

ALBUQUERQUE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

REPORT ON



FOCUS GROUPS

PERCEPTIONS *of the* SCHOOL DISTRICT



FALL 2001



PREPARED BY SHARED VISION



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SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUPS

Six focus groups held from October-December 2001 revealed that the strengths of the Albuquerque Public Schools school system are not known or understood well. Perceptions of APS as too large, bureaucratic, political, or inefficient are contradicted by actual personal experiences with teachers, counselors, and others who extend themselves for students. Its strengths as a public school system with a diverse student body are not publicized or appreciated by the public to the degree they are known and valued by those within it. More accurate publicity is needed not only to enhance image and respect, but to recognize those pockets of innovation and success that could help to revitalize the entire system.

Students

At the same time, there are real problems in some areas. Students feel the effects of deteriorating older physical facilities, scarce and outdated textbooks, and obsolete computers most directly. Students in older schools perceive that the newer schools have better teachers, resources, and physical environment. They generally think that newer schools attract the better teachers with seniority and that older schools are getting short-changed in the quality of education they are able to offer.

Any efforts to provide “teachers who care about the students,” spruce up the physical facilities and update the basic tools of learning would be met with approval and support. But all of these improvements flow from funding. Students resent having to pay for course supplies and participation in non-athletic activities; they feel these extra fees and costs as a burden. Only increased funding can remedy the sense of neglect and provide the needed up-to-date textbooks and technology necessary for APS to be competitive with schools elsewhere. Even with these limitations, students believe that a good education is possible, but that it is “up to the student” to make that happen through their choices and efforts.

The quality of the district most often mentioned as desirable was that of its “diversity.” This means being with students of different backgrounds and socioeconomic status, and learning from that experience. Students feel that private schools do not have this advantage. They also appreciate the free expression and lack of rigid dress codes that the public school offers. They are apparently willing to give up something in the way of challenging coursework and adequate supplies for this experience and believe that such deficiencies can be compensated for by individual initiative.

They value career-oriented courses. Some think that there is too much emphasis on remedial classes with not enough higher level choices available that are challenging. They attribute this lack to most students wanting to just “get by”-- leaving enriched courses with not enough students signing up or not enough teachers to teach them.

The principal is seen as the visible extension of an otherwise distant and abstract administration. If a principal does not participate actively in school events, students feel a sense of alienation.

Students had rich personal experiences to share about teachers who had extended themselves and made a difference in their lives. Letting students tell their success stories would provide powerful messages—stories of teachers and counselors who through their dedication and attention to them as individuals, had turned around a failing student to achieving an “A”, and a former drug user to an honor role student.

Teachers

Teachers realize that they could be making more money elsewhere but express a sense of caring and dedication to the students they find at APS. However, they express frustration about not feeling valued and supported by the media or administration. “PR starts from the top.” They perceive that when the administration does say something about teachers, it is often negative and even inaccurate. Many extend themselves for the students, planning extra field trips and using vacation time for learning and personal growth that will make them better teachers. They want to be respected and rewarded for their dedication.

Positive reinforcement and encouragement would go a long way toward building morale. There is a great need to overcome the “us versus them” perception that teachers have. They would like to be treated as part of the same team, wanting the best for students. What seems to be more important even than compensation is being treated respectfully as professionals—by the administration and by the community.

Initiatives for reform should include teachers actively in planning and problem-solving. The “top down” approach is too reminiscent of past failed efforts. If professional development is planned and managed by the teachers in each school to fit their particular situation they would participate in it more readily and enthusiastically than in a standardized approach. Those teachers with experience with the block program option strongly support it—anything that gives them more time to prepare, smaller classes, and students more choice.

They have a strong desire for more parental and community support for the goals of education, and are willing to put extra efforts into enhancing communications with parents to make that happen. They want to expand the definition of education beyond that of test scores, and would welcome publicity for the positive things in their schools that are producing results.

Public relations can be used to highlight and reinforce their dedication, getting the word out about teachers who go beyond what is required because of caring for the children.

Parents

Parents' main concern is with problems of size—the school district itself and its 87,000 students, schools with over 1000 students, and class sizes that are too large for one-on-one attention. If students had more individual attention, they would be more motivated. The main factor in keeping students from dropping out is the sense that “*someone at the school cares.*”

Their perception of the school system is that students “come last” because of political, self-serving agendas. There is distrust about the use of statistics as a tool to make the district look good at the expense of students, e.g. their view that the drop-out rate is not fully reported.

The real learning happens in the classroom with good dedicated teachers. But it appears to parents that the administration doesn't help teachers—mis-assigning them, and not providing adequate mentoring. Teaching conditions are not what they should be, and this dissuades teachers from entering the profession. This creates an endless cycle of teacher shortages, large classes, and lack of attention to students.

This perception—that decisions of the administration hurt rather than help learning—causes great frustration. Parents would like ways to bridge this gap, suggesting that administrators make visits to schools, and that the school board should substitute teach.

They perceive that good teachers prevail despite a lack of support, and that there are things that can be done to improve teaching conditions. They have had excellent experiences with individual teachers who extended themselves on behalf of a child with problems and truly “made a difference” in their lives. Principals embody the administration, and those who exert positive leadership can make a big difference at the school level. The individual school gives parents a sense of community and good accessibility for getting involved.

They perceive issues of inequity between schools—that newer schools get more resources and that schools with more two-parent families with higher parental involvement come out ahead. There is a sense of injustice that resources seem to depend on external factors, rather than on the needs of students.

The most problematic area is middle-school, where the system loses kids because adequate transitioning is not provided. The drop-out rate can be addressed in a number of ways, if students are given more choices so that classes are relevant to what they want to do. More student responsibility, e.g. in drama productions, produces enthused participation. They had good things to say about the block systems at Highland, Freedom High and Valley Academy. These schools should be viewed as models and their successes tried elsewhere.

Spanish-speaking Parents

The Spanish-speaking group characterized the district in more positive terms than any other group, seeing it as offering *opportunities* for their children to progress. Students and teachers are able to grow, and the school system gives all children the possibility to become educated and move ahead socially and economically.

There were three major themes throughout the session expressed by this group. First and foremost was the support for bilingual education, which they defined as proficiency in both English and Spanish. Some of the participants had been raised many years ago in New Mexico when speaking Spanish in school was prohibited. There is a tremendous sense of positive change and progress in today's world where Spanish is accepted and classes are given in the language.

All the participants strongly desire that their children become fully bilingual and that their Spanish be “correct”, so that they would be able to travel anywhere in the Spanish speaking world, be understood and be accepted. Beyond that, they want their children also to learn the idiomatic Spanish of New Mexico.

