

A REPORT ON THE COMMUNITY  
ENGAGEMENT PHASE, 2020-2021

*PREPARED BY CATALYST COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS*



**OVERVIEW**

Upper Darby Rising (UDR) is an initiative to foster Excellence with Equity in the Upper Darby school community.

It began last fall with an energetic program of community outreach and input that concluded on March 1 of this year with the final of three communitywide forums.

The input received during this initial phase of community engagement has been distilled into the 13 principles and the hundreds of suggested actions presented in this report.

The next step will be the formation of an Upper Darby Rising Community Advisory Board that will help district leadership transform this robust public input into a detailed Action Plan for Excellence with Equity.

The district's goal is to begin work on that Action Plan this fall. The Community Advisory Board then will serve as a sounding board and support for District leadership as it seeks to move the Action Plan from words to reality.

The School District contracted last summer with Catalyst Community Conversations (CCC), a program of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, to design and lead a foundational community engagement program for the initiative.

In brief, these were the elements of the engagement effort as it unfolded from summer 2020 until spring 2021:

- **August 2020** - Initiative launched with table-setting meetings with district leaders and one-on-one stakeholder interviews.
- **September-November 2020** - Stakeholder interviews completed. Four key project themes identified. Citizen advisory group formed; meets three times. Upper Darby Rising name and Seeking Excellence with Equity tagline chosen. UDR page on District website launched. Two-stage plan for seven public forums set; messaging and outreach plan formed.
- **December 2020-January 2021** - Four focus groups for specific segments of the community held: the African American/Black diaspora community; the Catholic parish community; the small-business community, and the immigrant community. Total attendance was
- **February-March 2021** - Three communitywide forums held, with a total attendance of 280 (248 community members; 32 district personnel as observers).

This report presents the Catalyst Community Conversations team's distillation of the robust, diverse, nuanced input that flowed from community members and District staff during this sequence of table-setting meetings, stakeholder interviews, advisory group meetings, and community forums.

The distilled feedback is presented in two forms: Principles and Community Suggestions.

The *Principles* are touchstone phrases that seek to capture the key themes, aspirations and caveats that emerged powerfully from these citizen conversations. These principles are first presented in the Executive Summary, organized around the four UDR project themes: *Diversity: An Asset and a Challenge*; *Discipline and Bullying: Real and Hyped*; *Resource Imbalances: Inside and Out*; *Community Engagement: Island or Hub?*



The principles are presented again in the body of the report, augmented by lists of *Community Suggestions*. These lists capture suggested steps for upholding each principle that were proposed by community members at forums or in interviews.

In some cases, these suggested actions relate to multiple principles, but we've tried to list each idea beneath the principle it speaks to most directly. In cases where an idea shows up more than once, the phrasing has been tweaked to show exactly how the suggestion relates to a given principle.

At times, several suggested steps that would address a principle in different ways, based on differing values, are presented. The CCC team felt it was not its place to highlight one and discard the others.

Under each principle, Community Suggestions are grouped into clusters of steps with similar aims.

Occasionally, we list a possible action step which the CCC team developed while analyzing the forum results, but which wasn't explicitly raised during the forums. Those steps are marked as such.

To deliver a useful and readable report, the CCC team had to cull, curate and combine the hundreds upon hundreds of suggested actions offered during the 59 breakout groups at the seven public events. This inevitably involved some judgments by the team, but we've tried to err on the side of comprehensiveness and transparency. In that vein, full reports on all of the breakout sessions, written by the CCC moderators who led them, are included as links in Section VI and Section VII.

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# I. THE UPPER DARBY RISING PRINCIPLES

These principles seek to distill into 13 memorable phrases the many hopes, concerns, exhortations, caveats, anxieties, suggestions and demands expressed at the Upper Darby Rising forums. Each of the 13 is explained and elaborated in a few paragraphs.

The principles are grouped according to which UDR project theme - again: *Diversity, Discipline, Resource Imbalances and Community Engagement* - a given principle most directly addresses. If a principle speaks to multiple themes, the other themes are noted.

A vital point to understand: This set of principles does not amount to an action plan in itself. It does not intend or pretend to do so. Instead, view each Principle as a guidepost highlighting key concepts that emerged from the forums. The hope is that the district can keep these core concepts at front of mind as the Action Plan is developed and put it into practice across the school system.

## PRINCIPLES ADDRESSING DIVERSITY

### 1) Upper Darby's superpower is its diversity. Embrace it. Live it. Sell it.

Today's students will graduate to live, love and work in an America that will resemble the Upper Darby of today far more than it does, say, *The Brady Bunch*. These young graduates will need to be - and mostly want to be - fluent in a language of diversity that their elders often struggle to master.

So let's recognize and celebrate this fact: The astonishing, multi-hued, multilingual diversity of the Upper Darby community and student body is our school system's single greatest educational asset.

Yes, this diversity poses challenges that must be dealt with daily and honestly. But see Upper Darby's diversity clearly for what it is: a huge competitive advantage, not a drawback. It can make the Upper Darby schools a magnet for young families, great teachers and philanthropic support.

So, let's double down on diversity. Don't limit our recognition of Upper Darby's many hues, tastes and sounds to a special day here, a school event there. Let it flower throughout the curriculum, the school hallways, and the district's messaging to the community - not only to parents, but loudly and proudly to Realtors, politicians, foundation heads and potential teachers.

*This principle also addresses Community Engagement.*

## 2) Mirror (and understand) the diversity of the student body

These two things can both be true at the same time:

1) Students in every school, of every race, ancestry, native land, gender and orientation, deserve to see adult role models (teachers and more) who share traits with them. Such adults are a reassurance, an inspiration, a support and a refuge for students who feel different or demeaned in any way.

2) Any teacher or staffer, regardless of race, ancestry, native land, gender or orientation, could be the one who is able to reach, guide, inspire and mentor a given student. (This is why cultural competence, which the district has been working to build for several years, is a powerful tool all good teachers should want to have in their toolbox - and which the district should be eager to help them develop and use.)

Upper Darby must exponentially increase its recruitment of educators of color - and its success at retaining them through consistent, sensitive professional support. It can deploy its extraordinary diversity - and its superior grasp of the value of that diversity - as a powerful tool in recruitment. By boldly leveraging this resource, this superpower, the District can counter stereotypes and offset perceptions that Upper Darby somehow lags behind other, richer systems.

Changing staff composition will be a long-term quest. In the interim, and beyond, the District can also work to reflect diversity back to its students and parents by inviting in as speakers, coaches, club advisers etc. the community members who embody Upper Darby's multiethnic, multilingual variety.

*This principle, in the way it recommends tapping into the diversity of the broader community, also connects to Community Engagement.*

### 3) R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Find out what it means to *me!*

Public schools *can* teach values. And none is more important than *respect*. Respect is not taught by a single course or training. It is taught by *infusing* each school and every school day with a culture of respect. This in turn can *defuse* the problems that might otherwise take hold in a diverse school community like ours.

Respect is a value that upholds all and teaches all - students, staff, faculty, parents, visitors.

Expect *everyone* to learn and demonstrate the *skills of* respect: putting one's ego and status second to another's need; accepting and appreciating difference; addressing implicit bias; actively learning about others; embracing the norms and sacrifices required of all if the school community is to thrive.

Begin early in teaching students to respect difference. Make it a habit around the district to discuss questions such as these: What does it mean to respect someone for themselves, not as a means to an end? How do you show that respect? How might you want to have respect shown back to you? What are the *productive* ways of responding to the misunderstandings or conflicts that arise when cultures with different customs and traditions come in contact?

In support of this principle, the UDR forums overflowed with suggestions for how to get the students from the district's very distinct elementary schools familiar and friendly with one another before they get thrown together in secondary schools: joint picnics and field trips, youth sports, joint fundraisers, school exchange visits and so on.

*This principle, in the way it could improve school climates, also addresses Discipline.*

### 4) Everyone needs coaching. Everyone can coach.

Community voices at the UDR forums were clear. Just like Americans as a whole, district personnel could benefit from a deeper grounding in some truths about:

- The huge, enduring role of racism in our nation's history.
- Systemic racism in our society today.
- The universal human failing of implicit bias.

- How to learn about and navigate differences in culture and norms among groups.

Fostering that deeper grasp is urgent, indispensable work for the district if it wants *Excellence with Equity* to bloom.

This work flowers best, though, if it is framed and practiced as a shared, humble, patient quest. It is not achieved simply through one-off trainings, particularly ones set up so that the “enlightened” can instruct the “benighted.” Avoid situations where some are demonized and others held up as exempt from criticism.

No one here is perfect - just as no one is utterly wrong. No person’s experiences and feelings should be treated as beside the point.

Think more in terms of *coaching*, rather than training. Coaching is not once and done. It is on-going, always available and thrives on mutual trust.

What’s more - and this is crucial - *everyone* can benefit from coaching. Even those who excel at what they do. Fortune 500 CEO’s have coaches. So do champions like Serena Williams, LeBron James and Tom Brady. This work will go best if everyone acknowledges they have more to learn. And that anyone might have something useful to add to the learning.

While the specific and grievous traumas, historic and ongoing, that the African-American/Black Diaspora community has experienced are central to what must be honestly explored, it also will be vital to hear and honor the stories and experiences of other communities and cultures. In a community where dozens of languages are spoken, where residents hail from many lands, hundreds upon hundreds of stories must be heard - and their power to teach valued. Diversity has myriad dimensions, including class and gender identity. Honor them all.

This principle, in its focus on cultivating broad and deep cultural competence, also addresses *Discipline and Community Engagement*.

## PRINCIPLE ADDRESSING DISCIPLINE

### 5) They’re children, not fodder for a school-to-prison pipeline.

Let us run schools where no child ever is given up on and discarded into that pipeline.

Uphold norms and maintain a stable school climate through a culture of curiosity, not one of control. Ask the preventative *why of* problematic behavior rather than just the punitive *what*.

Continue to educate staff and parents in the principles of trauma-informed care. The purpose there is not to excuse misbehavior but to anticipate and prevent problems, while addressing those that do occur in the most productive, lasting way. Favor restorative justice over suspensions and handcuffs.

Involve all four corners of the discipline issue when addressing it: school staff, students, parents, community. A key to a healthy school climate is making sure every child is known well by - and has trust in - at least one adult in the school. Consult and involve this adult when issues arise.

When incidents occur, get all sides of the story before deciding a response - and communicate decisions to the parents of all students involved in the incident, not just the ones being disciplined (i.e. don't leave victims' families in the dark).

The District should engage students in the work of keeping their school climate healthy, continuing to refine its Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), youth court and restorative justice programs. Enlist, engage and support parents in helping students grasp and comply with social norms and school rules.

## PRINCIPLES ADDRESSING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

### 6) Upper Darby is a vibrant rainbow, so communicate in more than one color

The UDR forums showed that our school leaders score highly with parents and community members on the traits of transparency and willingness to inform. Where we need to improve is in sharing information in the preferred languages of our parents, using the tools and modes that are most familiar and accessible to them. To know what those preferences are, we need to be proactive in surveying our community regularly. We need to find resources to bolster our translation and interpretation services. And we need to make sure all staff and faculty are aware of all the tools we have to communicate effectively with our diverse community - and know how to access or use them.

*This principle also addresses Diversity.*

## 7) Listening is leading. Make the UDR approach a way of life.

Communication that is all *Send* and no *Receive* is not effective. Any new policy or practice will be better conceived and better received, will take hold quicker and last longer, if the path to reaching that decision begins with 360-degree outreach and listening. By 360 degrees, we mean anyone with a stake in the decision - parents, students, principals, staff, community partners, township officials etc.

Deep listening is not something that comes naturally to humans - or organizations made up of humans. It is a skill, which must be learned, practiced, honed over time. It is work - but work with a tremendous return on the time invested.

Public trust, buy-in and patience with the Excellence with Equity action plan will grow in proportion to the degree that the entire initiative, not just its opening phase, is founded upon active outreach and listening to all corners of the Upper Darby community.

A vital step in listening as leadership is responding effectively to input, showing people you've heard what they said and detailing what you will do in response. Try genuinely to act upon their suggestions and concerns. When you find that you can't, pay people the respect of explaining why you went in a different direction. This demonstrates authentic listening as well.

Besides upping its own listening game, the district can also play a role in connecting different parts of its community that now do not know one another well and fostering productive dialogue among them.

*This principle also addresses Diversity.*

## 8) Call the community to the work, then partner in the doing

As the Upper Darby community emerges from the pandemic, as well as an intense year of racial reckoning and nearly a decade of state disinvestment in public education, much work needs to be done, many challenges addressed.

While the parents and community stakeholders who attended the forums largely agreed they wanted the district to be more of a "hub" than an "island," they were often quick to add that

they don't want the district to overload its plate and lose focus on its central, indispensable mission: educating children. Most view the district as underfunded, making it risky to take on too many new challenges.

That said, they don't want the district, when it sees a systemic problem, simply to shrug in frustration. They think the district can play a vital role in addressing some of the systemic, societal issues that impact children's ability to learn: the role of a catalyst.

A catalyst calls attention and gets things rolling, without having to run the show. The district can identify a problem, connect and convene the right stakeholders - and take its rightful seat at the table - without having to direct or fund a whole project.

A case in point discussed at several forums, above all the business one: the dearth of after-school programs in the community, which stresses parents, fuels behavior problems, frustrates business owners and harms student achievement. No forum participants thought the district could solve this problem by itself; many felt the district *could* be the key first mover, highlighting the scope of the problem and cajoling the right stakeholders to the table.

*This principle also addresses Resource Imbalances and Discipline.*

## 9) Offer a menu of ways to engage, then invite parents to feast

Recognize that, while parents all care about their child's school, they vary widely in the amount of disposable income and time they have to contribute. Create and promote a parental engagement menu that offers multiple ways of contributing - not just treasure, but time and talent as well. Of course, create this with input from parents.

