



Community Conversations Report

May 2017 – April 2018

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Report by Kylene Dibble, MSW, Executive Director
Assisted by: Morgan Phoebus, MSW, Intern

Parents for Public Schools of Pitt County
P.O. Box 2873
Greenville NC 27836
(252) 758-1604 ext. 201

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

Executive Summary

Parents for Public Schools of Pitt County (PPS-PC) is a group of more than 3,000 Pitt County parents, grandparents and community members who share the belief that public schools are stronger when parents are actively involved. Our mission is to advance the role of families and communities in securing a quality education for each child. Founded in 2013, PPS-PC (a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization) is actively pursuing community engagement in public education through three major initiatives: Community Conversations, School Tours, and the Parent Engagement Program. Community Conversations are structured discussions of public school topics designed to solicit community perceptions and opinions about public education in Pitt County.

From May 2017 to April 2018 PPS-PC convened twenty-one Community Conversation sessions with 262 participants, representing a wide variety of Pitt County residents.

At each Community Conversation, facilitators posed a number of discussion questions and then carefully recorded all participants' comments, both in direct response to the questions and as a part of the general discussions that ensued. To further encourage frank and complete commentary, all 262 Community Conversation participants were also invited to provide anonymous written responses after each oral conversation. Demographics of the participants were collected visually by PPS-PC facilitators, and are reflective of the diversity of Pitt County according to census data.

Participants varied widely in their relationship to public education. Some participants have children in public schools, some have never had children, some have children in private schools, some have moved between private and public schools, some have children who have graduated from public school, and some have school aged grandchildren. However, all 262 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.



Word Cloud generated from our 2017-2018 Community Conversations.

The following are key highlights based on the views and opinions expressed by the 2017-2018 Community Conversation participants.

- **Accolades:** Continuing the trend from last year, participants' overall comments were once again quite positive and indicated a solid appreciation for many aspects of Pitt County Schools, especially in the area of educational programming. The community is particularly impressed with the ongoing collaborations between PCS, Pitt Community College and East Carolina University. Participants also appreciate the variety of ways the schools now communicate with families (social media, apps, robocalls, letters being sent home, etc.), and value opportunities to have their voices heard by PCS. One participant summed it up by saying that "It feels like the administration and the school board are listening to us." Behavior management programs also came up frequently as an area in which participants are pleased. Programs like Terrific Kid and PBIS, when used well, are considered quite effective and credited with creating a positive atmosphere in schools.
- **Concerns:** There is an overall perception that resources are not evenly distributed among all schools in the district. This often came up in comments where participants desired more resources based on cultural needs, including stronger ESL resources at all schools. People also reported that there are less community and afterschool opportunities for children in the county's more rural schools. Some participants felt that schools with a higher percentage of minority students receive less resources than other schools (including all of the resources mentioned above), and some identified a need for cultural sensitivity training across the board. Another topic that arose was dissatisfaction with an overemphasis on testing; people want to see a stronger focus on the whole child, not just test preparation. Participants also want stronger safety mechanisms in schools, such as more cameras, especially in "blind" spots and on buses.
- **Customer Service:** Customer service experiences in Pitt County Schools are typically very positive, with most people feeling like schools are a warm and welcoming environment from the moment they walk through the door. People felt less welcome when office staff do not acknowledge them right away. Overall though, the perception is that individuals working in the schools, from the front office staff to the custodians and maintenance workers to the teachers and administration, are very friendly and caring. Some participants included School Resource Officers as a vital part of that friendly and caring team, and felt that the schools need more of them.
- **School Capacity:** Opinions about the population growth and capacity issues facing Pitt County Schools went in many directions. Most people feel that open enrollment has been helpful and might be the best solution, as it allows families to make decisions for themselves. Some individuals felt that open enrollment may have been harmful to smaller schools that do not have programs that attract families to them. There was definitely a negative response to the possibility of redistricting, and most participants asked that it be avoided if at all possible. Some participants were in favor of building new schools, while others felt that all seats in all schools should be filled before considering new construction. Many participants felt that research should be done to understand why some schools are more desirable than others, in order to replicate those desired qualities in schools that are less in demand.
- **Other issues:** At the end of most Community Conversations, we ask a very open question: "anything else?" Especially in recent conversations, the issue of school

