

DEKALB HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENT LED FOCUS GROUPS SUMMARY REPORT

A group of DeKalb High School students participated in focus group discussions in September 2006 to provide additional feedback to better understand our student's perceptions on the climate (i.e. health and safety) of our school based on the results of our first student survey given last year. After reviewing the survey, discussion questions were developed by the project breakthrough team. Listed below are discussion summaries, which highlight common themes, perceptions, and suggestions.

Question #1 In what ways does your education experience at DHS prepare you for life after high school?

Students cited many specific examples of classroom experiences that they felt would help them in their development, such as balancing checkbooks, driving, communicating with each other, health issues, technology, etc. Teachers and counselors were cited by many groups to be especially caring and helpful. Students felt DeKalb High School prepared them for mixing with a wide spectrum of people—different races, new students, mean, nice, and respectful. Some common themes were:

- Diverse student body helps with interactions.
- Tardy policy is good for real life; helps with time management.
- Counselors prepare you for college.
- Curriculum supports and applies to future careers.
- School prepares you academically & socially.
- Most teachers are educated in instructional areas and care; they help you prepare for the future.

Some suggestions for the future include:

- Allow and prepare students to think outside the box (more freedom with personal creativity on projects)
- Allow more students to expand academically by taking more challenging courses.

Question #2 What does it look like when DHS students, staff, bus drivers, administration, custodians, food service workers, secretaries and security officers show respect?

Students defined respect as polite demeanor, not being hypocritical, not gossiping, not condescending and patronizing, answering one's questions, listening to opinions, being patient, and not having an attitude. They especially liked being greeted by all and appreciated those who knew their names. Common themes through the groups included:

- Respect is shown by listening to opinions (For example, students liked focus groups.)
- Respect is shown by greeting everyone
- Respect is shown by knowing names of students
- Students liked participating in the focus groups

What can we do?

- Smile--it usually eliminates perception of a poor attitude or dislike.
- Address everyone you can by name - both students and adults to each other.
- Continue having student focus groups (students liked being listened to and would like to continue participating in future groups).

Question #3 If you could change one thing about DHS, it would be to????

Students appeared to be very genuine and thoughtful when they gave their comments. Some of the changes students would make include:

- Allow students to talk during study hall, especially the lunch study hall.
- Offer more challenging classes.
- Make it easier to move through the halls during passing period.
- Make the school clean, especially the bathrooms.
- Build a new school.
- Improve the physical appearance of the building.

Suggestions on “How can YOU” help with these concerns?

- Pick up after yourself
- Move to the walls when stopped in the halls during passing periods

Question #4 What is the purpose of having school rules at DHS? (Does everyone know and/or understand the rules? Do the consequences make sense? Why/Why not? Are rules consistently enforced? How important is student involvement in the development of school rules?)

Most students agreed that the main reasons for rules are safety, orderliness and to aid in learning. Some additional common themes expressed by the groups for the purpose of rules include:

- Not all students know the rules.
- Students should have input in the development of the rules.
- Attendance policy is unfair
- Some rules are unfair; some consequences do not make sense.
- Teachers break the rules.
- Teachers have favorites.

Suggestions on “How can YOU help” with these concerns:

- Apply to be a student member of the high school discipline committee.
- Participate in the Principal’s Advisory Team (PAT).
- Talk to an administrator about your concerns.
- Explain the rules to students who do not understand.
- Respectfully remind the teachers about the rules (e.g., insist that they write a pass for you in your agenda)

Question #5 What are the qualities/behaviors that you have observed in staff that you value? (In the classroom, hallway, before and/or after school, at events/activities)

Students valued the following qualities and/or behaviors in teachers :

- Teachers that have a balance between nice and strict.
- Teachers that are considerate/realistic about student lives outside of school.
- Students valued the following qualities and/or behaviors in teachers :
- Teachers that put in extra time/clearly ENJOY and are PASSIONATE about teaching
- Teachers that get to know students by having conversations/making small talk; being visible.
- There is mutual respect by not showing favoritism and practicing equity among students.
- Teachers are organized and prepared
- Teachers that have/present a variety of activities and material.

Suggestion for the future include:

- Make “small talk” with students.
- Greet students and ask about their lives.
- **Being visible** by being at games and other extracurricular events was mentioned.
- Offer a wide variety of classroom instructional activities.
- Students should invite staff to our games.

Question #6 What are the qualities/behaviors that you have observed in staff and dislike? (In the classroom, hallway, before and/or after school, at events/activities)

The major themes include:

- FAVORITISM
- Moods/shouting/yelling/rude/demanding
- Lack of consistency with rules
- Stereotyping /judging by appearance or by previous siblings’ experience
- Lack of organization/not returning work

Suggestions:

- Be open minded, non judgmental, dispense with stereotypes.
- Don’t be “demanding”, show mutual respect, ask nicely.
- Prepare and be organized.
- Examine practices with students—are you showing favoritism perhaps in ways you did not realize?

Question #7 What would/could you do to make DHS a safer place?

Comments on safety seem to indicate the majority of the students felt safe (4/5 of the groups stressed this).

- Security is doing an excellent job.
- Majority of the students feel safe at DHS.
- Are the cameras really necessary?

Suggestions:

- Upper classmen should role model for the underclassmen.
- Have health inspector review high school.
- Have cameras to prevent and/solve vandalism and theft (not necessarily to monitor student behavior).

Question #8 What are your ideas for making DHS clean? (Note the improvements that have been made over the summer-new floor tiles, paint, etc.)

Bathrooms, lockers rooms, and pool area were huge concerns. Suggestions for making the school more attractive included the following:

- Create more cultural murals on the walls in the hallways.
- Hang doors on stalls in the bathrooms and locker rooms.
- Put clocks in hallways.

Suggestion on how we can help:

- We all can pick-up after ourselves
- Put clocks in the hallways
- Have more school pride on the outside of DHS; flags from the Western Sun Conference flying for example.

Question #9 I feel I could get better grades if?????

Students felt they would learn better if a variety of teaching methods are used in a smaller class setting. They will achieve better in a learning environment that provides less lecture and more student teacher interaction and explanation. They feel they achieve more when teachers are encouraging and have a passion for the subject. Listed below are common themes and perceptions:

- Variety of classes/different subjects
- One- on-one help/extra help
- Encouragement
- Smaller classes
- Teachers are dedicated and have passion for the subject
- Having more options for help

Suggestions:

- We are currently introducing programs to our community that should provide additional resources to provide one-on-one help and more creative options for help.
- Teachers will use this feedback to drive dialogue for focus group discussions to address these issues.

Question #10 I would participate more in extra curricular activities if?????

The students felt that better announcements and explanation of clubs and activities will increase participation in extra curricular activities. Scheduling that minimizes overlapping of club meetings will provide the opportunity for students to participate in more than one activity. Fees for participation prevent participation for some students. Listed below are common themes and perceptions:

- Students feel activities need more publicity
- Better announcements
- Plan better – time management
- Cheaper sports fees
- Overlapping of club meetings to reduce schedule conflicts
- Better explanations of available clubs and activities

The Project Breakthrough team would like to thank all those who gave so freely of their time to participate in the focus group discussions. We would like to invite others to help us improve DHS by working on action plans to implement needed changes. Please send any question or comments by using the contact information below:

Dr. Lindsey Hall lhall@dist428.org or Sue Wong swong@dist428.org or to breakthrough@dist428.org.