

WEST DES MOINES COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
Community Education
Community Needs Assessment

AUGUST 24, 2015

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Executive summary

Overview

WDMCS Community Education commissioned West Des Moines-based Hanser & Associates to conduct a community needs assessment. The research in this report examines the community's strengths, changes and concerns from the previous five years and opportunities and priorities for the future. The full report includes summaries and transcripts of leadership interviews and focus groups. Note that the "community" refers to the geographic regions served by the West Des Moines Community Schools (WDMCS) district—portions of West Des Moines, Clive, Windsor Heights, Urbandale, and Cumming.

Key Findings

Results of the interviews and focus groups showed that community leaders and community members from across the district are in tune with each other based on perceptions of the strengths, changes, needs, opportunities and priorities of the community.

Strengths

The most prevalent strengths of the community include:

- A good educational system which includes good infrastructure and teachers who care for the students and their education
- A strong community, including having a great number of opportunities to be involved, as well as people who are involved, helpful and welcoming
- High level of safety

Changes

A majority of changes during the past five years and their impacts identified by participants included a dramatic population increase and change in levels of diversity. The impacts include changes in the schools, a greater need for resources, changes in income stratification within the community and schools, and business growth and development.

Concerns

Concerns were identified related to changes in demographics and the increase in diversity in the community over the past five years, including:

- A language barrier which impacts the community and schools, due to many languages and dialects being spoken by residents within the district
- Low availability of public transportation
- Lack of affordable housing for low-income residents
- Making sure students are still getting a high-quality education in the face of population growth
- Acceptance of diversity in schools and the community
- Social issues such as homelessness, mental health, bullying and drug problems
- The (business) community's ability to attract and retain millennials

Opportunities

Opportunities for improvement include the development of new resources or expansion of existing resources to address the growth in the community and changing demographics. Leaders and community members suggested such services as:

- Language classes for immigrant parents
- More affordable housing
- Expansion of public transportation
- Diversity training to increase general awareness of the changing needs within the community

The opportunity to educate the residents on the needs of the community stemmed from the idea expressed in many focus groups that the community has what was identified as a growing gap between the “haves and have nots.” The community is still viewed by many as a very affluent community that does not have to face issues such as income inequality. Based on this research, both leaders and community members are aware of the gaps in resources and services and the need to address them.

Priorities

Priorities focused on issues identified in the other areas, such as addressing education concerns with the changing demographics and continuing community-building to give all residents opportunities to contribute and be engaged members of the community. Accommodating the growing diversity in the community through community training and events related to diversity education to promote acceptance and tolerance were priorities of many participants.

Conclusion

The leadership interviews and focus groups conducted gave insight into the community members’ perspectives on the community. The most prevalent topics were related to education, population growth, changes in demographics and the impacts of those changes such as income inequality, language barriers, affordable housing and transportation. Find more detailed information about the focus group sessions and leadership interviews in the following pages of this Needs Assessment.

Introduction

WDMCS Community Education held a series of leadership interviews and focus groups in April and May 2015 involving various representations of the population within the district, including:

- School staff
- Law enforcement
- Minority populations
- Low income residents
- Parents of students
- Students (current)
- Community members
- Human Services professionals
- Business leaders

Through the interviews and focus groups, WDMCS Community Education gathered information to inform and guide school administrators, faculty and staff, as well as distribute appropriate information to other entities within the district.

Methodology

Instrument development

Development of the discussion guide was based upon conversations between the Community Education Advisory Council (CEAC) and Hanser & Associates. Topics and questions were developed based upon previous Community Education needs assessments. In order to gain a clear picture of the public's perception of the community based upon their experiences, a broad range of questions were developed.

Focus group questions and discussions were further guided by the results of interviews conducted during April 2015 with leaders in the community. The discussion was designed to determine the perspectives of residents about the following topics:

1. Existing strengths of the community
2. Changes in the community in the past five to 10 years and the impacts of those changes
3. What concerns residents about the community
4. What opportunities for improvement exist
5. What are priorities in the community for the next five to 10 years
6. An additional question was asked of community leaders about how best to communicate with the community at large

The conversations in leadership interviews and focus groups have resulted in the identification of issues the CEAC and other stakeholders may be inclined to focus on in future strategic planning.

During the interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to identify the issues confronting the community. Note that the "community" refers to the geographic regions served by WDMCS district – portions of West Des Moines, Clive, Windsor Heights, Urbandale, and Cumming.

Please note that the summary report is a compilation of ideas, comments and concerns from all participants. It does not represent consensus across all groups regarding the topics, but rather comments, concerns or suggestions that were prevalent in one or more focus group discussions.

Community leader participants

Community leaders were selected by the CEAC based upon their community involvement and representation of groups selected to take part in the research. Leadership interviews were scheduled by WDMCS Community Education.

- Director, West Des Moines Human Services
- Superintendent, West Des Moines Community Schools
- Director of Community and Economic Development, City of West Des Moines
- City Manager, City of West Des Moines
- Police Chief, City of West Des Moines
- Executive Officer, Office of Asian & Pacific Islander Affairs
- Director, Board of Directors, Indo-American Association of Iowa
- Burmese/Chin community leader and pastor
- Sacred Heart's Hispanic Ministry Outreach

Focus group participants

Focus group participants were selected by the CEAC based upon their representation of groups selected to take part in the research. All focus group sessions were conducted at the WDMCS Learning Resource Center, with the exception of the low-income group, which was conducted at West Des Moines Human Services.

