ENGAGING FAMILIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS:
Voices from Students, Families and Faculty

A Report on Family Engagement in Jefferson Middle School
Arlington Public Schools

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OVERVIEW

Middle school can be a critical stepping stone to a happy and successful future for young adolescents. Youth at this age often experience puberty and develop abstract thinking abilities. Identity development is a key component of this important and often challenging stage of pre-teen development. Self-esteem, social standing, confidence, peer acceptance, goal direction, and a multitude of behavioral and achievement-oriented patterns emerge. This is also a time of rapid physical development and emotional turmoil. According to the Association for Middle Level Education, “The parent plays a key role in terms of providing emotional understanding and support and the required structural design needed to increase the likelihood of success for their middle school student, both socially and academically.”

The staff and faculty at Jefferson Middle School recognize that parents play a key role in increasing the academic, social and emotional success of middle school students. To gain a better understanding of family engagement at Jefferson Middle School, faculty, students and parents participated in a study about family engagement from September 2012 through February 2013. This project was led by the Family Engagement Team—a graduate student in the American University Masters of Science in Organization Development (OD) Program, Jefferson’s PTA President, and professionals from Jefferson Middle School.

Engaging Families to Enhance Student Success: Voices from Students, Families and Faculty is a report on family engagement in Jefferson Middle School and summarizes findings from interviews, focus groups and surveys with teachers, administrators, students and parents. The report captures the positive comments and candid concerns about family engagement at Jefferson. It is the hope of the Family Engagement Team (FET) that information provided in this report will deepen stakeholders knowledge and understanding of family engagement at Jefferson and will be a springboard for action.

FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

From October through December 2012 the Family Engagement Team (FET) facilitated 12 focus group conversations with 93 students, parents and faculty members and one-on-one interviews with 38 administrators, staff, teachers and parents.

PARENTS: Thirty-one (31) parents participated in four (4) focus groups, which were African American, Ethiopian, Latino, and PTA. Parents attending the PTA focus group were African American, Asian, Caucasian, and Latino. Fifteen (15) parents were interviewed, who were African American, African American, Bengali, Caucasian and Latino.

STUDENTS: Fifty-six (56) students in grades 6-8 participated in seven (7) focus group conversations.

FACULTY: Five (5) Administrators, Six (6) Staff, and twelve (12) Teachers in grades 6-8 participated in one-on-one interviews. Six (6) faculty members (not teachers) participated in the PTA focus group.
SURVEYS

During November and December 2012 the FET created and administered two surveys, one for families and one for faculty. The surveys addressed four major areas of family engagement—school environment, effective two-way communication between home and school, learning at school and at home, and school decision-making and advocacy. Surveys were administered through Survey Monkey. The survey link was sent to all staff and faculty by e-mail and to families through the PTA’s listserv of over 400 parents. The survey was made available to parents via Jefferson’s website. The surveys were translated into Spanish, Amharic and Mongolian and then made available as a PDF to be downloaded from the website. Parents were also able to pick up surveys in the main office. All parents were contacted by robo-call to advise them about survey translations and availability.

PARENTS: 102 Parents of 785 students responded to the survey:
- African American/Black 9.59%
- Arabic 0%
- Asian American 1.37%
- Asian (Pacific) 1.37%
- Asian (South) 1.37%
- Caucasian/White 79.45%
- Ethiopian 1.37%
- Latino/Hispanic 6.85%
- Multi-racial 1.37%
- Native American 0%
- Other 4.11%

FACULTY: 51 of 156 faculty responded to the survey:
- Classroom Teachers 71.43%
- Specialists 11.90%
- Administrators 2.38%
- Resource Staff 7.14%
- Support Staff 2.38%
- Other 4.76%

KEY FINDINGS: ASSETS

Key findings of interview, focus group and survey results report Jefferson’s assets to be great afterschool programs, teachers, diversity and a positive environment.

Great Afterschool Programs ☀ Across all focus groups parents and students praised Jefferson’s after-school activities and clubs. “I like afterschool homework time,” said one student. “There are more after school activities than elementary schools have,” another student said. “And you can create your own.”

