

Creating a Strategic Plan- Meeting #1 for the Montgomery Township School District

Mission Statement

To empower every student to succeed in a diverse, dynamic, global society by providing quality educational experiences in a caring environment

Session 1

What are the Strengths, Achievements and Challenges of the Montgomery Township School District?

On December 12, 2023, Montgomery Township School District administrators, Board of Education members, staff, parents, and community members, seventy-seven (77) in all came together to initiate strategic planning. The first evening focused on the strengths and challenges/opportunities of the Montgomery Township School District. The meeting began with a welcome and introduction by Board President, Ms. Zelda Spence-Wallace. Ms. Mary McLoughlin, Superintendent, presented the current “State of the Schools” report. Facilitator Gwen Thornton, from New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA), was introduced and provided an overview of the strategic planning process.

We reviewed the consensus process utilized in strategic planning. The topic for the evening focused on identifying district strengths and challenges. Participants gathered in randomly assigned groups, four groups in total, and engaged in brainstorming the districts strengths and challenges. After group discussion, each group identified their consensus points, “Top 10” strengths and challenges, and presented those to the full group of meeting participants.

The information that follows is a summary of the work of the small groups. As discussed with the meeting participants, all consensus points are recorded and posted on the district website to share the group work during the course of the strategic planning process.

Group Consensus: Strengths, Achievements & Challenges

Group #1:

Strengths

Invested families
SEL
High Achieving
Extra-curriculars
Balance of Rigor and options
Strong community
Vast elective offering
Diversity
Staff committed to learn, stay current, and grow
Teaming structure at the middle school
Tiered support
91 percent score 3 or higher in AP
Our graduates excel in college
Traditions- (Heritage Day, Camp Mason, Disney, Music trips)
Greater opportunities
Social platforms
Mission, vision, reputation
Alumni /Employees
Teacher salaries
Professional time that is offered to teachers at the middle and secondary level is not offered at the Elementary Level
Talented students
The structure of our schools (builds resilience)

Challenges/Opportunities

Staff burn out
Transitions from school to school
Communication
Lack of Life skills in our students (problem-solving, resilience, accountability, empathy)
Academic stress
Students Lack access for extra help
Staff lack purposeful professional time at the elementary level
Student accountability
Honors classes are harder than AP classes
World language classes are very challenging
Music, Arts, and Sports infused with other sports than football

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Socioeconomic impedes the participation of parents and students
Language arts curriculum - teachers' college no longer have effective strategies
Workshop- scientifically based

Group #2

Strengths

Our Community values education
Academics-balance of arts/sciences and humanities
Great facilities
Extracurricular activities and opportunities for students
Competent and supportive staff
Inclusive environment

Challenges/Opportunities

High stress environment
Teacher recruitment and retention
Keeping curricular programs on pace with technology(AI) and society
Experiential learning
Addressing needs of introverted students
Helping students with learning strategies and those new to our district

Group #3:

Strengths

Diversity within the student
population, how the school is embracing the various communities
within (i.e., DEI Team)
Longevity of our staff, their commitment to Monty
The overall pride of the Monty Community: people are proud to be a
part of the community
Strong academics that are balanced by the infusion of the arts offered, media centers that
provide a high level of opportunities
So many sports and clubs, so much to offer for many students – something for everyone - so
much offered in the Arts
Staff is supportive of students, and even post-school hours, staff is there
Collegiality among staff members
High level of Parent Involvement, engaged in the Academic Process
The district has set goals of SEL
We have a director position

Challenges/Opportunities

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Improve late bus transportation, for when the activities end, provide ways to allow for more students to stay at school without the long delay of waiting for the late bus
Increase bandwidth for higher levels of academic challenges to still be supported for Special Education Students.

We serve some really well, but we are struggling with individualizing the IEP. Parents are taking kids out of the district.

How are we adjusting to the present world and how are we teaching our students to be ready for the future?

Shift in the environment surrounding our classroom and how is this going to impact the teaching that happens? We are very top heavy at central office.

Mental Health Crisis: How are we helping students manage their stress?

What metrics do we have to measure the goals we set?

Struggle with community buy-in to Social Emotional Learning, parents are more focused on academic due to cultural priorities.

Areas to support our teachers in professional growth: how can we help teachers infuse SEL throughout all courses - it cannot be isolated. Lack of support for Substitutes

Teacher Shortage

How are we preparing our students for opportunities outside of college, not all go to college.
Gaps in communication to the community (not parents) of what is happening in our school buildings

Group #4:

Strengths

Parent involvement and support

Dedicated and accomplished faculty and staff

Admin at the school level that care and willing to grow school experience

Warmth and communication from teachers

Staff and parents feel valued and heard

Facilities

Focus on the whole child: balanced appreciation and focus on academics, SEL, and growth

