

# **Oak Park Speaks: Community Guidance for a District 97 Vision**

***DRAFT DOCUMENT***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This document represents the input and ideas provided by the members of District 97's various stakeholder groups who participated in community conversations, served on the Superintendent's Advisory Panel, provided online feedback, or attended a "listen and learn" session. The primary purpose of this document is to help guide the Board of Education and district administration's work on the creation of a vision statement, identification of goals and development of action plans. By drawing upon the experiences, expertise and efforts of students, parents/guardians, community members, faculty and staff from across Oak Park, we have the opportunity to develop a shared vision for our schools and the children we serve.

## **BACKGROUND/PROCESS**

Upon joining District 97, Dr. Kelley embarked on a "listen and learn" tour to better understand the issues, strengths and challenges of the district and its stakeholders. One of the key priorities articulated by Dr. Kelley during in the 100-day report (which included many of the findings from her tour) was to create a "clear, shared vision, with a sustained focus." An explicit principle was that the vision be co-constructed by students, parents/guardians, the community, teachers, school and district administrators, elected officials and the District 97 Board of Education. To that end, Dr. Kelley and the district have been committed to and intentional about creating opportunities to collaborate with all of the aforementioned stakeholders.

In January, 50 leaders from across the district participated in an interactive planning day that led to the creation of several six-word stories that communicated the vision for District 97 students' learning experiences. The district solicited community feedback on the "vision" stories as part of the vision planning work.

This work was the launching point for the community conversations and the formation of the Superintendent's Advisory Panel (Panel), which is comprised of a group of 33 stakeholders from across the district brought together to shepherd the District 97 vision planning process. Additionally, M<sup>2</sup> Communications was engaged to help facilitate this process.

Between April 16 and April 30, M<sup>2</sup> Communications conducted 13 community conversations and heard from 255 parents/guardians, community members, district staff members, teachers, administrators and students (current and alumni). Based on the analysis of these crucial conversations, Dr. Kelley's listen and learn tour, and the six-word stories, the Panel has developed two strategic priorities, or "big rocks," that reflect that work. These "big rocks" will provide District 97 with a map to move it closer to its vision for all of its students.

## **ELEMENTS OF THE VISION**

The Superintendent's Advisory Panel identified the elements of a vision that the Board of Education will use to develop a vision statement for the district. These elements, which are featured below, were arrived at through research conducted with the community (including the community conversations), as well as via deliberations by the Panel.

District 97 will...

- Be student focused
- Incorporate the perspectives and needs of students and teachers
- Engage and challenge students
- Support students to feel happy, respected and excited
- Provide equal opportunity for all students
- Develop critical thinking skills
- Support students to find their passion and develop a lifelong love of learning
- Meet the diverse needs of all students
- Support students to develop tolerance, empathy and care for each other and the world
- Engage the entire community in support of our schools and each and every student

## **VALUES/LENS THROUGH WHICH WE APPROACH THE WORK**

The following list articulates the fundamental, non-negotiable principles that must guide the work of District 97, regardless of which priorities are selected:

- Ensuring that there is equity in both opportunities and outcomes so that all students succeed regardless of race, income and need for special education support
- Consistency, clear expectations
- Equitably allocated resources
- Positive relationships between educators and students is crucial for the student experience
- Support (for everything – e.g. teachers)
- Communications, engagement, transparency and trust-building
- The whole child, teacher/student relationship
- Expectations/norms for adults and their relationships need to be clearly articulated

## **DISTRICT 97'S FOCUS FOR THE NEXT TWO YEARS**

There was clear consensus throughout the community conversations, as well as within the Panel's deliberations, that the district's primary and immediate focus should be to:

*Create a positive learning environment for all District 97 students that is equitable, inclusive and focused on the whole child.*

The work that accompanies this focus will involve clearly defining the terms listed in the above statement with the help of stakeholders, and then sharing those definitions with the entire

District 97 community. This work began in earnest during the community conversations and Panel meetings. The feedback provided by the community and efforts put forth by the Panel members, which is reflected below, have provided the Board of Education and the district with a key starting point for accomplishing their goal:

