

## Summary of Public Conversation About Well-Rounded Education

Minnesota Department of

Education

### Summary of Public Conversation About Well-Rounded Education

On February 25, 2017, over 50 people gathered at Brooklyn Center High School to discuss what a well-rounded education means to them in the context of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). From a range of perspectives and across three diverse small groups, three themes consistently emerged. Participants defined a well-rounded education as **inclusive**, **many-sided** and **community-based**.

#### Inclusive

Many participants described the importance of Minnesota's school system being inviting and welcoming to all students. This extends from curriculum and instruction to the approaches schools and districts take to recruiting staff and engaging students and families.

Some participants pointed to the importance of using curriculum and instructional approaches that reflect students' cultures. They spoke to the importance of teaching that is culturally relevant across all disciplines. On a related note, some participants spoke about the importance of making sure students are able to access rigorous courses and learning opportunities; they expressed concerns that, at present, some groups of students based on race or other identity are disproportionately invited to participate in the highest levels of classes. Some expressed support for explicitly anti-bias curriculum, and several emphasized the importance of ensuring English learners and students with disabilities can access opportunities. Some also spoke about the importance of ensuring that both struggling and gifted learners receive attention and access to a well-rounded education.

Many participants also spoke about the use of restorative, rather than punitive, practices to address student behavior and keep students engaged in school. Still others emphasized the importance of reaching out to families and respected people in the community to enlist them as role models and supports for students, while also recognizing that some schools did not do enough to be welcoming and supportive of today's parents and family leaders when they were students.

The importance of equity was emphasized when looking at course assignment, access to support services (including libraries, counselors, etc.), discipline policies, and other areas. Since many decisions about these areas in Minnesota are made at the local level, this means ensuring that local decision-making is equitable in who is represented and listened to. Measuring this will include attention to student outcomes and implementation data, all disaggregated by student group.

#### Many-Sided

The minimum definition of "well-rounded education" provided in ESSA is primarily concerned with the subjects that are taught in schools. The law lists a wide range of courses, including those conventionally considered part of the "core" curriculum as well as other disciplines including art, music, health, physical education, career and technical education, world languages, engineering, computer science, and other areas. Each of these additional disciplines received significant attention and support from participants.

In addition to the multi-disciplinary focus in the ESSA law, participants on February 25 emphasized a wider range of opportunities and services. These include extracurricular opportunities in many areas, equitable access to libraries and information literacy, and real-world skills such as personal finance.

Additionally, some members spoke about how useful it can be for learning to take many forms, including experiential and hands-on learning as well as service learning.

Others spoke about the importance of social-emotional learning, which can be supported in classroom learning across disciplines as well as by school support staff. For example, physical education offers opportunities for students to build critical social-emotional skills, while some students will also benefit from access to school social workers, school psychologists, and/or guidance counselors.

The desire for a many-sided approach was also expressed in participants' thoughts about how to measure school success and progress. Participants expressed interest in surveys of engagement and social-emotional learning, as well as measurements of student health, employment, mastery of standards beyond those measured by standardized tests, and knowledge of other countries, languages, and cultures. Beyond the student experience, some also expressed interest in including measures of teacher turnover and effectiveness when evaluating schools and determining what supports to offer.

### **Community-Based**

Several participants expressed interest in making sure each student's experience of school is rooted in their community. This includes connecting students with mentors and role models from similar backgrounds in the community. It also includes building relationships with local businesses who are looking to employ students after they graduate, or even offer work-based learning opportunities for students who are still in school. Others spoke to the importance of service learning and ensuring that students' learning experiences in school were connected with their community context. Some also spoke to the importance of providing wraparound services to students, which generally involves finding and partnering with community-based nonprofits and other service providers.

One mechanism for strengthening the connection between schools and community is the World's Best Workforce (WBWF) process described in state law. The WBWF law requires that each district have an advisory committee that includes families, community members, and businesses who are reflective of the student body. This committee should have a significant role in strategic planning for the district. Additionally, each school should have a site team with family representation that informs the school's specific approach. These processes create an opportunity for district and school decision-making to be truly community-based, although they require local leaders to listen to their advisory committee as well as committee members who have support in analyzing the community's needs and strengths before making recommendations to local school system leadership.

### **Final Thoughts**

Many participants expressed great interest in moving past a school system that's governed primarily by concerns about standardized test scores. It was recognized that equity runs much deeper than simple measures of academic outcomes, and that each district and school has a responsibility to its community to create an inviting, relevant, and empowering learning environment for students. Commissioner Cassellius expressed support for the move to a well-rounded education, as opposed to focusing too much on test scores or other accountability measurements, and she recognized that much of the power to do this now rests at the community level.