



# IRVINGTON UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT QUALITATIVE DATA REPORT



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Report of interview & focus group data  
for use by the Strategic Planning Committee  
March 2023

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# **INTRODUCTION**

Irvington Union Free School District (IUFSD) is located in Irvington, NY and serves about 1,800 students from the villages of Irvington and Tarrytown in four schools. Dows Lane Elementary serves Kindergarten to Grade 3, Main Street School serves Grades 4-5, Irvington Middle School serves Grades 6-8, and Irvington High School serves Grades 9-12.

IUFSD has an ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and setting direction through the Strategic Planning process. With current plan set to expire, the IUFSD Board and Administration contracted with Hazard, Young, Attea, and Associates (HYA) to facilitate the development of a new plan to begin during the 2023-2024 school year.

The HYA Strategic Plan team would like to thank all stakeholders who participated in focus group meetings, interviews, or the community survey. The willingness of the community to engage and provide candid feedback was essential to our work. We particularly thank Superintendent Dr. Kristopher Harrison and Donna Friedlander, Assistant to the Superintendent, for their hours of work to communicate and arrange logistics for all Phase I activities.

## **PURPOSE**

This report presents the findings from the qualitative data collection activities during Phase I of the Strategic Planning process. The data contained herein were obtained from the input the HYA associates received during individual interviews and focus groups.

## **PROCESS**

Qualitative perception data was gathered from stakeholders through interviews and focus groups structured to assist the district in reviewing its mission, vision, core values, strategic priorities, and objectives.

Individual interviews were conducted so that key leaders in the district had the opportunity to share their perception of the current state of the district and preferred future. Focus groups occurred after the interviews were completed and allowed participants to build on each others' thoughts and ideas. Interview and focus group questions focused on the following topics:

- The vision of the Graduate, which is a description of what all students should know and be able to do as a result of their experience in IUFSD schools
- Current district strengths
- Opportunities for growth
- The preferred vision of the school's future

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Dr. Laurie Kimbrel and Prem Aithal conducted the individual interviews. Focus groups were facilitated, and data was captured by Prem Aithal. All interview and focus group data was assembled by Prem Aithal and reviewed by Dr. Laurie Kimbrel.

Focus groups and interviews are categorized as qualitative research, so findings must be based on the words and phrases of the participants and not the opinions of the facilitator. Notes were meant to capture individuals' or groups' perspectives, feelings, opinions, values, attitudes, and beliefs about their personal experiences with their schools.

## PARTICIPANTS

The numbers of participants by stakeholder group are listed in the charts below. It should be emphasized that the data is neither a scientific sampling nor should they necessarily be viewed as representing the majority of opinion of the respective groups to which they are attributed.

INTERVIEW CATEGORY	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
District Administration	3
Board of Education	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>

FOCUS GROUP CATEGORY	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
District AC/Instructional Leaders/District Office Staff	33
K-5 Faculty/Staff and Clinical Staff	22
Middle School and High School Faculty/Staff	14
Dows Lane & Main Street Parents (K-5)	27
Irvington Middle School and High School Parents	25
Irvington Middle School and High School Students	29
Community Members of Color/Spanish Language Parents	15
Village Leadership and Irvington Senior Center	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>178</b>

## OVERALL FINDINGS

Many of the themes that emerged from the individual interviews were also evident in the focus group data. In other words, there was close alignment between the interviews and focus groups.

### Strengths

It is clear that IUFSD is a high achieving district where students experience success and are prepared for the next phases of their lives. Focus group and interview data revealed much appreciation for the work of the teachers, staff, and leaders at the school and district level. Furthermore, while not always directly stated, there is an underlying understanding that effective governance is in place with a strong board of education. Many of the areas for growth noted by stakeholders are not new issues and there was widespread understanding that issues are being addressed, but further work is necessary.

The data also revealed strong appreciation from stakeholders for the size of the district. Many commented that the district's size is "just right" and allows individual student attention, small class sizes, and the ability of teachers and leaders to connect personally with families.

Teachers, staff, and leaders are well regarded for their commitment to the district, instructional skills, and effective communication with parents and guardians. There is a student centered culture and recognition that all efforts must support student growth. IUFSD prides itself on being a welcoming and inclusive community, and it has excellent partnerships with the Village, Irvington Education Foundation, and Irvington PTSA.

Other key strengths of IUFSD were noted among stakeholder groups including strong fiscal and operational management and effective leaders at the district and school level. Finally, the district's overall communication was often noted as exceptional. There was general agreement that the district communicates actively and is very responsive to community issues.

### Opportunities for Growth

The data also revealed several opportunities for growth. Many stakeholders indicated a desire for a renewed focus on curriculum development and effective instructional practices. Much of the feedback about curriculum centered on what stakeholders called "fundamental skills" and high standards for student learning. Others called for a curriculum "re-fresh" focused on increasing relevance and opportunities for transfer. As is typical in high performing districts, there were also requests for a broadening of the curriculum to add offerings at all levels.

Increased and improved professional development was also a common theme among teachers and leaders. Within the topic of professional development, several sub-themes emerged around systems of collaboration, differentiated instruction, intervention, defining high-quality instruction, and teacher choice. Parents/guardians often mentioned the professional development half-days and wondered if there is a method to consolidate days for efficiency.

Another theme that emerged was concern for the number of initiatives currently being pursued in the district. Stakeholders expressed their opinions that initiatives need to be narrowed, re-focused, and aligned to the new Strategic Plan. Leadership and staff turnover was also a frequently mentioned concern and this may be connected to the perception of the number of initiatives in schools.

Mental health and balance for students and staff resonated as another opportunity for growth. The level of pressure in high achieving districts such as IUFSD is often higher than in typical

school districts and this has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Mental health services and emotional wellness for students and staff were issues of concern for many stakeholders.

Finally, a few areas for growth emerged among specific stakeholder groups including parent concern about the perceived need for external tutoring to ensure student success, and the need for additional after school activities for students. Teachers and students frequently mentioned technology issues including access, functionality, and training.

## OVERALL THEMES

The following section outlines the overall expectations for students, strengths, and opportunities for growth expressed in the interviews and focus groups.

### Expectations for Students:

- **Prepared for post-high school success**
  - Four-year college generally is the path for most
    - Acceptance to selective colleges and universities
    - Prepared for the college experience – academic and social
  - Other pathways - learn and develop the skills they need for their chosen path.
    - Two-year college
    - Employment
    - Trade school
    - Military
    - Police
    - BOCES [Boards of Cooperative Educational Services]
    - Gap year
  - Leave Irvington proud and walk away knowing they have had a good experience
  - Have future goals and aspirations
- **Intelligent, respectful global citizens who make the community a better place**
  - Contribute to their immediate community through service
  - Posses a sense of perspective and understanding of their place in the world
    - Understanding current events and problems of our time
    - Understanding their rights and responsibilities as citizens
    - Understanding their privilege
    - Ability to look at a variety of perspectives
    - Being inclusive
    - Ability to make a positive change
    - Media literacy
    - Civics education
    - Learning foreign languages beyond the traditional romance languages
- **Posses a strong foundation for the future, know how to learn, and are prepared to learn continuously**
  - Master fundamental skills and how to apply them in new circumstances
    - Met requirements and mastered core academic skills in math, reading, writing, etc.
    - Students reflect the Vision of the Graduate.
  - Foster a love of learning and curiosity
    - Not afraid to ask questions
    - Instruction should not only focus on the content but skill acquisition, more importantly. Can we better assess skills that we value, i.e., critical thinking?
  - Graduation is a step but not the end. Learning continues afterward

- **Live healthy lives with good balance**
  - Being healthy and well balanced, physically and mentally
    - Emotional wellness & mental health
    - Continue to progress socially
    - Posses self-esteem
    - Comfortable asking for help
    - Demonstrate kindness
- **Impacts of technology**
  - Technology understanding (fluency standards), management, and awareness
  - Relationship between technology and civics; understanding the accuracy of sources
  - Prepared for rapidly changing technology
- **Other frequently mentioned topics**
  - Hope for opportunities for students to find their passions, honor what makes them unique, and accomplish their dreams
  - Desire for well-rounded students who have opportunities for electives and extra-curriculars.

## **Top Skills/Dispositions:**

- **Resilient/problem solvers**
  - Be willing to take risks - be brave, unafraid to fail, and try new things to grow.
  - Irvington should be a safe space for students to fail and grow without being discouraged or having a parent try to fix everything for them.
  - How to handle adversity/failure and learn how to bounce back - never giving up. Mistakes are part of being a learner.
  - In addition to educational resilience, resilience also needs to occur with friendships and work.
- **Effective communicator - verbally, in writing, and online**
  - Verbal
    - Able to carry on a conversation
    - Public speaking and presentation skills
    - Conversations with adults - students will be challenged during interviews
    - Able to build relationships
    - Conflict resolution
  - Collaborate, negotiate, and communicate cooperatively in groups across multiple platforms, virtually and in person, and can function in a team environment.
  - Research and report - orally and written
- **Critical thinker**
  - Questioning things and don't take all in social media as 100% factual
  - Analytical - be able to look at different viewpoints
- **Empathetic, kind, and compassionate citizens**
  - Social awareness
  - Seeing and honoring others' perspectives
  - Open-minded
  - Exposed to differences and hard things
- **Lifelong learner/growth mindset**
- **Self-advocate**

- **Other top skills/dispositions:**
  - Independent and flexible thinker
  - Collaborator
  - Executive functioning skills
  - Life skills including financial literacy - balance checkbook, electrical, carpentry work, more current Home Economics (i.e., how to use a plumbing snake or change a tire), investing in the stock market, etc.
  - Adaptability
  - Confidence
  - Persistence
  - Time management

### **Strengths of the District:**

- **The district's size is advantageous, and it is a welcoming & supportive community with significant partnerships and available resources.**
  - The size of the district is not too big and not too small, which allows for individual attention
    - There is a small-town feel with small class sizes - a good teacher/student ratio.
    - The size of the district allows teachers to connect with multiple families
    - The makeup and size of the district give it character - people know and look out for each other.
  - A welcoming and inclusive community
    - We feel connected to the district - the size is appealing.
    - We have pride in many things about our district, and it feels exciting.
    - There is a community atmosphere - someone will reach out to you if something important happens.
    - There is good camaraderie among students who generally know how to operate within a community and how to respect others. They are civil and well-rounded. There are social circles, but they are collegial with one another. Spanish-language parents indicated their children had adjusted much better here than in their prior schools.
  - Great partnerships between District and Village, IEF, and PTSA
    - Since Dr. Harrison came on, the partnership between the District and Village has been very collaborative. There is transparency and sharing of information, and both parties assume good intent.
    - The Irvington Education Foundation provides significant resources to the district, and it is an excellent example of getting the most out of \$1. Teachers pitch ideas, and programs are supplemented.
    - Parental involvement has funded many extracurricular activities - the PTSA has been highly supportive.
- **Educators and staff have a high level of commitment to students and the district. Teachers generally provide effective instruction and effectively communicate with parents.**
  - Many passionate teachers have genuine connections with students. There is a good quality of education overall.
    - Students returned after graduation, visit teachers, and comment that certain teachers inspired them.
    - During focus groups, students reflected on the importance of having a personal connection with their teachers and resonated with comments made by faculty about looking for purpose and connecting with the world.
    - Many teachers are very supportive of students' mental health.
    - Some teachers are very engaging and foster real learning
  - The quality teachers and staff are highly invested in students and supportive of each other
    - The staff has a growth mindset and is continuously improving



