

PITTSGROVE TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT
Comments/Feedback from Public Forum #1
November 2, 2016

Over 75 parents, school staff, district leadership, and community members participated in the first community forum on Wednesday, November 2nd regarding the future of the Pittsgrove Township School District. Participants took to the microphone 52 times and responded to the following questions with their comments organized and set forth below.

- A. District Accomplishments.** What does the District do well? Are students being adequately prepared for the expectations of college and careers? What are the District's major strengths that you would want to make sure are maintained?
1. Smartboards in classroom/instructional technology in general—especially at Middle School.
 2. Student success in higher education. Parents pleased about student success in college.
 3. The District has good functioning Child Study Teams.
 4. The staff is committed to collaboration and is open-minded regarding intervention and special education services. Staff members are focused on helping students.
 5. The District is focused on providing activities to engage the community, such as Trunk-or-Treat.
 6. Nurturing and caring elementary school teachers.
 7. Teacher communication with parents through e-mails and phone calls. An effort is made when something is going on with a student.
 8. Parents indicate good experiences with staff and with administration.
 9. The District has been able to restore music lessons at the elementary level.
 10. Parents note that the staff is amazing.
 11. The District demonstrates a willingness to outreach to the community and solicit opinions and takes steps to be transparent in its decision-making.
 12. The District is saving taxpayer dollars through purchasing consortiums and co-ops, regarding such things as printer/copy paper.
 13. The District is also saving money through the development of shared services between the Township and the District. This initiative does not involve an exchange of dollars, but a bartering of services. For example, exchanging trash hauling for janitorial services.
- B. What Would You Change?** District Opportunities to Improve. If you could change one thing about the District, what would it be? What are District and Community weaknesses?
1. Too many transitions between schools and grade levels that present challenges for students and families.
 2. Class sizes in elementary school are too large—should be 16-18 students.

3. Students are over-tested, using up valuable instructional time. District should engage federal/state agencies to determine if required tests could be scaled back and/or aligned with other tests in school.
4. Time during school day is heavily loaded without much free time or time for creative activities.
5. Instruction is focused on memorization of math facts, not math functions. There is too much reliance on drills.
6. Students in high school should have more opportunities to obtain college credits through dual enrollment programs, including being able to earn an Associate's Degree prior to graduation from high school. (Note: The District indicated that this was already in progress through the Salem Community College Jump Start Program, where students can earn up to 26 credits in high school).

C. District Challenges. What challenges exist now and in the future, both in the community and externally?

1. The District should not have enrollment caps on programs such as accelerated courses or the NJ STARS Program.
2. There is limited access to technology for some families, including availability of computers in the community. Lack of technology resources in the home is problematic.
3. The District should use other methods of evaluating student progress other than through standardized tests. The District should use outcome data, such as success in post-secondary coursework and in careers to judge how well the District is accomplishing its goal of preparing students. This could include employer surveys and outreach to graduates.
4. The District should encourage younger students to develop a love of reading.
5. The District should instruct students in basic life skills. For example: how to balance a checkbook.
6. The District should instruct students in civics and world citizenship.
7. Community participation in schools, generally, is a challenge.
8. There is a perception that the community does not feel that they are empowered in district decision-making.
9. Elmer residents should have a greater say in District decisions and should be able to run for School Board in Pittsgrove Township.
10. There is a lack of diversity in the schools in terms of race/ethnicity among both students and staff.
11. This lack of diversity is also evident in terms of community participation in strategic planning forums.
12. Parents noted the advantages of attending a small school district that allows for personal relationships with students and staff.
13. Training staff to work with students with severe food allergies and culture of acceptance of these students.

14. The District should take additional steps to be more welcoming of students from poverty or racial/ethnic minority groups. For example, during school events, the District should consider providing babysitting services or meals to accommodate family pressures.
15. Parents questioned whether the District was using the right communication strategies.
16. It was observed that surveys are an important outreach tool.
17. A parent noted that it is important to see that their input is being listened to.
18. Social media (Facebook) is an important news source for schools and local news.
19. It was suggested that targeted focus groups (disaggregated) be used to identify under-represented points of view.
20. The District should consider reframing invitations for input to focus more on individual school connections with parents.
21. It was suggested that the District consider using church or community organizations to spread messages.
22. The District should drop off flyers at churches, senior centers, and ball games.
23. The District should note the complaints regarding the District on Facebook and respond to them.
24. Parents and staff should convince friends and neighbors to participate in the input sessions.
25. In order to maximize participation, the District should use a conference line or broadcast the forums live.
26. To maximize participation, the District should be proactive and go out to various community groups such as churches, senior groups, volunteer fire companies, and grandparent lunches. Present the invitation to participate in a non-threatening way.
27. It was observed that there is not enough dollars generally. This is due to inadequate ratables that lead to the lack of resources.
28. Government mandates sap the District of time and resources, i.e. federal/State testing mandates.
29. Declining enrollments will present a challenge for the District now and in the future.
30. Not enough specialized courses and programs due to small district size.
31. There is overall, a lack of resources in the local community and region, and families are unable to access these government resources including transportation and social services.
32. Aging facilities will present challenges for the District.
33. The District has relied on the Inter-District Public School Choice Program in the past. Uncertainty regarding the future of the program and available slots presents a challenge for the District budget.

