

Middle School Community Dialogue

June 17, 2014



**ALBUQUERQUE
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Facilitated By



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*Thank you to all the community members who joined the dialogue.
We appreciate your involvement.*

Overview

Albuquerque Public Schools, APS, hosted a community dialogue about middle schools, facilitated by Learning Alliance New Mexico, June 17, 2014 at the Bruce & Alice King Educational Complex. More than 90 people attended. Individuals in attendance identified themselves as teachers, administrators, family members, students and community members. The dialogue had two objectives: 1) *learn from each other about promising practices in middle schools* and 2) *identify community recommendations to improve middle schools.*

Participants introduced themselves, established group norms, broke into small groups, discussed a number of specific questions and created recommendations. Representatives from each small group shared their recommendations with the larger group. During the debrief section of the dialogue, participants reflected on the session and shared what worked well and what could be improved. Learning Alliance closed the session by asking everyone to share one word or phrase that described how they felt about the work moving forward.

Kata Sandoval, APS Associate Superintendent for Middle Schools, said information from the dialogue can help inform work at the district and local schools.

Norms

The group established four norms.

1. Be respectful
2. Take an assets/ strengths-based approach
3. Keep a communitywide perspective
4. Think of positive pathways for students



Dialogue Discussion Prompts

Participants divided into five smaller dialogue groups and discussed the following questions.

How did you feel as a middle school student?

Personal comments ranged from “loved it” to “loathed it.” Some people remembered feeling happy, excited, pleased about more choices (electives, clubs, music, sports, etc.), included in teams and groups, challenged to persevere and find their own path and encouraged at every level. Others felt awkward, frightened, intimidated, compliant (“doing what we were supposed to do”), invisible, clueless and lost in a larger student population. For some, middle school was a supportive environment offering more opportunity for growth and fun. For others, middle school presented challenges to overcome and served as just a stage in life or a stepping stone to high school. One participant said, “As a white, hetero male, it was great because all the text books spoke to me. For my wife, who is Mexican, it was fearful.”

What worked for you in middle school?

Discussing what worked, participants spoke about high expectations, accountability, student advocates, extracurricular activities, performing arts classes, group projects, finding a place of belonging and having family involvement at school. Positive male role models, more career awareness, high quality administration, feeling safe, learning organizational skills - planning and writing, developing critical-thinking skills, a strong group of friends, and being entrusted with more responsibilities worked well, too.

One of the most common answers: **teachers**. Many people said connecting with excellent teachers who gave the time and attention to challenge and support them made middle school successful. Being mentored by a trusted adult on skills to deal with life during an awkward time was very helpful. Participants were grateful when staff and administrators understood them as students. They appreciated when leaders knew their names and created a sense of community in school.

"I grew up in a small town so the community and the school were one. The community embraced and celebrated my small successes. It was nice to feel like my success in school could be celebrated throughout the community."

"I was being bullied. Our principal and parents made us have a dialogue with each other and we worked through it. Talking face to face without all that other noise worked."

"I began my understanding of self."

"I couldn't talk to my parents, but I talked to teachers."

How could your middle school have better helped you succeed?

Participants stated more engaged adults would have better helped them succeed. More adult guidance when they, as students, worked on solving their own challenges would have been beneficial.

Other ideas included more consistency, greater school cohesion, bilingualism, smaller classes, hands-on/kinesthetic lessons and more curriculum relevancy that tied directly into career pathways. Some said offering greater safety through more supervision could have protected against bullying and drug abuse.

"Relationships can take a large community and make it feel small."

"The more adult involvement, the better."

"If teachers had slowed down they could have figured out earlier that I had a learning disability."

What are your expectations of middle school as a parent/ community member/ teacher/ principal?

Participants shared a variety of expectations. The report categorizes expectations into five groups: student experience, school environment, relationships, communication and systems.

"I expect student voice to be listened to, honored and respected."

Student experience

Group expectations included that middle schools prepare students for high school. Students have jump start days so they know what to expect for each grade level. They have clear expectations of middle school and high school and they accept responsibility and accountability.

Participants expected students to attend school, be excited to learn, have a curriculum relevant to 21st century skills and have opportunities to belong.

"I want for every child what I want for my child."

School environment

Participants expressed a number of expectations for the school environment, such as the environment feels welcoming, safe, nurturing, inclusive and engaging. The student-focused environment offers flexibility, provides outlets for creativity, challenges students, creates a sense of belonging, tailors learning for individuals and fosters emotional wellness. School is a place where students show up consistently and families are part of the community of learning. Administrators and teachers support the environment and oversee more just (fair) consequences for behavior. Classes are relevant, size appropriate and project-based. Student support is offered in a timely manner and addresses any trauma that students may experience in their lives.

"My daughter will succeed because she's driven and likes school. My son is different. He's a hands-on learner. Where do I send him?"

Relationships

The group voiced expectations of healthy relationships between adults and students. School staff members accept students for who they are and where they come from. Evolving mutual trust between teachers and students helps engage students and gets them fired up about school. Students strive to achieve and succeed and adults support them in their efforts, helping students find their talents by tapping into their interests. Students strengthen relationships with adults by choosing their mentors/ advisors.

"I read an article that listed five things each teacher should do: cultivate hope, develop trust, ask questions, be prepared and have a sense of purpose."

Communication

Participants said they expect open communication between all parties at all levels. A healthy level of accountability exists for parents to engage school leaders in a meaningful way. School leaders invite parents to get involved. Community input influences the school direction. All parties stay informed about students, including communication between 5th and 6th grades and 8th and 9th grades to help with transitions.

