



Capital School District Focus Group Findings Report

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Introduction

Capital School District (CSD) requested the assistance of the Center for Education Equity (CEE) to conduct focus groups of the school community and surrounding community to gain an understanding of stakeholder perceptions of trust, communication, and relationships between the school district and the community. CEE conducted a total of five focus groups with the following stakeholder groups: district and school administrators, educators and staff, parents and families, community members, and high school students. This report provides an overview of the scope of work, background on effective family, school, and community partnerships, the methodology and approach to collecting focus group data, overarching themes that emerged from the focus groups, and recommendations for action steps.

Background

Capital School District (CSD) requested TA from CEE because CSD was interested in building trust across stakeholder groups to develop collaborative partnerships with the district, schools, and the community in order to address issues. Research shows systemic family and community engagement to be as important as school leadership and curriculum alignment for improving low-performing schools (Bryk et al., 2010). Improved family engagement results in better attendance and homework completion, fewer placements in special education, more positive attitudes and behavior, higher graduation rates, and greater post-secondary education enrollment (Epstein et al., 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002 & 2007; Weiss & Stephen, 2009). Community engagement also supports academic achievement and transformational change. Low-income and linguistically and culturally diverse parents often fail to adequately access and benefit from community and school resources, stymied by cultural differences or the lack of social capital needed to navigate the American education system (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Ream & Palardy, 2008).

Creating welcoming environments and building trust between the community, families, and schools is the foundation of high impact culturally responsive family engagement. Synergy amongst all groups, including positive relationships between educators and administrators within schools, is essential to creating welcoming environments. Capital School District has been working to improve family and community engagement as part of the school district's strategic plan. In the summer of 2016, Capital School District began working to develop and implement three School Board-approved strategic intents which are a part of the district's strategic plan.

The strategic intents are as follows:

- o Strategic Intent Number 1: Linear and streamlined district.
- o Strategic Intent Number 2: Meeting the needs of the whole child.
- o Strategic Intent Number 3: Senator Pride.

The district has started this work before but, this is the first that the district is digging deep into equity and the root causes of why trust is an issue.

Study Purpose & Aims

This study provides insight from various stakeholder groups regarding their perceptions of equity, trust, communication and transparency between the school district and the community. Capital School District is partnering with CEE to gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to inequities inhibiting student achievement and growth and to plan for ways to address those inequities. Specifically, the District will use the findings presented here with the following intent: 1) to build trust between stakeholder groups and 2) to engage stakeholders in working with the district to resolve issues.

Study Design & Procedures

Design

In order to understand stakeholders' perceptions of equity, trust, and communication within Capital School District, two facilitators from CEE conducted five focus groups, one with each stakeholder group: (1) district and school administrators, (2) educators and staff, (3) parents and families, (4) community members, and (5) high school students. We use the term *focus group* to mean a specific type of research design that uses small group interviews to generate qualitative data for an articulated purpose (Krueger & Casey, 2009). We selected the focus group approach in order to understand stakeholders' views and experiences related to critical issues in the district, identify emerging issues, and uncover factors that may contribute to or address the issues.

Focus group designs are advantageous as they can create a space for participants to express a range of opinions or ideas within groups and provide varying information across groups. It should be noted that the data generated from focus groups depends largely on the selected participants and composition of the group. Thus, findings from focus groups may not represent the views and opinions of all stakeholders within an organization but can reveal deep insights related to the shared concerns of stakeholders.

Sample

The sample consisted of district and school administrators ($n = 7$), educators and staff ($n = 12$), parents and families ($n = 7$), community members ($n = 4$), and high school students ($n = 9$). Table 1 shows the demographic composition of each focus group (As a note: there were no focus group participants from the Latino or Asian groups). An administrator from Capital School District, Lawanda Burgoyne, coordinated the purposeful selection and recruitment of participants for each focus group. Participants represented a range of perspectives and roles. The district and school administration group consisted of members from the central district office as well as different schools and programs. The educators and staff group included teachers as well as counselors, paraprofessionals, school psychologists, health professionals, and other roles. The parents and families had children that were enrolled in elementary, middle, or high schools. The community member group consisted of individuals from local organizations serving students as well as from a law enforcement agency. Finally, the high school students represented every grade from 9th to 12th and from different course tracks, such as College Prep and AP.

Table 1. Demographic composition of participants by focus group

Focus Group	Number	% Female	% White	% Black	% Latino	% Asian	% Other
District and School Administrators	7	71.4	85.7	14.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Educators and Staff	12	58.3	50.0	33.3	0.0	0.0	16.7
Parents and Families	7	57.1	42.9	57.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Community Members	4	75.0	25.0	75.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
High School Students	9	44.4	33.3	55.6	0.0	0.0	11.1

Procedure

Two facilitators from CEE conducted focus groups during the dates of April 10-12, 2018. Focus group interviews followed a semi-structured protocol in which facilitators asked a consistent set of questions across focus groups and asked additional questions based on emerging ideas and topics. Focus groups began with an overview of the purpose and brief introductions. The facilitators also ensured that responses will be kept as confidential as possible and that participation in the focus group is voluntary. The focus groups were approximately 90 minutes in length. Facilitators audio-recorded the discussions to be transcribed for analysis.

