The Define 109 initiative was launched in fall 2021 as our school district embarked on mission & vision work during a pandemic. Yes, we did that! This roughly 5-month process in partnership with Eklund Consulting solicited hundreds of data points and stakeholder feedback that helped shape our new mission & vision and will inform our soon-to-come strategic plan.

Our **research** first involved a thorough analysis of what 109 had done during the previous iteration of this process in 2016-2017, which involved the fairly traditional methods of surveying and in-person focus groups. It felt very much like your traditional M&V, consultant-driven work. We wanted to create a process that felt more like we were inviting you to the dinner table rather than a series of meetings. We also had several environmental/contextual factors to consider. First, there was an Executive Order in Illinois that limited what we could do (or what people would feel comfortable with, frankly) in schools. Second, our neighboring high school district had floated the idea of consolidating the local high school, which dominated the local news cycle. Third, we had far greater technical capabilities at our disposal than they had in 2016. Who doesn't love a Zoom meeting?

When it came to **planning**, in order to invite people into the process, we had to **brand it**. “Define 109” (the logo you see above) was born out of the basic question we wanted our community to answer. This was going to be a community movement, not another formal process. The most significant aspects of achieving that would be to A) reach as many people as possible with an invitation to participate, and B) offer as many dates, times, and forums as possible for them to contribute, especially given the uncertainty of the pandemic. We would of course reach people in person and over Zoom, but also with a new digital tool, ThoughtExchange! It’s hard to give up an hour of your time for a focus group, so we wanted to offer two broad opportunities for our community to participate in an on-demand fashion. We started planning a community mailer/notecard for distribution and tapping into local contacts to help us spread the word.

The **implementation** of all of this certainly was a rollercoaster along the way! We started with videos introducing the project and consulting team, both featured on the new Define 109 webpage updating the project in real time. We worked with our middle school teams to create a short lesson and survey for students and leveraged a longer homeroom period to accomplish this with over 850 responses! We offered up in-person staff focus groups at each building, but a very lukewarm response to staying after school caused us to shift gears and offer up a staff survey as well. For the community, aside from the mentions in our own publications, we were able to get publicity in the village & high school newsletters, and created cards that we distributed to community centers around town encouraging participation. We had considered sending mailers to all homes but ran into an issue when the neighboring high school district started mailing information about special meetings involving potential consolidation, so we scrapped that to avoid confusion. We were also **aggressive on social media**! We offered up two ThoughtExchanges (Nov & Dec) with the second question building off data from the first question. After all of the feedback opportunities were collected, a smaller group representing various parts of our school community came together to synthesize and ultimately produce our new mission & vision.

The **evaluation** of Define 109 shows a process that was able to obtain feedback from over 1,800 participants, about 100 more than we were able to survey in some form in 2016! With a pandemic going on, we consider this to be quite an accomplishment! A solid 45% of the respondents are students, whose voices we value highly. In our ThoughtExchanges, approximately 31% of our participants identified as NOT having a current student in DPS 109. This is a fantastic representation of the hardest population to generally reach!
ADDITIONAL SUPPORT MATERIALS

BRAND & LOGO
The Define 109 brand & logo was born out of our current logo. It’s our intention to rebrand the district in the coming year or two, so we wanted a look that honored where we currently are and moved it forward. It uses similar geometric features, but removes the schoolhouse and replaces it with a compass.

PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST
This movement is about what’s best for kids. We wanted to represent that in everything we designed and put forward.

A PERSONAL TOUCH
It was important that we bring people along in this process. What is mission & vision work? Admittedly, it was our communications team’s first time doing this as well. How do we get people to buy into it? We made sure to humanize the team helping with the work and extend a personal invitation to the community from the superintendent.
REACHING OUT
We knew it was critical that we hear from voices in our community that are harder to access - those without students in our school system. We created the below flyers and postcards that were distributed at village hall, the library, in park district facilities, and a handful of local businesses to help get the word out.
LISTENING TO THE PEOPLE
This was our first time using ThoughtExchange on a large scale, and we knew that for it to be successful, we had to prove to stakeholders that they wouldn't be wasting their time. We built a baseline question in November asking about skills & traits and then used that information to build a process question in December about how to move the district forward.

NOVEMBER 10-19

Part 1: What is the most important skill that students today need to have for them to live fulfilling and meaningful lives?

Below: word cloud from the Part 1 question

DECEMBER 8-17

Part 2: If the goal is to produce students who are resilient problem solvers, who are understanding of and work well with others, and who possess critical thinking skills, describe in what ways the schools could be cultivating those traits in our students at school, at home, and in the community?