



College of Education
TEMPLE UNIVERSITY®

**System of Great Schools
School District of Philadelphia
Edward T. Steel School
Parent, Family & Community Input Report
November 2017**

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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. This report represents a synopsis of the major themes from the four focus groups and meetings conducted at Steel K-8 School.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Between October 4 and October 26, the research team visited Steel for five 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 3 small group discussions with parents and community members, for a total of 4 focus groups. According to the district's Family and Community Engagement (FACE) team, 37 parents, 10 staff members, and 28 community members participated in the data collection process at Steel. The vast majority of participants were women—mothers, grandmothers, and relatives of students attending the school. While other people (staff, community activists, etc.) also attended the events, the analysis here 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 Steel, 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. Edward Fergus attended every event and was assisted by Robin-Renee Allbritton, a Temple graduate student. 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

Major areas of strength:

- Low turnover of middle school staff members
- Staff is representative of the student population
- Addition of VISTA volunteer during the 2017-18 school year
- Long-standing and ongoing after school program

Major areas of concern:

- Facilities
- School safety
- School investments
- Student academic, behavioral and after-school supports
- School leadership
- Low academic rigor
- School diversity

MAJOR AREAS OF STRENGTH

Over the course of the four focus groups and meetings, the parents shared a great deal of concerns about the operation of the school. However, the parents highlighted some of the strengths at Steel School in various moments. The following represent some of those strengths:

1. Low turnover of middle school staff members

“Like most of the middle schools in the city have a teacher shortage. Like five teachers missing in the middle school building. We don’t have those issues, that’s a plus. We have dedicated teachers. Half of our middle school staff have been here for years. Those are the ones who stuck through the fight. Now that I’m thinking, all those teachers who are stable teachers are fifth grade, sixth grade, and seventh grade.”

2. Staff is representative of the student population

“Our teachers are invested into this community. Black teachers can educate Black children, this is an anomaly and if they give us the right resources to make this work, it will work. Our teachers are invested in being sure our kids are educated because our children are our future. It’s not generic, I’m going to be very clear. Black children are going to fill in the place for us black folks as professionals wherever we go, we need to be sure that we’re able to compete at the next level.”

3. Addition of VISTA volunteer during the 2017-18 school year

“So last year when the grant proposal and the request for VISTA came up, I wrote to Vista, got Mr. Dennis’s name on it, and then he wrote one as well, so we ended up with a Vista. Because we need a VISTA because I can’t be in the school all day. So she does community partnerships, she’s been doing our flyers. She reminds us when we have stuff on the [calendar] that it needs to happen.”

4. Long-standing and ongoing after school program

“No one talked that we had an after school program that has been consistent for years. Also attached to the after school program, they do summer camp. Which is \$120 for the whole summer. Trips and everything included to our students. Some of our kids go to the after school program here at Boys and Girls club. We don’t talk about those things. And education work as an in school time program.”

MAJOR AREAS OF CONCERN

1. Facilities

Across each focus group and community input meetings, issues surrounding the facilities of Steel school were prominent. The issues primarily involved health and hygiene concerns including the presence of bedbugs, fleas, mold, and rodents. The following are some of the descriptions from parents:

“There's bedbugs in here. They exterminated one side, the other side [wasn't] exterminated, and my son came home bit up, many of times. I have seven kids that go here and out of my seven, three of them have {bites}. One in gym, one in class, the other one, I think was in art class.”

“So I'm peeking in the room and I just see them coming out and I'm like, ‘How are you all allowing these kids to lay down on these cots and you all have rodents.’ It's not one, it's maybe three or four, and it's from here and there.”

“He had to go to the bathroom and he can't because it's so filthy and nasty in here, and he don't likes to use the bathroom.”

“I had to pay \$1100 to get bed bugs out my house from the school. They have ticks and bed bugs in here.”

Other facility issues arose such as the presence of mold, the quality of air, and problems with the bathrooms.

“They had to do some work this summer, because there was mold in the kindergarten wing. I don't think that was completely remediated, because it was really quick.”

