



Design21: Building the Future for CCSD21

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION 1

 Background 1

 M² Communications’ Process..... 1

 Development of this Report..... 3

 Next Steps 3

DESIGN21 INTERVIEWS 3

 Interview Themes..... 4

 Educators are Key 4

 Curriculum and Instruction and Academic Preparedness 4

 Technology..... 5

 Diversity and Inclusion..... 5

 Communications and Community Engagement 6

 Opportunities and Challenges of a Consolidated School District 6

 Facilities 7

 Finances 7

 Key Takeaways from the Interviews 8

DESIGN21 FOCUS GROUPS..... 9

 Focus Group Themes..... 9

 Educators are Key 9

 Curriculum and Instruction and Academic Preparedness 10

 Social Emotional Learning..... 11

Technology.....	11
Diversity	12
Communications	12
CCSD21 – Together as One District.....	13
Partnering to Support CCSD21.....	14
District Test Scores and School Ratings	14
Facilities	15
Finances	15
Key Takeaways from the Focus Groups	16
DESIGN21 SESSIONS.....	17
Key takeaways from the Design21 Sessions	21
FINAL THOUGHTS.....	21
About M ² Communications.....	22

INTRODUCTION

Background

In 2017, Community Consolidated School District 21 (CCSD21) launched a community engagement process, called Design21, to understand the community's ideas and priorities for building the future for all students. CCSD21 hired Fako Research & Strategies, Inc. in the fall of 2017 to gather quantitative data from the community through phone and online surveys. M² Communications was then engaged to conduct qualitative research and gather the ideas and first-person voices of parents, students, teachers, district administrators, board members, community leaders, and community members. M² is a full-service communications firm that works exclusively in education, supporting schools, districts, and education organizations at the national, state, and local levels. The firm offers the full range of communications solutions including comprehensive community engagement strategies to bring the voice of stakeholders into the work to establish an ongoing, two-way dialogue between the district and all of its stakeholders and ensure all students receive the best education possible.

M² Communications' Process

M² began working with the district in the fall of 2017 and developed a qualitative research project uniquely designed for CCSD21 that was informed by the findings from Fako Research and Strategies and based on M²'s expertise and experience working with many school districts. The project plan included the following elements:

Interviews

M² conducts interviews to gather background on the district and generate information and perspectives from a cross section of the district's stakeholders, from external community partners to those deeply engaged in the work of the district, that will ultimately inform the direction and content for the next steps of the research. The interview development process included working with the district to identify a cross section of stakeholders to interview and then developing a strategic set of questions to most effectively elicit stakeholders' views and ideas. M² interviewed 22 CCSD21 stakeholders including parents, teachers, school board members, district and school administrators, elected officials and other community leaders.

Between late November and mid-December 2017, M² conducted the interviews by meeting with people one-on-one or in small groups of two or three at a time. Interviews usually lasted about an hour and near verbatim notes were taken to ensure information and ideas were accurately captured for later analysis.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are another effective method M² uses to gain information and perspectives from stakeholders. Focus groups offer a different type of information from interviews by virtue of the

greater number of voices heard. Through this type of community engagement, we are able to surface areas of focus and begin to identify emergent themes. It is important to note that the type of focus groups M² conducts are different than those often used by political organizations or by companies selling products. While these focus groups seek a statistically representative sample of people with the same demographic characteristics, M² does an “all call” that encourages everyone and anyone in the community to participate. M² developed and supported the district in executing a thorough, wide-reaching communications and outreach plan to ensure maximum participation that included:

- Multiple emails from the superintendent, school principals, and PTO leaders to all district families and staff as well as community leaders
- Social media content on Facebook and Twitter
- Press releases to local media outlets
- Development of a dedicated section of the district’s website for information about the focus groups and the Design21 process in general
- Development of language for district and community members to share via their communications vehicles (e.g. social media, newsletters)
- Development of flyers to be inserted in students’ backpacks; posted in schools, libraries, and community centers; and handed out at district and community events.
- Targeted, personalized outreach to families whose first language is not English

Informed by the research conducted by Fako Research & Strategies and the results of the interviews, M² developed questions for the focus groups. The same questions were used for all adult focus groups. A separate set of questions was developed for the student groups that covered the same general areas but was designed to capture the students’ unique experiences and accommodate the shorter length of their focus groups (adult focus groups were 90 minutes while student groups were 45 minutes).

A common protocol was employed at all focus groups. Participants were welcomed, asked to sign in and make name tags, and were offered water and light snacks. Each session began with a high-level explanation of the Design21 process and description of how the session would unfold. It was explained that nearly verbatim notes would be taken but that there would be no attribution of comments and the participants’ anonymity would be preserved.

Design21 Sessions

As the final step of a community engagement process, M² often conducts a series of meetings to share what was learned during the previous steps and provide an opportunity for stakeholders to discuss and ask questions. M² worked with the district to design a set of focused, informational sessions organized around key themes identified during the interviews and focus groups. Each of these sessions followed the same format:

- The district provided background information on the session topic
- Small groups of families and community members engaged in conversations around what they heard
- Small groups then shared their ideas, questions, and perspectives with all participants including district administrators and board members in attendance.

