

***Clackamas Middle College
Parent Focus Group Study Report***

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Victoria Lukich, Ed.D.

Center for Student Success
Graduate School of Education
Portland State University



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Executive Summary

In Clackamas Middle College's most recent AdvancEd Performance Accreditation report, the school was encouraged to *"develop and implement a robust plan for increased parent and community involvement."* Improvement efforts in this area are well-documented in the CMC's 2015-2016 Continuous Improvement Plan.

In the fall of 2015, the North Clackamas School District commissioned the Center for Student Success (CSS) to conduct a study to assess the effectiveness of CMC's school improvement efforts. Given the investments CMC has made in improving communication and increasing involvement with parents and families, the following research question was identified for the study:

- ❖ To what extent has CMC been successful in improving communication and engagement with parents and families?

After a review of the data collected through surveys and interviews during the AdvancEd accreditation process, the CMC principal and the CSS researcher determined that a parent focus group would be the most appropriate methodology for the study. They worked collaboratively to design the focus group protocol which addressed the following key areas:

- Purpose and mission of CMC
- Communication – about individual students
- General communication
- Building community between home and school
- Preparing your child for college

The first focus group session was conducted on May 4, 2016 from 6:30-7:30pm on the CMC campus. Since only four parents attended, a second session was conducted (with different parents) on May 18, 2016 at the same time, 6:30-7:30pm also on the CMC campus. Eight parents attended the second session. The data from both sessions were combined for analysis and reporting.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the findings of the focus group sessions so CMC leadership and staff are aware of the areas in which they have made progress as well as areas that warrant additional attention with respect to parent communication and engagement. Highlights of key findings that emerged from the focus groups are shared below:

- Parents are extremely pleased with how well CMC is preparing their students for future success in college or in a career. Parents used words/terms such as "tremendous," "a hidden gem," and "a phenomenal program" to describe CMC. As one parent described how his son has not been successful at any school prior to coming to CMC, the parent exclaimed, *"For our family, this is a magic place!"*

- Parents articulate a solid understanding of the mission/purpose of CMC. Their perception of the school’s mission is based on what they observe in practice at the school and from what they have experienced with their own child at CMC, rather than specifically what they have read on the school’s website or in other promotional materials.
- Parents report they “partner” with CMC counselors and teachers as they work collaboratively to ensure their student feels safe and accepted at school in addition to being successful academically. Parents appreciate how open CMC staff are to engaging with parents in this important venture.
- The vast majority of parents access information about their students’ academic progress through ParentVue, though many parents also use email, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings with teachers and counselors.
- Several parents report frequently using the teacher web pages and express a desire for all teachers to post resources on the sites. Parents note the resources on the web pages not only help students, but also provide information to parents so they can better support their students at home.
- Parents are satisfied with general communication efforts at CMC, though a few parents suggest supplementing emails with other forms of communication such as Twitter and Instagram. One parent suggests CMC needs to develop a “dynamic, vibrant communication network” incorporating a variety of messaging tools.
- Parents unanimously agree that more communication is needed to help them understand the various pathways available to students at CMC. Parents of students at all grade levels report when they first arrived at CMC, they were confused about the paths and have had to “figure it out on [their] own.”
- Parents are generally unaware of specific strategies CMC is using to: i) support students academically; and ii) increase student persistence and engagement. Parents express interest in learning about the strategies.
- Although parents know their students engage in conversations about college during the Advisory period, they are not aware of the specific topics covered in the Advisory curriculum. They would like more information about the Advisory “lessons” so they can follow up with conversations at home.
- Parents are willing to volunteer at CMC provided the activity or event addresses a specific need that directly supports students—for example, organizing more extra-curricular activities for CMC students.

Based on the key findings from the parent focus group session, CMC leadership and staff are encouraged to consider the following actions:

- Identify a parent or community member who has the technical knowledge and skills to develop the “vibrant communication network” described by one of the parents in the focus group. CMC is encouraged to involve students in the process of creating the communication network.
- Add a dynamic banner to the school’s website to highlight upcoming events, deadlines, celebrations, challenges, and volunteer needs. Use pictures and videos to generate more personal appeal and interest.
- Help parents organize a parent group to address some of the areas parents identified as needing improvement or enhancement. Many parents expressed a desire to be more involved, provided the project/activity addresses an authentic need and directly benefits CMC students. The parent group could also serve as a “sounding board” to help CMC determine the most effective ways to deliver different types of information to parents. Many parents requested more information about the school/programs, but finding the most appropriate method of delivery is crucial.
- Identify innovative ways to share the strategies CMC teachers are using to support students academically and to increase students’ persistence and engagement in class. The parent group (described in the previous bullet) could help identify the most effective ways to deliver this information to parents. Parents of underclassmen in particular have indicated they are very interested in learning about these strategies.
- Explore ways to describe the different pathways available at CMC with all stakeholders, especially with incoming 9th graders and their parents. Consider engaging parents and students to design a visual to be posted within the campus, on the school’s website, and on brochures. By engaging the key stakeholders, CMC staff is not left to “guess” about the most effective design or the most appropriate location to post the information. This is also another way to engage parents in meaningful and authentic projects that positively impact students and families at CMC.
- Emphasize (with staff) the benefits of the teacher web pages. Encourage CMC staff to keep their sites current and complete with notes, plans, assignments, examples, PowerPoints and other appropriate resources. Emphasize that not only will students benefit from the information provided, but parents will be able to be more active partners with teachers when they have access to the resources and can help support their student.

