

School District of West Salem
2023 Community Survey
Comment Theme Analysis



The comment theme report identifies the prevailing themes collected through the comments from the District’s 2023 community survey. A major theme is identified as a result of having multiple participants referencing similar issues or concerns. It is important to note that these themes represent diverse opinions and may not align with each other or with the District’s current plans.

Of the 647 survey respondents, 290 participants (45%) left at least one comment.

Comment frequency:

- 72 respondents wrote one comment.
- 63 respondents wrote two comments.
- 57 respondents wrote three comments.
- 47 respondents wrote four comments.
- 51 respondents wrote five or more comments.

Major Themes

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Comments/suggestions: (Section: Achieving Excellence)

Communication and Engagement: Many comments highlight the need for improved communication between the District and the community, especially regarding safety threats, school events, policies, and overall transparency in decision-making. There's a desire for more consistent and transparent communication channels. Suggestions include email newsletters, roundups of social media posts, profiles of staff and administration, and more public community forums to discuss potential changes. Many commenters express a desire for more involvement and engagement opportunities between the school and the community. Suggestions include involving businesses in student projects, having community members share life experiences, and promoting character-building activities.

Expectations and Behavior Management: Some comments emphasize the importance of clear academic expectations for students, as well as fair and consistent consequences for behavior. There's a call for a strong message that a teacher's primary role is delivering quality instruction and that student behavior should not impede learning for the entire class. There's also a concern about bullying and inappropriate behavior among students. Some comments mention specific instances of bullying and the need for stronger disciplinary measures and anti-bullying campaigns.

Student Well-Being and Mental Health: Several comments highlight concerns about the level of support provided to students with diverse needs, especially students enrolled in special education and those with mental health struggles. Some respondents express a desire for more counselors, as well as greater focus on character development and mental health education. Several comments address the need for better support for students with special needs, both in terms of individualized education plans (IEPs) and mental health resources.

Staff Compensation and Retention: A recurring theme is the perception that staff compensation is not competitive with neighboring school districts. Comments suggest that this may contribute to losing talented teachers and hinder the quality of education. There are mixed feelings about teacher quality and satisfaction. Some comments praise specific teachers, while others express concerns about teacher investment, burnout, and overall staff support.

Rigor and Readiness: There's a general concern that students might not be adequately prepared for college. Suggestions include better college readiness support, information on Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and addressing the senior exit project's impact on graduation. More specifically, commenters suggest the project should be reevaluated for its weight/importance and its alignment with students' future goals. Some comments touch on the need for a more balanced curriculum, with more emphasis on academics, especially in areas like math, science, and English. There are also mentions of specific curriculum issues, such as reading programs.

Technology and Innovation: A few comments mention the use of technology in education, including the use of AI and AI-supported coursework and how it relates to student work. Some respondents express concerns about the overreliance on iPads and suggest having a unified app for school-related updates.

Safety and Traffic: There are comments about safety and security concerns, including issues with traffic flow during drop-off and pick-up times, bullying incidents, and the need for better security measures. Suggestions include better traffic management, more crossing guards, and improved communication about safety incidents.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: A few comments highlight the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within the District. Some parents suggest enhancing efforts in this area. At the same time, there is a recurring theme of maintaining traditional values and culture within the District, while also acknowledging the importance of adapting to changing times and student needs.

Extracurricular Activities: A few comments mention the need for more support and promotion of a broader range of extracurricular activities, not just athletics. Comments discuss the importance of offering a variety of extracurricular opportunities, not just in sports but in trades, agriculture, and other areas. There are mentions of school fees, lunch costs, and concerns about financial barriers for students participating in activities.

Transition Support: Some comments mention challenges with transitions between schools, particularly from elementary to middle school or high school. There's a desire for smoother transitions and more support during these critical periods.

Physical Facilities: Some comments touch on the condition of physical facilities, suggesting updates and improvements to certain areas, such as elevators and playgrounds. Some comments discuss the use of school facilities by the community and address concerns about specific facilities like the Panther Den.

