

Middle School Community Dialogue

September 25, 2014

Hosted at Truman Middle School by



Facilitated by



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

Overview

On September 25, 2014, Albuquerque Public Schools, APS, hosted a community dialogue about middle schools, facilitated by Learning Alliance New Mexico, at Truman Middle School. Thirty people attended including 6 parents, 12 teachers and 12 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*.

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

Truman Middle School

Judith Martin-Tafoya, Truman Principal, presented some bright spots about the host venue. With over 1,450 students, Truman is the largest middle school in the state. The school motto is “It’s cool to be smart and kind!”

Truman provides strong student supports including an exceptional dual language program with impressive results (Learn more at: <http://www.abqjournal.com/203897/news/dual-language-program-a-success.html>). About 360 students were enrolled in the dual language program last year. Also, Truman offers AVID, Advancement Via Individual Determination, a helpful college readiness program.

Ms. Martin-Tafoya complimented the Truman teachers’ drive for continuous improvement and their focus on data. She praised each Truman teacher for having a personal mission statement to guide her/his work. Ms. Martin-Tafoya concluded her remarks by saying she “felt like the luckiest principal” because she works at Truman.

Dialogue Discussion Prompts

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

How did you feel as a middle school student?

Participants’ feelings as middle school students ranged from “cared for and supported” to “painfully shy” and “like an outcast.” For many, middle school was a time of growing socially and exploring identity. Sometimes participants felt awkward, especially as physical changes and hormones increased. Other times, they felt confident as they built strong, lifelong relationships.

“I felt fortunate - I met my wife in middle school.”

“I remember a warrior statue...and I blocked everything else out.”

What worked for you in middle school?

Some participants said extracurricular activities such as sports, mediation programs, shadowing days, music, newspaper, dance and typing class worked for them. Others remembered academics worked well as school challenged them and introduced them to a deeper understanding of science.

“As a Caucasian I was a minority at my school. I was lucky to get exposed to other cultures, because school didn’t promote it.”

“School gave me somewhere to belong.”

“Stability – you could go to school and see the same teachers day in and day out.”

For many, relationships were key to their middle school success. Participants met friends and supportive adults and they appreciated when the community was involved in their learning. A specific type of successful relationships involved memorable teachers. Participants were grateful for the terrific teachers who supported them and honestly communicated with them.

"I still remember what he [a mentor] told me [about drugs] - each school is its own small town. He cared about us and not getting caught up in those things."

"Some teachers leave a lasting impression. My wrestling coach got me involved in choir."

How could your middle school have better helped you succeed?

Participants mentioned a number of strategies that could have better helped them succeed. The strategies have been categorized into four areas: safety, preparation, relationships and respectful engagement.

Safety

Schools could have ensured students felt safe. Addressing bullying, meeting students' individual needs and supporting students' emotions could have improved their comfort. Creating a safe environment where students could feel confident, ask for help and not feel embarrassed would have been useful.

Preparation

Some participants said they felt like middle school could have better prepared them for high school and careers.

Middle schools could have:

- Offered more "hands on" opportunities
- Developed student identity, confidence and character (like the Second Step program)
- Provided more exposure to careers, cultures and leaders
- Academically challenged students more

Pipeline programs that connect middle school students to life beyond middle school, creating richer context and presenting real world application for curriculum, would have been helpful.

Relationships

Some participants said they wished more adults were willing to engage with them as students – including schools pursuing their families to get involved. Streamlining communication from teachers to families, offering parent education sessions and presenting a kind atmosphere were strategies to increase involvement.

Respectful engagement

Many participants wanted more cultural awareness in their classes to bridge divides. It would have been powerful for schools to accept students' heritages, identities and languages. Showcasing the diverse success of others would have inspired students.

"We talk about increasing communication, but it's the nature of middle school students to NOT communicate."

"Removing the racism and sexism built into schools would have helped me succeed."

"[School] didn't allow him to be him. Parents wanted him to learn only English so he wasn't labeled ESL (English as a Second Language). They wanted him to be assimilated."

Recommendations

Recommendations fell into five areas: student experience, school environment, relationships, communication and systems.