- There is a very supportive professional development program
    - The staff is highly adaptable and very flexible
  - Generally, teachers communicate very well with parents
    - Teachers are usually very responsive to parents.
    - The Spanish-language parents indicated a positive relationship with their teachers in their focus group.
- **There is a healthy District culture**
  - The District leaders (Dr. Harrison, Dr. Duffy, Ms. Stein) are open to listening and adapting to changing ideas. Decisions are made with students in mind. There is a culture of acceptance of risk-taking. Staff is willing to try new things, and the administration is willing to support them.
  - The building principals are highly respected and work well with senior administration. They have an open mindset and help get resources. They are very supportive of the curriculum.
  - Generally, teacher retention is very strong due to culture and a stable work environment.
  - The Administration and Board have harmony.
- **The district is fiscally strong and well-managed with strong, steady leadership**
  - The district is well funded with tremendous potential.
  - Financial resources rarely get in the way of innovation.
  - IEF/PTSA provides additional financial support every year
- **Effective communication**
  - The district is highly responsive to community issues
  - Parent concerns are addressed very responsively
  - Internal communication is generally good as well

## Opportunities for the Next 3-5 Years:

- **Continue focus on curriculum and instruction**
  - Curriculum and standards
    - Refocusing on improvement in fundamentals to ensure college and career readiness
    - Increase standards for academic rigor in K-8
    - Broaden curriculum at all levels
    - Need for vertical/horizontal alignment of the curriculum - improved connectivity and continuity of service grade to grade and across each grade level.
    - Improved focus on achievement gaps, especially those that fall just outside of thresholds, which gives them additional supports
    - Ensure curriculum relevance
    - Transparency of curriculum for parents and community
  - Professional development
    - Improved systems of collaboration to allow for more development opportunities
    - Professional development day restructure for more teacher choice and opportunity for collaboration
  - Instruction
    - Increase differentiated instruction, especially for students with IEPs
    - Define excellent teaching and coaching for teachers
    - Increase student engagement
- **Collaborative prioritization of initiatives**
  - Commit to the priorities outlined in the strategic plan and focus on alignment
    - Make sure we have a narrow yet strategic set of goals to focus on with the idea of being successful.
    - Every year, some crisis diverts us from the day-to-day - we must focus on a few major key priorities.

- Remove long-standing initiatives with diminishing returns
- **Support mental health/balance of students and staff**
  - Ensure that actions reflect stated values for mental health and emotional wellness. Actions on mental health need to align with words regarding mental health
  - Ensure availability of wellness resources and education
  - Recognize that achievement pressures/expectations on students and staff
    - Teachers/parent tension – sometimes there is a difference in academic expectations, and tension increases when they don't align
    - Culture is ultra-competitive
    - Tests are a significant focus and sometimes cause pressure. Students seem to have numerous tests in one day.
  - The current high school schedule doesn't accurately reflect what students will see in college
  -
- **Perception that outside tutoring is required for student success**
  - The district community is heavily reliant on tutors and enrichment.
  - Subjects: math, writing, advanced science classes, and private college counseling
- **Impacts of technology**
  - Technology access, functionality, and streamlining
    - Technology is generally older at lower levels
    - Wi-fi not always reliable
    - Firewalls block sites needed for instruction
  - Technology training
    - Some technology has been purchased, but the full capabilities cannot be used without more outside training or costs.
  - Ensure technology directly impacts student learning and improves instruction, and continue to monitor future technology.
- **Improve administrative and clinical staff/leadership retention**
  - High turnover at some key school leadership positions
  - Retention of administrators, teachers, and staff members of color
- **Potential expansion of after-school clubs and activities**
  - Community/non-academic extracurricular activities are helpful for kids to find their interests and helpful for kids that struggle with academics
  - How can we utilize our parents, community, and senior citizens better?
- **Continued focus on facilities improvements**
  - Need more physical space for a growing staff – not much open space for collaboration
  - Dows Lane and Main Street (historic building) have some lingering issues
  - Technology infrastructure
  - Traffic safety issues

## SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW RESPONSES

Individual interviews were conducted with all seven Board members, Superintendent, and Assistant Superintendents. Questions and a summary of responses are included below.

### **1. What are your expectations for students graduating from your school system? What are the skills and characteristics you would like students to develop throughout their time in the school?**

- They are prepared to succeed in their chosen path - four-year college of choice (even most selective), two-year college, career, direct to the workforce, trade school, military, etc. They learn the skills. They learn the skills they need for their next steps in life.
- They have met requirements and mastered skills in overall academics - math, reading, writing, etc. They continue to improve their fundamentals.
- They are familiar with and have mastered technology fluency standards with the ability to apply these skills to life (and use technology as a tool)
- They know how to learn, are prepared to learn continuously, and have a strong foundation for the future. They aren't afraid to ask questions.
- They are prepared to contribute to the global community and a world bigger than Irvington.
- They have had many opportunities to find their passion and what motivates them. They know their identity and how they are situated in the world.
- Key skills/dispositions:
  - Think critically
  - Adaptability to various situations (can apply what they have learned to new contexts)
  - Persistent
  - Resilient
  - Effective communicators
    - How to listen to other ideas and have open minds
    - Strong communication skills - writing skills, especially after using short-hand over text
  - Collaborate and communicate cooperatively in groups across multiple platforms, virtually and in person, and can function in a team environment.
  - SEL skills/character education - i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, self-directed learning

## 2. What is the current state of the district?

- The district is high-performing and focused on goals to meet and exceed high expectations for students and staff.
  - Strong, rigorous, and competitive academic programs with a wide variety of offerings, including access to AP
    - We have competitive programs, rigorous course work, access to AP
    - Strengthening foundations while focusing on innovation
  - How do we continue to improve and strengthen foundations while focusing on innovation?
  - How much of the high performance is related to the community's demographics? Nature vs. nurture - would these kids be successful anywhere?
- Our administration, including principals, are strong leaders, consistent, and highly collaborative with staff.
  - Administrators' intention is good - more streamlined and clearer than three years ago.
  - Strong leadership team eager to build on the solid history of the district
  - Willingness to examine their growth and willingness to grow
  - Need continuity in leadership - high school turnover, assistant principals, etc.
- Strong DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work): leaning into modeling how to be more culturally responsive
  - We are ahead of the curve on DEI work and have faced little pushback. It hasn't always felt that way previously, but it is now generally optimistic.
  - We have come a long way in our school for diversity and equity.
  - Socioeconomic disparities should be a focus - wealthy people have an advantage.
- Encourage more depth of extracurricular programming
  - HS students want to interact with students from other communities - especially those that don't participate in athletics (need more clubs)
  - More connectivity with O'Hara Nature Center (east Irvington) - outside, hands-on - sustainable practices - pollinator pathways
- Strong Board of education that supports and trusting of faculty
  - Cohesive Board that are like-minded and come from the same place
- Community support - Irvington Education Foundation - funds projects by kids (i.e., gun control issues, sustainable housing), Irvington PTSA
- We are fiscally strong thanks to the leadership of Asst. Superintendent Stein.
- Strong teachers and staff invested in the whole child. Most of our teachers are highly effective.
- Need to refocus on connecting to the science industry BASF, Regeneron, etc. - real-world experiences, connections, and more access to internships.

## 3. How well does the current mission statement reflect the values and expectations of your families and community members?

**Mission:** *The mission of the Irvington Union Free School District is to create a challenging and supportive learning environment in which each student attains their highest potential for academic achievement, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Our schools encourage discovering and developing students' strengths, skills, and talents and foster social and civic responsibility.*

- Some feel it is pretty aspirational, while others feel it reflects where we were in the past.
  - It accurately reflects where we were, and I think we have matured and grown since then.
  - The "him/her" phrase is outdated and symbolizes how we have grown and changed.
  - Are we there or getting there?
  - Not a lot to object to - aligns to academic buzzwords aligned to that time period - rigor was key.
  - It feels pretty aspirational.

- It can be more concise and targeted; everyone should be able to recite it and know what it means.
  - Too long and very vague
  - Maybe too filled with jargon and not easily remembered and understood
  - Wonder if families newer to the community understand it and are invested in it
- It does a pretty good job - on the nose for most of it
  - Relevant but needs to be tweaked a little bit to reflect current conditions and progress
  - I think it still fits very well – we are looking for students to challenge themselves and be lifelong learners
  - I understand why all the pieces are there

#### **4. Describe the school community, including parents, employees, students, and community members. What makes your community unique? What does it value?**

- Parents
  - The majority of parents are involved and supportive of the schools. They are engaged and want to partner with the district.
    - Very demanding - the high expectation of needs being met. When engaging, want to be engaged back - "Why am I paying taxes and paying for this?"
    - Some not following chain of command and need to return to the structure
    - They have a lot of questions
    - I think they can have a lot of things - some things will have to be sacrificed, and others will take some time.
  - Currently, the lower level of engagement and disenchanted- a possible effect of COVID and loss of connection for that time period with the schools
  - More diverse than the past - socioeconomic, section 8 housing, 10% free and reduced lunch, progressive, "tennis player/cocktail parents." Generally relatively affluent, but not as affluent as Scarsdale
    - Classism exists even with people of color - money is a large driver
    - Lots of tutoring, extra tutoring
    - Families with means can fill gaps, i.e., college counselors
- Employees
  - Teaching staff
    - There for the right reasons - they really care about the kids
    - Some teachers are a great fit for certain students, and others sometimes are a non-optimal fit for students, but it happens. The district generally does an excellent job of matching teachers/students.
    - Some teachers connect more to the subject matter than students.
    - Engaged in the strategic priorities of the district and excited to improve
  - Good group of administrators - Dr. Harrison puts in an incredible amount of time into the district.
  - The administration and teachers are very welcoming - they're great
- Students
  - Students are incredibly active, capable, and driven - they care about their schools.
    - Students are smart and thoughtful; we need more student voices in decisions.
    - Talented
  - Stressed out, extremely fast pace of life in 2022
    - The pressure of being in a high-achieving district
    - Social-emotional struggles
    - Continue rigor but more balanced

- The student body has a variety of passions - athletes, musicians, and science/research.
  - Places for lots of different kids, i.e., chess kids
  - They are certainly enriched, so after-school activities help - we need to consider more after-school programming in collaboration with Park and Rec and other community departments (and volunteers) and potentially Irvington Education Foundation between 4-6 PM
  - Small district - if you are not mainstream, there are challenges. If you are super into theater or graphic arts, there are limitations
- Community members
  - Challenging population - not sure how good of a connection we have with them as a whole
    - Not clear how much parents engage after their kids leave the Irvington school system
    - We have high taxes - it's a challenge for them to stay
  - Still supportive of schools - not so far apart from parents in terms of views
  - Community members are friendly - you have to put yourself out there
- What matters to the community?
  - Our community is a great place to live; families move here and stay. People move here for high-quality public schools.
  - The community is highly engaged in DEI work, and it is valued
    - Very vocal DEI group - certainly agree it is an important endeavor, committed a lot of resources
    - DEI work is essential, but the reading loss is significant - the community should be focused on academics
    - Been engaged in DEI work - community values it
  - The community is not afraid to speak and express opinions, but we need to ensure all voices are heard - there is a silent majority.
    - Board meetings are not generally well attended - unless there is a crisis
  - It can be challenging for new families to feel accepted and fit in.
- What makes your community unique?
  - Tight-knit and supportive community that watches out for each other and is focused on high achievement
  - High level of engagement
  - It feels very small
  - Socioeconomically diverse - \$5M houses, renters, co-op - can't compare to Scarsdale or Bronxville. Scarsdale, as an example, has 0% of students on subsidized lunch.

