

Wyoming City Schools Citizen Advisory Committee Community Forum Report February 2019

<u>Citizen Advisory Committee Forum Background/Process</u>

Citizen Advisory Committee:

Made up of volunteer Wyoming residents, district staff, and Board of Education members, the purpose of the Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) is two-fold:

- Through the use of expert community resources, the committee will be responsible for conducting studies and investigations and reporting such finding and making suggestions for recommendations, if any, in the areas of school program and operation as those areas of study or investigation are identified by the Board of Education and the Committee members with the approval of the Board of Education.
- The Committee will assist in maintaining active and informed school-community
 relations through the discussion of general education issues affecting the community of
 Wyoming and by serving as the communication link between the Board and the citizens.

The current Superintendent of Wyoming City Schools, Susan Lang, PhD. Announced her intended retirement to the community in the fall of 2018. Superintendent Lang will retire in June 2019. As a result, the Wyoming Board of Education has begun a formal search for a new Superintendent. The Board has hired the firm Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates from Chicago to assist with the search. Over 35 focus groups were conducted in the community by the search firm in order to do a formal community assessment that will be reported to the Board.

In addition to the search firm formal process, the Board of Education desired a deeper view of community's views on future direction for the district. Under the leadership of the Board, the CAC decided an open professionally facilitated Community Forum would be the best way to allow the community to give input into the Superintendent process while also providing commentary on direction they would like to see the new leadership take to guide the schools into the future.

The CAC Community Forum was held on Sunday, February 10, 2019 in the atrium area of the High School. Approximately 50 individuals from the community attended. The participants were diverse in age with some empty nester community members joining. Although racial diversity was not as prevalent as we had hoped, there was some. There were also teachers that live in the community that were represented and joined the conversation. The Community Forum was advertised throughout the community for several weeks prior to the event including but not limited to, postings on district blogs, Parent Advisory Committee messages, Facebook messages and posters advertising the Forum at the local library branch, restaurants and community coffee establishment. While we would have liked to have seen more community citizens participate, the CAC believes the 50 individuals that came were all engaged in the process and had their opinions heard.

It should be noted that the prioritized thoughts/brain storming that follows are just that; brain storming ideas. They are not fact checked in anyway and are simply a prioritization of the issues/ideas generated.

The 50 participants were self-selected into the following three issue areas:

- Academic and College Preparation. Discussion in this group centered on questions of where we excel in areas of k-12 curriculum, and academic preparation for all students. Priorities for consideration included but were not limited to class size, Advanced Placement, curriculum paths that inspire a passion for learning, teacher development, technology/innovation, gifted/special/vocational education
- 2. Whole Child Education. Discussion in this group centered on priorities of creativity, well-roundness, and student health and wellness. Discussion in this group included music and the arts, extracurriculars, mental health and stress of students, service learning, school climate and inclusiveness, life skills and leadership.
- Financial Stewardship and Facilities. Discussion in this group included school funding, fiscal responsibility and communication, future facility and other capital needs of the district going forward.

Whole Child had the largest group of participants followed by Academic and College Preparation with Financial Stewardship and Facilities having the smallest.

The stated purpose of the Forum was to gauge priorities in the three issue areas stated above. The process all three groups followed was the same:

- 1. A discussion of what is working for 15 minutes
- 2. A conversation that identified areas for improvement for 30 minutes
- 3. A discussion to identified ideas to address areas of improvement and/or encourage what is working for an additional 20 minutes.

Each of the three groups then gave out color coded dots to bullet vote on their top three in each of the three areas. Those issues identified in the top three in each category are contained in the following pages of this executive summary report. The entire list generated by each group can be found in the Appendix of the report.

Each of the three group facilitators then reported the top three finding to the entire audience of participants so there was transparency among the groups. White index cards were provided for those that had something they wanted to contribute to a group where they were not a participant.

Finally, each community member completed a blue index card identifying their definition of education excellence which are summarized and reported in this report.

The following were principles/ground rules that guided the discussion for all participants:

1. All opinions count

- 2. Keep the focus on the strategic goal of your group
- 3. This is a brainstorming session- not a debate
- 4. Be succinct

Definition of Excellence in Education

At the end of the Community Forum, all participants were asked to write down their individual definition of excellence in education on blue index cards and then turn those cards into the group facilitators.

