



Community Engagement Participatory Research for Quality Schools in New Orleans

Executive Summary Report

Pilot Participatory Research Study

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This report describes the results of an initial pilot of the Community Engagement Participatory Research Study supported through the Orleans Public Education Network (OPEN), “to build an informed and cohesive civic voice for high quality education in New Orleans”. The pilot study was conducted between January through July 2009 and consisted primarily of focus groups with key stakeholder groups. A total of 99 participants were engaged in focus groups, including parents, students, teachers, district/state administrators, charter school advocates, and community members.

The central research question for the focus groups was “what is quality public education.” As members of the community reflected on the question, their answers invariably included an assessment of what is viewed as effective and ineffective in the current delivery of public education in New Orleans. Community members view quality as a process or a set of experiences, as well as a set of outcomes. Across stakeholder groups, members of the community expressed a deep appreciation for public education and what it means to the broader quality of life for the community-at-large. A summary of the key themes which emerged from the focus groups is listed below. These themes frame the launching point for OPEN’s broader foray into engaging the community in a broad discussion to identify what really matters to New Orleanians in defining quality for public education.

The following is a summary of the themes and sub-themes which emerged from the focus groups. While this report does not provide a definitive assessment of public education in New Orleans, it does provide a framework through which a broader and deeper set of engagement opportunities can inform the future of public education in New Orleans. OPEN is committed to moving forward on a constructive and community wide conversation on the future of public education in New Orleans. This pilot project and report serve as catalysts to begin the conversation, and offer an initial framework and glimpse into the diverse perspectives the New Orleans community brings to this important issue.

A. Perceptions of the System of Schools – New Orleans’ new decentralized model of delivering K-12 education post-Katrina frames a central issue on the future of how educational services should be delivered. As such, as community members (parents, administrators, teachers) discussed what is quality public education, a key component of those discussions focused on their perceptions of the system of schools. Parents generally articulated a belief that charter schools were better schools because they were more able to make changes to improve learning. They also believed they were more fiscally accountable to their funders because they could not exist without the additional financial support. However, parents expressed significant concern regarding the stratification of schools in the current system of schools and the lack of curricular alignment across schools within the same grade. While focus group participants felt they were well-informed about school choices,

they felt it was unfair for children to have to move from school to school to access a quality education. Moreover, parents and teachers expressed concern that the Recovery School District schools were schools of last resort for students the other schools did not want to serve.

B. Leadership and Vision – Research continues to indicate the second most influential school-based factor toward improving student achievement is school leadership (principals). Community members echoed concern that leadership is very important to ensuring quality public education. Many agreed that quality administration in schools ensures the provision of support services within the school to maintain a stable learning environment. Teachers, specifically, emphasized the importance of culturally competent school leadership. *“They should know their community. They should also know how to handle the culture of students who are coming from that particular community and I think the principal needs to be fully aware of what’s going on and in contact with community resources.”*

C. Community Relations–Comments from focus group participants reflect that members of the New Orleans community believe community relations is essential to school success. Participants across stakeholder group spent a significant amount of time discussing the role and importance of community relations to quality public education.

- 1. Parental Involvement*** – There was broad consensus that parental involvement is the centerpiece of a quality school. One participant framed it this way: *“All of the schools that are quality schools have great parental participation. No parental participation, lack of quality education.”* While participants commonly agreed that parents needed to be involved, several different barriers were identified as hindering this process: 1) Schools themselves were seen as not welcoming and become inhibitors to parent engagement, 2) Narrow definitions of parental involvement/engagement were also obstacles to engaging diverse parents. Participants emphasized the role of socioeconomic status as being a traditional definer of parent engagement. Often working families are unable to participate in bake sales and other meetings. As such, framing parent involvement from such a narrow perspective necessarily excludes certain parents. 3) Finally, participants also discussed the challenge of parent education level as a factor inhibiting parent engagement. Participants commonly agreed that community-organizations should play the role of cultivating and building parent leadership capacity and working with schools to help them be more parent-friendly.
- 2. Extended Community Learning Environments*** – Focus group participants felt strongly that community and schools must act as natural extensions of one another. The importance of extending learning outside of the traditional classroom/school environments was commonly seen as critical particularly for low-income students who are not often afforded access to museums and other cultural outlets. This type of learning via field trip was seen as helping students make important “real-life” linkages between curricular themes and their application in the world.

Focus group participants also expressed consensus on expanding the use of school buildings as community resources where community members in the surrounding neighborhood could access the school for various services including health services, adult literacy classes and afterschool care. Focus group participants felt that providing community, social and

family supports within the school was particularly critical to the success of students whose families lived in challenging circumstances.

- 3. *Community Ownership and Engagement*** - There was broad agreement that the community needs to better understand the characteristics of quality education in order to provide the additional resources and supports which propel quality schools. School administrators further expanded the conversation about community. Administrators suggested the community needed to see itself as owners of the schools. They believed community ownership and engagement are essential elements of quality public education.

“... If they[the community] have no ownership, there are people within our communities of schools, they don't know what's going on at the schools. That is very, is just amazing and it's not acceptable because that's their community school. It's not just for the school or the New Orleans Parish Public Schools or the archdiocese or Eastern Charter School Association. It's for the community. The library has to be part of it. There's so many extensions that we're not tapping into. We're just tapping into that one building on that one block and there are a plethora of resources around that can filter in so that at three o'clock, the kids are getting real world experiences that will assist and support them academically in the classroom.”

