

Summary Report Summarizing  
Perceptions from Interviews: Spooner  
Area School District

Presented to the Spooner Area School District Board of  
Education by Studer Education, August 24, 2015

The Spooner School Board hired Studer Education to interview the district staff and a cross section of community members to gain people's perceptions about the state of affairs of the Spooner Area School District. We traveled to Spooner for two days in July to complete in person interviews. We received additional recommendations for gaining insight and held phone interviews following our two day visit and concluded the interviews on August 6<sup>th</sup>. We interviewed 49 people in the Spooner Area School District and community, analyzed the information, presented a summary of findings at the August 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015 Board meeting, and are providing this report to the SASD School Board. This report will be posted on the board website.

The summaries in this report only reflect information we gathered from the interviews. The purpose of this high level summary is to provide the Spooner Area School District Board with the consistent themes that arose in our interviews with community members, the board, and district leadership and staff and to offer a short list of recommendations for moving the district forward to achieve success.

Our goal was to interview a cross section of individuals who represent varying viewpoints and have varying roles in the community to determine people's perceptions of the existing barriers that could hinder the success of the school district as well as possible solutions for positioning the school district to gain a more cohesive approach. From there, we analyzed the information to determine consistencies in perceptions as well as differing viewpoints. This report is submitted to the Spooner Area School District Board to enable the board to use these high level findings and recommendations to move the district forward in a positive and meaningful way.

It is important to note that this report is specifically focused on barriers based on the purpose of our work, and the results are summarized from the perceptions of the people we interviewed. Other existing data, such as survey results should be used to triangulate the information reported in this document to harvest wins and identify areas for improvements.

## **Background and Overall High Level Perceptions on Prioritized Changes**

- A new superintendent was hired by the Board to address financial issues and deficit spending and make changes to place the district in good financial standing. This charge seemed to be clear during the interview and the hiring process and was acknowledged by most people we interviewed. Most acknowledged that changes in some way needed to occur based on existing variables such as:
  - Declining enrollment
  - Failed referendum
  - Past decisions that have put the district in deficit spending causing the board to use the fund balance
  - Continued decisions to decrease employee benefits to position the district in financial good standing

- Some believe that community and past employee dissatisfaction is occurring because people are having a difficult time accepting change. Those with this belief acknowledged that changes occurred very quickly and made it difficult for district employees to adjust.
- Others we interviewed commented that they understood the need for change but questioned the speed with which the change occurred and most importantly to them – how the changes were applied (too fast with no or little input and applied with a heavy hand; no explanation for why decisions were being made; mixed messages when asking questions; and poor follow-through which led to low levels of trust in decisions being made).
- The new superintendent was also hired to get the district up to speed on Educator Effectiveness as it has been newly defined in the state of Wisconsin. Varying views exist in regard to the past work that was accomplished and implemented in the Spooner Area School District.
  - Some perceive the district being way behind with a high sense of urgency for changes that needed to occur to support the highest level of teaching.
  - Others believe foundational work had been accomplished, such as leaders being trained by the state and that credit had not been given to those who have been part of the state efforts.

The Board charged the superintendent with these major system changes and some board members acknowledged that they did not set initial expectations, parameters for year one as well as the vision and strategic direction for three to five years out. Without guidelines and expectations, people perceived the superintendent to take high levels of control of district and school situations, including directly managing teacher effectiveness/evaluation and employee behavior at the school level. Several instances occurred that have been reviewed by the board with no conclusion favorable to the workforce, which has caused negative energy to build by some community members toward what is perceived as inaction by the board when employees have reported being treated in unprofessional ways. Also, there seems to be confusion about the way the Employee Handbook is being applied (which handbook, consistent approach, etc.).

Some stated they did not have first-hand knowledge of situations that have been in the public spotlight yet, believed some difficult decisions had to be made to improve the district.

Most interviewed questioned whether or not the changes needed to occur as quickly as they did and believed change needed to occur in the Spooner Area School District. The speed and the way the changes were applied seemed to create a high level of concern by some that we interviewed. These actions may be a reason for negative perceptions by some community members.