- Notes from each small group were collected and posted along with the session's presentation materials on the district website

Development of this Report

Analysis

After completing all steps of the process, the notes from the interviews, focus groups and Design21 sessions were further studied to understand and catalogue what was heard throughout the process, what themes emerged, what questions stakeholders had, what information gaps and misinformation existed, and what directions stakeholders were interested in pursuing.

Narrative and Selected Quotes

The report that follows provides summaries of each stage of the research M² conducted: interviews, focus groups, and Design21 sessions. Within each area of research summarized, there is a narrative section organized around the themes that emerged from the research. Each section was written to summarize the theme and incorporate the range of ideas, questions, concerns, and perspectives shared by stakeholders.

Following the narrative is a list of selected quotes. Quotes were selected because they are representative of the comments heard by the range of stakeholder groups. We do not identify the source of the comments in order to maintain the anonymity of participants as promised.

Next Steps

Each process and each district is different but in general, M²'s clients make sure the research reaches the community by creating presentations or reports to be shared in print and/or online as well as at school board meetings and other community meetings. The information is then used to develop a plan of action. These plans can vary based on the findings and the district's goals.

DESIGN21 INTERVIEWS

Between late November and mid-December 2017, M² Communications interviewed 22 CCSD21 stakeholders including parents, teachers, school board members, district, and school administrators, elected officials and other community leaders. These interviews provided a great deal of information to help the district understand stakeholder perspectives and support the district's efforts going forward, while also serving as directional for M² in that they provided grounding in the community and understanding of local and district issues. This information, combined with the findings of Fako Research and Strategies, supported the development of the questions and protocol for the focus groups M² conducted in February 2018.

Interview Themes

Educators are Key

Educators were mentioned as a tremendous asset to the district, one worth investing in so they can provide the learning environment and opportunities students need. Interviewees said that CCSD21 provides incredible training, professional development, and collaboration and makes a significant commitment to and investment in the district's principals and teachers. As a result, educators feel supported by the administrative team. We did hear that it would be helpful to increase access to the range of materials that would allow teachers to differentiate for their students.

Selected quotes:

- Terrific staff and teachers.
- When I got here it was even better than I thought - incredible training, professional development, and collaboration among colleagues.
- I like this year. My kids are more confident. They say the principal comes into their classrooms. They are excited to have someone who understands them. And yet, they have teachers who don't speak Spanish but all of the teachers are always helping my kids. Everyone wants the kids to be successful.

Curriculum and Instruction and Academic Preparedness

Those we interviewed spoke highly of the education students in CCSD21 receive. Interviewees commented on the rigorous and high-quality content provided to students. Exploratories and specials (e.g. physical education, art) as well as music, drama, and other extra-curriculars were also talked about as part of CCSD21's high-quality education. There was tremendous consensus that full day kindergarten district-wide was important to the community as it provides a strong foundation for the balance of a student's education. The dual language program was widely seen as a strong program and one that should be offered district wide. Participants expressed concern that larger class sizes could make it more difficult for teachers to meet students' needs. Another area of concern mentioned was around inconsistencies within the special education program. We also heard that the middle schools are focusing on careers and making positive connections for students, but also that the curriculum needs to ensure that kids are ready for high school.

Selected quotes:

- The heart and soul of school is in the curriculum. That's where we look at the kids, structures, content and make sure we prioritize so that instruction reflects the standards.
- Diversity with high level of curricular rigor, high achievement is unparalleled.

- We keep hearing this positive feedback from parents about preparation.
- The [Discovery] science curriculum is outstanding but it's only every three weeks.
- Full-day K. It needs to happen in the next couple of years in order for our district to stay competitive.
- We also have to consider dual language across the district – we have it in two buildings and it's been tremendous. Even early childhood parents ask for dual language.
- Dual language honors the fact that it takes time to learn English. You'll have to pass the test eventually but you still have the opportunity to mix with other kids and not be isolated.

Technology

Interviewees talked about the importance of keeping up with technology in order to support student success. They were pleased that the middle schools are fully 1:1 and are eager to have the elementary schools achieve this as well. Technology was seen as an important tool to enhance curriculum and engage and support students where they are and where their interests lie. Technology was also seen as an important tool for teachers and parents to communicate about student progress.

Selected quotes:

- Getting close to 1:1, keeping up to date on that is important.
- Full 1:1 is a no-brainer.
- Power School is used at the middle school, so parents can see grades and assignments and that should be implemented in the elementary schools because as a parent you don't know what's missing until it's too late.

Diversity and Inclusion

During our interviews, there was much talk about the diversity of the CCSD21 community. The consensus among those we spoke to was that the district is one of the more diverse districts in the area and that this diversity is a strength. We heard excitement about bringing different cultures and their histories, languages, and experiences together within the same school. Those interviewed also acknowledged that some aspects of diversity presented challenges. Parents who do not speak English, or do so with less confidence, may not feel comfortable coming to school and participating in meetings or activities. With 60% of students in the district receiving free and reduced lunch, issues related to poverty impact individual students and families as well as the schools they attend. Our interviewees said that they heard concerns from families and community members about schools that receive federal Title I grant funds “getting more” and these stakeholders didn't understand why.

