Saint Peter Community Conversations

What skills and characteristics do Saint Peter graduates need?

Spring 2017

Key Summary of Findings from the Community Dialogue

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Public Deliberation and Dialogue

These community conversations were made possible through a collaboration between the Saint Peter School District and the Department of Communication Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College. Through a departmental course, Gustavus students were trained to research, design, facilitate, and report on public deliberation and dialogue events. These skills were then put into practice in two community deliberations: one hosted at Gustavus and one at the Saint Peter Community Center. The students acted as impartial facilitators and notetakers at each event and compiled this summary report.

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I. Overview

On Tuesday, May 2 and Sunday, May 7, the Saint Peter School District and Gustavus Adolphus Communication Studies Department hosted community discussions in Alumni Hall at Gustavus Adolphus College and the Saint Peter Community Center. Each discussion centered on the question: *What skills and characteristics do Saint Peter graduates need in this rapidly changing and increasingly diverse world?*

The conversations gathered community perspectives about the goals for public education in Saint Peter and strategies for achieving those goals. With the construction of a new high school and renovation of existing buildings, the district administration sought community input on how public education should continue to evolve to meet the needs of students and society. Identifying the skills and characteristics that should define the profile of all Saint Peter graduates will help district leaders to develop, enhance, and prioritize curriculum and programs.

Process

In the two community meetings, there were seven tables of discussion. One facilitator and one notetaker from Gustavus guided and documented the conversations at each table. Upon arriving, participants received a handout with an overview of the agenda, guidelines for respectful discussion, and Saint Peter school district statistics.

Following a brief introduction and overview by Dr. Pamela Conners, Gustavus Communication Studies professor, participants entered into discussion at tables. The conversations began with participants identifying skills and characteristics they thought a Saint Peter graduate should have. Notetakers recorded all the ideas. Once each group created an extensive list, they collectively came to a decision about what they believed to be the most important three (or four) skills. The participants then individually identified a) the ways in which the schools *currently build* those skills and b) how the schools *should build* those skills. After that written reflection, group members shared and discussed their ideas. Finally, the participants were asked about community engagement: how could the community help develop these skills in the students as well as how the district can better engage the community in the future. Dr. Paul Peterson, Saint Peter School District Superintendent, closed the event with remarks about next steps. Participants were also asked to fill out a survey providing feedback on the deliberation.

II. Key Findings

Each group began their conversation by identifying all the skills and characteristics they believed Saint Peter graduates should have when they graduate. Groups then narrowed their list to a "Top 3" skills, with three tables settling on a "Top 4".

Top Skills and Characteristics
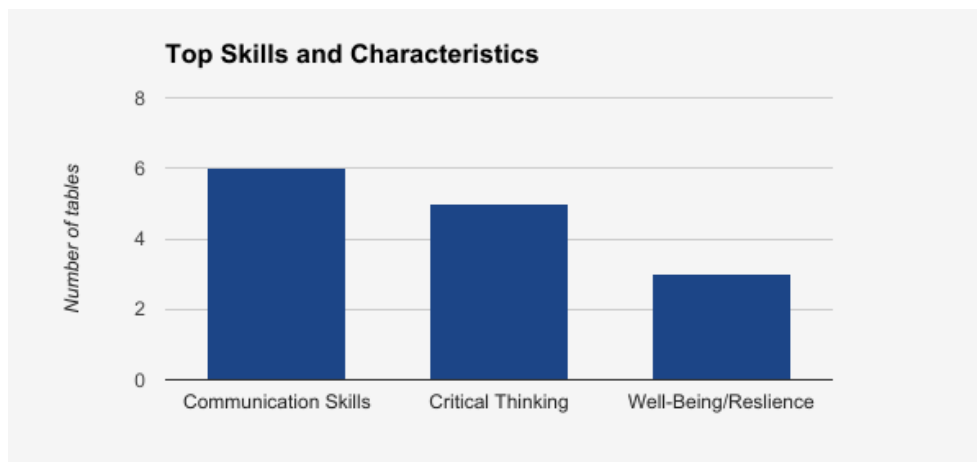
Top Skills and Characteristics

Communication skills, critical thinking, and personal well-being/resilience were most frequently prioritized.

