

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

MODERATOR REPORT – Group 3

Connections on High

May 28, 2014

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Translator: Ileana Ocasio

Moderator's description of the group:

Group 3 consisted of seven attendees—all of whom were female. When it became clear that Spanish translation was not needed for the group, our translator joined in as a participant, making eight total. Three group members were African American, four were Caucasian, and one was of Hispanic origin. Most members were parents of children currently in the Pottstown early education system, but the group also had two teachers, a great-grandmother, and several people familiar with situations relating to special needs education and identification. Most members were in their 30s or 40s.

Several themes emerged during the introductions and initial hopes and fears portions, such as the unique position of special needs kids and parents, the role that distance and venue choice plays in event attendance for parents, and parent engagement. One participant specifically mentioned location as key to her ability to attend the night's event, since it was close and would not require her to walk after dark.

After introductions and hopes and fears were recorded, the group jumped right in to the discussion of issues without any prompting from the moderators. Group dynamics were great, and although a few stronger personalities were present, everyone made space for all participants to contribute.

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

Hopes:

- Offer resources and tools for parents
 - A participant shared a personal story about how much she learned from working with an occupational therapist with her autistic child. She realized how much of what she learned could be used with her other children as well.
 - Numerous parents expressed a desire to learn more about how to help their children. Literacy Night was praised for providing this.
- Have programs nearby
 - Having tonight's program nearby made it possible to attend.
- Summer programs: kids want things to do during the summer
- Longevity of Head Start speech teachers – the turnover is hard on kids, especially shy kids

- Consistently have good teachers (The participant’s child has a good teacher now. She hopes that it will continue.)
- More free preschool programs within walking distance
- More tools and resources to engage parents; this can support early intervention
- Comprehensive one-stop-shop for all available programs.
- Teachers can help identify students’ needs and provide parents with information about where to find support.
 - A participant shared how lonely and isolated she felt after learning that her son has autism. It took a while to find the resources she needed and to connect with other parents of autistic children.
- More practical ideas to support kids learning. For example, having youth count change in the store.
- More activities like tonight--time for parents to talk to and support each other. There are many benefits:
 - They can help support each others kids.
 - If we can’t make it to an event, we can ask another parent to include our child. Then they don’t have to feel excluded.
 - We can call each other if we don’t understand the kids’ homework or to make sure that what our kids are telling us is really true.
- Occupational Therapy Night: a sensitivity training for teachers and parents
 - Lots of kids have sensory issues.

Fears:

- That kids are “pushed along with the group” – those who learn slower or faster are forced to move at the group’s pace.
- That trauma is seen as a behavioral concern rather than for the trauma the child has experienced.
 - “We try to tell teachers, but they have so many students...”
 - We need a way to get the information to the teachers more regularly (every three months is not often enough).
 - Teacher needs to have enough support.

Supports: things people identified as supporting their hopes

- Parent classes to learn what the kids are learning so that we can help with homework
 - “I am a math teacher, but I can’t help with first grade math because it is taught differently than I know how to do it.”

- Parent Literacy Night is great
 - Have other nights with more subjects: This would engage more parents. Some are better at reading, others at math, etc.
- Having a teacher that was more concerned about the kid as a whole than their academic performance.

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

- **Too Much Information** was seen as an obstacle, in that parents are swamped with too frequent little bits of information
 - Too much frequency of information giving
 - There needs to be more targeted communicaitons, happening less often
- **The Language Barrier** was mentioned as an obstacle, especially with regard to the special events and attracting more residents
 - Having bi-lingual supports are important for access
 - Allows Spanish speakers to access events, teachers, homework, etc.
 - Should add bi-lingual support and aspects to parent literacy nights
- **Lack of Summer Options** was mentioned as an obstacle, as some of the participants' kids were described as loving school or loving to learn, and stay busy.
 - The group discussed some of the middle school level summer enrichment programs offered
 - Allows trips, summer learning, and events for older children
 - Such a program should be offered for the younger grades as well

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?

