

CREATING A FORMULA FOR STUDENT SUCCESS IN NORWALK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A Community Conversation

October 17, 2009

Executive Summary

The general consensus was that great leadership and vision could foster improvements in the school system, increase transparency and build a more positive image. Communicating the assets of the system and demonstrating accountability, as well as increased outreach, could result in engaging more parents as well as those in the non-educational community.

It was recognized that given the current economic situation, the implementation of any new initiatives is very challenging. The hope is that with increased involvement, the community will respond and support the school system in more and diverse ways. Suggestions included using public support to improve the school district's image inside and outside of Norwalk, and to identify resources beyond the budget and alternative ways to fund education.

There were four major areas that participants felt were important to the success of the schools in Norwalk:

- Leadership
- Communication
- Community Partnerships, and
- Standards/Accountability

None of these areas operate in isolation. In fact, the overlap between them was emphasized repeatedly as well as their influence on other issues discussed such as funding.

Key points within each area are:

Leadership

While the discussions often focused on the position of superintendent of schools, probably because there is an on-going search, it was also made clear that respondents felt their comments applied to all school administrators and teachers. Latino parents also expressed a need for greater Latino leadership within the schools.

Skills mentioned as important were:

- Good Communicator
- Motivator
- Problem Solver

- Open Door Policy/Maintains Transparency
- Has a Vision/Plan and also the Practical Skills for Implementation
- Respectful/Accepting of Input from Others
- Sets High Standards
- Good Manager
- Visible

Desirable Personal Traits:

- Approachable
- Personable/Warm
- Not Overly Authoritative
- Open-Minded

Communication

Communication was seen as a necessity as well as a tool to enhance relationships within the educational/school community itself as well as outside the educational community.

Within the Schools

Schools and other educational groups make tremendous efforts to reach out to all the parents, yet some parents still have minimal contact with schools. Current methods of communication appreciated by parents are regularly sent emails and newsletters.

If it were possible to identify different groups among the non-involved, it might be possible to reach more of them. For example, if the primary reason for non-contact were a feeling of intimidation vs. a difficult work schedule, the approach would differ. A parent-to-parent mentoring system within each school and one-on-one contact, either through telephone, email or texting might help to increase contact and involvement among these hard-to-reach parents. To reach out to and include non-native English-speaking families (e.g., Spanish, Creole) translations of all communications as well as a telephone system for non-English speakers should be considered.

Gathering input from parents using various media on how they feel the school is performing could also be a motivator for more involvement.

Outside the Educational Community

Better communication is also seen as a tool to increase community partnerships. Participants felt that the non-educational community needed a better understanding of what the schools are doing (transparency and accountability) and more information on the schools' successes. As residents gain more confidence in the school system, they, in turn, can help the image of the schools by communicating this to others outside of Norwalk.

Community Partnerships

Respondents felt that it was important to increase the engagement with the community outside of educational groups. Included in an outreach plan should be an explanation of why the non-educational community members are stakeholders in the system. Examples of groups to approach are: businesses,

afterschool programs, sports, faith-based organizations, Latino/African American groups, real estate agencies, and civic groups. Increased contact could result in greater coordination with the school programs, more volunteers for educational/mentoring programs, and possibly even funding.

Community connections outside of the educational community could also help to engage some of the parents of school children who are not currently active in the school, for example, using non-school sports programs to enhance contact between parents and the school.

If more of the community felt themselves a part of educational system and felt as if they were contributing, they would also be a part of the schools' successes. As pride in the school system increases, support and engagement could also increase.

Standards/Accountability

While there was universal agreement that standards should be high, there was not a broad consensus about how standards should be defined, measured, and what the consequences should be if the set standards were not met.

Accountability should not just apply to the students; it should apply to the BOE, administrators and teachers. Professional development and on-going training for teachers was considered critical for student success.

Testing was considered important but many felt it should not be the only measure of success. Measures of success should include improvement from wherever the student starts – regardless of where that is. Rewards for success should be emphasized over punitive measures. The curriculum should be differentiated so that all students can improve and be challenged - whatever their level.

Best practices should be explored to determine what has worked elsewhere. If a student/teacher/administrator is not succeeding there should be aid available to help the individual succeed.

Methodology:

Nine small group conversations (10-15 respondents) were held on Oct.17, 2009 at Norwalk Community College. The groups were led by objective moderators to help facilitate discussion. Each discussion was two hours with a half-hour pre and post general session.

The diversity in the groups was balanced to the extent possible. There was one group held in Spanish in order to get input from native Spanish-speaking community members. Participants totaled 121 and were comprised of approximately 58% parents, 13% students, 12% educators, 9% community service providers, 3% public officials, and 5 % business, retirees and other. Twenty percent of the parents were Hispanic and 14% of total participants were African American.

Survey Results: Superintendent Skills

Sixty-one surveys were received from 121 participants representing 50% of attendees.

Concerning the question “*Please list your thoughts on the skills that the Board of Education should look for in a new Superintendent*”, the 61 surveys generated 252 comments on 20 skills or traits that should be present in a new superintendent. The table below shows all 20 skills/traits and the percent of the total 252 comments that each received.

SKILLS/TRAITS	% of Total Comments
1. UNITE COMMUNITY	12
2. LISTENER	9
3. LEADERSHIP	7
4. TEAM PLAYER	7
5. CONSENSUS BUILDER	7
6. MANAGEMENT	6
7. VISIBLE PRESENCE	6
8. VISION	6
9. MOTIVATIONAL	6
10. CREATIVE/INNOVATIVE	5
11. DOER	4
12. EDUCATION SKILLS	4
13. BUSINESS EXPERIENCE	4
14. EXPERIENCE WITH DIVERSITY ISSUES/POPULATION	4
15. WILL BECOME INVOLVED WITH MINORITY COMMUNITY	3
16. MEASURABLE GOALS	3
17. ACCOUNTABILITY - FOR SELF AND OTHERS	3
18. RECOGNIZED IN NORWALK SYSTEM	2
19. SUCCESSFUL TRACK RECORD	1
20. PERSONAL STAKE	1
	100