**System of Great Schools**
**School District of Philadelphia**
**Elkin School**
**Parent, Family & Community Input Report**
**November 2019**

## Data Collection and Analysis

Staff from the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) conducted two focus group sessions at Elkin School in fall 2019. The Office of Family and Community Engagement (FACE) supported the session by providing translators, as many participants preferred to provide feedback in Spanish. The first session took place on October 10, 2019, and the second on October 16, 2019. A total of 38 participants provided feedback across the two sessions.

ORE staff and a FACE translator also interviewed two parents during school dismissal time on October 23, 2019. ORE also interviewed a parent by phone on November 1, 2019. In total, 41 parents, guardians, and community members participated in the interviews and focus groups. (See Appendix A for the focus group and interview protocols.)

ORE staff took notes on all interviews and compared them to transcripts from the focus group recordings to identify key themes, which we categorized into the following areas:

- Climate & Safety
- Academic & Non-Academic Supports
- Communication & Family/Community Engagement
- Leadership & Systems

Please note that most of the participants spoke Spanish, so the notes and transcriptions capture the feedback as translated.

## Summary of Recommendations

Based on the feedback from focus group and interview participants, the SGS process should lead to the following results for the Elkin community:

1. Additional safety officers should be hired, trained, and stationed outside the school and in the schoolyard during student drop-off and pick-up.

2. The school should implement before- and after-school programs that offer students a variety of engaging activities (such as music, dance, and sports).

3. Additional staff should be hired and trained to support teachers, supervise students in classrooms and hallways, and intervene when students experience conflicts (such as bullying or fighting).

4. The school building should be updated with fresh paint and an improved playground.

5. School leadership should implement school-wide systems and procedures for communication between parents/guardians, and school staff, including teacher

and leadership. Communication should include information about the curriculum and how families can support learning at home, updates about after-school schedules and activities, and conversations about how the school is addressing and resolving any academic, social, or behavioral issues.

6. The school should continue to implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

7. The school leader should continue to be present, visible, and welcoming to families in and outside of the school building.

8. The school should implement a system for drop-off and pick-up and establish a safe, supervised waiting area that will protect students from the elements and will not result in caregivers receiving tickets from the Philadelphia Parking Authority (PPA).

## Findings

**Climate & Safety**

All focus group and interview participants said they were concerned that drug use, the presence of drug paraphernalia, and drug-related violence made the area around the school unsafe, and participants in both focus groups discussed this issue more than any other topic. Straightforward examples of this feedback include:

> *I'm very concerned about the safety of the school.*

> *The drug activity—that's a big issue.*

Parents and guardians also provided specific examples of their concerns:

> *As I was coming on the corner of [the school] there's a step. There's a guy shooting up right there [on school grounds] sitting on the steps. Shooting [up] right there, and I will tell you, he looked at me like, "What?"*

> *There is no security here as such. …All too often, they leave the gates open and people from the community just walk through.*

> *Like that man said, they sell drugs. We've got them driving up, going and shooting up right here by the school.*

Parents and guardians also described maneuvering around drug paraphernalia when walking their children to and from school:

> *I believe that the District should ensure that it is safe for the children to arrive to school, even walking.*

Several participants also said they would like the school to open early so students have a safe place to wait before the school day begins. One parent explained:

> The thing is, I keep [my child] in the car, but how about other kids? I'm not concerned only about [my child]—I'm concerned about the others, too. I've seen many people there, they come and they leave their kids at 7:30, and they leave to [go to] work. I can't understand that. Those kids are alone there, they don't have [anyone] to watch them. It's hard for only one guy to watch over a bunch of kids. I'm pretty concerned about it.

Several parents and guardians suggested that the school could solve this problem by opening earlier. Two examples include:

> I have to be to work sometimes [at] 8:00 in the morning, sometimes 6:00. Because of that, sometimes my daughter can't come to school. Is [there] a way that she could come in and wait until it's time for school to open?

> [It would be helpful] if the cafeteria can be opened at quarter to eight so that students can enter, have breakfast, and be ready for classes without the parent being penalized, waiting outside for the security of the child. When it's raining or snowing, we have to wait out there until 8:30.

Participants also spoke about how they would like the school to offer more engaging after-school opportunities. One parent recounted:

> Last year my son was in the after-school program. He was like, 'Mom, take me out. I don't want to be here.' One, it was not active. Two, it was boring.

