

Community Engagement in Rainier School District: Summary of strategies and findings

Prepared for Rainier School
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I. Purpose

In fall, 2019, Rainier School District embarked on an ambitious plan to engage students, families, and community members in discussion of the strengths and opportunities in the district to inform their continuous improvement process (CIP) and begin planning for the Student Investment Account (SIA).

In Oregon, schools and districts are called upon to engage in continuous improvement work to improve outcomes for students. According to the Oregon Department of Education, CIP is the process by which districts and schools:

- Determine what is working and what needs to change;
- Establish a process to engage stakeholders to effect change;
- Leverage effective practices to implement a plan;
- Use data to monitor and make timely adjustments to improve outcomes.

CIP results in the development of an ambitious, priority-driven action plan where routine collaboration and decision-making among district leaders is reflected throughout implementation.

New in 2019, the Oregon's Student Success Act (SSA) marks a historic investment in Oregon's public schools, focused on equity and improving outcomes for populations of students who experience disparities in educational outcomes as a result of historical oppression and marginalization by the public-school system. As part of the SSA, the Oregon Department of Education is dispersing \$500 million dollars to school districts across the state as part of the Student Investment Account (SIA).

SIA funds serve two purposes: 1) Meeting students' mental and behavioral health needs; 2) Increasing achievement and reducing academic disparities for students of color, students with disabilities, emerging bilingual students, and students navigating poverty, homelessness, and foster care. Per the requirements of the law, investments must focus entirely on these focal populations.

Districts may invest SSA funds in the following areas: 1) Behavioral and mental health supports; 2) Providing a well-rounded education; 3) Expanded learning time; 4) Class size reduction, and all investments must focus specifically on improving outcomes for the focal populations. Additionally, investments must achieve the following outcomes: TK

As part of SSA planning, school districts are required to conduct expanded community engagement to ensure the voices and perspectives of impacted populations are used to guide investments. Engagement must focus on soliciting input on strategies to:

- Reduce academic disparities
- Meet behavioral and mental health needs
- Provide access to academic courses

- Allow teachers and staff sufficient time to collaborate and develop strategies to help students stay on track to graduate
- Establish and strengthen partnerships

This report describes the community engagement methods that Rainier School District engaged in during fall 2019.

II. Methodology

Rainier School District employed multiple methods to reach the students, families, and community members in their district. Their engagement strategy included the following:

Empathy interviews were conducted by a team of staff members during the school day with 51 students in the district (36 students using one protocol and 15 students using a second protocol). Students were *randomly* selected in order to have representation of different student groups. Interview questions were open-ended and designed to elicit stories (“tell me about a time...”). Interview notes were recorded in a google form without student names attached.

Student survey was administered with all jr/sr students during advisory period. There was a high response rate (251 students) because of the ability to administer it during that time. The survey had seven questions with 4- or 5-point scale response options.

Community survey was sent out to parents, community members, and staff members. There was a high response rate, including 195 parents and 24 staff members. The survey was advertised through various mechanisms including social media, email, and personal asks. The survey also asked for people to self-identify in various groups, although this question was optional. Respondents who chose to answer the question, gave the following responses: 17% navigating poverty, 16% qualified for an IEP or 504, 3% LGTBQ, 4% foster care, 2% homeless/housing insecure, and 10% with mental health needs.

In-person community meetings. Two meetings were held with community members in fall, 2019. The October meeting was attended by 24 parents/community members. The meeting was advertised in many ways, with a particularly useful but time-intensive strategy of calling or texting people individually, including in Spanish. There was a translator available at the meeting. The attendance was double to triple the size of previous engagement session. A second meeting in November was attended by 20 parents/community members. Communication and outreach included over 60 personal

phone calls to invite families. A translator was available at the meeting, which was an essential support for two families. Similar to October, the meeting was held at a downtown restaurant, which is more convenient for many families. Food was provided.

Teacher focus group was held with nine teachers with varying years of experience and various teaching positions/grade levels in the district. The 45-minute focus group was facilitated by an external facilitator during a regular meeting time.

Partner/community meeting was held in August. Members from partner organizations and the community came together to talk about their partnership and to discuss Rainier's five pillars of success.

Individual family meeting(s). At least one family who was reluctant to come to school agreed to meet with a district staff member at the library to provide feedback.

