



College of Education
TEMPLE UNIVERSITY®

**System of Great Schools
School District of Philadelphia
Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences
Parent, Family & Community Input Report
November 2017**

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INTRODUCTION

In Fall 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 research and analysis process, focusing on parent and community experiences with the six target schools. This report represents a synopsis of the major themes from the focus groups and meetings conducted at Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences. (FSAS).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Between October 9 and October 26, Temple University Urban Education faculty and graduate student team visited Feltonville for four events: a community kick-off meeting, two focus groups, and a community input and ideas meeting. At the kick-off meeting there were 7 small groups, at the community input and ideas meeting there were 3, and there was 1 group at each focus group meeting. Edwin Mayorga, from Swarthmore College, joined the team to facilitate groups in Spanish and aid with data collection and analysis and the writing of this report. According to the district's Family and Community Engagement (FACE) team, 135 parents, students, and other family members; 44 staff-members; and 35 community members participated in the meetings. While all participants' comments were recorded and transcribed, the analysis here focuses on families and their comments about their and their children's experiences.

The goal in conducting the focus groups was to understand how parents experienced Feltonville SAS, 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. Maia Cucchiara and Edwin Mayorga attended every event as lead facilitators and were assisted by two Temple faculty members and five 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 meetings to allow us 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 researchers 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:

- Positive and caring school climate
- Quick and effective approach to discipline
- Frequent and effective communication
- Strong and committed school leader
- Hard-working, dedicated teachers

Summary of major areas of concern:

- Academic rigor, support for students and technology
- Need for more culturally and linguistically diverse staff
- Insufficient resources
- Safety in the neighborhood
- Parent involvement
- Skepticism About SGS Process

MAJOR AREAS OF STRENGTH

For the most part, parent and family members' perspectives on FSAS were extremely positive. Their comments highlighted the warm, caring climate; the effective approach to discipline; strong communication between home and school; and the dedication and hard work of the school leader and teachers.

1. Positive and caring school climate

Parents see the school as a caring place, where students and their families are welcomed, known, and respected and where school staff care deeply about the children.

“It’s so much love and compassion, and they really care—like these are their own children!”

“So it’s a very open forum in this school, and everyone seems to be very caring. From the principal on down.”

“I see the principal out there every morning and he’s like, ‘Good morning, kids! Come on, kids!’”

“About the teachers, they’re good! I mean they worry about the students. Like they make sure they come to class every day or, even the principal, they call to make sure your child come to school and if something happened they let us know.”

“I feel welcomed when I first come to this school, from the secretary to the staff. Yeah, everybody is respectful and I feel at home. I never had any problem, any disrespectful, or any bad feeling. I always feel welcomed. And any situation I come to address they always resolve. I’m happy about that.”

“And you know there’s always, you walk in the building, ‘Hello! Good morning. How can I help you?’ There is always a staff member that would ask or help you, direct you to where you want to be.”

The principal and staff’s presence outside and in the yard after school are especially meaningful to family members, as it shows a deep commitment to keeping the students safe.

“[The principal’s effort to] protect all the children... is very, very important to me.”

“One of the strengths I think is safety.... I’m saying safety because there are staff members on this corner when the kids are coming in or out. Basically at dismissal there is more staff outside and they get involved. And they sometimes even walk them like half a block, like when they see any trouble. I feel safe when my child comes in and out of the school.”

“The last three years, it has gotten so much better. Mr. Piniat, the teachers, they'll walk the kids. I mean they do everything.”

2. Quick and effective approach to discipline

Family members at FSAS reported feeling that the school is safe. They spoke about few discipline problems, and agreed that problems are addressed quickly and effectively.

“One of the things that I like most about this school is the fact that there are so few discipline problems. We don't seem to have a bullying problem here.... And if there is a problem, they can always find someone to go to talk to.”

“I came into the office, immediately. The next morning, I was here. I asked for the principal but they dean came over, and immediately ... I was literally called within an hour.... And everything was settled.”

“From what I've seen, they handle it quick. They don't let that happen, from what I have seen. From that point, they are good on that.”

“Like my daughter feels safe. She likes it, she tells me all the time. In the beginning, actually this year—so my daughter always brings money and it turned out that this little girl was actually taking the money from her and she wasn't saying anything. But a teacher found out and that was solved so quick, like fast, and now there's this little group that actually like watches over her.”

While the school emphasized resolving problems quickly, this did not—according to parents—come at the expense of a thoughtful, constructive approach.

“What I like about the school is, if they know that a child is acting out, the school works with them, the teachers work with them, they try to get to the bottom of it... It's not just like, ‘Oh, you got in trouble. We're kicking you out.’ Or ‘Oh, you're getting suspended.’”

“Like the teachers and the staff, the principal, they all try and address it. They try to get to the bottom of it.”