Please add any programs/services not listed above in the box below. (Section: Programs and Services)

The list summarizes (in no particular order) programs and services respondents provided.

- Add the arts into a STEAM approach.
- Implement a Gifted and Talented (G&T) program and/or enhance support for students scoring above grade-level benchmarks.
- Establish an alternative education program to support struggling students.
- Provide better transitioning from middle to high school.
- Offer a broader range of language courses, including sign language (ASL).
- Implement a wider range of mathematics, engineering, and aeronautics courses.
- Integrate everyday “life skills” into the curriculum (such as cooking, sewing, auto repair, and personal finance).
- Include financial literacy for students, including taxes, interest rates, budgeting, and credit.
- Stress the importance of trades and technical education.
- Promote career readiness and exposure to various job options in the community.
- Foster emotional intelligence, character education, inclusion, and strong mental health.
- Improve support for students in special education courses who are enrolled in or seek to take higher-level courses.
- Provide/recognize more extracurricular options beyond athletics, such as orchestra, band, choir, and string programs.
- Collaboration with local businesses and community members for internships and job shadowing.
- Reevaluate the class ranking and recognition systems.

What do you like best about the School District of West Salem? (Section: Programs and Services)

Quality Staff and Student Commitment: Many comments express an appreciation for the deep commitment to the well-being and growth of students. The staff is dedicated, caring, and passionate. There is consistent praise for the high quality of teachers and staff, their dedication, and their positive impact on students. The availability and responsiveness of teachers and staff for students and parents are seen as positive.

Community Atmosphere: The small-town feel and close-knit community are highly valued, creating a sense of belonging and support. The District's strong connection with the local community, including involvement in various community activities, is well received. The District is seen as a family-oriented environment. The convenience of having all schools on a single campus is appreciated, fostering a cohesive educational experience and community engagement. The feeling of safety within the community and the District is mentioned, creating a conducive learning environment.

Effective Communication: The District is commended for transparent communication, keeping parents and the community informed about school activities and events.

Extracurricular Opportunities: The availability of diverse extracurricular programs is highlighted, contributing to holistic student development and growth. The District's strong music and performing arts programs are specifically praised. Extracurricular and enrichment programs are highly valued, as the District is applauded for offering a wide array of clubs, sports, arts, and vocational opportunities that contribute to a well-rounded education.

Learning Opportunities: The District's ability to meet the individual needs of students and provide support, such as special education programs, is highlighted. Comments mention the importance of offering not only academic education but also programs that help students build life skills, explore interests, and engage with the community. The District offers a wide range of opportunities for students, both academic and extracurricular, catering to various interests and talents. The availability of college credit courses and opportunities for students to earn college credit while in high school is valued. The District's support for students with special needs and learning disabilities is acknowledged. Overall, the District is recognized for its commitment to academic excellence, high standards, and a focus on success for all students.

Camaraderie and Support: The positive relationships and camaraderie among students, staff, and the community contribute to the District's overall atmosphere. The District's willingness to continuously improve and adapt its offerings is highlighted.

High-Quality Facilities: The well-maintained and modern facilities contribute to a positive learning environment.

Positive School Culture: The overall positive atmosphere and culture of the District are appreciated. The District's emphasis on ethical behavior, core values, and character development is recognized. The District's efforts to provide a safe and inclusive environment for all students, including those with diverse needs, are acknowledged and valued.

What areas would you like improved in the School District of West Salem? (Section: Programs and Services)

Finances and Facilities: There are concerns about money management and the allocation of resources within the District. This includes comments about spending on things that may not be necessary and the need for proper facilities for athletes and students. There's a desire for a larger weight room, wrestling facility, and improved training facilities to accommodate growing activities and ensure success. Issues related to traffic congestion, bus routes, and drop-off/pick-up logistics are mentioned.

