

Creating a Strategic Plan For the Bernards Township School District

Session 1 of 3

What Are the Strengths, Achievements, and Challenges of the Bernards Township School District?

On Monday, October 1, 2018, Bernards Township School District administration, Board of Education members, staff, parents, students and community members came together to initiate strategic planning. The first evening's topic was focused on the strengths, achievements, and challenges of the Bernards Township School District. The meeting began with a welcome and introductions by Board of Education President and Nick Markarian, Superintendent, presented an excellent overview of the current "state of the schools." Gwen Thornton, assisted by Kathy Winecoff, and Maryann Friedman New Jersey School Boards representatives, reviewed the strategic planning process the group would be undertaking.

One hundred forty (140) participants then gathered in randomly assigned groups to identify the strengths/achievements and challenges of the Bernards Township School District through brainstorming and the sharing of ideas. After discussion, each group came to a consensus of its top 10 strengths/achievements and top 10 challenges and presented those to all meeting participants.

The information that follows is a summary of the work of the small groups. As discussed with the meeting participants, all consensus points are recorded and posted on the district's website to share the work of the groups during the course of the strategic planning process.

Group Consensus Strengths/Accomplishments and Challenges

Red Dot Group:

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top Ten)

- **Students are dedicated to success**
- **Diverse cultures**
- **Teachers rock and are invested**
- **Administration is helpful**
- **Great academic support system and...**

- ...opportunities for high performers
- Lots of extra-curriculars
- Some opportunities for options academically
- Relatively small class size

Challenges (Top Ten)

- Middle performers can get lost
- Higher performers reluctant to take electives / relax
- Weighted GPA provides the wrong motivation
- Reimagining assessment strategies
- Students not allowed to fail
- Lack of environmental awareness / recycling
- Teacher support
- Less pressure to add to transcripts
- Increased awareness of alternative paths / careers
- Lacking in inclusive education model/co-teaching
- Character education and character building

Yellow Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top Ten)

- PTOs
- School spirit / camaraderie
- Arts Programs
- Extensive options for students
- Supportive faculty and staff
- Counseling and “Whole Child Development”
- Academics
- Efficient budgeting
- Extra-curriculars
- Spectrum services
- Students accepting of other students

Challenges (Top Ten)

- Stress and academic competitiveness
- Lack of peer leaders
- Curriculum gaps in successive years
- Parent education in parallel with child
- More counselors
- Range of assistance for students with different needs
- Excessive homework
- Professional development needs more focus (depth vs. breadth)
- Lack of interaction across grade levels for students
- Technology dependent

Black Dot Team:

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top Ten)

- Diversity – students & programming
- Good academic performance
- Great teachers & staff
- Good Character Education programs
- Low incidents of bullying
- Good / safe facilities
- Parent education programs
- G & T and mini units
- Students are focused on achievement
- Special Education Program

Challenges (Top Ten):

- Student stress and anxiety
- Empowering students to self-advocate
- More parent education programs
- Parent pressures, voluntary and involuntary
- Lack of communication between school and home
- Unhealthy expectations in academics
- Continue Character development / coping skills
- Expanding already rigorous programs
- Increased drug use and vaping
- Improving security/balancing activities

Light Blue Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top 10)

- High levels of academic achievement
- Highly qualified staff and dedicated supportive staff
- Supportive and involved community and family resources
- Student-centered culture
- Excellent special education programs
- Excellent access to resources (libraries, computer labs)
- Music and Arts programs = well-rounded students
- Robust academic electives, (i.e., Shop, World Languages)
- Consistent, dedicated administrators – promoted from within
- Social-Emotional Learning and Character Ed

Challenges (Top 10)

- Stress – student, teacher / grades; start times, traffic, more counselors
- More district sponsored After School Programs –not run by volunteers; unsustainable
- Elementary School World Languages
- Public speaking at Elementary
- Keeping up with facilities & security

- Schedule changes (block schedule; HS start time)
- Cafeteria concerns
- Concerns about Aspen
- Student connectedness in MS and HS
- Are we reaching/serving the middle range student”

Green Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top 10)

- Rigorous curriculum
- Community of families that are academic minded
- Large high school that provides diversity and many offerings

Challenges (Top 10)

- Not enough acceptance and talking about “average” kid, including career options. These students feel “less than” and become depressed
- Academic pressures- lack of sleep too much homework@ HW, RHS,WAMS too big and bell periods too short
- Over emphasis on grades
- Communicating academic data/progress by cohort(s)

Orange Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top 10)

- Staff
- Reputation / rigor
- Curricular offerings
- Extra –curricular Programs
- Diversity
- Special education
- Parent Support
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Challenges (Top 10)