“I think the district needs to be clear [about] what's exactly wrong with the building so parents know what we're fighting against. [If] you have kindergartners [who] have asthma and all that mold, [it] is not a good situation for kids.”

“Okay, ever since I've been involved with Steel, [I've] had my kids here starting from kindergarten up. Ever since kindergarten up for about six or seven years, it's always been a problem with Steel's cleanliness. It's always been a problem. The kids, my sons come home and say [they] can't use the bathroom because it's so dirty.”

"I've come to the school for meetings and we'd be in the auditorium. [There would be] eaten apples on the floor, eaten sandwiches on the floor. I [would] say, you think they would clean it up since they're [going to] have a parents meeting or whatever."

Another issue raised related to facility is the inability of the school to have a washer and dryer. More specifically, a parent shared that various students are enduring hardship in which they are coming to school with clothes that smell or dirty. One teacher meets students by her car, collects their soiled clothing, and washes the items at her home.

"[T]he kids meet her at her car. I got the specifics today. They meet her at her car with anything that they need to be washed. She would take [the clothes] home and wash [them] for the kids. [The] kids would tell her [that] my mother couldn't go to the laundry or this happened or that happened. She would take their uniforms or their clothes. It doesn't have to be a uniform, because we [come] with the mindset that you're in school. You're not going to miss school because you don't have a uniform. You're just going to be here."

Parents also discussed the challenges in being allowed to meet with other parents after school hours. Parents identified being frustrated by the paperwork they need to submit in order to hold parent engagement activities; furthering their frustration is the times in which they have submitted paperwork and they do not receive a response from the district.

"Some of these things they've put in place make things much harder than they have to be. They've made it about money when it's not costing anything, because every event that we plan we pay for... We pay out of pocket. No one talks about that. Muffins with mom, Donuts with dad"

"We can't keep the building open cause we've [have to] fill out this form and it has to be sent in ahead of time and it has to be approved. You never had to do that before."

2. Student safety

Another prominent theme among parents involved safety. More specifically, parents considered the safety issues involving the entrance into the school, the hallways, and the presence of fights among students. Several parents expressed that the front of the entrance of the school does not have sufficient safety processes, such as security and sign-in procedures.

"Safety is a really big issue here at Steel. I'm an alumni. There are so many. One, the office is not positioned right. Anybody can come up in Steel, walk past the

office, and go up the stairs to wherever... So many times, I have walked past the office. I know I'm not supposed to but I do it anyway, because who is going to care. Nobody cares."

"As far as safety, they do have a camera on the outside which is against when they lock the box you bang on the door and let them in. I feel as though that box with the camera should never be locked up until everyone is out of the building... They buzz you right in without looking at your face, anything... When they get buzzed in, someone should be standing right there at them steps to ask for I.D. again."

The other safety concern raised by the parents involved fighting between students. Two parents and an older sibling actually shared stories of their children being hurt by other children.

"My brother comes home and tells me every single day that there is something wrong with him. He got a scratch on his shoulder, he got a scratch under his face, he got a bruise on his knee... They are going to slam their heads against a table, drag them against the floor. If it's going to be like that, I don't want my brothers and sisters to go here, because it's not going to be safe. When I was here, there was a fight every single day. I'm sure nothing changed in two years."

"My daughter just got punched in the nose this week Tuesday. The girl just walked up to her, punched her in the nose, blood all over the place. She went to the nurse's office. The nurse couldn't take care of her, because she had so many other kids in there from fighting and carrying on... In the school where she came from last year, my daughter had never been in a fight. Never been in a fight, never been, until she got here."

While at church, a fellow parent from the Steel school approached a parent volunteer and asked about school safety.

"She said, 'Well, my brother's child was there one month. She was there because they were in some kind of situation... And the child got jumped so much in one month that the father took her out.' I said, 'So what happened?' She said, 'Well, I went to the principal, I went to several people, and I was there every day. Because I didn't understand why my child's only been here a certain amount of time, and she had been jumped so much that now I have to take her out.'"

The parents tended to describe the safety issues as a result of the lack of adults in the playground, cafeteria and hallways.