## 5. What are your school's strengths? What aspects of the school would you like to make sure are maintained?

- Strong systems and goals approach.
  - Improved process and oversight - running business, building safeguards where there weren't before - leadership of Kris and Carol - accountability in a place where there previously was not
  - We have built structures to allow Board to be efficient - we may need to create space for listening forums.
  - The previous strategic plan drove all aspects of the district and made great progress. It was very mission and goal-focused.
  - Reflection and growth are huge District strengths
- District has a small-town feel
  - The makeup and size of the district give it character - people know and look out for each other.
  - Feel connected to the district - the size is appealing
  - We have pride in our district, and it feels exciting

- The district tries to be many things to many people, even as a small district
- Very fiscally strong thanks to the leadership of wise business official (Asst. Superintendent)
  - Financially sound, we have our ducks in a row
  - The district feels well-managed with strong, steady leadership
- Focus on DEI and cultural responsiveness - inclusion work continuing
- Focus on students, many opportunities for students in and out of classrooms
  - Teachers care about students - good quality of education overall
  - Overall, we do a good job, test scores are good, and we have grown in world language
  - Good array of electives and AP

## 6. What are the one or two most significant issues that the school should address in the next three years?

- Commit to the priorities outlined in the strategic plan and align our systems and stay focused.
  - Make sure we have a narrow yet strategic set of goals to focus on with the idea of being successful.
  - Every year, some crisis diverts us from the day-to-day - we need to stay focused on a few major key priorities.
- Need for a data-oriented approach.
  - Data is a big issue - how do we know if strategies are effective? There is a lot more that we could look at
  - Why are we doing well? We don't put stock into state assessments; we look at local assessments. We look at comparisons year over year.
  - Use data more so during the budget presentation.
- Continue to look at the curriculum to ensure our students are college and career ready. Are they the very best they can be?
  - Excellence in academics - need rigor and improvement in basics - i.e., math.
  - Refocus on rigor - we've done an excellent job of focusing on DEI and social-emotional learning, but at the expense of the rigor of academics.
  - The community wants early world language, which is being addressed, but it needs to be more than once a week for 45 minutes - it should be more of a cultural experience.
- Ensuring our teachers are fully prepared and resourced to ensure high levels of student learning.
  - Ability to create enthusiasm among all staff
  - Student engagement: how do we expand the best practices to all teachers?
- Retention of leadership and improving hiring practices - currently experiencing revolving leadership.
- Continue to focus on our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion work that is the foundation of our improvement efforts. We've done an excellent job of focusing on DEI and social-emotional learning.
- Enhance community engagement to ensure all voices are heard - helping people to connect more.
  - Examples: coffee with Superintendent
  - Meeting people where they are
  - Slow down processes to engage more
- District community heavily reliant on tutors and enrichment as early as 6th grade, particularly in math
  - Math determined by 6th - if not in accelerated in 6th, sets them on a different path and not in high school calculus.
  - Writing - sometimes tutors before school in AM
  - Test scores subsidized by private \$
- Ensuring students feel emotionally safe to engage in learning.
  - Kids should respect each other - tolerance
  - They should know about implicit bias earlier

- How we use technology - we need to focus on technology that impacts student learning and helps instruction.

## 7. How would you describe the quality of education provided by your school?

- The strong academic program focused on learning and applying content and skills—outstanding quality of education.
- An incredible amount of opportunities for small schools: electives, APs, honors, world languages, arts, STEM
- Like a private school: small class sizes, lots of attention to detail, safe
- Very student-focused, learning is personalized, deep, and rich.
- There are opportunities for improvement - pockets are fine & basic and not very innovative.
  - HS Math department needs improvement - this has been an issue for years. Instruction is probably weakest across the district.
- VIP program - special education is strong
- Program with Nature Center - can walk trails to center
- Lack of vertical integration
- What are your thoughts about the standards and expectations currently set for students? And for District employees?
  - Students
    - Have high expectations and challenging courseloads
      - Efforts are being undertaken to standardize. Root cause analysis indicated disproportionality in expectations
      - The focus should be on how they behave as humans and how they move forward academically.
      - Everyone should have the opportunity to excel and is capable of achieving their best
      - Generally, come to school with the right frame of mind
  - District Employees
    - Differing views on teaching staff expectations and performance
      - Teachers are always willing to meet with kids - come in early, stay late
      - Generally high expectations and fair
      - Good educators, and I'm grateful for that
      - HS needs better expectations, particularly around grades/grade books - a long time to return tests, lack of clear expectations, the parent has to initiate parent/teacher conferences, and home access portal only way to the community. Need more timely feedback from teachers - no current written expectation exists.
      - A mixed bag, not much you can do, tenured staff
      - Worksheet-driven culture - missing critical thinking
      - Not sure what the expectations are
    - Professional development is strong
      - DEI - staff can train peers - creating internal PD should be the focus
      - Sometimes need innovation, and occasionally supports need to come from outside
- Are you satisfied with the district's current curriculum and instruction? Is it current? Does it prepare students for college and careers?
  - Generally, we are up to all the standards; however, we need broader innovation and enrichment in the curriculum, and are making strides.
    - Curriculum map is being broadcasted. The Assistant Superintendent is doing a curriculum roadshow.
    - Need more differentiated instruction in upper levels
    - Need a connection to curriculum, resources that the district has (woods and river) can be integrated into the curriculum. NYC proximity is not being used



- Not familiar with the curriculum and don't know what's wrong with it, but it probably could be improved
    - Needs to be updated to be more reflective - currently outdated curriculum
  - Continuously evaluate programming for effectiveness through strategic measures
    - Examples: How did we know Bard ELA PD was successful over several years? How do we know the required 9th-grade writing course has achieved its objective - is a mandatory half period still necessary?
    - How do we know what it is working? How do we know what is needed?
  - The continuum from elementary to high school - vertical integration
  - Parents are supplementing with tutors
- Do students and faculty have access to digital devices? Is there a current plan to integrate technology into instruction?
  - 1:1 access to Chromebooks
    - It's not good enough for some kids, they want Macs
    - Kids bring Macs in 11th and 12th
  - The goal should be to integrate the right innovative technology into the instruction.
    - Use tools differently and make them pervasive
    - How to use technology - technology as a tool for learning
    - Unsure how effective staff is including in instruction
    - Other things we can do with technology - can we work with teachers in PD to be more effective in integration?
    - Don't capture shiny object
      - "The technology that exists when your kid goes to work will not be around today."
      - Don't invest in technology for the sake of it
  - Differing opinions on what students should have
    - Some people don't like Chromebook (K-12 Chromebooks are not responsive)
    - Maybe lower or no technology for elementary and better technology for high schools - shouldn't be one size fits all or lowest common technology
    - Equity concerns if we allow some students to purchase Macbooks

## 8. How would you describe the financial state of the district?

- Strong and healthy financial position
  - We are forward-thinking and do much long-term planning (3-year financial forecast each December).
    - Rare to have a financial surprise; we are well-planned. Unfunded mandates from the state - doing our best to weather those things
  - Asst. Superintendent Stein has been an asset since the district hired her.
  - Reserves have grown
  - No longer spending entire budget each year and doesn't feel wasteful
  - Solid tax base
- Community supportive of the budget with high levels of approval each year - we put responsible budgets together and have good stewardship. Need to understand community appetite for going beyond 2% NY tax cap when necessary—passed two referendums in recent years.
- The budget matches the district's priorities - tied to the strategic plan.
- Organized and smooth budget processes annually
- The budget is well-communicated by the Superintendent and Asst. Superintendent Stein and transparent. It is done carefully and intentionally.
- Strong relationships with bargaining units - learned well and negotiated well.

## 9. Describe the current state of facilities and any concerns or needs in the next 3 to 5 years.

- Facilities are in pretty good shape. Recent years, including an \$18M capital project, helped address deferred maintenance and some enhancements. Facilities were not a priority for a long time, but long-standing issues have been addressed.
  - Security needs and infrastructure issues have been addressed
  - Added two facilities for athletic equipment and buildings/trucks
  - Lots of work and facility enhancements over the past few years: innovation spaces, reconstruction of HS main entrance, and field enhancements.
  - Dows Lane looks beautiful - put a bathroom outside for safety
  - We just redid Library, and it looks like a Starbucks - fantastic job
- Additional upgrades are likely needed
  - Main Street is a historical building that is standing up well - it has technological problems.
  - Floors, bathrooms, and buildings should be d for our high-quality student programming.
  - As long as we continue to prioritize, we'll be fine
  - Dows Lane is old
  - A bit underwhelmed regarding facilities - buildings are old, and some updates were made but not a lot. No fancy wings - no fancy science
  - Security needs to be improved and reviewed - 3 schools have vestibules - Main Street school does not
- Strong relationships with the educational foundation, and they are considering funding facilities projects.
- There is an adequate budget to support ongoing maintenance - expensive to maintain facilities; they give a lot of thought and attention.

## **10. How would you describe school communication with stakeholders (both internal and external)?**

- Communication is definitely a strength of the district, with a comprehensive suite of communication tools from newsletters to social media.
  - Strong social media presence
  - Strong district branding
- The district excels with communication with multiple avenues of information that gets pushed out (newsletters) or is available for stakeholders (website, social media)
  - The website can potentially be more user-friendly. However, sometimes people struggle to find things - room for improvement.
  - Likely room for improvement in archiving - maybe keeping old news on the website
- Strong communication, but we need to continue to innovate to elicit the voices of all stakeholders.
- There is no opportunity to get back to public-facing feedback sessions with internal and external stakeholders and students
- Communication is very organized and structured; protocols exist and are used.
- Internal communication
  - Administration communications with teaching staff are generally fine
    - Regular staff meeting
    - Good relationships with union leaders
    - Generally dependent on school - when things are coming from above, Administrative Council discusses
  - Administration communication with Exec Committee of the Board. Thursday updates with salient information is an effective practice.
    - Generally, a good discipline of weekly communication with the Exec Committee
    - Admin communicates with Board via periodic communication as well
    - Executive Committee structure could be a bit problematic if times with timeliness on critical questions if not responsive

- External communication
  - Teacher-Parent - some room for improvement at the secondary level - there is a gap.
    - Generally, PreK to Grade 5 is good
    - Secondary level - the responsibility of meetings shifts to parents
      - More frequent communication, especially in cases where the student struggles out of the blue
      - Lack of communication in secondary levels
    - PTSA has had issues with communications
  - Administration-community is generally strong and improved during the pandemic.
    - Good and improving communication with parents
    - Great communication with parents/community members via FB, Instagram
    - Potential room for growth
      - Bullets instead of paragraphs
      - More graphics
      - How else can we reach people?
      - The Superintendent did weekly Facebook videos
      - Don't have an internal communications director
        - Have someone shape the strategy
        - Sometimes leans on the Communication Subcommittee
    - Each school comes out with a newsletter each Thurs/Fri
    - The pandemic made people cranky - we communicated very well during the pandemic but still have to do day-to-day operations
  - Board-to-community communication has room for growth.
    - Board subcommittee structure - communication subcommittee
      - Monthly newsletter - monthly Board briefing
      - Very hypersensitive to quorum and compliance to get three people together
    - We need to frame everything more, contextualizing some of the "why" of our work.
    - Outstanding communication during budget time

## **11. What are your hopes for the school in the future? How would you like your school to look and operate in five years?**

- More parents & community members will connect with our schools. We will have improved communication at the secondary levels. We will have deeper engagement with students and families that have been historically marginalized. Community and climate surveys will have higher levels of engagement.
- We are focused on the well-being of students and staff. A robust counseling department helps kids from K-12 reach their potential.
- Our students are well-rounded, engaged in the community, caring, global citizens, and understand the impact of their actions and decisions. They participate in various activities like sports, debate club, and arts & crafts.
- Students graduate feeling academically and emotionally strong. There is continued excellence in kids getting into good programs. Students persevere, stay the course, and know how to solve problems. Students are the best versions of themselves and can share with those around them.
- Students display mastery of Social Emotional Learning skills. Students can successfully navigate conflict.
- Students are heard, safe, and welcomed.
- The curriculum will continue to evolve and focus on critical thinking and the application of skills. We will have more enrichment, students moving around, and fewer textbooks.
- We are immersed in our DEI work, and the professional development we are doing now makes a difference in the level of cultural responsiveness, which is reflected in all school systems, from classroom practices to discipline. We will have decreased disproportionality and become more equitable and inclusive.

