

GASTON COUNTY SCHOOLS

Community Talks

with the Superintendent



Summary Report

April 28, 2014



Overview

In February and March 2014, Superintendent of Schools W. Jeffrey Booker hosted a series of meetings across Gaston County to meet with parents, employees, students, civic leaders, and interested citizens and hear from them about the future of Gaston County Schools.

A “Community Talks with the Superintendent” program was held at a school in each county township – two meetings were held in the Gastonia Township. At each location, a meeting was held at 3:45 p.m. for employees from schools in that particular community. The public meeting followed at 6:00 p.m. Each meeting lasted 90 minutes. The afternoon and evening meetings followed the same format.

Format

Each meeting began with a welcome and introduction. The principal of the host school introduced Superintendent Booker.

Mr. Booker talked about the purpose of the community meetings, reflected on his time as the new Superintendent of Schools, and discussed the school district’s mission and vision. He also focused on the following words – **Community, Communication, Choice,** and **Commitment** – and explained why these words are important to Gaston County Schools.

As part of the Superintendent’s presentation, the “WE ARE Gaston County Schools” promotional video was shown to the audience. The video offered reasons to be proud of our schools.

After the Superintendent’s remarks, the audience was divided into groups. Each group had 10-25 participants and met for 45 minutes. A facilitator was assigned to each group to guide the discussion, and a scribe recorded the group’s comments electronically. The discussion group format gave attendees an opportunity to share suggestions, ask questions, and voice concerns in a less formal setting.

The groups came together to conclude the meeting. Each group facilitator shared one idea with Superintendent Booker and the audience before Mr. Booker offered closing remarks.



Purpose

The “Community Talks with the Superintendent” meetings were designed to give our new Superintendent of Schools an opportunity to

- Meet employees, parents, students, elected officials, civic leaders, and other citizens;
- Promote Gaston County Schools and the accomplishments of our students and employees;
- Foster relationships between the school system and each community; and
- Receive comments, ideas, and suggestions about how to move our school system forward.



Meetings

The “Community Talks with the Superintendent” meetings were held at seven school locations:

Gastonia East Area – Monday, February 3

Ashbrook High School

Attendance: 221

Cherryville Area – Tuesday, February 4

John Chavis Middle School

Attendance: 88

South Point Area – Thursday, February 6

Belmont Central Elementary School

Attendance: 120

Bessemer City Area – Tuesday, February 18

Bessemer City Central Elementary School

Attendance: 126

Gastonia West Area – Monday, February 24

Hunter Huss High School

Attendance: 341

East Gaston Area – Tuesday, February 25

East Gaston High School

Attendance: 153

Dallas Area – Monday, March 10

Carr Elementary School

(rescheduled from February 13 because of weather)

Attendance: 179

Attendance Total: 1,228



Community Talks

with the Superintendent

Discussion Group Topics

As the Superintendent visited communities across Gaston County, it became evident that citizens have similar concerns. More than 1,600 comments were gathered from the discussion groups.

For this summary report, the comments were reviewed and categorized, and the most significant discussion group topics are outlined below and on the following two pages.

The ideas, suggestions, and concerns will help the Board of Education and Superintendent Booker develop the school district's strategic plan for 2014-2019.



Academics and Curriculum

- Schools offer a quality education for students.
- Provide the same opportunities at all schools.
- Increase the number of Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors courses.
- Elementary schools should have foreign language classes.
- Promote the Career and Technical Education program.
- Consistency with high school grading procedures.
- More programs needed to help with behavioral issues.
- Ensure services are provided to special needs children.
- Comments about the Common Core curriculum and Read to Achieve and math investigations programs.
- Offer more help to at-risk students.
- Continue efforts to increase the graduation rate and decrease the dropout rate.

Class Size and School Capacity

- Reduce class size at overcrowded schools.
- Review attendance lines to ensure adequate use of space at all schools.
- Consider population growth.

Communication

- Seek ways to increase communication with parents and the community.
- Share more positive information about the schools.
- Create a mobile app for the school system.
- User-friendly website.

Calendar

- Local control of school calendar.
- Align calendar with college semester schedule.
- Complete the fall semester and have exams before winter break.
- Consider other inclement weather make-up options to keep full week of spring break.
- Longer school days and shorter school year.

Discussion Group Topics

Equality from School to School

- Ensure equality from school to school and across the county in regard to programs, academics, extracurricular activities, sports, etc.
- Schools should offer the same services and programs for students and teachers regardless of size or location.

