



STATE COLLEGE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT

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VI-B

TO: Board of School Directors

FROM: Jason Perrin and Robert O'Donnell

DATE: January 21, 2015

RE: Strategic Plan Survey Results

Please find the attached "Executive Summary" of the aggregate strategic plan survey results.

The survey was completed in June 2014 in order to benchmark qualitative data regarding the district's *instructional focus* and "pillars." These four pillars/areas: 1) *Culture of Trust, Relationships, and Collaboration*, 2) *Responsive Teaching and Learning*, 3) *High Expectations for All*, and 4) *Welcoming and Safe Climate for Learning and Work*, continue to be the main focus areas as we look to improve.

The survey results were presented to the Culture, Climate, and Learning (CCL) sub-committee of the board on January 19, 2015. Through discussion, it was determined that a presentation of the executive summary would be beneficial for the full board specific to district-wide results/findings.

Dr. Ed Fuller will be in attendance at Monday's board meeting to review the findings presented in the Executive Summary. We will also discuss three areas specific to this information determined through conversation with the CLL sub-committee.

- 1) What did we learn through implementing the survey?
- 2) In which areas do we need further clarity?
- 3) What changes to policy/practice/action could the board make to help implement the strategic plan?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
State College Area School District
Strategic Plan
Baseline Surveys of
Students, Teachers, and Parents

December 2014

Ed Fuller, PhD
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Introduction

As part of the State College Area School District's Strategic Plan Initiative, members of the Penn State Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis (CEEPA) worked collaboratively with the SCASD administrative team to design surveys to provide baseline information about the SCASD Strategic Plan. Surveys were designed for students in grades 3 through 12, teachers, principals, and parents. Importantly, students, teachers, and principals reviewed the surveys and made important contributions to the quality of the surveys.

The student and teacher surveys were administered during the last two weeks of school in 2014 while the principal and parent surveys were administered in the last two weeks of June, 2014. All surveys were administered electronically through SurveyMonkey. Dr. Ed Fuller, Executive Director of CEEPA and an Associate Professor in the Education Policy Studies Department, collected the data and is the only person with access to the survey results.

The overarching goal of these surveys is to spur reflection and conversation among all SCASD stakeholders about areas of strengths and areas of challenge within the district.

Ultimately, these surveys will serve as the basis for a cyclical process that will involve three steps: measure progress, reflect on past practices, and improve practices. This cyclical process will occur on a yearly basis and involve district leaders, school leaders, teachers, students, and other school community members at the discretion of principals.

There are four pillars to the SCASD strategic plan: (1) Welcoming and Safe Climate; (2) Culture of Trust, Relationships, and Collaboration; (3) High Expectations for All; and (4) Responsive Teaching and Learning. Dr. Fuller statistically analyzed the original survey results and identified various concepts that aligned with the four pillars. Using these concepts—called domains in this report—to group statements together in the analyses ensures that statements measuring the same idea are grouped together. This Executive Summary highlights both the areas of strength and areas of potential concerns that should be investigated further.

Student Results

Because of the differences between elementary and secondary schools as well as the differences in cognitive abilities between students at the two levels, surveys were created and administered separately for the two school levels. The elementary school survey included 30 statements while the secondary school survey included 80 statements.

Elementary School Students

For elementary students, six different domains emerged from the four pillars of the SCASD Strategic Plan. These six domains and the average percentage of students responding “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” to the statements within each domain are displayed in Figure ES1.

