

2014



**Upper Arlington
Learning Experience**

STRATEGIC BRIEFING PAPER

Authored by the Learning Experience Team



UPPER ARLINGTON STRATEGIC BRIEFING PAPER

Learning Experience Work Team

RATIONALE

Description of Strategic Problem

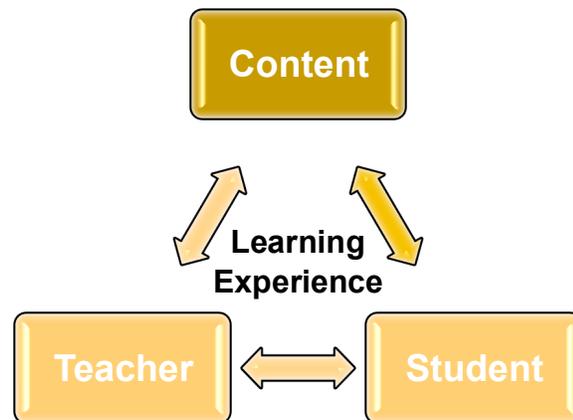
The purpose of this report is to help the Upper Arlington (UA) City School District identify the priorities for student learning experiences, the impact these priorities have on learning space, and the implications of these priorities on the strategic planning process. This effort is part of the district's continuing strategic planning process and demonstrates the commitment made to voters when they approved the 2013 school levy. The strategic planning process follows a blended approach that takes the best elements of the private and public sectors to focus on results that are important to the community.

Essential Question

The work of the Learning Experience team is guided by the following question:

What must we do to ensure our curriculum, instruction, assessment, technology, and facilities engage all of our students in relevant and rich learning experiences that result in future and postsecondary success?

A learning experience is the interaction of the components in the instructional core; the interaction between the teacher and student in the presence of content (City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel, 2009, p. 22).



Benefits

Addressing the essential question will produce the following benefits:

1. Support stakeholder engagement and ownership of the priorities for the student learning experience that prepare students for success now and in the future.
2. Identify a clear focus and actionable items to inform the strategic improvement process and provide options for learning pathways for student success.
3. Determine clear connections between the learning experience and learning environment which will allow UA Schools to plan for fiscally responsible facility upgrades that support student learning.

APPROACH

Research

The work team employed qualitative research methods in an effort to identify a clear vision for students' learning experiences. The design of this approach was to intentionally engage multiple stakeholders at critical points throughout the process.

1. The work team's first task was to determine the values and priorities for the learning experience in UA schools. We developed three questionnaires with parallel structure and surveyed parents, staff, and students in grades 6–12 (Appendix A). The existing UA strategic plan, current research, and input from the work team members shaped the content of the questionnaires. The focus was on what stakeholders value in the learning experience for students and the characteristics of the learning environment that best support quality learning experiences. We received 1,440 responses to the questionnaires.
2. The work team's second task was to determine the alignment of the priorities that emerged with organizations that receive our students after graduation—employers and institutes of higher education. A structured interview protocol (Appendix B) was developed and members of the Strategic Coordination Group helped identify potential participants. We interviewed four people to validate the preliminary findings.
3. Two additional structured interview protocols (Appendix B) were developed. One designed for key personnel within the district in an effort to determine the current state of practice relative to the preliminary findings, and the other designed for personnel from other high-performing school districts outside of Upper Arlington. We interviewed six additional people to gain an understanding of current practice, ideate strategies for the future, and identify potential gaps in the preliminary findings.
4. To validate the priorities and determine possible strategies, the work team developed a protocol (Appendix C) and conducted simultaneous, mixed stakeholder focus groups (students, educators, parents, and community members). Participants from all schools in the district were represented. Thirty-five people participated in the focus groups.
5. Finally, the Upper Arlington Educational Foundation's (UAEF) survey results were used to enhance the understanding of the UA Schools and analyzed for recommendations related to the identified priorities for student learning experiences.
6. Recommendations were developed based on the priorities that emerged from the survey process and participant open-ended responses, the feedback from the participants in the interviews and focus groups, the UAEF survey results, the members of the Learning Experience work team, and current educational research.