1. **Communication Skills:** Six out of the seven table groups identified communication skills as a top priority. Groups expressed a desire for students to learn how to communicate clearly, effectively, and honestly to different of audiences using a variety of methods/means (face to face, email, phone, text, livestream). Many tables also expressed a desire for students to be able to communicate with those of diverse languages and cultures in an earnest and polite manner.

2. **Critical Thinking:** Five of the seven table groups listed critical thinking as an essential skill for students to develop. A sixth table prioritized problem solving, which requires students to utilize critical thinking to evaluate and respond to challenges.

3. **Well-Being/Resilience:** Three tables prioritized personal well-being and/or resilience. This skill encompasses physical, mental, and emotional wellness. One table emphasized the need for students to learn how to find balance and respond to challenging circumstances.

Additional Priorities

The following were included in the "Top 3" list of one (1) or two (2) tables:

- *Collaboration (2)*
- *Self-Direction/Purpose (2)*
- *Adaptability (1)*

- *Citizenship (1)*
- *Practical Life Skills (1)*
- *Technology Skills (1)*

Saint Peter Schools' Strengths

After discussions regarding the top skills and characteristics Saint Peter graduates should have, the conversation moved to the ways in which Saint Peter is currently developing those qualities. This section of the deliberation was meant to answer *How do Saint Peter schools currently help build those skills and characteristics?*

Communication

Many participants felt that Saint Peter schools help students develop communication skills and utilize effective communication within the school. Saint Peter schools embody this through:

- Group projects in class
- Translators present in some classes
- Respectful staff who are accepting of Muslim community and Gay-Straight Alliance
- Addressing bullying issues
- Technological advances
- Respectful conversations
- One-on-one teacher-student interaction

> "The way the school and the space is set up in the new building can change the way the teachers are teaching and how the students are learning"

Classes and Coursework

Many participants discussed specific classes as helping or contributing to students' successes. Saint Peter offers many core classes such as math, physical education, language, and English. They also offer important courses beyond the core classes. These classes include:

- ESL classes
- Speech classes
- Cultural and global classes; social studies
- Vocational classes (e.g. FACS)
- Health classes
- Personal Finance
- STEAM and STEM
- Senior projects (e.g. senior English research paper and presentation)

- AP and other advanced classes
- "Flex" time/"Saints time" (or teacher office hours) during the day for the high school
- AVID now starting at the 7th-grade level
- CIA (community service student experience)
- High-STEP Health Science Academy

Extracurricular Programs

The participants addressed the strength of extracurricular programs multiple times. Critical was that clubs and activities are open for any student to join and experience. Specific clubs, activities, and other extracurricular activities that were mentioned by participants are listed below.

- Theater and Music Departments
- Sports programs
- Programs such as PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions & Support)
- Community events

- Debate & Speech
- Student organizations (e.g. Ecology Club, National Honor Society, Student Council, and Future Farmers of America)

Saint Peter Schools' Areas for Improvement

After discussing ways the Saint Peter School District is currently developing essential skills and characteristics for graduates, the conversation shifted to how the schools could improve. This section of the conversation was seeking to answer the question *What should Saint Peter Schools do to build these skills and characteristics?*

Critical Thinking

Participants were concerned that students face pressure to do well on tests forcing them to memorize information rather than learn the information. They believed that Saint Peter schools should place greater emphasis on building critical thinking skills at all grade levels. They also discussed that some students struggle with writing, so entering a high school-level writing course is often challenging. Overall, participants supported teaching critical thinking skills to allow the students to think independently and make connections in their everyday life.

Real World Engagement

Participants raised concerns about the amount of opportunities students have to learn about real world problems outside the classroom. Discussions centered around the need for Saint Peter schools to require or offer more community-based learning projects that could facilitate the development of communication skills, collaboration, adaptability, and problem solving skills. A suggestion offered was to provide a community-based learning class allowing students to complete a community engagement project. Through this real world engagement, students would learn about their interests, potentially contributing to future planning. Also, such individual and group projects could help develop critical thinking skills, communication skills, and problem solving skills.

