

Hill Top Preparatory School Community Perspective Report

Introduction

Hill Top Preparatory School has partnered with Concentrics Inc. to conduct an eight-month Strategic Visioning process that puts community engagement at the center with several opportunities for all community constituents to provide feedback throughout the process. We accomplished much of this through data gathering, wherein we provided constituents with opportunities to be heard through various means including phone interviews, community forums, focus groups, and participation in the Strategic Visioning Conference. Through quantitative and qualitative data collection, areas of strength, challenge, and opportunity were identified and explored in-depth to provide an informed basis from which to develop a strategic vision that looks at least ten years out and a multi-year plan that guides the Board of Directors and school leadership in determining how to prioritize opportunities, allocate resources and address needs over the next five years.

This document attempts to capture key themes and some unique ideas that have emerged from interviews, community forums, and targeted focus groups. This qualitative assessment was conducted from February through April of 2019. The purpose of this phase of the Strategic Visioning “Discovery Process” was to include, listen to and to value every voice in the Hill Top Preparatory School community. The document you will read is what we are calling a “Community Perspective Report”, yet we know that the community does not speak with one voice.

My team at Concentrics has culled through some very candid sharing to provide you with a digestible report. We have lifted up patterns, and unique contributions, which we felt would provide the Hill Top Preparatory School community with a reflection on some of its strengths, challenges, and possibilities. This report will serve as a springboard for some important conversations, prioritization, and goal setting that will set the stage for the strategic direction of HTPS over the next five to ten years.

Andrew Mozenter

Andrew Mozenter
President & CEO, Concentrics

Framing Questions

Our Framing Questions were derived from an initial deep dive into bedrock strengths, challenges and opportunities facing Hill Top. These questions have guided our process and will help push the right solutions for a shared future.

- How can Hill Top Preparatory School realistically help families define and execute each student's transitional path beyond high school graduation?
- What investments in our buildings, spaces and grounds are needed to advance our program, support our community, and grow our capacity to deliver on our mission?
- How might we better engage business and other future employers in helping us evolve our curriculum to align with existing and emerging needs?
- How do we create a more diverse vibrant and interactive community on and off campus?
- Using measurable outcomes, how do we assess the success of the programs we have? What's missing/needed as we look to the future?
- How do we build partnerships with colleges, businesses, cultural institutions, and/or other K-12 schools, to expand our programs, capacity, finances, marketing, branding, etc?

Data Collection Methods

16

Interviews

2

Focus Groups

- Advancing Partnerships for Learning
- Strengthening Community Outreach & Growing Our Capacity

100+

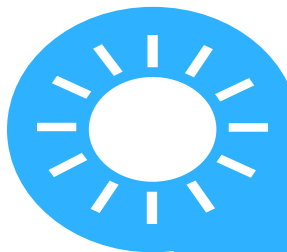
Community Members
Participated in the
Discovery Process

67

Community Forum Participants

- **2 Parent Sessions** 2/25-2/26; N=22
 - Current = 11, Former = 11
- **2 Faculty/Staff Sessions** 2/27; N=35
 - MS=18 (faculty & admin staff)
 - US=17 (faculty & admin staff)
- **2 Student Sessions** N=6, N=4
 - 11th graders (4 boys/2 girls)
 - 12th graders (3 girls/1 boy)

Discovery Process Overview



Strengths

- Faculty/Staff - Extraordinary teachers for exceptional students rings true
- Teachers were described as:
 - Well trained
 - Going above and beyond - working tirelessly to support success
 - Knowing each child
 - Genuine and deep empathy and unwavering respect for difference
 - Seeking, discovering and recognizing strengths
 - Responsive - getting back to you right away, giving generously of their time
- Small size - allowing for individualization and a personalized experience
- Sense of Community - HTPS is a place where friendship and trust grows between students, between students and teachers and between school and families
- Development of self-advocacy skills
- Investment, commitment, and leadership in student transition and employability for neuro-diverse students
- Sensory friendly environment
- Head of School - Tom serves as a great ambassador and cultivates relationships of trust with current and potential stakeholders

