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System of Great Schools
School District of Philadelphia
Wagner School
Parent, Family & Community Input Report
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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2017, the School District of Philadelphia, in partnership with Temple University, embarked on a school review process. Temple University Urban Education faculty and graduate students took the lead in the development, data collection, and analysis of parent and community experiences with the six target schools.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Between October 4th and October 24th, a research team visited Wagner School for four events: a community kick-off meeting, two focus groups, and a community input and ideas meeting. At each event, the team held between 1 and 2 small group discussions with parents and community members, for a total of 5 focus groups. According to the district's Family and Community Engagement (FACE) team, 23 parents, 2 staff members, and 28 community members participated in our data collection process at Wagner. The team also received 7 parent surveys. While other people (staff, community activists, etc.) also attended the events, the analysis in this report focuses on parents (or caregivers) and their comments about their and their children's experiences.

The goal in conducting the focus groups was to understand how parents experienced Wagner, what they saw as its strengths and challenges, and what suggestions they had for its improvement. Facilitators developed a question protocol to discuss specific issues such as academics, climate, leadership, and parental involvement, but the team was also open to topics that parents felt were important to them. Lori Shorr attended every event as lead facilitator and was assisted by Temple graduate students. The conversation at each meeting was recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Analysis involved multiple steps. First, after conducting two rounds of meetings (the kick-off meeting and focus group 1) and debriefing about the conversations, the facilitating team revised the protocol for the community input and ideas meeting to allow the team to dig more deeply into key topics and test emerging theories about parents' perspectives. The team then read the transcripts, making notes about key themes and important issues. Next the team created a coding system, which included such codes as "Academics," "General Climate," "School Safety," "Leadership," etc. A coding book, with definitions for each code, facilitated consistency across coders. Each transcript was coded, with all data related to a particular topic highlighted and put into

a new document. Coders also included comments aimed at summarizing and interpreting the quotes. Then the lead researcher for the school re-read the coded data to further examine themes and patterns, compare parents' comments, identify points of agreement and disagreement, and prioritize areas of concern to the parents. The results of this analysis appear in the feedback and findings presentation and, in greater depth, in this report.

In this report, the team lays out findings, summarizes data across key issues and uses quotes from parents to illustrate the points. Each topic discussed here surfaced at multiple sessions and was voiced by several parents. For each, the team assessed the extent to which parents generally agreed on the issue or whether or not there were opposition perspectives. The examples that appear in this report are not the only instances of parents speaking on a particular topic. Rather, they were chosen because they are especially clear, best represent parents' perspectives, or raise issues for further analysis.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Summary of major areas of strength:
- Caring staff members
- Student safety at dismissal
- Frequent communication with parents

Summary of major areas of concern:
- Unaddressed behavioral and mental health needs
- Student safety
- Staff vacancies
- Academic rigor

MAJOR AREAS OF STRENGTH

Parents, while concerned about the improvements that they very much want to see at the school, were also quick to outline some of the ways in which the school is meeting and exceeding their expectations. The following represent those strengths most often mentioned in relative order of how often they were mentioned:

1. Caring staff members

The parents often mentioned faculty and staff by name who they experienced as caring and made great efforts to deal with issues. It is notable that someone from every level of the school staff, from the principal to deans, to teachers to the lunchroom personnel was mentioned positively.

"It's like the staff, they're trying. I can see the effort in the staff."

"My daughter said that she likes that her teacher is relatable."

"The one we have here [counselor] is absolutely wonderful, however, she needs some help."

"[Sixth grade dean] was on it he said I want to meet with you the next morning but another incident happened that prevented with me from meeting with him. So I know he's on it and I like that. Like I said, I'm liking what I see so far and dealing with what I have seen. So I'm liking what Wagner is doing for me and the child. I'm going to give them their props. "

"One of the lunch ladies she's like 'oh you're so and so' she said she [my daughter] was really disrespectful and she told me what she did. Then when my child came in she said 'I told' and I like that. I like that. I like them to know everyone's gonna hold them accountable for what they do, everyone. Not just the teacher. I like that."