List - and show that you value and appreciate - small steps that can be done from home and require only minutes - along with those parental projects that involve extensive time at school or large sums of money. And express all this in the language of welcome and invitation, not of demand and expectation.

*This principle also addresses Resource Imbalances and Diversity.*

## PRINCIPLES ADDRESSING RESOURCE IMBALANCES

### 10) To fix holes in equity, think holistically

Internal resource imbalances that hamper the pursuit of *Excellence with Equity* come in at least three forms: facilities, faculty and opportunities. The area of student opportunities also subdivides into curricular (e.g. enrichment classes like art, music and languages, and AP courses, as well as class size) and extracurricular (school trips, sports facilities, uniforms and equipment, support for art exhibits and performances).

Complicating our situation here in Upper Darby, conversations at the forums show that the *perception* of inequality often lingers long after the past situation that fed the perception has ceased to be true. Case in point: much of the discussion about differences between the district's two middle schools.

Even as we acknowledge that budgetary limitations beyond local control (see Principle 11) limit our ability to fix all resource imbalances as swiftly as parents would like, our leadership needs to do (and to be seen as doing) regular assessments of glaring inequities. These should be followed by a plan with clear timetables (even if they involve years, not weeks) for addressing them.

As for extracurricular inequities, be vigilant to avoid situations where students from more affluent catchments or households get to enjoy school-sponsored opportunities denied to other students. These episodes can erode the self-esteem of the disappointed students and corrode belief in the district's commitment to equity. What's more, the inequities are often invisible to more fortunate families, eliminating any impetus for them to step up.

Seek, though, to address this problem with an "add on" not a "take away" approach. Taking away opportunities from those that have long enjoyed them may fuel an "us vs. them" mentality which could seriously harm the district as a whole.

Explore ideas for more whole-district fundraisers, which would feed a pool of money earmarked to ensure equitable access to things such as field trips, clubs, arts performances and sports. Explore multiple ways for parents, students and neighborhoods that don't face resource challenges to support equitable access for those who do.

Focus the quest to ensure equity on the desired impact of a program, not the specific details of the traditional approach. If you can find a cheaper, more equitable way to achieve the educational goal, then choose that over the inequitable tradition.

*This principle also addresses Diversity.*

## 11) Home in on Harrisburg, but look beyond it, too

A paradox percolated throughout the forums: Participants were somewhat aware of the “Outside” component of the Resource Imbalances theme i.e. how state funding formulas shortchange Upper Darby and “turn ZIP code into destiny” for children.

But they were more keenly aware that their own local school taxes are high - and, looking at the physical state of some district schools, they often wonder where their money goes.

Consider a two-step plan to encourage grassroots pressure upon state lawmakers to treat inner-ring districts like Upper Darby more fairly:

- 1) Do more, in clear, simple language, to educate taxpayers in how school taxes and budget works. (Try participatory budgeting exercises, perhaps.)
- 2) Invite district residents to lobby state lawmakers for more aid, giving them sound, factual messaging and tools to do so.

Equally important, though, is to recognize that the District has other potential sources of support it has not tapped in systematic ways. In these times of ferment for social justice, an Upper Darby school system that is on fire to execute a top-notch action plan for Excellence with Equity would have a great story to sell to individual donors, as well as corporate and nonprofit philanthropies. To do so would require a cogent development plan and some dedicated development expertise.

Also, remember another huge, under-leveraged asset - the good will, time, talent and donations of local community organizations and individuals.

*This principle also addresses Community Engagement.*

## 12) Serve *all* the children - and let the community know that you do

By federal and state law, the Upper Darby School District provides vital services to students who do not attend its schools, who instead go to religious, private or charter schools, or are home-schooled. Because of its public-minded spirit, the district also works collaboratively in other ways to support the educational services those children receive.

At the Catholic parish community focus group, it was clear that many in that sector were unaware of the scope of support provided. It was equally clear, though, that some who benefit from the services appreciate them greatly.

Because educating all children should be its core value, the District should view these services to non-enrolled children as intrinsic to its mission, not an undue burden. Always remembering that parochial and other schools help UDSD manage its crowding problem, the District should continue, even step up, its efforts to work with those schools on collaborative projects.

That said, it should not be shy about letting the parents of those students - and the community as a whole - know about all that UDSD does to support Excellence with Equity for their children as well. Share with non-public school parents information on how many of their tax dollars get devoted to these efforts. Steady communication about these budget facts should help with the rallying of the whole community behind fair school funding as discussed in Principle 11.

*This principle also addresses Community Engagement and Diversity.*

## 13) Learn from the pandemic

No one wanted to be forced to experiment on the fly with modes of virtual and hybrid learning. No one wanted to spend half their lives on Zoom. No parents wanted to find out how well their kids could learn while stuck at home and tied to a computer screen.

But we had to and we did. In the process, we all learned some things that open up possibilities going forward. Let's identify and make use of what our collective crash course in virtual learning and communication has taught us about how to use technology to address inequities.

What new, virtual modes of parent-teacher communication, community outreach and input, and student work from home should we incorporate into our "new normal" once the pandemic subsides?

Using the equity lens, how can we use digital technology to foster connection with and ease burdens on parents who are working multiple jobs to make ends meet? What do we need to know about their access to and use of digital tech to make those possibilities real?

How can we use everyone's hard-won facility with virtual learning to provide enhanced remedial and enrichment opportunities to students? Can we use virtual meeting rooms to enhance busy residents' sense of who their neighbors are and what's really going on in their local schools?

*This principle also addresses Resource Imbalances, Diversity and Community Engagement.*

## II. DETAILED PROJECT TIMELINE

**August 2020** - Two table-setting meetings with Central Office personnel and school directors. These sessions generate a list of themes to be explored and key stakeholders and communities to be engaged.

**August-September 2020** - The Catalyst Community Conversations team conducts in-depth interviews with 17 school system stakeholders, asking what aspects of the school system in their view worked well and not so well. This diverse group of 19 includes public and parochial school parents, faith leaders, district union officials, recent graduates, nonprofit leaders, members of the immigrant community, and the township police chief.

These interviews propel the initiative in two major ways: 1) They shape a list of four overarching themes that provided the agenda and structure for subsequent public forums. 2) They identify a group of engaged citizens willing to serve an ad-hoc advisory group to the CCC-led engagement initiative.

**September-November 2020** - The advisory group meets three times in this period. The group approves CCC's proposed list of four themes: *Discipline and Bullying: Real and Hyped; Resource Imbalances: Inside and Out; Diversity: An Asset and a Challenge; Civic Engagement: An Island or a Hub?* The group also endorses CCC's recommendation that the initiative be dubbed Upper Darby Rising, with a tagline of Seeking Excellence with Equity.

The advisory group pushes for a change in CCC's original plan for seven communitywide forums. The revised plan calls for an initial round of four sessions aimed at specific, often-underheard segments of the Upper Darby Community: the African American/Black diaspora community;

the Catholic parish community; the small-business community, and the immigrant community. These four opening sessions would be followed by - and serve as a springboard - to three communitywide forums in early 2021.

A page on the district website devoted to Upper Darby Rising launches in November.

**December 2020-January 2021** - The four initial forums are held with an overall community participation of 141 people (plus numerous district personnel who participated as observers).

**February-March 2021** - The three concluding communitywide forums are postponed from original dates to allow for more outreach with school-based incentives. The revised outreach strategy works. The forums are held in late Feb. and early March, with community participation of 221, plus 32 district observers.

### III. THE ADVISORY GROUP

#### A) ITS MEMBERS



A screenshot of a slide re: the advisory group that was shown at community forums.

The Upper Darby Rising advisory group was formed out of three pools of candidates:

District board members and Central Office personnel.

1. People from the initial group of stakeholder interviews who expressed interest in serving.
2. People whose names were proposed as possible candidates during the interviews.

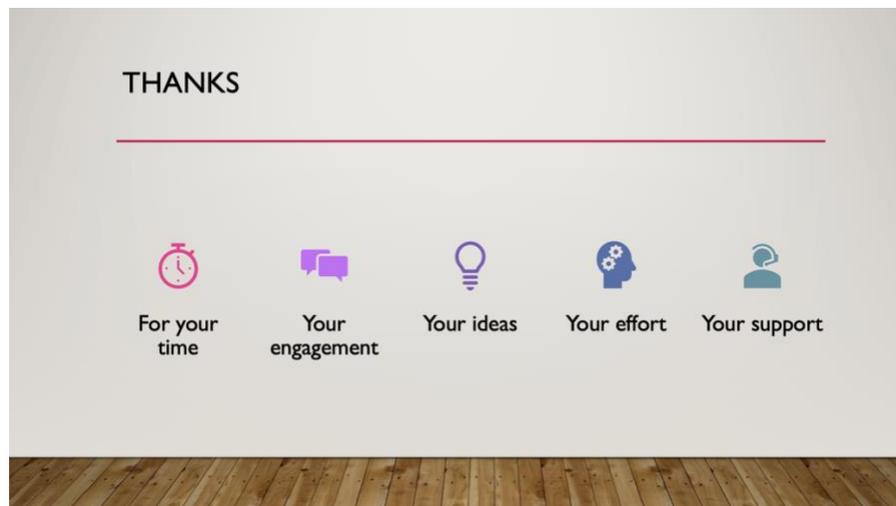
Here are the members of the advisory group:

- Tim Bernhardt, Upper Darby Township police chief
- Holly Clark, president of the Highland Park Elementary School Home and School Association
- Nick Coombs, a middle school Spanish teacher in the district
- Joe Coyne, a parent of students at St. Bernadette, active in youth sports
- Harry Dietzler, executive and artistic director of the Upper Darby Performing Arts Center
- Alison Dobbins, a district parent who works for the Township of Upper Darby
- Howard Goodison, a 2014 UDHS graduate whose sister is now in the high school
- Rev. Nate Goodson, pastor of Prayer Chapel Church of God in Christ; executive director of the Guardian Association of PA; former township councilman
- Arnold Jones, parent, small businessman, member of the Coalition of Black Fathers
- William Kaplan, consultant, Multicultural Community Family Services
- Melanie Masciantonio, President, Upper Darby Education Association
- Kim McDevitt, President, Upper Darby Education Support Professionals Association
- Shawn Oliver, coach, 69<sup>th</sup> St. Wildcats

- Rev. David Shaheen, minister, Christ Community Lutheran Church; head, Upper Darby Community Outreach Corp.

Here are the district leaders and administrators in the advisory group:

- Edward Brown, president of the school board
- John Council, assistant superintendent for personnel and equity
- Gina Curry, school board member
- Melissa Figueroa-Douglas, supervisor of equity, chief contact with CCC team
- Greg Manfre, director of secondary education
- Daniel McGarry, superintendent of schools
- Rachel Mitchell, school board member
- Frank Salerno, director of elementary education
- The late Leah Dawes, then a school board member
- Damien Warsavage, school board member



*A slide used to end an advisory group meeting.*

An important distinction: This group was formed by the Catalyst Community Conversations team to advise and assist in the opening community engagement phase of UDR. It is not to be confused with the as-yet-unformed Upper Darby Rising Community Advisory Board that will be formed by the superintendent to advise in the crafting and implementation of the school district's Action Plan for Excellence with Equity.

Some members of this initial, ad hoc advisory group likely will also serve on this second, longer-term community advisory board, but some may drop off while new people are invited by the District to serve. The CCC team has collected a list of forum participants who indicated interest in serving; the list will be shared with Superintendent McGarry.

## B) ITS WORK AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The advisory group has met four times to date: Oct. 19, Oct. 26, Nov. 11 and Jan. 14. It is likely to meet at least one more time to review this report.

Here have been the roles of the advisory group:

- Provide feedback and advice on all key aspects of the UDR initiative e.g. the very name of the project; the choice and wording of the four key themes; scheduling of forums; the design of forums.
- Assist in promotion and outreach of community forums: advising on key groups and connectors in community; sharing information and flyers with networks; social media posts; direct one-to-one recruitment of participants.
- Attend forums and provide feedback on what worked and what needs fixing.
- Review and give feedback on the draft of CCC's final report.

Here are some of the vital contributions made by the group:

- Swift, enthusiastic endorsement of the Upper Darby Rising name and mission statement, which helped create momentum in the fall of 2020.

- Strong encouragement to the CCC team to be bold and insistent in centering race - and its complex workings in the school system - as a key focus for the community forums.
- The strong recommendation, which was adopted, to divide the planned schedule of seven public forums into two segments. The first segment of four events would be designed and promoted as intended for a group of community stakeholders who felt their voices often were unheard or muffled: Blacks, the Catholic parish community, small business owners and immigrants.
- The proposed wording, after a deep, lively, intergenerational discussion, of “for the African-American and Black Diaspora Community” as the most inclusive description of the first of these four forums.
- Enriching, but mostly positive feedback on the CCC teams list of four key themes.
- Varied and persistent efforts to help the CCC team connect with and pitch the project to different parts of the diverse Upper Darby community. (More detail on members’ contributions can be found in the Outreach and Participation section of this report.)

## IV. THE FOUR THEMES

In July and August 2020, the Catalyst Community Conversations team conducted in-depth interviews with 19 people about their experiences with and impressions of the Upper Darby School District. These stakeholders represented a variety of roles, identities, and connections in relation to the school district – parents, teachers, taxpayers, recent graduates, township staff, pastors, advocates, consultants, and nonprofit staff involved with youth. They represented as much as possible the age, racial, ethnic, social, gender and sexuality, and economic diversity in the District and Township.

All but one of the advisory group’s community members was interviewed during this phase. Also interviewed were:

- Richard Blye, a community activist.

