

# High School Student Interviews

Douglas County School District, 2017



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# Overview and Context

This report summarizes interviews of 20 DCSD high school students that was conducted in early 2017, for the purpose of following up on specific issues of interest observed in an earlier survey. It is part of a larger community research project that includes the following reports:

- ➔ High School Student Survey Report
- ➔ [High School Student Interview Report](#)
- ➔ High School Student Data Breakouts and Open-End Summary
- ➔ Employee Survey Report
- ➔ Employee Interview Report
- ➔ Employee Data Breakouts and Open-End Summary
- ➔ Parent and Community Survey Report
- ➔ Parent Interview Report
- ➔ Parent Data Breakouts and Open-End Summary
- ➔ Community Data Summary and Open-End Summary
- ➔ Higher education and Employer Interview Report
- ➔ Summary of Top-Level Findings

# School Climate and Satisfaction

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## Section 1

# Students generally feel their schools have a good reputation

- When students were asked what kind of a reputation their high school had, most students felt that their school had a reasonably good reputation.
  - > Few students pointed to incredibly unique and specific things that influenced their school's reputation, but several mentioned school pride, sports, and academic reputation.
  - > Some students also mentioned that the size and age of their school influenced its reputation as well.
- Many students said they didn't feel particularly proud to go to their school, but not because they didn't like their school—simply because it was something that they hadn't given much thought to.
  - > Those students who did feel pride for their school mentioned that they were proud of the welcoming social environment in their school, the athletics, or the strong academics.
  - > Students in Charter or alternative schools tended to have stronger feelings of pride for the academics of their school.



We are one of the oldest high schools in the District so in terms of sports, we have some legacy things or long-running championships. I think we are known for being pretty well rounded and having a lot of options and being pretty friendly.

# The academic rigor of the sophomore and junior years of high school may result in decreased satisfaction

- ➔ When students were asked why there might be a decrease in satisfaction in the sophomore and junior years of high school, many mentioned that they were expected to take much harder classes in those two years than in other years of high school.
  - > They also mentioned that in junior year is when students have to take the SAT and/or ACT which creates additional stress.
- ➔ Students had several ideas for what schools could do to decrease stress and increase satisfaction during the middle two years of high school, which included:
  - > More coordination and communication between teachers to ensure that workloads are reasonable for students, and large deadlines and tests are not falling at the same time.
  - > More access to support resources, such as counselors, tutors, and prep courses.
  - > Beginning to talk about and prep for the ACT and SAT earlier, so it is not all loaded on students at once their junior year.

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I think it's probably because you are taking things like chemistry and very difficult classes and you have a lot of pressure for ACT, SAT prep and college things. A lot of people don't have the resources they need and expectations are too high. I think they need to be providing more resources and more ahead of time prep for the ACT and SAT and giving information beforehand instead of things happening in the last couple of months.

# Most students feel there is a fairly healthy social environment at their school, but recognize some don't feel accepted

- ➔ Many students felt that their school had a good social environment that felt like a family, however many other students mentioned that there were many cliques in their school, which made the social environment less enjoyable.
  - > Students often felt that a positive social environment impacted their learning as they felt more comfortable asking questions in class and getting help from other classmates.
- ➔ When students were asked why students may feel as if they weren't socially accepted, they pointed to many different reasons including:
  - > If you didn't have a set group, it was difficult to fit in, especially at large schools.
  - > Other students could be cruel and spread rumors via social media or in the schools.
  - > Students are at an age where they are uncomfortable with themselves and constantly feel the need to prove themselves to everyone around them.
- ➔ Students often felt their schools were doing a lot to make everyone feel accepted, but thought that encouraging activities that everyone could be involved in, promoting clubs and safe spaces for students, and encouraging teachers and counselors to reach out to struggling students would help.



It is expected for most teenagers. That is how we feel about life in general. But we could have more counseling and visits that are safe. We have Sources of Strength, but that is more popular people socially. We should put more positivity on certain clubs to make people feel more included.

# Students generally understand the rules at their school and feel that they are fair

- ➔ Students explained that school rules are mainly talked about at the beginning of the year, and individual class rules are explained in a class syllabus and explained by teachers.
  - > Some students mentioned that not much time was spent on explaining rules, and students would often not read the student handbook or syllabus.
- ➔ In general, students felt that most rules at their school were fair and understandable.
  - > The most common rules students didn't understand, disagreed with, or felt were unfair were rules about dress code.
- ➔ While most students felt that rules were enforced fairly, some students mentioned that students that were expected to act out, or who were considered “favorites” sometimes received a lesser punishment for breaking rules than other students.

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They are explained teacher by teacher, the classroom rules. If you get in trouble, then they will explain them more. You are just expected to know not to do things. Every year before we choose our classes they give a brief explanation of rules. I guess they could be enforced unfairly based on what the teacher thinks the student is like—based on their reputation.



