



Community Conversations Report

May 2016 – April 2017

Made possible by the generous donation of the time and talents of our Board of Directors with support by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, United Way of Pitt County, the Smith Family Foundation and individual donors who support our mission to advance the role of families and communities in securing a high quality public education for each child in Pitt County.

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PPS Pitt County is a chapter of the national organization, Parents for Public Schools, Inc.

However, all 511 participants chose to participate in the Community Conversations knowing that the topic was public education in Pitt County and that results would be shared with the school district. This suggests widespread vested interest in public education among a variety of stakeholders in Pitt County and a strong desire to engage with the school district.

The following are key highlights based on the views and opinions expressed by the 2016-2017 Community Conversation participants. To help readers understand the perspective of the participants, this report is divided into three categories: Parents and Community Members, Teachers, and Students.

Parents and Community Members:

- Participants' overall comments were quite positive this year and indicated a solid appreciation for many aspects of Pitt County Schools. In particular, participants praised teachers, technological supports, and communication. Parents are happy with the overall infrastructure of schools, feeling that students are safe, well cared for and nurtured while at school. In addition, parents seem pleased with the ways in which Pitt County Schools is interacting with the community.
- Individuals indicated that there is room for improvement in a few areas. Mainly, participants would like to see more resources available to students that would contribute to their overall success. These include more books and school supplies, smaller class sizes, and more teachers. Some parents and community members indicated that they would like to see more training available for teachers on behavior management and cultural competence so that teachers they can be both a nurturing and effective resource for students.
- Beautification was a theme that arose repeatedly in these conversations. Parents feel that schools are more welcoming and inviting when they have a nice visual appeal.
- Many participants suggested that Pitt County Schools should focus more on marketing for the public schools. They believe that there are many great programs in Pitt County Schools and that these programs, especially in a time when competition with charter and private schools is high, should be highlighted more extensively to the general public.
- Participants indicated a desire for flexibility when it comes to school involvement. Parents with changing schedules are not always able to plan volunteer opportunities ahead of time, and want to be able to volunteer on a flexible basis, and to have volunteer opportunities that match their availability (including days, evenings, and weekends).
- Comments about why people choose public, private, or charter schools were similar to those we have received in years past. Public schools are affordable, convenient, and often are a choice because of the parents' own positive experience having grown up attending public schools. Private schools often meet the needs of parents looking for a particular religious experience, and are perceived to have smaller class sizes and less discipline issues. Charter schools are perceived to have smaller class sizes, more of a community feel, and more opportunities for differentiation among individual students.
- Participants who spoke about their experience from a consumer perspective indicated an overwhelmingly positive experience, especially at the elementary level. There was some indication that as students approach middle and high school, parents feel less valued: more like a number and less like an individual. They reported often having to wait a

significant amount of time before being helped because middle and high school offices are often so busy.

- As participants in the parent/community group discussed options of open enrollment, redistricting, and new schools, there was strong support for open enrollment. Parents have an understanding of the process and enrollment caps, and felt that open enrollment allows families to redistrict themselves instead of the school district doing it for them.
- When asked what else they would like to tell Parents for Public Schools of Pitt County, participants' comments reiterated the thoughts shared from previous questions. Again, participants want to see parents get involved, and want to see a variety of opportunities for this involvement. They want teachers to receive as much support as possible, through resources that include increased pay, additional professional development training, and more teachers and teacher assistants. Participants in this group wanted to see programming available for students focusing on life skills, such as financial literacy or how to change a tire, before entering the world as adults. The other topic that came up frequently throughout the community conversations, and particularly from this question, is that parents would like to see the uniform policy examined and potentially changed.

Teachers:

- Teacher comments indicated that they are very pleased overall with their experience in Pitt County Schools. The comments that rose to the top in this group related to the amount of support and programming teachers received. Teachers named training and support programs such as the Beginning Teacher Support program, the Teacher Leadership Institute, the Curriculum Summer Institute, and the Teacher Executive Institute as particularly beneficial. Teachers noted an increase in resources available to them and their students recently, from more food opportunities for their students, to stronger access to parent and community support, to support for innovative and creative teaching methods.
- When asked what could be improved in Pitt County Schools, teachers spoke about the need for even more support. More training is needed offering alternative strategies for behavior and learning problems in the classroom--PBIS is appreciated and they want the option to learn and implement other similar programs. In addition, teachers see one another as a team with a strong bond, and they want more opportunities to collaborate both within grade levels and across varying grade levels. Teachers also very much appreciate when top PCS administrators and Board of Education members have a strong presence in their schools, which they felt strengthened the team spirit.
- Teachers who commented about schools from a customer service perspective focused on the importance of a welcoming office staff, and suggested that some form of training for office staff regarding this topic might be useful.
- Teachers also indicated that they would like their schools to be more aesthetically pleasing, noting that first impressions are important and the way the front entrance of the school looks affects the first impressions of families considering attendance. They also focused on the importance of the physical aspects of the building being well kept (security features in place, fixtures working, toilet paper restocked) so that it feels safe and welcoming.
- When asked about open enrollment, redistricting, and building new schools, teachers saw pros and cons to each possibility. Those in rural schools felt that open enrollment

