Leicester Future Search

Executive Summary

Leicester Public Schools
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www.lpsma.net

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Why Host a Future Search?

The timing for a future search was ideal. Leicester schools had made great strides over the past several years. As demands on the schools compounded and resources diminished, it had become crucial that schools continue to make improvements by focusing our efforts through a shared vision. The first step in this process was to bring members of the community together to see what is wanted for our schools.

The Leicester Future Search involved over 75 people – business leaders, municipal officials, students, parents, school employees, and those from the nonprofit and social services sector – who gathered together on May 31st and June 1st to create a common vision for the district's future.

Judy Enright, an experienced moderator and former public school administrator, led the discussion using a process known as Future Search. 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?* The data collected through the Future Search process will be incorporated into a strategic plan that will guide our district forward.

We thank all of our participants who generously gave up a Friday evening and Saturday to engage in this work. Their concern for the future of their community was evident. Special thanks go to members of the steering committee who helped by personally inviting members of the community to participate and to our facilitator, Judy Enright, for her insights and support throughout the 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, and brainstorm the desired future.

In the Future Search process, participants are assigned to table groups of six to eight who work together for the entire one and a half days. The facilitator uses a series of activities to promote team building among the participants and encourage focused and engaging discussions. After each activity, groups report all ideas generated and contribute data that 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 and beliefs to articulate a vision statement as well as 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 nor forgotten but will be a driving factor in moving our district forward.
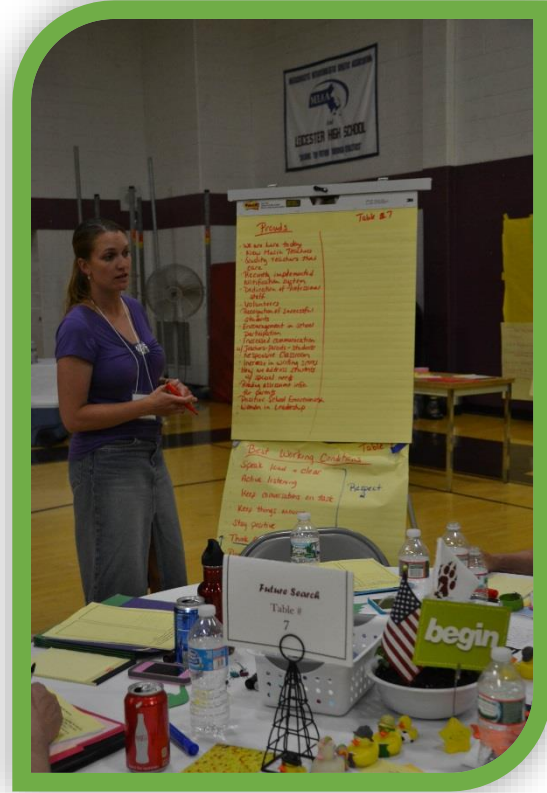
Planning Process

A steering committee worked with Judy Enright five weeks prior to the event to develop a common understanding of the Future Search process, identify stakeholders and commit to invite those stakeholders to the event, and complete logistical tasks. A subgroup later organized invitees into table groups. This committee consisted of Tina Boss, Tracey Hippert, Tyler Keenan, Deb Labombard, Kristin Lamprey, Tom Lauder, Joe Lennerton, Judy Paolucci, Kathy Pelley, Melissa Provost, Mary Scannell, Heather Staple, Jennifer Stanick , and Marilyn Tencza

Recognizing the need to keep costs low, the group decided to hold the event in the high school gymnasium and identified food vendors to provide meals to participants at reasonable costs. We thank Ann Pitzen of Leicester Food Services for Friday night's dinner, Olympia Snow of Mike's Donuts for Saturday's breakfast, and Restaurant 45 of Medway for Saturday's lunch.

Most importantly, the committee agreed on the following as the guiding question:

> *Recognizing the challenges and opportunities in our community, how will the Leicester schools evolve to serve our current and future students?*

Following the planning meeting, committee members called nearly 150 individuals representing various community stakeholders groups including students, parents, business leaders, local government officials, clergy, non-profit organizations, school staff and School Committee members. Additionally, a press release led to newspaper coverage of the event, attracting the interest of community members. A total of seventy-six individuals were able to participate in our Future Search.