Focus group sessions

The following is a list of groups and dates of the focus group sessions:

- School staff (eight participants) —Thursday, April 30, 2015
- Law enforcement/youth justice (seven participants) —Tuesday, May 5, 2015
- Human services professionals (six participants) —Thursday, May 7, 2015
- High school students (nine participants) —Thursday, May 7, 2015
- Parents (six participants) —Thursday, May 14, 2015
- Community (seven participants) —Tuesday, May 19, 2015
- Human Services clients (low income) (eight participants) —Thursday, May 21, 2015
- Business leaders (eight participants) —Thursday, May 21, 2015

Leadership interview results

During in-person interviews (one-on-one) from April 14-22, 2015, Hanser & Associates interviewed nine community leaders.

The following are strengths, changes and their impacts, concerns, opportunities for improvement and priorities for the community as identified by those community leaders.

Strengths

Community

(Mentioned by 7 of the 9 leaders)

Residents are willing to serve and collaborate and are demanding. According to some leaders, these are traits expected of an educated and high-quality population; but community members are also polite and not judgmental. The following are qualities identified regarding residents of the WDMCS:

- Quality people with a strong sense of community
- Openness to new ideas
- There are opportunities for residents of all ages to be involved and contribute *(mentioned by 1)*
- Residents possess high skills and intelligence
- Quality cities within the District and solid infrastructure
- Respect and caring for elders
 - The City of West Des Moines is the only city-operated Human Services program in Iowa. Respect for elders among the Asian and Latino populations was also mentioned.
- Quality volunteer and “community service” opportunities for adults and youth
- Quality “summer care” programs for kids including mention of the fine camps and summer programs for elementary school students.
- Pride in doing things well, which includes high expectations among the residents that things will be built/maintained well and public entities will provide top services
- Community events
 - There are a lot of public events in which the entire community can participate
- Family values, especially among the Asian cultures, in which the multiple generations of a family continue to live together here in the WDM community

Representative quotes

- “People open doors for people, people are polite. How often do you find that if you're trying to get out, like you see a construction out here, you try and get out of the road way and people won't let you in. But I find more often than not, that people are just very polite people here.”
- “All of us know each other. We're fairly small and so we all of us know each other and we're coming together and that could be a strength and a weakness. I said that because we tend to be so much together that then we don't get around and time plug in and I'm very typical and I'm very plugged in the system and I'm very aware out there but I think I'm the only one in my 500 - 600 people of Nepali community or couple of them.”

Education

(5 of 9)

- Quality public schools, which eliminates the need for families to pay for private schooling for their kids
 - Staff are dedicated and committed
 - AP and honors programs are excellent
- Infrastructure (buildings, classrooms, technology and athletic facilities) is excellent
- Strong focus on education

- Residents support education and our schools, a trait associated with an educated population

Representative quotes

- “The instructors that I've come across and had interactions with are very dedicated.”
- “That has afforded a lot of families to not have to consider private schooling from a financial perspective or just otherwise.”

Economy

(2 of 9)

The District has a strong local economy which has many educated workers and provides plenty of employment opportunity, and tax base, in the community.

Representative quote:

- “If you look at the whole state, we probably have one of the highest amount of jobs in the city than any place in the State. And it's growing, so that's good.”

Additional strengths

The following were strengths mentioned by one participant:

- Transportation for school children, who can get transportation for free based on income
- Safety; low crime rate
- Very welcoming to the refugee community

Changes and impacts

Diversity and population growth

The demographic change in five years has been “extreme” or a “radical change” bringing more diversity (ethnic, language and religion). Many of these changes are due to immigration, with an estimated 15,000 new immigrants living in Polk County. The diversity which provides an “enriched quality of life” for all in the community; leaders said that residents speak more than 100 languages/dialects in WDM schools and throughout the community. The population growth has also attracted additional opportunities for employment, shopping and entertainment.

The impacts of these changes include:

- New opportunities and programs for refugees to access needed resources (housing, education and opportunities to get engaged)
- Need to invest additional resources to communicate with the diverse populations,
 - This includes ESL teaching in schools and more employed and volunteer translators in schools and human services agencies. Example includes parents who do not speak English bringing young children to meetings for the child to interpret for “adult-only business” transactions and discussions for which a child is unlikely to understand the financial, legal and other ramifications.
- Need/demand for affordable housing
- Need for culturally appropriate healthcare (i.e., providers speak the patient's language),
- An increase in school enrollments

- Need for public transportation
- More low-income residents
 - This requires more community-wide resources to serve the low-income families. West Des Moines Human Services say 6 percent of the population is below Poverty-level
 - West Des Moines Human Services also says a total of 3,700 people in City of WDM are relying upon the city for assistance with:
 - Transportation
 - Meals and Food Pantry
 - Handymen (to do repairs that the resident can continue to live in their home)
- The Asian festival has grown to accommodate growing population

Beyond the variety and growth of housing, the concern is to accommodate coexistence (and balance) among residents of both owner-occupied and rented housing.

Several also pointed out “diversity” of skills and needs among the new residents. For example, there are two different kinds of immigrants:

- High-skilled work visa immigrants (mostly from India and China, who are generally very educated and have language skills; they are generally high-income families. Their highest needs include social integration, no participation in civic engagements. Learn about community services slower than other mainstream counterparts.
- New refugee communities (Bhutanese, Burmese, Iraqi populations). They are generally relatively new to the community (5-7 years), English language is their biggest barrier (approximately 20% are fluent in English), and they are low to medium-income. Due to their low income, these immigrants are most likely to be on some sort of government assistance and on Reduced Lunch program.

