



**BECOMING WEST MICHIGAN'S  
DISTRICT OF CHOICE**

**REIMAGINED**

prepared for

GRAND RAPIDS PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

July 27, 2023 (version 1.2)

the  
**eureka**  
group

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# overview

“[I]magination is everything. It is the preview of life’s coming attractions.”

Albert Einstein

Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) has educated children in Western Michigan for more than 150 years. Its more than one thousand teachers, together with the district’s nearly one thousand staff members and administrators, work to educate GRPS’ more than 14,000 scholars. Scholars are multi-racial, multi-national, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual, representing more than 70 different countries in which more than 75 languages are spoken. Currently offering the largest selection of school choices in Western Michigan, GRPS strives to educate its scholars, from preschool through twelfth grade, in neighborhood schools, theme schools, and Success Centers located throughout Grand Rapids.

It has been said that “nothing stops an organization faster than people who believe that the way you worked yesterday is the best way to work tomorrow.” Recognizing the need for continued evaluation of its offerings and valuing the importance of making changes to meet its scholars’ and the district’s evolving needs, GRPS is assessing its Facilities Master Plan, which governs the use, design, and structure of school buildings, with the intent to relocate academic programs and repurpose closed school buildings for community benefit. To inform its strategic decision-making process as to future

facilities use, GRPS initiated **Reimagine GRPS with Us!**, with a focus on learning the perspectives and experiences of underrepresented groups from previous community engagement efforts. The district retained The Eureka Group to develop a bespoke community engagement strategy to learn their voices—ideas, experiences, and wisdom—on the future of GRPS.

This report reflects the information learned from the qualitative analysis of the community engagement strategy, consisting of listening sessions, surveys, and hands-on activities of 459 GRPS stakeholders in 11 schools and 5 community partner organizations. Stakeholders provided a remarkable quality of intellectual, social, and emotional content on their present experiences as well as future casting, or reimagining, the district from their perspectives. To synthesize their collective desire for GRPS, three dominant themes are presented below.

- Stakeholders envision district leaders taking action to address their concerns.
- Stakeholders envision every scholar having access to the resources and supports required for success co-located in every school building.
- Stakeholders envision scholars and staff are safe and healthy in all school environments.

# methodology

The school-based strategy outlines an equity-centered, culturally-based approach to community engagement that will help inform the district's decision making in the Reimagine GRPS with Us! Initiative, Facilities Masters Plan, and emergent projects related to this engagement. The strategy is based on a qualitative analysis that will complement the quantitative analysis in which 6,500 GRPS stakeholders participated in surveys in the first phase of this project.

The school-based strategy is designed to learn the perspectives of stakeholder groups previously underrepresented and to focus on gathering their input on the vision for academic programming and facility use. In implementation, the scope quickly adapted and expanded to accommodate the topics of top-level importance to stakeholders, which may be broadly summed under the header of organizational culture, including leadership behaviors, employee morale, communication, safety, and similar matters.

In fewer than three months, the consultant team engaged approximately 459 stakeholders (not deduplicated) in 57 engagements activities in 11 schools and 5 community organizations, for a total investment of participant time of 1.25 million minutes.

## Project Timeframe

- March-June 2023

## Project Goals for GRPS

- GRPS is a district of choice for scholars and staff.
- GRPS right-sizes facilities for optimal and equitable programming for scholar learning and life success.

## Suggested Project Measures

- Increased scholar enrollment
- Increased scholar retention
- 75% utilization rate of facilities
- Scholar, parent, and staff satisfaction levels

## Priority Stakeholder Groups

- School building leaders (executive directors, principals, teachers, and staff)
- Scholars of color
- Parents of scholars of color
- Community partners providing services to GRPS families of color and refugee families

An overview of the methods of engagement for each stakeholder group follows.

# engagement milestones

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**1.25** million minutes

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**459** stakeholders

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**77** days

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**57** engagements

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**11** schools

## SCHOOL BUILDING LEADERS

Number engaged: 132

Number of engagements: 32

Number of schools: 11

The district selected a representative group of stakeholders to participate in a co-design process with the consultant team. The co-design team shaped decision making on the following:

- Selecting the schools that participated in the school-based engagement strategy
- Providing feedback and guidance to the consulting team in tailoring activities to each stakeholder group's unique goals and challenges
- Coordinating scheduling and logistics

For each school, the executive director, school building leader, and staff were invited to attend either an individual or group listening session. To facilitate more open and transparent dialogue, the consultant team requested direct or in-line supervision not to participate in the same sessions as their staff. Facilitation methods aligned with a set of structured questions with the understanding that the consultant team held the expertise to "read the room" and re-design sessions in real-time to successfully address each group's culture and meeting dynamics.

### Selected GRPS Schools

Aberdeen Academy

Alger Middle

Burton Elementary

Burton Middle

Campus Elementary

East Leonard Elementary

GR Montessori Middle/High School

Harrison Park Academy

Ken-O-Sha Elementary

Ottawa Hills High School

Stocking Elementary

### General Questions

1. Please describe your current role.
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. What is your why in this work?

### GRPS – A District of Choice for All Scholars, Families, and Staff Questions

1. Looking across all forty-four (44) schools, what do you think is the appropriate configuration of schools from your perspective?
2. What would the district/your school need to offer that would make any scholar, family, staff, or school leader confident GRPS/your school was their first and best choice?
3. Imagine a future where the district/your school is the first choice for all scholars, families, staff, and leaders, what would need to happen to get the district/your school from where it is today to first choice?

### GRPS – Right-Sizing Facilities for Optimal and Equitable Programming

1. If your school were to remain open and another school relocated into your building, which schools would be the best fit for the scholars, staff, and leadership in terms of your school's academic programming and school culture?
2. What are the unique needs and challenges, if any, that should be taken into consideration pertaining to the scholars, families, or staff at

your school related to the potential that any school might close?

3. Knowing that schools will be repurposed or closing, what resources and support will you need as a leader to manage changes successfully for scholars, families, and staff as well as yourself?

### Approaches to Staff Engagement

1. What are the best ways to engage staff?
2. How can we foster trust and confidentiality as external consultants?
3. What are the topics staff are most interested in ensuring district leaders hear their voice—ideas, wisdom, and experiences?

