



# District 99 Strategic Planning

## *Fall Stakeholder Engagements*

November–December 2021

### Executive Summary

In August 2021, CESO Communications (CESO) contracted with Community High School District 99 (District 99) to facilitate a strategic planning process that could guide the district over the next five to seven years.

Following an interview with the superintendent in September 2021, as well as a review of the district's previous strategic plan, progress reports and additional district data, CESO conducted a comprehensive stakeholder engagement process in November 2021.

The goal of this phase of the strategic planning process was to provide a wide variety of engagement activities to allow individuals to share their input. A combination of in-person and virtual engagements were used to solicit insight from stakeholders, allowing participants to share their thoughts at times and in ways that were most convenient for them. There was also an effort to intentionally include student voices in the process in order to create a strategic plan that represents the true mission and vision of the school system.

In November 2021, the district held several in-person engagements to include personal interviews, focus groups and collaborative workshops with current students, staff, parents/families, alumni, business representatives and community members. In addition, virtual engagement sessions were held with staff, families and community members, and an online conversation was open to all stakeholders throughout the month of November. Personal interviews were also conducted with members of the School Board.

In an effort to keep participants focused on the future and not on current topics and hot button issues, the district set out to answer the following key question:

***What do District 99 students need to feel prepared for their next step  
and hopeful for their future?***



## Engagement Formats

### STUDENTS

- Focus groups with a broad representation of students were held at both Downers Grove North (DGN) and Downers Grove South (DGS). In all, approximately 15 students participated in the focus groups.
- In addition, all students at both schools had the opportunity to share their insights in an open forum setup in which students responded to one of two prompts:
  - *To feel prepared and hopeful for my future, I NEED \_\_\_\_\_*
  - *TEACHERS/ADULTS can help me feel hopeful and prepared by \_\_\_\_\_.*

Using the above question — *What do District 99 students need to feel prepared for their next step and hopeful for their future?* — the following stakeholder groups shared their insights.

### STAFF

- **Staff open sessions** were offered at both sites after school. These were sparsely attended, with only a few staff participating
- A **virtual focus group** for staff was held in early December. This activity included about five staff members.

### PARENTS/FAMILIES & COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- **In person focus groups** included approximately 15 parent/family and community members. A small **virtual focus group** was also held in early December, which had three participants.
- **Two open sessions** were held with approximately 20 parents/families and community members. These sessions included individual, small group and large group brainstorming and consensus building.

### ALL STAKEHOLDERS

- As noted above, an **online conversation** was held via a crowdsourcing platform called Crowdcity. The conversation was open to all District 99 stakeholders. This online platform included 34 users and included 13 distinct ideas in response to the above key question.



## Key Themes

In reviewing the feedback from the different stakeholder engagements, the following themes emerged.

### STUDENTS

- **Academic Offerings** - Students had several suggestions for courses they would like to see added that would better prepare them for the “real world.” Many suggested life skills classes such as personal finance and how to do taxes, preparing for interviews and writing resumes, or a class on what to expect in college or career. While students acknowledge a brief course on this, they said it needs to be woven throughout their experience in high school so they can better understand how to apply their learning to the real world.
- **Academic Support** - Responses in this category focused on ways staff, in particular teachers, could be more supportive. Students noted the desire for more individual attention from teachers and wanting teachers to take the time to help them understand the concepts being taught. As one student said, *“I need to have teachers that believe in me.”*
- **Mental Health** - Students talked about the need for support around mental health, anxiety and stress. Comments included concerns about the amount of homework, the stress of preparing for college, and being able to balance school with home and family life. Additionally, suggestions were made about the need for more check-ins with counselors and training for staff on how to support the mental health needs of students.
- **Relationships** - Students also talked about relationships with teachers and the desire to have teachers be more understanding of individual student situations. They are looking for teachers to push them to be their best and to focus on their individual interests and needs. Comments here also included the impact teacher attitudes and interactions influence their own engagement with school. Many asked for teachers to be more understanding and supportive, but also more excited about teaching. As one student said, *“It’s hard to learn when the teacher doesn’t look like they have a passion for what they teach.”*
- **Student Voice** - Students noted the desire to be more involved in school decisions, including more engagement with administration. In particular, students would like more choices in course selection, particularly in earlier grades, and flexibility in their schedule.



As one student noted, *"Listen to us when we are speaking up on important topics and include us in key decisions."*

## STAFF

- **Connections and Relationships** - Responses highlighted the importance of strong connections and relationships for students, to include among students, students and teachers/staff, and school to home.
- **Experiential Learning** - Here responses focused on the need to personalize instruction for each student, and ensure students have access to engaging curriculum and learning experiences. There was discussion about the need for more opportunities to apply their learning in the real world (e.g. internships, job shadowing, business partnerships, etc.). In addition, staff identified the need to ensure there are pathways for students who may not be planning to attend four-year colleges, and to provide more exploration of trades and alternative options.
- **Life Skills** - Responses in this theme noted the need to provide life skills learning experiences for students (e.g., personal finance, interviews) as well as opportunities to explore and identify a plan for life after high school.
- **Social-Emotional Learning** - Responses here focused on the need to support the whole person, especially with regard to student mental health, social-emotional well-being and behavior.
- **Student Voice/Agency** - Ideas in this category centered around the importance of student voice in decision-making.

## PARENTS/FAMILIES & COMMUNITY

- **Academic Offerings & Career Explorations** - Families want to continue seeing specialized course offerings and connections with future careers. Comments were made about the need to ensure students have access to and can explore a variety of options earlier in their school career so they are better prepared for whatever is next after high school.
- **Future Planning** - Responses here focused on ensuring students have what they need to implement their plan for their future, to include more access to counselors. (They do recognize counselors already have large caseloads.)
- **Leadership Skills** - Responses focused on making sure all students have opportunities to learn and exhibit leadership skills, to include critical thinking, collaboration and communication. They want students to understand that they need to take ownership



and responsibility for their future. Many positive comments were made about the P.E. Leader program and how they would like to see that replicated in other content areas.

- **Life Skills** - Here responses noted the need to provide learning experiences focused on life skills (e.g., personal finance, interviewing, resume building), as well as opportunities for students to learn how to navigate the bigger world.
- **Personalized Learning** - Responses here highlighted the desire for student-focused teaching and learning; instruction that is personalized to each student's individual needs and provides diverse course offerings.

## Next Steps

The comprehensive engagement data report will help drive next steps in the development of the district's strategic plan. In January 2022, a core planning team composed of students, staff, parents/families and community members will convene for two days of workshops to review stakeholder input and develop a draft of the key strategic plan components, with a focus on the district's strategic directions. The core planning team will also contribute key insights around the necessary components and essential elements of an updated district mission and vision, which will be used by CESO to craft draft wording. The team will then reconvene later in January to review the draft language and identify key directions and pillars of the district's strategic plan.

After draft language is developed and reviewed by the core planning team it will be presented to the School Board in February, after which a second round of stakeholder engagements will be conducted to gather feedback on the draft plan. The data from these engagements will be analyzed and used by the district leadership team to refine and finalize the strategic plan, which will then be presented to the Board for approval, which is tentatively scheduled for late March.