

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

## **MODERATOR REPORT – Group 1**

Pottstown Middle School

May 27, 2014

**Moderators:** Tamika Barrow, Ted Enoch, Kizmet Meade

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

Our group consisted of seven mothers, two parents of color (perceived to be African American) and five of who appeared to be Caucasian. All of the parents had children who were between the ages of three and five who attended pre-kindergarten or kindergarten through the school district, Head Start, Pre-K Counts, YMCA, or private or religious preschool programs. Two parents had children who had special needs. Finally, two parents also had older children in upper elementary, middle school, and high school within the school district. The group was excited and invested in the process. Some women were experienced parent advocates and had many tips and strategies to share. Others were self-described “new mothers” or “first-timers” and as the meeting progressed, had questions for the other mothers about their challenges and experiences supporting their children.

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

#### Hopes:

- Children with special needs will have the least restrictive classroom settings and participate in mainstream instruction where possible.
  - Parents of children with special needs spoke very highly of the special education teachers.
  - There was a desire for every child in the district to have an IEP, reflecting the individualized needs of each child. Parents acknowledged the costs of special education services, but advocated that this outweighed the potential negative outcomes (e.g. school-to-prison pipeline).
  - In lieu of IEPs, early evaluation and intervention was suggested rather than waiting for children to experience academic difficulties/failures in order to begin the referral process.
  - Mothers spoke highly about opportunities to volunteer 1:1 in classrooms. There was a need for more adult volunteers to support intervention in the classroom.
  - Parents also discussed strengthening home and school connections. Some spoke of the need of children's advocates for families who were less involved in their children's schooling.
- More “play-based” learning opportunities in and out of school for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children.
- Children educated in the Pottstown school district will continue to have positive role models in the form of teachers as they progress into older elementary, middle

and high school years (e.g. "My kids current teachers are amazing!").

- The negativity that overshadows the good happening in the school district will be replaced by a positive outlook/perception (e.g. "We need to have high expectations for our children's education. I don't ever want to hear "That's Pottstown" as an excuse again.").

#### Fears:

- There seemed to be some ambiguity re: the kindergarten entrance process. Cut-off birthdates for enrollment and expectations for "advanced performance" were concerns. A mother expressed concern that she was unable to register her child even though she was just one day past the official age limit for enrollment. They are having her take a test to see if she is ready, and she is testing as the age of a beginning kindergartener, but they want her to be a "mid-year" kindergarten student before they allow her to enter.
  - In addition, other mothers were concerned about developmental delays and their children not getting the services they needed. Mothers spoke of being turned away/turned down when requesting special education evaluations and services for their children despite the process being initiated with parental and physician's requests.
  - There will continue to be an imbalance between the social and academic elements of kindergarten instruction as more emphasis is placed on academic rigor, higher standards, and mastery of content from the beginning of schooling. There appears to be a "continued push to meet standards that continues to drive play and creativity out of my child's education."
- Teachers will not differentiate based on the needs of the individual child (e.g. gender, academic ability).
  - There was concern of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to teaching that did not acknowledge the individual needs of children. This was spoken of by parents of children who have been diagnosed as special needs (e.g. autistic) as well as those whose children learn differently than the expectations of classroom instruction (e.g. active boys who are expected to conform to expectations to sit still for extended periods of time).
- Understanding the role of parent to instruct vs. reinforcing instruction taught in schools.
  - A mother spoke of concerns that she felt that her home was more academically rigorous than classroom instruction. There was concern that she was the primary instructor, introducing and reinforcing concepts in the home, rather than her child learning content first-hand in school. "I need to always be pushing and checking my child's teachers. It would be nice if I could be reinforcing what her teachers are teaching rather than always being the 'primary' teacher."
- Understanding the differences between programs and how to select based on the needs of the child and family (e.g. Head Start vs. pre-K).
  - This was reiterated in subsequent forums. Parents seemed uncertain about which programs were applicable to their families. Clarity re: criteria for

admittance and a resource page to access information with links to each program's website would be helpful as parents make decisions about preschool programs and transitions from program to program.

- Similarly, parents would like support in understanding how to navigate kindergarten enrollment while taking into account factors such as child's birthdate, ability level, and previous academic instruction/enrollment.

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

- More workshops on working with/raising/teaching children with disabilities.
- Flexibility/variety in scheduled offerings is helpful.
- Child-care is key. Plus, this supports adult learning and relationship building. If our kids are taken care of, adults can have quality time, focus on issues and build community.
- Food is key.
- Good word-of-mouth, good promotions, visibility, repeated offerings helps get adults to programs.
- Hearing from other experienced parents what they did for their children helps new parents.
- Low-cost and free really helps with access.
- If you know someone -- anyone -- going to an event or class, you are so much more likely to attend.

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

- (For some) When programs, like a parent literacy night, are offered as a continued series, it can make some parents frustrated and feel like if they miss one, they shouldn't attend any others.
- Titles can be misleading and sometimes disappointing. A "summer literacy" workshop was actually a one-time activity, not a time to learn and plan for your child's summer learning.
- Costs. Camp for one week now costs what it did last year for 6 weeks. The Pottstown Borough Camp was \$40 for June and July last year. Now it's \$45 a week!
- Location. Many families don't drive. They used to be a camp around Rickert's Rec. That camp is gone now, and many of those families in that community don't drive and will struggle to help their kids. Can there be creative transportation supports?
- The kindergarten registrations process is hard and confusing.

