

UPPER DARBY RISING

IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY SESSION

JAN. 20, 2020

OVERVIEW

This forum was preceded by an energetic, good-faith effort to attract a genuine cross-section of the stunningly diverse immigrant population of the Upper Darby School District.

The district's English-as-Second-Language teachers were enlisted to help with outreach and responded enthusiastically. The outreach coordinator for the consultants, Catalyst Community Conversations, did extensive phone, text and in-person outreach to connectors in the various immigrant communities, as did school district personnel on the project's advisory group. Based on advance registration, the district provided interpreters in the following languages: Spanish, Creole, Arabic, Malayalam, Bangla, Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu. (The Creole interpreter experienced chronic connectivity problems during the evening which left him unable to participate meaningfully.)

For reasons that never became entirely clear, but likely were related to language barriers and anxiety about ability to take part, the "melt" from the registration list of more than 50 people was even more severe for this event than for the previous three UDR focus groups.

As a result, the planned Spanish, Creole, Malayalam and Punjabi/Hindi breakout groups were not held. Based on sign-ups, the Spanish session had promised to be the largest breakout, with about a dozen. Alas, it was not to be.

Two multi-ethnic breakout groups for people who felt their English was sufficient were held, along with breakouts for Arabic and Bangla/Urdu speakers. One of the multi-ethnic breakouts was more successful than the other; in the latter, the mix of backgrounds and widely varying English fluency seemed to intimidate some participants into silence.

Given the usual issue of late arriving participants, it was not clear at the outset of the event which languages would be represented. Accordingly the opening plenary was conducted by having speakers pause every minute so their words could be translated into multiple languages (some of this interpretation e.g. into Spanish, turned out to have been unnecessary). Because of this situation, the content of the opening plenary was kept short and the breakout group

moderators were asked to present, with interpretation, some material (e.g. review of the key themes) that in prior events had been presented in the opening plenary.

Also, because interpretation does slow the pace of a dialogue, we limited breakouts primarily to discussion of two themes we surmised would be of most interest to this group: Diversity and Community Engagement, with a particular focus on how the District does in reaching out to a given breakout group's ethnic community. These moderators' reports note moments when the other two themes, Discipline and Bullying and Resource Imbalances, cropped up organically in the dialogue.

BREAKOUT GROUP REPORTS

GROUP 1

MODERATORS: JOSH WARNER AND KIM LEICHTNER

This was a group of nine people from different regions who spoke English well enough to participate in a session without interpretation. The breakdown was: 4 African-Americans, 1 Caribbean, 1 West African, 1 South Asian, 2 Whites.

THEME 1: DIVERSITY: AN ASSET AND A CHALLENGE

Main Ideas

Most of the participants said in one way or another that diversity is an asset, but the challenges lie in how to engage with those of diverse backgrounds and the funding needed to support this diversity. As one participant stated, "This diversity is an underutilized asset. People would pay for the experience of the diversity packaged here."

Several participants tied this theme into the one about unequal resources, which they see as preventing the district from leveraging its diversity as the asset it should be:

- A parent whose kids go to Highland Park loves the community's diversity but noted that if the district is underfunded and doesn't get the state funding it deserves, it can't meet the needs of the students. If there's a constant fight about building a new school, the school district can't meet students' needs: "We don't have the money to meet the needs of these students who come from all these wonderful places and who may need more supports – in terms of family, work, language. The district tries but the bottom line

is we're underfunded. There's a fight in this community for the district to provide the space and the education that our children need."

- One parent strongly felt that the standard of education in UD was subpar and has been declining in quality since he was a student in UD. He said his third-grade daughter is not challenged academically. He's frustrated and his family has been thinking about moving out of UD because he doesn't want to send his daughter to Beverly Hills. As an immigrant and as someone who drove charter buses for students from wealthier school districts (Radnor, Haverford), he felt that his daughter wasn't getting the same opportunities and getting a quality education. He also doesn't want his daughter sitting on a bus for 30 minutes to get to school.

Discipline concerns

One parent told a story of how a classmate kicked his daughter in school, but no one from the school notified him of the incident. His daughter told him and he had to call the school the next day to find out what happened. The teachers and principal were aware of the incident and "brushed it off."