## **High Level Findings: Most Common Themes (Employee Turnover and Ineffective Communication)**

- Almost all people we interviewed noted the high number (over 40) of employees making a decision to leave the district.
  - Some perceived that the majority of employees left so that they would not lose current benefits prior to changes on the horizon.
  - Some perceived that some of the employees that left were not performing at acceptable performance levels; yet acknowledged that some high performing employees left.
  - Others expressed that employees chose not to work in an environment with little trust and constant fear and anxiety.
  - The three reasons may or may not be mutually exclusive for each individual making a decision to retire/resign from the district.
  
- Ineffective communication was noted by almost all those we interviewed and consisted of areas such as:
  - Information not being shared accurately
  - Information not shared in a timely manner
  - Lack of consistency of follow up or follow through
  - Seldom sharing “why” decisions were made
  - Few decisions being made with input from varying views
  - Few processes or procedures in place by the board to function in a meaningful and productive manner
  - Inconsistent messages and messages that changed based on the audience or use of words that made the message difficult to understand
  - Public messaging at times at the system and board levels has been judgmental about some of the existing workforce being sub-par performers (what some people have heard from the type of messaging occurring)
  - Public input through forums, etc., have been limited by the board with no other alternatives for input which is perceived as limiting stakeholder input. Also, some believed the board needed to have better structures and processes in place to manage board meetings with the right focus.
  - The type of communication within the system leadership reflects a “micro managing” message.
  - Feedback from varying forms of input have not been shared with the community (internal/external) in a timely way.

## Recommendations

Our work concludes with providing recommendations to the Board to provide structure and guidance to the SASD leadership to achieve meaningful outcomes.

We recommend that:

- (1) as a way to move the community forward in positive way, the Board takes ownership for inadequately defining difficult charges to a first year superintendent and failing to provide clear direction via specific expectations for defined outcomes and parameters for a given time period. This action includes engaging in conversations with the superintendent to harvest last year's wins and to face some important brutal facts to advance the district and community to continue to have or restore confidence in the school system. The Board will also show responsibility for moving the district and community forward by applying the actions that follow.
- (2) the Board charges the superintendent and district leadership with the responsibility to create a best place to work environment that includes a teamwork approach to problem-solving, communication, and continuous improvement.
- (3) the Board applies a system-wide, measurable accountability system that includes the following areas and transfers to a measurable superintendent evaluation:
  - a. Student Achievement (district-wide measures that define success)
  - b. Growth (student enrollment)
  - c. Workforce Engagement and Satisfaction (employee engagement survey and retention)
  - d. Stakeholder/Community Satisfaction (parent and community surveys)
  - e. Finance (budget alignment and accountability and system efficiencies)
- (4) the Board reviews leader defined focused actions and progress monitoring measures that align to the above accountability system and measurable outcomes. As part of this process, the Board reviews focused actions and progress monitoring measures every 60 days to assess progress along the way and provide support/feedback for improvements as well as harvest the wins with the district staff and community.
- (5) the Board creates a reflective process for evaluating their performance on holding productive meetings aligned to outcomes that are transparent and well-communicated and following meeting protocols such as Robert's Rules of Order to manage productive board meetings and hold the district accountable for providing timely information prior to board meetings.

## Steps to Take

1. Create annual measurable district goals aligned to recommendation 3 and make the goals, annual results and progress monitoring measures open and transparent to the public. Use this tool as a positive and purposeful communication tool with district staff and community stakeholders.
2. Create a superintendent evaluation tool aligned to the annual measurable goals in step 1 using the following:
  - a. Measurable goals aligned to recommendation 3
  - b. Board determined weights to each goal
  - c. Scale to represent
    - 5 = Super Stretch Goal
    - 4 = Stretch Goal
    - 3 = Goal
    - 2 = Same as last year or some improvement but not at goal
    - 1 = Declined from last year
3. Gather baseline information on perception measures (employee engagement survey and stakeholder perception surveys to include leader and superintendent items). Train leaders on rolling out the results to staff and stakeholders and communicating the results in an open and transparent way for the purpose of harvesting wins and improving.
4. Create a plan for collecting hard data (student achievement and growth) as well as perception data every 60 days to review progress in a timely way. Use this information to engage in continuous improvement discussions with the leadership.

We have great affinity for the people in the Spooner community and appreciate the opportunity to provide these recommendations. Our goal is to provide information that can help the district and community achieve what is best to move forward in a positive and meaningful way. The approach above also has provided leadership teams in school districts with opportunities to achieve improved student achievement results, better workplace environments, improved stakeholder perceptions, and financial savings through growth and spending efficiencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this service.

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