

Community Committee on Neighborhoods and Schools
Summary of Community Forum
Pearce Middle School
October 9, 2007

Member Attendance:

(See attached list)

Others in Attendance:

(See attached list)

Proceedings:

- The forum was called to order at 6:10 p.m. in the cafeteria of Pearce Middle School.
- Although 87 people registered, total attendance is estimated at 150. In several cases, one person registered for a family.
- Mark Williams, President of the AISD Board of Trustees, welcomed attendees and provided a brief background on the Community Committee on Neighborhoods and Schools.
- Joey Crumley asked attendees to break out into assigned groups for discussion. In the smaller groups, participants would first take a survey (also available online on the AISD website) and then respond to a series of questions focused on the work of the committee (questions attached).
- Attached are summary notes from each of the four group discussions. Three group discussions were conducted in English and one in Spanish.
- Following their group discussions, attendees reconvened briefly to hear highlights from each of the groups.
- The co-chairs thanked attendees for coming and providing valuable input to the committee.
- The forum was adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

CCNS Member Attendance Record:

	2007												2008		
	5/22	6/12	6/26	8/14	8/28	9/11	9/25	10/9	10/23	11/13	11/27	12/11	1/8	1/22	2/12
Andy Anderson	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
Sally Brackett	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
Terry Clark	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓							
Christiane Woodley Erwin		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓							
Chiquita Watt Eugene															
Lourdes (Lulu) Flores	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
Linda Gibeaut	✓	✓		✓	✓										
Rev. Sterling Lands	✓			✓	✓			✓							
José Marrero	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓							
Rachael Proctor May	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
Susan Moffat	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓							
Leroy Nellis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓							
Yolanda Pedraza	✓	✓		✓											
Rev. Ivie Rich	✓		✓												
Paul Saldaña	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓							
Alfredo Santos	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓								
Kathie Tovo	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓							
Jim Walker	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓								

✓= Present

Others in Attendance:

Laurie Barber, Principal, Andrews Elementary School
Laurie Barzano, Community Member, Becker Elementary School
Laura Bautista, Community Member
Maria Bohner, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Sonya Bolden, Community Member, Pearce Middle School
Elmer Bonilla, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Nancy Bosch, Community Member, Linder Elementary School
Cheryl Bradley, AISD Board of Trustees
Maria Brito, Community Member, Reilly Elementary School
Maria Cantu, Community Member, Pearce Middle School
Benita Cooper, Teacher, Pearce Middle School
Joey Crumley, AISD Planning & Community Relations
Maru Cueto, Leon Translations
Heather Dalrymple, AISD Planning & Community Relations
Maria DeLuna, Community Member, Pearce Middle School
Mary Diaz, Community Member, Becker Elementary School
Charlotte Dotson, Community Member
Christina Escobar, Parent Support Specialist, Andrews Elementary School
Josephine Espino, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Nicanor Esquivel, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Jennifer Fahrenbacher, Teacher, Becker Elementary School
Jason Fowler, Teacher, Pearce Middle School
Monica Fuentes, Community Member,
Edgar Garcia, Community Member
Delia Gonzales, Parent Support Specialist, Pearce Middle School
Dr. Janis Guerrero, AISD Planning & Community Relations
Felisha Henry, Teacher, Pearce Middle School
Celia Hernandez, Community Member
Raven Hill, Austin American-Statesman
Jimmie Hines, Teacher, Pearce Middle School
Barbara Johnson, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Betty Johnson, District Advisory Council
Ann Kriss, Community Member, Becker Elementary School
Tomas Leon, Leon Translations
Rashaanne Lewis, Austin Council of PTAs
Thelma Liñon, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Angela Lopez, Community Member
Corina Lopez, Teacher, Andrews Elementary School
Dora Lopez, Teacher, Becker Elementary School
Elvia Lopez, Community Member, Pearce Middle School
Marcia Maisenbacher, Math Specialist, Pearce Middle School
Lisa Martin, Community Member
Marcia L. Martinez, Community Member, Pearce Middle School
Misty Martinez, Community Member
Jorge Meave, Assistant Principal, Pearce Middle School