- Parents are trusting of leaders and understand the direction of the district. Parents and the community see leaders, Board, and teachers as knowledgeable and worthy of their trust.

## SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES

The structure of the focus groups was open, allowing participants to build upon each other's comments. Participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What are your expectations for students graduating from your school system? In other words, what are the skills and characteristics you would like students to develop throughout their time in the district's schools?
- What are some school strengths?
- What are the one or two most significant issues you would like your school to address in the next three years?
- Visualize 5 or 10 years into the future; visualize the various areas of success for the school. What is that vision or your preferred picture of the school's future?

### District AC/Instructional Leaders/District Office Staff 33 Participants

Irvington Administrative Council	1/19/2023 @ 1 PM	11 attendees
Instructional Leaders	1/23/2023 @ 3:30 PM	12 attendees
District Office Staff	1/23/2023 @ 2 PM	10 attendees

#### Expectations for Students:

- Prepared to be successful in whatever the next step is
  - College for many - having an idea of what they want to do when they enter college
  - Non-college options – are they well developed as they should be?
  - Focus on what they want to do in life - hope they succeed in life
  - Pride they went to Irvington - walk away knowing they have had a good experience
  - Have future goals and aspirations

- Kind, good citizens in their community and beyond
  - Power in voice to make positive change
  - Worldly, multiple experiences in Irvington and beyond
  - Sense of perspective – how they relate to the world at large and what the problems really are
- Love of learning and skill acquisition
  - Graduation is a step, but not the end. Learning continues afterward
  - Foster love of learning – build on inquisitive nature
  - Importance of teaching skill acquisition compared with content
    - The more specialized the subject matter area is, the more pride in the content that they have
    - 21st-century skills are 3rd century skills
    - HS teachers agree skills are important – assessment does not reflect (are you assessing the skills you value? i.e., critical thinking – no assessment of critical thinking)
- Equipped with content and skills and socially and emotionally equipped to live happy, adjusted, and fulfilled lives
- Key skills/dispositions:
  - Independent and flexible thinker - takes in multiple perspectives
  - Problem-solving - independently and able to articulate their perspectives
  - Inclusive, accepting, and promoting equity
  - Collaboration - works well with others
  - Self-advocacy – path for self-improvement
  - Resiliency
  - Effective communicators
  - Empathetic citizens
  - Critical thinking
  - Adaptability
  - Confidence
  - Work ethic
  - Grounded and humble

## Strengths:

- Good District culture that cares about each student
  - The district commits to supporting every single child - no one is invisible. We focus on finding the individual solution, sometimes rubs up on other needs
  - Willing to adapt to changing ideas
  - Willingness to listen – Kris, Carol, Gail
  - Administration and board have harmony
  - Building levels and administration have a good connection
  - People make decisions with students in mind – good intentions, even if we disagree
- IEF/PTSA gives us lots of \$ every year
  - IEF – BOCES aidable things – arts and ed, environmental education, beautification projects, murals, benches, playground
  - Bulldog fund
  - Christmas/Thanksgiving – give anonymous help. New shoes/clothes
- A good place to work with nice people - colleagues make it better
  - Good support from the administration
  - Respected and appreciated building principals that have been here a long time, have an open mindset, and help get resources. They are also supportive of the curriculum.
  - Personnel – incredible professional staff and good leadership
  - Stable work environment – not a lot of teachers leave – good continuity
- Good facilities
  - Main Street – historic building – lots of restrictions, do the best we can
  - Capital bond projects

- Media center - 2 new rooms for PDs with new technology
  - A/C in Dows Lane
- Good communication and transparency – no district anywhere communicates as we do
  - The staff has a good connection with families
  - Internal communication is good – lots of meetings
  - Communication is pretty good externally with parents - in elementary schools, very transparent so that parents hear it first
- Financial resources rarely get in the way of innovation - we get most of the resources we ask for
- VIP – unique program – dedicated program
- Small class sizes – good teacher/student ratio

## Opportunities:

- There are too many initiatives, and they need to be prioritized
  - Everything is treated as a red zone; everything is watered down
  - We stick with things for a long time, diminishing returns because of the # of big things we are sticking with (need to remove things to focus on larger priority items)
  - What does success look like?
  - We should go into depth on a few main things rather than introducing too many new things
  - Be honest with what we can actually do
  - Example - World language earlier introduction – what will be removed? Need to add more meaningfully than once a week
  - We need time to plan lessons.
  - Teachers are overwhelmed and don't feel supported (data, MTSS, etc.)
  - Running out of time to teach with all the initiatives
  - There needs to be training of old initiatives for new teachers - who is training everyone?
  - We as teachers don't have a chance to identify valuable initiatives
  - Professional development
    - MS and HS administration – the opportunity to do the same initiative in both
    - K-5 – rotate different grades every PD day – same planned
    - HS – PD more forced
- Technology and training
  - Money for technology is not well-spent
  - Wi-fi is horrible in Main Street - wi-fi is lost between 2nd and 3rd period each day
  - Dows Lane gets all the seconds of High School in terms of technology
  - There was a time in the past when we were very innovative in technology – energy has not continued through
  - Lack of training in new products/new technology - need more hands-on training
  - We have added new Line Boards but don't have capabilities to use because it costs more money
  - Faculty Chromebooks – some older ones
  - Technology and processes - systems are not always explained to new people, ask 5 people and you get 5 different answers
  - Technology handled via BOCES (Harrison) – onsite contracted workers
    - Sometimes delayed for ticket
    - Not enough staff to handle what we need
    - BOCES has had a lot of turnover
    - EduTech – student issues/help desk – two or three technicians are overwhelmed and can't handle everything
  - Registration system and database – lots of issues in the database because it comes from various systems – systems need to be consolidated
- Facilities to the eye are good, but problems underneath the surface
  - The functionality of technology - innovation suite without wi-fi
  - Fitness program older
  - Crunches in room space – no place for collaboration/planning - pretty tight

- Need better long-term planning
- Can't get out of the parking lot safely
- Shower curtains in the gym
- Turnover - administrative, psychologists, technology - workload is high and increasing
  - Coalescing as a team; had a lot of turnover
  - Finding a way to add staff with new energy, ideas, and enthusiasm
- The curriculum hasn't been refreshed in elementary school in 10 years for math, 20 years for ELA
  - Operational efficiency – duplication of efforts – systems not vertically/horizontally aligned across various departments
- Concerns over financials
  - Administrators hire more positions because the initiatives are too much for them
  - 2% tax cap
    - Come to believe that this is normal
    - Mitigated by IEF
    - Worried about district financials – staff contracts
- The flexibility of staff (allowing more virtual for District Office Staff) – was able to handle during COVID

### **Vision for the Future:**

- Students who are excited to be here.
- We have a sense of family.
- We shift away from email culture.
- Parents volunteer and help within the buildings.
- There are initiatives home-grown by teachers.
- The administration is consistent, and technology is consistently working.
- Administrators work and talk to each other (vertical integration).
- Teachers are compensated more with better dental insurance.
- Morale is higher rather than found in small pockets. We have competitive pay, and money is invested in key initiatives rather than a number of initiatives that are not as critical.
- We have more substitute teachers in elementary schools.
- We have improved trust – “give us the ball and let us play.”
- We have systems that talk to each other.
- We have a sense of accomplishment that we have attained our goals.
- We have happy families.
- We have good staff retention – people are staying because they are happy to work here.
- Kids have access to a bunch of programs so that they can find their interests.
- The District Office Staff is more involved with the school community.

## **K-5 Faculty/Staff and Clinical Staff**

### **22 Participants**

Dows Lane Faculty and Staff	1/11/2023 @ 2:45 PM	Six attendees
Main Street Faculty and Staff	1/12/2023 @ 8:05 AM	Three attendees
Clinical Staff	1/11/2023 @ 3:45 PM	13 attendees

### **Expectations for Students:**

- Prepared for higher education, workforce, and the world beyond our district
  - Need more focus on career & life
  - A very high percentage of students graduate
  - The n
  - narrative right now is college, college, college
    - If I ask a parent to have a student drop an AP class, I'll get my ear chopped off
    - Many of us are scared of parents
- Productive contributors and global citizens – look for ways to help
- Can handle challenges and failures
  - Handling transitions and life
  - Can cope in a healthy way
  - Rather have them fail now rather than freak out in college when they get a C grade on a paper
  - Accepting productive struggle
- Equipped to handle the world - well-adjusted
- Key skills/dispositions:
  - Problem solvers
    - Everyone currently wants quick rewards and instant gratification
    - Need to learn to solve problems independently as well as in groups
  - Critical thinkers
  - Being an empathetic citizen
  - Self-advocacy – the parent needs to be able to let the child make mistakes
    - Need to let children advocate for themselves "i.e., their toe hurts."
  - Resilient - how do you respond when you fail?
  - Being open-minded - can deal with differences in opinion
  - Self-awareness
  - Effective communicators
    - Interpersonal skills
    - Can communicate in writing
    - Collaborators and negotiators
  - Independence – right now, there is so much hand-holding

## Strengths:

- Parent/staff relationship overall is supportive
  - Parental involvement has netted good programs - IAF and PTSA fund a lot of extracurricular activities
  - Parents are aware & educated
  - Involved in the school community
  - There is a difference between "Irvington average" and "average"
  - Most parents are respectful, although communication parameters had to be established
- Welcoming community both from a student and staff perspective
  - From the moment I came to this district for an interview, I felt like "this is the place I want to be" – it felt like a welcoming community – it didn't feel like an interview
  - The size of the community allows us to connect with multiple families
  - Great community pride - several groups of friends that get along - no disrespect
- Supportive leadership
- We are active communicators with the community
  - The district attends to every parent's concern; however, there are too many emails.
  - Is there an opportunity to reduce it a bit?
  - District responsiveness to community issues
- Level of commitment of educators and staff - there is a tremendous buy-in, and people in this room in the trenches really care