## SCHOLARS

Number engaged: 173

Number of engagements: 7

Number of schools: 7

Scholars had the unique opportunity to exercise their imagination and creativity using Place It!, an adaptation of a design activity by urban planner and artist James Rojas. The consultant team implemented Place It! with guided, age-based instruction encouraging scholars to use their hands and senses to be creative and expansive in designing their ideal school environment.

### Selected GRPS Schools

Aberdeen Academy

Campus Elementary

East Leonard Elementary

GR Montessori High School

Harrison Park Academy

Ottawa Hills High School

Stocking Elementary

### Place It Activity Option A (Grades K-8)

Scholars used various small, random materials (blocks, Legos, trinkets, etc.) and placed them on construction paper. Each piece represented a part of their story (trees, playground, school, etc.), and scholars described what they created to their class.

### Post It! Activity Option B (Grades 8-12)

Scholars used small slips of paper to organize ideas and process information. On the slips, scholars recorded key ideas, marked points of confusion in a text, and noted connections to previously posted content. The consultant team guided scholars by placing topics on large pieces of paper and asking scholars to post their thoughts, ideas, suggestions, and concerns. A short discussion and debrief concluded the activity.

### General Questions in Individual and Group Settings (Varied Based on Age)

1. How do you get to/from school?
2. What do you like best about your school and why?
3. What would you improve about your school? Or what is most challenging?
4. What advice would you give to GRPS leaders?
5. What are you most proud of right now?
6. What causes the most struggle for you?

## PARENTS

Number engaged: 58

Number of engagements: 5

Parents participated in listening sessions, small group discussions, structured interviews, and informal conversations using a variety of methods for input gathering, verbally and in writing. Designed for low-barrier access, the methods adapted to the setting and duration of time parents had available.

The consultant team engaged parents in their formal roles, such as Parent Action Leader (PALs) meetings, and in their natural capacities, such as student enrollment nights. A SWOT analysis technique provided the basis of data capture, aligning their insights and wisdom on how they perceived and experienced the district's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

### Engagement Settings

PAL meetings

Quadrant student enrollment events

Community gatherings

## INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS MEETINGS

Number engaged: 45 (Note: 91 participated in the first survey. Their data was analyzed, but participants were not tallied in the count.)

Number of engagements: 1

Instructional leaders engaged in the following activities and settings: listening sessions as part of the school-based strategy, surveys in the instructional leaders' meetings, and small group discussions and a design activity on reimagining the configuration and use of facilities with the consultant team. Since their voice capture was entered directly from participants into Mentimeter, an on-line survey tool, this report includes an additional analysis on themes from this group.

### General Questions

1. What are your top 3 ideas for reimagining instructional programming, electives, and extracurriculars?

2. If you knew facilities in your quadrant were closing, how would you reconfigure the school buildings to create an optimal learning environment tailored to the unique needs and goals of scholars in your schools?
3. Do you think the decision about the facilities consolidation has already been made?
4. Do you feel the district takes your input seriously?
5. If you could work with the district to solve one problem, what would it be?
6. What questions do you have for district leaders?

### Engagement Settings

January 27 Instructional Leaders Meeting - Survey

April 28 Instructional Leaders Meeting - Principals Only

## COMMUNITY PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Number engaged: 9

Number of engagements: 5

Number of organizations: 5

Nonprofit leaders and staff working directly with GRPS scholars, staff, and administrators participated in a structured interview process designed to learn more about their organization's experience and interactions with GRPS as a community partner.

### General Questions

1. Please describe your role and its connection to GRPS.
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. How does your organization currently engage with GRPS?



4. Using the lens of your current work, what would you say GRPS does well?
5. What are some of the areas where GRPS can improve?
6. GRPS leaders may be looking to consolidate or close schools in the future. What would you recommend leaders consider before making decisions?
7. What else would you like to add?

### **Community Partner Organizations**

Grandville Avenue Arts & Humanities  
Hispanic Center of Western Michigan  
Kent School Services Network  
Refugee Education Center  
Urban League of West Michigan

# what GRPS stakeholders are reimagining

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In reimagining GRPS, stakeholders' collective input synthesizes into three dominant themes:

1. Leaders listen and respond to concerns in ways that are meaningful to the people who brought the concerns to their attention.
2. Everything a scholar needs to be successful is accessible in every school building— particularly, full-time teachers.
3. Scholars and staff are safe and healthy in all school environments.

# leaders listen and respond to concerns in ways that are meaningful to the people who brought the concerns to their attention

## SCHOOL BUILDING LEADERS AND STAFF VOICE

“Our schools are falling apart because they [district leaders] should have made these decisions years ago. But they didn’t—because of politics. And they are doing it again related to the bond.”

### Action School Building Leaders and Staff Want

- Provide timely follow-up communication on issues raised—what was heard, what action was taken (or not taken), and why.
- Affirm/show how staff wisdom and ideas are being considered in district-level decision making.
- Create frequent two-way dialogue and feedback opportunities between school staff and district leaders.
- Clarify the role of the executive director position and how it adds value to what takes place in the school buildings.

### What We Heard

*Provide timely follow-up communication on issues raised—what was heard, what action was taken (or not taken), and why.* The power structure permits little to no autonomy for staff to make decisions that lead to the effective resolution of issues that staff identify as important. A typical

scenario: staff bring an issue to the principal. The principal needs feedback or approval from the executive director. The executive director needs approval from the Franklin Office; and eventually, the ball drops. The issue never gets resolved or experiences significant delays. As a result,

widespread disenfranchisement, skepticism, and low morale have taken root and become normative in district culture. From a principal's perspective, "Our schools are falling apart because they [district leaders] should have made these decisions years ago. But they didn't—because of politics. And they are doing it again related to the bond. Who do they think they are kidding?"

*Affirm/show how staff wisdom and ideas are being considered in district-level decision making.*

When staff were asked if they felt their voices were heard at the district level, most resounded, "No." Accompanied by a perceptible tension, staff equated the feeling of being unheard to "being devalued". "I feel our district does not value us; they view us as disposable." Even principals, who often have a strong relationship with their executive director, did not see the outcomes to warrant that their opinions held any significance in district-level decision making.

