

Troy School District Executive Summary of Focus Group Responses

Introduction

Between November 18, and December 8, 2009, I facilitated 12 relatively homogenous focus groups, asking each several identical questions about the Troy School District and its programs, services and characteristics. While 10-12 participants were invited to each, most groups had a number of individuals who did not attend, leaving an average number of attendees at six to seven per group. All attendees were prompt, honored to be asked their opinion, and were serious and candid in their remarks.

While we spent considerable time in planning for homogenous groups, expecting quite different responses, the outcomes were surprising. In fact, each group had a range of responses and the range was similar from group to group. Except for a few items, such as questions where intimate knowledge of educational practice was possessed by some, but not all groups, the variety of responses was pretty much the same. By the same token, the thought of closing schools, assumed by many to be an elementary school, was as distasteful to high school parents as it was to elementary parents. Possibly homogenous groups created a more comfortable environment for the participants, but it did not lead to substantially different responses on most questions.

This summary is intended to be a tool to assist the Superintendent and Board of Education in creating budget priorities.

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1. What is it about the TSD that would make you encourage others to move to this community?

Virtually all groups quickly cited the TSD's identification with high standards, high expectations and college preparation. Specific examples that supported this perception are the extensive array of AP classes, the IB program, and access to the International Academy. Closely associated with this were the high scores TSD students earned on state tests, on ACTs, AP scores, and the number of National Merit Scholars.

Just about as frequently mentioned as these academic markers, were testimonials to the quality of the staff---particularly the teachers---who deliver the instruction in TSD. They are seen as the best of the best, caring, going above and beyond, delivering excellent instruction with advanced strategies, and preparing the students well for college. Accolades for teachers came up in responses to other questions as well.

Another quality of the TSD often cited is the diversity of the district. The participants I spoke with saw this as a real plus. It was great preparation for their students' later transition to a larger

society, and the quality of the diversity being largely associated with professional, highly educated families who value academic rigor and who hold high expectations for their children were all seen as part of the draw of the TSD.

One final theme that emerged as a draw to the TSD I am simply referring to as “*Resources*”. Enhancers such as abundant, updated technology, modern, well equipped facilities, low class sizes, professional development opportunities for staff, the breadth of the curriculum, and the extensive extra-curricular programs available in the TSD were all cited as reasons the participants would encourage friends to locate here. The amenities of the city of Troy as well as the location and the general quality of the Troy community were also seen as part of the draw.

Many other particular assets of the TSD were mentioned during the focus group sessions. The ones summarized above, however, were repeated over and over again and seem to be the widely held view of the attraction of the TSD.

2. The elimination of what program or service would likely influence parents to remove their children from the TSD?

Given their druthers, almost every participant would keep things the same. Almost nothing was seen as superfluous or without value. However, the participants did understand the financial challenges the TSD is facing and were willing to seriously consider possible changes and cooperated in answering this question, which was another way to identify core facets of the TSD which the participants felt should not be impacted by reductions.

The most common response to this question was to not touch anything that sets the bar higher. AP classes and courses perceived as highly academic were seen as most important to be preserved. After that, music, sports, and the extra-curricular offerings were seen as opportunities in the TSD that, if lost, might cause parents to reconsider having their children enrolled in the TSD--primarily because then TSD would be just like any other district.

Closely related to the academic reputation of the TSD, was speculation about things that might force parents to reconsider TSD. Specifically, if MEAP scores began to decline or if class sizes were to increase significantly, it was felt parents might reconsider having their children remain in TSD.

Finally, it was felt that if safety were compromised, parents might also reconsider the TSD.

3. Given the financial strains the TSD is currently facing and will likely continue to experience, what would you do to reduce expenses or enhance revenue?

Participants offered a tremendous number of ideas in responding to this question. They represent not only thoughtful and interesting ideas, but also reveal a lack of understanding on a rather wide-spread scale of what is legally possible given the current status of Michigan school law and how constrained school districts actually are. Embedded here are the seeds of a public

information initiative that would help the staff and community understand why some areas are not being openly discussed and explored.

