



South Orange – Maplewood School District

Strategic Planning Meeting #1 Outcomes Report

March 16, 2026

Mission Statement

The South Orange & Maplewood School District's mission is to awaken potential by inspiring students to imagine boldly, pursue their passions with purpose, and work together to create a brighter future. We do this by cultivating a learner-centered environment, opening multiple pathways to success, and reimagining the structures, systems, and supports that shape learning. Through innovative teaching, genuine partnership with families, and the collective wisdom of our community, we prepare our students not only to thrive but to lead, create, and transform the world they inherit.

What are the Strengths, Achievements and Challenges of the South Orange - Maplewood School District?

On March 16, 2026, South Orange - Maplewood District administrators, staff, parents/guardians, and community members, thirty-two (32) in all, came together to initiate strategic planning. The meeting began with Mr. Jason Bing, Superintendent, presenting the current “State of the Schools” report. Jeanne Cleary from the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA) was present and reviewed the strategic planning process for the group.

Participants then gathered in eight small groups to identify the strengths and points of pride in the district and community, and to brainstorm what opportunities and challenges the school district faces. Each group identified their “top 10” list of strengths/accomplishments and challenges/opportunities for the district, which were then shared with the larger group of all participants. Underlying all the work is the District’s Mission Statement.

The information that follows is the work of the eight small groups. As discussed with the meeting participants, all meeting outcomes will be listed in this memo and will be posted

on the district website for the wider community to review. These outcomes will be used as the basis for Meeting #2 on April 15, 2026.

TABLE 1

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES / CHALLENGES
• Co-taught inclusion • Diversity • Our arts programs • Course offering variety at CHS • Elementary teachers as a whole • Athletics*see also challenges • Social work department at middle and high schools • Chinese Program • Istep/ ESS/ Loft/ Hub programs • Pre-k expansion • Community outreach efforts by current administration	• Inconsistency of experience from child to child and school to school • Teachers union is difficult to work with • Ineffective use of teacher evaluations to remove teachers that should be removed • Turnover in administration • Parents and community members are difficult to engage with • Community outreach to non-English speaking families, including not having important documents translated • Yearly financial struggles • Transportation • Achievement gap: Racial, SES, and SPED • Mental health challenges and being proactive about this • Athletics, cost, etc.

TABLE 2

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES / CHALLENGES
• The energy and enthusiasm in the buildings, mainly middle school • Easy to find your groups and more people that you fit in with as a student • Community involvement, community support with events and projects • Activities that are offered after school • Freshman Academy • Keith Bonds! • Freshman staying together for lunch • Teacher knowledge, do a good job • Conference periods • Students are confident with advocating for themselves and others • Kids!!	• Infrastructure - mold, rodents in buildings, etc. • Administrative level - no training for those that are moved into positions - no mentoring or training (more issues with administration, rather than with the teachers) • Utilize the expertise of those within the districts • MMS doesn't go outside for lunches, lunches were punitive • Bullying responses are not effective • Students treated equally across the district (policy created to standardize best practices) • The amount of IEP students being classified • Staff turnover • Programs coming and going before having a full plan; no follow through • Tracking system works better • Technology challenge using it as a tool in an effective way (AI is growing) • Consistency with systems • Vertical articulation of curriculum • Repetition and pacing of curriculum needs adjustment • Athletic facilities; places for kids to play (support for the Athletic Director)

TABLE 3

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES / CHALLENGES
• Supportive, engaged, talented parent communities • IT/technology department is very strong, organized, helpful • Wonderful, dedicated teachers • Dramatically improved communication • Noted improvements in transparency over recent years • Achieve programming and other district partnerships	• Administrative offices dealing with onboarding processes for both families and staff members could be improved • Blurred lines between district responsibilities and PTA/HSA supplementation • Definitive top-down universal guidance on expectations • PowerSchool • More collaboration amongst staff to ensure curriculum, instruction, and outcomes across schools are equitable • Redundancy and waste audit of underused systems • Greater commitment to transparency and earning trust from all stakeholders • Balanced class sizes across elementary schools

TABLE 4

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES / CHALLENGES
• Thoughtful about technology • Teachers are well-trained and engaged • Well-engaged Community • Arts in the middle school are high quality and well rounded (although may not be true at all elementary schools) • Opportunities for SEL and learning about diversity among students • Cohesive math curriculum at the elementary level	• Lack of cohesive vertical reading curriculum (at the elementary level) • District communication is abundant at District level but not at school/classroom level • District communication is large in volume but not always carefully constructed, proofread or complete (example, invitation for tonight's event had no time in it). • Special ed programming inconsistent across schools • Lack of science curriculum at

	elementary level • Lack of opportunity for hands on, project based, inquiry learning at elementary level • Lack of available information about academic programming at all levels (no info nights or info on website). • Poorly maintained facilities. • Principals seem distant and not engaged. • Lack of diverse/interesting specials at the elementary level
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TABLE 5

