

WAYLAND • PUBLIC • SCHOOLS

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To: School Committee
From: Gary A. Burton
Date: May 24, 2010
Re: Comments from My "Listening Tour"

Preface

This report is written for the Wayland School Committee; however, it is also meant to be a public document. Reactions by Committee members and individuals are welcomed.

Introduction

Presently, there is considerable interest in identifying our best and brightest students and challenging them with a more rigorous and creative school experience. Authors such as Thomas Friedman (*The World is Flat*) and Tony Wagner (*The Global Achievement Gap*) have written about the need for American educators to harness the intellectual skills of our most talented students to ensure our country's ability to compete internationally. At the local level, parents have raised concerns about the district's concentrated efforts to close the achievement gap for our under-performing students while seemingly to allow our higher-performing students to languish unchallenged in the classroom.

There is also considerable interest in tying student achievement to teacher evaluation. On the national level, this has become the centerpiece of the "Race to the Top" initiative to improve our nation's public schools. Federal officials have made it abundantly clear that only states and school districts that are willing to incorporate students' standardized test scores and other student outcomes into teacher evaluations will be eligible for funding under this initiative. At the local level, a number of parents have advocated for a voice in teacher evaluations, whether in the form of an annual survey of parents or some other vehicle for parent feedback on the quality of instruction in their child's classroom.

Purpose

The "Listening Tour" was an outgrowth of my annual goals and designed to solicit public input on these two topics – instructional opportunities for our district's accelerated learners and parental feedback on the quality of instruction in our classrooms. Brad Crozier and I hosted five-school meetings between March 15 and April 1, to which parents were invited. What follows is a summary of the organization and structure of those meetings and a summary of the comments, emails, and letters that arose at and out of those meetings.

GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- A total of 84 parents or community residents attended the five evenings. (Middle School – 20; Happy Hollow – 28; High School – 11; Claypit Hill – 12; Loker – 13).
- The five meetings were held over a three-week period: March 15, March 18, March 24, March 30, and April 1.
- An electronic letter explaining the purpose of the meetings was sent to all school parents inviting them to attend any or all of these meetings (attached).
- Email reminders were sent to parents prior to each meeting.

- Of the 84 attendees, five individuals attended two meetings, and one person identified herself as a resident of another community.
- Besides Brad and me, the appropriate building principal attended the meeting at his/her school. (Administrators were not counted among the 84; however, two staff members were among the 84.)
- All three school levels were represented at each meeting; it appears that more elementary parents attended than did middle or high school parents.
- All meetings ran approximately 90 to 100 minutes with the administrators staying afterwards to answer additional questions.
- The structure of each meeting was informal with participants sitting in a circle.
- Each meeting started with a brief overview and explanation as to why the particular topics of accelerated learning and quality of instruction were the subject of the “listening tour.”
- Parents were asked not to criticize individual teachers publicly. Praise was not prohibited. (Parents did not object to this ground rule, nor did it seem to discourage candor.)
- Brad recorded the essence of each question or statement without attempting to identify the speaker; 161 statements were recorded.
- Parents were encouraged to send written comments and suggestions, and 18 parents chose to do so. Written communications have been treated similar to the spoken comments and suggestions of those attending the individual meetings. (Some written comments are from parents who didn’t attend any of the meetings, while others are from individuals who wanted to further clarify points that they had made at a meeting.)
- At each meeting when questions were directed to me specifically, I tried to answer them. However, a concerted effort was made to let those in attendance speak while the administrators listened.
- At the close of each meeting, most in attendance thanked the administrators for the opportunity to meet and exchange information.
- One school committee member attended one of the meetings.

CATEGORIES OF COMMENTS

My efforts to categorize the 161 comments and 18 emails/letters involved reviewing each and then separating them into groups by specific topics. As such, five general themes emerged. They centered on:

1. The appropriateness of instruction, including classwork and homework for children of varying academic abilities.
2. Support for Differentiated Instruction and its uniformed use throughout the schools, and especially by the elementary instructors.
3. Communications between parents and teachers with an emphasis on the need for staff to keep parents better informed of the academic progress of individual students.
4. Support for the systematic and annual gathering of parental feedback on teacher performances for the purpose of improving instructional quality.
5. An acknowledgement of the importance of meaningful student/teacher relationships and a desire that all instructors strive to “inspire” each of the students in their care.

Appropriateness of Instruction – What did we hear?