Student Mental Health and Support: Concerns about student mental health are raised, with calls for more support, counseling, and programs to address the mental health needs of both students and staff. Many suggest regular check-ins with guidance counselors and teachers to identify and address concerns. Several comments touch on the need for more diverse and inclusive educational experiences. Some express a desire for better education on tolerance, empathy, and understanding of different perspectives. Respondents request creating an inclusive environment that promotes diversity and addresses issues related to discrimination, bullying, and derogatory language.

Academic Focus and Balance: Some respondents express a desire for a greater focus on academics rather than an excessive emphasis on sports or other extracurricular activities. There's a call for more balance in the curriculum and allocation of resources. Some respondents advocate focusing on core academics over social and emotional topics. Others mention concerns about grading systems, curriculum changes, and class disruptions. Respondents express interest in having foreign language education (like Spanish) offered at an earlier age. There's also a desire for more trade and vocational education offerings to better prepare students for practical careers.

Special Education and Gifted Programs: There are concerns about the quality of special education services and a desire for more support for students with special needs. Additionally, some respondents want more opportunities for gifted and talented students.

Post-High School Readiness: Many respondents emphasize the importance of teaching practical life skills to students, such as financial literacy, reading medical bills, using checkbooks, and understanding insurance. Respondents express a desire for better career counseling and preparation for life beyond high school, including exposure to various career paths and college options. There are mixed opinions about the senior exit project, with some suggesting its removal due to its perceived stress on seniors. The text highlights the need for improved guidance on college applications, scholarships, career exploration, and trade-specific classes.

Technology Use and Education: Opinions vary on technology use in education, with some wanting more hands-on activities and less screen time. Others call for better technology support and more up-to-date resources. Some respondents advocate the balanced use of technology in education and suggest incorporating technology courses for college preparation.

Communication and Engagement: The theme of communication is highlighted multiple times. There's a desire for better communication from administration, increased transparency, and

more promptness in responding to inquiries or concerns. Some respondents want more information regarding community involvement, activities, curriculum changes, grading systems, school events, and opportunities for parents to connect with each other and the school. Respondents articulated the need for better communication between teachers and parents. They want more detailed information about what their children are learning in the classroom and how they are progressing.

Safety and Security: There's a request for increased focus on campus security, including hiring more security personnel and implementing safety measures like metal detectors. Bullying is mentioned as an ongoing concern. Respondents desire stricter anti-bullying policies and quicker action when incidents occur.

Enrichment and Extracurricular Programs: There's a call for more diverse extracurricular opportunities, including clubs and programs that cater to different interests and talents. The balance between academics and sports is a topic of discussion. Some suggest that sports should not overshadow academic achievement, while others express concerns about coaching practices and favoritism.

Staff Support and Training: Some respondents mention the need for ongoing training and professional development for staff, especially in areas like diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many respondents also stress the importance of adequately compensating teachers to attract and retain the best educators.

What would have to happen in the next four years for you to be very satisfied with the performance of the School District suggestions: (Section: Programs and Services)

Educational Facilities and Resources: Many respondents emphasize the need for better training facilities, especially for athletes, and improved resources for students. They suggest expanding training facilities, updating classrooms with modern technology like smartboards, and providing more tools for both academic and extracurricular activities.

Communication and Accountability: Communication is a recurring theme, with calls for improved communication between administration, teachers, students, and parents.

Transitions and Continuity: Several respondents mention the importance of smoother transitions for students moving from one grade level to another. They express concerns about abrupt changes in scheduling and curriculum, suggesting that a more cohesive approach is needed for students moving from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school.

Student Success and Well-Being: Respondents express a desire to maintain high academic standards while also focusing on students' overall well-being. They appreciate the District's efforts in providing a well-rounded education. Many respondents highlight the need for increased mental health services and support for students. They mention the importance of addressing mental health concerns, providing counseling, and having more guidance counselors available. Safety is a recurring theme, with respondents calling for stricter handling of situations involving bullying or threats to student and staff safety. Some suggest having more security personnel and implementing measures like metal detectors.