Safe community/Safety

Course offerings- electives and arts program

Extracurricular activities in and out of schools

Technology

Professional development for teachers

Diverse and changing community

Well-funded district

Challenges/Opportunities

Academic pressure

Lack of field trips

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Diversity of staff & Teacher recruitment
Bullying
Parental investment in tutors/learning centers
Developing friendships and enduring connections/ Decrease in “close knit” community feel
Number of transitions throughout the buildings
Fall in state and niche rankings
Addressing community concerns and answering questions
Opportunities for students to learn about and from one another (advisory)

Group #5 : :

Strengths

Invested, dedicated staff/ staff retention/ Quality of our staff
Working collaboratively- taking multiple perspectives into consideration when making decisions.
Very involved parents
Peer Leader, and Unified students in the older grades visiting younger grades for mentorship and leadership experiences, younger students benefiting from these limited experiences
DEI efforts- hired Director of Data, Equity, and Accountability. Implicit bias training, inclusive curriculum, work toward cultural competency
Supportive School Board
Engaged and motivated students
Presence of staff and Board members outside of school events to support current and past students.
THRIVING VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS PROGRAM!!!
Shift in pedagogy that was activated by a result of Covid. Strategies to engage students of all different learning styles.
Technology tools and resources, using data to make informed instructional decisions
Strong PD, quality in-house PD opportunities.
Safety and Security measures across

Challenges/Opportunities

Decrease in the number of parents volunteering/support/involvement. Wanting to voice concerns but not be part of the solution.
Transitions- sense of community among students, students changing classes year to year and not having familiar friends - small fish in a big school feeling, needing to feel more connected. The high number of students that are all at one developmental stage in one school without role models
Feeling of community in our schools,
- gross behavior within the community infiltrating our schools

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- Adult behavior and politics infiltrating the education of our students
- Increase in families that have limited access to transportation, not being a walking community parents struggle to get to the building,
- Need for community supports for families who are struggling to navigate Underrepresented groups being celebrated
- (vo-tech was missing from tonight's presentation, celebrating students that are active participants in our community through work study opportunities)
- New SEL/ executive functioning needs of students across the grade levels
- Stakeholder involvement in curricular decisions and curricular program choices/need for culturally responsive curriculum decisions.
- Not enough opportunity for stakeholders to be involved with decisions, utilizing data.
- Need for culturally responsive decisions (with parent input from families).
- Curriculum that meets the needs of diverse students-
- Training in best practices- teachers should have access to the same knowledge/PD, not individual teachers seeking their own tools/resources.
- Time for Professional Development for staff
- DEI - taking our work to another level to address HIB data, inclusive curricular efforts, further build cultural competency and meeting the diverse needs of learners
- Recruiting more diverse staff members
- School start times

Group #6 :

Strengths

Curriculum and Academics, extracurricular activities and performing arts
Education and staff
Open minded and inclusive; diversity (growing)
Star Clinical Services at HS is a great success!
College prep
Parents and community
Students
District collaboration

Challenges/Opportunities

Parental involvement in a positive way.
More rigor; i.e., bring Spanish to Kindergarten (already done)
Staff retention, diversity in staffing
Parental conflict in special education- ways to avoid litigation

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Invest in administrative/parental relationships. i.e., building community, communications, and engagement
Balance between state mandates and parent concerns
Safety and security
Student mental health. i.e., social media supports for kids
Wide range of community needs
Recognizing and understanding where we are meeting students' needs.

Group #7 : :

Strengths

Community feel at OHES care and respect age-appropriate way - independent - feels good. Interaction positive - environment
Students happy to go to school - confidence – individuals
Different clubs to participate and opportunity for students - The teacher links the instructional purpose of the lesson to the larger curriculum; the directions and procedures are clear and anticipate student misunderstanding. The teacher's explanation of content is thorough and clear, developing conceptual understanding through clear scaffolding and connecting with students' interests. Different classes (outside organizations brought in to provide opportunities for students)
Relationship with the township and high school - environment - school and community collaboration environment commission
Parents diverse sets of skills - including parents in
Well-funded - 70% tax payers
Grant opportunities – pursued
Good teachers
Mental Health Program/ resources
Arts Program

Challenges/Opportunities

Opportunities for parents to participate -
PTA engagement of parents
Survey to better understand how to communicate with families
Top and bottom students are good - middle is a mess - more flexible alternatives to provide opportunities for students
Disconnected - sign out student at UMS -
“Messy Middle”
Refresh clubs - connection with community and county
Transparency- why a child did not get selected for G and T
Laughing at good teachers - A

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Class size

No mention of climate change

Dance curriculum - expand arts

Continue of assessment of teachers - parents want to see results transparent teacher evaluations -

AI - teacher training - teach students how to use it

Group #8 :

Strengths

Committed families and students

Funding

Educated community

Leveraging the wealthy community in support of equity and common goals

Tenured committed and experienced teachers

Diverse and rigorous curriculum

Arts

Attention to social, emotional learning

Special education program

Diversity

Challenges/Opportunities

Accessibility to learning and transportation

Funding

Preparing successful learning for our future/staying current with monumental shifts in technology and learning

