

A Vision for Education in the Roaring Fork School District

From September 25th to October 10th, 2013, the Roaring Fork School District, in collaboration with various community leaders and partners, hosted sixteen community engagement sessions with over 960 parents, students, teachers, administrators and community members from Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood Springs, Colorado to ask the question, “what is the purpose of education in our community”? The following document highlights the findings from these community dialogues and presents recommended next steps for the Roaring Fork School District, students, teachers, parents and partners to pursue together.

Report Developed By:



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Executive Summary

From September 25th to October 10th, 2013, the Roaring Fork School District, in collaboration with various community leaders and partners, hosted sixteen community engagement sessions with over 960 parents, students, teachers, administrators and community members from Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood Springs, Colorado. Participants engaged in a dialogue premised on four questions: What is the purpose of education in our community? What student outcomes are most important to us? What characteristics do we want in our schools? What are your hopes for your school?

The Civic Canopy, a Denver-based civic engagement nonprofit organization, assisted Roaring Fork School District leadership and a parent/community Steering Committee in the design and implementation of the process. The resulting approach was an inclusive and highly dialogic deliberative model in which participants engaged each other in discussion regarding the four guiding questions while facilitators captured qualitative and quantitative information generated from the discussions.

From the information collected across the sixteen sessions with parents, community members, students, teachers and administrators, clear themes of interest emerged around desired student outcomes and school characteristics in Roaring Fork School District schools:

- Engender character skills in our students;
- Develop critical thinking skills in students;
- Ensure our students have strong social skills and a strong sense of civic responsibility;
- Attract and retain the best teachers;
- Ensure our schools provide a safe environment, both physically and emotionally;
- Maintain and achieve high academic standards;
- Increase hands-on, project-based, experiential learning in our schools;
- Provide stronger academic differentiation for all Roaring Fork School District students; and
- Explore a deeper community conversation regarding the purpose, role and balance of standardized testing in the Roaring Fork School District.

Based on these findings, The Civic Canopy recommends the following steps to RFSD:

1. Craft an updated vision and mission for the Roaring Fork School District;
2. Develop a district-wide strategic plan that builds from the findings of this process;
3. Demonstrate immediate activity in priority themes that emerged from this process; and
4. Develop a structure for on-going parent/community, student/teacher engagement.

About The Civic Canopy

The Civic Canopy is a nonprofit organization whose vision is *the many working as one for the good of all*. The Canopy facilitates the connections, innovation, and results needed to build stronger neighborhoods, healthier communities, and a more just society. The organization came to life in 2003 out of the recognition that while Colorado’s landscape is full of efforts to improve the quality of life across the state, these efforts often operate in isolation and lack the means to coordinate their efforts and learn from each other in an organized, meaningful way. The Civic Canopy provides a way to connect and align the work of individuals, agencies, and systems to focus on the key outcomes that matter to everyone. As such, every engagement is viewed as an opportunity for long-term partnership, weaving together the sometimes isolated systems for greater community impact.

The Civic Canopy treats strategic planning as part of an ongoing, dynamic learning process. Based on lessons learned from successful organizations—ranging from corporations to health care providers, from nonprofit groups to sports teams—the Canopy’s approach to planning includes these basic core elements:



- Include – We work with you to ensure the right people and perspectives are reflected in the discussion.
- Dialogue – We help foster honest and open communication that clarifies values, surfaces tensions and taps into creativity, leading to concrete action plans that get results.
- Act – We help you build protocols and routines for executing your plans with discipline and efficiency towards desired outcomes.
- Learn – We help you learn from your experiences and translate that information into more effective actions.
- Culture of Collaboration – Most of all, we help you build the single most important ingredient in the ultimate success of any initiative: a culture of trust, accountability, and commitment.
- Results – We help you set benchmarks of success using indicators to assess the quality and impact of actions that lead to clear results.

