

Portage Public Schools

Community Focus Group Summary

Lam & Associates

March 24, 2011

## Overview

A total of 31 individuals took part in four focus group discussions between February 4 and March 4, 2011. The discussions were planned in 2010 as part of the schools' overall strategic planning process. The majority of participants were very familiar with Portage Schools, and most either had children and grandchildren in the schools, or still do.

Each session lasted between one and two hours. The outline/topics of discussion were set by administration in cooperation with school board members. Those topics were:

1. Purpose of this session
  - a. Planning context
  - b. How information will be shared and used
  - c. Today's discussion and outcomes
2. Ice Breaker and Introductions
  - a. Who you are
  - b. Your relationship, past and present, with the District
  - c. How do you receive your information about PPS
  - d. Do you receive information directly or only through the news media
3. How do you view academic reputation/performance of our schools at PPS? What makes you feel this way? Examples may include:
  - a. Performance in college
  - b. State test scores/comparative test scores
  - c. Examples of excellence/failures
4. What do you think the District's priorities should be? Examples for discussion can include:
  - a. Maintain small elementary class size
  - b. Expand attention given to individual student needs
  - c. Expand initiatives focusing on communication, both verbally and in writing
  - d. Expansion of other areas including:
    - i. The variety of challenging curriculum
    - ii. Math and Science initiatives
    - iii. World Language offerings
    - iv. Student use of technology
    - v. IB and AP offerings
    - vi. Other...
5. What do you think the District could do to improve?

The facilitator -- Blaine Lam of Lam & Associates -- considered the option of merely providing verbatim comments of the discussions. His experience suggests, however, that without an interpretive filter of some sort, readers tend to latch on to those 'hot button' issues that are of most interest to them, get focused on inflammatory/negative comments or are unduly influenced by the position of the comments (typically first or last). Regardless of how the comments are filtered, some participants' opinions will appear to be discounted, but it should be noted the facilitator has a greater interest in presenting the information fairly than in any of the issues discussed.

## **Introduction of Sessions**

Participants were made aware that their comments would not be individually attributed to them, that a summary would be shared with school officials, that participants would receive a copy of the summary, and that the report would be public.

## **Ice Breaker and Introductions**

As participants discussed their personal interactions with the schools, a remarkable pattern emerged. Invariably, more than one and in some discussions, several participants described the "different" and unique needs of their own children, ranging from emotionally and academically challenged to academically gifted. These discussions set the tone for a conversation in which many concluded that Portage -- by virtue of comparative academic testing scores in Kalamazoo County -- stands out as a district that "meets the needs of all students." The stories were personal, emotional and detailed.

This part of the discussion also served as a platform for a wide range of opinions not about the schools, but The Kalamazoo Gazette. The discussion highlighted the strength of communication at several elementary schools. Many were familiar with the schools' electronic, web and published communications products. Some participants had regular contact with schools, administrators and/or school board members. Others claimed "I only know what I read in the paper." Many commented on "the declining influence" of The Gazette, but commented favorably on some aspects of the Gazette's historical coverage, particularly by The Portage Gazette. Although not discussed in length during this portion of the sessions -- or in any other for that matter -- the dispute between the School Board and the Superintendent was largely characterized as "regrettable." The Gazette was seen as exacerbating the conflict.

## Academic Performance/Reputation

The participants were given the choice of commenting on academic performance or, in instances when they would not have enough direct knowledge to comment, academic reputation. At this point in the sessions, participants re-stated their interest in the schools' ability to meet a wide variety of needs.

Consensus seemed to develop in each group that Portage has been the "historical" academic leader in Kalamazoo County, but that the leadership position, depending on the point of view, has been challenged, is eroding or no longer exists. Each group commented on the "changing demographics" of the district, as reflected by higher percentage of students on free and reduced lunch. Expressed in multiple sessions was the opinion that "Portage has rested on its laurels."

While most participants said Portage Schools compare favorably within Kalamazoo County, several commented on academic achievement in other countries, and how Portage, along with other American schools, were falling behind.

The IB program received high marks from participants, who said the education of high achievers has always been a Portage strength.

## Priorities/Improvements

At the beginning of each discussion on priorities, a large number of preferences would be stated, but the dynamics of each discussion, given the time constraints, allowed groups to get focused on two or three items. Similarly, in the discussion of the final topic -- what should the district do to improve -- groups tended to gather around a few key points. Participants said that if Portage "rested on its laurels," other schools could catch up and/or surpass Portage Schools. No true consensus on priorities could be established, but the following areas appear to have received the most attention, albeit not necessarily in this order:

- **Strengthen basic programs**, particularly those that develop individual communication skills.
- **Expand cultural and international awareness.** The forces of changing demographics, a changing world and global connections led participants to suggest Portage needs to get "plugged in" to international realities.
- **Use technology appropriately.** Participants discussed both the advantages and disadvantages of technology. Opinions varied on how well technology

is being utilized in the schools. It's important to keep up, if not keep ahead, participants suggested, but not at the expense of basic social, academic and communications skills.

It is difficult to capture the "priority items" of each participant, but several participants were strongly desirous of having the following issues mentioned in the report:

- **Don't forget athletics and extra-curricular activities.** They are the backbone of Portage's well-rounded programs and help develop leadership.
- **Develop a more clearly understood "vision" for the district.** The current conflict between the administration and the school board, some suggested, highlights a lack of focus on where the district is going. Kalamazoo was highlighted as a district that communicates goals and vision in every school.
- **Improve recruiting of new students to the district.** Participants familiar with visits to the district by families "shopping" for schools highlighted Mattawan as a district where this is done very well.

## **Big Picture Takeaways**

Although the conversation was structured around the areas noted above, the following observations were very easy to make:

- Participants were adamant that the schools are the heart and soul of the Portage community.
- Participants were willing, almost anxious, to stay involved in this process and with the schools.
- Portage has a proud history and a strong base on which to build.

At the same time, participants voiced these big-picture concerns:

- The state financial/school finance situation is grim.
- The emergence of nearby systems, challenging Portage's attractiveness, exposes the system's vulnerabilities.
- The current dispute between the school board and the administration is hurting the system's image in the larger community.

## Other Observations

The focus group discussions were civil and constructive, but not without contradictory opinions on several issues, including overall teacher competence, technology applications, discipline in the schools, communication by the schools, attention to the needs of students “without special needs or special talents,” the district’s competitiveness, use of school finances and the schools’ relationship with other entities, including the business community and municipal government. Comments ranged from “throw-away” observations to strongly held beliefs. While one participant suggests that children are well-equipped for institutions like the University of Michigan, another suggests that children are not ready for the work world. Political and educational philosophies were often interjected, and difficult to capture in a report of this scope.