IDENTIFY PARENT AND STUDENT LANGUAGES EARLY IN THE SCHOOL YEAR

During the survey translation process, it was discovered that it will be helpful for the Jefferson community of staff, faculty, parents and students to:
- Create a process to identify (earlier in the school year) the languages spoken of families whose first language is not English.
- Identify whether parents whose first language is not English can read, write, and speak English.
- Develop a system to distribute documents to families based on their language spoken at home.
Teachers are Appreciated ☀
Students and parents appreciate teachers at Jefferson. One student remarked, “The teachers put a lot of effort into trying to teach us.” “Teachers seem happy here,” said a PTA focus group parent. Another parent from the PTA focus group commented that faculty and staff are accessible. On the survey, one parent commented, “I appreciate the open door policy and willingness to always talk and listen.” (See Table 1)

Diversity ☀ One parent from the PTA focus group said, “Jefferson has a nice blend of cultures.” Another parent from the PTA focus group said, “Acceptance of diversity helps kids to be open-minded.” On the survey, one faculty member commented, “I would like to see more celebration of our students cultures within the school in order to give more of our population a feeling of ownership within their school community.” Also, teachers and parents reported that they’d like for the PTA to be more diverse.

Jefferson has a Positive Environment ☀ Students enjoy coming to school and like the environment at Jefferson. A parent from the Ethiopian focus group said, “My daughter likes the school and likes her teachers. Everyone is friendly. No complaints from my daughter. That’s good news!” (See Table 2)
KEY FINDINGS: CHALLENGES REPORTED BY PARENTS AND STUDENTS

Parents and students identified concerns regarding communication about academic progress, homework, forming relationships with teachers, the IB program, and student engagement.

Communication about Academic Progress  ■ Parents and students want direct communication from teachers about academic progress. Parents want to understand what is expected of students. Many parents report not receiving notification that their child is struggling until it’s too late. “If I didn’t check my daughter’s grade I would never find out that she is not doing well in school. I had to call and send e-mails. They need to let parents know what’s going on. Send a note and say, “This is what’s happening to your child and this is the class” said a Latino parent. A parent in the African American focus group said, “My son was failing and I didn’t hear from the teacher—he had eight missing assignments and they didn’t pick up the telephone and call me. I’m here. His dad and I are accessible. When he’s in trouble behaviorally, they don’t have a problem calling. So, how about calling when he’s in trouble academically?” (See Tables 3 and 4.)

“I love when parents check-in with phone calls or a note to see how their child is doing.”

—Teacher Interview

“On-line is not as wide of a net as some think and should not be the sole or primary source of communication with parents. Pick up the phone and call...Most parents are happy to hear from teachers.”

—Teacher Interview
An overwhelming number of parents report that they monitor and help their child with homework. Parents want to help their child with homework and some don’t know or understand the best ways to help them. A Caucasian parent reported challenges with homework due to the time constraints and daily pressures. Findings also indicate that students want parents to help them with homework. Other parent and student voices:

- “How do you help your child with homework when you don’t know the subject area?”
  –PTA Focus Group
- To Parents: “Don’t make plans after school—because then we have to rush on our homework.”
  –Student Focus Group
- “I encourage her to do homework and help her with her homework. Sometimes it is hard. I ask questions about what happened during the day. I teach and have her keep her room and other things organized and work with her on focus. All of these things translate into having good habits at school.”
  –African American Parent Interview
- “We help with homework and make sure she does her homework. She’s struggling in math. I can’t help her. I make sure she gets tutoring.”
  –Latino (El Salvador) Parent Interview
- To Parents: “Help me with my homework… I appreciate that parents try, even when they can’t help.”
  –Student Focus Group

**Parent-Teacher Relationships**

Parents want to establish relationships with teachers. “I feel disconnected from my child’s teachers. I went early in the mornings to meet his teachers,” said a parent from the African American focus group. According to survey findings 82.3% of Jefferson faculty and staff surveyed agree and strongly agree that parents are willing to work with them as partners. Only 53.3% agree and strongly agree that there are many opportunities to create meaningful relationships. “At parent-teacher conferences, I only get to meet the TA and not the subject teachers. I really would like to meet with all of the teachers and have more of a relationship with all of the teachers.” Survey results show 33% of parents think that student-led conferences are sometimes effective and 15.4% say that student-led conferences are rarely or never effective.