Inextricably intertwined with the issue of bilingual education is the issue of *respect*. The fact that this meeting was carried out primarily in Spanish was key to its success and to the sense of being respected on the part of the participants.

A third very important theme is the positive feeling of all the participants toward teachers and individuals with whom they had come in contact throughout their association with APS. Several shared feelings of appreciation for teachers and administrators who had been willing to listen to concerns and suggestions and who actively asked them to participate in field trips and other school activities.

Several concerns expressed by Spanish-speaking parents had to do with lack of consistency across the system in terms of programs in Spanish language classes, tracking of students, and transitioning of students from primary to middle to high school.

Another issue of concern to this group is the matter of testing. Particularly in bilingual programs in the early years, Spanish speaking children tend to perform poorly. The concern is that this reflects negatively not only on the child but also on the teachers and the school. The question was raised several times about having these tests administered both in English and in Spanish to give a more balanced view of students' progress.

Administrators

Administrators see the district as “immense” and “bureaucratic” but given its size, would like to create shared partnerships, connections, and a sense of community with the rest of APS—as the best hope of achieving the challenging mission of educating all children.

They see themselves as accepting this challenge and doing a good job of meeting it, despite what they view as inadequate funding. They take pride in the public school's mission to educate all children, which contrasts to the selectivity of private schools.

This mission is complicated by the diversity of the student body and the district itself, and by the political complexities of funding from many levels of government—federal, state and local. They must follow the legal complexities of rules and regulations associated with each, and the political challenges of dealing with many governments. They sincerely do their best to cut through the bureaucratic layers in order to get things done for the children, but find the task difficult given the layers of complexity they are faced with. They cite studies that confirm the lean workings of the administrative staff and feel that they are doing the best possible job with limited resources.

Principals see their schools as a “safe haven” from the immensity of the system and find it most productive to concentrate on their school as a working community of students, parents, and teachers.

Administrators are willing to face up to shortcomings and acknowledge inequities in the system. Principals of older schools have the perspective that their schools do not get the basics of equipment and needed renovations. This exacerbates disparities, as the newer schools with more attractive physical environments are able to attract the best staff and teachers, and have more affluent families able to provide needed support from the community.

They would like people to understand the reforms and revamping of the system that the administration is beginning to undertake and to be partners in the challenge of carrying out change. They view the system as ingrown and welcome fresh ideas and innovative thinking from the outside, in particular citing the contributions of the business community and the desire to bring in more outside teachers and administrators from elsewhere in the country that could help provide innovative solutions in the change process.

Business Leaders

Business people are results-oriented. They want to see more emphasis on an organized institutional process to achieve the desired results for students. Key words and concepts are: setting objectives, identifying and measuring outcomes, monitoring, and accountability. “Where do we want to go and how do we get there?”

They had positive experiences with individual teachers but saw the district as spotty and uneven in offering a quality education. “Inefficient”, “mediocre” and “political” came to mind first in describing the district—though their individual experiences as parents of APS students contradicted those perceptions.

They offered creative ideas for solving problems. One problem identified was the lack of consistency between schools. While many of their children had received a quality

education at schools such as La Cueva, they recognized that other schools in older, lower income areas did not fare as well. The tendency of good teachers with seniority to be attracted to the newer schools with a more desirable working environment could be offset by offering teachers bonuses and incentives to teach in the more difficult situations.

They were particularly interested in making education more relevant at the high school level. Various programs that provided interface and practical experience working for businesses were strongly supported and advocated by this group. But these programs currently are inconsistent and fragmented; they should be institutionalized in a more comprehensive way throughout the district, with clear goals set, such as requiring every senior to have one “shadowing” experience with a business.

With a practical orientation, business leaders strongly supported career tracking at the high school level, and thought that students should be offered a number of choices that would help them gain experience and come to career decisions earlier. They wanted more interface between students and the business community, providing experience useful to students in deciding a career path and providing business with potential career track employees. Educators could also “shadow” a job in private business, and a business person could “shadow” a teacher, with both learning from the experience. There are programs now, but they are fragmented and not under one district umbrella. They preferred an organized, system-wide approach.

One cited an experience with a work study student whom he subsequently hired full-time upon graduation. In this case, the work experience led to a career opportunity. Experiences like this where students have had a successful experience with a business partner could be publicized.

Innovative programs that are successful within APS should be tracked and strengthened. The business group’s interest in publicizing these models is practical: they saw publicity as a way to get the word out so that these success stories could be incorporated into the rest of the district in innovative ways.

They tended to be practical, constructive, and systematic in their approach, wanting clear targets, processes to get there and measurable outcomes. Communications with this group should emphasize concrete strategies to achieve results using familiar business terminology.

They echoed other groups in highly valuing the “diversity” of the school system.

I. PROCESS

Shared Vision conducted six focus groups for Albuquerque Public Schools: teachers, administrators, English and Spanish-speaking parents, business leaders and students. The purpose was to find out attitudes and perceptions of different groups towards the school district, in order to increase the effectiveness of an upcoming APS public relations campaign. The focus groups also provided information about issues and challenges facing the school district and how reform efforts can be more successful.

As a community-oriented non-profit organization, Shared Vision was hired in order to provide a neutral, independent facilitation process. APS recruited the participants, provided incentives, and served as a resource for each group.

Administrator Group – principals, assistant superintendent, special program coordinators, liaisons director (October 18, 2001)

Business Leader Group – corporate executives, educational task force participants (October 19, 2001)

Parent group – activists involved in citizen advisory councils, booster clubs, ex-teachers, parents of students in special education (October 20, 2001)

Student Group – high school participants, student officers and leaders, students in Career Enrichment Center and other special programs (October 22, 2001)

Teachers Group – high school and elementary school teachers, including gifted program teacher, bi-lingual program teacher, and alternative high school. (October 25, 2001)

Spanish-speaking Parents Group – parents of elementary school age children and grandchildren, including participants born in Mexico but living their adult lives in the United States, and native New Mexicans. (December 1, 2001)

The focus group participants were generally highly articulate, actively involved either on a paid or volunteer basis with their individual schools. Several groups said that they enjoyed the process of conversation with their peers, learned from it, and hoped that their comments would be heard and acted upon. Several members appreciated the opportunity to express themselves and requested another meeting or series of meetings to continue the discussion process. The students and parents groups, including especially the Spanish-speaking group, expressed this desire most strongly.

