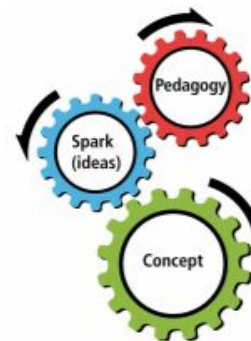


Aldershot High School Focus Exploration: Summary of Student Focus Group Results



Introduction

The purpose of these focus groups is to gather student input from across the Halton District School Board to explore various innovative high school concepts.

Methodology

Between November 20-23, 2017 the Halton District School Board’s Research Department conducted student focus groups in five secondary schools:

- Aldershot High School
- Dr. Frank J. Hayden Secondary School
- Georgetown District High School
- Iroquois Ridge High School
- Milton District High School

Participation

Student focus group activities were conducted with students currently enrolled in Grade 10 Civics (CHV2O) or Careers (GLC2O) classes. The rationale for selecting students in these courses is twofold:

- CHV/GLC are Open level courses which bring together students from a variety of pathways to learn with and from one another; and
- by Grade 10, many students have a sense of what they would like to get out of their high school experience.

Ten classes participated in focus group activities:

School	Class	Participation
Aldershot H.S.	1 Careers	30 students
Dr. Frank J. Hayden S.S.	1 Civics 1 Civics	22 students 20 students
Georgetown District H.S.	1 Grade 9 Essential ** 1 Civics 1 Civics	13 students 14 students 26 students
Iroquois Ridge H.S.	1 Careers 1 Civics	20 students 16 students
Milton District H.S.	1 Civics 1 Civics	16 students 17 students

** Note: Students in a grade 9 essential course participated to potentially include additional pathways.

Focus Group Activities and Facilitation

At the start of each focus group session, a member of the Board's Research Department asked the class:

- *How would you describe your ideal high school experience?*

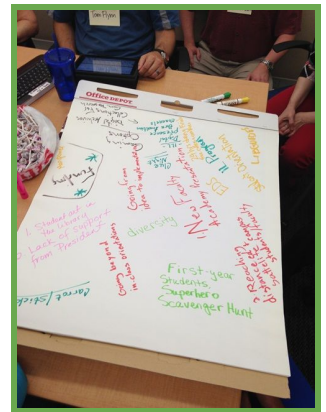
To stimulate students' thinking about schooling, each class was shown the first minute of the video [*The Future of Our Schools: An Urgency For Change*](#)¹.

This was followed by a brief overview of four focus group questions - each designed to dig deeper into the query:

1. What would you learn about in your ideal high school?
2. How would you want to learn in your ideal high school?
3. Describe the skills you want to develop in your ideal high school.
4. What does your ideal school day look, sound, and feel like?

Students were divided into table groups comprised of 4-8 students. Each group was given markers and a piece of chart paper with one of the four questions written in the center.

- Each group was given 7-8 minutes to discuss the question and write their comments on the chart paper.
- Questions and responses were rotated to the another group for further idea collection.
- Where possible, table groups were facilitated by the Research Department and volunteer staff (e.g., classroom teachers, department heads, student teachers, educational assistants).
- After groups had a chance to respond to all 4 questions, a class discussion followed in most classes, facilitated by the Research Department and the classroom teacher.
- Smaller focus groups followed with volunteer students, to review and probe responses to each question. These were facilitated by a member of the Research Department.



Data Analysis

Data analysis is a process of moving up “from the empirical trenches to a more conceptual overview of the landscape” (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For each of the four questions, themes emerged from the raw data based on frequency of responses, intensity of expression, and importance to the overall purpose of the study.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=8_R55Z0OWQU

Summary of Results

1. What do students really want to learn about?

"If we learn about history, why don't we learn about the future?"
"Many of our subjects are outdated and look backwards rather than to our future."
"... the real world (outside of school) sounds so exciting and full of opportunities to be creative - but that feels so far away from where we are."