Selected quotes:

- Love the community and students and the diversity in the schools.
- Hard to give an impression of the district – every building is so different and the demographics shift a lot from east to west.

- Eight Spanish speaking parents meet as the school's Bilingual PAC. They would like to be part of the PTO but they do not speak English, some don't drive and for some, the meeting schedule doesn't align.
- There is a perception from different sides of the community that we're not treating all schools the same way in terms of academic expectations and what we provide.
- We have to get the message out – different communities have different needs and it doesn't make sense for all schools to be the same across the board.

Communications and Community Engagement

Communications and community engagement were important topics raised within all of our interviews. Interviewees shared the importance of the district telling its story and highlighting the good things it is doing. They also discussed the importance of outreach and communications to all families, pointing out that the district doesn't often hear from the 60% of the district that receives free and reduced lunch and that families often feel intimidated speaking up at board meetings. Discussion included gathering input from families about learning opportunities that interest them, and bringing them in to learn about those identified topics of interest like Common Core and how parents can support their children.

Finally, interviewees shared the importance for board members and administrators to be visible and accessible in the schools and broader community in order to connect with families and community members. Interviewees identified the importance of using all channels of communication, from face-to-face, paper newsletters and traditional media to emails, social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), apps, and parent portals like Power School.

Selected quotes:

- Parents are involved in all of the committee work so there are lots of avenues for getting a pulse on their concerns.
- Face-to-face is the most productive – because you need to build a relationship. Then you can follow up with other methods of communication.
- The old school ways like phone calls and mailings that are getting into people's hands are important. And we have to continue to strengthen and grow social media as well.
- People want to know what it actually means for kids/people, when we are able to share stories of impact, – it makes a stronger case. Too often we miss the individual stories about what it means.
- We need to consistently translate all district materials.
- The same people that show up to board meetings – they're not representative of the entire district
- I like *The Author*, it's done professionally, it's nice looking, concise information.

Opportunities and Challenges of a Consolidated School District

Students who attend CCSD21 schools come from six different communities. The tax base and student and family needs within these communities are very different. Those we interviewed pointed to the opportunity for partnerships with the different municipalities, libraries, and park

districts that fall within CCSD21. But they also talked about the challenges of being a consolidated school district that include meeting the diverse needs of students and families and being compared to neighboring districts with real and/or perceived differences.

Selected quotes:

- CCSD21 should collaborate more with all of the different entities e.g. the Village of Wheeling and Buffalo Grove.
- There's a certain level of pride related to District 25...District 25 has real or perceived prestige.
- Parents can compare and go to neighboring communities. We have to stay competitive.
- I haven't seen anything better in neighboring districts. We have been a leader – we had tech centers before others, got Chromebooks but we don't get credit for that. We've been a very progressive district educationally.

Facilities

Interviewees talked about the importance of 21st century learning spaces that support student success. And the desire for air conditioning was a common theme. While most felt it would come eventually, we also heard that for some, other educational enhancements were more of a priority. The age of the buildings and play equipment were acknowledged consistently throughout the interviews. Updating the buildings would support students' education but should also include securing the facilities.

Selected quotes:

- We need to make learning spaces more appropriate for learning styles today.
- Brick and mortar, security of schools – we have to pay attention to these things.
- Air conditioning is expensive - \$20 million to install for use one month of the year. I'd rather see that money go toward full day kindergarten or something that benefits students.
- Even window units would help if it's a huge expense to do central air.

Finances

Those we interviewed talked about the district's budget-tightening efforts over the last few years. They felt that cuts had been made strategically to protect the classroom as much as possible, and that there was not much left to cut without negatively impacting the education students receive. They also said that the district needs to further raise awareness with stakeholders about all the cutbacks that have happened. While everyone worried about high taxes, they felt it was important to develop a clear plan of what is needed to enhance the schools and the education students receive that reflects stakeholders' priorities. Participants felt that if additional funds were needed but were not received, the district should communicate anticipated cuts. Interviewees also raised the idea of seeking corporate funding and setting up a foundation to seek and accept private funds.

Selected quotes:

- Raising awareness of the cutbacks that have happened – these are not decisions we took lightly, we’ve made things as tight as possible.
- It’s hard because everyone feels like their taxes are high enough.
- District staff are really incredible and they’ve managed to save money and cut costs without touching the classroom. This story needs to be told.
- People would be comfortable to know that the district is working from a plan and being strategic.
- Enhancing the schools and the education the district provides is not just about our families but about the full community – we are preparing global citizens to support our future.
- We need to educate people on what it costs to run a district and what it costs to do the things people want in the schools.

