



RESULTS

2015

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ABOUT BEYOND BRICKS EBR

Beyond Bricks EBR is a volunteer-based process to gather community input on how to recharge excellence in our public school system. The impetus for this effort came from factors influenced by national, state, and local policies. Over the past several years, heated discussions at the national level about standards and curriculum have trickled down to the state level. Locally, this has resulted in much unrest around accountability, testing, state takeover of schools, and appropriate management of those schools. In East Baton Rouge, the focus on accountability scores and a history of unrest with district administration has recently motivated some residents to attempt forming a new city and, in turn, to form a separate school district. Additionally, the business community offered a model through proposed legislation that would have de-centralized school system management. However, this model was not driven by educational professionals or the community and failed.

In order to find effective and successful solutions, the community must again become a partner and a voice in the public school system. The Baton Rouge community has gone nearly two decades without any collective, meaningful discussion around the vision for the entire School District. Beyond Bricks EBR aimed to be a beginning in fulfilling this need.

A core group of community organizations began discussions to design and implement this community engagement process. The East Baton Rouge Parish School System Administration was engaged as a partner and enthusiastically supported the initiative, clearly understanding that it was community-driven. A large and diverse group of organizations supported the initiative (www.beyondbricksEBR/about-us).

THE PROCESS

Building on previous efforts and proven models of community engagement, the core group organized facilitated, small-group dialogues and made them as accessible as possible. Thirteen “Listening Events” were scheduled throughout the community at churches, schools, and libraries over three weeks. The facilitators were trained by a seasoned lead facilitator and partnered with a “scribe” to take notes on the discussions.

There were also four student focus groups, a Listening Event with principals, and one with the School District’s top administrators. An attempt to have a Listening Event for teachers resulted in poor turnout due to timing that conflicted with a testing period. Although some teachers participated in the thirteen community Listening Events, the core group plans to again attempt to reach out to teachers, as their voice is important in designing a vision for our public schools.

LISTENING EVENTS

Each Listening Event was hosted by a member of the faith community who welcomed the participants. The role of the host was to create a welcoming and safe space for dialogue. After a brief informational presentation about Beyond Bricks, a lead facilitator went through the dialogue process and guidelines ([Lead Facilitator Script](#)). This was followed by a scripted presentation on some facts about the school district ([Listening Event Presentation](#)). From there, trained facilitators at each table led the participants through the dialogue using a script ([Table Facilitator Script](#)) while the scribes captured primary discussion points.

Promotion of the Listening Events relied on widespread newspaper, television, radio, and social media. Participants were encouraged to sign up online and help promote the events. Informational flyers were posted at schools and local businesses. Community members were invited to attend any Listening Event that was convenient for them.

A total of seventy-four dialogues were completed averaging 8 participants each. No participant demographic information was collected. This number includes the principals, teachers, and senior administrators. Approximately sixty students participated in the four focus groups at two different high and middle schools. Their dialogues were facilitated in a similar format to the community groups. Additionally, online input was made available for a period of two weeks after all of the Listening Events were completed. There were thirty responses.

INTERPRETING THE COMMUNITY'S VISION

Upon completion of all Listening Events, a team of eight social science professionals were assigned to read and pick out themes from the scribe notes for each table discussion. These professionals met together as a group to discuss the perspectives and definitions from the notes. The themes and ideas identified by these professionals were then presented back to a group of facilitators and scribes to validate the observations and to determine any missing considerations.

The limitations of the process were thoroughly discussed as well. Beyond Bricks set out to engage as much of the community as possible in thinking about and discussing a vision for our public education system. Those who attended the Listening Events are likely community members who are already somewhat active and engaged and likely brought a certain perspective. Likewise, community members who were unable to attend due to work, transportation, or other issues did not likely have a strong voice in this process.

The results that are taken from this process are an interpretation through several layers of listening and consideration. Although this does not make the results invalid, acknowledging and appreciating such limitations will help to improve future efforts and provide guidance to the areas that need additional input.

RESULTS

The clear message from the community is that there is immense passion and support for strong public schools. People acknowledge there are many great things happening in our public schools, as well as great challenges and areas that need improvement or to be reconsidered. In some instances, results suggest more information needs to be shared with the public. In others, the community's perception warrants further investigation.

There is also a strong understanding between the role of the community and the role of schools. Schools are expected to educate all children that come to their doors and to help them develop to their best potential. Those children come with a large variety of needs. A high percentage of children currently attending public schools live in households with incomes below the poverty line. Participants acknowledged that the expectation to address these needs is not the sole responsibility of our schools. Our community must play its role.

The community wants a strong public school system that is easy to navigate with a clear path from pre-kindergarten through graduation. While the community wants strong, equitable schools that students attend close to home, it recognizes that all schools should be excellent and provided the resources to work to develop the whole child in partnership with the community for those needs outside of the educational mission of the school district. Additionally, the following themes were heard: testing and accountability, discipline, resource allocation, leadership, parental involvement, and communication and media relations.

TESTING and ACCOUNTABILITY

The community expressed a desire to see less focus on testing. There is a strong perception and concern among both the community participants and the students that standardized testing drives teaching. The desire is to have a stronger focus on the whole child emphasizing the arts, extra-curricular activities, and free play/thinking. The community expressed resentment of the state takeover of schools, as well as the district's response of moving students around to avoid this. The community wants an alternate answer to measuring success of students and schools.