sometimes hurts a rural or low performing school and can leave one school with more behavior issues than another school. Some felt that redistricting could be an acceptable option if the lines were drawn in a way that makes sense, but also felt that redistricting and open enrollment could not happily coexist. When they shared their thoughts about new schools, their main concern was that there would not be enough teachers available to staff them.

- When asked what else they would like to share with PPS-PC, teachers reiterated that they want more training programs that will help them with behavior and learning obstacles, and more opportunities to collaborate with other teachers.

Students:

- As students discussed what they enjoy about Pitt County Schools, the overall theme that emerged is that students want as many choices as possible. This applies to numerous situations, from open enrollment (students stated that they have been happy with the open enrollment options), to choosing classes (many students were thankful for the types of classes offered in a variety of forms), to choosing their clothing (students indicated a strong desire for a revision of the uniform policy).
- When asked how Pitt County Schools could improve, students' primary suggestion was related to environmental issues. Students want schools to take a more active role in recycling and in general, caring for the environment. In addition, students requested classes that would help them develop life skills that could be used on a practical day to day basis.
- Students indicated that they are open to having their parents serve as volunteers in their schools, but would rather they engage in extracurricular activities instead of in the classroom. Students also indicated that parental involvement is sometimes prevented by time and work schedules.
- When students described their "dream school", the issues they most described included flexibility and choices, improvements to buildings and facilities, and a stronger commitment to the environment. Examples of these issues include flexibility in regards to classes and the uniform policy, more recreational and gathering facilities, as well as some specific recycling programs.

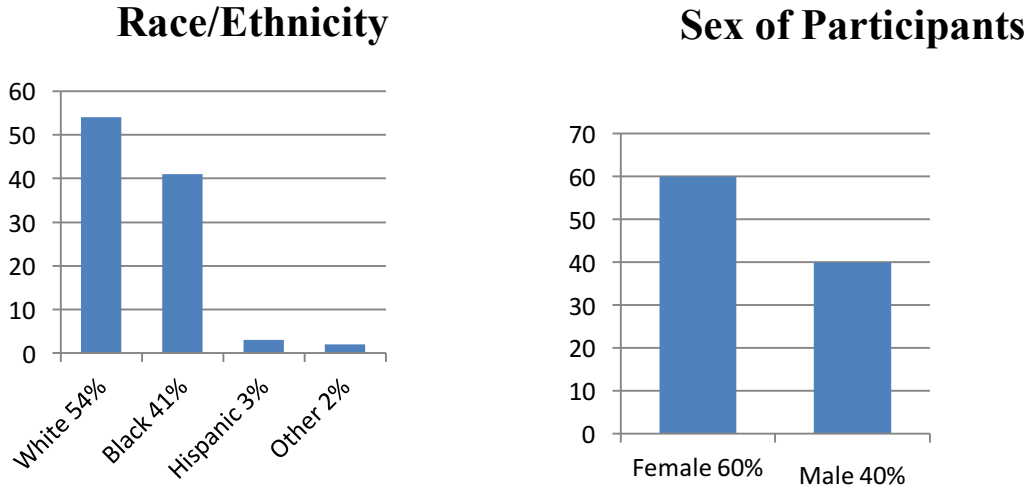
Community Conversations were appreciated and welcomed by each group who agreed to serve as a conversation host. Many participants had not previously participated in dialogue of this nature and were grateful for the opportunity to share their thoughts on our local public schools. PPS-PC believes that all stakeholders should be part of the conversation about our public schools, and we consider it our responsibility to provide a bridge of communication between Pitt County residents and its public education leaders. We hope that education leaders and other stakeholders will consider the ideas and opinions voiced through this effort when seeking ways to improve student achievement in our county. PPS-PC stands ready to engage with education leaders, parents, community members and other stakeholders to make Pitt County Schools the preferred choice to help all our students reach their full potential.

Methodology

Participants

PPS-PC conducted a series of Community Conversations in 2016 and 2017 with a wide variety of stakeholders interested in public education in our county. Based on comments from previous years' community conversations, PPS-PC held conversations with three main categories of stakeholders: parents and community members, teachers, and students. The majority of the community conversations were still held with parents and community members (23 conversations), while seven conversations were held with teachers, and two conversations with students. There were a total of 511 participants: 320 parents/community members, 143 teachers and 48 students.