## Opportunities:



- Staff retention, specifically administrators (high school), assistant principal changes, new psychologists
  - New hires don't stay long (PPS turnover, PPS Administration, Admin Turnover)
  - 19 years, six principals at Dows Lane
- Achievement pressures/expectations of staff and students
  - Driven by kids (on themselves) & parents
  - HS kids not going to lunch and eating a granola bar, taking multiple classes in a row, ultra-competitive
  - Can we limit the number of AP classes? Typical response - "If Ardsley student has 7 AP credits and we have 5, you are going to hurt my student."
  - Maybe change the value of classes? A voluntary honors component in an existing class
- Dows Lane facility issues
  - Sometimes looks dirty
  - Tiles falling down in gym – redid floor, heat has to be manually regulated, A/C leaks.
  - Need to better maintain the building
  - Don't have an auditorium
  - Lack of open space in high school/Dows Lane
  - Heat manually regulates
  - Spent money to build an outdoor bathroom
- Want more input on how to prioritize initiatives and professional development
  - Need for more PD choices and connect with what we actually do in day-to-day
  - It would be beneficial to have more planning/collaboration time during PD half days
  - Keep on adding initiatives but need to remove items as well
  - Weeding the garden – how can we add World Languages if we have SEL, DEI, core academics
- Improved staff morale - sometimes, we don't feel valued by the community
  - Our principal goes above and beyond to make us feel valued
  - Teacher salaries - the latest contract is not comparable to the cost of living
  - Salary scales on the lower end of Westchester county
  - High school staff morale – feels underappreciated
  - Disconnect with what goes on in school and what parents think we are doing
  - Sometimes not thanked from an external perspective - frustrating
- Technology Department
  - A new person just came in
  - Website – not compliant due to privacy
  - Technology issues
  - Have to file a ticket when issues get addressed
  - Training on Google Sheets
  - Right now, we are given new technology and are told to figure it out – we need training
- Bussing situation
  - It is awful – don't offer buses to plays/sports
  - There is a HS bus in AM where students get here way too early
- Opportunity for more equity
  - Improved equity in communications
  - Equity and acceptance in high school - some students don't feel part of the HS once they get there

## **Vision for the Future:**

- We have an honest, practical, and realistic view of what the day looks like (we allocate time better), with the right priorities - basic instruction, one thought-provoking higher-level thinking subject, SEL, reading/writing workshop.
- There will be less pressure for the students instead of a 6 AM to 7 PM culture. We build in decompression time like Finland because, right now, it's like a rat race. The pace slows down, allowing time for SEL.
- We have four days of school each week.

- Students and staff are happy and will have a healthier balance. Kids will have fun.
- We will have newer software and more integrated technology systems that talk to each other.
- We graduate some nice humans. Students will graduate with their plans rather than what their parents want them to do.

### **Bonus question: what are students struggling with?**

- Problem-solving/self-help skills
  - Lack of stamina
  - No problem-solving/self-help skills – learned helplessness – more so after the pandemic
  - Students immediately seek help without trying to problem solve
  - Don't know how to problem solve or how to resolve an issue
  - Need help with struggling through problems, assessing reasonableness, being comfortable with struggling
  - Want instant gratification
  - Self-reliance – always needing reassurance “Am I doing this right?”
- Socialization issues post-COVID
  - Harder to make connections
  - Dynamics
  - Finding a partner
- Anxiety and depression - still fresh from COVID
- Competitiveness
  - Private tutors and additional supports are being utilized to stay competitive - some students feel like failures
  - Competitiveness results in equity issues – ones who have resources vs. one who don't have
  - Balance – academic rigor and SEL – more risk assessments – little kids stressed out
- Post-COVID academic struggles
  - Spelling, grammar, and vocabulary areas of struggle
  - Writing – basics of punctuation

## **Middle School and High School Faculty/Staff**

### **14 Participants**

IMS Faculty and Staff	1/11/2023 @ 7:30 AM	Five attendees
IHS Faculty and Staff	1/19/2023 @ 2:35 PM	Nine attendees

### **Expectations for Students:**

- When they leave, what is their plan? Pathways – college, trade, military, gap year
  - High college attendance rate – culture is college, disservice not to introduce other pathways BOCES – Technical (county-based, talent-based)
  - For those in a self-contained world – Complete transition process and well – appropriately connect to the adult employment world
- Finding their passions and their uniqueness - honor themselves and celebrate who they are.
  - What are my passions, and how do they translate?
  - What do I do well?
- Be a lifelong learner
  - Focused on learning and not grade-obsessed
  - Academic risk-taking
- Use of technology and civics

- There are currently a lot of bubbles and echo chambers
  - Critical thinking - recognizing when a source is inaccurate
- Graduating with a greater sense of self
  - Be a citizen and see the world around them
  - Give back to their community
  - Confident of voice and where they stand in the world
- Meeting performance levels, skill-based performance levels
- Meeting Irvington's Vision of the Graduate
- Key skills/dispositions:
  - Resilience and grit
    - At least try something - not seeking immediate gratification
    - Mistakes are part of being a learner
    - Intellectual stamina - the ability to figure it out
    - Independent thinker and problem solver
  - Empathy
    - See and honor other perspectives
    - Doesn't make other people's perspectives less valuable
    - Being sensitive
  - Critical and flexible thinking
  - Self-awareness
    - Using tools
    - Reaching out to a friend
    - Metacognitive

### **Strengths:**

- Committed and collaborative teachers and staff that are completely invested in kids and supportive of each other. They have a true willingness to do whatever it takes.
  - Very supportive PD
  - Ability to shift and move – flexibility in how people approach their jobs
  - Growth mindset and adaptability of teachers – trying to improve ourselves
- Supportive and responsive administration
  - Culture of acceptance of risk-taking – staff willing to try new things, administration willing to support
  - The district is very supportive and responsive compared to other places
  - The core of the building is innovation
- Students generally want to improve their school and are visible and invested.
- The supportive community has embraced kids - IEF, PTSA, parents, businesses, and VIP kids.
- Investment in every student - the district supports highest achievement students and special needs students

### **Opportunities:**

- Opportunities for professional learning
  - We need to be at classes and have limited coverage
  - More peer observations, not a consistent practice
  - Disconnect between what the administration wants us to do (district goals handed down) and what teachers want to work on and improve - teachers' voices need to be heard.
  - Respond to the needs of the staff/community
  - More professional development time?
- Effects of COVID
  - Socialization
  - Being able to handle setbacks
  - Emotional regulation
  - Building capacity for these students for skills they were not able to master
  - Kids missed those critical pieces during the pandemic
- Need for the creation of systems and systems of collaboration (time)

- Can we structure our day differently?
- Need for more collaboration time.
- Parents drive narrative too much – we tried to change the schedule, but parents intervened – lunch shouldn't be sacrificed for AP classes.
- Student access to us and our access to them is based on free periods, which are limited.
- Pressure cooker
  - Testing anxiety – too much pressure
  - Parents put a lot of pressure on kids, and pressure felt by teachers
  - Teachers/parent tension – the difference in academic expectations, especially when they don't align
- Lots of administrative changes – have to go through the “get to know them” cycle consistently
  - Need to relearn how we are going to respond to their needs and how they communicate
  - Teaching faculty have had to be extremely flexible
  - Historical knowledge carried by staff and teachers has helped the transition of administration
- Technology access, functionality, and streamlining
  - Needs to be consistently reliable
  - Rain would cause technology issues in past
  - Access control - can we monitor what students are looking at during lessons? Can sites be unblocked? Past experience has had DEI work content blocked, resulting in a 7-10 step workaround.
- Physical space for a growing staff – not a lot of open space for collaboration

### **Vision for the Future:**

- Children feel safe, happy, and accepted. They have the capacity to say that they are doing ok. A student who wants to be a beautician or a sanitary worker is treated the same as one who is planning to go to Harvard.
- We are able to engage with all students and parents, including those with socioeconomic struggles.
- Our schedule reflects flexibility, responsiveness, and accessibility. We have more collaboration time during Superintendent conference days before kids enter at the start of the school year.
- We would have improved technology.
- We work in a supportive environment where it is ok to make mistakes.
- Our school reflects the community and world that we live in.

### **Bonus question: what are students struggling with?**

- Perseverance and patience
  - Mental stamina
  - Short attention span
  - Connected to electronics
- Sense of belonging
  - All students need opportunities to belong; some feel that they don't.
  - Lower socioeconomic bracket struggle with higher bracket

## **Dows Lane & Main Street Parents (K-5)**

### **27 Participants**

Dows Lane Parents - Day Session	1/11/2023 @ 12 PM	Nine attendees
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Main Street School Parents - Day Session	1/11/2023 @ 1:15 PM	Four attendees
Dows Lane Parents - Night Session	1/11/2023 @ 6 PM	Nine attendees
Main Street School Parents - Night Session	1/11/2023 @ 7:15 PM	Five attendees

### Expectations for Students:

- Be prepared for whatever they want to do: higher education, career, trades, blue-collar professionals, armed services, arts, creativities, police - we want them to discover themselves.
  - More than adequate K-12 education
  - Get into top schools - access to one of their top schools and not being left behind
  - Some kids take a gap year
  - To be accepted to any four-year school that they apply for
- Education beyond the classroom – practical, real-world experiences and discovering their range of abilities. Well-rounded in things outside of school and exposed to cultural diversities.
- Being healthy, physically and mentally
  - Having self-esteem
  - Emotionally sustainable
  - Mentally healthy children that come out as balanced grown-ups
  - Not to be traumatized by MS and HS – have good mental health and demonstrate kindness
  - Do not want them to experience too much pressure - balanced approach
- Be a global citizen in the world and make it a better place
  - Understanding the problems of our time
  - Understanding their own privilege
  - Social capital – connect to community organizations
  - Media literacy – prepare for a world more multifaceted
  - Civics education - know how local and state government works
  - Learning foreign languages – expand beyond romance languages and start earlier
  - Being inclusive
  - Being good people that care about the world and are excited to learn more about the world
  - Understanding current events - i.e., energy policy, climate issues
  - Be able to operate in a community
  - Contributing member of society
  - Understanding their rights and responsibilities as citizens
- Be adept at problem-solving and thinking for themselves
  - Know how – have a question or thought and know how to go after it (study skills, perseverance, academics)
  - Confident in facing obstacles
- Key skills/dispositions:
  - Critical thinking
    - Understanding what a primary and secondary source is
    - Common-sense thinkers
  - Love of learning/growth mindset
    - Teaching them how to grow
    - Develop a love of school and education – lifelong learning
  - Good communication skills - written, verbal, and online
    - Interpersonal
    - Conflict resolution

- Being able to present
  - Research and report – oral reporting
- Resiliency – encouraging kids to fail to learn and grow
  - Risk-taking and grit - holding safe spaces to fail and helping them grow and push through and not be discouraged, rather than a parent trying to fix everything for them
- Knowledge and skills for life
  - Basic financial literacy, i.e., balance checkbook & invest in the stock market.
  - Home economics
  - How to be a grown-up
  - Oil change in a car
  - Typing
  - Home economics
- Social competence and maturity
- Independence and self-reliance - be able to learn and succeed on their own and don't need reassurance - able to take risks
- Integrity and authenticity - being comfortable in your own skin.