- Lou Devlieger, a former district superintendent.
- Jennifer Schoener, Executive Director at the Upper Darby Arts and Education Foundation.
- Kerry Sebro-O’Neill, a district parent and employee who is a West Indies native.
- Joanne Sharma, president of the Drexel Hills Mothers Group.
- Lee Steube, youth librarian in the Upper Darby Township Library system.

Some of the interviewees send or sent children to District schools; others decided to send their children elsewhere. They also lived in neighborhoods across the District. The Catalyst Community Conversations team asked for and got their candid stories and observations about what the school system does well and where it falls short.

The CCC Team has distilled those hours of conversation into a list of four cross-cutting themes, which formed the foundation for the community conversation on excellence and equity that came next.

They were reviewed, adjusted and approved by the advisory group.



## Discipline and Bullying – Real and Hyped

Upper Darby School District is hardly unusual in having problems with disruptive behavior and bullying that can stress faculty and alarm parents. It's also not unusual in that such issues seem worse in its middle schools. Disruptive behavior - and the perception of disruptive behavior - is a common theme among the various communities. The interviews revealed the struggle to determine the degree to which it is actually a problem and the degree to which the perceptions are heightened by the age and ethnicities of the students. Some interviewees assert that poor student behavior requires greater discipline, etc.

Other interviewees insist implicit bias and a diversity mismatch may lead to disparate treatment of different students for the same behavior. They believe this might worsen both the reality and perception of behavioral issues in the schools. This, they say, is not only an equity issue in itself, but can also feed a sense of alienation and disrespect in some students, leading to more disruptive behavior.

Moreover, on a subtler level, some veteran faculty and staff may simply be more comfortable responding with warmth and familiarity to students who look like them and whose families have deep roots in the community. Other students from different backgrounds, not offered that same casual warmth, can notice the unequal treatment and feel hurt or devalued.

## Diversity – An Asset and a Challenge

In the interviews, more people than not said they count the Upper Darby School District community's ethnic, religious and social-economic diversity as powerful and positive, a community strength and a reason to send children to its schools. However, all acknowledge that this diversity can also spawn misunderstandings, tensions, grievances and pockets of isolation that the District, while certainly aware and well-meaning, must do a better job of recognizing and addressing.

A key issue is that the diversity of the District's faculty does not match that of the student body or the larger community, leading to concerns about implicit bias toward students, parents and other District staff. Some interviewees cited two (2) priorities in this regard: building a diverse recruitment pipeline and building up cultural competence among existing staff. Some said that past stumbles at staff training around bias and racism must be acknowledged, with lessons learned.

## Resource Imbalances – Inside and Out

Some interviewees said disparities in resources – books, materials, programs, extracurriculars, physical plant – among District schools seem apparent to them. The willingness and capacity of parents in some schools to raise money to support programs and extracurriculars for their children – while admirable in itself – tends to accentuate this inequity. What’s more, Upper Darby School District parents or students have to travel only a few miles, to Lower Merion, Radnor or Media to vividly see how unequally Pennsylvania’s system of education funding distributes opportunity based on zip code. How might the District work to eliminate internal equity gaps while marshaling its community’s energy and will to push for reform of their state’s systemic inequities? How might the District engage the various stakeholders to utilize the resources and expertise that exist within the community and with which they would like to become more actively involved?

## Community Engagement – An Island or a Hub?

Interviewees credit the District with a sincere desire to do better at connecting with all elements of its remarkably diverse community. Many said the District does a good job of letting the community know what’s going on in the schools. However, several pointed out that engagement is not just a matter of 'sending' but also 'receiving' and that the District may have the will but hasn’t yet found the way to operate as a true hub of community. They said the District has room to improve not just on soliciting feedback, but also showing that it has heard and done something with the input it solicits. Low parental involvement at some schools, they added, can’t be dismissed as a problem with the parents; it should be addressed creatively as the District’s job to solve.

People also acknowledge the District has an extraordinarily complex challenge here - serving a community that combines rooted, multigenerational tradition with an influx of newcomers from many different cultures. Parts of the community, some well-rooted, others lately arrived, could be described as "islands" - isolated from an active sense of belonging in the school community. Building bridges to these “islands” will require patience, creativity, sincerity, humility and persistence.

## V. OUTREACH AND PARTICIPATION

Outreach and promotion of the Upper Darby Rising initiative and its public forums proved to be challenging amid a pandemic. Parents were stressed and anxious, having to navigate virtual learning with their children and then, for some, a transition to the hybrid model.

By late 2020 and early 2021, when the first forums were held, many community members were experiencing profound “Zoom fatigue.” Extra effort was needed to persuade people to take on yet another virtual session. Meanwhile, District staff and faculty were busy coping with the cascade of challenges the pandemic had brought them.

Finally, Upper Darby Rising asked participants to be candid and thoughtful about that most tangled and sensitive of American topics: race and identity.

Despite all that, community attendance at the initiative’s seven public forums totaled 362, out of 933 who registered. In addition, 85 district personnel and officers took part as observers.

This robust turnout was fueled by the support of the community advisory group and herculean efforts by some Central Office staff and district teachers.

Linda Breitstein, a veteran community outreach expert, led the Catalyst Community Conversations piece of this effort.

The key player inside the Central Office was Melissa Figueroa-Douglas, the district’s supervisor of equity, who worked tirelessly on the project. She and Breitstein were in nearly daily contact, including weekends, from November through the final forum on March 1. Superintendent McGarry supported their efforts in an engaged, hands-on way. Aaronda Beauford, the district’s director of communications, worked with the CCC team, primarily Chris Satullo, to create and fill with content an Upper Darby Rising page on the district website.

While all contributed, several members of the advisory group went above and beyond in helping. With regard to outreach, these included: Joe Coyne and Alison Dobbs with the Catholic parish community; Nick Combs with the Spanish immigrant community; the Rev. Nate Goodson; and school board member Gina Curry, who was continuously active in urging her business contacts and neighbors to get involved.

The CCC team produced 10 short videos with messages from advisory group members and district officials promoting the final set of three communitywide forums. Starring in those

videos were: Superintendent McGarry; Assistant Superintendent John Council; supervisor of equity Figueroa-Douglas; school board members Curry and Rachel Mitchell; and advisory group members Joe Coyne, Rev. Nate Goodson, Arnold Jones, Holly Clark, and Tim Bernhardt, the township police chief.

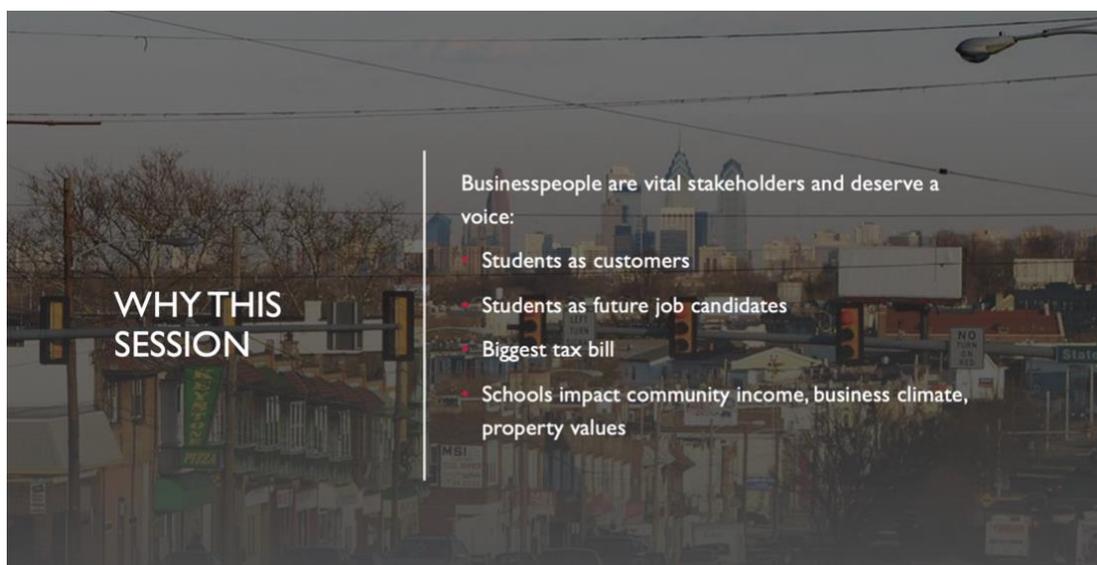
Flyers promoting the initiative and individual events were designed by Stacey Wilson of the CCC team.

A slightly different outreach strategy was used for each of the seven public events, tailored to the parts of the community being invited to each:

### African-American/Black Diaspora Forum – Dec. 10

- Advisory group members were asked to write individual outreach plans, which Breitstein collated into a “commitment chart.” Breitstein followed up with group members to supply flyers, offer support and check on progress.
- Registration was 146. The number of participants who signed onto the Zoom was 84, with 50 community members plus 34 district observers (administrators, faculty, staff and board members). This degree of “melt” between registrants and actual attendance has become commonplace for Zoom events as we move deep into the pandemic era.

### Business Community Forum – Jan. 5

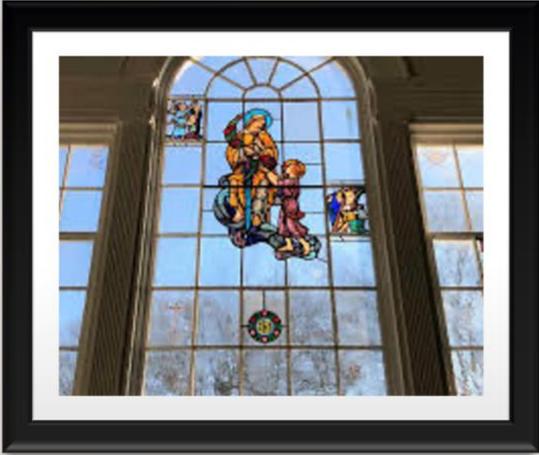


*A slide shown at the business community forum.*

- Breitstein and Figueroa-Douglas did in-person outreach among merchants at Barkley Square and along Lansdowne Ave. Visits were followed up with emails. Gina Curry actively recruited among her business contacts.
- Registration was 16. Actual attendance proved disappointing: 14, including five district observers. On the plus side, the quality of the discussion in the two breakout groups was quite high.

### Parish Community Forum – Jan. 7

- Breitstein delivered hundreds of flyers to five churches in Upper Darby: St. Laurence, St. Charles Borromeo, St. Andrew, St. Bernadette and St. Dorothy as well as to Monsignor Bonner and Archbishop Prendergast High School. Three advisory group members, Alison Dobbins, Joe Coyne and Harry Dietzler, were key to helping us make connections with priests and school secretaries.



## WHY THIS SESSION

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Members of parish communities are vital stakeholders and deserve a voice:

- Some send students to public schools
- They pay school taxes even if they don't use public schools
- Public school quality affects community climate, business climate, property values
- Parish schools serve non-Catholic students
- Parish school students get a menu of services from school district and IU

*A slide shown at the parish community forum.*

- St. Laurence's Rev. Jeffrey Rott shared a statement from the UDR team from the pulpit. Other parish priests offered to speak about Upper Darby Rising from the pulpit and school principals emailed digital flyers to parents.

- Registration was 82, with a high turnout percentage producing a Zoom group of 74, including 10 observers. After the first forum, we worked with Central Office staff to limit the number of observers to fit better with the expected community turnout, so we would not have breakouts with more observers than participants. For later forums, we also modified the rules on district personnel observers, so that, for example, teachers or board members who were also parents of a UDSD student could contribute to the discussion in their capacity as parents.

### Immigrant Community Forum – Jan 11



*A screenshot of the immigrant forum getting underway on Zoom.*

The team put special efforts into outreach for this forum because we knew this would be the most challenging group to recruit. During the open interview phase of the initiative, we had set up interviews with residents from the Latino, Muslim, Southeast Asian and Bengali communities and not one showed up for the session.

Eileen Caruso, the District ELL supervisor, provided invaluable assistance, along with her teachers. They collected names of people interested and shared the sign-up list with us so we could register them. Instead of asking people to use the multi-step Eventbrite registration site, we designed a flyer with a link to an easy Google registration page.

We sent flyers translated into Spanish, Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu and Arabic to the Welcome Center and to the Multicultural Community Family Services center.

The steps Breitstein took included:

- Spending two hours with Raya Fagg of the Upper Darby Welcome Center at the Township Building food distribution site, spoke to people on line and gave them flyers in their language.
- Going to mosques in the township to drop off flyers in Arabic and Bengali.
- Meeting with Rev. Stephen Keiser of Christ Lutheran Church. His church is home to many immigrants and houses the Haitian Church. The pastor mentioned the event in church and gave flyers to his congregants.
- Meeting with Sree Kanthsomajan, a community leader in Millbourne. He delivered flyers in Punjabi to all of the houses in his neighborhood.
- Visiting stores around 69<sup>th</sup> Street and informing managers/owners of businesses catering to immigrant communities about UDR and leaving flyers. St. Laurence holds Mass in Spanish and Vietnamese. Advisory group member Nick Coombs, a district Spanish teacher, handled outreach with the church deacon who handles the Spanish Mass. Breitstein also contacted a priest who conducts Mass in Vietnamese. The priest spread the word to that flock.

These efforts produced a sign-up list of 62. The actual turnout at the forum - 18 - was disappointing, in multiple ways. The effort to gain input from the Spanish-speaking community was not as successful as hoped. This is an area for improvement in future efforts.

Seven Vietnamese speakers who hadn't registered showed up, but because of the lack of advance notice, Vietnamese was not one of the seven languages for which we had arranged interpreters. The Creole interpreter experienced connectivity problems and could not take part. We adjusted as best we could on the fly and held an event with four breakout groups initially, later combined into three. Overall, counting one-to-one interviews and all seven forums, 53 members of the school district's immigrant populations took part in Upper Darby Rising.