Rosa Mendez, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Helen Miller, Community Member
Rosa Montoya, AISD Planning & Community Relations
Elizardi Morales, Community Member, Pearce Middle School
Laura Muñoz, Community Member
Consolacion Nava, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Amanda Navarrette, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Gloria Neunaber, Windsor Park Neighborhood Association
Beverly Odom, Principal, Linder Elementary School
Blanca Padron, Community Member
Josie Palacios, Teacher, Becker Elementary School
Elva Perez, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Beverly Pickett, Teacher, Pearce Middle School
Shalana Poole, Community Member
Maria-Elena Ramon, AISD Planning & Community Relations
Benita Reyes, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Nettie P. Roby, Substitute Staff, Pearce Middle School
Paula Rodriguez, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Irma Rosas, Community Member, Reilly Elementary School
Sharon Ryder, Community Member, Andrews Elementary School
Bob Sessa, Community Member, Becker Elementary School
Billie Spivey, Community Member, Pearce Middle School
Kenny Taylor, Community Member
James Trautman, Principal, Pearce Middle School
Gloria Treviño, Community Member
Maria Vidal, Teacher, Pearce Middle School
Marie Washington, Community Member
Allen Weeks, St. Johns Neighborhood Association
Mark Williams, AISD Board of Trustees

<p style="text-align: center;">Community Committee on Neighborhoods and Schools Guiding Questions</p>

The following questions are numbered for reference and are not presented in any particular order of importance:

1. How should AISD inform and engage stakeholders regarding important school issues and concerns?
2. What do “over-enrollment” and “under-enrollment” mean to you, and how do you see these issues affecting your school and your neighborhood?
3. How should the district identify and consider alternatives for over-enrolled and under-enrolled schools? What steps should be included in the decision making process? Who should be involved and how? What is a reasonable length of time for this process?
4. Who in the community should be involved in helping neighborhood schools increase enrollment and performance?
5. Other than enrollment, what factors should AISD consider in making decisions about your school?

Summary Notes from Group Discussions

Group 1

Information

- Meetings: advertise two weeks in advance
- Forums
- Change locations: priorities and issues vary from school to school
- Letters, flyers, TV
- Make information parent friendly
- Proof by parent group
- Ongoing basis, not crisis mode
- Door-to-door flyers to those without kids, through churches and neighborhood associations, PTA presidents, CAC members
- Allow more time before decisions are made. How much time depends on the issue; two weeks to a month to a year. Possibly five years for larger problems.
- Can school go to the people (neighborhood associations, churches, etc.)?

Under-enrollment

- Need clear definition of under/over enrollment
- Need to look more at what capacity and utilization mean
- Funding, staffing, salaries
- Community does not have power over boundary lines
- Vulnerable communities: safety, transportation, parent involvement
- Limited programs in under-enrolled schools due to lack of students. This is a cycle; schools will continue to lose students.
- Flexibility of formula at campus level (Becker has ACES, special academies, dyslexia offices)

Academic achievement versus enrollment

- Look at formula: identify campus needs.
- Common areas lacking in older campus.
- Consider whole climate of school
- Support personnel areas
- Give “weight” to factors

Time frame

- Start process at beginning
- Trend or annually
- Established trigger point
- 3-5 year time period
- Interactive process: develop collaborate action plan with benchmarks
- Hold AISD accountable to community for information
- Impact on other (receiving) schools must be a factor
- Survey to school: direct to parents
- Consider survey takers: get people to critique
- Test audience at various schools
- Internet access?

- Consider kids' point of view as well

Who?

- Everyone!

Other factors?

- How it affects school, parents, students
- Transportation issues to new schools
- Leaving community "network"
- Economic factors
- Community needs: are parents heard?
- Under-enrolled may not be able to offer curriculum of larger school
- Book, Small is Beautiful for smaller schools. Very special for those students
- Possibly use campus space for academy
- Larger schools may not be best
- Look at each school and community individually. Get all people involved.
- AISD should not consider closing our schools. Find proper use.
- Encourage students to stay
- Transfer policy promotes not supporting neighborhood school
- Look at transfer policy
- Encourage parents to give the school a chance
- District needs to offer more of its expertise and resources to school community to accomplish action plan for campus.