Background and Purpose

In August of 2013, The Roaring Fork School District contracted with The Civic Canopy to assist in the development and facilitation of a community wide visioning process. The goals of this effort were to:

- Surface the raw material for a district-wide vision for education;
- Engage parents, students, community members, teachers and district administrators in a conversation about our shared purpose in education and the outcomes we seek; and
- Initiate what will become an on-going dialogue and process through which community members and the district will work together to improve our schools for all students.

Methods

Discovery and Process Design Phase

During the Discovery Phase, The Civic Canopy staff conducted interviews with thirteen Roaring Fork District parents, community members, teachers, school board members and administrators to gather information for the design of a process for community engagement. From these interviews, the following community engagement goals were developed:

- Engage the community members in a dynamic dialogue with each other and district leadership about what we all want from our schools, rather than a town hall approach in which people testify to their individual interests;
- Gather data and information that can be compared across the entire district;
- Shape an inclusive approach that ensures the active engagement of the Spanish speaking parents and families of the Roaring Fork School District.

Visioning Steering Committee

District leadership formed a Steering Committee, representative of key perspectives in education throughout the Roaring Fork School District, to inform the design of the community engagement process. Civic Canopy staff facilitated two Steering Committee meetings, testing the community engagement lead questions and process design while gathering and incorporating feedback. Additionally, Civic Canopy staff facilitated a test run of the community engagement process with school board members, who offered suggestions for improvement.

Lead Questions

Based on the information gathered through interviews, Steering Committee and school board meetings, four primary research questions were formed which framed the dialogue and data collection of every community meeting:

- What is the purpose of education in our community?
- What are our hopes for our schools?
- What student outcomes are most important?
- What school characteristics are most important?

Process Design

Community sessions were a mix of small group dialogue, open-ended questions and idea prioritization. Democratic polling technology allowed facilitators to gather data from participants about preferred student outcomes and school characteristics. The technology also provided immediately available results, enabling participants to view and discuss the meaning of the data in real time. Through these approaches, both qualitative and quantitative data were generated. A summary of this information is provided in the findings section of this report.

Our framework for dialogue regarding student outcomes and school characteristics was informed by a study conducted by the Thomas Fordham Institute entitled "[What Parents Want.](#)" This report, combined with the Roaring Fork School District's own survey results regarding parent preferences, shaped the choices available in the polling exercises. The polling exercises were framed by four categories: Student Outcomes, Core Academics, Extracurricular and Non-curricular Activities and School Environment. Each category contained ten choices (see appendix). Participants first engaged in small group dialogue, discussing individual priorities in each category, then utilized the democratic polling technology to prioritize their top three choices in each of the categories. After their choices, participants discussed the relevance of the data which appeared immediately.

Community Engagement Meetings

Sixteen community engagement meetings were held over the course of three weeks in Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood Springs, Colorado. Over 960 students, teachers, administrators, parents and community members participated in the conversations, all responding to the same set of questions in small group dialogue while registering their preferences through the democratic polling technology.

To ensure active participation of Spanish-speaking parents and community members, one meeting in each of three communities was led in Spanish. All community meetings (Spanish and

English) had presentations and materials in both languages with interpreters and headsets available. Over two hundred Spanish-speaking parents and community members participated in the process. Manaus Fund’s Valley Settlement Project provided significant outreach support of Spanish speaking families in Glenwood Springs, Carbondale and Basalt.