It became evident that parents disapprove of classwork or homework assignments that lack purpose or substance. Additional work for brighter students or simply busy work for students was openly criticized; work

appropriate to a child's ability, neither too easy nor too difficult was requested. Also, teachers would be well advised to frequently explain to parents the purpose of homework assignments. Classroom assignments of varying difficulties based upon individual student abilities are also warranted. Support for training in Differentiated Instruction was widespread. Finally, parents expect that classroom instructors can easily recognize varying student ability levels, thus knowing when a child is struggling or not working hard enough.

Differentiated Instruction – What did we hear?

Parents repeatedly cited examples of teachers who could differentiate their instructional lessons or activities for students from others who could not. Only a small number of parents supported special classes for accelerated learners; however, there was agreement that professional development activities to better ensure that all teachers can differentiate their instruction when necessary should be a staff development priority. Parents expect teachers to know the strengths and weaknesses of each child and adapt lessons accordingly. Most examples cited were specific to elementary classes and criticized the inappropriateness of "busy work" or assignments that were neither corrected nor used to promote additional learning.

Communications Between Parents and Teachers – What did we hear?

There were numerous comments that established an appreciation (or lack thereof) for frequent communications between teachers and parents. In some cases, parents feel unwelcome in trying to obtain basic information about class activities or specific information about a child's academic progress in a particular area of classroom study. However, numerous teachers were singled out and praised for their ability to keep parents informed. Thus, teachers who are able to clearly communicate classroom happenings or expectations are better received and more highly thought of, in general, than instructors who appear defensive or reluctant to explain classroom goals or procedures. Clearly, parents expect teachers to know how individual children are doing and not simply how the class in general is performing.

Parent Feedback on Instructional Quality – What did we hear?

There is no question that parents have strongly held opinions on the effectiveness and desirability of having their children in the classrooms of particular teachers. There is also no question that these opinions vary greatly and often contradict each other. Opinions are comprehensive and cover a range of topics from a teacher's knowledge of subject matter to his or her willingness to "really get to know the students." Parent comments about teacher effectiveness were often at odds, as some would like our teachers to push or stretch their students further, while others believe that the instructors should be less concerned with covering the subject material (MCAS scores, etc.) and more concerned with the social and emotional state of the children in their care.

All parents expressed desires for their children to do well in schools; however and not surprisingly, how this might be best achieved varied greatly from parent to parent.

Generally, parents felt powerless to offer comments or observations regarding a teacher's annual evaluation. Many, in fact, have no awareness of how or by whom teachers are evaluated. Some would like direct input into this process, while others accept this as an administrative responsibility. There was no shortage of opinions on the value of good instructors or the damage that can be done by a "bad" teacher.

There was general agreement that individual teachers should not be victimized by anonymous comments or complaints. However, there were sufficient comments to believe that some parents feel that it does no good to bring their concerns to the attention of the administrators, as there is seldom any follow-up or action taken.

Certainly, the teacher evaluation process and the role that parents can legally play in this process should be better explained publicly and probably on an annual or bi-annual basis.

Instructors Who Inspire – What did we hear?

By the end of each session, I often sensed that parents, besides specific complaints or compliments, were expressing a desire that their children be truly inspired by the instructional staff regardless of a child's academic abilities or personal behaviors. Parents want their children to succeed in school and believe that teachers, more than anyone else or anything else, can make this happen.

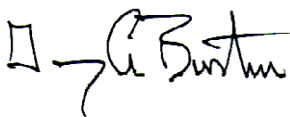
Parents know, too, that our students, collectively, have many different interests, skills, talents, and abilities. They do not want all children treated the same. They expect our teachers to know their students, to vary their instruction accordingly, to sincerely care about each child individually and, above all to strive to inspire their students to grow and mature as they pass through the Wayland Public Schools. In the opinion of many parents, these are not unreasonable expectations for Wayland's teachers and administration.

Conclusion

In summary, I appreciate the candor and honesty of the comments made (or written) to me and acknowledge the value of this activity for me as superintendent. As a result, (1) I will use this report and the parents' comments as the basis of the administrators' retreat this summer. I believe it is important that the district's administrators see and discuss what has been said by the parents who participated in this activity. This will help us to better supervise the staff, to enhance instruction at all grades, and to more sharply focus the efforts of the administrators and teachers in helping students learn, (2) I will inform the teachers of the need for better and/or more frequent communication around curriculum goals; and (3) I will inform parents at specific times in the school year of our interest in their comments on teacher performances and the quality of classroom instruction.

If improvements over time are noted in these areas, then the Listening Tour will have been worth the time and effort involved and will ultimately prove beneficial to our students.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "G. Burton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "G".