Background

In CMC's most recent AdvancEd Performance Accreditation, the school was encouraged to *“develop and implement a robust plan for increased parent and community involvement.”* In response to AdvancEd's report, CMC has invested resources to improve communication and engagement with families. CMC's efforts in this area are well documented in the school's 2015-2016 Continuous School Improvement Plan.

In the fall of 2015, the North Clackamas School District commissioned the Center for Student Success (CSS) to work with CMC leadership to design a study to assess the effectiveness of CMC's school improvement efforts. Given the investments made in improving communication and increasing involvement with families, the following research question was identified for the study:

- ❖ To what extent has CMC been successful in improving communication and engagement with parents and families?

After a review of the data collected through surveys and interviews during the AdvancEd accreditation process, the CMC principal and the CSS evaluator determined that conducting a focus group with CMC parents would be the most appropriate research methodology for this study. The principal and the evaluator worked collaboratively to design the focus group protocol. The protocol addressed five key areas:

- Purpose and mission of CMC
- Communication – about individual students
- General communication
- Building community between home and school
- Preparing your child for college

The protocol identified 2-3 questions within each area. During the session the facilitator followed up with additional questions as needed to clarify and to probe more deeply into participants' responses. The focus group protocol appears in the appendix of this report.

Important Notes:

- i) Within the narrative of this report, questions from the focus group protocol appear in red font.
- ii) Direct quotes from participants appear in italics.

Methodology

Focus groups are carefully constructed and facilitated discussions held in non-threatening environments designed to elicit candid responses in defined areas of interest. The result is a highly interactive process that helps the researchers understand some of the variables and underlying reasons for people’s opinions. The focus group methodology allows the facilitator to ask clarifying and probing questions in addition to allowing participants to interact with each other and to react to the ideas and comments of others during the discussion.

Two focus groups were conducted with CMC parents. Four parents attended the first session held on May 4, 2016. Because of the low turnout, the CMC principal and the CSS facilitator decided to hold a second session (with different participants) on May 18, 2016. Eight parents attended the second session. Both focus groups were conducted in a classroom on the Clackamas Middle College campus from 5:30-6:30pm. At the beginning of each session, the principal made brief introductions and expressed his appreciation to the parents for their willingness to participate in the group. He then left the room and was not present during the discussion.

Prior to starting the focus group protocol, the facilitator emphasized the importance of maintaining confidentiality within the group so participants would feel safe to share openly and honestly. The facilitator explained that data generated from the session would be compiled and reported as themes, not associated with any particular person. Participants were also assured that direct quotations would not provide specific personal identifiers in an effort to maintain participants’ confidentiality. The session was audiotaped to ensure all comments and ideas were captured. Participants were assured the facilitator would be the only person with access to the audiotape and the tape would be destroyed as soon as the final report was submitted to the school.

Demographics of each focus group session are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Group Demographics

GROUP 1 – May 4, 2016		
Parent	Student	Length of time at CMC
Mother	9 th grade	1 st year
Father	11 th grade	1 st year
Mother	11 th grade	3 rd year
Mother	12 th grade	1 st year, in Take 5 Program
GROUP 2 – May 18, 2016		
Parent	Student	Length of time at CMC
Mother & Father	9 th grade	1 st year
Mother & Father	Two students: 9 th grade, 10 th grade	1 st year
Mother	10 th grade	2 nd year
Mother	Two students: 10 th grade, 11 th grade	2 nd year
Mother	11 th grade	1 st year
Father	12 th grade	2 nd year

Focus Group Results

NOTE: Results from the two focus group sessions were combined for analysis and reporting.

Purpose and Mission of CMC

- What do you believe is the purpose/mission of CMC?
- Where did you get information to form this perception/belief?

When the CSS facilitator asked parents what they perceive as the mission of the school, parents used phrases such as: *“preparing students to be successful in college,” “helping kids get a head start on college,” “encouraging [students] to think about and prepare for their future,” “getting kids headed toward a career,” and “helping [students] think about their life goals, including how to be good citizens.”*

The parent of a 9th grade student suggested: *“I believe [the mission] is to give the skills and preparation needed for the students to continue on to a four-year college or begin a career.”*

Another parent shared: *“I don’t know the official statement of the school’s core mission – like what is on the website or on a t-shirt, etcetera — but I think the mission is about preparing students to be successful in college and in life.”*

Several parents described CMC as a bridge to help transition students from high school to college. One parent maintained the mission of the school extends beyond just providing college prep: *“This program is more experiential for students – not just preparing them for college, but actually doing college. The options here let them experience college courses – so students know for sure they are ready to be successful in college.”* This parent emphasized that students gain confidence when they realize they are actually *“doing”* college.

