



Fallon Research & Communications, Inc.

WASHINGTON, DC: 202-263-7292 ■ COLUMBUS, OH: 614-341-7005
FAX: 202-318-0346 ■ MAIL: P.O. Box 12181, Columbus, Ohio 43212

November 29, 2012

TO: Superintendent Judy Wiegand

Cc: Stephanie Stuart
Scott Leopold

FR: Paul Fallon

RE: Focus Group Key Findings Overview

I drafted this memorandum to highlight some of the key findings from the focus group sessions recently held among respondents residing in the Champaign Community Unit 4 School District. They were conducted in separate sessions comprised of respondents who were voters that did not have children enrolled in the system (non-parents), and voters that did have children enrolled in the system (parents) at the time the sessions were held. The purpose was to assess their opinions about the school system and its performance in core areas, evaluate priorities for various public outcomes, and explore views of the District's current facilities and future needs.

OPINION ENVIRONMENT:

As a matter of practice, both sessions began with open-ended questions to acclimate respondents to the focus group milieu by asking them about aspects or characteristics of the local community that they like or believe positively contribute to the quality of life that they experience. Although this is normally a formality that does not warrant emphasis, I thought it was noteworthy that there was only one spontaneous reference to the schools in either session, and it was a rather oblique one that was made by a non-parent. This suggests that the school district may not be viewed as an extant institution of importance for which residents have a strong affinity or emotional connection. Most respondents mentioned the community's diversity, the presence of the University and the more modest pace of life that can be enjoyed, in comparison to larger cities.

When asked specifically about it, general impressions of the Champaign Community Unit 4 School District were rather tepid. The non-parents seemed to think it was in decline, despite the fact that those who had children that graduated from the system said that they were pleased with quality of education they had received. They cited lackluster performance indicators, such as test scores, second-hand information about students who were falling behind and classroom disciplinary problems. Some non-parents opined that the District was

plagued by parents who were not actively involved in the education of their children, which none of the other non-parents openly challenged. The parents were no less disenchanted, with many echoing the sentiments of the non-parents, as well as airing their own grievances about the school assignment system and the lack of consistency in the quality of the education, which they said varies from school-to-school and is declining in upper grade levels. Despite this, parents of students in lower grades expressed high satisfaction with the schools, but many conceded they had trepidations about the quality of education at the higher grade levels, which appeared to be based on information they gleaned from other parents. A telling indication of the limited depth of specific knowledge they had about the Champaign Community Unit 4 School District was that only one person in either session could cite the name of the new superintendent. This suggests that conventional media coverage has not been sufficient, and that informal social networks of parents, neighbors and friends seem to be filling the vacuum of information in a way that has been detrimental to the reputation of the school system.

The respondents in both groups appeared to have somewhat favorable impressions of teachers, and felt that they were making earnest efforts to teach. The non-parents seemed to think that the teachers were beleaguered, because of burdensome administrative demands and the prevalence of disrespectful students, who they believed were emboldened by the diffidence of their parents. Some also impugned the District for failing to equip the teachers with adequate support and materials, such as basic school supplies. Although it did not seem to be a universal sentiment, a small portion of the parents were ardently critical because they did not believe the teachers were fully committed to delivering a high-quality education. Overall, there appeared to be a considerable amount of indifference that the parents exhibited about teachers.

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS:

Opinions of the overall quality of education provided by the Champaign Community Unit 4 School District varied greatly. Some of the non-parents said that they thought the school system had done a good job educating their children. Other non-parents were critical and seemed to believe, by inference, that because discipline problems were rampant, it was not possible for the school system to deliver a high quality education. Many non-parents also alluded to national phenomena that they assumed were plaguing local schools, even though they could

“I’m not looking forward to middle school and high school, just from what I’ve heard around me. We’re seriously considering moving.”

Quote from Parent

“They [teachers] have to do a lot of refereeing and a lot of behavior management, and sometimes I think it’s just because the kids – the kids are not held accountable.”

Quote from Non-parent

“I mean, I see with teachers the same thing that I see with employees in a lot of our – people situations nowadays. A lot of teachers that really are just going through the motions, and don’t really invest in the children.”

Quote from Parent

not cite specific examples to corroborate their beliefs. The parents had equally vast differences of opinion, with characterizations ranging from “great” to “inconsistent,” – with the latter sentiment being one that seemed to be shared with even the most effusive supporters. Some of the parents did say that they were very pleased with the Gifted Program, and also lauded the school system for the Enrichment Program, which seemed to garner agreement among many of the other parents. Non-parents and parents were both disenchanted with the job the schools have done preparing students for higher education, because they said there is too much reliance on technology and they have seen or heard that graduates struggle when they begin attending the local university.