**IB Program**

A Latino parent from the Dominican Republic said, “I want to know more about the IB program. I still don’t understand it.” Across the board, parents want to know more about IB and the IB curriculum. One parent from the PTA focus group had several questions: “How do we see the IB curriculum in the students’ work? How is it really different curriculum from other middle schools? Is IB a higher standard?”
Student Engagement ▪ Parents want students to take responsibility for their learning. “I’m available if need be. They [my children] need to take ownership. We stay out of the way to let them work it through,” said a Caucasian parent. Students shared that it is sometimes hard to take ownership of their learning when teachers talk to parents instead of them. “I didn’t do something on a project…the teacher goes to my mom, rather than talk to me.” Another student commented, “I would appreciate if teachers addressed the students before they addressed the parents.” Students also talked about experiences with parents when trying to take ownership of their learning. “When you really work hard on something that is difficult and are proud of it and your parents give you other suggestions or recommendations to improve it, that’s tough. Parents should try to be more supportive, without being critical.”

KEY FINDINGS: CHALLENGES REPORTED BY FACULTY
Faculty identified several concerns regarding families’ engagement at Jefferson. Teachers want families to do more to support their child’s education, especially the use of technology to check for homework and grades. Many teachers have a hard time communicating with parents who do not speak English. Lastly, many teachers and administrators are frustrated when students show a lack of respect for their mothers.

Monitor Homework ▪ Findings show that many teachers think that parents can do more to support their child’s education, especially through the use of technology. “Check with your child each day about homework assignments. Check notebooks and Blackboard.” One teacher said, “Teachers are doing their job, parents should do theirs—check Blackboard and on-line grades. These communication efforts are set up.” “We have an on-line portal. You can see if your child is failing, call us and make the extra effort.” Survey results show getting parents to monitor homework and projects as the third top challenge that faculty faces in engaging families in education.

Even though some teachers see the use of technology as a good resource for families. Families reported that they want to hear from teachers if their child is struggling, “Grades on-line is not a way out for teacher-parent communication. It is not a substitute for getting in touch with parents.” —African American Focus Group

Language and Cultural Barriers ▪ Students at Jefferson come from many countries and speak many different languages. Some faculty members expressed difficulty trying to communicate with families who do not speak English. One teacher said, “More interpreters are needed to contact families to let them know what’s happening. I don’t feel as though interpreters are available. We need interpreters in all languages spoken at Jefferson.” Another teacher shared, “One boy missed school in October…I called and they hung up (the child did this). Sometimes the child is the interpreter for the family and we don’t have time to track it down and get in touch.” Many families do not understand the American educational system or how they should best be engaged. One teacher shared, “It is not the same educational system here as in their countries. Parents want a better life for their children. If a child is having a problem or something is happening in the family, it is helpful to know.” (Refer to Table 6)
Disempowered Families ● When talking to families whose first language is not English, often times the middle school student is the interpreter between parents and students. This puts students in a position of power over their parents. One teacher said, “Children are at power over their mothers...One parent shared that at 12 years old her child was staying out late and yelling at her.” Another teacher said, “Some kids disrespect their parents and yell at them...students of all races.”

KEY FINDINGS: BARRIERS TO FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Students, parents and faculty identified three major barriers to family engagement: high cost of living, cultural isolation, and HILT (High Intensive Language Training Program) student struggles.

High Cost of Living ■ Arlington has one of the highest costs of housing in the Washington, D.C. area. Many of Jefferson’s families report trying to survive and work two to three jobs just to pay rent or mortgage. During the Ethiopian focus group, parents report working really hard to provide shelter, food and other necessities as their first priority. “If the teacher calls the parent, then we respond. Our community is not working on Sunday. Even though it’s church day, Sunday is the best time to connect with Ethiopian parents.” One teacher adds, “Latino parents are working and don’t come prepared to the county. They think they are going back to their country and they get stuck in America.” At the African American focus group, a parent commented, “I’m a single dad, it’s tough. I have to be on it at all times.” A Bengali father of a sixth grade student said, “I work seven days a week. My work is seven days a week...” Another teacher said, “Families are working and have no time. With the exception of a few, I don’t see much family engagement.” A student shared, “I don’t think my parents are engaged because they are busy all the time and they are working. I would like them to ask me if I am done with homework and check my assignment notebook each night.”

