



Summary
Analysis of
Focus Group
Feedback for
Amherst County
Public Schools

March 2019

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This summary analysis is based on feedback from **xx** focus groups with approximately **xxx** participants including employees, parents and community members along with business and faith leaders. This analysis presents the high-level themes that emerged during the discussions and will help to solidify the development and branding of the ACPS Strategic Plan.

Hopes and Dreams for ACPS Students

Several themes consistently emerged among the focus group participants, primarily:

- Being prepared for the future no matter what their next steps
- Becoming productive, contributing members of society and the community
- Leading healthy lives and pursuing happiness
- Living and working in Amherst County after graduation
- Feeling safe, supported and connected with teachers and administrators

In addition, parent and community respondents said they would like schools and staff to be as diverse as the student population and that public education should become a priority for the Amherst County community.

ACPS Strategic Plan Implications: Consider creating an advisory council composed of parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders who can rally the community and advocate for public education as a priority in the county, especially when it comes to funding.

Current Perception of ACPS

Overall, the current perception of Amherst County Public Schools reported by participants was mixed and tended to be more negative than positive. Many of the comments focused on the fact that Amherst County is rural and as a result, suffers from lack of resources and opportunities for students and teachers. The perception is that with the low salaries and high stress of working with a challenged population, high quality teachers are hard to recruit and retain.

Other oft-repeated negative perceptions surrounded the safety and security of students while in school and that school facilities are in decline, outdated, run down and not maintained well.

However, many respondents also noted that improved communication is key when changing this perception. This need for better communication was cited frequently and regularly in the feedback. Said one, "We do a poor job bragging about ourselves" while another said, "The school system is Amherst County's best kept secret."

Some of the positive aspects of ACPS mentioned were having great, dedicated teachers and administrators who work to meet the needs of every child and that it is a supportive and encouraging school system.

ACPS Strategic Plan Implications: Create a strong communications plan that targets key stakeholders, including employees, about the successes and challenges of the school division. Include ways for stakeholders to stay engaged and involved in making improvements and celebrating progress.

School Division Priorities

Overwhelmingly, respondents noted that increased funding for programs, salaries, technology and facilities is a top priority. Hiring and retaining more qualified teachers, reducing class sizes, making schools safer and more secure, and better internal communication were among the other priorities frequently mentioned.

Most definitely, creating more opportunities for Career and Technical Education is on the minds of many focus group respondents who are concerned that non-college bound students may not be as well prepared for their future as those students attending college.

Also mentioned frequently were putting supports in place for students who may need extra assistance to succeed, including bolstering attendance, providing mental health help, motivating students, and enlisting the help of mentors.

ACPS Strategic Plan Implications: Consider adding a goal that focuses on the health and well-being of students, especially targeting those who may face considerable obstacles to success.

Detailed Summary of ACPS Faculty and Staff Responses

What are your hopes and dreams for the students of Amherst County Public Schools?

There were five frequent themes that emerged in the faculty and staff responses to this question.

1. Being prepared –
 - To pursue college or a career
 - To obtain jobs in fields of their choice
 - To have hopes, dreams and goals to improve themselves (“see and reach their full potential”)
 - To have a desire for lifelong learning (“to learn to love learning and understand it is a lifelong endeavor”)

2. For students to become productive, contributing members of society and community –
 - And to have a clear sense of possibilities for the future

- To be accepted regardless of race, socio-economics, gender or sexuality
 - “I want them to know they can break the cycle and become independent.” And “to overcome what they have been through”
3. For students to lead healthy lives and pursue happiness in life –
 - Thrive, just not survive
 - Have a joyful experience during their ACPS career
 - Follow their dreams
 - To have every opportunity that students in affluent, urban schools have
 4. For students to live and work in Amherst County, if they so choose –
 - “Be proud of where they are from”
 - Establish a real connection to the community and enlist community stakeholders in this vision
 5. For students to feel safe, supported and to have authentic connections with teachers, administrators –
 - Feel as if they have a voice
 - Learn in a safe and nurturing environment

What do you believe should be the priorities of the school division for the next two or three years?

Below are the themes frequently cited among respondents to this question. Among these themes, the ones that appeared most often are grouped at the top of the list:

Cited most often:

- Increase funding for programs, salaries, technology, facilities
- Significantly increase teacher and employee salaries
- Hire and retain more qualified teachers
- Reduce class sizes
- Ensure students learn material they need before moving to the next grade
- Expand CTE programs, especially for students not college-bound; career readiness program at middle and high school
- Ensure students feel safe in all classrooms; “progress is being made in terms of security, and needs to continue”
- Update school facilities and infrastructure
- Better internal communication (among central office and teachers, vertical teams); “create a central office staff who communicates with each other as well as with its school-based employees”

- Improve student and teacher morale
- Improve district’s image in the community and surrounding areas; building deeper ties with communities, neighborhoods, businesses and civic groups; increase community support for schools

Also reported frequently:

- Improve relationships and involvement between teachers, students, parents
- Increase rigor of academic offerings and increase number of elective courses
- Hold students and parents accountable
- Improve technology in classrooms (i.e., Chromebooks)
- Increase student attendance
- Offer more PD opportunities for teacher training (differentiated instruction, integrating technology, reading, identifying at-risk students); more resources for SOLs; more collaborative instruction;
- Engage teachers in decision-making process
- Provide more resources targeted to students in need
- Motivate students to succeed
- Increase racial harmony among staff and students
- Provide mental health supports and appropriate use of school counselors
- Provide more money for classroom supplies

What do you think is the current perception of the Amherst County Public Schools?