# Teachers and Learning

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## Section 2

# Students believe that the best teachers are passionate, organized and treat students as individuals

- ➔ When asked to describe the best teachers that they've had, students described teachers that genuinely cared that their students were learning, and made accommodations to meet each student's individual learning style.
- ➔ They also believed that the best teachers made themselves available to students—to either talk about school-related or personal things.
- ➔ Many students also felt that their best teachers were very passionate about what they were teaching, as well as very organized in class.

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They are understanding of things that you have going on. They work with you when you're gone or can't make something up. They help with anything that you need and are available to help. They have a unique approach to teaching, so it's not sitting there and lecturing so it makes the class more enjoyable.

“

They find the best time that works for you and make their schedule open the best they can to help you with that class or problems in general. They are engaged in what they are teaching and you can tell they are passionate so the students want to learn.

# Teachers who are disengaged detract from learning

➔ When asked what characteristics their worst teachers have, students most frequently mentioned teachers who were disengaged or didn't seem to care about their students learning.

> They mentioned that some teachers seemed to just be there for the money, but didn't care much about teaching.

“ Those are the ones who are the opposite and don't seem to care about the students. Either they don't care how well they are doing or they don't care about what they are teaching. Or they don't understand what they are teaching. They don't pay attention to student requests.

➔ Students were most likely to believe their teachers were going to leave during the school year if they seemed like they were disengaged or didn't care.

> However, many students said they did not think they would be able to tell if their teacher was thinking about leaving, unless it was for obvious reasons, such as maternity leave.

> While most students had not experienced a teacher leaving during the year, the few students who had believed it detracted from their learning because they had to learn the teaching style of a new teacher, and sometimes the new teacher was not as knowledgeable on the subject.

“ I had two teachers leave. I was impacted negatively because teachers teach so differently. It takes a long time to figure out how teachers teach and grade. Having a new teacher set me back because you had to relearn.

# Having teachers who are excited about the subject can make students more excited about learning

- When asked what teachers could do to get students more excited about learning, many students mentioned that when the teacher was very excited and passionate about the subject that they were teaching, students would naturally be more excited about it as well.
- Many also believed that when teachers used different styles of teaching, rather than just lecturing every day, it helped students become more engaged.

“ I think it’s really important for teachers to be excited about the topic. Humor is really valuable. It doesn’t work with everyone’s teaching style, but many of my teachers have entertaining stories or little songs to help us remember. It is entertaining and enjoyable. When the teachers get excited, we get excited.

- Students also felt that they would be more excited about learning if what they were learning in class could be applied to real-world experiences and they could understand how they would use what they were learning later in life.

“ I think a lot of time, it would help to relate it to issues going on now and how it will affect our lives later. When there is no reason behind why we are learning, we are not excited. So if they explained how we could relate it what we will do in our career or every day life that would help.

# While students want some level of involvement in designing their learning, they don't want complete control

➔ When asked what it would look like for students to be involved in designing their learning, students had several ideas, which included:

- > Picking their own project or subject for a paper
- > Having the teacher distribute surveys at the beginning of the year to understand how and what students wanted to learn
- > Picking their own reading material from a list



I think there are some teachers who have a survey at the beginning of the year asking what we are looking to get out of class, and what ways we learn best. That is useful in getting feedback so you can see what students said and figure out how to help them. Especially for a year long class, checking in at each quarter and semester to improve and make it better.

- ➔ While many students were interested in being involved in designing their learning to some extent, many expressed that they did not want to be overly involved, as they trusted their teachers and felt that things could go wrong and they wouldn't learn what they needed to if it was all driven by students.
- ➔ Students were mixed on their current level of involvement in designing their learning. Some students said they were not involved at all, while others had several classes where they were able to be more involved.

# Support

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## Section 3

# Having support at home pushes students to do well at school

- ➔ To students, getting support for education at home means their parents encourage them to go to school and push themselves to do well. It can also mean helping with homework or having someone to talk to about school.
- ➔ Many students felt that having support for education at home impacted their learning as it made them more motivated to go to school and do well.
  - > A few students mentioned that if their parents were not pushing them to go to school and emphasizing how important it was, they would not be motivated to go themselves.
  - > Several students also mentioned that it was good to get support at home because it meant they had someone to help answer questions so they could get their assignments done on time.
  - > They also felt that getting support at home allowed them to concentrate on doing well in school, instead of being distracted by other things.

“ I think it’s the people in your house paying attention to your education and being supportive. Giving you time to do homework, helping with things, and being an advocate as a parent if someone won’t listen to a student. Being available and understanding.

“ I think it’s having your parents do anything that is needed of them to help you get a good education. That could mean making sure you are going to your classes or supporting you. If my parents weren’t leading me, I probably wouldn’t have a lot of care for school, but they push me to come and be the best I can be.

# Counselors

- ➔ While students are generally assigned a counselor, many students, particularly underclassmen do not get to know their counselor.
  - > Students often mentioned that counselors would come into their classrooms to let students know they were available, but many did not meet with them one-on-one.
  - > Several upperclassmen explained that as they got closer to graduating, they would have to see their counselor for credit checks to ensure they were on track to graduate, but didn't have much contact outside of that unless they needed a schedule change.