Instrumentation

Focus Group Questions

Based on the concerns and interests of the administrators at Capital School District, CEE facilitators drafted a set of questions to be used across focus groups. The questions centered around equity, trust, and communication among stakeholders within the district. After feedback from the CSD's Equity Core Team, CEE facilitators created a final set of questions:

1. How would you define equity? What does equity mean to you?
 - a. Could you give us an example?
2. What does equity look like and feel like in your school/district?
3. From your perspective, what are critical issues in the district that the district needs to focus on?
 - . If you could change something, what would you change?
 - a. How would you resolve the issue? What are your recommendations?
4. (For District & School Administrators only) How would you describe the policies that contribute to or hinder equity for students, families or staff?
5. How would you describe the practices that contribute to or hinder equity for students, families, or staff?
6. How does race play a role in how students are treated, taught, or disciplined?
 - . What about language?
 - a. What about class (socioeconomic status)?
7. How would you describe the school climate?
 - . Do you believe [stakeholder group] have positive relationships with [another stakeholder group]? Why or why not?
8. How would you describe the level of trust between [stakeholder groups]?
 - . What can the district do to improve trust between [stakeholder groups]?
9. What do you see as the strengths and roadblocks for communication between district/school and [stakeholder groups]?

Analysis

The analysis of focus group data began with identifying ideas and themes within and across focus groups. First, we reviewed notes from the focus groups to begin generating broad thematic categories. Second, we reviewed the focus group transcripts to highlight key excerpts related to themes of equity, trust, communication, and relationships. In the process, we also highlighted excerpts representing emerging themes, such as safety, technology, resources, organization of resources, and structural issues. Third, we sorted the transcript excerpts from across focus groups by themes. This allowed us to select common themes and points of differences within and across focus groups. Fourth, after sorting excerpts, we created summaries for each theme that succinctly and accurately represented what was discussed in the focus groups. Finally, we engaged in further analysis to conceptually link themes together.

Findings

The findings are organized into four major sections:

1. Equity is about fairness, access, and cultural awareness. The first section describes participants' definitions of equity
2. Underlying equity issues need to be addressed. The second section describes participants' perspectives of issues in the district or schools related to equity.
3. Trust breaks down when communication and relationships break down: The third section describes participants' views of trust through their thoughts and experiences with communication and relationships in the district.
4. Additional themes and topics: The fourth section describes additional themes or topics that emerged across focus groups.

1. Equity is about fairness, access, and cultural awareness.

We initiated the focus groups with defining equity to provide a common framework for discussing trust, communication, and relationships. Across focus groups, participants defined equity in terms of fairness, access, and cultural awareness. Participants' definitions aligned with research-based conceptualizations of equity. Below, we describe participants' definitions in more detail:

Fairness: Administrators, educators, and community members defined equity as fairness, or “every student and staff member gets what they need, when they need it.” In the administrator group, one participant noted that what is fair is not always equal; staff and students may need different levels of resources and support. A community member stated that equity is helping diverse groups of students overcome obstacles and reducing barriers. Similarly, educators emphasized that fairness involved creating a “level playing field.”

Access: Administrators, educators, parents, and community members also defined equity as providing equal access or giving individuals the same opportunities. One educator articulated that equity is about allowing individuals to reach the same place but providing different or alternative means to get there. Moreover, administrators and educators talked about access in terms of material resources (e.g., facilities, technology), knowledge (e.g., rigorous curriculum), and supports (e.g., high quality teachers, health and mental health professionals, language translators).

Cultural awareness: Across all groups, participants mentioned diversity or cultural awareness as a key component of equity. Participants suggested that meeting the needs of a diverse community required deeper understanding of cultures, particularly those that are often stereotypically or problematically characterized. Administrators and educators expressed the need to move past cultural sensitivity towards cultural responsiveness and ways of checking biases. Educators also implied that cultural awareness required action and not only reading about it.

Positive teacher-student relationships: Interestingly, only the student group explicitly mentioned that equity involved positive teacher-student relationships. Students suggested that

equity means access to instructionally effective and respectful teachers. Though administrators, educators, parents, and community members also emphasized the importance of relationships, they implied that relationships were the means to achieve fairness and access and to build cultural awareness. Students, on the other hand, viewed positive relationships as a core component of equitable access.

2. Underlying equity issues need to be addressed.

Administrators, educators, parents, and community members emphasized that equity should be an explicit and integrated goal. In addition, participants expressed that equity required ongoing action, starting with educator and staff training. This section describes participants' perceptions around issues of equity: (a) problematic assumptions and biases, (b) "life-sentence" labels, and (c) lack of diverse staff. We also provide recommendations from the focus group participants.

Problematic assumptions and biases: Across all focus groups, participants believed a small portion of administrators, educators, and staff held problematic assumptions and biases, particularly related to students and parents of color. Administrators and educators expressed that staff and teachers may misunderstand cultural behaviors and suggested that male students especially received negative judgements. One administrator stated:

Teaching is a female dominated profession and...because we may not always understand certain things just about the composition of the male that we attempt to feminize their behavior and we characterize it as misbehavior when it could be just appropriate and it's misunderstood.

In addition, administrators, educators, parents, and community members noted that some teachers were not aware of their own biases and lacked cultural awareness. One administrator pointed out that some staff members denied they held biases:

We talk a lot about bias, but I hear people say, Oh, you know, I don't even see color or I don't even see whatever it is. And yeah, that's not really the answer either. We need to see it, we need to appreciate and cherish it...

However, as one administrator pointed out, educators need to be careful not to let their cultural awareness lead to lower expectations:

I think that we really have to focus on having high expectations for all because we have teachers who are aware, but with their awareness, they make up excuses...before the child can give you an excuse they've made up an excuse for why the child can't learn it to the level that it should be learned.

Another administrator similarly stated:

So, as much as we need to reach and embrace the students, we still need to hold our standards high for these kids. We can't lower expectations because they're coming from a different situation, or a tough situation.

In the parent and family focus group, participants shared their experiences dealing with racial biases. They expressed that some administrators and educators had stereotypical perceptions about Black parents. One parent stated:

I think they look at a lot of our [Black] parents...as we don't care. We just want to push our kids off. We have no education. It's like, you can't just assume by looking at us...

Some Black parents in the focus group also stated that sometimes Black teachers assumed they could talk to their children in disrespectful ways:

...just because we're the same color, that doesn't mean you get to talk to my child the way you want to talk to my child.