Learning for the Future

The vast majority of students, across all sites, expressed deep interest in pursuing learning that would enable them to flourish in the future (e.g., career, family, health, personal finance). Many students recommended that career-based learning be embedded in all curricula rather than a stand-alone course in Grade 10.

Technology

Several students expressed a desire to learn about and with technology. Some examples of technology-related learning ideas include:

- a course to learn how to be successful in online learning environments
- computer coding, graphic design, engineering, animation, automotive, business

Some students had difficulty articulating what 'technology-related learning' means to them; however, they seemed to understand that it was an important ingredient for future career success.



Business and Entrepreneurship

Many students shared a keen interest in entrepreneurship. Students suggested a theme-based school program to attract those involved in [DECA](#) (leadership in business club). DECA is currently offered in some schools as an extracurricular club with links to school business courses. Students also shared their interests to partner with local, national, and international business to enhance their learning and employment prospects (e.g., Amazon™, Google™).

Global Citizenship

Students, primarily from Iroquois Ridge and Milton District, acknowledged the importance of being aware of and understanding the wider world - and their place within it. They highlighted cultural competency, geographic education, human rights education, solving 'real world issues' (e.g., hunger, poverty) and communicating in different languages as key areas of interest.

Financial Literacy

Across all school sites and programs, students identified financial literacy to be a significant gap in their school learning. Students expressed their lack of knowledge of banking and budgeting, paying taxes, buying a car, mortgages, credit cards, purchasing insurance, paying bills, how to write a cheque, investing money, and/or planning for retirement.

Well-Being, Mindfulness, & Healthy Relationships

Well-being, mindfulness, and healthy relationships were described as “things we hear said a lot, but we don’t learn much about.” Many students, across genders, asked for a more explicit focus in schools on healthy mindsets, stress relief, spiritual connectedness, and relationships with self and others.

Visual and Performing Arts

Specialized programming (e.g., whole school focus) was viewed as beneficial to accommodate students who excel in the Arts (music, drama, visual art). One student shared that he does not feel comfortable/safe in his school to attend a drama/dance class; however, he, and other students, indicated that they would travel to a “School of the Arts” to be with others who also appreciate/excel in the Arts.

Athletic Performance

Some students shared that they spend more time out of schools for extracurricular sports (school, regional teams) than they do in class. For this reason, they felt that schooling should be more flexible in providing different opportunities for athletes to be successful. Some ideas included:

- granting phys. ed./ leadership credits for participating on school/regional teams;
- having online courses more accessible for students to complete academics outside of the school day.

2. How do students want to learn?

“We need to learn how to learn.”

“I want to stop writing notes and get my hands dirty doing something!”

“I live on a farm and do math everyday: I measure feed and medicine. There’s counting, weighing ... why can’t this count?” (toward math/science credits)

In the field, on the job training

A majority of students, in all sites, requested more opportunities to ‘try on’ experiences for future careers. Learning is seen as more relevant when it is done in the field and students can see (and feel) how knowledge can be applied.



Some suggested ‘on the job’ experiences include:

- co-op programs starting in Grade 9 (link in-class learning to out-of-school experiences);
- earning credits toward post-secondary diploma/certificate;
- becoming career “specialists” by the end of high school; and/or
- offer co-op placements in sectors where jobs are available.

Relevance

Students expressed that they want teachers/schools to make explicit connections between classroom learning (math, science, English) and the world around them. For example, some students said they would be more engaged in subjects like math, science, English, if they were expressly linked to “real world problems”.

Learning with Technology

Students recognize that their learning is enhanced when they access different technologies (e.g., reliable access to the internet, smart devices, virtual reality experiences, online lessons accessible from anywhere, communicating through technology, eLearning courses, language/translation apps).

However, many students feel that schools and classrooms inhibit their learning because different technologies are not available (e.g., connectivity issues, updated software/apps, tablet desks) and/or their their teachers do not understand the technologies well.

