Creating a Formula for Student Success in Norwalk Public Schools

A Community Conversation
A Message to Our Friends in the Community

Thank you for your participation in the community conversation “Creating a Formula for Student Success in Norwalk Public Schools.” It provided an opportunity to engage a broad cross section of the Norwalk community in productive, action-oriented deliberation about its public education. Participants totaled 121 and were comprised of approximately 56% parents, 13% students, 12% educators, 9% community service providers, 3% public officials, and 6% business, retirees and other. Twenty percent of parents were Hispanic and 14% of total participants were African American.

By coming together, you not only showed your dedication to the youth in our community, but you also performed the vital service of working together to help clarify areas where parents, educators, business leaders, employers, colleges and universities, and community-based organizations need to do more to support our students and our public schools.

This report summarizes the information that was recorded in the focus groups during the conversation. We invite you to think about where we might go from here, and to decide the role you’d like to play in helping to get there. We hope that you will want to remain involved as we ask the Norwalk Board of Education to work with us – the community – to develop a plan of action moving forward that helps Norwalk Public Schools be the best that they can be.

Thank you again for your participation.

Very truly yours,
The Planning Committee
Norwalk Education Foundation
Norwalk Community College
Norwalk NAACP
Senator Duff
Coalition of Norwalk Neighborhood Associations
Norwalk PTO Council
Norwalk League of Women Voters
Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce

What are Community Conversations?

Community Conversations are carefully constructed problem-solving dialogues that bring diverse stakeholders together to discuss an important and pressing public issue. This Community Conversation was entitled “Creating a Formula for Student Success in Norwalk Public Schools.” It provided an opportunity to engage a broad cross section of the Norwalk community in productive, action-oriented deliberation about its public education. Participants totaled 121 and were comprised of approximately 56% parents, 13% students, 12% educators, 9% community service provider, 3% public officials, and 6% business, retirees and other. Twenty percent of parents were Hispanic and 14% of total participants were African American.

Common Ground

Participants found agreement on many issues, including:
• the need for a visible school leader with a vision, a plan, and the practical skills for implementation;
• improved communication both within schools and outside the education community to enhance relationships;
• increased community partnerships and better coordination of these partnerships;
• high education standards and accountability applied to everyone: students, the BOE, administrators, teachers, and parents.

Concerns

Participants shared experiences and identified many common needs that they believed to be critically linked to student success. Those cited most often were:
• the district’s need to communicate more effectively on many issues: budgetary process, parent involvement, standards, and accountability;
• lack of coordination with school programs and the community;
• the need for more volunteers for educational/mentoring programs and alternative funding sources.

Priorities for Action

From the many suggestions made by participants, the common ground and major themes lend themselves to action items that the Norwalk Board of Education and the Norwalk community can implement and move forward to ensure student success in Norwalk Public Schools.

Leadership

The next Superintendent of Norwalk Public Schools must be visible and connected to schools and the community.

Suggested Strategies:
• The Superintendent and school leaders must leave the 3rd floor of Central Office and go into the community for meetings to touch Norwalk;
• School leaders must eliminate the silos that currently exist across school departments, the Board of Education, the city, and the community by creating a shared vision with action that shares best practices;
• Include and/or develop Latino/Hispanic leadership in the schools.

Resources

Norwalk Public Schools needs to utilize alternative ways to fund education.

Suggested Strategy:
• Access private funding and in-kind services by identifying community resources, and accept them.

Communication

Norwalk Public Schools needs to do a better job communicating both within and outside the school community.

Suggested Strategies:
• Create a public relations/communication plan to educate people on what the BOE is doing, especially so that people in the community understand how school funding is spent;
• Continue ongoing public dialogue about improving Norwalk schools in different places with a diverse audience for sustained input from stakeholders;
• Use daily or weekly email blasts and texting to communicate to more people.

Community Partnerships

Norwalk Public Schools needs to increase community engagement, especially with non-educational community groups.

Suggested Strategies:
• Create a “Community Outreach” plan that explains why the non-educational community members are stakeholders in the school system;
• Create “Latino Night” for Norwalk schools to reach more Hispanic parents;
• Bring school activities to communities where families are located;
• Create a buddy system of kids mentoring kids, and parents mentoring parents in innovative ways, like parent home visits to non-engaged parents;
• Allow parents to volunteer in their school’s before and afterschool programs;
• Consider the creation of more magnet schools to increase community partnerships;
• Continue and expand partnerships with preschools.

Standards/Accountability

Norwalk Public Schools needs to define what high standards are, how they should be measured, and what the consequences should be if the set standards are not met.

Suggested Strategies:
• Create meaningful and ongoing term professional development for teachers;
• Go beyond test scores and test-related learning – create a group that evaluates innovative curricula;
• Encourage principals to be accessible to their staff, and to empowers their teaching staff to get the job done;
• Create a “best practice model” to duplicate what’s working in Norwalk Public Schools;
• Develop a bottom-up system for funding and resource allocation, and provide information to the community about how the budget is developed and how the money is allocated;
• Analyze school staff turnover and test scores;
• Define “high” expectations;
• Increase attendance of parents at Board of Education meetings.

Other Action Item Suggestions:
• Teach parenting skills to students in high schools;
• Increase ownership of parents in the PTO – perhaps by having dues or some other requirement.

For each of our initiatives, we need the Norwalk Board of Education and the Norwalk community to plan, orchestrate and sustain action. Each initiative can succeed if we work together for a common goal: the educational success of all of Norwalk’s 10,500 public school students.

This community conversation is just a first step. We challenge the Norwalk Board of Education to continue with this dialogue started by the efforts of the Norwalk Education Foundation, Norwalk Community College, the Norwalk NAACP, Norwalk PTO Council, the Coalition of Norwalk Neighborhood Associations, the Norwalk League of Women Voters, Senator Bob Duff, and the Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce.

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