Across focus groups, participants seemed to celebrate diversity but also highlighted the complexities in understanding and meeting the needs of diverse students, parents, or communities. Problematic assumptions and biases appeared to undermine the district and schools' efforts to provide high-quality services.

“Life sentence” student labels: Administrators stated that special education or English learner statuses could become “life sentences,” meaning labels seemed to stick to students and administrators and educators had difficulty seeing students who had been labeled in different ways. Administrators and educators noted that sometimes it was difficult to “mainstream” special education or English learner students because there was resistance or lack of communication “on the other end.” As one administrator stated:

...this is not a life sentence for them and they do not need to remain this program - that they can come in here and get the tools that they need whether it's academic or behavior. And then they can come back to being with their peers. And it's so, so important that they have the opportunity to do that.

While suspensions are not necessarily labels, students who have been suspended or have had multiple discipline infractions could receive labels as “bad students” or “frequent flyers.” As another administrator stated:

...not just with our students who may be returning from alternate placements but even just our students who are returning from suspensions, after school detention they've had their consequence and that's now over.

Students spoke about student labels in similar ways. They noted that there seemed to be a “totem pole” of good students who behave at the top and bad students or “frequent flyers” who regularly get in trouble at the bottom. Educators, parents, and students described student discipline as a lose-lose situation. They explained that the disciplined students are labeled and

shut out of the relationships and support they need. Students stated that teachers seemed to dismiss students at the bottom of the totem pole and provide support for students who they perceive will do the work.

A community member stated the consequences of students who had been repeatedly labeled, disciplined, and eventually expelled:

You have a whole group of people that are going to be a menace to society. That is what is going to happen because that's what you've created because you've not allowed them back into our community. You've ostracized them.

Focus group participants expressed that students received differential treatment based on their labels. “Life sentence” labels could be detrimental to students over time if school staff continued to put students into the same boxes.

At the same time, teachers who frequently address student misbehaviors in class waste instructional time. Participants suggested that suspending or expelling students was not an effective strategy.

Lack of diverse staff: Administrators, educators, parents, and community members articulated the importance of having diversity in the teaching force, while recruiting teachers who have skills to work in urban settings. One parent stated:

I think diversity is very important, so they were in a school and their peers looked like them, but the very people who stood in front of them to teach them, did not. I had a problem with that.

Similarly, an administrator expressed:

I think it's important to see people who look like them. It doesn't mean that people who don't look like them don't have good intentions because we prove every single day that they do. But...it definitely means a lot to a child that they can look in their school and they see someone who looks like them.

Another administrator cautioned that staff should not be hired just because they represent a particular race but because they have the skill set to work in urban schools:

Not stereotyping what they need to look like or just good educators that can have a skill set to work in an urban school and then give them the tools that they need to be able to be successful in an urban setting because I think when they come to us from college they sort of gone on one size fits all this is how school works and their needs are different in an urban setting.

Interestingly, students mentioned diversity related to the law enforcement officers in school:

One thing I want to say about the constables though, I know before the district hired them...they were supposed to be representative of the population here. There was supposed to be some female ones and different races but that's not how it turned out. I was kind of disappointed.

The student quote suggests that students received messages from the district or schools that diversity is a goal. The quote also suggests that the district and schools seemed to value diversity. However, as the administrators pointed out, recruitment of staff had been challenging in general and not only in relation to diversity.

Recommendations from the focus groups:

- Administrators, educators, and parents suggested anti-bias or cultural awareness training to help change the mentality or mindset of teachers. In addition, educators proposed equity training that moves beyond awareness to action (e.g., planning next steps or brainstorming strategies to implement).
- Administrators liked the teaching and learning model because it was the same materials for the entire district and suggested creating a model for learning about equity and biases.
- Across focus groups, participants recommended hiring staff and educators of color or who have experience and skills to work in an urban district.

3. Trust breaks down when communication and relationships break down.

Participants in all focus groups expressed that trust was a critical issue. Participants discussed trust in terms of communication and relationship-building. For example, educators related trust to feeling they can raise concerns to their administrators and knowing the administrators will listen to and support them. One educator stated:

I don't go to admin now, because I can't trust that I'm going to be supported.

Students related trust to feeling teachers are doing everything they can to help them learn:

They [students] feel like they're being left behind in a way, because that ruins that relationship where they [students and teachers] don't trust each other as much anymore.

In other words, participants viewed trust as feeling heard, respected, and supported. Parents and families further viewed trust as, to paraphrase, “does the district have the best interest of my child in mind?”

Students stated that they felt supported by other staff members (e.g., counselors and resource officers), as well as, teachers. Overall, students in the focus group felt safe in the high school and felt that the law enforcement officers at school did a good job preventing fights and breaking up fights. Some students said that the law enforcement officers appeared to have positive relationships with students. One student stated, “*They’re like really cool with some of the students...That’s how they get their intel.*”

However, some educators did not feel that administrators “put themselves out there for you.” Students’ statements mirrored educators statements; students viewed some teachers as

unhelpful or difficult to approach and liked teachers who made an effort to ask about their day and listened to their perspectives.

The following section describes in more detail participants' views of (a) communication and (b) relationship-building.

Communication

Four major themes related to communication emerged: (a) “inbreeding” communication methods, (b) lack of reciprocity, (c) parent advocate as “squeaky wheel”, and (d) complex technologies, inconsistent information. This section describes each theme in detail. Recommendations from focus group participants are also included.

“Inbreeding” communication methods: Administrators, educators, parents, and community members raised concerns that the district did not seem to be reaching all groups or communities. In other words, participants in those focus groups felt that existing communication methods were reaching the same groups of people. Educators, particularly, noted that newsletters, flyers, and other materials about school programs and services did not appear to be effective for everyone; only parents and families who were already well-informed seemed to be receiving school services. One Kindergarten teacher responsible for screening students for Kindergarten stated:

But we only get the children whose parents are already involved. Like if you already have another student in school and they've seen the fliers we've sent home. So we're only seeing kids who already have parents who are involved in their education.

