THE CASE - Visioning Together: Community Solutions for a Thriving LRSD

Background

The Little Rock School District (LRSD) is at a pivotal crossroads. While recent efforts have improved student achievement, the district faces ongoing challenges, including declining enrollment, reduced funding, and increasing competition from private, charter, and homeschooling options amid state and federal legislation targeting public schools. These issues threaten the district's long-term viability and capacity to serve its students and community effectively.

Financial Context

A significant concern is the district's financial health. Declining student enrollment directly translates into decreased revenue, hindering the district's ability to fund staffing, programs, facilities, and other operational needs. Additionally, limited resources mean LRSD must critically evaluate spending and prioritize investments with the greatest impact. Over the past several years, LRSD has taken steps to address enrollment and financial concerns, driven in part by recommendations from the 2014 Facilities Master Plan. However, not all recommendations in the feasibility study have been implemented, and recent #OptimizingLRSD recommendations have addressed only some immediate needs.

Community Context

The challenges facing the Little Rock School District are complex and multifaceted, requiring more than just internal strategies and administratively driven efforts. They demand active engagement, collaboration, and leadership from the broader community, including families, local organizations, businesses, and civic leaders. Historically, strong community involvement has been essential in shaping the district's success and resilience.

To navigate the current challenges and prepare for the district's future viability, district leaders recognize that sustainable solutions must be rooted in a shared vision developed through community-led efforts. When community members take ownership of these issues, they help foster trust, generate innovative ideas, and build collective commitment to the district's future.

Authentically engaging the community is critical to rebuilding trust and enthusiasm around public education. The district aims to mobilize community partners, parents, students, and local organizations to co-create solutions that ensure a thriving and sustainable future for the Little Rock School District.

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Problem of Practice:

The Little Rock School District requires a comprehensive, short-term, and long-term strategy to address the multidimensional challenges threatening its future viability. How can the LRSD leverage the strengths and assets of the LRSD community to lead a solutions-oriented process that delivers a clear, comprehensive roadmap for the future? What steps, actions, policies, and practices should be implemented to optimize expenditures, prioritize investments, and ensure the district remains competitive and sustainable?

Problem of Practice Key Challenges and Strategic Questions:

1. Declining Enrollment and Revenue
    a. Challenge: The loss of students to growing choice options (i.e., private schools, charter schools, neighboring districts, and increased homeschooling) reduces district funding.
    b. Challenge: With potentially insufficient revenue to address all needs, LRSD must evaluate whether current spending is effective and identify cost-saving opportunities.
    c. Question: How can LRSD stabilize and grow its student enrollment to preserve funding and community relevance?
    d. Question: Are current expenditures aligned with district priorities? Where can spending be reduced without harming student outcomes? How should limited resources be prioritized?
    e. Question: How can we generate additional revenue?

2. Optimizing Educational Resources
    a. Challenge: Fewer resources (e.g., funding, personnel, programs, and partnerships) are available to support students, families, and communities.
    b. Challenge: Our resources are currently distributed across several small, under-enrolled campuses.
    c. Question: How can we maximize the resources available to provide the best educational opportunities and experiences for all LRSD students?

3. Competition from Private, Charter, and Home School Options (Parental Choice)
    a. Challenge: Public funding for private school tuition, homeschooling, and the growth of charter schools diverts students away from district schools.
    b. Question: What do parents want?
    c. Question: How can the LRSD enhance its offerings and community engagement to remain an attractive competitive choice for families?

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d. Question: How can the LRSD utilize modern marketing and branding methods to better attract parents and students to the district and its programs?"
e. Question: What innovative programs or models can LRSD develop to meet diverse family needs and rebuild trust?
f. Question: What successful district schools and programs can LRSD replicate to expand access to high-demand programs or schools?

4. Community Engagement and Trust
    a. Challenge: Rebuilding community confidence is crucial for driving enrollment growth and fostering support.
    b. Challenge: Customer service remains a real and perceived problem within LRSD, both internally and externally.
    c. Question: What community engagement strategies can LRSD implement to foster collaboration and shared vision?
    d. Question: How can we identify and address current pain points for parents, students, and other stakeholders (including employees) in their interactions with the LRSD?"