Race/Ethnicity/Sex of 2016-17 Community Conversation Participants



Community Conversation Events

The Community Conversation events were held at venues convenient to those participating, often as part of another scheduled meeting. Community Conversations varied in length from 30 minutes to 60 minutes, depending on the number of participants and the type of event, with most taking about 45 minutes.

Community Conversation Events From May 2016 to April 2017		
Community Group	Participants	Date
Strive #1	10	5/16/2016
Strive #2	8	6/20/2016
Eastern NC Jack and Jill	8	6/2016
Student Success Academy: A.G. Cox Middle School	12	7/11/2016
Student Success Academy: Building Hope	22	7/12/2016
Student Success Academy: Bethel	10	7/13/2016
Student Success Academy: Farmville Middle School	15	7/14/2016
Strive #3	7	8/1/2016
Strive #4	5	9/7/2016
Boys and Girls Club	9	11/3/2016
Girl Scouts	10	11/10/2016
Strive #5	5	11/14/2016
Key Beginning Teachers	49	12/1/2016
Strive #6	11	12/12/2016
Teach For America Pitt County Teachers	20	12/15/2016
Link Crew at Rose High School	39	1/12/2017
Pitt County Association of Educators	24	1/19/2017
H.B Suggs/Sam D. Bundy Beginning Teachers	20	1/30/2017
Pactolus Beginning Teachers	14	2/7/2017
Life Long Learners of ECU	2	2/13/2017
Wintergreen Intermediate Beginning Teachers	6	2/15/2017
University Club Kiwanis	35	2/20/2017
Golden Kiwanis of Greenville	22	2/21/2017
Strive #7	10	2/27/2017
Parent Engagement Program	11	3/15/2017
Falkland Elementary Beginning Teachers	10	3/15/2017
Greenville Evening Rotary Club	53	3/20/2017
Antioch Church	14	3/21/2017

Lucille W. Gorham Intergenerational Community Center	35	3/28/2017
Strive #8	6	4/3/2017
ECU Socw4990 Seminar	9	4/17/2017
Total	511 participants	31 conversations

A recorder took notes of the discussions on a flip chart for all to see. A written form with the discussion questions was distributed to all participants, who may or may not have also answered questions aloud during the group discussion. The forms were collected at the end of each event and information contained therein incorporated into the notes from the flip chart. Demographic information was collected only visually by facilitators, and was not collected by participants, to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Questions Asked

The questions asked of all of the groups were almost exactly the same, although some wording was slightly altered for clarity as the Community Conversations progressed throughout the year. This is the third year that PPS-PC has conducted community conversations, and it began to seem that some questions were no longer needed as we gathered new and helpful data. It was also determined that some new questions were needed as we gathered information that would be most beneficial to the school district. Therefore, readers will note that questions regarding reasons for attending public, private, and charter schools were asked from May 2016-November 2016. Those questions were replaced with a question about participants’ experiences when interacting as a consumer with schools, and another question that gauges participant thoughts on population growth issues within the schools. The new questions were asked from November 2016-April 2017. In addition, the student conversations had questions that were tailored to fit their experiences, including questions about parent volunteerism, and a “dream school” question. Due to time constraints, some groups were not asked every question. The wording for each question is as follows:

Parent and Community Member Conversations:

- 1) What are Pitt County Schools doing really well?
- 2) What are the most pressing needs facing Pitt County Schools right now?
- 3) What can Pitt County Schools do to encourage effective and constructive parent involvement? (May 2016-November 2016)
- 4) a. What are some reasons some parents send their children to public schools?
b. What are some reasons some parents send their children to private schools?
c. What are some reasons some parents send their children to charter schools?

(May 2016-November 2016)

- 3) What has been your experience as a customer when you walk into your child’s school?
(November 2016-April 2017)

- 4) Pitt County has a growing population of students at some schools while having available space in other schools. There are only a few options to deal with this- new schools, open enrollment, and redistricting. Tell us how you feel about each of these. (November 2016-April 2017)
- 5) Is there anything else you would like to share with Parents for Public Schools of Pitt County?

Teacher Conversations:

- 1) What are Pitt County Schools doing really well?
- 2) What are the most pressing needs facing Pitt County Schools right now?
- 3) What has been your experience as a customer when you walk into your child's school?
- 4) Pitt County has a growing population of students at some schools while having available space in other schools. There are only a few options to deal with this- new schools, open enrollment, and redistricting. Tell us how you feel about each of these.
- 5) Is there anything else you would like to share with Parents for Public Schools of Pitt County?

Student Conversations:

- 1) What are Pitt County Schools doing really well?
- 2) What are the most pressing needs facing Pitt County Schools right now?
- 3) What are some ways you would like to see your parents get involved in your school?
- 4) If your parents are not currently involved, what do you think is keeping them from being involved?
- 5) What does your dream school look like?

