiring, and challenging. The theme is summed up by the following quote, *“Students feel secure, encouraged to be the best they can be, in a warm and friendly environment.”*

Our Community’s Opinions and Reflections

Details and Comments: Emotional safety and security is a predominant component of this theme. We must create environments where students feel comfortable expressing themselves without risk of retribution and have clear expectations for behavior. Establishing caring connections with adults for each student in the school is important. Participants recommended instituting positive behavior support (PBS) systems across all schools and incorporating bully-proofing curricula.²

“Safety, in terms of them being able to express their views, is important. Be able to say what you want and feel like you won’t be put down for your views. Students need to feel that teachers have their safety at heart. Emotional safety has become more of a topic, i.e., stressful pressure, suicide... cruelty has intensified with technological access/ways to share stinging comments.”

Other aspects of a caring environment are concern and encouragement for each and every student to succeed regardless of individual needs.

“Students should feel valued and engaged in their learning, and in their journey through school, that they are connected to an adult, not a number.”

Comments directed attention to building a school community with a culture of personal belonging/connectedness, concern, mutual respect, collaboration and a focus on assets. In addition, participants talked about inspiration and passion for lifelong learning and integrating “fun” into learning.

“As a student I feel value as a part of the community, no matter what kind of kid [I am] (GT, Special Ed, minority, etc...)... A school community should mean that I feel at home... larger schools don’t feel like a community.”

“When school inhibits the love of learning, it is too much about the grades and not as much about learning. To grow a lifelong learner, learning must be fun. While it is okay to push students and teach them to strive, the fun and love for learning [should not be] lost.”

“Students should feel valued and engaged in their learning.”

Interestingly, notions of caring tempered the notion of high expectations with a call for balance and for living in the present.

“We seem to emphasize too much and too early—the ‘next step.’ Parents are urged to start talking to students about college as early as middle school. Self-scheduling is a specific example of how we may be urging a level of responsibility onto students who may be too young to deal with the transition in a positive way. This may cause some students angst. How do we strike the balance between being clear about expectations and the necessary preparations for the college road ahead and focusing on enjoying the process of learning in the present?”

Under this theme, comments also suggested that the District attend to transitions, help students move from one level to the next, and create physical environments that are welcoming to all.



²Our District board policy states the expectation that schools have “a secure school climate...that is free from threat, harassment and any type of bullying behavior.” The District provides clear guidelines to schools regarding bullying/harassment prevention. School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SW-PBS) is a broad range of systemic and individualized strategies for achieving important social and learning outcomes while preventing problem behaviors with all students. Currently, CCSD has 23 elementary schools and 13 secondary sites implementing PBS and two PBS/Bully Prevention Coaches to support schools with trainings and implementation of programs/strategies.

Theme 3

Identify and Address Individual Needs

Description

Within this theme, forum participants acknowledged the importance of attending to the individual needs of students. The overall sentiment within this theme was that students should be seen as individuals who have unique learning needs. Teachers should identify and foster each student's potential through differentiated instruction that addresses the needs of students across the spectrum (including race, income and intellectual ability). Participants acknowledged that class size is an important factor in teachers' abilities to address and instruct children individually.

Our Community's Opinions and Reflections

Details and Comments: The following comments illustrate this theme.

"It is important to focus on those who are underachieving, but we cannot lose focus for those who are overachieving."

"Each individual child is the focus!"

"We don't have to teach 40 different ways, but as long as the teacher knows how to handle each, I am pretty pleased."

"Differentiated instruction is a reality in the classroom; avoid one-size-fits-all. We need to acknowledge that kids learn differently and are inspired differently... a successful school must provide that."

In concert with calls for differentiation was the opinion that addressing individual needs should occur without tracking, without diluting the overall experience of the whole, and with an understanding that labels do not always capture or define the whole child.

"We need to bring the gifted students and Special Ed students into the school community; we need to understand... that they may need something different for enrichment or extension. We should recognize that if we label a child, the 'label' may not apply to every aspect of their learning or themselves."

Further, forum participants urged that attention to student learning differences be approached in a way that each student feels valued, recognized and validated.

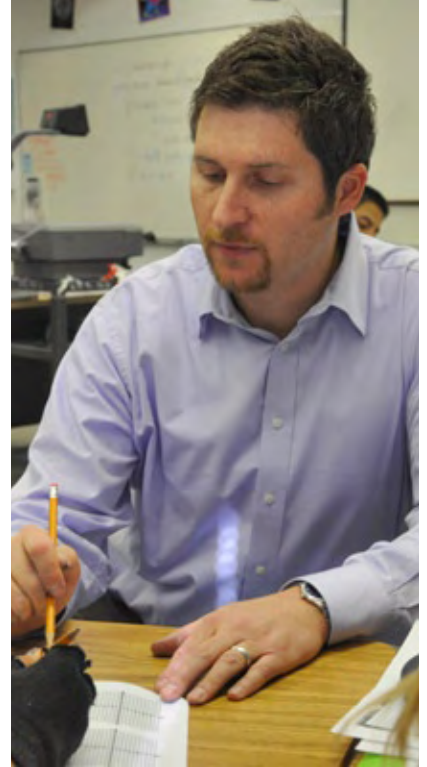
"There is always a lot of emphasis on the achievers, but not necessarily the ones who are really trying, but not necessarily as successful. The strugglers should be acknowledged when they make gains. Validate the effort."