Representative quotes

- “But, especially immigrant families, low income families have real challenges in terms of resources that they have available at home for the kids whether it's computers whether it's being able to access the internet or just having books and stuff at home.”
- “It started to change 5 years ago, but it has I think rapidly changed over the last 5 years so. We have more families in need than we have 5 years ago. We have more religions represented in our community now. More languages represented in our community now which then brings on some just different needs of how to support all those different groups.”
- “It’s impacted us in the sense that, we really have to think about what other services are we going to provide, so that we can really meet the mission of what we are here to do and that’s to educate all kids and to get the highest extent possible.”

Education

(3 of 9)

Due to the increase in population, there have been an increase in enrollments in the WDMCS. According to one of the interviewees, this has caused schools to have to do more with less. A positive change noted is that there is more focus on the overall health of students in the form of more physical education, healthier food choices and opportunities for involvement.

Representative quotes

- “[There is] probably greater pressure on the school system in terms of trying to keep taxes low but yet they're trying to turn out a quality product. And maybe that's always been the case but I think the district feels I'm a great deal of scrutiny in terms of being able to provide value for the tax dollars that are given.”

Business growth

(5 of 9)

Interviewees mentioned that there are more large businesses, such as Microsoft, coming to the WDMCS and that this growth is providing:

- A larger tax base
- Opportunities for community growth and improvement
- Job growth
- More shopping and entertainment

Because of the growth in the business sector, there are also more visitors coming to the city of West Des Moines and doing business at Jordan Creek Town Center, local businesses or staying overnight at hotels (five new hotels are also being added).

While there is business growth, the change in taxation of multi-family housing from commercial to residential has had an impact by lowering the revenue of the City of West Des Moines by approximately \$2 million in 2015.

The larger number of visitors to businesses in the WDMCS has also presented a new challenge for law enforcement to deal with a different set of violations than have previously occurred in order to protect and serve residents.

Additional changes and impacts

The following changes and their impacts were mentioned by one interviewee:

- Law enforcement officials, via a program called “CodeRed,” (operated by WestCom) send a text message when a child is reported to be missing, which is appreciated by parents
- Online capabilities have matured within the school district

Concerns

Language and diversity

(5 of 9)

Many interviewees mentioned a language barrier in the community and schools, making language a top concern in the community. This primarily means that:

- All residents need opportunities to learn English
- Because of the language gap, WDM community schools are seen as unfamiliar and, therefore, “intimidating” (not a “comfortable” place)
- Schools need more multi-lingual employees
- Need more language resources for kids (more than ESL programs)

- Parents are sometimes unable to participate in their child’s education (at school or at home) due to a language barrier

Other concerns related to how people from different backgrounds, such as refugees and immigrants, become involved in the community. Some had concerns about how the community accommodates the growth in diversity:

- We must maintain a “community of tolerance” but our increasingly diverse population does not “know/understand” others in the community and may face others who have preconceived notions about “me/us”, and roles in the community (“Why is this person here?”).
- How to provide the community-wide supports needed by low-income and immigrant families, including those families’ need for more support and skills

In addition to accommodating the needs of the increasingly diverse population in the WDMCS, the language barrier and cultural differences can have an impact on the education of children in the community. Some interviewed had education-related language and diversity concerns, such as:

- Parents not devoting enough time to help their children learn. Hispanic and other immigrant families in which the parents work, and are not devoting time in the evening to assure that the kids are doing their homework. A second dimension is the parent may be unaware of the homework assignment because they can’t read to curriculum/homework assignment schedule
- Low educational level of parents in immigrant families. Some Hispanic families may have only a 3rd or 4th grade education, so low reading and writing skills, and inadequate English language skills.
- Need to increase understanding of “the path to success in America,” including the need to help parents (especially in Hispanic families) understand the importance of educational attainment in the USA – the need for their children to finish High School because it is necessary for success here.

Representative quotes

- “You know when it comes to the school, that’s one area where I feel like a lot of families feel very intimidated, really don’t know what’s going on and how to interact and we’re very afraid of saying a wrong things and lot of... our community members are... language has been identified as a top most priority for... most Asian Pacific Islander communities.”
- “They’re a little hands-off in education because it’s not important to them because they were working there hard and they’re working here hard, education is not on top of their priorities.”
- “You know, we have to have not only teach them the core, but we have to give them that core instruction and then more because we close that achievement gap... They have to grow at a much different rate, faster rate than our kids otherwise.”
- “We’re having ‘adult conversations’ (re business, family financial matters and/or healthcare) with adults here using children as translators and that’s a horrible position for a child to be at.”

Education

(5 of 9)

Education concerns were at top of mind for community leaders, including making sure schools have adequate resources because of the growth and changes the schools have faced in recent years, such as larger class sizes and diversification of students. The concerns from community leaders include:

- How to maintain adequate resources for schools
 - Systems/processes to “assure a better connection between students, teachers and parents to catch early any problems that kids may be having
 - Staffing and funding to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population
- School district needs a better plan to accommodate rezoning and redistricting so diversity of students is addressed
- School district needs to teach “persistence” in learning (life-long learning). The learning skills need to include:
 - a “growth mindset” (how to learn continuously learning from failure)
 - critical thinking skills
 - collaboration
- School district needs to figure out how to hire more diverse employees to match the new diversity of the student population and community
- School district needs to change the focus from standardized test scores to other ways to predict success, including how provide the resources needed for success and “how to define career-ready”
- Schools may be changing curriculum unnecessarily. Schools should be “sticking to the basics” and “not chasing the teaching fad (style) of the year”
- School size. Some parents are concerned that Valley High School is too big and kids may be getting lost in the crowd. Others are saying we may need more buildings so the elementary schools can be smaller
- How to make schools meet the needs of the workplace, by looking and functioning more like a modern workplace to assure prepared and productive workforce for the future.

