

Perrysburg Schools Focus Group Summary

Background:

BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES:

- These focus groups were conducted as an opportunity to build community engagement/partnership (part of strategic plan), starting with growth/facilities as a first exploration area.
- Groups were led by an independent pro-bono moderator, Heather Smith.

METHODOLOGY:

107 Perrysburg residents applied for the focus groups. A total of 31 people participated in six, 90-minute focus groups, which were conducted Feb. 26 – 29, 2024.

Applicants were screened and selected using the following criteria:

- Mix of ages for participants
- Mix of kids/no kids under 18 living at home
- Mix of which schools children attend
- Mix of how long people have lived in Perrysburg

Note that applicants who were previously part of the Facilities Committee were intentionally excluded to allow others in the community to participate. Similarly, Facilities Committee applicants who were not chosen for that committee were given priority status for these focus groups.

Key Findings & Recommendations:

- 1) The focus group participants appreciated being part of the conversation about the growth occurring in Perrysburg and how our schools need to change to accommodate this growth.** Participants appreciated the focus group discussions for the following reasons:
 - Helps build trust with the School Administration, shows they care
 - Provided an opportunity to learn from each other
 - Many felt heard (“They are finally listening to me.”)
 - Allows “both sides” to give input
 - Glad to know there are others out there who feel the same
- 2) While these groups were a good start to the conversation, many participants would appreciate having additional community conversations, and hope that others are also given the opportunity to participate.** The schools will need to determine what format would be best for these future conversations.
 - Having an independent moderator was appreciated both in terms of leading the discussion as well as leading the selection process.
 - For future discussions/conversations, consider prioritizing Focus Group applicants who were not selected to participate in this round.
- 3) Although significant information has been shared in regards to school growth and facilities, many are still seeking more information.** Note that since the November 2023 ballot issue failed, many feel *more* invested in learning about how the growth in Perrysburg affects our schools and how they can be part of the solution.

Detailed Findings:

The following themes emerged from the 6 focus groups. As a reminder, these ideas and suggestions were generated after speaking with 31 community members and might require further investigation to determine if they represent the broader community. Also, quotes from participants are included below to help illustrate the findings.

Please note that the discussion was broken into three main topics:

1. Reasons the November 2023 ballot issue failed
2. How much participants trust the School Administration and School Board
3. How participants feel about the information shared about school growth and facilities

Perceived reasons why the November '23 Ballot Issue failed:

- **The November ballot issue was “ill-timed,” in combination with the property tax assessment, high inflation, etc.**
 - Uncertainty existed around how much property taxes and school taxes would increase.
 - Perception that the economy/affordability is very different now (versus a few years ago).
 - “We need a recovery period to catch our breath from the increase in our property taxes.”
- **Some felt there wasn't enough urgency in the community to pass the November ballot issue, possibly because “levies passed easily in the past.”**
 - Some felt the anti-levy proponents started talking first and also loudest for the November ballot issue.
 - “I heard nothing about it until a month before the voting.”
 - “It almost felt like they were sneaking it in, and assume we will just vote yes.”
- **There was a wide range of how much people knew about the November ballot issue and also how engaged they were.** Also, many people didn't know how to calculate how much the November school ballot issue would cost them.
 - Participants with younger kids were more likely to vote Yes, even without understanding the details of the ballot issue (they're busy, it directly impacts their kids, etc.).
 - Older participants were more likely to seek out more detailed, specific spending information.
 - Some people would appreciate having access to specific details of how the proposed March ballot issue funds would be spent.
- **Some had “Sticker Shock” at the total dollar amount in the November ballot issue.**
 - “The number knocked me down.”
 - “All of this money seemed like too much for the amount of growth.”
 - “I couldn't afford the ballot issue, that doesn't mean I don't agree with it.”
- **Some also want reassurance of why building a new elementary is the right next step, and reassurance that other options were pursued as part of the decision to build.** Questions/suggestions included:
 - Benchmark with other cities that are either currently growing quickly or grew quickly in the past.
 - Consider increasing the Perrysburg income tax to help support our schools.
 - Can builders be taxed to help with the burden on schools?
 - Did we consider buying an existing building?
 - Should we consider year-round school, which allows for 25% headcount growth without expanding buildings (Cary, NC)?