- **Parents Literacy Night** was described as very beneficial to kids, parents and the community by the majority of participants. The group spent a lot of time on this subject, and began to brainstorm ways of expanding it for greater effectiveness
 - Provides homework skills
 - Allows interactions with other parents and the broader community
 - Acts as a "sit down moment" where parents can take a breath and enjoy some quality productive time with kids
 - Offers prizes, raffles, and snacks – and the raffle prizes are actually *good*
 - It is broken down by grade and age groups, as well as skill levels
 - Offers childcare
 - It helps parents to better help their kids
 - Is very empowering in this way

- Kids get to see their own parents involved in their schooling
- Kids form relationships with other families of their friends
 - Allows for community building
 - Other parents can help out a child, if that child's parents can't make it to that specific night or event, then they can sit in for their parents
- One participant expressed that she was just learning about Parents Literacy Night tonight, and would definitely attend the next one
 - HOWEVER
 - Transportation was brought up as an issue and downside to the program
 - This was further described as an issue of access—in that the locations were out of the way for some
 - And also as a timing issue, since in the later fall months the seasonal weather issues and earlier sunset times make attendance impractical (it gets dark earlier)
 - Group proposed that choosing different locations would be good
 - Spanish Language access was also brought up as needing work
 - Bi-lingual support could be offered that would expand the attendance and success of Parent Literacy Night
- **Pre-K Counts** was lauded by the group for positive effects it has on children and their families.
 - Kids love it—they feel like it is “real” school
 - Kids get exposed to structures & routines
 - Especially social exposure, and talking with others
 - Kids are exposed to healthy foods, and are trying new foods
 - Kids then expose parents to new things
 - The program sends the right amount of explanatory information home with the kids
 - This is good for the parents, and helps re-inforce the learning and patterns
 - It is free
 - All-Day program, which is great for work schedules
 - Kids eat lunch at the program, and have time for naps
 - HOWEVER
 - Transportation and access are issues. Locations not always accessible for some
 - Serving breakfast at the program would be nice as well, since it

is odd for some students in a household to get school breakfast (at elementary school), while pre-k counts kids need to eat at home first

- The free breakfast program in schools does not carry over to Pre-K Counts program
- There should be more of the Pre-K Counts classrooms
 - The classes fill up quickly
 - Parents need to advocate
- **Healthy Family Nights** were mentioned as another successful program, able to draw parents that might not attend other events
 - It is good for the dads – allows them to come out when they might not be comfortable at other events
 - This idea was then extended by the group as a call to be more inclusive to other caretakers, such as grandparents
 - At this point, the group began to move toward brainstorming about openness and access to events
 - A question was asked by a participant that was a single mother to a young child about to start pre-k: “is it okay for moms to come to ‘dad’ events?”
 - The whole table answered “YES”
 - Discussion turned toward the need to spread awareness about the events and their open policy
 - Also, care should be taken when naming these events, as the name might turn some folks away
 - Explain the open policy of the event in the announcement
 - Parents can do a lot to pull in other kids or new adults to the events
 - As families get to know one another
 - This then led to an idea about having a working list of parents that are willing to be mentors to other parents new to the system
 - Also, topic-specific lists for parents who have experience with special needs navigation, autism, etc. and linking these mentors with other parents
 - Even something as simple as a homework help circle, organized among parents
 - Leads to community building

Final synthesis of qualities, values, characteristics

- In the final synthesis, Group 3 settled on three main points to communicate:
 1. Expand the Parent Literacy Nights
 - Expand to other subjects, such as Math or Social Studies
 - Some parents might be more comfortable in math or science than they are with reading/literacy
 - Have the nights in different locations
 - This will allow for better access for some parents, and mitigate transportation issues
 2. Need Summer Programs for Younger-aged Students
 - Should be affordable and accessible
 3. There should be means for Regular Connections between Parents and Teachers
 - Offer joint workshops or learning opportunities aimed at parents and teachers
 - Each can learn from the other
 - The parent-teacher conferences scheduled every 3 months are not enough

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

- When potentially facing special needs or situations that impact a child's learning abilities such as autism, parents often get a feeling of helplessness, since they may be facing their child's situation alone. Having support groups of parents and teachers may help ease the plight of parents that are new to these situations.