Students agreed that their administrators and teachers were generally good at communicating with and involving them in issues, such as revisiting the dress code. However, students also mentioned that the same group of students had been selected to participate to communicate with school adults, which left out other student perspectives:

I feel like it can be a little unfair when it comes to that because...I feel like some of us get picked for different things because we're known. I feel like some, because of that, our [the student body's] opinions may not be well represented because there's not a good percentage of what the actual population at Dover looks like.

In general, “inbreeding” communication methods seemed to send the message that the district provides services and supports for certain communities or that the district listens to the perspectives of certain groups of people and not others. Moreover, communication methods appeared to be school-centric. Educators, parents, and community members pointed out that most of the district's communication methods required access to technologies that families may not have or required families to come to the school. Alternatively, the district could consider reaching out to families and communities where they are. As one educator stated:

...that connection can't all happen in a [school] building. So, when I hear you talk about you can't get the parents there, well what about trying to get to the parents? They may be more receptive and open if you came to their home and had the conversation with them.

Importantly, administrators and staff implied that the cultural aspect of communication should be considered when corresponding with families and the community. Other participants in those focus groups alluded to the notion that communication meant more than just words. For example, one administrator mentioned that the supports and resources could be set up for a meeting with a parent of an English Learner student, but the meeting would not be successful if the district assumes that the parent understands the U.S. school system and does not communicate what the meeting is for and why it is important.

Lack of reciprocity: Participants across focus groups noted instances where their communication efforts were unreciprocated. Administrators in the focus group felt that the district administration did a good job of communicating with each other but there seemed to be a disconnect between administrators and staff. Educators expressed difficulty communicating with administrators because of time constraints (for both parties) but also because sometimes educators felt that if they went to an administrator for help, they would be seen as incompetent or ineffective:

It's kind of like, it makes you feel like sometimes you're frowned upon, for going to admin. You know what I mean? So, it's kind of like, say there's a situation that comes about and maybe you don't know...And when you go to ask that administrator, it's kind of like, "Well, what do you mean you don't know?" Or they look at you like you're stupid, or like the answer is demeaning. So it's kind of like sometimes you don't want to ask, so you ask all the way around, before you go there, because when you get there, you know it's not going to be a small little argument. That's my honest experience.

Parents and families discussed communication extensively. Many of the parents felt that communication between teachers and parents was generally positive in elementary school. Parents received regular feedback from the teacher about their children's progress and work. However, communication became difficult when their children attended William Henry Middle School. In that school, parents felt that direct teacher-parent communication was mostly related to negative student behaviors rather than student progress. Furthermore, parents agreed that communication was irregular, and they felt they had to actively seek out teachers and administrators to advocate for their child. One parent stated:

Really, it takes kind of a Herculean effort to get, sometimes, those things [academic placement] changed. Why is it that way? That's a much harder thing to understand, but we have had teachers tell us that to ensure that the right things happen, you have to be aggressive, you have to be known, you have to be firmly and on good terms with these folks in this office.

Another parent noted that sometimes when parents try to communicate to teachers or advocate for their child, their efforts are not recognized, dismissed, or even ridiculed:

They [teachers] don't respond in a timely manner...Also, when you do [reach out], and I'm not saying this is true of every teacher but I have found this to be common, lots of times, it's not reciprocated well. It's like, I had my son come home and say a teacher said,

"I know how your mom is." What's that mean? Because I care, because I ask questions? Do you know what I mean? He said that to him in front of his peers in his classroom.

Parents not only expressed difficulties in communicating with teachers but also with administrators if concerns have not been addressed:

You addressed it with the teacher. Those concerns aren't met, then you would see an administrator...I'm going to say bully, but the two of them maybe talked or had a conversation and you could tell, because when you went to the administrator, it was like the teacher's already been talking.

Communication was the biggest concern for many parents. They felt that the communication structure of some schools, particularly William Henry Middle School, was complex and problematic. It is important to note that parents and families in the focus groups had great appreciation for administrators and teachers in the district. Many parents seemed to have had frustrating communication experiences in one school or with certain individuals.

Lack of access to technology: Parents, community members, and students stated that the district should not assume that all families and students have access to technology, such as computers or the internet. Parents commented that some families do not have the necessary technology at home, and so some students may not be able to complete the online assignments or learning modules. Community members mentioned that some students need to go to the library to work on the computers or access the internet, but there is an hour limit on those computers.

Students said that some teachers are nice and print out online work for students who may not have easy access to technology while other teachers dismiss students' technology issues. One student stated:

Some teachers think because you have a cell phone - I've heard teachers say, 'You've got a cell phone so you can do this work.' Not necessarily. Some phones don't access the internet.

In an increasingly technology-driven educational system, participants emphasized that access to technology was a major issue.

Parent advocate as "squeaky wheel": Parents stated that seeking communication with teachers and administrators to advocate for their children could be perceived as "a bother." Yet, in William Henry Middle School especially, parents believed they needed to "show their face" to make sure their children were placed in the right classes or were given the right supports. Parents also emphasized that they were actively involved in the school because they heard their children were being treated disrespectfully. However, when parents raised issues, they felt they receive a reputation as the "squeaky wheel." One parent stated:

Being a squeaky wheel sometimes can be a detriment to your kid, because a teacher at Capital, this year, there was an issue with math, and I needed an answer. I sent an e-mail that I had a follow-up question, and it just happened to be during the class that my kid

was in. He turned to my kid and said, "Tell your mom to stop sending me e-mails" in front of everybody. He laughed it off, and I didn't. That's the kind of thing...that needs to be accepted in a mature way.