Discovery Process Overview



Challenges/Needs

- Serving a wide spectrum of complex learners - Individualizing curriculum while achieving certain common outcomes is a differentiator and a challenge
- Professional Development - Providing ongoing professional learning to stay current and proficient in addressing evolving student and family issues and advancing our craft as educators
- Executive Functioning Skill Development - Effectively articulating and demonstrating how we go about systematically developing executive functioning skills
- Staffing - Closing gaps in learning support needs; i.e. Speech and Occupational Therapy
- Diversity - Increase gender, racial, cultural, and socio-economic diversity in our students. Increase racial diversity in our teaching staff
- Fundraising - Corporations, grants, former and current families
- Increase enrollment
- Marketing
- Parent education and community building
- Leadership transition and development - Board, HOS, Second Tier Leadership

“We have a good portion of students who are bright and for which college is a fit and we have others for who it is not. We need to strengthen our design to assess earlier and design several alternative pathways to success.” (Faculty member)

Discovery Process Overview



Opportunities

- Activate our board, family, alumni, and networks of support
- Redesign and better utilize our current learning and community gathering spaces
- Expand our Residential Program - Expand boys facilities and develop a new girls dorm
- Strengthen our branding and marketing
- Invest in assistive technology and tech enriched learning
- Advance win-win partnerships with colleges and companies
- Access government and foundation resources
- Expand our post High School summer program
- Find new and improved ways of utilizing our facilities as a potential revenue stream
- Explore partnerships with other LD and trade schools
- Strengthen opportunities for connections among the parent community
- Provide robust professional development
- Provide faculty the time, space and resources necessary to work collaboratively to incubate, pilot and implement new ideas

“Schools don’t change fast enough, but the workplace does change rapidly. Employment opportunities will accelerate faster than students are being trained. Now, high tech students are a “hot commodity” and these students will need more preparation to enter the tech work environment. Because students on the spectrum are often successful in high tech environments (as well as in creativity/design environments) and are adaptable to intellectual diversity, they are natural candidates for the new and emerging workplace environments. I urge HTPS to discover students occupational alignments, and create individualized programs that will give them a head start on developing skills in their alignment areas, well before college where students can fail without the supports HTPS can provide. I also suggest placing students in summer programs, internships and apprenticeships that will train them directly or PT or FT work.”

(Craig Single - HR Exec. Vertex)

Stakeholder Perspectives:



Faculty & Staff



Students



Parents



Alumni

Words that describe Hill Top

- Confidence builder
- Safe
- Accepting
- Collaborative
- Inclusive
- Specialists
- Tolerant
- Tailored
- Caring
- Family
- Home
- Life Saving
- Dynamic/Evolving
- Flexible
- Unafraid
- Holistic
- Forward thinking
- Social
- Community
- Accommodating
- Intense
- Involved
- Connecting Teachers to Students
- Inspirational
- Transformative

Top Priority

- Furthering the Advancement of Executive Functioning Skills
- Continuing to develop more internship/work opportunities
- Develop alternative pathways for success for students beyond college

“

“My son had never had friends at a birthday party. He had 16 kids show up at his birthday party - which brought tears to my eyes.”

-Former parent

Stakeholder Perspectives:



Faculty & Staff



Students



Parents



Alumni

Words that describe Hill Top

- **Attentive**
- **Good & Bad**
- **Understanding**
- **Lifting**
- **Encouraging**
- **Sometimes Confusing**
- **Homey**
- **Supportive**
- **Family**
- **Welcoming**
- **Tailored to fit**
- **Flexible**

Top Priority

- Enrolling more students to broaden options and strengthen motivation

“

“I am the only person in my class taking calculus right now. I am motivated by social interaction with my peers. Also, I have known my students in my class since I was in 7th grade. We know each other long that we can butt heads. It is great but small is challenging.”

Stakeholder Perspectives:



Faculty & Staff



Students



Parents



Alumni

Words that describe Hill Top

- Exceptional
- Energetic
- Creative
- Safe
- Adaptable
- Trusting
- Invested
- Effective
- Family
- Supportive
- Community
- Nurturing/Caring
- Relaxed
- Welcoming
- Open
- Specialized
- Individualized

Priority

- Making sure we re-evaluate our phasing system and effectively, group our students into their right cohort

“

“We will take a shot on a kid others will not. Our teachers just don’t give up! We work tirelessly to support every student.”