Key Takeaways from the Interviews

- **CCSD21 would benefit from a cohesive identity and brand.** With schools in different communities and many types of diversity (e.g. by language, ethnicity, socio-economics) within the district, CCSD21 would benefit from building a clear identity and brand that is widely communicated and understood by all residents who live in the district and within the geographic area it serves.
- **CCSD21 is the best kept secret.** The district emphasis on supporting teachers through professional development and providing opportunities for collaboration, and the subsequent high-quality instruction and support teachers provide for their students is a story that needs to be widely communicated to all stakeholders.
- **The CCSD21 community is supportive of full-day kindergarten and dual-language programs being implemented district-wide.** These two programs, currently only in some schools, were widely mentioned as strong programs that should be brought to all CCSD21 schools.
- **The CCSD21 community values updated and cutting-edge facilities and technology.** Stakeholders are unified in their interest in updating facilities and creating innovative learning spaces that include the best technology.
- **Further cuts and belt tightening will not get CCSD21 where stakeholders want the district to be.** The district has made about \$19 million in cumulative cuts over the last three years and further cuts would negatively impact the quality of the education students receive. To support the kinds of enhancements stakeholders want and need, additional revenue will be required.
- **Communications and community engagement are key to advancing the future of CCSD21.** CCSD21 has an exciting and positive story to tell about where the district is and where it wants to go. Communications should cover all topics (e.g. finances, programs, testing) and include the “why” behind each area. Additionally, the district will benefit greatly by continuing and prioritizing a two-way dialogue with all stakeholders to ensure the district’s story is consistently well known and so they can work together to ensure

success for the district and all students. Efforts should include bringing people into the school – including those without students – to help demonstrate what great resources the schools are in the community.

DESIGN21 FOCUS GROUPS

Between February 1st and 14th 2018, M² Communications conducted 11 focus groups with families and community members, teachers, students, principals. Two additional family and community focus groups were offered in Spanish, but we did not have any participants at these sessions. Following is a breakdown of focus groups and attendees by role:

Role	# of focus groups	Total # of attendees
Students	3	42
Teachers/staff	2	12
Principals	1	12
Family/community	5	52
Totals	11	118

The focus groups were extremely helpful in gathering feedback from district stakeholders in general and by specific role. We gained a very good sense of the issues that are important to members of the CCSD21 community. This information can be used to support the district in a variety of ways.

Focus Group Themes

Educators are Key

There was a lot of discussion around the educators in CCSD21. We heard high praise for teachers, principals, and other staff working in schools with students. Teachers were routinely credited with creating positive, supportive environments for their students. There were many comments about how educators take a “no excuses” approach and focus on the strengths of the students. Students especially talked about educators taking care of them and helping them to learn. Teachers were also lauded for successfully balancing language diversity and differentiating instruction to meet individual student needs, though there were some comments suggesting that teachers needed more guidance and support in differentiation. And while there was clear consensus that CCSD21 has many excellent teachers, participants wanted to understand what was being done to provide support to teachers they believe need help. The professional development offered by the district and the collaboration among teachers were deemed strong but there were comments around the need to engage the expertise of teachers and include them in educational discussions and decisions around things like curriculum. There

were also comments that cutbacks have led to reduced staffing that impacts teaching and learning.

Selected quotes:

- Our teachers and staff have a good reputation, people trust the teachers and we have quality educators in every building.
- Parents are very happy with their neighborhood school, they think the teaching is quality.
- The teachers are so dedicated and the professional development they get is above and beyond.
- Our teachers create in our students the love for education and for them to continue to have the desire to seek new knowledge, inspire creativity, and be challenged.
- Teachers and principals exceed expectations, very impressed each year with their professionalism.
- When new initiatives are introduced, they don't take other initiatives off the teachers' plates and there is limited time given to prepare for the new initiatives.

Curriculum and Instruction and Academic Preparedness

Teaching and learning were a big part of what focus group participants talked about. All groups agreed on the importance of a well-rounded education that set high standards that were achieved through a high-quality instruction. Full-day kindergarten and dual language programs were highlighted as programs that should be available at all CCSD21 schools. Specifically, the dual language program was lauded for helping students feel less segregated and giving all students a sense of belonging. In terms of the current district-wide language program, many wished for additional language options beyond Spanish and some would prefer Spanish be made part of the core curriculum rather than as an Exploratory class. STEM was another area of interest across the focus groups. Several commented on effective teaching and learning in this area while others hoped for upgrades to include things like coding and robotics. Special education was also raised with anecdotes shared about families moving into the district because they heard about the strong programs CCSD21 has to offer, while others shared about inconsistent experiences. There were also several discussions about teachers connecting with and encouraging students, and the need for more support for both the students who struggle and those who need more challenge.

Selected quotes:

- We need to get back to teaching kids the why, not just the rote memorization, we've gotten caught up in the test scores.
- Average students get cut off from going into accelerated classes.
- I worry that kids fall behind – we need a program for kids so they get the help they need and catch up.
- I was looking for more language in school – there are no options, no French, Polish or Russian, nothing. The more languages they have the more their brain is challenged.

- I feel like kids fall behind and don't want to do the work and are not interested. Teachers should find out what they're interested in.