Cultural Isolation ■ Teachers and parents agree that many families are disconnected from the American educational system and don’t understand how it works and how they should be engaged. As one Ethiopian father said, “I don’t understand the culture of American Schools. She [my daughter] doesn’t read much, how does she get those grades? How do the grades work for HILT students and what are the students supposed to know?” Other parents do not speak English and cannot understand information sent home in English. “Everything is in English. I really want to know how my child is doing in school,” said one parent from the Latino focus group. Latino parents shared that since they don’t speak English, they have to rely on their students for information about their education and often times the student won’t talk to parents in their native language. “My son never tells me what’s going on in school,” said one Latino parent of an 8th grader. “I want to know how he’s progressing in his studies, or not.” One teacher commented, “It takes about five years just to learn how to survive in another country. There are also barriers linguistically, socially, emotionally and economically affecting the lack of participation in schools.” One student HILT student said, “We feel left out.”

“Ideally there would be some kind of push to establish direct contact with every parent at the beginning of the year and convey 1) how parents will receive information, 2) how and for what reasons parents are encouraged to contact the school, and 3) how Jefferson will foster the parent-student-teacher “team” expectations for parent interactions with the school.” —Faculty and Staff Survey
HILT Students Struggle to Fit in at Jefferson

One parent from the Ethiopian focus group talked passionately about HILT students’ experiences with bullying, peer pressure, and teasing because of language and cultural barriers. “Jefferson needs workshops for students to be tolerant. They should be more proactive in the area of tolerance!” One HILT student said, “I feel like other children discriminate against us because we don’t speak English.” As another HILT student put it, “We don’t participate in anything so we feel segregated. Like the eighth grade picnic, no one came to get us.” HILT students discussed they would like to have access to computers and art classes. They’d also like to go on field trips with other students, and change classes so they are not in the same room all day. “We don’t even know what team we are on. We’d like to feel like we belong, like every other student at Jefferson.” Although, HILT students want to be integrated with other students at Jefferson, some teachers have other ideas on how HILT students should be integrated at Jefferson. One teacher says, “This population has different needs. They are a wonderful population—multiculturalism, equal and sameness are not always good. How much do we integrate the [HILT] children?”

VOICES FROM FACULTY: Ideas to Enhance Family Engagement

- Check with your child each day about homework assignments. Be actively involved and aware of what your child is studying. Check assignment notebooks and Blackboard. Stay on top of deadlines. Keep up with grades online. Have conversations with your students about grades.

- Promote the many cultures of Jefferson through the IB program.

- Come to meetings.

- Bring traveling or permanent exhibits to Jefferson. For example, exhibitions to represent the cultures of students or to represent the principals of IB.

- Monitor your children, even if you work. Create systems to know where they are.

- Invite 25 parents to breakfast at a time to talk about issues, concerns and appreciations. Rotate around diverse segments of parent/student population.

- Let’s do something on a Saturday afternoon.

- Call parents on the phone. Bus them to events.

- Let’s do a volunteer project as a staff/faculty in the communities where our families live.

- Keep up with important dates like interim reports, report cards, end of the quarter, and field trips.

- It’s important for teachers to build and foster relationships with families—child, parent and school/teachers—it takes all three for it to work.

- Teachers and Staff should come out and speak at PTA meetings on different topics or issues in order to engage parents who don’t normally show up.

- More interpreters and translation is needed.

- Call parents to share the good things their child is doing?

- Show parents what’s in it for them [parent engagement].

- Connect family engagement activities to student learning.

- Invite parents to Jefferson in a non-threatening, non-academic way early in the school year. For example, during the first week of school have a big BBQ.

- Teachers should attend PTA meetings.

- At all grade levels create block captains. For example, a Latino parent might be willing to be a block parent for 5-10 other parents and be responsible for them.

- Invite parents to events. The more parents we personally invite, the more engagement will increase.
In the survey taken by families, parents share things they are presently doing to be engaged in their child’s education.

- Read with my daughter
- Ask if she’s missed classwork, we hound her to check with teachers to catch up
- Look over assignment notebooks
- Make sure they have supplies, computer access, etc.
- Make sure he is exceeding the school’s expectations
- We speak French at home with our son
- Monitor homework
- Stay on top of projects and school work
- Attempting to view grades on-line, but I need help with that
- Discuss current events
- Read and discuss the “Buzz” with my child
- Constant Q & A
- Read his agenda/planner, handouts, papers from school
- Daily review of Blackboard
- Inquire about their day. Knowing what needs to be done for homework and being available if they have questions.
- Involved with the PTA
- Nightly check-in with student
- Make sure homework, classwork and projects are completed on-time
- Have a set time for child to start homework...everyday at 4:00 p.m. (this lets him relax a little once he gets home before starting homework)
- Set homework as a priority—time to be determined by my child, but must be done before any screen time and sports practices
- Reading, playing music, imagination play, writing and other creative pursuits are encouraged at home
- Talk to my child

