**Penn Project for Civic Engagement**

**Tight Times, Tough Choices**

**Taxpayer Forums**

**March 11, 2013 – Westbrook Elementary School**

**Ted Enoch and Susan Tyler**

29 participants: They were a mix of employees of the school district, parents, students and taxpayers (with no children in Upper Darby schools). Out of this mix 5 were African American. Ted and I both noted that many individuals identified themselves as homeowners as their primary relationship to the district; there was a strong emphasis placed on home ownership.

Overall, the group was very passionate, but was willing to listen to one another, even when coming at actions from different positions. Although there were only 5 minorities, 3 were very vocal and comfortable with stating their opinions. It appeared as though they were very comfortable in the group. A total of 86 points was achieved.

Several themes were expressed through-out the night ; (1) cuts that had an impact on the students (quality of education, test scores, health etc.) should be avoided (2) the overall sentiment was that the teachers were already doing all that they possibly could and that the administration and township could assume more responsibility and absorb more of the cuts (3) several times through-out the night individuals mentioned that the township itself (as opposed to the school district) could assume more responsibility. For example, it was suggested that township librarians could help out more at the individual schools. (4) There did not appear to be a lot of “love” for the school district and there seemed to be a lingering thought that the township could do more. (5) Finally, during the introductory period, this group placed a high emphasis in stating that they were homeowners. In addition, there was great concern on how any changes could impact the value of their homes, including whether people would choose to purchase homes in the district

**LOW HANGING FRUIT:**

**17. Coordinator and Secretary of Instructional Media –** 75% or above agreement (2 points)

**Discussion:**

This item was a no brainer for the group. The decision was made quickly without a lot of dialogue. The overall sentiment was that the positions could be absorbed by others.

**Values**

The value was that cutting this item would not have a negative impact on the students.

**Objections – N/A**

**1(a). Elementary Classroom Teachers -** 75% or above agreement (9 points)

**Values**

* The overall consensus was that this initiative would not have a great impact on the quality of the kids’ education and that no jobs would be lost as a result of the cut. A teacher stressed that the change in classroom size from 21 to 24 would not have a big impact.

**Objections**

* It was noted that classroom size varied greatly from school to school. There was concern around the use of the term “average” because of the disparity in classroom size.

7. **High School Classroom –** 75% or above agreement (9 points)

**Discussion**

The average listed is not accurate across the district. There was a major discussion on class size and an acknowledgement that there were great discrepancies across the district. The group agreed that staff needs to be reallocated across the district as needed. One person emphasized that personal choices of the staff were less important than appropriate allocation.

**Values**

* With the exception of one student expressing disagreement, there was not a lot of discussion around this item. The values echoed were consistent with comments under 1a.

**Objections**

* Student had concerns over increasing class sizes. Remarked that teachers cannot control the class. She also voiced concerns over the amount of students that are “illegal” (live outside of the district). She stated that the kids are very vocal in acknowledging that they live in Philly. It was her opinion that they did not care about the school and were only there because they were forced there by their parents. This led to a discussion around the district needs to take more responsibility in managing the illegal students.

**19(b). Instruction and Curriculum -** 75% or above agreement (2 Points)

**Values**

**Value theme –** no more cuts/negative impact on the teachers. The group felt that teachers have taken a huge hit in Upper Darby. “How many times can you re-write the curriculum” and “cut the fat” from the administration were two themes that were expressed in different ways.

Note – The group did not appear to trust the district. They did not take the items on the worksheet for face value. There was a concern that they did not know where the 10% would come from

**Discussion (22, 23, 25, 26(a), 28(a) Collectively): Total of 7 Collective Points**

Our group discussed this section as a whole. There was not a lot of discussion on the individual items. Over 75% of the group felt that in the past the administration has focused on instruction and not supportive services. The majority of the group believed that the bus services were not being utilized effectively. Several commented that on certain routes there are only 1 orr 2 students on the bus. There was also a detailed discussion on the use of maintenance workers. Contractors are often used and several believed that the maintenance workers could be replaced with contractors. For example, one mentioned that new codes require that contractors (as opposed to employed maintenance workers) perform the painting responsibilities.

**Values**

The underlying value is that they’d rather see cuts made to positions that aren’t in front of students.