Agenda

Friday

- Registration
- Welcome and Introductions
- Conference Overview, Outcomes, and Agenda Review
- Getting Started
- The Past: Historical Scan
- The Present: Prouds and Sorries

Saturday

- Future Trends and Influences
- The Future: Creating Guiding beliefs and a Vision for Education in Our Schools
- Discovering Common Themes for the Future
- Participant Feedback
- Next Steps and Closing Comments

Activities and Data

The Past: Historical Scan/Major Implications

After brainstorming events in town, school, and national history that have influenced the current reality in our schools, table groups looked for common themes and major implications from that history. Despite working independently, the 11 table groups were consistent with identifying common implications among the following themes:

- Economic
    - There has been no financial plan for the town nor a plan for future economic development. The desire to maintain a small town feel without fresh ideas for an economic plan that is supportive of this goal has resulted in stagnation.
    - Unfunded mandates from the state and federal government have placed new financial burdens on schools.

- Societal
    - Tragic events over the past 20 years, including both increased occurrences of bullying and school violence, have led to an increased need for school security.
    - Family involvement has decreased as families' own needs have increased.
- Technological
    - Growing use of technology in schools and throughout society have resulted in new tools for teachers and expanded opportunities for communication and collaboration.
    - Our schools and town offices have infrastructure and hardware that is insufficient and outdated.
- Attitudinal
    - There is resistance to change, both in the town and schools.
    - School-age parents have limited political involvement.
    - A lack of connection between the community and schools results in an us-vs.-them stance.
    - There is need for more community involvement and pride.
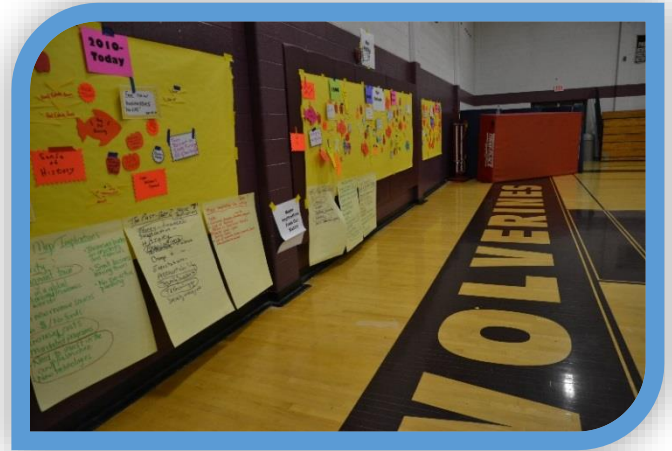
Activities and Data

Prouds and Sorries

Participants moved from the past to the present by creating two lists. The list of "prouds" highlights characteristics of Leicester Schools that create a sense of pride, while the list of "sorries" include current school characteristics that are most regretful.

PROUDS

- Students: respectful of teachers and others, low dropout rate, high number are college-bound, community service
- Educators: respectful of students, professional, dedicated , do more with less,
- Instructional Program: increase in AP courses, good overall quality of education, good preparation of students for post-secondary choices
- School Environment: positive school environment, small town feel
- Parents: Mother's club and school volunteers are active

SORRIES

- Facilities and Equipment: poor condition of buildings and athletic facilities, outdated equipment and textbooks, poor technology infrastructure and equipment
- Programs: cuts in staffing and programs, such as world language, library, health; higher class sizes, lack of differentiation for all students
- Dispositions: lack of vision and direction, settling on average achievement vs. high achievement, perception by town that the schools are the "enemy," lack of excitement/engagement with school, unwillingness of some teachers to change
- Communication: lack of communication between schools and town, schools and homes
- Finances: decreases in school support have prevented schools from development; fees for sports, bus, and parking

Activities and Data

<u>Vision</u>

Although a formal vision statement will need to be developed to more clearly and concisely communicate our hopes for the future, the following statements were generated by the Future Search participants and will be used as a basis for this work.