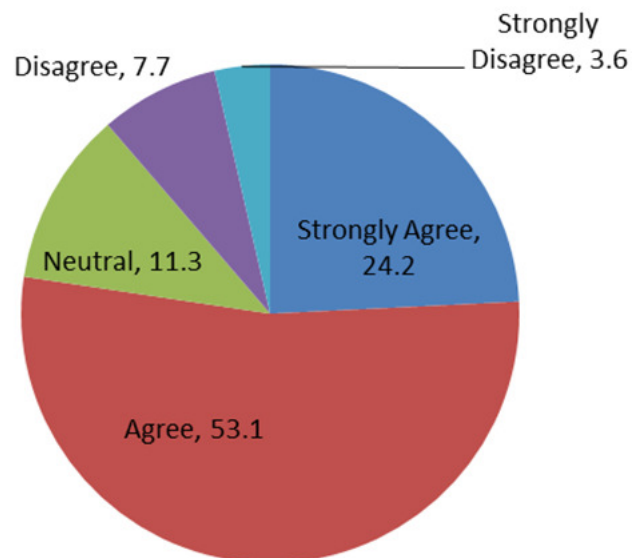
Outreach for the RFSD visioning process was the collective effort of community volunteers, partner organizations and district staff. Communication plans began with public relations outreach to local newspaper and radio stations in both Spanish and English. Flyers were distributed at elementary schools, local social and sporting events, preschools and churches. Posters were placed in key locations from Basalt to Glenwood Springs. Principals/staff targeted parents with robo calls, emails and personal contacts. Facebook was used during the process including posting updates from each session. The RFSD website calendar provided general information on the process, the event schedule, frequently asked questions, and a downloadable flyer (translated).

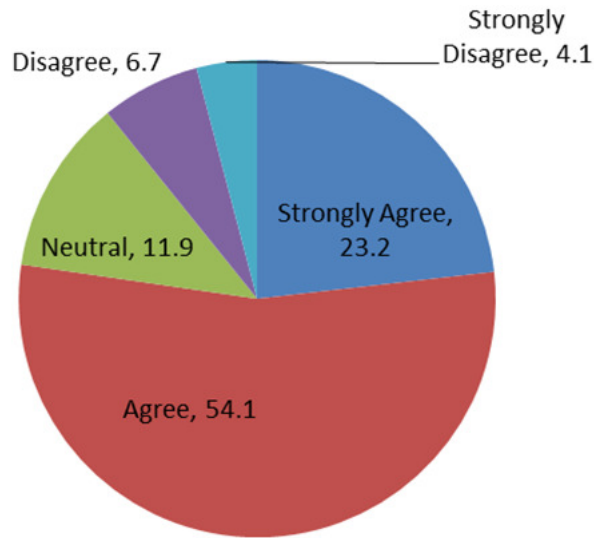
District leadership was visible throughout the engagement process, with school board members attending one or more community sessions. The School Board President attended all of the evening community meetings. The Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent attended all sixteen sessions, opening and closing each discussion.

Participant Feedback Surveys

Each participant who provided an email address received a survey monkey follow up survey within three working days of attending an engagement session. There were 194 respondents. The results to the three questions were:

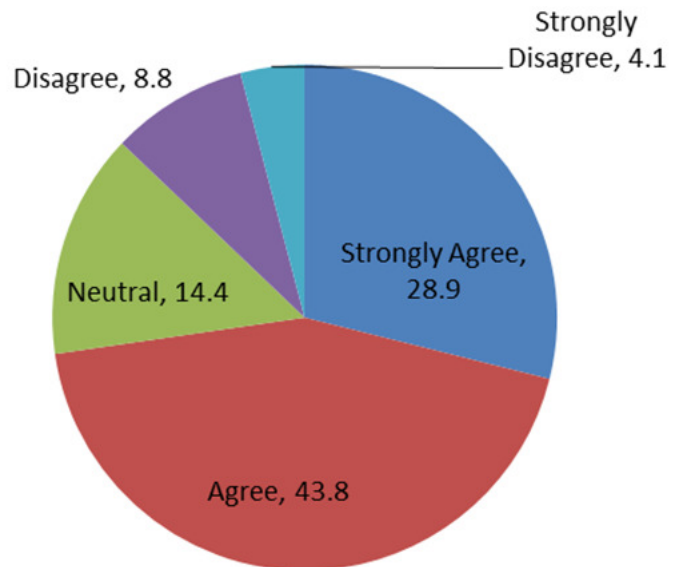
I feel that the visioning meeting I attended inspired an inclusive dialogue about the purpose of education in my community.





I feel that the visioning process will provide the district with valuable information about needs and wants regarding educational choices & priorities in Glenwood Springs, Basalt and Carbondale.

I feel that participating in a visioning meeting was a valuable use of my time.