safety rose to the top. Participants very clearly do not support arming teachers, but do support an increase in School Resource Officers. They also support improving physical security (such as controlled access systems and cameras), as well as an increase in counselors and programs designed to prevent security issues from arising. Many were not aware of all the security measures already in place at PCS. Other topics that came up included scheduling: some felt that half day and middle of the week teacher work days were less than optimal for all involved. Concerns were also raised about “teaching to the test.”

Many participants in the 2017-2018 Community Conversations had never participated in discussions of this nature and were grateful for the opportunity to share their thoughts and suggestions on our local public schools. PPS-PC believes that all stakeholders should be part of the conversation about our public schools, and we are honored to provide a bridge of communication between these Pitt County residents and our public education leaders. We hope the ideas and opinions voiced herein will be considered in ongoing efforts to improve our schools. Our goal, together with education leaders, parents, community members and other stakeholders, is to help all students reach their full potential by making Pitt County Schools the preferred educational choice in Pitt County.

Recommendations Based on all 2017-2018 Community Conversations

Our community feels empowered when their voices are delivered to key educational decision makers in the district. They also trust that their suggestions for improvement will be valued as a resource for educational leaders when decisions are being made that affect our community’s students and families. With that in mind, PPS-PC respectfully makes the following suggestions and recommendations:

Accolades: With collaboration being identified as one of the greatest strengths in Pitt County Schools at this time, we recommend that collaborations with community partners continue and that the school system keep the community better informed about existing and new connections forged between PCS and educational institutions, area businesses and other groups. Parents for Public Schools of Pitt County stands ready to help make our citizens aware of these collaborative partnerships through outreach to our 3000 members and the general public.

Concerns: As cultural sensitivity issues arose as a topic of concern, several participants recommended that school personnel receive additional cultural sensitivity training. This could come in many forms, from providing professional development around services available to ESL students, to the ACES training that many Pitt County Schools staff participate in to learn about adverse childhood experiences, to specific training about how to best connect with children from a variety of backgrounds who are all working and learning together.

Customer Service: While most Community Conversation participants are quite happy with their customer service experience at Pitt County Schools, several participants suggested that front office staff should acknowledge all school visitors promptly, even if they cannot be served immediately. Another suggestion was that front office staff participate in some form of professional development focusing on best practices for hospitality and customer service. Additionally, parents suggested adding more School Resource Officers, indicating that when a resource officer welcomes them to the school, they feel a stronger sense of safety and security.

School Capacity: Even with such a wide variety of opinions regarding school capacity and population growth, there was one recommendation that appeared several times. Admission to some schools in the county is very sought after, while other schools are less popular. It is recommended that PCS research (instead of relying on opinion or anecdotal evidence) what makes the sought after schools so desirable, especially through the open enrollment program. Then, when the specific programs or practices that make those schools so desirable are identified, those same programs and practices could be implemented at less popular schools, potentially giving all schools a more equal opportunity to attract students and families. This approach would also be a step towards addressing another concern voiced by parents: resource inequity between district schools.

Other Suggestions: School safety was a huge concern, and participants were in favor of virtually every option—physical and psychological--to increase security. Participants were surprised and pleased to learn of all the safety measures already in place at PCS, so making these measures more widely known in the community would be helpful. Another suggestion that came up time and time again was the need to address “teaching the whole child” rather than “teaching to the test.” One recommendation was that PCS educate parents and families more about the various tests students must take, when they are given, and why they are necessary. A “Testing K-12” publication/online resource might be useful to get parents on board about the need (or requirement) of these tests and what the various tests entail. Also, PCS should continue to help teachers access strategies to incorporate their curriculum into the concept of teaching the whole child. PPS-PC is happy to promote and help facilitate methods that might allow students to prioritize meaningful learning while also preparing for important milestones such as end of grade tests.