Social Emotional Learning

Throughout the focus groups we heard the need to focus on social emotional learning as much as on academics because, ultimately, academic success is supported by a positive social emotional environment and sense of self. There was consensus around the importance of learning how to learn and being part of a community so students can build community that lasts beyond school. Teaching tolerance, empathy and how to deal with each other is key because students need to see the other person's opinion – we heard comments that CCSD21 does this well. There were many examples given of teachers who knew and supported students but there were also comments suggesting that teachers should connect more with students, including understanding a child's background and home life. There was also a good amount of discussion about bullying. The question of a district-wide policy on bullying was raised.

Selected quotes:

- Schools should focus on SEL as much as academics.
- Middle school is critical in being prepared for adulthood – students need to feel welcome, loved, and supported or they won't thrive. They need to learn skills through extra-curriculars.
- "Trouble makers" might have stuff going on at home. Teachers should think of all the different scenarios that would make... [our classmates] misbehave.

Technology

Technology was discussed throughout the focus groups. People were pleased that the middle schools are all 1:1 but expanding this to the elementary level and aligning with the technology used at the high schools were raised. Also, the need for electronic textbooks came up. We heard comments about the need for technology upgrades to support all subjects but that technology should be used to enhance education and not as a replacement for other effective teaching and learning methods. Participants also expressed interest in using technology to support communication about the district and individual student progress.

Selected quotes:

- All middle-schoolers are 1:1 and it's so much better.
- The same technology tools and platforms should be uniform across the district.
- I would like to see science get upgrades with technology – would be more authentic and hands-on.
- In regards to technology, it's more an issue of quality over quantity – there needs to be best practices for how to use them.
- The parents need training too.

Diversity

Many focus group participants listed diversity as what they liked most about the district and saw it as a real strength. Several people pointed out that diversity can also present challenges and the district needs to better communicate to families and the community how diversity enhances learning and explain how this prepares students for a diverse, global society. According to participants, the district has been more successful communicating the value of diversity to the students.

Selected quotes:

- One of the things that drew me to 21 was the diversity.
- Diversity is our strength but part of the challenge, but we have not communicated the value of this diversity to learning. Some see this as a burden to education – [but] interacting with other languages and ethnicities will benefit students.
- At our school, we are more than 50% ESL. Does our school have the resources it needs to support students learning English?
- The kids are so great and accepting.
- We're teaching tolerance and they're getting that and that extends to the families.

Communications

Communications was a significant part of the discussion across all focus groups. Participants talked about many great things happening in the district that need to be better showcased and communicated broadly. As one person said, communications need to be “tiered and trickle down.” Ideas included:

- From the board (e.g. make board meetings more visible – televise; accept questions in advance and answer at the meeting and/or post online; or write a summary)
- From the administration (e.g. push out information via all communications channels routinely and be present at schools/events)
- From the school (e.g. set consistent expectations about communication across all schools for principal and teacher communications)

Focus group participants said they get information from different places, like emails, social media (including Facebook and Twitter), websites, backpacks and Parent Portal. Translation of all communications (e.g. currently, *The Author* is only produced in English) would be helpful.

Participants appreciate the district engaging families/community, educators and students in an ongoing, two-way dialogue to share information and perspectives, and would like additional opportunities to be heard. Discussion around the communications necessary if a referendum was put before the community was also shared. Participants shared that they would like continued information gathering (like that done through Design21) to understand what the community is looking for. Communication should continue to be systematic, transparent, and thorough, so people know how things are going and that the district is consistently following through with any potential referendum plan. It was shared that during the last successful

CCSD21 referendum, teachers were very much engaged in the process, and were able to communicate what the referendum was for and why it was important.

Selected quotes:

- Our district administrators [and principals] need to be transparent, they...[need to be more visible]... in our buildings and talking to the community.
- It would be nice to record/televisе board meetings, every time I go, I learn something new and I feel more connected.
- We can all rethink bringing messages to the community instead of expecting the community to come to the school.
- This is the first time that the district has ever solicited input at all from the community.
- The plan for a referendum needs to be targeted and specific, with visible results.
- People don't feel comfortable giving money if they don't know what it's for. If people don't trust what will happen with money, they won't feel good. If I get a plan, then I'll go out and sell it.
- Social media has helped a lot...most parents are on Facebook, we need to continue this, we've been encouraged to put more kid pictures up, the ability to email the whole school community is helpful and I've gotten positive feedback.

CCSD21 – Together as One District

A strong theme of the focus groups was the importance of being one, unified school district. Paramount to the participants was a level playing field where all students have access to the same programs, resources, curriculum and instruction, policies and norms, and technology, regardless of which CCSD21 school they attend.

There was a sense among some participants that schools within the district were in competition with each other. The perception that different schools offer different/better opportunities is an inherent challenge in many school districts. Certainly, staff understood why some programs exist at only some schools but the broader community of parents and citizens were often misinformed or uninformed. Also, many participants spoke of great things going on throughout the district that did not appear to be widely known within the broader community.

Additionally, with schools in multiple communities, CCSD21 community members drive by schools in other districts and have friends and neighbors who attend schools in other districts. When other districts are building or renovating buildings, or friends tell them about a great program in another district, people begin to compare. Proximity and comparison to other districts gives some stakeholders the impression that these districts are doing more and better for students.