-Staff Member

Focus On: Strengthening Community Outreach & Growing Our Capacity



- ❖ What can be done to further strengthen our outreach, education and community building among our existing parent community?
- ❖ How might we better engage and connect our alumni and alumni families to each other and our school?
- ❖ What ideas do you have for telling our story and expanding our reach to families who could benefit from a HTPS education?
- ❖ What opportunities do you see for developing HTPS champions?
- ❖ In thinking about who we want to serve, as we look out over the next 10 years, how might we reimagining our campus spaces, to further strengthen our program and expand our community?
- ❖ What are untapped revenue streams we might consider as we look to the future?



- **Expand Parent Association mix/membership**
“I am on the Parent Association board. You try to do things, but the same people show up. The people that show up are great, mind you, but I would love to engage a broader group.”
- **Enroll the whole family**
“We are successful at our school due to our strong relationships with families. I think we might be able to build sort of a “Social Contract” with parents. We are really enrolling entire families is HTPS, and need to think about this opportunity to enroll them.”
- **HTPS is a real culture change**
“A lot of the students and parents we bring in here are experiencing a form of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) from the experience they had in their previous school(s). HTPS is such a different place and perhaps they don’t know how to fully engage with this kind of special, caring school.”
- **Be very intentional with our community building**
“Sometimes when we do a lot of events for our families, It seems like a lot of serious information is being shared at one time. Perhaps we could start off with things that are more fun. More interaction, more of an ice breaker or community building activity.”

“Maybe starting earlier like the end of the summer. Some evening that is strictly social and all about welcoming parents into our community. We could even use the “Fun Friday” model. We give information really well. And do it in concise, efficient ways, but there is not as much intentional time building the community.”

“I agree, having a regular scheduled event once every month or two, or once every quarter could improve things. Something like our First Friday format could work well. Not everybody is as eager to be social but making our alumni proud of going to Hill Top after they graduate is important, and having it on the calendar has a regularly scheduled event could be helpful.”
- **Continue to grow and expand our school’s social networks**
“Our parents have actually been very active on our social networking. Sites. Photos and documenting experiences/events has gone really well. They are looking at things and sharing them with others. They are especially responsive to pictures and video clips on Facebook and Twitter. Our instagram is not getting as much attention yet. I’ve been pleasantly surprised with how many parents are engaging though, I think we can build off of this.”



- **Ensure we have a strong memorable mission**

“Our mission should clearly communicate our distinctive value proposition. It should provide an excellent framing of everything we do.”

- **Articulate our distinct value proposition in the LD educational marketplace**

“Through our school’s strategic planning process we tried to be clear about what we believe our value proposition is as we move from constituent group to a next constituent group.”

“What is our unique features, our unique service that makes us attractive in the LD educational marketplace?”

- **Making deeper connections in our neighborhood/community**

“The one thing I have thought about is hosting teachers certification, or lawyer, or psychologist, certification conferences out here. As an attorney, I know we have these certification requirements and I know Psychologist have something similar perhaps we can bring them on campus.”

“I think we need to find ways to make contact with all families within a 10-20 mile radius so they know about our school.”

“I think we need to make connections with not just parents, but therapists, educational consultants and lawyers.”



- **Tell our story with a single “voice”**

“Everyone involved has to have a clarity of purpose and know how to speak about our school.”

“Before we tell the story, we have to get the story right.”

“If we don’t speak with one voice, over time our messaging become diffuse. People don’t know who we are and what we are about.”

“Coming from the board and alumni parent hat, our success stories are with our graduates. In hearing the stories, and meeting real people, like Chris, our families leave with some real hope. But there are even more stories, of those who have found success in the trades, or in steps that have not been quite so linear. There are powerful mini-success stories, like what takes place in terms of socializing on Fun Fridays. There are these alternative pathways to success to be shared that provide real world examples, of the journey and the role HTPS plays in paving those pathways with life skills that can serve these students for a lifetime.”

“There also has to be a vitality that comes with telling your story. A passion behind it that I know you have. I always like to talk about our success stories. We have this population that has a 70% unemployment rate. With our re-found, intentional investment in employability and transition we have an even stronger message to communicate.”

- **Grow/expand our boarding program**

“One thing we can do is increase our 5 day boarding program for kids to accommodate interest of students/families who live farther away. The other option is to move to a 7 day program where kids would come here beyond the region and perhaps even internationally. If we pursue either path, The marketing piece would be really important.”