Participants also provided comments. A few examples include:

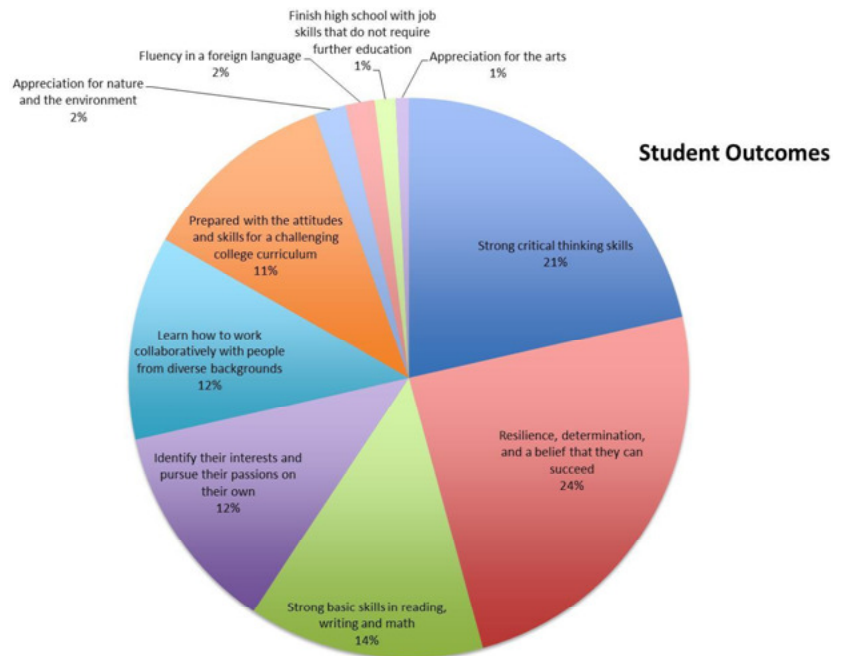
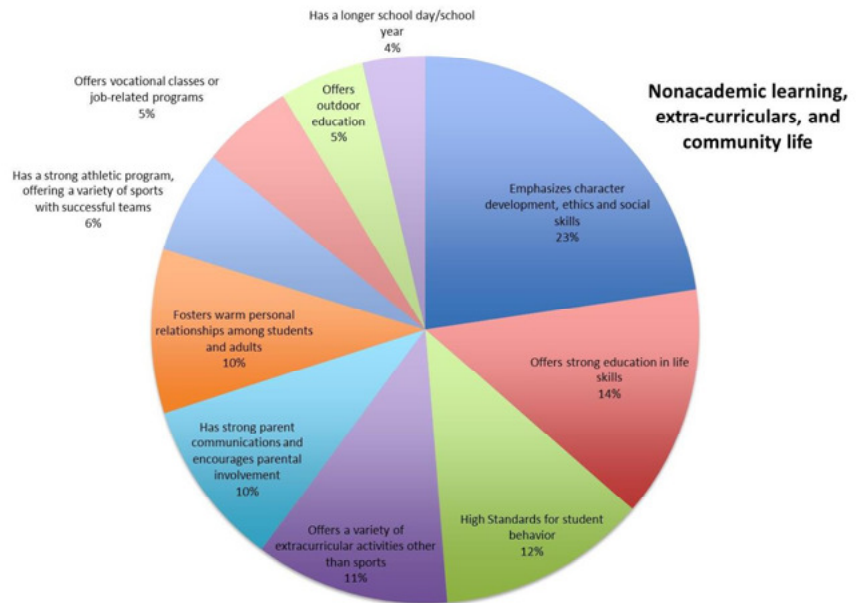
- (I enjoyed) "getting to know others, and realizing that many others shared some of my own visions. "
- "It was good to see how the district is moving forward in a proactive way, finding out what students, staff, and the community wants."
- "I enjoyed the dialogue between parents with children of different ages and different ways of viewing education. "
- "A lowlight-- too much time to discuss things."

Findings

Over the course of sixteen community meetings with over 960 participants, Civic Canopy collected both qualitative and quantitative information using small group dialogue and democratic polling technology. The following findings are supported from both forms of information gathering.