### Community Forums – Feb 20, 22 and March 1

For the last three forums, Melissa Figueroa-Douglas led a coordinated effort with school principals to offer meaningful incentives for teachers and students to recruit people to the

events. In addition to the district-devised incentives, CCC offered prizes to students and community members who recruited the most people.

The CCC team wrote up a detailed social media schedule with posts and content list for use by the District communications team.

At the heart of that social media blitz were the 10 video testimonials by the advisory group and Central Office members that were produced by the CCC team.

Figueroa-Douglas worked with school principals to identify attractive incentives for students and parents to sign up. At the urging of one principal in a Zoom conference, the team added the phrase “Students Welcome” to the main flyer.

Working with Eileen Caruso, Breitstein used a free interpretation texting program called Talking Points to stay in touch with everyone who had mentioned needing interpretation services when they registered.

The team connected with Ebony Sims, a District Human Resource Specialist, so she could invite students from the middle and high schools.

A total of 241 people registered for the Feb. 20 forum. A total of 80 community participants signed onto the Zoom, plus 13 observers.

A total of 224 registered for the Feb. 22 event, with 73 showing up, plus 9 observers.

Registrations for March 1 totaled 183, with 68 signing onto the Zoom, plus 10 observers.

## VI. THE FIRST ROUND OF FORUMS

### A) THE CONCEPT AND DESIGN

The forums that opened UDR community engagement were aimed at four segments of the community that the district administration and the advisory board believed have often felt unheard or underrepresented. They are:

- The African-American and Black Diaspora Community
  - The Catholic Parish Community
  - The Small Business Community

## · The Immigrant Community

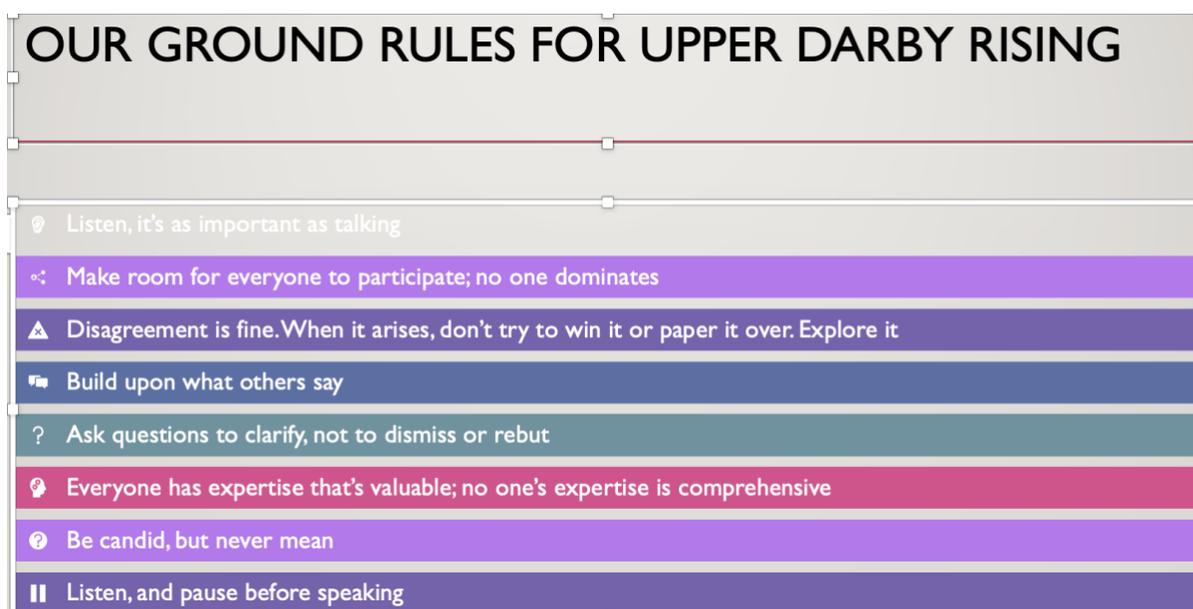
Each session was held on Zoom and lasted about two hours and 15 minutes. Each began with a welcome from Superintendent McGarry. At the top of each forum, participants were asked to post in the Zoom chat their answer to a simple prompt - e.g. *What's your holiday wish for the district? Or: When you hear the phrase "Upper Darby schools," what word or phrase comes to mind?* This helped people get in the mode of expressing opinions, while letting the whole group get a sense of who was present.

The core Catalyst Community Conversations team then reviewed the goals and activities of the initiative to that point, including the reasons why the project team and advisory group felt that it was important to hold a dialogue with that forum's specific stakeholder group.

The bulk of this plenary session ([the basic slide deck for which can be viewed here](#)) was devoted to reviewing in depth the four key themes to emerge from the stakeholder interviews, as ratified and enriched by advisory group input.

After an opening plenary of 20-25 minutes, those present were divided into breakout groups of 4 to 7 people, each with a mix of community participants and district observers. The breakouts lasted from 90 to 100 minutes, depending on how well the opening part of a forum adhered to the desired timetable. Each group had a trained and experienced moderator from the CCC team. Overall, the cohort of CCC moderators reflected well the diversity of the Upper Darby community. (A list of moderators can be found in Section IX.).

The CCC team used eight ground rules to guide the discussion:



CCC's structured dialogue process relied on the appeal of storytelling to overcome participants' potential anxiety and to unlock their insights and observations about the school system.

Breakout sessions began with discussion of two of the themes: Discipline and Bullying and Resource Imbalances. Moderators asked people to share stories about how each theme cropped up and was addressed by the district. Participants were asked to share positive as well as problematic anecdotes. The moderators then led the group through an analysis of the story: What did it say about skills, assets, relationships either present or absent?

The theme about diversity was framed by a different set of questions: *Do you feel diversity is more of an asset or a challenge for this school community? Do you feel like you yourself get treated more like an asset or a challenge?*

Because of time constraints, moderators were urged to devote ample time to these three themes, with the fourth one – Community Engagement – treated as optional. Some breakout groups got to discuss it; others did not. Moderators wrote detailed reports on each breakout session. All the moderator reports from each event are combined into an overall report, presented in Part B of this section.

The whole group gathered for a final session. People were asked to put their key takeaway from their breakout session in the chat; samples of these are included in the reports on each of the four sessions. Then the CCC team led the whole group in a short discussion of what they'd like to see the district do with Community Engagement.

All participants were informed about and invited to the set of three communitywide forums in the second round of UDR's opening phase of community feedback

**NEXT STEPS**

- EVALUATION SURVEY
- OUR REPORT ON THIS EVENING; YOU'LL GET A COPY
- FOLLOW UDR ON SCHOOL DISTRICT WEBSITE
- EARLY JANUARY: THREE MORE FOCUS GROUPS
- LATE JANUARY: THREE GENERAL COMMUNITY FORUMS; YOU'RE INVITED; BRING A FRIEND.
- FEBRUARY: CATALYST COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS SUBMITS REPORT ON THE PHASE I DIALOGUES

Slide shown at end of forums in the first round.

## C) THE INPUT FROM THE FORUMS



Here are links to the four reports summarizing what was said and learned at each of the opening forums:

- [Dec. 10, 2020 - The African-American and Black Diaspora Community](#)
- [Jan. 5, 2021 - The Small Business Community](#)
- [Jan. 7, 2021 - Catholic Parish Community](#)
- [Jan. 20, 2021 - The Immigrant Community](#)

## C) PARTICIPANT EVALUATIONS

A link to an online evaluation survey was posted at each forum, then sent by email to all participants. A total of 40 evaluation forms were filled by people who attended one of the four forums in the opening round. Here is a summary of results, with the wording of each question.

### **How satisfied were you with the forum?**

A strong majority of respondents said they were either satisfied (45%) or very satisfied (40%). The remainder said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

### **What were your key take-aways from your forum?**

The majority of respondents said they appreciated that the school district convened the forums and showed “an openness to receive feedback.” Some described the district as “enthusiastic about involving the community and listening to community ideas and perceptions” and “ready and willing to take steps to improve.”

- Another common thread noted “a desire among stakeholders to collaborate in order to better elevate and serve the needs of a richly diverse community” and “want[ing] our students and schools to succeed.” “Families and the District recognize that engagement is important and both sides seem ready.”
- Another often-noted take-away was the importance of communication between the UDSD and the African American and immigrant communities.
- Some also noted that “it was good to hear that the community all wants to strive for the same thing,” that we “share experiences and concerns” and “all see the same problems.”
- “Systemic racism and inequity require school-community-family collaboration” and “much work needs to be done.”

### **As you discussed the themes in small groups, was there anything missing in the way the themes were framed?**

- The vast majority of respondents said the themes “covered it well,” and were “a good place to start.” They said the themes were “thought-provoking and assisted in getting to the root cause” of participant concerns. At the same time, some also thought it important to delve into the themes more deeply, particularly around discipline and bullying. And some noted that the themes didn’t tackle issues that specifically focus on black students and the black community.
- In addition, some thought other issues needed attention, including mental health and the culture/energy within organizations.

**As you discussed the themes, was there anything in particular where you thought “That’s right!”?**

Many respondents thought the themes were “right on” and led to “awesome” and “interesting” conversations. Those who went into more depth focused on:

- “Great assets that should be celebrated and can make UDSD a standout district in PA including the diverse population and arts and music program.”
- “Great opportunities for collaboration between public and private schools.”
- “The challenges faculty face in discussing/moderating conversations about race, politics, religion, etc.”

They also particularly pointed to the following kinds of concerns as “right on:”

- The challenges of diversity and inclusion were often cited here – the need to hire a more diverse and inclusive school staff and meeting the needs of a very diverse community.
- Disparities across schools.

- Bullying.
- Diversity as a strength and a challenge, and that “we have to learn to be more accepting of others.”
- Communication.
- Conversations about funding, suspension rates, hiring practices and training.

Others noted that this initiative for community involvement itself was “right on.”

**What did you think was the most productive part of the forum? Why?**

The vast majority named the small groups with parents/community members talking and school personnel/board members listening. They gave the following kinds of reasons:

- They were “non-judgmental” and “safe spaces for productive conversations.”
- They were “effective ways for people to engage with each other.”
- “We could join together to come up with positive solutions.”
- “Meeting new community members ... and appreciating and respective diversity of thought.”
- “Our common values and goals shone through!”
- They allowed folks to “hear different perspectives” (including students), and hearing from other adults.
- Hearing the voices and needs of young people (students).

## VII. THE SECOND ROUND OF FORUMS

### A) THE DECISION TO DELAY

The three communitywide forums that concluded this phase of UDR were originally scheduled for late January. On Jan. 12, with signups for the forums looking thin, the CCC team decided in concert with Superintendent McGarry to delay the events by a month to allow time for a new social media-boosted, incentive-laden recruitment strategy to take hold.

The team's sense was that the combined impact of the pandemic, the shift to a hybrid learning system, and the holiday season had so occupied the bandwidth of parents and district staff that little was left to devote to promoting or learning about UDR events.

Led by Melissa Figueroa-Douglas, district principals devised a plan to deploy incentives like a school-wide pizza party to encourage students to get their parents, or themselves, to take part in a forum. The effort was particularly successful at Bywood Elementary School, which walked away with the prize for the school with the most adults attending a forum. The outreach plan also attracted a few high school students, whose presence and input added a lot to the breakout sessions where they participated.

### B) THE CONCEPT AND DESIGN



*The superintendent speaking during the welcoming video.*

Three communitywide forums were held on Zoom in February and March. Each lasted about two hours and 15 minutes. One was held on a Saturday morning to provide a convenient option for working parents and for students.

Each session began with a [welcoming video](#) produced by the District, featuring Superintendent McGarry, Assistant Superintendent Council, equity supervisor Figueroa-Douglas and several school board members, each commenting on the goals of Upper Darby Rising.

At the top of each forum, participants were asked to post in the Zoom chat their answers to several simple prompts - e.g. *Why did you decide to take part today? When you hear the phrase "Upper Darby schools," what word or phrase comes to mind?*

This was designed to help people get in the mode of expressing opinions, while letting the whole group get a sense of who was present. The prompts generated robust responses in the chat.

The core Catalyst Community Conversations team then reviewed the goals and activities of the initiative to that point.

The bulk of this plenary session ([the slide deck for which can be viewed here](#)) was devoted to reviewing in depth the four key themes that the UDR dialogues set out to explore.

After an opening plenary of 20-25 minutes, those present were divided into breakout groups of 4 to 7 people, each with a mix of community participants and district observers. The breakouts lasted from 90 to 100 minutes, depending on how well the opening part of a forum adhered to the desired timetable.

Each group had a trained and experienced moderator from the CCC team. Overall, the cohort of CCC moderators reflected well the diversity of the Upper Darby community. (A list of moderators can be found in Section IX.)

The CCC team used the same eight ground rules as before to guide the discussions:

- Listen, it's as important as talking.
- Make room for everyone to participate; no one dominates.
- Disagreement is fine. When it arises, don't try to win it or paper it over. Explore it.
- Build upon what others say.

- Ask questions to clarify, not to dismiss or rebut.
- Everyone has expertise that's valuable; no one's expertise is comprehensive.
- Be candid, but never mean.
- Listen, and pause before speaking.

These communitywide forums posed a particular challenge in terms of structuring breakout sessions. Some participants had already taken part in one or more of the sessions in the first round. For others, this was their introduction to UDR, its dialogue method and its core themes. The process had to work with both groups.

The solution chosen was to frame the discussions around anecdotes and quotes drawn from the earlier forums. The hope was to show repeat participants that their previous input had been heard and valued, while giving newcomers an accessible point of entry to the conversation. Then the task of the moderators became to push the groups to go beyond merely discussing the issues to proposing action steps and guiding principles for addressing them.