- **Monetize our facilities-grounds**

“I think renting our facilities/grounds is a possibility. I have pushed for an indoor soccer field that we can use and rent out. The Phelps School did it, and they are renting it day and night! Sports facilities are money earners. We have the space, but need the money to build. Another money earner is turf fields, which are a huge investment upfront, but pay for themselves fairly quickly. DelVal recently built a turf field which and shared costs with the township. Once again these fields are used all the time, pay for themselves, grow visibility and earn money.”



- **Location, location, location - It is an asset and a challenge**

“**Physical Location** to me is still a question. I wonder if having that Hogwarts building on top of the Hill in Bryn Mawr on the MainLine limits us. Would we do well to house ourselves in South Jersey, across the bridge? Would it be easier if our expansion was more accessible through public transportation. As I think about our long term future, I wonder what we need to do to get us on a 10-20 year runaway that is less constrained.”

“Another point is if we are going to invest in employability and transition, we need to be closer to where the job opportunities may be. That may have an impact on where you might choose to expand, or develop an additional/alternative campus.”

“Visually, it's just an easy place to just drive by. Our signage is limited.”

“We had an ADVIS (Association of Delaware Valley Independent Schools) event here last year, and we had such a wide variety of educators out here. Programs like that can significantly improve our visibility.”

- **Get our students out of our HTPS bubble**

“What we have heard from our recent assessment by Fred Schindler that our kids need more exposure to students who are not from Hill Top. They need to get out of the bubble and continue to interact with more neurotypical students as well.”

“It should be stated, that we have difficulty with students who are more socially savvy, we can lose them when they feel like there are not enough students like them to relate to here at HTPS. More kids and more places to go is important to keep that broader range of students.”

“There are not a lot of environment outside of the public school system, where there is that kind of intentional mix of neurodiverse and neurotypical students. And perhaps not very many safe spaces at all. Having been an HTPS student, I think we could set up a mentoring program. Every other Tuesday and HTPS student go with another independent school perhaps to work on a shared project where a mentor/mentee relationship could be developed. Not a forced atmosphere, but something that could provide mutual benefit for both parties.”



- **Grow our corporate partners/sponsors**

“In thinking about the question about who might serve as Champions, I’m curious, do you have any corporate champions? SAP, SEI, folks might be willing to be out front in helping to get the story out and get the word out about the school, and help you in securing OSTC and EITC support. At the Community Partnership School, We have a number of individuals in corporate settings who contribute with EITC. We have grown our corporate relationships.”

- **Increase our understanding of marketing and further our efforts in the areas of public relations**

“Speaking of the marketing piece, when I go to the Doctors office, I see an article on The Woodlynn school in Main Line Today. I’m not sure we have enough public relations exposure.”

“Michelle just put out a WXPN add which was great to hear. This can increase our exposure.”

“From Eric - I think it is critical that you understand what the market place is saying about a school like HillTop and how it meets needs out there. Quantitative Data is important. NAIS data from DAZL is something we have used to understand our market at the CPS. This allows you to tap into their member schools information, and census data. Understanding National, regional and Local market from an SES perspective, and understanding what’s evolving relative to race and ethnicity, in your catchment areas is important. Benchmarking against your competition is important too.”

- **Grow our financial vitality to enhance diversity, program excellence, space and place**

“I would like us to continue to find ways to raise some money for scholarship, so that more students who could benefit and find a home here in our school could afford to attend it.”

“The only thing we have in place to help us grow our socio-economic diversity, is the money we bring in from OSTC (Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit), and EITC (Earned Income Tax Credit). We can continue to aim to grow this opportunity of corporate and individual investment, but it is uncertain how long these programs will last.”

“I don't know the demographics of the school, are we doing enough to serve those who need a school like ours. There are many students who can't get district funding but could really benefit. Aside from the loan program with Republic Bank, I'm not sure how we can support families, who can secure funding.”



“I have always envisioned a marketing campaign that we could call “See me on the spectrum.” I would craft a Video that could reveal all of the passions and work our students have pursued. I could see us really promote our capacity to help students diagnosed on the spectrum, explore a ‘spectrum’ of opportunities.”