Character Skills

The theme of character development received strong support across all engagement sessions with parents, community members, students, teachers and administrators. In our model, forms of character skills were presented in two categories – the nonacademic priority list (seen in this pie chart) and in the student outcomes category (seen in the pie chart on page 8 under the title “resilience, determination and the belief they can succeed.” In both priority lists, character development received the highest rankings. One community member commented that schools should “help students cultivate grit” to prepare for challenges that lay ahead. This finding was consistently high among all groups.



Critical Thinking Skills

Through both qualitative and quantitative data collection and among all groups participating in the community dialogues, critical thinking skills emerged as an important trait of successful students. Participants valued skills such as creative thinking,

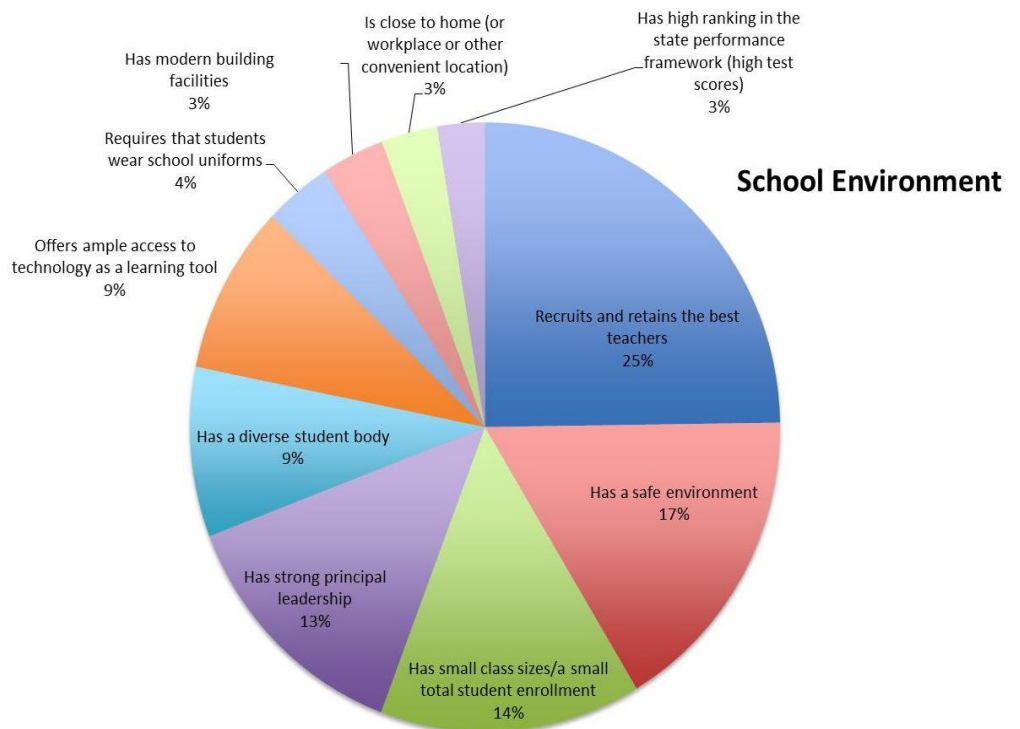
problem-solving and having the ability to work through difficult situations. As one parent put it, “we need to prepare them to solve problems that we don’t even know exist yet.”

Social Skills, Collaboration and Civic Responsibility

At the beginning of each community session, open-ended questions concerning the “purpose of education in our community” and “hopes for your school” were posed to participants. Through those conversations emerged a clear pattern of significance around social connection, collaboration and civic responsibility. Using phrases such as “engaged, thoughtful, productive citizens”, participants highlighted the need to provide education to students so they are prepared to be the next generation of citizens. The concept of civic responsibility applied not only within the Roaring Fork Valley, but as members of a global community as well. Related to the theme of civic mindedness, participants discussed the need for young people to learn how to work collaboratively with others. These themes applied within the community and civic realms, but also extended into potential work situations. One parent offered, “they need to learn to work and deal with people in the real world.”

