



**Township High School District 113:
Highland Park High School Principal**

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT AND PRINCIPAL PROFILE

March 5, 2024

In the fall of 2023, District 113 engaged School Exec Connect to assist in the search for a District superintendent and a principal for Highland Park High School. The superintendent search was completed in February 2024 when the Board approved a contract with Dr. Chala Holland. The opening for the Highland Park High School principal was posted before winter break, but SEC waited to conduct a community engagement process and to hold interviews until after the new superintendent was hired so that she could be involved in the hiring process.

The community engagement process included focus groups and administration of a survey to staff, students, parents, and community members. This report documents reflections and insights from those constituencies.

Participation in the community engagement process was excellent. One hundred seventeen (117) stakeholders participated in one of eighteen (18) focus groups. All participants were asked to express their views regarding the strengths of Highland Park High School, challenges facing HPHS, first-year priorities for the new principal, and the specific characteristics, skills, and experiences to be sought in the next principal. Information from the focus groups and the survey was used to create a **New Principal Profile** that is guiding the screening, interviews, and selection of a new principal. The profile is found on the last page of this report.

The District also sought input from stakeholders via an online survey, open until February 28. Three hundred and sixty-one people (361) answered questions about the perceived strengths and challenges facing the school and they also identified priorities for the new principal to address. Respondents also identified characteristics of a successful principal for Highland Park High School. One open-ended question asked respondents to name other items they thought were important to consider in the search for a principal, and a second question asked respondents to give advice to the new principal. A summary of the survey results can be found after the focus group report. The survey was translated and posted in Spanish and a focus group was held for Spanish-language parents.

The opinions set forth in the report may not reflect the opinions of all staff, students, and residents but do reflect the opinions of those who participated in the community engagement process. Judgments regarding what is included in this report are those of the consultants, based upon the frequency of statements received throughout the data-gathering process.

This report may be used in several ways. The profile will be helpful to the consultants and superintendent as they screen and interview candidates, using it to prepare questions for interviews with the candidates. The consultants also recommend the report be given to the newly appointed principal for a better understanding of the issues and opportunities facing HPHS. This report will be made available to the public through a posting on the District website.



Focus Group Response Overview

Focus Groups/Open Forums were held with all constituencies. Board members, parents, administrators, teachers, students, support staff, and community members all contributed to discussions about the unique needs of Highland Park High School and what a new principal needs to know and be able to do to be successful. One hundred seventeen (117) participants in eighteen (18) focus groups provided insights into the strengths and challenges facing the school, the priorities the new principal should address, and the qualities and skills the next principal should possess. Below is a summary of the responses to each of the four questions asked in each Focus group.

Focus group participants were first asked to identify the major strengths of Highland Park High School. What characteristics of HPHS would make someone want to be principal here?

- Across groups, respondents noted the ambitious, engaged, talented, and dedicated students comprising a diverse community of learners at HPHS. Highland Park’s diversity is a foundational strength.
- Parents are highly involved in the school and concerned for its success. A number of parents told stories of how they chose Highland Park as the ideal place for their children to go to school when they moved here from other communities. Many other parents indicated that they had attended school here and wanted their children to have the same experience they had.
- Gifted, highly-qualified and passionate teachers care deeply about students and are committed to excellence in teaching. Teachers tend to stay in their positions, bringing valuable experience to all aspects of instruction, curriculum-development, and learning.
- The shared trauma of a pandemic, a community shooting, and other high-profile incidents created a sense of protectiveness and caring for each other as well as a commitment to strengthening relationships and protecting every child. There is a highly-developed sense of community at HPHS.
- The size of the high school was noted as a strength – not too big and not too small. It was also noted that the building and grounds are clean and well-maintained and that the new and updated facilities are appreciated.
- The breadth and depth of curricular offerings are notable strengths, with a commitment to meeting the academic and emotional needs of all students.
- Students and parents are extremely grateful for the broad offerings of extracurricular activities, including athletics, clubs, and the arts. Focus on the Arts was mentioned frequently as an example of a unique program that is available to HPHS students.
- Students indicated that they had many opportunities for leadership, and that new activities are available whenever there is sufficient interest. They also said that “everyone can find a community” and develop a sense of belonging at this school.
- Spanish-speaking parents feel well-informed, and they appreciate the programs that help them understand the American high school system and structure. They expressed strong appreciation for the help and guidance their children receive in order to succeed.
- The phrase “House on Vine” was mentioned by several as an indicator of the climate and

culture that is sought at HPHS.

