

Leicester Public Schools

FUTURE SEARCH * April 8, 2017



Introduction

Over 80 people, representing a broad cross-section of the community, met on April 8, 2017 to develop strategies for improving Leicester Public Schools. Chris Haskins an experienced moderator and public school administrator, led the discussion using a process similar to the district's Future Search, held four years ago. The event this year was planned for one day, as opposed to the two-day event held in 2013, since the district is already starting with a strong foundation. The district's current improvement efforts focus on three district improvement strategies: (1) engaging instruction and effective interventions grounded in a rigorous curriculum, (2) development of staff skills through effective feedback and training,

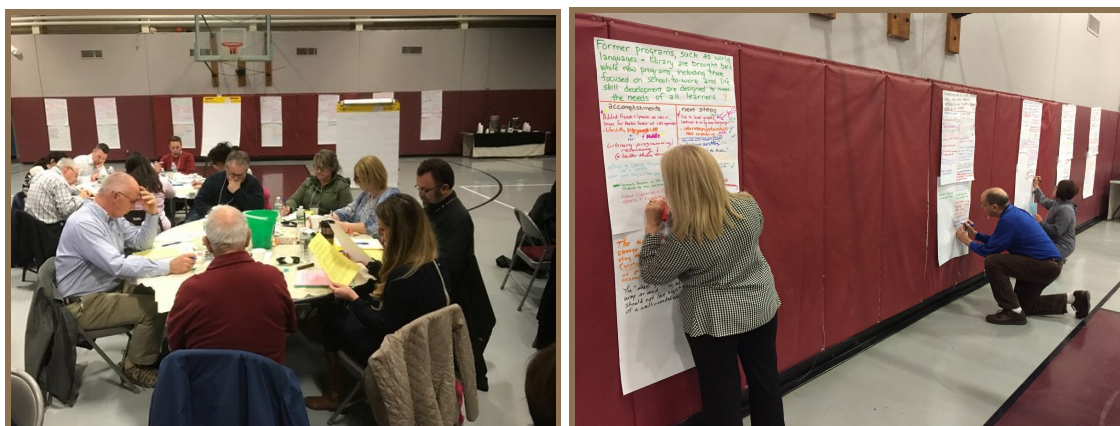
and (3) improved infrastructure and resources. Additionally, the recent town and school survey, administered through the organization, Thoughtexchange, provided valuable data about the community's values and needs.

Other New England communities have made positive changes in their schools using a similar visioning process. Leicester's Future Search focused on the question, *Recognizing the challenges and opportunities in our community, how will the Leicester schools evolve to serve our current and future students?*

Business leaders, municipal officials, students, parents, school employees, and representatives from nonprofit organizations were invited to participate in the event, which was held at Leicester Middle School from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. A mid-morning brunch, prepared by Harry Brooks, a town Select Board member, was provided.

The timing of this process was ideal. Leicester schools have made great strides over the past several years. As demands on the schools have compounded and resources have diminished, it is crucial that we focus our efforts through well-defined strategies. The Thoughtexchange survey of the community will provide valuable data so that we can include ideas generated by people who may be unable to come to the Future Search event.

We thank all of our participants who generously gave up a Saturday to engage in this work. Their concern for the future of their community was evident. Special thanks go to our administrators, who facilitated table groups; Harry Brooks, who provided the brunch; custodians who helped with set-up and clean-up, and Chris Haskins, our facilitator, for his support through the planning and implementation of this event.



Background: Future Search

The Future Search process was developed by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff and is based upon social science research on the conditions for effective dialogue among diverse groups of people. Over the past 50 years this process has been used throughout the world and across many different sectors of society.

While Future Search conferences may vary, all share certain characteristics including being task-focused. Typically, participants tell stories about their past, analyze present realities, In the Future Search process, participants are assigned to table groups of six to eight who work together for the entire event. The facilitator uses a series of activities to promote team building among the participants and encourage focused and engaging discussions. Data generated by each activity is later reviewed to identify common strands and beliefs that will form the basis of a strategic plan. A written plan is eventually done by a smaller group of individuals who use the identified common strands to identify major goals and specific action items

In Leicester, the School Department has pledged to develop opportunities for community members to periodically review the progress being made to implement the strategic plan. Thus, the shared vision developed through our Future Search process will not be shelved or forgotten but will be a driving factor in moving our district forward.