One parent proposed the mission of CMC includes a focus on high expectations and accountability for students: *“I think [CMC’s mission] is to have the students be ready for real life experiences on a more educated level. Harder courses are taught and there is a different level of accountability than when we went to high school. Part of the mission here is striving for excellence.”*

Although parents unanimously acknowledged CMC’s strong focus on college/career preparation, the emphasis on college and career was not what initially caused many of them to consider the school as a viable option for their children. Many parents reported they were first drawn to CMC because traditional, comprehensive high schools were not working for their students.

Several parents shared stories about their students experiencing high levels of anxiety toward school (at their previous schools), suggesting the anxiety was caused by—or at least magnified by—their student not receiving the individual attention he or she needed to be successful in the school environment. CMC’s commitment to individualize programs and instruction to meet the

needs of each student was identified by several parents as a key component of the school's mission. One parent reported: *"Counselors and teachers here look at each student as an individual and identify where students are in their learning process."*

Another parent shared his perception of the mission of CMC: *"I think part of the mission here is a striving for excellence in an environment that focuses on the individual abilities of the students much more than focusing on the curriculum per se. Part of that is focus is on college prep and making kids ready for the more rigorous environment that they will face in college. But it is also a place for kids who will not go to college but just to get them ready for life in general."*

Other parents nodded in agreement and engaged in conversation about the array of paths available to students at CMC; paths that meet the needs, abilities, and future goals of a wide variety of students.

The size of the school is one of the features that drew many families to CMC. One parent explained how large class sizes in her daughter's previous school made it impossible for her daughter to access the individual help she needed. The parent shared: *"My daughter felt like a number at her other school. She took it upon herself to research options in the district and found this school. It's working very well for her."*

A few parents reported their children *"didn't fit in"* socially at the large, traditional high schools or did not want to participate in what students perceived as *"drama"* in other schools. Parents indicated they are *"thankful and relieved"* that their students are now content and doing well at CMC. Parents suggested that the smallness of CMC allows strong relationships between staff and students and among the students creating a warm, caring learning environment where students feel comfortable and embraced within the school community. One parent shared: *"It's kind of like a family."* Several parents showed signs of agreement and suggested another aspect of CMC's mission is to ensure all students feel welcome and included.

Parents reported their perception of CMC's purpose evolved primarily from conversations with their own student, with other CMC students and parents (current and former), with CMC staff, and with counselors from schools where their student attended previously. Some parents also reported their perception was confirmed and enhanced through reading promotional materials about CMC online and in printed documents.

- What do you perceive is the role of parents at CMC?
- What is currently in place at CMC to help you fulfill your role as a CMC parent?

Focus group participants used terms such as *"supporter," "encourager,"* and *"motivator,"* to describe their role as parents of CMC students. Many referred to their relationship with CMC teachers as *"partnerships"* and reported they work collaboratively with CMC staff to address the specific needs of their child.

Participants acknowledged their responsibility as a CMC parent often requires balancing support and accountability. Parents of upperclassmen reported as their students have matured through high school, they have focused less on accountability and more on supporting and championing their students. Parents reported they often *“follow the lead”* of CMC staff allowing their student increasingly more freedom and responsibility for making decisions about aspects of school such as class selection, homework, and time management.

Another parent explained she has backed off from being directive with her daughter and has allowed the CMC counselor to take the lead: *“My daughter thinks I don’t know anything but she listens to the counselor – I think it helps to hear the message from another adult. I am forcing myself to step back. I realize that other adults will be mentoring her for these next couple of years. The counselor is helping to make suggestions that my daughter takes better from her than from me.”*

Providing motivation when their children lack the confidence to persevere was identified by several participants as a key aspect of their responsibility as a CMC parent. One father reported he and his wife often serve as *“cheerleaders”* to motivate and inspire their daughter to finish a task or complete a project when the daughter doubts her own capabilities.

Another parent described the role she and her husband assume to support their daughter at CMC: *“Our responsibility is to partner with the teachers to give our daughter the best chance educationally. We work with the teachers to make sure [our daughter] is staying on task with her school work. I appreciate the online programs that help me see if she is keeping up with assignments and how her testing is going. I also appreciate personal emails from the teachers.”*

Another parent suggested the collaborative partnership with CMC teachers involves more than just supporting her child academically, but also personally, socially, and emotionally. Other parents agreed and more conversation ensued about the benefits of a small student body where students are known well by the adults at the school, minimizing the chance students will *“fall through the cracks.”* One parent shared: *“I’m a big fan of the smaller setting – so students aren’t just numbers. The students at CMC have connections with their teachers and the parents have those connections with the teachers and counselors, too.”*

The parent of a 9th grade student described how she supports her son by helping him develop self-advocacy: *“One thing I see as our parental responsibility is to encourage our son to speak up for himself. It is a partnership between the teachers and the parent – you have to be monitoring everything that is happening with your kids. We do that. But knowing that they will be going over to the college, I have been encouraging him to speak up when he questions something in a class – I encourage him to go talk to teacher. I think it has been good to help him take more ownership of his life and his education—learning to advocate for himself. So he is addressing it rather than mom doing that. Just another part of becoming a responsible young adult.”*

Communication – about individual students

- How do you access information about your child's academic progress?
- How would you assess/rate CMC's efforts to keep you informed about your child's academic progress? What is CMC doing that "works" for you (w/regards to communication about your child's academic progress)? How can the school improve in this area?

