Building Excellence Spring Engagement 2016: Perceptions and Vision

Key Findings

1. When asked about their perceptions of MMSD facilities, many comments related to the *functionality* and *size* of facilities. Participants expressed concerns about how MMSD facilities suited their instructional needs and about the lack of sufficient space for learning.
2. Many teachers and students also made comments about the *atmosphere* of facilities and said the facilities made them feel unwelcome, however, others appreciated the unique and historic nature of some MMSD school buildings.
3. When describing their vision for facilities, teachers and staff want spaces to be flexible, clean, bright and modern.

Background

MMSD is developing *Building Excellence*, a long-range planning resource to guide decision making for the next 20 years. Engaging the community and capturing their voice is a key component of this planning process and will ensure that decisions reflect the priorities, needs and values of the Madison community. Our Spring 2016 engagement sessions helped ensure that *Building Excellence* is responsive to our community by capturing current perceptions of facilities and the community's vision for what MMSD facilities could be.

This report presents findings from engagement during Spring 2016, which focused on gathering perceptions of and vision for facilities in MMSD through focus groups with students and staff members. The guiding questions for these sessions were:

- What are your perceptions of MMSD facilities?
- What is your vision for MMSD facilities in the next 20 years?

This information will not only inform *Building Excellence's* development, but it helped guide our planning for Fall 2016 *Building Excellence* Engagement.

Data and Methods

For the *Building Excellence* spring engagement, we conducted 11 focus groups (4 student, 5 staff, and 2 Library and Media Technology Specialists) from May-June 2016 and had 82 student and staff participants. Forty-six (46) of the participants were high students, 34 were female and about half were students of color. The majority of the 35 staff members we spoke with were white females.

We recruited staff participants by contacting principals at construction site schools. We believed these staff members would be helpful to speak with because they may have been involved with or impacted by recent facility planning. We also reached out to LMTSs and spoke with high school and middle school LMTSs at one of their monthly meetings. To recruit students, we contacted high school principals and asked them to help us identify or convene a group of students. We chose high school students because we believed they had the greatest capacity to answer the kinds of questions we were posing in this round of engagement and the most experience in MMSD facilities. The principals and administrators at each school site helped arrange a time and location to host the focus groups.

While we strategically chose school sites based on our research question, we had no control over the demographic representation of the students and staff who participated. It is important to keep in mind that our small sample size (82 participants) is not representative of all MMSD students and staff.

To answer our research questions we loosely structured each 45-minute focus group. We began by asking participants to create a series of word lists to describe their perceptions of and vision for MMSD facilities. These lists functioned as a

springboard to generate discussion about impressions of MMSD facilities and their vision for facilities in the future. We generated discussion by asking participants to read a word from their list and explain why they chose that word. This activity sparked the discussion about perceptions of MMSD facilities. About half way through the discussion we asked participants to describe their vision for facilities over the next 20 years.

To analyze the data, we conducted a qualitative analysis using descriptive coding. Coding is a way of organizing and sorting qualitative data that involves assigning labels, or codes, to each comment or response. We began this process by using the word list activity to generate a set of descriptive codes to capture the major themes expressed in the focus group data. Using an identical list of nine codes for *Perceptions* and *Vision*, we coded all comments into one of the nine descriptive categories. For a more detailed list of codes, see the Appendix.

Findings

Perceptions of Facilities

We coded 344 comments as *Perceptions* and used nine subcodes to further analyze these comments. The most common themes were *Atmosphere* (22%), *Functionality or Suitability* (21%), *Size* (15%) and *Equity* (10%). In total, these four themes comprised nearly 70% of all coded comments. The final five codes (*Health and Safety*, *Cleanliness*, *Outdoor Space*, *Reference Non-MMSD District*, *Other*) each had between 5-7% of coded comments. The sections below describe the top three codes.

Atmosphere

Approximately 22% of student and teacher comments about perceptions related to the atmosphere of facilities. The majority of these comments expressed negative feelings and emotions using phrases such as "depressing," "negative energy," "not welcoming," and "institutional." Students and staff described the aesthetics of MMSD facilities with opinions such as, "a lot of schools in this district are run down and dingy." Participants explained that the condition of the school building often negatively impacts the pride students and staff feel about their school. A few positive comments related to the beautiful historic character of MMSD buildings. Others said that they liked that MMSD school buildings are not "cookie cutter," and that the varied building designs give each school a special identity and unique feel.