The process – [documented on the linked slide deck](#) – asked participants to react to stories about the Discipline and Bullying, and the Resource Imbalances themes, while reviewing a set of real statements made in earlier sessions about Diversity. As with the earlier forums, a lesser amount of time was reserved for Community Engagement per se, because ideas about that topic kept bubbling up during discussion of the other issues.

The concluding plenary entailed participants sharing, via chat or out loud, their key takeaways from the breakouts and a rundown of next steps in the process. A sampling of chat comments can be found at the end of each of the overall reports on the three sessions provided just below in Part B of this section.

## C) THE INPUT FROM THE COMMUNITY FORUMS

Here are the links to the three reports summarizing what was learned at three communitywide forums:



[Feb. 20, 2021](#)

[Feb. 22, 2021](#)

[March 1, 2021](#)

## D) PARTICIPANT EVALUATIONS

A link to an evaluation survey was shared on Zoom at the end of every forum, then sent via email to every participant afterward. A total of 37 responses were received.

### **What were your key take-aways from the Upper Darby Rising community forum?**

Respondents framed many take-aways, including:

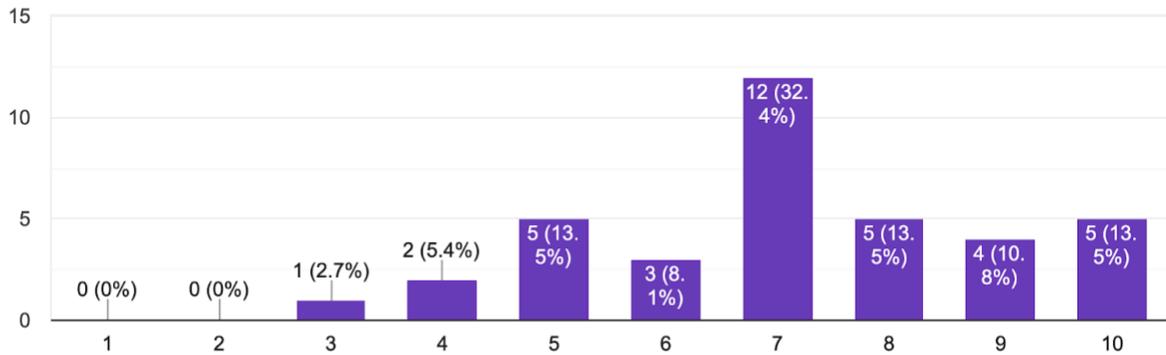
- “There’s still a lot of work to be done.”
- “The UDSD project’s focus on the treatment of students of color, on diversity and inclusiveness is important.”
- “It’s positive and can be productive that the UDSD is inviting the community into a conversation about these challenging issues and must still do more.”

- “Every community wants change for the better and we are willing to work with each other and the District to achieve that change.”

**On a scale of 1 (Very Pessimistic) to 10 (Very Optimistic), how hopeful are you that the district will act on/respond to what it heard in these community forums?**

On a scale of 1 (Very Pessimistic) to 10 (Very Optimistic), how hopeful are you that the district will act on/respond to what it heard in these community forums.

37 responses



**Why do you feel that way? Why did you give the rating you provided on the previous question?**

Reasons given included:

Very optimistic (score of 9 or 10)

- “UDHS has many programs to help better serve the students.”
- “This was a huge undertaking to begin with ... I’m certain this is just the beginning of further action and deep discussion.”

Optimistic (score of 7 or 8)

- “I believe the current administration and board members are committed to this change.”

- “I believe Upper Darby Rising is the first step for betterment.”
- “There are many caring community members and mobilizing their positive energy could be fabulously powerful.”

Neutral (score of 5 or 6)

- “Everyone is doing a lot of talking; I would like to see more follow-up and action.”
- “Because it’s been the way it has for so long.”

Pessimistic (score of 3 or 4)

- “It was disheartening to hear that the issue of a diverse teaching staff has been raised but not enough is done about it. ... This is a necessary long-term commitment.”
- These issues “were not any different from when I went to school here.”
- “It’s all about MONEY!!!... property taxes alone will not make it.... The state of PA is notoriously known for not prioritizing public education.”

Very pessimistic

- No written responses.

**How would you know whether the district really heard the community during these forums?**

Participants stressed the importance of actual changes being put into place:

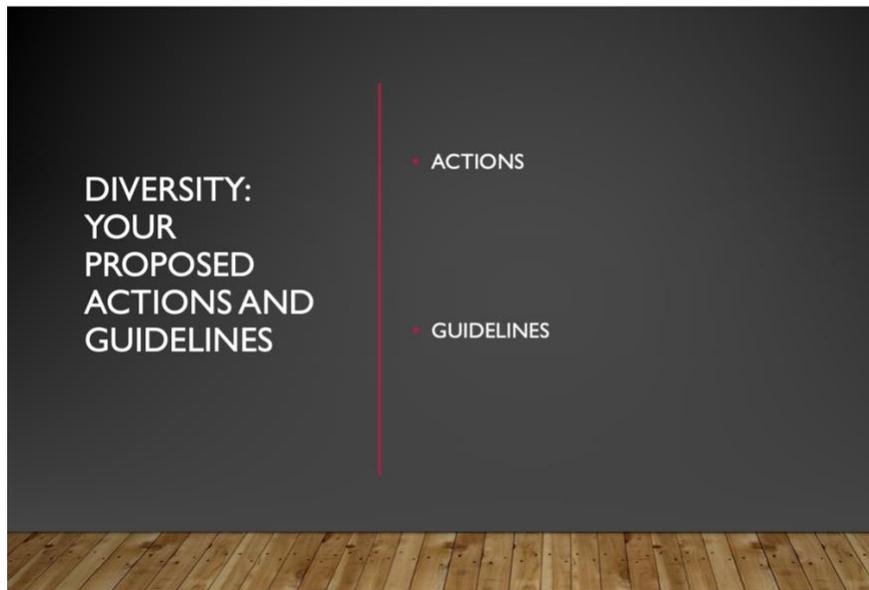
- “I will know when I see action.”
- “If I see changes.”
- “By the actions of others in our community and how our school district improves all schools in the district.”
- “The staff will begin to reflect the student population.”

But action alone is not enough. Respondents talked about the importance of communication, in comments such as:

- “Feedback to the citizens; changes attempted.”

- “If they follow through and develop a plan.”
- “Releasing a summary.”
- “If the messaging continues and there is action.”
- “Responses from Superintendent McGarry and on down, visible on the media and social media.”
- “Looking for messaging on different issues from the district.”

## VIII. THE PRINCIPLES, WITH COMMUNITY SUGGESTIONS



*A slide used during the community-wide forum breakout sessions.*

Now, we return to the 13 principles outlined above. This time we list under each principle some steps - suggested by community members at the forums - that could be taken to uphold it. For principles with many proposed steps, related suggestions are grouped under headings to make the lists easier to scan.

Note several key points: 1) Not all actions listed mesh together; some propose different approaches based on differing values. 2) These spur-of-the-moment community ideas do not

always take into account all the legal, fiscal and practical restraints that the school district faces.

3) In the interests of brevity and clarity, sometimes multiple similar suggestions from multiple forums are woven into one item, blending the words of different speakers.

These ample rosters of suggestions are offered in a spirit of transparency and comprehensiveness, seeking to capture the hopefulness, urgency, creativity, and sense of possibility that animated the community forums.

These suggestions are not, to stress the point again, an action plan. They are the raw material of public input that we hope can lay a foundation for a true, considered Excellence with Equity action plan developed by the District.

A few of the listed suggestions come specifically from the Catalyst Community Conversations team, prompted by its analysis of the input from the forums and its experience advising other school systems. These ideas are identified as such in italics, distinguishing them from suggestions made explicitly by participants in the forums.

To review the full text of a principle, click on its title here; the text is cross-referenced.

## **PRINCIPLE 1**

*Upper Darby's superpower is its diversity. Embrace it. Live it. Sell it.*

### **ADJUST ATTITUDES; EXPAND OUTLOOKS**

- Let the world know Upper Darby is systematically and enthusiastically “rewriting the narrative,” crafting a new way of operating that draws strength from deeper cross-cultural and experiential understanding, elevation of multiple points of view, and the co-creation of solutions that honor different voices. This replaces an “old way” that perpetuated biases, cultural misunderstanding and systemic inequities. Urge people to see this new way as a shared point of pride and strength.
- Frame diversity in ways that don't demonize any group but encourage everyone to learn skills of respect, appreciating difference and actively learning about others.

- Reflect diversity in our school system's everyday culture and throughout our curriculum. No more relegating whole cultures to a day, a week or a month of notice. Have conversations every day exploring differences, where we come from, etc.
- Promote a salad bowl metaphor vs melting pot.
- Help students and teachers see how their experiences in a diverse school system prepare them to succeed in America's increasingly diverse workplaces and communities.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Create a presentation to be given to local Realtors, chambers of commerce, business associations etc. on how the Upper Darby schools' diversity is a huge asset that should be promoted, not hidden or apologized for. Drive home the message: Vibrant diversity is what many younger Americans are seeking in a school and community.

#### **CREATE A TRULY DIVERSE CURRICULUM**

- Develop curricula and reading lists that are more culturally relevant and diverse, then monitor that they are staying current.
- Each class should have regular segments where students explain/share their culture. Do a project about their background... Partner them up so you can work with a partner to create the project... Report out on each other and share what they are learning about each other.
- Keep building on the sound foundation of multicultural events at schools.
- Have more activities where people from different backgrounds dance, sing and have fun, etc.
- Provide students with curriculum, readings and materials in which they can see themselves and feel affirmed in their identity. Be vigilant about instances where a traditional "white" lens is distorting or leaving out important points. e.g. Black history does not start with slavery.
- Make it easier for parents to help schools develop curriculum on various ethnicities. (Parents often can offer lesson plans, artifacts, pictures with notable people, personal stories, etc. that teach important points.)

## **HONOR DIVERSITY WITH EVERYONE, EVERY DAY**

- Diversity training is important and should be taken by everyone, including security guards, secretaries, lunch staff, bus drivers, etc.
- Have staff discussions, meet & greets, social activities etc. to learn about each other's cultures.
- Make sure that we try our hardest to understand where our kids and families are coming from.
- Train teachers to look for the positive of what a student brings to the table.
- Share information with the community/parents to inform them about the diversity conversations that are being had.
- Engage respectfully but bravely and honestly with residents of the district's more affluent, less diverse neighborhoods to talk about the "fear factor" they experience as the township grows more diverse and less like (superficially) the place they grew up.

## **PRINCIPLE 2**

### **Mirror (and understand) the diversity of the student body**

#### **INCREASE STAFF DIVERSITY**

- Hire more minority teachers and staff and administration in Upper Darby. Children will be more open to faculty and staff who are like them.
- Don't just talk about hiring a more diverse faculty. Build a pipeline that can steadily supply the teachers you want. Recognize and mentor students, especially black males, who express an interest in education. Support that desire through enrichment programs, internships, support groups. Continue the program of guaranteeing a job to qualified district grads willing to come back to Upper Darby to teach. Create sustained connections with the colleges (HBCUs and others) that are training the kind of teachers you need to diversify your faculty.

- Also build a pipeline for developing educators who mirror the district’s diversity into principals and other administrators, who can in turn identify, recruit, lead and inspire other educators of color to commit to UDSD.
- Offer incentives to draw diverse staff and diverse perspectives.
- Recognize the impact of representation (I.e. kids seeing people that look like them as teachers, leaders, etc.)
- Hire more minorities in staff and administration
- *CCC team suggestion:* Do exit interviews with teachers who leave the District, particularly teachers of color, to get their perspectives on teaching in the district and how the district does handling diversity.

#### UTILIZE COMMUNITY AND PARENT ASSETS

- Invest in Upper Darby parents who want to return to school: employ them in the district; give scholarships contingent on a commitment to return to the district.
- Find ways to help black males come in and help mediate issues in the school and help create better behaviors and school culture.
- Encourage community members to apply for district jobs and make sure the workforce reflects the area it serves.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Kids notice all adults, not just teachers. Mirror the student body’s diversity also through the speakers, volunteers, mentors etc. that schools invite in.

### PRINCIPLE 3

#### **R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Find out what it means to me!**

#### HELP STAFF FOCUS ON ‘CONTENT OF CHARACTER’

- Staff should get to know the students as people. Know each child for who they are, not what they look like.

- Train teachers to look for the positive of what a student brings to the table. Some teachers need to change how they view the students AND what “currency” students bring.
- Encourage staff and children alike to share their stories (we have a lot more in common than what separates us).

#### **HELP STUDENTS LEARN RESPECT FOR ALL**

- Add lessons for the kids to learn to understand and communicate with immigrants.
- Offer time during first period for kids to learn how to express their feelings, either out loud or in a journal.
- Recruit older immigrant/multilingual students into a buddy system to help new immigrant students learn and adjust to their new environment. And make sure the mentoring students get recognition for their contributions.
- Stress social emotional-learning. Parents and teachers - spend time everyday talking about it with our children.

#### **HELP FAMILIES/COMMUNITIES NURTURE RESPECT FOR ALL**

- Match families from different cultures to build personal relationships. We can expose our children and families to others of a different culture. What would it look like for my family to be matched with an Indian family and for us to share our cultures? That might create a more intentional relationship where families can get to know each other better – this can be an optional program where families opt to build more fun personal relationships. This cultivating of relationships is what helps kids respect other cultures instead of seeing others as “them,” to see them as their friends.
- Schedule/create opportunities for the adults and children to share what they have learned from the above efforts.