Outreach

The Learning Experience Work Team provided opportunities for stakeholders' voices to be heard along the way. Questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups were utilized as tools to garner input from multiple stakeholder groups including institutes of higher education, businesses, community members, parents, UA school district personnel, non-UA school district personnel, and students. Additionally, the results from the Upper Arlington Educational Foundation's (UAEF) survey of UA recent graduates in 2013 were used to inform the recommendations generated by this inquiry process. Additional outreach is encouraged as the strategic planning process continues and goals are developed based on these findings and recommendations.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF CORE ELEMENTS

Survey Findings

The Upper Arlington Schools' community is largely in agreement on the priorities for the students' learning experience. Six learning experience priorities emerged from the analysis of the 1,440 survey respondents (students, parents, staff) and three learning environment priorities emerged (Appendix D). Natural breaks in the data by respondent group were used to identify both the priority learning experiences, and the characteristics of the optimal learning environment for students. The three learning experiences identified by students, educators, and

parents as very important match well with the 21st century learning framework the district has been working toward over the last few years.

Learning Experience

- How much would each of the following [descriptions of learning experiences] support your learning/your child's learning/your student's learning in the future?

Three learning experiences were consistently regarded as very helpful to students by all three respondent groups.

- Have opportunities to think creatively and solve real-life problems
- Be provided examples of how what I learn in school matters in the real world
- Receive feedback (not graded) from teachers regularly

An additional three learning experiences were regarded as very helpful to students by two of the respondent groups.

- Use problem-solving skills to lead, influence, and guide others (staff and parents)
- Have time to explore and study a topic of personal interest that I am passionate about (students and staff)
- Have a laptop computer or tablet to use in all of my classes for learning purposes (students and staff)

Student Response

In addition to the priorities already identified, student responses rally for more hands-on learning experiences, complex topics being represented visually, and the opportunity to create, and work collaboratively with peers. Many students emphasize the importance of the teacher to their learning. Students say, "Teachers are always there to help me," "teachers are very interactive," and, "when teachers act like they actually care about teaching, it motivates me to learn." Helping, being interactive, and caring about teaching are a few of the roles students value from their teachers. Students also value their own time and do not care for "busy work."

Parent Response

In addition to the priorities already identified, parent responses indicate that projects, authentic experiences, open-ended problem-solving that is experiential in nature, hands-on learning, creative problem-solving, and opportunities to speak publicly are also important for their students' learning experiences. Parents mentioned they would like to have visits to the school from authors, artists, scientist, etc. and real world experiences such as Junior Achievement's BizTown, working field trips to museums, and community colleges. Overall, parents repeatedly asked for more hands-on learning where students can showcase their knowledge, mastery of the curriculum, and how that knowledge relates to the real world. Parents additionally stated their children need more real world knowledge of superior written and verbal communication skills and for them to learn how to work well in team settings. Finally, parents want problem-based learning where the students are presented a problem, given criteria and materials, and then work in small groups to solve the problem in a given amount of time.

Staff Response

Staff responses support the identified priorities while also emphasizing the importance of hands-on activities leading to authentic, real life connections and real world problem-solving as much as possible with less paper to pencil worksheets which would allow students to engage with each other in the creative process of learning. Staff believe in student choice of

topics and approaches which leads to higher engagement and retention. Intentionally selecting interdisciplinary topics would also be important for students to understand relationships. In order to be successful as educators, they identify the need for collaborative planning time and the desire for flexible use of collaborative time. In addition to the classroom, staff believe there needs to be opportunities for students to work in the real world, doing real projects in industry/work settings. Some ways to address this, as indicated by their responses, are to use problem-based learning with constant field experiences that expose students to professionals in the community, and to access various real world experts through technology tools. Students need to be able to work in all different types of settings. This is reflective of real world experiences.

Learning Environment

The Upper Arlington Schools' community is largely in agreement on the priorities for the students' learning environment (Appendix E). Three priorities emerged from the analysis of the 1,440 survey respondents (students, parents, and staff). Natural breaks in the data by respondent group were used to identify the characteristics of the optimal learning environment for students.

- Parent/Staff Prompt: If you could create the optimal learning environment (for your students, your child) where they would learn best, what would it look like and what would your students be doing?
- Student Prompt: Imagine the place where you learn best. It can be inside or outside of the school. Describe the environment and what you are doing in the environment. What does it look like and what would you be doing?

The characteristics of the optimal learning environment for students that emerged from respondents' open-ended responses are:

1. Use of technology
2. Collaboration and teamwork
3. Seating/movement options

1. Use of Technology

The most coded category for learning environment, with all respondent groups in agreement, is the use of technology. Students describe their learning environment as, "a place with lots of technology," "I would like to be able to use laptops or iPads to learn," "I would have my own laptop to do work on," and "I would use a laptop to help me work on my homework." The parents in UA generally support the one-to-one (1:1) use of a technology device along with Wi-Fi *as long as it enhances instruction*. They want technology to be integrated appropriately as a tool to aid in their child's learning and to prepare them for the future. Several parents mention more advanced technology skills like coding, using different software, and programming. Staff responses about the use of technology indicate that, "it is time for education to reflect the real world so that we can properly prepare students for the world they will live in when they leave us." Many staff specifically described a desire for 1:1 technology availability. They support access statements with purpose statements such as, "technology that allows students to truly dive into productive learning," and "computers/tablets readily available for research purposes."