"Yeah, most partly the staff is welcoming. That's not really my problem with the staff it's just, I don't know, just getting things under control but I experience, 'Hello, how you doing.' They make me feel comfortable."

"I see them walking the neighborhood and talk to them and stuff."

2. Student safety at dismissal

The parents across focus groups mentioned that the orderliness at dismissal time has greatly improved from last year, although though there are still some concerns about that time period.

"Well, living in the neighborhood I can tell … Last year it seemed like, as far as the let out, it was a little rowdy. It seemed like they had that more under control this year with clearing out the schoolyard."

"I like what I see. Mr. ***** is always on the street, there is an older officer I see he is always there. I look at them going coming home I like what I see. No fighting in the streets, at least I haven't seen it."

"I live right across the street so I don't know because if it's early in the school year, but it seems pretty calm than normal. Because last year I seen lots of kids fighting like a mob almost. But I haven't seen that this year so far."

"And the principal does a great job when 3 o'clock comes, she is like "alright let's keep it moving, keep it moving" you know. She breaks up, some kids from other schools come and hang out with their friends she just tells them to keep it moving."

3. Frequent communication with parents

Parents mentioned that staff were responsive to parents' concerns and often communicated with them in a timely and satisfactory manner.

Parent: *Yes. "We are in contact with teachers every day."*
Facilitator: *"Do you call them on the phone or you walk up here or you email with them or you text? How you-"*
Parent:*"We text, they call, the app, the remind app, I come up here. Whatever I need to do."*

"I have to give them credit. The teacher, when I first met her, I said, 'call me'. And she has. And then I met the dean and he's called me. I'm like, call me. And I like that. And he's called me…. So I like that with Wagner. That was a plus for me. I didn't get that at the other school so I'm kind of comparing."

"I know from my experience, I had a situation, they told me I needed to see the principal. She called me, and the situation was addressed."

Parents also mentioned staff members' ability to de-escalate situations by communicating with parents and students.

"I remember she got in trouble...they immediately got the child involved and put them together and asked the child questions and my child questions. And they really got a quick resolution there. So I see that they are on it and I like that. And I think that my child knew that they're not going to play here."

MAJOR AREAS OF CONCERN

The following are the concerns that parents raised about Wagner in order of how often they were mentioned by parents.

1. Unaddressed behavioral and mental health needs

Students with behavioral and mental health issues that are not addressed tops the list of parents' most pressing concerns. Parents concerns about student mental and behavioral health were often expressed around particular students and their negative actions. We are not including those quotes here in order to protect the children. But it is important to know that parents are aware and concerned that serious problems exist. When asked what would improve the school parent responded:

"... Some sort of psychiatrist or something like that to help ... not guidance counselors but... A therapist to just listen to the kids and talk. Talk to the kids that have some kind of angst"

"So behavioral health if I was king, behavioral health, mental health, instructional support."

Parents also talked about the impact of unaddressed mental or behavioral health issues on the learning environment in classrooms and the negative impacts for the other students.

"She pretty much keeps to herself but everyday she getting in trouble because of everybody else. And she feels as though she's not learning enough."

"Because the teacher's in the middle of trying to teach the lesson and again with the mental health and whatever other challenges there is from trauma the classroom is disrupted. So if the period is 40 minutes maybe the teacher gets ten

minutes before they're having to deal with a classroom size that's over 28 students. That's a lot to try to teach Algebra to or History to. You've got people acting out because they're issues are not being addressed."

"But there are a lot of mental health issues here in the school and overcrowded classrooms so that the teachers go from instruction that they're trying to share with the class to having to be Social Workers or Psychiatrists, or Psychologists or whatever. They are dealing with emotional and mental health and just a plethora of challenges when they're trying to teach algebra, or History, or English. And in an already overcrowded classroom."

"So, there are some kids that haven't been identified with anything from dyslexia to autism. So there quite a few that you'll see in here. Not just in the ES classes but are struggling because they haven't had things identified that are greater than just immaturity. They actually need some support. Some clinical support and I don't mean anything that's medication. But Wagner just seems to be the place where everybody just drops in."

