

Focus Group Report Middle School Connect Project through June 2010

Conducted by Community & Parent for Public Schools of Portland in partnerships with Portland Public Schools

Overview

This report highlights the process and findings of Community & Parents for Public Schools of Portland's (CPPS) Middle School Connect project conducted to widen the diversity of opinions and ideas heard by Portland Public Schools (District) and the Board of Education (Board) on subjects related to the High School System Design Process (HSSD).

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1. Purpose

The purpose of the Middle School Connect project was to conduct targeted outreach to Portland families with middle-grade students who would not be likely to utilize other methods of community comment about the HSSD. CPPS was asked to concentrate efforts in the Franklin, Madison, and Roosevelt clusters. With the HSSD proposal that would move students in the Marshall cluster to Franklin and Madison, Marshall was also included in CPPS outreach.

Questions were designed to solicit opinions and ideas that would have relevance beyond only one HSSD proposal.

2. Method

Organizing Meetings

The project plan called for CPPS to hold a community meeting in each of the assigned clusters. These meetings were intended to provide information about the HSSD and how families could give comment directly to the District and Board. These community meetings were also expected to be used as a source for participants in 9 focus groups.

This model was based on a successful pilot meeting at Tubman School.

It was decided that the community meetings would be held in a non school-specific location so as to not create a barrier to families from schools other than the one where the meeting was held (e.g., it was believed that a meeting held at George Middle School would not appeal to Clarendon Portsmouth families). Meetings were originally scheduled at University Park Community Center (Roosevelt), Mt. Scott Community Center (Franklin and Marshall), and East Portland Community Center (Madison and Marshall).

During the planning process, the community meeting planned for Mt. Scott Community Center was moved to Lent's Commons to accommodate Harrison Park families asking CPPS for a meeting, and the meeting at Mt. Scott was changed to a focus group format. Families were invited to the University Park and East Portland meetings through flyers (English, Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, and Mandarin), the District's auto dial phone system, listings on local web-based calendars, flyers at community events, personal phone calls to families, outreach to the District's ESL/ELL and Title I leaders, and mention in the Pulse.

The community meetings were not as well attended as anticipated and so did not provide the pool of focus group candidates expected. CPPS quickly implemented an alternative method to recruit focus group participants.

CPPS reached out for help from several of the District's ESL Equity Coordinators and visited a number of schools to ask for assistance inviting families to a focus group. Schools visited or called include George, Clarendon Portsmouth, Lent, Harrison Park, Lane, Creston, Arleta, Vestal, Jason Lee, Harvey Scott, and Rigler.

Overall, schools responded positively to CPPS contact about the Middle School Connect project. Vestal's principal, Susan Foxman, and Lent's Family Engagement Coordinator, Carmen Flores, set a standard for excellence in response and support. The counselor at Rigler, Nicole Levine, helped assure the focus group included representatives from the school's large Spanish speaking population. The principal's secretaries at both Jason Lee and Arleta were helpful in outreach as well. Having someone at the school make contact with families was important.

The combination of a very tight time-frame and school end-of-year activities made it impossible for some schools to participate at this time, but provide opportunity for future contact. Outreach efforts were started to reach Russian-speaking and Somali families; this will take ongoing work and should be continued in order to assure participation by these communities in future discussion projects.

CPPS met with Lorenzo Poe and Robin Mack in an effort to collaborate planning meetings, especially to reach families who had transferred out of the Jefferson cluster. This addition to the project could not be completed because the contact information for these families was never provided to CPPS. This is another opportunity for future CPPS discussion projects.

The method used to invite participants to the meetings varied at each school. The most successful method included a combination of mailed letters and phone calls from the school, with the letters and phone calls in the language spoken by the parents.

Focus group meetings were held da Vinci Middle School to widen the demographics of respondents and to represent families who had transferred from their neighborhood school.

Participants were offered childcare and/or interpreters, as well as a thank you in the form of a \$25 gift card and refreshments.

Community Meeting Summary

University Park Community Center: Roosevelt Cluster invited through flyers, personal outreach, and auto-dial calls in Spanish and English.

East Portland Community Center: Madison and Marshall Cluster invited through flyers, personal outreach, and auto-dial calls in English, Russian, and Spanish.

Lent's Commons: Marshall Cluster invited through personal phone.

Focus Group Meeting Format

Focus group participants were asked to identify themselves, grades/schools of students, and how closely they had been following the HSSD process. The group was then asked a series of 7 questions: 1) hopes and fears for students as they enter high school, 2) proposed core curriculum, 3) suggestions for focus option themes, 4) boundary changes as they relate to potential increased travel distance and increased school offerings, 5) proposed changes to transfer policy, 6) how to support students as they start high school, and 7) preferred District/school to family communication methods.

CPPS volunteers facilitated the focus group discussions. Some written information was provided, and the two meetings held at Roosevelt High School included a brief presentation by a CPPS member/Roosevelt site council parent to provide cluster-specific information.