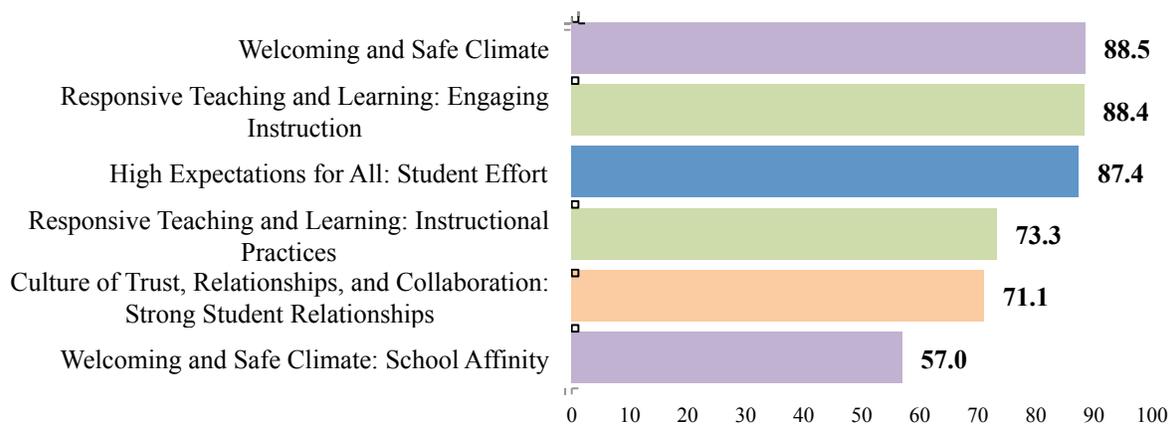
As shown in the graph, students had very positive perceptions across all six domains. This reflects very positively on the educators working in SCASD elementary schools. In particular, students had extremely positive perceptions about the existence of an overall welcoming and safe climate, the provision of engaging instruction, and the communication of high expectations for all students. The average percentage of students responding “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” for each of these three domains was about 88%. These are extremely positive results and would likely be more positive than for most schools in the United States.

While the perceptions associated with instructional practices and a culture of trust, relationships, and collaboration were less positive than the aforementioned three domains, the

results were still quite positive. Indeed, an average of nearly three-quarters of students responded positively to the statements in these two domains.

The domain with the *least positive response was students' perceptions of their affinity for school*. The two statements for this domain included: (1) I like school; and, (2) I look forward to going to school. About 61% of students answered “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” to the first statement and about 53% answered similarly to the second statement. While almost none of the students responded with either “No” or “Definitely No” to either of these statements, about 32% and 38% of students responded with “sometimes” to the two statements, respectively. Thus, a substantial proportion of elementary students appear to not agree entirely that they look forward to school or enjoy school.

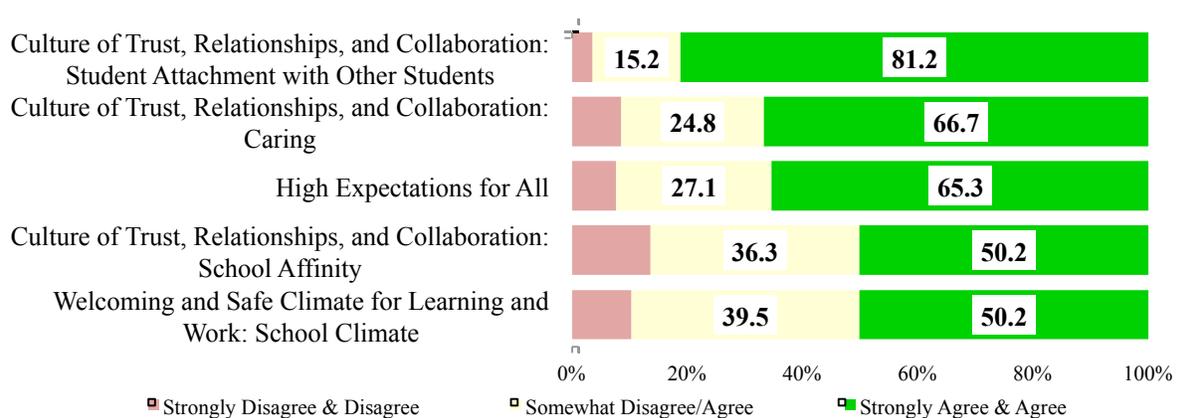
Figure 1: Avg Percent of Elementary Students Responding Yes/Definitely Yes by Domain Area



Secondary School Students

Because of the nature of the statements used in the Responsive Teaching and Learning sections of the survey, comparisons across all domains is not possible. However, Figure 2 provides the average percentage of students responding “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” to the statements within each domain. As shown in Figure ES2, the majority of responses were quite positive across all five domains. In particular, students were particularly positive regarding their attachment with other students in the school. Students were also quite positive regarding student perceptions of caring and high expectations for all students.