Pace of Learning

There was some acknowledgement that students learn slower/faster than the pace set by teachers in classrooms. Self-paced learning that would enable students to work ahead to gain credits or take more time to process curriculum was viewed by some as a reasonable request and a more “modern way to do school.”

Student Choice (in final evaluation)

Students expressed a strong desire to have more control and flexibility with respect to how they are evaluated. For example:

- choice to show their learning in different ways (e.g., explaining/applying concepts face to face with their teacher) vs. formal written examination;
- opportunities to personalize weightings of exams and performance tasks based on their strengths.

Interactions

Opportunities to interact with and learn from various perspectives and experiences of others was viewed by some students as a more engaging way to learn (when compared to one teacher). Valued learning opportunities included opportunities for further interaction such as class seminars, structured debates, guest speakers, and meeting with experts ‘in the field’ (e.g., through field trips, co-op activities).

Note: Not all students wanted to change the traditional, teacher-centered approach to learning. Some students shared that they need in-class routine, structures and clear evaluation expectations to be successful.

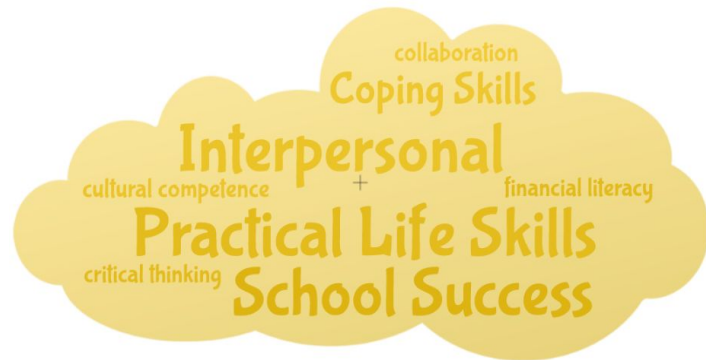
3. What skills do students want to develop?

“We need help figuring out our natural skills.”
“Why do we talk about the future like it’s so far away? We are the future and need to learn skills for the future now.”

Practical Life Skills (to transition to adulthood)

Students want to develop a variety of practical life skills while in school. Some of these needs include:

- mental math, keyboarding, cursive writing, how to write a signature;
- swimming, driving, self defense, first aid, basic automotive skills (how to change a tire);
- cooking (nutrition), gardening, family planning, parenting;
- financial literacy: living independently, budgeting, paying taxes, mortgages.



Interpersonal Skills

Many students indicated that they would like to increase their proficiency in speaking and working with others, including:

- using technology to communicate and collaborate (with people in different locations);
- learning to interact respectfully with people of various cultural backgrounds (cultural competency); and/or
- face-to-face communication skills (striking up conversations, interview skills, large group discussion skills, “creating good vibes”).

Coping Skills

- Skills to manage stress and anxiety caused by school demands, busy schedules, relationships;
- Well-being skills (total mental relaxation; introspection; mindfulness, mediation skills);
- How to deal with death and loss; how to grieve.

Skills for School Success

Some students felt that sometimes schools (teachers) assume that students already have skills in place to be successful (achieve) in school. More explicit attention to skill development in the following areas were highlighted:

Developing a work ethic, paraphrasing, writing research papers, study skills, time management, organization, critical thinking skills (in all courses), presentation and discussion skills.

4. How do students describe their ideal school (day)?

"Schools should be built around the students, not the adults."

"School should be a place where we want to come, not a place we have to go."

Greater Flexibility

Students provided various suggestions to "break the everyday monotony of school," such as:

- Students have the option/flexibility to leave class to complete work elsewhere in the school (e.g., a learning cafe, library, calm room); *"classrooms can be too distracting for me to focus."*
- Self-paced learning options.