Online Survey

To collect additional input, CPPS added an on-line survey component to the project. To discourage 'ballot stuffing', the survey was set up to accept only one survey per computer. Results of the survey are reported separately from the focus group results.

3. Measurement of Success Benchmarks

The primary indicator of success for this project was that more families would participate in the HSSD process, and the Middle School Connect project did accomplish this goal.

The thoughts and opinions of people that would not have otherwise been heard were shared in a detailed report to the District on June 9, and are included in the Key Findings section of this report.

It was hoped that this participation would include: actively participating in the focus group sessions, writing letters to the District and/or Board about HSSD, attending and speaking at the District community meetings, attending and speaking at Board meetings in May and June, and participating in surveys conducted by or on behalf of the District.

Most of the 92 focus group participants actively participated in the focus group sessions.

CPPS developed a mini-workshop to prepare participants at the CPPS community meetings on speaking at Board or District meetings. However, the community meetings did not provide opportunity to present this information to a large number of people. CPPS created a document providing dates, locations, phone numbers, and email addresses where comments or questions about HSSD could be directed to the District or Board; this information was given to all focus group participants.

At the time the project was developed, it was reported there had been few, if any, Roosevelt, Franklin, and Madison families speaking at Board meetings. With the high level of community input, including many from these three clusters, it is impossible to know which participants spoke or wrote to the District or Board because of Middle School Connect project activities.

4. Focus Group Meeting Demographics

Ten (10) focus groups

92 people

Language:

- 17 Spanish-speakers with interpreters
- 9 Vietnamese-speakers with interpreters
- Rest were English speakers

Relationship to schools:

- 3 Students
- 3 Community Members
- 4 Grandparents
- 82 Parents

1. Arleta K-8 School, 10 participants
2. da Vinci Middle School, 1st Group, 12 participants
3. da Vinci Middle School, 2nd Group, 10 participants
4. Jason Lee K-8 School, 9 participants
5. Lent K-8 School, 9 participants, 5 Spanish-speaking with interpreter
6. Mt. Scott Community Center (originally planned to be a Franklin cluster Community Meeting), 7 participants representing Jefferson, Marshall, Cleveland, and Franklin clusters
7. Rigler K-8 School, 7 participants, 2 Spanish-speaking with interpreter
8. Roosevelt High School 6/1 Meeting, 6 participants
9. Roosevelt High School 6/3 Meeting, 10 participants, 9 Spanish-speaking with interpreter
10. Vestal K-8 School, 14 participants, 9 Vietnamese-speaking with interpreter, 1 Spanish-speaking with interpreter

Community & Parents for Public Schools of Portland

How closely have you been following HSSD process?

- Closely - 15
- Some - 30
- Little - 32
- None - 15

Schools currently attended (as reported by participants, number of families not number of students):

- Alameda - 1
- Arleta - 9
- Benson - 7
- Buckman - 2
- Charter schools - 2
- Cleveland - 1
- Creative Science School - 5
- da Vinci - 24
- Duniway - 1
- Franklin - 3
- George - 4
- Glencoe - 1
- Grant - 3
- Harrison Park - 1
- Homeschool - 1
- Hosford - 2
- James John - 7
- La Salle - 2
- Lee - 7
- LEEP - 1
- Lent - 8
- Madison - 2
- Marshall - 1
- MLC - 1
- Mt. Tabor - 1
- Portsmouth Clarendon - 7
- Private - 1
- Rigler - 7
- Robert Gray - 1
- Roosevelt - 1
- Vestal - 13

Participants reported living in the following clusters:

- Cleveland - 5
- Franklin - 13
- Grant - 4
- Jefferson - 4
- Madison - 29
- Marshall - 12
- Roosevelt - 16

5. Key Findings from the Focus Groups

1. Parents are worried that changes made to high schools will not be successful or will be too expensive to maintain, and the process will start over again. Parents are concerned that adding AP and other courses will not be enough to lift the quality of teaching at their child's high school.

Parents are concerned that their students will not be academically challenged or that they will not be engaged in high school; those with more than one child often listed one of these issues for one student and the other for another student.

Additionally, parents of students in K-8 middle-grades are worried about the inequities between how middle school and K-8 students are being prepared for high school.

2. The proposed core curriculum was mostly well received though there were some concerns expressed even among those who generally supported the idea.

Concerns include: funding to maintain the core curriculum and sufficient demand for advanced classes at all schools. Families do not want advanced classes be added at the expense of remedial courses.

Electives mentioned as desired by many parents are: industrial arts/shop classes, home-ec, all forms of arts, and a wide variety of sports/physical activities.

3. When it comes to focus school themes, parents are interested in arts, rigorous academics, and math and/or science. However, many also believe that every student would benefit from an opportunity to explore a variety of subjects during their high school career, and that students need to be able to easily change focus as their interests change.

Non-English speaking parents tended to have little knowledge or understanding of existing focus schools.

4. While no parent wants to see their neighborhood school closed, most would favor a longer commute to school if it gave their child more opportunities.

