

Coventry Public Schools, Coventry, RI

Focus Group Report - Final

Report Overview

After the 2014-2015 budget presentations and vote at a Town Financial Meeting June 2014 and an all-day referendum, the Superintendent and the School Committee discussed how it had communicated with the public: its message, its reach to stakeholders, and its vehicle for messaging. It was agreed that the School District needed a communication plan that addressed its challenges in gaining public awareness of the needs of the School District.

The School District was fortunate that Alan Shawn Feinstein approached the Superintendent and offered a \$10,000 grant for the School District to develop a communications plan. Superintendent Almeida hired a consultant, Donna Wieters. She, the Superintendent of Schools, and a School Committee Member, Ann Dickson, worked as a team to develop a plan to develop the Communications Plan. The first step in the plan was to obtain stakeholder feedback on a variety of issues.

From November 2014-February 2015, focus group sessions were held with Coventry residents to obtain their feedback concerning their Coventry Public Schools. Individual interviews or group sessions were held with town council members, the town manager, school personnel, parents, students, and other stakeholders. Approximately 70 people participated. To encourage participation, emails were sent by the Superintendent to interested stakeholders, and two advertisements were placed in the *Coventry Reminder*.

This report provides the feedback data and a selection of comments made during the sessions. The report will be presented to the School Committee, Dr. Almeida, and the Advisory Council for Coventry Education (ACCE) which will be formed with interested stakeholders.

The ACCE will advise and provide council to the School Committee and the Superintendent on the development and implementation of a Communications Plan. The purpose of the plan is to strengthen the relationship between the Coventry School Department leaders and the community.

The Focus Group Format

As the participants arrived, they were greeted, asked to sign-in, and were offered a name tag. The purpose and format of the focus group was discussed. If an interview was conducted on the phone, the same questions were used. Group sessions lasted approximately 1 ¾ hours. Individual interviews lasted 45 – 60 minutes.

Structure of Focus Group

The focus groups followed a specific pattern as follows:

- A statement was made.
- A quick poll relating to the statement was taken. A forced choice format was used, with an option for a participant to add “other” choices.
- Attendees voted; votes were recorded.
- A discussion on areas of greatest interest was conducted.
- Votes and comments were recorded. All responses were anonymous.

Focus Group Protocol

Statement #1

Statement: The mission of the Coventry public schools, with community partnerships, is to educate, inspire, and motivate students to be lifelong learners.

Question: What is your overall perception/ impression of how well the Coventry Public Schools is doing in fulfilling this mission?

Responses	% of Total Votes
Positive, many strengths	5%
Mixed positive, more strengths than weaknesses	80%
Do not have an opinion; mixed negatives, more weaknesses than strengths	12%
Negative, there are serious problems	3%
% rounded up	

Comments

- *Teachers are flexible; Teachers are willing to stay and help after school and give added help when needed.(student)*
- *There are lots of programs to motivate students and to help them achieve success.*
- *We as a community have a reputation as being reform-minded; perception is that we are not slackers.*
- *Have a supportive community.*
- *Overall weakness has been in special education area or behavioral areas.*
- *People feel education is very expensive.*
- *Great programs – like technical; not all kids learn the same way.*

- *Need to continue with messaging about blended learning. If people are not involved with schools, do they see it.*
- *We need (engaged?) business people with valuable insights who can help us with our mission.*
- *I hear things that are positive and negative and cannot pin to particular people. I try to not be too opinionated on anything.*
- *We need community partnerships.*
- *Have not seen the school system recently.*
- *We do not use our strengths enough.*
- *I only have limited information about how well we are performing against mission.*
- *Schools are very family-focused; there is good communications.*
- *Do not see a lot of community partnerships.*
- *There is marked bias toward the outstanding students.*
- *I see that some who have potential to do well get less support than others.*

Statement #2

Statement: Based on your overall perception, what are its areas for improvement / challenges?

Question: What should be the Coventry Public Schools improvement priorities? Discuss rating scale.

Responses	% of Total Votes		Responses	% of Total Votes
Improve underperforming schools as measured by RIDE criteria	4%		Improve students' basic academic skills	9%
Expand blended learning curriculum at all levels	5%		Increase academic rigor and raise performance expectations	11%
Increase professional development time	5.5%		Promote students' creativity and self-motivation	7%
Improve quality of instruction	11%		Improve School District Data and financial management Systems	10.5%
Provide alternative high school for students with behavioral issues	5.5%		Provide a viable, enhanced curriculum for academically advanced students	6%
Provide all day kindergarten	10.5%		Complete the curriculum revisions to meet common core standards with 2 years	2%
Increase extracurricular activity offerings at all levels	3.5%		Other - engage parents in children's education; offer internships; discipline	2%
Offer and/or expand career and technical education at all levels	7.5%		% rounded up	