5. Maintaining and Improving Student Achievement
    a. Challenge: Despite recent progress, the sustained decline in resources and enrollment threatens to reverse gains.
    b. Question: How can the district focus investments and initiatives to maximize impact on student outcomes?

6. Staff Recruitment, Compensation, and Retention
    a. Challenge: Attracting and retaining talented staff is critical, especially in priority schools facing improvement needs while operating under budget constraints.
    b. Challenge: Improving overall staff morale is increasingly complex for public schools facing unprecedented attacks at the local, state, and federal levels, while also seeking to address longstanding operational inefficiencies and student achievement issues.
    c. Challenge: Employees identify a lack of a growth mindset and inflexible thinking among colleagues as barriers to improving morale and adult culture.
    d. Question: How can LRSD offer competitive salaries and incentives to attract and retain high-quality personnel in all schools, and particularly in priority schools?

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e. Question: What targeted incentives can motivate staff to serve in the most challenging environments?
f. Question: How can the LRSD improve overall staff morale, contributing to retention efforts while also ushering in changes to improve district operations amid efforts to destabilize the district?

The Charge:

To become a thriving district, LRSD must proactively address the complex interplay among enrollment decline, financial constraints, and talent management. Through strategic financial stewardship, program innovation, community engagement, and targeted incentives, the district can build a resilient foundation for growth, equity, and excellence. However, proactively addressing these challenges through comprehensive, actionable short- and long-term planning must be led by the expertise, talents, and perspectives of a diverse group of LRSD community members, not by district administration. Suppose the resulting plan of action is community-driven. In that case, there is a significantly greater chance of community buy-in, engagement, and support for the recommendations, which may require financial and resource commitments from the broader LRSD community.

The Proposed Process: (To be facilitated by Solution Seekers Consultants)

From Apr 10, 2026 to Dec 17, 2026 , Solution Seekers will facilitate a series of community engagement meetings to gather input and develop actionable recommendations to address the challenges outlined in the Case Study/Problem of Practice document. Some community engagement meetings will target specific groups and individuals with expertise in areas aligned to Key Challenges detailed in the Problem of Practice. Some community engagement meetings will be open to all citizens of the greater Little Rock area. The process for each community engagement meeting is described below.

1. Meeting Objectives

- Clearly define the purpose of the meetings: to gather community input and develop actionable recommendations addressing the challenges outlined in the Case Study/Problem of Practice document.

2. Meeting Structure

- Introduction (10-15 minutes):
    - Welcome participants and introduce facilitators.

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    - Briefly present the problem of practice and its significance to the community.

- Setting Ground Rules (5 minutes):
    - Establish norms for respectful dialogue, active listening, and equal participation.

- Information Sharing (15-20 minutes):
    - Provide an overview of key challenges and data from the document to set context.
    - Highlight the importance of community engagement in finding solutions.

- Breakout Sessions (30-45 minutes):
    - Divide participants into six small groups aligned to Problem of Practice topics to encourage discussion.
    - Each group will address “The Challenge(s)” and “Question(s)” associated with their assigned group.

- Group Presentations (20-30 minutes):
    - Each group shares its key insights and recommendations.
    - Use a whiteboard or digital tool to capture all ideas.

- Open Forum (15-20 minutes):
    - Allow time for open discussion to address additional topics or concerns raised by participants.

- Wrap-Up and Next Steps (10 minutes):
    - Summarize key points and thank participants for their contributions.
    - Outline the process for compiling recommendations and how they will be utilized.

3. Post Meeting Follow-Up

- After the meetings, compile and analyze the recommendations.
    - Share the outcomes with participants to maintain transparency and demonstrate that their input is valued.
    - Consider organizing follow-up meetings to refine recommendations or discuss implementation strategies.

The goal is to present recommendations from the Viability Process at the December 2026 LRSD Board of Education Work Session/Agenda Meeting. The LRSD Board of Education will vote on the recommendations at the December 2026 board meeting.

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