During the course of meeting with the focus groups, there were consistent laments regarding the waste seen in the district. If all perceptions were ultimately proven to be valid and measures were taken to eliminate these wasteful practices, it is likely the dollar amount of the savings would be a long way short of solving the economic challenges facing the TSD. But the economic side of this perception is really less important than what the damage has done to the credibility of the TSD's "case" in the court of public opinion. As a result, my recommendation is to address these perceptions head on and either act on them or defend current practice and communicate widely and transparently on whatever action is taken. Unused technology purchases, paper and printing practices, community mailings and promotions, administrative staffing at the high schools and in the athletic departments, and some student busing are examples of these perceptions of waste.

Frequently mentioned responses to this question include addressing teacher pay and benefits. These were discussed despite an overwhelming declaration of support, appreciation and almost reverence for the teachers in the TSD. They are seen as excellent, caring, proactive, going above and beyond. No one was interested in cutting their compensation out of any kind of vengeful or spiteful motive. Rather, it was felt that since salaries and benefits constitute 85% or more of the TSD budget, then this is where the real savings should be realized. The TSD is part of the SW Michigan economy where virtually everyone fortunate enough to have a job has had to take some sort of cut in compensation. There seemed to be more widespread interest in having employees adjust or participate in paying the cost of healthcare, than in cutting wages. However, participants who understood "steps" on salary schedules recommended temporarily freezing them. Also, a number of responders thought such measures could be "sunset-ed" so that when better times return, a restoration of compensation can be put into effect.

Other frequently mentioned ideas were to continue the reductions TSD has been making, changing Prop A and lobbying the legislature to see this happens, asking parents to pay more in fees, pay-to-play, and exploring to see for which services the TSD can legally charge, cutting such things as elementary Spanish (not seen to be valuable) and high school busing. In addition, consolidating schools, lengthening the school day and shortening the school year were mentioned numerous times, with staff promoting the shorter year/longer day idea.

4. Please indicate your support or lack of support for the following revenue enhancements:

❖ Expanding "Schools of Choice" for non-resident students:

With only a couple of dissenters out of all focus group members I met, the sentiment was nearly unanimous to keep at least what is already in place in the TSD regarding schools of choice. The vast majority also favored very slight expansion of up to one or two more grades, but there was virtually no support to expand beyond the elementary level. This support was also predicated on

the condition that there would be no additional costs, so that these students would fill empty seats but not create a need for more teachers and support staff. Any expansion should be slow with research done along the way to document “how it is going.”

At the same time participants were indicating the level of support described above, they were also expressing concern. They believe the incoming students were not as well prepared as the TSD students and, as a result, needed much more support and intervention to meet the TSD’s standards. There was also a frequently repeated idea that applicants needed to be screened to make sure they could be successful in the TSD. In addition, the possibility that the TSD’s scores on state tests might drop would detract from the TSD’s reputation and create yet another challenge to face. Nevertheless and despite these worries, it is clear that at least the current schools of choice plan was receiving a lot of support.

One additional note needs to be made regarding the schools of choice process used by TSD. A few participants believed the process to be cumbersome and slow resulting in the loss of potential enrollees who chose other districts from whom they received acceptance more quickly than they did from the TSD. Possibly, the protocol for accepting schools of choice students should be reviewed to determine the validity of this perception.

❖ *Increase marketing to increase resident enrollment:*

Responses to this question were quite mixed with nearly equal numbers of supporters and non-supporters. A number of respondents felt a cost-benefit analysis specifying, among other things, numbers of new enrollees required to make the effort worthwhile was essential prior to embarking on this strategy. Supporters felt the TSD was a good product to market, should probably be done by a hired professional who really knows how to do this sort of thing, and should be cost-free perhaps by getting sponsors to underwrite the cost. A related suggestion was to target the marketing to segments desirable to the TSD like Beaumont doctors or other professional families who would be an asset to the TSD.