- Build awareness among parents, students, staff etc. about the challenges faced by “others”:
  - Resource differences within the district at “other’ schools.
  - Facilities.
  - School trips & activities.
  - Disciplinary overreach issues faced by “other” ethnicities.
  - Language barrier and communication issues faced by immigrants and “other” language groups.
    - Feelings of loss and cultural confusion faced by “other” (longtime white) residents.

#### **BRIDGE GAPS AMONG SCHOOLS**

- Appreciating difference and diversity/teaching respect and understanding should begin in elementary schools - all of them. Continue in middle schools when the various student bodies merge.
- Bring together the elementary schools so they will have some connections with each other before they are forced to be together in the middle schools. Do the same with the middle schools to prepare for the high school e.g. class picnics across schools.
- Promote “meet and greets” and just hanging out after any sports or arts competitions.
- Directly address and inform students at middle (and high) schools about what happens when people from differing cultures mix and aren’t prepared for it. Help them spot the signs that something’s amiss: intergroup bullying, etc.
- Have the two middle schools or the elementary schools come together so the kids feel like they’re all part of the larger community (since they’ll all be in high school together - no separation between the schools).

## PRINCIPLE 4

### Everyone needs coaching. Everyone can coach.

#### EQUIP ALL TO RECOGNIZE AND TAME IMPLICIT BIASES

- Frame implicit bias and cultural competence training as an investment in supporting good teachers in becoming even better, not as remedial or punitive.
- Equip people with tools to combat their inherent/implicit/unconscious biases/implicit bias. We all have some (e.g. a reflexive sense that Black boys must be doing some things they shouldn't be doing. Or, that white teachers don't care. Or, that the way immigrants dress or eat is "weird".)
- Be sure, as is often done now, to include all adult staff in the coaching about implicit bias and cultural competence . Office staff plus security and custodial personnel are often a first point of contact for parents and visitors. Those first encounters can form lasting impressions.
- Cultivate DCIU (Delaware County Intermediate Unit) as a possible, trusted source of training around cultural competence.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Use a gentler, "we all do it even though we shouldn't" tone, not a judgmental, punitive tone, when coaching someone re: their implicit biases.

#### FOSTER A CULTURE OF MUTUAL COACHING TO EXPAND PERSPECTIVES AND BUILD SKILLS

- Be clear that all adult stakeholders need to keep learning about different cultures, anti-racism, implicit bias, empathy, listening skills etc. "Even the best seek out coaching."
- Work with deep-rooted UDSD parents to deepen their awareness about Upper Darby's growing immigrant communities and the experiences those neighbors had before joining this community.
- Help teachers and staff expand their sense of what "currency" (i.e. hidden value) students who may seem different or difficult actually are bringing to schools.

- Make it OK for parents to point out what they see in terms of implicit bias and cultural missteps to teachers.
- With tips and resources, help parents teach their kids about appreciating difference and immigration (maybe videos, an easy curriculum, reinforce importance and resources at parent meetings, etc.).
- *CCC team suggestion:* Look first inside, rather than outside, for resources to enhance cultural competence. Local immigrant and ethnic communities might be able to offer both resources and coaches who can help build the needed understanding and skills. Solid coaching that emerges from the community might be better received than “training” from paid outsiders. This is not to suggest never bringing in expert help from outside; just don’t ignore valuable resources close at hand.

## PRINCIPLE 5

### **They’re children, not fodder for a school-to-prison pipeline.**

*This topic produced some of the lengthiest, most heart-felt dialogue at the forums. It also turned up some profound disagreements as to the best path. In listing suggestions from participants, we’ve erred here on the side of a) listing multiple statements that make similar points, but with different emphases b) providing a few statements that flatly contradict others, to give some sense of the range of views.*

#### **FOSTER PREVENTIVE AND RESTORATIVE APPROACHES**

- Avoid punitive discipline as the very first resort. Create (or expand the use of existing) processes for restorative practices/conflict resolution.
- Preserve, expand and promote the successful peer-led discipline programs in UD schools.
- Teach both students and teachers about how to de-escalate, how to do conflict resolution.

- Give kids tools to resolve their disputes and express their emotions in constructive ways.
- Expand and extol Youth Court – make sure all parents and the community at large know about this excellent program.

#### **SEE THE PERSON, NOT JUST THE PROBLEM**

- Train teachers and administrators on the effects and indicators of trauma, toxic stress, emotional and learning challenges and their effects on behavior and academic performance.
- Staff need to know the students as people. Know each child for who they are, not what they look like.
- Remind teachers and counselors to remain curious about behavioral issues; to be quick to ask questions to learn more about a child, slower to judge and punish. But this requires the district giving teachers the training, time and spaces to do this.
- Create an atmosphere of non-judgment. Caring adults make a positive impact on students.
- Treat kids as individuals and invest the time into learning what's going on in their lives and sharing that learning with students, parents, faculty and staff.

#### **BE VIGILANT ON BULLYING**

- Develop a clear definition of bullying, including its online dimension, and share it in written form and through trainings with students, parents and staff.
- Notify immediately the parents of the victims of bullying and attacks, with full transparency.
- Proactively address teasing and bullying issues at middle and high schools.
- Make space for the kids to talk about the bullying that's happening, why it is and ideas to address it.

- Given that middle school is when a lot of the bullying issues crop up, intensify the preparation for the middle school experience that's offered students and parents during the elementary-to-middle transition program.

#### **BE SMART ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA**

- Stay current with the forms of social media kids are flocking to, and know their downsides and how they can foment bullying or violence. Keep parents informed on what you're learning.
- Monitor social media for mentions of the school district or individual schools, as an early-warning system on in-school trouble brewing among individual students or cliques.

#### **HELP KIDS TO DO BETTER**

- Give kids tools to resolve their disputes and express their emotions in constructive ways.
- If they got some kind of "currency" for following rules and norms, you could set up some more proactive behavioral plans.
- Find ways to identify, praise, train and support students who can model good behavior to their peers.
- Develop a theater class that allows students to see first-hand what it looks like for bullying; something acted out on stage.
- Offer positive reinforcement for *GOOD* behavior more often. (This will change both students' behaviors and the adults' perspectives of the students.)
- Line up mentors for students having behavioral problems. Partner with community groups who do this. Have a program, with a script; don't make people have to figure it out by themselves.
- Proactively work to ensure that when kids merge with kids from feeder schools (into the middle and high schools) they get to know and appreciate each other and to identify the signs and problems that often result from "merging" cultures, etc.

### **HELP TEACHERS TO DO BETTER**

- Give teachers more support, resources and guidance about emotional management and self-cares. Sometimes when teachers react unhelpfully to situations, it may not be because of bias. It may be burnout and anger management. These are hard jobs; even great teachers have bad days.
- Give staff training and templates for how to document/portray disciplinary incidents accurately, without hyperbole, overdramatization or cultural insensitivity.
- More training in implicit bias, cultural competence and building supportive relationships with students and their families. Include this as part of teachers' required continuing education. (And, again, don't forget office staff when doing training; often they are the face of the district to parents and community members.)

### **HELP PARENTS TO DO BETTER**

- Use home and school associations as a vehicle to teach parents about child development, the causes of bullying and teasing, and how to monitor digital platforms where these problems brew out of adult sight.
- Work with leaders and organizations in various immigrant communities to offer culturally competent outreach to immigrant families so they know school rules, know what resources exist and how to contact staff when behavior problems arise.

### **ADDRESS FLAWS IN PROCESS**

- Develop some third-party mediation or listening system to deploy when the school and the parent have differing versions of what happened during an incident.
- Actually hold kids accountable.
- Ensure consistency in disciplinary processes/practices. If two different students commit the same infractions, then they should experience the same outcomes.
- Make sure details of discipline processes are written down and made widely available.

- Slow down the discipline process. The fast pace of how discipline is doled out doesn't allow for "processing time" – there's an incident, emotions are high, a report gets written up, students get disciplined (maybe too quickly), maybe cops are called.
- Involve parents as problem solvers in discipline issues – particularly in deciding how the discipline will be done. We know what will and will not work with our children – each child will respond differently.
- In issues of student behavior: Provide a structure for students and other involved parties to talk and to listen so students have the opportunity to present their viewpoints.
- Children should have someone to advocate for them in discipline issues.
- Instead of suspending both bully and victim, find ways to address the situation so that victim doesn't feel punished by administrators.
- Partner with the new township police chief on anti-bullying, anti-violence programs. Create protocols with the police for when and how they should respond to incidents at schools – looking to limit the occasions to a minimum when police swoop in with a major presence.
- Share with parents and the community the questions/process that are being used when incidents happen.
- There should be multiple meetings in place before a student is suspended; essentially, there should be more "steps to the process."
- End the demerit system. It allows kids to do too many bad things before any consequences and many of them don't take it seriously.

#### **TRACK THE DATA AND LEARN**

- Track and analyze cases of students who don't "succeed" due to behavioral problems.". What went wrong? How can we learn from that?
- Evaluate and compare how consequences are issued (including suspension rates) to verify concerns about unequal treatment of Black and Latinx students. Learn what the data are telling you and react accordingly.

## PRINCIPLE 6

### Upper Darby is a vibrant rainbow, so communicate in more than one color

- Survey parents regularly to learn what apps and platforms they are most comfortable using - and learn how best to use them. Understand that different immigrant communities might have very different habits and preferences.
- Help immigrant families overcome language barriers so they can advocate for themselves and their children (language, interpreters; advocates that speak their language).
- Identify and remove barriers to minorities (parents, community, students, etc.) participating in district meetings (scheduling, difficulty understanding terms and processes, interpreters).
- Find resources to enhance translation and interpretation services.
- Make all teachers and staff aware of and trained to use the technology that can help them talk to both parents and students. e.g. Google Translate, iPad, phone interpreters, interpreters hired by the school, interpretation services on Zoom.
- Make the District website clearer. The UD Rising vertical on the district website was pretty clear. Don't make assumptions that people know what different things are, like home school association. Communicate clearly and everything should be translated for all the major languages rather than putting translation responsibility on teachers' shoulders.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Remember that educators sometimes speak in their own "language" - i.e. professional jargon, terms of art, legal terms of school district governance - that even many English-speaking members of the public may not understand. That language needs to be translated and made clearer for community understanding, too. Check to make sure parents are understanding what you are trying to communicate.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Create a Parents Academy, a regularly offered workshop that helps demystify for parents and guardians the complexities of academic vocabulary,

education law and school district procedures, giving parents tips and tools to help them to navigate the system to become effective advocates for their children. Back that up with web resources covering the same topics. Groups such as DCIU, national PTA, ASPIRA, Education Law Center, the Philadelphia Foundation and the National Fatherhood Initiative could be resources in developing this program.

- *CCC team suggestion:* Don't forget visual learners. Tap into the power of videos, charts, drawings, animations and data visualizations to get key information across to the general public. Invest perhaps in some training in data visualization for key communicators on your team.

## PRINCIPLE 7

### **Listening is leading. Make the UDR approach a way of life.**

- Build the district's "new way" of Excellence with Equity (see Principle 1) upon a foundation of active listening to all students, teachers, and parents. Through dialogue with all diverse parts of the district, identify the key cultural competencies or understandings – what they are, why they are needed, where they are lacking. Remember that students can be resources and leaders in this effort.
- Welcome teachers' voices and insights. They are with children 8-10 hours a day. What do they see? What do they need to be able to respond effectively to what they see?
- Have more forums like these. Don't forget or squander the excitement with which many greeted and embraced Upper Darby Rising. Keep the public involved all the way and report frequently and transparently on how the action plan is coming together.
- Position district officials often in the role they had during Upper Darby Rising: listener and responder, not star of the show.
- The District should continue to incentivize students (e.g. pizza parties) to attend events and encourage their families to attend.
- People need to get over themselves and start engaging with each other; the school board needs to model that.

- Invite families in through clearer communication about different initiatives, meetings, etc. Demonstrate to the community what different meetings are about to draw people in, just like how UD Rising did in its promotional videos. Communicate clearly with families what meetings are about and why they're important – for example, this is going to be a listening meeting, or this is going to be a meeting where we're looking for community engagement. Maybe not pressure families to attend all the meetings but ask families to commit to attending one or two meetings.
- Let parents know they matter and have a voice.
- Focus on quality communication: You listen to me and I listen to you.
- Ensure timely responses when parents reach out. Use school as a forum to discuss “uncomfortable subjects.”
- Schools should make concerted efforts to help parents meet their neighbors.
- Connect with cultural representatives from various immigrant communities who can promote the home and school association as a resource to their communities.
- Create open forums at the school - bring in moderators to help students and teachers talk to each other. Then, get the community involved on the topics the students raise.
- Increase awareness of initiatives so that all families know what is going on. Make sure that regional home and school presidents are sharing info.

## PRINCIPLE 8

### Call the community to the work, then partner in the doing

- After-school programming is a great example of an issue that is in the district's wheelhouse, but beyond its fiscal ability to solve by itself, where it could pull together lawmakers, township officials, business leaders, parents groups, nonprofits and foundations to work out a coordinated plan.
- Perhaps UDSD could encourage youth sports organizations within the district to collaborate more. If the sports programs were more coordinated, it might make their

dollars go further, while fostering the kind of early contact across boundaries that the Respect and Diversity principles are looking for.

- Collaborate with local entities: District already has financial constraints. Partner with local businesses and entities like the new community center to save/find money. Connect with businesses that provide grants. Use connections to link students with career opportunities at local businesses.
- Partner to bring all together for more community-wide events where people could get to see and get to know each other. – community-wide events.
- Foster a “we’re all in this together” mindset to replace the old “that’s the other side of the tracks” thinking.
- Enlist community agencies to assist and support with writing grants for District and/or after-school programming.
- Better connections to township businesses might lead to more externships, volunteers, mentors.
- Work more closely with the churches to create stronger support for the schools.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Convene a clergy advisory group (pastors, imams, priests, etc.) as a forum for understanding common issues and generating diverse solutions. This also allows for cross-community awareness building. Additionally, it can garner resources and assistance from the various communities.
- 



A slide used during breakout sessions.