These methods were designed to gather feedback from many stakeholders with specific efforts to reach populations of students who experience disparities in educational outcomes.

In addition to all of the engagement strategies above, district team members reviewed the following data sources, both as a whole and disaggregated by student groups in order to highlight the opportunity gaps students are experiencing:

- Graduation (ninth grade on-track data, essential skills, and graduation rates)
- Attendance (regular attenders)
- Smarter Balanced Assessment data
- Significant Disproportionality data
- STAR Testing

III. Stakeholder Engagement Themes

Data from all of the community engagement methods (surveys, empathy interviews, community meetings, and focus groups) were brought to a team work session to uncover trends and highlight strengths and opportunities. For some sources such as survey results, team members examined raw data together and highlighted themes. Other data sources (e.g., empathy interviews, focus group) were analyzed before the meeting using qualitative analysis methods and the analysis summary was examined by group members.

For each data set, strengths and opportunities identified by team members were recorded on post-it notes. Then, across the multiple data sets over 50 post-it notes were examined, sorted, and categorized. The resulting strengths and opportunities are highlighted below:

Strengths

- I. There are strong foundations of healthy relationships and trust for many students.
- II. Students and families value in career courses and families value preschool
- III. Many families and students feel welcomed and safe at school

Opportunities

- I. Parents and students want more courses and internships that meet their career and college goals, especially CTE
- II. While relationships are strong for some students, about one in four students don't have an adult they trust and/or don't feel safe and included at school
- III. There is a need for more mental health services, social emotional work with students, and connections to trusted adults
- IV. Behavior/discipline systems and policies are perceived by students, families, and some staff as needing improvement
- V. Vaping is a large problem
- VI. Some parents, students, and staff want a later start time
- VII. Address technology access and use of technology issues for students and families, including supports for bilingual families
- VIII. School and classroom policies and practices regarding testing, homework, etc. need to be examined

Details about these strengths and opportunities from post-it notes were recorded and used extensively by team members during the planning process.

VI. Considerations

Rainier team members discussed what they learned about community engagement strategies and the planning process.

Team members noted that these aspects of their engagement strategies **worked well**:

- Empathy interviews with students provided great information. Students “liked being heard” and interviewees felt students were honest and open. The data went more deeply into understanding the details behind some of the survey data and revealed additional insights into student experiences and needs.
- The students survey was an efficient way to hear from many students (easy to create, easy to administer and easy to analyze).
- The community meetings had higher attendance than ever before which team members attributed to the personalized outreach and invitation. Community members who attended the meeting gave feedback that they appreciated being listened to. The facilitators felt that all voices were heard and that the district listened.
- The community survey achieved a fairly high response rate which team members attributed to multiple, repeated advertising and outreach efforts.

Team members also discussed **what they learned** about their engagement methodologies that could inform improvements in the future. They noted the following:

Empathy Interviews

- Make sure interviewees know how *and* have time to probe more deeply in interviews (“tell me more” kinds of probes)
- Interviews take time to code and analyze. Make sure that time is built in and assigned to someone who knows how to analyze qualitative data
- Collect some sort of information about the student who is being interviewed so that data can be sorted by different groups (gender, ELL, FRL status, etc.); this could just be a checklist in the google form
- Allow enough time for empathy interviews to be conducted; the timeline was fairly short

Surveys

- While the overall response rate to the community survey was high, the response rate was somewhat lower among families experiencing poverty (and/or they didn’t indicate

that they were in poverty when asked that question). Consider how to reach a higher proportion of these families

- Make sure all teachers follow through on having students take the survey (a few teachers did not administer the survey as requested)
- Survey results often need to be disaggregated for analysis. For example, separating the parents from the staff on the community survey or those in the focused populations for SSA. The student survey did not ask for any student characteristics so results could not be disaggregated
- Some of the survey items need to be tweaked for future use. For example, ask about only one thing at a time (one question, for example, asked if you/your child feel welcomed at school instead of one or the other)
- Consider whether or not to include “neither agree nor disagree” in the scale. About one in three students chose this on most student survey items

While many voices were represented in the data, team members were also inspired to look for additional ways to engage students and families in the future, especially populations who experience disparities in educational outcomes as a result of historical oppression and marginalization (e.g., navigating poverty, homeless and foster care, emerging bilingual). Rainier School District will continue to prioritize community engagement as they plan for SIA funds in 2020.