"Once we got here, it's really being able to find out what is really going on in the classroom because the kids are so disruptive in certain settings. She can't be tolerated around there when I'm trying to put her in that setting. The behaviors are off the hook. The teachers, I don't know how they are addressing the behaviors. That's losing out on all of our kids that are really trying to focus on learning."

2. Student safety

Parents are understandably concerned that their children are safe when they are out of their care. The parents at Wagner certainly are no different. They shared incidents that they knew of that made this point. One father told of his child being injured several times this year already, due to student-on-student altercations. Another parent told of of an injury her son sustained last year. One parent described an incident between her daughter and another students:

"They push her. They push her. She was talking with her friend, they push her. They grab her head, they push her on the wall… The kids, oh my God. It's hyper here. Hyper, hyper…When the school was done, I was come to pick up my kids on the side, oh my God."

Many parents are concerned about drug-related activity across the street at the playground where their children go for gym and other school activities:

> *"Why are grown people standing there doing drugs? I've seen it with my own eyes. Just different things like that. While these kids are out here."*

> *"The only concern I have is the activities that is across the street a little bit right there where the park is. Because the kids go across there for what I understand they do outdoor activities."*

> *"For gym. Because it's right there. There is a drug corner. They hang out there. You are grown. Like why are y'all grown and standing in front of a playground. It's very intimidating. Like if I did want to take my child across the street, they are hanging out there so that is the only concern I have, the community piece. I don't feel safe with that across the street. Other than that, I feel safe with her inside of the school."*

3. Staff vacancies

Several parents mentioned that there are too many teacher vacancies, which impacts student learning: and that they are concerned that the level of learning is being impacted by this:

> *"There's a lot of substitutes."*

> *"It was like 'I don't have homework because my teacher wasn't there.' And that's a concern for me."*

> *"There are substitutes that are here. You don't get the same quality of attention and subject matter from a substitute as you would a regular teacher. You need to address the vacancies that have been in the school."*

4. Academic rigor

A perceived lack of academic rigor was also an issue that parents mentioned in all of the focus groups:

"I do feel maybe a little more academic? I don't see her being as pushed as she needs to be and I know especially with her being seventh grade, is when high school's is looking. That is a concern for me. Like I said, even though she had the smaller setting but making sure she getting more of that rigor instruction and everything."

"She came from a catholic school and one thing my daughter did say was, "Mom I did this already." That was the biggest issue is to keep her engaged and challenged and to know that we're a year behind. Maybe we can do something about that."

"They are spending 75 minutes in a classroom with a piss poor curriculum that does not address what they need to have by the time they go out to high school, let alone by the time they graduate."

Facilitator: *"Do you feel he's learning here?"*
Parent 1: *"No."*
Parent 2: *"Because in [name of a school the student previously attended] you felt like it was more of a challenge, more of his speed."*
Parent 1: *"Yes."*
Parent 2: *"I understand that."* [said as a confirmation]

"My son has special needs….The school he came from was [name of school]. I have two children that graduated from there and I have my son that's here, he came from there. Coming from a challenge within himself to a place of structure and pride and great education to here. I feel so bad for him."

SUGGESTIONS FROM PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

The parents provided some suggestions on how to move forward at Wagner School, which are detailed below. The following provides details on each one of those areas. These are not in order of importance but merely a listing:

1. More supervision at dismissal

Even though many parents commented that dismissal time has improved compared to previous school years, they feel that it could be further improved. t In order for the students to be safe during dismissal parents would like to see more adult supervision around the school:

"The supervision is not enough [it's not enough] supervision outside for those kids whatsoever. In the morning and when these kids get out of school ….not at all, it's not enough."

"'Cause every day when I pick my daughter up it's just insane. I'm being honest, it's just insane here. I see cops in everything but I don't know this enough. I don't know."

"I see when they come out the teachers really cannot...account for all those kids."