*Create frequent two-way dialogue and feedback opportunities between school staff and district leaders.* Many staff members do not believe they have viable points of access for their voices to be heard—and received—by district leaders. Eighty-four percent (or 51 out of 61) of the comments on communication described a communication desert between staff and district leaders. The disconnection was not only between district leaders and staff but observed between district leaders. "Executive directors don't talk to each other or the staff." The

chasms widen through organizational bureaucracy ("we don't know who to talk to"), unspoken rules of behavior ("we will get a slap on the hand or worse if we talk to anyone other than the principal about our concerns"), and inaccessibility ("how can they [department heads] listen to us when they are not here?"). Staff also expressed feeling dismissed or "blown off" by district leaders. "At the town hall meeting, administrators from Franklin Campus that represent this building were on their phone the entire time." Another person added, "We don't even allow students to be on their phone."

Principals identified a breakdown in their up-line communication and the very low presence of district leaders and board members visiting their schools, especially struggling schools.

*Clarify the role of the executive director position and how it adds value to what takes place in the school buildings.*

Staff either did not know the name of the executive director, have a relationship with the executive director (limited or otherwise), or understand the role of the executive director. On multiple occasions, staff members suggested that their school would be better run if the principal had more decision-making authority. "Why do we have an executive director? Why doesn't the principal run our school? Why do they have to consult with their ED to suspend someone? The money used for the ED could be distributed better—better pay for teachers, para pros, floating subs, and maintenance needs."

## SCHOLAR VOICE

When asked to provide school leaders with one piece of advice, a high school student said, "It's a part of life to struggle, but it's not part of life to let it continue."

No additional data from scholars is reported on this topic.

## PARENT VOICE

“GRPS is losing kids and families because they [administrators] have not listened. Families lose trust and leave.”

### Action Parents Want/What We Heard

- Practice compassion and empathy.
- Communicate proactively, transparently, and with intention.
- Share more bright spots.

### What We Heard

*Practice compassion and empathy.* The lack of empathy from district leaders is palpable, and, sadly, many parents identified district leaders as threats in their SWOT analysis. Parents feel district leaders ignore them and only hear their concerns as complaints. When parents voice their opinions at public forums, they see administrators on their phones, avoiding eye contact, and using non-verbal cues to indicate they are not listening. For parent support, deep listening will be required.

*Communicate proactively, transparently, and with intention.* “GRPS is losing kids and families because they [administrators] have not listened. Families lose trust and leave.” For many parents, “transparency equals trust”, and trust begins with effective communication. Parents shared school enrollment as one of many examples for improvement. The long wait time makes parents consider other school districts because they fear they may not get into a GRPS school or worry that a slow response time will be characteristic of

what they can expect from that school. Enrollment should be seen as an opportunity to demonstrate the district’s strengths. Making the process as clear and consistent as possible may help improve student retention.

*Share more bright spots.* Although parents acknowledge the district “should formally address the pain in our communities,” they hold hope for the bright spots. Parents believe good is happening and want to see more of it. They want to see strong examples and stories of good schools replicated across the district. They want more inclusion and balance brought to the neighborhood schools, as well. “Let’s also celebrate our neighborhood schools. Administrators should visit them and highlight them.” Parents suggest the district focus on the good in GRPS as means of being more competitive rather than trying to compete with private schools or add a theme to everything not working.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS VOICE

“Sometimes our work with GRPS feels very transactional. We hold value, we are connected, and we want to be the partner they come to. However, we want the relationship to be more than transactional. Can we grow together rather than being asked to participate when a crisis arises?”

### Action Community Partners Want

- Nurture and strengthen community partner relationships as authentic partnerships rather than transactional activities.
- Be more transparent about where funding has been applied effectively to make needed changes.

### What We Heard

*Nurture and strengthen community partner relationships as authentic partnerships rather than transactional activities.* GRPS leaders represent a large institution, and small nonprofits or grassroots organizations feel the power dynamic when GRPS calls on them for help. Nonprofit leaders, particularly, described “feeling used” by GRPS because their voices and concerns go unheard while GRPS constantly makes last-minute requests of which they are expected to respond. A leader opined, “When working together, we have disagreements with GRPS staff or leaders, mostly because they expect us to do what they ask. After all, they hold funding streams that may or may not be connected to our work.”

What would work better for community partners is for authentic partnerships to replace the transactional nature of their relationships with GRPS. “Sometimes our work with GRPS feels very transactional. We hold value, we are connected, and we want to be the partner they come to.

However, we want the relationship to be more than transactional. Can we grow together rather than being asked to participate when a crisis arises?”

*Be more transparent about where funding has been applied effectively to make needed changes.* Community partners expressed frustration on the lack of clarity and transparency of district expenditures. According to the information they have available to them, community partners have grave concerns that buildings remain outdated when the district has been adequately funded to fix them. The resonant question being, “Where are the dollars going?” Citing examples from kids not being able to “safely go to school because of a heat wave” to perplexing thoughts, such as how enrollment numbers can decline while “they are paying administrators more,” community partners want assurance that their support, if given to the facilities master plan and the bond, results in notable changes in the district.

# everything a scholar needs to be successful is accessible in every school building—particularly, full-time teachers

## SCHOOL BUILDING LEADERS AND STAFF VOICE

“Everyone here at GRPS is very passionate about what they do, and that passion dies when people are not given the right support. The support might look different, but who can we go to?”

### Action School Building Leaders and Staff Want

Comments here distilled into two categories: effective teachers and educational supports.

#### Effective Teachers

- Develop and maintain adequate staffing models and levels across all buildings.
- Support the mental and emotional health of school leaders and staff.
- Pay an equitable and competitive salary both to support internal collaboration and to safeguard retention from other districts.

#### Educational Supports

- Provide and tailor specialized staffing supports and resources to each school's unique needs.
- Increase special education resources and staffing to adequately meet needs.

### What We Heard

*Develop and maintain adequate staffing models and levels across all buildings.* Principals and executive directors feel stress and inadequacy in helping to solve the staffing shortage and are doing

their best to work with what they have. In schools with only a handful of classrooms, leaders have split classes among grades to ensure scholars have a teacher. Other leaders have taken on double

duties, both leading the school and teaching in the classroom. Some communicate the detrimental impact of having too many long-term subs on student learning, and others communicate splitting classrooms because of the lack of teachers and subs. "There is a lack of subs. When we get sick, we don't have subs to teach. That's a lot of pressure." One teacher laments regarding the long-term vacancies in filling permanent positions and specials, "The inconsistency has been the case for the last five years." Another speaks to the significant safety concerns. A child was injured, and they could not pull anyone to help without leaving children unattended elsewhere in the school or bringing all the children with them while they tended to the injured child.