Group 2

Question #1

- Working closely with community
 - Meetings at school
 - Having all information at same time
- Email doesn't hit everyone ... try flyers, phone calls
- Recognize different schools are different
 - Churches or neighborhood associations might be your best bet
 - Don't even count on the school (flyers, CAC, PTA)
- Timing is really important; church or neighborhood association needs a lot of advance notice for newsletters
- Need to get outside of AISD networks so non-parents can be involved
- Recognize language and education barriers; use "people-friendly" language
- Personal phone calls
- Make it clear what the data and letter mean to me ... numbers not percentage
- Grocery stores, other places of business
- Barbershops (for need for mentors); example of Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BB/BS) trying unique ways to get the word out
- Newspaper won't reach everyone
- Should have a "stakeholders list" that anyone could join to keep informed about AISD issues
- Need earlier notice
- Electric bills

- People are afraid to speak out and identify what they see is wrong, especially on the east side

Question #2

- Teacher at Linder elementary: over-enrollment means they're at about 150% capacity
 - Had to add extra specials
 - Lunch starts at 10:05
 - Kids only go to library every 2-3 weeks because library is being used
 - PE classes share gyms
 - "We keep asking for relief and it's not happening"
 - Proposal to move kids to Becker: transportation issues meant many parents prefer kids close but in overcrowded schools rather than across town
- Perception that some people don't want "these kids" in the neighborhood school
- BB/BS will (sometimes) prefer to provide services at schools that aren't under-enrolled (even though those are often the kids who need the help the most)
- Becker: even though under-enrolled, the kids have huge needs
 - Good that parents can walk to schools
- BB/BS proposals to close schools affect their funding
- Doesn't like portables ... why can't we plan better?
 - Response: it gives flexibility for fluctuations in school population size
- Even if parents at one school don't want kids from another school transferred there, you should transfer them anyway

Question #3

- Closer communication between district and city on permitting
- Give better information to stakeholders
- Don't tell us in April for changes in fall; September/October good time to identify problems; in January go to community with those problems and propose a few options
- Start a year in advance at least
- The boundary task force already has proposals for what boundaries should look like ... "I should be a part of deciding those"
- Teachers are a good source of information, but don't always have authority to communicate all their ideas to parents
- School board trustees can invite people to participate if they're there to represent all kids
- People in East Austin don't trust AISD because they've been mistreated in the past; that's why they don't get involved
- Need administrators who can relate to the community

Question #4

- Need strong mentors
- Administrators need to keep the doors open to the community to allow mentors
- Need administrators who welcome the community's involvement
- Recruit retired people to mentor
- Pair schools in different parts of town
- BB/BS; CIS; other mentoring groups; APIE
- 2,500 kids in AISD have mentors ... can we increase that?
- Get Chamber to help make it easier for people to volunteer during work hours

Question #5

- Lack of transportation
- Parents' educational and family status
- Need for mentoring
- Language
- Transfer policy
- If a school is low performing too long, it gets into a "death spiral"
- Need caring, effective teachers
- Need for equity between schools
- Need strong administrators
- Work schedules
- Student advocacy: the difference between advocacy levels at different schools

Group 3

Question #1

(a) Stakeholders should be informed through the following means:

- Newspaper, TV, radio ads/coverage
- Notes sent home with students
- Regular mail
- PTA meetings/newsletter
- Parent support specialists
- Phone calls, automated phone calls
- Email
- Churches
- Neighborhood associations
- NOTE: Most participants heard about this meeting from Parent Support Specialists and flyers sent home with students

(b) Communication should:

- Be written in "plain English," as well as Spanish and other languages as needed
- Be direct and to the point
- Marked so that the recipient knows this is an important issue

(c) The district could reach more people by:

- Having multiple meetings at different locations
- Supporting the parent support specialists and paying them more ... they are key to communication
- Building bridges between elementary, middle, and high schools
- Engaging parents
- Keeping parent contact information current; both parents and staff should work to keep this current in school office
- Having a "parents room" at schools to give parents space to socialize and get information

Question #2

(a) "Over-enrollment" means:

- Children don't get individual attention
- More than one-quarter of the campus is made up of portable classrooms
- Not enough tutors

(b) "Under-enrollment" means:

- School's demographics should be considered in determining under-enrollment; schools with large numbers of higher needs kids may function best with low enrollment and smaller class sizes
- Most parents do not view under-enrollment as a problem
- Parents generally prefer small class sizes and smaller schools
- Under-enrollment can be issue if size is too small to offer extracurricular activities and special areas, such as art, music and PE; may need to find creative ways to help smaller schools offer certain activities, perhaps by partnering with another small school

(c) Other enrollment issues:

- Academic achievement of the school may indicate over-enrollment or under-enrollment; if students are doing well in an "under-enrolled" school, maybe it is the right size; if they are struggling in a fully-enrolled school, that may indicate over-enrollment.
- Too large of a school may not allow all interested students to participate in extracurricular activities due to lack of space or extreme competition for spots
- Community needs to be involved in boundary decisions
- District should monitor each school's enrollment and deal with it before it becomes a problem
- District's determination of schools' ideal size needs to be reevaluated to find true optimum size

Question #3

(a) Identification and alternatives:

- District should consider socio-economic status of school and needs of students in determining whether a school is over- or under-enrolled
- If school is over-enrolled, close it to transfer students; first preference should be given to students in the school's attendance zone
- If school is under-enrolled, look at school-compatible partnerships to multi-purpose the school building (daycare, police substation, etc.)
- Consider combining two under-enrolled schools with opposite socio-economic statuses to provide balance and give more opportunity.
- District needs to use business model and study successful schools so it can apply methods that work to less successful schools
- Priority must be to provide a quality education, not just move kids around

(b) Steps district should take in decision-making process:

- Communicate through early notice and multiple community meetings
- Provide a multi-year process for major decisions, involving parents, staff and community
- District needs to devote resources to address major school decisions and give the community a fair and informed starting point

(c) Who are community members who should be involved?

- All those mentioned in Question #1 response, including parents, Parent Support Specialists, PTA, churches, neighborhood associations, etc.
- Education experts working with the community.

(d) What is a reasonable time frame for major decisions?

- At least five years to bring parties together, develop a plan and implement it
- Over-enrollment should be addressed more quickly since it takes away from the education process, ideally in one year to 18 months
- Under-enrollment should be addressed in a longer timeframe to allow time to rebuild a school

Question #4

- All parties listed in Question #1 response should be included: parents, PTA, Parent Support Specialists, area churches, neighborhood associations, etc.
- In addition, the district's central administration should commit to taking an active role in helping to rebuild a struggling school

Question #5

Additional factors for consideration should include:

- The importance of the school to the community fabric
- Small central schools often cannot become physically larger; though they can't compare in size to suburban schools, they are vital to their communities and that value should be recognized
- Don't be shortsighted and look at ongoing community development; a school that is currently under-enrolled may be fully enrolled in a few years
- Impacts to tax base: closing or repurposing a school will likely lower property values
- Consider basic needs of students and families, such as access to adequate food, clean clothing, decent housing and health care; lack of basic necessities can negatively affect school performance and the community should be enlisted to address these needs
- Low-income schools tend to be branded failures; need to change the paradigm to ensure high-quality education for all students
- Work to create more socio-economic diversity in schools
- Recommendations of committee should not simply create a better process by which to close schools; goal should be to create a process that will help us maintain all our public schools and encourage them to function for the benefit of students and the community.