"But the other thing, too, is there's a shortage of people in the school yards, particularly in the morning. Now, I know we were doing one type of assembly in

the morning; people were lining up outside. From the parents' perspective, it was great because all the teachers were outside, the principal was outside. They did a morning welcome. The kids got in line, they knew what to do when and they entered the building orderly."

3. School investments

The parents shared concerns about how the district has not sufficiently invested in Steel. More specifically, Steel parents shared how staffing has been removed from Steel school even during the expansion from K-5 to K-8; and most significant absence of investment shared by parents is the lack of follow-up after the school designed a plan in 2014 and the district did not fund it.

"You talking about safety issues, I remember they used to have a lot of staff in the yard. What happened was they had to fill out these papers for background checks. Most of them failed and they said they got rid of them."

Parents consider the dis-investment in Steel as connected to the perception the district maintains of the school and where it is located.

"This school sits in the highest homicide rate, the highest illiteracy rate. I mean, I couldn't believe it when I looked at the Department of Health Social Determinants. And then, I feel, and I'm sure other people feel when we were here, that we are being marked because we were one of the only schools that fought back. So, when you feel ... I feel like we're being punished. And then we become the ground for every child that's having issues that the charter school kicks out of this area, that other schools can't handle. It's, "Ah, we're going to send them to Steel." So now, you're bringing more children in who have ... whether they have trauma or developmental ... so we become the ... I'm not going to say 'dumping ground,' use that word, but we become the school that we're going to send all of these other issues, not on top of all the social determinants that we have in this community. And we're going to say we're going to take stuff out, and then we want y'all to survive."

"It's not top secret that most of the schools surrounding us are charters... The bigger issue is the district needs to make a sound investment in Steel and other schools like Steel in order for us to get better or our kids are going to continue to suffer."

Parents also raised a concern as to whether the district has the capacity to know how to make reform happen given the prevalence of failing schools in the area.

"And so, I think the problem starts with the School District of Philadelphia. Whatever the model is, when they came in here with that first meeting, when they put that projector up there, and they wanted to talk to us about, 'Look at

this little dot, in north Philadelphia, look at this little red dot. This is your school.' But we're surrounded by over 200 other red and orange dots. I got a problem with that."

4. Student academic, behavioral and after-school supports

Parents shared concerns about the types of behaviors students were demonstrating and identified that the way in which student supports were organized at the school contributed to student behavior. Some of the issues raised by the parents and two teachers involved the master schedule,

"It's hard for four hours and 24 minutes and you know to get ... they need that break in the time. I try to make that break, whether it's a bathroom break, or something, but they take their break on their own and I have to get them to settle down. And I wish it was broken up a little more, like a 90 minute, or block break."

"Well it just makes sense to schedule the day in a way that's conducive to how we operate as people, as human beings, as our children operate, we're not built ... especially we keep talking about our attention spans in the microwave age and the video game age and how kids attention spans are getting shorter and shorter and shorter, but we haven't adapted the school day to deal with it."

Parents did not consider the behavioral problems they presented to be as pervasive as it may be perceived. In fact, the parents discussed the behavioral problems as isolated to specific grade levels. One parent shared they consider the issue as related to the students with disabilities that are bused in to the school.

"And we keep talking about all the kids are bad, I can think there's about maybe about 10 kids. And I'm not going to say they have like, severe challenges that disrupt the school community. It's about maybe ten. Right, maybe 20, from the whole school that disrupt everything most of the time. It's the same kids, it's not like we're talking about the whole school is bad."

"We have a high percentage of children who have special needs, who are IEP cases. And there is a program here in the building and ... forgive me, somebody can please jump in if y'all know the correct terminology. But there's groups of students who are bused in who have classes on the third floor. And I think whatever that program is, they do not know how to manage those children. They come in just like all the rest of the children. But oftentimes, they're all over the place. And I don't want to just single them out, but it's enough of a percentage that it disrupts the rest of the school. So, there's two things at work here. Whatever that program is, it's not sufficient to handle the needs of those

children. And two, the school district needs to lend more support to this school in terms of staff and training, so that those people in the building can handle those situations.”