Representative quotes

- “What’s the plan for changing demographic? What’s the plan to really accommodate these new families and these children without having to go through rezoning activity every two years.”
- “The State is almost in the race to see how we could invest less in education and infrastructure. But show me a state or region that doesn’t invest in education, infrastructure and quality of life that is a place where people want to work and live. I just don’t think it’s out there.”

Housing (5 of 9)

With an increase in diversity and a shift in demographics such as income, many were concerned about the availability of housing for all residents. There were comments and concerns about recent increases in monthly rental rates for apartments and houses (the increases cited as a problem were three percent at time of annual renewal (example was “up \$20/month, to \$670/month).

- The affordable housing should be dispersed, so it is near to schools (within walking distance of school, especially elementary schools)
- Need more rental properties

Representative quotes

- Regarding rent increases: “So they rise, like \$20 per month. I'm a little bit concerned about that and I'm trying to bring up this one when we are going to have a next Clive community meeting also.”

- “What we have noticed then because of that is a lot of families are now moving out of West Des Moines going towards Waukee because the housing that’s available here is getting more and more expensive.”

Community and resources

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- How to maintain a high quality of life for residents, including how to provide the same quality of life in the older and newer areas of the city, and keep West Des Moines livable and walkable.
- We need to figure out how to “do more” with limited resources, including how to:
 - maintain adequate staffing levels for police and fire protection, in line with growing number of residents and visitors to the community
 - provide the right amount of visibility for law enforcement officers; at the same time need to communicate that crime rates are in line with communities similar to WDM..
- Not enough computer technology for learning, which included concerns expressed regarding:
 - More online capabilities for the school district, i.e. parents would like to make online payments for fees, etc.
 - Schools and/or community should help assure that all have computers and Internet access
- Need more collaboration, including community institutions working together to solve broad-based problems
- How to continue making adequate investment in infrastructure to assure continued high quality of life for all residents
- Human services professionals have a high burnout rate

Representative quotes

- “You don’t want to go all new on one part and then let another part of your city slowly decay. I’m from Des Moines and I watched that happen. I can go to my old neighborhood and I see it keeps slipping and once it gets to a certain tipping point, then it’s hard to regain.”
- “We’re trying to work with our policymakers to keep taxes down. But we can’t continue, at the public service level, doing more and more with less even though that is the new norm. It’s becoming impossible and that’s kind of where my main theme goes back to is, what we are...these things all lead to... How do we maintain and increase the level of services that this community has grown to know and expect.”

Transportation

(3 of 9)

Community leaders have concerns regarding school bussing and public transportation; need more buses and accessible schedule to get to/from school; also improved public bus systems to get to work, shopping and entertainment.

Representative quote

- “Public transportation there’s a lot to desire. I know ten, fifteen years ago West Des Moines was a very small community but that’s not the case anymore.”

Opportunities

Community and resources

(6 of 9)

- Need more volunteer and “community service” opportunities for adults and youth, especially for young kids
- Teaching relevant job skills, including the need to fill the gap for mid-skill jobs; we have plenty of highly-trained professionals, and people for non-skilled jobs, but not enough for mid-skill jobs.
- Need more greenspace and sustainability, i.e., trails, parks and other open space that millennials say is important to them.
- Keep cities attractive to millennials (especially important to them) and all people.
- Need to improve redevelopment options – i.e., how City of West Des Moines, and other cities in the WDM school district, can accommodate news storm-water requirements when redeveloping older parts of the city.

Representative quotes

- “There aren’t always very obvious volunteer opportunities. Now there are some that are if you have a child in school, that’s more obvious you get involve in that kind of activity.”
- “You start seeing more research and [millennials] want homes, they want families. It may be a little different approach to life and how they view it, but they still want a lot of the same things. They want experiences though, that is different. And, they’re not someone to say, *‘I’m going to go find a job and then I’ll live there.’* They’re more, a little more I think, I’m going to live somewhere and find a job.”
- Regarding civic engagement for Asian/Pacific Islanders: “It’s really important for us to be at the table and I encourage other people to do the same thing but, you know I’ve learned there are few places where you really do have to be a squeaking wheel or your issues are never going to be brought to the table. And being at the state house to advocate for your... for what you need is one of them. So yes, civic engagement, people don’t really want to come out and, you know and that’s something that I feel like we need to work on.”

Education

(5 of 9)

- Need “diversity training” for teachers and other school staff, which includes the need for teachers to understand the language and cultural barriers confronting various cultures/immigrant groups.
- Schools need to help people (new families, especially immigrant families) get acclimated to the community and schools regarding the role of parents, how things work, etc.
- Change the perceived discrepancy between high level of education and low acceptance to Ivy League schools
- Flexibility in education while assuring a solid core curriculum, also provide flexibility to teach in more modern and relevant ways (using technology and group/team learning if that helps each student learn better
- Teach both students and parents the value of a college education

Representative quote

- “We have to start teaching and be a community of tolerance; tolerance being that we accept other people's beliefs, their religious beliefs, their sexual orientation, their racial or cultural beliefs. We have to get better as a community because we're not...we don't experience those challenges as much as other communities.