Responses

Responses to the Community Conversation questions are grouped by category in this report to facilitate comparison. The categories are not mutually exclusive. The numbers in parentheses after each response indicate how many times participants from all Community Conversation groups mentioned that particular response, within the overarching category of parent and community, teacher, or student. Some participants responded both verbally during group discussion and in writing on their individual Community Conversation form, creating the potential for overrepresentation of their comments. Responses without a number indicate mention by one participant only.

Recommendations Based on All 2016-2017 Community Conversations

Several themes arose in the Community Conversations held by PPS-PC over the past year, some of them crossing all three target populations of parents/community members, teachers, and students. PPS-PC understands that delivering this information to key decision makers in the District is helpful, and that making specific suggestions and recommendations based on the information can help improve the quality of experiences within Pitt County Schools. With that in mind, PPS-PC respectfully makes the following suggestions and recommendations:

1. The topic of life skills classes came up from each category of Community Conversations participants. It seems that everyone is in agreement that students need to receive not only an academic education, but one that prepares them for nonacademic issues as well. PPS-PC recommends researching evidenced-based life skills programs being used by other districts and educational institutions, including how life skills programs are delivered and what topics they include. It would be helpful if the research included information about the outcomes of such life skills programs, specifically how they increase student performance during and after high school. Once this research is complete, a pilot life skills program could be implemented at one high school, followed by an evaluation of the effectiveness of said program. If successful, the life skills program could be replicated at other high schools. PPS-PC is willing to assist in the preliminary research about best practices related to this topic.
2. All three categories of participants indicated a desire for more training opportunities for teachers related to discipline and behavior strategies. PPS-PC recommends that PCS review research on various behavior programs that have proven effective. It is possible that some of these (like PBIS) already exist in Pitt County Schools and could be expanded. It is also recommended that behavior programs be thoroughly evaluated before they are continued or removed and before new programs are added. In addition, there was an indication that one way to help programs succeed is to limit the amount of administrative turnover so that program support and implementation remain as consistent as possible.
3. One theme that rose to the top of the parent and community member conversations was the desire for the school system to provide students with more books, printed materials, and school supplies. While the recognition exists that in the digital age textbooks are no longer a primary resource in classrooms, it is obvious that families would like the opportunity to utilize all kinds of books and printed materials. To address these needs, there are many back-to-school supply initiatives in place, but it may be helpful to try and start a mid-year book and supply drive as well. Specifically, a late Fall-early winter book and school supply drive could be considered, with materials being distributed in January, a time when supplies are running low. PPS-PC would be willing to help advertise this opportunity to local service organizations and students looking for specialized projects.
4. Parents, community members, teachers, and students all seemed to agree that they would like to see more volunteer opportunities available for parents. It is important that parents are given a

variety of volunteer opportunities and that these opportunities exist at various times so as to meet the needs of parents who need flexible scheduling.

5. Another theme that emerged is that schools should feel welcoming and inviting both on the outside and the inside. PPS-PC recommends that each school consider developing a “beautification team.” This team of parents and community members would work together to complete small beautification projects such as planting flowers in front of the school, decorating bulletin boards on a rotating basis, suggesting wall murals, installing art or “spirit” objects (like Aycock’s new “rock” or J.H. Rose’s commemorative Brickyard) or other projects that would add to the aesthetics and school spirit of the buildings and facilities. Some schools already have successful school “spruce up” days once or twice a year that involve the entire school community, and these could be encouraged system-wide. These recommendations meet two needs identified during this year’s conversations, as they improve the beautification of schools, and also provide creative volunteer opportunities for parents and community members. PPS-PC PEP graduates have already begun this type of project at a few schools, and PPS-PC is willing to share ideas and models with other schools who are interested in these opportunities.

6. In a time when public schools must compete with private and charter schools, marketing the positive aspects of public education is more important than ever, and many of the community conversation participants recognized a need for this. It would be useful to develop a comprehensive, multiyear, multimedia marketing strategy for the entire PCS system targeted at the reasons families choose public schools (programs, diversity, sports, tradition) and the most common entry points (Kindergarten, high school, newcomers). Immediate steps could be taken to promote the public schools as well. PPS-PC suggests creating several pieces of marketing material that could be distributed around Pitt County as a means of raising the positive profile of the public schools. Distributing this material to day cares in the months before kindergarten registration, to houses in areas of Pitt County that have a high competition with charter and private schools, to the Chamber of Commerce, industry and other avenues where citizens are being targeted by charter and private schools is recommended. PPS-PC is currently creating a video that will highlight Pitt County Schools with industry owners and their employees in mind as a means of marketing public education to newcomers and the business community in Pitt County.