Environment and Growth: Multiple suggestions focus on creating a more inclusive environment, providing equal opportunities for all students, and promoting diversity within the District. Respondents mention the importance of recognizing all students' potential and ensuring that every student feels valued. Additionally, there's an emphasis on holding students accountable for their behavior and performance. Respondents want students to be responsible for their actions and strive to be the best versions of themselves.

Career and Life Skills: Some respondents emphasize the need for a stronger focus on life skills and career exploration. They suggest incorporating practical skills like financial literacy, job readiness, and exposure to different career pathways.

Staff Compensation and Retention: Teacher compensation and retention are concerns, with several respondents suggesting that higher pay for staff would help attract and retain quality educators. They believe that well-compensated staff would positively impact students' education.

Adapting to Change and Innovation: Respondents encourage the District to stay adaptable and open to change, embracing innovative teaching methods and technologies. They appreciate the District's forward-thinking approach and urge it to continue evolving.

Comments/suggestions: (Section: District Initiatives)

Funding and Financial Concerns: Many comments focus on financial matters, such as co-curricular fees for students, the use of taxpayers' money for facility maintenance, and questions about the allocation of funds for various projects and programs. Some express concern about the affordability of fees and suggest seeking alternative funding sources like sponsors. This includes discussions about scholarships for financially disadvantaged students and providing opportunities for all students regardless of their financial situations.

Transparency and Engagement: There's a consistent theme of dissatisfaction with the way information is communicated to the community. Comments highlight issues with the timing and availability of newsletters, the lack of awareness about changes and fees, and the need for more transparent communication about both achievements and challenges within the schools. There's a suggestion to improve engagement with the community, especially with those who don't have children attending the school. This includes sharing information about school achievements and initiatives to help build support for the District.

Education Quality and Performance: Several comments touch on concerns about academic performance, readiness for college or the workforce, and the overall quality of education. There's a desire for more detailed and data-driven information about student achievement, as well as a focus on improving educational standards and outcomes.

Facility Improvement and Maintenance: The condition of school facilities, particularly the elementary school, is mentioned repeatedly. There are concerns about maintenance, cleanliness, air conditioning, and the need for improvements such as new floors, painting, and better care for facilities. Respondents also discuss the swimming pool and, more specifically, the desire for a proper aquatic center.

Data and Accountability: There's a desire for more detailed and measurable data to support claims of improvement or excellence. Some comments request specific information about student achievements, performance trends, and other relevant data. Some words inquire about students' educational and career outcomes, suggesting a desire for more data on graduates' paths beyond high school.

Strategic Planning and Initiatives: A few comments reference specific initiatives, like the Panther Den and strategic planning, and seek more understanding about their goals, impacts, and relationships with broader school objectives.

Employee Relations and Professional Development: Comments mention staff issues, such as compensation and the importance of having engaging and effective teachers in the high school.

Technology and Social Media: The use of technology and social media for communication is highlighted, with suggestions for improving the District's online presence to share information more effectively.

Comments/suggestions: (Section: Future Initiatives)

Funding and Spending: Many comments express concerns about the allocation of funds and the need for responsible spending. There's a desire to avoid unnecessary expenses and ensure taxpayer money is used efficiently. Some commenters advocate finding alternative revenue sources, like partnerships, grants, and foundations, to support District initiatives without overburdening taxpayers.

Facility Expansion and Improvement: Several comments highlight the need for expanding and improving facilities, particularly athletics, music, tech ed, and fitness areas. The growth of the District and the need for appropriate spaces for various programs are emphasized. The importance of accommodating students of all abilities in fitness and athletics areas is noted.

Early Childhood Education: There's discussion about the 4K program, with some expressing concerns about extending the school day for young children, while others support maintaining the current half-day structure.

Child Care and Before/After School Programs: The need for childcare and before/after school programs is mentioned multiple times. Some parents feel it would be valuable for the District to offer such services, while others are concerned about the financial implications. Opinions differ regarding the responsibility of the District to provide childcare and the role of taxpayers in supporting education and other services.