***Support the mental and emotional health of school leaders and staff.*** Recognize that staff care and remain student-centered despite the challenges. "Everyone here at GRPS is very passionate about what they do, and that passion dies when people are not given the right support. The support might look different, but who can we go to?" A profound transformation can occur by holding space for staff to share their concerns without fear of reprisal or a breach of confidentiality. (Surveys or emails make them feel uneasy because their comments might be traced back to them.) Leaders being transparent and accountable in following up on staff requests would help overcome staff discouragement related to the poor track record they have witnessed of little being done, at least, in their view. And the fear of punishment or of losing their job could be addressed through adherence to sound HR policies and practices.

Pervasively, however, leaders should be very intentional to help alleviate the burden many staff members feel that they [the leaders] have placed on staff. The weight feels heavy enough that more than

a handful of staff became very emotional and cried during the listening sessions in several schools as they discussed this topic.

***Pay an equitable and competitive salary both to support internal collaboration and to safeguard retention from other districts.*** Staff members often compare the GRPS district to other districts in conversations and point to a lack of resources and pay inequities. Regarding colleagues who have left GRPS, one teacher noted substantial differences, "Some make \$10k to 12k more and have supports like planning time and specials." Staff members also witness an unhealthy competitiveness within the district itself that they attribute to the resource inequities across schools. "There is a level of competition within the district. People don't always work together and that creates some issues."

***Provide and tailor specialized staffing supports and resources to each school's unique needs.*** Many areas of opportunities were identified by leaders as it relates to adding support and resources for scholars, teachers, and support staff. Some suggested academic interventionists especially trained for reading, and others more resources to help support scholars academically, behaviorally, and emotionally. One leader recommended a system in the district that reviews scores and sends human support to a specific school to ensure that resources were being launched equitably based on need. This includes wraparound services that can address the diversity of scholars' lived experiences. "There are so many kids with trauma and not enough support for social and emotional issues."

***Increase special education resources and staffing to adequately meet the need.*** There is a high need for more support staff, resources, and teachers in special education. Emotional impairment, autism, mental health, and other areas consistently came



to the fore. Some teachers were concerned that their school had been made a target and that special education scholars were being moved to their school without adding staff and support to help the students. This issue came up on several

occasions for multiple schools. One staff member described their student population as “maybe one-third or more of the school is special education and IEP kids.”

## SCHOLAR VOICE

**“I don’t like how they are trying to take our teachers away from us for people who don’t care.”**

### Action Scholars Want

- “Stop moving staff.”
- Listen to us.

### What We Heard

*“Stop moving staff.”* Many scholars identified the relationship with their teacher or coach as one of the things they liked most about their school. So it was not surprising when middle and high schoolers quickly pointed to the lack of staff and teachers as a

concern. “I don’t like how they are trying to take our teachers away from us for people who don’t care.” Scholars find having too many substitute teachers undesirable and want relationships and continuity with their teachers.

### ***Listen to Us***

*A limited English proficient third-grade student built a beautiful school and described it in Spanish through the Place It! Activity. She said, “La mejor escuela tiene muchos parques y mucha comida y mucha imaginación y mucho arte.” The translated version of what she said is, “The best school possible has many parks, a lot of food, and a lot of imagination and art.” This student also shared that she has been in the United States for a year. She was shy and had little to say in English initially. A facilitator overheard her speaking in Spanish and engaged her in the language. Her eyes immediately lit up, and, full of life, she told the story of the school she designed. When students feel genuinely heard and understood, they will tell you exactly how they feel. If we’re lucky, they’ll articulate a better present and future based on their ability to imagine.*

## PARENT VOICE

“As allies and partners, PALs are eager to support scholars, teachers, and staff and believe their school and the district can do more.”

### Action Parents Want

- Utilize the full potential of PALs.
- Hire more teachers and staff.
- Appreciate and leverage the resources that community partners bring.

### What We Heard

*Utilize the full potential of PALs.* PALs support family engagement by working closely with their school’s principal, attending school meetings, communicating with their school’s families, and more. As allies and partners, they are eager to support scholars, teachers, and staff and believe their school and the district can do more. If utilized to its full potential, PALs can facilitate empathy interviews with other parents, do listening campaigns across the district, and provide an oral history of what has and has not worked within the district over the years. The data can then be shared back to parents and be used as an opportunity for growth and reflection.

*Hire more teachers and staff.* Parents generally acknowledge and value that teachers and staff genuinely care about their students. Therefore, teacher attrition and burnout and the high volume of

substitute teachers raises an alarm. Exacerbating the issue is the inequitable distribution of resources, magnifying gaps in communication. How can principals wear many hats, work two or three jobs within the same school, *and* maintain consistent communication with parents?

*Appreciate and leverage the resources that community partners bring.* On multiple occasions, parents and school staff mentioned that local churches, businesses, and nonprofit organizations supported their school by bringing in food or snacks, volunteering their time, and helping with fundraisers. Teachers often depend on these connections for field trips and other enrichment activities. Parents would like district leaders to nurture these relationships to help bring a more consistent flow of resources into the schools.

## COMMUNITY PARTNER VOICE

“Sometimes, they only call us so that they can stand and be seen with a respected entity serving a specific population.”

## Action Community Partners Want

- Co-create solutions with community partners.

### What We Heard

*Co-create solutions with them.* Community partners articulate their value proposition as their relationships with the communities they serve. Their organizations bring context, expertise in cultural responsiveness, language access, family programming, and various human services. Respected by community, they take tremendous pride in their accomplishments and want the district to recognize them as partners in co-creating solutions instead of narrowly defining them only by the services they provide or the people they serve. “Sometimes, they only call us so that they can

stand and be seen with a respected entity serving a specific population.”

Community partners believe too many opportunities have been missed to help scholars and the district be more successful because of the absence of community voice. This sentiment applies to the Facilities Master Plan, as well. “If the district had called upon us early on when the master plan was being created, we would have been of great value to them. They may have avoided some of the challenges they ran into. But they moved without us and, therefore, without community.”