Interestingly, the greatest point of divergence during the two sessions was during the discussions of assessments about the school system’s performance providing students with rigorous exposure to fundamental coursework in areas such as math, science and English. While the non-parents were dissatisfied, largely because of test scores and anecdotal information about students struggling, all of the parents rated the school system’s performance as good or, at least, fair, in this critical area. Demonstrating the importance and impact of first-hand knowledge, many cited their experiences helping their children with homework as the basis for their opinions.

“I help my kids with their homework, and I learn a ton of stuff I was never exposed to when I was growing up. And I went on to, you know, university and MD [medical degree] and everything, and I’m impressed with the stuff that they’re exposed to.”

Quote from Parent

The non-parents and parents seemed to be like-minded about the job the district has done providing the same quality of education and learning opportunities to all students throughout the district. It was a topic that was spontaneously and repeatedly raised at numerous points in both sessions, which is an indication of its salience and importance. During discussions of answers they gave on a written exercise to evaluate performance of various educational functions, respondents in both groups seemed to mimic each other in explaining the nearly-identical dismal ratings they gave for providing the same quality of education and learning opportunities to all students throughout the district. Comments indicated that they were due largely to impressions gleaned from other parents that have been embraced as fact, and the reputations of some individual schools, which are believed to be markedly better or worse than others. The non-parents seemed to believe that these differences coincide with the age of the school buildings, and also alluded to class or generational differences that they appeared to think were causally-related.

Although there was minimal specific recall of the Consent Decree, and events leading up to it, most of the non-parents and parents talked about perceived racial differences among the composition of the individual school populations, which they seemed to point to as evidence of systematic disparities. Notably, some of the parents also complained of inequalities within the schools. They expressed concern about the attention being given to the best and most struggling academic performers, which, they worried, was coming at the expense of the vast majority of the other students.

While there also were differences between the two groups in their assessments of the job that the school system has done providing students with suitable opportunities to be assigned to the schools of their choice, it was largely because many of the non-parents admitted they had little knowledge about the topic and did not appear to be attuned to it. They struggled to provide substantive assessments of the Schools of Choice program and appeared to take cues from the name of the program, rather than have specific impressions of it. In contrast, a majority of parents rated the District's performance as poor.

During this segment there were noticeable changes in body language among the parents that suggested substantial aggravation and ardor. Their biggest grievance was with the Schools of Choice program, which they scoffed at, because they questioned whether most choices were being fulfilled. Some implied that the system was too byzantine for them to understand and be confident about.

The two groups gave similar assessments of the District's performance communicating with the public, which about half in each session rated as poor. They cited the dearth of knowledge about the new superintendent as justification. Although it was evident that they seemed to be influenced most strongly by information from other District parents, about half of the respondents in both groups said they get some or most of their information about the schools by reading the *News-Gazette* newspaper. The parents suggested a myriad of alternative mediums for communicating with them that hinted at the difficulty of deciding how to wage mass communication in the modern information age. Interestingly, only about half the parents said they had recently visited the District's website, but nearly all said that they used social media, such as Twitter or Facebook. The parents were slightly more satisfied than their non-parent counterparts with the District's performance managing and using tax dollars. It appeared that few of the respondents in either group were aware that the District has been the beneficiary of a voter-approved sales tax, which is another indication of the lack of specific knowledge about intricate details of District operations, such as financing.

SCHOOL BUILDINGS:

Like views of the quality of education within the schools, non-parents and parents said the conditions of the buildings varied greatly from school-to-school. There were broad consensuses within both groups that the Central High School building was in the most egregious condition -- and lacked space for outdoor athletics, which many lamented -- but few could agree on the conditions of the other buildings, with most of the dissention centering on the condition of the Centennial High School building. Some of the non-parents were quick to qualify their answers by implying that the conditions of the buildings would not

"It was poor for me because...when they said 15 percent, but 80 percent of the people I talked to didn't get their schools."

Quote from Parent

"[Central High School is] definitely rundown, and the fact that it doesn't have room for its own outdoor football field and everything is definitely a downside."

Quote from Non-parent

materially affect the quality of education that is delivered within them. Others pointed to the existence of air conditioning to justify their beliefs that the buildings were, at least, adequate, which was a sentiment that was also echoed by some parents.