Parent and Community Relationships

- Seek ways to increase parent and community involvement.
- Reach out to churches and faith-based community for support.
- Increase the number of school volunteers.
- Work to ensure that all schools have a strong PTO or booster club organization.
- Schools need more support from businesses.
- Involve parents, churches, businesses, etc. in school decisions to build community trust.

Funding

- Schools are in desperate need of more funding for teacher salaries, supplies and resources, and facility maintenance and repairs.
- Schools need more support staff such as social workers, teacher assistants, nurses, guidance counselors, instructional facilitators, etc.
- Salaries should be competitive with other area school systems to retain employees.
- Consider the disparity in funding between Title I and non-Title I schools.
- Adequate funding is needed for new textbooks, classroom materials, library books, copy paper, and other supplies.
- School system does a good job with limited funding and resources.

Safety

- Continue to find ways to enhance school security.
- Students and teachers must feel safe at school for learning to take place.
- Schools do a good job of providing a safe environment.



School Choice

- Provide more choices for students and parents.
- Have more magnet schools like Highland and Early College.
- Highland is extremely popular – create more schools like it.
- A year-round school would be a possible choice for students and parents.
- Consider establishing an online school and a vocational/career school.
- Promote the International Baccalaureate program as a school choice option.
- Children need more summer enrichment and after-school opportunities.

Discussion Group Topics

Support for Public Schools

- Work to increase support for public schools and rally the community to support education.
- Gaston County Schools needs a voice with state lawmakers.
- Parents want a way to express concerns to local and state elected officials.

Teacher Morale

- Low teacher morale is a problem.
- Factors that contribute to low teacher morale are no salary increases, inadequate planning time, increase in teaching requirements and expectations, changes in curriculum, and increase in class size.
- The state law to end tenure for teachers and eliminate pay increases for advanced degrees contributes to low teacher morale.
- The Professional Learning Communities program gives teachers an opportunity to collaborate with colleagues.
- Professional development is important.

Technology

- Students and teachers need the latest technology in the classroom.
- Schools should have access to digital textbooks.
- Make it possible for students to use their own electronic device such as an iPad at school.
- Provide training that highlights how teachers can include the use of technology in classroom activities.

Testing Requirements

- There is too much emphasis on testing.
- Excessive testing creates unnecessary stress for teachers, parents, and children.



Gaston County Schools Strategic Plan

In addition to providing comments about Gaston County Schools, participants in the discussion groups had an opportunity to offer suggestions about the Gaston County Schools strategic plan for 2014-2019.

They believe the strategic plan should

- be written so that it is memorable;
- include words that are easy to understand;
- highlight the importance of academics, school safety, and technology; and
- provide direction for the school system.

The strategic plan includes the mission, vision, and goals for Gaston County Schools. The Board of Education will use the comments to develop the new strategic plan.

Questions and Answers

Not only did the “Community Talks” participants share comments, but they also asked questions.

We grouped similar questions together and provided information in a **Questions and Answers** section on the Gaston County Schools website – click the “Community Talks” link.

If you do not see an answer to your question, please e-mail your question to the GCS Communications Department – communications@gaston.k12.nc.us – and we will get an answer for you.

What’s Next?

We would like to thank you for attending one of our “Community Talks” meetings. The school system is working now to address suggestions and concerns.

The “Community Talks” meetings gave school leaders an opportunity to connect with people who care about our schools. So what happens next?

While the meetings are complete, we want the conversation to continue. Gaston County Schools plans to host similar community meetings during the 2014-2015 school year. Superintendent Booker also looks forward to working with the Community Advisory Committee, which will come together this fall.



‘Meet the Superintendent Night’

As a continuation of the “Community Talks with the Superintendent” meetings, we hosted two additional events.

A “Meet the Superintendent Night” program for families in the Highland community was held Monday, March 24 at the Erwin Center in Gastonia. Mrs. Darryl McClure, executive director of the Erwin Center, assisted with the program.

A “Meet the Superintendent Night” program for Hispanic families was held Monday, March 31 at Saint Michael Catholic Church in Gastonia. Father Jose Antonio Juya and Carmen Vasquez, who direct the Hispanic ministry at Saint Michael, coordinated the meeting.

The events gave parents and community leaders an opportunity to meet and talk with Superintendent Booker.

Attendance: 111

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WE ARE Gaston County Schools

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