There were 28 cards submitted. The themes identified in the cards included:

- 1. Excellence in education is a school district that provides a learning environment that is encouraging and accepting.
- 2. Learning methods that relate to and prepare kids for the real world.
- 3. Recognizing a child's strengths and encourages and supports those strengths in the best way for them.
- 4. Excellent teachers. Culture and expectation for excellence. Demanding curriculum. Good facilities.
- 5. Building the academic and social emotional needs of all students while fostering 21st century skills that will allow for success in life following their educational experience.
- 6. Fully reflecting and engaging the racial, ethnic, economic, intellectual, emotional and physical diversity of our student body.
- 7. Where students look forward to and enjoy learning. Where they realize that education and learning does not end at a certain grade or degree.
- 8. High quality teachers who value their own professional growth and consistently use best practices on teachings that value learning over grades.

The themes in the cards were very consistent to say happy, healthy students who are productive members of society and that we should meet them where they are and how they learn. This should be sure to include diversity and inclusion. The themes in the cards played out in the priorities for each sub group you will see below. The overall message is consistent and clear that Wyoming residents care very deeply about their schools and they are a priority for the community.

Academic and College Preparation

The Academic and College Preparation group consisted of 15-20 members. There was a mixture of educators, professors, residents with and without children in the district.

The group brainstormed robust lists of what's working, opportunities and ideas for improvement in our focus are (Academic and College Preparation). We then identified the top three themes/ideas in each area.

What's Working

The first strength identified focused on **Wyoming's arts and music programs**. The district has strong appreciation for arts and music and the programs and opportunities for students to get involved. Programs like these extend academic learning.

The second strength identified focused on **parents' value of education**. There was a consensus that support of parents has been and continues to be a key factor in the success of Wyoming Schools.

The third strength identified is related to the second in that the Wyoming community overall values and supports the tradition of excellence in education and supports the academic and college preparation of its students. This was listed as a separate point because there is a large majority (~ 70-75%) of residents that do not actively have kids in Wyoming Schools. But this community continues to support the schools in spirit, volunteerism, and financially.

Opportunities for Improvement

The first opportunity focused on meeting the needs of students who do not fit in the "traditional" mold of the home grown, academically high achieving, college bound Wyoming Student. Examples and thoughts included increased support for special needs students, students in the middle/average learners, students on IEPs (Individual Instructional Programs), career/technical path students, and students new to Wyoming (getting acclimated to the environment). Lack of focus on these cohorts could possibly and at times have led to students not having an optimal education experience and at times leaving the district entirely.

The second opportunity focused on what faculty support can provide an ideal learning environment for students. Examples and thoughts included a lack of robust professional development with the variety and teacher input to make the time beneficial; the need for more mentoring of teachers who need assistance and methods to remove ineffective teachers; the need for improved instructional practices (e.g. too much lecture vs hands, better use of technology) and stronger alignment with administration.

The third opportunity focused on the overemphasis of testing and grades – specifically AP testing. Thoughts captured included a sense that AP's are overemphasized/pushed and are offered at too young an age. This includes the negative sentiment that more AP's the better and that this is a key measure of student success. There were also thoughts captured regarding over emphasis of state testing, grades and the notion that high test scored not necessarily equaling quality instruction.

Ideas for Improvement

The ideas for improvement in this group had a wide distribution of support however the top three include the following:

1. Improve Professional Development:

Focus on improving professional development by identifying gaps between current practices at Wyoming and best practices in the industry. Increase the involvement of staff in the planning of professional development to ensure topics and methods meet the needs of the audience. Create professional development that meet the needs of the district and enhances the instructional practices of faculty. Finally, create a climate and culture that believes in the importance of continual improvement, looking outside for fresh, new ideas, and shift away from only doing thing the "Wyoming Way".

2. Instill Love of Learning

Ensure that administration cares about and encourages a love of learning in all students and not just "bank on" history and test scores

3. Course Quality and Variety

Offer more, well taught classes that are not AP. This will provide students the opportunity to take an interesting variety of courses without the pressure/expectation of the AP system.