2. Collaboration and Teamwork

Parents and staff concur that learning spaces that are flexible and allow for teamwork and collaboration is a high priority, while for students this is a moderate priority. A "team environment" is a repeated theme in parent responses with opportunities for students to understand the importance of building off of everyone's strengths. One parent indicates the environment should be, "modeled after the workplaces of today—it's a collaborative space."

Another parent highlights that, “collaboration and peer evaluation would be common.” Staff responses expand the use of space for not only students to collaborate, but also for teachers to collaborate. “Teachers would have collaborative planning time,” and they would be, “working with a collaborative team representing different subject areas.” The co-teaching model and the space/time that would allow for planning together is also seen as meaningful to staff. Like parents, staff agree that collaboration with individual responsibility is critically important.

3. Seating and Movement Options

Again, parents and staff agree that students’ learning environments need to be flexible and provide options for different types of learning experiences. Parents recognize the need for students to work alone as well as collaborate together, and would like the environment to accommodate these flexible needs. “Kids that have a problem sitting still seem to do better in unconventional seating arrangements, like more comfortable chairs or bean bags.” Alternative furniture and seating options are a theme. Parents also note that project area and quiet areas for individual work, reading, etc. is important. The staff would like to see a change in the seating arrangements to provide students the opportunity for movement throughout their learning day. “Flexible furniture (modular tables or desks that we can use to best suit needs of groups during project or individual work), and a wide range of seating options in each classroom to meet all needs (standing desk options, on floor options, chairs that allow for movement if needed to cultivate best thinking).” Staff desire flexible classroom spaces and comfortable seating options to create a learning environment that would allow for individual and group work to be completed in order to create a welcoming and collaborative environment for Upper Arlington students. Although students rarely mention seating options specifically in their responses, they are enthusiastic about comfortable seating options and a more relaxed learning environment.

Interview Findings

The Learning Experience work team interviewed four people representing employers and institutes of higher education to validate the preliminary findings and determine if there were any gaps in the priorities. All interview participants validated the importance of the six priorities that emerged and noted the overlap in some of the descriptions. Something that surprised them was the technology statement because to them it seemed outdated or low-level thinking stating, “all kids, especially in grades 6–12, should be using technology as a tool to learn every day,” and, “technology must be used correctly because it has limitations.” In response to the question, “What is missing?” all respondents indicated that global connectedness or international awareness is critical for student learning experiences. Learning shouldn’t just be connected to the real world, but to the international real world. To this group of respondents, life skills were singled out as an important factor in preparing students for life after PreK–12 education. All students will one day be in the workplace and need to understand the attitudes and attributes to be successful. Some attributes mentioned include humility, responsibility, communication skills, initiative, leadership, self-advocacy, problem-solving, being a learner, and resilience. It was also noted by three of the respondents that students should have the opportunity to explore other options besides college and that taking a year off from school after high school before entering college should be encouraged with some students. Self-identity is important for success after high school. Lastly, this group of respondents all indicated that the ability to work well in a group or team setting is critical—being a leader as well as being a contributor. Teach them how to be good followers, then leaders second. Good followers will get rid of bad leaders.

Three key personnel who are internal to the Upper Arlington Schools and represented a cross-section of the district (elementary, secondary, and district) were interviewed to determine the current state of practice relative to the preliminary findings. A similar message was expressed

by all personnel, “We spend a lot of time looking back and not into the future.” Current priorities were difficult for them to identify because, “We started coasting at some point and haven’t found a new direction yet.” All were adamant that a new vision, mission, and priorities need to be established. Time to get everyone on board with this new vision was also seen as critical. “We have a highly intelligent staff, but some feel beat down.” A sense of hope along with clear direction and an intentional approach to rebuilding a culture of excellence are needed. “We are afraid of change and we are being passed up.” With respect to the priorities that were identified from the survey data, this group of respondents reiterated that excellent instruction using technology was more important than technology alone. Computer labs are highly coveted and are rarely available. They realize that UA Schools are so far behind in our technology resources and teachers have little support learning how to use technology as an instructional tool. In addition to having access to use technology in our classrooms, we are in need of professional learning opportunities and ongoing support such as an education technology coach who can help us. Formative instructional practices like providing students with ungraded feedback regularly are known to staff, but are not executed in classrooms. More training and support are needed for staff to do this well. Something missing from the list of priorities identified by this group are intervention strategies for students who are falling behind. Personalized learning approaches are seen as challenging, but important. Meeting the needs of the whole child are seen as a strength within Upper Arlington Schools, but we need to identify what each child needs on an individual basis and set them up on the right learning pathway. Real world connections was seen as a non-negotiable for today’s students, but teachers have to know their content deeply in order to make connections to the real world. Providing content and pedagogical support to keep the high quality teachers that are hired at the top of their game was highlighted as a necessary action to attain the identified priorities.