2. More help in supporting their students at home

Parents would like to support their children at home and have the tools to do so. They often mentioned that their children do not bring home books, which would allow them to look up materials to help the students complete their homework. They also mentioned that something like an agenda book or calendar with due dates would help them help their children:

Parent 1: *"Yeah. Yeah, the book thing. When I was going to school … I know I'm kind of older now but it was a little different. I would get books sent home and I've been out of school for a long time so I be trying to help her the best way I can. Go on the internet 'cause some certain things I forgot so sometimes books ... And if not, I go to the library."*
Facilitator: *"But they don't bring books home?"*
Parent 2: *"No."*
Parent 1: *"No."*
Facilitator: *"Okay and you're saying if they had books they could bring home, that could help you?"*
Parent 1: *"Yeah, I would-"*
Parent 2: *"Be able to help them."*

Parent 1: *"Try to remember again certain things. It's been a long time."*

More than one parent mentioned the need to take their student to the library in order to help them with their homework since their children do not bring textbooks home:

"He can't do his homework because he didn't understand what they taught him today. I have to take him to the library to read how to get it done. You know, don't get me wrong. It's not too much work it's just it has to be done."

One parent mentioned that her child brings home books from school, so there are some inconsistencies around this concern:

"Now when I go through [child's name] books I will find, you know, certain math to help me see how it was done, and I can re-explain it to her and reinforce it in her head and I like that. She does bring home all these books and I like that. But she's bringing home all these books and she's showing me the new books she has and I'm liking it. So I'm liking the start of this year, seeing the textbook and knowing what she's gonna learn. I like that."

Parents also raised a desire for agenda books and calendars of homework assignments.

"That is a complaint that I had in the beginning is that there's no type of agenda for the kids to follow. I'm used to her having an agenda book. Maybe it's just an elementary school thing. I think it's still ... we deal with calendars every day as grown folks. I think it's a great start to keep them independent. It's hard for me to be able to know what's due if it's not clear on here."

Parent 1: *"Right but how can you have parent collaboration, and them sitting down and working with the kids if we don't know what agenda to follow? They expect the kids to tell us? That's not the case. They are not going to be able to explain things….The problems that are circled are what she does for homework, okay. Because if not, I'm gonna have her do the whole sheet and she's gonna look at me frustrated."*
Parent 2: *"And sometimes I don't trust my child if she says I just have to do the front. Because I will make her do the front and the back. I just wish the teacher*

would, like I said, that activity book, do pages 1 and page 3. So I can see it in writing."

Parent 1: *"When they were going to Prince Hall, they would get agenda books at the beginning of school year so it kind of followed and see what they was doing throughout the school year."*

Facilitator: *"And that's something you found helpful?"*

Parent 1: *"It helped me keep on track of what they was doing so...Like when I'm driving the car I'll just shoot off little games or see whatever they doing in school ... If they practicing multiplications I just shoot numbers at them for them to answer back. I don't know what they working on now so it's hard for me to test them to see what they learned."*

Parent 2: *"Yeah, I mean, she used to get calendars but I haven't really ... Some type of agenda to see what's going on. I would like that."*

"I want a calendar. I want a calendar. When the month comes I want a calendar. Where is the calendar? I don't get it. Every child gets a calendar. I don't want to go on the computer, I want it in my hands."

3. Positive, engaging programming in the classroom and during after school hours for students and for families

Sometimes in schools that have been identified as historically low-performing, parents speak only to the making up of "deficits"' in the school. While it is true that many of the parents focused on making sure their children were getting "what they are supposed to get," they also want more than that for their children. Parents' comments below are about community building for parents, engaging pedagogy for students and bringing more "joy" into their school community.

Several parents suggested a need to build community:

"Let's collaborate together, figure out some ways to get everybody involved, whatever the case is…. And also I know that I've had the pleasure of being a part of parent cafés.... So that's a way of engaging the parents and having something, a place for them to come let their hair down. And having those meetings, having those Family Fun Nights. Having a panel, just a small panel, like one night just to have a question or answer or moderator to get what the parents' thoughts are."

"But I would like to see more school parent communication or togetherness. I know I went to this school back then we had Family Fun Math night every Wednesday or so. And have that with family come bring and they had different games, different skills, and you test your skills or whatever. Activities like that for the whole family or the community. Even if you don't have a school...Have a kid in school."