All parents reported having used ParentVue to access information about their child's academic progress, though the frequency of use varied significantly among participants in the focus group. Many parents reported they accessed the tool on daily basis when their student first started at CMC; about half the parents in the group continue to use ParentVue regularly. Parents who have reduced their use of the online tool reported a variety of reasons their use of ParentVue has diminished.

More than half of the parents expressed some level of frustration about what they called the "lag time" with teachers posting grades to ParentVue. Some parents reported they no longer use ParentVue because of the lag time, while others have learned to work with the delay. One parent described his use of the tool: *"I access ParentVue about once every two weeks. There is some lag time between when the assignments are given and when the grade is posted, so I have to keep this in mind. I realize I might be looking at a C, but it will turn in to an A by the weekend."*

Several parents shared that as long as their child is doing well academically, they do not need to check ParentVue regularly, but they appreciate that the tool is available as an option. One parent explained: *"Our student has 'earned' his autonomy . . . ParentVue is good for keeping an eye on things and it is good to know there are ways to dig deeper if I need to."*

The majority of parents in the focus groups reported they are able to communicate directly with their student about his or her academic performance because of the high level of trust in their parent-child relationship. One parent noted (and several others agreed) allowing students to provide the updates on their academic achievement reinforces the students' role in taking responsibility for their learning.

Parents acknowledged getting accurate and timely updates on a student's academic performance directly from the student is not a viable strategy for all students and parents. One parent shared that although she trusts her son—currently a senior at CMC student—to be open with her about his academic performance, she does not have the same confidence that her second son—who will be a CMC student next year—will provide an honest and accurate report on his academic performance. This mother confided that she will be accessing ParentVue on a daily basis to monitor the second son's grades, and she will also be communicating regularly with the CMC counselors.

In addition to getting information from their student and from ParentVue, parents reported they also learn about their students' academic progress through emails and phone calls with CMC teachers and counselors. Parents unanimously agreed they felt comfortable emailing CMC staff

when they had a question or concern; all parents reported that CMC teachers respond promptly to emails from parents—usually within 24 hours.

One parent shared she prefers face-to-face contact over email, so if she has a question she calls the CMC counselor and requests an appointment. She appreciates that the counselor makes time to meet with her and that the counselor does not appear to mind her requests for in-person communication.

Two parents expressed concern about not receiving feedback on their students' academic progress from college instructors even when the class was taught on the CMC campus. One parent reported she did not find out how her son was doing in the class until the mid-term report. Parents suggested CMC should consider facilitating communication between college instructors and the parents of CMC students or provide some other way for parents to get updates on their students' progress in college classes.

Of all the participants in both focus groups, only one parent expressed dissatisfaction with the level of communication she has received from a teacher at CMC—and the situation appeared to be an isolated incident. The parent reported that her daughter's grade fell dramatically and suddenly—to an 'F'—and the mother claimed she was not notified until it was too late. The mother declared that although she did eventually connect with the CMC teacher, she was unhappy that she had to initiate the contact.

About one-third of the parents reported they access the teachers' websites to get information about curriculum, lesson plans, assignments, upcoming tests, etc. One parent explained: *"We use the websites and it has been very helpful for my son who is on an IEP and has severe organizational challenges. On the teachers' websites – the teachers have their PowerPoints and lecture notes. Having access to the teachers plans and notes has always been on his IEP, but this is the first school that actually followed that part of [my son's] IEP. . . For him to be able to log on to a single source and have everyone's notes there (for the teachers who use it) has been really helpful."* Although other parents expressed their appreciation for this resource as well, several parents noted that not all teachers post on the website. Parents reported they would appreciate more CMC teachers using the site to share their plans and lecture notes.

All parents reported being aware that CMC hosts parent-teacher conferences as another means of providing parents with updates on students' progress; about half of the parents indicated they attended conferences. One mother shared: *"I appreciated the parent conferences first term but wonder why they didn't have them second or third term. I think it would have been good to have them again to bring it full circle."* Another parent added: *"I agree that [conferences] could be offered later in the year, too, but if not conferences, then some other kind of review/report that identifies the student's strengths and weaknesses."*

Overall, parents reported CMC's communication regarding individual students' academic progress is timely and effective.

A parent expressed her appreciation for the frequent communication she receives from CMC staff regarding her daughter's academics and behavior: *"I love the emails – even the one telling me my daughter was late to two classes in a row! I appreciate that my daughter is not getting lost in the system. And even as she transitions into the college program, I feel there is still pretty good communication with the counselors and informing me about what is going on. As expected, you lose a little bit of the communication as the student accepts more of the responsibility when they move to the college level, but I feel like CMC does a good job of keeping us informed."*

- Has CMC provided you with ideas and/or strategies you can use with your child at home to help him/her academically?
- How aware/familiar are you with strategies CMC teachers are using to increase students' effort, persistence, and participation in class as well as strategies to facilitate student learning?

Participants were not aware of any strategies provided by CMC intended for parents to use at home to help their students academically.