Planning Process

A month prior to the event, administrators identified stakeholders to invite to the event, developed a press release, and sent out invitations. Logistical tasks, such as location, refreshments, theme, materials, and an agenda were then determined. Most importantly, a facilitator was identified to help us with a detailed agenda and appropriate protocols to use to help find common ground. Chris Haskins, an experienced facilitator and school leader, was trained in the use of protocols for learning-centered dialogue. His facilitation enabled the group to have deep conversations on topics of concern.

Teachers and students are engaged in meaningful, rigorous, dynamic, student-centered curriculum that supports all learners utilizing technology and project-based learning. The broad curriculum includes an emphasis of the arts, social tolerance, local and global learning, as well as the core academic areas.	
Technology use has increased and includes 1:1 chromebooks at HS. Curriculum work in science, ELA, and math complete. Implemented the workshop model at elementary grades, inquiry-based science instruction, STEM programs. And PBIS.	Continue to focus on and increase STEM, critical thinking, communication skills, and personal development. Help students to better plan for their futures. Add more foreign languages and to think more globally. Educate students about digital citizenship.
The teaching and learning environment is characterized by safe, functional, energy-efficient, and accessible facilities located on one campus. This learning environment moves beyond the physical campus to incorporate and embrace virtual learning.	
LHS offers 25 Virtual High School seats. All staff are ALICE trained. A facilities capital committee is moving us toward a plan for more functional, efficient, and accessible facilities.	Feasibility study is next step toward improved facilities and making them a town and school resource. Additionally, ensuring that maintenance is keeping up to provide for better health and safety is a priority.
State of the art technology supports improved communication and collaboration and prepares students for the global market.	
All schools now have dependable Internet access and Chromebooks (1:1 at HS and 1:2 at other schools). Teachers are using Google classroom and interactive boards. STEM programming has increased.	Expand 1:1 programming to middle school and offer more innovative technology use at lower grades. Balance technology use with other authentic learning opportunities. Increase use of technology for finances & writing.
Areas of obsolescence are identified and resources redirected to areas of growth and necessity. Additional resources, both within and external to the community, are identified to meet the needs of the schools.	
Grants include a TCLP Arabic Teacher, STEM Grant (Project Lead the Way), and other small but important grants. Libraries have been renovated.	Identify partnerships and grants for innovative programming. Update Primary and High School libraries.

The skills and resources of the community are activated to support education.	
The police and EMT have had info tables at school events. Community Readers and activities with the Senior Center connects students with community members. Friends of Leicester Middle School established to support middle school.	A coordinator could reach out to community - inviting people to share their skills through job shadowing and internships and connecting community members to classes to improve career awareness. All schools could establish a "friends" group.
High quality, ongoing, focused, and sustained professional development is utilized to help teachers to adapt and excel in the new learning environment.	
PD committee works to bring in high quality pd that has included training in PBIS, workshop model, Engaging Schools, and co-teaching. Staff are encouraged to participate in PD.	Formalized PD plans for each staff would meet individual needs. Expand some (i.e. co-teaching) training to additional grades/schools. Expand opportunities for teacher-lead professional development.
Parents and guardians are engaged with the schools and their own child's education by means of regular forums, a dynamic website, social media, and other forms of communication.	
There has been a significant improvement in home/school communication that includes the use of social media, websites, as well as Power School.	Help more parents to learn the technology used for communication. Inform parents when there is a problem and include the plan for rectifying situation. Strategize ways to involve working parents, utilize senior citizens and get more parents volunteering. Utilize Remind App (text) and use of social media and other avenues to get 360 degree feedback.
Relationships with businesses, Becker College, and other higher education institutions provide for additional opportunities for our students as they enrich the institutions themselves.	
Students are engaged in dual enrollment with QCC & Becker. Relationship with WPI enables high quality STEM programming, community service is another avenue for learning.	Increase opportunities for career exploration through career fair, internships, and mentorships.