Recruiting teachers and substitutes; diversity of age and race

Tapping into our professional community for learning and mentoring

Security improvements and safety officer in each building

Closing learning gaps

Perception of trending in rankings-impacting real estate and reputation

Group #9

Strengths

Parent involvement overall- PTA at each level

Good quality teachers, administrators and nurses who care

Focus on the whole child

Focus on SEL, health curriculum

Visual performing arts, importance of music and theater

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Diversity, equity, and inclusion work.
Taking a stand, not backing down.
Diversity within community
Academically strong students
Access to technology

Challenges/Opportunities

Outreach to all parents, including multilingual families (providing families with a sense of “how schools work, “school lingo” - IEP, special education)
Being intentional about transitions between buildings for students and parents (PTA serving as liaisons)
Triple tier busing, early start time for the HS (buses are still early even with later start time).
School funds used to move to two tier busing. Late busing, especially for families in need. Lack of teacher applicants, challenge to our goal of a staff that reflects student body
Less responsiveness from HS and central office admin. HS Guidance counselors are more focused on upperclassmen than lower classmen.
Not enough spaces on robotics team at UMS (open at HS)
Increased communication with community, areas outside of academics (extracurriculars) -
School report card for community
Academic pressure
Small playgrounds, not enough room to play at middle schools
Lack of substitutes

Group #10

Strengths

Engagement of the teachers... emails and responses back... passionate and advocates for students
Music program teachers
Engaged parents... engaged in their kids' life at school but not necessarily engaged with the BOE and the district and being here
So many opportunities like the library system, sports, music, performing arts and co-curriculars
Diversity used to be a challenge like back in 2017 but it is improving and getting better... it has gotten better, and I see more people that look like me. More Black teachers and Black male teachers... demographics of staff and students are more diverse
Kids have structure at MHS... we are put together with grades, attendance, hall passes, etc. A parent who took their student out of Princeton HS and moved here to Montgomery after doing research. There is scaffolding here, and it is an amazing school district that is underrated

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Likes the block scheduling... you can go more into depth and do not have as much homework each night in different subjects... can go more in depth
We have really good superintendent... HP is an amazing principal at the high school... cannot have a better person than Cory Delgado
Educators are second to none... high quality teachers and principals
Innovative and puts students first all the time
Access that staff and students have to high quality media representing multiple experiences is something to be proud of
We have counselors and added more counselors to OHES
Passionate staff... very little apathy in our district... everyone cares deeply
Academic Success
Research based practices and interventions - such as no homework at elementary, training dyslexia
Safety improvements and security staff

Challenges/Opportunities

Demographic of the staffing is still predominantly white at all the levels and staffing types (drivers, aids, teachers, support, admin, etc.).
Challenges of pipeline of staff with recruiting and finding diverse applicants
We do not have enough guidance counselors... students need more time with them... counselors are stretched thin. The counselor: student ratio at the upper grades is too high
Support during curricular transitions when a new program is being implemented, sometimes it is just here do this... change management, for example G and T might not be enough support
Communication can definitely be developed... it is a huge district and sometimes things are not clear... both internal and external communication
Related Arts at the elementary school... not enough time with them with 40 minutes every 6 days... it is thirty times a year and hard to get into depth
LMS - too early of a start time... rough on the kids
Language barriers for the parents because their language is not perfect... Talking Points is helpful but it is new, and we are learning to use it still
Lunch staff yell at the kids and the food is not really fresh (mostly VES)
Can we add more AP classes
Teaching shortage... we are doing ok, but it was close at the start of the year still finding positions
Substitutes - having enough and having those that can communicate clearly with the students and have experience with the students both because of language barrier and not always being articulate
Electives offerings are so rich at upper grades, but our schedule does not allow for them to focus and have a variety
Elementary schools should start earlier, and older grades should start later.

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Properly preparing for the move into an inclusion model in special education
Academic Pressures places on students at times

Following each group reporting out on their consensus points, among all of the groups there were many **common themes**:

Strengths: Committed families and students, passionate teachers and support staff, academic rigor, cocurricular programs-fine arts, athletics, clubs, access to technology, attention to social, emotional learning and mental health supports for students and staff, diversity, equity and inclusion work, community/school collaboration

Challenges/Opportunities: transportation-accessibility, after school and number of tiers; Communication-outreach and engagement, recruiting and retaining a diverse staff and substitutes, fiscal challenges, high stress environment and multiple transitions for students, safety, and security, staying current with technology (AI) increasing professional development

The second strategic planning session is scheduled for:

Wednesday January 31, 2024, at 5:30 pm,

Meetings are scheduled for 1.5 hours. Meetings start and end promptly.

During the January 31st meeting we will create a shared vision together for the future of the – Montgomery Township School District . . . we will talk about our aspirations and expectations for our students and school district.

Please join us. Bring a friend! Everyone is welcome! We look forward to seeing you!

Please RSVP by signing up online.