Figure 2: Avg Percent of Secondary Students Responding “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” by Domain



With respect to individual statements, students were extremely positive about three distinct areas: teacher classroom practices; teacher expectations and student effort; and, caring and safe atmosphere. For the statements in Table 1, at least 90% of students agreed at some level with the statement and at least 67% responded with either “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.”

With respect to teaching practices, the results suggest students perceive that teachers instruct students to: use technology to enhance student learning; use information accurately; interpret information to draw conclusions; and, work in groups. With respect to high expectations and student effort, the results suggest students perceive that they try their best, teachers expect them to participate, and teachers expect students to treat each other with respect. Finally, with respect to the caring and safe atmosphere, the results suggest that students perceive: teachers and other students care about them; they have friends, and feel safe in the school.

Table 1: Statements with the Highest Percentage of Secondary Students Responding “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” by Selected Areas

Survey Statement	% Students Responding	
	Agree & Str Agree	All Agree Responses
Teaching Practices		
Teachers teach us to use information accurately.	74.4	92.5
Teachers teach us to use technology as a tool to research, organize, evaluate and communicate information.	74.1	91.6
Teachers teach us to interpret information and draw conclusions.	67.1	90.2
Students work with a partner or in groups.	69.5	92.2
Students use technology.	86.1	95.5
Teacher Expectations and Student Effort		
Teachers expect me to participate in class every day.	69.5	88.4
I usually try my best at school.	76.0	91.4
My teachers expect me to treat people with respect.	83.6	95.3
Caring and Safe Atmosphere		
My teachers care about me.	69.8	91.2
There is at least one adult in this school who cares about me.	88.0	95.6
I have some good friends at this school.	90.1	96.5
There are students in this school who care about me.	87.2	96.1
This school is a safe place to be.	73.7	91.2

The responses to other statements, however, highlight some areas of challenge. In particular, students were less positive about two areas: relationships and student voice; and, teaching outcomes and practices. For these statements, less than 50% of students responded with “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” and less than 75% of students agreed with the statement at any level of agreement.

With respect to relationships and student voice, students feel less positive about: the level of respect shown by students; their level of comfort in communicating their thoughts and opinions; the frequency with which teachers recognize or praise students; and, students and teachers collaborating to make the school a better place.

With respect to teaching outcomes and practices, students had less positive perceptions about the degree to which teachers employed some fundamental teaching strategies such as: communicating the purpose of the lesson; summarizing the lesson; having students correct

mistakes on assignments and assessments; emphasizing learning from mistakes; and, having students provide feedback to their peers. Not only are these teaching behaviors that should occur on a regular basis, but they are fundamental to student learning, particularly with respect to the 21st century skill of learning from mistakes.

Table 2: Statements with the Lowest Percentage of Secondary Students Responding “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” by Selected Areas

Survey Statement	% Students Responding	
	Agree & Str Agree	All Agree Responses
Relationships and Student Voice		
Students at this school treat each other with respect.	34.3	73.3
Students are involved in decisions about classroom rules/procedures.	37.8	66.1
In this school, students show respect for each other's viewpoints.	38.8	73.4
I feel comfortable saying what I think at school.	45.4	74.0
Students are encouraged by teachers to say what they think.	46.1	74.9
Students can talk to teachers about things that are bothering them.	48.0	75.1
In the past week, a teacher has recognized or praised me for doing good work.	49.1	70.2
Teachers and students work together to make our school better.	44.1	74.6
Teaching Outcomes and Practices		
My teachers: Take the time to summarize what we learn each day.	39.4	64.8
My teachers have us correct our mistake on both assignments and assessments	40.8	64.3
My teachers: Emphasize learning from our mistakes.	47.9	74.0
My teachers: Tell us what we are learning and why.	45.4	74.0
Students provide feedback to each other.	43.9	74.3

