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40 East Adams Street
Suite 110
Jacksonville, FL 32202

TO: Dr. Nikolai Vitti, Superintendent
Hon. Cheryl Grymes, School Board Chairman

FROM: Trey Csar

DATE: October 26, 2015

RE: Feedback from October 19, 2015 ONE by ONE Public Education Forum

On October 19, the Jacksonville Public Education Fund gathered more than 130 diverse ONE by ONE education advocates from all over Duval County to learn about and discuss changes to the school grading system and the proposed program and boundary changes for several schools in our county. Participants had the opportunity to hear about both issues from Dr. Vitti, as well as from a panel of Asya Smith, a high school student and member of the JPEF Community Advisory Team, Melissa Daniel, representing the Duval County Council of PTAs, and Willie Brewster, the teacher of the year from Rutledge Pearson Elementary.

After the panel, ONE by ONE delegates engaged table discussions around these issues. Below is a summary of participants' feedback and opinions specifically about the proposed program and boundary changes, as well as recommendations about how to better engage the community in the upcoming working groups where the changes will be discussed in detail.

Community Feedback

While the forum was designed for discussions around both changes in school grades and school boundaries, most of the table discussions centered on the boundary changes. The primary themes that emerged from these discussions was a deep desire to:

Increase the level of communication about the proposed changes: Participants had a limited understanding of the proposed changes, with some not understanding that there was an upcoming process for community input. For those that had heard of the proposal, few details were known and rumors ran rampant. Creating a single, definitive location for community members to learn about the proposals, such as a dedicated web site, is vital. They were also eager to learn more about the working group/ACE process, and asked that the membership on those groups be intentionally diverse and the members' names be made public.

Better describe the rationale behind and potential impacts of the proposal: Though participants had the opportunity to hear from Dr. Vitti at the beginning of the program, many were still seeking clarity around the reasons the changes were necessary. They were particularly interested in the impact on students and less so on system-level factors, such as underutilization of school buildings or charter competition, which they did not find motivational. They also asked for more examples of where such changes had worked (e.g. The Leadership Academies at Eugene Butler), and suggested going through a scenario planning exercise to explore the likely impacts of making or not making a change.

Increase opportunities for public input: For a change of this magnitude, participants agreed that the community must have multiple opportunities for input on the proposal, and that those opportunities be made clear and marketed to a broad cross-section of interested and affected parties. They suggested using both electronic (web-based and social media) means, as well as traditional channels, including a specific focus on going door-to-door in affected neighborhoods. Community members also spoke about using a variety of intermediaries to host conversations about the issue, including school board members, churches, and nonprofit organizations.

Align expectations for new choice options and market them effectively: Finally, should any of the changes be approved, participants spoke strongly of the need to ensure that any newly-created programs (e.g. an academic magnet) were held to the same high expectations of existing programs of the same type. Also, the community felt strongly that a focused marketing strategy needed to be implemented for these new options, to ensure parents throughout the district knew of them and found them to be viable options for their children.

Recommendations

It is clear that continued public engagement will be crucial to the district successfully emerging from this discussion with community support and confidence, regardless of which changes are eventually made. The initial steps taken by the school district, to convene working groups and public forums, hold great promise, but the participants from our meeting believe there are additional actions that could help deepen the public dialogue around these issues:

1. Continue to remind the community that this is a proposal, and that their feedback is not just welcomed, but desired and necessary, in order to strengthen or adapt the proposal.
2. Build a comprehensive online resource for all materials related to the boundary changes and community engagement process.
3. Create a series of easy to understand materials (handouts, etc.) for each affected school or program that describe the proposed change, the rationale and specific opportunities for input and feedback.
4. Build a Frequently Asked Questions document and create a single place (e-mail address and/or phone number) where questions can be collected. Commit to a timeframe (e.g. 48 hours), inside of which all questions will be answered and posted to this FAQ.
5. Focus on creating conversations at all community gatherings on this topic, including working groups and public forums. With the amount of information related to any of these topics, it's easy to focus on the informing role, when what the community is seeking is true two-way conversation. Train and use strong facilitators to give the community opportunities to react in small groups after each segment of information is presented; capture that feedback and share what is learned back out to the community.

As you know, significant changes like the ones proposed garner significant interest from a wide cross-section of the community. Our experience over the past six years facilitating these kinds of conversations in our community, such as the one last week, show us that this interest, if nurtured and engaged effectively, can be a strong force for positive change in our schools. If there is anything we can do to assist you in these efforts, please let us know.