**Equity.** During the community conversations, many stakeholders—from educators, parents/guardians and community members to students—articulated that some students experience the district “differently.” This was described as the existence of unfair biases and negative assumptions that some adults in schools have around student behavior and academic performance. Both stakeholders and members of the Panel provided examples that illustrate this belief, including:

- Inequities in student outcomes based on achievement data.
- Access to and participation in gifted classes – these classrooms are overwhelming populated by white students.
- Representation in discipline data – African American students (particularly boys) are far more likely to be disciplined (including suspensions). Anecdotally, students talked about the lack of consistency in discipline with different students receiving different consequences for the same offense.
- Inequitable opportunities to benefit from the International Baccalaureate (IB) philosophy and curriculum. For example, students receiving special education services do not get the same exposure to IB work because they are frequently pulled out of the classroom.
- Participation in extracurricular activities – there are inequities from an access standpoint because there are fees for participation.

The Panel’s discussions around equity led its members to the conclusion that equity does not necessarily mean equal. That in order to address inequities, different people will need different things.

**Inclusion.** The theme of inclusion was an important one raised throughout the community conversations. It was used in the context of equity, and in its broadest definition of ensuring that all students feel and are included in every aspect of the district. However, it was also used in the more specific context of special education. In this context, stakeholders raised significant concerns about students being siloed and separated from the rest of the district, particularly as they move into upper grade levels. While there was some praise for the implementation of the inclusion model, which includes co-teaching of classes by special and regular education teachers and “pushing in” of services to students in regular classrooms, there was concern that this was not available for all students.

**Whole child focused.** The need to recognize, support and engage all aspects of each student was a common theme throughout the community conversations and the Panel’s deliberations. Many people felt that the focus on academic achievement, while important, overshadowed the importance of social/emotional learning, artistic expression, and other important aspects of a student’s development and positive sense of self. Stakeholders also expressed significant concern around the emphasis on standardized testing and want to ensure children are seen as “more than a test score.” They want teachers to evaluate students in a robust way that is founded on knowing each student well and incorporates many qualitative and quantitative measures. Similar to the concepts of equity and inclusion, stakeholders felt that attention to the whole child should be reflected in all aspects of the district’s work and valued on par with academic achievement.

**Positive learning environment.** A positive learning environment includes equity, inclusion and a focus on the whole child. Both the participants in the community conversations and the Panel members identified social/emotional learning and the relationship between teachers and students as keys to establishing and maintaining a positive learning environment. In terms of social/emotional learning, one of the examples raised on a consistent basis was the need to provide students with the language and tools to prevent bullying and/or successfully handle incidents that occur. The teacher-student relationship was also consistently cited as the core of a positive learning environment. Both the community conversation participants and Panel members discussed the need for the district to prioritize and support this fundamental relationship through time, training and other resources.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION**

Through its vision planning process, District 97 has sought to establish and implement a shared vision for what we want for our schools and students. Recognizing that our vision is expansive, it is important that the “big rocks” be focused on a few things rather than attempt to do everything at once. That said, focus does not mean siloing. For example, the Panel recognizes that attention given to something like professional development will likely impact other areas (e.g. implementing new curricula, addressing biases, enhancing social/emotional learning, scheduling of the school day, week and year etc.).

Working towards this vision demands a “work in progress” approach whereby the district will be in a constant state of improvement, feedback, evaluation and adjustment. This is the dynamic nature of educational improvement that will help our students become college and career ready. For this reason, and because the ongoing cycle of our work will likely lead to additions and adjustments, this document outlines plans for two years.

As the district embarks on its efforts to address the two “big rocks” listed below during that two-year period, the Panel recommends the following framework:

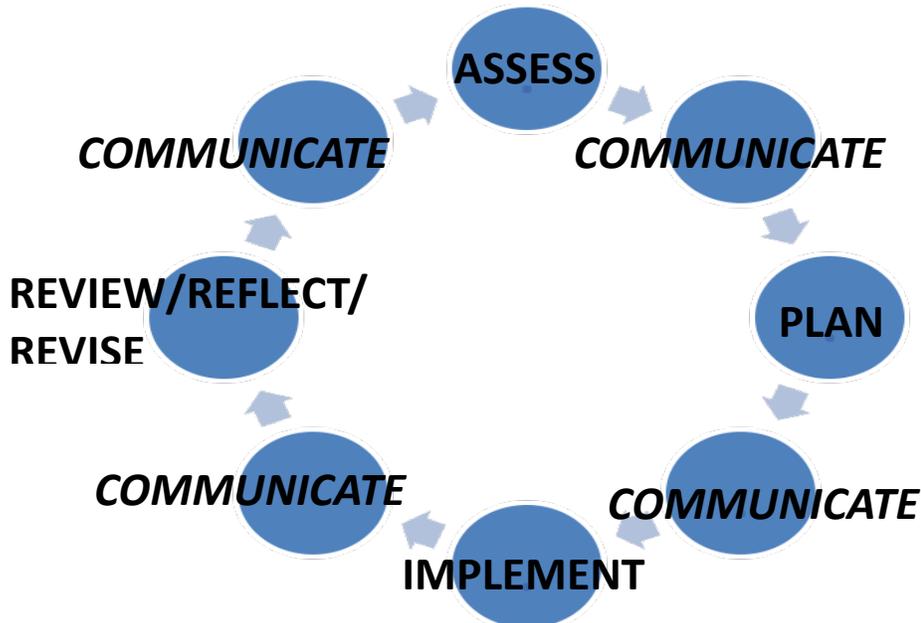
**Assess.** Begin tackling the “big rocks” by assessing the work the district is doing in each area. This assessment would include performing an audit that covers what initiatives the district has in place, how those initiatives are working and for whom they are intended, as well as the identification of the gaps between what the district is currently doing and the needs to be addressed.

**Plan.** Each “big rock” will require the development and implementation of a thoughtful process that is inclusive of key stakeholders and attentive to the shared vision and values of the district (outlined above). Developing a comprehensive and thoughtful plan is critical for garnering buy-in from all stakeholders and facilitating smooth implementation. This plan should include embedded accountability that requires ongoing review to ensure the work is achieving the intended goals.

**Implement.** Begin implementing the actions for each “big rock,” being mindful of the shared vision and values of the district throughout the process.

**Review/reflect/revise.** As the work of each “big rock” is being implemented, there must be a system in place for reviewing, reflecting on and revising the work as necessary.

**Communicate.** Develop and implement a two-way communications plan for sharing all aspects of the work on an ongoing basis with stakeholders. By sharing each step of the process (plan, implementation, review/reflect/revise), stakeholders will be updated and informed about the status of the goals and work, and have a mechanism for offering feedback. This will also help facilitate and foster stakeholder knowledge, input and buy-in.



### **SPECIFIC AREAS OF FOCUS – THE “BIG ROCKS”**

The Panel, informed by the community conversations and other stakeholder research, arrived at two major areas it believes the district should focus on for at least the next two years. The Board and administration will use this high-level direction to help determine the district’s goals and develop action plans for directing change and improvement. The Board and administration’s work on these important endeavors will include setting clear and measurable benchmarks for evaluating progress and identifying the need for mid-course adjustments or corrections.

**#1 – Educate the whole child by ensuring all systems, structures and processes within District 97 reflect an understanding of what it means to support the successful development of each and every student.**

**#2 – Establish a comprehensive system of support for District 97 teachers.**

## **SUPERINTENDENT’S ADVISORY PANEL MEMBERS**

The 33-member Superintendent’s Advisory Panel – a group of students, teachers, staff, parents/guardians, community members and administrators – reviewed and synthesized the findings from the community conversations and embarked on discussions that led to the development of this document. This document will ultimately be provided as guidance to the District 97 Board of Education and administration.

Michael Arensdorff

Chris Jасulca

Rachel Buccieri

Dr. Carol Kelley

Hugo Campuzano

Megan Kennedy

April Capuder

Samuel Lee

Chemaine Carr

Audrey Williams Lee

Olive Collins

Rito Martinez

Rupa Datta

Jim O'Connor

Jack Duffy

Elise Pope

Julie Dunn

Lisa Peloquin

Carla Fager

Adam Raducha

Emily Fenske

Ryan Schlifka

Tricia Groben

Mary Jo Schuler

Genevieve Grove

Megan Sutor

Lisa Hendrix

Dr. Felicia Starks Turner

Talmadge Hill

Bob Walicki

Craig Iseli

Cindy Won

Echelon Jackson