“It's like they're trying to help the children so they won't continue to be like that... It's ‘They don't normally do that, they just started acting out, and it's a consistent thing. Okay, what's causing this?’ And that's what

they do. They want to know what's causing this and how can we fix it and how can we make it better so we can make this a better child growing up in the community.”

3. Frequent and effective communication

Communication emerged very clearly in the focus groups as another strength at FSAS with parents calling the school “*an open door*” and referring in particular to frequent calls and reminder messages they receive from FSAS.

“I feel like the school is very open to parents. I've never been turned away or shut me up when it came to an issue. The teachers are very open. They always have a line of communication open. They're very open about everything that is going on. They let parents be aware, if you're not getting a memo, you're getting a call. You're always informed of what's going on in the school. You're always able to talk to somebody to address your needs or issues.”

“They call when your kids are late, so by then you can know where he is. If you know he left early, you should know if he's somewhere else. So I really appreciate that about this. Every day, if they're late, they call you. They make sure they contact you—that is very important.”

“We get calls every Friday like in Spanish and English, so whenever any kind of language, letting us know, ‘Look, it's Friday. Have a safe weekend, I hope everything is fine.’ And then on Sunday we get another phone call a message saying, ‘Look, don't forget that tomorrow is Monday and you have to send your kids in uniform and don't forget that we need to keep our average up for absences. If [you need] anything, give us a call back.’ Then, Monday, ‘We're back on Monday, thanks for coming, and we love you all. Have a safe day.’ And it's every communication. ‘We have meetings. Oh, don't forget we have a meeting, we need you here!’ And, you know, it's like a family environment thing...”

“Everything is like ‘Have a nice evening.’ And ‘Don't forget picture day, don't forget President's Day. Don't forget dress-up.’ You know, they keep you up to date. Because myself, I'm telling you the truth, I put the calendar on the refrigerator and if you don't remind me, because I'm worrying about my own kids, I don't have time to look at it. But they're still keeping up with you and the kids.”

The school's efforts to reach out to parents in their native languages (especially Spanish) were also striking to parents.

“They do communicate well, because they send us the grades, one in English and one in Spanish so we know the percentage grade, the number of absences...They send that in Spanish, too.”

“Mostly nobody takes that time to do a recording in any kind of languages. To make you feel safe... Like it's so much love and compassion and they really care. Like these are their own children.”

4. Strong, committed principal

Parents and other family members were similarly enthusiastic about the principal, seeing him as caring, responsive, skillful, and hardworking and a significant improvement over prior school leaders.

“The principal, now, he greets everybody. He takes care of the kids. When they're outside, he's outside, even if it rains, snows, whatever... I mean, he's respectful. You come in and if you've got any questions or whatever, he goes straight to you, and talks to you... When your kid needs help, he's right there too.”

“He's a very good leader. This is why I've been saying and I continue to say.... He cares for the children academically, socially and safely. He's always everywhere. I don't think he gets a break to sit down. “

“He's very caring, and when I see him I say, ‘I pray for you.’ Because I feel like, you see, he really cares.”

“Another thing I noticed of him, I don't know how he does it, but he knows every student's name. He calls them by their name. I'm like, “how do you know all their names?”

5. Hard-working dedicated teachers

Parents and family members described the teachers at FSAS as hardworking, willing to provide extra support, caring, and connected to the students.

“I feel like the teachers are doing everything in their power to help the students.”

“Because the teachers are interested in the kids' learning. They gave us an e-mail address for every teacher, for any concern any parent had about math or any subject. Any concern or question a parent has about

their child's homework, and they've said they're going to see what they can do with the kids so that they can learn."

"They're constantly working."

"I know it's not in the job description, but... they're like mentors."

"What I like about the teacher is they are always willing to help the students. Willing to stay after school. I like that."

"Let me tell you, these teachers here are for the students!"

Several parents pointed to the teachers' communication with them about their children as especially effective.

"They'll always call and that's how I found out about my son. They call you to tell you what's going on. 'This is what we teach and this is the way he is. He needs to do more. He can do it, he needs more effort to do it.'"

"Every time I call, they always call back. They call me and they do try hard."

"The teachers are open here.... They let me know what is going on with my child. You know if she is missing an evening of homework or classwork is not being done. So I feel like the teachers are communicating with us very well."

MAJOR AREAS OF CONCERN

Parents and family members also shared a range of needs and concerns related to the school—some of these needs and concerns are within the school's locus of control, while others are issues that would be more appropriately addressed by the school district.

1. Academic rigor, support for students and technology

Overall, families believe their children have been getting a good education and progressing academically, but they still expressed concerns about a few key things. First, families felt that curriculum could be more challenging and faster paced. One parent commented:

“The only thing that I feel is that the curriculums could be just a little harder... I know it's different for different parents and then also each student is different. Both of my girls were on different levels, I felt as though it could be a little more challenging just for mine.”