The second question asked focus groups participants to identify the school's greatest challenges in the next two years.

- While also noted as an important strength, the diversity in the school and community presents a challenge for leadership. Racial tension among the communities sending students to Highland Park needs to be addressed, and DEI initiatives with staff and students are important to continue and expand.
- A veteran teaching staff is a strength of HPHS, but a new principal will need to negotiate the tension between autonomy and collaboration as well as tradition and change.
- Maintaining and enhancing academic standards was frequently mentioned by parents, with an emphasis on a rigorous curriculum, consistent experiences for all students, and high standards for all.
- Respecting the uniqueness of HPHS in a two-high school district can be a challenge to a new principal, especially when discussing resources and opportunities. Teachers, students and parents want the principal to seek a balance between maintaining traditions and finding new opportunities (curricular or extracurricular) that meet the needs of today's HPHS students, even if some opportunities or support systems might not be needed at both schools.
- Addressing the achievement gap and supporting academic success for all students is an important challenge for the new principal.
- Communication from the principal to all constituencies is important to maintain and improve. Parents mentioned the strength of the written communication from the principal's office, but some employees felt that they did not hear about district decisions or initiatives until after decisions had been made. A communication system to communicate important information, solicit feedback, and collaborate with stakeholders is an important challenge.
- As mentioned in the superintendent focus groups, school safety was cited as a challenge by all groups. Safety systems, personnel training, and a focus on school culture were mentioned as ways to address safety at HPHS.
- Other challenges include the following:
 - Work closely with all parents, and especially find ways to create a sense of connection to the school by parents who may feel reluctant to become involved.
 - Understand and communicate a system for decision-making, being clear as to when a decision is made collaboratively, when it is made with input, and when it must be made by administration alone.
 - Build a strong relationship with the new superintendent, district administration, and Board of Education.
 - Form a partnership with the Deerfield High School principal and establish that the relationship is one of respect, responsiveness, and collaboration.
 - Focus on articulation with the sender districts; establish strong relationships and communication strategies with all constituencies.
 - Be visible, accessible, and responsive to students. Regularly visit classrooms, lunchrooms, activities, and performances.
 - Establish a consistent system for seeking student input and use that input to drive decision-making.

The third question asked participants to identify those skills, personal qualities, and experiences that are important for the next principal to possess in order to be successful.

- Strong background in curriculum, instruction, and learning; follows and supports best practices
- Excellent relationship skills, demonstrating deep empathy, loyalty, and trustworthiness
- Culturally responsive person who is invested in addressing inequity and injustice
- Familiar with trauma and recovery; understands the experience of trauma and its consequences for individuals, the school, and the community while leading toward healing
- Excellent listener, writer, and speaker, always focusing on a clear and consistent vision for the future of HPHS
- Successful problem-solver who implements solutions and evaluates results
- Experienced leader in secondary schools with extensive time as a teacher and building leader
- Builds high-functioning teams and develops leadership capacity in others; delegates responsibility and holds self and others accountable
- Personable, kind, empathetic, humble, inspiring – demonstrates a sense of humor
- Visible, approachable, recognizable, and accessible to students, staff, and parents in the school and community
- Understands the developmental needs of young people aged 14-18 and enjoys interacting with students
- The needs of all students drive decision-making and priority-setting
- Visionary, innovative, strategic thinker who will stay as principal for a significant amount of time
- Deeply understands and appreciates the entire community that sends students to HPHS
- Reflective and vulnerable enough to admit mistakes, but confident and self-assured enough to lead decisively
- Skilled at using data to understand problems, seek solutions, and assess results
- Leads effectively during a crisis; establishes and follows plans and communicates clearly with others
- Skilled at building management and budget administration
- Listen empathetically to opposition or protest and sincerely consider alternative points of view
- Students' important qualities: considerate, compassionate, listener, visible, understanding, enthusiastic, respectful, affirmative, approachable, communicative, thorough, real, honest, funny, likable, and unbiased

The final prompt for the Focus Groups asked participants to identify the priorities facing Highland Park High School next year and beyond.