In our desired future…

- The community views the schools as assets.
- 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.
- 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.
- State of the art technology supports improved communication and collaboration and prepares students for the global market.
- 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 schools' needs.
- The skills and resources of the community are activated to support education.
- High quality, ongoing, focused, and sustained professional development is utilized to help teachers to adapt and excel in the new learning environment.
- 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.
- 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.
- Relationships with businesses, Becker College, and other higher education institutions provide for additional opportunities for our students as they enrich the institutions themselves.
- Common student assessments ensure a guaranteed curriculum and help identify students who are struggling to meet high district expectations.
- All students are college or career ready at the time of graduation and have the skills and dispositions of life-long learners.
- A strong, stable, united leadership holds teachers accountable and are themselves accountable to the community.

Activities and Data

<u>Beliefs</u>

The vision is based upon the following beliefs about education in Leicester.

FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS
- The community is responsible for a quality education.
- The schools are vital to the continued success and growth of the community
- Effective schools are engaged in continuous reflection and re-evaluation.
- We can't be afraid to take risks and accept change.

BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENTS
- All students can learn to high standards from programs that support their learning needs.
- Students learn in different ways, in different settings and at different rates for different futures.
- Student learning is enhanced by meaningful, real life experiences requiring complex thinking.

BELIEFS ABOUT LEARNING
- Learning should be future-focused, engaging, and enjoyable.
- Real learning takes place when individuals struggle to make meaning.
- Learning is promoted in a safe atmosphere with mutual respect for all stakeholders.
- Learning is fostered by frequent, formative feedback.
- Global learning is a necessity.

BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING
- Teaching is collaborative and involves on-going learning.
- Teachers should infuse technology in lessons to develop 21st century skills.
- Teachers should be models of continuous learning and improvement to inspire, motivate and empower our children.
- Teaching should be innovative, interactive and incorporated new technology.

BELIEFS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS
- Positive relationships between the community and the schools enhance learning and build a sense of community both inside and outside the school.
- Parents are important partners for student success.

BELIEFS ABOUT THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
- All students benefit from safe, functional, and appealing learning environments.
- Students learn best in environments that promote 21st century learning.

Activities and Data

Common Themes for the Future/Major Goal Areas

Through a discussion of common themes for the future, the following major goal areas were identified. In addition, table groups identified the need for accountability systems for ensuring success.

- Technology: improve infrastructure and wireless capabilities, leverage social media, provide for consistent hardware access, ensure strategic planning and spending

- Financial Goals; develop a plan with clear priorities, encourage community investment, engage creative solutions regarding contracts, increase transparency, develop business partnerships, seek grant funding

- Facilities: do a comprehensive review and prioritize a plan for the long term, ensure ADA compliance and safety, support all teaching styles, provide for future functionality, engender pride in our school facilities.

- Parent and Community Engagement: keep all involved, develop awareness of trends and current conditions, unite Leicester, develop partnerships

- Communication: increase communication between school, community and students; keep community informed of school activities, needs, and achievements

- Instructional Program: ensure dynamic curriculum and student-centered learning, provide enrichment programming, bring back world languages

- Professional development: build staff skills to integrate technology into new core curriculum and utilize new techniques and best practices, develop strong leaders, encourage all to embrace change
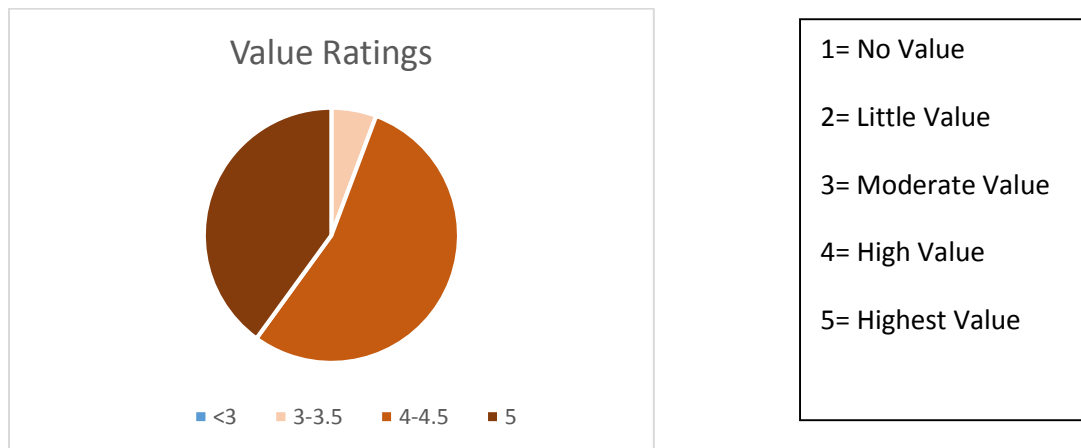
Evaluation