**Objections**

A student passionately disagreed with the cutting of bus services. She stated that Lansdowne Road was not safe and that the group was basically consenting for deaths as a result of the proposed cut. Her passionate plea did not seem to sway the group

**22. Office of the Superintendent – 75% - 1point**

**23 Office of the Principal – 75% - 1 point**

**25 Business/Fiscal Services -75% - 1 point**

**26(a). Maintenance – 75%- 1 point**

**28(a). Transportation – 75% - 3 points**

**4(b) Middle School Classroom teachers – 75% or above agreement – 18 points**

**Values**

**As similar to other discussions –** the value was – no impact on the students.

* Pro - “Significant way to reduce costs and does not increase class size – less impact on students”
* Pro - “No difference on test score outcomes”

Objections

Several believed that in the team approach the teachers really collaborate and talk with each other. They stated that this has a positive impact on the student. A Middle school teacher who taught both ways supported the fact that in the team approach, the teachers collaborated with each other. A parent with a child that had behavioral problems stated that the team approach was a benefit for his child. In all of the groups that I facilitated people either supported this cut or were against it depending on whether their child utilized the services. It seemed to have more impact for parents that had children that had special needs or behavioral issues.

**18(a). Library – 75% or more agreement- 2 points**

**18(b) – was discussed first and did not make the list**

**Discussion:**

The majority of the discussion was that the group questioned how valuable the librarian role was. In most cases the librarian was not at one particular school for extended periods. Some mentioned a librarian rotation where parents helped check out books.

The fact that there was no instruction was mentioned numerous times. The value was placed on education as opposed to clerical duties.

There was a discussion on who would perform tasks such as checking out books and ordering books at year end. It was suggested that the Building Assistants could be trained to do this role. One parent suggested that the Township librarians could help out in the schools. The group agreed.

**Values**

The value was placed on education/instruction – the clerical aspects of the librarian job could be, and was already being managed by others.

“Librarians do not teach, they correct behavior and check out books”

**Objections – N/A**

**24 Nursing (public and non-public) -** This item did not make the list – 75% did not agree to add it to the list

Initially it appeared as though there was agreement that this could be added to the lists of cuts. The opinion of the group changed after three parents spoke about the high risk needs of their children. The group acknowledged that in most schools the nurses visited on an already reduced schedule.

**Values/Objections**

Three parents remarked that their children needed the support from the nurses and were concerned about less qualified individuals performing this role. Illnesses that were mentioned included epileptic seizures, heart condition and severe migraines. One parent remarked that he was unaware that his child had epilepsy; the first seizure occurred while the child was at school. The fact that the child had epilepsy was discovered by the nurse. This comment had a major impact on the group as I believe that all parents could relate to the need for an “expert” during a crisis. There also was a discussion on certification. It was acknowledged that certain teachers were certified to act in emergency situations. This fact did not seem to matter to the group.

**35. Property Taxes – 75% agreement or above- 37 points**

**Discussion**

There was a great discussion on how high the taxes already were. There was a concern that the high taxes, budget concerns and quality of the district could deter future buyers to the area – which ultimately would impact current home owner’s ability to sell their own homes. The group also believed that a tax increase was going to occur whether they voted for it or not.

**Values**

Similar theme – this was chosen because it had less impact on the students.

Value of homes – protect the value of homes at all costs

**Objections**

A minor objection was raised that not all people could afford an increase. The person that stated this said it hesitantly and no lingering discussion occurred.

**No Way/No How:**

**1 (c) Elementary Classroom**

Discussion

There was little discussion around this. It was an absolute (no discussion required), “No Way/No How.” The recurring theme on property values surfaced as individual voiced concerns that people will not move into the district if there was no kindergarten arose.

**Values**

As in previous discussions, the value of homes was echoed.

**Objections**

Suggestions that kindergarten service could be picked up by the district was quickly dismissed.

**32-34 Student Activities**

**Discussion**

There was little discussion around this. It was an absolute (no discussion required), “No Way/No How.”

Values

The student programs are the proud and joy of the district. The overall sentiment was that the quality of a child’s education is positively impacted by sports and extracurricular activities.

It was agreed that parents/students could pay to participate in sports or extracurricular activities

**TOTAL POINTS – 85**