- Take time to listen to all constituencies, including students; build strong relationships within the school and in the community, including with the sender districts.

- Develop a strong understanding of the community’s history and vision for the future; put students at the center of planning and decision-making.
- Recognize that the principal is the face of the school and the school is an important symbol and a source of pride to the community.
- Work with the district and building teams to assess student safety and implement any additional measures that are deemed necessary to help everyone feel safe.
- Build a strong leadership team at the building level that supports the district and school vision. Be willing to delegate, but also to hold everyone accountable for results.
- Focus on academics – curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student learning. Use data to assess current realities and collaboratively address deficiencies.
- Create a system for communication that is articulated with the district and DHS, but which meets the unique needs of the HPHS community. Communication systems should value transparency, clarity, and timeliness.
- Hire a talented and diverse group of leaders, teachers, and support personnel who are committed to the well-being of all students.
- Find ways to include and involve parents and community members who may feel disenfranchised or ignored.

Survey Overview

Three hundred and sixty-one people responded to the online survey, including parents, students, and staff.

Question 1: Please select the choice(s) that best describe your relationship to HPHS. Please select all that apply:

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| • Parent of current student | 56.11% |
| • Certified staff | 21.94% |
| • Student | 15.83% |
| • Non-certified staff | 4.72% |
| • Other | 0.83% |
| • Community member | 0.56% |

Question 2: Please select up to four (4) top educational strengths of HPHS.

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| 1. Committed supportive teachers and other staff | 53.19% |
| 2. Rigorous and engaging learning opportunities | 48.75% |
| 3. Opportunities for students beyond the classroom | 44.60% |
| 4. Students are college, career and life-ready | 36.84% |

Each of these responses matches strengths that were noted in the focus groups. Strong teaching and a rigorous instructional program are important to students, parents, and teachers. Respondents believe that students are prepared for life after high school and that students have access to many opportunities outside the classroom. In the comments for this question, a number of people mentioned Focus on the Arts as a strength as well as the breadth of course offerings at the school.

Question 3: Please select up to four (4) items that represent the greatest strengths in the area of organization and management for HPHS.

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| 1. Comprehensive offerings of clubs, activities, etc. | 73.41% |
| 2. Parent and community support of education | 34.07% |
| 3. Clean and attractive school facilities | 31.86% |
| 4. Financial resources available to the school | 29.92% |

Note that the availability of a comprehensive offering of clubs, activities, arts and athletics was selected by almost three-fourths of respondents. There is a close correlation between the survey findings and the focus group responses pertaining to the pride felt about the extracurricular program.

Question 4: Which of the following high school priorities should the new high school principal focus on? Select up to four (4) answers.

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| 1. Student growth and achievement | 51.52% |
| 2. Student acquisition of 21 st century skills | 50.69% |
| 3. Student well-being (emotionally safe and confident) | 47.65% |
| 4. Student and school safety | 37.40% |

As noted in the focus groups, respondents prioritized student achievement and skill development, though they also value student well-being and safety. In the comments after this question, a number of respondents cited improvement of staff morale as a priority. The impending change in the high school schedule (for each of the next two years) has appeared in open-ended responses as a concern/priority as well.

Question 5: What improvements are most needed for the high school in the areas of organization and management? Select up to four (4) answers:

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| 1. Administrative leadership and management | 49.03% |
| 2. Staff morale | 42.66% |
| 3. Professional training/development for staff | 32.96% |
| 4. Safety and security | 32.69% |

While school safety and staff morale have appeared as concerns in focus groups and in other places on this survey, administrative leadership/management and professional development were not frequently cited. The comments after this question reiterated these top items and mentioned such areas as the need for vocational education improvements in the IEP process. Facility needs were mentioned frequently.