Student experience

- Allow students to move for more interactive learning
- Ensure students feel secure
- Expose students to more careers, lifestyles and cultures
- Provide more opportunities - electives
- Extend rigorous academic challenge
- Connect 8th grade career mentorships with businesses
- Give more help and supplemental ways to teachers to reach students
- Host more Jump Start days
- Schedule more physical activity
- Highlight real world application(s) for what is being taught
- Integrate service learning
- Offer digital citizenship education

School environment

- Open more community schools
- Provide teachers with tools to succeed
- Offer more time for teachers to prepare, plan and collaborate
- Provide more social and emotional support, e.g. counselors
- Encourage more stability in staff at schools, e.g. fewer substitutes
- Offer more after school programs with transportation

Relationships

- Increase family engagement
- Support parents to be advocates for their students
- Focus on building relationships and community partners
- Develop parent capacity
- Each school should have a family liaison

Communication

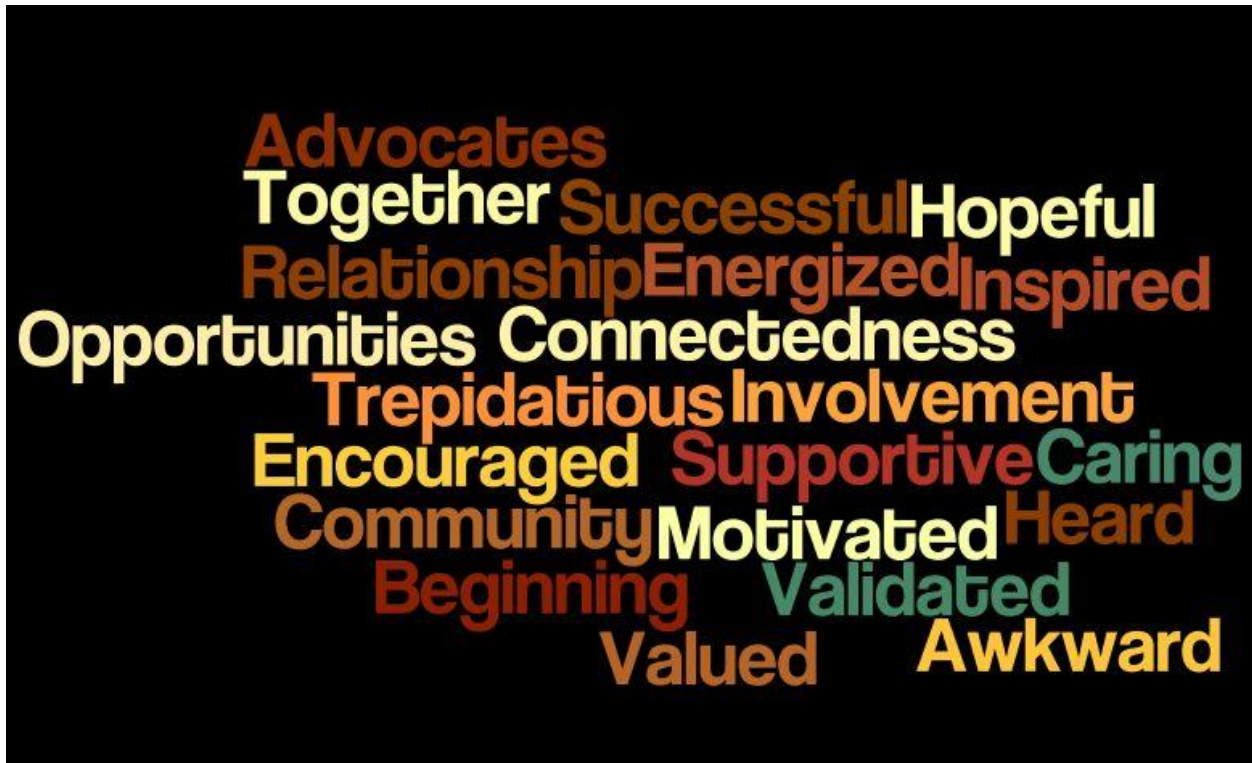
- Increase communication
- Encourage creativity in curriculum – allowing kids to think and act outside the box
- Help students know themselves
- Nurture students to challenge and push themselves

Systems

- Shift the schedule to year-round education
- Offer opportunities for students to earn high school credit in 8th grade
- Consider various “non-academic” ways to give credit to students so they feel successful
- Consider same gender classes
- Support magnet schools
- Help connect kids with common interests who fall outside of school run activities like sports

Closing Words

To close the dialogue, each participant shared a word that described how they felt after participating in the event. Each participant's word is listed below.



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 a report draft to the parents, teachers and community members who participated in the dialogue and asked for feedback to list on this page. Learning Alliance received no feedback.