

Giddens School

inspiring children to better their world

Strategic Planning
Community Input Report

February 2010

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Introduction

The Giddens School Strategic Planning Steering Committee is pleased to share the following summary of community input gathered in January 2010 as part of the comprehensive strategic planning effort undertaken by the school, starting in 2008 and due for completion in March 2010.

In all, our community input gathering activities generated well over 60 pages of data. We are extremely pleased with the variety of input we received as well as the numbers of people who participated in either or both the Community Input Session held at the school or the online survey.

We don't take lightly asking busy people to attend a meeting or fill out a survey. We did this with a commitment that every idea, suggestion, and comment would be seriously considered and every effort would be made to build these perspectives into the final strategic plan.

With that commitment in mind, all the data collected has been shared – verbatim – with the 7 focus area work teams. These work teams have spent the month of February carefully reviewing the data, comparing it to their original goals and strategies, discussing the tradeoffs associated with any changes, refining the goals and strategies based upon the input, and ultimately providing the Steering Committee with a final set of goals and strategies that the Board of Trustees will vote on in March.

Barring any unforeseen delays in our timeline, once the Board of Trustees approves the Strategic Plan in March, we will make it available in both hardcopy and electronic format, both internally - with current faculty, staff and parents - as well as externally – with alumni, donors and other key stakeholders.

Draft Focus Area Goals

The following broad-based draft goals were created prior to community-input gathering activities and shared with participants as the basis for gathering suggestions, input and ideas. They are included here as a reference for the community input data shared later in this report.

Powerful Learning

We will provide a dynamic learning environment with outstanding faculty and staff that is enriched with a commitment to critical thinking and social responsibility.

Goal 1: Develop multiple forms of common, usable assessment that allow teachers to communicate clearly amongst themselves and with parents.

Goal 2: Develop and document curriculum in core content areas, (e.g., motor, social emotional, literacy, math) demonstrating how instructional goals are met with fidelity to mission & values.

Goal 3: Document and assess professional development opportunities for school staff.

Goal 4: Create guidelines and policies around school-wide structures that support powerful learning.

Goal 5: Develop, implement and evaluate vision for enrichment opportunities that enhance learning

Admissions/Marketing

We will grow the Giddens community in ways that reflect our commitment to diversity in its broadest and most powerful sense.

Goal 1: Increase Applicant Pool to net full enrollment

Goal 2: Decrease student attrition to 20% (NAIS average is 15.9%)

Goal 3: Keep financial aid award between 30-35% of student enrollment

Goal 4: Maintain position as having the most diverse population of the independent elementary schools in Seattle

Financial Stability

We will build an organization that is fiscally sound and mission-appropriate.

Goal 1: Increase cash reserve balance to 75% of budget

Goal 2: Tuition will fall within the 40th – 60th percentile of competitor independent schools.

Goal 3: Compensation and benefits will fall within 40th – 60th percentile of competitor independent schools

Goal 4: Determine Organizational Need for Endowment and/or Capital Fund

Goal 5: Vet and produce mission appropriate short & long-term investment strategies

Fundraising and Development

We will create and sustain a culture of joyful philanthropy that allows us to fulfill our mission, vision and values.

Goal 1: Create and sustain a culture of joyful philanthropy.

Goal 2: Build Alumni Network.

Goal 3: Develop external support for the school.

Goal 4: Lay Groundwork for Endowment and Capital Campaign.

Facilities

We will create a physical environment that supports and enhances learning and reflects our commitment to social responsibility.

Goal 1: Identify & Address Facility Needs

Goal 2: Identify & Address Technology Needs

Governance

We will build a diverse and strategic Board of Trustees with strong systems in place to ensure the health and well-being of the School.

Goal 1: Cultivate and grow the pool of qualified Board members.

Goal 2: Implement on-going Board orientation and training that results in higher level Board performance (strategy based).

Goal 3: Create and implement assessment tool to evaluate Board performance and satisfaction.

Goal 4: Implement standard Board document review.

Goal 5: Communicate the role and responsibilities of the Board to the Giddens Community.

Internal and External Communities

We will create and sustain an engaged learning community that will be looked to as a model for other independent schools.

Goal 1: Increase school community engagement.

Goal 2: Increase alumni involvement

Goal 3: Interact with other schools and organizations with similar missions, locally and nationally

Goal 4: Implement the Communication Plan (CP) and Brand Message Framework (BMF).

Some Overarching Themes

In the course of reviewing all of the data generated in the community input phase of our strategic planning process, our consultant, Gail Ransom, discovered several important ideas and suggestions that emerged as over-arching themes, cutting across several focus areas. These themes are summarized below.