II. MAJOR THEMES AND MESSAGES

The disconnect between perceptions of “the district” and actual personal experiences with schools, students and teachers came up again and again throughout the sessions. Many perceptions of APS are created by sensationalism and negativity in the media. The challenge is to better communicate the *reality* of the district—its successes as well as its problems—and most of all what is happening in the classroom with students. By being more proactive in getting these messages out, the district can avoid being put on the defensive as frequently. As one participant advised, “*Create a positive image about things you care about.*”

A. AUDIENCE

Marketing internally within the organization

The attitude ought to be that “we’re all in this together trying to make things better for the kids. We need to change our image both internally within the organization, and externally out in the community.”

Administrators observed that “We don’t have a climate within APS where people believe they are part of the organization. We’re our own worst enemy internally. How will the public have a good opinion if the teachers are negative and complain?” On the other hand, teachers did not want to be labeled as part of the problem and feel that there is often an “us versus them” mentality in publicized statements. “PR starts from the top” and should be used to create a climate of trust.

Business leaders thought that a media campaign can have a dual purpose—not only getting the word out about positive things that are happening in the schools but also helping to invigorate the educational system. “It can be used to motivate the district or motivate individual schools to emulate successes that are occurring in pockets. How do we move those around throughout the system? This is very important. If people see that the community supports those programs, they may ask how they can do the same thing in their school.”

Targeting marketing externally

Business leaders pointed out that Albuquerque is not a unified city; it operates in segments (e.g. South Valley, Northeast Heights) and not all areas think the same. Perhaps marketing and awareness needs to take place in each district based on their customized needs.

B. MESSAGES

Teachers, administrators, and business people were asked, “*What’s the one thing you wish people know about APS?*”

Personalize it

Participants observed that “We’re always talking about the business of running the schools and the adults involved, rather than what’s actually happening for the students. There are good things going on. Those are the stories about the classroom that ought to be out there.”

Classroom visits

“Take the community to the schools, introduce them to a teacher, and show them, hands-on what goes on in the classroom. Tell them a personalized story of something a teacher, counselor, or administrator has done. People get so focused on thinking about the larger system. Taking them to a school ‘puts a face’ on the people they are criticizing.”

Student success stories

There are success stories about students doing well, getting scholarships and beginning careers. Hearing from former graduates who are successful would be very powerful. The Spanish-speaking parents emphasized the importance of respect for individual talents --music, arts, sports, etc. as well as academic.

Parent-teacher interactions.

Parents on a one-to-one individual basis often have good interaction with schools and teachers. “You have parents that say nothing good about APS, but many wonderful things about individual schools.”

Measuring results

Provide concrete information about progress

Many thought that the district needs to come up with different ways of measuring success in addition to test scores, to “show people that the money we’re getting is producing results.” The issues with schools that are not performing well should be acknowledged, but “test scores don’t tell the whole story.”

Spanish-speaking parents see standardized testing, particularly in the early years, as being unfair to students who have started out primarily in Spanish language classes. These tests are not a fair measure of what the children have actually attained and are ultimately unfair for the teachers and the schools. Testing at the third grade level is a particular problem.

It’s important to show the programs that are in place to address them and the progress that is being made toward goals. This means going beyond drop-out rates and Terra Nova test scores to talk about what a teacher is doing in the classroom or using performance-based assessment, that measures progress from one year to the next.

Let a school tell its own story.

“Schools should be given the tools and money to tell their story.” Other measurements (language proficiency, success in careers or college) can give a different message and

provide a *positive frame* for statistics such as test scores. This focus on the schools would empower schools to become more accountable and influential in the community.

Highlight innovative programs

Models for change within APS that are working well should be publicized and broadened throughout the system. Valley Academy, Freedom High School, and the Career Enrichment Centers were specifically mentioned.

Publicize shared responsibility with community and parent partners

Education is a community process, a village concept. Instead of sitting back and criticizing, parents and others can be encouraged to take a more active role in the school as a “community that works together.” Business leaders want to challenge people to get engaged, asking critics, “What have you done to help our education system? The focus should be on what we as a community can do to help teachers achieve an outcome.” Administrators called for a sense of “shared responsibility” to provide more support for a diverse group of children. Teachers would like parents and extended families to take more responsibility to be primary teachers. From ages 8 to 18, kids are at school only 10% of the time.

Highlight diversity – Accept the challenge of the public school’s charge to educate all children

All groups thought that the district’s cultural and racial diversity is a great strength, and the public schools provide opportunities--that private schools don’t have-- for students to “*learn together as they will work together.*” As a public school system, the district is charged to take everyone. Administrators at APS speak proudly about accepting the “incredible challenge of diversity.” They would like the community to know: “We believe in ourselves, believe in our work, accept our weaknesses. We love our children and are good at what we do. We accept the challenge of our charge – serving *everyone* with quality.”

Students see diversity as the major advantage of public over private schools. Spanish-speaking parents appreciate the opportunity that *all* students have for progress through education.

Bilingual and cultural education is valuable, especially in New Mexico.

The Spanish-speaking participants were very complimentary that APS is doing something FOR Hispanics and that the Spanish language is respected now. Participants who shared stories about past discrimination about language stressed how much it meant to them to have their language honored. Hispanic culture, contributions and celebrations can be highlighted through publicity. .

The Spanish-speaking group was asked “*How can the district better communicate with Spanish-speaking parents?*” The group appreciated schools that communicate in both

Spanish and English via written communications, loudspeaker and classroom announcements and would like more schools to adopt this practice. Many listen to Spanish music and cultural programs on the radio station, KANW, 89.1 FM, but were unaware that it is an APS station. This station is a resource that can be publicized and used for the Spanish-speaking community.

Communicate re-structuring and re-design of the system

The public may not be aware that APS is going through a major restructuring. This reform can be communicated in positive ways, showing the efforts that are being made to improve the district with limited resources. APS is a system that is willing to improve.

Teachers and administrators are dedicated professionals

Teachers can get more money in other jobs in other states, but they like being in APS because “the kids are wonderful.” They are there because of “what they can do for the kids and what the kids can do for us.”

Messages to the community should emphasize that many teachers and administrators work more than their scheduled days. Many take classes in the summer on their own time and do not get any paid vacation or holidays. Teachers would like the community to know about the extra time that they put in voluntarily after hours, and to make those commitments part of how they are measured and evaluated.

APS is doing an excellent job

Administrators and teachers in particular would like people to know that APS is “doing the job well.” Many problems are not school system problems but are related to families and society beyond the school’s control. Administrators perceive that “the ‘Yugo’ is running great” for the dollars that are being spent.