Whole Child Education

The whole child education group was the largest group of the three issue areas with approximately 20-25 members participating. The group included several teachers, former school employees/school board members who continue to live in the community, a high school student, and numerous parents with many identifying as parents of special needs students.

Many items were identified as areas where the school district excels. A high level of consensus was present when determining the top three areas that are working well. The top three areas working well include:

- 1. K-12 Music Program: there were nineteen votes for this area. Many positive comments were shared about the music program. There were several suggestions to enhance the program including: adding additional courses such as musical theory; adding a second choir; promoting more cultures in all aspects of the program both in curriculum and performances a music across the globe theme in both areas; and adding music classrooms at Elm and Vermont schools.
- 2. Community Involvement: there were sixteen votes for this area. The high level of engagement that is present in the community is evident through the generous support of the school levies. Many suggestions were offered as to how the district can improve community involvement. One highly supported suggestion was to expand the concept of "experienceships" at every level (K-12.) Group members shared that Wyoming has a wealth of community expertise: engineers, marketing professionals, accountants and others that could assist in teaching students practical applications as a supplement to the curriculum. Many of the other suggestions surround opportunities for better communication with parents. As an example, scheduling opportunities so that working parents can attend. Many of the current opportunities such as "coffee with the superintendent/principal" occur in the morning or daytime hours when working parents aren't available. Another suggestion was to require administrators to have an open door policy and that the Board hire a "community-minded" superintendent. Group members believe there should be increased use of social media for school communications and that there should be more communication with the community to include sending out innovative articles of best practices in education. Another suggestion is to have teachers share best practices on a regular basis (as opposed to learning about what certain teachers are doing and being informed of it through an end of the year award.) Finally, parental involvement is encouraged at the primary school level but discouraged at the middle and high schools. The group felt parental involvement should be encouraged at every level.
- **3.** Extracurricular Activities: there were sixteen votes for this area. Two improvements were suggested: offer more opportunities for kids entering the district who lack the foreign language background and improve all school facilities gyms, athletic fields,

performing arts center. Members felt we are falling behind other districts. We also need appropriate resources to support facilities – a performing arts manager as an example.

The group then focused on areas where improvement is needed. There were many items raised and are grouped into themes for the purpose of this report. The top three areas for improvement are as follows:

1. Mental Health and Bullying: Mental health issues are placing a strain on teachers and are affecting the classrooms. There needs to be more resources to address mental health issues. This includes additional staff and training for staff to better equip teachers to handle the increasing number of issues. Kids are experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety. Anxiety and other mental health issues should be treated equally to physical health issues. There was discussion that students at the primary levels need to be educated on dealing with anxiety/stress as it just continues to increase as they progress through school. Many believe there is too much focus on test scores, grades, and taking numerous AP classes which is contributing to increased stress and anxiety.

With regard to bullying, it was noted there has been educational efforts regarding bullying that occur occasionally and, in general, students are responding to this issue and awareness has definitely increased. Teachers bullying students and teachers enabling bullying is not being addressed. Teachers bully directly and indirectly and it was suggested that teachers be provided with a document or reporting process to report other teachers. More follow-up training sessions to reinforce bullying education efforts are needed. It was noted that things get better for a short period after bullying education but then bullying behaviors resume so touchpoints that are more frequent are needed. One suggestion was to use Cowboy Bell for training/education on bullying behaviors. It was noted that there are links to mental health and bullying and a bridge between these two issues should be established. During this discussion, there was consensus that the school administrators need to deal with problem teachers and they don't. Teachers need to be held accountable for their behavior and problem teachers need to go.

