

Harney County School District #3

Strategic Planning Focus Group Report

February 2018



Harney County School District #3

550 North Court Avenue

Burns, Oregon 97720

Phone: 541-573-6811

<https://www.burnsschools.k12.or.us>

**Presented by Harney County School District #3
and Jerome Colonna Education Consulting Services**

Introduction to the Focus Group Process

On January 29 and 30, 2018 the Harney County School District #3 staff, students, parents and various community groups voluntarily participated in 11 individual focus groups. The 11 groups were made up of the following:

- Business Owners
- Ranchers, Farmers and Related Associations
- Elementary School Staff Members
- Paiute Tribal Members
- School Board Members
- High School Students
- Senior Citizens
- An All Community Meeting
- Hospital, Department of Human Services and Law Enforcement Members
- Middle School and High School Staff Members
- Parents

A total of 208 individuals took part in the 11 focus meetings. This is considered a large number for a school district the size of HCSD#3.

Understanding that many District residents were unable to participate in focus groups, the District put an online survey with the same five questions used with the focus groups on its website: www.burnsschools.k12.or.us. A total of 30 individuals contributed 62 pages of electronic data. No focus group or District website survey comment can or will reveal the identity of any individual's written, oral or online submission unless the person voluntarily added their name or contact information.

At the start of each focus group all participants were given the same five questions that follow (the handout used is the last page of this report). Although the oral comments were meticulously written down (by Executive Assistant, Brenda Graham) from each of the 11 meetings and represent the majority of this report, information submitted on the handouts and District website survey comments are also included.

The reason for the time, planning, resources and energy put into the focus group process is to assist the District in the development of its multi-year strategic plan. The focus group comments will help form the District core values and beliefs. In turn, the core values and beliefs will create a foundation for the plan's mission, vision, goals and performance indicators. The strategic plan will be completed on or before October 31, 2018.

The following represents background on each question and a summary of trends and key comments captured from all focus groups. This information includes **the more general and**

frequent replies. It is not in priority order nor does it represent an all-inclusive list of responses to any of the five questions.

The District Office has a complete list of all responses gathered. It can be made available to anyone who requests it (contact Brenda Graham at 541-573-6811).

**Note: The use of the word staff in this report is meant to represent teachers, all support staff and administrators.*

General Trends for Each Question from Focus Group and Website Survey Responses

The District Strategic Planning Team selected the following questions and also which groups should be selected to take part in the focus group sessions; they did not select individual participants. The Planning Team is made up of 16 members and Jerome Colonna, strategic planning consultant, who was hired by the Harney County School Board to assist the District in the overall strategic planning process. The body of this report consists of trending comments mentioned during focus group meetings, information written on the forms distributed at each meeting and data submitted electronically through the District website survey.

Question 1: What are the things you like most about our School District?

This question is an important one because the District's new strategic plan will consist of both honoring and enhancing the best that is currently in place along with identifying key areas to implement for future improvement. Much of the content is in relation to the safe, caring and collaborative environment the District currently enjoys. The small size of the District and its surrounding communities are overwhelmingly considered as positive. The majority of people who live and work within the District do so because they enjoy the close-knit and small town feeling, the ability to build partnerships, the historic collective wisdom, the conservative values and the uniqueness of Harney County. A significant amount of the District's population is made up of long-term, multi-generational families whose roots have grown deep in all aspects of the region. In many ways the responses to question one are as much about the communities the District serves as they are about its public schools. Listed below are a number of positive trends in no priority order that emerged from this question.

* The District has highly successful athletic and activity programs with dedicated teachers, coaches and advisors. The excellence of the art, music, agricultural and FFA programs was frequently mentioned. These programs form the foundation for year-round entertainment the

community truly enjoys. The programs are basically supported by the District but are also generously assisted by community members and organizations, especially in times of need.

* The overall quality of the staff was mentioned often as was the emphasis staff showed for the care and concern for each student. “We have outstanding teachers who are very involved in the community.” Staff members are “easy to get to know, easy to communicate with and it’s easy to volunteer in their classrooms.” “The best assets are our support staff and teachers.” Some reference to the staff’s friendliness, ability to work with different student learning styles, approachability, strong work ethic and visibility in the community was voiced in every focus group.

* There is a strong sense of family in the schools along with guiding cultural values from the community. This orientation creates strong personal relationships between students, parents, staff members and the community. The District is a loyal community partner and vice versa.

