



LISTEN LEARN LEAD RECOMMENDATIONS

AUGUST 8, 2022



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INTRODUCTION

In June 2022, the Upper Arlington Board of Education directed district leadership to provide recommendations following the conclusion of the first phase of the Listen Learn Lead engagement process. This report includes a summary of that process as well as recommendations in all included topic areas.

BACKGROUND

In February 2022, the Upper Arlington Board of Education charged the district leadership to initiate a system for ongoing stakeholder engagement. The process was meant to encourage meaningful and open dialogue with the goal of bringing people back together for a common purpose of helping the Upper Arlington Schools be the best it can be in preparing students for their futures. The intent of the Listen Learn Lead process was to honor the community by providing multiple options and opportunities to *listen* to all voices, *learn* from what was heard and use the community's feedback to *lead* the school district into an even brighter future. Students, families, community members and staff members were all vital stakeholders in this process.

The Listen Learn Lead process began in earnest in March 2022 with a series of in-person roundtable discussion opportunities. These conversations were held at various times of day and different locations for the convenience of potential participants. A virtual meeting was held as an additional option. Similar conversations were held with groups of students at the middle school and high school levels. More than 350 students, staff members, parents and community members engaged in these conversations and documented their feedback on topic areas stemming from the district's strategic plan: our district's strengths; whole learning (academics); student and staff well-being; finances; and communications. Conversations with elementary students also provided insight on the viewpoints of the district's youngest stakeholders.

The themes that arose from these conversations were analyzed and used to create separate surveys for students and adults. The intent was to see how each theme resonated with a broader group of stakeholders and to help the Board of Education and district leadership establish priorities and check alignment with the established goals laid out in the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan.

SUPPORTED THEMES

The June 2022 Listen Learn Lead Briefing Report provides detailed accounts of the themes tested in the adult and student surveys. It also provides information about the secondary themes that emerged and contains selected quotes from participants to illustrate the broad range of views represented by respondents.

Below is a brief summary of the primary themes for each area. Note that the learning experience and culture themes have results from both adult stakeholders and students. The topic areas of finances and communications were not included in the student survey.

All of the themes align with the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan, but the analysis of the Listen Learn Lead results provides a new lens through which to reflect on the timing and emphasis of each area.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE THEMES

Under the topic of the student learning experience, there was strong support from adult stakeholders for strengthening a healthy and supportive learning environment; expanding relevant course offerings at the secondary level; increasing opportunities for the application of 21st century skills, such as collaboration, critical thinking and communication; and providing easier access to academic supports.

The student themes largely echoed those from the adults, with strong support for increasing real-world curricular options and increasing community-based work that could include service projects, internships and shadowing opportunities.

STUDENT AND STAFF CULTURE THEMES

Under the topic of student and staff culture, there was strong support from adult stakeholders for ensuring classrooms are safe spaces in which students feel connected, valued and a sense of belonging; increasing staff morale; and strengthening a culture that supports parent and community involvement.

Students supported similar themes of helping teachers create more supportive classroom environments for all students and providing ways to support community building and peer relationships. Students also supported a theme of reducing homework levels and optimizing the use of class time.

FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THEMES

Under the topic of financial responsibility, there was strong support from adult stakeholders for continuing or expanding the amount of opportunities and programs for students and providing ongoing transparency about financial decisions.

COMMUNICATIONS

Under the topic of communications, there was strong support from adult stakeholders for increasing proactive communication; providing a clear communication system known by all; and increasing opportunities for communication with the Board of Education.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

It is important to keep in mind that the Listen Learn Lead process was meant to foster stakeholder engagement through meaningful and open dialogue between people with diverse points of view. It was not designed to be a strategic planning process. Instead, as stated earlier, the results from this process provide a new lens through which to view progress in the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan and to begin thinking about the process that will be created to work with the community in the development of the next strategic plan, tentatively scheduled for 2023. In keeping with this, the recommendations in this report represent adjustments and improvements to existing efforts that align with the current strategic plan. The recommendations do not introduce entire new areas of focus of programming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The district leadership team has reviewed the Listen Learn Lead Briefing Report and compiled the following recommendations for consideration by the Board of Education.

- **Elevate student voice in the operation of the district** - The Board of Education is committed to using student voice to inform all aspects of district operations. It is recommended that a diverse group of students from all levels be engaged in a dialogue to identify appropriate and effective ways for student ideas and feedback to be systematically gathered and used in this work.
- **Strengthen Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) across all grade levels** - Strengthening supportive and healthy academic learning environments is the fundamental work of MTSS, which establishes high-quality universal approaches toward student achievement, belonging and balance and matches the appropriate instructional approaches and resources to each individual learner. Simply put, the MTSS system ensures that the district meets every student where they are so they can achieve at the highest possible academic levels. During the coming year, these processes will become more deeply embedded into the elementary level and procedures and protocols will be solidified at the secondary level. It is recommended to provide increased communication to families about the MTSS process, including a short video.