Similarly, none of the participants reported being familiar with specific strategies CMC teachers use to increase students' efforts, persistence, and participation in class. Even when the facilitator probed by offering a brief list of some of the strategies—"in-the-moment" accountability, using language frames, growth mindset language, intentional language development, using assessments in instruction, providing feedback to students—parents did not acknowledge an awareness of any of the instructional strategies.

One parent indicated she is aware of specific strategies CMC staff are using to support her son, because the strategies are written into his IEP. However, she did not mention any of the specific techniques (identified by the facilitator) that CMC uses school-wide to increase students' persistence and participation in school.

Although parents were not familiar with "in-the-moment" accountability, many of them reported they are emphasizing general accountability at home, giving their children more responsibility in an effort to support the added responsibility students have at CMC.

More than half of the participants—primarily the parents of underclassmen—reported they would appreciate learning about strategies CMC staff use to support their students academically as well as ways to increase students' effort, persistence and participation. Posting videos on the CMC website with teachers demonstrating the motivational strategies was identified as an effective (and preferred) method of sharing the information with parents.

General communication

- How do you access general information about CMC?
- How do you rate the level and type of information provided by CMC? What suggestions do you have?

Parents reported they access general information about CMC through email, “snail mail,” and the school website. Overall, parents are satisfied with the level and type of information provided by CMC, and they offered minimal suggestions for improvement. The few recommendations parents provided focused on: i) the need for more clarity about the various programs offered at CMC; and ii) more timely communication about deadlines, especially deadlines for seniors preparing for graduation.

Parents were unanimous about the need for more communication about the specific pathway/program options available to CMC students. Parents of 9th graders claimed they felt “*in the dark*” about what options were available and parents of upperclassmen noted they would have appreciated more detailed information early on in their students’ CMC experience. They reported “*having to learn it on their own.*” Specific comments addressing this area of concern appear below:

“For us as parents of a freshman -- I still don’t have a good grasp on what the process is going to look like and what is going to happen as he transitions. I have questions such as: What is that going to look like? How much say do we have in the classes he will be taking? I feel like there is a lack of information as far as the different tracks that students are on and what he needs to do to progress to the next track or when would that happen – there isn’t enough information on the website. I could look for it, but I don’t think I should need to look for it — its not detailed enough for what I need to know.”

“I agree – when we first came to this campus, I was pretty confused. I was like ‘okay so they are going to go to school here but they will be able to take some classes at the college, but when is that? And how does that work?’ We had to figure it out on our own.”

“I made personal meetings with the counselor, and she was awesome . . . but I had to be proactive about that – it wasn’t like I had all this information flooding to me. Fortunately, I am a proactive type of person, but I wonder about parents who are not like that . . . I can see there being room for improvement – being more clear about what the program looks like each year, each term. They provided that in the regular school for each term.”

“Even the names of the programs are so similar – it is confusing. I am always asking my son so which program are you in? And how is that different from the other programs. I think they could describe what each one looks like a little better and list what admission requirements are needed for each one.”

In response to the claims CMC has not shared information about the paths available to students, other focus group participants noted that information about program options was provided during the orientation meeting. It was noted, however, not all parents attend the orientation. One parent indicated although she had attended the meeting, she lacked sufficient context at that time to make the information meaningful or relevant. (Note: This comment echoes what students reported during their focus group.)

A few parents recently attended a CMC meeting where they learned about the college application process, including financial aid. Parents reported the information shared was helpful and timely. Parents with older children who have been through the process before, did not feel a need to attend this meeting, but appreciated that the opportunity is provided for those parents who need it.

The parent of a senior student suggested: *“[CMC staff] need to be more clear with the senior deadlines – they were really good at the beginning of the school year. They gave us a packet with all of the dates and all of the things we need to do, but as the year has gone on things have started falling through the cracks . . . I find myself pulling out the folder that I got at the beginning of the school year, and then I realized that I missed a deadline that was last week.”* This parent recommended more timely reminders about specific deadlines throughout the year.

Parents of underclassmen identified the need for more communication about requirements for the college application process such as when, how and where to register for the SAT and/or ACT. All parents expressed concerns about missing critical deadlines that could potentially negatively impact their student’s path to college.

One parent offered a suggestion about general communication at CMC – not limited to any specific topic. He shared: *“I would like to see more vibrant communication . . . I don’t know what that looks like exactly. Is that twitter feeds? Is that Instagram? Is that more heavy social media involved in the day-to-day life of the school? We have the nuts and bolts covered. I think we need to consider what is the next step in creating a dynamic, vibrant communication network.”*

Parents expressed their appreciation for the frequent emails they receive from CMC staff, but also recommended text messages and newsletters to supplement email communication. One parent shared: *“Email is fine, but I would also love to have a parent newsletter – something that could get parents a little more excited about events. The email seems to just serve as a notification, but not an invitation that generates enthusiasm about the event.”* She suggested a parent newsletter *“produced by and for a parent group—different from the newsletter from the school—to keep parents informed about what is going on at CMC, how they can get involved, how they can support their student, etcetera.”*

Another parent recommended a single location on the school’s website where parents can access all the information they need so they *“don’t need to hunt for it.”*

One parent expressed a high level of frustration with the frequent calls and emails she receives from the North Clackamas School District about events happening at other schools in the district. Her son is only a 9th grader at CMC and she is hopeful she will not have to endure the flood of communication—information that does not pertain to her son or family—for the next three years.