“Each individual child is the focus!”

“I would want my individual talents to be recognized and valued and have those things shape the instruction I receive.”

Within this theme comments also relate to self-determination and self-advocacy. Participants stated that students should feel comfortable to take risks, believe in themselves, be self-directed, make goals, and have the confidence and persistence necessary to advocate effectively for their own goals and success.

“Teach kids to explore. Teach kids to honor the struggle. Teach kids that learning can happen in adversity. Ownership of one’s own success should be imparted to each student.”



Theme 4

Value and Respond to Diversity

Description

Forum participants acknowledged the changing demographics of the District and called for a focus on inclusion, inclusiveness and integration for students and families who represent different aspects of diversity – race, culture, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, class, ability levels, etc.

Our Community's Opinions and Reflections

Details and Comments: One of the most compelling comments within this theme was, “No more ‘melting pot,’ we want a ‘tossed salad’.” Regardless of the nature of the so-called “difference,” there was a suggestion for the collective to honor and support all students and families within the school community. Multiple quotes capture these sentiments:

“We arrive here timidly and sometimes our kids absorb a sense of [low] self-esteem. We would like our kids to have the ability to express themselves freely without restrictions.”

“When my daughter is twelve, I would like her to cover her head... I would like the district to pay attention...to help other children understand the cultural reasoning for covering the head. I don't want her classmates to tease her. I would like children to understand the cultural reasoning for covering the head so that they will understand why it is offensive to remove the head covering.”

Participants emphasized equity and access for all students.

“There is a difference among different schools in the way that students with special needs are integrated into the classroom/class structure. This seems to be easier at the earlier grades.”

“My dream is to walk into an AP class and see it as diverse as the school. Equal access to resources and enrichment activities at all schools. I expect to see opportunities for all students regardless of their background.”

To support this goal, participants suggested the development of culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum that build off of students' assets and background experiences and integrates role models. “When I go in a classroom and see diversity and that every child is accepted for who he is, there is transparency within the class.”

Forum participants acknowledge the need for professional development for teachers in order to achieve these goals and move forward from an assets perspective.

“The District should be responsible for making teachers aware of different cultures. Foreign students are under stress... We must understand these students and make sure they know they have assets and value.”

“My dream is to walk into an AP class and see it as diverse as the school.”

Similar to comments under **Partner with Parents and Community (Theme 5)**, remarks in this section called for the development and use of resources and forms of communication that recognize language differences and create inviting environments for all students and parents.

“As parents we are very capable but... we need to continue learning so we [are able] to help our kids. We would like more opportunities in each building to help build relationships and respect among cultures. We would like to see major communications in Spanish and have flexible schedules for school events.”

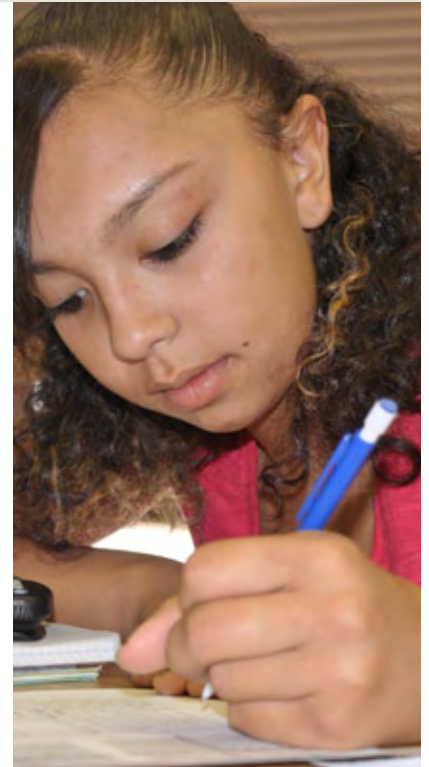
“As parents, we are willing to support the schools but we don’t always know the process and procedures... we need more contact through cultural liaisons to understand expectations. We feel sad and disconnected when we don’t understand. We would like this barrier reduced. Sometimes the school thinks we don’t care about our kids and our education, but we do. We just need more cultural and linguistic support.”

Forum participants urged that the diversity of teachers and administrators should reflect the diversity of students.

“Our district is quickly changing. The recruitment and retention of teachers of color would lead to more of a safe and caring environment. There should be more recruitment of males. Do we recruit our own students? We need the role models for the students of a more diverse teaching population. A majority of teaching staff are white; it would be nice to have more diversity, reflective of the student population racial makeup.”

