

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

## **MODERATOR REPORT – Group 1**

First Baptist Church, King and Charlotte Streets

May 29, 2014

**Moderators:** Tamika Barrow, Ted Enoch, Jess McCarten, Maricruz Clemons provided English/Spanish translation.

### **Moderator's description of the group:**

Seven mothers and one young woman comprised small group 1 at the Let's Talk forum at Pottstown's First Baptist Church. Most were in their twenties or thirties, though one or two women might have been a bit older. Two of the women represented local early childhood education centers, both white, and were also mothers living in the community. Two women were African American and two women were Latina, both of whom were predominantly Spanish speakers. One of the African American women identified as a community activist who was also the parent of a twelve-year-old. Another young woman was a white student intern shadowing one of the early childhood education professionals. Three of the women had young children or infants with them in the room while others had children upstairs in the provided daycare services that were part of the meeting's offerings. Children ranged in age from infants to preteens and participated in a variety of ECE programs or Pottstown elementary and middle schools. A translator worked effectively to translate the comments back and forth between English and Spanish so that everyone could participate in the same conversation. The group was active, and most listened well, built upon or explored others' concerns and shared repeatedly. Two women thanked the organizers for having a daytime meeting, as evening meetings were difficult for them.

### **Hopes and fears for their child's education, ages 3 to 9:**

Hopes:

- More anti-bullying programs and metal detectors in all of the schools.
- More parent workshops on how to help their kids (e.g. homework).
- Discrepancies in teaching styles between parents' childhood instruction and the instruction their children receive.
- Parent workshops could also focus on parent mediation services so as not to escalate concerns regarding bullying.
- More low-cost programs for young children through middle school, e.g. sports, activity and play programs.
- Another mother was excited about this and talked about some of the creative building programs she had heard about, like a "Lego" program.

- Parents hoped for additional ongoing interventions for struggling readers (e.g. reading to pets program).

### **Fears:**

- Nearly all of our participants talked about safety fears related to weapons, bullies, poor security, attackers, and other threats to their children.
- Related to these fears were the ways and methods schools used to communicate safety/threat issues to families. Many in the group were alarmed about hearing (through official school channels, possibly an email from Superintendent Sparagana's office) that yesterday a student had been apprehended and arrested in one of their schools for a purported armed robbery committed the day before. This incident was magnified from a related incident that had also just occurred (a threat of some type had been posted on a Pottsgrove school Facebook page). Most parents appreciated the communication, but all wanted to be able to access some type of follow-up information to learn more and be clear that the threat was over and that it had been managed well the whole time.

### **Supports: things people identified as supporting their hopes**

- More supports (aides, interventions, etc) to prevent fights and share information, clear policies, steps to take, if their children are bullied.
- More Spanish language support, like at today's meetings. Many predominantly Spanish-speaking parents feel "left out", unwelcomed or not included. "Why would you attend a meeting if you can't understand the outreach efforts, or if you do attend, that you won't understand the meeting itself?" The two Spanish speaking mothers were appreciative of the translator provided today. Spanish-speaking parents lamented being asked to sign in attendance and/or receipt of information without being provided translation as to what they were signing off on. Several ideas were offered:
  - Have more outreach info created in both Spanish and English.
  - Have a "Spanish hotline" number available, where Spanish speaking parents can call to talk to someone or hear recorded information to get information.
  - Have a designated bilingual person who can be a community support, to parents and students. Several parents thought this might help some ESL students be more comfortable at the school and that it might keep them from getting isolated. This idea/need reappeared a few times.
  - One parent later talked about how "Sometimes there is translation. Many times not. And we get lost..." Could school websites be provided/posted in Spanish too?

- One parent was very excited about the idea of having all parents required to volunteer at least one time each school year to support the schools. Parents could volunteer before, during, or after the school day accounting for the varied parental work/commitment schedules. All parents agreed that when you see your parent at school, it really sends the message to the child that school is important. Others felt that increased parental presence could reduce the number of bullying incidents. This provided another opportunity for the assembled parents to clearly show how they were very concerned about climate/safety issues at the schools for their children. There was a perception that additional adult presence was needed during lunch and recess where the student to teacher/aide ratio widened. Parent volunteers could also be used for tutoring and coaching.
- Better communication about roles parents can serve and be involved with at the schools. Several parents said they did not know all of the ways that they could volunteer and did not know where to find out such information. This got some parents excited. One stated, "It takes a village to raise our children." Another, "We need a real welcoming spirit!" This got several parents excited and they were active in their agreement. So again, the need for parent volunteer roles was emphasized: fundraisers and related committees, parent aides, trip chaperones. All felt that if the school was better at explaining their needs, they would get more participation. Could there be a festival to get parents involved?

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

- Parents talked about travel as a barrier; many kids and parents have to walk to school and education events. Many in the room wanted to see transportation supports. This brought up the idea of parent aides on buses to increase safety -- to which one parent clapped vigorously in agreement. Transportation also brought up the issue of cost, as it was stated that many parents cannot afford bus tickets regularly for events and school functions.
- Nutrition and food concerns were raised. Some parents felt that their children were not given enough time to eat their lunch each day and that more lunch aides could help children get settled, served and fed more quickly. Other parents did not know what they could and could not send to lunch and wanted more information from the schools.
- Related to the need for why more parents did not actively participate in their children's education, a mother lamented that they did not participate (i.e. volunteer) because it was not required. Another acknowledged that there is a shifting family dynamic (e.g. single parent homes, working parents) that limited parents' ability to volunteer in schools. Other parents may not know how they can be of service to their children's schools. Parents agreed, as has been mentioned, that volunteering

once per academic year in any of their children's schools, was a reasonable minimum commitment. Schools could facilitate this process by better articulating their volunteering needs.

**Final synthesis of qualities, values, characteristics**

- Communication about threats and dangers