- **Broaden who we serve**

“We talk about peer group alot. When we look at a student who is coming in to HTTPS, we ask ourselves, will they benefit from what we have to offer and will they fit into our community? I like the idea of broadening who we serve. If we can grow our population well beyond our existing 80, that would be a much easier situation to grow our diversity and serve students who could benefit and feel comfortable at our school. if we doubled our size, the growth would be painful, but the impact would be great.”

- **Redesign and additions to our facilities could grow our capacity**

“I could see us developing a pavillion for school events and summer events, A big roof with tables could be something we can use internally and rent out. I’ve always felt that we would do better to have our graduation outside. Give the beauty of our campus, this would be such an impressive setting to culminate a HTTPS experience.”

“I wanted to share a brief idea I had that stems from our discussion on Tuesday about Hill Top's physical growth. We spent some time talking about additional locations ("Hill Top North") but we might also want to consider expanding into adult education through night classes or a Hill Top Educational/Community Outreach Center. I thought this would work well with Chris's idea of expanding into a city setting too.”

Focus On: Advancing Partnerships for Learning – Employability and Transition



- ❖ How might we better leverage community resources to advance life skills, and set our students off on their trajectory of success?
- ❖ What opportunities do you see for cultivating mission aligned partnerships for learning? How to include opportunities for resource sharing and sponsorships with educational, cultural, not for profit institutions, and corporations?
- ❖ What can we learn from our existing partnerships? What else seems possible?
- ❖ What are the strengths of our existing employability and transition program?
- ❖ What are some of our lessons learned and some potential opportunities for strengthening our program?
- ❖ How can we elevate our position as leaders/innovators in providing students on the spectrum with a pathway to success in terms of their transition and employability?



- **Train Employers**

“One of the key phrases Amy mentioned was social mishaps. All the kids have them. It's important that these managers/supervisors understand neurodiverse employees. You don't want to lose smart, really capable employees due to some social quirk. Educating employers is critical!”

“What I see at Drexel is a lot of students who can academically make it but need help with executive functioning and social skills. From the higher ed perspective, we are shocked that the faculty/staff are not prepared to deal with the influx of students on the spectrum/neurodiverse students. There is no experience with IEPs, no preparation of our staff!”

- **Start Early**

“In terms of the development of work skills and preparing students for transition after HTPS, I feel they can't start early enough. The challenge is that each student needs a different component to round out their development. Along with interviewing for example, for my son it was about advocating for himself. These employers are scared that they will be taking on more than they can handle with our children.”

“I agree that we need to start these skills much earlier. We are further behind than Hill Top at our school (Churchill a K-12 LD school in NYC) in terms of employability and transition, we offer internship programs that are only for our seniors.”

- **Invest in and expand our boarding program**

“When I think about life skills, getting my child into the boarding program has been huge! Having a boarding program is a real differentiator. Kids don't lose touch with their family, but the family gets its needed respite. Students learn independence in a very supportive environment. My son has been prevented from finding that crack in the environment where he can slip through and avoid responsibility. I have seen real growth.”

- **Bandwidth (human resources) may be needed**

“An issue we have and one I know HTPS has as well is the bandwidth (the number of paid staff, to develop this program). If we are talking about educating employers for example, who does that work? How do we fund this? Are there grant opportunities? If we raise money in a campaign, that may not be enough, as this is an ongoing need. We have to find sustainable funding.”



- **Provide an outline of our program to potential employment partners. Make a case and ease their concerns***

“One of the things I see over and over again is that a company’s wants to know what they can do to minimize the risks of hiring neurodiverse employees. There is a real gap in their knowledge. They are asking themselves, can we really afford to do this? There are lots of ways around this issue. Creating a simple document/presentation that explains, how you move students into employment would be helpful. An outline of a program should be a simple presentation.”

“There is such stereotyping of this kids, they are either “Rainman” or are thought to be completely non-verbal. My kid for example is not an SEI, or Ernst and Young employee, he’s a manual labor kid. We have to explore ways this person can be productive and independent member of society.”

- **Bringing together our alumni**

“I should also say that every time we bring alumni parents together they value the sharing and mutual support. There is an opportunity to step up our game here and further our process and opportunities to share experiences and grow connections.”