Finally, as an over-arching strategy for valuing and responding to diversity, comments highlighted the need for students, teachers, administrators, and parents to develop the ability to view issues from multiple perspectives. There was an impression that goals of inclusion, inclusiveness, and integration would be more easily accomplished if each stakeholder could view events from multiple perspectives.

“What do you do about the situation where the parent isn’t or can’t be involved? The parent working two jobs, the parent who is falling apart, what do we do?...We must make them comfortable with being involved in school – teach healthy, respectful questioning, tolerance by teachers and fellow students.”



Theme 5

Partner with Parents and Community

Description

This theme relates to how schools should communicate with, develop partnerships with, and otherwise involve parents and community members in activities to educate students, and provide other types of support to parents and families. There was a widespread belief that it is critical for parents and families to be involved in the educational process. Parental involvement requires that barriers be addressed. As Cherry Creek becomes more racially, culturally, and economically diverse, we must also diversify the ways in which we connect with and involve parents. Forum participants saw this as a critical area of need for the District.

Our Community's Opinions and Reflections

Details and Comments: All parents and families need effective communication from school staff, and school staff must be able to rely on parents and families to actively support education. There should be a partnership between parents and schools.

"As a parent, I need to be involved with my children's education and have a partnership between parents and educators."

Parents need to set and model appropriate behaviors in their home, and teachers are responsible for this in the school. In turn, parents need to demonstrate support for teachers in their home. Schools and teachers should welcome parental involvement.

"You have to welcome parents all the time, not just the first time."

This partnership works well with some teachers and some parents, but forum participants struggled with how to expand successful partnerships to all Cherry Creek families.

"How do you get other parents to understand that they are stakeholders?"

Central to the discussions were issues of family diversity in terms of socio-economics, language, and culture. Parents working long hours, evening shifts, and schedules without flexibility need access to information in ways that do not require them to attend weekday evening meetings. In addition, schools cannot assume that all families have Internet access. Schools need to find ways to reach families with these diverse circumstances. Parents felt a sense of inclusiveness, a broad sense of community.

"They are all our kids. We need to offer programs and services for those parents who can't do all they want to do."

For some families, language poses a barrier to their involvement. Many Cherry Creek families speak languages other than English at home; parents may be monolingual. The District should provide interpreters and send information home in languages common in that community, to the extent possible. In addition, immigrant families do not always understand how American schools work. Parents suggested that there be cultural services to support their access to information and other resources.

“As a parent, I need to be involved with my children’s education...”

One forum small group that was conducted in Spanish recorded,

“As parents, we are willing to support the schools but we don’t always know the process and procedures...we need more contact through the cultural liaisons to understand expectations. We feel sad and disconnected when we don’t understand. We would like this barrier reduced. Sometimes the school thinks we don’t care about our kids and our education, but we do. We just need more cultural and linguistic support.”³”

Schools can form partnerships with other parts of the community and alumni, as well as with parents. Community members, parents, and alumni could be invited to give talks at school about their careers, that is, what they do and what it took to get there. In addition to getting community members inside the schools, students should be encouraged to get involved with the community outside the school. All students should be required to participate in age-appropriate community service activities, and community members should provide students with opportunities to get involved.

Forum participants also mentioned other types of parental support: classes on how to be a successful parent of a school-aged child, training in technology, English language classes for parents and other community members, academic content classes, and/or sample homework assignments for parents so that they are better prepared to help students with homework.



³Comment also included under Theme 4: Valuing and Responding to Diversity, page 10.

Theme 6

Focus on Character and Citizenship Outcomes

Description

While the question regarding character education was not directly covered by all focus groups, important citizenship concepts emerged, including the need for students to think globally, act locally, see themselves as part of a larger world, and develop a sense of caring and responsibility for others. Certain strategies came up repeatedly within this theme, including engaging students in community service, peer mentoring, peer tutoring, volunteerism, and developing leadership skills.

Our Community's Opinions and Reflections

Details and Comments: The quotes below capture the sentiment of forum comments under this theme.

"In a school where students are displaying citizenship and character traits there would be cooperative learning experiences, children listening as well as speaking, active participation in learning activities, children sharing materials, children using their manners, and acting in an orderly manner."

"Children should be treated with respect and in turn act respectfully toward their peers, teachers, and visitors... It starts with high expectations and letting children know when they have crossed the line. When a child misbehaves, verbally or physically, the child needs to know that the particular behavior is unacceptable and the consequences that result."

"Schools need to be the catalyst to initiate, promote, and develop programs to build character and strengthen community. I envision a character-building community where caring, engaged citizens serve with moral courage. It is really a lifelong commitment to encouraging these qualities first within the teachers and students, and then in the community. It needs to be an association of parents, students, educators, business and community leaders working together to encourage the qualities of citizenship and ethics/character. Establish training/conferences for students and teachers to educate on the subject of citizenship and ethics/character traits."