Non-supporters were concerned about spending money on this sort of activity. In addition, even if interest were sparked in potential move-in families, the current real estate market would preclude their moving at this time. It was also felt that such marketing was a sign of desperation and sent the wrong message to the larger community about the TSD. Word of mouth “advertising” was felt to be the best kind and that would be free.

❖ *Increasing pay-to-participate fees:*

This item was met with almost unanimous agreement. Equally unanimous was the need to offer scholarships or waivers to students whose families could not afford the fee(s). The concern was to make sure no interested student was excluded on the basis of inability to pay. As the participants added their thoughts on this one, it was suggested that the pay-to-participate policy be extended to any and all extra-curricular offering that had a paid coach/moderator salary

attached to it. Finally, along the same vein, it was suggested that parking fees for high school students be raised and even entertain selling all or the most desirable parking places to staff.

❖ *Increasing building usage fees:*

Again, this idea received nearly unanimous support. It was felt that a market study be made, and rates need to be competitive and include custodial and all other costs. Care needs to be taken to not lose current “renters”. Whatever policy is developed needs to be enforced and while school groups should be exempt, clarification is needed to define who “school groups” are. Some felt it would be worthwhile to negotiate with Troy Parks and Recreation since they use the buildings a lot. Finally, the availability of renting school facilities needs to be marketed, and the process needs to be streamlined and include charging with credit cards to avoid chasing down late payers and deadbeats.

❖ *Allowing advertising on school district property (athletic stadiums, gymnasiums):*

This idea was met with a mixed response. There were probably more in favor than opposed, but those in favor quickly acknowledged the slippery slope the TSD would be on in this endeavor. They felt this could work and bring in revenue if it were done with very well thought out policies on the type of products that could be advertised, making sure it was consistent with the TSD’s image, and was consistent with healthy living, etc. The message such advertising sends could be problematic, and rejecting some requests could present challenges---legal and otherwise. Those opposed thought this idea was “tacky”, and might cheapen the TSD reputation. This group also opposed naming rights for fields, stadiums, etc.

5. *Please tell me about your support or lack of support for the following reductions:*

❖ *Close schools:*

This was met with great reluctance but also acceptance as a “last resort” sort of strategy. If it were done, it should only be done at the elementary level, and then probably go with only one less school. There was concern about loss of neighborhood schools, and particularly the increasing cost of transportation which might negate the potential savings of closing a building. In one group, this was seen as a possible last resort measure but only after employee wages and benefits were reduced, acknowledging the challenge of going in that direction.

❖ *Increasing class size to contractual limits:*

This idea had a mixed response. Somewhat surprising was the acceptance of this idea by a significant number of participants. Those opposed felt that it would detract from the personal instruction occurring at the elementary now, and that there really wasn't physical space for even one or two more in those classrooms. Much the same response was heard from high school staff. Middle school staff thought we were already there and that it would be OK to reach contractual limits across the district. It was also feared that this would run counter to the TSD's draw of low class size when marketing the district to schools of choice families and potential move-ins.

The significant number open to raising class size felt it would maximize the use of staff, and that one or two more would make no difference. It was also felt that this was preferable to other possible cuts that might occur.

❖ *Reducing transportation:*

Interestingly, there was quite a bit of support for this idea---especially at the high school level. However, some felt that it would be important to continue the service for 9th and 10th graders. There was less support for it at the middle school level and almost no support for reductions at the elementary level---especially if an elementary building were to be closed.

Safety was paramount at any level. Overall, there was a feeling that it might be better to consolidate and reduce rather than eliminate this service in a community without sidewalks like Troy.

There was also interest in making it fee-based, and at least charging for athletic and field trip transportation.