Security – APS is concerned about security for students and is doing a good job of carrying it out.

III. PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

A. *DESCRIPTIVE TERMS*

All groups were asked for the first word that came to mind about the school district. Most participants came up either with neutral terms, such as “education,” “schools,” “learning,” “students” and “teachers,” or with descriptions having to do with its size.

“Big, Monolithic, Behemoth, Bureaucracy, Impersonal”

Perceptions about the large size of the district were common to teachers, administrators, and parents. All components of the district are viewed as too large -- the system itself, the schools, and the classes.

Teachers compared the district to a “giant dinosaur trying to move”--a “bureaucracy” that is “top-heavy” and “disjointed.” The parts don’t relate; “there seem to be lots of committees and people at the top, but they don’t filter down to the trenches or to what the kids need.” “The people at the top don’t know what the feet (of the dinosaur) are doing.”

The system is viewed by teachers as “impersonal.” Top administrators don’t come to the schools as they once did and the personal connections of teachers with people at the top seem to be missing. From the teachers’ perspective, this gap translates to more paper work, pressure regarding results of standardized tests, and programs “coming down” that are not well understood. Teachers too often take a back seat to other administrative goals.

Parents noted that the district is large in terms of physical distances; with 11 high schools it can take an hour to drive from one to another. Parents are frustrated with the large size and have a perception—borne out by responses to the question where “students” were last on the list—that the system has lost sight of the students. Most media stories seem to be about administrators, school board, contract negotiations, and political bickering. “The bureaucracy is winning, students are losing.” “APS doesn’t correlate with students.”

Their responses to the question would have been quite different if they had been asked what they thought about their “school” rather than the “district.” “With APS, you’re identifying a “monolith.” On the other hand, the involvement in their local school as a community that works together is seen as very positive. “When I think of APS I think of bureaucracy that spends more time *interfering* with education rather than *supporting* education. When I think of education I think of it happening in the schools and in the classrooms.”

Complex Community

Administrators see a “complex” organization with 87,000 students, grades K-12, alternative schools, charter schools coming on line, new organizations of cluster leaders, and huge accounting and budgetary layers. They described the district as “huge,” “immense” and “complex,” but also were interested in it as a “community” – and in the professional relationships that exist within the system now or could be nurtured to offset its immensity. Various combinations of these words created phrases such as: “complex learning community” or “huge political bureaucracy.” The infrastructures of departments and personnel that support the schools are like interlocking circles of people working together for the common goal of “kids succeeding in the classroom.”

Contrary to the perceptions of teachers and parents, administrators express a strong commitment to focusing on the “child and learning—why we’re here.” They described their efforts to find legal ways around layers of bureaucratic rules in order to “get something done” for the schools.

Principals turned to their individual schools as places they could manage and feel comfortable with. “The only safe haven that I have is my school, because there it’s about kids.”

Inefficient, mediocre

The initial descriptions of the district as “inefficient” and “mediocre” that business people used reflected general perceptions and the reputation of the district portrayed in the media. However, their own experiences as parents with children in school contradicted these negative labels. From a recent arrival, “Everyone said the education is terrible, but my personal experience is good.” Several cited positive experiences with the quality of education and community support at particular schools.

Political

Administrators used the term “political” to describe the district. The political environment consists of board members, convoluted relationships with myriad governmental agencies that provide funding—federal, state, city, and county--different agendas, a diverse population, and the “old” way of doing things based on a good-old-boy system. “Something’s wrong with the system if only some people can get things done in the bureaucracy and others can’t.”

For business leaders, “political” means that “the business of running the schools seems to be in a public forum conducted by the press” and this is an obstacle to developing and implementing programs that produce the desired outcomes for students.

Spanish-speaking parents also used the terms “political” and “controversial” to describe the district, perceiving that some decisions about staffing are made not on the basis of merit but rather on political/seniority imperatives.

Poor, Old, Cheap

For students, APS has to do with “schools” and “education.” “That’s their job.” However, they perceive that the district lacks sufficient funds to provide what is needed in the schools to carry out this mission—computers, textbooks, and an adequate physical environment conducive to learning. Ceilings are leaking; schools lack adequate heating; textbooks are falling apart, unavailable or outdated.

Seen as “cheap,” “poor” and “old,” the district fails to fix the problems it has and to do the renovations that are needed before building new schools. They describe inequities among high schools, with new schools such as Rio Rancho and La Cueva faring better than older schools such as Albuquerque High, Highland, and West Mesa, where it is necessary to double up classroom space and resources are deficient.

Public

The term “public” is meaningful and positive to students, differentiating APS from private schools with a more limited and homogeneous makeup.

Progress, Education, Opportunity

The Spanish-speaking Parents group was unique in that it viewed APS in mostly positive terms, as offering educational opportunities and progress to students. Students and teachers are able to grow and advances have been made in bi-lingual instruction. If children graduate from APS, they can go anywhere and do anything they desire. They thought that the school system gives *all* children the possibility to become educated and move ahead socially and economically.

B. COMPARISONS TO OTHER SCHOOLS

Business leaders, administrators and students were asked *How do you think APS compares with other schools in Albuquerque and out of state?*

Business people with experience elsewhere thought that APS compared favorably, but are not sure if their experiences with the newer school districts of Albuquerque are typical. One person had experienced smaller class sizes and longer hours where she had grown up. There is a perception that “there are too many days off” in APS, that classroom time (45 min.) is too short and that perhaps there need to be fewer periods and longer class times. The block schedule came up as a desirable option.

This group has the impression that private schools assign more homework and more projects, but again, there is inconsistency in the APS system. It is difficult to compare “apples to oranges” between private and public schools because parents who are paying extra tuition typically are more involved in their children’s education.

Administrators were favorable toward APS in comparison to other places. “Services and staff are better than anywhere.” At out of state conferences they hear about things they’re already doing. APS is also offering career pathways and block schedules similar to what the private schools are doing.

Students valued their public school experience over private schools because of the greater diversity of students and free expression. Areas in which APS is seen as deficient are the physical environment, a shortage of challenging upper level class offerings in high school, and lack of current textbooks and state-of-the-art computer technology.

A surprising student view is that they place a high emphasis on personal responsibility. “Determined students can do better than private.” “What you put into a situation is what you get out of it.” With APS, “it’s more on the teacher and the student.”

IV. POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES

People

When asked directly what they like about APS, participants talked the most about the *people* in the system—the children, teachers, and the “people who keep things moving and keep it running.”

“We have exceptional educators. These individuals have committed their lives—for minimal pay—to build our children.”

“There is lots of expertise and talent in the district that is not appreciated.”