Functionality or Suitability

Twenty-one percent (21%) of comments coded referred to the functionality or suitability of facilities. These comments generally described how facility spaces did not meet teaching and learning needs. Teachers explained that the lack of flexible spaces made it difficult to create "the right kind of space" for varying purposes. As one teacher said, "You are asking us to do X curriculum wise and be creative but not giving us the physical space to do those creative things…" Quite a few comments referred the "hodgepodge" of furniture and equipment at the school, citing instances when school staff have improvised with an assortment of furniture and various quick-fixes. A number of students and teachers spoke about unusable and broken water fountains, buckling carpets and old, rickety furniture, which made accommodating various classroom set-ups challenging.

Size

Participants commonly addressed issues with insufficient space. Teachers and students used descriptors such as "cramped," "overcrowded" "tight" and "inadequate" to describe the challenges they face with space. Teachers also talked about insufficient storage space. Indeed, teacher comments revealed that a number of spaces that not only served multiple staff members, but were also used to house testing materials, manipulatives, books, art supplies and miscellaneous furniture. One teacher specifically described her aversion to using the teacher's lounge because she felt "surrounded by work and chaos." While the majority of participants cited frustrations over insufficient space, a few noted that their classrooms or school buildings were adequately large. A few teachers even appreciated sharing classrooms because it provided an opportunity to observe their colleagues teaching and helped them learn new strategies.

Vision for Facilities

We coded 130 comments as "vision" and used the same nine subcodes that we used to analyze perceptions comments to categorize the vision comments. The most common themes were *Functionality or Suitability* (32%), *Atmosphere* (18%), *Size* (14%) and *Other* (12%). In total, these three themes comprised 77% of all coded comments. The final five codes (*Outdoor Space*, *Cleanliness*, *Health and Safety*, *Equity*, *Reference Non-MMSD District*) each had between 7-2% of coded comments. The sections below describe the top three themes.

Functionality or Suitability

Thirty-two percent (32%) of vision comments-coded related to the suitability of school spaces for teaching and learning. Students and staff most frequently used terms such as "flexible", "adaptable" and "open" to describe the functionality they envision for MMSD facilities. Describing "flexibility," one teacher said that for her flexibility meant the ability to move furniture and dividing walls to make a space fit a variety of purposes ever-changing curricular needs. Students and staff also mentioned the importance of incorporating research about how students learn into classroom design to ensure spaces are comfortable and well-suited for optimal learning.

Atmosphere

Students and staff described how the school buildings should make them feel. Students and teachers overwhelmingly suggested that schools should be "comfortable," "inviting," and "uplifting." One student explained his idea of "uplifting" as a bright and colorful space with positive messages on the walls. Participants repeatedly cited the desire for natural light with large windows to allow for sufficient ventilation.

Size

Comments related to the size of facilities generally expressed the need for more space. Some of these comments mentioned classroom spaces in particular and the need for larger classrooms, so that "students aren't piled on each other" and to allow for greater functionality. Other participants spoke about the need for larger cafeteria and gymnasium spaces to accommodate whole-schools meetings and events and to alleviate scheduling difficulties. Staff also frequently described their vision for smaller pull-out spaces to have private meetings with parents, and for student intervention services.

Conclusion

Our conversations with staff and students about their perceptions of facilities centered on issues related to the functionality, atmosphere and size of the facilities. Participants said that the buildings suffered from deferred maintenance issues, drained them of energy and were not conducive to their teaching or learning needs. While the majority of comments were negative, some teachers said that they liked the unique and distinct character of MMSD buildings, and others said that their classroom provided sufficient space for teaching. It is important to note that despite their frustrations, participants had reasonable and modest visions for what they hoped MMSD facilities can be. They described buildings that would be clean, bright, well-functioning and flexible spaces. Most of all, teachers and students stated their commitment to MMSD and want facilities that make them feel welcome and proud to come to school.