Leadership

Clearly, the community is looking forward to a time of stability in leadership. Those who commented are eager to have a consistent perspective and vision from the Head of School which will add stability to the school on a daily and longer-term basis.

Academics

Many participants want more improvement in the academic realm. There was not agreement as to how that would be achieved. Some thought hiring and retaining the best and brightest teachers provides the correct foundation. Others are interested in assessment and accountability for the student achievement results. Most are committed to social justice being a strong part of the Giddens' experience, but there are different perspectives regarding the definition of social justice education for elementary students.

Enrollment and Financial Stability

There is strong interest in a diverse student body, while meeting the enrollment targets which can promise financial stability.

Communications

In all areas of activity at Giddens, community members want more information. During their child(ren)'s first year, new parents would like a more in-depth and personal introduction to the school. Parents also want continuous feedback about their students' progress. Several would like to know more about Board of Trustee operations. Others want knowledge of Giddens shared with key community partners and leaders.

Summary of Online Survey Data

The strategic planning survey was launched on December 28, 2009 and closed on January 29, 2010. Sixty-eight (68) individuals responded to the survey, and 97% responded online.

The first question was about respondents' role(s) at Giddens. Respondents were allowed to "check all that apply." Nearly three-quarters of respondents (72.7%) identified as current families. The remaining respondents identified as faculty/staff (18.2%), alumni families (16.7%), board members (3.0%) and other (6.1%).

The second question was about the importance of addressing the seven focus areas over the next three to five years. Respondents were asked to rate each focus area as "very important," "important," "somewhat important" or "not important." Of the seven focus areas, a majority of respondents rated powerful learning (95.5%) and financial stability (64.6%) as "very important." Nearly half of respondents rated governance (47.7%) and admissions and marketing (46.2%) as very important, closely followed by fundraising and development (43.1%).

The remaining questions were about the importance of addressing various goals within each of the seven focus areas. Respondents were asked to rate each focus area as "very important," "important," "somewhat important" or "not important." All of the goals within each focus area were rated "very important" or "important" by a majority of respondents, although none of the goals within facilities and internal & external communities were rated as "very important."

The following are responses are summarized by focus area:

Powerful Learning

Of the five goals within this focus area, a majority of respondents rated "Develop and document curriculum in core content areas, demonstrating how instructional goals are met with fidelity to mission and values" (72.3%) and "Develop multiple forms of common, usable assessment that allow teachers to communicate clearly amongst themselves and with families" (56.9%) as "very important."

Admissions and Marketing

Of the four goals within this focus area, a majority of respondents rated "Decrease student attrition to 20%" (58.1%) and "Increase applicant pool to net full Enrollment" and "Maintain position as the most diverse independent elementary school in Seattle (54.7%) as "very important."

Financial Stability

Of the five goals within this focus area, a majority of respondents rated "Develop compensation and benefits plan to ensure that Giddens falls within 40 – 60th percentile of competitor independent schools" (58.1%) as "very important." None of the other goals were rated by a majority of respondents as "very important." However, "Vet and produce mission appropriate short and long-term investment strategies" was rated as very important by a significant number of respondents (37.7%).

Fundraising and Development

Of the four goals within this focus area, a majority of respondents rated “Develop external support for Giddens” (50.8%) as “very important.” None of the other goals were rated by a majority of respondents as “very important.” However, “Create and sustain a culture of joyful philanthropy” was rated as very important by a significant number of respondents (44.4%).

Facilities and Internal & External Communities

As outlined earlier, none of the goals within these focus areas were rated by a majority of respondents as “very important.”

Governance

Of the five goals within this focus area, a majority of respondents rated “Cultivate and grow the pool of qualified board members” (53.8%) as “very important.” None of the other goals were rated “very important” by a majority of respondents.

Individual Comments & Suggestions

In addition to prioritizing goals and strategies for each of the focus areas above, respondents were invited to contribute suggestions for additional goals as well as ways to further embed equity and social justice into each goal area. In total, we received over 300 individual comments offering suggestions and personal perspectives. Each of these individual comments is being reviewed carefully in order to refine the strategic plan in ways that best reflect the community’s needs.

Summary of Community Input Session Data

In January 2010, the Strategic Planning Steering Committee hosted a Community Input Session. This session was open to current families, teachers and administrative staff, as well as alumni parents and former teachers and staff. We sought to have a cross-section of our community gather to share their ideas and perspectives and hopes for the school. Approximately 60 people were in attendance.