NOTE: The day after the focus group session, the CSS facilitator received an email from one of the group participants. The parent wanted to append and to clarify comments she expressed

during the focus discussion: *“In the meeting, I said that there was not clear information about the programs given to parents or available on the website. This was true for last spring and early this fall when I was combing the website trying to figure out how things worked. We had very little to go on when he started. However, after getting home from the Focus Group, I was looking on the school’s website again, and that info is there now. I’m glad they did update it, it just would’ve been nice to have more of it early on, and it definitely should not require a parent to meet with the principal or a counselor to get it. This should be sent home to the parent in a packet when their child is enrolled.”*

Building community between home and school

- Have you attended any family events at CMC?
 - If yes, were the events worthwhile? Why or why not?
 - If no, why have you not attended and what would help make it more likely you would attend such an event?
 - What ideas do you have for future family events can you suggest for CMC?
- How aware are you about opportunities to volunteer at CMC? Have you volunteered at CMC? If so, what did you do? If not, why not?

All focus group participants reported they were unaware of any “family events” at CMC—other than parent-teacher conferences. One mother shared: *“If there have been events, our kids haven’t told us about them!”*

There was consensus among participants that the school space belongs to the students and parents do not necessarily need to be included in CMC events. One parent suggested: *“[CMC] is their thing. I don’t want or need to be involved unless it means helping to fundraise for something that would help the school.”*

This parent’s comment was a segue into a conversation about volunteerism at CMC.

Parents offered a variety of ideas about how parents could volunteer to address specific areas of need at CMC. One parent claimed CMC students should have more opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities: *“I think the school could improve in the area of extra curricular activities – even if it is interfacing kids with community options . . . so they get to experience some of the things students at regular schools get.”* She suggested parent volunteers could access discounted tickets for CMC students to attend community theatre or other community-based events.

Another parent recommended: *“[CMC students] have only one dance a year – I think if we got more parents together who are interested in providing these kinds of opportunities for students we could fill some of the areas that students don’t have available because they chose this school. They need more activities.”*

Regarding volunteer options that are already available at CMC, helping with senior mock interviews was the only volunteer opportunity with which all parents were familiar; two parents

reported they had helped with the interviews. One parent commented: *“If there is anything else that they are seeking volunteers for, then that information never reached me.”* Another parent added, *“I signed up to volunteer – but of the few things that were on the list they didn’t fit with my schedule. Mentoring is one option currently available and I have done that.”*

The majority of parents reported they fulfilled their parental responsibilities regarding volunteering at school in the early years of their child’s educational experience; one parent shared she was *“happy to be done with it.”* Another parent explained although she would like to volunteer, she feels overwhelmed by her work obligations and does not have time to be more involved at CMC.

Two parents said they would be willing to help at CMC if there was a specific need that matched their skill set and schedules, though they emphasized they are not seeking out opportunities *“just to get involved.”*

Three parents indicated they signed up to volunteer at the beginning of the school year, but were never contacted.

One mother described how she would like to be contacted if there was a need for a parent volunteer at CMC: *“What would get me to volunteer is if one of my kids’ teachers emailed and said, ‘I need this . . . I need help with this . . .’, then I would be happy to help. If you want to build up parent volunteerism, then that is how I would go about it – parents already have relationships with their kids’ teachers, so a phone call or email from a teacher would be the most effective way to solicit help.”*

Helping your child prepare for college

- **Do you have conversations with your child about taking college classes while in high school? If so, what aspects of college or preparing for college do those conversations focus on?**

All parents reported having frequent conversations with their children about taking college classes while attending CMC. Several parents indicated the conversations often include words of encouragement as well as reminders for their children to work hard and strive for excellence in everything they do. One parent reported: *“CMC teachers push our students toward excelling . . . I just try to follow up and add on to [the teachers’] message.”*

Another parent offered a similar response: *“We do talk about preparing for college. Mostly about the importance of keeping your grades up and staying on top of things. Organization, planning and communicating with the teachers are key components.”*

Two parents offered opposing perspectives on the advice they give to their children in terms of what should be the goal of their high school experience. One parent suggested her son should try to narrow his focus: *“Our conversation right now is around helping my child focus on one thing – he has so many interests and to decide on a college he has to be more focused on what he wants to do. Everything – which college, finances, all of it.”*

In contrast, another parent encourages her daughter to use this time to explore a wide variety of options: *“I want my daughter to cast a wide net. She has lots of interests and I want her to try lots of different things. I want my daughter to use this time to discover all the many things that she is passionate about.”* The mother expressed appreciation that CMC has allowed her daughter to explore topics and areas of study that would not have been available at another school. The mother reported that at a recent activity day sponsored by CMC, her daughter was introduced to coding—an activity her daughter never would have been exposed to had she not attended CMC. The daughter is now engaging in independent work to learn how to code and will be attending coding camp this summer.