"Student volunteerism and community outreach should be central and should be celebrated just as much as sports. Even offer credit for helping out in the community, peer tutoring, etc."

“Excellence is expected without arrogance.”

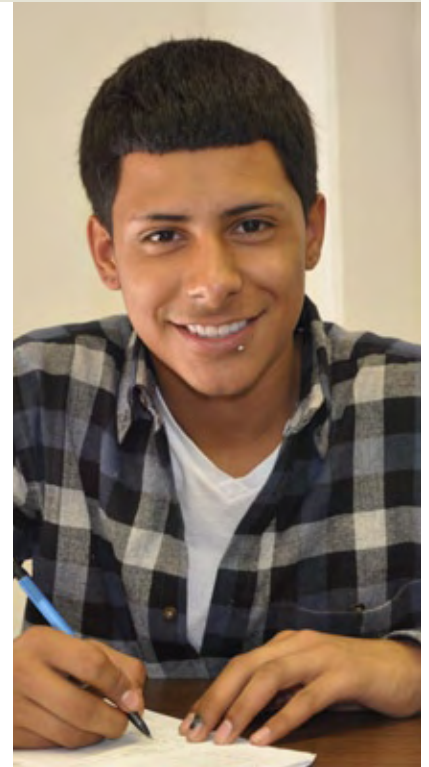
“Students collaborating, being respectful, and having those traits is important, but it needs to be at another level and involved in the learning. Community service can also teach economics, math, science; the African project has kids tracking donations, looking at the problems they’re helping to solve, talking with the children in Africa [via computer] through Skype.”

Community members regarded involvement in these activities as important to developing students’ sense of and demonstration of integrity and responsibility (toward self, others, and the school). Students need a moral compass, such as acting on incidents when they see people being mistreated and not yielding to peer pressure when it is directed toward disrespect of self and others.

“How do we create the environment where integrity and honesty is honored at the highest level? How do we instill this in the mind and the heart of the child?”

They hoped to see students acting in a way in which *“You do the right thing because it’s the right thing to do: Excellence is expected without arrogance.”*

In some cases character education was seen as necessary to move students beyond actions of egocentrism and entitlement. It is about *“Creating kids who can balance their needs and the needs of the group.”*



Theme 7

Align and Equitably Distribute Resources

Description

This theme focuses on district-wide policies and decisions that affect all Cherry Creek schools, and those that affect how student time is organized and spent. Comments are predominantly focused on fairness across schools, district-wide consistency, school reputations, availability of programs, school size and class size, and the ways that students' limited time is organized.

Our Community's Opinions and Reflections

Details and Comments: Equity across schools was seen as an issue of fairness and equitable treatment. Due to differences in student populations across Cherry Creek schools, forum participants asked that the District consider school needs when determining the allocation of resources.

"Diversity in schools is not equal across the district; blanket rules don't apply to all district schools. More resources should be shifted to those schools that have a greater need."

This notion of fairness is related to district-wide consistency in expectations and quality of education.

"Excellence in education doesn't look the same in different schools, and it should." "How can schools be so different?"

One of the most commonly requested opportunities was the availability of high quality technology hardware and software at all schools. Another frequently mentioned item was the physical appearance of school property. All schools should be well-kept and clean; physical appearances matter to students and the community.

There should be cohesiveness across the district; there should be a feeling of a "district team," rather than competition among schools. As one participant put it,

"We need to be careful in a district of such different schools that we don't have 'brain drains' or 'athletic drains' to benefit [one] school... Also, it pulls away parents with resources that can positively impact the school. It benefits all students to keep high achievers at all schools."

Several participants commented on the detrimental effects of schools competing for students and the need for all Cherry Creek schools to have similar, strong reputations. The external perception of some schools needs to improve. One way of addressing this is through better public relations; that is, to communicate the good things going on at each school through better District and community reporting (e.g., through the *Denver Post*, the *Hub*, e-newsletters, homeowner's associations).

The educational program opportunities available district-wide should include preschool and full-day kindergarten, as well as opportunities for advanced study (for example, IB programs). Participants expressed a high value for preschool programs and asked that there be sufficient preschool slots to accommodate all Cherry Creek families: "Preschools are full. It is difficult to find a place for all children who need preschool." Participants also recognized the importance of full-day kindergarten and asked that the district provide this in all elementary schools.

*“It benefits all students
to keep high achievers at all schools.”*

Some participants expressed concern about class size and school size. Class size was frequently mentioned as important for meeting the needs of all students, *“Addressing students in the middle is difficult when the class size is too big,”* and to ensure a safe environment, *“Smaller class sizes deny the opportunities for bullies to manifest in the group dynamic.”* Some felt that smaller schools provide more opportunities for creating community within schools, *“How do you keep the connection in buildings that are so big?”*

Another frequently mentioned issue concerned the ways in which schools use limited student time. Student scheduling was a concern. On a daily basis, concerns were about block scheduling, whether the school day is long enough, whether lunch periods are long enough, whether the school year is long enough, and whether campuses should be closed in order to keep students focused on school and increase safety. One person pointed out the relationship between the length of the school day and the flexibility of teachers to spend extra time on topics. Another person wondered if closed campuses might provide students with more time during the day. It was also suggested to schedule students into study halls during open periods.