“The bonding in the classroom between teacher and kids—so kids don’t get lost in a big system.”

“The most at-risk kids have amazing stories, how they find the strength and courage to keep going.”

“People care about the cause—children.”

“Teachers and principals.” “There are great administrators within local schools.”

“Teachers inspired my children”

“Teachers are concerned about students and even spend their own money to buy materials that are not provided by the school.”

“Teachers work well beyond their paid hours to make sure children who need tutoring receive it.”

“In the schools where older students tutor younger students this is a real plus, not only for the younger students but also for the self-image of the students doing the tutoring.”
(Spanish-speaking group)

Diversity

All groups saw the diversity of the district as both a great strength and a great challenge.

“Lots of cultural diversity” “You’ll not work with as diverse a group of children anywhere else.”

“A lot of districts elsewhere are outlined by economics; APS is not and this is what makes it different.” “It’s good that the district not partitioned off into separate suburban and inner city districts like Phoenix or Chicago”

“Our children have been exposed to every language and culture. The private schools are limited in what students are exposed to.”

“Learning from different types of people.” “Anyone can go—lots of different types of people and clubs.”

“Freedom to dress the way you want—free expression.”

“Diversity complicates getting things done, but differences between schools are good”

Choice

“The choice of classes, especially those that offer job training and preparation for professional careers (e.g. nursing, engineering, law).

“Choices in extra-curricular activities – sports, drama.”

“The ability to transfer to other schools”

“That places like Freedom High exist, providing alternatives”

“Teachers have mobility, can move around to find a good fit” (an advantage of size)

“Charter schools are a great step forward. They give parents options. Small classes are a real plus in charter schools. The lottery system for acceptance at charter schools was perceived to be equitable by participants.” (Spanish-speaking group)

Administration

“A good bang for the buck—for the dollars we’re spending, we have a well-running ‘Yugo’”

“We’re not afraid to acknowledge weaknesses and are ready and willing to improve.”

“There is support for innovation in the alternative cluster schools.”

“Excellent special education and handicapped programs for disabled.”

“Good education”

“The district is free of scandal and improprieties.”

“The education is free.”

Community Support and Openness

“When something is needed for children, people come through.”

“Involvement in the local school as a community that works together”

“Sense of community at the school level”

“The opportunity for parents to be involved and have good access.”

“There is freedom for parents to express their concerns and to be heard. There is interest on the part of teachers and staff about parents’ concerns and the opportunity for parents to learn.” (Spanish-speaking group)

“Teachers reach out to parents and get them involved in classes, field trips, etc. This makes the parents feel valued and part of the school community.” (Spanish-speaking group)

Bi-lingual Education

The Spanish-speaking parents group was very supportive of bi-lingual education, defined as proficiency in the proper use of *both* Spanish and English. Music programs, where they exist in both primary and middle schools, are seen as very positive in general, but specifically with regard to improving language arts in Spanish.

V. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

From a business leader: *“Every educator I’ve met has been fantastic. All these great people! But why are so many kids not getting an education? We are not where we should be or need to be. We need to define quality as output. It’s not consistent within schools and between schools.”*

Inadequate funding leads to a series of conditions affecting the quality of teaching, class size and class offerings, and in turn to high drop-out rates. Students said, “If APS had the money they could hire more good teachers and keep students.”

A. INCREASING FUNDING AND RESOURCES

According to one administrator, “The expectations don’t match the resources available. We want a quality Cadillac education but instead we have a ‘Yugo.’”

Adequate resources, supplies, and physical environment

In response to the question, *“What is the one thing you would change about the schools?”* students said, “Change the way the school looks; keep it up nicely so that people respect it.” “If the environment is not quality, then how can kids concentrate on studying?” They want to see schools restored and repaired. Administrators see this as part of the problem of size and the strains put on services with \$570 million worth of needs. “We ask for bond money for technology, but it’s OK if the roof leaks on the computers.”

Parents expressed the opinion that spending so much on building new schools keeps the older ones in disrepair. “Give to schools that need improvement rather than building and building new. They get too large and spend so much money building that there’s nothing left over for equipment and other things.”

Parents say that “resources are a big challenge.” “My son never had a textbook to bring home.” APS “doesn’t have the money” to provide these basic tools of learning. Students ask for new textbooks and computers to replace old and obsolete equipment. They would like adequate desks and materials and want to be able to “keep up with the future – technology and computers.” Facilities and equipment (books and computers) make a difference in the quality of education.

The lack of funds is a special burden for lower income families and students and even for teachers who sometimes need to cover the cost of supplies. A student says, “Every class I’m taking costs money.” Lack of money carries over into extra-curricular activities. While the school pays for sports, it doesn’t help with other activities, which cost hundreds of dollars in order to participate.

For Spanish-speaking parents, lack of funding is seen as a problem in terms of support for language and cultural enrichment programs.

Need for Equity and Consistent Quality among Schools

The quality of education among schools is inconsistent. Participants identified “pockets” of quality education and other “pockets” where the drop-out rate is higher. All recognize that a more equitable distribution is needed.

Business leader: *“How do we get to where all schools are performing at the same level and producing the output that should come out?”*

Administrator: *“What I would like is that all schools are created equal.”*

Teaching quality

Teachers with seniority can teach where they want to, so they seek better schools, creating more inequities in education level and talent. Students say that teachers at the newer schools have higher expectations and provide the needed challenge. “Kids at newer schools have a better education because everyone wants to be at a new school and all the teachers flock there.”

It’s harder to get teachers to stay in schools where the drop-out rate is higher because it’s felt that they don’t get the administrative support they have in the newer schools. A principal at an older school built in 1958 expressed frustration that she was not able to get new seats for her classrooms until 2010. “All I know is this is what we need. This wouldn’t happen in a far NE Heights cluster.”

Resources are uneven for other reasons also. Strong booster clubs affect the allocation of money; areas with many single-income households don’t have the same amount of extra funds as schools in higher income areas.

Bi-lingual Education

Spanish-speaking parents wanted more consistency in language training in Spanish across the APS system. Lack of Spanish speaking capability of children whose parents speak only Spanish creates serious relationship problems in the family.

B. IMPROVING QUALITY OF EDUCATION

Retaining good teachers

Students and parents feel that the district doesn’t have enough teachers that “teach for the students.” Because other states pay more, teachers want to go there. “They’re like the physicians of Albuquerque, they’re all going away.” Administrators agree that the district needs more money to pay teachers what they should be paid and to hire sufficient support staff. Morale would go up and internal structure would improve.