Another participant had similar feedback:

> They need a better after-school program...I know the one they had last year ain't worth nothing.

Several participants noted that improved after-school activities would ensure that students are supervised in a safe location and also motivate them to come to school and be engaged.

When we asked for feedback on school facilities, one participant suggested improvements to make the school brighter and more inviting:

> Let's brighten [the school] up. It looks so gloomy...can we get some color...you can make it look pretty to [kids], and they're okay with it. Just make it look comfortable. Bring some excitement to it…it looks so dull.

Another parent requested improvements to the schoolyard, explaining that the asphalt has gotten so hot that students have burned themselves when playing outside.

**Academic & Behavioral Supports**

When we asked for feedback on instruction and academics, many participants spoke positively about what their children were learning. For example:

> *My daughter has been here since kindergarten, and I don't have any complaints at all, in regards to instruction.*

> *I do not complain. My child is progressing along very well...the education is good.*

One parent suggested that the school should provide students with more challenging opportunities, as the schoolwork was sometimes too easy.

Parents provided positive comments about the existing PBIS system. For example, when we asked what was working well at Elkin, participants replied:

> *I like the sky dollars.*

> *They get [sky dollars] when the cart comes every Friday. Then they can buy things, or they can save up money for events.*

> *I like how they have parties if their attendance is good every semester.*

However, participants also expressed concerns that some teachers may be unable to manage all their students and maintain an environment conducive to learning. One participant asked:

> *Why [can't] Philadelphia…have an extra person there for the teacher in the classroom?*

Others echoed this point:

> *Teachers are good, but they need assistants.*

> *I was thinking about the teacher, they control the whole class like this. A teacher can only do so much.*

Respondents also noted that they thought the school should have additional staff in the hallways and throughout the school building. For example:

> *There are not too many people working the corridors in the building. Children are doing their own thing.*

When asked what the school needed, one respondent said:

> *More staff, period.*

Another responded similarly:

> *Add more people…to work with these kids.*

Two parents also commented that, because the school does not have an autistic support classroom, they had to transfer their children in order to secure the necessary supports.

**Communication and Family/Community Engagement**

Participants mentioned that many teachers use Class Dojo to communicate with families, and the feedback around this method was positive. However, some mentioned areas where the school could improve communication. For example:

> *One of the things that [I] would like...is better communication.*

> *I'm big on emails just for the paper trail. It's just hard to get a response.*

> *We want more communication between the office, the workers…and the parents. When we call the office, they hardly ever…[respond] to our call. At times, it even goes to a recording.*

A few parents specified that they would like better communication about homework and ways in which they can support their child's learning at home. Two examples include:

> *It's my first year here at the school, and I have a little problem with the homework, because sometimes my son asks me for help, but I don't know what that says, so I will not help him.*

> *He's sent home with stuff he doesn't know how to do. And he's doing two different things, one on his grade level and one not on his grade level, so I get really confused with that.*

**Leadership & Systems**

Overall, many participants spoke positively about the principal. One parent noted that she likes how the principal is always outside the school during drop-off and pick-up.

When we asked about areas for improvement, many participants voiced frustration that there is no way to drop off students or pick them back up without risking an expensive parking ticket from PPA. Examples of this concern include:

*Why [is PPA] issuing those tickets when there's nowhere to park? We have to park to get our kids.*

*[PPA] has already been coming by, giving us tickets…for parking and waiting outside for our kids to go inside the school. I'm waiting to see five tickets at my house in the mail, and it's not right.*

*I just paid a ticket that I didn't know I had. It was at my house and I didn't know [anything] about it. I would want to fix that. That's one of the issues with the schools. Let us parent for our kids. You know what I'm saying? We be frustrated.*

Parents and guardians also discussed the need for a better system that defines bullying and sets clear parameters for how it should be addressed. A few participants said that when their children were bullied or mistreated, they did not feel that approaching the teacher resolved the issue properly. They explained:

*My daughter will come up and say, "Someone hit me. Someone did this." I say, "What did you do about it?" She says, "I tell the teacher." But then, there's nothing [the teacher] can do, other than tell the mother, but they can't contact the mother, so the next day, my daughter is still getting hit on.*

*My daughter says that sometimes…she'll tell the teacher but the teacher [doesn't do anything].*

Another parent/guardian had a similar experience:

*[My child says] "They do things to me, and I tell the teacher. I tell the teacher, but she doesn't pay any attention."*

## Conclusion

This feedback, along with other data, will be used by District and school staff as part of the System of Great Schools planning process. As the process unfolds, additional parent/guardian input will be sought out, as needed.