- School schedule
- CP vs. Honors
- Lack of focus on “average” / over acceleration
- Drugs
- Stress & anxiety / emotional needs
- Maintenance concerns-facilities
- 5th-6th transition
- Bus routes / traffic
- Over extension of student schedules / time (lack of family time)
- ELL / Small populations

White Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top 10)

- Parent involvement

- Educated & caring teachers
- Energetic and interested students
- Teacher-administration collaboration
- Many learning / class options
- Arts Program
- Sports program
- Facilities/Technology
- Reputation
- Individualize programs-differentiation and special service

Challenges (Top 10)

- Return to simplicity / community; “It takes a village.”
- Competition
- Anxiety / stress
- Too much focus on test scores
- Excessive Testing / assignments
- Teacher pay / incentives
- Student communication
- Academic integrity
- Communication
- Counselor-staff case loads
- Educate students on various life/career paths

Lime Green Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top 10)

- academics / curriculum
- extra-curricular / athletic programs
- staff
- school spirit / pride
- community involvement / parent involvement
- student performance
- Special Education Programs
- Assemblies / additional programming
- Cost management

Challenges (Top 10)

- Student information system (Aspen)
- Technology availability
- Streamline information – too many sources
- Ridge wake-up time / block scheduling
- Phone use during school
- Mental health – counselors separate from college advisors
- Security
- G&T / Accelerated access
- Stress level
- Transparency in special education services

Dark Blue Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top 10)

- Supportive parents
- Variety of extra-curriculars / finding a place
- Technology / use of Google suite
- Athletics, clubs, academics
- Educate staff and parents when there's a change
- Students are motivated to attend
- Team model at WAMS
- Varied rigor
- Outstanding faculty
- Sense of community

Challenges (Top 10)

- Rigor vs. stress
- Consistency of expectations across the district including homework
- Secondary level; building relationships between adults and students
- Welcoming and transitioning new students to the district
- Collaborative communication with all stakeholders
- Grit / coping strategies
- Holistic support for ELLs
- Teach kids how to be an effective group member
- Resilience! Build it!
- Parental competitiveness
- School calendar

Pink Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top 10)

- Strong academics
- Strong extra-curriculars
- Excellent staff
- Variability in academic choices / programs (e.g. Vo-Tech)
- Communication
- Community involvement
- Parent support
- Safety / security
- Counselling / guidance
- Student programming / assemblies

Challenges (Top 10)

- Overscheduling
- Facility upkeep
- Start time
- Traffic
- Large class sizes
- Parental pressure
- Peer pressure

- Technology – too plugged in
- Short staffed at Elementary for guidance
- Security at elementary level

Purple Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top 10)

- Dedicated teachers – passionate and knowledgeable
- Strong, adaptive curriculum
- Strong PTO, devoted parents
- Variety of extra-curricular activities
- Healthy supportive classroom culture
- Facilities
- Technology
- Academic success
- Social Emotional Awareness
- Motivated Talented Students

Challenges (Top 10)

- Lack of opportunity for teacher collaboration
- Stress management / coping strategies
- Additional support staff for social emotional needs-
 - Mental health professional
 - Guidance counselor
- Inconsistent security measures between schools
- National and International Academic Achievement opportunities
- Class sizes are too large at Elementary level
- More project-based learning

Gold Dot Team

Strengths/Accomplishments (Top 10)

- Parent / educator partnerships
- Competition / drive (can be a negative)
- Special Education programs, ELA / Math – need more for other academic areas (Sciences / Social Studies / World Languages)

Challenges (Top 10)

- Coping strategies:
 - Stress / anxiety
 - Balance academic with SEL
 - Growth Mindset
 - Problem-solving
- Enrollment / facility
- Crowding WAMS / OSS (age)

Overall Needs:

- **Educating the WHOLE Child**
- **Mission Statement revamp – rework to prioritize good citizenship first (core values)**
- **Professional Development – instructional coaching program (Instructional Aides), Growth Mindset**

Following each group reporting out on their consensus points, the following Common Themes emerged from multiple groups:

Strengths:

Students engaged and focused on achievement

Dedicated, talented staff and supportive administration

Parent and community involvement

Academics-rigorous curriculum and plentiful co-curricular programs including athletics

Cost effective

Technology

Excellent Fine Arts and special education programs

Cost efficient education

Challenges:

Stress/anxiety

Technology

Empowering students

Expansion of parent educational programs

Upkeep/upgrades – facilities, security and technology

Reaching all students; differentiation

Communications; i.e. ASPEN

Expansion of guidance and support services for students

Professional Development

The second strategic planning session is scheduled for:

Monday, October 15, 2018 from 7:00 – 8:30 PM

Meetings are scheduled for 1.5 hours. Meetings start and end promptly.

During the October 15th meeting we will create a shared vision together for the future of the Bernards Township School District . . . we will talk about our aspirations and expectations for our students and school district.

We look forward to seeing you!