Another parent's experience: "You always get calls if your child is the attacker/offender but when he is the victim, you won't hear anything." He feels that the conflicts arise from a cultural misunderstanding between American kids and kids from other backgrounds. For example, his elementary-aged kids have a hard time keeping their hands to themselves, which he keeps reminding them is the norm here. But in their original home of Sierra Leone, it was not a big deal. Whenever his kids are the offender, he has to go into Beverly Hills and even then, he doesn't feel like he gets the full story. Sometimes, he believes that perhaps his kids were the victims but were portrayed as the offenders because they didn't have the language to defend themselves. He just wants the teachers to be fair and to offer the full story (preferably before he has to intervene) so his kids can be appropriately disciplined.

Finally, one parent said that she's been able to deal with any challenges with the school because she's always been an advocate for her daughter and her daughter "knows how to handle herself when she's dealing with adults inside of the school system." The parent acknowledged how it would be difficult for parents who don't feel comfortable being their children's advocates or don't feel safe in institutional spaces, and that it's the responsibility of the community to work together. As someone who's been an educator, she thinks teachers should treat students from the lens of them being their own children and parents should remind themselves that teachers are "human."

Tensions

The tension that ran throughout the discussion: Everyone agrees diversity is an asset, but how do you leverage that diversity into something positive? How do you connect with the immigrant community in their language and help teachers understand the cultural differences among their students?

Possible actions

A parent suggested to another parent that they try and attend the school district meetings to find out information on the building of a new school and/or to voice concerns. She talked about fighting for your kids who are in overcrowded schools or for kids being bused.

A participant brought up the need for everyone to “be in dialogue with each other,” that the school district staff and administration don’t necessarily represent the changing community and it becomes difficult to make connections with someone who doesn't look like you or is culturally different from you. Therefore it’s even more important for parents to engage in dialogue with each other and for students to engage in dialogue together to make others more aware of one’s ethnic background.

One suggested finding ways to communicate with families in their language in addition to Interpret Talk.

A teacher shared that when she first started working in UD, she always felt that UD had the best support system and was an “innovator when it came to working with immigrant families.”

THEME 2: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: AN ISLAND OR A HUB?

Main Ideas

Your view of this topic depends on how personally connected you are with the district: “If you’re not in it, you’re outside of it.”

The school district, it was asserted, could do a better job bringing the information to various immigrant communities (vs. asking them to attend school board meetings).

To engage the community more, connections need to be made at a more personal level and the community has to work to bring others in to broaden the circle. The district could lay the groundwork by helping to foster *some* way for families to connect.

Concerns

A parent who is engaged with the district says that she feels UDSD does a “very good job getting information to parents” and communicating with her via different channels (phone, email). She feels she gets the information she needs and doesn’t have to search for it. However, she could see how it would be difficult for those who don’t speak English to get the information they need.

Another parent expressed concern that it’s the personal connections that matter more than any official communication from the school (phone calls or mail). He came to tonight’s forum because of his child’s teacher. If there’s a personal connection, it makes him want to participate and speak up more.

Another participant, a homeroom parent at Highland Park, said that it’s valuable when she physically goes out to schools in the morning where students are lined up and makes those connections to other parents. She does see language barriers causing parent participation to drop off, understandably. She attends school board meetings and doesn’t recall seeing interpreters there and she acknowledged that could be a barrier for parents who want to get involved or to get information.

A parent from Millbourne said that many of his neighbors are from India or Bangladesh and have no idea if there’s a new school being built or any of the funding issues. He said that when you’re from a different country, you’re afraid of “going against the establishment and facing backlash” with any issues you raise. He invited people to come to this forum but people looked at him skeptically: “People from third world countries feel like they’re getting a quality education and are just happy to be here in America, but they don’t realize that UDSD isn’t offering a quality education by American standards.”

Tensions/Trade-offs

It seems that families that want to know what is going on in the school district, often aren’t able to get that information due to language barriers or not being able to attend school board meetings. How can the district help to create those personal connections within various communities so that people want to actively participate more and not be afraid to speak up for improvements to their children’s education?

Possible actions

The school district should go into communities, using interpreters who are already there, and explain what's going on. That might make people more comfortable being active: "Have a meeting at the mosque or at the church and talk to people in their own community with interpreters - explain to them what's going on, explain to them that they need to talk to their lawmakers to get more funding."