* Participants like that there is a “pathway for all kids, not just a college pathway.” In spite of the limited size of the District, technology access, a broad academic curriculum and extra-curricular programs are being offered at an impressive level. Some of the District’s career-technical-education classes and their facilities/equipment are considered as state-of-the-art for Oregon high schools. One staff member said, “If I could keep only one thing it would be the four-day week.” The teacher professional development and new teacher mentor programs are popular.

* The schools are viewed as safe by all who spoke to the issue of safety in the schools. One participant said, “We are lucky to not have metal detectors on every door.” Further comments were about feeling safe in this less populated environment and that it is a great place to raise children. There is a solid working relationship between the schools and law enforcement.

* Most participants view the teacher-student-ratio positively. This allows for more one-on-one relationships for students with their teachers. One parent said, “Kids know teachers and teachers know kids.”

* Paiute Tribal members reported a stronger bond with the District. Visibility of Board members and staff at Reservation events, placement of the Tribal flag inside the schools, extra help for Tribal students, Tribal dancers participating at assemblies and more Tribal culture and history being taught in the overall curriculum were all offered as evidence for the more positive partnership.

* Although there are never enough financial resources or staff members to address all District and community needs, county social service organizations are viewed as vital, effective and staffed with caring professionals. The new hospital was noted as, “...best thing that happened to the community and it brought needed jobs.”

* High school students were the largest group of participants (75) so it is appropriate that a few of their comments are included separately for this question. “We have good, old-fashioned values.” “Most class sizes are small.” “Many of the staff members live in our community.” “Teachers push us to be the best we can be.” “We live in a rural environment that is rich in

history and tradition.” “I like how teachers personally know me.” “I have a sense of belonging. I feel important in my school.” Most students like open campus, the four-day week and the trimester system.

Question 2: If you could improve, add or delete any one thing in the District what would it be and how would you suggest we do it?

This is a key question because the strategic planning process is all about determining what an organization should/could improve and then creating a process that will deliver the desired improvements. This question had the most responses and the vast majority of comments were in the form of constructive criticism, not outright negative statements. Most students, staff, parents and other community members have positive views of the District. Yet, there are a significant number of areas suggested for improvement, to add or to stop doing listed below.

Although many respondents identified improvements, it was more difficult for them to answer the second part of the question. This is the problem in asking question two because in most cases, but not all, it takes extra resources to fund the satisfactory implementation of improvements. One of the reasons why most strategic plan goals are not fully implemented is because they are not adequately resourced. With employee retirement costs going up and Oregon’s funding of public schools not likely to increase in the near term, it is entirely possible Oregon school district budgets will be quite challenging over the next 2-6 years. This is why a multi-year, strategic planning process is so important. When properly implemented over a three to five year period, strategic plans help school district leaders prioritize resources. This allows limited resources to be used for what constituents indicate are the most important initiatives to implement in order to move to a higher level of effectiveness and closer to community beliefs and values.

In no priority order, the majority of responses were aggregated around the areas listed below. Some items were only mentioned once but they seemed important enough to include.

*There were many requests to focus on vocational trades and to expand career and technical training programs that are relevant for jobs in Harney County. The requests include making classes available to develop workplace skills for students, especially those who are not college-bound. These classes should connect academic learning to instruction in the real world. There should be more hands-on-learning that takes place outside of classrooms. The District should work with the community in establishing more job placements, apprenticeships, internships, job shadowing and mentoring.

* Students and parents want more programs, policies and practices that will reduce/eliminate bullying and harassment, and improve relationships.

* There is a need for more student support service in general and counselors in particular. Typical responses were: “Students need more guidance.” “Seniors need to have help with where they are going after graduation and how to get there.” “Students are finding out too late that

they are missing graduation requirements.” (The District went through two rounds of interviews for a K-12 Counselor in the past two years, an offer was extended but declined.) Parents and business owners discussed the idea of housing a career center at the high school which could be run by community volunteers and would help students with obtaining scholarships, filling out applications and loan forms, job placements, resume writing, etc. This is not uncommon in high schools in Oregon with or without counseling staff members. They are often called Future Centers. The Bend-La Pine School District has an impressive one in each of their high schools. A number of individuals said the community organizations they belong to have had very few applicants for the scholarships they offer. They believe a guidance counselor would be a tremendous boost to their efforts to fund both students and teachers.