Common student assessments ensure a guaranteed curriculum and help identify students who are struggling to meet high district expectations.	
Common district assessments, such as STAR, identify students for interventions in grades K-8.	Consider standards based grading in which students are given multiple opportunities and methods to demonstrate mastery. Use data to determine ways to make the class better. Use data to group students to foster individual growth.
All students are college or career ready at the time of graduation and have the skills and dispositions of life-long learners.	
Technology use in schools translate to use beyond grade 12. Curriculum is becoming standards-based.	Emphasize "career ready" by including opportunities for internships, life skills, learning in the trades, and student entrepreneurship programs - DECA, United Way, Youth Leaders, etc. Improve writing - both for a need to address entrance exams and future writing for college and work.
A strong, stable, united leadership holds teachers accountable and are themselves accountable to the community.	
Strong relationships exist between teacher's association and admin.	Unity is difficult. Consider soft skills training to decrease adversity with stakeholders. Focus on how to get parents/community to do the same.
Former programs, such as world languages and library are brought back while new programs, including those focused on school-to-work and life skill development are designed to meet the needs of all learners.	
Library and world languages program have been brought back to middle school and is better than ever. Increased STEM programming at the middle and high schools provides new programming.	Continue to add new languages (Arabic added for 2017-18 school year) and expand programming to elementary grades. Internships/externships need expanding. Whether or not to include cursive writing should be discussed. Innovative topics, such as: How to Win Friends and Influence People, Personal Finance, How to Remember (Moonwalking with Einstein) should be considered as well as adding more art and shop classes and simple basic life skills starting at a younger age. Consider affiliation with a vocational school.



Prouds and Sorries

Participants moved from the past to the present and future by creating two lists. The list of “prouds” was determined by envisioning an ideal school year, while the list of “sorries” was generated by thinking about characteristics of an ill-fated school year.

PROUDS

- Resources
 - Sufficient and efficient spending for special subjects, additional staff and programs, as well as special education
 - Adequate pay for staff
 - Increase in grant and private funding
 - Students connected to resources
- Involvement and Engagement
 - Supportive and engaged parents attending school events and learning how children are being taught
 - Relationships with community members provides mentors and role models
 - Increasing collaboration between town and school administrators and departments, including Senior Center
 - Increased opportunities for students to give back to the community
 - More involvement with religious groups - Food Pantry, Special Olympics, etc.
 - A community liaison or volunteer coordinator is employed by the schools
 - Staff who are engaged, proud, and invested in schools and are active in extracurricular activities
 - Students who are happy and who employ a strong work ethic in school.
 - Community values and support schools with time and money

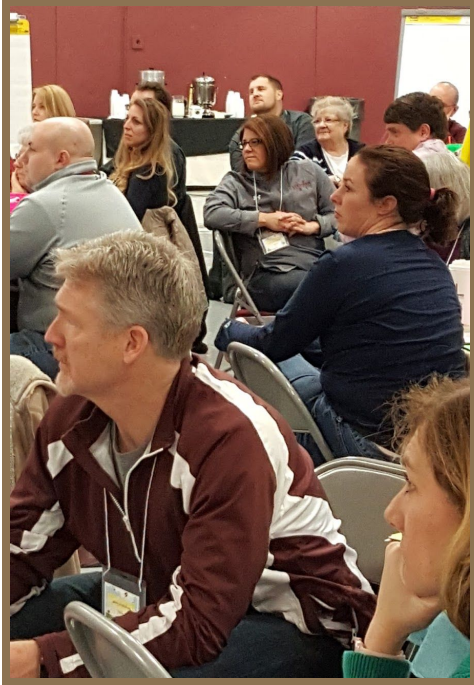
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- Growth Mindset / Response to Feedback
 - Staff, students, and parents have a growth mindset
 - Planning for the future is actively evaluated
 - Students and parents provide constructive, useful feedback to teachers
 - Staffing
 - Increased staffing enables sufficient common planning time and small class sizes
 - Leicester is attractive to new teachers and administrators
 - Feelings of Confidence, Belonging, Pride
 - Parents feel child is understood and supported.
 - Public recognition of work being done in schools
 - Students enjoy school and learning and feel respected and empowered
 - Teachers, administrators, community all feel part of a team; shared leadership
 - Academic Success/Instruction
 - Students show growth each year and are supported by Response to Intervention
 - Innovative teaching strategies and curriculum individualize instruction, incorporate the outdoors, and include local history
 - Well-prepared students head out to great colleges and jobs
 - Dropout rate decreases, graduate rate increases, tests rise, and schools move into Level 1 status
 - Students have a manageable workload
 - Safety, Well-Being, and Social-Emotional Learning
 - Every student safe and healthy and feeling safe physically and emotionally
 - Suspensions are no longer needed because other options exist and because behavior is appropriate.
 - Schools teach students healthy behaviors, including how to avoid Lyme disease.
 - Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) are employed to teach appropriate behaviors
 - Students are happy and are kind to each other
 - Partnerships, such as the one with Community Health Link ensure that students get the counseling they need.
 - Schools teach coping and other SEL skills
 - “Beyond the Core” Extra-Curricular Offerings
 - Guidance utilize various strategies and tools, like Naviance, to help students plan for their futures
 - Innovative use of technology and 1:1 Chromebooks at the middle school
 - Variety of innovative learning experiences including JROTC, STEM, dual enrollment, DARE, internships
 - All students are CPR trained
 - Opportunities for students to partner with businesses - starting in MS
 - Graduates speaking Mandarin, other languages
 - Successful academic (i.e. robotics) and athletic teams