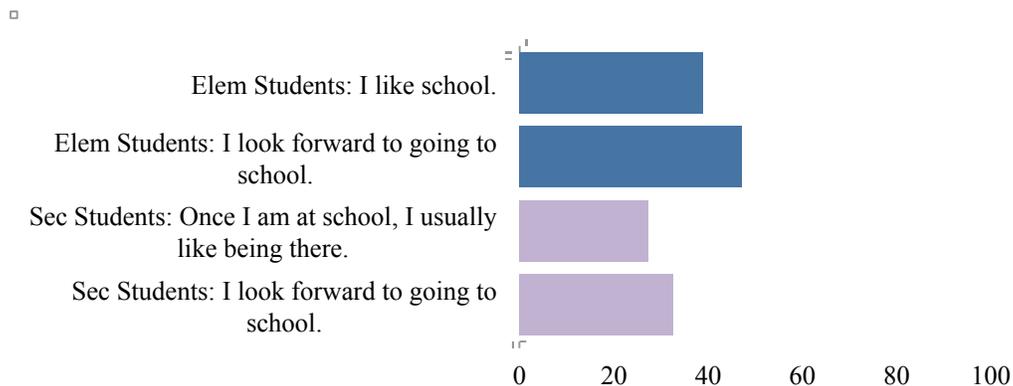
Overall Strengths and Areas of Challenge for Elementary and Secondary Students

The overall greatest strength is that students perceived that both teachers and other students care about them. This is a critical finding given the extensive research literature that has found a strong, positive relationship between the perception of caring and student outcomes.

Another strength made evident by the surveys is that students perceive teachers to employ a variety of instructional strategies. This suggests SCASD teachers are not simply lecturing students and then assigning homework, but are employing a variety of different instructional strategies that include both group work and the use of technology.

One major challenge area is that a rather significant percentage of students at both school levels reported that they did not look forward to going to school, did not like school, and did not like school even after they had arrived at school. Figure 3 displays the percentage of students *not* in agreement with statements regarding looking forward to going to school and liking school. Students responding more negatively to these statements were far more likely to have more negative responses to all other statements in the survey—even with respect to teaching practices. Unfortunately, the survey data does not allow for the identification of a causal or directional link between liking school and perceptions of student and teacher behaviors. One possibility is that students that do not like or look forward to going to school simply perceive all of their schooling experiences from a more negative perspective. Alternatively, students that experience less positive interactions with students and teachers and have less exposure to engaging instructional practices may simply become less likely to like or look forward to going to school.

Figure 3: Average Percentage of Students Responding “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” for School Affinity Statements



Another area of challenge that is not evident from the overall responses is that students with the lowest perceptions about teacher care had substantially less positive perceptions for almost all other statements. While student perceptions of teacher care are quite positive for most SCASD students, the survey revealed that somewhere between 15% and 20% of the SCASD student population were not in full agreement that teachers cared about them. As shown in the full report (see page 25), such students had dramatically lower perceptions for almost every other statement in the survey. Indeed, these students hold more negative perceptions about the behaviors of their: classmates, teachers, and instructional strategies employed by teachers. Again, the data do not allow for an identification of the direction of these relationships or the causal link. Certain behaviors by other students and teachers as well as differential access to particular classroom environments may reinforce a student’s perceptions of teacher care. Alternatively, a student with a low perception of teacher care may view the behaviors of students and teachers in a more negative light than other students.

Teacher Results

Research has generally shown that teacher perceptions differ by school level with secondary teachers typically have less positive perceptions of school leadership and other facets of schooling than elementary teachers. To some extent, this is a result of secondary schools being organized differently and serving far more students in a larger physical space. In addition, research has shown secondary teachers tend to be more committed to their particular subject area and subject area team than to the overall school or to students. Finally, secondary school teachers interact with a far greater number of students on a daily basis and the behaviors of secondary students differs dramatically from elementary school students. Because of these reasons, the data are reported for both elementary school and secondary school teachers. This does not mean, however, that secondary schools or secondary school teachers are any better or worse than elementary schools or teachers. Rather, the point is that there are differences between the two schooling levels that impact teacher perceptions.