2. Teaching to All: Many expressed that if your child is an "average" student or has special needs, there is no interest in you. In fact, some suggested that they feel, as parents of special needs children, that the school would be happy if they just left the school district—that they are really not welcome here. All children need to be embraced. More staff is needed, along with other resources, to handle IEP and special needs kids. It takes months to get IEP forms processed, meetings held, etc. due to insufficient resources and lack of adequate support. "Tier 1" teaching should occur for all levels/kids. Teachers need to be able to have the flexibility to use alternative teaching styles and equipment in classrooms to accommodate different learning styles and

- abilities. More project based learning styles should be employed and new innovative teaching techniques that embrace all learning styles needs to be explored and implemented. In summary, "every kid has a gift, not just the gifted kids."
- 3. Administrative Issues: There were many concerns expressed from an administrative standpoint. A big theme was around respect. Administrators and teachers need to demonstrate respect and active listening. Parents and students need to feel they are actually being heard. Administrators need to have and demonstrate humility. This needs to occur from administrators/teachers to parents/students and vice versa. Again, the district needs to deal with bad teachers as well as bad administrators who lack leadership.

Discussion also centered on needing administrators/teachers who employ common sense. Rigidity is abundant. Rather than considering an individual and circumstances, everything is policy driven with no room for looking at whether something makes sense. There is no room for recognizing other educational opportunities such as traveling abroad. Instead, you are penalized.

Administrative processes need to be standardized across schools – including communications. All schools are doing things differently and sending out different communications and it is too much when you have kids in multiple schools.

Finally, it was suggested that an innovative superintendent be hired and that diversity be increased both in administration and teachers.

Financial Stewardship and Facilities

The financial stewardship and facilities group was the smallest of the three issue areas. There were eight participants in the group. Three of the eight participants were teachers who live in the community but also work for the district. Their views were expressed from both the perspective of an employee of the district and community member/parent.

The group made a comprehensive list of the strengths in financial stewardship and facilities in the district. The top three issues identified as working well were:

- 1. The generous support of the community to pass levies with an overwhelming majority of the voter electorate. Levies in Wyoming pass with well over 55% of the vote which is seen as a real strength in the community that all residents support the local schools.
- 2. That there is appropriate and fiscally responsible stretch in the amount of time a new tax increase or levy is put on the ballot. The participants appreciate the Board due diligence in asking for more resources from the community.
- 3. Improvements in the middle school were done well and has made that environment appropriate to meet all the needs of 21st century learning. The communication on the improvement needs for the middle school were appreciated and communicated well to the community which in turn overwhelmingly supported a bond issue to the fund the project.

Other assets such PSA funding, community driven dollars and the Wyoming school foundation were cited as unique attributes to the community.

Next, the group identified a list of opportunities for improvement. While there were many areas identified (complete list in Appendix). The following three were prioritized:

- 1. Upgrade for primary buildings. All eight participants identified this as the most pressing facility need for the district going forward. While the participants may have had varying ideas on how to address the need, all eight identified it as a need.
- 2. Most of the participants felt the Board and the district spend too many resources on outside consultants and would like more communication on how these resources are utilized and their return on investment to the community. While the inclusion consultant was mentioned specifically, this was a broader commentary on the Board use of outside consultants more generally.
- 3. A scoped and purposeful renovation to the High School in specific areas such as the cafeteria, art facilities and size of the gym. Although the group was limited with not having a big high school parent representation, the three areas mentioned above were recognized as priority needs that should be addressed in the short-term as class size will grow at the High School.

Finally, the three ideas that came out of the group to address the areas of opportunity were:

- 1. Combing the three primary neighborhood schools into one primary school location. Again, this group had very small participation and certainly the three teachers that travel between all three primary schools did influence the conversation, however, one primary school location did receive the most votes during the prioritization process. A more comprehensive evaluation and testing of the community needs to be done on this issue. Separate k-1. 2-3 and 3-4 schools were discussed as another idea, but one primary school physical location was the consensus of this group of participants.
- 2. Develop a formal process for discretionary dollars. The process to use the remaining district resources after staff and benefits feels random to the community. What needs are prioritized for discretionary dollars is not transparent. If there was a formal process for faculty to apply and the process were more transparent it might help with communication on return on investment and where the discretionary dollars age going and how they are being utilized.
- 3. Leverage more private funding into the schools and utilize parents and stakeholders. There was a sense that there are a lot of community assets in Wyoming that are not being optimized. Parents have interesting experiences that can be shared with students. Parents could be used as crossing guards and volunteers. There should be more volunteer opportunities for parents to invest in the schools which might lead to more outside funding resources.

