



2024 Environmental Scan

Executive Summary of Open Response Questions

The environmental scan was conducted in January 2024 as the district introduced the Future Focus Strategic Planning initiative to the community.

Invitations to the community, parents and staff were sent digitally throughout the month. The printed district newsletter, which is delivered to all households in the district, also invited residents to participate.

There were four open-response questions answered by all audiences. There were 515 parent responses and 138 staff responses to the survey with most commenting in each of the open-ended questions. The following are the common themes and summaries as they align with the strategic planning work.

PARENT RESPONSE OVERVIEW

Parents expressed high satisfaction with Northbrook District 28, highlighting its strong academics, dedicated staff, supportive environment, effective communication and dedication to student well-being and success. While many parents prioritize academic rigor and student well-being, there is also disagreement on specific approaches and implementation. Parents specifically identified the following:

- Variety of programs offered, including STEM, music, art, foreign language, and electives.
- Emphasis on academic excellence and National Blue Ribbon recognition.
- Strong sense of community fostered within the district and schools.
- Individualized attention with classroom aides and support for students with different needs.
- Regular feedback and updates are provided to families.

- Involving the community in decision-making and fostering a sense of belonging were appreciated.
- Parents appreciate the school's ability to navigate challenges like COVID-19 and maintain a positive learning environment.

While specific concerns exist in some areas, the overall sentiment is positive and appreciative of the district's dedication to student well-being and success.

Some of the common themes identified as weaknesses include:

- Inconsistencies between teachers and schools
- Lack of focus on core subjects
- The need for more special education services
- Outdated facilities
- Bullying
- Outdated curriculum in some areas
- Lack of preparation for middle school

Opportunities for Improvement

Academics

- Stronger curriculum: Some statements call for a more rigorous curriculum, particularly in math, language arts, and STEM fields.
- Better transition to junior high: Several responses mention the need for better preparation in 5th grade for NBJH, including exposure to letter grades, more challenging homework and consistent academic placement practices.
- Focus on Critical Thinking & Problem Solving: Several responses emphasized shifting the focus from tests and grades to critical thinking and real-world application.

Student Well-Being

- Soft Skills: Teach executive functioning skills throughout the curriculum.
- Diversity and inclusion: More diversity in teachers and staff, addressing the needs of neurodiverse students, and more resources for students in the "middle." Ensuring equal treatment for all students regardless of background or sexual orientation.

- Reduced screen time: Limiting iPad use in schools is suggested by some parents.
- Social-emotional learning: Several responses ask for more emphasis on kindness, compassion, resilience, and responsible behavior while advocating for a supportive environment with clear consequences for bad behavior. Some emphasize the importance of effective bullying prevention and intervention. Some call for prioritizing mental health above all else.

School environment and communication

- Smaller class sizes: Maintaining small class sizes in elementary grades.
- Better communication: Some parents want clearer and more frequent communication about student progress, academic expectations, and decision-making processes.
- Collaboration and involvement: Some emphasize the importance of collaboration between teachers, parents, and administration to share responsibility and achieve shared goals.
- Homework: Some parents of elementary children wanted more (optional) language homework and more challenging homework to prepare them for middle school and high school.

Teachers & Administration

- Increased Teacher Accountability: Holding teachers accountable, particularly for performance and communication.
- Improved Principal and Superintendent Communication: Better communication and listening from leadership.
- Reduced Parental Interference: A few parents felt parents should be less involved in certain school matters.
- Teacher quality and engagement: Some call for higher teacher standards, removing ineffective teachers, and encouraging more engaging teaching methods.

School environment and facilities

- Improved facilities: Upgrading, updating and expanding buildings, particularly at Meadowbrook & Northbrook Junior High, is a recurring theme. This includes

addressing overcrowding, providing lunchrooms, having adequate space for programs and modernizing to accommodate the digital world in all buildings.

- Safety: Top-notch security and ensuring children's safety.

STAFF RESPONSE OVERVIEW

Staff also perceived the district as having strong academics and a supportive environment. The district is seen as prioritizing students' needs and creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment. Many highlight small class sizes, special education support, and resources catering to diverse needs. Respondents commended the district for providing a high-quality education with academic rigor, diverse curriculum, pursuit of high standards and support for special needs students.