The idea of replacing the Central High School building met with great enthusiasm, but many of the respondents were ambivalent about re-locating it to another area. In addition to its historic importance, many said they could envision logistical problems that would be created for parents and students residing in adjacent neighborhoods, who would have to travel further to attend classes. The non-parents seemed to agonize over the dilemma of getting a new school, with athletic facilities that are common to other schools, or preserving something that is an ingrained part of the local heritage of the neighborhoods, even though there is not sufficient land available to accommodate sports. Some also complained of inadequate parking at the school, which they said should be rectified. A couple of the parents commented on its aesthetic appeal to explain why they had conflicted views about replacing it, but were incensed about the lack of athletic facilities. During discussions of answers they gave on a written exercise to evaluate the importance of various proposed capital projects, half of the non-parents and most of the parents said that it should be a high priority to construct a new high school to replace Central High School.

Only one of the respondents in either group said that renovating Centennial High School was a high priority, because many said that they were not aware of any problems or thought it was in good condition. Only about one-third of the parents had heard anything about the Future Facilities Process, which they believed was undertaking an analysis to repair or replace aging school buildings, such as the one used for Central High School. Neither the non-parents nor parents expressed any urgency or interest in the idea of renovating the Edison, Franklin and Jefferson middle schools to update facilities and expand capacities. As the discussion progressed, some of the non-parents appeared to subsequently second-guess their answers by asserting that they believed Edison was no longer in a safe condition. There was only rather modest interest among the two groups in the idea of renovating and upgrading the Dr. Howard and Southside elementary schools, with some of the parents citing growing enrollment as the reason they think such work needs to be performed.

Most of the non-parents were indifferent to the idea of building additional middle and elementary schools to accommodate enrollment. They appeared somewhat oblivious to enrollment trends, although they did not challenge the plausibility of the assertion that more students are entering the system. While opinions about the magnitude differed greatly among respondents, the parents appeared to be cognizant of enrollment growth, and about half of them said that it should be a high priority to build additional middle and elementary schools. Interestingly, some pointed to the reliance on trailers for temporary class space to justify their assessments. In fact, the subsequent discussions of trailers proved to be the most animating topic of the two sessions. As an indication of how

“There is a stigma attached to it to me. Because when I was in high school, the trailer was detention. That’s where the kids – that’s where the kids were in detention. If you had in-house suspension, that’s where they went.”

Quote from Parent

emotionally-charged the matter was to the respondents, nearly all of the parents and non-parents said that it should be a high priority to ensure that nearly every student has a seat in the classroom rather than having to take classes in a trailer, even though some were unaware of the practice. Many expressed indignation at, what they implied, was the inherent unfairness of doing so, and it seemed to have been most evocative to the respondents who theretofore had been unaware (“I’m shocked!”). Parents also complained of practical aspects, such as comfort during periods of inclement weather and accessibility for students with mobility limitations.

FUNDING FOR FACILITIES:

At the end of the sessions, the respondents in both groups were asked to speculate about how voters would react to a request for approval of a bond issue to provide funding for the construction of new schools buildings and renovations to some existing ones. The non-parents appeared split, with some saying that the community would vote against a bond issue because of personal financial situations, while others disagreed because they said that they, and others in the community, placed great importance on public education because of the culture that exists, due, in part, to the presence of the University. Parents appeared somewhat dubious. While they supported the idea in concept, they were, frankly, jarred by the potential size of the monetary request that they deduced would be required for such an undertaking. Although they speculated that most other parents would be supportive, because they strive for the best possible education, their greatest misgiving was the amount of money it would cost them. There also were some isolated questions about the need, and worries about the opacity of the District, which they said must adequately communicate how the money would be spent.

A closing comment is that, upon reflection, the most notable observation from the sessions is that the respondents appeared to be most interested and enthusiastic about intangible aspects, such as parental involvement, eliminating the inequity of requiring students to take classes in trailers, creating classroom atmospheres that are more conducive to learning and providing a consistent educational experience throughout the school system. This suggests that outreach to engage the public about the facilities needs should center on the benefits that can be achieved and ideals to be pursued, rather than bricks and mortar. Even the discussion of Central High School -- which most respondents seemed to think was in deplorable condition - - was eclipsed by the distress respondents felt over the fact that its students were being denied a typical and complete high school experience, because it did not have any athletic facilities for team sports that could serve a source of cohesion for students and the community.

If you have any questions about the information discussed herein, please feel free to call me at 614-341-7005. I will be glad to assist you in any way that I can to utilize the focus group data.

This information is based on focus group interviews at a neutral location on November 8, 2012 that were held during separate sessions with respondents who did and did not have children enrolled in public schools. The sessions were populated with randomly-selected, screened and incentivized registered voters residing in the Champaign Community Unit 4 School District. The results of the focus group research are context-based and, therefore, are not statistically generalizable to extrapolate findings to represent the views of the at-large populations of residents, voters or parents. Focus group research is a method for exploring and understanding the rationales for opinions and attitudes, rather than to measure them.