Comments

- *We need more sports at middle school and elementary schools.*
- *More exposure to the technical school options and what they are doing every day is needed. The more opportunities, the better.*
- *Relating to increasing academic rigor: we do have high expectations and we do deliver quality instruction at all levels.*
- *Increasing rigor in a vacuum is not important.*
- *It is not OK to just approach the standard.*
- *If students lack the basic skills, they will not have the confidence to do other things.*
- *Want to see research going from ½ day to full day K.*
- *Focus has been on getting standard scores met instead of real education. In this day and age, a person coming out of school that has a skilled trade and moved through that trade has a 10-year head start over a college educated student. Need to expand technical education and think of other things. We need to turn this around, focus students on expectations not on standards.*
- *Students need to solve problems in their head. Tools are fine but people have to comprehend what they are learning. Students will learn more in failure than in success.*
- *Promote students creativity and self-motivation. Everyone learns differently.*
- *Kids need the basics; without the basics, a student cannot make it.*
- *Common core is not the only way; we need to complete curriculum revisions; we are behind other districts.*
- *Provide all day K – we need a strong base early on and it will pay dividends in the long term.*
- *If a student is motivated and open and creative in learning, they will advance as much as the curriculum will advance them.*
- *Improve school financial data and financial management system. We need stability in the financial team (at the school district).*
- *We need a viable curriculum for academically advanced students. These will be the people who will carry society in the future.*
- *We need a viable, enhanced curriculum for academically advanced students. There are Tier 1 students and what are we doing to push them forward? This piece is lacking. We fund everyone else.*
- *Have a kindness club. Praise kids that go out of the way.*
- *Things cannot be too easy.*
- *The expectation on my kids is the same as the person who is struggling. (My kids) do not feel there is a push to challenge them.*
- *I have problems with heterogeneous groups. Need to look at individual students and use homogeneous classrooms.*
- *All-day K is a goal but do not believe pouring in the funding it would require is the greatest need.*
- *We need to see our money is managed properly. I want to see concrete information on what they would do with money. Even as a parent, I had a hard time supporting the budget.*
- *Very few people get information about what is going on. A lot of improvement could be made by making information available.*

Statement #3

Statement: The Coventry student is rated "average" on several measures of student performance, such as NECAP, SAT scores at the local state, and national levels. Many Coventry Government members have stated publically, "What is wrong with being average?" How important is it to you to set a higher standard for student performance?

Question: How important is it to set a higher standard than average for student performance?

Response	% Total of Votes
Very important for students to be above local, state and national levels	26%
Important for students to be above local, state and national levels	45.5%
Not sure that it matters if students are better than average local, state, and national levels	22.1%
Not important for students to be better than average at local, state, and national levels	6.5%
Not very important at all for students to be better than average at local, state, and national levels.	0%

Comments

- *We need to bring people up to the highest level. Set standards high for students to make significant growth each year.*
- *If we are above standards, people have more options. If not above average, less options. Aim high.*
- *There is a lot wrong with being average. Have to be above average to make it in this world. No one picks someone who is average.*
- *People need a well-rounded child. They need to volunteer; be in extracurricular activities as well as being able to test.*

Statement #4

Statement: Assume you are a leader of the Coventry Public Schools. You want to introduce a new educational program in Coventry, such as full-day kindergarten or a transitional education program for students with behavioral issues. Each has a value, but each has a price tag that requires an increase in the school budget.

Question: What would be the most effective way you could convince the town council to invest and support the program?

Responses	Total # of Votes
Provide data which clearly indicates projected results	23.5%
Provide samples of successful programs in other communities	24.1%
Paint a picture of intended outcomes from the program	5.9%
Provide consistent frequent messaging targeted to stakeholders	5.3%
Ensure program aligns with strategic plan	8.8%
Provide a multiyear plan with defined objectives and cost projections	23.5%
Align school communications with municipal communications and objectives	5.3%
Indicate if property values will increase	2.9%
Show what the council wants	0%
% rounded up	

Comments

- *For this question, the participants provided pros and cons for each choice. These statements will be used to develop the communication plan.*

Statement #5

Statement: Assume you are a leader of the Coventry Public Schools. You want to introduce a new educational program in Coventry, such as full-day kindergarten or a transitional education program for students with behavioral issues. Each has a value, but each has a price tag that requires an increase in the school budget.

Question: What would be the most effective way you could convince the voters to invest and support the program?