Alternative Schedules/Calendar

Students, across all sites, surfaced various options to (re)design the school day and school calendar. Some frequent suggestions across all sites include:

- later start times, end at normal time (many students too tired to learn in early a.m.),
- classes could be shorter and more focused - too much "dead time" in class when nothing seems to be happening,
- have subject-specific days (e.g., math Monday, history Tuesday, etc.),
- incorporate a study period for all grades (not only seniors) in addition to lunch period,
- 4-day school week (5th day, Wednesday or Friday an optional "seek help" day at school).
- redesign the school year (take longer breaks at different times: e.g., 1 month summer, 2 weeks fall, 3 weeks spring).

Note: Not all students wanted to change the current school day/calendar. *"School is like my job. I have to learn to be at a certain place by a certain time each day."*

Classroom Arrangement/Composition

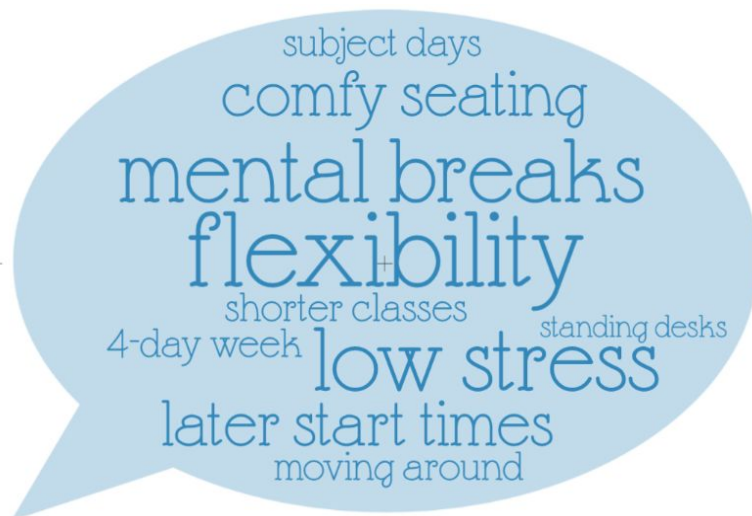
Students were very passionate about describing their ideal classrooms, particularly around:

- *Seating:* chairs should not all be facing the front (does not support peer interactions), desks and chairs are not comfortable (consider: swivel chairs, standing desks, bean bag chairs)
- *Movement:* increase students' activity levels while in class, no prolonged sitting.
- Classrooms should be thoughtfully designed: colourful, modern, bright, clear of clutter, equipped with technology, with different zones to interact and/or focus on work.

School Environment

Students contributed a variety of expectations and ideas around how their schools (as a whole) should appear, sound, and feel:

- Colourful, bright, energetic, having whole school activities, spirit days, fun evening events, opportunities for interactions between grades, clean, more involved staff.
- No bells, cafeteria food affordable for all.



Social-Emotional Considerations

School should provide more social-emotional support throughout the day, such as:

- Designated areas of the school for students to destress, quiet zones, calm rooms (not to be confused with prayer rooms), access to counselling (no waiting long period for appointments).
- Greater availability/accessibility of guided spiritual activities (meditation), stress balls/tools, mental breaks during classes.
- Overall, school should help to lower student stress, not increase it.

In my ideal school...

- ... I would never get bored.
- ... I would have no homework.
- ... I would have phys-ed all day.
- ... I would be more focused.
- ... I would have access to technology (tablet desks).
- ... I would feel confident at all times.
- ... I would get fed healthy food.
- ... I would be stress free.
- ... school work wouldn't feel like work.
- ... I would want to return every single day.
- ... I would be happier (than I am now).
- ... I would enjoy my teenage-hood.
- ... I would specialize in the field I want to go into (graphic design) and have more opportunities to take initiative and develop my leadership/communication skills.
- ... I would have immersive (hands on) experiences.
- ... I wouldn't have to memorize information, but learn how to do things.
- ... I would only learn things that I will use everyday in life.