Diversity

(4 of 9)

Most diversity-related opportunities identified by community leaders were education-based to create awareness, but also with breaking down communication barriers.

- Need to provide more education to general public regarding diversity. Community and civic engagement from the Asian community members will help.
- Need “diversity training” for teachers and other school staff, which includes the need for teachers to understand the language and cultural barriers confronting various cultures/immigrant groups.
- Schools need to help people (new families, especially immigrant families) get acclimated to the community and schools so they are less intimidating and know processes
- World Day to teach cultural awareness.
- More ESL for students and parents

Representative quotes

- Regarding transportation for ESL classes: “Again, it's about transportation, it's about ease of use. We will jump in our car to go wherever and many times they don't ... if they have car, they may not have money for gas.”
- “I'm sure we have Bosnians and different backgrounds and I don't know if the teachers, knowing that type of background, the type of personalities that they will get in their classrooms, might help a little bit in the education that they get. We do it in corporate America.”

Business

(4 of 9)

Businesses and schools in the community should be more engaged in collaborations to better serve residents, including:

- more outreach between business and schools
- identify future skills and needs in the workplace
- opportunities for internships (paths to employment)
- sponsorships from business community to fund that job training

Representative quote

- “Business of education hasn't changed a lot and yet the world is so much different and ... I'm hearing that types of skills employers are looking for. We need to think about how we can do a better job of helping students with those skills.”

Affordable housing

(3 of 9)

Community leaders believe there needs to be more affordable housing, including more rental properties within the community.

Priorities

Education

(6 of 9)

There were many different ways in which education topped leaders' priority lists, such as teaching styles, technology, outreach and more:

- Improve outreach to diverse/minority communities by laying the groundwork for greater inclusiveness, and make WDM Community Schools “more approachable” the suggestion was that this include the school district adding an ongoing assistant (a “customer service representative”) to serve each ethnic community; one leaders noted that “maintaining the public’s image and trust is the most important issue of our time.”
- Provide multiple ways to learn, including full Implementation of the “New-Tech Program” (which uses technology and group/team learning to engage each student in learning) and more STEM skills
- More early career training (starting career training as early as elementary grades)
- Providing individual teaching plans for kids
- College preparation seminars
- Prevent a future incident like the three fights that broke out at Valley High School on February 12, 2015. This includes viewing the incident (whether racially motivated or not) as “a wake-up call” and “never being complacent in the future.”

Representative quotes

- “Opportunities like that where we get a little more in depth practical experiences. I think that overall what I see and again I’m talking as a community member having kids from 22 down to 5 is really using the STEM programs using some more in-depth learning opportunities to help people really understand what they want to do with their life.”
- “[College preparation seminars] need to be done. I know Sacred Heart is not the only church who is more like an outreach but I feel, I always say this, if I had time, I will do like a workshop at our church, bring teachers, counselors. I don’t know if that’s a volunteer basis or that’s something that West Des Moines can provide. A little Powerpoint, forms, a checklist saying this is when they start 9th grade or 8th grade, whenever that magic number is, grade is when they have to really shape up, get up your GPA at 4.0 so this is what you can get.”

Diversity

(4 of 9)

Diversity training for the community in a priority in order to both Increase awareness and educate about Asian and other minority populations in Iowa. Other resources should be prioritized, such as more resources to reduce language barriers and provide more cultural experiences in the community, such as a World Day event.

Representative quote

- “So, as we are a changing community, it also can bring with it some struggles and instead of focusing on our differences of whether it be culture, or race, or gender identity, or socio-economic status, or all of that religion, whatever it maybe, let’s focus on our similarities”

Community

(4 of 9)

Community leaders believed that improving the community in a variety of ways should be a priority through means such as:

- Increasing civic engagement
- Increasing the public’s knowledge of available services and ensuring communities have access to services
- Continuing to open up more opportunities for kids and the community, such as volunteer opportunities
- Improving the visual attractiveness of the community through community planning

Business

(3 of 9)

Business and the local economy can be improved and should be prioritized in a variety of ways:

- Improve self-sufficiency via skills/job training. Residents should be able to learn the necessary skills to get better jobs
- Outreach by businesses and schools to place students and faculty in workplace learning environments so they can experience “the real world of work/career.”
- Improve economic viability by creating a plan to make City of West Des Moines more economically viable.

Public transportation

(3 of 9)

The improvement of public transportation is a priority of community leaders because residents need to be able to get to school, work or other resources in order to be successful and contribute to the community.

Representative quote

- On what transportation is needed: “Definitely community wide and schools. Even if you’re allowed to open and enroll in a school you don’t have the transportation available even if you’re ready to pay.”

Affordable housing

(2 of 9)

Residents should be able to live in the WDMCS without having to move out because of high costs of housing.

Representative quote

- “The first priority is to live around that West Des Moines District because they love the West Des Moines School District, they don't want to move to other places so they start looking for a house they can afford and they start buying a house in West Des Moines Community Schools also.”