Responses	Total # of Votes
Provide data which clearly indicates projected results	15.3%
Provide samples of successful programs in other communities	24.0%
Paint a picture of intended outcomes from the program	14.2%

Provide consistent frequent messaging targeted to stakeholders	10.4%
Ensure program aligns with strategic plan	6.0%
Provide a multiyear plan with defined objectives and cost projections	14.2%
Align school communications with municipal communications and objectives	2.2%
Indicate if property values will increase	13.1%
Grants	.6%
% rounded up	

Comments

- For this question, the participants provided pros and cons for each choice. These will be used to develop the communication plan.
- The taxpayer is a suspicious person. No one told me the cost for the following year. Give a long range cost. People need the 5-year plan.
- We participate and then we never hear anything more about something. So the attitude is, "Why do it if nothing comes of it. This is why participation drops."
- People need to know how something will affect your child. If you say that you will cut a behavioral specialist, people will say, "This does not affect me." You need to explain why this cut will affect the child.
- People with no one in schools are totally disconnected. I once heard someone say, "If you don't support education now, who will be your doctors, lawyers, etc.?" You need to say that.

Statement #6

Statement: Often programs compete for program dollars. For example, do you support clubs and sports at all levels or a new reading program for K-5?

Question: When revenue to support programs is limited, what criteria should the school district use to set priorities for the programs it will promote and support?

Responses	Total % of Votes
Cost per students	3.5%
Number of students involved or impacted	37.9%
Tradition - we always did it	0%
Strength of advocacy and/or stakeholder support	1.2%

Performance data evaluation (i.e. what is the greatest need/)	36.8%
Political considerations	12.6%
Other : Learning and curriculum come first	12.9%
Other - what is successful	1.2%
% rounded up	

Comments

- *Sports help keep kids on track and I have seen kids who got into trouble stay on the straight and narrow*
- *Kids that play sports are more likely to succeed (student); I am not into sports but I feel I will still succeed and do well. (another student).*
- *No matter what we do, the message does not get out there. Seems like there is an igloo over the school to get the word to families.*
- *No matter what kind of stakeholders, no one method (set of criteria) is going to work.*
- *I do not believe that Chrome books were fully thought out before the purchase.*
- *Greatest need is to keep kids busy*
- *There is a gap between what the town wants, what the school wants, and what the voters want.*
- *The school committee can ask for all the money it wants but it does not levy the tax. It is the council that has to face the voters.*

Statement #7

Statement: Often programs compete for program dollars. For example, do you support clubs and sports at all levels or a new reading program for K-5?

Question: When revenue to support programs is limited, what criteria would be most convincing to the voters?

Responses	Total % of Votes
Cost per students	21.7%
Number of students involved or impacted	30.4%
Tradition - we always did it	6.5%
Strength of advocacy and/or stakeholder support	13.0%
Performance data evaluation (i.e. what is the greatest need/)	19.6%
Political considerations	2.2%
Other : Property values	4.4%
Other - what is successful	2.2%
% rounded up	

Statement #8

Question (Open discussion: What can the school committee do to develop a working relationship with the town council?)

- *Sit down and talk about priorities.*
- *There is a perception that the administrators of the schools are highly overpaid for what they do. There is mistrust between the municipal side and the school about how money that is given is spent.*
- *When you go through the budgeting discussion, bring parties together. Be transparent. The majority of the stakeholders do not have visibility.*
- *Municipal leaders have to feel more included in the budget; may feel more willingness to raise taxes.*
- *People need to know what you (the school district) need(s) and they will accept it.*
- *Put budget on web site. ...more than barebones skeleton. Develop an email blast.*
- *Keep council informed. Sell the council before you sell the community.*

Statement #9

Question (Open discussion: What can the School District do to improve its communication with the community?)

- *Link school website to town website.*
- *Use Coventry Patch.*
- *Connect with senior center*
- *Use Center of NE senior housing to connect – about 150 people.*
- *Hold forum like Tammy Duxbury is doing in district 5 and see how she is doing it.*
- *Use school children to gather email addresses of neighbors.*
- *Try direct mailing.*
- *Use kids to get more email addresses.*
- *Try to connect with grandparents; they raise their grandchildren.*
- *Mail gets my attention; I have no kids in school; without mail. I would know nothing.*
- *Turned off by chicken-little message. Doomsday did not happen when budget failed.*
- *Where is the money going? People want to know.*
- *My son is in education. He does not believe teachers understand, like most of us, the pay and health benefits in real world. Show teachers health benefit cost for rest of the world.*
- *Admin costs too high in Coventry schools. Total cost of admin is high.*
- *Publicize your budget by line item, cost of teachers' salaries, admin salaries, and specifics.*
- *Use data in RI and NE for comparison purposes. Put in budget publication.*
- *Improve measurement. Most "things" are 30% inefficient.*

- *Look at non salary costs for savings.*
- *Use church bulletins.*
- *Use restaurant placemats.*
- *Put notices on bulletin boards as assisted living centers*
- *Use social media.*
- *Go to where the parents are. Show up at the dog park, the library. Go to the public.*
- *Go with what is trending now – twitter, social media.*
- *People are not seeing results. They want to see something come out of it.*

For questions on this report, please contact the following people:

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