Three interviews were conducted with people from other high-performing school districts outside of Upper Arlington to gain an understanding of their current practices (what makes them high performing), ideate strategies for the future, and identify potential gaps in the preliminary findings. Understanding the needs of the student population (personalization), accurate and timely use of relevant data, and preparing students to be high-performing members of the workforce at some point in time were identified as the current educational priorities. High performance was attributed to having a clear vision for what we want to become, hiring the best people we can find, creating partnerships with governmental agencies, businesses, community and philanthropic organizations, paying close attention to data—setting goals regularly and implementing these goals, developing an outstanding executive leadership team, aligning expectations of success beyond the minimum standards, and intentionally bringing the community into our world to share and support our vision. In response to the priorities identified by the survey data, respondents were in agreement about the importance of these learning experiences. They felt Upper Arlington needs to ask the question “why” for each one and be sure to connect the learning experience its intention and purpose. International or global awareness was seen as a missing piece. “How can every child have an experience outside of Ohio or the United States before they graduate?” Resource allocation was referenced as an important factor that could make these priorities come alive. Upper Arlington Schools is seen as falling behind with regard to innovative practices necessary for the 21st century learner. In general, there is much to be done and there is a tremendous amount of opportunity.

Focus Group Findings

The Learning Experience work team conducted simultaneous, mixed stakeholder focus groups consisting of students, educators, parents, and community members. Participants from all schools in the district were represented. The purpose of these focus groups was to validate the survey results and identify existing gaps in the learning experience for students.

Learning Experience

In regard to the learning experience survey results, the focus group participants confirmed that a variety of real world, authentic, creative, hands-on, problem-solving learning experiences were necessary for student success. The term “hands-on” was used often and with emphasis.

Students need their learning experiences to lead them on the right path, one that is aligned to what they are passionate about. A wide variety of opportunities for exploration of the world and what it has to offer is something they hold in high regard. Purposeful collaboration and the use of technology is something that students should be doing daily. At the elementary level, the focus group participants voiced concern about, “the potential for over use of technology,” and felt that one-to-one technology devices were not a priority for their students. A well-balanced approach with a variety of tools to engage students and help them learn was a strong message, especially at the elementary level. Personalized learning, knowing where each child is and where he or she needs to go, was a theme of their discussion. All learning experiences should be designed with individual students in mind, not planned for an entire class. Lastly, the focus group participants shared a desire to have all stakeholders involved in the learning experience for students—parents and community members. Increased communication and outreach efforts to engage a broader pool of resources to support student learning and create opportunities for non-traditional learning experiences were identified as a desire moving forward.

Learning Environment

In response to the trends identified regarding the learning environment survey results, the focus groups identified flexible learning space as their biggest priority. Open spaces for large groups to meet, outside learning spaces, and a lounge for students to work together on collaborative projects were some examples. Students and teachers should have options for seating that can be moved around depending on the purpose (balls, standing up desks). The current physical learning environments, especially at the middle and high school levels were seen as deteriorating and “not inspiring.” They felt the physical spaces should be upgraded and decorated to appeal to students and inspire their learning. This is an area that has been neglected for several years and a plan to address the condition of the facilities was recommended. A fiscal recommendation that emerged from the focus groups was to regulate the heating and cooling systems for efficiency and comfort so students could focus on their learning and not on their body temperature.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented here are preliminary and based on the synthesis of many voices and perspectives, anchored in sound educational research, and intended as a starting point for conversations that will inform district goals, strategies and objectives. We recognize that many of our recommendations connect with strategies and actions already under way in the district. It is important that we build off our strengths and stretch ourselves for the best interests of our students. The results of the Upper Arlington Educational Foundation’s survey of recent graduates that align to these findings are integrated in these recommendations as well as the recommendations from the representatives interviewed from high performing school districts. The first set of recommendations in this section are aligned to the question guiding the inquiry (see below), while the second set of recommendations are outside the parameter of the guiding question, they were seen as important to consider.

