



San Juan Unified School District

in California



thoughtexchange

7,000 personal perspectives on school start times

San Juan Unified School District, a district of 49,000 students and over 65 schools, started considering later start times for its high school students after a group of parents and other community members approached the District's leadership with research supporting the health and learning benefits of a later start to the school day.

The District held meetings to get an initial read on the community's reaction to later start times and quickly came to some important realizations.

The first was that the impact of moving start times is highly personal, changing from family to family, according to the unique circumstances of each. In order to be able to support any change, families would need to be able to talk about how much they were impacted and to express their hopes and concerns in concrete personal terms. The second was that finding a way to hear, appreciate and organize, these stories would be critical to fully understanding the impact of the decision the District would ultimately make.

Online surveys, with predetermined questions and a closed-ended format, could not provide the nuanced understanding the District required. However, given the District's size, holding the number of town hall meetings necessary for district-wide two-way conversations would also be a challenge.

7,309 participants

15,711 thoughts

288,819 stars

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“To capture that range of perspectives, on what we knew was a somewhat contentious issue, we needed to hear from as wide of a portion of our community as possible. As we looked for tools, Thoughtexchange rose to the top. In fact, it was very successful at bringing thousands of individual voices together so that we could hear both the concerns and the support for later start times,” says San Juan’s Senior Director of Community Relations, Trent Allen, APR.

Scale and detail

Using Thoughtexchange, San Juan heard from over 7,000 people who provided nearly 16,000 thoughts and assigned almost 300,000 stars to the thoughts that resonated most.

“Everyone was really taken aback by how many people took the time and were able to participate because it was so easy for them, because it honored their voice, and because they got to hear the voices of others, unfiltered. That really made us realize how powerful and effective Thoughtexchange was at bringing the voice of the silent majority out,” says Allen.

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Partnering with Thoughtexchange also saved weeks’ worth of administrative work for Allen and his team. “Knowing what it takes to run processes, and having done so many times in the past, I was very grateful to have somebody else assist and provide some leadership and guidance with designing the questions and analyzing the information. Having that outside perspective, and not having to worry about capturing, interpreting, and categorizing the information, elevated the conversation with our community and helped us get out of the weeds,” says Allen.

“It also allowed us to see the direct language that was used, have that on record, share that out and be transparent about it. Certainly, the quantity was greater and the quality was greater,” he adds.

Creating shared understanding

Knowing that their community would be divided, Allen and his team hoped to identify specific concerns and create a forum where participants could learn about the trade-offs from each other.

“Thoughtexchange really created the opportunity for our entire community to see both parts of the conversation, react to what they learned, and help us understand how they felt about that conversation,” Allen explains.

“Part of the power was that it shared that with the community in a very neutral voice. It wasn’t us collecting and then pushing back out. Folks could see that conversation happening organically themselves,” he adds. In the end, a more complete and nuanced picture of families’ concerns emerged. While the community felt strongly about the health benefits that longer sleep periods could provide for students, their reservations about the change were rooted in how it would affect athletics and sports, homework, pick-ups and drop-offs, and the time that families have at home together.

Actionable results

San Juan used its Thoughtexchange results, in conjunction with a detailed look at the start time research, to provide its Board with a better understanding of the community’s sentiment toward later high school start times.

The analysis that Thoughtexchange staff prepared for San Juan, and the verbatim thoughts that Allen and his team pointed



Created in 1960 with the merger of six school districts, San Juan Unified School District has a rich tradition of helping students find academic success and achievement. The district serves a 75-square mile area, is the 11th largest school district in California, and employs more than 5,000 individuals to educate more than 46,000 students in its early learning, TK-12 and adult programs. San Juan Unified proudly offers a variety of high quality education environments to serve the learning needs of every student.

sanjuan.edu



to when they drilled deeper into the data, suggested a clear course of action to Allen, his Board and the leadership team. Their next step is to create alternate start time scenarios, each of which is responsive to concerns raised by families. The District will also re-engage the community to collect further, more specific input on those scenarios.

Delivering on the promise of accountability

San Juan believes that they have a responsibility to not only share the input that comes out of their engagement efforts, but also make sure that people understand the actions the District is able to take because of it.

“The Thoughtexchange process has lent itself very well to that. Not only do we have the assistance of the incredible Thoughtexchange staff in helping us analyze and make sense of all the information, but the website that was put together and shared out with the public allows all of the members of our community to see the results. They can see the priorities of their fellow community members and then follow along as we continue that conversation both with the Board, and again this fall as we go back out to the community. Thoughtexchange has been very powerful for helping folks understand that it’s important to share their voice, that we do listen to it, and we do try to be responsive to it, as much as possible.”

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