"Accountability – let's hold each other to a higher standard with less focus on grades and more focus on learning."

"Hear my voice as a parent..."

"I would like to hear groups not bash each other. More understanding from community of what goes on in schools: What is in APS's control? What is the state telling us to do?"

Systems

Some expectations focused on education systems, such as implementing a credit system in middle school similar to the credit system in high school and for teacher training to encourage students to get excited about learning.

“Middle school is the forgotten child in any district. It’s the most critical time in a school career. It’s about teaching kids to love to learn and putting systems in place so that happens.”

Recommendations

Student experience

- Include parents and students in building the school around students’ needs
- Create relevant and challenging learning experiences that are interconnected with the community before, during and after school
- Offer a life skills class
- Embrace 21st century learning and integrate technology into student experience
- Prioritize positive digital citizenship including how to politely use social media
- Meet and ensure student developmental needs
- Offer more mental health, emotional and social support
- Provide more opportunities for students to be responsible and be held accountable
- Encourage student-oriented problem solving

School environment

- Develop community atmosphere at school where parents feel welcomed and included
- Create a community of communication with a focus on transparency, wellness and safety so there are no surprises
- Build the culture of a community-based school
- Provide engaging curriculum to support student success and growth
- Focus on learning and engagement processes not testing and teaching outcomes
- Use 21st century technology
- Offer equity of choices and a continuum of learning experiences beyond the classroom: more electives, clubs, arts programs, etc.
- Decrease class sizes
- Utilize more project-based learning
- Small teaming during early grades

Relationships

- Build meaningful relationships
 - Student to student
 - Student to teacher
 - Teacher to parent
 - Student to parent
 - Student to community
- Encourage all teachers and administrators to know their students
- Ensure the same student advisor follows the same student all three years
- Develop community support of career exploration

Communication

- Facilitate teacher/parent dialogues and collaboration
- Institute teaming and continuity around the transition from 5th – 6th grade among teachers

Communication (cont.)

- Offer orientation for parents on how to support middle school students
- Encourage teachers to share information and regularly talk to each other to:
 - Identify warning signs
 - Provide wrap-around services
 - Look into students' backgrounds
- Encourage staff to talk to parents regularly about the good, bad and ugly
- Increase email contact between parents and schools
- Provide a hotline for parents' questions
- Ask students about their opinions and honor their perspectives
- Produce digitized career next step plans to assist with transition to High School
- Communicate explicit expectations for attendance
- Inform parents of student truancy as soon as possible

Systems

- Improve student attendance
- Increase transfer policy transparency
- Ensure classwork and homework coincide so students can complete both
- Give fewer daily classes to students
- Provide AVID in every school
- Offer anti-bullying programs
- Expand transportation options
- Abolish 100% grading scale and adopt 4 point scale
- Give competency-based report cards
- Improve early warning systems
- Standardize classes for transfer students
- Offer professional development that focuses solely on middle school
- Host parenting programs (parenting skills, ESL, GED, etc.)
- Focus on early adolescence needs for special licensing
- Use a middle school credit system similar to high school credit system

Debrief

Plus (What worked?)	Delta (What could be improved?)
Group discussion Diversity of voices Respect Facilitator Tone Heard from everyone Discussion questions led us on a journey Established common ground Lots of voice Phone calls inviting to attend Good beginning	Tight rooms/space Lack of student voice Would have preferred to sit in a circle Provide a legible agenda Schedule the meeting during the evening Create more marketing and outreach Have more decision makers attend Invite media Encourage more parents to attend Host meetings in different quadrants in the city Encourage similar processes at schools Task force or division of APS follows up

Closing Words



Next Steps

As district administrators and community members review this report, they can consider how they would like to use information from the dialogue to inform future work. Learning Alliance is available to work with individual schools that may be interested in hosting similar dialogues.

For those individuals who have any questions not addressed during the dialogue, please contact the APS Student, School and Community Service Center at (505)-855-9040.

Comments Section

Learning Alliance distributed the report to the community and asked for comments during a two week period. Community members' responded with the following comments.

- Relationships is probably the number one expectation and recommendation. That is the underlying reason for smaller class size.
- In my group there was conversation about adolescent brain development and how little teachers and parents know about the science. The solution is professional development for teachers and workshops or conversations with parents (or both).
- I heard some conversation in more than one group about the need for curriculum that engages diverse cultures and respects the cultures and languages of parents and families when engaging with the community.
- Also missing is consistent discipline policies and procedures across the district and across grade levels. I think that might fit into the school environment or student experience. It's part of what makes kids feel safe, but also the conveyor belt on the school-to-prison pipeline.
- Systems- Attendance: Parents are often confused about how to excuse kids, what's an excused absence and why they don't find out about their kids' absences until they are defined as habitually truant.
- Engaging courses or curriculum - Middle School Students are thrust into a "sit and get" type environment to focus on the tested math and reading subjects. Engaging curriculum such as the ever disappearing courses such as "shop, woodworking, metals, textiles, sewing, foods, and art" were identified to get hands-on type courses instead of just hands-on in the courses. All of these can support mathematics and reading and are the engaging type of "problem based" subjects that have been taken out of middle school. This sort of curriculum and project based work was not explicit in the report and various definitions of "problem based" and "hands-on" is missed in the report (when looked at from schedule offerings).
- Middle School is where students make important decisions about their interests in school. If we don't hook them at this age, students often find high school "more of the same" and choose to drop out. We are responsible to heighten their curiosities and introduce some ways to engage in hands-on learning. I believe that if we focus on the middle school and improve interest opportunities, we will have some students choose not to drop out as freshman.