The way teachers are assigned and move around contributes to the inequities and teacher shortages. There is a perception that new teachers just going into education are dealt the

most challenging kids and are not adequately trained for special education or difficult schools. “New teachers are sent to the worst schools and burn out quickly.” Parents had stories about teachers who are not bi-lingual being assigned classes with Spanish-only speaking children. “We lose many good young teachers because they are mis-assigned.”

Improving Teaching Conditions

Improving teaching conditions would help to attract and retain qualified teachers.

Professional Development

Teachers perceive that there is a lack of administrative support for their professional development. With only ten days allocated per year for an entire school—they feel that professional development is not really available to them. Many would like to observe what other successful schools are doing (e.g. Freedom High, Highland HS block schedule), but there’s no leave time for visits, or even for peer coaching in their own school. Leave days are “owned by the district” and are used for district programs that are “superimposed on the school.”

They would like to decide what types of training would be useful and helpful. The “focus of planning professional development and deciding what happens ought to be with teachers in their individual schools.”

Smaller class sizes, individualized programs

Not only is the system too big, but schools and classes are too big. “There are dedicated teachers, but they are responsible for 160 kids; this is too many, too much.” “You can have the most dedicated teachers in the world, but if they have over 100 students they’re responsible for every day, there will be 10-20% that slip through the cracks.” “If we truly care about each individual student, then we can’t throw them in such an environment where we can’t focus on them.” This means more resources and more teachers. It takes money to reduce teachers’ loads.

One teacher talked about a recent seminar on high school restructuring – where the administration wants to make schools look more like what Freedom High school is doing, with smaller classes and more individualized programs. “They’ve been trying to have smaller ‘learning communities’ classes, but this year we have bigger classes than we’ve ever had. This year 9th grade classes are half again as large as they were last year. I have 40 students in one class, a little large for a ‘small learning community’.” Teachers wondered where the district would get the money to reduce teachers’ loads from 100 to 90 students as proposed in a new plan.

Block schedules

Teachers and parents who had experience with block schedules at the high school level praised its merits in allowing smaller classes and more time for preparation. A teacher had 90 students on the block schedule, contrasted to 140 at a different high school without the block schedule. This made a huge difference in her ability to give one-on-one attention to students and prepare subject content.

A parent talked about block teachers being able to remember a student years later. “Teachers know who they are by name and take extra time with kids. They helped my son out tremendously with block classes. There would be fewer drop-outs because kids *feel someone cares at school.*”

Expectations

A former teacher in another state, now a business leader, said that he left teaching due to frustrations in dealing with bureaucracy leading him to be ineffectual in the classroom. “All across the country, teachers are spread too thin with too much paperwork and expectations to raise test scores, and the good ones leave.” The emphasis on test scores especially in elementary schools creates tremendous pressure on teachers and principals. Business leaders say, “They can’t do it; there are too many kids, too few teachers.” Similarly from parents: “Teachers have to do so much more than teach; this is a huge challenge to our society.”

Incentives and appreciation

Business leaders thought that teachers should be provided economic incentives commensurate with the economic benefit of education to the community. There should also be a way to measure and reward the hours of service given by teachers helping with activities outside the classroom.

One participant in the Spanish-speaking group made an impassioned plea for more pay for teachers and stressed the need to honor teachers for what they give to our children.

Parental and community involvement

Business leaders thought that the biggest challenge is to “engage the community and family back into involvement” in education. The schools can’t teach morals or discipline. This is a societal problem more than an APS problem, but we need to deal with it.

“The challenge is that kids don’t get equal treatment. Students whose parents are involved or who are better students and involved – tend to get a better education. There is inconsistency at all levels.” Lots of kids are “out there by themselves, doing it on their own--to their credit.” While some parents are very involved, doing fund-raising and boosters, others look to APS to provide “baby-sitting” and complain or criticize. Many thought that parental involvement should be a requirement.

Teachers say, “We are not at odds with parents. We are supposed to be in this together. How do you build that up?” Some parents do not feel comfortable questioning what the teachers are doing, and the attitude of teachers toward parents is not always welcoming. This is especially true at middle school, where typically kids at this age don’t want the parents to be there either. “Parents need to realize how important they are,” and “Teachers need to have skills to interact with parents and collaborate rather than view them as the enemy.”

The Spanish-speaking group felt that sometimes children were empowered in the “wrong way” and wanted to teach them sense of caring, discipline and responsibility. There was a debate as to whether discipline was a responsibility of the home and family or school, with everyone agreeing that it should be a shared responsibility.

Dealing with the Drop-out Rate

Meeting these challenges of resources, quality teaching and community involvement would help the drop-out rate.

Target Middle-school

Participants in all groups stressed that it’s critical to motivate and encourage children when they are younger. The elementary and middle-school years of 6th through 8th grades are especially vulnerable and critical to focus on. Problems often begin earlier and become more evident in the transition to middle school. “Focus more on elementary and middle schools for preparation.” This is where the biggest change needs to occur. “Don’t wait until they’re in high school.”

The major transitions at middle school often lay the conditions for dropping out. “If you have a mid-school with 1200 kids in classes with 30-40 students, you’re losing them right there.” The middle school age group should be targeted for the one-on-one attention they need.

The Spanish-speaking group also focused on middle schools as a particular problem, suggesting that the district create a smoother, well thought-out transition process between grade schools and middle schools with regard to language both in English and Spanish.

Motivate Students

Parents, students, and business leaders all emphasize the importance of offering more options of classes that engage students, that are not “boring, irrelevant.” Some students just go through the motions. “Not every drop-out leaves school.” Students suggested giving kids a reason to try harder by offering incentives and rewards and liked the focus of career track, citing practical courses such as nursing and engineering.

Employ performance standards

The Spanish-speaking group supported a system of progression with clear standards for each grade. There should be systematic follow up for each student to insure that they are fully prepared to advance to the next level. This should be done on a consistent basis throughout the school system with uniform expectations for each grade by school and by district.

Hotline

The Spanish-speaking group suggested an e-mail *hotline* to provide assistance to students when needed. Students could get help with lessons and homework when parents don’t

have the capability or time and teachers are overworked. (Furrs provided this until recently)

Respect

The Spanish-speaking group saw the need to nurture self-confidence and respect in every child. Teachers should show by example and teach children “respect, respect, respect.” Teachers should help children develop a love of education. Every child should be respected for who and what they are, emphasizing their individual talents, whether they be scholastic, artistic, musical, athletic, or any other. These participants agreed that teachers need more training in how to nurture mutual respect between students, parents and the community at large.