How to Improve Communication

We must use multi-channel communication and with more frequency

(9 of 9)

Reach out via multiple platforms, although nearly all stated that Internet (websites, email and social media) alone is NOT adequate. One leader remarked that, *“Everyone is trying to figure out the best ways to communicate with the Hispanic community... People want to talk on the phone and interact – some because they cannot read; also because Hispanics like person-to-person interaction.”*

The channels requested most commonly are:

- Email
- Print (recommended by most because it is pushed to parents via students, rather than expecting off-line parents to take the initiative necessary to access info online)
- Social media (*Police recommended use of social media*).
- Word-of-mouth (dialogue, discussion and opportunity for Q&A Discussion -- in-person or via phone); these would be activated by small group meetings, roundtables and informal “over a cup of coffee” discussion to drive word-of-mouth
- Community organizations and non-profits should communicate through the schools (public and private) as a way to reach parents and students
- Websites
- “Places where everybody goes (i.e., grocery stores, churches, libraries and other public places)

Word-of-mouth communication via community representatives

(5 of 9)

These “representatives” include clergy and others affiliated with immigrant associations (most are 501c3 with designated officers/leaders). These representatives spend most of their time answering questions and pointing their members to resources need by families. (e.g. Indian Association, Nepal Association, and four pastors working in the Burmese community)

Provide more of a “world view” by conducting community-wide events, including an “International Day” or “World Day”

(4 of 9)

This should include wearing of traditional ethnic attire, serving ethnic food, participation in ethnic/national activities, and display of national flags

Overcome the language barrier

(2 of 9)

Need to communicate with adults in multiple languages. For example, community agencies and schools should use language-specific flyers sent home with students to be read by their parents (if parents speak a language other than English)

Transparency and openness

(1 of 9)

More opportunities for residents to interact directly with leaders, providing true dialogue.

More video

(1 of 9)

People want “more pictures, fewer words.”

Focus Group results

Hanser & Associates conducted eight focus groups, during which participants identified several strengths, changes, concerns, opportunities and priorities for the WDMCS communities.

Strengths

Education

(Mentioned by 5 of 8 groups as being a strength)

Education was a common topic when strengths of the community were mentioned. Groups discussed how the schools have worked very well to accommodate growth and changes in diversity, teachers connect well individually with students and care about the students and that having a solid education system helps drive growth because it draws people into the community.

Representative quotes

- “If you look at the support for the schools and the commitment from schools and when people are looking in the metro area for housing and such things, they are also looking for school so it’s a key element in the community.”
- “They don’t only teach they strive to make the student better not only in academics but responsible in characteristics.”
- “My older son had some learning disabilities in school and I guess as a parent it really meant a lot to me that the teachers cared beyond just the school room day.”
- “Our school district has been very good about keeping up with all types of languages and different cultures and accompany these kids would come in there it’s like I think we deal with like 30 different ethnic groups in the schools right now.”

Safety

(5 of 8 groups)

Groups discussed enjoying the feeling of having a safe community, mentioning good response times from law enforcement and having a low crime rate despite the large amount of growth in recent years.

Representative quotes

- “And for us from a law enforcement side as the city has grown, our crime rate has not. So even though we increase amount of population night time or day time, visitors and everything else, we don't see a huge jump associated with the increase of either.”
- “It’s quiet, safety, like you can go outside, can get kids to play outside without any problem or something.”

Community

(5 of 8 groups)

Groups described WDMCS as one which has a strong sense of community, is very collaborative, helpful and involved, with lots of opportunities to participate.

Representative quotes

- “The citizens of all the cities in this district are very involved in all aspects of government, non-government and anything else.”
- “All the cities in the community have a sincere desire to find out what the needs are of its constituents and to address them.”
- “A lot of Valley kids and Dowling kids all like hang out together and it's not just a huge division just because we go to a different school.”

Resources

(5 of 8 groups)

Participants described WDMCS as a community which has a lot to offer those who are in need of assistance or are looking for some way to get involved. In the discussions, a sense of community was often related to the availability of resources and programs. Specific resources and programs mentioned were Human Services, libraries, the Character Counts program and Backpack Buddies.

Representative quotes

- “As long as they know who to call in terms of what they’re looking for then there’s usually something available, it’s just a matter if someone is directing people the right direction, if that makes sense. It seems like there is a lot there for people to use and be able to benefit from if needed in different family situations or anything like that.”
- “I think that if a family or individuals in the community need something and they can’t get it where they currently are, this community is really good about reaching out to others.”

Additional strengths of the WDMCS

- Business growth *(3 of 8 groups)*
- Diversity *(2 of 8 groups)*
- The following were topics mentioned by one group as a strength:
 - Technology
 - Accessibility of trails
 - Focus on the future
 - Youth Justice Initiative
 - Accessibility for persons with disabilities
 - Infrastructure

Changes and impacts

Population growth and diversity

(8 of 8 groups)

All groups identified changes in the population, including a drastic increase in the general population, changes in economic stratification and an increase in diversity, mainly ethnic and cultural diversity. The impacts of these changes included:

- Needs for more resources,
- Education on cultural differences both in and out of school
- Language classes and interpreters
- Some participants viewed the changes as very positive because of the impact it would have on their children's ability to accept differences and be empathetic individuals

Representative quotes

- "I've been here fifteen years and in the last five years, the number of low income families, the number of apartment dwelling families, the number of non-English speaking families has grown tremendously."
- "I see kids are more empathetic, because they are being exposed to a lot of different kinds of lifestyles and cultures. And so, I see the kids are much more accepting."
- "I just love that my kids are growing up, seeing that not everybody has the same amount and then the teachers do a fabulous job of putting in the extra effort for those ESL kids. And just the kids who -- probably don't have quite the stability at home that some other family might not. So it's a big challenge for the district, but I think they are rising to the needs."