Organized By Topic

1. Academics and Instruction

- Accomplishment – Smartboards in classroom/instructional technology in general, especially at Middle School.
- Accomplishment – Student success in higher education. Parents are pleased about students' success in college.
- Would Change – Too many transitions between schools and grade levels that present challenges for students and families.
- Would Change – Class sizes in elementary school are too large—should be 16-18 students.
- Would Change – Students are over-tested, using up valuable instructional time. District should engage federal/state agencies to determine if required tests could be scaled back and/or aligned with other tests in school.
- Would Change – Time during school day is heavily loaded without much free time or time for creative activities.
- Would Change – Instruction is focused on memorization of math facts, not math functions. There is too much reliance on drills.
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- Challenges – The District should not have enrollment caps on programs such as accelerated courses or the NJ STARS Program.
- Challenges – There is limited access to technology for some families, including availability of computers in the community. Lack of technology resources in the home is problematic.
- Challenges – The District should use other methods of evaluating student progress other than through standardized tests. The District should use outcome data such as success in postsecondary coursework and in careers to judge how well the District is accomplishing its goal of preparing students. This could include employer surveys and outreach to graduates.
- Challenges – The District should encourage younger students to develop a love of reading.
- Challenges – The District should instruct students in basic life skills. For example: how to balance a checkbook.
- Challenges – The District should instruct students in civics and world citizenship.

2. Special Education

- Accomplishment – The District has good functioning Child Study Teams.
- Accomplishment – Staff is committed to collaboration and is open-minded regarding intervention and special education services. Staff is focused on helping students.

3. Community Engagement

- Accomplishments – The District is focused on providing activities to engage the community, such as Trunk-or-Treat.
- Challenges – Community participation in schools, generally, is a challenge.
- Challenges – There is a perception that the community does not feel that they are empowered in district decision-making.
- Challenges – Elmer residents should have a greater say in District decisions and should be able to run for School Board in Pittsgrove Township.

4. School Culture

- Accomplishment – Nurturing and caring elementary school teachers.
- Accomplishment – Teacher communication with parents through e-mails and phone calls. An effort is made when something is going on with a student.
- Accomplishment – Parents indicate good experiences with staff and with the administration.
- Accomplishment – The District has been able to restore music lessons at the elementary level.
- Accomplishment – Parents note that staff is amazing.
- Challenges – There is a lack of diversity in the schools in terms of race/ethnicity among both students and staff.
- Challenges – This lack of diversity is also evident in terms of community participation in strategic planning forums.
- Challenges – Parents noted the advantages of attending a small school district that allows for personal relationships with students and staff.
- Challenges – Training staff to work with students with severe food allergies and culture of acceptance of these students.
- Challenges – The District should take additional steps to be more welcoming of students from poverty or racial/ethnic minority groups. For example, during school events, the District should consider providing babysitting services or meals to accommodate family pressures.

5. Communication

- Accomplishment – The District demonstrates a willingness to outreach to the community and solicit opinions and takes steps to be transparent in its decision-making.
- Challenges – Parents questioned whether the District was using the right communication strategies.
- Challenges – It was observed that surveys are an important outreach tool.
- Challenges – A parent noted that it is important to see that their input is being listened to.
- Challenges – Social media (Facebook) is an important news source for school and local news.
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6. Efficiency

- Accomplishment – The District is saving taxpayer dollars through purchasing consortiums and co-ops regarding such things as printer/copy paper.
- Accomplishment – The District is also saving money through the development of shared services between the town and the district. This initiative does not involve an exchange of dollars, but a bartering of services. For example, exchanging trash hauling for janitorial services.
- Challenges – It was observed that there is not enough dollars generally. This is due to inadequate ratables that lead to the lack of resources.
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- Challenges – The District has relied on the Inter-District Public School Choice Program in the past, and uncertainty regarding the future of the program and available slots presents a challenge for the district budget.