## Strengths:

- We have very qualified teachers who care and are skilled at what they do. They need to be supported.
  - Teachers are excellent in responsiveness to parents. Really happy with the teachers – they communicate really well, especially over email.
  - Teachers are super involved in the welfare of kids – nurturing, caring
  - Teachers are very adaptive to the classroom
  - Every teacher we have had is fantastic - each teacher has their own style.
- The facilities are nice and clean and really good, especially the high school. The facilities are well-maintained, and the custodial staff is awesome.
- Resources that are put into special education - good support. Really happy with the extra help screening
- Students are really good kids that are well-rounded. Kids are civil - warm and safe environment - good anti-bullying culture.
- Connection with District/Village/IEF/PTSA
  - Partnership with IEF – teachers pitch and programs are supplemented
  - Everyone works very nicely together
  - Figuring out how to get the best out of \$1

## Opportunities:

- Lack of academic rigor – return focus to what is happening with academics
  - Increase standards for academic rigor K-8
  - Main Street stagnated - 4th and 5th grades have no homework
  - Work ethic and rigor were way below what we expected – students were not being challenged - students had never done a book report.
  - Main Street – a lot more current focus on SEL
  - Need more focus on achievement gaps - Students struggling to read but because they are just over the 25 percentile, can't get additional support.
  - Many parents turn to external tutors, which is expensive - a lot of supplementing for not only extras but must-haves. Examples: Spelling lists, coding, art classes, digital art
  - Current lack of differentiated instruction (had in the past) – meeting students where they are and pushing them
    - Some schools, during orientation (prior to students begin coming to school), meet to understand each student for 10 minutes each.
  - NY State does not mandate gifted and talented
  - Anecdotally, we have heard: "In 8th grade, it will get really good."
  - There is a perception that the quality of school gets lower as you higher

- Lot more leaving for private school
  - We're being safe (kids are getting college), whereas other districts are scrappy with innovation.
- Need to do more with mental health - ensure resources are available when kids are anxious.
  - Schools do handle bullying and racism really well.
  - The kid who presents at the nurse's office with a stomach ache – it's anxiety.
  - No communication from the school
  - Does each kid have a trusted individual? Upper ages, yes. Lower ages, no
  - Main Street nurse is most proactive and astute and can identify issues – something that draws students to her
- Special needs – a lot to do there
  - Lack of support for high-functioning autism spectrum
  - Teachers/staff needs to be trained better to deal with special needs/autistic children
  - Anecdotal, we have been told, "Have to get them out by 6th grade" – typically where the issues are socially
  - If your kid has ADHD, teachers can't tell us that they should get services elsewhere to help them (potentially driven by the cost aspect since the district would be responsible)
  - Currently, we have a rigid reputation as a school district (sitting at a desk) - we need more flexibility and accommodating for each and every student
  - IEPs not being implemented - differentiation for special needs students does not get addressed
  - Outcomes for students with disabilities – disparities glaring for Irvington – 25-30% getting services
- After-school clubs and activities are critical, need to be expanded, and are under-resourced
  - .
  - Bussing and budget
  - Why not start talking about it? Form a committee – we have committees for everything.
  - We have an expensive budget; why do we not have fundamental things?
  - Fostering community garden
  - Parents can come in and volunteer
  - Can we partner with other school districts on clubs & activities?
  - Clubs are important to help find an identity when athletes are not their thing – like debate or chess club.
  - HS/Club Offerings/Sports/Arts/Robotics – expand offerings – different kids should be able to try many different things – right now, GPAs mean everything
  - How can we utilize our parents, community, and senior citizens better?
    - Tie the students with the community and tie the community in for resources
    - Bring the parents in – have those sessions
- Professional development and great teaching instruction
  - More personalized PD to help them succeed in what they want to succeed in
  - Want to know what they are being developed on during these half-day PD days, not because I'm suspicious
  - The current schedule is not designed 2 for working parents or those who don't have a nanny
  - Is there an opportunity to consolidate the days?
  - Full day rather than a half day – for parent/teacher conferences, watch a movie in the gym?
  - How do you measure great teaching? More of a focus on understanding what makes them great
  - Need more focus on current teachers
- Hiring more people of color – lost 3-4 of 5 after the pandemic
  - How do we expect our students to be more culturally diverse if that's all they see?
  - Were there exit interviews?
  - Lots of rumors of why people left - controversial - should be clearing the air
  - Hiring and retaining more diverse teachers by doing more than going to a job fair
- Innovation and technology need to be better utilized

- Aware of technology advances - don't let technology use you
- Impacts of technology - district/teachers need to tell students that they can't spell 4 hours on video games
- Technology – Chat GPT – cheating will be that much easier – stay relevant on how we are teaching children
- We are well-funded - where is the money going?
  - Kids don't have a foreign language program.
  - Gifted and talented – there was a program but we got rid of it - should be a gifted learning program for elementary schools.
  - Getting to the inflection point on the 2% tax cap
- Lack of vertical alignment
  - Information not passed from Dows Lane to Main Street in terms of support needed.
  - Lack of connectivity and continuity of service grade to grade
- Purposeful playing rather than all instruction
- Alternative parent view on Welcoming Schools Presentation
  - Juggle what they are talking to children about
  - Books in 4th grade about men kissing – need to balance community values
  - Different points of view are a challenge
  - Certain things are age-inappropriate
  - It should be an opt-out program
  - Elective-based programs?
  - The children were overanxious with some of the lessons.

### **Vision for the Future:**

- We collaborate with neighboring communities and pop the Irvington bubble.
- Our students will have optimal mental health and will feel less pressure.
- We have a rigorous elementary school experience with both high standards and emphasis, with thoughtful professional development and differentiated instruction. We have a districtwide system for mental health issues, particularly for students in crisis.
- Our district will continue to be academically rigorous but also more humane.
- The community plays a part in the district and students' success.
- The district is more interactive with the community, and the community will play a huge part in the district and students' successes.
- We are on the top 10 list of best schools in New York. Irvington High School wins awards for curricular innovation.
- Each student has a quarterback from a staff perspective that follows them through the school system (i.e., a college/career counselor).
- The community truly values DEI, and it can be seen when you walk through the school doors, and it is just not just lip service. We are a more progressive district from a learning perspective – children are bold enough to take risks from a DEI perspective.
- Strengths of the upper levels (inclusion & acceptance) of the school are brought down to the lower levels, and each student experiences smooth transitions from school to school.
- The Irvington community has more focus on volunteering rather than funding for additional resources.
- Our school district is able to service any and all children in the district.
- We live up to the hype and have measures to show that we are (i.e., college acceptance rate - % of people that apply that are accepted).
- Students leave the district being introspective thinkers and know who they are, and find meaning in their life.

## **Irvington Middle School and High School Parents 25 Participants**



IMS Parents – Day Session	1/12/2023 @ 12 PM	Eight attendees
IHS Parents – Day Session	1/12/2023 @ 1:15 PM	Seven attendees
IMS Parents – Night Session	1/12/2023 @ 6 PM	Four attendees
IHS Parents – Night Session	1/12/2023 @ 7:15 PM	Six attendees

### Expectations for Students:

- Prepared for their next step, whatever it may be – most are college but could be different.  
Prepared to go into the world.
  - Prepared for college - college prep is the major part of the job but not the entire job. Not a huge leap for students.
  - Prepared for technical school, workforce
  - Ready for life, have life skills
  - Students didn't have to deal with any major challenges
  - As prepared for whatever the next step is after high school - we are doing a really good job now, but there are things we could be doing better. We shouldn't be as reliant on parents.
- An active member of the community and society
  - Be good citizens - civics
  - Used to be a community service requirement for graduation that was dropped for whatever reason - it needs to be added back in. This could result in the opportunity to get a job. Should start much younger and see many different ways to give back.
  - Sense of responsibility to the community - part of something bigger
  - Helping out seniors
  - Learn more than their environment because the world is much bigger than Irvington – expose them to spaces outside Irvington and learn about people that don't live here.
  - Being aware of real-world issues – real learning and practical benefits
  - Good, moral people in a world that could be cruel
- Have good math/science skills
  - Having good math skills - make changes in high school so that people don't need outside tutoring - math curriculum supports within the school.
  - We don't give the kids the opportunity to try and fail
  - Don't like holding kids back that are excelling – don't want to level people to the lowest level
  - By 6th grade, we know who is going to which track. By 8th grade – the top gets to take the Regents exam. You want everyone to be fluent in math at the highest possible level. If 100% are getting > 85% on Regents, then we are not offering the exam to enough students.
- Strong base in reading and writing
  - Writing and knowing how to write is everything.
  - Kids that know how to write with implements rather than a computer – students don't know how to read cursive.
  - Kids need to be taught how to write thesis-level stuff and how to write emails.
  - After high school, kids are not prepared for the amount of reading
  - Don't have a strong enough background in literature
  - Writing can be improved
  - Know how to write a research paper - persuasive writing
- Prepared technologically
  - The students need to get off the computers
    - Chromebooks are disruptive to kids.

- Wish more assignments were via handwriting. Can we do something system-wise?
  - Kids need to be able to write well because it is the first impression that people get – shorthand does not work – professionally, it is very important.
- Tech point of view – future of technology – technology is changing so rapidly, and kids are not where they need to be; I don't see any of that.
  - Understanding what the different technology that is coming - like the pre-internet to the internet era
  - Technology understanding, management, and awareness
  - Intelligence about technology is not there – students don't know how to critically review what they search
- The logic of coding will stay the same
- Create, don't consume
- Well-rounded human beings. Academics are important; a certain level of exposure to arts and sciences
  - Having them feel like they are part of something. Beyond a classroom setting, they have extracurricular activities.
  - Finding their passions
- Key skills/dispositions:
  - Resilience and ability to handle stress - problem solvers
    - Never giving up
    - Teach them how to handle disagreements (as they are coming from a small pond)
    - Lots of mental health issues in college - Teach them they may not do well, it's ok not to be the best all the time or the top of the class – not everyone gets a trophy
    - How to handle adversity - need to learn how to bounce back
    - Students are paralyzed during tests
    - Sometimes, they breeze through MS in a happy place. By the time they reach high school, it is too late.
    - Don't get enough homework.
    - Willing to take risks in the future - brave, resilient, able to fail, try new things
    - Get a bad grade - need to be able to come back from that. In my career, I can't call mom.
  - Interpersonal communication skills
    - Will be challenged during interviews
    - Speak publicly – interact with members of the community
    - Communicating effectively - speak and discourse with adults
    - The youngest generation doesn't have the social skills to build relationships, which is exacerbated by pandemic
    - Collaboration – group projects
    - Presentation skills
    - Speech skills - debate – would be good if integrated into the curriculum
  - Self-advocacy - how to ask for help
    - How do you go to a teacher and ask for support?
    - How do you ask for support?
    - Self-advocacy needs to be taught - how to be advocates - some kids are out there in the yearbook, etc. but quiet kids left behind
    - School is the hardest place to advocate for themselves because they get shut down (they have no choice)
    - Some students/people are in the know or sought after on how to volunteer, but others don't know – equity issue – needs to be more equitable access on who gets chosen
  - Executive functioning has to start much younger, even in elementary school, needs to be an executive functioning class
    - 6th grade – study skills class is a complete waste of time, doesn't teach the right skills, and needs to be revamped

- Building support program
  - Only four other people in class – need IEP
  - Individualized study skills, support in planning
- Every student learns differently – everyone has their own system – no individualism.
- New-age educators need to be open – can give students options - notebooks, binders, and computers. Try options. If it doesn't work, try different ones.
- Certain organizational skills – time management, planning. If you don't get support at home, you are floundering.
- Critical thinker – critical reader, discussion, and writing
  - If you are not in honors in high school, you stay at the middle school level. Have to be honors in 9th and 10th grade. If you have a child that is capable and has anxiety, not ok that they have to be honors. Non-honors class should be able to teach you how to write
  - Question things and don't take it all as 100% in social media
  - Analytical, be able to look at different viewpoints
- Cultivate an attitude of lifelong learning and curiosity
- Confident
- Growth mindset - fixed vs. growth mindset
- Persistence
- Demonstrate empathy and kindness