# scholars and staff are safe and healthy in all school environments

## SCHOOL BUILDING LEADERS AND STAFF VOICE

“Students said the roof wouldn’t be fixed and nothing would happen because they were just ghetto kids.”

### Action School Building Leaders and Staff Want

- Fix all physically unsafe conditions immediately and, if not possible, implement stopgap measures.
- Develop a comprehensive plan for addressing the trauma of gun violence.

### What We Heard

*Fix all physically unsafe conditions immediately and, if not possible, implement stopgap measures.*

In perhaps the most emotional parts of the listening sessions with staff, they felt defeated by the lack of essential resources that were resulting in health and safety risks for the scholars and themselves. Many issues ranged from a lack of working security cameras to a leaky roof and no window screens. “We don’t have clean drinking water in most of the taps.” “The building has active mold, and it’s falling apart.” “The rooms get over 100 degrees.” “We can get assaulted, beat up, and nothing happens.”

When issues were brought to leaders, staff either felt dismissed or that their principal was dismissed. Perhaps, the most difficult burdens pertain to the impact on the psyche of the scholars. “Students said the roof wouldn’t be fixed and nothing would happen because they were just ghetto kids.”

*Develop a comprehensive plan for addressing the trauma of gun violence.* School leaders spoke of the long-term effects of trauma related to gun violence and the critical need for ongoing support for scholars and staff.

## SCHOLAR VOICE

When an elementary-age scholar was asked to build the best school possible, the scholar described a school with a state-of-the-art system that detects weapons. The system would include three lights near the entrance of the building; and if someone had a weapon on them, the light would turn orange, alerting people that they were in danger. A security guard would be next to the lights so that they could help get the person with the weapon arrested.

### Action Scholars Want

- Stop guns and other things that make us feel unsafe from happening in school.
- “Give us soap or hand sanitizer.”
- “We need better food.”

### What We Heard

*Stop guns and other things that make us feel unsafe from happening in school.* Scholars communicated concerns for their safety at all age levels. Overall, opinions varied on how to deal with the challenge, but there was one common piece of advice to share with school leaders: “Don’t ban backpacks.”

*“Give us soap or hand sanitizer.”* In several schools, students pointed to deteriorating parts of the building or classroom. Some mentioned that water leaked through the roof. In one instance, a third grader pointed to a spot with a water stain,

explaining that water leaks from that part of the ceiling. Some students said that their bathrooms and buildings don’t get cleaned, and at least one school didn’t have soap in its bathrooms because they didn’t have custodial staff.

*“We need better food.”* Unanimously a concern across all age groups, the food needs to be improved. “The food is horrible and low quality. It is individually packaged and frozen. Like something they put in a microwave every day.” “The school claims the produce is fresh, but it is not.” “A lot of students will skip eating lunch because it’s so bad.”

## PARENT VOICE

“A lot of our kids get sick at school, even before COVID. Is it because the building isn’t up to code?”

## Action Parents Want

- Involve parents in generating solutions regarding safety.
- Ensure buildings are up to standards independent of code.
- Fix the transportation problem.

## What We Heard

*Involve parents in generating solutions regarding safety.* Parents want to participate in the big decisions that impact the safety of their scholars. If guns or weapons are in district schools, they want to learn why it is happening and to help be a part of the solution. "Safety is an issue. Lately, there have been weapons at the schools. They are only kids."

*Ensure buildings are up to code.* "A lot of our kids

get sick at school, even before COVID. Is it because the building isn't up to code?" Another parent commented, "I wonder if administrators have issues with buildings but are afraid to publicize it because of fear they will get shut down."

*Fix the transportation problem.* A continuing issue with school buses is frustrating, and scholar pick-up and drop-off can be much improved.

## COMMUNITY PARTNER VOICE

"GRPS can do a better job of mirroring other school districts around the area with the purpose of creating responsive neighborhood schools. Right now, some of our students need to walk to a bus stop at 6:30 a.m. to get to school on time. Some students spend 3-4 hours a day riding buses because the schools that provide the programs they need are across the city from where they live to get the proper programming. We need schools that are walkable and that parents can access. . . . [because] parents don't always have reliable transportation. It is an inaccessible way to engage with parents for school nights and other school events."

No additional data from community partners is reported on this topic.

# reimagining with instructional leaders and scholars

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Instructional leaders and scholars participated in surveys and hands-on activities that permitted additional opportunities to learn their wisdom and insights on their present experiences and future vision of GRPS.

# instructional leaders

## REIMAGINING GRPS WITH INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

In reimagining instructional programming, elective course offerings, and extracurricular activities, ninety-one GRPS instructional leaders offered multiple ideas in a survey completed on January 27, 2023. Synthesized below, their recommendations included:

### Reimagining Academic Instruction

- Provide before- and after-school tutoring
- Provide additional staff to support full-day pre-kindergarten and kindergarten education
- Provide advanced placement and dual enrollment programs
- Provide more bilingual education opportunities
- Utilize growth rubrics instead of letter grades
- Utilize curriculum that connects or relates to real world problems and solutions
- Implement a recurring four-year curriculum review for effectiveness and relevance

### Reimagining Elective Course Offerings

- Offer visual arts programs (theatre, photography, drama, and dance)
- Offer foreign language courses
- Offer information technology courses
- Offer STEM programming for elementary scholars
- Offer courses focused on the trades, such as an apprenticeship program

- Offer elective courses in sign language
- Survey the scholars to learn their interests and needs

### Reimagining extracurricular activities

- Provide entrepreneur, business training and internship opportunities
- Implement a sports program for elementary scholars
- Establish an elementary school student council
- Offer mentoring programs
- Offer summer programs focused on the fine arts
- Establish more academic-based clubs
- Offer programming in animal husbandry

### Reimagining Facility Use and Design

On April 28, 2023, The Eureka Group met GRPS school leadership at GRPS University. Up to 50 school leaders participated in a facility design reimagination exercise, in which the leaders, working in teams based on their schools' geographic locations (quadrants), reimagined how GRPS facilities within their locales can be reconfigured to optimize the learning and teaching environments. Their redesigns are captured on the next page.



## NORTHWEST QUADRANTS

Building 1 Pre-kindergarten through the fourth grade

Building 2 Fifth and sixth grades

Building 3 Seventh and eighth grades

Building 4 Ninth grade

Building 5 Tenth through twelfth grade

Other Elements: All offerings available in the district are made available in every school, so that resources are available to those families and scholars that do not have transportation to travel outside their communities.

