



Focus Group Report

I. Summary of Project

Rockwood held a series of focus groups on Oct. 8, 2018, involving various parent and staff populations represented in our school community. Through the focus groups, the district gathered information to help our goal leaders as part of the strategic planning process. Groups were facilitated by Mr. Glenn Hancock, director research, evaluation and assessment, and Ms. Cathy Orta, executive director communication, with the assistance of Rockwood Communications team members.

Overall, common themes among focus group participants included these top priorities:

- 1) Students need to develop critical thinking skills.
- 2) Students need opportunities for exploration. This includes exploration in curricula and interests connected to potential careers, as well as assessment that offers authentic experiences.
- 3) Students need to understand themselves as a person and a learner. They need to be able to answer the questions: What are my unique interests? How do I learn best? How do I advocate for myself?
- 4) Students need to develop empathy. It is important that students have the ability to converse and communicate with others in a responsible, respectful manner.
- 5) Rockwood needs to focus on the process, rather than the product. It's vital that parents understand the learning process in order to see their child's growth. It's much more than a final grade or end product.

II. Focus Group Invitation

Rockwood Communications invited the community-at-large to join in these focus group discussions through an online form. The district shared an open, online process where any member of the Rockwood school community could reserve a space at the focus group table. This opportunity was communicated via our district/school websites, Rockwood eNews distribution to more than 40,000 emails, the district's social media channels (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), school channels via principal e-communication, during the State-of-the-District presentation held on Sept. 26, as well as the district's print newsletter that is mailed to more than 150,000 residents.

The focus groups were held after the conclusion of the districtwide Thoughtexchange. This online discussion included 1,353 participants who shared 792 responses and provided a total of 21,853 star ratings. The focus group discussion was designed to gather information from the members of the Rockwood school community who wanted a more personal conversation regarding the future of our school district.

III. Participant Demographics

Seventeen participants took part in five focus groups. All were women with children in multiple schools: four in early childhood programs, nine in elementary schools, five in middle schools and eight in high schools.

IV. Perspectives

Participants shared a common belief that Rockwood had a well-established foundation in academics. Many shared this was the reason they moved to the district, so they could take advantage of the excellent curriculum and instruction for their children. When asked what our students needed to be successful in learning and life, they shared the following:

- **Strong communication skills:** To be successful, students need to learn the soft skills of communicating within a team. It's important that students collaborate and work together. A strong foundation in interpersonal skills will help guide students throughout their lives.
- **Critical thinking and problem solving:** Interest, curiosity and excitement for learning are needed by all students. Our curricula should focus on the process, as well as the outcome.
- **Perseverance:** Students need to value grit and stick-to-itness vs. having the academics come too easily. Challenge students so they can expand their learning.
- **Determine fact from fiction:** We live in an information-rich society. Students need to understand that they can't always be dependent on Google for accurate information.
- **Safe schools:** Our kids need to be safe in order to learn.
- **Differentiation:** Not all kids learn the same. Schools need to let children know there are different paths to success – in learning styles, assessment and interests.
- **Champions:** Students need advocates in schools. They will believe school is a safe, calming place if they know adults care.
- **Leadership training:** Teach kids to be leaders. Give them opportunities to show their strengths and lead.
- **Empathy and kindness:** Students need to be kind and relate well with each other. The social and emotional aspect of school culture must be a priority for students to be successful in life.
- **Hands-on learning:** Discovery through doing is important. Children learn best when they are actively engaged in the process.
- **Diversity:** Students need to be exposed to greater levels of diversity. They will have a better grasp of life beyond high school as they enter a more global society.
- **Balance:** Parents feel a tension in wanting children to be prepared for the best colleges; however, this can cause kids to feel stressed. Some parents would love to see secondary students take more of the arts and humanities, as well as courses to prepare them for "real-life" situations, such as writing a resume, balancing a financial account, or composing an email.
- **Appreciation:** Students need to recognize and embrace their gifts of self-awareness, conscience, creative imagination and independence, as appropriate to their respective age group and developmental stage.
- **Community:** It's important to have consistency among family, teachers, and other members of the school community. This will help us achieve student wellness, foster learning and develop a vision of shared values.

Parents shared what they believed were some of the most important things that should be included in plans for the future of the Rockwood School District.

- **Exploring and experimenting:** Children learn in different ways. We need to foster curiosity so they can be prepared for jobs that don't even exist yet. The teacher is not the person who knows everything, but a facilitator to guide learning.
- **Accepting failure:** Children need to know it's okay to fail and then try again. The growth mindset is something

we need to believe in. The world is constantly changing, and children need to learn how to adapt.

- **Involving our community:** This generation needs mentors in businesses and corporations so students can see what opportunities are out there.
- **Fiscal integrity:** Our community must trust how our superintendent handles finances and carries out bond issue projects. It's apparent our leader does his "homework."
- **Student wellness:** Promote student wellness first and foremost through following APA guidelines that middle and high school should start no earlier than 8:30 a.m.
- **Foreign languages:** Give elementary school students the opportunity to learn a foreign language.
- **Guidance counselors:** Increase the ratio of student counselors to students (ASCA recommends a 250 to 1 ratio).
- **Early childhood education:** Expand full-time Rockwood Early Childhood programs and make it more affordable for families.
- **Affordable programs:** Provide a lower cost for extended before- and after-school care, and make Summer Adventure Club programs more affordable.
- **Transitions:** Students starting elementary school have strong support, but moving from elementary to middle school is a giant leap. Middle schools are not as nurturing, and it's an abrupt change, especially for those with IEPs.
- **Lunch:** Elementary schools have assigned tables, but in middle school it's a "free-for-all" approach that can be intimidating for some students. Plus, students need more time to eat and socialize.

