

Our Kids...Their Future: Strengthening Pottstown's Children and Families for a Brighter Future

MODERATOR REPORT – Group 1

Barth Elementary School

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Moderator's description of the group:

Our group consisted of eight participants, five women and three men. Four of the participants were African-American and four were Caucasian. Children in the home were those in utero to middle schoolers, with all ages of ECE represented within the group. One of the mothers, although the parent of a three-year old, was not a Pottstown resident and was merely accompanying her sister to the forum. One parent was a part of the PTO at Rupert Elementary School. One of our fathers was an attendee at one of the previous forums (Forum #3) and had returned to provide additional feedback.

Hopes and fears for their child's education, ages 3 to 10:

Hopes:

- Parents wanted better support in how to provide homework help. In forum #3, this sentiment was also echoed with participants requesting parent workshops on how to support instruction in the home. Alternatively, parents in our group advocated for memos/newsletters educating parents on how children were learning.
 - Parents shared anecdotes of further confusing children because there was a disconnect between how they were taught and how their children were being taught. Of particular frustration was the new math curriculum, which was echoed by many parents who felt ill-prepared to support their children in understanding and mastering content.
 - One mother spoke of her son being penalized (e.g. getting multiple questions wrong) for not understanding math concepts in school and being unable to support him in the home.
- Parents hoped that children with special needs would receive mainstream instruction rather than being placed in self-contained settings.
 - The forum was an opportunity for parents of children with special needs to advocate for their children. They encouraged peers to be persistent given the needs of their children, lamenting that it is "the squeaky wheel that gets oiled."
 - As parents who are either new to the school district given the ages of their children or bewildered by the special education process, parents spoke of the need for advocacy among families with special needs children and a compilation of resources that are available.

- There was a need for more adult aides, particularly in the kindergarten classroom where the ratio of students to teacher was 26:1.
 - Similar to previous forums, there was perceived to be less opportunities for hands-on activities as the teacher could only supervise one activity/center.
 - One mother spoke of her ability to volunteer in her child's classroom and saw a need for additional parent volunteers with schools being more transparent about days and needs so that more parents could support their children's learning in schools. There was a need to streamline this volunteering process (e.g. opportunities for volunteering, clearances needed, off-set costs).
- Across the forums, there was an expressed need for a resource page for what academic programs were available for ages 3-5. Parents were unsure what was available, to whom, and opportunities to offset costs of programs. Most participants seemed to get information via word-of-mouth from other parent friends.

Fears:

- Parents were concerned that decisions were made based on politics rather than the best needs of children (e.g. child retention, social promotion).
 - There was a need for more transparency about how decisions were made and parent advocacy when parents felt decisions were not being made in the best interest of the child.
- Parents advocated for school district policy on bullying
 - Parents shared anecdotes of children being repeatedly bullied over years and the school ineffectively addressing the situation. They spoke of their children having anxiety regarding school and losing the love of learning.
 - There seemed to be palpable concern because of recent mass correspondences of a student arrest after an armed robbery and a threat against the school district via social media.
 - There was a request for peer mediation services and/or conversations on bullying in schools.
 - Participants spoke of the need for early intervention before conflicts escalated.
 - In addition, they saw this as an opportunity for additional adult/parental supervision in schools.
- Parents feared that there were not enough supports/resources given the differentiated needs of their children.
 - They sought better communication and resources for bridging home and school learning
 - They believed there was a place for additional support in schools for managing the social and emotional needs of children.

Supports: things people identified as supporting their hopes

SEE ABOVE SUB-BULLETS UNDER "HOPES" SECTION FOR ELABORATION

Barriers: things people identified as leading to their fears or of getting in the way of reaching their hopes

These should be short descriptive phrases followed by some explanation or discussion of what it means, how it might be applied, trade-offs, tensions, etc.

- SEE ABOVE SUB-BULLETS UNDER “FEARS” SECTION FOR ELABORATION

Programs: We asked participants to review the list of Pottstown ECE programs that have been offered and to speak to those they have participated in. What made these programs positive experiences for their families? In what ways could these programs be improved?

- *Parent Literacy Nights*
 - + Literacy nights offered great strategies differentiated by grade level.
 - + There was an opportunity to get to know school staff and other parents through this event.
 - Families with limited transportation were unable to attend.
 - In addition, similar to previous forums, parents echoed concerns that there was no childcare provided for non-school aged children. This limited their ability to participate.
 - △ There was a suggestion that literacy nights be offered on different days so that parents did not have select which child they wanted to support academically.
- *Childhood Chatter*
 - + Parents had an opportunity to engage with their school community regarding comparable concerns (e.g. summer reading loss, challenging behavior). These meetings allowed parents to commiserate with other families serving as an empathetic sounding board.
 - + Parents left meetings with resources they could implement with their children.

Final synthesis of qualities, values, characteristics

It behooves us to mention that this group was primarily moderated by community members. As we think about opportunities to build capacity from within Pottstown, our group was a successful example of what this can look like. Both moderators participated as community members during previous forums and were easily able to switch roles in order to facilitate discussion among our small group. In my opinion, having an opportunity to voice their concerns as parents and community members during previous sessions allowed them to do an incredible job of facilitating conversation and pushing participants to share their opinions.

Participants assumed roles as critical friends to the school district and were able to speak of the program components they found effective and those that they would like to see changed for the greater good of Pottstown’s students. There was laughter and energetic conversation despite the difficult work they were tasked to do.

What resonates the most was their receptiveness to participating in conversations in a forum format. They want opportunities to connect with other parents, to share resources, and to learn how to better support their children. I believe at least three parents participated in previous nights' forums. This speaks to their commitment to connect and to be a part of the change process.