- **Do you have conversation with your child about going to college after graduating from CMC? If so, what aspects of college or preparing for college do those conversations focus on?**

All parents reported they talk to their students about college with most of the conversations focusing on career options and finding programs of study that will provide the best preparation for those career options. Parents of upperclassmen also reported that as their children get closer to high school graduation, the conversations about college include details about the steps involved in applying to and transferring to a university. The parents of 9th and 10th grade students reported they do not have enough information about specific steps in the college application process to engage in meaningful conversations with their children. They expressed a desire for more information from CMC so they are better prepared for those conversations.

Several parents (of students at all grade levels) noted that conversations at home are supported by input from the CMC counselors. One parent reported: *“My daughter’s counselor has helped her identify areas of study that are reasonable for her.”* Other parents nodded in agreement, and another parent added: *“I have had conversations with my son’s counselor and together we help guide my son in his choices. It’s a real partnership.”*

Another parent described the college conversations she has had with her son: *“We have talked about factors to consider when choosing a college, like the proximity to home. We have also talked about small schools, big schools, urban and rural. And when we go places where there is a local college we have tried to visit.”*

One parent shared that she has started having conversations with her 11th grader about *“life skills you need when you are in college and living away from home, including budgeting, doing your own laundry, cooking and cleaning.”*

Since no parent had specifically identified ‘financing college’ as a topic of the conversations with their students, the facilitator posed the question: *“Does anyone have conversations with their children about preparing for the financial aspects of college?”*

Parents of upperclassmen reported the financial aspects of college have been included in their discussions with their children, while the majority of parents of 9th and 10th graders reported they have not had conversations about financing college. Parents of the underclassmen requested

more information about the financial aspects of college so they feel better prepared to engage in those conversations with their children.

- How aware are you of the steps that CMC is taking to help your child plan for and prepare for college after graduating from CMC? If not, would you like to be? How would you like to get this information?

The majority of parents reported they are not aware of the steps CMC is taking to help students plan for and prepare for college. Parents of underclassmen, in particular, expressed a desire to learn more about the conversations CMC staff are having with their students about college. One parent offered this suggestion: *“It would be helpful to have a road map that describes what the college-focused conversations will be like. My daughter is open with me about what they are talking about in school, but my other kid is not so open. It would be helpful to have a big picture of what is being talked about.”*

A handful of parents mentioned they are aware CMC students learn about preparing for college during Advisory period though they are unsure what the curriculum includes. All parents agreed it would be helpful to have a list of the Advisory topics so they could follow-up with conversations at home. One parent suggested the school should provide an *“Advisory calendar of events”* so parents would know what topics are being discussed each week, ensuring their home conversations are timely and relevant. Other parents supported the idea.

One mother reported she knows what is included in the Advisory curriculum only because her son was out of school for an extended period due to a medical situation and she had to work with him to make up the work. She shared: *“I know they talk in Advisory about steps to prepare for college – a lot about how to use a college library, how to pick classes . . . things like that. ”*

Another parent recommended CMC provide parents with a list of the college preparation “benchmarks” that students are working on at each grade level; she claimed other high schools provide something similar to their parents.

A parent repeated a comment she had shared earlier during the focus group session: Information about what CMC is doing to help students prepare for college was provided in the Back-to-School Night packet. Many parents had either forgotten they had received the packet or had not attended Back-to-School Night. One parent recommended the information should be shared in a variety of different ways and at different times so that it reaches all parents at the time when the information is most relevant to them.

Additional comments from parents

The facilitator closed the session by giving parents the opportunity to share any additional comments, advice, suggestions with the CMC staff/leadership. Parents' responses are listed below:

- *"It took my son by surprise when he took the SAT and he started getting all this college mail – and he was confused as to why? Then he started getting 'invitations' to solicitation that looked like they were Honors, but they were workshops that you had to pay for. That took him by surprise – I was paying attention and could help him understand this, but some kids might not. The school should consider letting kids know they will be on a mailing list and to expect this so they are prepared."*
- *"Students should be exposed to curriculum focused on financial and social media responsibility." [Other parents agreed, suggesting CMC should offer a Personal Finance class.]*
- *"I would like to know what the disaster plans are. I don't know where the pickup place would be or what their lock down process is."*
- *"Students are told that they can access clubs at their home school, but my daughter tried to attend Key Club and the advisor would not allow her to stay at the meeting. If this is really an option, then someone needs to communicate with the staff at the other school to make sure everyone is on board at both sites."*
- *"CMC does a good job within the parameters that they have, but I don't think they get enough FTE to cover the needs of the SpEd students. People are disabled every day so to have specialists here just part time does not make sense. It's not their fault – I think it's a funding issue."*
- *"This school has been tremendous with my daughter really transitioning into college. It is just amazing. She is graduating from high school with over 50 college credits! She is used to being in college classes, doing college level work, picking college classes and interacting with professors."*
- *"I feel very lucky that my kids can be a part of this phenomenal program."*
- *"I agree—this school is a hidden gem."*
- *"The CMC teachers are tremendous."*
- *"My son has emailed everybody he knew at his other high school trying to get them to come here."*
- *"For our family, this is a magic place."*

