

Summary

We were looking for a range of ideals and feelings that students, parents and staff have about their school. We attempted to understand the difference in perspectives between groups. We attempted to uncover factors that influence opinions, behavior, or motivation. We were also looking for ideas from the focus groups.

One of the positive aspects reported from every group was everyone feels safe at their school. Students' feeling safe in their school creates a strong foundation for a tranquil learning environment. High School students reported that the small class sizes allow them to get help when needed and that the staff works with them to stay in school.

Major Findings

- Lack of consistency with **discipline**

Junior High, High School, Faculty, and the Community Group all commented that consistency in discipline was an issue.

- Lack of **school pride**

A common answer between all of the groups was a lack of pride for the school. School pride was generally attributed to the schools athletic teams. "If the basketball team is winning, then everyone is wearing school colors and proud of Cairo".

One comment: "You can't have school pride if you don't have pride yourself – the community has taken so many hits that the kids have internalized it - we are seeing the byproduct of the way parents feel and see the community– Mindset needs to change. Churches try to make an effort to change the mindset; the church plays a vital role in community and school pride."

- **Communication/shared vision** throughout the district

Faculty expressed a concern for the lack of communication between the school buildings. The school lacks a common vision for the faculty to follow.

- The question was asked to the students if they were **bored at school** and most reported "Yes" - they were bored. They said they would like to see more "hands on learning", experiments, and field trips.
- Not being prepared for **college** - They want to be **challenged** more - higher expectations. High School students report they are not getting encouragement to attend college, faculty make it sound like it is going to be too tough; most students either go to military or get a job. Students would like more structure in the classes (like a college syllabus).
- Most groups reported that they feel that the **expectations are not high** enough at Cairo. The High School students do not feel challenged. One comment was that most teachers just give students passing grades to move them on.
- It was reported that the **School Board** is not effective.
- There was an expressed need for increased **counseling services** to be provided for the students at all levels. Some students are reported to have severe emotional problems.
- All groups felt that there was not enough **recognition** and good **publicity** for Cairo students.
- **Comprehensive Reform Model, Alliance for Achievement** has not been well received by school staff. Two of the many comments were: "Good concept, but no direction" and "Waist of time". Many teachers also felt that the district was switching programs too often.

Minor Findings

- Lack of respect of students between other students and faculty

The elementary student group mentioned racism as an issue when we asked them about respect. They commented that not all students respected each other because of their different color of skin. Also, students are not respecting the differences of each other, resulting in fighting. Students who are not wearing brand name clothes and shoes are being made fun of which leads to fighting.

- Thursday morning fights at Bennett Elementary

The elementary student group also mentioned that at Bennett Elementary, students expect to see fights on Thursday's because of the disciplinary actions give the students Friday off, giving them a three day weekend.

- New teachers are not being retained. Students have a hard time adjusting to different changes. One focus group reported that the new teachers have been very good with lots of energy and good ideas.
- Too much turnover of administration at the school district. Comments were made that they would like to see people in these positions live in the community so they are "stakeholders". Right now, faculty/administration can come into town and do their job and leave at the end without having to worry about if they made a difference.
- Reading level of students is reported by teachers to be low.
- Lack of extra-curricular activities. Students are discouraged that football program is being discontinued. They are also concerned that the band program may be next.
- More emphasis placed on sports than academics – "...you can fill up a gym for an athletic awards banquet, but won't even half fill the cafeteria for the academic banquet".
- Lack of positive recognition in the community and southern Illinois.
- Need for parent education and a parent group. There reportedly is no PTA or any other parent group within the school system.
- Many of the groups mentioned the need for new and improved text books.
- School buildings in need of remodeling/repair.

Recommendations

- Service Learning program

A service learning program could address the issues of respect, empathy (helping other people), and school/community pride. Community service type of programs will help students gain workforce preparatory skills and develop leadership. Students could perform activities around the school or in the community and later discuss the activity as to its benefits to the community. Implement Jr. Beta Club.

- Disciplinary Procedures

Procedures at Bennett Grade School should be changed to prevent students from being absent from school due to suspension. Punishment should be issued that keeps the student at the school for the duration of the punishment. Steps should be taken to ensure adequate supervision is in place where the fights are occurring.

- Cairo School District Pride

A school pride program would help students discover pride in Cairo School. One approach could include inviting past graduates of Cairo to return and share their success stories and how Cairo school district contributed to their success. By having school assemblies once a month focusing on school pride, the students will learn proper behavior and expectations of being in a large group.

Current student successes should be acknowledged on a school-wide basis either at a "pep rally" or as part of a newsletter. Students who are selected will provide an example of the type of model student expected from the faculty and administration.

Another suggestion would be a sportsmanship award to be created to be handed out during the athletic award banquet; **this should be considered the highest award an athlete can receive.** This award would be given to the athlete who exemplifies the highest level of sportsmanship on that team.

Athletics drive too much direction for the school in general. Although athletics prepare students for a lot of life's lessons, participants in the focus groups believe too much emphasis is placed on athletics rather than academics. The school district might consider a minimum grade point

average in order to participate in athletic events. The climate within the school will be difficult to change unless faculty/administration/school board members enforce this type of policy.