The only exceptions were parents concerned about transportation or those who currently live within a few blocks of their neighborhood high school.

5. Parents had mixed feelings about the transfer policy. Many blamed it for the imbalance in school populations. However, there was concern about cutting off options if an assigned school was not working for a student, and many felt that if a different comprehensive school has a subject offered that a student can't get at their own school, they should be able to transfer. Being able to transfer to a different comprehensive high school for a particular art form, advanced subject, or language (for non-immersion students) was specifically mentioned by many people.

Returning to an application process, with an explanation for the requested move, was mentioned by several groups as something they'd support. There is interest in changing the attitude from transferring out of a school to one in which a student is asking to go to a particular school for the opportunities at that school but not at their neighborhood school.

There was support to allow students to stay in a feeder pattern from earliest grade entered to high school graduation in order to allow them to attend school with friends.

6. Parents thought having more information from their school would increase their ability to help their children succeed. This includes being able to access homework assignments, grades, syllabus, and teachers online. Many supported the use of freshman academies (or pods as they are called at Franklin), freshman starting school earlier than older grades, and peer mentoring. Parents would like more information for them and their students before leaving 8th grade and in the beginning of the high school year.

Many felt that Counselors can play an important role helping students and parents get oriented at school as well as directing them to social service and on-site programs, and eventually help with college and financial aid applications. Neither the current nor proposed ratio of counselor to student was considered low enough to allow counselors to adequately fill this role.

7. Parents want a variety of approaches to help them stay connected with their school and the District. They support being able to indicate which mediums work best for them and having the school and district contact them through their personally preferred method – email, postal mail, or phone. Many felt the district was doing a good job of communicating on most issues, and the electronic newsletter was mentioned as being a good source of information.

Non-English speaking families said that consistency in communicating in the language they request would be good.

Another frequent response was ‘focus groups like this one are a great way to communicate’ and ‘I hope we have more meetings like this to keep us informed.’

6. Summary of Online Survey Results

During the first two weeks of June, 163 people completed a CPPS online survey with questions similar to those asked at the focus groups. The survey was set up to only accept one survey per computer in order to increase the number of unique entries.

Responses were analyzed overall, as well as broken out by those who answered that they had a student attending other than their assigned neighborhood school (90) and those who answered no to that question (69); 4 people did not answer that question. Detailed information about the online survey responses can be found in Addendums F, G, and H.

Survey respondents reported students at 33 different schools with largest numbers from Sunnyside Environmental School (27%), Hosford (23%), and Abernethy (13%). Between 6% and 8% had students at Grant, Buckman, Vernon, da Vinci, Atkinson, and Cleveland.

Core Curriculum:

57% said every comprehensive high school should offer these classes, 20% said there were classes they would add, 8% said there were classes they would remove, and 17% felt they would need more information to make this decision.

Focus Schools:

Focus schools were briefly described and respondents were asked to indicate which themes or focuses they thought should be available. The question stated the school did not have to be one their children would attend. Respondents were able to select as many answers as they wanted.

Arts were indicated by 72% of respondents, vocational by 61%, rigorous math and science by 58%, environmental by 50%, and 'math, science and leadership for girls grades 6 to 12' was selected by 32%.

Travel and Boundaries:

71% of all respondents said they would choose to travel further to a school with more options, 24% said they would rather have a school closer to home even if it meant fewer choices.

Transfer:

48% said they could see the benefit but were concerned about significantly limiting transfers. 31% said they agreed with the change; 32% said they disagreed.

7. Conclusions

The Middle School Connect focus groups provided an effective way to engage families in meaningful dialogue about their students, schools, and education.

CPPS successfully represented both a voice that was neutral, not endorsing any specific opinion or course of action, and a connection to decision-makers.

It was important to the participants that the District and the Board were going to know what they had shared in the meetings.

The meetings provided a safe place for participants to ask questions; this was perhaps best represented by the father who, when the advanced level classes were explained as giving students the opportunity to earn college credit, asked what a college credit meant.

Some who self-identified as having followed the HSSD process closely made inaccurate statements about what was in the proposal, while others who said they knew nothing repeated almost verbatim what was being said in the media by people protesting the changes at Benson.

Many participants expressed an interest in continuing the discussion; they became members of CPPS, expressed an interest in participating in future focus groups, and indicated an interest in the upcoming CPPS Parent Leadership Conference.

CPPS looks forward to an opportunity to continue this partnership with Portland Public Schools, to develop the contacts begun in the Somali and Russian communities, to forge new connections with families, and to build on the relationships that have been started.

8. Addendums

- A. Focus Group Summary Results by Question
- B. Focus Group Summary Results by Location
- C. Focus Group Answers by Location and Participant
- D. Focus Group Participant Detail
- E. Complete Text of Focus Group Questions
- F. Online Survey Results Data
- G. Online Survey Results Answers to Open Ended Questions
- H. Online Survey Results Analysis