Appendix: Codes Applied

Table 1: Perceptions Codes

Descriptive Code	Percent of Comments Coded	Representative Quotes
Atmosphere	22%	"Dilapidated; tables from the 1970s, don't have matching tables, the chairs, the feet are jagged, it is carpeting, but it is worn out and stained." "What I like is that as I go around the district and see remodeled buildings, they have done a nice job of keeping the character and history of Madison."
Functionality or Suitability	21%	"I feel like it's unique in that there are shared spaces – I like having the shared planning areas so you can facilitate conversations within teams and across subject areas." "Bathrooms stalls don't work – "uncomfortable" to use bathrooms." "Acoustic walls don't work, seats out of date and uncomfortable; no pit orchestra, so really tough to have musicals because sound is an issue; needs to be updated."
Size or Capacity	15%	"Most rooms have 2-3 people housed in there—kids come looking for teachers and can't find them—Spanish and French on a cart—rarely in the same room for two classes in one day."
Equity	10%	"It is inequitable – I really feel that our students are not getting access to an equitable learning environment – thinking about the district at large (not other schools) – our kids have inequitable facilities." "Maintenance didn't happen equally throughout the district…We are all over the place for our facilities. Some beautiful ones and some pretty embarrassing spots.
Health and Safety	7%	"One need we have that would be astronomically expensive but necessary is drop off area – its extremely unsafe here.""…but also about safety – kids being scared to use them – there has to be a better way to organize or lay out the bathrooms to help with bullying and lack of privacy."
Cleanliness	6%	"I'm not talking about sterile warehouse, just clean place – I clean when I can; carpet has permanent black stains, the chairs get crustier and crustier – "We do our best and it's not enough."
Outdoor Space	5%	"Gardens – noticed that almost all MS and ES in the last five to eight years have gotten a garden of some sort to do activities with students – that outdoor environmental learning is very positive for students." "Better upkeep of fields - our baseball field is walking through about six inches of grass because not mowed and we have to keep it up (the baseball team) – it really isn't our job to do that, but its extra work; one of the kids on the team brought his lawn mower over to mow the field ."
Reference Non-MMSD District	6%	"I go to small towns, [name of surrounding district] and it is like "oh my god" they are so nice, it seems 21st century, "mind blowing" to go to other districts to see what they have."
Other	8%	"People change, just because a school wants something right now, things change. Decisions should not be specific to certain people. Customizing furniture or colors, but there does need to be a minimum standard, you should be able to count on a standard."

Table 2: Vision Codes

Descriptive Code	Percent Comments Coded	Representative Quote
Functionality and Suitability	32%	"Area that can have flexibility to do a lot of different things." "If district could say, here are the types of tables, chairs, desks – so its consistent ad we can switch out as number of kids change." "When kids and teachers are comfortable they learn and teach better. 'I can definitely see that in our laptops you can move where you want to and find comfortable places, it is just beautiful.'"
Atmosphere	18%	"Welcoming" & "Up-To-Date" – besides how the building looks, the atmosphere needs to be comfortable – up-to-date – keep things maintained "as much as we can" and have it as "nice s possible" "…don't need a lot of space, but its about the clean environment that feels welcoming – garbage taken out, floor mopped, tiles in good repair, ceiling that doesn't leak."
Size or Capacity	14%	"Would love to have a classroom that is big enough to have teaching space along with flexibility, such as a rug or soft furniture." "[Explaining the desire for a large classroom size] And allowing some students to be away from someone for a while to stay in the classroom space – big for those kids."
Outdoor Space	7%	"Outside classrooms are big open space, can go out during class and there's furniture – can collaborate outside of the classroom."
Cleanliness	6%	"…something that is "easily cleaned" – carpet put in in the 90s, told it would probably be awhile for new carpet [other participant agrees] – we have comfortable chairs but we can't wipe them down – food and drink issue – if we could at least wipe down floors or furniture – keeping it clean "for the long term" – having a clean space is nice."
Health and Safety	5%	"Natural light that is important because kids are on their screen so much more and it is healthy to look outside and good for your brain." "Safety – how we would all feel if someone got hurt outside the school."
Equity	4%	"I really appreciate that there will be a systematic way to figure out where they will focus facilities efforts rather than relying on PTO; this will help with equity."
Reference Non-MMSD District	2%	"Dream: Monona Grove HS, think about it, we are not a 21st century school district in any way. I wish we could maintain those beautiful old buildings."
Other	12%	"More building/staff control over what goes on in your classroom – if a teacher wants a Promethean board, should be able to get it. Let staff have some control over what's being done with a classroom – more control."