Selected quotes:

- We need to identify what D21 is about – we are one district, we should brand ourselves, same logos.
- Each school does its own thing and there's no central policy – creates challenges.

- I do hear [from parents] that they think they get less than neighboring districts. There's a perception that we offer less than neighboring districts.
- They're doing a lot of construction in D25 and people notice.
- We are all having different conversations with parents but we have to come up with a common understanding of our community – culturally, linguistically, socioeconomically. I hope this process leads us to doing these things – it's about how great we can be.

Partnering to Support CCSD21

During the focus groups, participants spoke of the importance of working together – within the district and with the community – to support the education of all students. Many people talked about the value of collaboration among teachers within the district – within grade levels and schools, across schools, by role and vertically so that teachers could better understand their incoming students and better prepare students for the following grade level. This issue of vertical articulation was also discussed as very important in terms of working with the high schools CCSD21 students feed into to ensure students are well prepared, know what to expect, and that there is curricular alignment.

Another aspect of working together discussed in the focus groups was the importance of partnerships with other taxing bodies such as the library and the park district. These partnerships leverage resources to support organizations' shared interests in supporting young people. These partnerships are also a good way to communicate with the broader community.

Selected quotes:

- As a grade-level team we work well together but to work with grade bands with other middle schools would be good.
- The other thing that might be interesting is the idea of articulation among grade levels – but can we do more between middle and high school and also between schools?
- District should communicate better with 214. We have a tremendous resource in 214 and would like to see us communicate with them and partner with them to identify what it would take to be ready.
- Develop partnerships across the community, we don't partner enough with all of our resources – village and library boards etc. – then they could advocate for what we're doing. How can we facilitate more co-sponsored events with a partner that serves the community that parents trust? If the park district is going to be there too and I can sign up for something – double whammy, one night with two events.

District Test Scores and School Ratings

Across the family and community focus groups, participants talked about the Greatschools.org ratings of CCSD21 schools and the test scores that likely support the development of these ratings. People were concerned about drops in test scores and school ratings. They were concerned that these numbers meant their children's education was suffering and that their property values were in jeopardy.

Selected quotes:

- Parents can see what schools go with the house that's listed and it takes you to greatschools.org.
- I have concerns about the rating of the schools, this mixture of the kids is not going away and people need to understand that. We have a lot of ESL kids.

Facilities

Throughout the focus groups there was discussion about facility enhancements and how this would improve the experience for students, educators, parents, and community members and would offer tangible evidence of where the community's tax dollars are going. There were many comments about the need for taking pride in the schools and providing inviting, engaging, 21st century learning spaces.

There were also many comments about air conditioning and a consistent call for adding it to all CCSD21 buildings. Concerns about the impact on teaching and learning, and the health of the students, were raised. The point was made by a few, however, that air conditioning was not as important as other educational or security improvements.

Security was another area of facilities that was discussed in the focus groups. Participants raised the need for significant updating in this area given recent events across the country. We also heard that security was more than a facilities issue and that it required developing comprehensive safety procedures that were communicated effectively. Focus group participants also raised the importance of balancing safety with creating a welcoming environment.

Selected quotes:

- They really need to do a facility assessment and have a plan from a capital perspective over the next 10 years.
- I've been in buildings in surrounding districts and I feel like we are behind in facilities. We look old and our electricity is inadequate. The district is falling far behind what the high school is providing both in terms of facilities and materials.
- When I have visited other schools, the experience that you have walking in says a lot about culture and climate of school. Investing in the experience you have would alleviate a lot of the complaints that parents have about, "what am I getting for my tax dollars?"
- Thinking about accessibility for all students, our facilities are a problem.
- Safety is most important. Air conditioning won't keep everyone safe.
- We need an upgrade in safety, the cameras outside don't always work. We need a button that can lock all doors in the schools.

Finances

The focus groups generated a lot of conversation about district finances. These discussions raised questions and highlighted the need for understanding how schools are funded, how specific education funding programs work (e.g. Title I and funding for ESL), and the impact of current State education funding issues on the district. Participants also had questions about

how CCSD21 currently spends money and what cuts the district has made and why. Most agreed that further cost-saving measures would be detrimental to the schools and students.

Participants also encouraged creativity in saving money and fundraising for the district – e.g. going paperless, corporate partnerships (advertising, cell towers), families paying for extra-curricular buses, and writing grants to philanthropies. PTO fundraising was also raised with questions about what they can and can't pay for and how to deal with the variation of fundraising capacity of different schools.

Finally, the issue of a referendum to support the district was discussed. While many people shared concerns about raising what they said were already high taxes (especially for taxpayers who do not have children attending CCSD21 schools), many did say it could be done if the district develops and communicates a clear, specific plan with benchmarks and transparency. People would need to know exactly what the money was going to be used for and, if passed, be consistently updated on progress. Also, it was brought up a few times that during the last successful referendum teachers really helped so it would be important to make sure they fully understand and support the plan and help promote it.