Attract and Retain the Best Teachers

Parents, community members, teachers and school administrators all consistently valued attracting and retaining the best teachers, above all other choices associated with shaping a school environment. While there were variations across subgroups, it ranked first or second among all choices in the school environment category in each of sessions. At the Glenwood Springs community session, a participant commented that high ranking for the importance of teachers comes from the general agreement the “huge difference an effective teacher can make in a classroom.”

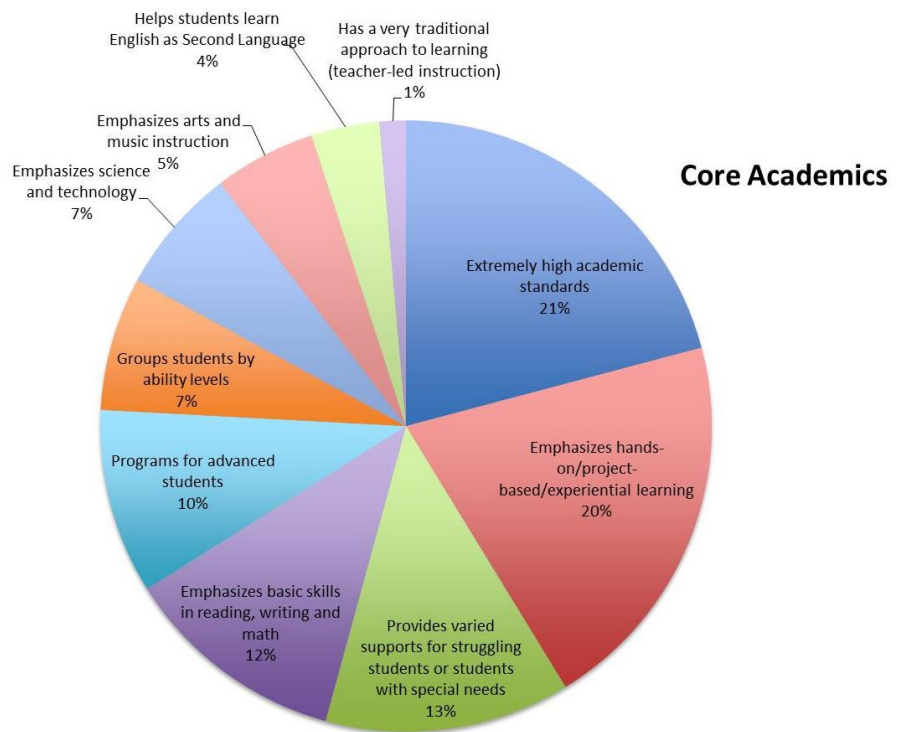


Safe School Environment

Throughout the discussions across the sixteen sessions, participants defined a safe school environment as inclusive of both physical and emotional safety. Among the choices available in the category of school environment, safety ranked second as an area of importance. One student commented, “if you aren’t feeling safe, it’s difficult to learn.” Despite the overall support for the safety as a critical theme, there were interesting variations. Teachers, administrators and Spanish-speaking parents and community members tended to prioritize safety higher than other subgroups. Some concerns about safety were expressed in some of the meetings, particularly from Spanish-speaking parents/community members, which might point to the need for early-warning systems and clear mechanisms for reporting concerns about safety.

High Academic Standards

Among the choices available in the category of Core Academics, participants gave high priority to setting high academic standards for students. Support for this element was uneven across subgroups: teachers and administrators gave high priority to high academic standards while parents and community members in Basalt and Carbondale ranked it lower. However, comments in the reflective dialogue indicate at least some parents view that success in areas such as critical thinking would lead to high academic success, which may have affected their choice in this area.



