

The Boston Parent Organizing Network

For

Youth Transition Funders Group

The Boston Parent Focus Group Results

***Identifying Issues Impacting Out- of-School Youth and
Struggling Boston Public School Students***

Submitted to:

Boston Private Industry Council

Boston, MA

July 2005

Prepared by:

Caprice Taylor Mendez, M.Ed.

Brendan McCaffery, BA

Boston Parent Organizing Network

21 LakeHall, Northeastern University, Roxbury, MA

Acknowledgements:

Jessica DelVecchio, Matthew Miller

BPON Partners: DSNI, ACORN, EBECC, Sociedad Latina, and City Life/Vida Urbana parents

“There should be more communication between parents and teachers and more counselors in the schools.”

“It would be good if we continue to work together.”

“I wish it would be possible to reduce the high level of school drop outs.”

By Parent Participants

Overview of Project

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the focus groups conducted with parents of Boston Public Schools students or youth who are disconnected from school without a high school diploma. The purpose of the focus group is to incorporate the voice of parents in the Youth Transition Funders Group strategic planning process that aims to identify the existing barriers and resources impacting their children’s success in school and their path into the workforce. The Youth Transition Funders Group strategic planning process is focused on assisting Boston youth in having greater success in the area of education, training, and work opportunities as adults.

Focus Group Questionnaire and Survey Construction

Each focus group consisted of two components during the two hour session: a series of three sets of discussion questions and a written survey of key demographic information. The first set of discussion questions (see appendix C) was administered with the primary intent of requesting parent participants of struggling students to identify a ***set of challenges they felt contributed to their children’s experiences as struggling students***. The second set of discussion questions was directed to parents of Out-of-School Youth, asking them to ***identify the reasons why their children are disconnected from school without a high school diploma***. The final set of discussion questions requested parents’ perspective on the ***strengths and resources that currently exist and their level of accessibility*** for the family members. It is important to note that there were several occurrences where the individual parent had several children who were either struggling or disconnected youth, that required for the focus group discussion to address both youth populations in the same focus group.

The survey component of the focus groups required participants to complete a survey (see appendix E) designed to obtain key demographic information in an effort to place the responses into context. The survey questions focused on determining their children’s history as students and/or workforce status, their children’s ages, the primary language spoken at home and parents’ personal assessment of their English proficiency (which impacts access to resources).

Focus Group Participants

As noted in the participant demographics information presented earlier, these findings stem from the responses of participants who are parents of school age youth who are either in the Boston Public Schools or are disconnected from school without a diploma. With the African American and Latino children highly represented as the majority (46% African American and 31% Latino) within the Boston Public Schools student population and within the disconnected youth population, the recruitment for the focus groups was mainly aimed at obtaining African American and Latino parents as participants.

Six focus groups were conducted in five community based organizations in Boston: ACORN, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, East Boston Ecumenical Community Council, Sociedad Latina, and City Life/Vida Urbana. The organizations are based in various neighborhoods, allowing for the recruitment of 50 focus group parent participants from various neighborhoods: two from Allston-Brighton, 16 from Dorchester, five from East Boston, three from Jamaica Plain, four from Hyde Park, two from Roslindale, eight from Roxbury, two from the South End, one from West Roxbury, and one parent who did not specify a neighborhood.

Focus groups were conducted in the various primary languages spoken at home by the participants; two of the focus groups were conducted in English with a total of 8 participants, one in Cape Verdean with 17 participants, and three in Spanish with 25 participants.

Based on the demographic information parents provided, it was determined that thirty-eight of the parent participants had children who were between the ages of 11 to 20. As a group, the parents had a total of 91 children, 41 of whom are between the ages of 11 to 15 years old, 16 of whom are between the ages of 16 to 20 years old, and 27 of whom are ten years old or younger.

