

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

MODERATOR REPORT - Group 3

Pottstown Middle School

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Translators: Pilar Aguilera & Lupe Hernandez

Moderator's description of the group:

Group 3 had ten people total—eight female and two male. Seven members were of Hispanic origin, two were of European descent, and one was Middle Eastern. Half the group was in the 20-40 age range, while the other half ranged from their 40s to 60s. During the introductions and initial hopes and fears portion, all group members related that they had kids or grandkids currently in the Pottstown school system. Other topics mentioned by two or more participants included the recent elementary school merger, special ed programs, issues of funding, and the need for teachers' aides and bi-lingual support in and out of schools.

With two Spanish translators, we were able to take flip-chart notes in both English and Spanish. Group dynamics suffered somewhat due to the time taken for translations, room layout, and several side conversations that reoccurred throughout the process. Despite this, Group 3 discussed several key issues and proposed a few programmatic changes by the end of the evening.

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

Hopes:

- That the children get the education they deserve (*unanimously held hope*)
- More afterschool support for children who need it
- That no child is left behind
- Want take home activities for young students
- More hands on help for students who learn slower in order to help them keep up (*lots of support for this*)
- Want to be able to talk to teachers/administrators about our kids. (*lots of support for this*)
 - Want bilingual teachers and administrators
 - Want interpreter at parent/teacher meetings
- For my kid to get a good education without any problems, like drugs
- Want afterschool programs like arts and crafts
- Want documents that kids bring home to be in both English and Spanish
 - It was noted that the schools have gotten better about this in the last 2-3 years. Tonight's bilingual handouts were appreciated.

- Increased communication and collaboration between schools
 - They could share a translator and other resources
 - The schools should be the same since the students come together in Middle School
- That tonight will made a difference for Spanish speakers because the population is growing
- More activities for parents and kids throughout the year

Fears:

- That my child won't pass. She needs more help after school with reading.
- Large class size: There are 26 kids and only one teacher (no aids) in kindergarten
- Money is spread too thin
- Since kids can't take textbooks home, we can't help them with their homework
- With money going to remedial classes (which is needed), there isn't money left to support honors students or bilingual access

Supports: things people identified as supporting their hopes

Part 1 SUPPORTS: Stories derived from Hopes & Fears discussion

- Language access – everyone agreed that it is very important. The only tension is around funding.
 - Documents being in English and Spanish (and other languages)
 - A school was referenced that had a computer program that did translations – this helped one participant's son succeed
 - Teachers and administrators who are bilingual
 - Interpreters at meetings
- IEP & 504 – one-on-one support
- We are lucky to have good teachers who care.
- Parents that try hard to support their kids by asking about school

Part 2 SUPPORTS: Program Participation (programs thought of as beneficial):

- **Pre-K Counts** as beneficial and appreciated by participants
 - Participants mentioned that the program provides a great base of learning, that improvements were noticed in kids attending, that students have the same teacher several years in a row, and more learning takes place than expected of a standard pre-k situation
- **Pre-K** (standard kind, not the specific Pre-K Counts) – also considered beneficial, however a few participants explained that standard pre-k and pre-k counts are

different

- Pre-k is focused, and instills learning, discipline, and notions of routines in kids
- One participant noticed a large difference (behaviorally) in Kindergarten students who had attended pre-k versus those that had not.
- **Head Start** was mentioned, and one participant had experience with her children in the program
 - There is a good focus on early learning
 - **HOWEVER**
 - Differences between the pre-k and pre-k counts programs were discussed, with the general notion that the Head Start program does not instill the same focus and routine aspects as the others
 - Head Start needs more advanced learning (on par with pre-k counts) and must have bi-lingual aspects for kids and parents
- **Parent Literacy Nights** were described by several participants as a great program and opportunity
 - It brings people out that normally would not come out to school events
 - Provides prizes for families and free babysitting
 - There was some brief discussion over whether the prizes were the main driver of attendance, or rather the program's aspects
 - The nights help to teach parents how to further kids' education, with tips, games, and other take-home activities to boost parent & child learning
 - It is organized
 - By grade level, and also by abilities within a particular grade level
 - This was seen as very important to the majority of participants
 - Overall it is a great tool
 - **HOWEVER**
 - There was some confusion expressed over the program name. One participant expressed that he thought the night was geared only toward teaching parents that have trouble with literacy themselves, and did not know that it was geared toward helping parents further literacy in their children. Is the night for parents that cannot read, or do not have strong english language skills and need help? Or rather is for parent and child learning using reading?