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- More and stronger after school and extracurricular activities
 - Opportunities for students to teach younger students and/or seniors.
 - Challenge students who excel.
 - Night classes for parents
 - Facilities
 - Community support for new school(s) leading to new facilities & athletic fields
 - Healthy, modern, & accessible school environments
 - Facilities are well maintained; a maintenance plan that ensures buildings are well cared for.-
 - Buildings that are accessible and feel warm and welcoming
 - All schools on one campus

SORRIES

The sorries mirror the prouds. For example, a proud is to “challenge students who excel,” whereas the corresponding sorry is “students who excel are not challenged.” In particular, participants expressed a concern that a failure of a major system in one or more facilities would be experienced. Participants also listed as sorries:

- Lack of resources
- Adversarial relationships
- Lack of communication
- Disengaged students, parents, staff, and community
- Loss of staff
- Poor perceptions of and confidence in schools
- Decreasing test scores, loss of HS accreditation, over-reliance on web-based programs,
- Increased dropout rate
- Students unprepared for the world after high school
- Unsafe schools - physically and psychologically
- Increasing social-emotional issues
- Increased bullying, drug-use, suicide
- Poor special education services
- Loss of athletic programs, extracurricular offerings, AP courses
- Overemphasis on testing
- Inability to secure funding for new school buildings



Learning from our Thoughtexchange Survey

Future Search participants sorted through data obtained from the recent Thoughtexchange survey, which the town and schools did together. ThoughtExchange was a way for our families, community, and staff to share priorities and ideas with town and school officials online. Participants indicated what is important and got to see and respond to what others are saying. It was done through an easy three-step process:

- **Share** – answer open-ended questions about our town and schools.
- **Star** – review ideas from others and place a star on the ideas you like best.
- **Discover** – learn what is important to the community as a whole.

The Thoughtexchange data confirmed the ideas of the Future Search participants by indicating that facilities are a concern and there is a need to continue to ensure that school programs are improved and test scores and school ratings increase. Additionally, Thoughtexchange data showed a concern for too much emphasis being placed on state assessments. Clearly, members of the school community want schools that address the needs of the whole child.

Common Themes for the Future

The reflection on the past, the review of the common themes for Future Search I, the prouds and sorries, and the review of Thought exchange data consistently resulted in themes that are directly related to the district's initial three strategies, with specific areas listed below:

(1) Engaging instruction and effective interventions grounded in a rigorous curriculum

- Continue to strengthen RTI and PBIS
- Challenge all learners
- Prepare students for life after high school
- Ensure a proper focus on non-tested subjects
- Expand extracurricular offerings

(2) Development of staff skills through effective feedback and training

- Encourage a growth mindset
- Develop leadership skills on all levels to ensure strong, shared leadership

(3) Improved infrastructure and resources

- Develop comprehensive facilities plan
- Improve maintenance of facilities and athletic fields
- Connect students to local resources
- Capitalize on volunteers and local resources
- Increase grant funds

The results also show a strong interest in attending to students' social-emotional needs and to leveraging strong relationships within the community, suggesting the following new strategies:

(4) Attending to the social-emotional needs of students

- Finding alternatives to suspensions and other punitive measures, focusing instead on teaching appropriate behaviors, employing consequences that restore relationships, and employing PBIS techniques.