Only one parent identified their child as a disconnected out-of-school youth in the written questionnaire responses. In addition, eight more parents identified having children who are out-of-school disconnected youth during the course of discussion in the focus group discussions. The recruitment message for these focus groups (noted in the outreach flyer that was translated in various languages) clearly delineated the criteria for participation as needing to be a parent of a youth who did not complete high school or is struggling to complete high school (see appendix A). It is also important to note that many parents were sharing, what can be considered in many cultures, sensitive family problems for the first time with strangers. As a result, not many were eager to share their child's academic status.

Focus Group Findings

As the findings are presented, it is important to note that the findings represent the voices of 50 parent participants based on their experiences as parents of a total of 91 children. Due to the low number of parent participants, the findings should be considered carefully as an unscientific sampling with rich information based on the diverse background of the parent participants from the various neighborhoods,

ethnicity and level of English language proficiency. Clearly, English language proficiency impacts the home- school connection and the parents' experiences shared within the focus groups. Sixteen out of the 50 parents stated that they "understand very little English" or are not able to understand at all. This is particularly relevant information, considering that 17% of the Boston Public School student population is identified as being English Language Learners.

Discussions from all the focus group participants identified common themes concerning the barriers they or their child(ren) faced, and resources they would like to receive or had received in support of their struggling students or disconnected youth. The main themes were:

- Improving school climate to create welcoming schools to support effective parental engagement, highlighting the need for parents and teachers to work closely together in the effort to support struggling students and disconnected youth;
- Providing additional resources to improve schools' capacity to meet the individual needs of children and treat all with respect.

Supporting Parental Engagement

The parent participants highlighted a large opportunity for improvement within the Boston Public Schools in the area of **supporting parental engagement** focusing attention on the fact that "there should be more communication between parents and teachers ...", as stated by a parent participant. This lack of communication was identified as leading to minimal parent / teacher collaboration and a lack of knowledge about services and support programs for students.

What emerged as key to parental engagement were issues around:

- **Improving School climate** and creating a structure that is welcoming for parents.

Within four of the six focus groups, parent participants indicated a general lack of respect and support from schools including teachers and administrators. One parent participant captured a shared experience by stating that schools offer "no love, no support" and therefore parents feel "pushed under the rug." Within three of the six focus groups, parent participants emphasized a sense of distrust towards the schools; experienced apathy and discrimination based on ethnicity from school staff on a personal level and towards their children; and expressed frustration from the lack of communication from schools.

One parent participant mentioned seeking help from within the school to deal with threats of violence to her child, to which she stated the administrators were apathetic and insensitive. Administrators responded to her concerns by saying that "he must have done something to be threatened like this." This led the parent to transfer the child to another school.

In another focus group, a parent participant mentioned that the school informed her that "Once (your) son turns 16 he is not required to go to school," and in a similar vein, another parent participant felt that her child

never received assistance or encouragement to stay in school from the school staff.

- Increasing the number of ***school based staff in support of parental engagement*** to the extent of providing funding for parent advocates and teacher training on how to engage parents as partners.
- Increasing timely ***communication to the home*** in an effective manner.

Some of the examples mentioned were providing early and frequent communication with a parent if their child is struggling in school, providing effective communication in the appropriate language, and providing parents opportunities to be involved and voice concerns even if they are unable to attend a meeting by providing a variety of times to meet and modes of communication.

All parents in several focus groups affirmed that there was minimal communication from schools with parents. Parent participants noted most of the communication happens directly with the students. A parent participant stated the following based on her personal experience: "We never learned that they (children) were having difficulties until we approached the end of the year."

Parent participants also noted the need for schools to ***inform*** parents more effectively on the ***resources available for struggling students and disconnected*** youth, including in the appropriate language.

- Providing ***additional resources*** to parents to support their children's academic success such as ***training*** at home to support the school's curriculum. Parents wanted information available in their language and a ***space*** within the school to meet as parents. One focus group emphasized the need for the schools to provide ***support for parent involvement in the parent site council and parent council***.