While responses from faculty and staff ran the gamut from negative to positive, overall, the more frequent response was that the current perception of Amherst County Public Schools tended toward the negative.

However, many of the respondents noted that the perception depends on one’s personal experience with a school or with the school system and whether that experience was positive or negative.

Among those who reported a negative current perception, the following reasons were frequently cited:

- Amherst County is rural and can suffer from a perception that “rural is less” especially when it comes to technology, innovation, adequate job training opportunities for students (CTE), inability to retain good teachers (due to low salaries), and lack of quality learning experiences such as AP classes. Rural also comes with the perception that there is poverty and low economic growth and not able to compete with surrounding school divisions.
- There is a perceived undercurrent of drug, gang, bullying and/or safety issues which impact the perception of schools.
- School facilities are in decline, outdated, run down, not maintained well.
- The school system is underfunded by the Board of Supervisors, who don’t value the school system. Several comments noted there is a lack of growth in the county due to the Board of Supervisors actions, which ultimately impacts the school system.
- Parents behave in an entitled way and are disrespectful to teachers.

- Administrators are less than supportive of teachers and are solely focused on SOL test pressures.
- Some believe that students are badly behaved and that reflects on the entire district.
- ACPS suffers from a teacher and student morale problem.
- There is a lack of diversity among the teaching and administrative staff.

Also frequently cited was the concern that the positive news about the school system was not getting out to the community or local media, which in turn was feeding the negative perception. “We do a poor job bragging about ourselves,” wrote one respondent. Another wrote, “I do not believe people in the community understand the work that takes place in a school.” Another said, “The school system is Amherst County’s best kept secret.”

A number of respondents noted that they believe the perception was “fair” or “average.” One respondent stated, “Many parents know that teachers do the best with what they are given, but that doesn’t always mean that students are getting the best possible education.”

Among those reporting a positive perception, the following reasons were frequently cited:

- ACPS students are better than anywhere else.
- Having great dedicated teachers; “amazing staff and educators,” who work to meet the needs of every child.
- Good athletic programs.
- The majority of our families feel we are doing what’s best for children.
- Being fully accredited.
- The school system is a large family that works hard to support each other and fix the things that need tweaking.
- ACPS is an “overlooked gem.”

Even those who cited a positive perception of the school system noted that there is room for improvement especially in providing 21st century skills, or with a bigger focus on the arts. Many respondents noted that ACPS has the potential to go from good to great.

Detailed Summary of Parent and Community Forum Responses

(includes all responses within the Community Forum section)

What are your hopes and dreams for the students of Amherst County Public Schools?

Many of the community forum participants echoed the responses of the faculty and staff. Below are other responses that represent a bit more variety:

- For public education to become a priority in our community
- For students to feel like they can accomplish anything

- Equal opportunities for all students
- Improved communication
- That our schools and staff are as diverse as our students and all can feel truly a part of the ACPS community
- Inclusion in all aspects of education, especially for children with varying abilities
- To be fully qualified and/or certified to land a job of their choice
- Improved parent education and more face-to-face conversations about goals and opportunities
- 100 percent graduation rate
- To create a faith-based organization to support the school system in terms of volunteers, mentors and financial resources for needs
- Continue to have community input and participation in schools

What do you believe should be the priorities of the school division for the next two or three years?

- Pursue the profile of a Virginia graduate
- Increase funding, teacher pay
- Recruit highly qualified and diverse teachers
- Increase CTE opportunities
- Rally the community and build relationships; communicate clearly with community and parents
- Expand business and community partnerships for parents and students; consider mentoring program for parents
- Improve facilities, technology
- Increase support to student athletes
- Focus on diversity and inclusion, mental health
- Improve school safety and security
- Increase parent and community involvement
- Put more focus on the whole student and less on testing
- Maintain accreditation
- Reduce class size
- Provide tutoring to help students before and after school; provide help during the summer
- Increase graduation rate

What do you think is the current perception of the Amherst County Public Schools?

Overall, like the faculty and staff responses, the community forum responses were mixed, but tended to skew toward reporting a negative perception. Here are some notable comments:

- Strong academics, but disconnected from the community
- Not valued or viewed as a high priority
- Seen as a “country” school system that people don’t want to send their kids to
- “We need to grow our community and make people want to move here because of our great education system.”
- Underfunded, outdated

- Not competitive with regional schools in terms of quality or quantity of programs

Among the positives:

- That we care a great deal about our students and their achievement
- Supportive, encouraging school system
- Good, great schools and teachers
- Very positive with more strengths than weaknesses