
COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR INVESTING IN EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Community Meeting #1
September 13, 2005
6:00 – 8:00pm
John Stanford Center Auditorium

FORMAT

Committee co-chair Trish Dzikowski led off the meeting with brief welcoming comments, in which she outlined the make-up of the Committee, the Committee's charter, our comprehensive community engagement plan, the format for the evening's meeting, the follow-up protocol, and additional ways interested community members can participate in our process throughout the next few months.

Participants then spent one hour in 10-person breakout groups, facilitated by Committee members. The groups discussed four questions (listed below).

Finally, one person from each team stood and reported to the full audience their groups' best ideas and most consistent themes.

Trish Dzikowski closed the meeting with a thank-you to all participants, and reiterated the many ways to continue participating in the process.

PROMOTION

Notice of this community meeting and of all other opportunities for the public to provide input to the Committee were (and will continue to be) publicized through a postcard mailed to all Seattle Public School families (including translated notices to 6,000 bilingual households), approximately 17,000 emails, a media campaign (PI, Times, Weekly, Stranger, NW Asian Weekly, Chinese Post, Seattle Medium, Metro Homemaker; NPR [KUOW], African-America radio [KRIZ, KYIZ, KZIZ], Spanish-language radio [KDDS, KKMO, KXPA]), and the Committee's website.

MATERIALS PROVIDED

Each participant was provided the Question Set, an overview of the Committee's charter, and an overview of the Committee's comprehensive community engagement plan.

GOALS

Prior to the meeting, the committee set specific goals for success:

Target		Actual
100 people in attendance	√	121 people in attendance (plus an additional 50-60 facilitators, note takers and observers)
Diverse representation	√	Gender, geographic, and ethnic diversity (including representation from the Oromo, Somali, Latino, Vietnamese and Chinese communities)
High quality/usable feedback	√	Highly constructive tone, productive input (see "Community Input" below)

A NOTE ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

Community members were, as hoped, very vocal about their attitudes and expectations of Seattle Public Schools. Many common themes arose, as did some divergent opinions. Comments that appeared multiple times on various groups' easel paper are reflected first, followed by comments that appeared with less frequency.

COMMUNITY INPUT

Question #1: In your opinion, what are the strengths of Seattle Public Schools?

Strengths identified by several breakout groups were:

- **Choice*** of schools and of programs within schools
- **Community support** of schools, including parental involvement, voter support of levies, business support
- Committed **teachers**
- **Diversity** of languages, cultures, learning abilities and socio-economic status add a "richness" to the education experience at Seattle Public Schools, and leave students well-prepared to succeed in the global economy
- **Special education** services
- Quality and range of **programs** (special education, APP, MEJA, Honors, bilingual, after school)

Other strengths noted were (in alphabetical order):

- Academic performance strong relative to other urban districts
- Alternative schools
- Bilingual orientation centers, service of Instructional Assistants
- District making an effort to:
 - address disproportionality
 - reach out to the community
 - grapple with the achievement gap
 - face problems (heart in right place)
- Examples of good financial stewardship at individual schools
- Grade level expectations
- Math and science curriculum
- New facilities
- Outstanding opportunities in high school for some students
- Responsiveness of individual schools to individual needs
- Individual principals
- Site-based management (though only successful w/a strong administrator in school)
- Small schools
- Strong neighborhood schools
- Strong elementary schools
- Transportation*

*The issue of choice, as tied to transportation, elicited the greatest diversity of opinion, with many saying free transportation was critical to the success of the schools, and many others saying either a)

the principle of choice can and should be preserved without the add-on of free transportation or b) shifting the emphasis from system-wide choice to strong neighborhood schools is a better investment of resources leading to better student outcomes.

Question #2: In your opinion, what are the weaknesses of Seattle Public Schools?