- * More emphasis on basic skills especially practical mathematics, reading and writing was mentioned in most groups.
- * Emphasize character skills for all students in the District’s classrooms. These skills should include work ethics, responsibility, respect, attendance, service to others, etc. Some feel as though there is an increased level of disrespect toward adults in general as a result of more students coming to the District from dysfunctional families. It would seem, unfortunately, community schools need to take a larger role in student character building.
- * Reduce employee turnover, especially with school administrators and newer teachers. Some participants said administrators need to live within District boundaries. It was suggested that the District start looking in its employee ranks to select, train and hire administrators and in its student ranks for prospective teachers (“grow your own”). Others want to identify ways to entice and incentivize classified, certified and administrative staff, “To come to Burns, invest in Burns and stay in Burns.” Making affordable housing available to new staff was suggested.
- * In most focus groups there were suggestions for the District to keep or eliminate the four-day school week. In terms of schools the District schedules athletic contests with: Grant Union, Crane, Prairie City, Baker, Vale, Riverside and Irrigon currently have four-day school weeks. Other comments were, “I only hear negatives about the four-period day” and “We want kids back in school five days a week because this has to do with daycare issues, having unsupervised kids on Fridays and not getting as good of an education as from a five-day school week.”[sic]
- * Increasing elective options was popular with participants. A common request was, “Like to see more support of the fine arts.” Adding back home economics, life skills, practical application mathematics and personal finance classes was mentioned in some form in almost all of the focus groups.
- * Dealing with the District’s aging facilities was noted by many. Everything from taking care of specific deferred maintenance items to tearing old schools down, i.e. Slater, and building new schools was mentioned.
- * Tribal members suggested an increase in Paiute language, culture and history classes.
- * Some teachers noted that many of the District curriculum materials are outdated; social studies and science curriculum materials were specifically identified.

Question 3: What would you like to see our students accomplish after they leave the District or another way to say this is what should the “finished product” look like after a student leaves grade 12?

Know that during the focus group discussions the consultant explained that this question is referring to students who have been in HCSD#3 for multiple years and have graduated from Burns High School rather than considering a student who has transferred into the District, has only been in the District a few years and may not have graduated. The expectations participants offered for question #3 were straightforward and what we would predict most individuals, especially parents, would say. The majority of responses were related to graduates being prepared to select from a wide variety of options such as trade school, the military, community college, directly into the workforce, four year university, etc. and be successful at whatever they select. The expectation is that during their years in the District, especially at the high school level, students would be helped to find their areas of strength and their areas that need improvement and they would make realistic choices based on gaining this knowledge of themselves for their next step after high school.

* It was often mentioned that District students should not just be prepared for college but also for vocational pursuits needed in the community such as welding, farming, ranching, construction, plumbing, small business ownership, etc. Respondents want well-rounded students to graduate and have a realistic, personalized plan and know how to make it happen. A parent summed it up best when she said, “I would like to see our young adults offered every opportunity to succeed in life, no matter what they choose.”

* Mastery of practical, every day life skills was a repeated answer. Such things as balancing a checkbook, managing money and paying bills, filing taxes, understanding rental agreements, success in job interviews and how to write a resume and complete job applications were given as examples. A business owner said, “Give students real life job experiences before they leave high school in a meaningful, structured environment and not just free labor.”

* Positive character traits represent another area of frequent responses. Examples mentioned are: service to others, loyalty, strong work ethic and motivation, accountability, responsibility, punctuality, trust, kindness, confidence, ability to form meaningful relationships, productive citizen/community member, team-player, problem-solver, self-reliance, independent, ability to seek out needed resources, self-sufficiency, pride in one’s work, creativity, hopeful and passionate, honest, wanting to make a difference, ability to integrate with others. One parent summed the above comments up by saying, “I want a confident, compassionate and well-rounded young adult who can become an outstanding addition to our society.” Another parent said, “I want to see young adults who are confident in their abilities to create a life for themselves.”

* An additional aspect of this question is the desire for graduates to become lifelong learners. That is, having a continuing interest in learning and being “self-directed learners who have

respect for other cultures, places and people.” Parents want their children to have learned how to learn as a necessary component of their education and to realize that learning does not stop after grade 12.

