



## Design Thinking – summary & themes

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MN Comeback has made strides to round-out the knowledgebase and insights toward fostering substantially stronger parent demand in Minneapolis – a key lever. In March 2015, we completed Design Thinking conversations with 50-plus parents from diverse races and ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The following captures what we learned, themes and ideas for improving parent access to rigorous and relevant schools.

### Objective

Leverage Design Thinking to advance conversations with parents on education – applying the principle of solving for individuals for the betterment of all; explore many areas: how parents learn about different school options and their preferences in making a school choice, how they decide which school to enroll their children, and how they evaluate their choices.

### Flow and participation

Due to strong interest among parents, we filled all Design Thinking interviewee slots and then hosted a supplemental focus group for the “overflow” crowd. For our focus group, we asked Design Thinking-style questions, but parents responded as a group versus individually; those themes are also captured below.

Specific to Design Thinking, all interviewers received training on how to conduct interviews; then, after conducting lengthy parent conversations, we underwent an iterative process to understand our parents’ needs and ultimately hone in on solutions.

### Parent profiles

Our interviewing teams assembled profiles to help illustrate examples of parents we engaged:

- Sally: A courageous, caring parent who is engaged in her children’s education. She succeeded in moving to this country, finding a great school for her kids and participates in every school event that she can. Sally started to get concerned about the bus being late and her children freezing for 25 minutes. She went to the school to express her concerns, but the administration said nothing could be done. Sally was told, “That’s just the way it is.” What if Sally knew what her rights were as a parent? What if she knew other parents face similar problems?
- Tasha: A mom who is resourceful, confident and wants to be engaged but has limited time. We are amazed to realize that her expressed needs are still not met. It would be game-changing for her school’s leaders to be completely open, responsive, and accountable to the needs and ideas of the community, parents, and students.
- Marta: An immigrant from Mexico – is a multicultural, courageous mother who is goal driven. We were amazed to learn that she doesn’t feel entitled to



advocate for or navigate her children's education. It would be game-changing if she was empowered to use a parent's bill of rights to pursue the dreams of her children. Marta is influenced by those she trusts; she believes kids should have better access to resources, and her ambitions for her children are rooted in intellectualism and togetherness (not replicating what she experienced in Mexico).

- Miz: An ELL immigrant and stay-at-home mother. We were amazed to realize how much information exists, yet how poorly informed she is on education, school readiness and school choice. She needs help navigating options and information. It would be game-changing to reach her in her own language with a one-stop shop for trusted, customized information to make the right choice for her children.

### Themes

Our team observed the following big takeaways from our parent interviewees:

- Parent-to-parent communication is arguably the most-trusted source of information, as is their deferring to local neighborhood and community leaders for information and validation. We need to leverage existing community networks of trust, including basic communication and sharing of information. Teachers are another trusted source, but largely on how well their child is achieving – not on whether the school is the right fit.
- The rumor mill is rampant – absent is accurate and comprehensive information. Parents often look to limited resources for information, like the fellow parent or neighbor noted above; they can often hear single-track or inaccurate information.
- Parents continually underscored stories and feelings of their voices not being heard, even using words like “impenetrable” to describe schools or “that’s just the way it is” as messages they hear from schools.
- Many parents don’t feel comfortable navigating the education system, including utilizing the current tools and resources available. It’s unclear if parents are fully aware of resources available. They’re desperate for objective, unbiased information. No one is currently doing this well in Minneapolis – at least not scale. Concurrently, there’s an overwhelming amount of information “out there,” however piecemeal it may be, yet parents aren’t accessing it.
- Parents perceive their educational attainment – or lack thereof – as a barrier to making decisions on behalf of their children (i.e., they question their competence in making critical decisions and lack confidence in asking questions). We need to validate and reaffirm their decisions and efforts to raise their voices.
- Parents make many attempts to educate themselves on options, but are often unaware of resources; school and district touch points to engage them are limited, static or nonexistent.
- Parent definitions of “quality” are across the board, ranging from the volume of homework their children receive to the types of extra-curricular activities the school provides as indicators.

### “How might we...”

After our interviews, we explored potential solutions, ranging from low-hanging fruit to transformative, by asking “How might we...”:

#### *Parent-related*

- Create a parent “Bill of Rights” so parents are more informed on what to look for in a school and what questions to ask educators? This could include allowing parents to do school “drop-ins” or offer a city-wide “Top 10” list of things parents should ask educators when exploring school options?