The session was organized around two 30-minute break-out sessions, each offering participants the chance to have small group in-depth discussions about one of five focus areas:

- Admissions & Marketing
- Powerful Learning
- Internal & External Community
- Finance & Facilities
- Fundraising & Development

In each session, participants reviewed draft goals and were asked to reflect upon them. Framing questions were:

- What goals resonate with you?
- What goals might you add?
- How can we further embed equity and social justice in this focus area?

For each session, a “Final Flip Chart” summarized the discussion around the following three areas:

- Most critical goals

- Goals to add
- Ideas to further embed equity and justice

After the break-out sessions, Final Flip Charts were posted around the room and participants were encouraged to review these, add any additional comments and star those items that were most important to them.

The following are transcriptions of each of the Final Flip Charts from each of the focus areas. Asterisks note where people attached stars to indicate agreement and support.

Fundraising & Development – Final Flip Charts

Most Critical Goals

- 100% participation goal
- Tie marketing and partnerships more to Giddens development efforts*****
- Reach external audiences better
- Lots of response/feedback to donors/thank you/kids understanding
- Raise fundraising goal every year
- Do more with alumni**
- Make ownership of facility our #1 endowment goal. Creates stability, sense of purpose for all improvements.*
- Define what facility ownership means for Giddens: is it financially sustainable and achievable without compromising our mission?

Goals to Add

- Educate the community about the nature of Capital Campaigns and Endowment Campaigns.
- Co-fundraise with external partners (e.g., African American History Museum and Giddens School share proceeds from a fundraising effort).
- More plans for thanking, involving kids- grow alumni donors here!*
- Parents need to know more about the fundraising picture, e.g., the barbell idea and what we do to avoid being a “barbell” school is a good marketing piece for the school
- Building donors and alumni in the classroom so they understand the support they receive and can give now to their friends and community and later in life back to Giddens and other organizations.
- Be more specific how board is involved (goal 1.3)
- Broaden who is alumni (not just 5th grade, include preschool)
- Goal #1 should include EXPAND not just sustain
- Other revenue services to raise money
- Need data from alumni
- Make ownership of facility #1 endowment goal****
- All asks tailored to different constituents

Further Embed Equity and Justice

- What do we want a “student body pie chart” to look like? Keep the school’s definition of diversity at top of mind, for example, market how and why we are not a barbell school

- Let the Board of Trustees play a hand in defining our diversity goals so we can know who we are better for fundraising and marketing efforts
- Do not be insular; describe ourselves better to the community
- Refute the idea that social justice is somehow in conflict with strong curriculum*****
- Our social justice/equity aspect is our strongest fundraising message: don't downplay it *****
- Keep front of mind how to be across spectrum, not barbell*
- May not be ready for endowment yet,
- Define Alumni Grant Program better

Admissions & Marketing

Most Critical Goals

- Attrition & impact to community. *****
- We need to build the community. (There is a cost to the school community as well as a financial cost for attrition. Building the sense of community will assist with attrition.)
- We need to address specifically the attrition of girls. By the 4th grade, the parents who want early admission to get their girls into the all-girl middle schools apply and we lose 5th grade girls. Can we strengthen the program for girls so that their parents want them to stay? Link with Powerful Voices?*
- Balanced enrollment to space/staff *
- Why isn't attrition goal to be better than NAIS average? *
- Marketing- quantify benefits of diversity *****
- Marketing forward: 6th grade and beyond***** (What does a "Giddens kid" have in a quantifiable way that others don't. How will the Giddens experience benefit the child and make them a better candidate when applying for middle and high schools?)
- Marketing academics within Social Justice *****
- Negate the perception that social justice is done at the cost of academics.
- Market externally***

Sticky Note Additions

- Word of mouth is huge! Create evangelists. *
- Community Building *
- Attrition
- Without a GREAT academic reputation, certain families won't stay/sign on (regardless of mission)
- Really understand the school community through survey or other assessment- not clear if diversity here is true.
- Giddens differentiation needs to be made clearer- how does the school teach social justice? How does it live it? Should be accessible and systematic. *
- PUBLISH CURRICULUM- Overall, accessible framework. Reassure families with how organized the Giddens approach is.

Goals to Add

- Change/improve visibility & reputation of school***
- Partner with organizations with like missions*****

- Do more than just advertise to target diversity, build relationships in communities to foster this diversity*
- Expand reputation of school via community building. Show student involvement through student involvement.

Sticky Note Additions

- Should we consider expanding preschool again to enable a better internal feeder pool? I know there was a lot of history behind this decision- is it worth revisiting?
- Develop and implement systematic method for documenting and tracking attrition, include trends re: reasons, subgroups, etc. so that can be addressed in a strategic manner.
- Examine and articulate “value” of Giddens education so that families believe that “perceived outcomes” far outweigh “perceived costs” (referencing J. Hochberg’s article)
- Make a marketable product on progressive education: CD, blog, and market it.