English-Language Learner (ELL) Program

Concern was expressed about the ELL program and the communication with ELL students and parents. The weakness in this area results in students not understanding what is going on in class and feeling uncomfortable expressing their needs. Some suggestions offered were increasing the number of translators as well as improving the English learning that happens in the community.

Mentorship Programs

Participants suggested programs that involved mentorship for students from community members, older peers, and college students. Participants identified mentoring as a way to focus students' sense of purpose, improve their writing, and build communication skills. They connected real world engagement and community mentorship as ways to help facilitate learning about real world experiences and networking.

> "Community mentorship can help facilitate learning about real world experiences and provide experience with networking."

Secondary Themes

- **Communication with Parents:** Participants suggested that parent involvement could be increased with improved communication from the schools about needs.
- **Creativity:** Some concern was expressed that the rigidness of scheduling does not allow students to explore different interests. It was suggested that the curriculum could offer more creative outlets and hands-on experiences for students.
- **Curriculum Integration and Reflection:** Participants noted a need for creating more connections between classes, which would help students to apply knowledge in different ways and build a sense of community and collaboration across the school. Encouraging more student self-reflection to motivate learning and inspire improvement was also suggested.

III. Community Engagement

The last question in the conversations centered on how the school district can communicate with and engage the public.

Strengths

Groups mentioned positive communication between the community, the school district, teachers, parents, and students. Several groups noted the value of different forms of communication. This theme covers multiple strengths, listed below:

- "Overall, great collaboration between community, parents, students and teachers."

- Communication with diverse parts of the community
- "The community gets to know immigrants, which allows students to integrate in community and school."
- Student interaction with community elders
- Teacher collaboration with community (e.g. farm project or fair grounds projects)
- Strong forms of communication:
    - Newspaper and TV advertisements keep the community up-to-date.
    - Teachers send notes home with students to update parents.
    - Teachers call parents when students are not doing well.
    - Oral communication (conferences), written notes, and social media

Areas for Growth

For a community, many different opportunities are available to help Saint Peter graduates prepare for the future.Participants identified a few specific programs with potential benefits that they hope Saint Peter will expand on, create, or continue:
- Partners In Education (PIE) Program
- "More events like this deliberation should happen."
- District should provide a *specific* list of tasks with which the community can help.
- Parent-Teacher Associations
- Teachers interacting with community groups during teacher training
- More English-learning opportunities in the community
- Community based assignments similar to the past senior project program
- Multicultural potlucks and dinner events
- Community organization connections (e.g. "The Somali community meets once a week to pray and talk about current events that are happening.")

IV. Next Steps

In addition to being made public, this report will be shared with the Saint Peter School Board, Superintendent, and administrative staff as they develop the Saint Peter Graduate Profile and work toward future strategies and policies for Saint Peter public schools. The authors of this report recommend continued and regular communication with the public as the district assesses, creates, enhances, and prioritizes curricular and co-curricular approaches and programs.

V. Appendix

This report was compiled using notes from the table conversations, flip chart lists of skills and characteristics, and participant worksheets. To view that material, you can access the raw data at www.gustavus.edu/communication/stpgrads.

Demographics of Conversation Participants

Not all participants responded to all of the survey questions; some did not complete a survey at all.

Gender

Male	11
Female	15
Non-Binary	1

Ethnicity

African American	5
Asian American	0
Hispanic or Latino	0
Native American	0
White/ Caucasian	20

Age

17 or younger	1
18-30	6
31-45	4
46-64	15
65 or older	1

Thank you

A special thank you to everyone who had a hand in this deliberation process. To the Saint Peter School District staff for support and publicity; to the Horn of Africa Aid and Rehabilitation Action Network as well as Bjorn Kjelstad for language translation; and to Gustavus Catering for providing food for these events. Most of all, thank you to the community members who were interviewed, participated in the conversations, and/or are reading this report. Your involvement in community building activities is what enables Saint Peter Schools to improve and adapt. The Gustavus Public Deliberation and Dialogue program looks forward to working with the community in the future.