Key Findings

- Parents' perception of the mission/purpose of CMC aligns with the official mission very well. Parents did not simply reiterate the mission posted on the school's website, but described the mission in their own words from what they have observed in practice at the school and from what they have experienced with their own child at CMC.
- Parents look to CMC staff to help define their role as a parent of a CMC student. They understand the importance of giving their child more freedom and more responsibility and "follow the lead" set by CMC staff.
- Parents describe their relationship with CMC staff as a "partnership," and appreciate the opportunity to work collaboratively with teachers/counselors focusing on ensuring their student feels safe and accepted at school in addition to the student being successful academically.
- Parents use ParentVue, email, phone calls, and in-person meetings to access information about how their student is doing academically. The lag time associated with ParentVue causes frustration for some parents.
- Parents expressed a desire for all teachers to maintain a website posting lesson plans, PowerPoints, notes and other resources for students (and for parents).
- Parents are unaware of specific strategies CMC is using to support students academically. Parents are unfamiliar with strategies CMC staff implement to increase student persistence and participation in class. Parents expressed a desire to learn more about the strategies in both of these areas.
- Parents are satisfied with general communication efforts at CMC, though a few parents suggested supplementing emails with other forms of communication including parent newsletters, Twitter, and Instagram.
- Parents expressed a strong need for more communication about the different programs offered at CMC.
- Parents are willing to volunteer and/or participate in school activities provided the activities address a specific need that will directly support students – for example, providing more extra-curricular activities.
- Parents are unaware of the specific "lessons" in Advisory and would like more information about what is discussed and when so they can follow-up with conversations at home.

Considerations / Recommendations

The CSS facilitator encourages CMC to consider the following:

- Identify a parent or community member who has the technical knowledge and skills to develop the “*vibrant communication network*” described by one of the parents in the focus group. Although much of the information parents requested is located on the school’s website, many parents are not accessing the website regularly and therefore are missing important information. Other, more innovative forms of communication should be explored. CMC is also encouraged to involve students in the process of creating the communication network. (The CSS evaluator can recommend schools who have been successful with this type of project.)
- Add a dynamic banner to the school’s website so you can highlight upcoming events, deadlines, celebrations, challenges, volunteer needs. Use pictures and videos to generate more personal appeal and interest.
- Help parents organize a parent group to address some of the areas parents identified as needing improvement or enhancement. Many parents expressed a desire to be more involved, provided the project/activity addresses an authentic need and directly benefits CMC students. The parent group can also serve as a “sounding board” to help CMC determine the most effective ways to deliver different types of information to parents. Many parents requested more information about the school/programs, but finding the most appropriate method of delivery is crucial.
- Identify innovative ways to share the strategies CMC teachers are using to support students academically and to increase students’ persistence and engagement in class. The parent group (described in the previous bullet) could help identify the most effective ways to deliver this information to parents. Parents of underclassmen in particular have indicated they are very interested in learning about these strategies.
- Explore ways to describe the different pathways available at CMC with all stakeholders, especially with incoming 9th graders and their parents. Consider engaging parents and students to design a visual to be posted within the campus, on the school’s website, and on brochures. By engaging the key stakeholders, CMC staff is not left to “guess” about the most effective design or the most appropriate location to post the information. This is also another way to engage parents in meaningful and authentic projects that positively impact students and families at CMC.
- Emphasize (with staff) the benefits of the teacher web pages. Encourage CMC staff to keep their sites current and complete with notes, plans, assignments, examples, PowerPoints and other appropriate resources. Emphasize that not only will students benefit from the information provided, but parents will be able to be more active partners with teachers when they have access to the resources and can help support their student.

APPENDIX

CMC Parent Focus Group Protocol

Purpose and Mission of CMC

- What do you believe is the purpose/mission of CMC?
- Where did you get information to form this perception/belief?
- What do you perceive is the role of parents at CMC?
- What is currently in place at CMC to help you fulfill your role as a CMC parent?

Communication – about individual students

- How do you access information about your child's academic progress?
- How would you assess/rate CMC's efforts to keep you informed about your child's academic progress? What is CMC doing that "works" for you (w/regards to communication about your child's academic progress)? How can the school improve in this area?

General communication

- How do you access general information about CMC?
- How do you rate the level and type of information provided by CMC? What suggestions do you have?

Building community between home and school

- Have you attended any family events at CMC?
 - If yes, were the events worthwhile? Why or why not?
 - If no, why have you not attended and what would help make it more likely you would attend such an event?
 - What ideas do you have for future family events can you suggest for CMC?
- How aware are you about opportunities to volunteer at CMC? Have you volunteered at CMC? If so, what did you do? If not, why not?

Helping your child prepare for college

- Do you have conversations with your child about taking college classes while in high school? If so, what aspects of college or preparing for college do those conversations focus on?
- Do you have conversation with your child about going to college after graduating from CMC? If so, what aspects of college or preparing for college do those conversations focus on?
- How aware are you of the steps that CMC is taking to help your child plan for and prepare for college after graduating from CMC? If not, would you like to be? How would you like to get this information?