

Prairie Fire Research Group

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*Delivering expert research and analysis
In Organizational Effectiveness, Strategic Planning, Knowledge Management
and Population Studies.*

USD 262 FOCUS GROUP PROJECT Final Report

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Introduction

My PowerPoint presentation contains a summary of the research questions, participant profile and key themes from the sessions. In this cover letter I would like to provide further background on the participants and discuss ideas for further research.

At its meeting of 2/12/07, the board reviewed both the results from the focus group sessions and an analysis of demographic trends in the Valley Center school district. The data regarding population and housing patterns can help the board define what choices it needs to make regarding future growth of schools, additional facilities, programming and other issues. The focus groups can help the board understand how patrons in the district view those choices.

Focus group research is a dynamic process of gathering information from stakeholders and processing the results into categories of key themes and ideas, which can help the board and administration ask more focused and specific questions in future sessions. Data from demographic research or structured surveys can help clarify the context of change that is emerging in the Valley Center area, and thus help refine interview questions. At the same time, focus groups can help decision-makers identify what elements of the data are most critical to understand.

It's always important to report a summary of the focus groups to your stakeholders as soon as possible as a means of acknowledging what was said in the interviews and seeking confirmation that the report is essentially correct. With these first focus groups, the board has opened a dialog with its stakeholders and it can capitalize upon that relationship by continuing to provide information regarding the district's strategic plan and seeking further input to help shape both the planning process, its objectives and its outcomes.

Ideas for Further Research

Given the board's interests, as I heard them expressed at the Feb. 12 meeting, I suggest the following approach to future focus group research.

As the board develops specific strategies to address future needs of the schools, those strategies can be presented to stakeholders in a series of focus groups in which they are engaged to help refine those strategies and quantify both the value they perceive in those strategies and their willingness to pay to support the implementation of them. A line of questions can be designed to address the following themes:

- Successful implementation – what resources do stakeholders think will be necessary to achieve the desired outcomes of these strategies? What administrative structure or curricular changes will be necessary to successfully implement these strategies?
- Perceived value – what value do stakeholders see in these strategies?
- Expectations of measurable results – what specific results would stakeholders expect to see come from these strategies? What impact on students do they want to see? How, generally, would they want the value of these strategies demonstrated?
- Willingness to pay – given stakeholder expectations of measurable results and their perception of resources necessary to implement these strategies, to what extent are they willing to support them with taxes and other resources? Given that the district is working with limited resources, what would they be willing to give up to support these strategies?

Focus Group Profile

The following table provides the details of the profile of focus group participants. The information summarized in the table was gathered at the end of each session from the participants.

Session	AGE	SEX	RACE	HOUSEHOLD INCOME	OCCUPATION
1/22/2007 11 participants	17-24 = 0 25-44 = 4 45-64 = 5 65+ = 2	Male = 6 Female = 5	white/non-Hispanic = 11	\$0-24,999 = 0 \$25k-49,999 = 2 \$50k-69,000 = 1 \$70k+ = 8	teacher, business owner, contractor, elected official, school aide, finance, insurance, engineering
2/7/2007 16 participants (10 completed profiles)	17-24 = 0 25-44 = 5 45-64 = 5 65+ = 0	Male = 5 Female = 5	white/non-Hispanic = 10	\$0-24,999 = 0 \$25k-49,999 = 0 \$50k-69,000 = 1 \$70k+ = 9	parent, medical technician, engineering, school administration, teacher

Comments: We don't expect the views of focus group participants to be statistically representative of the views of the population at large in USD 262. However, we always want to include a cross-section of the community in order to capture the greatest variety of views. We gather basic demographic information from participants to assess the degree of fit between the profile of participants and the general population. The results indicate that the participants in the two sessions were slightly older than the median age for Park City (30), Kechi (33) and Valley Center (35). The household income of participants was weighted heavily toward the \$70,000 and above category, which is far higher than the median household for the three major communities – Park City (\$42,794); Kechi (\$61,333), and Valley Center (\$50,683).

The age difference between participants and the communities at large may not be significant, but it would be a good idea to seek further input from patrons in the 17 to 24 and 65 and older categories. It is probable, however, that focus group responses heavily favor the views of wealthier patrons who are typically college educated. Income is often a reflection of education level and a factor in shaping lifestyle choices and attitudes toward funding education. National research indicates people with higher levels of education tend to value more highly formal education as a source for job skill development. Only 16 to 17 percent of workers with a high school education or less say school was important in helping them develop their job skills. It is clearly important that the board seek further input from patrons from other income categories. In this case, a randomized survey of district patrons might be effective in gathering broader perspectives.