



Washoe County
School District

Incline Schools Focus Groups Notes

Group: Private and home schools

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Summary Comments / Notes:

1. Are you satisfied with the level of education students are receiving?

Consensus: Yes. No other discussion on this item.

2. Do you believe you/your children are actively engaged and enjoy the learning process at school?

Members agreed their children enjoy going to school, with some adding their students would rather be at school than home.

Consensus: They would like to see students continue to foster love for lifelong learning.

3. If you could change one thing in Incline school to improve student learning, what would that be?

Comments varied sharply from tuition to providing more project-based learning. They would like to see more integration of subjects, such as Spanish overlapping with social studies and social studies overlapping with language arts. One member stated this has been done successfully at the K-5 level of Lake Tahoe School, but not so well at the middle school level.

Basic academics is good, but offerings of enrichment need improvement.

Diversity also needs improvement, members agreed. They said they would like to offer students a more real-world environment and come out of the "bubble" (school) more prepared for the workforce and life after school.

One member said for some grades only one track is available and that they would like to see two or more classes per grade level.

Members said they want to add rigor to the classroom, particularly to help develop students' critical thinking skills. They expressed sadness that International Baccalaureate will no longer be implemented in Incline. They felt IB offered a pathway to helping students attain critical thinking skills.

They would like to receive more information about test dates for PSAT. They said the District has told them they have to dig for their own information when they've made requests for information.

Consensus: They would like to see a better link between the private and public school system. More communication is needed, especially with working with parents for various activities. There is too big a gap between the middle school and high school levels.

4. How important is it to have a challenging learning environment? What does this mean to you?

Consensus: It is extremely important. They pay for private school because they expect their students will be challenged in this setting rather than in a public school.

They feel it's important to distinguish between "rigor" and "challenging." They defined rigor as working harder to get better test scores and higher grades, but that students are only challenged when they're encouraged to develop their critical thinking skills in speaking and writing and in other areas that could be harder to measure. More portfolio evaluation is needed.

Being challenged in only one or two classes is not enough. Students should be challenged in a variety of classes.

Members agreed students who attend public schools should be pushed to perform better. Distance learning is not an acceptable option, especially for younger children. They would like to see enhanced learning using technology programs rather than just teaching kids how to use a computer program. Lessons should be built from the curriculum.

They would like to see teachers get away from having kids strictly memorize information.

Smaller class sizes would foster greater challenge for students and more attention from the teacher to the individual student.

5. Respondents to the recent survey identified instruction in science as critically important. What are your thoughts on that?

Consensus: Both science and math are crucial. The hands-on component of science, in particular, keeps kids engaged in class.

It's also important to the future economy by preparing students to become skilled for careers in engineering and science "to carry the torch" from what's being done now.

Members said Incline has the unique advantage of having direct access to the outdoors for hands-on lessons. Students should be encouraged to explore their surrounding environment in Incline.

They think teachers and schools should do more to get kids more excited about science and keep them engaged.

One member said it would be difficult to continue living in Incline unless academic diversity comes to Incline, in terms of offering particular activities and classes.

Members said they are concerned about sending their child to Incline High School's ninth grade biology class. They feel instruction is not keeping other students engaged.

6. Respondents to the recent survey identified instruction in innovation/technology as critically important. What are your thoughts on that?

They believe technology and innovation are great so long as they have a good teacher in the classroom.

Content in classes that incorporate technology into lessons must be purposeful and integrated into the curriculum. One member said, "If they're just making iMovies, it's not worth it."

Having students learn how to design websites and use technology tools should lead to critical thinking skills and students' self-expression.

One member pointed to the Kham Academy at which students learn better from watching an instructor's YouTube videos rather than listening to him directly in the classroom. Member called this system "light years" better than the current system if students are engaged.

Schools must be willing to invest in replacement of old or outdated equipment frequently. There is no point in teaching technology if schools cannot keep up with the pace of ever-changing technology. If funding is an issue, schools should consider leasing programs with businesses.

Without innovation and technology, Nevada high school students will not be competitive against other students applying for college.

Members also are concerned that the way technology has been taught bores students. Creativity is needed to keep them interested.

Basic computer skills should be taught as early as elementary school. Middle school students should come in already knowing how to use programs such as Word or PowerPoint so they can have a jump on the software while integrating their knowledge with lessons in the curriculum.

Consensus: Using technology just for the sake of using is worthless. Technology should be used in collaboration with science, art and Spanish. Members said they would like to see project-based learning revived through the use of technology.

7. How important is it to have a vertically aligned curriculum among the three Incline schools?

Schools should evaluate at some of their programs and what they have to offer students. Programs should meet students' needs.

The scope and sequence of the grades between kindergarten and eighth grade are crucial. Middle school and high school teachers should be in better communication about how transitioning students are prepared for high school.

Members said the IB program would have allowed for a stronger vertical alignment and more knowledge acquisition. Quality control is important; teachers at Lake Tahoe School push to raise standards. Weeding out stubborn or lazy teachers is necessary unless the District can provide resources to help them.

Equally important along with K-12 alignment is alignment between high school and college. Members said there must be a greater understanding of college readiness. Students must be ready for college to reduce the remedial rate.

One member asked the question, "How do we prepare vertical integration for all of Nevada?"

Consensus: The schools cannot be out of sync. Each grade level must progress logically into the next. No gaps should exist as students advance.

8. As you know, the Incline Great Schools Committee is focused on making Incline Schools great. Do you have any closing thoughts on this?

In general, the members feel there are good things going on with the education currently being provided. Some strategies, however, are only "tactical holeplugs" to provide temporary fixes to long-term problems.

Middle schools need to have more computers.

Members hope the Incline Great Schools Committee's recommendations will address strategic goals, not just about what students are achieving academically. Activities and building the student as a whole person must be incorporated.

They want to get away from the mentality that increasing the graduation is good enough. They feel this only fosters the idea that the District and other educators are just pushing students through their senior year.

Members want to produce more than graduates; they want students to become lifelong scholars who are passionate about learning rather than just waiting to get out of school. Member said, "If you set the bar low, you'll get there." Education needs to stop being incremental and start being more qualitative.

The emphasis on No Child Left Behind is hindering the emphasis on actual learning.

Adapting teaching techniques to learning styles is important. Students have different learning needs and those must be accommodated.

One huge challenge to making all of this work, however, a member said, is coming up with the fiscal resources necessary to provide a better education. Member hopes the IGSC makes recommendations to Superintendent Heath Morrison that will allow him to prioritize based on the budget.

Group feels “we have more needs and less money.”

Overall, group feels the “loud grumblers” who opposed the IB program got their way and that the supporters were sabotaged by the few who have been outspokenly passionate. Some questioned why IB was canned before the process with the IGSC has been completed.

Such conversations, however, have spurred talk of what makes up a good education. Members would like to see Incline High School Principal Stacey Cooper receive authority to be an empowerment district of schools in Incline. They would like Incline schools to have more autonomy to operate independently of the Washoe County School District.

Members said they believe Incline is now in a unique position to do something revolutionary with education if the people, resources and energy are available to rally community support. All students are entitled to a great education, not just high-achieving students.

If education is not improved, no businesses will come to Reno to recruit potential employees because the region will not have a pool of qualified candidates from which to choose.

*Group is asking where the reports of these focus groups will be made available.