## Strengths:

- Most administrators and teachers truly care and are very supportive of helping any student with whatever they want to do.
  - I appreciate the superintendent – he does use data a lot; I wish he would use data to measure his own goals/objectives.
  - Dows Lane and Middle School administration are very competent
  - Generally impressed by the teachers – a lot of teachers take a genuine interest in students at a granular level, which is appreciated
    - Alternate view: "I have not found that" – is this a symptom of bad pairing with the teacher?
  - Teachers are frontline people – how do you get them to buy in from admin? How are they held accountable even with the teacher union?
- In general, the community is great – a huge plus.
  - Belongingness
  - Sense of pride (athletics)
  - Safe environment across the board - you know if something is going on, someone will reach out to you – community atmosphere
- Financial health is good, but prioritization needs improvement
  - Plenty of \$ - not always used the right way
  - We have the money available - tremendous potential to change whatever we want.
  - The financial health of the district - I heard horror stories about other districts; we have competent administrators.
- PPS is very good – have a Consortium with other villages
  - Guidance counseling
  - Early screening of dyslexia
  - Lots of improvement in social work
- Students lift each other up
  - Kids have friend circles, yet they are still collegial with other kids
  - Students are supportive of one another
- The size of the district is perfect
  - Not too small, not too big
  - The Smallness of the school district allows individual attention
- Constant improvement on facilities - facilities are in good condition

- Need to self-advocate and be proactive in seeking help - if you push for help and ask for help, you will get help

## Opportunities:

- Curriculum, instruction, and development need to be reviewed - should be more relevant.
  - Curriculum
    - Needs to be more interesting – the books they choose are not interesting, not inspiring.
    - “I had to discover the world in college” – why can’t our kids experience that here?
    - Should be able to look at curriculum K-12 at a very detailed level on the website
    - The curriculum itself – Common Core is a safe answer – not engaging – be bold
    - Is there instructional coaching necessary? Where is the instructional support?
    - Don’t really have physical textbooks – lots of paper, not organized
    - Broaden curriculum
    - Earlier access to languages
  - Instruction
    - Watching a video and answering questions on a computer
    - Wish I knew what it was like in the classroom
    - Kids not talking to each other about content
    - Teaching has evolved over time – not supposed to be read and retrieve
    - Have some excellent teachers, but some bad ones
    - Certain places in the high school are struggling - math and history department, quality of teaching issues that have been documented for years
    - .
    - Testing issues - multiple tests in a day
      - Four tests in a day – should be protocols and testing calendar
      - Test a day after a break
      - Every teacher thinks their class is the most important
  - Development - we would like to learn what the teachers do during the professional development days so we can support them at home – so that parents and teachers can work together
- Extent of tutoring
  - A lot of tutoring indicates perhaps more need for professional development – not much transparency.
    - Lots of people are getting HS Math tutors for \$150/hour
    - Some teachers haven’t changed their teaching style for ten years
  - The tutor is another staff member making all his business from students in that other teacher’s class
  - Inhibits the ability to make adjustments to school
  - The first step is to understand the extent of tutoring and why?
  - Conflict of interest and transparency?
    - Transparency of administrative and high-paid teachers on their outside income – state ethics should disclose. Don’t want undue influence.
    - How many teachers have a tutoring business?
- Equity and access – we need to do more to educate parents and kids
  - Just because a kid didn’t do well in 7th grade doesn’t mean they can’t do well in higher grades. Kids get activated at different times...not all kids progress the same way
  - Should inspire kids to do more rather than put them in a box - assessments in 6th-grade result in different rest of education tracks. Math in 6th grade – stop tiptoeing – give it to us straight and justify
  - The district can do a better job of communicating requirements. Communication with parents needs to be improved - say more and speak less
    - Don’t want to read 15 paragraphs – emails need to be bullet-pointed and concise

- The district needs to communicate in a different way to parents and students so that they can guide parents on a more interactive level and need to tailor to student needs. Push/pull needs to happen. If you fall in the bell curve, "you're ok." It should be inspired and pushed.
- If it is too clear, certain families can game the system
- How much does a parent know about the process? i.e., requirements for honors classes – only some people know
- "Half of you are not going to be in advanced math next year, don't feel bad" – not the way to inspire. Need a more supportive environment
- If you are in the know, you know a lot. But if you are not in the know, then you will miss a lot
- Mental health is a national problem – remote was so difficult for kids
  - Should be more resources - the problem is a shortage of resources and not enough staff to address
  - More training in this particular area for all the teachers and parent support
  - Education is not there in the school system
  - Kids are having their first year of high school now (after a few years)
  - Anxiety/social anxiety - struggled post-COVID
- Special needs support and differentiated instruction
  - Address individual learning styles - not just engage high motivating
  - Those who need help get it, high fliers get it, middle of the pack don't get it (lost in the middle) unless they have involved parents or have money for outside resources
  - Heightened awareness of different learning styles
  - The structure of the high school will not work for certain students – fix the high school.
  - Differentiated learning in the middle school – some students are bored, need advanced science and advanced math
- Community/non-academic extracurricular community activities, especially for kids that struggle with academics
  - Are there other non-science activities like the competition?
  - The district is lacking in partnerships with the community
  - Few clubs that go deeper in partnerships with, i.e., reps to Youth Empowerment Council
  - Connect with Village

## **Vision for the Future:**

- We will have smaller classes.
- We will have a reduced focus on athletics.
- We will have a master schedule with block scheduling.
- We would not mind having our child in school later and more often, but not earlier.
- Non-sport extracurricular activities take place in an expanded environment. They are not limited to the school day, and we have more access to the building.
- Your child can get support if they are in band 9th period (can't get extra help in high school right now if that is the case).
- The VIP kids will be moved out of the basement, and we will be creative to try something different.
- We communicate better about other non-college programs since not all kids are destined for college and some go to trades and other paths of life. We bring back SHOP.
- Irvington has graduates that want to work here as educators.
- We have a smoother transition to college where there are fewer classes and deadlines are in a few weeks.
- There is a lounge in high school available for free periods, which includes a coffee bar that can be run by kids. Fundraisers are done for prom.
- The high school continues to be refreshed.
- Physical space and availability have improved.

- We have more community engagement like these focus groups that are attended by different people than the normal people that participate.

## Irvington Middle School and High School Students

### 29 Participants

IMS Students	1/11/2023 @ 8:45 AM	18 attendees
IHS Students	01/19/2023 @ 10:30 AM	11 attendees

### Expectations for Students:

- Be more well-rounded
  - Be exposed to many different courses and activities to see what is out there.
  - There is a lot of pressure. We talk about mental health and arts/music/PE are things that help improve it, but budgets usually cut these things first.
  - Music used to have trips to Belgium/Amsterdam. This year, we have a trip to Philadelphia.
  - Electives offered to all but impossible to take for underclassmen.
  - There are several requirements that prevent being able to take more electives.
  - Some requirements don't feel value-added and seem pointless – lots of people don't have lunch. Perhaps some of the requirements can be assemblies instead.
  - Knowing about the world and how it works
- Be prepared for the college experience
  - Experience in college may be different in high school – how are we going to adapt to college?
  - Ready to engage in college materials – i.e., write longer essays
  - My impression is college is less jam-packed than now
- Proficient in core subjects and fundamentals, i.e., math, science, and AP classes
- There is so much focus on grades, and it is putting mental health in jeopardy
- How to succeed in life outside of careers
- Being more comfortable reaching out to others
- Key skills/dispositions:
  - Life skills
    - Some current classes are unnecessary for the future - why are we going to need sewing?
    - Usage of calculators
    - How do we get a job?
    - How do we invest money?
    - We want to be socially smart rather than just book smart
    - Good study skills
    - Paying taxes
  - Time management - some of us struggle with it
    - Planning in advance
    - Trying not to procrastinate
  - Learning to learn
    - Ability to learn something new and get good
    - Sometimes it is not about the subject itself, but the process
  - Public speaking – speaking to big groups
  - Collaboration - group work
  - Good social skills

## Strengths:

- Some teachers are really amazing and have impacted my life
  - Some teachers are trying to actually connect with students and connect with the world – faculty makes comments about looking for purpose
  - Personal connections with teachers like sports and music
  - Some teachers make it enjoyable
  - Foster real learning, it has been normalized that you memorize things and are just taught, not what it should be
  - They ask us questions and have us figure it out ourselves, which is more engaging.
  - Lots of good art teachers
  - They ask about our mental health
  - They give us extra accommodations at times (i.e., an extra week to finish the project)
  - Teachers prepare us for next year
  - Alternate views:
    - Stand-and-deliver teaching doesn't work
    - I ask a lot of questions (it's how I learn), and some teachers don't like that, and I struggle with those teachers
    - The way they talk to students impacts their lives - I am scared of some teachers
- In elementary school, it is instilled in us how important it is to be within a community and respect others – as such; there are no real conflicts and good camaraderie among students.
  - Focus on making people feel welcome – some do not
  - Creating safe space
- Science department – gizmos, labs, presentations, different learning techniques, more hands-on
  - Classes are the hardest but most enjoyable and extremely effective.

## Opportunities:

- Tests are a large focus and sometimes cause too much pressure. We seem to have numerous tests in one day. More tests could be open notes and we should have more review days.
  - Faculty not willing to accommodate
  - At the end of the marking period, there is a lot of stuffing in many exams
  - I have had more homework this week than all year
  - I had 2 tests with one teacher
  - There were rules put in place regarding testing schedules that haven't been followed by teachers.
  - Lots of cramming
  - I have three tests in one day, a project in another class, and no midterm review.
  - Tests seem to be clustered and crammed – 3-4 tests on the same day need to be spread out, and teachers need to collaborate on the testing schedule.
  - Balancing is difficult
  - Having tests after tests is hard because it is difficult to switch your mentality
  - They do give us an advanced warning about tests.
  - Some tests are a regurgitation of information rather than about the process
  - Open book/notes
    - Should be Open notebook – shows paying attention, care about unit material
    - Certain classes open book – science, math, social studies
  - Sometimes POW (Problem of the Week), Quiz every week
  - Should give more tests that don't go in the grade book
  - Should be review activities on the days before tests
- Need for life skills class that includes:
  - How to make and manage money
  - Public speaking
  - Time management
  - How to get a job
  - How to invest in the stock market
  - Paying taxes

- Communication skills
- Teaching engagement and instruction
  - Teacher ownership and student ownership are off balance right now
  - Certain departments just don't care – a lot of teachers care, but there are others that don't
    - Teacher – "you just don't belong in this class."
    - Some put it all on students "you don't study enough, you don't do this..."
- The teacher body needs to reflect the student body – some tenured teachers do not
- Student voice not heard by teachers – should be more unannounced visits for teacher observations
- Engagement and checking on teachers – science department is good – want better psychology department
- World language department – more native speakers – future new hires
- Use the budget for students and teaching staff
  - Outdoor learning classroom is not being used
  - Current lack of transparency
  - The Capital Bond project was used for the entrance
  - Should be more double-paned glass – do it the right way
  - The administration wasn't listening to what the art faculty was looking for in terms of renovation; voices need to be heard
- Mental Health and communication around that
  - 99% of teachers don't care about mental health
  - Accommodations should be made for those with anxiety
  - No effort on their part to understand
  - Ivy league pressure – there should be more acceptance of a "B" – junior jumpoff meeting, anxious every day
- Should have courses that teach:
  - Study skills – we have a class on how to get help, should have more focus, maybe change to life skills and future
  - How to take notes – being self-reliant to take notes ourselves and take personal responsibility - More notetaking opportunities – both handwritten and digital (finding what works for each student)
- The current schedule is too crazy:
  - 9-10 classes each day
  - I get here at 7:40 and go home at 6:20 – it's draining, and you lose yourself a bit; I want to relax, but I have lots of homework on weekends; it feels personal, and we should get two days to ourselves.
  - Most have lunch but at very inconvenient times
  - A lot of teachers have been accommodating to allow us to eat in class – value well-being
  - Two ELA blocks back to back need to separate with a free period
- Cafeteria food – disconnect between what Irvington pays and what we get
  - Partnership with local businesses
  - Food budget
  - Aramark supplier, Cisco distributor
  - Don't want to sound entitled; little things that can be better
  - More vegetarian options

## Vision for the Future:

- We would offer a life skills class, which would offer a good array of skills and not be too focused.
- Physically, the school would look the same. Each class would have a specific day for a test, which would be an open book.
- We would offer a larger variety of languages because it is good to learn new languages.