Question 6: What educational improvements are most needed in the high school? Select up to five (5) answers:

1. Students are college, career, and life-ready	41.55%
2. Instructional methods and learning experiences that engage students	34.63%
3. Meeting the individual needs of students	32.96%
4. Quality of administrators	31.58%
5. Rigorous and engaging learning opportunities	31.30%

Interestingly, responses 1 and 5 were cited as strengths in question 2. It is not unusual to find that a portion of respondents feel that a certain quality is a strength while another group thinks it needs improvement. Focus groups respondents (especially parents) expressed that they believed that students are receiving a rigorous education and are ready for life after high school, but at the same time they expressed concern that the school (and new principal) continue to focus on academic rigor and readiness for college and career.

Question 7: What else would you like to tell us about the selection of the next principal for HPHS?

This open-ended question elicited 152 comments that are consistent with the responses in the rest of the survey, but also occasionally brought up other issues. For instance, a number of respondents expressed the feeling that there is too much emphasis on DEI initiatives while an approximately equal number praise the district and school's emphasis on DEI. Strong consistency in answers came in the area of needed an outstanding leader who will lead HPHS into the future. One response, for instance, said: "We have worked a lot with the "warm demander" language of Zaretta Hammond, and this is what we need from our leader. A warm demander who sees our humanity and our potential. Such a person will not buckle to political pressure, to the squeaky wheel. But, they will also provide authentic support, trust, and encouragement to lead us to improvement." Respondents mentioned energy, experience, and charisma as well as good listening and communication skills.

Question 8: What advice do you have for the new principal that will support their success at HPHS?

This open-ended question elicited 152 comments as well. Listening was a common theme – listening to students, parents, and staff as the challenge of working as principal at HPHS begins. They also reiterated items mentioned in focus groups: get to know all the HPHS communities and their history; be visible in the building and at activities; "connect with kids – all the kids!" They remind the new principal that HPHS is not DHS, and that the principal should respect the differences. Respondents asked that staff be consulted and informed, that respect guide their relationship. Many, many responses called on the principal to see each student as important and worthy, and that programs and activities continue to meet the needs of every student.



Principal Profile: Highland Park High School

- Knows the Highland Park High School community, and values each student, parent, and constituent as individuals.
- Inspires others to believe in a clear vision for the education of all students, placing students at the center of decision-making and focusing on academic growth and student well-being.
- Values the diversity of the Highland Park community and supports and participates in initiatives that promote diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Develops a communication system that is aligned with the district, but which clearly communicates important information about the high school in a timely and transparent manner.
- Displays expertise in high school curriculum development and best practices in instruction, assessment and learning, clearly demonstrating educational leadership to the school community.
- Uses data to analyze, plan, implement, and assess all aspects of curriculum, instruction, and programs.
- Prioritizes relationship development across the school community; demonstrates high emotional intelligence.
- Values collaboration but understands the dynamics of decision-making and communication about those decisions.
- Holds self and others accountable for decisions and results.
- Prioritizes student safety by working with the district and all constituents to use safety systems, skilled personnel, and a positive culture that protects and supports all who enter HPHS.
- As noted by students, the principal is: considerate, compassionate, visible, understanding, enthusiastic, respectful, affirmative, approachable, communicative, thorough, real, honest, funny, likable, and unbiased.
- Works closely with parents, capitalizing on their commitment and passion for HPHS, while also working to include parents that may feel marginalized.
- Addresses morale issues among teachers and other employee groups.
- Responsibly manages budgets, facilities, and operations in the high school.
- Communicates decisions with clarity, reason, and empathy after considering input from all stakeholders
- Supports opportunities for students outside the classroom through budget prioritization and through visibility at events and contests.
- Understand the developmental needs of adolescents and enjoys being with teenagers.