“Push students harder.”

“Make the kids give them as much as they can give them education wise.”

“I think that it's really too easy actually. And I feel like the students, especially in reading, it's like kind of slow paced for me. And math is also slow paced. I[t] could be going faster. Science is at an okay pace.”

Second, families recognized that there is a broad diversity of learner needs at FSAS and particularly a large population of English Learners (ELs).

“[There are] some kids that are still learning English, talking, you know, in English. But we haven't made...one or two counselors that can talk more than one language. And that's what we need in a school like this, because this area is really a real mixture of different groups, you know.”

“It is very difficult for Hispanics to get help from the teachers.... If the child has a problem or didn't understand something, he can go to that teacher. But if the child doesn't speak English and the teacher doesn't speak Spanish, how is the child going to go to the teacher and say, ‘Teacher, please do me a favor; I didn't understand?’”

“It's like the children are on different levels and to try to accommodate that in one classroom, [having] children that are on a scale and the scale is tipping over, so how do you teach and keep them balanced? And, you know, teach all of them so they learn, not go too fast for these students, but not go too slow for these ones. And now you're trying to find a happy medium.”

Third, and related to the academic experience in the classroom, families reported that it has been difficult to help with homework—both because of technology and needing support in understanding how teachers are teaching, especially in math. A set of comments from two parents about the math homework, captures what parents are feeling:

First parent: “What she's having trouble is with her math, and it's frustrating her because she's a good student. She's an A student and this math has been bringing her down and she needs tutoring. I came to the school for thing[s] and they said they didn't have tutoring available so all we're doing is getting tutoring

through our internet, but it's not the same...She asked me... I don't know what to tell her, I'm looking at her like I really don't...and I feel like—”

Second parent [nodding in agreement]: *“You feel dumb.”*

First parent: *“It's not the same math I was doing when I was in school and I don't know how to help her...I would like to see tutoring...I think, yes. And I think—oh my God, I think the kids would improve so much.”*

To add more depth to this point, at the community feedback and findings meeting, a teacher commented that the school has had the current district-endorsed math curriculum for one year, and that they felt that the “home-school connection” materials included in the curriculum were not enough to support educating the families about the curriculum. The teacher also felt that while the principal had made a strong effort to provide training time for teachers and workbooks for students, there was still a need for more training time and on-time delivery of resources for students from the school district.

Fourth, the concerns around math and homework were related to concerns about access to internet-connected computers at home. One parent reported:

“They should have more access like to internet or laptop, due to now everything is Google, everything is through online. I had to purchase one. Not everybody can purchase one, but whoever don't, let them have access, take home from school, or something if they don't have access.... I have some of her friends who need to computers, to share, whatever they need to do with her on that laptop. I want to see the school provide some days for students to take that home and do their homework, and I think that would improve them, through internet services or get their homework done on time or stuff like that, because some of the are not doing it because of that.”

“Not all parents, you know—just situations at home that some of them don't even have internet, some of them don't have laptops. Some of them do have phones but it's not the same on the phone...”

“They're [computers] still there at the library. My son, his laptop is messed up. He gets problem because he cannot do his homework. He has to come to the library, sit down in the library, but [there are] too many kids so he doesn't have enough time to do his homework.”

2. Need for more culturally and linguistically diverse staff

Families reported being very appreciative of the dedicated staff at Feltonville, but they still had some concerns regarding needing more personnel overall, and needing more culturally and linguistically diverse staff in particular.

“The school... needs more staff. Because last year they sent out a letter saying they lost a lot of staff. They took away the interpreter... I don't know. They got rid of three positions at the school.”

“I would like to see the schools cater to the ethnic groups in the school. You know what I mean? Have more ethnic, like, to be able to relate better to families... that's what we need in a school like this, because this area is really a real mixture of different groups, you know. And that would help a lot of the parents interact and the teachers.”

“Something that I've always felt in this school is that we need more Latino teachers. Because I say that the students feel more comfortable with teachers they can communicate with in their language. Especially students who are new arrivals from other countries. They truly don't have teachers they can communicate with, who they feel comfortable with, who understand their culture. Because that's a very important aspect, for a teacher at a school to understand the culture of the students they are teaching.”

These comments point to the large presence immigrants from Latin America have in the school and the specific needs this population has as they enter a new country and a new education system.

3. Insufficient resources

In several focus groups, conversations focused on the need for more resources at the school. The resources identified ranged from books and school supplies to afterschool programming and social emotional development programs.

First, families think teachers need more staff and materials to support their work in the classroom.

“We don't see that money coming into the school, and supplies coming into the school, like book-wise or technology-wise, whatever they need, whatever the kids need.”