Parents shared their specific ideas of things the school district could do to improve our schools to meet the needs of our students.

- **High school classes:** There is a big difference between honors classes versus regular classes. The perception is that honors classes are better because kids want to learn and they can learn at a quicker pace. We need more middle ground in curriculum.
- **Electronic communications:** Some websites are not updated. If teachers and schools will not keep them up, just get rid of them. Plus, there are a lot of different places to receive information. It can be too complex to keep up with all the channels, as parents are not sure where to look.
- **Professional development:** Staff need to know how to talk to kids about things they hear, do or see. It's important that they build strong relationships with students and with parents.
- **Drug prevention:** Vaping needs to be addressed in our high schools.
- **Gifted education:** The Center for Creative Learning is excellent at teaching kids to "think outside the box." However, all students do not get this quality education. There is lots of busy work in schools on days when students who qualify go to the CCL.
- **Homework:** Homework doesn't count in middle and high school and students take advantage of it. Then, when they go to college, they get lost in the shuffle of time management.

- **Online courses:** Parents would like to see more online courses offered at the high school level. It would help balance course selection, especially for areas where students need more of a challenge.
- **Cell phones:** Students need courses in digital citizenship as they spend their lives on their phones. It's important to teach our kids the appropriate time for cell phones. The fear is that students are losing class time to these devices.
- **Student Restore Center:** This is a gray area in our schools as the lines of consequences are blurred. What really happens to a student who has committed wrongful behavior? It does not allow teachers to be proactive with students, and a more clearly-defined student handbook would be helpful.
- **Physical education:** Rockwood needs to ensure students are active and get physical education every day.
- **Highly qualified teachers:** Students must have the most highly qualified teachers who are dedicated and committed to student well-being. Retention of top qualified teachers occurs when parents express appreciation, take their input, and the administration provides support as well.

Parents shared input to ensure we are successfully meeting the needs of all learners.

- **Testing:** The way we test does not demonstrate what a student knows. We make kids feel dumb and that they have failed. We need less emphasis on testing. Plus, we should evaluate kids to see how they learn best. Perhaps we could consider tracks of learners, such as those implemented in private schools.
- **Reaching all students:** Kids in the middle get lost. We recognize high achievers and help low-performing kids, however, middle kids don't get the same attention. We need to recognize kids for things other than academic achievement. Avoid complimenting intelligence levels in classrooms.
- **Project-based learning:** Ask why, dig deeper, teach children to question, challenge and try different things. This includes hands-on science experiments, in math ask why is this the answer, in preschool it's play plans and centers. We need to focus on creation and emphasize an understanding on real-world applications of learning.
- **Identifying passions:** We could have one period where the whole school has study hall and all teachers would be available to help students develop their academic gifts and personal learning plans.
- **Mindset:** Growth mindset is how we need to present learning to kids. Make sure they know that everyone makes mistakes and fails. Focus on the process of learning and minimize defining them through grades.
- **Mental health:** Schools need to have additional resources for traumatic situations that families may encounter. Parents need to feel they can disclose any concerns regarding their child's safety and well-being to the school community.
- **Fifth grade:** Elementary schools are very different in how fifth-grade changes classes. Some schools change for most subjects and some fifth grades don't change at all. Changing classes helps prepare kids for middle school.
- **Curriculum:** Please do a better job of serving kids who are high performers in language arts. Schools are focused on math education, but language arts is left behind. Also, be sure to teach inference in content. Children need to learn to read and not just look for the "right or wrong" answer.
- **Flexible seating:** Invest in configuring classrooms with flexible seating options to facilitate different classroom activities.
- **Character education:** It's strong in elementary and middle schools, but falls away in high schools. It creates

contradictions – especially from middle to high.

Parents shared their perceptions of what it means when we say our students are college and career ready.

- **Multiple paths:** Students need to realize options beyond the traditional path to four-year college, including tech programs, community college, military pursuits and career options. Not all students need a four-year degree.
- **Ready for life:** Help students be aware of themselves and have grit to bounce back when things don't go their way. They need social and emotional strength to be college and career ready – and ready for life.
- **College counselors:** Students need to fully understand the timeline for scholarships, financial aid, and admissions for the different types of colleges they want to attend.
- **Responsibility:** Students must be responsible for their choices, with both positive and negative consequences for their independent behavior.
- **Organization:** Students are organized in their academics, and they understand how to deal with stress.
- **Communication:** Students have the knowledge, skills and abilities to read and write effectively, compile a resume, complete a job application, and converse respectfully with a diverse group of people.
- **Resourceful:** Being trainable is important – no matter what path our students take in life. They need to be creative problem solvers as they enter the world of work.