Another parent agreed that being the “squeaky wheel” parent could negatively affect their child:

Like you said, being a squeaky wheel and having the issue. My son's teacher's African-American, and I felt like because they were African-American, they felt like there was that connection and they could just talk to my child any kind of way because we were the squeaky wheel.

Parents and families suggested that the district overall did not appear to understand and appreciate parents’ lives or perspectives. They noted that parents who do not have the time to be involved in school were undervalued and parents who raise concerns or issues related to their children were also undervalued.

Complex technologies, inconsistent information: Parents and students mentioned issues with communication technologies. Parents noted that teachers were not regularly utilizing or updating in communication platforms, such as Class Dojo and home access centers. One parent stated about communication overall:

...in the earlier years...you send an email to a teacher, you get information. Everybody's very well aware of what's happening, but it's also less complex. As they get further up, it's very variable as to the kind of answers you get, how quickly you get them, how easy it is to communicate, and how well-informed we are as to what's happening.

Some students expressed issues with Schoology as not being accessible on different devices:

I feel like Schoology, I just can't stand it. I really can't. Schoology and like on my phone I can't. Some things don't work on Schoology on my phone as it would on the computer.

Another student mentioned that technological resources, like TV’s, were being underutilized:

We have these TV screens out in the hallways but all the information is outdated. They keep them up for two months and it's this thing, deadline January and it's month ago. Why is that still on the screen? I feel like they could do a better job getting information out.

Overall, parents and students seemed to suggest that the districts’ communication technologies could be simplified or used in more consistent and effective ways.

Recommendations from the focus groups:

- Administrators, educators, parents, and community members proposed that school staff also visit families where they are instead of always requesting families to go to the school.
- Administrators, educators, and community members suggested that school could be a community center where students and parents and families are invited to a celebration of success or an event to share information.
- Administrators, educators, parents, and community members emphasized that the district should make an effort to value parent participation no matter the level of participation (from writing a note to the teacher to bringing food).
- Administrators and educators believed a shared language around equity would be beneficial to construct action plans or strategies. Administrators suggested adapting the teaching and learning model for equity.
- Administrators proposed that the district should analyze their communication methods - how the district is communicating and who is receiving the communications.
- Parents recommended that teachers communicate about good student behaviors and progress and not only about misbehaviors or issues.
- Community members suggested having more focus groups to discuss concerns.

Relationship-building

Three major themes related to communication emerged: (a) a few bad teachers, (b) not enough time or space, and (c) lack of support. This section describes each theme in detail. Recommendations from focus group participants are also included.

A few bad teachers: Overall, students agreed that they had good relationships with their teachers. They also stated that most teachers respect students, listen to them, and show they care about them. As one student described:

A lot of teachers will ask you - I know our one teacher for AP, she's probably going to come and the first ten minutes of class where's going to be talking about you as a person, what you did over break. Just trying to getting to know [students].

Students liked that most teachers take time to get to know them. As stated before, they believed that positive teacher-student relationships helped build trust. However, students in the focus group were aware that their experiences may not reflect the experiences of all students, particularly the “frequent flyers” who regularly get in trouble. One student stated:

Once teachers realize you're not going to be the one to do your work it's like they just shut you off.

In addition, another student noted that teachers differentially treated their peers who did not primarily speak English:

Well, there's this kid, he's in my class...Sometimes it seems as if he doesn't get the same kind of treatment as everyone else. He speaks Spanish but he transferred out of english

second language class. But, most of the time when the teacher's up there speaking you can tell he's not understanding what is going on and sometimes it just seems like they write him off.

All students expressed frustration with a couple of their teachers who - in their view - were disrespectful, unhelpful, and unnecessarily strict. As one student stated, there were only a couple of teachers that they really did not like:

There's a lot of teachers where it's like people love them because they are such good teachers and they connect with them so well but then there's also a bunch it's like either way, they hate them or they love them. Then there's only a few where you can't stand a certain teacher in the school.

Students explained that some teachers do not understand how students learn or do not help students who learn in different ways:

I know there are some teachers where they go by their one teaching style and they don't cater to anyone else and those are usually the students that don't like the teacher because they can't connect to what they're teaching, so they zone out.

Another student similarly stated:

I think definitely teachers that you see that student relationships are not as good throughout all their classes and all their students, are the teachers who only teach one way and don't help out. Maybe somebody learns differently or has difficulty with her topic or subject that you're learning. They feel like they're being left behind in a way, because that ruins that relationship where they don't trust each other as much anymore.

Students explained that a few of their teachers were simply rude or “nasty.” Many students suggested that some teachers did not seem to like them or students in general. One student described a small but telling incident:

She was mean especially to me. I would say hi to her, she'd just roll her eyes...you don't have to roll your eyes. You told us to say hi back. You should say hi back to us.

Parents also expressed that their children had negative interactions with a few teachers as well. One parent stated:

...my daughter that's at William Henry now, she had one teacher, and she knew for a fact this teacher did not like her, because the teacher didn't hide it. We're sitting in a meeting ...I'm like, "My daughter knows you don't like her. She's a child. At the end of the day, why are you arguing with the child? Why?"...at the end of the day, my child should never get to the point to where she's physically sick because she doesn't want to go to school, because she knows the teacher doesn't like her. Not only that, you're voicing it to the other students in the classroom, so now the students are taking it on...

Another parent described a similar situation with her child:

My child's stomach was hurting because he was like, "Mommy, the teacher couldn't ... No, my stomach is hurting. I didn't know. I didn't want to ask." I'm like, "You're going to go back in and you're going to ask her [the teacher] for clarity. You're going to go in there tomorrow morning..." But because of how disrespectful she [the teacher] has been to other students and to him, he was afraid to talk to her. He was afraid to talk to her.