Some identified positive changes like increased transparency, DEI initiatives, & curriculum upgrades. There is a supportive & responsive HR department. SEL programs & efforts to create a more inclusive environment are positive steps. The district's handling of COVID-19 is praised, with respondents noting creative solutions and support for students, families, and staff.

Some of the common themes identified as weaknesses include:

- Communication: Lack of communication between staff and administration, district office disconnected from buildings. More transparent decision-making.
- Curriculum: Inconsistent delivery of instruction and curriculum across the district, literacy needs improvement, better alignment between grade levels, more effective social-emotional learning.
- Facilities: Aging buildings, lack of space, inadequate facilities. Bathrooms and other NBJH locker rooms need to be modernized.
- Class size: Increasing class sizes, lack of support for large classes.
- Shifting priorities: Some express concerns that the focus on standardized testing might overshadow the "whole child" approach. Others feel the academic rigor has diminished.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Professional Development: Professional development specifically for student services staff could be improved. A few teachers felt there was a lack of quality professional development opportunities available.

- Equity: Concerns about meeting the needs of diverse learners and a lack of inclusive practices.
- Preparing students for the future and the real world.
- Need for better systems, processes, and protocols.
- Collaboration across grades & with other districts could be improved.
- Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): More support for students' social-emotional well-being, including diversity training and programs to address the needs of marginalized students.

Goals for the District

Parent Overview

The responses present a multifaceted view of what's important for student success. While academics and preparation for the future are crucial, fostering well-rounded and responsible individuals in a safe and supportive environment is equally important. Effective communication, strong leadership, and addressing individual needs are seen as key factors in achieving these goals.

Overall Goals

- Holistic Development: Several responses go beyond academics, highlighting the importance of social-emotional well-being, character development, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.
- Student Success: The most common theme was ensuring the overall success of each student, encompassing academic achievement, social-emotional well-being, and preparation for future endeavors. Making learning enjoyable and fostering curiosity.
- Academic Excellence: Many responses emphasized strong academic foundations, particularly in core subjects like math and language arts.
- Safe and Supportive Environment: Creating a safe and inclusive environment where students feel supported emotionally and socially was another prominent theme.
- Individualized Learning: Several responses stressed tailoring education to individual student needs and abilities.

- **Teacher Quality and Communication:** Effective teaching and clear communication from teachers were seen as crucial for student success.
- **Facilities and Resources:** Modernizing facilities, managing resources effectively through informed choices, and allocating them equitably.
- **Safety:** Ensuring a safe and secure environment for learning is paramount.

Points of Tension

- **Balance between academics and well-being:** Some express concerns about balancing academic rigor with emotional support.
- **Discipline and expectations:** Opinions vary on appropriate disciplinary measures and student behavior expectations.
- **Equity and consistency:** Ensuring consistent and equitable resources and support across schools and programs is desired.
- **Pressure on students:** Some worry about excessive pressure on students, advocating for a more relaxed approach.
- **Teacher support and accountability:** Both supporting teachers and holding them accountable are desired by different respondents.

Staff Overview

The responses reflect a strong focus on creating a school environment that prioritizes both student well-being and academic excellence. Addressing diverse student needs, ensuring equity and inclusion, supporting teachers, and maintaining modern facilities are key themes. Open communication, data-driven decision-making, and adapting to change are also emphasized.

Overall Goals

- **Student Well-Being & Development:** Holistic development including emotional health, social skills, and responsible citizenship. Individualized attention and support through smaller class sizes, interventions, and special education resources. Equity and inclusion for all students regardless of background or needs.

- Academic Excellence & Equity: High-quality curriculum and instruction delivered by competent and well-supported teachers. Alignment with standards and rigorous learning are important while adapting to changing needs.
- Staff Support & Working Conditions: Reasonable workload and manageable systems are essential for teacher well-being and retention. Ongoing training and professional development are crucial, especially in DEI and intervention strategies. Collaboration, communication, and transparency between administration and staff. Competitive salaries, benefits, and recognition are important for attracting and retaining qualified staff. Mental health support for both students and staff is emphasized.
- Infrastructure & Resources: Modernized facilities that are accessible and appropriate for all learners are needed. Forward-thinking planning for future growth and facility needs is emphasized. Adequate funding and resources to address diverse student needs and implement high-quality programs are crucial.

Responses analysis supported by Bard AI