

Professional Development Lab School: Focus Group Summary Report



On January 16, 2025, representatives from Columbus State University facilitated focus group discussions with Dimon Magnet Academy's staff, families, and community members. The purpose of the focus group was to lean into the knowledge, perspectives, and expertise regarding the strengths, challenges, and opportunities within the school and local community to help inform the development of a Professional Development Lab School (PDLS).

NOTE: Page 1 of this report highlights key themes from the focus groups, and pp. 2-4 synthesizes the feedback by providing actionable insights and recommendations to construct a PDLS that serves as a central nexus for the community, one that prioritizes education, healthcare, wellness, and research as the cornerstone of its services.

Key Themes

Theme 1: Strengthen Community Partnerships and Awareness

"Dimon really is a great school. Administration and teachers are always willing to help in any way they can," shared a participant. The sense of community at Dimon Magnet Academy is a foundation that can be leveraged to expand partnerships and increase visibility.

Theme 2: Enhance Family Engagement

"When Dimon found out my family had been through a fire, they stepped up in a major way," shared one participant. This compassion can be extended to increase family engagement.

Theme 3: Expand Academic and Non-Academic Supports

"Dimon kids are happy, smiling, and thinking like scientists," said an attendee. This enthusiasm highlights the importance of expanding support systems to nurture student success.

Theme 4: Offer More Enrichment Programs and Extracurricular Activities

"Our chess club has been a huge success—we need more programs like that," shared a teacher. To build on this, the PDLS can introduce non-competitive clubs, competitive activities, and enlist students to serve in leadership roles such as a student council.

Theme 5: Increase Professional Development for Teachers and Families

"One of the biggest things that we hear from parents is, 'We want to know how to help our child, but we don't know what to do or how to help.'" This highlights the need for professional development opportunities not only for teachers but also for families, ensuring they have the knowledge and tools to support student learning effectively.

Theme 6: Address Systemic Challenges

"Transportation is a huge factor... it's not that the parents didn't want to attend PTA meetings, they just didn't have the means to get there." This underscores a systemic barrier that affects family engagement and access to resources, emphasizing the need for solutions that address structural challenges within the community.

Theme 7: Monitor and Sustain

"This needs to be followed up as you go through the year. You will need to know, 'What do I need to do? How can I use it now?'" This emphasizes the importance of ongoing evaluation to ensure that initiatives remain effective and sustainable over time, rather than being one-time efforts.

Theme 1, Strengthen Community Partnerships and Awareness

1.1 Develop a Targeted Marketing Strategy: Participants noted that "a lot of people don't know Dimon exists," and suggested that more effort is needed to spread the word. To address this:

- Collaborate with marketing professionals to build a strong brand identity, including logos, infographics, and promotional videos.
- Launch a social media campaign to highlight STEM certification, unique programs, and student achievements.
- Engage local media outlets and influencers to share Dimon's story and successes.

1.2 Host Open House and Community Days: "Parents love coming to Dimon. You say you need something, and they show up," noted one participant. Building on this enthusiasm:

- Organize open houses and community events where families can participate in a host of activities and programs.
- Provide interactive training sessions for families to engage with students and staff.

1.3 Broaden Partnership Efforts: Several participants suggested approaching larger organizations for support, with one saying, "We've tried to get Pratt & Whitney involved, but it's been a challenge." Recommendations include:

- Proactively pursue partnerships with corporations and organizations for financial and in-kind support.
- Collaborate with nonprofit organizations to access additional funding and resources.

1.4 Centralize Community Resources: A participant reflected, "It's hard to find resources—you have to know where to dig." To address this challenge:

- Work with the district or community organizations to create a centralized online directory for the community to locate various resources (e.g., food, healthcare, transportation, training).
- Maintain the resource directory with the help of tech-savvy individuals.

1.5 Increase Visibility: "We've tried to get the news to come here, but they haven't," one participant lamented. To increase awareness:

- Distribute flyers and host informational sessions across the region.
- Partner with community centers, churches, and businesses to amplify the school's visibility.

Theme 2, Enhance Family Engagement

2.1 Offer Flexible Family Engagement Programs: "The dinners we used to have brought everyone together," a participant recalled. To foster connection:

- Host monthly or quarterly community dinners with workshops on family literacy, behavior management, and financial literacy.
- Provide childcare or interactive student activities during these workshops to encourage participation.