❖ *Institute early release or late arrival to eliminate substitute costs for professional development:*

This idea seemed to open up a lot of deeply held thoughts that seemed to be looking for an outlet. There was support for this if it saved money, but there were many variations on the proposed idea. Participants connected to Baker MS gave testimony to the fact that it worked there and was rather easily incorporated into family schedules.

There was also a rather widely held skepticism, even among some staff, about professional development in the TSD and whether it really made any difference to the education of the students. Some parents claimed to see no evidence of anything improving as a result of P.D. and questioned the amount that was scheduled in the TSD.

Another frequently stated assertion was that P.D. was the responsibility of the teacher and it should be done on their time as it is in the business world. If it were done that way there would be no scheduling issues with families and sub costs would be sharply reduced.

❖ *Reductions in staff overall compensation (wages and benefits):*

Responses to this idea were very interesting and divided. Staff, for the most part, was unwilling to respond to this question, acknowledging that it was contractual and their leadership would speak for them. Some offered the thought that it would hurt morale, but perhaps a freeze was possible. There was also skepticism that “real” budget figures were yet to be seen. Association leadership felt cuts had already been borne by the membership, and in some segments wages were already low and people worked just for the benefits. Administrators and non-represented employees saw the need for some cuts in one or both of these areas, but felt strongly that such cuts be equal across units, and cuts already borne be taken into account when new cuts were considered.

With all other groups, however, there was near unanimity that despite the respect and affection with which teachers (and staff) were held, concessions were needed. There seemed to be a little less support for cuts in salary than for concessions in benefits---either in raising co-pays, participating in premiums or both. It was strongly felt that given the financial challenges the TSD was facing, and the fact that the Troy community had endured cuts in salary or benefits or both, it was time teachers got in line with the rest of southeast Michigan in this regard. It was also felt that such cuts should have a “sunset” provision so that when “good times” return, these things may be restored.

ELEMENTARY

❖ *Reinstating combination/split classes at elementary:*

The discriminating characteristic on this idea seemed to be whether or not the respondent had any personal experience with splits. If they did have experience in the TSD when this was done, they tended to have positive feelings about it and remembered that it was done “right”. Elementary teachers who remembered splits felt that they worked because this preceded the individualized learning approach used today, and that the two approaches were inconsistent with one another. Support for this idea was conditioned on the fact that it would need to be done thoughtfully, with lots of teacher input in selecting the students as well as the teacher.

A great many respondents declined to comment because this was a new idea to them and they felt ill-prepared to respond, claiming they would need to see more research and hear more discussion in order to form an opinion.

Finally, there was the thought that this was counterproductive to the reason people come to the TSD in the first place, and as a result, they were opposed to splits.

❖ ***Reducing the length or frequency of elementary art, instrumental music, vocal music, PE and/or Spanish:***

Almost all responses to this question were negative. The few who could live with reductions here expressed lukewarm support, and then only if the dollar savings were significant. Of those who opposed this reduction, the repeated response was that these offerings “make the TSD what it is”, that kids need this, and there is too little now.

The noteworthy exception to these responses was the widely held view that elementary Spanish could go, where respondents did not see direct impact on student achievement and that it did not necessarily translate into success at the middle and high school level. One suggestion was to make it an after-school club.

In regard to PE, there was an even split between those who thought it could be cut because at the elementary level students have recess, and those who referenced recent childhood obesity reports underscoring the need for PE.

❖ ***Reducing or eliminating non-classroom programs such as PACE, reading support, or instrumental music:***

There was virtually no support for cutting reading support. “It makes the TSD what it is” was a frequent statement. This is the foundation of all learning, so it cannot be cut.

Keeping PACE was also strongly expressed but a bit less than Reading Recovery. “It is the elementary AP,” said one participant. The long term benefits of PACE were not obvious, however, and a number of supportive statements were more along the lines of how this helps market the TSD rather than the real benefits to students.