### **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?**

- *Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts (targets students ages 3-5)*
  - + There are two teachers in each classroom.
- *Pottstown School District pre-K (targets students who are entering school for the first time)*

- + Parents saw this as great preparation for kindergarten.
- + Given previously articulates concerns re: the imbalance between academics and socialization, and the goals of kindergarten; parents discussed pre-K's focus on school socialization and norms/routines.
- + Parents spoke highly of the qualified pre-K teachers who are able to manage their classrooms without other adult support. Additional teacher supports were needed.
- *Head Start and Early Head Start (targets students ages 3-5)*
  - Participants thought this ECE option was treated more as daycare by families with fluctuating attendance day-to-day.
- *Parent/Child Workshops*
  - Families attended but expressed confusion about what was advertised vs. what was shared in terms of content (e.g. expected to learn about how to support literacy instruction in the home). One parent reached out to the classroom teacher after attending workshop for additional ideas of how to bridge home and school literacy practices over the summer.
    - △ There was a need for other types of workshops (e.g. building parent relationships/support groups, special needs).
- *Parent Literacy Nights (held Sept-Dec for all grades)*
  - △ Participants would love if these sessions were offered all year long.
  - Parents would prefer sessions be differentiated based on needs rather than by grades. This addresses concerns of children who may be reading far above or far below grade level.
  - Parents also expressed difficulty in having to decide which child to focus on as all sessions for each grade run concurrently. This makes it difficult to gain resources/strategies when there are children in multiple grades.
  - Because sessions build upon one another, parents were reluctant to attend if they missed content. Suggestions were made to repeat sessions on varying days or for content to be *not* be based on previous sessions. Alternatively, a recap from the previous session could take place at the beginning of each session for those who were unable to attend.

**Other programs not listed:**

- *Pottstown camp end of the summer*
  - + Previous summers cost families \$40 for the entire summer with \$5 additional for field trips.
  - Parents expressed concern that this program is currently advertised as \$45/wk which they viewed as unresponsive to the poverty level among Pottstown families (e.g. 75% eligible for free lunch).
  - There was a perception that due to the increase in fee for participation, this would limit activities for area children who may default to getting into troublesome behavior.
  - Finally, parents expressed concern about letting their own children down because they would not financially be able to provide an opportunity that they were previously able to participate in.

- *Fantastic Fun Fridays*
  - + Parents spoke highly of these classroom-based activities where children were able to rotate through centers.
  - + Parent volunteers were welcomed to support in centers. This addressed concerns of limited adult support in the classrooms despite perceived needs. Teachers were only able to provide small group support to one center while others operated autonomously. With additional adult support/supervision, students could be coached through learning.
- *Activities/Programs specifically targeted at children with special needs*
  - △ Special Needs Olympics was listed as one opportunity for students with special needs. Additional activities/programs were requested.
  - Parents wanted support/advocacy in navigating the special education spectrum and available resources. A parent mentioned a “families with autism” support group that currently exists, but that is poorly attended. This was comparable to the impetus behind the Kellogg grant and the school district’s concerns of many activities/resources being offered, but are poorly attended. Mothers who participated in this support group were unsure why attendance lagged and also questioned how to increase participation.
  - + “Mr. Downse at Franklin is amazing! I love the way he is helping to make sure special needs children get mainstreamed and the support they need.”
- *Pre-K two-week kindergarten bridge program*
  - + This was free to pre-K children and utilized as an opportunity to get children back into school-mode. It is held at 6-7 locations throughout the town.
  - + This was also an opportunity for students to reconnect with friends from pre-K and diminish uncertainty in transitioning to a new schooling setting.
  - + Bridge programs are highly recommended and highly attended. Students receive backpacks in preparation for the school year and attend field trips to all of the elementary schools.
  - Parents were disheartened that children could only attend based on predetermined income levels which prohibited families from participating who did not financially qualify.
- *Moms Club International*
  - + This parent-run organization is open to all stay-at-home (at least part-time) caregivers in the Pottstown/Pottsgrove area.
  - + They have organized themselves via social media (e.g. FB group) and local meetings (e.g. meets 3rd Wednesday of each month at St. James Lutheran Church).

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

As we wrapped for the evening, we posed to participants what some of the barriers/challenges were for them to participate in these programs. Many spoke highly of the forum format and wanting to attend similarly organized events in the future. What made this design appealing was the available childcare. It was an opportunity for them to give undivided attention to the conversation at hand. Parent Literacy Nights were highlighted as similar in structure. They were another type of event where childcare was

available while parents learned, but for parents who also had younger, non-school age children, they were unable to attend unless they coordinated their own childcare separately for younger siblings. They also appreciated the opportunity for adult conversation and to build as a collective.

There was an extended conversation re: the multiple programs that are available in the Pottstown area. There was confusion about which programs were opened to whom. Program selection seemed to be a nebulous process. Quality, low-cost and free programs for children are greatly desired by mothers in Pottstown. A resource page with program descriptions, ages served, and links to programmatic websites would be helpful to families as they navigate the enrollment process.