## PRINCIPLE 9

### Offer a menu of ways to engage, then invite parents to feast

#### REMOVE BARRIERS, THEN CELEBRATE ENGAGEMENT

- Start with the assumption that parents want to be active, that the problem causing low engagement may be barriers you didn't realize were there, not a lack of parental interest.
- Develop, with parental input, then distribute a list of creative ways for parents to be involved. There should be options at various price points/ levels of involvement. It should not matter how much money a household has or how many minutes a parent can spare. Respect that people have different ability levels/talents. Make it easy for parents. It could be a mini task list for a fundraiser, such as bringing something to school when you drop kids off. A parent should be able to say, I can't do X, but I can do Y. Make sure that parents feel welcome in school.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Post the list online, with helpful details. Promote different opportunities regularly on district social media. Do stories highlighting and praising a diverse array of parents who are helping in various ways. Consider an annual event thanking all parents who donate or volunteer, with some awards for people whose contributions stand out. (And make it a diverse group!)
- *CCC team suggestion:* Have a one-stop online form (designed to work on mobile) where parents/community members can sign up to volunteer or to suggest a new way to help. Link the form to an FAQ which helps parents understand the steps and complexities (e.g. fingerprinting) which might be involved in volunteering extensively in schools.
- Assign person(s) to be responsible for building these parental connections and finding money. Consider interns and grad students from local universities.
- Identify and remove barriers to minorities participating in parent-teacher, school and district-level meetings (scheduling, difficulty understanding terms and processes, interpreters, using tech to overcome challenges, etc.)
- *CCC team suggestion:* Hold an annual Helping Hands Academy, with workshops on how to get involved, how to navigate the district's rules and departments, how to start a club

- along with a fair where different parent groups can have tables to inform and recruit parents.

- Make it easier for parents to help schools bolster curriculum on various ethnicities.
- Create some projects/ways for students/parents to be more involved in the community, for example:
  - Health and school fairs
  - Senior citizen food drives
  - Shovel snow for the elderly
  - Holiday cards delivered to community members' mailboxes



### WHY THIS SESSION?

- EVERYONE HAS EXPERIENCE THAT IS VALUABLE TO THIS EFFORT.
- YOU ARE THE EXPERT IN HOW THE SCHOOL DISTRICT SEEMS TO BE WORKING FROM WHERE YOU SIT.
- THE SCHOOL BOARD AND DISTRICT STAFF ARE GENUINELY COMMITTED TO LISTENING AND LEARNING.
- TOGETHER, WE CAN COME TO FIND A WISDOM WE COULD NOT FIND ALONE.

*A slide shown at the community-wide forums*

#### **KEEP YOUR ARMS OPEN**

- Communication – listen and be willing to see the other person’s point of view, why are they behaving a certain way (e.g. not coming to School Night).
- Ensure that all staff respect/value/appreciate all parents. Make sure that parents feel welcome in school.

- Ensure timely responses when parents reach out.
- Remember that every little bit helps. If more people helped, it would make a difference. Avoid burnout for that same small group that seems to be doing all the work all the time.
- Start planning now for something to bring folks together ASAP - right after COVID.
- Build trust and connections by offering other resources helping parents cope with non-school related challenges (health, real estate, etc.).



*A slide used by moderators during breakout sessions.*

## PRINCIPLE 10

### To fix holes in equity, think holistically

#### **DON'T TRY TO DO IT ALL BY YOURSELF, ON YOUR DIME**

- As elaborated in Principle 11, the district should focus on grant-writing to grab more government and philanthropic grants to plug gaps in equity. Framing proposals around a comprehensive equity agenda could be attractive to some funders.

- Allow/help more nonprofits and partnerships to come in to provide programs keyed to real needs. (Learn to trust them and realize you don't know everything and you might not understand the environment that some of these kids come from.)
- Accept that you can't fill all gaps internally. Partner actively with community organizations and churches that can help address inequities.
- Crowd-source ideas and potential helpers for classroom projects and extracurricular offerings.

#### **PUT EXTRA EFFORT INTO EXTRACURRICULAR EQUITY**

- Don't let lack of money (for a school or within a household) deny students in one school the chance to be part of school-sponsored field trips or extracurricular opportunities available to students in another school.
- Focus on the core educational/social value of a trip or activity, not the traditional way of doing it, when figuring how to offer it equitably. If it's not possible for all students to attend a distant sleepaway camp, for example, can the same benefits be found in offering field days closer to home, say, at Ridley Creek State Park.
- Enlist both Home and School Associations and community groups to run and support district-wide fundraisers (e.g. car washes, hoagie sales, silent auctions etc.) to feed a fund to ensure equitable student access to field trips and extracurriculars.
- Alternatively, have each HSA designate a portion of what it raises to feed such a district equity fund.
- Inform all parents at all schools about fund-raisers and events at other schools, encouraging them to buy items or tickets to support other schools, particularly under-resourced ones.

#### **BUY SMARTER, SPEND SMARTER**

- Pool resources. For example, the District could save money by buying in bulk for the spirit sale if the Home and School Associations for the middle schools worked in concert.

- Prioritize resources to address higher-need issues (i.e. food insecurity, school safety, physical plant improvements) over merely desirable things (i.e. new sports jerseys).
- Resources need to be allocated better – especially in the amount of taxes that we pay for the school district. Other communities pay less taxes and get better districts.

#### **SHAPE PERCEPTIONS THROUGH FACTS AND DIALOGUE**

- Inform people across the district (parents, etc.) of resource challenges that exist in various schools (facilities, books & materials, extracurriculars, trips and activities, etc.).
- Find ways/forums groups to help parents connect and speak to other parents at different schools, so they can share stories of resource challenges or available resources at various schools.
- When perceptions about unequal resources or results among schools lag behind reality, be aggressive in sharing the updated facts broadly.

#### **WORK ON THE BIG STUFF**

- Make it a district priority to have a high-functioning Home and School Association in every school. Provide support and training where needed.
- Consider redrawing school catchment lines so that they don't reinforce inequities among neighborhoods' relative wealth.
- We need more counselors and behavioral specialists, more AP courses, more lead teachers.
- Build the third middle school.
- Fix up the high school or build a second one to address the crowding.
- As also noted in Principle 13, explore how virtual tools can help you repair gaps in the courses and extracurricular activities offered among schools e.g. have a well-wired room where a student can go to participate virtually in a language class or advanced class not offered at their own school.

- Encourage continuity in programs. The clubs and sports that the district supports at higher grades should be promoted in middle schools.
- Bolster teacher compensation for academic clubs.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Do an annual equity scorecard, showing where gaps among school programs and resources persist, what’s being planned to address them, and what gaps have been successfully closed in the last year.

#### **AVOID HIDDEN BARRIERS**

- Provide financial assistance in a way that preserves anonymity of students in need.
- Review policies on student access to enrichment and extracurricular opportunities to make sure they do not inadvertently or unwittingly exclude children of different backgrounds.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Recognize that some logistical or legal barriers that may be preventing individuals and organizations from helping the schools are not set in stone. Try harder than before to get to “yes.” If you do in fact have to say “no”, be very clear why.

## **PRINCIPLE 11**

### **Home in on Harrisburg, but look beyond it, too**

#### **CULTIVATE ALLIES FOR EQUITY, THEN UNLEASH THEM**

- Educate parents about the types of resources that go into making a good school. [e.g. reading specialists, math coaches, staff training on diversity, after-school activities, clubs and sports teams, class trips, conditions inside the building (i.e. gym cleanliness and paint). Identify practical ways for all stakeholders (students, parents, community members, etc.) to advocate for more state funding for the district.

- *CCC team suggestion:* In that vein, consider trying participatory budgeting exercises, both as a public teaching tool and a way of gathering valuable input (in line with Principle 7).
- Figure out ways to genuinely thank taxpayers without children who help fund schools.
- Hold a “lunch and learn” for local Realtors and business leaders to give them a factual, positive narrative about the school district’s assets and progress.
- Identify your best parent-advocates and equip them with good facts and talking points to make the case for more equitable state funding to their friends who live in affluent districts.
- Find ways/forums to make it easy for parents to speak to other parents at different schools, inside and outside the district. A part of their discussions will be about resource challenges in under-resourced schools.
- Create education equity teams of parents/students/business leaders who can bring the district’s equitable funding message (e.g. “ZIP codes should not equal destiny”) to local/state/federal officials.
- Build and tend to relationships with state and federal lawmakers in the region.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Identify the key connectors, influencers and opinion leaders who have the trust of the larger community and enlist them in the equity fight.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Reach out to famous alumni (e.g. Tina Fey) to see if they are willing to help polish the District’s image and raise funds.

#### **BE BOLD IN SEEKING OTHER SUPPORT**

- Build out an alumni giving program. Base a persuasive pitch upon the Excellence with Equity plan.
- Enlist community agencies to assist and support with writing grants for District initiatives such as equitable access to extracurriculars, language services for immigrants and after-school programs.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Contract with an experienced nonprofit development professional, preferably one from or deeply familiar with the community, who can

identify and make pitches to businesses, foundations and high net-worth individuals that might be receptive to supporting the Excellence with Equity plan.

- *CCC team suggestion:* Identify, in particular, key business leaders in immigrant communities. Talk to them about supporting the district's efforts to ensure equitable access to educational and extracurricular opportunities for immigrant students, to build its translation and interpretation capacity and to coach staff in cultural competence.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Also seek a professional fund-raiser's guidance on how to pull together the kind of district-wide fund-raisers to support equity described under Principle 10.

## **PRINCIPLE 12**

### **Serve *all* the children - and let the community know that you do**

#### **GO BEYOND WHAT THE LAW REQUIRES**

- Continue and expand the program of having school arts groups visit and perform at parochial/private schools and community centers.
- Seek more opportunities to collaborate with religious/private schools on topics of mutual concern bearing on children's welfare e.g. the school safety conversations.

#### **CLARIFY AND HIGHLIGHT WHAT'S OFFERED AND DONE**

- Clarify on the district website and through regular bulletins all the Title 1 rules, funds and processes that apply to services or funding for non-public schools.
- Hold periodic meetings with heads of parochial/private schools that Upper Darby children attend to ensure accurate information about district-funded support programs that are available to those non-public school children or families.
- Regularly remind elected officials and community leaders about services the district offers for non-district students and the community at large (e.g. recent vaccination clinics).

- *CCC team suggestion:* Create compelling digital assets to be shared broadly around the community explaining how the vision of Excellence with Equity that emerges from this process will benefit even families that don't send children to district schools.
- *CCC team suggestion:* Do an annual report with sharp graphics and good story-telling documenting everything the district does to benefit non-district students and the community at large.
- Realize that district playing fields are a window into the school district for many community residents and that ill-kept, littered fields can have an outsized effect on community perceptions.

## PRINCIPLE 13

### Learn from the pandemic

#### KEEP ON 'ZOOMING' WITH THE COMMUNITY

- Continue to use virtual tools (Zoom, etc.) to bring the community together to talk.
- Use virtual tools to encourage communication across neighborhood boundaries.

#### KEEP ON 'ZOOMING' WITH PARENTS

- Have some HSA meetings via Zoom (or other virtual tools) to accommodate parent schedules.
- Have parent-teacher or parent-administrator meetings virtually as well as face-to-face (to accommodate parent schedules and/or comfort levels.) Some parents said they felt their communication with teachers had never been better than during the pandemic.

#### USE VIRTUAL TO ENHANCE EQUITY

- *CCC team suggestion:* Use virtual tools to make AP and other classes accessible to more

students in different schools (I.e. roster kids in each school to join district-wide virtual classes to offer a wider range of classes in schools that don't traditionally have a critical mass.)

- Encourage the use of on-line tutoring as appropriate.

#### PLEASE TRANSLATE (SEE PRINCIPLE 6 AS WELL)

- Utilize in-person, on-line and technological (e.g. Google translate) services: for community outreach (the personal connection and translation is essential); for parents to communicate with teachers, school staff and school and district administrators; for student-teacher interactions.

#### EXTEND A DIGITAL HAND TO 'STRANGERS'

- Offer to meet virtually with communities for whom in-person meetings have not seemed to work.
- Ask the churches, mosques, temples etc. that serve immigrant and minority communities for tips on how they are using technology to stay in touch with and serve those groups.