Future Search Participants were asked to complete an evaluation form at the conclusion of the conference. Seventy (70) people submitted a form. Evaluation forms included four items and the results are summarized below.

1. What were the high points of this Future Search Conference?

   - Open, honest, constructive, productive, and enlightening conversations
   - Hearing others' ideas and being heard
   - Connecting with a variety of community members, including students
   - Working on common goals through a methodical process
   - Well organized, collaborative process that resulted in common ground
   - Facing brutal truths as well as things to celebrate

2. What value would you assign to the work completed in the Future Search?

Value Ratings

■ <3   ■ 3-3.5   ■ 4-4.5   ■ 5

1= No Value

2= Little Value

3= Moderate Value

4= High Value

5= Highest Value

3. What do you wish had been done differently?

   - Wish I saw more new faces
   - Faster start, too much time spent on Friday with process and norms
   - Time commitment was significant
   - Time of year was difficult – need air conditioning!
   - Instructions could have been more concise
   - Needed additional data on current trends in secondary education
   - Would have liked to interact more with other tables, get out of seat more

4. Other Questions, comments, suggestions, and/or appreciations

Many expressions of appreciation were noted. In addition, participants noted a desire to see that the work continue.

Next Steps

After the Future Search many may wonder what will happen with the ideas generated. Making this report public is one step toward holding the School Department accountable to the work that began in May. In addition, on July 30 and 31 a planning team will meet to develop action plans for each of the goal areas identified through the Future Search. This set of action plans is commonly known as a strategic plan or education plan.

The education plan will be presented to the School Committee for review and approval then will be made available to the public through our website. While certain staff members will be responsible for carrying out the action steps within this plan, the planning team will additionally meet 3-4 times annually to update and oversee the implementation of the plan. We also plan to annually convene a community meeting to report on progress and get input regarding each of the goal areas and for the overall educational improvement in Leicester.

Special Thanks to our facilitator, Judy Enright, our photographer, Jake DeBrusk, and to the Future Search participants….

Ted Antanavica	Mark Armington	Doug Belanger	Sam Berman
Jeff Berthiaume	Tina Boss	Colin Boyle	Jim Brennan
Mary Brown	Sarah Brown	Tom Buckley	Deb Burak
Kate Campanale	Richard Cehon, Jr.	Dr. George Cladis	Rachelle Cloutier
Marjorie Cooper	Steve Corley	Ed Cote	Michele Cote
Tracy Davenport	Frank DiPilato	Kayla DiPilato	Tim Fontaine
Mariah Frost	Cindy Garabedian	Brian Granville	Linda Granville
Corrine Hellstrom	Tracey Hippert	Marilyn Hyland	Richard Jubinville
Tyler Keenan	Bob Kennedy	Deb Labombard	Jonathan Lajoie
Kristen Lamprey	Tom Lauder	Alouneny Le	Annie Le
Joe Lenerton	Tammy Fleming Maus	Paul McCarthy	Cindy McGurl
Shelby Miller	Dr. John Millette	Suzanne Morneau	Bob Myers
Judy Paolucci	Kim Pare	Jan Parke	George Pataky
Kathy Pelley	Tim Peltier	Jane Prouty	Maxwell Provo
Melissa Provost	Jim Reinke	Diane Rieder	Jacob Sanders
Pastor Barry Sanderson	Jen Sauter	Mary Scannell	Patricia Shevory
Emily Soltysik	Jennifer Stanick	Ryan Stanick	Heather Stapel
Tracy Steiger	William St. Cyr	Jen St. John	Marilyn Tencza
Matt Thompson	Shawna Tibbets	Mary-Jo Valois	Sandy Wilson
Audrey Wright			