Both Elementary and Secondary Teachers

While there are differences in the levels of agreement between elementary and secondary teachers, there was some agreement on the areas of strengths and challenge areas.

Strengths

Most importantly, both sets of teachers were in ***strong agreement that SCASD schools were a good place to work and learn and that they enjoyed working at their particular SCASD school***. These are important perceptions given the strong research connection between teacher satisfaction with their workplace and teacher effectiveness with respect to teaching and learning. Further, this suggests that SCASD school leaders have been fairly successful in creating and maintaining positive working environments for teachers.

Teachers at both levels generally also ***had positive perceptions of their own abilities and efforts***. More specifically, both groups of teachers were confident in the own abilities to: assess student learning; improve their teaching effectiveness; enhance student effort; adjust instruction based on a variety of information; and, improve their overall instruction. In addition, both groups of teachers agreed that they consistently tried to improve their classroom climate based on the input of teachers and students as well as to accurately identify the strengths and weaknesses of every student.

Both groups of teachers also ***agreed school leaders evaluated teachers in a fair and professional manner as well as held teachers to a high professional standard for delivering instruction***. Moreover, both groups of teachers were in agreement that school leaders consistently attempted to ensure schools were safe and welcoming places for students and parents.

Both sets of teachers were also in general agreement that SCASD educators teach students to achieve the following outcomes:

- Communicate effectively (writing and speaking);
- Evaluate information critically and competently;
- Use technology as a tool to research, organize, evaluate and communicate information;
- Access information efficiently (time) and effectively (sources);
- Work with a partner or in groups; and,
- Interpret information and draw conclusions.

Both sets of teachers also were in agreement that teachers attempted to achieve a number of other learning outcomes. However, the outcomes mentioned above had the greatest levels of agreement.

Both sets of teachers also had relatively ***high levels of agreement that teachers ensure all students have equitable access to a high-quality curriculum and utilize a wide variety of information to make decisions about instruction***.

Finally, and importantly, both sets of teachers had high levels of agreement that ***all members of the school community are valued and that educators value what students have to say***. Valuing all community members is important given that community members must feel valued in order to create a democratic and responsive environment. Further, when educators and students are valued, both groups of individuals have greater commitment to the school and district.

Research has consistently shown that all of the above areas of agreement are critical to high performance. Such positive responses by teachers at both school levels underscore the high quality of schools in the district.

Areas of Challenge

There were a number of different areas of challenge that were common to both elementary and secondary teachers. The two most prominent areas of challenge were associated with teacher involvement in decision-making and engagement in effective discussions about the achievement gap.

With respect to *involvement in decision-making*, a substantial percentage of both groups of teachers disagreed with the statements shown in Table 3. While the majority of teachers actually agreed with these statements, the percentage of teachers disagreeing was high relative to the levels of disagreement for other statements. These results suggest that school leaders should focus on creating a more effective process for making decisions, involving more teachers in the decision-making process, and creating an atmosphere in which teachers can feel comfortable voicing concerns. One strategy to accomplish this might be to start collecting anonymous feedback from teachers and discussing such feedback with teachers.

Table ES3: Percentage of Teachers Disagreeing with Statements about Involvement in Decision-Making by School Level

Statement	Elementary	Secondary
We have an effective process for making group decisions and solving problems.	26.9	35.1
Teachers feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them	33.3	35.6
School leaders seek the input of teachers on important decisions concerning this school.	21.2	25.2
School leaders are willing to make changes based on teacher input.	23.3	26.3
School leaders provide opportunities for teachers to provide anonymous feedback about school leadership.	39.1	53.9

The second major challenge area was *having effective discussions about the achievement gap in terms of gender, racial/ethnic, and socio-economic equality*. About 30% of elementary teachers and 50% of secondary teachers disagreed with statements about the school having effective discussions in these three areas. Given that closing the achievement gap is one of the Pennsylvania school profile metrics and a district goal, school leaders should endeavor to have such discussions more often and focus on concrete actions that can address the gaps. Further, the district administration can ensure that schools have accurate and timely information regarding the various achievement gaps faced by each school.