- Our food services would offer a larger variety and better school lunches.
- We take more action and have less lip service.
- We focus our energy on the right things. The district presents key initiative ideas to students who vote on them.
- There is more transparency in the school district.
- The student stress level has decreased.
- Teachers offer more differentiated instruction and are more engaging.
- Teachers advocate and care about students.
- Students don't compare themselves to other students.
- IUFSD is a home away from home rather than a facility.
- We would keep the curriculum as is and continue to help kids who need help.

## Community Members of Color/Spanish Language Parents

### 15 Participants

Community Members of Color	2/1/2023 @ 7 PM	12 attendees
Spanish Language Focus Group	2/8/2023 @ 7 PM	Three attendees

### Expectations for Students:

- Be well-balanced
  - Achieve academically what they want to achieve - have what it takes and tools to get there.
  - A good foundation for mental health
  - Prepared for the future
  - Continue to progress socially
- Graduate with an understanding of the world outside Irvington.
  - One view: NYC hasn't really been taken advantage of – we're in a bubble
  - Opposing view: I feel like parents should be responsible for introducing kids to NYC
  - Colonial day - did for so long, but it is offensive
  - No intermingling, with these students for 13 years, we need to break the bubble - the theme of bullying
- Applies for colleges, has career choices, and is competitive with other students. If college is not an immediate goal, support is necessary for the next phase
- Lives a productive life - contributes to society
- Able to look at a variety of perspectives
- Accomplish their dreams and find their passions
- Key skills/dispositions:
  - Resilience – with friendships, work, and education. Ability to be challenged - students are so afraid to fail.
  - Compassion – exposed to differences, open-mindedness. Developing compassionate kids means they must be exposed to the hard stuff.
  - Critical thinking – understanding of the 'process.'

- Empathy – understanding of other people and social awareness
- Self-advocacy
- Ability to voice an opinion
- Independent thinkers

## Strengths:

- Very good attention from teachers and communication with parents
  - The teachers are very nice when they chat with us, and it has given me trust
  - They have good communication; I always had a lot of questions – especially since we are not from here, and they've answered my questions.
  - My teacher and I were able to resolve an issue with my child very quickly.
  - The teachers pay attention to us, my children now have a lot of friends and when they talk too much, I hear about that too from the teachers.
  - My son was in another school because he was not progressing, but I feel comfortable now because teachers are communicating with me well. Teachers are doing a great job helping my kid progress.
  - We are new in the school district as well – we feel good about the teachers.
  - Approached teachers with issues, and they have been responsive
  - Teachers are always sending messages to keep us updated.
- This is a welcoming and inclusive community.
  - I am very comfortable here – I cried more than my son did on his first day of school. My kid used to be behind, and now he is progressing well.
  - We used to be in another school, and my child wasn't happy there. She gets along with everyone here.
  - I don't feel discrimination here.
- Small size - not a pressure cooker
- The fact that we have this focus group is a good thing – it isn't common enough to have a forum for persons of color.
- Good resources for special needs
- Teacher retention – seats are filled
- Location – central location, easy access

## Opportunities:

- Curriculum – lack of standards
  - If I asked what texts are used in each grade, they weren't available.
  - Left to teachers in every class, the librarian pulls some books, working toward it
  - Very disappointed with the materials
  - Lots of teacher choice
  - Need aligned standards
- Excessive tutoring
  - Skews the data
  - What subjects? Writing, advanced science classes, math.
  - Private college counseling – shapes up your resume and recommends clubs to join, etc.
  - The district should quantify it - it really contributes to the inequity
  - Tutors paying \$150/hr
  - Continued Guiding Reading which isn't supported
  - Person in school being hired as a tutor (reading specialist)
- POC teacher retention
  - Minority students need better representation of themselves
  - All students need to be exposed to different people – it will help them grow up to be compassionate and understanding
- Inequities in root cause analysis – DEI section
  - Lots of discipline in schools - exacerbated with students of color
  - Black students 3x more likely to be referred

- 5x more likely to be suspended
- Need affinity spaces – a place where kids can talk to others like them
  - Not a lot of safe spaces
  - POC and Allies student union – were funded by IEF
  - Students don't even feel safe in the affinity spaces
- Avoidance of issues
  - Avoidance of issues like the painted swastika in the tree was brushed under the rug.
  - Lack of transparency is problematic.
- Anti-racism training should be part of the curriculum NOW – need intensive training by people who have done it so people understand - parents have had to teach racism, classism, etc., they are seeing.
- Does each student have a trusted adult they can rely upon in the building? No. However, nurses, teachers of color, and DEI coordinators are helpful.

### **Vision for the Future:**

- We have a transparent curriculum, and administrators are closely monitoring the instruction on a regular basis.
- We embrace difficult topics, acknowledge when something happens, talk about it, and trust that it is resolved well.
- We are not afraid of talking about the hard things. We are racially sensitive. We need to do better for our kids. The kids deserve to see themselves in the curriculum and not be subject to a racist culture. They are happy and healthy, as is the district staff. We want to see progress made in a short period of time.
- We maximize the benefit of being in an Irvington bubble (i.e., safety) but tackle the problems and challenges of the bubble.
- We have diverse teachers teaching diverse curricula.
- We have language immersion at the Kindergarten level.
- We are open to having conversations and affinity groups. We are just starting this with the faculty.
- Our grading system removes inequities.
- I picture everything going well as it is going now.
- We're going to be ten years older, and my daughter will be older. I would love for her to study whatever she wants to study and be working as a professional.
- For my son, I am thankful he's doing well, and I want him to accomplish his dreams and be a good person and have his objectives reached by then.

## **Village Leadership and Irvington Senior Center**

### **13 Participants**

Village Meeting	1/19/2023 @ 3:45 PM	Three attendees
Irvington Senior Center	1/11/2023 @ 10 AM	10 attendees

### **Expectations for Students:**

- Resourceful, well-trained, basic education from which to build
  - Math facts are important – need to memorize

- Swinging back to phonics
- Improved writing skills
- Early world language 3-5th grade foundation
- Kids learn more in the first five years than in a lifetime
- If you don't know your own skills well, it doesn't translate
- Some of the teachers are not in tune with grammar rules either
- Well-prepared to pursue college, become employed, or other paths like armed services
- Focus on reading, writing, and everyday math well instead of fancy programs that change every year – there are many gaps
  - Skill drill in elementary
  - Basic math skills
- Hopefully, contribute to the community based on what they learned in school.
- Students will be respectful, intelligent citizens that are prepared for life.
- Key skills/dispositions:
  - Interpersonal skills - Be able to carry on a conversation since it doesn't seem to be second nature anymore. Talking to anyone these days is a struggle.
    - There is a gap between students who can and cannot communicate
    - We see it on the Community Advisory Board
  - Life skills - balance checkbook, electrical, carpentry work, Home Economics (more modern than the 1950s - i.e., how to use a plumbing snake, how to change a tire)
  - Self-confidence
  - Self-advocate - comfortable speaking up for yourself
  - Negotiation and conflict resolution
  - Love of learning - students don't currently value education
  - Start languages early – right now, committee after committee, not going anywhere
  - Demonstrating respect

## Strengths:

- Since Kris has come on, there has been a great partnership between the village and the schools.
  - Building custodians and village staff have each others' phone numbers
  - The police department shares information with school and youth officers. In other places, problematic. Not here!
  - During the pandemic, I talked to Kris every day for 6 weeks. His leadership is great.
  - We have a united front between the village and schools – conflict rarely leaves the rooms, and we assume good intent.
  - Very willing to try new things on both school and town side.
  - Both Village and School are approachable and collaborative. We solve problems together – a genuine partnership.
  - Community Advisory Board comprised of students, village leaders, school leaders, and police officers - students determine the agenda.
- Passionate teachers that connect with students
  - Kids came back and were inspired
  - Teachers care that students are successful
  - Genuine connection with students and teachers
  - The good reputation of good schools - attracts decent teachers and brings in good students.

## Opportunities:

- Students get a chance to be exposed to more life skills. Not everyone goes to college.
  - Pushing students to get involved in community
  - More well-rounded students right now: 90% academic/10% Activities
  - Giving kids a voice is a way to get them more involved in the community
  - Summertime/weekends – more community leadership skills
  - Empower kids to organize
  - SHOP eliminated – need carpenters, plumbers, etc.

- More student internships for Irvington seniors in high school
- Teachers are demoralized and feel overwhelmed
  - COVID
  - Lack of continuity of HS admin
  - Voice is not heard (or not the right voice)
  - Social pressures, no time
- The community has a very loud, overpowering voice. Stop listening to the loud voices – the teachers being slammed by it.
  - Parents are too vocal and have too much of a voice; we need to let the teachers do their jobs.
  - Racism is learned and taught.
  - Need to put American Flag and/or Blue Lives Matter flag up and explain the true meaning.
- Balancing demands of the district at every level with the available \$
  - Financial sustainability
  -
- Partnerships with other schools may give us a strategic advantage
  - Opportunity to host AP classes for other schools, Baccalaureate for them
  - VIP program run by Village Staff
- Lack of understanding of some parents
  - We need more after-school programs
  - The district does not have the facilities they need to accommodate all the things.
  - More partnerships with the community – groups who want things need to help
- “Woke” early sexual education being taught at Dows Lane - can parents opt out? (anecdote of student shaking/crying regarding subject matter)
- HS Schedule – so little free time, lack of collaboration

### **Vision for the Future:**

- Kids and faculty are happier than they are now, and mental health is a more integrated part of the curriculum (i.e., health classes focus on meditation and breathing).
- Irvington has schools with top-notch staff, facilities, and cutting-edge curricula. It is safe and has minimal drug use.
- Kids want to go back to school at night, and we set the tone that the buildings belong to the students.
- The district and community will have real respect for the teachers – the door needs to be open.
- Students will be good citizens that are respectful and kind (mutual respect for all).
- Students will have basic fundamental skills like math and English at elementary school with nothing fancy additionally.
- There will be less reliance on testing and more dollars to put into the classroom to meet the needs of students – 1:1 support and smaller classrooms.
- Students will respect themselves and won't wear pajamas and slippers to class.