DISCIPLINE

The school system is expected to address the challenges of our community. Both community participants and students acknowledge that students who are acting out need more than discipline. Community support in the areas of mental health, mentoring, and parent support are seen as key needs. The voice of the students was very clear that follow through and more effective responses to disruptive behavior is needed. There is also a perception in the community that there are policies in place that limit what teachers and principals can do to be effective in this area.

ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

The perception in the community is that some schools are better resourced than others and a tiered system of schools has developed. The vision of the community is to have all schools be equitable and strong pillars of their geographic area. Particularly at the high school level, the community does not take as much pride in nor identify as strongly with schools as it once did. The community wishes to see success, data, and demand drive educational programs—replicating what works and offering this to a larger population of our children.

LEADERSHIP

There is a strong desire to see a higher level of functioning between the school board and administration, as well as between board members. This concern stems from a high turnover of leadership at all levels and the general sense that employees on the front line are not supported by higher-level administration. The impact of state education policies is seen as a barrier to district success. A culture of support toward teachers and students is a high priority. The community expressed an immense amount of respect for teachers and a desire to see them treated as professionals allowed to do their job. There is a strong belief that principals can make a significant impact on a school's success, both positively and negatively.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The thoughts around parental involvement were expressed widely throughout all Listening Events. The community has a great deal of empathy toward parents that are unable or ill-equipped to be involved in their children's education. However, this is seen as a key component to increasing excellence in our schools. In addition, some parents who do get involved voiced frustration with their experience. They communicated ambiguity about roles and an unwelcome reception as a volunteer. There is a perception that the public school culture is not one that nurtures community collaboration.

In addition, the possibility was discussed that attending schools nearer to one's home may increase parental involvement in the school. There is a public belief that the forced bussing that happened during desegregation is still happening. This stems from students having long bus rides due to choice and attending magnet schools not near their home.

COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RELATIONS

Both community members and students clearly conveyed their dismay with the lack of coverage of the great things that our public schools are accomplishing and the focus on negative things. This was explained as a lack of focus on the part of the school district as well as inadequate coverage by the media. There is a desire to see a stronger partnership between the School District and news reporters to convey the strengths of our public

schools and not just the challenges. Additionally, seeking ways to improve district communication to the community about school-level opportunities would strengthen participation and a sense of belonging.

STUDENT REMARKS SUMMARY

There is a very strong sense of social justice within the student body. They want all students to receive equal treatment without the sense that some schools or students are better than others. They want to be heard and acknowledged. They want a positive school experience with warmth, structure, and consistency.

Since their primary interaction is with teachers, they have strong feelings on this topic. In learning about the difference between certified and highly qualified, there is concern that they are being taught by teachers that may not really know a subject matter. This point requires further exploration and discussion with students. There was also a strong concern expressed about the adverse effect of substitute teachers on the quality of students' experience in the classroom. However, their primary concern was to have teachers who care, who enjoy their profession, and who are supportive of students.

The students expressed the desire for teachers and administration to have a better understanding of the root causes of discipline issues and the tools to effectively address them. They understand that their peers who are acting out need and want help. They believe the key to stemming discipline issues is to respond with effective, caring measures beginning at the elementary level and to ensure measures are followed through.

The student experience expressed is supported by community comments that the focus on testing and college readiness has diminished the joy of learning. There is strong support for less college prep and more whole student development for a multitude of careers. Having later school start times, mentors, and more student-interest driven activities were expressed as possible solutions.

The clear message is that students want to be heard and have an impact. They are living this experience every day. Giving public school students a voice and ownership in their educational experience is a necessary step to strengthening the school system.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

The Beyond Bricks EBR initiative set out to engage the community in re-charging public schools. The process is ongoing and evolving, but the results have already exceeded expectations. Raising the awareness of the challenges public schools face and fostering a community-level conversation on solutions has, in itself, accomplished an important feat: to make the issue of public schools a dialogue rather than a top-down monologue. The connections made between community members at the Listening Events have already created additional supports and services.

There is a commonplace view in the community that the city's path through desegregation has led to many of the current issues, but there is also an acknowledgement of the value of having a school district that reflects the diversity of the community. How to deal with this and truly reunite as a community is less clear. Some commented that it is time to "move on," but that is easier said than done due to long-standing beliefs and the structural dynamics of the city.

The dialogue illuminated the many different perceptions and experiences the community has with the public school system. Although the District Facts presentation gave some information, there is much work to be done to have an informed population about the dynamic offerings and complex challenges of our public schools.

Although it is impossible to capture every comment made during the process in a paper, continued dialogue around solutions will give the opportunity to further explore and implement the community's vision. Many specific solutions and insightful remarks will be shared at more in-depth discussions with the community.

NEXT ACTIONS

Beyond Bricks will take these results across the community and also to our educators and policy makers for more in-depth, solution-focused discussions. This will be the community's opportunity to test its perceptions and gather facts to inform progress. The results will provide the framework for developing priorities, policies, and solutions to be implemented. Additional input from teachers, principals, special education participants, and more students is important as this initiative moves forward. There is also a need to capture more feedback from families who have challenges with school participation due to resource and transportation issues or language barriers.

The priorities of this initiative will be fostered by the leadership team of Beyond Bricks EBR in collaboration with the wide variety of participants. A community organizing approach will be taken to create focus on each of the key areas, starting with Community Results Assemblies. These meetings will allow for an interactive and robust dialogue to determine additional facts needed, top priorities, and solutions the community can come together to implement and recharge our public schools.