This group felt that additional funds were needed for programs to enhance learning in language and culture. One parent suggested that students do things like plant grass and flowers, something that is ordinarily paid for through the school system, and that the money saved could be used to fund additional programs.

C. PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE WORKPLACE

Curriculum

Business leaders thought that there should be more career path *choices* available for students to move along professionally based on their skills and interests. “We do this in the business world; why not do it at the high school level?” College should be a personal choice of the student and not expected of everyone. “Education comes in all shapes and forms.” “Track along lines of interest and get curriculum that’s relevant to that end point.”

Courses in life skills (e.g. budgeting, insurance) should be required for graduation, with some flexibility built in so the subject matter helps students with career goals.

Choice and Challenge

Students also valued having vocational and career choices available. Students participating in the focus group were goal-oriented and wanted more challenge in their coursework. “Teachers should push harder.” These students would like more enriched classes to be available. “Whatever you put into it is what you’ll get, but you can only go so far.”

“Most students will choose to take classes that they can pass easily” and as a result the district emphasizes lower level and remedial classes and the enriched classes don’t have enough people signing up. At one school there were 7 math classes below Algebra I, 5 below Biology 1, and few at upper levels. “They cater to remedial kids, and there’s not

enough for students who are trying.” Better communication with principals would help raise the standards.

School to Work

Business leaders were asked, *How can the district better prepare students for the workplace of the future?*

There should be more flexibility in providing opportunities for students to have different workplace experiences that help them come to a choice of career earlier in life and see the relevance of coursework to their goal. They may eliminate lost time for things they don't want to do by gaining experience. These experiences should be *institutionalized* throughout the school system rather than happening on a random and fragmented basis as they are now.

- Expand the definition of education and get students out of the classroom. Set a goal that every sophomore or junior has to have a “job shadow” experience
- Have business people talk to students in the classroom so they hear first-hand from people already out there in the business world.
- Develop, expand and promote mentor programs that place students with businesses.
- Have educators “shadow” business professionals so they understand the expectations; have a business person “shadow” a teacher for a day.
- Have each high school focus on a particular industry cluster as a specialty to give students opportunities in that field.

There are initiatives going on like this, but they are not under a common district umbrella. It's happening in pockets, but inconsistent, not adequately staffed, and not managed in any system-wide way.

- There should be a program set up within the schools system to help organize the business community to be a partner to standardize and institutionalize these steps, establishing goals, timetables, and processes to get there.

This type of access should be provided to every student.

D. SUPPORT FOR REFORM

For administrators, the biggest challenge is “*How we can reform, how we can do things differently.*” Yet they recognize that “We don't prepare our organization for change, to help people “become part of the solution.”

Need for Follow-Through

Teachers who have been in the system for awhile have experienced too many failed reform efforts and view each as yet another short-lived fad. “It’s different every year. Why don’t they keep something for several years in a row and see how it goes? It sounds good in the PR realm, that we’re doing all these big words, but nothing actually happens. Lots of good ideas are started, but they’re not followed through and don’t get implemented because they are not supported.”

Innovative Ideas and Programs

Teachers think that the sheer size of the district makes positive change “almost impossible. By its very nature, it goes toward its stasis; any extremes or new ideas continue to push it back to the norm.” Administrators observe that the system is “ingrown” and lacks infusion of people from outside with new ideas. The involvement of the business community is valued for opening up fresh ways of thinking about education.

The fact that there are models for change within APS that are working well gives reason for optimism. Valley Academy was started a few years ago by a teacher. “Why can’t APS look at what Valley Academy and Freedom HS do and initiate a program in every high school? This is something they could do with little money or time.” If these models were adequately understood and publicized, they could be broadened throughout the system.

E. COMMUNICATION AND PARTICIPATION

Administrators talked about making connections among departments and with the schools, so the “schools really understand that they’re really working together in a partnership.” Principals and teachers voiced a similar desire to build relationships among their peers and share ideas.

The teachers’ group was asked: *How could the district better communicate with teachers?* Teachers describe directives as impersonal: “It comes down to us. It’s a joke—what do they have for us in this year’s ‘in-service’? Twenty years ago it was ‘global perspective.’ Now who remembers it? It’s just one of many things ‘they’ put across to us, now long-forgotten.” Further, teachers view such directives as irrelevant. “Because of the large bureaucracy, they’re creating paperwork and products that have nothing to do with what we’re doing in the schools at all. Principals are stressed out because of all the reports they have to do, typing things into the computer.”

Visiting the schools

Teachers would like administrators to visit the schools “so we know what faces go with what names, and so they know what’s going on.” These visits could take place in after-school sessions, or during school hours. Administrators could align themselves with certain clusters and be there for the cluster.

Business participants also said that “Administrators should go into the schools and see if they can learn something. They should all go into a teacher’s class. The school board should substitute teach. The superintendent should go in and see what’s positive.”

Providing respect, appreciation and support

Avoid negative statements in the media

“If the leadership wants teachers to listen, then they should be careful about what is said regarding teachers.” Teachers were concerned about what they see as misrepresentation or distortion of facts regarding their performance, questioning a report that said teachers miss 18 days per year. A field trip or in-service training should not count as a day out of the classroom. Instead, going to a journalism conference or a drama festival with students should count as extra work. Measurement of hours of service should include teachers helping out with PTA and other duties outside the classroom.

Foster an attitude of teamwork

Teachers feel a lack of support from top administrators and the press and do not want to be labeled as part of the problem. Negative distortions in the media create an “us versus them” mentality. The attitude ought to be that “we’re all in this together trying to make things better for the kids.” It’s the “rest of the world” who tends not to care.

People live up to expectations

If teachers are seen negatively by the administration and media, they will tend to perform that way.

View Test Scores realistically

Another sensitive area is that of the focus on test scores. Teachers are told, “If you don’t get test scores up, your jobs are on the line” – when they see that many of the student problems are due to factors outside their control—parents, environment, and the economic climate. “They’re choosing to blame the teachers.”

Provide for Two-way communication

There should be a system where teachers are asked regularly what they want and are invited to be part of the solution. They need to feel supported in their jobs. “Part of communication is feeling valued.”

Continuity of administration at the school level

Because of the high turnover in principals, new people who are not familiar with the school don’t have time to learn. At Rio Grande, they have gone through several administrations in the last five years. There should be some way to build a base of community and camaraderie, where people stay there because they want to be there, rather than viewing it as training for another school.

Students and teachers thought that the administrative pool is weak—there are not enough people to fill positions. “The way APS uses and moves principals around is disruptive.” Perhaps APS could work more positively with UNM and do outreach to recruit more educators and administrators.