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- Teach healthy behaviors (physical & emotional, avoiding disease, online behaviors)
- (5) Develop family and community engagement
- Develop opportunities for parents to attend school events and learn how children are being taught
 - Provide mentors and role models utilizing community members
 - Increase collaboration between town and school administrators and departments, including Senior Center
 - Increase opportunities for students to give back to the community
 - Employ a school community liaison or volunteer coordinator

Since both the Thoughtexchange survey and the Future Search included strong advocating for expanding curricular and extracurricular programming, it might be advantageous to tease this out into it's own strategy and eliminating strategy 2 by incorporating strong training into other strategies.

Evaluation

Sixty-four participants completed a feedback form about the event. All expressed positive remarks about the value of the day. The comments below are representative of those provided by other participants:

"I feel hopeful about the future of Leicester. Both groups I was a part of all seemed to be on the same page in regards to what we, as a community, need to do together to improve our schools and therefore improve our town."

"I feel like my opinion mattered and I was not afraid to speak my mind"

"After participating today I am thinking that we have a great platform to stand on and grow. We need to harness the community residents who are willing to help and spread the word about what is needed in our schools and town."

"There is great leadership with passion and ideas. There are many opportunities for growth for LPS. While there are many facility needs, there is also enthusiasm for new programming and curriculum."

"This day is so important for our town and school district. It will set the strategy for moving forward, not just educationally, but in enticing people to come to Leicester to live. If we are an excellent town, we will attract excellent people."

There were also constructive comments about logistics that will be valuable when we plan

other, similar events. Additionally, some expressed concern that the cost for new facilities may be daunting and there was a concern expressed by some that the specific action steps were not determined by the end of the meeting and that without such specific steps, progress might not be made.

Next Steps

Making this report public is one step toward holding the School Department accountable to all that was accomplished on April 8th. In addition, on May 8 and 15 a team will meet to develop action plans for each of the strategies identified through the Future Search. This set of action plans is commonly known as a strategic plan or improvement plan.

The improvement plan will be presented to the School Committee for approval at its June 12th meeting then will be made available to the public through our website. While certain staff members will be responsible for carrying out the action steps in this plan, the district improvement team will additionally meet 3-4 times annually to update and oversee the implementation of the plan.

Special Thanks to our facilitator, Chris Haskins; Harry Brooks, who prepared the brunch; and to the Future Search participants...

Rigo Alfonso	Rachelle Cloutier	Tracey Hippert
Mark Armington	Linda Colby	Katie Hunt Baker
Courtney Bachand	Lisa Cole	Marilyn Hyland
Aviva Belhumeur	Nate Cosper	Richard Jubinville
Jeff Berthiaume	Andrea Culross	Karen Kemp
Ronda Bertrand-Robbins	Tracy Davenport	Kayley Laflamme
Shannon Beveridge	Rev. Aileen DiBenedetto	Nancy Lamb
Eileen Boisvert	Mary Ellen Dion	Tom Lauder
Tina Boss	Elin Dolen	Jennifer Leahy
Sarah Brown	Chris Fontaine	Melissa Ledbetter
Tom Buckley	Kevin Forti	Fr. Robert Loftus
Christine Bugbee	Scott Francis	Erin Macaruso
Cate Calise	Mary Gabrila	Kingsley Mante Angua
Rep. Kate Campanale	Jessica Gilligan	Dawn Martilla
Joseph Carpenter	Carrie Grimshaw	Paul McCarthy
Laurie Cascione	Jason Grimshaw	Nicole Muzzy
Hawraa Chreim	Michelle Herbert	Joyce Nelson
Timothy Clark	Tim Hickey	Nicki O'Connor

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Jim Reinke
Madison Riley-Powell
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Suzanne Sears
Elisabeth Seith
Emily Soltysik
Kelley Southwick
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Tammy Tebo
Erica van Lingen
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