“I would love for the district to know about not only the teacher doing all that stuff, but to help the teachers with the books that they need for the kids ... for them to teach...They don't have money like that, but they still push it, and not only for those supplies. It's like their teachers don't have the books to give out assignments for them to take home. Even her. Last year, a couple of times, I was

like, why are you not bringing any homework? She's like, 'Mom, we do this work, because she writes on the board, we do it in a group working, right away we do it.' Why don't you get the book? They don't have the books. They don't have enough."

"Well, the thing with that is, it's gonna be a struggle, because they don't have books enough for the kids. And now everything is more technology, but they don't have tablets, or a computer, or a laptop for all the kids. So either way it's not gonna be enough."

"I don't know if the help that comes is sufficient, but I do know that every parent arrives here with their own package of materials, because the school won't give it to them. Their paper, everything like that, so I think that the funds aren't enough, because they have to buy two or three packs of paper."

A second way that limited resources have affected the school is the lack of afterschool programming that is available at the school.

"I am just going to say, we used to have five-day-a-week after school program for math and reading. I see some of the alumni raising their hands and nodding their heads. That's something the district cut from every student across the district."

A third area that families wanted to see more support was in the area of social emotional development. One parent commented that she,

"...feel[s] these kids, at their age, and things that go on in their head. I think that there would be a lot of suspensions, a lot less people wanting to kill themselves or whatever if we could support them, emotionally, psychologically. What's going on? Let's talk to these kids. What's going on?"

Another parent noted,

"I don't know if the school has a psychology department. But they should make an effort with the student's psychology. Because there are also students who have issues, who suffer from violence at home, and who maybe are making these mistakes for that reason. So we should focus more on that and emphasize the students' mentality."

For families with mental health and wellbeing challenges could be supported by the school, but only with many more resources than currently available.

4. Safety in the neighborhood

While parents were pleased with the school's efforts to keep the children safe in school and around the school, they still worried about students' safety in the neighborhood. The families recognize that these issues are beyond the school's control, but raised them as important nevertheless.

"I don't feel the kids feel safe going outside, because they're forever fighting. Like, they leave from here and they don't...try going to the other school, and then the younger kids in the front. And they're forever fighting. If it's not in the cemetery, it's in the park that's there."

In addition families raised concerns about traffic on streets during dismissal. In particular they were concerned about the intersection of "A" and "Wyoming." They would like to see additional resources and staffing to further extend the zone where students and the surrounding neighborhood feel safer.

5. Parent involvement

Families that participated in the focus groups felt that all families at the school needed to step up and be more involved.

"A lot of times, many parents don't participate. I think that I, in all the meetings I've been to since my children go here, I don't see many parents in the meetings. I think that you have to come in to the school to see your child's progress, how your child is behaving, and I think you have to be more involved in your child's education."

Moreover, families felt that the schools School Advisory Council (SAC) and Home and School Association (HAS) were inactive, which limited ways that families could participate and frustrated with the district's rules about clearances.

"It seems like in the beginning of the year they were promoting more of the helping parents, but it sounds to me like every time they will call it's more like we need your criminal background, we need this, we need the other. And a lot of the people don't have a lot of the time actually put the information.... It's taking time, it could take up to six weeks."

6. Skepticism about SGS process

A final sentiment families expressed was their suspicion of the System of Great Schools (or SGS) process. They were frustrated by the top-down nature of the process and worried it would not be responsive to local issues and concerns—especially the importance of trust at FSAS.

“You're already going to bring people in, into something that's a family and these outsiders are coming in and do what? Disrupt it? You know how long it took for my kids to gain trust in these teachers? Do you know how long it took for me to gain trust in these? Do you know how long...this takes time to build and you're going to bring these outsiders in for what? I mean, like what's the purpose of all of that? And what are we going to get out of all of this?”

Families felt that the SGS process brought in numerous outsiders who had very little understanding of the school's dynamics. They worried about interventions that could potentially disrupt the positive relationships within the school and community. Some families further wondered if this investment the city was taking on was actually the best way to spend school funds. They hoped the process would have a positive impact on the school with respect to providing new resources but that it would also respect the knowledge and perspectives of those closest to the school.

SUGGESTIONS FROM PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

1. Increase the amount of Latinx and Spanish-speaking staff members that reflect the student body.
2. Ensure that the SGS process is transparent, supportive, does not disrupt existing school strengths, and provides needed resources.
3. Increase communication with parents about children's academic progress, especially in the form of interim reports.
4. Provide more supports for English Learners and/or immigrant students.
5. Provide more supports for parents around technology, homework, and other issues.
6. Ensure all families have sufficient access to technology.
7. Provide more academic supports, including tutoring, for children who need it.