## NORTHEAST QUADRANT

Building 1 Pre-kindergarten through the fourth grade

Building 2 Fifth and sixth grades

Building 3 Seventh and eighth grades

Building 4 Ninth through twelfth grades

Building 5 Montessori pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, with a division within the school between pre-kindergarten through sixth grade and the seventh through twelfth grade

Other Elements: The development of college and career programs offered on the northeast side through partnership opportunities with Grand Rapids Community College.

# Envisioned Building Structures

## SOUTHWEST QUADRANT

Building 1 Pre-kindergarten through the fifth grade

Building 2 Pre-kindergarten through the fifth grade

Building 3 Sixth grade through the eighth grade

Building 4 Sixth grade through the eighth grade

Building 5 Ninth through twelfth grade

## SOUTHEAST QUADRANT

Building 1 Pre-kindergarten for scholars three to four years old

Building 2 Kindergarten through the fourth grade

Building 3 Fifth and sixth grades

Building 4 Sixth and seventh grade

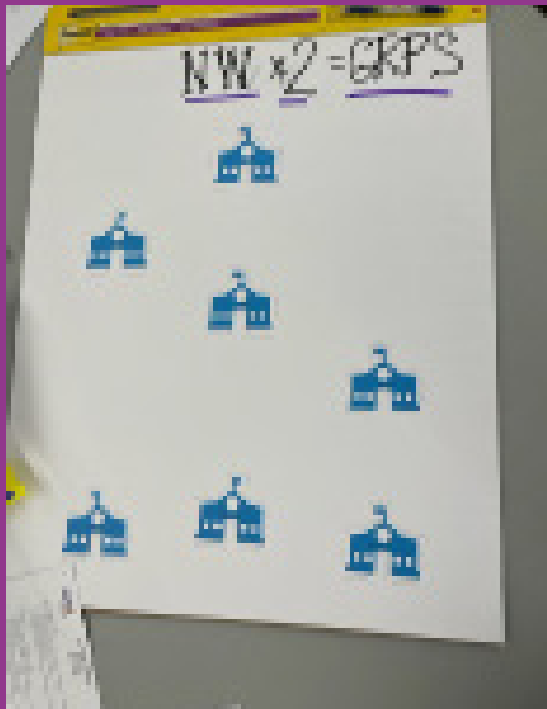
Building or Wing of Building Eighth grade

Building 5 Ninth grade academy

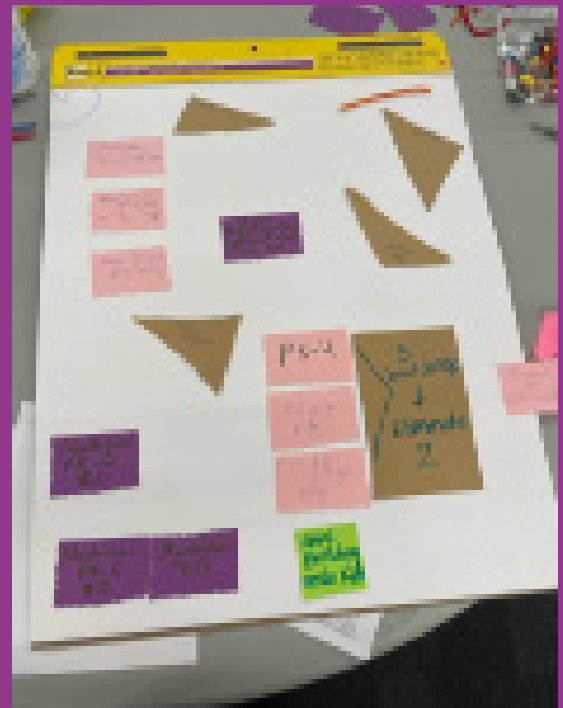
Building 6 Tenth through twelfth grade

Other Elements: Pools, athletics, and Spanish-speaking courses for non-English speakers.

NORTHWEST QUADRANT

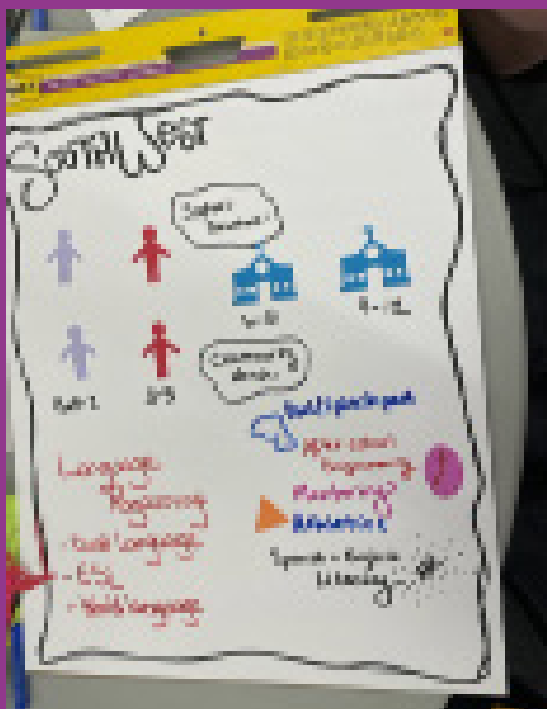


NORTHEAST QUADRANT

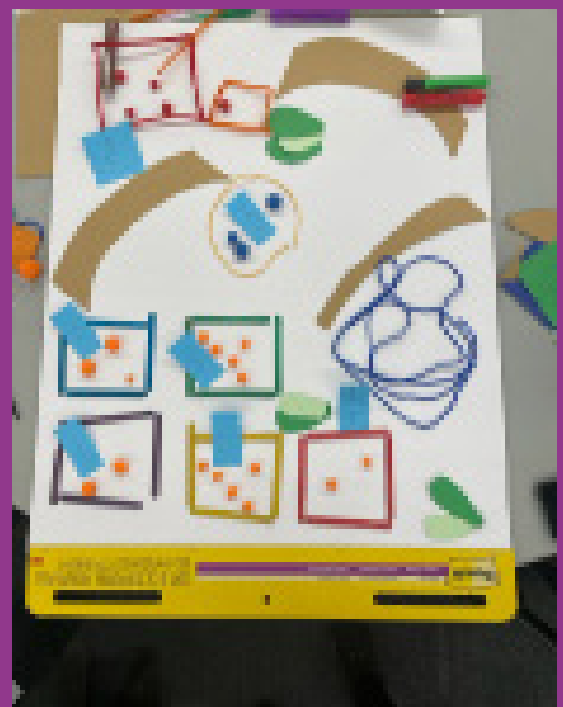


## Envisioned Building Structures

SOUTHWEST QUADRANT



SOUTHEAST QUADRANT



## PRINCIPAL EXPERIENCE

**“I’m sad and frustrated because I thought we were working to be more transparent. And after all the changes for next year, I feel like we have a sneaky, back door culture.”**

During the facility reimagining exercise, principals expressed concerns that the right conversations were being missed and were given an impromptu survey to unearth their concerns. Thirty-one principals participated.