D. Instruction – Focus group participants view instruction and instructional rigor as the centerpiece of quality public education. Members across stakeholder groups expressed strong opinions. Quality public education employs culturally relevant curricula that are meaningful to student's lives. When students emerge from high quality public schools they will be well-prepared so that they can be competitive in the workforce and postsecondary education. Parents identified both characteristics of quality public education and their perceptions of the shortcomings/failings of the current system. Two quotes capture the views and concerns community members expressed on defining quality public education.

On the shortcomings, *“they're not learning on task and on target to be college prepared or even career prepared beyond minimum wage jobs. I see them putting trumpets and basketballs in kid's hands before I see them putting books in their hands. The teachers weren't challenging the kids too much.”*

“.... {a quality public education} produces a student who is confident in their ability to adapt to any situation, whether it's treading tires or landing a space shuttle. They are equipped and aren't intimidated by having to learn information to do another job or to do or test what you push them through school. They aren't intimidated by having to research, by having to find out how to do something, they aren't intimidated by asking for help to accomplish something. This student...they might not necessarily be fluent in four, five languages, you know, that might not be that particular student's track, but they come out critical thinkers.”

E. Teacher Capacity – While research gives credence to the role of teacher quality at improving student achievement, focus group participants highlighted a series of issues and concerns related to teacher capacity. Parents put great emphasis on the importance of lower class sizes, teacher's readiness for the classroom, and issues of cultural competence. Regardless of where the teachers came from (alternative preparation programs like Teach for America or university-based teacher

preparation programs) parents expressed universal concern about the adequacy of preparation of first year teachers. There was a general perception that teacher candidates were being rushed through preparation programs to address teacher shortages within public schools in New Orleans.

Focus group participants gave even greater consideration to the diversity of instruction strategies and an expansive curriculum which focuses classroom instruction beyond preparation for the LEAP.

F. Service Delivery – Focus group participants, including parents, administrators, and teachers, expressed a keen awareness of the magnitude of need facing students in public schools in New Orleans. Because students have non-educational problems which impact their ability to learn, focus group participants articulated the need for well-resourced schools which work in concert with community organizations to provide wrap-around services addressing the health, emotional and psychological needs of students within the school building.

- 1) ***Special Education*** -While there was relative consensus about the need to provide a broad array of social services in schools, focus group participants also highlighted the lack of essential services to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. Focus group participants expressed concern that special needs students were not being adequately served. Several voiced concern that the practice of inclusion within certain schools simply was a mask for the inadequacy of resources to properly accommodate the diverse academic needs of children with learning disabilities. Focus group participants broadly agreed that there was a need for greater accountability across all public schools in the serving of special needs students.

G. Resources –Resources matter! Whether it is the resources of the individual family to support and encourage the educational achievement of a child or the resources of the school to provide a safe, well-designed environment to deliver a quality education, focus group participants agreed resources matter. However, participants had differing view points on the availability of resources, the equitable access to resources, and the extent to which governance structure affects the availability of philanthropic dollars to support public education. Focus groups agreed that better school buildings are an essential element of delivering a quality education.

Several community members still felt there was a serious lack of resources for public schools and some attributed the lack of such resources to mismanagement. School administrators expressed concern about how federal dollars like Title I are distributed and concern that while a formula based of percentage children in poverty determines the local education agency distribution amount, New Orleans has not exercised parity in how those funds are distributed to schools. Others articulated concern about how the changed governance landscape had exacerbated issues of inequity. The lack of resources was seen as directly linked with challenges in serving special needs students.

H. Accountability – Across the groups, focus group participants believed accountability from teachers and school principals was an important and significant characteristic of quality public education. Participants agreed it was important for schools to be able to communicate and transfer information to members of their school community. However, various stakeholder groups have

divergent views on the extent to which accountability currently exists within the system, who is being held accountable and how. Parents indicated they did not have a clear understanding of what body, entities or individuals should be responsible for holding schools accountable for student learning. However, teachers felt that they were already held to high levels of accountability for improving student test scores. Charter school advocates discussed the need for consistent accountability standards to better assist in comparing student success across schools. They also viewed this as an important element of helping parents make school choices based on actual results versus perceptions.

I. Governance - Stakeholders articulated mixed concerns about the role of governance and the extent to which governance is important to quality education. Charter school advocates stated that the research on leadership supported the importance of school-based leadership and the need to develop school teams. There was significant concern expressed about the extent to which traditional school systems contribute to a cumbersome, inefficient and time-consuming interaction between the school and the central office. However, it was also equally clear that the new demands placed on school leaders in the new environment required leaders to focus on personnel, budgets, transportation etc. If site-based leadership persisted in an environment where a traditional central office also made demands of schools, there was a concern the two really could not co-exist effectively.

Parents expressed frustration regarding the difficulty with navigating multiple systems. Specifically, parents seemed concerned with the frustrations associated with enrolling and transferring students. Parents also did not feel like they truly had access to all schools, even if one was an informed and savvy parent.

J. Access - Access to schools that provide a well-rounded educational experience was viewed to be highly desirable by parents and community members. While participants expressed a value in having schools with different foci, community members and parents expressed concern about ensuring some level of continuity across all schools. Specifically, parents felt it was important for students to have access to certain classes regardless of the type or focus of the school they attended. While participants valued having schools with different foci, they also discussed the importance of all schools serving diverse types of students. There was a general sense that currently not all schools were serving all students. Specifically, the RSD was viewed as serving the city's most challenging student populations. Finally, while thematic focused schools were seen as valuable in helping meet the needs of diverse students on different academic/career paths, participants discussed the importance of creating some consistent vehicle of measuring quality of schools of all types. Charter advocates felt that quality is improving overall, schools were becoming more competitive and charter schools are attracting nonpublic school students.