

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

MODERATOR REPORT – Group 3

First Baptist Church

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Moderators: Josh Warner, Terrill Thompson

Translator: Lupe Hernandez

Moderator's description of the group:

Group 3 consisted of nine participants—all of whom were female. Three group members were Caucasian, one was African American, and five were of Hispanic origin. Most members were parents of children currently in the Pottstown early education system, but one member was a representative of an institutional partner involved in Pottstown's system. About half of the participants were in their 20s, with the remainder in their 30s to 60s.

Several themes emerged during the introductions and initial hopes and fears portions, such as safety in schools, bi-lingual support for homework and in school main offices, the service gaps present when kids transition between elementary and middle or middle and high school, summer programs, over-worked teachers, and the head start program.

There was Spanish translation for the entire session, both for English and Spanish discussions, such that all participants could understand what was said. Note taking was only in English, however. Although translation took time, everyone in the group participated, and rich discussions were generated—even between speakers of different languages. The initial hopes and fears discussion spurred further conversations about the issues brought up by the group, but due to the shorter timeframe of the session, less time was spent on the stories and discussion (for supports & barriers) of the list of early education programs in Pottstown.

Hopes and Fears for their child's education, ages 3 to 9:

Hopes:

- Think about the child as a whole person – not just about “stuffing the kid with information.”
- More teacher assistants: Teachers need more help. They can't focus on a kid that needs it with so many other kids to pay attention to.
- Increase the teacher to student ratio: There would be fewer discipline issues
- More communication with teachers
- Ability to help our kids with their homework (We can't because of language barriers.)
- To learn more about the system

- More support programs to keep kids from using drugs
- Schools will open their doors earlier. They won't open before 8:30am even if it is raining. Kids that don't have cars have to wait outside and get wet. Kids also need time to wash their hands, etc. before class.
- More people to help with translation – (*There was a lot of support for this*)
 - We want to be able to talk to our kids' teachers
 - We want to be able to help our kids with their homework
 - We don't know about activities that are happening
 - Want translators available for day-to-day translation. They need to really know Spanish and English or else it can be more confusing.
- Summer activities (*There was lots of support for this*)
 - Need to be free or low cost (Rupert Elementary has a program that is lower cost)
 - Continue kids learning over the summer
 - Kids enjoy school and miss it during the summer
 - Helps to have programs that allow siblings of different ages to participate
 - Like a mix of learning and fun
 - Need to have air-conditioning so that kids with asthma and other health concerns can participate
- Head Start is an important program
 - Helps kids learn faster when in school
 - Kids grow from the program
 - Head Start is different from other preschool programs because it teaches life skills and social skills
- More support for kids with special educational needs: Three times a week isn't enough

Fears:

- Safety
 - In both the community and the school
 - Having to wait outside
- During the transition from middle school to high school kids can get into trouble with drugs.

Supports: things people identified as supporting their hopes

- Translators – a participant talked about having translators available in the school district where she used to live. It made a big difference. The only concern is money.

- Homework help – “If a school requires homework to be done in a certain language then they are required to provide support. You can’t fail a kid because of language.”
- “We need the tools to help our kids.”
- Offer English class for parents
 - Provide child care
 - Don’t require documentation
- Offer Spanish classes for parents and students: “I would love to learn Spanish and to have my kids learn Spanish. I want to be able to help.”
- Volunteering in my kid’s classroom: “I appreciate seeing what the teacher is doing. How important their work is.”

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

- Language access
- Duration of Summer Camp – the fieldtrips are good, but the limited times are hard
- Time: Have weekend programs that allow parents to be involved outside of work hours

Final synthesis of qualities, values, characteristics

- Head Start is a great program. It prepares kids to succeed in school and teaches important life skills.
- Need more teachers or aids.
- Safety is a concern.
- Language access.

Tensions or Issues that were brought up:

- An English-speaking participant who was visibly frustrated with the interpretation, asked the Spanish-speakers, “What are you doing to learn English?” She remained for the discussion, then left the group. On account of her question, a rich discussion took place relating to the background conditions of families that could use more bilingual support in schools (for classrooms, homework, administration, notifications, etc.). After the group talked this out for several minutes, it became clear that there are many nuances when it comes to Spanish speaking families’ backgrounds and needs for bi-lingual support, and the claim that “families should simply work toward English comprehension in the home” is easier said than done. The group cited examples of many types of families that possess some comprehension of English; however there are many different circumstances that can affect parents’ abilities to help children with schoolwork and stay abreast of school

events, communications, and requirements.

- In some cases, one parent might have a good grasp of English, but because of work hours, he/she is not the primary parent interacting with teachers at drop-off and pickup.
- In other cases, parents may speak Spanish, but might not be able to read or write well in their native language. Homework and school hand-outs that require reading comprehension of English are therefore doubly difficult.
- Even for those parents who do speak English, many are not fully fluent, which means that misunderstandings still happen.
- For community-based English classes for parents, work schedules often conflict
- Reduced funding for free English courses, combined with stricter requirements of citizenship or green cards, prevent some residents from attending these structured forms of language learning
- When bringing home homework, children might have only a partial understanding of the assignment, so when translating to parents, directions and purpose of the work might be misunderstood
- All these points brought up the question of the degree to which the school district should ensure that kids' homework assignments are comprehensible by adults