- Tailor communications to a person's language and culture, from language used to communication channels leveraged?
- Harness the "rumor mill?"
- Reach parents where they're at?
- Make parents, especially those marginalized or disenfranchised, feel entitled?
- Validate parents' rights to advocate and navigate school options? This could include having diverse media outlets feature parent columns on education.
- Make navigating the system simpler?
- Honor the parent as an expert, including when deciding where to send their child to school? This could include videos of parents sharing their journey and experiences successfully navigating school choice and education.
- Elevate the importance of academics without ignoring or deemphasizing other things parents value (e.g., safety, extra-curricular activities)?
- Inform but not overwhelm parents?

#### *Organizing-related*

- Empower trusted neighbors and local community leaders to help guide but not decide in the school decision-making process, as well as make sure they advocate for quality and fit?
- Establish city-wide parent organizing groups (not by school), including an organizing boot camp?
- Connect with parents at places of work?
- Create neighborhood walking tours of great schools?
- Keep organizing authentic, and ensure that work is not coopted by any interest groups?

#### *School-related*

- Establish consistent marketing standards for schools in Minneapolis (e.g., how they talk about quality)?
- Hire school employees from the community?
- Ensure schools adopt a system of accountability and responsiveness to parents and students?
- Develop a Great Schools Welcome Committee, comprised of educators from multiple great schools who welcome new families or families with children about ready to enter the K-12 system to funnel enrollment into high-quality schools?
- Elevate and circulate teacher testimonials from high-performing schools?
- Develop policies and professional development that pressure administrators to respect and empower parents?
- Have parents run a boot camp for teachers on diversity, their expectations, etc.?

#### *Accountability- and systems-related*

- Create a common definition of "success," and measures of "quality" that reflect parent and student priorities?
- Scale parent-organizing work?
- Create a system of equity practices?
- Measure success? This could include creating public report cards on each school in Minneapolis?
- Ensure trust and integrity throughout the process (of parent organizing)?
- Create a Minneapolis parent engagement "office" so parents can inform educator personnel decisions (e.g., hiring and evaluations), and find rigorous and relevant schools for their children?
- Create a parent hotline in multiple languages so parents can ask questions, raise concerns and relay positive feedback?



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- Create leaderboards to identify and promote schools that are high performing – feature online, in businesses and at stores, at community centers, etc.
- Allow parents to rate school quality?
- Offer easy, city-wide universal enrollment for all students?

### **Focus group summary**

- Parents articulated common goals: for their children to graduate from high school and attend college, and to attain a career.
- When choosing a school for their children, they use referrals from early education and community providers, such as Way to Grow, as well as friends and family. Many also cited using Minneapolis School Finder.
- Language is an important factor in choosing/switching schools, as is transportation.
- Parents continually cited language as a key component in where they send their children to school; they want their children to maintain their native language, as well they want to be able to communicate with their child's teacher and school administrators.
- Parents want to know what is expected of them (as parents), and they want their children's school to communicate with them as parents.
- Parents said that it is extremely important to be in a school that does not discriminate against immigrants or segregate immigrant children, while also recognizing that immigrant families need some additional help navigating the system.

### **Topline recommendations**

Through the iterative Design Thinking process, our interviewing teams offered the proposed solutions:

- Trusted Neighbor Initiative: Provide sound, accurate information where parents are at from someone they trust (leverage existing community networks via a new part-time parent fellowship, in which local "influencers" receive training on school quality and resource available).
- Teachers of Choice: Parents and students help hire and evaluate educators and staff. This could take the form of parents and students sitting on school-based committees that hire teachers and staff, as well as contributing to educator evaluations in meaningful ways.
- We the Parents: Free, one-stop shops that provide in-person and online information in a parent's preferred language. These "shops" would enable parents to navigate the education system, know their rights, connect with other parents, and learn about trainings and activities for parent advocacy.

The above, coupled with other efforts to better engage parents – including the IFF Quality Schools Study and the GreatSchools literature review – should inform how our coalition elevates parent engagement and organizing surrounding opportunities to select high-quality schools that are the right fit for their children.