Transparency and Communication: Transparency in sharing information, particularly about the potential impact of funding decisions and changes, is requested by some commenters.

Educational Priorities: Some comments discuss the importance of core academic subjects and suggest that resources should be directed toward them rather than other areas.

Support for the Schools: Many commenters express strong support for the District and its educational initiatives. They emphasize the positive impact of good schools on the community.

School Calendar: The school calendar is mentioned, with suggestions for changes like starting after September 1 and ending before Memorial Day.

Local Control and Decision-Making: There's a preference for local decision-making in education and opposition to excessive control from higher levels of government.

Identity and Community Comparisons: The desire to maintain West Salem's identity and not lose competitiveness in comparison to neighboring communities is expressed.

Comments/suggestions regarding how we can improve our District communications: (Section: District Communications)

Methods & Timeliness: There is a strong emphasis on improving communication methods within the District. Many commenters suggest that social media, emails, texts, handouts during events, QR codes, and other online platforms can effectively keep the community informed about events and updates. Several comments mention that information is often received too late or after events have already occurred. There's a desire for more timely communication, especially regarding important dates, activities, and events. Some commenters point out that the content of the communication should dictate the method of delivery (email, text, social media, etc.) to ensure the message reaches the intended audience effectively.

Website Navigation and Content: Some individuals express difficulty navigating the District website and finding specific information. There's a call for improvements in organizing content and making it easier for parents and the broader community to locate relevant information.

District Newsletter: Feedback on the District newsletter is mixed. Some feel it arrives too late to be useful, while others suggest enhancing its accuracy and ensuring that important events and dates are included.

Social Media Presence: Many commenters encourage the District to expand its social media presence, sharing a wider variety of events and activities beyond athletics, and using platforms like TikTok and Facebook more effectively.

Extracurricular Communication: There's a desire for better communication about extracurricular activities beyond major sports events. Other activities and achievements should receive similar attention. Relatedly, people want to see a broader range of student achievements and activities highlighted, beyond the focus on sports. Music, arts, clubs, and other accomplishments should be included.

School Board Information: Concerns are raised about the availability of School Board agendas and related materials. People want more timely access to these documents for better transparency and preparation.

Orientation and Information for New Parents: Some comments indicate that new parents struggle to find specific information about half-day programs, pick-up times, and other essential details. There's a request for clearer information and improved accessibility.

Involvement of Students: Some suggestions involve getting students involved in managing and promoting communication, including using social media platforms like TikTok.

Engagement and Feedback: Respondents appreciate being engaged and having the opportunity to offer feedback on communication strategies and content.

Comments/suggestions: (Section: Communication and Engagement)

School Nutrition and Health: There's a concern about the nutritional value of school meals and a desire for healthier options with more protein, vegetables, fruits, and whole foods. Commenters want their children to access nutritious meals that support their overall health and well-being. Some respondents believe healthier food options positively impact behavior and learning, especially engagement, focus, and overall performance.

Communication: Communication is a central theme, with a focus on both its quality and timeliness. Respondents want easy access to information about classroom activities, clubs, volunteering opportunities, and other school-related events. A centralized source of information, such as the website or regular email updates, is seen as beneficial. Respondents appreciate clear and transparent communication, especially when it comes to important issues like threats at school, changes in grading, and graduation ceremony details. Parents appreciate opportunities to provide feedback and be involved in decision-making processes. Suggestions are made to form task forces of community members to address specific issues or areas of improvement.

Educational Philosophy and Strategies: There's a call for a more classical education approach that focuses on producing well-rounded, highly functioning young adults. Some respondents express reservations about standardized testing and state/federal education standards, suggesting that local determination of education strategies is important.

Co-curricular Activities: While sports are highlighted as successful, some parents want to hear more about other co-curricular activities and clubs. There's a desire for a broader range of communication about these activities to highlight student achievements and opportunities.

Technology Use and Restrictions: The use of technology in schools is a topic of concern, with some people advocating for more restrictions on students' access to specific platforms, like YouTube and online gaming, and more strategic use of technology.