“We need more time in the school day. Can we make it longer? How do you teach the whole child in 6½ hours? Teachers are pressed for time — is it easier to just revert to telling students the answer? Teachers are on a tight schedule, if you miss something, teachers can’t go back and ensure that the kids ‘got’ the concepts.”

Some participants voiced concerns about the scheduling of final exams (after winter break) and questioned the need for final exams at all. For example, one participant asked, *“How much of a break do students really get when they are stressed about and maybe preparing for upcoming exams right after break?”*

Parents commented about the relevancy and the amount of student homework assignments. Homework should *“reflect applied learning versus rote practice. Limit ‘busy work’...and multiple repetitions of the same types of problems.”* Homework should be just as relevant to learning goals as is the work done in class. A longer school day would allow for more work to be completed in the classroom and, therefore, less homework.



Theme 8

Support Development of Quality Staff

Description

This theme addresses comments related to developing and maintaining high quality staff (including principals, teachers, and non-licensed staff) at schools. Many participants voiced positive comments about the Cherry Creek staff, noting that the District has great teachers and wonderful schools. However, several participants went on to highlight the following issues in relation to hiring and maintaining high quality staff: kindness on the part of all staff, high levels of competence in each job, diversity, retention of quality staff, and adequate compensation for staff.

Our Community's Opinions and Reflections

Details and Comments: All staff should be kind, welcoming, and polite to students, parents, and community members. These should be best practices for all jobs in the school district, not just teaching positions. Constituents want to see welcoming staff working in the cafeteria, driving the buses, and in the front offices. Staff set the tone for the school and model behavior for students; therefore it is important that they model positive behavior. One participant noted, *“Model integrity and respect: students will want to follow that leader.”*

Teachers should also want to work with students and want to be at school. The engagement and involvement of middle school teachers, both inside and outside of the classroom, was a particular concern singled out by some participants.

“Have teachers that want to be there, who have a passion — a cohesive staff with strong leadership in a positive direction to make our students feel that positive teamwork.”

Ongoing, job-embedded teacher development was another frequently mentioned item, with a call for ongoing, research-based, effective staff development for all teachers, whether new or veteran. *“Teachers can’t teach the way they did 100 years ago or even 10 years ago.”* Teaching needs to be relevant, active, and dynamic. All teachers, not just elementary, should be trained in literacy. A commonly noted area ripe for staff development is the use of technology.

“Keep teachers current so that they can integrate into classroom practice the technology kids use so that it is productive for learning.”

Participants recommended that staff development efforts emphasize:

- principals becoming instructional leaders,
- master teachers supporting new and struggling teachers,
- teachers observing other teachers in their building and in other buildings,
- teachers working collaboratively to share practices that work,
- teachers using culturally relevant instructional strategies, and
- staff with expertise in differentiation.

It was also noted that teachers could benefit from training in how to identify behaviors of troubled teens and provide guidance to them.

*“Have teachers that
want to be there, who have a passion...”*

Staff diversity is important to our community. Staff should “look like” the students. Participants would like us to have a diverse staff in terms of ethnicity, gender, disabilities, and other characteristics. *“Hire more people of color at the top of the system.”* It would be nice if more staff spoke Spanish, particularly at schools with high English language learner enrollment. *“At my son’s school there is a Spanish speaking secretary and that adds an important part to a successful day.”* This enhances an inviting school environment and accommodates the needs of Spanish speaking students and parents.

It is critical to hire and retain quality teaching staff, hold them to high expectations and, in return, appreciate and compensate them for quality work. Some participants suggested that the District revisit the teacher tenure system and focus on a merit-based system.

Having said all of this, it is worth pointing out that a few participants felt that schools have become overly focused on being warm and welcoming and that this comes at the expense of academics. While this was a minority opinion, it serves as a reminder about the importance of balance.



Theme 9

Ensure Physical Safety

Description

This theme reflects the concern of some participants for students' physical safety. Comments related to physical safety were fewer in comparison to other categories. Some recognized areas for improvement as well as needs to strengthen safety in relation to lockdown procedures, monitoring visitors in schools, and availability of security personnel and school staff to supervise students.

Our Community's Opinions and Reflections

Details and Comments: Some parents said that they feel their children are safe in Cherry Creek schools. Parents recognized better organization for pick-up and drop-off, acknowledged the use of "Reverse 9-1-1" for good, efficient communication, and appreciated the remodeling of buildings to create a more explicit entrance and check-in process for visitors. Parents mentioned a connection between safety and learning, noting that with physical safety assured, students are better able to engage in school.