One parent also shared a concern about the effect all these various behavioral disruptions have on all the children.

“And my other thought was, outside of the child that needs the additional supports, we have to also consider the kids that don't need additional supports, and how this is affecting their education, whether it's because they don't have supports to keep this child focused and attending to what he needs to attend to, so they disrupt the classroom, hitting people, throwing fire extinguishers, fighting the teacher, fighting other kids, flipping desks, like that. The needs of that child not being met is affecting the environment of 25 to 30 other kids.”

5. School leadership

Though issues surrounding leadership did not emerge frequently among parents, some issues surfaced in relation to confidence in the district's capacity to follow through on commitments.

“I was just going to say that no, I don't think that the school district is responsive. It should be held responsible and accountable. When I look at the problems in the school, I don't look at the teachers and the principals. I know just like where I work, I'm just an employee. I'm not saying that they are just employees or just getting a paycheck, but they can only do so much. I'm not looking at them like they don't do this, they can only do what they are allowed to do with the means that they are given. I do think that if they were to decide to change the school, or they were to decide for it to be charter school, that would be letting the school district get off too easy.”

The discussions about the Steel principal focused on his capacity to build effective relationships, interact in a respectful manner with parents, and skills to repair relationships. Additionally, a few parents wondered about the principal's prior school leadership experiences.

“I stayed here last night with the principal until almost 10:00 P.M. at night. A lot of our conversation revolved around his relationships. Broken relationships that need to be repaired. New relationships that need to be formed. The process of how do you go about doing that?”

“In relation to the school, one of the things that happens is principals are given a lot of leeway and a lot of power to do certain things... So again, one of the things that Mr. Boyd said was, there's a lot of professional staff here who know what

they're doing, but if it doesn't reach the top and get implemented, then it's pointless."

"I think the principal needs some assistance. I don't know what they call it, but I just think he needs some help getting the school under control."

6. Low academic rigor

The parents identified that academics or instruction is the main activity or purpose occurring at Steel; however, they consider the presence of the other issues as limiting the effectiveness of academics.

"Education is the most basic thing that we're here for and yes, that should be primary concern, but there's all these other things on top of it that are preventing us from even getting to that part of the conversation. So if we can take care of those things, those are the things that parents are most offended by, most affected by. You expect your child to come to school to get an education. You don't expect them to come and get bit up by bugs, or have allergy concerns."

The only area in which academics were raised as a concern involved the absence of reading materials. One parent shared that she helped a teacher obtain enough books for each student in the classroom.

"She wanted specific novels, and we didn't have the money and I looked around asking teachers what do you need? I'm going to try to leverage my resources whether you need...She wanted a couple of novels, sets, for her whole class. We got it donated from a friend of mine who plays for the Saint's. His foundation bought all the books that she put on that list. They came and donated those books to the class at her request and she said that's what she wanted."

7. School diversity

When parents were asked whether there are any concerns related to English language learners, the parents expressed it as an emerging issue. Specifically, they notice a growing Latino student population and are unsure as to whether the school has the capacity or resources to provide sufficient language services.

"So, I think we definitely need support because we have a lot of our Hispanic families moving in. We had an Asian family last year. Not that the kids couldn't speak English, but the mom did not. So, historically, this neighborhood is changing, so I believe that there is a need for it because we find that other cultures are moving into the community that we did not have in the past. So I

think that there should be some support for that, because, like I said, we have some families that are here.”

“A lot of the children speak English, but we don't always want to assume that, with all of them that had families that are not ... from other countries or do not speak the language. But I see it's a growing trend.”

SUGGESTIONS FROM PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

The parents provided a range of suggestions on how to improve Steel School. However, these suggestions tended to coalesce around specific areas. The following provides details on each one of those areas:

1. Implementation of plan from 2014

Parents developed a plan in 2014 and concluded Steel should become a community school.

“Going back to the plan that was devised three or four years ago when that charter take-over was attempted, we need to go back to that model, we need to take that model, and we need the school district's full support in implementing that model that was suggested four years ago. Because all the other things on that list, several of them have been tried. We've already gone through a high turnover with teachers, we already have a relatively new principal. The principal has multiple people in this building to support him in terms of a co-principal, a vice principal, a principal coach. We need to go back to that model that the community put together.”