Further Embed Equity and Justice

- Clearly define and measure diversity on a regular (annual) basis so can track and target outreach.*
- Push our role of best early education also feeding public middle schools.
- Look at non-traditional day cares like church programs to increase diversity of population****
- Explicitly recruit people of color by using internal resources (i.e. current families who are people of color. Ask explicitly for them to refer)
- Look at support charter school initiatives

Powerful Learning

Most Critical Goals

- Number 3 got a lot of comments because they felt it was the foundation for the rest.
- Goal 1 (2 tallies), Goal 2 (3 tallies), Goal 3 (4 tallies), Goal 4 (0 tallies), Goal 5 (2 tallies)
- All goals are critical and interconnected.*
- Two had a lot of energy, and is very related to Goal 1.*
- Specialists and enrichment are high priority. ***
- Need to develop common understanding (rephrase in document?) of Goal 1
- Structure for additional help that may be needed.
- Integration of enrichment is essential, it is not “release” time.
- I like the term “learning community”- it feels broader than “powerful learning” and incorporates social justice and social responsibility.

Goals to Add

- Evaluation of Teachers?
- How does school facilitate parent role?
- How will assessment be communicated to parents? (add to goals) *****
- Goals don’t line up with mission statement (e.g. where’s critical thinking, social responsibility, dynamic learning environment)*****
- Is there any measurement to be added?

- Can what assessments look like be made clearer in document?
- Make a concerted effort- explicitly recruit and retain teachers of color. *
- Is “thinking outside the box” part of goals at Giddens?
- Help! These goals are so complicated- why use this language? Think more about what we are- educating kids to better their world, quality teachers to teach community involvement.
- Ensure curriculum is created to teach all fundamentals to kids who naturally gravitate to other subjects.
- Language: be careful when you wordsmith e.g. referring to learning in preschool as “instruction”- isn’t an accurate description of how the learning happens.
- Some of the comments in this area feel like the progressive vs. traditional argument. What kind of philosophy will we espouse? Can we blend the two?
- The goals missed the point. I would scrap them all and start anew. We need to recruit and retain quality staff trained as progressive social justice educators.
- Overall, deliberate, accessible FRAMEWORK that makes Giddens’ social mission clear...can drill down to curriculum- and have the CONFIDENCE to PUBLISH IT. *
- Extended day and summer programs are crucial here.
- Develop strategies for family participation and involvement (p-5) Homework as part. ****
- Add something about how parents/community can shape enrichment program. *
- Goal 1: Progressive Education: using progressive, authentic methods of assessment.
- Social justice is key to a strong curriculum- it is important to have in the goal of developing curriculum.
- Make sure parents understand and can articulate that academics ARE being taught within social justice framework.

Further Embed Equity and Justice

- Is this clear enough within Goal 2 (embedded in curriculum)?
- How do you build on strengths to help them excel w/challenges?
- Values/concepts kids should understand about the world. *
- Academic excellence is social justice.****

Financial Stability & Facilities

Most Critical Goals

- Enrollment target*
- Capital Fund-Endowment*
- Permanent Facility*****
- Build endowment*
- Tuition funds operations

Goals to Add

- Enrollment target
- Permanent facility
- More Tech + Staffing + Replacement *
- Faculty retention and professional development***
- Evaluate mission/program in setting facility/finance goals*

Further Embed Equity and Justice

- Compensation:
 - -check and raise % *
 - -reconsider goals, comparison group
 - -matches mission & vision
 - -move them upwards
- Endowment
- Teacher compensation higher \$% to attract and retain the best*****

Internal & External Community

Most Critical Goals

- Build community- bring more people*
 - Parent activities*
 - Inspiring kids to better their world by formalizing relationships (brainstorm other ways)
- Is it strategic, action step or goal?
- Social justice mission explicit in the conversation***
- Connections to progressive educators → what does this mean? Could be interpreted in many ways*****

Goals to Add

- How do we include families that can't or don't come: expand opportunities*****
- Partnering with another group for diversity and social justices- ways to decrease work and increase participation.
- Make parent engagement clearer and more successful
- G2: Internal community organizers****
- Build a better web site/social network

Further Embed Equity and Justice

- Formal commitment to cont. education for staff and families: institutional racism, family structures, LGBT equity*****
 - Talks, visits, field trips, projects/student research geared toward these issues?
- Educational equity for disparate communities**
- To be involved in the FSA : inclusivity, reach out to those missing and create access*****
- And how do we include families of color with more traditional backgrounds?