Group 4 (Conducted in Spanish)

General Notes:

- Group consisted of approximately 24 parents (almost all mothers)
- Most of the participants were under 35 years of age
- A majority of the parents were from Andrews and Reilly elementary schools
- 20 of the parents had been in the United States less than 10 years
- These parents were eager to participate and contribute to the sessions; however, they were generally unfamiliar with many of the topics we were asking them to talk about

(e.g., over-enrollment, under-enrollment, state law regarding academic performance requirements, AISD policies, and policies/practices specifically related to their children's schools)

Survey:

A majority of the parents required a significant degree of assistance filling out the survey in Spanish. Some of the reasons include:

- Many participants had less than a high school education and found the language level used in the survey difficult to understand
- Most participants had little experience taking surveys
- Survey terminology was either unfamiliar to respondents or not translated consistently (e.g., the over-enrollment/under-enrollment term used in the guiding questions was different than the term used in the survey)

General comments from participants:

- Language was mentioned frequently as the main barrier to participation in school events
- Participants did not know about or had not been informed of the resources available to them at the schools (e.g., the majority had not heard of Parent Support Specialists; when the translator and Pearce Principal were asked what Parent Support Specialist is called in Spanish, no uniformly used district term emerged)
- Teachers are held in very high regard and are the most sought after and trusted source of school information
- Participants hold the schools in high regard and greatly appreciate the efforts made to educate their children
- Participants are starved for information that helps them navigate the school system and are eager to contribute to the schools themselves; they want to be asked to help, but they do not know what they can do or the best way to interact with their schools; they asked for guidance
- Participants identified teachers as the ones who care the most for their needs; school administrators and the district lagged far behind; many participants gave the district an "A" grade in their surveys, however responses diverged greatly when participants were asked if staff, administrators, district, trustees, or superintendent "valued" their input; teachers, school administrators, and bilingual principals were highly valued
- The majority of the participants did not have Internet access and were unfamiliar with the Internet; only a few had home computers, but most parents indicated they were willing to obtain one for their children if it would help them at school; some were concerned that they would not know what their children were doing or watching on the Internet if they bought them a computer
- AISD's Channel 22 was unfamiliar to the group
- Participants recommended community gatherings, churches, and other social events as good places to receive school information
- Radio was mentioned frequently as a good place to get information
- Many parents asked of the school could call them before a meeting
- Parents wanted more than one scheduled meeting time so that they could attend school events
- All participants worked

- Notes from school, especially from the teacher, was the preferred method of school-to-parent communication
- Despite the lack of specific knowledge about over-enrollment and other important school issues, participants expressed happiness and were flattered that we were asking their opinions
- Participants said translations were not uniformly provided at school events
- Many participants expressed a reluctance to speak in school gatherings because they felt they did not know enough about the subject at hand; they also expressed a strong desire for a school orientation that would walk them through who to contact in the school when they had specific needs
- When asked, participants voted unanimously against closing schools for any reason
- Childcare was important to school meeting attendance; however, most parents had their children with them at our meeting; the reason expressed by a few parents was that they attended another school (not Pearce) and they were reluctant to leave their child with a person they did not know
- Although the participants were not initially familiar with the term over-enrollment, the group expressed concern that over/under enrollment could cause school closure and wanted to be informed of the process and help in whatever way they could; the key for them was to avoid closing the school at all costs
- Participants were uniformly against transferring their children to other schools citing lack of a second vehicle and the inability to easily reach a child if there was a problem
- Participants expected challenges facing the schools would be solved with district, school, and parents working in conjunction to find solutions
- Participants wanted more meetings with teachers and principals so that they could help their children get ahead
- Parents repeatedly cited bilingual teachers, administrators, and principals as extremely important to making them feel welcome at the school
- Participants wanted to know the process the district and schools use to make decisions; who could participate, and how could they participate; they want easy to understand information that tells them exactly what is expected of them and how they can help
- Regarding the length of time it should take to make important decisions affecting the school, participants indicated that the district should take their time and allow input from those affected; many tended to trust the district to determine a reasonable time frame for decisions, as long as those affected were consulted
- Transportation to meetings was particularly important for two women who attended along with their five children, including an infant; they walked approximately ten blocks to this meeting and walked home afterward
- At the end of the focus group, many participants thanked the moderators for asking their opinions and expressed eagerness to participate in similar forums again