- **Frequent communication from Mr. Hosler and opportunities for in-person gatherings/Q&A help build and reinforce trust.**
 - Some appreciated that Mr. Hosler “reaches out to us,” and is accessible (Coffee Chats, School tours, etc.).
 - “I appreciate the detailed emails that come directly from the Superintendent.”
 - “Mr. Hosler tries to get the message out, like the Gathering Volumes meeting.”

- **For some, Perrysburg Schools’ excellent results helps build trust of School Administration.**
 - “I see the great outcomes!”
 - “We’re here in Perrysburg for the schools, I’m voting Yes regardless.”
 - “The per pupil cost shows me they’re spending efficiently.”
 - “My taxes are still a hell of a lot cheaper than private schools.”

- **In order to build trust, many want reassurance that plans for expansion and renovation include the proper long-term growth planning.** Some believe that the High School and HPI were at capacity too soon after opening, and should’ve been built larger.
 - One questioned why classrooms were not added to the High School with the addition of the Auxiliary gym.

- **There was a lack of understanding around the Facilities Committee, both in terms of who was part of the group and what options they explored. For some, this led to mistrust of their recommendations.**
 - “Remind me how we landed at this plan.”

- **Some feel we have too many school administrators and would like to understand why so many positions have been added.** Ideas included:
 - Benchmark versus other local school districts.
 - Show how the Administrative staff has grown over time.

- **Some have greater level of trust at the Elementary School (Principal) level due to personally knowing and interacting with the Principals, as compared to the Superintendent level.**
 - Parents of elementary age kids often have a personal relationship with their school principal and feel it’s a tight community.
 - As a result, there could be an opportunity to conduct community conversations and share info about growth & facilities within the Elementary communities.

- **There is an opportunity to build trust and relationships between the community and the School Board.**
 - Many participants had low engagement with Board members, Board meetings, etc.
 - “They operate in the background.”
 - Other participants question the checks and balances of the School Board and feel they “say yes” or “rubber stamp” everything.

- **Continue providing multiple delivery methods for sharing information about growth and facilities. People appreciate the monthly *Spotlight* email, *District Dashboard*, and receiving information via the *Messenger Journal*.**
 - Most participants said they receive the *Spotlight* email and *District Dashboard*. Many people read them or at least give them a “quick skim.”
- **Of those who get their local information via Facebook, some feel a greater presence is needed on Facebook for refuting negative/inaccurate levy information and/or ensuring the facts are readily available.**
 - “It seems like the negative voices overpower the positive voices.”
- **Some said the information should be “all in one place” to make it more accessible.**
 - “I want it at my fingertips.”
 - “I have to go find it.”
- **After the November levy defeat, some want to know specific details about what’s included in the March levy and how the money will be spent.**
 - “Tell me how \$88 Million will be spent.”
 - “Give us a break-down of the spending.”
 - “Send me a 1 or 2-page document with a QR code to link to more details.”
- **Some confusion exists about how/whether city planners, schools and the Mayor talk to each other in regards to growth.**
 - This was relevant because some feel we should be better at predicting school needs as Perrysburg’s population grows.
 - “Schools need to be involved in city planning because it becomes their problem to deal with.”
- **Some want the opportunity/forum to ask “hard questions” and get answers.**
 - A suggestion was sharing the relevant information ahead of time, allowing them to digest it, and then being able to come prepared with questions.
 - As an example, some would like to get broader community input/preferences on whether our community should have 1 or 2 high schools.
- **Parents of younger children might relate more to messaging focused on the kids and their future/wellbeing, rather than focusing on the costs and the buildings.**
 - “It’s all about the kids!”
- **Remind the community about the Senior Citizen Activity Pass as a way to strengthen emotional connections of Empty Nesters/Retirees with Perrysburg school and kids.**
 - Provide occasions for them to have the “feel good” emotional moments with Perrysburg Schools, which many parents of school age kids experience.