However, several people expressed concern about school safety. Lockdown procedures need broader explanation to students, parents, and the community, and in the event that a lockdown occurs, there must be timely communication. First responders should be immediately recognizable to students, so that students know who to go to and who to trust in an emergency. Elementary schools should ensure that students and staff on playgrounds can re-enter the building quickly in the case of an emergency outside. It was suggested that all security staff wear vests or other types of uniforms for greater visibility and identification.

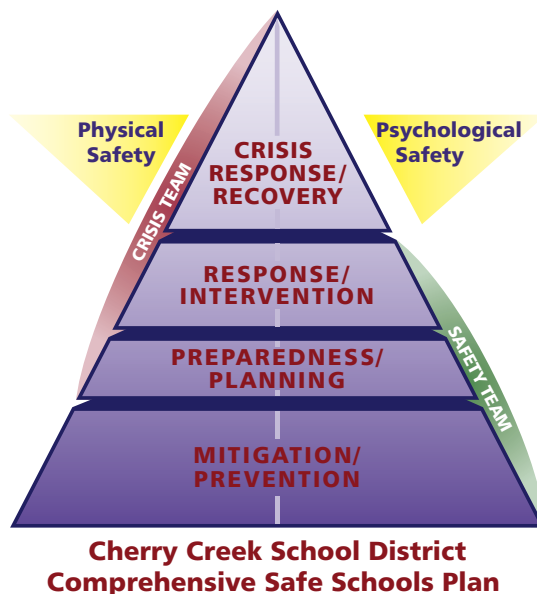
Bus safety is a concern, especially after hours when buses drop students off far from home. Some parents expressed concern about after school safety for students on school property. Other safety recommendations included the continuation or reinstatement of drug education programs, zero tolerance for drugs and weapons⁴, closed campuses at high schools, and clearly marked and safe school drop-off zones, especially during early winter mornings (when it is dark).

⁴Our District board policy states the expectation that all schools have zero tolerance for the possession or use of prohibited substances and weapons. Drug education takes on different forms in Cherry Creek schools via the "Guiding Good Choices" program at elementary and middle schools and the "Life Skills" program at middle and high schools. District staff will continue to strive for increased and improved communication about drug prevention education to the community.

With physical safety assured, students are better able to engage in school

Safety concerns also extended to visitors in schools; participants felt that all schools should have and enforce check-in procedures for visitors. Recommendations included buzzer systems used in all elementary schools and name tags used in all schools. In addition, students should be empowered to assist in identifying and reporting strangers, and students should take some ownership in ensuring a safe environment.⁵

Community members raised concerns about the potential effect of budget cuts on security personnel, the availability of staff to supervise elementary students on the playground, and transportation. Perhaps there are low-cost alternatives that can be explored when measures are potentially expensive.



⁵District staff affirmed that the procedures noted in this paragraph are currently in effect in all district schools. District staff will continue to strive for increased and improved communication about safety procedures to the community.

*“We should not be satisfied with local data...
How do we compare to the world?”*



How Do We Measure Success? Academic and Affective Indicators

Description: This topic area is presented last because it is not a theme that contributes to a successful school experience. This topic summarizes small group comments about how the District might assess the outcomes that contribute to a successful school experience (described in Themes 1 through 9). The majority of responses related to this topic indicated that the District should collect a body of evidence that speaks to multiple aspects of the school experience. Participants took a “whole child” view when discussing successful school experiences (addressed in the first small group question) and when discussing how to measure that success. Both descriptions included academic achievement as well as growth in interpersonal, personal, and social skills.

Academic Achievement Indicators. When participants mentioned test scores, they placed importance on “*staying high performing*,” “*test scores rising*,” and “*every child should grow one year, every year*.” Community members expressed a strong value for comparing Cherry Creek students to other students statewide, nationally, and internationally.

“We look great versus the state but are we preparing our students for a smaller world and a new global reality? We should not be satisfied with local data [comparisons]” and, “How do we compare to the world?”

Forum participants did not believe that standardized tests alone are sufficient indicators of successful schools. There was somewhat more credibility placed on the ACT as a nationally referenced measure than in CSAP as the Colorado state assessment, but there was still very little support for relying solely on either of these measures.

Comments indicated that test data is important in identifying and monitoring achievement gaps among groups of students, primarily among racial/ethnic and socio-economic groups. While most “achievement gap” comments simply acknowledged it as a problem that needed more attention, a few people raised a concern about whether closing the gap will result in high expectations for all or mediocre expectations for all. Although the achievement gap was not a frequently mentioned issue in the forums, the misunderstandings evidenced in these comments warrant mention.

“Will we hold high-performing students down while we bring low performers up?”

“Will [the] gap be decreased by bringing down the highest achievers?”

“Will we hold high-performing students down while we bring low performers up?”