The complete generated list of things going well, opportunities for improvement and ideas put forward is in the report Appendix.

Conclusion

As you have seen in the priorities identified by the groups above, there are some very consistent themes needing the attention of the district. These themes should be kept top of mind during the superintendent selection process and future school district planning. The summary of themes is listed below:

- 1. It was very apparent from the community who attended the Forum that the Wyoming music program is a gem and asset to both the community and the schools. Every group mentioned the music program as a strength and expressed interest in growing the program.
- 2. It was also very clear that the number one capital/facility issue facing the district concerned the primary schools specifically the perceived poor condition of the schools and the topic of a central vs neighborhood primary schools. Candidates for Superintendent should be asked about their experience in capital campaigns for new facilities and their thoughts on communicating to citizens in a way that garners support for such an endeavor.
- 3. Finally, the community members that attended the CAC Forum were clear that the current teacher performance management system is not as strong as it should be and that there is room for improvement. The Board should prioritize asking candidates how they have handled this issue in the past and how they would implement enhanced strategies at Wyoming Schools.

On behalf of the CAC, we hope the Board finds this report useful as they conduct their search for the next Superintendent and leader for Wyoming Schools. We also hope this document will serve as an introduction to the next Superintendent on how a portion of the community feels about the issues discussed. We hope this report will continue to be referenced and used as the district moves forward under new leadership.

Appendix

	CAC Community Forum Facilitators
Suzanne Burke	
Justin Buckner	
Melissa Saladonis	
	2019 CAC Members
Community Members:	
Justin Buckner	
Summer Fisk	

Christine Guillory

John McMichen

Ben Nicholson

Melissa Saladonis

Angie Edmonds

Jamie Hayner

Richard Schaen

Board and Administration:

Board Member Aaron Meis

Superintendent Dr. Susan Lang

Board Vice President Kara Broderick

Director of Communications Suzy Henke

Teachers and Community Members:

Angie Kozak

Financial Stewardship and Facilities

Working Well:

<u>Finance:</u> Pass levy, teacher pay, good communication about levies, reliable revenue sources, stick to a tough budget, music program well-funded, city and schools working together, school foundation, stretch time between levies, PSA funding, community driven extra dollars, grants,

<u>Facilities:</u> Improvement of middle school, middle school meets 21st century learning needs, athletic facilities aka football stadium, baseball field, buildings are clean, facilities are open to the community, input/communication on facilities with community, improvement/ renovations on high school, neighborhood primary schools exist, wifi capacity at all schools.

Opportunities for Improvement:

<u>Finance</u>: Future funding support, more balance funding for extra curriculars, increase budget from the state, prioritization for discretionary dollars, staffing challenges due to three buildings, process for discretionary dollars, more corporate sources, bussing for high school students, judicious looks at outside consultants, unnecessary spending on outside consultants, more crossing guards, accommodation of non-traditional learners, eliminating union contracts, more money allocated to field trips, experiences, no more foreign trips taken by administration.

<u>Facilities:</u> Upgrade safety in all locations, upgrade primary buildings including but not limited to: Hilltop structural issues, open Hilltop campus not safe, more classroom space, additional space for future preschool. Safety challenges that come with renovations, No economy of scale in three primary school buildings, space impacts educational opportunities, administrators are split between buildings, limited collaboration between students and teachers, High school gym needs renovated with more space, more space in middle school auditorium, HVAC systems at all buildings, renovation of art rooms at HS, uniform technology at all schools. Limited score and renovation of HS focusing on art rooms, café and gym.

Ideas for Improvement:

<u>Finance: Support city</u> and schools working together, capital levy on the ballot, lobby state legislature for increased schools funding, develop a process for how discretionary dollars are spent, get corporate sponsors, utilize parents and stakeholders more, increase school income tax, limit trips taken by administration staff, utilize parents for extra-curricular activities.