- 8 out of 10 felt the district has already made the decision about which facilities were consolidating.
- The majority agreed that the district did not take their voice seriously, giving it an average rating of 2.2 with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.

### **If you could work with the district to solve one problem, what would it be?**

- Transportation for scholars
- GRPS hiring process
- Creating actionable steps for improvement
- Repairing trust
- Understanding why so many talented staff are leaving the district
- Special education curriculum and staffing
- Parent involvement

### **What questions do you have for the district?**

- “When are we going to make the hard choices for the benefit of all students?”
- “Why are we doing things that have failed in the past?”
- “If a building is closing, pull off the bandage and let it be known! We do more damage with the current rhetoric and lack of information.”
- “Are we so desperate to keep incompetent bus drivers when we know drivers are hazardous to the health of scholars?” How does the district plan to address staffing shortages in the coming year?
- Can there be a committee that works with the executive team to ensure our voices are being heard?
- Will you support moving principals from managers to leaders?
- How do we balance the interests of neighborhood schools versus theme schools and does the district value one more than the other?
- Why don’t we bring the district together rather than continue to separate us by quadrants?
- If special education programs cannot be adequately staffed, can we collaborate with other districts for placement?
- After these responses are read, what is your plan, and how will those of us who are not at central office be included?

## ASSESSMENT

As it relates to the key question, “How can the district equitably achieve a seventy-five percent utilization rate of its facilities while reimagining programming for improved retention and attraction of scholars?” The information learned from GRPS’ leadership presents several considerations.

First, in the view of at least some GRPS school leaders, GRPS’ overarching structure creates a sense of division, disparity, and competition within the district. There seems to be a hierarchy where schools at the top are difficult to get into and receive more resources compared to other schools in the district.

School leaders report the hierarchy presents as follows.

1. City High School
2. Theme Schools (Not Montessori)
3. Montessori Schools
4. Neighborhood Schools

Additionally, a school will receive resources depending on the executive director overseeing the school and their relationship with the principal. If the executive director has strong ties to central campus and they get along with the principal, the school will receive more resources at the expense of other schools within the district.

Second, several school leaders made comments regarding the accessibility of schools in their communities to scholars and their families, with two principal challenges being identified: transportation and language. School leaders report that transportation provided by the district for scholars is unreliable and inconsistent at best. Even if the scholar received reliable transportation from the district, their family would still have limited access to the school if it were outside their community. If transportation issues persist for families and scholars, the district will continue to see issues with parent involvement, student attendance, and academic achievement.

Regarding language barriers, GRPS scholars come from many different countries and their English language comprehension and fluency varies from proficient to inadequate. School leaders report that GRPS does not have enough staff who are fluent in the languages spoken by scholars in the district. Consequently, there are many scholars within the district for whom English is not their native language that struggle to understand their teacher’s verbal and written instructions. This language barrier presents as failing grades and low standardized test scores. In truth, the real issue is the lack of staff who can communicate with scholars in their native language. Until GRPS addresses its staff shortages, many scholars will continue to struggle.

# scholars

## REIMAGINING GRPS WITH SCHOLARS

### Place It Activity Option A (K-8)

Place It! Urban planner and artist James Rojas found a design- and participation-based urban planning practice. At its core, Place It! engages people in urban planning, transportation, design, landscape, and neighborhood change through their hands and senses to be creative and expansive and offer real solutions to the challenges facing our cities and neighborhoods. In this case, students will use various small, random materials (blocks, Legos, trinkets, etc.) and place them on construction paper. Each piece will represent a part of their story (trees, playground, school, etc.). Scholars will then be asked to describe what they have created.

### What do you like the most about your school?

- Class: science, math, gym/physical education, music, band, art
- Field day
- Field trips
- My friends
- PBIS
- Playing sports (with my friends)
- Recess
- Specials
- The school store

### If you had a magic wand and could create the best school possible, what would that look like?

- Add a security system that detects guns

- Add extracurricular activities – dance and music were popular examples
- Add organized sports to the school
- Add security guards to help prevent people from bringing guns or weapons to school
- Allow backpacks to be carried
- Allow toys to be a part of the classroom
- Bring back the computer lab
- Improve bathrooms so that they are clean and have soap
- Improve technology and equipment in all classrooms
- Improve the lunch food
- Increase recess time
- Provide air conditioning
- Provide better playground equipment
- Provide custodial services that clean classrooms, bathrooms, and school
- Provide more snacks throughout the day (because lunch isn't good)

### What does your happy place look like both at school and at home?

- Backyard, swing, and play areas
- Being with my family
- Ice cream and snacks
- Getting home to my dog
- My friends

## Reimagining Facility Use and Design

From May 15 to May 24, The Eureka Group met with 173 GRPS scholars. The Place It! Activity was administered in classrooms from third to sixth grade (92 scholars). The sessions with scholars aimed to understand how they viewed their current schools and ask them to imagine the best learning environment possible.

## Scholar Experience and Recommendations

During the activity, scholars recommended that school safety needs to be improved. In one instance, a scholar built a school that had a magic light machine that would automatically turn orange if someone was carrying a weapon to school. They also imagined a security guard would be a part of the school to help arrest anyone that wanted to harm them. Scholars also consistently recommended that facilities needed to be updated. For instance, a scholar pointed at the ceiling during the exercise and wished the room would not leak: “That stain right there is where the water comes through when the snow melts.” Multiple scholars imagined a clean school, and at one school, scholars said they wished they had soap and a janitor at their school. The teacher confirmed no soap in the bathrooms because custodial services are not always available.