Administrators and educators acknowledged that some of the teaching staff had issues with classroom relationships and management. One staff member described that some principal-student relationships resembled negative teacher-student relationships:

You're so used to the principal, whether it's a he or she, just disciplining you, so you automatically throw your defense. So that's where you get these kids where he's like, "Oh, forget that." And then she sees him do that. It's a ladder effect. So these kids are just getting that from each other. So they're seeing him flick off the principal or wave their hand at the principal, and it's like "Oh, everybody's doing that now." Because there's no comfort interaction between the two. Just like most teachers. Most teachers are at the board and then it'll be class is over, that's it. There's no comfort.

Many administrators and educators noted that a few school staff did not seem to care about building relationships or some school staff cared but they did not know how to build relationships. Some educators noted that they heard the same students receiving discipline from the same classrooms, which perpetuated a cycle of negative relationships. An educator commented that the students who have behavior issues in kindergarten are the same students who have issues in later grades because their teachers have not established a positive relationship with them. Furthermore, across all focus groups, participants described that some teachers “just teach” and do not feel it is their job to understand students’ lives outside of the classroom, even though some students may be in impoverished or difficult family situations that may affect their participation and learning.

As a note, participants across all focus groups mentioned positive relationships students have with school counselors and other mental health or health professionals. Students mentioned that their counselors were helpful and nice. Parents appreciated the responsive support they received from school counselors.

Not enough time or space: Administrators and educators repeated that there was not enough time or space to build relationships with students, with each other, or with families and community members. In terms of the classroom, educators particularly expressed that there was limited time in class or outside of class to get to know students. In class, some educators felt pressure to focus on instruction and meet standards. As one educator stated:

We can all agree that relationships and all that stuff, and we can pay lip-service all we want, but if we're not doing things like stop holding these teachers to these crazy standards where they get in at 8:40 and it's games time. They can't build a relationship. Some of them are skilled at doing both. Some are not. Some of them are frazzled. Some of them are so worried about losing their job.

Educators also felt that, though building relationships outside of class was important, some had family or other obligations preventing them from spending time with students through extracurricular activities or sports. Administrators and educators suggested that more time needed to be built into the school day to interact with students. Although, one administrator implied that too much time with students without periods of reflection could be stressful for teachers.

Many administrators agreed that more reflection time for both administrators and educators was necessary. According to participants in those groups, more reflection time would allow staff to process events and adequately plan for next steps to meet the needs of students. One administrator provided an example:

We have incredible EL [English Learner] teachers. We have some who are really very innovative, but it goes back to that reflection. We need time for those EL teachers to really integrate into the classrooms because they, a lot of times can observe and reflect on what is happening in the classroom and provide ideas and suggestions and [provide] teacher support and student support.

Related to time, another limitation to building relationships with students was class size. Administrators, educators, and parents all mentioned that large class sizes did not allow the time or space to meet the relational, socio-emotional, or academic needs of each student. As one educator stated:

So we're trying to build relationships, meet the social-emotional needs and their academic needs while making our evaluations look really good because we've achieved all of this and we have a large classroom size. So, when you're trying to promote equity in relationships, in their educational needs, and doing a great job, you need to have a smaller size. It's not we're the little Catholic school down the road.

Another educator commented:

...24 kids in a kindergarten class? I can't control the two I got at home myself, and I'm trying to build relationships with them. I hope I'm doing it.

A parent also described the challenges of large class sizes and spaces from the perspective of a student:

It's hard for kids to go from that nurturing kind of environment in elementary school. Smaller class sizes, and then they go to this other place [William Henry Middle School] that's just full of kids, and the halls are crowded, and the lockers, it's a huge transition for them. You take a sense of the kid who thrives at one school, and they're placed in another school with just so much, and it's just overwhelming.

Parents recognized that teachers have to manage many students and tasks. However, parents believed that there was no excuse for teachers to be disrespectful to students, privately or

in spaces where other students could hear. In addition, parents expressed frustration that they tell their children how to do the right things when some teachers are not setting the right examples.

Students did not mention large class sizes. However, they implied that the size of the high school led them to feel disconnected from other students or what was happening in other parts of the building.

Lack of support: In terms of administrator-educator relationships, some educators did not feel supported by their administration. Though educators recognized that administrators had difficult jobs and limited time, many educators felt the lack of administrator support affected communication and trust. One educator stated:

I don't go to admin now, because I can't trust that I'm going to be supported, so I don't want to go to [them] with behavior issues or parent issues or anything, I'd rather just try to figure it out myself, because I don't know that [they're] going to stand by me.

Another educator similarly expressed that sometimes administrators were not on their side and more concerned about their superiors:

I have had several teachers voice concerns about lack of support this year and having decisions on what they would like a student to do to get their grades up, or to draw the line on something, and then overridden because the principal does not want it to get back to the district office. And, I don't think that's right. I think that's very wrong.

Moreover, educators felt that they were not treated as professionals and constantly judged or evaluated without understanding their classrooms:

We're professionals and I feel like we're not being treated as professionals and supported as professionals. We're one of the only positions where someone is always standing over your back checking on your work, "Are you doing this, are you doing that?"

Not all educators felt unsupported. A few educators said that their administration was "willing to put [themselves] on the line for us." One educator stated:

We swapped administrators this year within the district, and I love our new guy, and I think he's somebody that has our back. Everybody has different strengths and all that, but to feel supported is huge. And to know that if you're going to go up against the parent and you have a legitimate story behind you, you need the support. You can't be thrown under the bus.

Administrators acknowledged that their staff and teachers needed continuous support:

That is one of my concerns is that we just keep, you know, the kids and the families continue to ... their needs keep growing so we keep taking on more and more and more and what's the breaking point. How are we supporting our teachers and our support staff within our schools?

