

Thomas County School System Strategic Improvement Planning Community Engagement Session Report



Presented March 24-25, 2020

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Teaching Children, Ensuring Success

Thomas County Schools: Community Engagement Report

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As a component of its strategic planning process, Thomas County Schools (TCS), with the Georgia School Boards Association, conducted both an online survey and a community engagement meeting open to the Thomas County community in the Winter of 2020. This report summarizes the results of both data collection efforts. The TCS strategic planning team will use these results to inform the development of the strategic plan.

Survey respondents and community engagement meeting participants all answered the following four questions:

1. What are your observed strengths of the Thomas County Schools?
2. What are your observed areas in need of improvement for TCS?
3. What opportunities do you see ahead for TCS?
4. What challenges/threats do you see ahead for TCS?

For each of these four questions, survey respondents were asked to select their first and second choices from a set of possible answers or to specify a different response.

Two hundred eighty-nine Thomas County community members participated in the online survey. Of those, almost half (47.54%) were parents/guardians of TCS students. **Table 1** shows the respondents' relationships to TCS.

Table 1. Survey Respondents' Relationship to TCS¹

Relationship to OCS	Percentage	Number
<i>Parent/Guardian</i>	48.44%	140
<i>Teacher</i>	41.52%	120
<i>School Employee (with children in the district)</i>	11.42%	33
<i>School Employee (no children in the district)</i>	4.84%	14
<i>Community Member</i>	2.42%	7
<i>Student</i>	1.73%	5
<i>Other, please specify or provide comments</i>	1.73%	5
<i>School Administrator</i>	.35%	1
<i>Business/Civic Leader</i>	.35%	1

About one hundred seventy-five community members attended the community engagement meeting. In response to each of the four questions listed above,

¹ Percentages do not add up to 100% because multiple responses were possible.

these participants generated a set of responses which were recorded and posted in the meeting. They voted for their top three choices on each question by placing stickers next to each choice.

Question 1

What are your observed strengths of the Thomas County Schools?

Survey respondents' first choices for this question were the level of focus on student achievement (23.88%), the level of technology accessible to students (18.69%), and the level of support services available to students (11.42%). When asked to choose a second choice, these same three answers dominated the responses, with 13.29% selecting the level of technology accessible to students, 11.19% selecting the level of focus on student achievement, and 10.14% selecting the focus on providing students and staff a safe learning environment.

Community engagement meeting participants cast 306 votes on the strengths of TCS. Based on their responses, the diversity of programs (MERIT, CTAE, Dual enrollment), opportunities and options for students received the most votes; Qualified and great teachers received the second highest number of votes. The Special Education Department and support of various programs around Special Education received a large number of votes as well. The community recognized numerous strengths in the district. Other areas that were mentioned: Communication avenues such as Remind, One Alert, Social Media, graduation rate, free lunch, breakfast, snacks and weekend, Athletics, curriculum designed for students to excel, extracurricular activities, relationships/caring and facilities.

Question 2

What are your observed areas in need of improvement for TCS?

Survey respondents selected **Other (please specify)** (18.34%) as their first choice for areas needing improvement and **the level of parent support in the district** (14.88%). Their second choices included **Other (please specify)** (15.52%), **the methods used to assess student achievement** (13.72%) and **the level of parental support in the district** (13.36%). In looking at the specific answers when Other was selected, the majority of the comments were around a lack of diversity among leadership and staff. Other comments referenced the Merit program and its effectiveness, transportation concerns involving the buses, monitors and safety, facilities, class size and equity.

In the community engagement meeting, this question brought in more responses than the first question, with 420 total votes spread over a wide

variety of responses. The most common topic was the lack of diversity on school board, leadership and staff. There were a large number of responses around facilities, preparing students and connecting students to enhance life skills, and class size. There is also a concern about the lack of internet access for the Chromebooks that are provided.

Question 3

What opportunities or areas have the greatest potential for improving TCS?

The top three opportunities survey respondents saw were **hiring and keeping quality teachers and staff (38.75%)**, **getting parents involved with the district (23.88%)**, and **increased funding (state, federal)(16.61%)**.

Second choice responses included **getting parents involved with the district (23.59%)**, **increased funding (state, federal)(20.42%** of respondents, and **raising community support for the district (19.72%)**.

Community engagement meeting participants focused on increasing opportunities and pathways for students (equal opportunities for students in Work Based Learning, CTAE, Technical School), building partnerships with businesses and higher education to increase opportunities, recruiting and retaining more diverse teachers, increase in population, future teacher program, tutoring, one-to-one devices, 100% Pre-K enrollment and maximize community service opportunities. There were 247 votes pertaining to this question.

Question 4

What challenges do you see ahead for TCS?

Over one third of survey respondents (33.22%) selected **the effects of poverty on the community** as the primary challenge ahead for TCS, followed by **the political environment (20.42%)** and **funding (state, federal) (18.69%)**. These same three challenges were the most common second choice responses, with 30.63% selecting **the effects of poverty on the community**, 26.41% selecting **funding (state, federal)**, and 17.25% selecting **the political environment**.

At the community engagement meeting, 352 votes were recorded for this question, with the most votes for responses referencing population growth/increased enrollment and class size/student overflow, funding, parental involvement, attracting and keeping qualified teachers, and poverty.

Conclusion

Across these four questions, several consistent themes emerged. First, TCS community members recognize that the strength of their schools rests in high quality teachers, administrators, and staff, as well as with the number of programs and opportunities available to students. They are concerned about the lack of diversity in leadership and teachers/staff. There is also a concern around students being prepared and the age/condition of the facilities.

Community members see opportunities ahead for TCS through finding new funding sources and using community resources and business partnerships as a way to increase offerings at the schools. There is also an opportunity to grow Work Based Learning opportunities and building awareness by creating opportunities for more students to be involved in CTAE options, Work Based Learning and technical schools. There is a great concern around out of district enrollment and student overflow. Funding and attracting/recruiting/retaining highly qualified staff are presented as possible threats for the district. Community members also addressed poverty as a challenge that the district will need to address.
