



Clarkston School District

in Washington



 **thoughtexchange**

The power of dialogue

When Tim Winter, Clarkston's new Superintendent, arrived a year and half ago he discovered that trust had broken down in his district. This feeling was most evident in the strained relationship between Clarkston's teachers and District administration. Winter and his team believed the problem was rooted in a lack of dialogue, and set out to change how the District communicated with employees and the broader community.

"When we started looking at Thoughtexchange it seemed like an opportunity to provide voice to a lot of different people and rebuild that relationship. And, over the first two processes, it's proven to be true," says Winter.

While rebuilding trust was a priority, it wasn't the only issue the District faced. Clarkston needed to replace its high school, but had failed its last two bond attempts. The District, which represents a high percentage of free and reduced lunch students, also needed to find ways to support its students and families in the community.

Instead of trying to address these complicated and important issues individually, Winter and his team ran a standard Thoughtexchange that asked three simple, open-ended questions about the District in general. This approach allowed all of these topics to surface inside of a single conversation, and after analysis, provided a road map for where the District needed to go next for each topic.

417 participants

20,174 stars

775 thoughts

775 thoughts

20,174 stars

20,174 stars

participants

775 thoughts

20,174 stars

417 participan

20,17

Building relationships through shared experiences

“Thoughtexchange establishes a relationship by asking people what they think. It’s not just ‘check a box’ or ‘fill out a bubble’, it asks people to give us a narrative of the experiences they’ve had,” says Winter.

Winter strongly believes that the experiences of Clarkston’s community members collectively tell the story of his district. He used his second Thoughtexchange to start rebuilding the relationship at the center of that story. This time, Winter and his team asked the community for their thoughts on how the District could build a stronger relationship with them. He also asked the community to share a story of a memorable experience they had in the Clarkston School District.

“These are stories that you may tell the people in line at Costco, or at a post office or at a basketball game. We want to share those stories and market and measure ourselves through them. What we didn’t expect was that the stories that people shared really did guide us as far as where we need to go next,” says Winter.

“Unlike the results you get from surveys or other methods, Thoughtexchange remains in the forefront. It’s active, it’s fluid and it’s changing.”

TIM WINTER SUPERINTENDENT CLARKSTON SCHOOL DISTRICT

A safe forum for open conversation

Getting people to share their perspectives is challenging when there is a lack of trust. As Winter and his team sent out their first questions, they were met with concerns from staff about whether the responses would be tracked, or if the district would know which computer the answers came from.

Having a third party like Thoughtexchange control the data and confidentiality was a huge plus for Clarkston. “The third party piece was critical to getting people to participate in the conversation,” says Winter. “It shows that there is no secret, behind-the-curtain maneuvering on our part.”

By the Star step – where people see the thoughts they submitted surrounded by the thoughts of others and assign value to the ones that resonate most – attitudes had already changed.

“The safety of the Star step is that you go in truly anonymously, see what other people have said and then identify what’s important to you without really putting too much risk out there. It gives people the confidence to share their voice, and a chance to be part of something bigger. I see our community recognizing that as well,” says Winter.

A trusted partnership

As part of their partnership with Clarkston, Thoughtexchange delivered not only software but all of the services necessary to make the engagement successful. This included engagement consulting, project management, communications support, facilitation, moderation, website creation and analysis. In effect, Thoughtexchange acted as an extension of the District’s own staff.

“It truly feels like we are in a partnership with not just a company but someone who truly cares about the success of our district and the success of the work that we’re doing. There’s relationships and business partnerships, but with Thoughtexchange you also start to leak into that friend element. You start to feel like they are people that are in your friend circle because they listen, and they encourage, and they provide input and advice,” says Winter.



The Clarkston Story is about you and me. It's about all of us. We are the students, parents, teachers, bus drivers, custodians, maintenance workers, food service staff, administrators...and so much more! We are the leaders of business, government, higher education, faith, and our community. We are volunteers, partners, and neighbors.

csdk12.org



Learning from the results

“When Thoughtexchange comes back with the results, they are professional, produced, and show you where the feedback is really targeted. Most importantly, it’s clear that we haven’t manipulated the data. It’s evident that what you see is truly coming from the responses of the community and the district,” says Winter.

Clarkston expected to see the high school facility in the results, and was grateful to discover concerns about academics and programming they had previously not known about. Instead of just replacing the high school, Clarkston is now envisioning a building that could provide students with programs they’ve never had access to in the past.

Winter believes Thoughtexchange’s results allow districts like his to pinpoint areas that need to be focused on at a particular time. “Unlike the results you get from surveys or other methods, Thoughtexchange remains in the forefront. It’s active, it’s fluid, and it’s changing,” he explains. “Topics that keep reoccurring represent ones we aren’t done with yet, and new issues give us something to really look for and put some focus on.”

Looking forward

Clarkston has shared the results of its first two Thoughtexchanges with its community, along with a document listing the steps they plan to take next. They plan to run four more Thoughtexchanges this year.

“This is an investment and its embedded in the work we do every day. We hope that our district and our community see that, and it becomes part of who we are,” says Winter. “Thoughtexchange brings us together to move forward and keep this dialogue going.”

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