2.2 Expand Communication Channels: "Not every parent has a ride or the time to come to the school," said one participant. To address this barrier:

- Use text-based updates, QR codes, and video announcements to keep families informed.
- Offer virtual options for PTA meetings, workshops, and parent-teacher conferences.

2.3 Introduce Family Support Groups: "Sometimes parents feel like they're in a silo," one attendee observed. Building on this insight:

- Reintroduce programs like FAST (Families and Schools Together) to create support groups for parents.
- Offer parent mentoring programs where experienced parents can guide new families on ways to partner and engage with the school.

2.4 Incentivize Engagement: "Sometimes, just a small incentive can make a big difference," noted one attendee. To encourage involvement:

- Offer small rewards for families who participate in school events, such as raffle entries or certificates of recognition.

Theme 3, Expand Academic and Non-Academic Supports

3.1 Provide Comprehensive Tutoring Programs: "Tutoring should start earlier in the year and cover all subjects," a participant suggested.

To address this:

- Expand tutoring to include social studies and science alongside reading and math.
- Collaborate with local colleges and universities to involve college students in tutoring and intervention programs.
- Offer year-round tutoring sessions and increase frequency.

3.2 Create Field Trips and Real-World Experiences: "Our kids need experiences to build background knowledge," shared an attendee. **To expand exposure:**

- Offer field trips to museums, botanical gardens, farms, and industries.
- Align trips with STEM/STEAM and other curricula to enhance learning.

3.3 Offer Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): "Our kids need a place to decompress," said a participant, highlighting the need for:

- A dedicated behavior specialist or mental health counselor on campus.
- A sensory room where students can self-regulate with stress-relief activities.

3.4 Ensure Support for Basic Needs: "We need to expand the uniform closet and food pantry," one participant suggested. **To address basic needs:**

- Partner with businesses to provide seasonal items like jackets, umbrellas, and shoes.
- Increase access to healthy food and hygiene supplies.

3.5 Explore Career Options: "Kids need to see what's possible," noted one attendee. **To expand career exploration:**

- Host "Career Week" events featuring local professionals and tradespeople.
- Create after-school clubs focused on career skills, such as coding, engineering, automotive, and/or robotics.

Theme 4, Offer More Enrichment Programs and Extracurricular Activities

4.1 Introduce Non-Competitive Clubs:

- Launch after-school programs like yoga, gardening, and comic book creation.
- Recruit parents or community volunteers to sponsor and lead these clubs.

4.2 Enhance Competitive Activities: "LEGO League brought families together," noted a participant. **To expand opportunities:**

- Introduce additional STEM-related competitions.
- Provide transportation for students participating in after-school activities.

4.3 Create Student Council and Leadership: "We need to give students more leadership opportunities," shared an attendee. **To address this:**

- Reintroduce a Student Council to foster student leadership and voice.
- Involve students in community outreach efforts.

Theme 5, Increase Professional Development for Teachers and Families

5.1 Customize Professional Development for Teachers: "We need training that meets us where we are," an attendee reflected. To provide support:

- Offer workshops on behavior management, mental health awareness, and STEM integration.
- Build on the EMPOWER model to provide conference-style sessions tailored to teacher needs.

5.2 Offer Parent Workshops: "Parents need help navigating technology and homework," a participant noted. To address this:

- Host workshops on using platforms like iReady, helping with homework, and managing stress at home.
- Offer training on accessing community resources and understanding pathways to higher education or skilled trades.

Theme 6, Address Systemic Challenges

6.1 Advocate for District Support: "We need more district-led publicity for Dimon," said a participant. To address this:

- Propose a district-wide "School of the Year" award to highlight unique achievements like STEM recertification.

6.2 Create Transportation Solutions: "Transportation is a barrier for many families," shared an attendee. To address this:

- Work with local businesses and the district to provide transportation grants or ride-sharing options for families and students.

6.3 Ensure Sustainable Funding: "Sometimes, we just need money to make things happen," noted a participant. To address this:

- Pursue grants for STEM/STEAM initiatives, health and mental health resources, and early childhood education.
- Establish a donor recognition program to encourage ongoing contributions.

Theme 7, Monitor and Sustain

7.1 Establish Clear Metrics for Success: "We need to track what's working and adjust as needed," said a participant. To address this:

- Track improvements in academic performance, attendance, family engagement, and partnerships.
- Use surveys to gather feedback from parents, teachers, and community members.

7.2 Create a Community Task Force: "It takes a village," several participants echoed. To ensure sustainability:

- Form a task force of parents, staff, community leaders, and business partners to identify resources and recommend solutions.