Participation

The sense of being on the same team that administrators speak of can be strengthened by involving teachers and students actively in the change process. Students say that “the administration should listen to students” and have a communication plan. The core concern of educators, parents and students is the education of students, and with more interaction and communication, this sense of shared mission can grow to a stronger sense of community. “Dialogue is critical to have change.”

APPENDIX

PERSONALIZE IT

EXAMPLES OF PERSONAL STORIES

About teachers

A teacher who gave up weekends to go to Colorado to get tiles, so that kids could do mosaics in the classroom.

A teacher that stayed after hours to tutor kids that had difficulty and helped a parent's daughter who had problems with math

A teacher and coach who teaches competition, teamwork and supporting each other.

35 elementary teachers who gave up a week of their summer at their own expense to attend a summer class about how to incorporate music and dance into their classroom. The only benefit to the then is that they'll be able to benefit their kids. (Where the workshop leader was teaching before, no one wanted to do it).

A fifth grade academy where teachers are dedicated to peer mediation. Fifth graders apply to spend a day at the Chamber of Commerce and in the process they put together a resume and letter and have an interview, in which they talk about experience in peer mediation.

A teacher who had study groups and dinner at her house every week-end to help students. She called and made bookmarks for each student and gave positive reinforcement.

Positive experiences with block schedules at Highland and Albuquerque High. A parent telling about a block teacher who made such a big impact on her child's life that he doesn't need special education in language arts anymore. Teachers know the students by name and were able to take extra time with them so that kids *feel someone cares*.

A special education teacher who goes out of her way to advocate for the kids.

A drama teacher who opened up the drama department at lunch time so that kids could come and interact in a place they felt comfortable and safe. She gave them responsibility in drama productions, and they lived up to it.

A teacher that created a book club and meets with them for a couple of hours every month where kids have incredible discussions about books they read and life. They have a huge debate to decide about what book is next month's book.

A teacher who teaches students how to do “sign language” to students in 3rd grade who then passed it on to their kids and grandkids.

About Principals

A principal who is also counselor, teacher, administrator with a positive, can-do attitude to make things happen.

A principal who gave up being a principal to be a teacher so she could better support her teachers and give other teachers the opportunity to walk in her shoes. A role reversal that shows she didn't have to be in power.

A principal who involves students in the school—working in the cafeteria, library so they had more ownership. Leadership comes from the top- principals make a huge difference.

An elementary school where parents are able to request a teacher; even if they don't get it, it is a great service.

A principal who invites real estate agents wanting information to come in and visit any classroom they choose so they can see for themselves.

About students

Native American students from Taos Pueblo who graduated from West Mesa and then from the Air Force Academy. Somewhere, at some point, parents or someone made them realize the *importance of education*.

A student who was going to fail a class he didn't like because he didn't understand it. The teacher made him come in every day after school. At first he hated it, but he ended up getting an A.

A freshman in high school who got expelled because of drugs. She came from a gang-related family involved with drugs and violence. Because of a counselor who took the time and effort to become “her best friend”, she is now in Honor Society, getting A's and B's.

Students who did a paper quilt made out of cards representing feelings about the World Trade Center attacks, creating conversations about the event.

A Spanish-speaking parent who spoke about having been a gang member who had carried weapons in high school, and a teacher who had made a difference. “The teacher made me feel like I was ‘somebody’ and it was a turning point in my life.”

About Parents

A Spanish-speaking parent who has actively participated in the classrooms of her children for several years. She reads out loud in Spanish to the children and sometimes translates English text into Spanish as she goes along. She has gotten a wonderful sense of appreciation from both teachers and principal for her volunteer efforts.

About schools

At Freedom High, kids come in from gangs and cliques and become one big family that is supportive of each other.

Teams of four teachers at Eldorado, Valley and Rio Grande during 9th grade that help kids feel like the teachers are behind them.

A dual language program at Longfellow that starts out with 90% instruction in Spanish in kindergarten and first grade and decreases to 50-50 by fifth grade. Students by 5th grade come out above norms in both languages. The level of Spanish vocabulary that kids know is incredible.

A Hispano/ Anglo couple who felt so strongly that their children should be able to communicate with both sets of grandparents that they moved their children to a bilingual school at a considerable distance from their home and had nothing but positive comments to make about their choice.

A school in Indiana where the principal publishes an annual report on the school that reports all the good things happening in the school as well as test scores and graduation rates.

An elementary school where students are involved in the school – working in the cageteria, library, where they had more ownership and respnsibiity

About School-to-Work

A business that hired a student on the ABEC program and ended up hiring him as a full-time employee. He serves as a model for other students coming into the program, showing them that there is opportunity to move into a corporate environment.

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Teacher Effectiveness and Equity between Schools:

- Offer rewards and incentives for teachers. Establish targets and goals and give bonuses for accomplishing a goal; provide incentives (e.g. \$5,000 bonus) for teachers to produce a certain output for schools where there is a higher drop-out rate.
- Do different types of programs and teacher assignments for different demographics and socioeconomic conditions.
- Provide more teacher support in areas and schools that need more support; think creatively about differences between schools.
- Provide mentor programs for new teachers.
- Give extra incentives for teachers to teach more challenging students.
- Make it easier for substitute teachers.

Professional development:

- Allow teachers to plan their own professional development in their school.
- Provide teachers with time and money to observe successful teaching practices and programs, even in other states.

Student motivation:

- Publicize and broaden programs to reduce class sizes, such as use of block schedules.
- Middle schools should not have 6th graders and should keep 9th graders.
- Give kids incentives, a reason to get involved and try harder, e.g. Student of the Month.
- Provide an e-mail “hotline” to assist students with their lessons when questions arise.

Parent involvement:

- Provide a parenting program for mid and high-school parents.
- “The challenge is communication.” Think about different ways of communicating and involving parents.
- Put in telephone lines for teachers. Make it easier to get an outside line to return phone calls and communicate with parents.
- Do a “family” report card (like Longfellow and Academy) requiring parents to be more accountable and volunteer a certain number of hours.

Communication:

- Explore and initiate different means of participation and communication among diverse groups within the system to think ahead and plan for reform.
- Have interested participants in the focus groups each bring in one person who has not been involved for continued discussions and try to grow a leadership role by drawing in members of the community.

Publicity:

- Hold a town meeting with teachers, parents and students as spokespeople, sharing positive experiences that they have had with the schools.

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SHARED VISION is a non-profit organization with a mission of conducting interactive community dialogue on critical issues facing the community.