12:13:19 From Megan Kennedy to Everyone : Thanks for the opportunity and for listening and sharing to everyone in my group for listening and building on each others ideas  
12:13:35 From Brian Leposki to Everyone : Are the subsequent events repeats of this?  
12:13:36 From Balbir Kaur to Everyone : Your Welcome  
12:13:42 From Ana Collins to Everyone : This has been a wonderful event. I really appreciate being a part of it.  
12:13:47 From Edward Brown - Observer to Everyone : Thank you Megan! Your comments were valuable and insightful.  
12:14:09 From Maureen Ingram to Everyone : Thank you so much for this exercise. I look forward to further conversations.  
12:14:12 From Jill Williams + Richard to Everyone : Do we attend all three focus groups or just one???  
12:14:15 From Carmen R to Everyone : Informative event thank you all  
12:14:18 From Imani Hall to Everyone : Thank you all. Please communicate the reports in multiple languages.  
12:14:26 From Rachel Mitchell - Observer to Everyone : Thank you all for your input. Great session.  
12:14:27 From Leah Dawes - Observer to Everyone : Thank you all for attending and sharing your thoughts.  
12:14:28 From chad0 to Everyone : this was a great event I hope there are more to come  
12:14:30 From Moderator: Harris Sokoloff (he,him) to Everyone : Brian: Yes, each event will be structured like this one...  
12:14:30 From Denise Kennedy to Everyone : This was a great opportunity. Thank you all.  
12:14:42 From Megan Kennedy to Everyone : Great input Imani for multiple languages  
12:14:43 From Moderator: Marisa Denker to Everyone : Big thanks to my group!  
12:14:44 From Mary Park to Everyone : Thank you for the platform to share, listen and learn!! Thjis will lead to action.  
12:14:46 From Moderator - Ted Enoch (he/him) to Everyone : Great work everyone!  
12:14:59 From OBSERVER:Melissa Figueroa-Douglas to Everyone : Thank you all for attending!  
12:15:01 From Sandy Knese to Everyone : Good session. Truly hope it leads to positive changes.  
12:15:02 From Frank Salerno - Observer to Everyone : Thank you everyone!  
12:15:15 From Moderator: Lauren Hirshon (she/her) to Everyone : Big thanks to my group as well for their energy, ideas, insights, and commitment to Upper Darby!  
12:15:16 From Ford, Denise L to Everyone : thank you all be safe!  
12:15:17 From alpha Diallo to Everyone : thank you

A screenshot of the Zoom chat at the end of one of the community-wide forums.

## IX: THE CCC TEAM

### A) THE CORE TEAM

**Dr. Harris Sokoloff** (project co-lead) is director of Catalyst Community Conversations at Penn's Graduate School of Education and co-director and co-founder of the PA Project for Civic Engagement. In those roles, he has designed and implemented local, national and international community engagement projects. He is also director emeritus of the Center for School Study Councils (CSSC) at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. As director of that organization for 38 years, he led five professional learning communities of public school superintendents from PA, NJ and DE.

**Brian Armstead** (project co-lead) has spent the bulk of his career working with communities, children, and families as an educator, social worker, mediator and community advocate. A skilled facilitator and convener, he brings together diverse--often hostile--groups for meaningful and productive dialogue. Throughout his career he has also mediated individual, family-to-family and neighborhood conflicts. He has also led city-wide and neighborhood-based advocacy campaigns that led to various educational reforms. He is the co-founder and former Co-Director of the David P. Richardson, Jr. Rites of Passage (for Black teenage males). Currently, Brian is an adjunct professor of Human Studies and a social work consultant.

**Chris Satullo** (adviser and lead writer) is a consultant on media, civic engagement and nonprofit strategy, doing business as Keystone Civic Ventures LLC. He is a co-founder and co-director of the PA Project for Civic Engagement and a consultant to the Red and Blue Exchange at the University of Pennsylvania. He writes a weekly commentary on politics and civic dialogue for the National Interest blog. Previously, he was vice president for news and civic dialogue at WHYY public media in Philadelphia, and editorial page editor and columnist at the Philadelphia Inquirer. He has won more than 60 awards for columns, editorials, reporting and civic engagement.

**Linda Breitstein** (outreach coordinator) is a community outreach and event planning consultant. She has filled those roles with Catalyst Community Conversations and the PA Project for Civic Engagement for the last 13 years. She also served from 2018-20 as Eastern region coordinator for the Draw the Lines PA anti-gerrymandering project. Prior to joining PPCE in 2008, she worked as public relations director for WSBK-TV in Boston and media consultant to the Dana Farber Cancer Institute. She also has worked as an editorial assistant for CBS's "60 Minutes" in Paris and as a special-education teacher in Israel. She is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts.

**Catherine Sontag** (lead digital producer) is a freelance consultant event design and production. Before launching her freelance career in 2019, she was the Events Director with Technical.ly, organizing tech and startup related programming in the five cities where the tech news company operates. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, she expanded her expertise in supporting virtual events including, but not limited to, platforms like Zoom, Hopin, Accelevents, Remo, Mixaba, etc. She received her Bachelor's Degree in Business Management from Saint Joseph's University.

## **B) THE MODERATOR TEAM**

**Marisa Denker** is the founder and CEO of Connect the Dots. Connect the Dots ([connectthedotsinsights.com](http://connectthedotsinsights.com)) is focused on co-creating more equitable and resilient cities through inclusive stakeholder and community engagement. She started the firm in Ireland, building on her work as a Fulbright scholar there focused on 'connecting the dots' across stakeholders to better address complex urban challenges. The company has grown to have a HQ in Philadelphia as well, led by Marisa. **Shari Gilmore** (she/her) is a leadership coach and consultant. Her passion is working with marginalized individuals and groups committed to heart-centered living and work. She is the founder of Divine Spectacle LLC, where she offers services to help create powerful, positive, and purposeful change agents.

**Ted Enoch** is the Director of Catalyst at Partnerships for Parks (PfP), a joint program of NYC Parks and City Parks Foundation. Catalyst has a 25-year history of addressing equity gaps that challenge NYC parks and communities. Prior to joining PfP in 2015, Ted led multiple social

justice and equity driven programs, including: the ASK Program, an alternative-to-incarceration program for Washington, DC youth and the Philadelphia social justice and arts activism organization, Spiral Q. Ted is also a highly experienced facilitator and leader of community conversations.

**Cassandra Georges** is Principal of Above & Beyond Dispute Resolution. Ms. Georges has used facilitation, mediation, arbitration, and other forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) to help resolve thousands of complex disputes. She has experience handling a wide variety of conflicts, including commercial, community, family, and employment matters. Georges has served as alternative dispute resolution chair of the Philadelphia Bar Association. She has been selected by the global ADR provider American Arbitration Association to become an inaugural A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. Fellow. A native of Philadelphia, Ms. Georges is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in Communication (2001) and a J.D. with a Business and Public Policy Certificate (2005).

**Ellen Greenberg** is the owner and Principal Consultant of Partnering For Change, LLC, an Organization Development Consulting firm working with individuals, groups and organizations to create new solutions and approaches that lead to sustainable results, greater success and healthier, higher performing organizations. Greenberg has experience in leadership development, executive coaching, diversity programming, strategic planning, training, team building, managing change, organizational learning, and building high-performance work systems.

**Lauren Hirshon** is an organizational change and transformation consultant for businesses, governments, and nonprofits. She is the Director of Learning and Research for an applied research and leadership advancement program at Harvard. Lauren also teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on management, leadership, and communication at the Wharton School and the University of Pennsylvania, and consults for Wharton's Executive Education program.

**Germaine Ingram** has dedicated a half-century to work in law, public service, performing arts, and arts/cultural strategy and production. In addition to spending 30 years in legal practice and law school teaching, she held leadership posts with the School District of Philadelphia and the Children's Defense Fund, among other public service engagements. Her career in arts and

culture, spanning more than 30 years, includes dance and vocal performance, choreography, oral history, writing, filmmaking, and arts/culture strategy at the intersection of art and social change.

**Serrano Legrand** is a 5th year doctoral candidate (Ed.D) at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania in the Teaching, Leading and Learning division. He is also serving as the Director of Mathematics (K-12) for KIPP Philadelphia Public Charter Schools.

**Kimberly Leichtner** is an independent consultant who has extensive experience in leadership development and group dynamics. She has been a High Performing Team facilitator for the Wharton School. Prior to getting her MPA at UPenn Fels Institute of Government, Kim worked in healthcare research and consulting. She currently serves as the Co-President of the Penn Wynne Library Association Board.

**Carol Lydon** lives in South Philadelphia. She has been a moderator with the Penn Project for Civic Engagement for fifteen years, having first worked with them as a "citizen" as part of a year-long project centered on the 1999 Philadelphia mayoral election. She has worked as a paralegal in Philadelphia for over 25 years.

**Kiersten Mailler** works with the Connect the Dots community engagement firm. She is trained in architectural and urban design but has gravitated to public engagement over the last decade. She works as a community and regional planner in the greater Philadelphia area, and has done extensive work in user experience, urban spatial planning, and demographic studies, and has worked in architecture, construction management, real estate, and education. She comes to Philadelphia by way of Boston.

**Joshua Warner** has lived, worked, and studied in Philadelphia for 15 years. In that time, he has been a city planner, a consultant, a teacher, a workshop facilitator, a civic activist, and a business owner. Currently, Josh is completing his PhD in Urban Planning at Penn, where his research investigates commercial corridor change—i.e., the factors that influence growth or decline along neighborhood retail streets. Josh believes that honest dialog and collaboration are the keys to democracy. As a facilitator, he brings deep listening, problem solving, and empathy to bear for a variety of stakeholders and issues, and he loves every minute of it.

## X. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

We are grateful for the support of the Upper Darby Board of School Directors for Phase 1 of the Upper Darby Rising project. Many school directors participated in one or more of the community forums, and some participated in all seven. Several also participated in the advisory group meetings and were active in reaching out to different segments of the Upper Darby Community.

- Edward W. Brown, President
- Gina H. Curry, Vice-President
- Donald Fields
- Rachel D. Mitchell
- Neil Desnoyers
- Dr. Meredith Hegg
- David Neill
- Damien Christopher Warsavage
- The late Leah Dawes
- Debra Williams

### **District Leadership Team**

The District central office leadership team played an important supportive role in the success of Phase 1 of Upper Darby Rising. Ms. Melissa Figueroa Douglas was an essential problem solver on community outreach and equity issues and an always reliable point of contact.

- Dr. Daniel P. McGarry – Superintendent
- Dr. John Council – Assistant Superintendent for Personnel and Equity
- Edward W. Marshaleck, Assistant Superintendent for Student Services

- Melissa Figueroa Douglas, Supervisor of Equity
- Christine Kelley, Director of Curriculum
- Aaronda Q. Beauford, Director of Communications
- Dr. Greg Manfre, Director of Secondary Education
- Frank Salerno, Director of Elementary Education

### **Community Members Interviewed**

- Tim Bernhardt, Upper Darby Township Chief of Police
- Richard Blye
- Holly Clark
- Joe Coyne
- Lou Devlieger
- Harry Dietzler
- Alison Dobbins
- Howard Goodison
- Rev. Nate Goodson
- Arnold Jones
- Bill Kaplan
- Melanie Masciantonio
- Anastasia Nikolopoulos
- Shawn Oliver
- Joanne Sharma
- Kerry Ann Sebro-O'Neill

- Rev. David Shaheen
- Lee Steube
- Jennifer Schoener (non-resident, Executive Director at Upper Darby Arts & Education Foundation)

## **Phase 1 Advisory Group**

### Community Members:

- Township Police Chief Tim Bernhardt
- Holly Clark
- Nick Coombs
- Joe Coyne
- Harry Dietzler
- Alison Dobbins
- Howard Goodison
- Kim McDevitt
- Rev. Nate Goodson
- Arnold Jones
- William Kaplan
- Melanie Masciantonio
- Shawn Oliver
- Rev. David Shaheen

### Board Members and Central Office Staff:

- Gina Curry
- Edward Brown

- Rachel Mitchell
- Frank Salerno
- Dr. John Council
- Greg Manfre
- Melissa Figueroa-Douglas
- Dr. Dan McGarry
- The late Leah Dawes
- Damien Warsavage

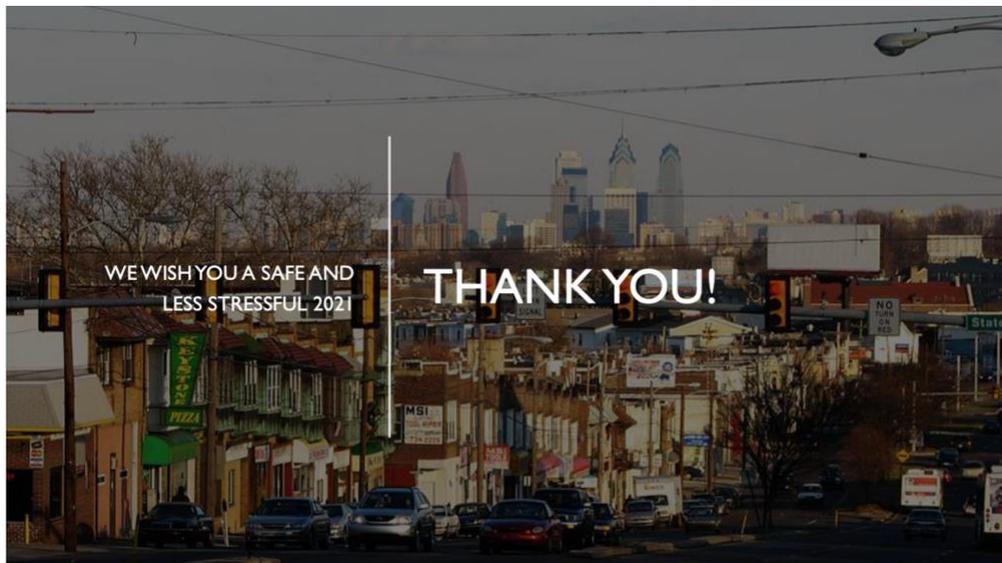
## **Moderators**

- Brian Armstead
- Marisa Denker
- Ten Enoch
- Cassandra Georges
- Shari Gilmore
- Ellen Greenberg
- Lauren Hirshorn
- Germaine Ingram
- Serrano Legrand
- Kim Leichtner
- Carol Lydon
- Kiersten Mailler
- Chris Satullo

- Harris Sokoloff
- Josh Warner

## Project Team

- Harris Sokoloff, Director, Catalyst Community Conversations
- Chris Satullo, Director, PA Project for Civic Engagement
- Brian Armstead, Project Co-lead
- Linda Breitstein, Project Manager
- Catherine Sontag, Zoom technical support
- Justin Villere, Zoom technical support
- Kelsey Guinnup, Zoom technical support
- Stacey Wilson, Graphic design



*Concluding slide of the three community-wide forums.*