They also suggested that after school activities would engage students in the arts and asked for real-world learning opportunities that allow students to explore their interests:

"I would say after school programs. I know like when I was coming to this school we had like chess club, or basketball, theater, stuff like that. I would like to see stuff like that."

Engaging students in real world learning that takes advantage of their interests was also mentioned by several parents:

"Getting them something that they really wanna do. I'm talking about, not the ones who want to learn, I'm talking about the ones who just running around just doing what they wanna do. Find something that they are more engaged in."

"Do you think that they need more exciting things in the classroom? Not just sitting in the classroom like all day. There's the experience outside things of what they learning. Whatever they learning take a trip. Something to keep them going. Not just sitting in the classroom. It seem like they're bored and don't know. They need an outlet, not just sitting in the classrooms. For example, if their learning about the Holocaust or something like that. Take a trip, go to a museum. Let them see anything they learning about. I mean, I know every day can't be a party but you know something."

"I would like to see our kids be more joyful and be able to express themselves through ... Whether that's music, poetry, cooking, sewing, in addition to the academics. And to show how important math is when you're trying to make a dress. You actually need to know the size of a person. Like The Workshop School actually."

Parents understood that in order to do some of these things, teachers would have to be supported differently:

> *"So I would like to see the teachers supported in a different way that allows them the freedom to exercise out of the box thinking, creativity."*

4. Disinvestment by the district and school

Parents noted that school resources have been cut in recent years, including clubs, teaching assistants, and greater adult to student ratios:

> *"Classroom sizes that actually make a difference where teachers actually have an assistant and a coach and a classroom that they can actually get to each and every student. I remember a spelling test of homework but classwork really made a difference because we were interactive with our teacher because it was few of us. It was a few it wasn't 30 plus."*

> *"We don't have any money for the schools. They keep taking away all the programs, that's an issue as well to the teachers."*

5. Improved food quality and improved lunchroom

Some parents mentioned that the quality of the lunch offered to students and the environment for serving the lunch should be improved. They explained that this is especially important because for many of the children, lunch is a critical component of their daily nutrition.

> Parent 1: *"Might sound silly but better lunch."*
> Facilitator: *"No, it's not silly."*
> Parent 1: *"Ever since I went to school. She complains about it like - come on, a little better with the lunch food."*

> *"There's not enough food or not good food for them at lunch. A lot of them depend on the meals here to eat. They're impoverished."*

> Parent 1: *"Well the lunches are horrible."*
> Parent 2: *"Exactly. They need to make the lunches better for the children."*

"The lunchroom downstairs is like you might as well be in jail. You might as well be in jail. It's a very dark, gloomy place that I don't think any kid should be part of and I don't feel like they go in there and they feel respected."

6. Support for students who receive special education services

There were quite a few parents of students with special needs in the focus groups. Some of the comments above were from those parents. Here are some of the comments they made about the services their children are receiving at Wagner:

"So I feel like I have support around the teachers. For example, the social studies teacher, [name of teacher], she's able to sit her down with one of the other students in the classroom just to kind of make sure she's supported with the work. So being able to match her with a peer to support that makes me feel good. It does."

"I think that with this school not having an autistic support class, you know, the learning support teachers who are on staff right now, I think they should do a better job collaborating with the school where the child is coming from."

"Yeah I feel my child has special needs and she may need to be either ... I keep saying she needs a wraparound. She needs somebody to be with her."

Additional parent comments

The parents who participated in the focus groups were very engaged in the focus group conversations and, particularly at the final focus group, they seemed enthusiastic about helping to make positive change in the school. The majority of them also expressed frustration and sadness that the school was not one they all could feel good about sending their child to everyday.

"It's not fair. Why am I afraid to send my kid to the neighborhood school because of all the stuff that's going on and everybody saying, 'The kids is bad. The teachers' the same.' You know? I shouldn't feel uncomfortable sending my kids to the neighborhood school."

One of the parent remarked upon her biggest fear for the school:
"Okay, so my fear is just nothing's changing, it remains the same."