Increasing Support of Individual Student Needs

Within all of the focus groups, participants strongly noted a large opportunity for improvement within the Boston Public Schools to ***increase support of individual student needs*** through improving teaching and learning practices, performing accurate assessments and early intervention for struggling students, increasing the number of support programs available for struggling students and out of school youth, and increasing the schools' awareness of the context created by the individual youths' social and emotional needs, while providing effective individualized support.

- Parent participants encouraged the schools to ***provide additional support to teachers in addressing individual student*** needs by:

Reducing smaller classroom sizes, helping struggling students with new curriculum, providing more resources such as supplies and books, conducting training and hiring for teachers and staff in support of addressing

the needs of at risk youth, and providing art and music classes to allow students different forms of self expression.

- Parent participants identified the need for ***schools' awareness of the daily life and individual emotional challenges facing students***. All of the focus groups, especially one of the focus groups with ten parent participants, largely focused on this area noting that this lack of awareness and support often leads students to become disconnected youth or struggling students.

Some of these challenges identified by the parent participants are students having low self esteem, body image issues, lack of motivation, lack of guidance in the future careers, negative social influences and violence in their environment.

Violence in the school and outside of the school was noted as a contributing factor for two of the parents' children leaving school because the children were attacked by fellow students.

Lack of financial resources at home was identified by parent participants within three of the focus groups as limiting the families' ability to find academic remedial support outside of school. As a result, participants stated that families are dependent on the school for this support for their children. Also, the financial limitation was noted by participants as being a factor in pushing students to work instead of finishing school. One of the solutions posed to address this limitation was for ***support programs to provide a stipend to encourage and enable disconnected youth participation***.

- As a solution to the lack of individualized student support efforts, parent participants emphasized the need for the following: ***programs to provide individual attention; increased opportunities for after school programs*** such as tutoring; summer enrichment programs; volunteer positions for youth; more ***guidance counselors with better academic and career advice; programs and practices that provide more options for children earlier in life; an improved truancy system; strengthened teaching and learning in elementary school;*** and the creation of a ***school climate accepting of youth***.

Other Issues Around Supporting Youth

It is important to note that several other issues around supporting youth were brought up with less frequency, yet deserve mention:

- Three parents expressed having negative experiences with SPED in their efforts to advocate for their struggling children in school.
 - One parent stated they felt the mis-diagnosis of special needed to be addressed as a serious obstacle to student success.
- Language barriers were mentioned by the parent participants of all of the Spanish speakers' focus groups.

- In one of these sessions, a parent participant stated that immigrant parents, without school staff support or support from a community agency, cannot assist their struggling students because they cannot navigate the school system.
- Few resources for struggling students and disconnected youth were identified by participants as helping their child.
 - The few that were mentioned were: one alternative education program, legal support including probation and truant officer, therapist, three community based agencies that acted as advocates and provided guidance to accessing resources, three after-school programs, and Gang Peace, a youth rehabilitation program.
 - Of those participants who mentioned that they sought support for their child from school, not one noted a positive or welcoming response from the schools.

Summary

Overall, the parent participants highlighted the need for parents and schools to work more effectively as partners including teachers, guidance councilors and school-based parent advocates or coordinators. Three parent participants highlighted positive experiences in this area. For example, one parent participant spoke highly of meetings at Nathan Hale School in Boston, where parents and teachers would talk about issues, saying that it was “very effective to have everyone in the room together.”

In summary, improving the partnership between home and school was viewed as a bridge that needs strengthening to support struggling youth in crossing over turbulent waters. Effective communication in a respectful way between home and school was a core element that all focus group parents agreed upon as being the nuts and bolts to strengthening that bridge. Parent participants highlighted the need for schools to become more welcoming of parents as partners to allow for early intervention and access to resources to support struggling students and disconnected youth. Parent participants also highlighted the need for schools to improve their capacity in meeting individual students’ needs.