What must we do to ensure our curriculum, instruction, assessment, technology, and facilities engage all of our students in relevant and rich learning experiences that result in future and postsecondary success?

Curriculum Recommendations

- Continue to **conduct a systematic examination of the curriculum** for both vertical and horizontal alignment, with a particular emphasis on how to more personalize learning and how to facilitate learning in ways that authentically engage students in their own learning. Continue to assure the curriculum is aligned to expectations in excess of the standards. A benchmarking study or process to identify one or more districts that inspire Upper Arlington would be beneficial in setting high expectations.
- To provide additional opportunities for students to engage in the real world and experience global connectedness, continue to grow and strengthen the service learning curriculum and **build partnerships** with business, community, philanthropic, and community organizations that can provide real world experiences for students. Incorporate global citizenship into the mission statement and a strategy to bring this to life in the classroom.
- To address the needs of all students, **commission a study** of special education student performance as well as the performance of the gifted and talented students (top and bottom quintiles); and develop a **systematic intervention program** for support and curricular enhancement and extension.
- To assure learning experiences and projects that have been implemented historically are still relevant and produce excellence, **benchmark experiences** to similar learning experiences in other high-performing schools. For example, the Capstone Project can be informed by New Albany's Senior Seminar and Metro High School's Gateway Process.
- To prepare students for success beyond college, **integrate success skills** into the curriculum at an early age (e.g., humility, responsibility, communication skills, initiative, leadership, self-advocacy, problem-solving, being a learner, resilience), and provide alternative learning pathways for students.

Instructional Recommendations

- To meet the ongoing needs of students throughout the learning process, implement a formalized learning process for teachers to **implement formative instructional practices** (clear learning targets, documenting evidence of student learning, providing feedback, and student ownership). Align walkthrough tool to these formative instructional practices.
- To prepare teachers to design learning experiences that are problem-based, connected to the real world, and collaborative, continue to **develop a professional learning system** informed by staff focus groups aligned to the needs of students as evidenced in the instructional core. Assure professional learning is experiential in nature and based on models of excellence. **Increase funding** designated to support teacher learning.
- To understand the overall health of the instructional core, which produces the learning experience, **conduct the instructional rounds process** (a qualitative research process that examines the teachers, students and content and results in a short-term action plan related to the identified problem of practice at the school level) at each site. Analyze the findings across schools to identify a district-wide problem of practice that resides in the instructional core. This district-wide problem of practice can be used to inform the goals and desired outcomes of the professional learning system related to the learning experience.
- To continue building a collaborative learning culture among staff, through **embedded interdisciplinary professional learning communities** using a model that empowers teachers, such as Critical Friends Groups. Continue to provide training and support for PLC Facilitators (teacher leaders) to effectively lead their peers through the work of PLCs.

Assessment Recommendations

- To create a personal learning experience for all students, use existing data sources and personal interest inventories to engage students is **setting annual and PreK–12 goals**;

explore options to **enhance choice** for students such as dual-enrollment and learning pathways (STEM, fine arts, social justice, global, etc.).

- To continue to align intervention support and identify student needs early, continue to support **data teams** at each site and maintain a timeline for ongoing data analysis. Data driven protocols can be used to dig deeply into the implications of the data.

Technology Recommendations

- To provide greater access to technology for learning purposes, create a policy that provides guidance for the use of personal technology devices provided by families and provides access to devices for students who do not have access to a personal technology device from home. Create a plan to update the technology resources available for students.
- To provide support to educators as they continuously learn to integrate new technologies as tools for teaching and learning, **designate and prepare education technology coaches**.

Facilities Recommendations

- To create learning spaces that support student growth, examine each site for its “friendliness” related to the survey findings (technology-rich, space for collaboration and teamwork, seating and movement options) and **develop a facilities** plan to address these educational needs.

Additional Recommendations

- To expand the perspective of stakeholders (both internal and external) to the possibilities of educational systems today, **conduct strategic site visits** to innovative, high-performing school districts.
- To unify the Upper Arlington community and provide direction, create a simple, inspiring **vision statement** that raises expectations for everyone, a mission statement that concretely represents the core purpose and outcomes of the Upper Arlington Schools, and a focused set of beliefs and objectives that stakeholders are proud of and will work collectively to attain.
- To inspire innovative practices, build off existing **innovation funds** that allows the superintendent to fund projects that break boundaries particularly related to the three learning experience qualities identified in this report (problem solving, real world experience and non-academic feedback).

REFERENCES

City, E.A., Elmore, R.F., Fiarman, S.E. and Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.