“They used some of the plan ... they told her that the plan that we had looks like a community school. Then the mayor went in and now there are 11 community schools, or something. Steel is not one of them, but Steel did this plan that looks like a community school four years ago.”

2. Mental health services

Mental health services including counseling and group counseling, Student Therapeutic Services (STS) staff, and outpatient therapists.

“I think the district needs to make a sound investment in the things that they know are issues with this school. It's not top secret that mental health is needed. It's not top secret that we are one of the number one areas that have foster care.”

“[T]here are a lot of kids who are here who are not identified as having high needs. I see this as more of a mental health ... we need more of a mental health component, not just a behavioral health component.”

“We have one school counselor. We have about 500 or so kids. We only have one outpatient therapist who ... we don't have anybody that's full-time. We need more in that aspect of counseling and therapy.”

“We have an STS program, but they are about to hit capacity for the number of kids that they currently have in the program, as well as kids that I'm referring to the program. So, there is a large need that's not being met with the kids who have needs, and the kids who need support.”

3. Relationship building and repair

Parents identify a long-history of inconsistent messages and broken promises that they suggest some form of relationship building and repair needs to occur with the school, district and community.

“Efforts should be taken to unify this community in terms of the school community, and then first in the building, and then expand it to the outside of the building because we have a lot of trauma. This whole school, reform school take over meeting every day ... Is it going to close becoming a charter? That's traumatic. That's a lot of instability that's happening so I think some efforts need to be made on the district's behalf to do some healing. I don't want to get all spiritual, but some healing around that, because we can't move forward if we can't heal. I think that needs to happen regardless of what they decide to do.”

“[The District] keep[s] coming and disrupting school communities at the beginning of the school year. That's unhealthy. It's unhealthy and I think that they need to invest in repairing those relationships across the board. The relationship with the district is probably never going to be healed.”

4. Effective use of highly qualified teachers

Parents suggest the effective use of teachers.

“We have some really dynamic teachers here that are relegated to corners. I think that has a lot to do with ego and all of that kind of stuff but if we have highly qualified teachers, it can really help support the school community in different ways that have climate management. I'm telling you all, I went in the class and there was nobody moving, [what them being drawing?] all this drama that we talk about so often, that none of that. The kids were completely engaged

in the task. On the computers, working on the 3D thing and all ... It was really happening. Engaging classroom ... We need to highlight that and really allow people to work at what they're good at."

"I think that even allowing teachers to be able to support other teachers and learn from each other is a way to help build that community and it's not costing the district anything. I don't know how to make that happen, because we have teachers here with the skillset to make it better. I think that teachers need a level of autonomy to be able to make decisions based on the individual groups for us to be effective. You can't micromanage someone and get success. It's a lot of micromanaging happening on layers. It comes down."

5. Improved school climate for students

Celebration of students' positive behaviors and academic achievement.

"The other thing I want to add is that we need more activities in the school that are self-esteem building. We need more activities that celebrate our children when they do something good. We need something that encourages more school pride, because as most of us know as adults, negative news travels seven, eight times as fast as positive news. And so, it's very easy for all of these horrible situations to kind of get spread around the community real easily, but none of the positive stuff. And so, that's another thing that leads to parents not wanting to be involved, students not wanting to be involved, is that we don't do enough celebrating of the good things that actually do happen. And there several good things that are happening, including the teachers here."

6. Additional staffing for playground, hallways and cafeteria

Adding staff who able to provide supervision and care for students.

"So, I think that just like with the regular ed in a positive light, I think that a lot of the problems come in general from 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. I think that there are issues that need to be resolved in terms of behavior, and we need manpower for it. And we don't have enough manpower to man the lunch room, to man upstairs, to man other places."

"Yeah. So, in terms of safety we need a Safe Quarters Program. I know there's an organization nearby that does the Safe Quarters training. We also need crossing guards. We've got one crossing guard, that's the one on Germantown Avenue."