Dr. McGarry interjected a few comments: "We have to bring each other together to solve these problems together. It has to be a community effort." He also acknowledged how Americans have "watered down the value of education" and how the standards of discipline and education are different here, and therefore immigrant communities may have differing value and quality expectations than what UDSD is delivering.

A parent talked about a yearly "multicultural day" event they hold in Highland Park that brings people together with great turnout. People bring their own foods, music, cultural traditions, etc. "We have to do things that first bring us together on a common ground (i.e. soccer) and then we can address touchy issues."

Participants then discussed the idea of the school district partnering with the various soccer clubs and communities and felt this would be an excellent bridge to greater involvement.

A teacher observed that for immigrant families, the district is an island because they are getting information in English. They need emails and communication in a language they understand and they need community leaders who can connect with the school district to help that community's families: "The district is both a hub and an island depending on where you fall in diversity."

GROUP 2

MODERATORS: ELLEN GREENBERG AND CAROL LYDON

Due to the challenges of reordering breakout groups and assigning interpreters once the erratic turnout among language groups was recognized, this multiethnic group was formed out of two smaller groups a few minutes into the breakout session, which caused some disruption and hesitation among some participants. It included two Indian-born immigrants, one American-born man of Indian ethnicity, a Puerto Rico native, a Vietnamese immigrant and a Haitian immigrant, with widely varying fluency in English.

THEME 1: DIVERSITY: AN ASSET AND A CHALLENGE

Main Ideas

The American-born man who is part of an Indian community in Millbourne said he felt he was an asset to the community. He says that pre-2000, when he was a student, the ratio of non-white (both immigrant and non-immigrant) to white students was about 1-10. He said that he was sometimes made to feel different but that was usually from other kids, not from the teachers. He feels that now the schools are more diverse and that Upper Darby School District is doing a "pretty good job" trying to embrace the diversity of the district.

The Puerto Rican woman says that she is unable to say one way or another if she is viewed as an asset or a challenge. Where she lives now, she has not experienced any problems because people mostly keep to themselves and her children are small.

An Indian immigrant who switched from interpreter to participant due to the low turnout said that in her community, parents expect children to go to school, work hard, learn, be respectful and obey the teacher. Expectations were held high, which she thinks is how it should be. In general, she said, some immigrants do struggle on low expectations based on stereotypes, but in her case, her teachers' expectations of her were just right.

Several participants of East Asian heritage said sometimes people from their culture don't speak up because of ingrained respect for authority: "We're supposed to *go with it*." They said their people need to be reassured that it's OK to voice issues or problems because that's the only way to make changes.

They said people from their community constantly compare the expectations back in their country to here, though children are children everywhere. One said she thought that teachers have a good heart towards her people, with high expectations. She said that teachers seem aware of the different cultures in their classrooms and are very sensitive. If the teacher has questions about a behavioral issue they reach out to see if it's normal for their culture.

Concerns

Names and their pronunciation can be a problem that causes immigrant children stress. The same is true when children come to school in dress from their native culture.

In the Indian community, some parents are concerned that some teachers don't seem to check or grade homework. They want rigor and accountability for their children.

Possible actions

Start the school year with a session, like a mini-academy, to teach immigrant parents how to connect with the school system and their children's schools and teachers.

THEME 2: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: AN ISLAND OR A HUB?

Main Ideas

Culture days at district schools are a great way to bring out the best of the different cultures and understand how diverse the community is. Students also value talent shows where students are encouraged to represent their cultures in song and dance.

Concerns

It can be hard to engage with some immigrant parents due to technology barriers.

Poor back to school night turnout should not be assumed to be the product of apathy. It could just as easily be due to communication barriers, work schedules or travel distance to schools from a place like Millbourne.

Possible Actions

- Having translators and interpreters is helpful.
- At Bywood, they do an HSA meet and greet. In the fall, they tried to provide dinner for parents to help alleviate some of the barriers. Keep open communication with the parents and let them know if they have questions they can call and ask for a teacher. Important for them to see that there's someone they can go to.
- Offer adult English classes.

GROUP 3

MODERATOR: BRIAN ARMSTEAD

This group consisted of two women speaking a mixture of Arabic and English, with an Arabic interpreter and one district observer.

THEME 1: DIVERSITY: AN ASSET AND A CHALLENGE

Main Ideas

The participants did not have any comments about diversity other than that they thought it was a good thing for the district and didn't have any issues or concerns.