An effort should be made to increase the number of student leadership opportunities. Consideration should include the development of a mentoring program for older students to help younger students with assignments, athletic activities, and being a good role model. This program would create a sense of responsibility for the older students and give them self-confidence. Other opportunities exist through the University of Illinois Extension leadership development programs.

Churches and schools can play a role in changing the mindset of "there is nothing to be proud of in Cairo." School, community, and church leaders need to speak highly of Cairo and tout what the city has to offer. They should also develop a plan and vision for the city, with the help of others.

- Make a strong emphasis on classroom teachers, building principals and building secretaries to report each day the absences of each student to the Truancy officer. Work with State's Attorney to ensure that truant students and their parents/guardians attend school. Classroom teachers should also be responsible to stress the importance to students on attending school and not being truant.
- Consistency in following Cairo School Handbook procedures

As mentioned previously in the major findings section, both faculty and students expressed a desire for consistency in following policy and procedures.

- Take advantage of opportunities for students to visit Universities

It is important to expose the students to opportunities beyond Cairo school. One way of doing this at a discounted cost could be to visit the local colleges and universities. Dr. Jesse Thompson of the College of ACES (Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences) at the University of Illinois has expressed an interest in recruiting students from the southernmost counties. He has even suggested paying the cost of travel for students to visit the university. The University of Illinois offers some summer programs to expose students to higher education and some with no cost. We are confident that opportunities such as these exist at most college and universities in the United States.

If your students are not able to visit a college or university, representatives are available to come to your school and inform the students about their programs. Dr. Jesse Thompson has visited area schools and will be back in the future. However, it is important that the school be prepared for such visits and have the right audience available to the college/university representatives. The more contact the students have to higher education opportunities the more likely they are to attend.

It is also recommended that all school staff in the school system be responsible for informing and encouraging students to explore higher education opportunities.

- Implement more hands on learning projects/experiments into classroom

Challenge the students more by increasing the number of experiments/projects. Faculty could invite more outside speakers to come and speak to individual classes. Students suggested more outside speakers, but didn't think it would happen because of past experiences (a small number of students had disruptive behavior in the audience). Individuals (Professionals) should be sought from the area to talk to students about importance of career planning and education.

Another avenue that could be pursued is partnerships with private businesses in the community to provide vocational training for students. Many students and community members commented on the lack of vocational programs for students to explore. Working with local businesses, students would be introduced to a trade as well as the normal operations of a business.

- Communication channels established for students, faculty, administration, and school board officials to discuss issues/concerns/problems/programs. Encourage follow up with focus group participants to implement solutions.

We understand in most organizations communication is generally a problem. One problem identified was communication to faculty about a common vision for the school. Without looking at the Cairo school district handbook and knowing whether a vision statement exist for the district, we would recommend Cairo develop a vision statement for the school...with participation coming from school board, administration, faculty, and students. If one already exists, then it should be reviewed by the stakeholders listed above and re-introduced to the district.

Another solution to help communication would be to encourage staff to use in-service days to collaborate with peers, not necessarily the same grade levels (actually encourage different grade levels) to share what students are

expected to know upon completion of their class. If these standards don't already exist, then a committee should be established to determine what a student needs to know upon completion of a particular grade. The more opportunity for faculty to communicate with each other the more likely a student will receive proper assistance to succeed.

A mechanism needs to be created to share success stories between the different schools in Cairo. A suggestion would be to create a memo or newsletter type of publication for mass distribution to faculty to share "good news" and facts about the school. The intent of this is to relay positive information to faculty to share with the students and create some pride in Cairo schools. Hearing of successes, we would hope that it would replicate across the school...if appropriate. Also, articles included in the publication could be sent to the local newspaper for print so the community can read about successes occurring at Cairo. This would also create value in the community for education rather than just athletics.

Consideration should be given in having a high school student write a weekly column in the local newspaper, highlighting the positive events and happenings in the Cairo school district.

- Provide School Board members training so they are able to make informed and knowledgeable decisions

Training programs exist to help school board members gain a better understanding of their responsibilities to the students, faculty, and the community. We would recommend the Illinois Association of School Boards program to help board members.

- Raise expectations and standards of what is expected of students and staff. Ensure that they are accountable.
- Consider re-evaluating the **Comprehensive Reform Model, Alliance for Achievement**. Hold more discussions with the teacher teams at each school on what direction to take.
- Work on retaining teachers. Provide orientation and mentoring for new staff.
- Implement plan to increase respect within the school. Consider making School uniforms mandatory. Provide lessons on respect.

- Continue to emphasize the importance of reading to raise reading levels. Recruit volunteers to work with students on reading during non-school hours.
- Work with staff and volunteers on providing extra-curricular activities.
- At the High school, consider placing windows or sky lights in the building; repair any leaky roofs.
- Work with a dedicated group of parents to reintroduce or revitalize a PTA.
- Search for funding to purchase updated and improved text books.
- Search for grant opportunities that would fund a school social worker or school counselor to help prepare students with emotional problems for learning while at school.