

**High School Research Project
Citizens Advisory Committee
2005-2006 Project Assignment
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Submitted by

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Direction from the Board of Education

Gathering perceptions in a formalized manner/strategies to get information to our constituency (the community) in an effort to expand their awareness of the positive happenings at the high school. With the goal of having Westlake High School be the "lighthouse" or "flagship" for the Westlake Schools, it is important to determine what parents of students who attend Westlake City Schools and the community's perceptions are of the high school. Therefore, this proposal is to gain baseline data as to what the perceptions are of Westlake High School. While anecdotal information is frequently provided, it does not provide a generalized viewpoint.

Questions to be answered:

- *What is an effective, efficient and systematic method to gather information of our constituency's perceptions of Westlake High School?*
- *How can Westlake High School positively affect people's perceptions?*
- *What are some effective strategies to communicate and expand people's awareness of the good that is happening at Westlake High School?*

Approach

The most direct approach to answer the questions posed by the Board would be to conduct a survey. However, this is a costly and time consuming undertaking so the Project Team decided to focus on secondary analysis of a survey conducted in January 2005 as well as interviews with key staff members at Westlake High School.

Summary of Findings

We identified four aspects that contribute to the overall image of WHS:

- Academic performance
- Extracurricular activities
- Appearance of physical plant
- Discipline

Our consensus is that WHS is generally thought to be doing an excellent job with academics and extracurricular activities. However, we identified some concerns about the condition of the school building and grounds as well as regarding student discipline. We will address these concerns in

more detail below as well as consider why academically or athletically talented students sometimes choose to attend non-public schools rather than WHS.

In summary, Westlake High School is doing an excellent job in most areas. The appearance of the physical plant is a concern and will require financial investment and commitment to improvement. Discipline also needs continual attention as well as a concerted public information program to let the community know that the conditions are not as bad as some people think and that there are actions in place to address the major issues.

Academic performance and extracurricular activities

The 2005 survey showed that Westlake residents have a very positive perception about the quality of education being provided, with 91% of respondents rating it as Excellent (52%) or Good (39%). Similar positive perceptions were reported for college preparatory activities and extracurricular offerings. The survey did identify some concern about programs for underachievers and “average” children on the part of a relatively small percentage of respondents.

The district’s continued high performance on state proficiency tests is well known to the community. This message is delivered by local newspapers as well as through communication channels operated by the schools themselves.

Sports are a significant component of the community’s awareness of WHS and both team and individual results garner significant media coverage. Some students with specific athletic interests have chosen to attend non-public schools in order to play hockey (not offered at WHS) or play other sports at a higher level of competition.

Physical Plant

Many members of the Project Team visit the school frequently for student activities such as sporting events, as do many parents and community members from both Westlake and other districts. The team also had a tour of the facility specifically for this research.

The first impression that visitors to the Westlake High School campus get is not entirely positive. We saw some restrooms that were closed, damage to door grilles and lockers and some general maintenance issues such as cracks and leaks. Outside there is significant litter and landscape maintenance is also an issue. This is especially jarring due to the building’s proximity to the new and attractive Performing Arts Center.

We discussed these observations with the WHS Principal (George Scheckelhoff) and some members of his staff. They agree that there is a need to make the building more inviting and to enhance its “curb appeal”. The top priority improvement (assuming budget were available) would be renovation of the rest rooms by the gym. These get the most use and are seen by many visitors attending events at the school.

The issue here is primarily money – some improvements and repairs have been deferred because of the current budget situation. A few student volunteer projects have been undertaken (cleaning the trophy case by the main entrance and some landscaping). The WHS administration is reluctant to lean heavily on student volunteers. However, we think that there is an untapped opportunity to utilize volunteers and contributions from community organizations and businesses.

Discipline

One area that the January 2005 survey highlighted was discipline. Although the majority view of respondents was positive (59% Good or Excellent) this was one area with a substantial number of negative impressions. The primary discipline issue is smoking in the rest rooms. The WHS

administration acknowledges this as an issue but believes that there has been significant progress made over the last five years and that conditions are not as bad as some people think. The Project Team thinks that this is an opportunity to communicate the actions being taken and the progress being made to address public perceptions. At the very least it will communicate the fact that the WHS administration is talking this problem seriously and attempting to solve it.

It needs to be said that schools cannot be effective in achieving a level of discipline without parental support. We heard reports of parents paying multiple \$100 tickets for their children who were cited for smoking by the police. However, those parents who actively oppose and undermine the actions of school officials are in the minority. Unfortunately, the consequences of their actions tarnish the reputation of the school as a whole.