THEME 2: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: ISLAND OR HUB

Main Ideas, and indicate whether there was a lot of energy (agreement, disagreement):

Decrease the bullying that's going on between the students.

One woman's daughter suffers with bullying. The mother doesn't know how to stop it and is not sure why it's happening. She was afraid that if she went to the school to raise the issue, that would make things worse for her daughter. (The district observer later tried to reassure her that was not the case.)

Class sizes: Having a lot of students in one class makes a lot of problems in the school; small class sizes would make it easier to learn.

Question: How well do the students and teachers treat the Muslim students?

One mother: No problem with the teachers; the bullying comes from the students. Muslim students are mocked for their names and their how they dress -- the hijab.

The other mother: Bullying is not that big an issue for her and "you have to be confident with yourself. If it was a big enough problem I would talk to school." Her son had a lot of problems with other kids when they first arrived. She worked with her son so that he adapted and learned how to deal with American kids and fit in better. Told him simple things; don't do this; don't do that. How to respect the other student, etc. Now there is no problem.

Question: Do you get enough information from the school district? And how easy is it to communicate with the teachers and principal?

The translating helps a lot. One woman's brother is new here (3 years ago); there's help when they have some problems; she sees the translated emails, etc.

Question: Do you have any suggestions or requests to serve the Muslim community better?

There was much energy around these two ideas:

- A *masjid* for Muslim students to pray inside the building

- Allow Muslim students to celebrate the holiday at the end of Ramadan (Eid al-Fitr)
 - They have to write notes to the school and ask for the students to be let off. It is not easy and should be automatic.
 - They should also get the day off and NOT be considered absent.
 - It should be considered a day off to celebrate.
 - They also don't want the students to miss anything that day (i.e. tests, etc.)

GROUP 4

MODERATOR: CHRIS SATULLO

The group consisted of three Bangladeshi parents, two men and one woman, all with some English skills. The excellent interpreter assigned to the group was also an Upper Darby parent and was able to add some insights to the parents' responses. The participants were usually able to understand the moderator's questions as they were posed in English, made simple replies in English then relied on the interpreter to translate their lengthier replies. Two district observers were present.

THEME 1: DIVERSITY – AN ASSET AND A CHALLENGE

Main Ideas

This group was extremely positive about how the district was serving them and their children. They had particular praise for Senkow and the staff there. One man had a daughter in middle school and was vocal about some problems with bullying and teasing she was experiencing, and all three expressed worries about what their children would experience once they reached the high school.

"I'm very much thankful. The teachers are helping me and my kids very much," said the Senkow mother.

They agreed that at the elementary school level, the teachers were very friendly and considerate of their family's backgrounds and culture.

They said their children had experienced no issues praying during the school day as desired but, in line with what parents said in the Arabic session, creation of a designated space for prayer would be welcome.

One man who said he is a leader of the Bangladeshi community locally said, "We teach our children: Follow your culture. Do not forget about your own culture. But the school is supportive of that."

Concerns

Bullying and teasing of his middle-school daughter was very much on the mind of that community leader, who returned to the topic over and over:

“The concern is not about inside the school. It is what happens outside the school, on the way home. The school should do more to let parents know about these situations, provide some guidelines to parents and students about what to do about this bullying. It starts with just words, but it can go on to violence. ... This cannot be just a teacher-student conversation. They need to involve the parents. It is up to us to teach our children what to do, what is good and what is bad.”

The other two, who have younger children, said this was not yet a concern for them, but acknowledged “we hear things about what goes on at Beverly Hills.”

A related concern was the distances some children have to walk to school and will have to travel to secondary schools later on.

Possible actions

Workshops for immigrant parents on how to help their children respond to incidents of teasing and bullying and how to inform the school and avail themselves of district resources.

THEME 2: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: AN ISLAND OR A HUB?

As already noted, the participants were full of praise for the job Senkow staff does in communicating with them and helping them follow their children’s progress.

The Senkow mother had one concern: She’d had a hard time following the twists of district policy about virtual vs. in-school instruction during the pandemic.

She said her children were still doing school at home, were tired of it and could tell that some other students were back to in-person school. Her kids desperately want to be back to school: “It puts pressure on the parents. They are asking me and asking me.”

She had one more question: “Why no vaccines for teachers? Why?”