However, the nature of their own jobs created challenges for administrators to provide that support. Administrators also desired more support, particularly from their peers, so that they could address their challenges in order to support their staff. As one administrator said, “it’s a lonely job.”

Recommendations from focus groups:

- Administrators, educators, parents, and community members highlighted the importance of creating safe space for students to discuss issues or share their experiences.
- Educators suggested that relationships could be built within classrooms starting with simple questions, like “What’s on your mind? Let’s talk about it.”
- Across focus groups, participants stated that the district should hire more highly-qualified teachers.
- Parents and students suggested removing disrespectful and ineffective teachers from the district.
- Administrators, educators, parents, and community members suggested reducing class sizes.
- Administrators and educators highly recommended scheduling more reflection time during work.
- Community members proposed creating support networks for administrators and educators.
- Administrators suggested more Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

4. Additional Themes or Topics

This section describes additional themes that consistently emerged from multiple focus groups or topics that participants believed were of high importance. The themes are organized in relation to two categories: structural barriers and resource factors that are related to equity. We presented themes and topics, within each category, in order of relative frequency, with the top sections highlighting themes and topics that were discussed across multiple focus groups and the bottom sections showing themes and topics that were discussed in one or two focus groups.

Structural barriers to equity

Transition from elementary to middle school: As mentioned previously, administrators, educators, and particularly parents highlighted the challenges of transitioning from elementary school to William Henry Middle School. Participants raised multiple issues regarding the middle school, including large class sizes, impersonal climate, and less responsive teachers. Participants believed that the abrupt change from elementary to middle school contributed to communication, relationship, and behavior challenges. For example, parents were concerned with bullying and fighting in the middle school. They also felt that sometimes administrators did not handle bullying and fighting incidences well - punishing one student and not another when both were involved. Participants also viewed this in relation to trust, particularly communication.

EL and special education identification: Administrators and educators stated that they needed more training, support, and time to identify students for English learner and special education programs. As one administrator pointed out, “We don't want to over identify either. We want to really get to know them and understand what their needs are.” In addition, participants in those focus groups expressed that better communication was needed across the district to transition students out of programs as well.

September 30th count: Administrators noted logistical challenges arising from the September 30th count. As one administrator noted:

Yeah, that's how we get funding and then for preschool kids who come in all year long, you know, if they're not in a seat and being served by September 30th and we're serving them October third, we don't get to count them for the whole year and they might be intense or complex or have very significant needs. We might even have two paraprofessionals with this one child but there's no funding that comes with them because they didn't get started until October 1st.

Administrators stated that this particular policy impeded certain students from receiving appropriate services and supports.

Testing and standards: Administrators and educators expressed that students, particularly English Learners (EL's) and special education students, were being held to unrealistic academic standards based on test scores. Participants in those focus groups emphasized that the district should be more focused on students' learning than test score achievement. In fact, an educator stated that the district should be willing to sacrifice test scores in the process of implementing strategies to improve instruction or services. Educators felt that standardized testing, though necessary, was highly disruptive to instruction and the school schedule.

Accountability between the district and community: Parents and community members stated that there needed to be more accountability in the district. They clarified that accountability did not mean more regulations or evaluations but peer-to-peer accountability and more transparency in communicating what is happening across the district.

Necessary resources

Mental health and counseling resources: Administrators, educators, parents, and community members all highlighted the importance of mental health and counseling services for students. Administrators and educators stated that there needed to be a school psychologist and social worker at each school. The mental health, social workers, and counselors who participated in the focus groups expressed that their services were stretched thin across the district. One staff member explained:

I can just look at my role...behavioral support and crisis support...evaluating to get into special education. Trying to help to consult teachers to learn how to work with children in certain ways. Then you look at, well, I've got 50 meetings in the next two weeks, so I'm

in 50 meetings, and when do I go in and help the kids and the teachers, because I've got all these other things that I have to do? When do I get in those things that I know is number one and should be number one?

Year-round calendar: Administrators and educators wanted more time for planning, interventions, and professional learning community meetings. Some administrators suggested implementing a year-round, or 12-month school calendar. A year-round calendar would not add any more instructional days but spread out interventions and other activities throughout the year and provide more time to help students who need more support.

Community and business partnerships: Community members believed the district should form more partnerships with outside organizations and local businesses. Community members believed the partnerships were important because some students have no activities or safe spaces to go after school. Moreover, they saw local businesses and corporations as untapped resources that could provide much needed funds for technology or materials.

Mid-level courses: Students stated that there were not many mid-level courses, in between College Prep and AP courses, offered to students, especially for juniors and seniors. For some students, AP courses were too fast-paced or the cost of AP exams were too high. However, the only other option for some of the students were College Prep courses. Students proposed that the high school offer more Honors-level courses.

Recommendations

Focus group participants proposed several recommendations during discussions. A review of the literature shows that the recommendations offered by participants are supported by research studies. This not only strengthens their views but also suggests that participants understand issues related to equity and steps to address them. In this section, we echo the recommendations that emerged from the focus groups and also provide perspective. Some of the recommendations are also aligned with recommendations outlined in the district's Action Influence Map from May 2017.

General:

- Because Capital School District serves a racially, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse community, equity was a central concern for focus group participants. The district may want to create explicit goals and a shared language specifically related to equity. Rather than defining equity broadly, we encourage the district to have discussions with administrators, educators, families, communities, students, and other stakeholders to construct a clear definition of what equity looks like and how it can be achieved. This can help to construct a common vision or framework to align district and school activities, including instruction and communication.
- In addition to creating a common goal and shared language, the district can provide more ongoing equity and anti-bias training for administrators and educators. Training should move beyond awareness of equity and bias to creating strategies to implement in daily work. The Center for Education Equity (CEE) at

the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium (MAEC) can provide trainings and facilitate professional development sessions.