Even when participants spoke about academic achievement indicators, their focus was not solely on test scores. Their conversations included academic outcome measures such as high school graduation rates, college attendance rates, college completion rates, advanced degrees obtained, military enrollment rates, vocational school completion rates, success in chosen careers, employment rates, and average wages. They took a broad view of a successful Cherry Creek graduate and they valued multiple post-high school paths.

Teacher effectiveness data is another source of evidence about the school experience. Although it was not frequently mentioned, some comments suggested using student achievement data to evaluate each teacher’s contribution to student learning, and to monitor how teachers use student achievement data to plan, monitor, and inform their instruction.

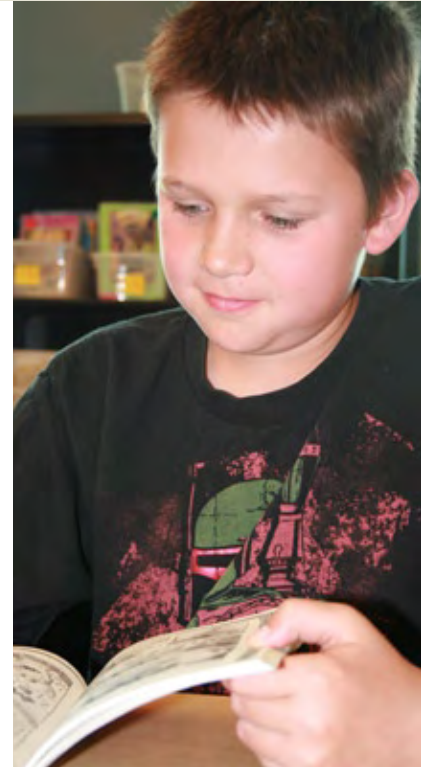
Affective Indicators. The body of evidence should include many affective indicators.

“Successful school experiences include assessments that assess the whole child, not just large scale standardized assessments that focus only on academic standards.”

“What gets measured gets improved-CCSD is missing the boat on those things that aren’t measured. Behaviors like being on time, being kind, having good character, taking pride in school, participating, working well with others, and demonstrating a good attitude should continue to be put on report cards as an accountability for students. Once it is not recognized, it goes away.”

Responses urged that students’ personal qualities be measured. These qualities include integrity, caring, perseverance, consideration, resiliency, appreciation of diversity and differences, and leadership. In general, these forum participants felt that the District should measure whether students are well-rounded and competent as adults. Not only should these student personal qualities be assessed, but student self-reported satisfaction and “happiness” with school should be measured. Student attendance is an important indicator, too, because *“if you are engaged, you come to school.”* Although participants were not sure how to measure many of these attributes, they were confident that tapping into them would help round out the picture of school and student performance.

Some participants felt that students’ personal growth should be measured. Suggestions included asking students to reflect on their own growth and sharing that, conducting high school entrance and exit videotaped interviews to allow students and schools to see how they have changed, and *“Have students create a personal portfolio to measure emotional growth as well as academic growth through a yearly reflective process and requirement.”*



“Interesting how our conversation did not focus on academics...but rather on character...”



Student, Parent, and Community Feedback

Finally, participants recommended that the District clearly communicate the entire spectrum of student success indicators to the community, including, but not limited to, test scores. “CCSD is known for having great test scores, but there are greater things for CCSD to be known for.” Highlight success stories on the other indicators. For example,

“Do not focus only on graduates who go on to exceptional careers in professional fields, but also on ‘equally successful cases where students with special needs compete in a swim event.’ One participant summed it up by saying, ‘Interesting how our conversation did not focus on academics...but rather on character...and these are the things that we should brag about, that we should honor these instances.’”

Where should the affective data come from? Participants overwhelmingly felt that feedback should be solicited from the students. Students should have a voice in evaluating their own school experience. One commented, “Kids are a great sounding board...ask kids the questions [through surveys] and they will answer. Keep the communication open.” Respondents urged the District to listen to what students have to say and involve them in solutions to problems. Consider involving students in evaluating their classes and ask them to give feedback to teachers. When student input is collected, it should be used to influence improvements.

“Students know their strengths and weaknesses, and are happy to get further education on their weak spots. Maybe even a ‘fill in the holes’ type of class that students help design. Work with students to round out instruction. This tactic may even be great for the social/emotional needs. The students know where they have needs.”