Hands-on, Project-based, Experiential Learning

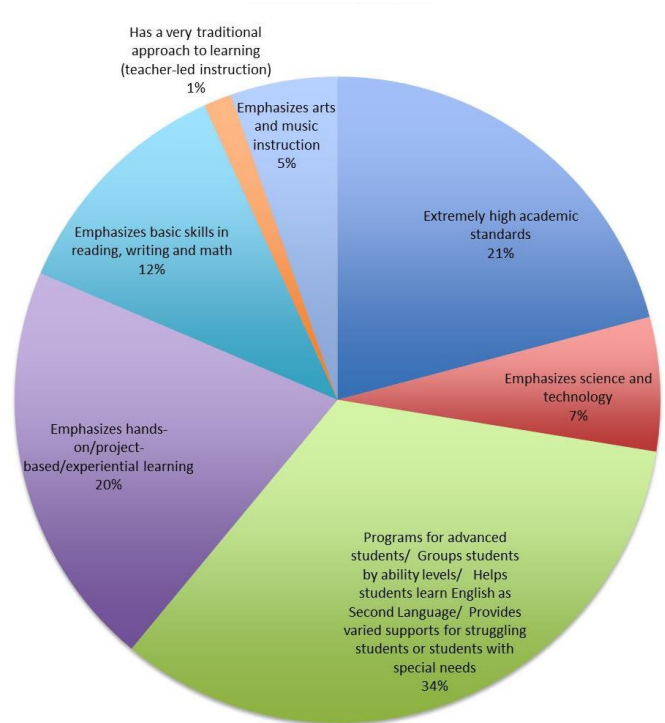
Through both our open-ended dialogue and through the prioritization process, there was significant interest in emphasizing project-based and experiential learning in the schools. And while there was overall general support among subgroups, parents showed greatest interest in this attribute. There was also some geographic differentiation, with parents and community members in Carbondale and Basalt more likely to prioritize this option than parents and

community members in Glenwood Springs. Teachers also valued this approach, although in the discussion reviewing the data results one educator commented “we show great support for hands-on, project-based learning...but when I walk up and down the hallways of the school that’s not what I see happening.”

Strong Differentiated Supports

Over the course of the sixteen meetings in all three communities, a dialogue emerged around the notion of differentiated supports. The conclusion to cite this as an important finding emanates from both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of our data collection. As community members chose their priorities in the Core Academic category, they often expressed a conflicting false choice between “offers programs for advanced students,” “groups students by ability levels,” “helps students learn English as a second language,” and “provides varied supports for struggling students or students with special needs.” What emerged from the dialogue across the many meetings was a community interest in exploring approaches that differentiate not only for special populations, but for every student. This adapted core academics pie chart aggregates all four of those themes into one, providing an overall weight for the notion of differentiated supports. The Civic Canopy believes this is an area of deeper exploration for schools, students, parents and community members.

Differentiated Supports



State Performance Framework

Certain themes consistently received low prioritization during our quantitative exercises. In the cases of “support for the arts,” “science and technology,” and “environmental education,” participants often indicated in subsequent dialogue that low priority given to these themes was not reflective of low interest, but rather in our forced choice exercise, these attributes gave way to higher order student outcomes and school characteristics such as critical thinking, high academic standards and character development. Participants suggested achieving these higher order outcomes would include a focus on arts, science and technology and the environment and were therefore not exclusive of them. The school attribute entitled “high ranking in the state performance framework” reliably received very low support across all communities and

groups. However, this did not appear to be similarly indicative of prioritized high order outcomes, but instead, was in most cases a deliberate non-selection. In the Carbondale community meeting, as the facilitator reviewed the low results for “state performance framework,” the room broke out into loud applause, following with comments such as we need to stop “teaching to the test”. In a separate session, upon reviewing the high prioritization for character development and critical thinking skills that emerged from the participants in the room, a teacher commented that “the state standards do not currently evaluate us in those areas.” Based on the consistently low support for this theme and the supporting qualitative feedback across various meetings, it is our sense that a deeper community dialogue is required concerning the purpose, role and balance of standardized testing in the Roaring Fork School District.