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES / CHALLENGES
• High parent engagement • Amazing art program • Strong early childhood educators • Diverse high school course and extracurriculars • Students encouraged to self-advocate (like attending BOE meetings)	• Triple III • Transportation • Infrastructure to support diversity • Representation (like hiring diverse teachers) • Lack of clear and timely communication • Attention to social-emotional learning and executive function differences • Need more challenging academics • Crumbling building infrastructure

TABLE 6

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES / CHALLENGES
• Positive curriculum changes for math and ELA • Lots of resources in our community (money and time, engagement) • Engaged community and community groups • Close proximity between buildings, has an opportunity for more connections/mentorships between kids • District events and communication has improved dramatically and helps with feeling connected with the district • Supportive schools for different groups of students (clubs and groups at the secondary levels) • Feels like we are cleaning up after many tough years (going in the right direction, slowly) • Great Teachers • Aftercare programs, sports, theatre, places for kids to shine • Civic engagement for our children • People and commitment to progress	• Communication from district to the community • Inconsistency between years - leadership • There is not an opportunity to have honest conversations community-wide • Consistency between what's being communicated district-wide and what's happening in the classroom • Mental health - what are the demographics? ◦ Is III contributing to this? • Science and social studies are not covered in elementary in a real way, is Amistad curriculum in use? • Math is still concerning because all groups aren't doing equally well, AP courses underenrolled by Black students • Aftercare / pre-k can be better taken advantage of in terms of academics so that kids have more equal footing • Communication black box in elementary spaces - no uniformity in the schools and parents have to proactively act to get information - how are we communicating to families - this is a missed opportunity to connect families to what is learned and any incidents that have happened

	• The community isn't well-versed in our outcomes - example, graduation rates and which kids are doing well, and which need more help • Communication • Student outcomes - academic / mental health • Consistency
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TABLE 7

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES / CHALLENGES
• High quality staff • Dedicated parents and high community engagement • Roll out of new math curriculum (K-8) • Socially engaged students • Moral clarity and community passionate • Frank Sanchez is an asset to the district and it's key that he is staying • High school curriculum is rigorous enough to prepare for college • Freshman Academy • Diverse community • Dedication from admin to promote inclusivity and combat hate speech	• Chronic absenteeism • Ethnic/racial achievement gaps • Graduation rate • Lower NJSLA scores in ELA & Math • Increased incidents of mental health concerns • Consistent approach to mental health for staff • Executive functioning beginning in the middle school • Consistent implementation of District initiatives (SEL, curriculum, mental health) • Leadership turnover • Infrastructure

TABLE 8

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES / CHALLENGES
• Diverse Community • PD opportunities/choices for Staff • Restorative Practices for Students & Staff • Technology and Foundation to collect data from students on new ELA and math curriculums • New SOPs for administrative/district wide systems • Great teachers at all schools • District has improved communication and is trying to be more transparent (we have very opinionated stakeholders which can be challenging at times) • High school course selection • Warm welcoming elementary schools • Improvement of the buildings/infrastructure (mostly as a result of Long-Range Facility Plan)	• Staff Retention/ Budget Cuts- New Contract 2027 • Supporting Teachers with Students (Climate & Cultural in middle school needs support for chronic absenteeism / tardiness and also discipline processes) • Balancing Tech with curriculum • LGBTQ students to feel more supported - proactive district protocols • Curriculum Mapping/ Feedback from Teachers (Formal to district) • Operations Systems - alignment across buildings (vertical articulation) • Budget constraints / district being creative and problem solving to save money • Transportation is a big cost, and we need to learn how to streamline costs • The two towns have financial challenges which impacts taxpayer sentiment when taxes are raised by school district (inflation) • District needs to develop new revenue streams creatively

SUMMARY – Top 5 Common Threads

Each group reported out to the large group their list of strengths and challenges. The group identified and discussed common threads. The following common themes appear below.

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES / CHALLENGES
1. Strong commitment to equity and inclusion 2. Robust community engagement and partnerships 3. Talented and dedicated staff 4. Diverse student population 5. Existing academic and extracurricular programs	1. Inconsistent communication and transparency 2. Achievement gaps and uneven student outcomes 3. Facility and infrastructure concerns 4. Need for greater staff support and professional development 5. Social-emotional and behavioral needs of students

Next Meeting: April 15, 2026, 6:30pm – 8:00pm