Selected quotes:

- Taxes go up but everything gets cut at the school.
- You have tax revenue that's spread equitably, and Title I money goes to some schools – how does that money get awarded?
- Some PTOs are able to raise more money for their schools. Why are there so many building blocks that prevent PTOs from bringing resources into the school?
- There are grants and federal money, maybe the district doesn't look for opportunities.
- Parents would need a lot of education, they don't understand how [finances] work.
- A referendum needs to be targeted and specific, with visible results.
- I would like to see milestones [for a referendum] and if we don't meet them, there has to be repercussions.

Key Takeaways from the Focus Groups

- **CCSD21 would benefit from a clear and shared definition of equity.** As part of a cohesive identity and brand for CCSD21, the district should develop a clear definition of equity that is shared by all stakeholders. CCSD21's efforts would be supported by unpacking and communicating what equity means within and across schools and how equity is defined from the district level to the individual level.
- **CCSD21 stakeholders need a common understanding of what the district provides for its students across all schools.** There is acknowledgement of many of the district's strengths but these strengths are not consistently known.
- **The CCSD21 community values updated and cutting-edge facilities and technology.** Stakeholders are unified in their interest in updating facilities and creating innovative learning spaces that include the best technology.

- **CCSD21’s full community needs to better understand district finances.** While some stakeholders in the broader CCSD21 community do understand, there are information gaps and misinformation about funding for education including where money comes from, how that funding works, cuts and cost-saving measures made by the district to date, and the alignment between what the community wants and how it can (or cannot) be paid for.
- **CCSD21 would benefit from a strategic communications focus.** Weaving communications into everything the district does would provide more consistent understanding and support of the district and establish a collaborative spirit and relationship among all stakeholders.

DESIGN21 SESSIONS

As the final phase of the Design21 process, CCSD21 hosted a series of four community engagement sessions in March. Each session was focused on a key topic identified during M²'s interview and focus group work. These topics were:

- **School Reform: The Foundation of a Professional Learning Community**
- **Programming to Meet the Needs of the Whole Child**
- **Building Future-ready Facilities**
- **Community-focused Finances & Allocations**

Each of these sessions included background information on the topic and the opportunity for families and community members to discuss the topic and share their ideas, questions, and perspectives. This continued dialogue will support CCSD21 as it plans for the future in order to meet the needs of all students.

Session #1 -- School Reform: The Foundation of a Professional Learning Community

Nineteen members of the CCSD21 community participated in the first Design21 session. Reflecting on the community’s desire to better understand the District’s strategic plan and how district decisions are made, participants learned about CCSD21’s Professional Learning Community, or strategic plan, and engaged in discussion on how the District’s Mission, Vision, Collective Commitments, and Areas of Focus, together reflect the District’s Professional Learning Community. In small groups, participants discussed and then responded to questions.

What surprised you in today’s learning?

- The number of children in CCSD21 who live in poverty. Over the past 10 years, the number of CCSD21 children who live in poverty has risen from 36% to 60%.

Given what you know about CCSD21, in what ways do the current Mission, Vision, Collective Commitments, and Areas of Focus reflect what we value in our school community?

- The current Mission, Vision, and Collective Commitments reflect the values of the community, including valuing student learning, diversity, and fiscal responsibility.

- Mission, Vision, and Collective Commitments are overarching components of the District’s strategic plan but interested in better understanding specifics on how instruction is delivered with these elements in mind.

What would need to be included/deleted in order to better reflect our community values?

- Include language that reflects 21st Century Learning, STEAM, and differentiation for all ability groups.

Session #2 -- Programming to Meet the Needs of the Whole Child

Thirty-one members of the CCSD21 community participated in the second Design21 session. Through earlier phases of Design21, participants identified programs that have been implemented to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students that they wanted to know more about:

1. **Professional Learning Community Areas of Focus** -- The District’s PLC Areas of Focus are aimed at increasing student achievement. This group focused on Creating a Positive School Climate and Literacy Throughout the Day and what implementation looks like in our schools and classrooms.
2. **STEAM** -- STEAM ensures that Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math are elevated in our classrooms and schools. This group focused on the integration of these areas into Illinois standards-based curriculum and how technology enhances learning for our students across all content areas.
3. **Teaching the Whole Child** -- This group focused on the importance of meeting the needs of the whole child and the significance of academics, exploratory experiences and extra-curriculars for students.
4. **Language Learning** -- This group focused on the importance of language learning, the benefits of being bilingual, goals of the bilingual program, program offerings and funding sources.
5. **Instructional Structures and Programs** -- This group focused on the structures and programs provided to Pre-K, Kindergarten, Elementary, and Middle School students.
6. **Assessment and Student Achievement** -- This group focused on the various assessments used in the district, how assessments are used to inform instruction, and how teachers differentiate to meet the needs of children.

Participants became “experts” in one of the above topics and at the end of the evening, they responded to questions and shared what they learned with the whole group including programs, services, or structures to protect, eliminate, or add.

What did you learn tonight that surprised you?