Interesting Differences

With over 960 people participating in the community dialogue, there are many interesting nuances to the data collected. Here are just a few of the ways parents, students, teachers and community members are unique:

- Students and Spanish-speaking parents/community members rated “prepared with the attitudes and skills for a challenging college curriculum” 1.5 to 2 times higher than English-speaking parents/community members, teachers and administrators did.
- Students rated “identify their interests and pursue their passions” 1.5 to 2 times higher than parents/community members, teachers and administrators did.
- Generally, students prioritized athletic and non-athletic extra-curricular activities higher than other subgroups did.
- Glenwood Springs parent/community members rated “higher standards for student behavior” 1.5 to 2 times higher than parents/community in Basalt and Carbondale.
- Carbondale parents/community members rated “hands-on, project-based, experiential learning” higher than any other group did.
- Teachers and administrators tended to give priority to “learn how to work collaboratively with people from diverse backgrounds” more than students, parents/community members.
- While it is not possible to draw statistical comparisons between the national What Parents Want study and local priorities, there are a few interesting similarities between Roaring Fork community preferences and those cited by parents in the national study. Parents locally and nationally prioritize high academic standards, critical thinking skills, and character development. There are also some interesting differences. Hands-on/project-based learning and the ability to work collaboratively with others from diverse backgrounds seem to be even stronger priorities locally than nationally. Nationally, there seems to be higher interest in high standards for student behavior, traditional approaches to learning, and technology.

Recommendations and Next Steps

With an ambitious and successful community engagement process completed and a compelling set of results from which to build, the Roaring Forks School District has a number of opportunities before it. The Civic Canopy makes the following recommendations:

1. **Craft an Updated Vision and Mission** – The results of this community engagement process have supplied ample material to refresh the vision and mission statements of the Roaring Fork School District. The Civic Canopy recommends the District convene a small group of stakeholders committed to an ongoing community/district partnership to update the current vision and mission statements based upon the findings of the process and raw material captured over the course of the meetings.
2. **District Strategic Plan** – While this report does not arrive at clearly stated goals for education in the district, it does provide community-based direction for desired outcomes in education and potential actionable areas. The Civic Canopy suggests that district leadership use these findings as a framework to develop a strategic plan, in partnership with the many parents, community members and teachers that have participated.
3. **High Priority Themes** – While this process was not designed to lead to immediate action steps, there emerged consistent, resonant themes across all meetings and groups such as critical thinking, character development and retaining the best teachers. With such strong support in these areas, we suggest that district leadership prioritize these themes for deeper exploration, incorporate them into a district strategic planning process and continue to engage the community in an on-going dialogue to shape outcomes and metrics for these areas. It is The Civic Canopy’s sense that there are two categories of immediate activity:
 - a. themes which emerged from the dialogue that require a more immediate action , such as safety on school buses and;
 - b. themes that require additional dialogue for deeper understanding, such as emphasizing character development as an outcome for students.
4. **Ongoing Parent, Community, Student and Teacher Engagement** – By engaging the community in a proactive and open dialogue about the purpose and practice of education in the community, The Civic Canopy believes that RFSD has embarked on something truly unique – the development of a civic infrastructure to engage community in the ongoing improvement of schools. We suggest you build upon this foundation by creating regular routines and structure for civic dialogue around education in your schools.

Recommended Timeline

Action	Timeline	Who
Craft an updated vision and mission.	November – December	Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, School Board, Steering Committee
Develop a district-wide strategic plan.	January – March 2014	Parents, Teachers, Students, Community Members, District Staff, School Board
Demonstrate immediate activity in high priority themes.	January – March 2014	District Staff, School Board, Community
Implement elements of the strategic plan.	Fall 2014	District leadership
Develop a structure and routine for on-going parent, community, student and teacher engagement.	November 2013 – on-going	District Staff, School Board, Steering Committee, Community

Appendices

The following documents and information are available through the RFSD website <http://www.rfschools.com/about-us/district-vision.html>.

- Tools for community dialogue utilized in the RFSD Visioning Process
- Tools for the Discovery process
- Visioning Steering Committee Job Description
- Data from the Visioning Process
- Communication tools developed and utilized for outreach of the Visioning Process