- Administrators and educators emphasized the importance of having time to reflect. The district can restructure school days or schedules to provide more reflection time for administrators and educators. Research shows that reflection can enhance the quality of work, boost performance, and promote creativity (Postholm, 2008).
- Focus group participants voiced that educators are asked to do more as the needs of their students and the community continue to grow. The district can create a pool of resources and support systems for educators. For example, the district can consider hiring more counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and paraprofessionals. The district can also create a support network consisting of administrators and educators to help teachers constructively respond to issues on a case-by-case basis.

Establishing trust:

How can the district improve communication?

- To improve communication, the district can begin by analyzing current communication methods and assess whether those methods fit the needs of the community. The district may not want to rely too heavily on technology if members of the community do not have regular access to technological devices or internet. It is important to note that technology is a communication tool and not necessarily a method. Technologies should be selected based on the designed and selected method, not vice versa.
- The district's current communication efforts appear to be reaching only certain groups, families, and communities. The district can initiate communication with families and communities in their homes or where they gather, for example religious or community organizations. The district can also invite religious or community organizations to school spaces to exchange information or collaborate in an event. Finally, the district can distribute information or recruit participation by using the "snowball" method of reaching out to key parents or community leaders who, in turn, reach out to other parents and community members and so on.
- In addition to reaching out to all families and communities, the district should ensure that materials and information for families and communities are translated in a language they can understand. The district should also provide accessible interpretation services at district meetings or events for families that do not speak English. The district can facilitate communication by helping families and communities (both English-speaking and non-English-speaking) understand the significance of information, meetings, and events within the cultural context of Capital School District's school system.
- Parents and community members felt that the district undervalued their participation. Not all parents and communities have the time or resources to participate in expected ways. The district can encourage all forms of participation and express appreciation for all levels of participation through simple gestures, such as saying "thank you" or writing notes. Even "negative" forms of

participation should be appreciated as it shows that the parent or community member cares and is involved.

How can the district build and maintain relationships?

- Effective communication can help build relationships. In addition to communication, the district can create time and space for more personal and professional interactions. For example, the district can structure more learning communities or networks in which administrators and educators can share their experiences and strategies. Moreover, the district can allow for more flexible instructional time for teachers to converse with students within the classroom or engage in activities with students outside the classroom. Finally, the district can construct an “interpersonal organizational chart” that outlines to whom staff can go to - a peer or superior - if they want to discuss concerns or need support.
- Though intentionally providing time within the school day to promote relationships is important, it is equally important to know how to build relationships through professional or academic interactions. Students clearly expressed that they formed positive relationships with not only teachers who asked about their lives but also teachers who could support them in their learning. In other words, *how* individuals interact when doing work shapes relationships. The district can provide training or professional development sessions specifically related to building relationships through daily work.
- Administrators and educators often felt pressure or high stress from trying to attain high standards. Stress interferes with building good communication and relationships (Prilleltensky, Neff, & Bessell, 2016). Though high standards and expectations are important, the district may want to create a non-judgmental climate by focusing on progress towards standards rather than meeting standards. This can help reduce workplace pressure and stress. The district can also alleviate stress by hiring more support staff in order to distribute the workload and provide more time for supportive interactions.

Community forum: Next steps are to conduct community forums in order to brainstorm ways to engage the community. For the upcoming community forums in May 2018, we strongly recommend that Capital School District (CSD) recruits families and community members of every racial or ethnic group to reflect CSD’s demographics population. This will ensure that diverse perspectives are heard. Interpreters or interpretation services should be provided at the community forum for families and community members who do not speak English. We suggest the following format for the community forum:

1. The community forums begin with an overview/summary of the focus group report and findings.
2. The attendees break out into different topic areas, each that correspond to a recommendation from the focus group report which comes from the analyzed data.
3. In groups, participants create action map/plan/strategies, including concrete steps, for ensuring that the recommendations are put in place.
4. Before each community forum ends, each group presents their action steps to the larger group for feedback.

Conclusion

Overall, focus group participants viewed Capital School District positively. Participants were willing to discuss difficult topics, such as equity, and share their thoughts and experiences. In discussions, participant responses revealed underlying interpersonal (e.g., communication and relationships) and structural (e.g., policies and procedures) issues in the district. Findings show that establishing and maintaining trust across the district involves consistent, transparent communication and supportive relationships between all stakeholders on a daily basis. Effective communication can be achieved by simplifying communication methods that are easily accessible to diverse communities and valuing different, cultural ways that stakeholders participate in district-related activities. Constructive relationships can be sustained through allotting precious time and space for interactions or conversations and providing adequate support in response to stakeholders' emerging concerns. We recommend beginning improvements with an analysis of communication methods across the district and developing a common language explicitly related to cultural awareness and relationship-building.

Data Matrix

	District and School Admin	Educators and Staff	Parents and Families	Community Members	High School Students
Equity - fairness					
Equity - providing equal access					
Equity - cultural awareness					
Equity - positive teacher/student relationships					
Equity - explicit, integrated goal					
Dealing with racial bias					
Making assumptions about others - race or gender					
Life sentence of student labels, bias, and unfair treatment					
Importance of a diverse staff					
Communication only reach the same group of people					
Vary communication methods					
Communication should consider cultural background of families					

Trust equals support, feeling heard, and respected					
Communication methods and quality differs as students get older					
Parents are undervalued if they cannot meet district standards for participation					
Complex technologies, inconsistent information					
Positive teacher-student relationships do exist					
Some teachers treat students differently					
Students do have positive relationships with school counselors and health professionals					
There is not enough time to build relationships with students					
Lack of support affects outcomes					
Challenges with transitioning from elementary to middle school					
EL and special education identification					
September 30 count					
Testing and standards					

Accountability between the district and community					
Need to have mental health and counseling services for students					
Year-round calendar					
Increase community and business partnerships					
Establish mid-level courses					