- Processes and structures are in place for highly-able and high potential students in elementary and middle schools.
- There are a variety of language programs and services to meet the needs of students.
- Teachers use a variety of assessments to inform instruction and engage in an ongoing process for analyzing student performance.

What programs, services or structures need to be protected?

- Orchestra/Band
- Elementary enrichment
- Middle school accelerated programs

What programs, services or structures need to be eliminated?

- There was general agreement among most participants not to eliminate current programs and services.
- Reduce class sizes.

What programs, services or structures need to be added?

- Foreign language in the elementary school
- Additional foreign languages in the middle school
- Band opportunities in fourth grade
- Applying more rigor to schoolwork and learning experiences

Session #3 -- Building Future-ready Facilities

Ten members of the CCSD21 community participated in the third Design21 session. Participants learned facts about each of CCSD21's 14 buildings, reviewed student enrollment history and projections, and considered different levels of facility enhancements that would ensure the District's physical spaces are safe, innovative, and meet the needs to the students and community. Enhancements and improvements were grouped into five levels:

- Level 1: Building Maintenance
- Level 2: Safety and Security
- Level 3: Learning Environments and Furniture
- Level 4: Outdoor Play Spaces
- Level 5: Air Conditioning

Participants worked in small groups and responded to the following questions:

What surprised you in today's learning?

- Participants were surprised to learn that not all schools are air-conditioned.

Given what you know about CCSD21, which level of building needs are you most interested in addressing? Why?

- All participants agreed that Air Conditioning and Safety and Security were the areas they were most interested in addressing.

Which levels are you least interested in addressing? Why?

- Although there was less overall consensus on which areas participants had least interest in addressing, Building Maintenance, Furniture and Learning Environment, and Outdoor Play Spaces, were mentioned.

Are there any building enhancements you would like to see that were not reflected in today's presentation?

- Develop a comprehensive recycling program.
- Ensure that new technology is available in classrooms.

Session #4 -- Community-focused Finances and Allocations

Thirteen members of the CCSD21 community participated in the final Design21 session. Participants heard a brief summary on school financing, how fiscal and human resources are allocated to support the District's mission and vision, and learned about the financial condition of CCSD21. In small groups, participants responded to the following questions:

What surprised you in today's learning?

- Participants were surprised to learn of reserve spending in FY 2015 as a result of a decline in property values.
- They noted that CCSD21 has a balanced budget and has increased reserve funds due to cost-saving measures, but that a deficit is projected by FY 2021.

What three pieces of information will you share with your neighbors to help them better understand CCSD21's finances?

- Share the presentation or direct them to the Design21 webpage.
- Explain the distribution of funds, including that 78% of expenditures are allocated to the Education fund, of which nearly 85% is associated with staff compensation.
- Encourage neighbors to be active and involved in the District budgeting/decision-making process and consider future financial needs, to potentially include a referendum.

What financial goals do you see as a priority and what role can you take to achieve those priorities?

- Meet the needs of all students and work together to maintain a balanced budget.
- Increase reserves, continue to look for ways to reduce costs, be fiscally responsible and not raise taxes.

What additional information about CCSD21's finances do you need to continue this conversation with your neighbors?

- More transparency (each table group named a certain area where they sought more information, like budgeting, overall expenditures, and expenditures by school).
- A desire to better understand (and respond to) the projected deficit.
- More information on revenue received from commercial property.

Key takeaways from the Design21 Sessions

- **The community was surprised to learn of existing programs, services, and structures in place to meet the needs of students.** There are stories the district needs to tell about its high-quality teaching and learning.
- **The community values current programs, services, and extra-curriculars.** The community does not want to see further cuts that would impact the classroom.
- **The community prioritizes air conditioning in every school and enhanced security.** There is a need for upgrades to facilities across the district.
- **The community needs more information to better understand CCSD21's finances.** Participants identified the need for a clearer understanding of the district's finances – including the rationale for decision-making, the nuts and bolts of State education funding, and how funds are allocated across the district.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We would like to offer a sincere thank you to the CCSD21 students, parents, community members, teachers, administrators, and board members who shared their perceptions, ideas, and concerns. It is incredibly valuable for the school district to have two-way communication with its stakeholders to elicit this important feedback to use as they develop strategies for the next year and beyond. A strong partnership between the district and its stakeholders bolsters the work and ensures that all kids get the very best education.

About M² Communications

M² Communications works with organizations, districts, and schools to promote ideas and initiatives that make educational equity and achievement for all students a reality.

Patricia Maunsell has more than 20 years of management experience and background in improving education. She combines her extensive knowledge of education research, policy and practice with expertise in strategic communications and stakeholder engagement to support and improve public education. A former senior manager at several national nonprofit organizations and a former Chicago Public School teacher, Pat holds a Master's Degree in Education and Social Policy from Northwestern University.

Eva Moon has more than 15 years of experience working with universities and organizations committed to urban, public school improvement. She has extensive experience communicating with and engaging diverse audiences in the pursuit of better schools for all. Eva served as communications director of both the college of education for an urban, public university and a national school reform organization and has also worked in collaboration with community colleges.