* The website survey responses brought out many of the points referred to in the focus groups. The following quotes are from the online survey: “A high school graduate should have the tools and wherewithal to get a job and/or pursue a career or higher education and some idea of what that entails along with access to local resources that can help them along their path.” “Graduates should be prepared and engaged in a career, higher education or serving their country in some way. They should have an understanding of what is expected of them as an employee or a team member and it should be firmly instilled in their education.” “I would really like to see the District focus the students on the right kind of continuing education for each one of them. Without a doubt each student should be going on to some kind of training. Whether it is a vocational or traditional four-year degree depends on the student but they need to be aware of and prepared for whatever their next step is. They should have a plan, some idea of what they need to do next.” “I want to see kids confident when they leave the doors of our District. I want them to feel like they can tackle challenging situations.” “I want them college ready with multiple college credits having been taken.” “If they choose to enter the job market I would like for them to know how to write a resume, conduct themselves in a job interview and present themselves professionally. I would also like them to have a few hours of work-related experience/apprenticeship to bring to the table.” “I want students to be competent, confident and with a firm understanding of their strengths and an eye to strengthen their weaknesses into assets.”

* A parent who contributed on the website survey and who wants her student to be prepared for college spoke for many other parents by posting the following quote, “I would like my child to be equipped with all the tools needed to get into college. This includes scholarships, financial aid, resources outlining what college will look like, cost of attendance, etc. I want my child to feel like college is the next step and have it be an easy transition. I want them to feel that the education they received was worth it and gets them ready for college. My hope is that they don’t feel confused or overloaded because of the experience. I want counselors available to help make sure they have the right credits and are on track for college.”

Question 4: What is the best way(s) for the District to use communication and interact with you and what is the best way(s) for you to communicate and interact with the District?

School districts are constantly trying to improve and increase their ability to communicate with their constituents and HCSD#3 is no exception. Comprehensive, accurate and timely communication is a necessity for all public and private organizations but it is especially true for today’s public schools. With effective communication a district can promote its schools, connect with students/staff and successfully engage community members who do or do not have children

in public schools. Staff, parents, students and community members are in constant need to know what is going on and how to effectively contact and be involved with their schools. A comprehensive communications plan is fundamental to on-going improvement. Given the variety of kinds of information and the modern channels for delivering school information, planning and allocating resources toward the effort have never been more important. From crisis communications to urgent, time-sensitive matters to lunch menu posting, effective communications can make life easier for all associated with schools. How a district handles their website, social media, and emergency notifications have never been more important. Even such matter-of-fact items such as school newsletters, posting scores of athletic contests and keeping the district calendar current need to be done well. The HCSD#3 can have the finest multi-year, strategic plan in Oregon but if the District is not effective in communicating about the plan, it will fail. Support is built through strong communications, by involving all who can be involved in carrying out the plan and prioritizing a few key areas to improve over a period of five or more years.

Two-way communication is essential and although 11 focus groups were held throughout the community and almost 250 individuals (this is a very good number for participation) took part in the groups and the District's online survey, many voices were not heard. Tribal members, other minorities, and families living in poverty participated in much lower numbers than the percentage of students they represent. This is the reason question four was selected by the Planning Team. Question four received many positive responses, for example a parent wrote, "The communication our District has set up has worked fantastic; I like how I can email teachers if I have questions or concerns and they respond in a timely fashion." The hope of the Team is that answers suggested for this question can assist the District with its overall communication efforts.

The information that follows includes comments given most often that represent trends and important quotes.

* The focus group process was mentioned as a very valuable communication tool. It was suggested by some participants that it become a regular and frequent way for the District administrators and Board members to interact with the community at large. Some organizations call this type of outreach "Listening and Learning" sessions.

* A favorite and successful method of communication in the District's past was the local radio station. Since it has stopped broadcasting, all types of community and regional communication have felt the loss. Members of all groups want the station to start up again.

* The District website is a valuable and much used communication tool, however, some said it needs to be kept more current, have more information and be more user friendly. Some feel it should receive extra resources and become the master calendar of everything going on in the District, be constantly updated and linked to the Chamber of Commerce and County websites.

* Connection with some individuals may be improved by offering more fun events for community members to enjoy (donkey basketball was given as an example).