“The school should mail everything home and not have the kid take it home to get the parent to sign it.”
—Student Focus Group

“There are a lot of kids who don’t do their homework, so parents should remind kids to do their homework. That is helpful.”
—Student Focus Group
ADDITIONAL SURVEY RESULTS

Family Survey Findings
THE BEST EVENINGS FOR PARENTS TO ATTEND PROGRAMS AT JEFFERSON

- Thursday Evening: 43.20%
- Wednesday Evening: 40%
- Tuesday Evening: 38.30%
- Monday Evening: 35.80%
- Friday Evening: 16.00%

Family Survey Findings
TOP FIVE TOPICS THAT PARENTS WOULD LIKE TO LEARN ABOUT

- Understanding/Building Resilience: 57.10%
- Preventing/Dealing with Risky Behaviors: 44.60%
- Helping My Child Identify Career Options: 44.60%
- Helping My Child to Engage in Learning: 42.90%
- What to do if my Child is Struggling: 30.40%

Family Survey Findings
THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH FAMILIES

- E-mail: 35
- Telephone: 37
- Text Messages: 5
- In-Person: 6
- Robocalls: 13
- Letters and Notes
- Letters Mailed Home
- Flyers

Faculty/Staff Survey Findings
MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS

Facility/Staff Survey Findings
IDEAS TO INCREASE IBMYP VISIBILITY AND AWARENESS AT JEFFERSON

- Display student work: with inquiry questions; more prominently; on bulletin boards in hallways; on walls.
- Have visual representation of international mindfulness: display items from around the world; display units/projects/student work reflecting internationalism.
- Provide more professional development opportunities to train teachers in MYP application and objectives.
- Have more connection between community, service and school.
- Create student and teacher t-shirts.
- Get architects/designers involved in decorating the entrance and entry hallways for a more cohesive look.
- Post IB philosophy in building entrance.
- Provide a clear explanation of IBMYP.
- MYP should be alive and well in classrooms, and is not. Make sure all staff implements the program. Full implementation must be achieved in order for awareness to be tangible.
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TEAM

- Develop a plan to include second language learners in art, technology and fieldtrips.
- Create student, faculty/staff and family conversations about bullying, especially the bullying of HILT students. Work with students to increase relationship-building and to generate solutions.
- Create opportunities for students to learn about each others’ cultures and family traditions.
- Deepen parents’ and students’ knowledge of IB. (For example, bring in families to share their cultures and connect it to classroom learning.)
- Use the Jefferson entranceway to promote the IB program and student and family and faculty cultures and activities.
- Replace the two red signs on the outside upper windows of Jefferson’s outside doorway and make them parent friendly. Note: The Spanish translation of the sign reads, “If you are coming to the school, just go back.”
- Create opportunities for Jefferson’s teachers and parents to have conversations. Create systems which allow for on-going and effective communication among parents, teachers, students and faculty and staff, this includes communication between teachers-teachers, teachers-administrators, teachers-students, parent-parent, parents-teachers, parents-students...and so on.
- Continue to communicate discoveries, results and next steps of the new family engagement team and seek ideas and input from families, staff and faculty, and students on an continuous basis.

NEXT STEPS

1. Create a new Family Engagement Team (FET) that will:
   - Analyze and prioritize feedback from the data presented to Jefferson’s faculty on January 2, 2013 and the written report on family engagement.
   - Develop a concise and achievable three year plan of action to engage families by June 2013. Roll out the plan in phases.
   - Plan and lead a family engagement kick-off event for summer of 2013.
   - Lead faculty, families and students through the implementation and communication of the family engagement plan.

2. The new FET will be chaired by Timothy Cotman and will include members of the former FET and other staff, faculty, parents and community partners.

3. The Family Engagement Team will seek to create a culture of family engagement at Jefferson.

4. The Principal will share the results of the faculty’s feedback at the January 2013 faculty meeting.

5. The Principal will share the final report on family engagement at the February 2013 faculty meeting.

6. Information from the family engagement report will become part of Jefferson’s communication plan.

For the complete results of the faculty and staff survey or the family survey contact Tim Cotman or any member of the Family Engagement Team.