We don't get to know them that well. We get their names and if we have a schedule issue, we go see them. Junior year we have a mandatory credit check, but otherwise we just go when we need them.

- ➔ While students were aware that counselors were available for personal and emotional issues as well, many said that they would not feel comfortable talking to their counselor about personal issues, as they didn't know them well.



# Students feel they get high levels of support at school from their teachers, but could get more support from counselors

➔ When asked about the overall level and type of support that students received, students often spoke of incredibly supportive teachers who would help them with both academic and personal issues.

> Particularly in smaller schools, such as charter and alternative schools, students seemed to have very close relationships with their teachers.

“ The teachers try really hard to make sure they are there to help students. When they see there are issues with students, they will talk to other teachers and advocate for students. They are looking out for the students’ best needs.

➔ To better support students when they have a personal or emotional issue, students wanted there to be a better way to get to know their counselors. Many of them recommended that counselors have more regular meetings with students just to get to know them so that students would feel more comfortable talking to them.

> They also wanted teachers to be proactive about talking with students if they felt as if they had something personal or emotional going on.

“ Maybe the counselors could try to have meetings with students so that they make a connection so that the students feel more comfortable talking to them. I know a lot of students, especially freshmen, find it awkward to go to the counselor since we aren’t connected.

# Preparing for the Future

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## Section 4

# Students have a strong desire to learn about personal finance to help them after high school

- ➔ When asked what students thought they should be learning about to help them in the future, students overwhelmingly mentioned practical life skills such as filing taxes, personal finance, and applying for a loan.
  - > While some students mentioned that economics and personal finance courses were offered as electives at their school, they thought that they should be required.
  - > Students believed that no matter what their plans after high school were, they would need to have these skills to live as an adult.



I think learning more about personal financing. We offer one class about it, but applying it more. You can take that one class, but if you don't have room to take the class, you don't have any info about how to do taxes or take a loan. Trying to connect what we are learning to real-world applications would help.

# Discussions about college often begin at home, but are re-enforced at school

- ➔ Students often began thinking about their plans after high school in their sophomore or junior year.
  - > This thinking was often initiated by the students themselves or their parents.
- ➔ While it varied a bit by student, many students said that they talked quite a bit about college while at school, particularly starting in the junior year.
  - > Several students mentioned using Naviance to help them learn about the process and plan for the future.

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At the end of sophomore year, it hit that I should probably start thinking about colleges, but spring of junior year is when I really started. I got the first shove from my parents, but after that it was mainly me because it was something I was excited about. They talk about college a lot junior and senior year. I did most of my college searching on my own, but that was my preference. They really push Naviance—it's a system that the school uses that allows you to look at different colleges. It's basically a college prep website.

# Students not going to college feel less prepared for life after high school than students going to college

➔ Students who planned to go to college tended to feel academically prepared for college, particularly if they had taken AP courses.

> They felt that their school had prepared them for the level of academic rigor that would be required in college.

“ I think school has prepared me for what life will be like in college. I know academics will get harder, but I've taken AP classes, which has given a good insight. Also the social construct of high school has also prepared me well because you will be close to your peers all the time.

➔ However, students who did not plan to go to college did not feel as prepared for life after high school as they often felt that their high school was very college focused.

> Many wished they had more information on types of jobs available and how to get a job, in addition to other life skills, such as personal finance.

“ After high school, my school is really good about college and what college you are going to. They are very college based, but some of us aren't going to be able to go to college, and nobody has ideas for me there. I don't feel prepared at all. I don't know how to handle a checking account, credit, renting a house. That makes me so nervous because I have no idea what I'm doing.

# Appendix

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# Methodology

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## ➔ Research mode

- > All interviews were between 30-45 minutes long and conducted via telephone in February and March 2017.

## ➔ Recruiting

- > Participants were recruited from a list of survey respondents who indicated they would be willing to participate in further research.
- > Participants were selected randomly after being stratified by grade level to ensure a good mix of students.

## ➔ Confidentiality

- > Participants were promised confidentiality. Names and other identifying information of participants are not included in this report.

## ➔ Incentive

- > All participants were offered \$50 as an incentive for their participation.

# Participant Profile

*General characteristics of the participants from the interviews are summarized in the chart below*

Gender	Grade	High School
Male: 4 Female: 16	9: 4 10: 3 11: 3 12: 10	Chaparral: 2 Castle View: 2 Douglas County: 2 eDCSD: 1 Highlands Ranch: 2 Legend: 1 Mountain Vista: 3 Ponderosa: 1 Rock Canyon: 1 SkyView: 1 STEM: 2 Thunder Ridge: 2



# About Corona Insights

Our founder named the company Corona because the word means “light.” It’s the knowledge that surrounds and illuminates an issue; exactly what we provide. Our firm’s mission is to provide accurate and unbiased information and counsel to decision makers. We provide market research, evaluation, and strategic consulting for organizations both small and large.

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