# Appendix A - Focus Group Protocol

**Introductory talking points:**

- I am part of the SDP team who is working at each of the schools in this process. I am here to collect feedback about your experiences with the school so that your voice is included in how the school is supported.

- I do not make any decisions. My job is simply to gather your ideas about the school and get them to the decision-makers.

- I will audiotape our conversation because it is the most accurate way to document your feedback. However, your comments will be anonymous and no one besides myself will have access to these recordings. They will be transcribed and comments combined together.

- You have knowledge no one else has about this school and this neighborhood. This is important information in this process.

- Let's make sure everyone's voice is heard this evening. *[Review norms on the poster]*

**Instructions for facilitator:**

Thank everyone for coming. Give overview of how focus group will work: we will cover parents' views on how it feels to be at the school, what their children are learning, the school leadership, family and community engagement and the school building.

Let parents know that the principal and other staff members have been asked <u>not</u> to attend so that parents feel they can speak freely. If district representatives are present, introduce them and let parents know that they are not affiliated with the school and that should feel free to speak openly and honestly and that their comments will remain confidential. Pass out consent and get signatures.

We have a lot to talk about and want to make sure everyone gets heard. We are recording the meeting to make sure we represent the conversation as accurately as possible. These meetings are confidential—there will be no names in anything shared with the district.

*Note: When appropriate, after several people have made similar points, ask: Do other people feel similarly? Do other people feel differently? We can ask for a show of hands on each and then (depending on size) ask a few participants to share.*

**Questions:**

1. **Introductions**: First names only, connection with school, child's age/grade.

2. What do you see as the **strengths** of this school? What aspects do you and your child like most?

3. What do kids **need** at school that they don't already have? If you could improve one thing about the school, what would it be?

4. **About the school climate**: Let's start with the school in general. I'm interested in your thoughts on how the school feels to you, how people treat each other, how the kids behave, and how the school handles it. What are your thoughts about these things?
      a. Do you think your child feels respected in this school?
      b. Do you feel respected?
      c. How would you describe students' behavior here?
      d. Do you think discipline here is fair and effective?
      e. What are things the school could improve on here?
      f. What are the biggest problems?
      g. Any thoughts on the school building and what could make it better?

5. **About instruction**: Now let's talk about what happens in the classroom. In general, would you say your child is getting a good education here? Why or why not? What would you say have been some of your child's best learning experiences? [probe for subjects, projects, teachers, etc.]
      a. Thinking about the work that your child receives, how challenging is it for your child? Does it require much writing, creativity, or complex thinking? Is your child assigned projects to complete? If so, what kind?
      b. What about some of the worst learning experiences? [careful about probing here] What made these difficult experiences?
      c. Besides report cards, how do you know how your child is doing in school? Does this information help you?
      d. What kind of support does your child receive if they are struggling? For example, does the school offer tutoring or one-to-one help?
      e. How do you feel about your child's relationship with his or her teacher(s)?
      f. How is your relationship with your child's teacher(s)?
      g. What do you think could make teaching and learning for your child stronger?

6. **About leadership**: What would you say are the biggest strengths and weaknesses of this school's leadership team?

7. **About parent & community involvement**: How would you describe parent and community engagement in the school? What suggestions do you have for making it better?

> a. What kinds of events does the school invite families to? Do a lot of families attend?
> b. How does the school keep in touch and keep you updated? Do you like this? Why or why not?
> c. Does the school have a SAC (if the focus group is not held during a SAC meeting)? What do you know about it? Is anyone here involved? What can you tell us about the SAC?
> d. Does the school have a Home and School? What do you know about it? Is anyone here involved? What can you tell us about the Home and School?

8. **About facilities**: How would you describe the school building?

> a. Does the school seem well-maintained? Are there areas of the building you think are especially well- or poorly-maintained?
> b. What about the classrooms?
> c. What suggestions would you have for improving the school building?

9. **Catch-all**: What else is important to say about the school and your child's experiences I have not asked about?

> a. What are your hopes and fears for this process?
> b. Final things you really want the District to know about this school or how to make it better?