We believe that most parents are willing to become more involved with school activities. Parents have been seen to be effective as chaperones at school dances, for example. We suggested use of parent volunteers to monitor smoking in rest rooms. The WHS administration was open to this approach but indicated that they understood the Board of Education was uncomfortable with that approach because the parents would have no enforcement powers. We believe that the simple presence of an adult would have a deterrent effect.

Public Information

The public's perception of Westlake High School is not necessarily based on the reality of the situation. Particularly for members of the community who do not have students attending WHS there is a need to communicate positive messages effectively.

The January 2005 survey address sources of information about the Westlake schools. The most frequently cited source was the school department newsletter ("Commentary"). Informal, word-of-mouth methods were also commonly mentioned, including friends & relatives, own children and other school sources such as teachers or PTA. Formal media outlets were also cited, including the Westlake Sun Herald, the Plain Dealer, Westlife, TV and radio and the Chronicle-Telegram. WHBS was mentioned by only 1% of respondents as a source of information. The District's web site was not mentioned at all; however, it was not offered as a response option by the survey.

These findings suggest a two-pronged strategy. For parents, leverage Parent Connection and word of mouth. For non-parents, use the Westlake Schools Commentary and standard print media (Plain Dealer, Sun, etc.). In both cases the message should target specific areas of concern as well as publicize good news about the school and the achievements of individual students.

Loss of students to non-public schools:

One area of concern expressed by the Board was the fact that some Westlake students enrolled in non-public high schools rather than WHS. Based on our research and experience, the most common reasons for choosing not to attend Westlake High School seem to be:

- Religious preference (I want my children to attend a Catholic school)
- Tradition (family history of attendance)
- Sports opportunities
- Perception of lax discipline

Not much can realistically be done by WHS about any of these except the discipline issue. As described above it is important to communicate the actual situation and actions being taken to address specific areas of concern (such as smoking).

High School Research Committee
Summary of Prior Survey Results
January 23, 2006

The TRIAD Research Group conducted several surveys of voters relative to the Westlake public schools, most recently in January 2005 and previously in 2002, 1999 and 1997. The 2005 survey of 400 voters likely to participate in the anticipated May levy election addressed their overall perceptions of the Westlake schools but did not allow us to look at perceptions specifically regarding the High School. Nevertheless, the report contains some useful information for the purposes of this Committee.

Sources of information about the Westlake schools

Voters consider themselves to be well informed about the Westlake schools, with 84% claiming to be somewhat well informed (58%) or very well informed (28%). Parents with children in the schools are likely to consider themselves very well informed.

The most frequently cited source of information about the schools is the school department newsletter ("Commentary"), with 38% of respondents mentioning this. Informal, word-of-mouth methods were also commonly mentioned, including friends & relatives (23%), own children (17%) and other school sources such as teachers or PTA (14%). Formal media outlets were also cited, including the Westlake Sun Herald (25%), the Plain Dealer (15%), Westlife (10%), TV and radio (9%) and the Chronicle-Telegram (8%). WHBS was mentioned by only 1% of respondents as a source of information. The District's web site was not mentioned at all; however, it was not offered as a response option by the survey.

Any information campaign that might be undertaken to disseminate positive information about the High School must take these results into consideration and focus on those channels that reach the most people (voters).

Overall perception of school quality

The overall perception of school quality is very positive, with 91% rating it Excellent (52%) or Good (39%). Parents with children exclusively in private or parochial schools have a less favorable impression, however, with only 31% of this group rating the Westlake schools as Excellent. There is also a substantial relationship between the perception of quality and reported likelihood of voting in favor of a levy.

Three specific questions relating to quality are of relevance to the High School. Respondents have very favorable impressions of the job that the schools are doing in terms of offering extra-curricular activities (such as music, clubs or drama) and in terms of preparing students for college. Both questions had positive ratings (Excellent and Good combined) in excess of 80%. Maintaining discipline in and around schools was also generally positive (59%) there are also substantial numbers of respondents who have negative impressions. Parents of students in parochial schools have similar perceptions regarding the first two items but have greater concerns about discipline, with 38% rating it fair or poor.

Positive information about the quality of High School academic and co-curricular programs seems to be getting out to voters. However, there is a significant amount of negative perception concerning discipline and this should be an area of concern.

Reasons for attending private or parochial schools

The survey asked parents who had children in non-public schools to describe the reasons for their choice. This is a small sample, with only 17 respondents reported as having children only in public schools, but some indeterminate number of additional respondents indicated having children in both public and non-public schools. Both groups were presented with the open-ended question. The most frequent reason, given by 8 respondents, was the perception that Catholic schools offered a higher quality education. Religious reasons were cited by 7 respondents and 4 indicated concerns about discipline.

There is not much that can be done to address religious concerns. The schools can counteract negative perceptions about academic quality and discipline but these beliefs are often deep-rooted and not easily changed, even by the facts.