<u>Facilities:</u> One primary school, renovations to current primary schools, k-1 school, 2-3 school. 3-4 school, add modular at primary for more space, close the Hilltop open campus to form new

classrooms, window and doorway updates for safety, too many entry ways to monitor at Hilltop, decentralize HVAC system per building, HS gym renovations

Academic and College Preparation

What's Working: Verbatims/Post Its`

- Ability to Communicate between students, parents and staff
- Expectations are High
- Academics are valued in general
- High Achieving District
- Pockets of creativity coupled with academic excellence
- Variety of course options
- Number of AP courses Good Variety
- Strong arts and music
- Music and art appreciation
- Variety of extracurriculars that extend academic learning
- Arts opportunities
- College placement results
- "College Ready" students
- High graduation percent
- Good scholarship opportunities for academics
- Some exceptional teachers
- Low teacher turnover
- Strong teachers, low turnover
- Parents value education
- Pockets of great instructional practices
- Rigorous academic path in High School
- Challenging classes
- Number of devices per students Technology
- Residents value education
- Community composed of people who value education
- Parental support, community support
- Community feeling
- Community is economically advantaged
- Parents who are highly educated and professional
- Strong libraries/Learning Commons (WMS)
 - Great students
 - Lots of kids who love to read
 - Small class sizes
 - Small classes, small school size "Community"
 - Strong Research (WMS)
 - Research studies at WMS

Opportunities for Improvement

- AP's offered at too young a grade
- Push for AP's
- The number of AP classes taken should not be the measure of success
- Extreme focus on AP classes
- Expectation to take a lot of AP classes
- Need investments and challenges that are not AP classes
- Incorrect assumption that high test scores equal high quality instruction
- Testing (state testing)
- Focus in high school on grades
- Too much emphasis on state testing
- Class size
- Not enough administrative support for innovative and interdisciplinary
- Lack of elective options
- The "GPA" Game (boosting GPA)
- Too much emphasis on academics and
- Too much stress on achievement
- Achievement gap
- Educational gap between advantaged and
- Curriculum needs to be more diverse in representation
- Better support of Faculty
- Lack of professional development on best practices in instruction
- Career readiness (Not just
- More proactive mentoring of teachers who need assistance
- Need wider range of choices for teacher development
- Need more time for vertical alignment for staff
- Complacency with current practices
- Areas of poor instructional practices
- Not enough hands on too much lecture
- Some ineffective teachers
- No good ways to take care of ineffective teachers
- Need better integration of technology by faculty
- High administrator turnover
- Turnover of building administrator
- Student perseverance, persistency, problem solving
- Special Needs Why not Wyoming?
- Special services, poorly
- Not support for non typical students
- Fail to focus on kids strengths
- Education geared for one kind of kid (high achieving)
- Average learners
- Need more emphasis on helping all learners (e.g. kids with IEP's)
- School impact on the culture of the class
- New students (harder time fitting in)
- People move out of the district because it is "not a good fit"

- Students not allowed to engage in current events/politics
- Improve communication platforms
- Communication: Administration ->Staff→Students→Home: The platforms are not uniform
- Lack of computer classes @ middle/primary schools

Ideas For Improvement

WMS – Flexible schedule allows for more class selection

Create flexible schedule

Create clear beliefs about best practices in instruction areas

Identify gaps between best practices and current practices in instruction

Involve Staff in the planning of professional development days

Professional development that balances district priorities and specific instruction practices

Stronger special services team

Stronger college/career counseling that meets diverse needs

Stronger academic counseling at the high school – More

Leverage families/parents as resources more

Low hanging fruit – Invest in teachers, special education, Expanding opportunities for all students

Big Picture - Engage in community conversation regarding school culture

Assimilation class for new students

Conduct a study/survey for diversity representation in school curriculum

Find creative ways to retain building administration

Improve communication

More transparency from district officials

District communication – what are we doing already?

Show AP results/numbers from previous years – how did we do?

Less homework for students

Later HS start time

Utilize distance learning

Administration should care about and encourage love of learning in all students – Not bank on history and test scores

How do we encourage and reward teacher innovation

LMS (Learning Management System) used at all levels

Staff member instructional technology

Creative ways to handle class size

Create opportunities for teacher evaluation by students at the WMS and WHS

Encourage teachers to try new things without fear of test scores

Offer more life skills classes for students

Graduation survey for 2nd Year High School Grads (how are they doing)

Offer more, well taught, NON-AP classes

Consider the International Baccalaureate Program