

PORTAGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PARENTS' FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Lam & Associates
May 12, 2011

Overview

A total of 16 individuals took part in three focus group discussions on April 22. The discussions were a continuation of community focus groups, part of a strategic planning process that began in 2010. The parents were grouped by level -- elementary, middle and high schools. Each participating parent is very involved in his or her school.

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
3. How do you view academic reputation/performance of our schools?
4. Regarding examples illustrating student achievement at your school(s):
 - a. What is working well?
 - b. What are some challenges?
5. What do you think the District could do to improve student achievement?

The facilitator -- Blaine Lam of Lam & Associates -- has put this report in the same format as the format for the report from the community focus groups. There is an interpretive filter with an emphasis on objectivity.

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 made public.

Ice Breaker and Introductions

The content from these discussions was much more specific and pointed than those offered by community members. This section revealed how “hands on” the elementary parents are. There were mixed comments about the continued involvement of parents as children get older. Some see this as a natural and necessary progression of “letting go” for parents as their children attain a sense of independence. Other see it as a failure of parents and the schools to remain connected. High levels of satisfaction with the schools were expressed in these sessions. It was during this part of the discussion that it surfaced that parents were aware of what was happening in schools other than their own. Some programs and amenities are available at some schools and not others, but this fact -- other than a preference for certain offerings by certain parents -- did not surface as a central issue or complaint. At each level, parents expressed sentiments such as “I wouldn’t want our children to attend any other school (not even in this district).” There were strong loyalties expressed, both to individual schools and to the district as a whole. It is difficult not to name names from these discussions, as individuals -- teachers and principals -- were singled out for their exemplary work. High praise was offered by elementary parents for communication between the school and the parents.

Academic Performance/Reputation

While the community groups were more focused on Portage vs. other districts and on academic reputation, the parents were specific in their praise of overall academic performance and were complimentary of teachers and principals. There were complaints about class size and crowding. Concern was expressed that the “good, but not great” students were the students who suffered most -- that the needs of students at the top and the bottom were tended to first, and most. Parents were very knowledgeable about MEAP scores, but also critical of their use and the practice of “teaching to them.” Parents did understand the rationale being teaching to the tests. Parents were complimentary both of basic skill teaching and advance teachings, particularly in languages, including Chinese. One group, acknowledging that it might be “sacrilege” to say so, challenged the value of the IB program. Others spoke highly of it.

Priorities/Improvements

The priorities of parents were quite similar to those stated by community members, with a greater emphasis on reducing class size. Parents said that they could “feel” the budget cuts in the schools, and were concerned about future budget cuts. Parents expressed a desire to see basic programs maintained. But they also called for increased offerings of programs that make for a well-rounded and world-savvy student. There was a strong desire for students to expand their cultural and international awareness. Once again, technology was seen as a “mixed bag,” and parents felt it was being used, by and large, appropriately. Parents had much more specific wish lists than did community members, and much more specific praise and complaints. There was a strong attachment to individual schools, and a significant less sense of “connection” to the administration, with some sense that the administration might improve communication with individual schools, though it wasn’t clear what type of support might be needed there. A number of parents said they felt they had access to the “system” through the Curriculum Instruction Council (CIC), but the connection with administration by parents was not seen as a strength. Parents wondered out loud about the “disconnect” between administration and the schools and parents. The conversations invariably turned back to the individual schools. And the expression “every school is different” was heard often. Parents wondered if the district should be more aware of what is “expected” at various colleges in terms of preparation and content. Parents felt that protecting art and music classes should remain a priority. And, although less pronounced than in the community, and less pronounced from parents at the elementary level, there was an expressed need to protect sports programs, as they are seen as an important part of the system’s reputation. Additionally, media centers got high marks, and were seen as valuable. The issue of more attention on the “kids in the middle” surfaced frequently.

Big Picture Takeaways

Although the conversation was structured around the areas noted above, the parents shared the following observations with community members:

- Parents shared the community view that the schools are the heart and soul of the Portage community, but expressed it more in their own terms (“important to my family”).
- Parents are willing, almost anxious, to stay involved in this process and with the schools, and to continue their existing involvement in PTO, DAC and CIC.

- Portage has a proud history but may be “resting on its laurels”.
- The state financial/school 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.
- Changing demographics and the socio-economic profile of the district has affected the district in a number of ways.

Other Observations

The focus group discussions, while positive and constructive , did reveal some animosity toward some underperforming teachers, who they felt were “protected by the system.” At the same time, the praise was glowing on many fronts, with reference to teachers who had their children in the schools and who were very much a part of the Portage family. A few parents said the counseling could be improved. Some parents, especially at the elementary level, expressed appreciation for the role of secretaries and para-professionals in the schools. As at the community level, discord between the school board and administration was seen as a negative for the schools.