Weaknesses identified by several breakout groups were:

- Lack of **accountability** at District level (senior leadership) and school level (principals, teachers)
 - Lack of trust in administration
 - Failing teachers passed from school to school
- Lack of **equity** and **consistency** among schools and programs
 - Some changes happen only because of individual/small group parent activism
 - Parental financial support at some schools leads to imbalanced opportunities
 - Not all kids have access to all programs in all schools
- Lack of **leadership** at District and School Board
- Inadequate (state) **funding**

Other weaknesses noted were (in alphabetical order):

- Building safety – physical structure, quality of air & water
- Bureaucracy** – sense of system-wide rigidity, contractual obligations, lack of flexibility in school-based staffing
- Choice – detrimental to neighborhoods and communities when families go outside neighborhood for school
- Complexity of budget
- Class size
- Communication/feedback
 - Opinions of parents/community solicited but not implemented
 - Lots of data floating around – unclear how it is applied
- ESL students marginalized/not adequately served
- Expectations:
 - Lack of academic rigor (business find students ill-prepared to work)
 - Low/weak expectations for student outcomes
 - Weak graduation requirements
 - High schools funded on assumption some kids will not take full load, not on track for college
- Lack of customer service – not responsive at school level to parent calls
- Lack of support for teachers – don't feel respected, listened to
- Lack of long-term strategic planning
- Lack of role models in leadership positions for communities of color
- Lack of stability
 - Great principals moved around
 - Teacher turnover
- Low market share
- Music and arts programs vulnerable
- No grievance procedures (or not well understood) especially w/regard to teacher assignments
- Too many schools
- Too much spent on transportation

** There were competing opinions on whether the system was too decentralized or vice-versa.

Question #3: What would you like to see the District do better or differently?

Initiatives identified by several breakout groups were:

- **Communication** – adopt a better model for gathering input and engage in greater outreach, especially to the bilingual community
- Increase investments in **marketing** to increase market share
- Greater **school & family** partnerships
- **Align budget** with academic priorities

Other suggestions were (in alphabetical order):

- Adopt a customer service orientation
 - Hire more enrollment specialists
 - “Sell and serve” parent needs
- Close schools
- Focus improvement on weaker schools
- Greater cultural competency
- Provide greater support for bright children
- Implement in-house suspensions
- Increase arts funding
- More support for struggling students
- More language immersion programs
- Reduce class size
- Reduce transportation (provide choice without transportation)
- Reform teacher assignment practices and change appeals process for teacher placement
- Replicate programs that are improving/performing
- Improve accountability:
 - Quickly identify and deal with low performers (students and teachers)
 - Reward excellent teachers with compensation and acknowledgment
- Study success models & replicate

Question #4: What are you willing to do to make schools better?

- Accept closing or re-organizing schools
- Accept tradeoffs to get a better product
- Give up choice & transportation to get a better education (some dissented)
- Invest time – volunteer in classrooms, tutor, get active in PTA, help market the schools system to friends and neighbors, attend community meetings
- Invest money – fundraise, support levies, pay for transportation, pay higher taxes (if spent well, if competent leadership proven)
- Keep kids in Seattle Public Schools
- Lobby elected officials

Additional ideas provided:

- Sell off perimeter properties
- Have the School Board spend time in classrooms
- Reform the governance structure – make the Board paid professionals, not volunteers
- Pressure the media to report positive stories about SPS’ successes; move away from “District under siege” mentality that perpetuates negative public perception, widespread myths

NEXT STEPS

A re-cap of this community meeting will be presented at the full committee’s next meeting, on September 22, 7:30 – 9:30am, John Stanford Center Auditorium.

The input received at this event will be reviewed by the Committee and considered in the context of the broad range of input we are receiving through all three city-wide community meetings, focus groups, a large sample telephone survey (n=800), the Committee’s website, the mail, and Neighborhood Meet-Up Day (in November; details to be announced in October).

A great thanks to everyone who dedicated their time, energy and passion to this effort. Please attend the Committee’s next city-wide public meeting:

Tuesday, September 27
6:00 – 8:00pm
John Stanford Center Auditorium

The format and content areas for that meeting will be distributed by email and posted to the Committee’s website the week prior.

THANK YOU!