“One of the benefits of Hill Top is that it feels like a family. Alumni and alumni families getting together on a regular basis would be a wonderful thing. When these kids come to Hill Top many were actually what I call lovable, fragile, misfits, who for the most part, had been (psychologically)beaten to heck. It took our daughter a year, maybe longer to adjust, fit in and blossom.”

- **Technology is an opportunity**

“We see some of that with some techy projects we are currently working on. Currently, we have a relationship with BSD code and design, our kids go once a for 10 weeks sessions. We do this 3 times a year. Getting our kids off campus into a joint venture with another school has been great. I just had a meeting with them last week, they have moved from Bryn Mawr and we are planning to go down to Philly to their office. It's a nice set up. We have a bunch of kids who excel in coding and technology and we have others who want to.”



- **Expand the Horizon Program (Continuing education post HS is definitely needed and could be profitable)**

“Another thing we didn’t talk about is our Horizon Program which is a 13th or “Super Senior” year. These students come for time management and executive functioning skills strengthening. We have currently have 6 students in that program registered for next year. Two students who are not from HTPS and 4 who are HTPS students who will be staying with us for another year.”

“One of the things we do offer is an alumni program for first year college students. Its an executive function course that we offer during their breaks and over the summer.”

“There seems to be a need for post high school students to continue to develop their transition and employability capacity. We can also offer, students who were never enrolled at HTPS, but still need support relative to transition and employment. (This could be a revenue stream)”

“You have heard through us and others that this is what can really set us apart. I would suggest we continue to support alumni. I don’t think we can cram this all in the few years that we have them here at HTPS. We can give you a diploma and a relatively nice resume of experience, but you will need to keep working at things. We have an opportunity to enroll and support families while they are here and after they graduate.”

- **Expand partnerships locally**

“So, if I was prioritizing our needs. I would say the biggest problem harkens back to an earlier discussion we had about finding partners who are willing to take risks and join with us. We have to break through their fears and stereotypes. These partnership needs to be close by so we get back and forth to school efficiently.”

“I have actually made this a project in our Employability and Transition 1 class (ET1), where students were asked to develop a spreadsheet of viable business partners on Lancaster Ave. They provide the business, the Manager name and email addresses. We then invite them in for a breakfast meeting, and let them know what we are doing.”

“We do have the bones of a document we have created describing our program and what we are looking for. Right now we actually have more student interest than we have partners. When they hit ET2, we need to find places where they can go.”

“The good news is that we live in amazing areas and we have lots of connections and networks that could find some real opportunities and benefits from working with and employing our kids.”



- **Explore partnerships with other small private schools**

“Over the years Tom has been talking about finding other small schools who could share and leverage resources in terms of vendors, educators, facilities, etc. Unfortunately there is often resistance, as schools worry about protecting their own enrollments. I do though think that if anyone could make this happen it would be Tom with his magnetic personality.”

- **Explore partnerships with value aligned corporations, small businesses, colleges, and arts/educational institutions**

“I think it would be interesting to explore possibilities with organizations like the The Rising Tide Car Wash, where my son works now and where 70% of their workers are on the spectrum. This was a business started by a family who were looking to start a business where their son could be employed. Its proven to b a big success. I could also see us connecting with places like the PGA resort where my son works as well.”

“Whereas, there are schools who are more hesitant than we would hope, to share resources, I am finding colleges are much more receptive. Recently, I was introduced to a professor from Villanova’s Business School. One of their top priorities in their plan is to advance neurodiversity in the workplace. I see opportunities for internships there on the horizon.”

“I too see more possibilities at local universities as were mentioned before, Drexel, West Chester, Temple, Villanova, SJU, who have an interest in our community.”

“I see opportunities in the city as well for summer employment, at places like The Franklin Institute. And now that Drexel is in partnership with The Academy of Natural Sciences there seems to be opportunities there as well.”

- **Tap into our existing networks**

“Lastly, I think we all have the opportunity to access our networks, board, faculty/staff, alumni families, alums to open up new possibilities.”

“As a parent we make such a big emotional commitment to our children. I can help with resume building. There is a powerful parent network to tap into.”

“I want to give this more thought, but I am typically a resource referral person, I love nothing more than to make connections. We are clearly not leveraging our parent network and community adequate to support these potential kind of opportunities.”