When thinking about their happy place, scholars mentioned wanting more physical activity, being outside, and bigger and better playgrounds. Their families, friends, and teachers were at the core of their happy place. Scholars were always excited

to share their favorite parts of the school, it often included math, science, physical education, and music. They wished they had more art and music and organized sports.

## Walking around observations

- The classroom buildings were outdated and desperately need to be improved.
- On hot days, the rooms are very uncomfortable to be in, and air conditioning needs to be added to all buildings.
- The teachers had a good command of their room, and scholars were quick to pay attention, but they were severely understaffed and underresourced. In multiple cases, there was only one classroom per grade. If a third-grade teacher needed to seek guidance or discuss ideas with another third-grader, they would need to find that person at another school. This limits teacher growth and increases burnout.

## ASSESSMENT

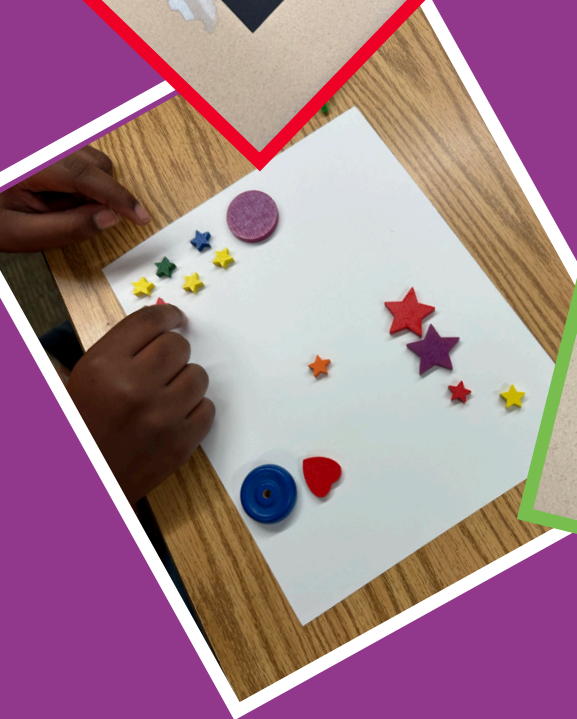
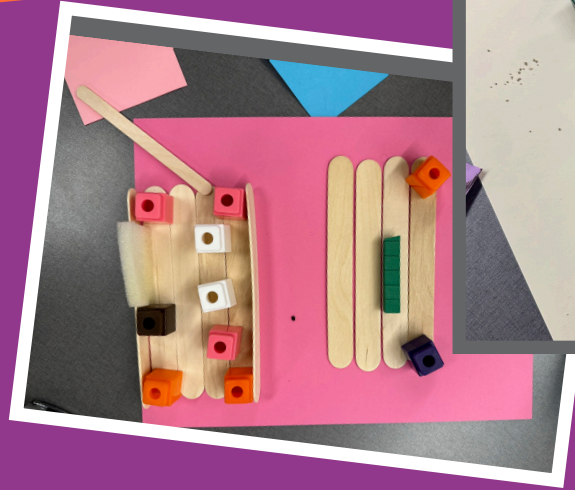
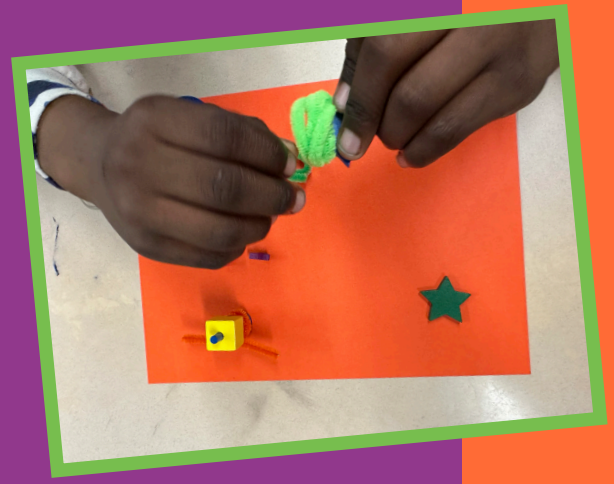
The scholars identified specific areas that need to be improved (in no particular order):

- Safety
- Facilities
- Extracurriculars
- Food
- More teachers



GRPS SCHOLARS

# Place It! Activity



# recommendations

To facilitate movement toward reimagining GRPS, this report took the liberty to begin translating themes into action to help outline a clear path forward. In looking at the whole, the number of actions stakeholders envision for GRPS can be overwhelming, difficult to prioritize, and even harder to gain momentum and buy-in. Consider the following a suggested guide for first steps:

1. Share what district leaders have learned from this report and the intended positive actions that will be taken as a result with all stakeholders who participated in the community engagement process. (Note: It is a good practice to determine early which stakeholder groups have access to the full report compared to a high-level summary and be transparent in your reasons.)
2. Announce facility consolidations and school closings as soon as possible and implement an effective change management plan that ensures scholars and their families, as well as school building staff and their families, have long lead times and the necessary supports to transition well—physically, socially, mentally, and emotionally.
3. Repair building safety issues as soon as possible and give serious consideration to expediting repairs or closing those buildings either permanently or temporarily until repairs can be made. Implement mental and emotional health services for scholars (and staff) who have been subject to unsafe or unhealthy building conditions.
4. Hire full-time teachers committed to the holistic development of GRPS scholars. Remove any known bottlenecks in the district's hiring process and re-design pay and incentive structures to align with best practices in talent retention.
5. Adopt a collective impact or other collaborative problem-solving framework to co-develop, prioritize, and implement action plans related to each of the three dominant themes in this report. Project management and related disciplines will be critical competencies here.
6. Cultivate a set of leadership behaviors and practices that model the culture of GRPS that stakeholders have reimagined and ensure accountability by integrating it into the district's professional development and performance management systems, beginning at the executive director level and up. (A suggested start is effective communication, namely deep listening combined with stronger feedback loops.)



# appendix

[The Eureka Group Engagement Log](#)

[1/27/2023 Instructional Leaders Survey](#)

[4/28/2023 Principal Survey](#)

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