- * Face-to-face and direct contact type of communication methods like phone calls and home visits are preferred by many respondents. It is recognized that these types of outreach are time and personnel intensive; hence, they are extremely difficult for smaller districts to sustain. One person said, “Person-to-person is the best way, but it seems impossible.” A staff member said, “Home visits might need to be made for kids we don’t want to lose.”
- * The local newspaper is a favorite source of communication, especially the regular column Superintendent Quick writes.
- * Some staff members said that dinners, childcare and other incentives help attendance at their parent events and the District should consider incorporating more incentives in efforts to connect with those parents who do not attend.
- * A list of technology communication tools were mentioned the District either is using and participants would like to see more use of or to start using. They are: Skype, Go-To-Meeting, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Survey Monkey and ParentVUE. One parent commented, “I’m loving this new ParentVUE app which allows me to check my child’s grades from my phone.” Some parents are not aware of ParentVUE. Some like posters and billboards best.
- * The every third Wednesday parent education meetings are seen as effective and could be considered for expansion.
- * Law enforcement officers said the District is doing a very good job of sending them information but when possible they would like to get calls earlier.
- * Tribal member attendance has improved as a result of the TAPP Coordinator position Scott Smyth holds.
- * Some respondents feel Board member and administrator visibility at school and important community events could be increased and that it would improve overall District communication efforts.
- * Many District website survey respondents said email is their preferred communication method. Many prefer text messages as well. Some noted that they get a daily email from both the middle school and high school.

Question 5: Is there anything else you want to share with us?

This question was included as a placeholder in case any of the focus groups completed the first four questions and there was time left in our 90 minute meetings. All but the parent and high/middle school staff groups had adequate time to give oral answers to this question. Many focus group participants wrote down and submitted information on this question and most of the website survey respondents did. Question five is open-ended and in addition to being a placeholder, its purpose is to invite more creative responses. In many ways the responses to this question provide the most interesting and innovative answers. The comments listed below are items deemed important for HCSD to consider and also have not directly been expressed in the

previous questions. All the sentences that follow are quotes with limited paraphrasing for understanding and some grammatical modifications for accuracy.

“Replicate the Baker Technical Institute’s vocational training modules. There are heavy equipment, construction, nursing, landscaping and other vocational training options.”

“Unplug from the top down model and return to local level governance.”

“Academic and vocational scholarships are going unused from the Lion’s Club.”

“There are many honors for athletes, but nothing for students. Need an Academic Student of the Month honor. Need a stronger culture of academics.”

“The BHS parking lot would be a nightmare in an actual emergency since it only has one exit.”

“Take cell phones away from students; they are a distraction and bullying occurs over social media.”

“Would be nice to have a live feed from the high school at Dispatch if there is ever a shooter or crisis. Would be great if Dispatch could see immediately and help direct law enforcement personnel.”

“Law enforcement personnel in the schools is a good idea.”

“Would like to see schools stay conservative.”

“Teachers need to receive more respect from students.”

“School board meetings need to be for students to be heard.”

“We (students) want you to come back and let us know what you’ve done with the info we’ve given you.”

“Need unified training for substitutes; they need to know rules for district, schools and classrooms.”

“Bus drivers and custodians need to have the same professionalism as teachers.”

“Need to get away from Band-Aid fixes of buildings; we need all new buildings.”

“We need new buildings at every level including a performing arts center for economic development and the betterment of students.”

“Turn our old buildings into low-income housing.”

“We need administrators to be taxpayers in our community. We need more vested administrators and staff who are not renting in this community but rather invested.”

“Scholarships for teachers are available for ag-based activities. No one from the District has applied.”

“Need to ask Crane students why they are going there instead of staying here.”

“Want more dual credits for high school students.”

“Online learning program is being looked at, I’m not opposed to a virtual charter school. Need to be cautious.”

“We are a caring/giving community. Our resource is our children. Our future is our children.”

“The dress code is one of my pet peeves, it desperately needs to be updated.”

“A strong senior project of some sort would help our students tackle some of the practical elements of living outside of the home if it included financial elements as well as job, career assistance, college matriculation, etc.”

“We can reach out and forge more connections between students and background-checked adults who can help guide them on a career path.”

“The career offerings at the high school do not prepare kids for the outside world.”

“Could the District buy real estate or rental properties? Could they rent these properties to employees who would pay the District back for housing that would be affordable, quality living arrangements?”

“I want our kids to enjoy school, feel safe, and learn a lot and in order to achieve that. Our administrators need to invest their heart and time into our children.”

“Every kid in our District needs an incredible amount of technology training.”

“I would love more music in our schools.”

“Together we can do so much more than we can when we sit back and depend on the state or federal government to provide for us and set our standards.”

“I would like to see included with the report cards at the high school a checklist and progress type of report to show credits earned toward the 26 they need for graduation.”

“To empower our kids, not entitle.”