Additional areas of challenge include: school leaders’ efforts to improve teaching and learning by being aware of what occurs in classrooms; teachers receiving feedback; and, teachers being able to observe each other in the classroom. About 23% of elementary teachers and 36% of secondary teachers disagreed that school leaders were aware of what occurred in classrooms. Further, 27% of elementary teachers and nearly 50% of secondary teachers disagreed that teachers have opportunities to watch each other teach. Finally, 23% of elementary teachers and 41% of secondary teachers disagreed that school leaders provide suggestions that improve teaching effectiveness.

One caveat to this final challenge area is that, due to the nature of secondary school specialization, school leaders of secondary schools are rarely the primary providers of suggestions of the improvement of instruction. Rather, secondary school leaders are expected to ensure teachers have access to someone that can help improve a teacher's instruction. In fact, almost three-quarters of secondary teachers agreed that there is at least one person who provides effective suggestions to improve teaching effectiveness. Moreover, both elementary and secondary teachers agree that school leaders are understand how students learn and understand effective instruction.

This suggests that the issue is not the knowledge and skills of school leaders, but creating different structures and mechanisms to ensure that teachers have greater opportunities to work collaboratively on improving their instruction. This will require a strong collaboration between district leaders, school leaders, and teachers to create new strategies that focus on providing teachers more and different opportunities to work on improving their instruction.

Elementary School Teachers

Strengths

There were also some areas of strength that were specific to elementary schools. These additional areas of strength included:

- School leaders' understanding of the teaching and learning process;
- School leaders' support for risk-taking;
- Focus on teaching students how to learn from their mistakes, evaluate their own progress, view failure as an opportunity to learn, and view success as a long-term cyclical process of small successes and frequent mistakes;
- Effective professional development;
- Atmosphere of trust and respect; and,
- Support for students having a voice.

Areas of Challenge

The major areas of challenge identified by elementary school teachers were also identified as areas of challenge by secondary school teachers. As such, there are no teacher-identified areas of challenge specific to elementary schools. To review, the areas of challenge mentioned by elementary school teachers included:

- Teacher involvement in decision-making;
- Effective discussions about various achievement gaps;
- School leaders' efforts to improve teaching and learning by being aware of what occurs in classrooms;
- Teachers receiving feedback; and,
- Teachers being able to observe each other in the classroom.

It is important to note that these areas of challenge do not exist at every school. Rather, these are areas of challenge across all teachers.

Secondary School Teachers

Strengths

The areas of strength identified by secondary school teachers were the same areas of strength identified by elementary school teachers. As such, these areas of strength were mentioned above. The specific areas of strength included:

- SCASD schools were a good place to work and learn and that they enjoyed working at their particular SCASD school;
- positive perceptions of their own abilities and efforts;
- school leaders evaluated teachers in a fair and professional manner as well as held teachers to a high professional standard for delivering instruction;
- high levels of agreement that teachers ensure all students have equitable access to a high-quality curriculum and utilize a wide variety of information to make decisions about instruction; and
- all members of the school community are valued and that educators value what students have to say.

Areas of Challenge

There were several areas of challenge specific to secondary schools. Most noteworthy of these areas were:

- Increasing opportunities for teachers to collaborate on a variety of issues;
- Managing student behavior effectively and consistently enforcing rules of behavior in a fair manner; and,
- Viewing failure as an opportunity to learn.

Parent Results

Overall, parents were extremely pleased with SCASD. Indeed, 29% of respondents “strongly agreed” and another 48% of respondents “agreed” that they were satisfied with the district. Similarly, almost 85% of respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they were happy with the educational experiences provided by the school district with another 9% responded they “somewhat agreed” with this perception.

With respect to the four pillars, respondents overwhelmingly voiced positive perceptions about: a welcoming and safe climate; responsive teaching and learning; high expectations; and, a culture of trust, relationships, and collaboration.