Responses regarding instrumental music were almost evenly divided. Some felt it could be an after-school club, and fee-based. Others felt a cut could be made between instrumental and vocal music, but not both. Some concern was expressed regarding the effect a cut would have on middle and high school instrumental music programs.

There was an overall reluctance about any cuts in this area, and a general conclusion would be to do it very carefully if it is done at all.

❖ ***Reconfigure elementary schools to create greater staffing efficiency, specialized magnet schools, etc.:***

Support, while less than unanimous, was widespread. There was considerable openness to this idea, especially if a lot of good research was done and districts that had gone this way were

studied to see long term effects. It was also seen as a great marketing tool---especially if the result was well researched and highly innovative.

There were questions and concerns about increased busing and the cost that would bring, as well as having children in one family in a number of different schools at one time---as parent convenience issue. Nevertheless, it would seem there was a lot of support to investigate this option.

SECONDARY

❖ Reducing or eliminating the number of sports and/or intramural offerings:

There was little support for cutting anything here, especially since pay-to-play was instituted. Increasing pay-to-play to make the sport self-sustaining was widely supported along with more help from Booster clubs. Intramurals were seen as important, and, with some, even more important than competitive teams. There was a lot of comment on the amount of money spent on uniforms---they see waste here. Also, it was suggested that teams have commercial sponsors like summer little league does. Finally, if cutting does occur, cut sports that duplicate what is available through the city athletic/recreation program.

❖ Requiring consolidation of all low enrolled classes between high schools or offering alternate schedule:

There was widespread support for this idea, although it was tempered by concern for busing costs and the time lost for students to travel to the alternate site. The cost of transporting students was also raised, and was countered with the suggestion to charge for transportation.

The most interesting response in this discussion, and one which, when raised, garnered a lot of support, was to solve the problem through technology. Creating webinars, arranging for distance learning, using protocols like “Go to Meeting” were all suggested by community members who use these technology solutions in their work lives.

❖ Increasing pre-varsity team sizes where appropriate or reducing/eliminating 9th grade athletics:

While there was some support for this idea, it was lukewarm and linked to many concerns: too much time on the bench; team sizes are already “huge;” 9th graders are smaller and need their own teams; and focusing on middle school sports which can be replaced with city recreational teams. Frequently increasing pay-to-play rates was cited as an alternative to reducing or

eliminating teams. In the final analysis, however, money needs to support academics if a choice needs to be made.

❖ *Reducing fine arts offerings:*

There was almost no support for this idea. However, there was some interest in charging for instrument use/rental, sheet music, supplies, etc. There was also the suggestion that TSD not duplicate what is available in the community through recreational leagues, Parks & Recreation, etc. There was concern for kids who are pursuing the arts after high school and what their needs are to create portfolios, etc. for admission to post-secondary schools. Finally, the TSD reputation must be considered in such potential cuts, along with the real savings versus the loss of prestige, loss of marketing attractiveness, and the like.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Kids need training on resume-writing, careers, community service, real world experiences, balancing checkbook; interviewing for jobs; TSD = well rounded education.

TSD and Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills should consolidate and save the operational overhead.

Coordinate cuts with other districts so we don't look like we're so strapped.

Get with the other superintendents on this to get on the same page---will get parent support in all the districts.

Hope we've learned a lesson about school funding.

Reduce management and let teachers run the schools in a team approach.

Prop A needs to change and allow for a local option for increased millage.

Cuts need to be targeted in line with the economy.

Schools need to attract young families.

Can't cut core where we meet, compete and excel.

Work with real estate agents and share the TSD's statistics, also partner with the city.

IB is a real success story and so is Niles.

Consolidate services with other districts like transportation with Clawson, Avondale; use volunteers for club sponsors, share services between MS and elementary schools.

Be a test site for alternative fuel, solar energy, and alternative energy.

Get online access to texts to use at home, leave single copies in school.

Have these decisions already been made?