Growth, business development and infrastructure

(7 of 8 groups)

Participants often discussed changes to the environment, including infrastructure and aesthetic changes, caused by the population growth.

According to participants, traffic in some areas and at certain times has increased due to the large influx of people working in the WDMCS.

Others discussed business growth and development in the community having a positive impact on the local economy for job growth and an increase in discretionary income. With all of the growth, there is now a need to build up instead of out because of the community becoming landlocked.

One of the perceived impacts of the change in building up instead of out is a change in demographics with the increasing population, which is also represented in the schools.

Another impact of the population growth is that the city may be unable to keep up with the changing needs because they are required to do more with less.

Representative quotes

- “Sometimes I feel like the development isn’t always well thought out... every time you turn around they’re building some enormous building and it’s harder to get in and out... Maybe the infrastructure isn’t keeping up with the development.”
- “I have noticed a lot of upgrades in the parks in the community. There has been a lot of upgrading and taking down the older equipment or stuff that was starting to fall apart or that was wood that was kind of...have wear and tear that’s been updated.”
- “We cannot expand outward anymore, so we’re expanding upward. And with that brings change in demographics that are coming to the school. And I see a big separation between the haves and the have-nots. And there's not a lot of middle ground anymore from what I see there's a big difference from those that have a lot and those that have very little.”

Additional changes and impacts

- Education (*3 of 8 groups*)
 - Secularization causing friction in schools (one participant; other group members mentioned the diversity of viewpoints as positive for students)
 - Schools becoming more populated with population growth
- Technology (*2 of 8 groups*)
- Public transportation (*2 of 8 groups*)
 - Increase in types of transportation due to population changes
 - Change of routes
- The following were topics mentioned by one group:
 - Leadership in city and education
 - Larger population has changed how responses to problems are scaled
 - Increase of homeless youth
 - More community outreach

Concerns

Diversity

(*5 of 8 groups*)

How the community responds to the increasing diversity and meets the changing needs of the community was a very common concern amongst the focus groups. At times, diversity concerns were tied to income and the need for more resources. Including:

- Resources for changing demographics
- Lack of diversity in leadership
- Language barriers
- Acceptance of diversity
- Bullying in schools related to differences
- Some not being accepting of diversity
- Maintaining high standards in schools regardless of changing demographics

Representative quotes

- “This year, we’ve had a huge influx of Chin families, and Burmese and they all have pre-schoolers and none of them have transportation and they all value education, where they dearly want their children in preschool. I had no idea that was coming. And it just suddenly was there. And then, you're trying to respond to it.”
- “We have families coming in that cannot speak our language and they will not ... they’re very good people but having a barrier, needing to learn English themselves is a barrier to them.”

Education

(5 of 8 groups)

Many of the groups saw educational concerns that were created by the increase in population without a proportional increase in resources. This includes:

- School staff being over-extended
- Increasing class sizes
- School budgets and cutbacks, including loss of some positions
- Schools having more of a parental role than has been traditionally expected
- Teachers’ inability to accommodate numerous learning abilities in the classroom
- Redistricting
- Income gaps becoming more visible in schools

Beyond population-related concerns, participants expressed concerns about having too much testing in classroom and No Child Left Behind adding stress for parents, teachers and even students.

Representative quotes

- “There used to be a time where it seemed that money was no object to West Des Moines Community Schools district. Now – They're feeling the financial pinch like everybody else so we've had to let go of positions, and it is still a fantastic school district with fantastic infrastructure and everything else but the days of no financial worries are gone.”
- “I think today in the classroom, the teachers have to deal with such a wide range of ability levels and they have to differentiate to such a degree for just so many different abilities and behaviors that I feel like their job is just, insurmountable sometimes.”

Transportation

(4 of 8 groups)

Focus group participants discussed a lack of public transportation options, such as routes and times available. Since much of the focus is to bring people downtown for work, this can present a problem for those who are trying to get to work at different times during the day or evening. In addition to public transportation, a lack of school transportation options was also mentioned.

Representative quotes

- “Our school district charges for busing if you live less than two miles away. And without transportation, and two miles is a long ways to walk, and the weather that we have in Iowa for any kid, but that's a big barrier.”

- “Lot of the bus routes run around here have been changed, they’re not near as convenient as they used to be.”
- “As an employer...you find that public transportation could be an issue of getting people to work, doing recruiting with...retail, you bring a lot of entry level positions and we recruit in Des Moines but I can’t get them to my store because I don’t have a busing system that goes by my store on the weekend when I need people there.”

Social issues

(4 of 8 groups)

Half of the groups mentioned social issues as areas of concern for them. Many of these problems were mentioned in the context of schools and how it impacts education. These topics included:

- Mental health (parents and students)
- Poverty and the growing need for free school lunches
- Drug problems in schools
- More fighting in schools
- Growing gang influence
- Homelessness

Representative quotes

- “And parents projecting their mental health concern onto their kids and projecting what’s going on with them their anxiety which creates anxiety with their kids. And it’s just a huge circle of mental health.”
- “Seeing all the problems that are out there and how many camps and homeless people are out there, it’s really just like eye opening to me and not only just homeless in Iowa but homeless teens especially the LGBTQ community.”