In addition, there were some particular areas that received extremely high levels of agreement from parents. These included:

- Communication efforts from schools and the district;
- High expectations for the district held by parents;
- Positive treatment of students by educators;
- Enjoyment of school by children; and
- Provision of a breadth of learning experiences by the district.

While these areas received extraordinarily high levels of agreement, it is important to remember that all areas received high levels of agreement from respondents.

There were, however, some areas of challenge. In particular, parents of high school students had lower levels of agreement than either elementary or middle school parents. Some specific areas of concern raised by high school parents included:

- Homework issues;
- Degree to which educators know parents and students well; and,
- Communication to parents about the strengths, weaknesses, and progress of students.

Some of these issues are simply a result of the structural and organizational differences between elementary and high schools. However, the high school—and middle schools as well—could endeavor to address some of the concerns of parents. In fact, issues surrounding homework appear to be a concern of all parents, but particularly of parents of older children.

Conclusion

Overall, the results from this baseline survey of the SCASD Strategic Plan strongly suggest that the district is perceived in an extremely positive manner by students, teachers, and parents. Clearly, all members of the SCASD community believe district schools are highly successful across a number of different areas. It is difficult to imagine that many other school districts in Pennsylvania or from across the nation would receive such consistently high levels of agreement across students, teachers, and parents.

These high levels of agreement can, however, be both a blessing and a curse. Such strong positive views of the district are a blessing in that, overall, the district appears to be meeting the needs and expectations of community members. Rightfully so, community members have long been very proud and supportive of the district. This was shown in the overwhelming support for last spring's referendum on building a new high school.

Alternatively, these high levels of agreement can also be a curse in that the widespread positive views can overshadow some areas of challenge that exist in the district. For the district to move from being a very good district to a truly outstanding district that becomes recognized for excellence across the state and nation, community members and SCASD educators will need to recognize these areas of challenge and commit themselves to identifying and solving the underlying issues identified by these challenge areas.

Although the survey data is only a snapshot of SCASD and further evidence should be collected, the survey suggests several areas of challenge that should be addressed. First, and foremost, the survey suggests that a small but important percentage of students feel disengaged from the schooling process, perceive teachers don't care very deeply about them, and perceive teachers don't provide them with a sufficient level of encouragement and support. These students are often the "invisible" children in classrooms—the children who don't excel, don't behave inappropriately, and don't participate at high levels. While such students tend to perform reasonably well in school, they often don't perform to their potential. To be a truly outstanding district, SCASD educators will need to discover why some students feel disengaged and collaboratively identify strategies to more fully engage the students so that they can maximize their potential. This will be a long and arduous process which is why many districts rest on their accomplishments and ignore their mission to maximize the potential of *every* child. Yet, this district is extremely well-positioned to break the mold and truly embrace the notion that each and every child can truly succeed.

The second major area of challenge is to increase the communication and feedback between students, teachers, school leaders, and district leaders. While this survey is a step in this direction, educators should endeavor to create strategies and structures that greatly increase the frequency and quality of communication and feedback between all stakeholders. One concrete action step that stems directly from the survey results is for district leaders, school leaders, and teachers to begin or enhance efforts to collect anonymous feedback and act on that feedback. Acting on such feedback should include, at a minimum, having open and honest conversations about the feedback at the classroom-, school-, and district-levels.

The third major challenge is to create strategies and structures to increase collaboration. This is difficult—particularly at the student and teacher levels—because time is so precious in a school day. Educators, however, need to examine and analyze the outcomes they desire and whether they can reach these desired outcomes without changing the degree to which effective collaboration occurs.

Finally, the fourth major challenge is to ensure that each and every student receives high-quality instruction in every classroom. While the overwhelming majority of students receive such high-quality instruction in almost every classroom, the survey suggests the existence of instances when not every child has the opportunity to engage with high-quality instruction in every classroom. Improving in this area will require a great deal of reflection by teachers and leaders as well as focusing on the above three challenge areas.

The State College Area School District is extremely well-situated to face these difficult challenges and move the district forward such that the district is widely recognized as one of the truly exemplary school districts in Pennsylvania and the United States. This survey provides important baseline data to measure the commitment and progress of our community as we strive to become even better.