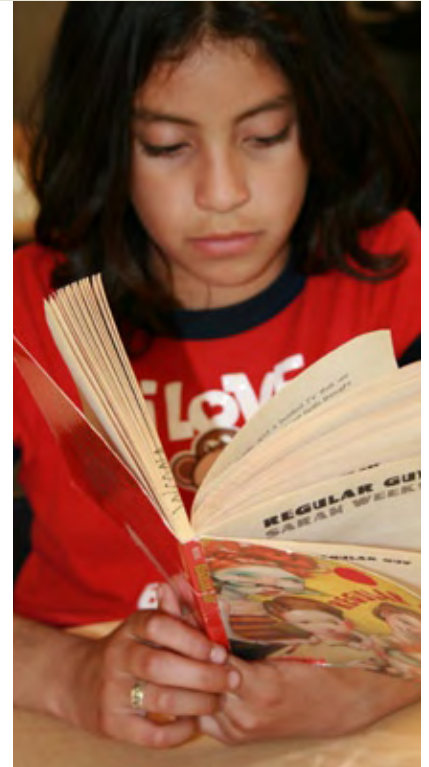
Comments also highlighted the importance of administering student surveys while students are still in school and follow-up surveys after graduation. In addition to surveying all students, recommendations also included that parents and community members be given voice in the evaluation process. To ensure anonymity and foster candid responses from students, use technology to collect data and provide anonymous drop boxes for students to communicate their written concerns. Another source of rich data is observation in the school environment — watch student behavior and interactions while at school. Hold sessions, like these community forums, with students to collect feedback; repeat forums with adults at each school site.

*“Work with students to round out instruction...
students know where they have needs.”*

SUMMARY: What We Learned

In conclusion, the input from nearly 400 parents and community members participating in the Community Forums yielded feedback and advice for the District that fell into ten primary areas or themes. The first nine themes addressed what a successful school experience looks and feels like. One area addresses ways in which the District might measure whether it successfully achieves the desired outcomes raised in the nine themes.

Participants’ responses to the open-ended discussion questions show a clear emphasis on the importance of comprehensively educated, well-rounded students who are part of a culture of caring and community. Participants desire that greater attention be paid to individual student needs, as well as to needs spawned by the growing diversity of the community. Parents and other community members should be integral to the work of the schools, and schools should reach out to them in ways that take their linguistic, cultural, economic, and scheduling needs into account. In some areas, community members desire increased fairness and consistency in program opportunities and resources across the schools. Participants acknowledged the importance of maintaining high quality staff for all schools. Schools should produce good citizens. All students should be physically safe.



“Schools need to be the catalyst to initiate, promote, and develop programs to build character and strengthen community.”

Appendix A



Details of the Data Analysis Process

The District provided all data to the UCD research team in electronic form. The unit of analysis was, at a minimum, one word answers or phrases that spoke to a research question, and in some cases this extended to several sentences addressing one idea. Data analyses proceeded in four stages:

1. First, two data researchers read a sample of 12.5% (6 of 48) of the small group reports and drafted initial coding categories. Researchers compared these initial themes to a list of possible themes provided by the District’s small group facilitators. The theme sets bore some resemblance, but also several differences. After consultation with the District staff, the study proceeded using UCD’s coding categories, as they were independently derived.
2. Second, researchers independently coded 2/3 of the forum reports. The coders then compared coded files and reconciled any differences. During this stage, two theme categories were consolidated and another significantly expanded.
3. Third, one researcher went through all of the data again to apply the new codes to the previously coded data and the remaining 1/3 uncoded data. The other researcher then independently examined all coded data to verify accuracy and agreement. Suggested changes to the coded data were subsequently reviewed and, where appropriate, accepted by the first researcher.
4. In the final stage, the research team read all comments within a theme for internal consistency, made final revisions, and summarized the findings.

Critical decisions made during the coding process have bearing on the results.

- Researchers coded feedback without restriction as to which question prompted each comment, as participant feedback to a particular question frequently addressed other research questions.
- In some instances, comments that fit within more than one category were read within the context of the conversation in which they occurred. For example, when a comment such as *“students should feel safe”* appeared within a dialogue about weapons and lockdowns, it was coded as physical safety; when it appeared within a dialogue about a sense of belonging, it was coded as emotional safety. If the context could not be determined, the comment was assigned to both themes.
- On occasion, a comment clearly belongs to more than one category. For example, one comment about Spanish-speaking parents needing school information in Spanish pertains to themes about responsiveness to diversity and connections with parents. These types of comments were double-coded.
- A few comments were not coded due to lack of clarity.

*“Teach kids to explore. Teach kids to honor the struggle.
Teach kids that learning can happen in adversity.”*

Details of the Data Analysis Process

Themes appear in approximate order of importance as expressed by participants. This was evaluated according to the volume of comments documented by each of the 48 small group recorders. While it was relatively easy to identify the theme with the greatest number of comments (Comprehensive Education/Well-Rounded Students—30 single-spaced pages) and the theme with the least number of comments (Physical Safety—less than 3 pages), it was difficult to separate themes with similar volumes of comments. As a result, the relative importance of themes 3 through 7 should be interpreted cautiously because the difference in comment quantity was less clear.

One topic, “Body of Evidence Measures of Success,” was not included in the theme quantification process; it is presented last because it addresses what Community Forum participants would like to see the District do to measure progress related to the important themes presented in #1-9. This last category was largely in response to the research question asking how the District should measure progress toward important outcomes.

Appendix B