- **Breakfast with Kids** in the schools was also lauded by the group as a good chance for parents to interact with kids within the school and classroom
 - It is a good program and allows parents to meet one another, interact, and see the classroom
 - One variation has morning reading in the classroom with parents and their kids
 - Other variations on this kind of interactive program for students, parents, and the school include Field days, carnival days, and book fairs. They allow time to be spent on shared activities
 - **HOWEVER**
 - Some of the elementary schools have this, while others do not.
 - Depending on space and timing, the program is rushed at some schools
 - Overcrowding in schools with more free lunch/breakfast students—has everyone eating and talking on top of each other
 - Inconsistency in the programs within and across schools. The program keeps changing and differs for each elementary
 - Also, the carnival day was taken away this year, compared to last, which was seen as a negative.

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

Part 1 BARRIERS: Stories derived from Hopes & Fears discussion

- Not being able to communicate with the school due to language barriers. (See “Language access” above)
- A participant spoke about her daughter, who has special needs. The daughter gets frustrated when trying to read. The mom wants more support for her daughter during and after school.
- Discipline is distracting from learning
- Teachers not letting parents know when their child needs help

Part 2 BARRIERS: Program Participation

- **Infrequency of Events** was seen as an obstacle by nearly all the participants.
 - Since some events occur only once per year, what happens with parents or grandparents that have multiple children, in different schools?
 - They would have to choose which child to visit
- **Time** of events and meetings often conflicts with parent schedules
 - Parents would like to be involved, but cannot make mid-day or after-school events because of work or responsibilities

- **The Language Barrier** was seen as a large obstacle, but not merely for students & teachers with the curriculum.
 - Spanish speakers must be better informed, and materials translated
 - Other language groups should be better informed as well
 - Materials and take-home notices, as well as text messages and other communication should be translated

- **A Lack of Information** was cited as an obstacle for parent involvement
 - Several participants did not know about pre-k counts and the other programs listed on the handouts until that night, and until they were discussed by the group as a whole
 - Need to get information via regular mail, instead of relying on email or students taking home info to parents.
 - Many spanish speakers do not access email
 - Text messages are a good option to reach many
 - Phone calls or auto-dial calls are fine; however, the messages are only in spoken english
 - Sending paper information home in student folders is very unreliable
 - Students often forget
 - Parents inundated with too many individual take-home sheets from different teachers or offices or event notices
 - Put these in a weekly or monthly digest
 - Timing of communication regarding events needs to be better
 - Sometimes parents are informed the day of the event, or even after the event has already occurred
 - District should use redundancy, repetition, and multiple means for communication
 - One notice, in one format/medium is not enough
 - Parents talking to other parents is the best way to communicate events and issues

Final synthesis of qualities, values, characteristics

- In the final synthesis, Group 3 settled on three main points to communicate:
 1. Bi-Lingual Language Access
 - This applies to teachers,
 - Teacher aids in classes,
 - As well as main office and communications/information delivery

2. Classroom and Overall Learning Support

- Attention should be paid to after-school learning
- As well as targeted in-class assistance to students

3. Inter-School Communication and Coordination

- This should be implemented to limit the differences and contrasts between the various elementary schools in Pottstown.

Tensions or Issues that were brought up, but not fully discussed by the group:

- Parental involvement is key, but notion that some parents don't want to be involved
- That district funding is "spread around" too much for numerous special programs and special needs students
- The extent and number of spanish speaking parents who require bi-lingual access to reach beyond just teaching in the classroom
- Special education needs, as well as particular student needs that may not qualify as officailly in need of special ed, yet still are not on par with average student learning abilities