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

MODERATOR’S REPORT – Group 2  
Pottstown Middle School  
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Moderator’s description of the group:  
This group was comprised of 8 adults and one 14 year old who accompanied her mother to the forum. From visual observation, there were two African Americans (mother and daughter), two white males, and 5 white women. When asked, no one stated that he/she needed language translation. There was one early childhood service provider in the group. The rest of the participants said that their attendance was motivated, among other things, by the fact that they have children who are in the age range addressed by the forums. From visual observation, I estimate that the age range of participants in the group was 30-50. Some have adult children and teenage children as well as early learners. One participant is an adoptive parent. The group was animated and responsive to prompts. They listened to one another and built upon each other’s comments. They were respectful of diverse viewpoints and were eager to tap into one another’s knowledge about programs and services. As with any group, some participants were more talkative and assertive than others. However, all participants engaged in the conversation and seemed to feel that the group valued their comments. All of the parents seemed very involved in their children’s education and not reluctant to seek out and accept programs and services that would help them. There were several comments about how some parents don’t shoulder their responsibility for partnering with educators. They saw this as a problem for the children whose parents aren’t involved as well as for their own children. They offered suggestions for how to bridge relationships between schools and noninvolved parents. The two fathers talked eagerly about their children’s learning and social needs, education issues they are dealing with, and their assessment of programs they have attended or have experience with. Apart from the service provider, a couple of the participants seem to have leadership roles in their school community, and one father attested to his wife’s high level of involvement. They had lots of thoughts and ideas about needs and how to address them. However, they fairly easily found common ground on three primary need areas.

Hopes and fears for their child's education, ages 3 to 10:
Hopes:
- That schools can help to instill positive values and common sense in young people; this is an effort that needs to start when kids are at an early age.
- More parent involvement in schools, and study of why parent involvement has declined.
- Address children’s emotional needs better.
- Adoptive parent of a 4 year old who has been diagnosed with ADHD hopes that there can be more understanding of her son’s situation and needs.
  - Although she seemed quite pleased with the way that she has been connected to services, and provided with diagnostic and therapeutic support for her son.
- That kids will develop social competency, especially in a time when so much communication is done on digital media.
- Mother of 5 year old who appears gifted hopes that her daughter will have access to programs that will keep her engaged and beneficially challenged.
- An overall system that works so that kids are happy to be in school.
- 14 year old student wants teachers to be more responsive to kids’ emotional needs.
- More free and affordable programs.
- Parents have access to the services and tools that will help them be good parents and role models.

Fears:
- About how kids’ behavior can affect negatively the learning environment.
- That all children who need support for special needs aren’t being reached.
- That children, even at a young age, are beginning to lose capacity for empathy due to the impact of social media, among other factors.
- How bullying is affecting the school environment; that a bright, sensitive child like her daughter could become the target of bullying. Our student participant was also concerned about bullying.
- That students who have dropped out or are chronically truant are getting lost.
- That Pottstown’s reputation will continue to undermine appreciation for its assets.

Supports: things people identified as supporting their hopes
The group had lots to say about current and lapsed programs that respond(ed) to parental needs.

21st Century Program: Participants familiar with this program were favorably impressed, but the program is only for middle school students.

Friendship House: This program lost funding last year. Two participants were familiar with this program; one had used it for her child. Program services were provided at parents’ homes. Helped parents to develop children’s literacy skills; provided free books and educational toys. One
participant said that the program provided excellent guidance and affirmation for parents, and she especially liked that it was a home-based service.

PEAK (At YMCA): One participant stated that this is an “awesome program”; she liked the literacy focus, and felt that it prepared her child well for full-day schooling and 1st grade. The program got good reactions for its work with building emotional and social intelligence in children. A recommendation for the program was that it can do more to celebrate children’s achievement---such as graduation ceremonies. Another participant had heard of the program, but expressed concern that the program day was too long for her child. The information she had about the length of the day was not accurate, and she was able to get the facts from others in the group. She still had concern that some programs don’t have enough options for gradually transitioning children into longer program/school days. One participant expressed her deep gratitude to the program for helping her assemble a network of services for her adopted son, who has been diagnosed with ADHD.

Literacy Night: There was very positive commentary on this program. As described by one parent participant, it is a program that helps parents to prepare their children to read. It is a recurring 4 week program that uses multiple strategies to support parental involvement in developing early literacy. Part of the evening is instruction for parents; then parents are joined by their children and are able to test the new skills they learned. The program is reportedly well-attended. They use a host of strategies to attract parents to the program: free books; good word-of-mouth; raffles and other incentives; persistence in reaching out to parents---e.g., auto-dial to remind parents of events.

Family Game Night: A father in the group reported on this program that offers a variety of family- oriented and age-differentiated games. He noted that these events bring families together, and are generally well-attended.

Communication to Parents at the Rupert School: Participants applauded the ways that administrators at the Rupert School inform and remind parents of school events. Methods mentioned are text messages, hard documents sent home in weekly folders with students, stickers attached to children’s clothing, robo-calls, Evites and other electronic calendar software.

Love & Logic: A program offered by the Family Center. This program focuses on ways to develop empathy and social skills in youngsters. Most of the parents were unfamiliar with this program.

**Barriers**: things people identified as leading to their fears or of getting in the way of reaching their hopes
Participants had a host of thoughts about what parents need to support development of their young children.
• Reduced class size: Now kindergarten classes hold 26 students. Participants think that reducing class sizes to 16-18 students will serve students well.

• Resources and guidance for addressing children's behavioral and emotional challenges. Participants said that many parents don’t know how to identify signs of a problem; teachers can be more active in alerting parents to behavioral issues. Parents don’t have enough information about options for testing. There should be more training for teachers about ADHD and other conditions that affect children’s behavior----they should also get training about how to talk with parents about their children’s needs. Building trust between teachers and parents is essential. Participants said that it is important to start working with parents on their children’s behavioral issues when the children are young.

• PEAK program should be continued for children throughout elementary school.

• Help for single parents who don’t have adequate and affordable childcare options. One participant (14 year old student) noted how often she sees teenagers raising their younger siblings.

• Increased parental involvement in schools, like attending parent/teacher nights, becoming classroom volunteers, etc., would help to address problems with attention-seeking behaviors is schools and classrooms.

• A resource center to help parents learn about program options for their children, perhaps provide professional guidance to parents about how to match options to needs (for example, one parent was dealing with a decision about how to deal with his daughter being too young to enter kindergarten and his feeling that she needs more challenges than she can get by staying in preschool. Another parent is looking for affordable activities for her gifted daughter.) One participant said that she is aware of a resource book, but it’s not available to most parents.

• More activities for children outside of school, like sports, gardening, arts, cooking, etc. Participants mentioned some places that offer activities, such as the Y, libraries, local organizations, municipal playgrounds. But there needs to be more information about what’s available, and activities need to be affordable, especially for parents of more than one child.

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

• More programs that provide emotional and behavioral support for children, and education and training for parents on how to address their children’s emotional and behavioral needs. Programs need to be available both in and outside schools.

• More free and affordable programs in the summer and after school.

• Improved communications about resources and events. There needs to be better coordination, centralization, and improved distribution strategies.