Additional areas of concern

- Infrastructure (3 of 8 groups)
 - Potential neglect of Eastern part of district with development of Western area
 - Limited parking in Valley Junction
- Business development (3 of 8 groups)
 - Need to keep millennials
 - Recruiting entry- to mid-level positions
 - Businesses closing in Clive
- Affordable housing (2 of 8 groups)
 - Low income tenants can be taken advantage of
 - Housing costs are increasing
- Community (2 of 8 groups)
 - Loss of small-town feel
 - Long-time residents are disconnected, particularly if they are not involved in the schools
- The following were topics mentioned by one group:
 - Elected officials pushing personal agendas
 - Little league is very expensive

- Potential to get an influx of undesirable groups with positive rankings
- Access to medical care
- Handicap accessibility
- Poor eating habits in teens and healthfulness of school lunches

Opportunities

Resources

(6 of 8 groups)

The need for resources was very evident to the focus group participants, and most of these needs were based upon the growing population and changes in demographics, and included resources for the increase in ethnic and cultural diversity, social issues and income gaps across the population. The resources and action items mentioned included:

- ESL resources for immigrant parents
- A service coordination entity
- Community education on how to maintain homes
- Building general awareness in the community on the need for resources
- Better communicate what resources are already available
- Extend Human Services hours for working families
- Make Valley Junction more handicap accessible
- More summer childcare programs
- Mental health awareness and resources
- Substance abuse resources
- Addressing social issues at a younger age
- Gender-based violence

Representative quotes

- “You can’t get into half the stores if you’re in a wheel chair and people are going to start realizing eventually that’s going to be lots of business for them.”
- “I don’t qualify for childcare assistance and I have to pay out of my pocket. It is a big challenge for me and I’m sure it’s a challenge for a lot of parent here in West Des Moines area.”
- “I think in some ways it’s hard for West Des Moines to admit yes we have people that are diverse, we have people that have substance abuse [concerns], we have people that have mental health concerns and I think West Des Moines and I think it’s always been there, but I think West Des Moines likes to hide behind the fact that we are suburban community and very affluent, so I think bringing awareness to that West Des Moines has those needs is one the biggest things that needs to be done”
- “A big issue and gender violence probably is not as hot a topic in the high schools as perhaps it should be...it’s not something that they just come up with, it’s a matter of educating them so if the educational process starts early on you could cut off some of these problems that occur later.”

Diversity

(6 of 8 groups)

Participants called to the need for an increase in resources and acceptance related to diversity. Language barriers for immigrants as well as addressing cultural differences were common topics. Topics discussed included:

- Need for ESL and interpreters
- Education on cultural differences
- Diversity of educators in schools
- Need for further diversification of the population
- Educate immigrant parents on the importance of education

Representative quotes

- “I just think different cultures have different understanding and maybe the way we teach it is not the way that they understand it.”

Priorities

Education

(6 of 8 groups)

Education was the top priority for the majority of groups participating in the focus groups. Priorities relating to education were varied, such as budgets and funding, availability of full-time pre-school, educating about social issues in school, keeping up with technology and teaching technical skills to better prepare students for their futures.

- Equality of distribution of Parent Teacher Organization funds between schools
- Teach students about body safety, as this may be perpetuated across generations if not addressed in schools since the problem frequently is in the home
- Alternatives to the nine-month school-year calendar to accommodate different parent schedules
- Keeping up school infrastructure with the population growth
- Teach kids to think rather than only teaching to tests
- Professional development for teachers
- Keep class sizes smaller to give students the attention they need

Representative quotes

- Regarding school calendars: “And it is very difficult for new people or especially people who have very different cultures, they don't often work nine to five or eight to five.”
- “I think the classes have gotten so big then it's hard for the kids to get a little one-on-one that they might need...because it has to be so generalized and the classes are also big that there can't getting lost sometimes.”

Community building and communication

(5 of 8 groups)

Community building and communication were very important priorities to half of the focus groups. As one group member mentioned, the city lines in the district are invisible and because of that, communication district-wide is vital. There were several reasons and suggestions for building community and improving communication:

- Have community activities to attract and keep millennials
- Develop trust between communities and service entities, such as law enforcement
- People will be more aware of services and needs for services
- Communication is even more important with increasing diversity
- Recognition of people in the community doing good

Representative quotes

- “But in law enforcement, it's very important that we do outreaches not just in specialized units, but our patrol officers and everybody else so that they'd become part of the community and the community is trusting them”
- “Just an example like, wow, how could we have communicated better, so that everyone in the district knows there is an ESL program.”

Aging population

(4 of 8 groups)

As mentioned in multiple groups, there is a high aging population, and the some groups mentioned that this is a group that needs to receive more attention, including:

- More involvement and activities for senior citizens
- Accommodations for the aging population, including affordable housing
- Keep the needs of the aging population in mind when making decisions in the community

Representative quotes

- “From the seniors viewpoint there are a lot of senior communities, retirement communities, the greater number of which are very expensive. And the typical that I’m aware of any way at my level cannot afford to live there. We just can’t. There is not enough senior housing at an affordable level.”

Additional priorities

- Resources (3 of 8 groups)
 - Maintain or increase funding for service programs
 - Have a “teach a man to fish” mentality when developing programs
 - Educate the community on needs
- Recreation (2 of 8 groups)
 - More opportunities to attract millennials
 - Expand Parks and Recreation activities
- Affordable housing (2 of 8 groups)
- Diversity (2 of 8 groups)
 - ESL to reduce language barrier
- Public transportation (2 of 8 groups)
- The following were mentioned in one group:

- Technology upkeep for services
- Clear direction and plan for the future of the district
- Handicap accessibility
- Increase housing stock in older areas, such as Valley Junction