- **Build on STEM experience for students, K-12** - The district's approach to the strategic priority of whole learning prioritizes making connections across academic content areas to simulate real-world experiences, which are in high demand by both students and future employers. STEM — the intersection of science, technology, engineering and mathematics — is a perfect example of whole learning in action, as it goes beyond content alone to involve a hands-on, collaborative and solutions-oriented approach to learning and thinking. Now in its second year of scaling the STEM approach at the elementary level through Elementary Explorations, the district will bring tighter alignment and clarity to standards connections in the STEM areas as well as the arts and well-being. The district recommends and intends to enhance the STEM opportunities at both the middle and high school level, with the support of the Board of Education, by shifting budgetary resources that will support the work needed to vertically articulate STEM learning from grades 6-12. As the Board of Education looks to the development of the next strategic plan, the district recommends incorporating an increased focus on STEM at all grade levels.
- **Re-establish community financial committee** - The district has a long history of utilizing the expertise in our community, including in the area of finances. It is recommended that the treasurer's department reconvene a community financial advisory committee during the upcoming school year. The district will look to this group of professionals with expertise in the area of finance to ask questions, offer insight and share lessons learned from their own professional experiences.
- **Increase awareness of the Annual Financial Update and other financial documents**
 - The district goes to great lengths to compile thorough and transparent financial reports and documents. While these documents have always been publicly available on our Treasurer's Office website (www.uaschools.org/treasurer.aspx), it is recommended that a concerted effort be made to increase community members' awareness of these resources so that they may be better informed about the district's use of taxpayer dollars.
- **Increase awareness of the district's efficiency efforts** - The district remains focused on financial efficiency and the responsible use of taxpayer dollars. In order to better communicate these efforts with Upper Arlington residents, it is recommended that a running list of cost-saving and efficiency measures be published on the district website, with progress updates also included in the UAiNSIGHT newsletter.
- **Enhance district website** - As part of the district's commitment to clear and transparent communication, the district has already taken steps to make information and resources more easily accessible to families and community members on the

district website (www.uaschools.org). Initial steps include expanding information on academic rankings; curriculum standards and resources; performing arts events open to the community, and more. Initial steps have also been taken to provide families with easier access to and a better understanding of the tools that they may need throughout their students' academic journey. As part of the district's commitment to continuous improvement, district leadership will seek feedback from families on these changes and continue to evaluate potential updates for the future.

- **Offer new opportunities for online engagement** - Upper Arlington Schools remains committed to keeping all stakeholders informed of what is happening throughout the district and receiving and responding to feedback from stakeholders. The district recommends launching a Listen Learn Lead digital hub, available on the district website, that will provide links to frequently requested topics and submit questions, ideas, compliments and concerns that will be directed to the appropriate department or school. In the near future, community members will also be able to visit the district website to sign up for the monthly district e-newsletter that is currently sent to families and staff.
- **Create the Listen Learn Lead Community Academy** - All Upper Arlington community members are important stakeholders in the school district. The Listen Learn Lead Community Academy will provide opportunities for parents, guardians, caregivers and community members to learn more about opportunities and programs within the district, as well as topics of importance to the growth and development of our students. The district will utilize internal staff, experts within our community and outside partnerships to provide meaningful learning opportunities for families throughout the year. This recommendation aligns with both the Listen Learn Lead themes and the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan.
- **Hold annual Listen Learn Lead roundtable discussions** - At the heart of the Listen Learn Lead process was the goal of bringing community members together to share different perspectives in a positive and future-focused manner. The district recommends that the Board of Education host a set of roundtable discussion opportunities each year. These opportunities will allow Board members to listen to and learn from residents, thus informing their leadership in the district.
- **Reinforce use of district learning management systems, Seesaw (K-3) and Canvas (4-12)** - Students and families can struggle if the information needed for classes is spread across several different platforms. It is recommended that the district reinforce the importance of staff members using the appropriate learning management system (Seesaw or Canvas) to post all class-related information in one location.

- **Provide easier access to academic supports** - There are many academic support systems in place in the middle schools and high school, but they are difficult for students to access if the opportunities are not clearly communicated to both students and families. The district recommends consolidating this information on the district website and for regular publication in secondary school parent newsletters. In future years, the district may look to expand these supports, including using student mentors to assist peers and younger students.
- **Delay strategic planning process** - The next strategic planning process was due to begin in early 2023. In light of the timing of the current superintendent search, it is recommended to delay that planning process until the 2023-2024 school year. This will allow the incoming superintendent to be fully engaged in the process from the outset.

CONCLUSION

The Listen Learn Lead process brought to light many areas in which students and adults see strengths room for improvement in the district. The 13 recommendations listed above represent real action steps that can be taken to improve experiences related to UA Schools for all stakeholders. In addition to being inspired by the Listen Learn Lead findings, these recommendations also align with the 2019-2024 Strategic Plan. If approved by the Board of Education, updates on the prioritization and implementation of these recommendations will be provided during upcoming meetings.