CAT Team Meeting #1
Report and Analysis

Formation of the CAT Team

Over the last several months, Southwest Local School District has hosted several opportunities for the community to engage with the district, and for the district to engage with the community. Through multiple town halls, community surveys, building tours, and more, SLSD has been listening to the community about the issues that matter most.

One of the key takeaways from this continued engagement has been the desire to form a team that can dive deeper into some of the specific issues and challenges facing SLSD. This has led to the formation of the Community Advisory Team (CAT).

Recap of CAT Meeting #1

The first CAT meeting was held on Wednesday, November 20, 2024. In total, roughly 150 movers and shakers in the community were invited to attend, and over 100 individuals showed up to participate. This marks one of our largest and best attended engagement opportunities in recent years.

With this being the first CAT meeting, in what will be a series of events, this first meeting was designed to give participants a 30,000-foot view snapshot of some of the key areas for the district. So, after a brief presentation from Superintendent John Hamstra to kick off the meeting, participants were split into 3 groups. From there, they rotated through a series of presentations and discussions on the following topics:

1. Finance and Facilities
2. School Safety and Mental Health
3. Programming and Communications

In each room, a presentation was given by SLSD staff, followed by a question/answer portion and general brainstorming by the group.

Feedback and Action Steps

The goal of the CAT team is to not just become better educated on key topics, but to provide recommendations and suggested action steps for the district. It is important to SLSD that engagement turns into action. With that being said, note takers were set up in each room, and participants were encouraged to take an exit survey following the event. A copy of the results of that survey is attached for your review. However, in order to better present the findings, a summary and analysis of the feedback received can be reviewed below.

Overall, participants were encouraged by the event and appreciated the opportunity to provide their thoughts and get their questions answered. There was a clear desire to dig much deeper on some of these key topics. With this feedback, SLSD will be more intentional in getting deeper into the weeds in upcoming Cat meetings to ensure that residents and community leaders are given the depth of knowledge that they crave.

Summary of Feedback from CAT Participants on Finance and Facilities

The key challenges facing SLSD when it comes to school finance and facilities include:

1. Accommodating rapid residential growth and student population increases in the district, particularly in the Harrison area. This is straining facilities and resources, making it difficult to plan for future needs.

2. Securing adequate funding, space, and resources to support growing student enrollment, maintain appropriate student-teacher ratios, and provide quality educational programs and facilities.

3. Continuing to educate the community on the district's evolving needs and building trust/understanding around the need for future investments.

4. Coordinating with the city/local government on development plans, zoning, and funding to ensure the school system can keep pace with growth.

Overall, the feedback indicates SLSD is viewed as being efficient and responsible with school finances based on the information shared. However, there are concerns about ensuring adequate funding and support for growing student populations, including instructional and support staff.

Recommendations for SLSD include:

- Improving communication and transparency around facility needs, priorities, and expansion plans
- Advocating for the city to manage residential growth more effectively
- Providing more detailed financial information and education for the community
- Exploring ways to maximize community use and benefit from school facilities
- Closely examining staffing levels and caseloads for support personnel like therapists

In future CAT meetings, the community would like to dive deeper into topics like revenue sources, high school facility needs, facilities planning/expansion, and the differences between general operating funds and bond/levy funds.

The overarching themes are ensuring SLSD can keep pace with rapid growth, maintain quality educational programs and facilities, and build stronger community understanding and support for the district's financial and facility needs.

Summary of Feedback from CAT Participants Feedback on School Safety and Mental Health

The key challenges facing SLSD when it comes to school safety and mental health resources include:

1. Insufficient staffing and resources to adequately address the growing mental health needs of students, resulting in waitlists and unmet demand.

2. Lack of awareness and accountability from parents regarding the mental health and behavioral challenges students are facing.

3. The strain on school resources as they are increasingly required to take on the role of supporting students' social-emotional and mental health needs, which takes away from traditional educational priorities.

4. Concerning levels of physical altercations and fights occurring at the junior high level, which are impacting the overall safety and climate of the schools.

5. Uncertainty around the long-term sustainability of mental health programs and services that are currently grant-funded.

The feedback indicates the community recognizes the significant efforts SLSD has made to address these issues, but there is a desire for the district to do even more. Recommendations include:

- Adding more mental health staff and resources to eliminate waitlists
- Continuing to collaborate with community partners and organizations
- Implementing programs and initiatives to address the root causes of behavioral issues and promote positive student development
- Highlighting the impact and success of mental health initiatives through data and communication
- Exploring ways to make mental health services more sustainable long-term

In future CAT meetings, the community would like to dive deeper into topics such as:

- Specific behavioral and mental health services offered and how they are funded
- Data demonstrating the positive outcomes of increased access to mental health resources
- Strategies for addressing the underlying causes of behavioral challenges and fighting
- Improving communication and accountability around bullying incidents

The overarching theme is ensuring SLSD can provide comprehensive, sustainable, and impactful mental health and safety support for all students, while balancing the need to maintain focus on core educational priorities.

Summary of Feedback from CAT Participants on Programming and Communications

The key challenges facing SLSD when it comes to programming and community engagement/communications include:

1. Streamlining and differentiating communications to reach all stakeholders effectively, from parents to community members without children in the district.

2. Overcoming perceptions of a lack of transparency or timely information sharing, particularly around extracurricular activities and events.

3. Balancing the diverse expectations and preferences of the community - some want constant, detailed updates while others feel overwhelmed by too much information.

4. Engaging and informing the broader community, including seniors and those without a direct connection to the schools, about the district's programming and offerings.

5. Ensuring programming options continue to evolve and align with student interests and career/technical needs.

The overall feedback indicates SLSD is viewed as providing a robust set of programming options and making strong efforts to communicate and engage with the community. However, there is room for improvement in areas like:

- Enhancing social media and video-based communications to showcase a wider range of schools/programs
- Introducing more career-focused and technical course offerings
- Expanding community service opportunities that benefit the local area
- Streamlining communications to be more consistent and timely

In future CAT meetings, the community would like to dive deeper into topics such as:

- Detailed programming options across all grade levels and schools
- Opportunities for technical/vocational education, including potential partnerships
- Initiatives and support for students in special education
- Alignment of programming with student interests and post-graduation pathways

The overarching themes are ensuring SLSD's programming continues to evolve to meet student and community needs, while also enhancing communication strategies to keep all stakeholders informed and engaged.